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Turnout and Partisanship in Tennessee Elections

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Part III POLITICS

CHAPTER 7

Turnout and Partisanship in Tennessee Elections

—*Lilliard E. Richardson, Jr., and Grant W. Neeley*

INTRODUCTION

Elections play a vital role in American politics. Although citizens can participate in government in several ways, voting is the easiest and perhaps the most important means of influencing government. At all levels of government, elections shape the representation of citizens' views.

Generally, the state is the single most important unit of voting within the federal system. All elections in the United States are either held or sanctioned by states. For example, presidents are elected state-by-state within the electoral college rather than by national popular vote; congressional representation is solely determined by geographic lines that are formed by or within the states; and municipal elections are held according to mandates set forth in state constitutions. Ultimately, the authority for most any election held in the United States is derived from a state or from a combination of states.

One of the most important features of American elections is the tremendous diversity in the political culture of the states. The unique aspects of the South derive in part from its distinct political, economic, and cultural history. For most of the last 125 years, Southerners have been more traditional in their values, more cautious about national political power, and more reliant on family and local community than the rest of the nation. From the end of Reconstruction in 1877 until the civil rights reforms of the 1960s, the South maintained a closed political system. The Democratic Party dominated elections in almost all of the region. In addition, minorities, women, and the poor were effectively excluded from participating in politics for much of this period.

Although Tennessee shares many of the characteristics of Southern political culture, the state has a unique political history that shapes the politics of today. Many observers see Tennessee as being composed of three distinct political regions or grand divisions: East, Middle, and West. As discussed in chapter 1,

these regional differences can be attributed to historical, economic, and demographic factors.

East Tennessee is home to what V. O. Key called the "mountain Republicans."¹ During the state's early period, eastern counties relied on small-scale farming and mining never relying on the slave-based economy prevalent in the other regions. Consequently, East Tennesseans overwhelmingly voted against seceding from the Union in 1861 and became known as "Lincoln Republicans." Since then, voters in the eastern counties have supported Republicans for all offices much more frequently than the rest of the state.

The central and western divisions both supported secession from the Union in 1861 and remained loyal to the Democratic Party after Reconstruction. Because of the larger population in these two regions, Democrats enjoyed overwhelming success in statewide elections from the end of Reconstruction until the 1970s. Recently, however, the partisan dynamics of the state have become more complex.

To understand the forces shaping current Tennessee politics, we discuss two fundamental concepts of Tennessee's electoral system: voting turnout and partisanship. These two concepts are easily illustrated by two questions. First, how many people participate in elections in the state? Second, whom do Tennesseans elect to represent them? While we use a historical perspective to inform the analysis, we are generally more interested in the forces shaping politics in Tennessee today.

VOTING TURNOUT

Perhaps the most important feature of any electoral system is the degree to which citizens vote. Generally, voting turnout in America has been much lower than in most other Western democracies.² This low turnout is problematic for two reasons: first, some scholars are worried that certain segments of society may not have adequate representation; second, others suspect that low turnout is an indicator of a decline in the public's belief in the political system.

FACTORS AFFECTING VOTING TURNOUT IN TENNESSEE

Scholars who have studied the problem suggest many factors explaining low voting turnout in the United States: the political system, sociodemographic characteristics, and cultural norms.³ While many of these factors pertain to the nation as a whole, some explanations are specific to regions or even particular states. Voting turnout in Tennessee has been influenced by legal barriers, illegal attempts to restrict voting, registration laws, election laws, and the lack of a viable two-party system.

Historically, the restriction of the franchise, or right to vote, to certain segments of a society has been the greatest factor in low voter participation.⁴ In the years following statehood, only white males were allowed to vote in Tennessee, as was the case in the rest of the nation. Black males were not given the right to

vote until after the Civil War with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. After Reconstruction ended in 1877, many Southern states, including Tennessee, sought to deny blacks the right to vote through various legal measures, and white supremacy groups effectively denied whatever opportunities remained for most black Southerners. The poll tax, used to cripple the voting rights of the poor, was not eliminated in Tennessee until 1953 and not outlawed at the national level until 1964.⁵ African Americans did not gain full access to the ballot until the 1960s, when Congress passed a series of reforms designed to ensure the voting rights of all citizens regardless of race. Today, the right to vote is denied only a few groups of Americans: felons, citizens under the age of eighteen, and the mentally incapacitated. Despite the fact that the vast majority of adults are eligible to vote, less than half regularly vote in all elections.

Some barriers to participation are due to government policies not designed to impede voter participation but that nonetheless have that effect. Much of the attention given these barriers focuses on the harmful effect of registration laws and the difficulties associated with casting a ballot.⁶ In Tennessee a citizen must register with the county government thirty days prior to an election in order to vote. Because many citizens are not aware of the requirement, do not know where to go to register, or may even be afraid that registration will make them eligible for jury duty, about 30 percent of all Americans are not even registered to vote.⁷ In Tennessee about 76 percent of the four million eligible citizens were registered to vote in November, 1996. Consequently, about one million Tennesseans cannot vote, even if motivated to do so.

Even registered voters face many obstacles to participation. For example, in most states a voter must be present on election day to cast a ballot or fill out cumbersome paperwork that must be approved by county officials to vote absentee. The hours available to vote are often limited and restricted to daytime hours, further hindering voting participation. Because voters usually must vote in neighborhood voting sites, some find it difficult to cast a ballot if they commute significant distances to their workplace. In addition, national and most state elections are held on Tuesdays, a working day for most people. Overall, the costs of voting can be quite high and tangible for the average citizen, while the benefits are somewhat abstract.

Barriers to participation in the electoral process are compounded in the American system by the multiplicity of elections in which voters can participate. Turnout in presidential elections has been close to 50 percent of the voting age population (VAP) for the last two decades, but it is much lower for congressional, state, and local elections. Like the rest of the country, Tennessee voters participate at a higher rate in presidential races than in other types of elections, such as those for city, county, and state offices. This difference in turnout rates among the different levels of elections is partly related to the voters' belief in the greater importance of the higher offices. In addition, presidential elections enjoy greater media attention, and candidates spend more money on campaign activities designed to motivate voter participation. Further, many contests for offices at

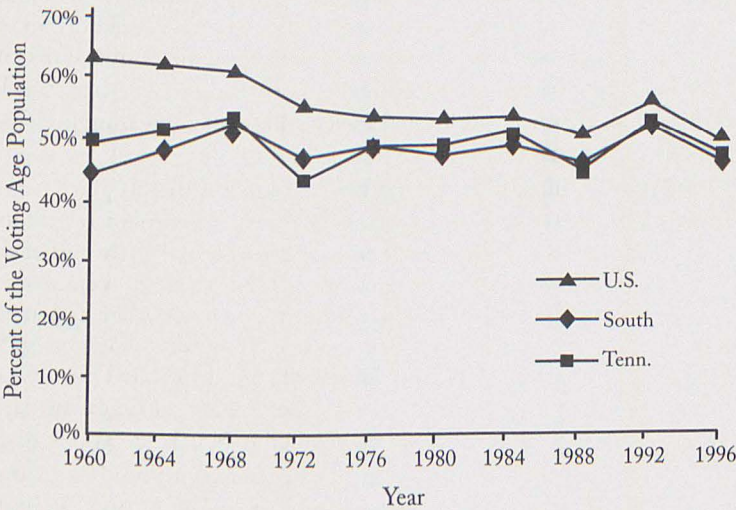
lower levels are characterized by minimal or nonexistent competition. Often, members of Congress and state legislators run unopposed or face poorly funded and badly organized challengers who provide little competition or interest among the constituency.

TURNOUT TRENDS

Turnout in twentieth-century American presidential elections peaked in the 1960 election between Democrat John F. Kennedy and Republican Richard M. Nixon, with 62.8 percent of VAP casting a ballot. As figure 7.1 shows, turnout in presidential elections has declined since 1960. This decline was temporarily halted in 1992 when more than 104 million people voted out of the 189 million eligible to vote. The 55.2 percent turnout rate was the highest since 1972, but this reverse of the downward trend was short-lived. In the 1996 presidential election turnout dropped to the lowest point since 1924.

Figure 7.1

TURNOUT IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS



A curious feature of Southern political culture has been voting turnout that is lower than in the rest of the country.⁸ As figure 7.1 shows, Southern turnout in presidential elections has been as much as 15 percent lower than the nation as a whole. Three factors help explain this phenomenon. First, barriers to minority participation still existed as late as the 1960s. Second, Democratic dominance of the region greatly reduced the number of competitive races that typically mobilize citizens at a greater rate than one-sided contests. Third, the sociodemographic composition of the South, with generally lower income and education

levels, has contributed to lower turnout. The problem has been even more pronounced in midterm elections for congressional and state offices (when the president is not on the ballot). These elections are likely to be less competitive so there is less interest in the campaigns, and many voters may not feel that they have any reason to vote.

In recent years, however, the gap between the national and Southern rates has narrowed to about 5 percent, on average. This development is at least partly explained by an increasingly active and successful Republican Party, which has been able to increase greatly the number of competitive races in the South. For example, with the exception of the 1976 election of President Carter, the South has not given a majority of its electoral votes to a Democratic presidential candidate since 1964.

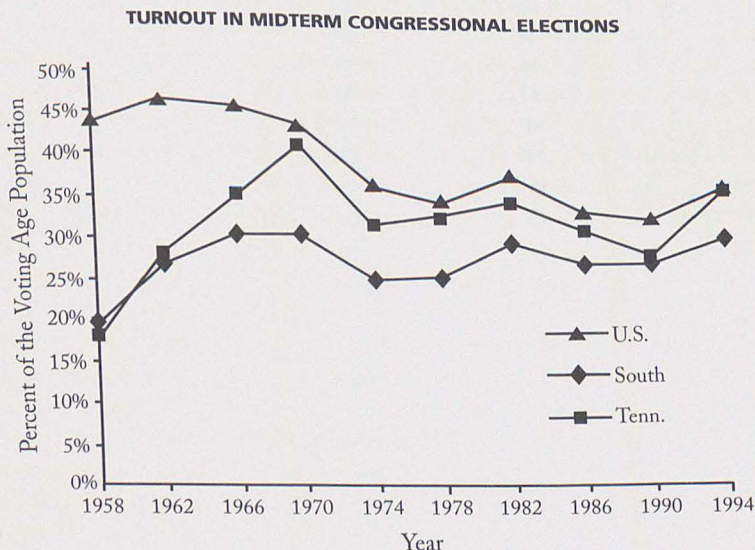
Several other factors have contributed to the narrowing of the turnout gap. First, almost all Southern states have dramatically reduced the barriers to voting. In addition, income and education levels have dramatically increased in the region, and generally wealthier and more educated citizens are more likely to vote. Also, many areas of the South have experienced an increase in urbanization. Because of improved transportation systems, greater mass media exposure, and the expansion of suburban areas, citizens now have greater choices in where and how they live and more information with which to make choices. Further, the migration of non-Southerners into the region has changed the South so that it is more like the rest of the nation in its political culture. Overall, the region is less dominated by a rural, clannish, traditional society that stifled meaningful participation for many in the past.

Since 1960, turnout in Tennessee has hovered around the 50 percent mark for most presidential elections, a level closer to the regional turnout rate than to the rest of the United States. Turnout in Tennessee has been slightly higher than in the rest of the South in all but two elections: 1972 and 1988. Tennesseans appear to have been less than satisfied with the electoral choices they had in each of those years: Richard Nixon (Rep.) versus George McGovern (Dem.) in 1972 and George Bush (Rep.) versus Michael Dukakis (Dem.) in 1988. This indicates that many Southern Democrats may have abstained from participating rather than choosing between a liberal Democrat from the North or Midwest or a Republican. On the other hand, when given a choice between a moderate Southern Democrat (Bill Clinton), a viable independent (Ross Perot), and a Republican (George Bush), Tennesseans were more attracted to the polls, as evidenced by the 1992 turnout rate of 52 percent. In 1996, however, voters in the state did not participate at such a high level; turnout fell to 47.2 percent. This decline may have resulted from three factors: weaker support for third-party candidate Ross Perot; the vigorous health of the economy; and the perceived lack of competitiveness.

As previously discussed, turnout in midterm elections has always been much lower than in presidential elections. As figure 7.2 shows, national turnout rates in midterm elections have not even reached 50 percent in any election during the period studied. Southern turnout has been even worse in that it has rarely

reached even the 30 percent mark. Whereas national turnout in midterm elections has been declining over the last three decades, Southern turnout has been creeping upward. One possible explanation for this increase is the renewed competitiveness of the Republican Party in nonpresidential races in the South. This trend reached new heights in 1994 when the Republicans gained a majority of all congressional seats from Southern states for the first time since Reconstruction.

Figure 7.2



Tennessee turnout has fluctuated somewhat between the low Southern rates and the higher national rates. In the period from 1958 to 1966, Tennessee was similar to the South, but since 1970 the Tennessee trend has generally followed the national pattern. The fluctuation in midterm turnout rates in Tennessee may be largely due to the competitiveness of state elections, which are held at the same time as the midterm congressional elections. For example, in 1990 the incumbent governor, Ned Ray McWherter (Dem.), and the incumbent senator, Al Gore (Dem.), were virtually assured of victory because of the weak opposition they faced, and consequently turnout was much lower than most other recent elections: an anemic 27.9 percent. By comparison, the 1994 election, which featured two competitive races for the U. S. Senate and a highly contested gubernatorial election, had one of the highest turnout rates ever for a midterm election in Tennessee (36.2 percent).

CURRENT ISSUES IN TURNOUT

Recently, several electoral reforms have been suggested to increase turnout by eliminating barriers to participation. One of these reforms, adopted by Tennessee

in 1994, is early voting. This program allows voters to cast a ballot during a two week period prior to any state election. As opposed to absentee balloting, which requires an approved excuse to vote earlier than election day, early voting allows everyone the opportunity to vote prior to election day. Besides offering additional days to vote, early voting also allows for evening and weekend hours as well as using nontraditional voting sites that might be more convenient for voters. Because of this convenience, those citizens who previously found it difficult to participate on election day may turn out at higher rates.

Voter response to early voting has been quite positive. Eleven percent of registered voters used early voting in 1994, and about one in five ballots was cast during the early voting period. In the 1996 election 13 percent of registrants voted early, accounting for 21 percent of all ballots cast. Although these participation rates are similar, the greater turnout in presidential elections means that almost 400,000 Tennesseans cast early ballots in 1996, a 60 percent increase over the 1994 number of 250,503.

Another important development affecting turnout has been the passage of the "motor voter" legislation. This federal law requires states to make voter registration more convenient by providing registration applications at various governmental offices rather than just at the office of the county registrar. In Tennessee, these locations include the Department of Safety (where drivers apply for a license), state public assistance agencies, and public libraries. Because many citizens frequent these sites for other purposes, providing registration materials may increase the number of registrants and perhaps increase turnout.

In Tennessee, there was an immediate change in the normal registration trend following implementation of the National Voter Registration Act in January 1995. Even with the purging of inactive voters (as is the case after every statewide election), there was a 2.05 percent increase in registration in the six-month period from December 1994 to June 1995. This increase compares quite favorably with similar post-midterm election registration figures in the 1990s: a 1.64 percent decrease in June 1993 and a .46 percent decrease in June 1991. In the eighteen month period from January 1995 to June 1996, 284,417 Tennesseans utilized the motor voter registration system. Overall, from November 1994 to November 1996, registration in Tennessee soared from 2,683,422 to 3,055,962, an increase of 14 percent.

PARTISANSHIP IN TENNESSEE

Political parties serve as a mechanism for representing and articulating interests in society by nominating candidates, winning elections, and joining together to form public policy. Since 1860, the political party system in the U.S. has been characterized by two dominant parties: the Democrats and the Republicans. Formed in the 1930s, the New Deal coalition of white Southerners, Jews, urban Catholics, minorities, and unionized workers became the core of the Democratic Party. Generally, the Democrats have believed in governmental intervention in

the economy and a more equitable distribution of societal resources. Republicans have been more focused on a belief in a free market economy and more traditional social values and structures.

With the advance of the civil rights movement in the 1960s came the decline of the New Deal coalition. The Democratic Party's support of civil rights reform alienated many Southern whites. In addition, many conservative Southerners were distraught with the Democratic Party's support of a greater federal role in the economy. While Southern whites no longer sided exclusively with the Democratic Party, they did not immediately switch party allegiance to the Republican Party. Until 1994, a majority of Southern congressional seats went to Democrats in both the U.S. House and Senate. Nevertheless, at the presidential level, Southerners left the Democratic tradition decades before. Even in the 1950s, Dwight Eisenhower, the Republican candidate, broke the "Solid South" by winning several Southern states. Since 1964, only President Carter, a Southern governor, was able to forge a Democratic majority in the South. Similarly, Tennessee has supported the Democratic presidential candidate only five of the last thirteen elections, including President Clinton in 1992 and 1996, when former Tennessee Senator Al Gore was on the ticket as a vice presidential candidate.

TRENDS IN PARTISANSHIP

Why do parties matter? The party affiliation of a political candidate can help provide clues about his or her views and beliefs. Many voters use this cue in selecting a candidate for office. Examining the political party affiliation of elected officials provides some information as to the electorate's public policy preferences. One way to understand the wishes of the voters is to look at the partisan composition of the different electoral bodies, such as the U.S. Congress or state legislatures.

One of the recent changes in Tennessee politics has been the rise of the Republican Party in statewide races. The party first asserted its strength in presidential contests. The Republicans gained a majority of votes for a presidential candidate as early as 1952, with President Eisenhower receiving 50.1 percent of the popular vote. Since then, only the Southern Democrats Johnson, Carter, and Clinton have won in Tennessee.

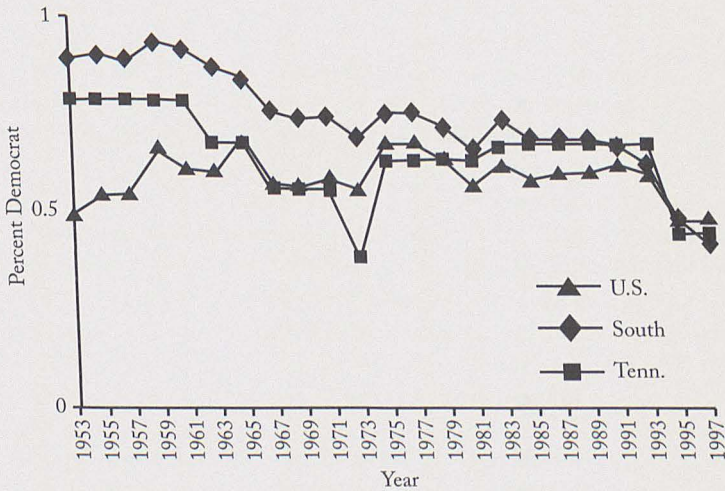
The Republican Party has also made gains in subpresidential elections in Tennessee. Since electing Howard Baker to the U.S. Senate in 1966, the voters have sent a Republican to the Senate in six of the eleven elections, including current Senators Bill Frist and Fred Thompson. In that same time period, the Republicans have also won four out of the eight gubernatorial elections, including Don Sundquist's victory in 1994.

These victories for statewide offices, however, have not been easily converted into electoral success within the Tennessee General Assembly or the Tennessee delegation to the U.S. House of Representatives. The Democrats have controlled a majority of the Tennessee seats in the U.S. House every year since 1953, except for 1973 to 1975 and the two sessions of Congress since 1994 (see

figure 7.3). Until 1963, the Tennessee House delegation was similar to the rest of the South with a preponderance of Democrats. From 1963 until 1981, however, Tennessee was more similar to the rest of the nation than the South. Since 1981, the differences between the nation, the South, and Tennessee have been less pronounced. Indeed, the success of the Republicans in Tennessee and the rest of the South helped propel the Republicans into majority status after the 1994 election.

Figure 7.3

PERCENT DEMOCRAT IN THE U.S. HOUSE



While the Democrats have long maintained control of both chambers of the state legislature, Republicans have enjoyed more success in Tennessee than in much of the South. As figure 7.4 shows, the Tennessee Senate has generally exhibited a pattern more similar to the rest of the nation than to other Southern states. Although the Tennessee Senate has been controlled by the Democrats for decades, the dominance is nowhere near the level exhibited in the typical upper chamber in the South.

It is important to point out, however, that the Democratic grip has weakened in both Tennessee and the South over the last decade. Indeed, the Democrats lost control of the Tennessee Senate during the fall of 1995 when two Democrats switched to the Republican Party. Although this partisan switch did not make much difference from an ideological perspective, it gave the Republicans control of another political institution in Tennessee. The Republican control of the Senate was short-lived, however, with control returning to the

Figure 7.4

PERCENT DEMOCRAT IN THE UPPER STATE HOUSE

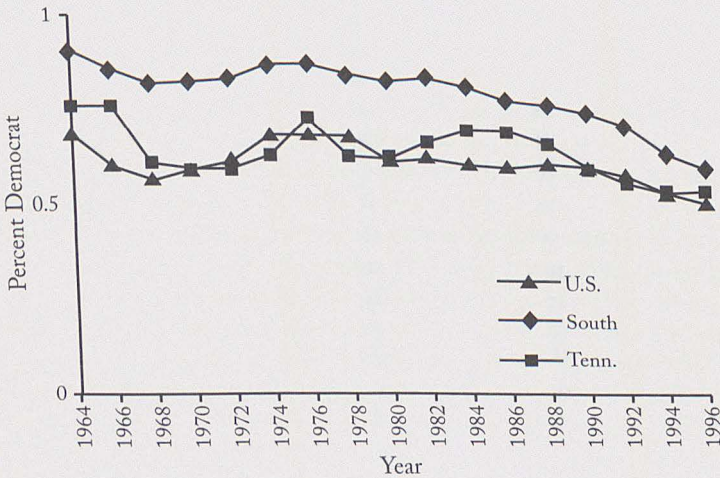
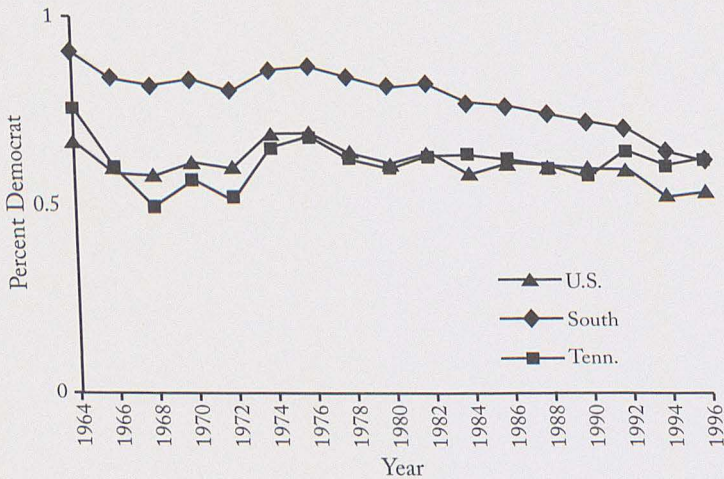


Figure 7.5

PERCENT DEMOCRAT IN THE LOWER STATE HOUSE



Democrats following the 1996 election in which they captured eighteen of the thirty-three Senate seats.

As one can see in figure 7.5, a similar pattern for Tennessee, the South, and the nation holds for lower state legislative chambers. The South has been far

more Democratic than the rest of the nation, including Tennessee, though the Democrats nationwide have been losing lower state house seats. The Tennessee House, however, has been much more competitive than the typical Southern lower chamber since the 1960s, looking much like the rest of the nation. The major event boosting the Democratic profile over the last couple of decades was the influx of new Democrats into the chamber as a result of the Watergate scandal involving Republican Richard Nixon. Like much of the rest of the nation, Democrats gained seats in the Tennessee House in 1974, and since then they have maintained a comfortable majority. After the 1996 election, the Democrats controlled 61 out of the 99 House seats, an increase of two seats over 1994.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN PARTISANSHIP WITHIN TENNESSEE

Regional political cultures within the state have an enormous effect on partisan success rates in Tennessee. Historically, the Democratic Party has dominated statewide elections, but Democrats have not dominated at the local level in all parts of the state. As V. O. Key pointed out, "The peculiar form of the coalitions and combinations that struggle for control of the state grow out of geographical diversity and the powerful influences of long-past events on the voting behavior of its citizens".⁹

While Democrats have typically won statewide offices by dominating Middle and West Tennessee, Republicans have enjoyed great success in electing local officials and state legislators in East Tennessee. Key and others have noted that the roots of these partisan differences emerged in the prevailing economic systems of each region prior to the Civil War. The topography and soil of each region largely determined the agricultural systems that could be used. The mountainous eastern region, with poor soil conditions, could not sustain plantation farming and its system of slave labor. Therefore, the eastern region had few slaves and was pro-Union during the Civil War. It retained its pro-Lincoln stance by supporting the Republican Party after the war.

The impact of terrain and soil conditions has continued to affect the farming economy of all three regions. The western region of Tennessee benefits from the fertile soil and more tillable land of the Mississippi river flood plain, which allows large-scale production agriculture. As a result, the value of farm products sold annually per county in West Tennessee averages \$27 million as compared to \$15 million per county in Middle Tennessee and \$13 million for each eastern county. This type of agriculture currently relies largely on mechanized farming implements, but in the past it required a huge labor force. Until the Civil War, this need was met by the slave economy. This dependence on slave labor explains the overwhelming support for the Confederacy and the vote to secede from the Union in 1861. It also helps to explain the current racial composition of the state: East, 93 percent white; Middle, 87 percent; and West, 65 percent. Given the strong tendency for African Americans to support the Democratic Party, much of the Democrats' support in the western region could be attributed to the large minority population.

Another factor influencing regional political differences has been population growth. Population changes have been unique in each of the grand divisions. West Tennessee has experienced little growth in the twentieth century, and it has even lost population between 1980 and 1990. In comparison, Middle Tennessee has grown by 70 percent since 1900, and the eastern region has expanded by 151 percent during this time. In the 1980s, Middle Tennessee experienced 7 percent growth, and the East grew by 4 percent.

Because of the values, ideologies, and partisan attachments new residents may bring with them, it is also important to look at the source of this growth. According to the 1990 census, Middle Tennessee has experienced a greater in-migration of residents from outside the state than the other two regions. In addition, about 10 percent of Middle Tennessee's residents have moved in from other parts of the state, nearly double the rate of intrastate migration to West Tennessee. Indeed, the Nashville-Davidson County metro area surpassed the Memphis-Shelby County metro area in population during 1995. These recent changes in the demographic composition of the regions may have profound effects on partisanship.

PARTISANSHIP IN RECENT ELECTIONS

As the previous section suggests, regional variation is an important characteristic of Tennessee politics. In addition, the earlier discussion of partisan trends suggests that major changes in electoral competition have taken place over the last few decades. (See chapter 1 for a detailed discussion of the events surrounding several salient campaigns.) While the state as a whole is no longer dominated by the Democratic Party and many Republican candidates have enjoyed statewide success, regional differences persist. In recent elections, Tennessee resembled the rest of the nation in its partisan preferences. The state gave its eleven electors to Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton in 1992, and the U.S. House and Senate delegations were dominated by the Democrats. In 1994, however, the state elected a Republican governor, two Republican senators, and five Republicans among the nine U.S. representatives from the state. In 1996, Tennessee supported divided government: Clinton won the state's electoral votes, and the Republicans retained both of Tennessee's U.S. Senate seats and the majority of U.S. House seats.

The 1996 presidential election and the 1994 gubernatorial election illustrate a stark contrast in the ability of each party to garner votes in the different regions of the state. As the maps displayed in figures 7.6 and 7.7 show, there is tremendous variation in the pattern of partisanship across the state. Each of the maps shows the percent of the county vote supporting the Democratic candidate: figure 6 displays the support for the presidential candidate Bill Clinton in 1996, and figure 7 shows the percent of the vote for the gubernatorial candidate Phil Bredesen in 1994.¹⁰

As the map of the 1996 election shows, Clinton received overwhelming support among those casting a ballot for one of the two major party candidates.

Figure 7.6

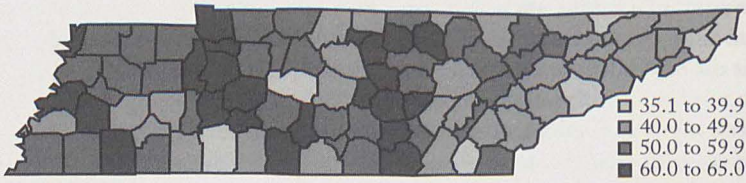
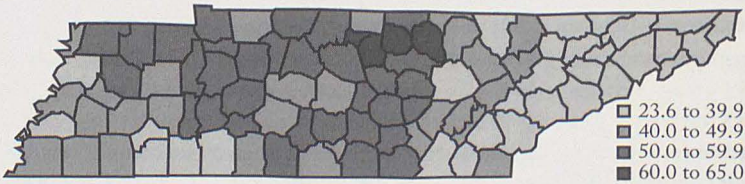
PERCENT DEMOCRAT VOTE, 1996

Figure 7.7

PERCENT DEMOCRAT VOTE, 1994

Clinton won a majority of the two-party votes in fifty-seven of the ninety-five Tennessee counties. Of the most heavily Democratic counties (above 60 percent of the two-party vote), five were in the West, none were in the East, and 18 were in the Middle Division. A vast majority of the thirty-eight counties won by the Republican candidate Robert Dole were in the East region. No doubt the Democrats performed particularly well in the 1992 and 1996 election in Tennessee partly because of the presence of Al Gore, a native Tennessean, on the ballot, and Clinton himself is a Southern Democrat. Nevertheless, those elections reflect the current conventional wisdom that East Tennessee is the stronghold of the Republican Party, and Middle Tennessee provides the bulk of the Democratic votes.

While the 1996 contest shows where a successful Democratic candidate can draw support, the 1994 map illustrates the division of party preferences among Tennesseans in a midterm election. The Republican sweep of the major offices and the pickup of two House seats in 1994 can only be matched by the period from 1973 to 1975, when the Republicans controlled both Senate seats, the Governor's office, and five of the eight U.S. House seats from the state.

Despite this Republican success, figure 7.7 shows that much of the traditional pattern of partisanship persists, albeit in a reduced form for the Democrats. Phil Bredesen, the Nashville mayor and Democratic gubernatorial candidate, was not able to gain a majority of votes in even one East Tennessee county.

The East region was by far the most solid in its support of the Republican gubernatorial candidate, Don Sundquist. As in the 1996 election, the Democrats performed best in the Middle division. The only four counties to give more than 60 percent of the county vote to the Democratic candidate were in middle Tennessee. Further, of the thirty-five counties in which the Democratic candidate won a majority, thirty were in the central region.

The Republican candidate also performed quite well in the western region with five counties providing at least a 60 percent share of the vote and an additional eleven counties giving a majority to the Republican. In viewing the Republican gains in the western region, however, it is important to point out that Don Sundquist represented a congressional district from that region for twelve years. Overall, West Tennessee appears to be the most politically volatile. Given the more enduring party allegiance of voters in the other two divisions, the partisanship of voters in the western region may well be the deciding factor in future statewide elections.

CONCLUSION

The most striking feature of Tennessee elections over the last thirty years has been the rise of the Republican Party. This renewed vitality has had a profound effect not only on the partisan landscape of Tennessee but also on citizens' electoral participation. Increased competition has redefined how elections are conducted and has also led to greater participation by voters who may have previously felt they had no real choices in state elections. Tennessee no longer resembles the closed political system that characterized Southern states in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, the contemporary Tennessee electoral system appears more like the rest of the nation in both turnout rates and partisanship.

Without the limitations of a one-party system, political parties have a greater motivation for mobilizing voters, and citizens should find it easier to express their views. Much of the potential for increased turnout lies in the increased opportunities for participation afforded by such reforms as early voting and motor voter laws. These policies can continue to ameliorate barriers to electoral participation by reducing the costs imposed on voters, especially those who may have found those costs insurmountable.