

## *Tennessee: Advantage Republicans*

Robert Swansbrough and David Brodsky

In 2004, Tennessee failed to receive the national attention it enjoyed in the three prior presidential elections. In 1992, the governor of neighboring Arkansas, Bill Clinton, selected Tennessee's popular Senator Al Gore as his vice presidential running mate, and together they successfully challenged President George H.W. Bush. Clinton won Tennessee's electoral votes, but captured only a 47 percent plurality of the popular vote in the three-way race; Bush received 42 percent of Tennessee's votes, while independent Ross Perot took the balance. Four years later, the Clinton-Gore ticket won reelection against the lackluster campaign of Senator Bob Dole. Tennessee's electoral votes went to the Democratic presidential ticket, but Clinton again failed to win a majority of the ballots cast in November 1996 (winning a plurality of 48.0 percent to Dole's 45.6 percent with Ross Perot winning 5.6 percent). (See generally Swansbrough and Brodsky 1997; Brodsky and Swansbrough 2002.)

Republican strategists believed an attractive presidential candidate in 2000 would help solidify the GOP's dominance in the Volunteer State. Specifically, the party leaders hoped a strong candidate's coattails would fuel the election of a Republican majority in the state Senate, an outcome which would then give the Republicans control of one house in the state legislature, the governorship, two U.S. senators and a majority (5-4) of the state's congressional delegation.

The narrowness of the Clinton-Gore 1996 Tennessee victory encouraged Texas Governor George W. Bush's 2000 campaign to expend considerable money and effort in the Volunteer State. In contrast, although Gore located his national presidential campaign headquarters in Nashville, his advisers focused their campaign efforts in other battlefield states, including Florida. Ironically, Vice President Gore lost his home state's eleven Electoral College votes, votes that would have elected Gore president of the United States *without* Florida's electoral votes! Although the Bush-Cheney team won a 51 percent majority of the Volunteer State's popular votes, the Tennessee General Assembly remained in Democratic hands.

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ROBERT H. SWANSBROUGH is professor of political Science at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. DAVID M. BRODSKY is the Dalton Roberts Professor of Public Administration at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

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President George W. Bush's 2000 victory over Gore led Tennessee Republicans to believe the state had moved into the Republican column. Despite the narrow 2002 election of the former Mayor of Nashville, conservative-leaning Democratic businessman Phil Bredesen as governor, White House planning for Bush's 2004 reelection assumed the Volunteer State's momentum toward the GOP could be maintained and even accelerated in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

## **The Presidential Race**

### **Setting the Stage**

A December 4-8, 2003, Tennessee Poll of 400 likely voters, conducted statewide by Mason-Dixon Polling & Research, Inc., illuminated the setting for the 2004 presidential race (Mason-Dixon Polling and Research 2003). Over three-fifths (61 percent) of Tennessee respondents rated President George W. Bush's overall job performance as either Excellent or Good, with only 38 percent describing Bush's performance as Fair or Poor. While Volunteer State respondents looked favorably upon President Bush, Democratic Governor Phil Bredesen—after only one year in office—received an even higher job performance rating of 72 percent Excellent or Good scores, with only 19 percent Fair or Poor evaluations.

In a December trial election poll between George W. Bush and an unnamed Democratic opponent, Bush gained 52 percent statewide support compared with 37 percent backing for a Democratic presidential candidate. However, a gender gap existed with women, where 8 percent fewer women than men backed Bush's reelection. Significantly, 60 percent of the Tennessee respondents stated they were Very or Somewhat confident the Bush administration would make the right decisions regarding the situation in Iraq.

### **Front-Loading the Democratic Party**

The 2000 Democratic and Republican primaries in Tennessee occurred on March 14, after the parties had determined their respective nominees. In order to obtain more national media attention, gain a greater voice in the selection of the party's nominee, and attract more presidential candidates to the Volunteer State, the Tennessee Democratic Party's leadership decided to ask the General Assembly to schedule the primary elections one month earlier, on February 10, 2004.

The change appeared to have its desired effect as advancing the Democratic primary date to the same day as the Virginia primary enticed Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, North Carolina Senator John Edwards, retired

four-star general Wesley Clark, and Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich to stump for votes in the Volunteer State. As House Democratic Caucus Chairman Randy Rinks, who helped push the successful bill through the state legislature, noted during the spirited 2004 Democratic primary contest that “a lot of money [is] being spent in Tennessee” (Humphrey 2004a, 1).

### **The Primary Campaign**

The state’s Republicans kicked off their Bush-Cheney reelection campaign at a January 12 rally led by Bush’s designated Tennessee co-chairs, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist and Senator Lamar Alexander, a former Tennessee governor. Senator Alexander declared that, although “Tennessee has always been a competitive state. . . . I expect him [George W. Bush] to carry the state.” But the senator added, “we’re not taking anything for granted” (de la Cruz 2004a, 8). Senator Frist stressed the president’s record and vision, arguing that Bush’s values and moral vision matched that of Tennesseans.

Tennessee Democratic Chairman Randy Button quickly fired back, “President Bush does have a record. It’s of failed jobs in Tennessee with 67,000 lost jobs under the Bush administration” (de la Cruz 2004a, 8). Giving a preview of the national campaign, Button also hit the Republican administration for its record of “a failed health plan” and dishonesty.

The southerners General Clark and Senator Edwards vigorously sought the support of Tennessee’s Democratic primary voters. Clark emphasized his childhood in neighboring Little Rock, Arkansas, and his attendance at Castle Heights Military Academy in Lebanon, Tennessee, during his sophomore year of high school. Clark told a reporter, “I think we’re doing well in Tennessee. I went to school there. I have friends there. It’s a natural fit” (de la Cruz 2004b, 2).

Clark decided to skip the Iowa caucus, so Tennessee afforded him an early target of opportunity to showcase his appeal in the South. He made a major commitment in Tennessee, beginning his TV and radio advertising on December 31, 2003, before the start of early voting on January 21. Clark established a staff of sixteen in Tennessee and made four political trips to the Volunteer State before the January 27 New Hampshire primary. Since only his campaign was putting money into Tennessee, Clark maintained, “We want to win more” (de la Cruz 2004b, 2). The general added, “I represent values and priorities more Tennesseans agree with.”

A January 28-29, 2004, Mason-Dixon Tennessee Poll, conducted on behalf of the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* and Nashville’s *The Tennessean*, included 400 registered voters; it also over-sampled likely Democratic presidential primary voters. The poll found that after reading the names of

Democratic candidates to 313 likely primary voters, John Kerry enjoyed 94 percent name recognition, John Edwards 89 percent, Wesley Clark 93 percent, Joe Lieberman 96 percent, and Howard Dean 98 percent. Kerry enjoyed a positive ratio of 50 percent favorable to 11 percent negative ratings among Tennessee Democrats. In comparison, Wesley Clark received 43 percent favorable to 13 percent negative scores while John Edwards received 41 percent favorable to 8 percent negative ratings. Only Howard Dean received more unfavorable (29 percent) than favorable (25 percent) ratings.

A trial primary election among likely Tennessee Democratic voters found Kerry leading the pack (31 percent), followed by Clark (22 percent) and Edwards (13 percent). Former Vermont Governor Howard Dean (7 percent), Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman (6 percent), and Al Sharpton (3 percent) trailed behind. Kerry had clearly established himself as the front-runner in Tennessee by virtue of his come-from-behind victory in Iowa, followed by the New Hampshire primary win.

In trial heats against the incumbent, including all respondents, Bush won over Kerry 47 percent to 43 percent, defeated Clark 49 percent to 40 percent and beat Edwards 48 percent to 39 percent. President Bush swept the early match-ups, boosted by his 56 percent positive overall job performance rating.

Senator Edwards brought his “Two Americas” campaign theme to Tennessee, encouraged after winning the February 3rd South Carolina primary. During a Memphis visit, Edwards challenged President Bush’s southern appeal, “The South is not George Bush’s backyard: it’s my backyard. And I will beat George Bush in my backyard” (Sullivan 2004a, 1). On February 4 the North Carolina senator’s campaign began running TV ads in the Volunteer State, one day before the close of early voting, stressing his support for civil rights and opposition to poverty. He declared during an appearance, “The truth is that we live in a country where there are really still two different Americas. . . . One for all those families who have whatever they need whenever they need it, and then the one for everybody else” (Sullivan 2004a, 1).

After a narrow victory in the February 3rd Oklahoma primary, Clark intensified his make-or-break Tennessee efforts. His Little Rock headquarters staff volunteered to forgo their pay for one week to bolster his TV ad campaign and direct mailings in Tennessee. His spokesperson Carol Andrews stated, “General Clark will spend 75 percent of his time in Tennessee through February 10, and our Tennessee staff has been increased by more than 30 staffers across the state” (Callahan 2004, 1).

Howard Dean’s campaign never took off in Tennessee, despite Al Gore’s well publicized December 9, 2003, endorsement. Dean state spokesperson Deb McCarver expressed the disappointment of his Tennessee

workers that neither Dean's national campaign nor Gore helped their efforts. Kerry supporter state Senator Steve Cohen asserted, "People don't feel Al Gore's still a Tennessean" (de la Cruz 2004c, 1). But Tennessee Democratic Congressman Lincoln Davis, who backed General Clark, observed, "I think it has more to do with how Dean is running his campaign than with who's supporting him" (de la Cruz 2004c, 2).

Even though Senator Kerry led the Democratic contenders after New Hampshire, he rarely visited the Volunteer State. Kerry's February 7 rally at Belmont University, only days before the February 10 primary, was his first trip to the state since April 2003 (de la Cruz and Bivins 2004, 2). Nevertheless, Kerry told a reporter, "I'm serious about Tennessee, and I hope my chances are good." The Massachusetts senator described himself in terms to attract southern voters, "I'm mainstream, a Democrat talking common sense to the American people" (de la Cruz 2004d, 2). Kerry began running his TV advertising in Tennessee on February 5, five days prior to the primary. When General Clark hit Senators Kerry and Edwards for supporting President Bush's Leave No Child Behind education bill, Kerry responded, "I'm sorry the general has chosen to run a negative campaign" (de la Cruz 2004d, 2).

At Senator Kerry's Belmont University rally, former governor Ned McWherter declared, "I believe he is the Democrat who can stand toe-to-toe with George W. Bush and win the presidency. . . . I love Tennessee, and I believe he's the person for Tennessee and Tennesseans" (Humphrey 2004a, 1). Congressman Harold Ford, the first major Tennessee office holder who endorsed Kerry, introduced the candidate. "I can tell you that someone who hunts, who has three purple hearts and earned a Silver and a Bronze Star—he understands the needs of the South better than the president in Washington does."

Clark stepped up his attacks in the closing days before the primary, desperately seeking a second-place finish to keep his campaign alive. While in Tennessee, the general charged that Senator Kerry was a Washington insider. "Sen. Kerry is part of the inside Washington politics-as-usual crowd" (de la Cruz and Bivins 2004, 2). Clark likewise blasted Senator Edwards as no friend of veterans. "When it came to deciding between the special interests and our veterans, Sen. Edwards blinked. He didn't support our veterans."

Senator Edwards drove his Strengthening American Jobs bus from southwest Virginia to Knoxville, while his wife Elizabeth campaigned in Morristown and Memphis. Senator Kerry's wife Teresa spoke with environmentalists at the University of Tennessee College of Law and later spoke to Kerry supporters in Chattanooga.

Governor Bredesen, keynoting the annual Kefauver Dinner at the Chattanooga Choo Choo, stated, "If there's one difference [on campaigning in

the South] I would offer someone from Massachusetts or Vermont, it's that I think Tennesseans are more interested in character" (O'Neal and Newmyer 2004, 1). Although invited to the Kefauver dinner, Senators Kerry and Edwards, General Clark, and Rev. Sharpton all instead decided to attend the Virginia Jefferson Jackson Dinner in Richmond.

The state party staged a Nashville Democratic rally featuring Governor Bredesen on the evening of February 8, 2004, to capitalize on the Democratic governor's popularity. House Speaker Jimmy Naifeh acknowledged, "A person with a favorability rating as high as his, and the job he is doing, yes, he will have an impact on the presidential election in November" (Gang and Commins 2004, 1). Bredesen's spokeswoman Lydia Lenker affirmed that even though the governor held back from a presidential endorsement in the primary, he would campaign for the Democratic nominee. She added, "Clearly, the governor's popularity will energize the party base as well as sway independent and Republican voters to take a second look at the Democratic Party."

The pre-election statewide Democratic rally honored former vice president Al Gore, former governor Ned McWherter, and former Senator and Ambassador Jim Sasser. Gore charged that in the prior three years, "the truth has taken a beating from this administration. . . . In the last three years, we have seen the politics of fear rear its ugly head again" (Schrade 2004, 1). Only Senator Edwards and General Clark attended the Nashville rally.

In the final days of the Tennessee Democratic primary, Senator Edwards explained his strategy. "What I need to do is be competitive in Tennessee. We're rapidly approaching this becoming a two-man race and if it's between the two of us, I believe I can be the nominee" (Locker 2004a, 1). Edwards' pollster Harrison Hickman told reporters earlier that Edwards' goal was a second-place finish to Kerry in Tennessee and Virginia, although they would prefer a win (Humphrey 2004a, 1). Edwards campaigned in Middle Tennessee at a Morrison Carrier air-conditioning plant that had just announced plans to close, throwing 1,300 people out of work, while shipping jobs to Mexico (Humphrey 2004b, 7). He visited the state seven times, including the full week before the February 10 primary. Clark had spent every day but one during the prior week campaigning in Tennessee, spending about \$1 million on campaign ads.

Kerry returned to the state for an election eve rally in Memphis, hitting President Bush's stewardship of the economy with a just released government economic report. "More than 56,000 jobs have been lost in Tennessee since the beginning of the Bush administration, including 5,300 during the month of December alone" (Sullivan 2004b, 1).

Senator Kerry clearly held the frontrunner's position, entering the Tennessee primary with ten out of twelve wins in other states. A MSNBC/

Reuters/Zogby poll on February 9 found Kerry leading in Tennessee with 35 percent of the Democratic vote, Edwards 21 percent, Clark 19 percent and Dean at 6 percent. (Humphrey 2004b, 1). A SurveyUSA poll for WBIR TV, Channel 10, showed Kerry with 35 percent, Edwards 25 percent, Clark at 24 percent and Dean with 9 percent. (Humphrey 2004b, 1) Senator Edwards and General Clark hoped for second-place standing in the Volunteer State to shore up their southern vote-getting credentials.

### **And the Winner Is**

State Election Coordinator Brook Thompson said 367,849 Tennesseans voted in the Democratic primary, about 100,000 more than in the March 14, 2000, primary (Humphrey 2004c). One in four (104,602 voters) cast their ballots through either early or absentee voting (Sullivan 2004b, 1).

Senator Kerry won the primary with 41 percent of the vote and 31 Democratic convention delegates. Edwards finished second with 26 percent of the vote and 20 Tennessee delegates while Clark ended with a disappointing third place standing of 23 percent and 18 delegates. Howard Dean, the Reverend Al Sharpton, and Congressman Dennis Kucinich finished in single digits and failed to win any delegates.

An Associated Press exit poll in Tennessee, conducted by Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International, provides some clues about the factors motivating Democratic primary voters. More than four-fifths of the Democratic voters expressed anger or dissatisfaction with President Bush, and nearly a third of the primary voters felt the most important quality for a Democratic candidate was the ability to defeat Bush in November (Associated Press 2004). Almost half of the exit poll respondents said their financial situations had gotten worse over the last four years. About four-out-of-ten Tennessee Democratic voters felt the economy and jobs were the most important issues, while over two-thirds disapproved of the war in Iraq.

Not quite two-thirds of Tennessee Democrats who wanted a candidate who could defeat Bush in the general election gave their votes to John Kerry (Lester 2004). Kerry received the votes of four-out-of-ten Democrats who listed health care as their top concern, while Edwards got the support of over one-third of those who pointed to the economy and jobs as their major worry. General Clark drew more support among voters identifying national security and the Iraq war as their key issues. Significantly, Kerry won almost half of the African-American vote.

Although Wes Clark did better in Tennessee's primary than in Virginia, where he received only 9 percent of the votes, his third-place finish led the general to withdraw from the presidential race the following day. Bill Fletcher, whose Nashville consulting firm worked with Clark's campaign,

looked back at Senator Kerry's momentum from his Iowa and New Hampshire's victories as turning around the Massachusetts senator's electoral prospects in Tennessee in the prior month. "We had Clark at 30 percent here. Kerry went from under 5 percent to where he wound up last night—just since New Hampshire" (Humphrey 2004c, 1). Indeed, the Associated Press exit poll indicated that half of Tennessee's Democratic voters decided on their primary candidate in the last week, including almost one-third who chose their candidate in the final three days, underscoring the fluidity of the party's electorate (Associated Press 2004). Fletcher described the impact of the national context of the media's drumbeat of Kerry as the winner upon Tennessee, "The electorate is like a hog on ice. Once you get started in one direction, it's very hard to turn around" (Humphrey 2004c, 1).

### **The Quiet General Election**

The Bush campaign hoped to get a jump on Senator Kerry before he could crystallize his image and favorably frame the issues. Consequently, the GOP launched a March TV add blitz in fifteen of the sixteen marginal states the President had either won or lost by 5 percent or less of the vote in 2000. The media buy excluded Tennessee, perhaps a sign of the campaign's confidence in the President's ability to again carry the Volunteer State.

On April 19 the Republican National Committee hosted a \$1,000 a plate fundraiser in Chattanooga featuring Vice President Dick Cheney. David Kustoff, the Bush-Cheney campaign's general chairman, emphasized Tennessee was as important to President Bush's reelection as in 2000 when "our state made a difference; 2004 is no different" (Gang 2004a, 1). On April 23 First Lady Laura Bush visited Memphis to highlight the administration's "Striving to Read" program, followed by a luncheon hosted by the CEO of Saks Inc., Brad Martin (Donahue and Kelly 2004). The Republican National Committee collected \$800,000 from the two Tennessee fundraising events (de la Cruz 2004e). President Bush visited Nashville on May 27 to speak at Vanderbilt University on medical technology. A Nashville RNC fundraiser that evening featuring the president raised \$1.7 million (de la Cruz 2004e).

After the conclusion of the Democratic and Republican conventions, the Mason-Dixon Tennessee Poll conducted a statewide survey (September 11-14, 2004) and found President Bush leading Senator Kerry 53 percent to 37 percent among registered and likely voters, with Nader getting an insignificant 1 percent and 9 percent undecided. Bush received solid majorities in historically Republican East Tennessee (59 percent to 39 percent) and in traditionally Democratic Middle Tennessee (52 percent to Kerry's 40 percent). Only in West Tennessee did his support fall below 50 percent (46 percent to 40 percent).



These findings led Brad Coker, managing director of Mason-Dixon Polling and Research, to declare, “At this point, I wouldn’t consider Tennessee a battleground state.... With 16 points, it’s probably out of reach at this point. Kerry will look at these numbers, and he will go elsewhere” (Commins 2004a, 1). But Bob Tuke, the Kerry campaign’s Tennessee finance chairman, asserted a surge of newly registered voters would close the race. “There are 200,000 new voters in Tennessee, and we believe they are going to vote for Kerry.”

Statewide (in the Mason-Dixon poll), President Bush received 57 percent Excellent or Good ratings for his overall job performance, with men (61 percent) more enthusiastic about his performance than women (53 percent). Homeland security and the war on terror (29 percent) represented the issues most influential on the voting decisions of Tennesseans, followed closely the economy and jobs (26 percent). Fifty two percent of the respondents approved of the decision to go to war in Iraq while 55 percent felt the President would do a better job than John Kerry (34 percent) handling the war. President Bush led Senator Kerry on questions asking who would do the better job handling terrorism and homeland security (60 percent to 33 percent) or handling the economy and unemployment (49 percent to 41 percent).

Democratic Governor Phil Bredesen maintained a 69 percent Excellent or Good job performance evaluation, bolstering Democratic hopes the governor’s popularity could counter the coattails of President Bush. Indeed, 60 percent of respondents (66 percent of all men) approved Governor Bredesen’s efforts to reform TennCare, the state’s struggling health care program.

Spokesmen for both the Bush and Kerry campaigns stressed their early plans for the final grass-roots Get-Out-The-Vote efforts. Ralph Reed of Georgia, Bush’s Southeast regional coordinator, explained, “We’re building an organization that goes all the way down to the county and precinct level all across the country” (Sher 2004a, 1). Bob Davis, deputy chairman of the state’s Republican Party, emphasized Tennessee would implement the national GOP’s “72-hour program,” a major final push to mobilize Bush voters. Tennessee’s Democratic chair Randy Button expressed optimism about his party’s game plan. “We’re trying to pinpoint the pockets of persuadable voters and also Democratic voters in every county and legislative district that’s competitive across the state.”

Bush’s Tennessee general chairman, David Kustoff, scoffed at Democratic musings that Tennessee’s ticket-splitting would help other Democratic candidates on the ballot. “While Tennesseans will not automatically elect any Republican on the ballot, it takes a special type of Democrat to carry the day statewide in Tennessee. John Kerry does not fit the mold. He is too liberal” (Humphrey 2004d, 4). Democrat Congressman Lincoln Davis argued

that Governor Bredesen's draw would be stronger than that of President Bush, since Bredesen's coattails were "strong, broad and easy to hold on to," while Bush's coattails were "like a screwdriver covered with grease" that slips easily out of one's grasp. Congressman Harold Ford of Memphis, Kerry's national co-chairman, claimed the forthcoming presidential debates would help Kerry's candidacy. He admitted, though, that "John Kerry has experienced some problems articulating his message and getting it heard" (Carroll 2004, 1).

By the end of September, the absence of aired television ads by either the Bush or Kerry campaigns indicated Tennessee no longer fell into the national "battleground" category. Kerry's Tennessee chair Bob Tuke, denying the Democratic contender had conceded Bush the Volunteer State, revealed that Kerry's campaign would run a TV ad by Music Row Democrats, probably in Davidson, Knox and Hamilton counties, targeted "where we need to get out the vote" (Davis 2004, 1). But Kustoff, Bush's chairman, declared, "It appears that John Kerry is treating Tennessee like the rest of the Southern United States—as a write-off."

The University of Tennessee Social Science Research Institute released a poll on October 24 showing President Bush with a 17-point lead over Senator Kerry, 54 percent to 37 percent. This finding of the survey, conducted between October 5-20, led the director of the Institute, Michael Gant, to conclude "for all intents and purposes, the presidential election is all but over in Tennessee" (Humphrey 2004e, 1). Almost two-thirds (65 percent) of the respondents indicated they watched at least one presidential debate, and 41 percent of them picked Kerry as the debate winner while 25 percent gave Bush the edge. Unfortunately for Kerry, only 2 percent of the Tennessee respondents said the debates had changed their mind, while 73 percent said the debates made no difference.

On October 24th the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* and *The Tennessean* published the final Mason-Dixon Tennessee Poll of registered, likely voters (the poll was conducted during October 19-21). The survey found President Bush ahead by 12 points, 53 percent to 41 percent. Although Kerry picked up some points among undecided voters, pollster Brad Coker affirmed that Tennessee "is in the Bush column" (Gang 2004b, 1). A hefty 92 percent of the respondents said they had watched at least one of the presidential debates, with 50 percent stating the debate had no effect on their voting choice and 37 percent saying it reinforced their previous voting decision. An equal number of respondents (38 percent) called themselves either Democrats or Republicans, with 24 percent labeling themselves Independents.

A final Republican two-day bus tour throughout GOP East Tennessee became entangled in the upcoming fight to secure the party's nomination to

fill the U.S. Senate seat left open by Majority Leader Bill Frist’s decision not to run for reelection in 2006. Suzie Alcorn, a Nashville GOP operative and supporter of Chattanooga Mayor Bob Corker, wore a Corker for Senate sticker on the bus (Sher 2004d, 1). Other GOP hopefuls used this as an opportunity to rap Corker’s early organizational efforts. Former congressman Ed Bryant, who lost a 2002 Senate primary race to Lamar Alexander, declared, “My concern right now is not about this Senate race but about the president and our statewide Republicans” (Sher 2004c, 1).

Mayor Corker’s spokesperson emphasized he had not scheduled senatorial campaign events before the presidential election. Corker had held two fundraising events in his home for President Bush’s father and First Lady Laura Bush. Van Hillary, the losing GOP gubernatorial candidate in 2002, declared, “My efforts are focused on electing President Bush, helping Republicans take over the state Senate and gain seat in the state House.” Representative Marsha Blackburn and the state’s Republican Party Chairman Beth Harwell made similar statements.

**Results and Analysis: Turnout**

A record 1.1 million Tennesseans took advantage of the state’s early voting period, October 13 to October 28. The high early-ballot turnout not only eclipsed the 2000 election record of 747,753 it also previewed the high turnout on Election Day. Almost two and a half million (2,437,319) Tennesseans cast ballots in the 2004 presidential race, a 17.4 percent increase from just over two million (2,076,155) in 2000 (Table 1). The 2000 presidential election saw turnout increase in each of the Volunteer State’s three grand divisions, a pattern repeated in 2004. The increases in turnout ranged from 13.6 percent (74,518 voters) in West Tennessee to 16.6 percent (127,733

**Table 1. Presidential Vote by Tennessee Region, 2000 and 2004**

Region (Counties)	2000		2004		Change in Turnout	
	Number	Percent of Votes Cast	Number	Percent of Votes Cast	Number	Percent
West (21)	548,306	26.4	622,824	25.6	+74,518	+13.6
Middle (41)	758,023	36.5	916,936	37.6	+158,913	+21.0
East (33)	769,826	37.1	897,559	36.8	+127,733	+16.6
Total (95)	2,076,155	100.0	2,437,319	100.0	+361,164	+17.4

Source: Compiled by the authors from election data provided by the Tennessee Secretary of State.

voters) in East Tennessee and 21.0 percent (158,913 voters) in Middle Tennessee.

### Results and Analysis: The Presidential Race

President Bush won the Volunteer State with 56.8 percent of the vote. Bush's margin of victory represented a substantial improvement over his narrow (51.1 percent) win in 2000 and compared favorably to those attained by Ronald Reagan in 1984 (57.8 percent) and the President's father in 1988 (57.9 percent).

### Geography

Historically, the success of Republican presidential candidates in Tennessee depends on their success in mobilizing voters in East Tennessee and in holding down the Democratic vote in Middle and West Tennessee. For example, President Bush's 2000 victory depended, in large part, on the 141,090 vote advantage he enjoyed in East Tennessee, an advantage sufficient to offset Al Gore's 60,861 vote margin in the remainder of the state.

The 2004 election saw the President gain majorities in two of Tennessee's three grand divisions (Table 2). The incumbent captured almost two-thirds (63.9 percent) of the votes cast in East Tennessee and 56 percent of the votes in traditionally Democratic Middle Tennessee. The President trailed John Kerry only in West Tennessee where the Democratic challenger claimed 51.7 percent of the vote. Bush increased his East Tennessee advantage to 256,476 votes, carried Middle Tennessee by 116,172 votes and held Kerry's West Tennessee edge to 24,750 votes, well below the Democratic margins of 40,042 in 2000 and 55,716 in 1996 (Table 3).

**Table 2. 2004 Presidential Vote by Tennessee Region**

	Region					
	West (21)*		Middle (41)*		East (33)*	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Kerry	321,970	51.7	397,357	43.3	317,150	35.3
Bush	297,220	47.7	513,529	56.0	573,626	63.9
Other	3,634	.6	6,050	.7	6,783	.8
Total	622,824	100.0	916,936	100.0	897,559	100.0

\*Number of counties in each region.

Source: Compiled by the authors from election data provided by the Tennessee Secretary of State.

**Table 3. Democratic Presidential Vote Margin by Tennessee Region, 1996, 2000, and 2004**

Region (Counties)	1996	2000	2004
West (21)	+55,716	+40,402	+24,750
Middle (41)	+52,894	+20,459	-116,172
East (33)	-64,049	-141,090	-256,476
Total (95)	+44,561	-80,229	-347,898

Source: Compiled by the authors from election data provided by the Tennessee Secretary of State.

**Table 4. Republican Counties by Tennessee Region, 1996, 2000, and 2004**

Region	1996 Number	2000 Number	2004 Number	Change, 1996-2004 Number
West (21)	5	11	15	+10
Middle (41)	7	17	29	+22
East (33)	25	31	33	+8
Total (95)	37	59	77	+40

Source: Compiled by the authors from election data provided by the Tennessee Secretary of State.

The county-by-county results underscore the breadth of President Bush’s support (Table 4). In the 2000 election Bush won popular vote majorities in 59 counties, including 11 counties in West Tennessee, 17 counties in Middle Tennessee and 31 counties in East Tennessee, a substantial improvement over the 37 counties carried by the Republicans in 1996. In 2004 the Bush-Chaney ticket carried 77 of Tennessee’s 95 counties, including 15 of 21 counties in West Tennessee, 29 of 41 counties in Middle Tennessee and all 33 counties in East Tennessee.

**Party Identification**

According to National Election Pool exit poll results, Republicans represented a plurality of Tennessee voters in 2004 as the Democratic share of the electorate fell from 39 percent in 2000 to 32 percent in 2004 while the

proportion of Republicans increased from 37 percent to 40 percent. The percentage of independents in the electorate also increased, from 24 percent in 2000 to 28 percent in 2004.

Tennessee partisans, for the most part, voted for their parties' candidates. While 90 percent of Democrats supported the Kerry-Edwards ticket, 95 percent of Republicans voted for President Bush and Vice President Cheney. A majority (57 percent) of independents also chose the Republican ticket, a level of support virtually unchanged from 2000.

### **Ideology**

In 2000 moderates represented a plurality (44 percent) of the Tennessee electorate followed by conservatives (35 percent) and liberals (20 percent). By 2004, however, conservatives accounted for a 46 percent plurality of the voting public while the proportions of moderates and liberals fell to 39 percent and 15 percent, respectively. Bush captured 82 percent of conservative voters, 40 percent of moderates and 25 percent of liberals. Perhaps David Kustoff, Bush's general campaign chairman, got it right when he faulted Kerry's liberal politics for turning off Tennesseans, claiming "He was to the left of the Democratic Party in Tennessee" (Humphrey 2004h, 1).

### **Issues**

The two campaigns emphasized the war in Iraq and the war on terrorism, and both "wars" affected how Tennesseans cast their ballots. A majority (55 percent) of Tennessee voters approved of the decision to go to war in Iraq, and 89 percent of these voters supported the Republican ticket. In contrast, 89 percent of the people opposed to the war marked their ballots for John Kerry. Among the 16 percent of the voters who identified the war in Iraq as the most important issue, 73 percent chose Kerry.

Among the 56 percent of the voting public who saw the United States as safer from terrorism compared to four years ago, 85 percent supported the President while 83 percent of those who felt less safe voted for the Democratic challenger. One in five voters (19 percent) singled out the war on terrorism as the most important issue in the campaign. Of these voters, 84 percent chose the incumbent.

The NEP exit polls reported that, nationally, 22 percent of voters mentioned moral values as the most important issue in the presidential campaign, and 80 percent of these citizens voted for the President. In comparison, 28 percent of the Tennessee electorate cited moral values as the most important issue, and four-fifths of these Tennesseans voted for the Republican ticket.

## **Demographics**

The 2004 results continued a pattern which has generally prevailed in Tennessee presidential contests since 1964. The Republican candidate captured 65 percent of the white vote, up from 60 percent in 2000, while his Democratic opponent gained 91 percent of the votes cast by African-Americans, virtually unchanged from the outcomes in 1996 and 2000.

The national exit poll data indicate 62 percent of white males but only 55 percent of white females voted for President Bush. In Tennessee, however, the President received comparable support from white males (66 percent) and white females (64 percent).

Unlike 2000 when Al Gore received majorities of the votes cast by 18-29 year olds and voters age 60 and older, President Bush received majority support from voters in every age group. The Republican ticket's majorities ranged from 53 percent among 18-29 year olds to 56 percent among voters 45 and older and 61 percent among 30-44 year olds.

Not surprisingly, income also influenced voter preferences. The President did best among voters with incomes of at least \$50,000 (62 percent). He fared poorly among Tennesseans with incomes under \$15,000 (41 percent) and with incomes between \$15,000 and \$30,000 (47 percent).

## **Religion and Religiosity**

Three of five Protestants (62 percent) and a majority of Catholics (52 percent) voted for the incumbent. President Bush garnered strong support from white conservative Protestants, gaining 91 percent of their votes. Although he fared less well among white evangelical/born-again Christians, the President still received 74 percent of their votes.

## **Results and Analysis: U.S. House of Representatives**

The 2000 election ended with the Republicans holding a 5-4 majority in the Volunteer State's congressional delegation. Subsequently, the Republican incumbent in the Fourth District, Van Hilleary, decided to seek his party's nomination to replace the out-going two-term Republican governor, Don Sundquist. The prospect of an open seat led the Democratic majorities in the state legislature to take advantage of the redistricting following the 2000 census to make the Fourth District more Democratic. The 2002 election saw the fruits of this effort with the narrow election (52 percent) of Lincoln Davis who represented part of the Fourth District in the Tennessee Senate. Thus, the Democrats entered the 2004 election with a 5-4 majority in the state's congressional delegation.

President Bush's lead in Tennessee aroused GOP hopes his coattails might allow Janice Bowling to beat freshman Congressman Lincoln Davis in the 4th District. Republican Senator Lamar Alexander observed, "A strong presidential undertow can create consequences in the United States Congress" (Sher 2004b, 1).

Consultant Bill Fletcher, working for the Davis campaign, argued that personality and local values, not partisanship, determined House races. "They know that he is pro-life, pro-gun and that he is very conservative on budget matters." Indeed, Davis co-sponsored a Republican House measure proposing a constitutional ban on same-sex marriages that failed to obtain the requisite two-thirds vote on September 30 (*Chattanooga Times Free Press* 2004). Representative Davis in the June 30 campaign finance report led Ms. Bowling in fundraising with \$750,000 to her \$166,000. She hoped to raise money from the National Rifle Association, describing herself as "a card-carrying [in the NRA], pistol-packing mama."

In the end, the Democrats maintained their share of the state's congressional delegation despite the Republican's success at the top of the ticket. Fourth District representative Davis improved his victory margin to 55 percent while the other Democratic incumbents defeated their Republican challengers with vote shares of 69 percent in the Fifth District, 64 percent in the Sixth District, 74 percent in the Eighth District and 82 percent in the Ninth District. The Republican incumbents in the First, Second and Third Districts had little trouble dispatching their Democratic challengers, and Marsha Blackburn, the Seventh District representative, ran unopposed.

### **Results and Analysis: The Tennessee General Assembly**

Despite their many electoral successes in Tennessee, the Republicans have failed in their efforts to elect majorities in the Tennessee House and the Tennessee Senate. In the state House, Republicans and Democrats have held the same number of seats twice in the 20th century, but an independent lawmaker held the balance of power. In the state Senate, the Republicans gained a majority in 1995 when two Democrats switched parties, but the Democrats regained control with an 18-15 majority after the 1996 election.

Most observers felt the Democrats would retain their 54-45 seat majority in the state House. However, a Republican majority in the Senate appeared within reach. Of the sixteen Senate seats up for reelection, six Democratic incumbents appeared vulnerable. To enhance their prospects for capturing the upper chamber, Republican legislators proposed two constitutional amendments—an amendment with the potential to restrict abortion rights and an amendment defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman—as wedge issues they hoped would energize the party's conservative base.



### **Presidential Coattails versus Gubernatorial Popularity**

The state's Republican leaders built their hopes for gaining control of the state Senate on voter turnout. First, the GOP counted on President Bush's popularity to bring Republican voters to the polls. Second, they hoped voter reaction to the wedge issues raised in the legislature would further increase turnout.

Governor Phil Bredesen recognized the vulnerability of the Democrats' legislative majorities, and he campaigned to keep Democratic majorities in the state Capitol. The popular Democratic governor worked hard for endangered Democrats, particularly state senators, raising funds, and taping radio ads and phone messages as well as getting photographed with candidates for brochures and direct mailings. Bredesen broke a gubernatorial tradition in Tennessee by openly campaigning against incumbent Republicans to maintain his party's supremacy in the General Assembly. Bredesen candidly explained his actions, "I've always been concerned that, with the Kerry campaign not really contesting Tennessee, that would let it [the presidential race] become a runaway and hurt our abilities to elect Democrats" (Humphrey 2004f, 1). Particularly worried about sustaining Democratic control over the state Senate, Governor Bredesen acknowledged, "I'm certainly running on some of the strength of my office," but promised to work with whoever controlled the General Assembly after the November election (Commins 2004b, 1). As former Democratic governor Ned McWherter observed, "It's a sea of change out there from my days as governor" (Humphrey 2004f, 1). Bill Fletcher described the challenges Democratic state legislators faced in the face of Bush's popularity in Tennessee by observing, "It's like sailing into a 20-mile-per-hour headwind" (Humphrey 2004g, 1).

In the end, the headwind proved overpowering, at least in the Senate. The Republicans captured control of the state Senate, securing a 17-16 majority in the new 104th General Assembly. Democrats retained control of the House, with a 53 to 46 majority, losing only one seat. As Senate Majority Leader Ward Crutchfield said, blaming the late start of the Democratic campaigns, "I think the governor did everything he could do" (Commins 2004c, 1), Democratic Party Chairman Randy Button admitted, "When you have that big of a margin at the top of the ticket, it's really hard to overcome."

### **Be Careful What You Wish For**

Clearly, gaining a majority in the state Senate represented a major goal for Tennessee Republicans. Nevertheless, during the 2004 campaign, four GOP state Senators openly supported the reelection of the 83-year-old

Democratic speaker of the Senate, Lieutenant Governor John Wilder. They even signed a letter aimed at voters in Wilder's district urging his reelection. Republican Senator Tim Burchett of Knoxville explained, "When the Republicans were in the minority, he extended his hand to us and we were served well by him." He added, "Disloyalty is an ugly side of politics that I do not choose to embrace" (Humphrey 2004i, 1).

Not surprisingly, other Republicans—hungry to exercise their newly won control of the Senate—considered Burchett's pledge to Wilder a betrayal. Senate Republican Caucus Chairman Ron Ramsey declared, "It's going to be hard to tell the grassroots Republicans across the state of Tennessee how we elected a Senate Republican majority for the first time in 140 years and then we didn't elect a Republican speaker" (Humphrey 2004i, 1). Wilder rejected any suggestion that he should change his party, "I am a Jeffersonian Democrat and I intend to remain a Jeffersonian Democrat" (Humphrey 2004i, 1).

Republican Senator Curtis Person of Memphis also voiced his intent to support Wilder's bid for an 18th term as Senate speaker. He pointed to Senator Wilder's practice of appointing Republicans to a pro-rata share of Senate committee chairmanships, even when they were a minority (Locker 2004b, 1). Both state Senators Burchett and Person resisted the appeals from Tennessean Bill Frist, the U.S. Senate majority leader, and former Republican governor Winfield Dunn to elect a Republican speaker of the Senate. Dunn declared that a Republican majority reelecting Wilder as speaker was "totally antithetical to everything I think is appropriate as far as Tennessee politics and more particularly the Republican Party" (Sher 2004e, 1). A grass-roots Republican organization, TeamGOP, pledged to support 2006 primary challengers to any Republican state Senator who voted to retain Lt. Governor Wilder as speaker.

In January 2005, Democratic Senator John Wilder won reelection as speaker of the Senate, and thus remained Lieutenant Governor, by an 18 to 15 vote over Senator Ramsey, the new Republican majority leader. Republicans Burchett and Mike Williams cast their speaker ballots with the Democrats, but Senator Person changed his mind and voted for Ramsey. The reelected speaker appointed Republicans to chair four of the state Senate's nine standing committees and gave the GOP majorities on seven committees. However, Democrats maintained majority control of the powerful Senate Finance Committee and the Commerce Committee. Wilder named Republican Senator Williams speaker pro tem, but at his request, Senator Burchett neither sought nor received a leadership post. The new Republican majority leader, Senator Ramsey, said, "The bottom line is, to the victor goes the spoils." He continued, "Obviously, I'm disappointed" (Humphrey 2005, 1).

### **Conclusion: Answers or Questions**

After the 2000 election we concluded Tennessee would remain a competitive two-party battle ground where neither party enjoyed a permanent advantage (Brodsky and Swansbrough 2002). The 2004 election and poll results suggest the advantage, at least for the short term, lies with the Republicans. President Bush's victory represents the seventh Republican win in the ten presidential elections since 1964, and the President's popular vote majorities in both 2000 (51.1 percent) and 2004 (56.8 percent) dwarf the plurality victories achieved by the Clinton-Gore ticket in 1992 (47.1 percent) and 1996 (48.0 percent). The Republicans elected a majority in the Tennessee Senate for the first time since Reconstruction, and the Bush-Chaney ticket carried all 33 counties in East Tennessee while making significant inroads in normally Democratic Middle (29 of 41 counties) and West Tennessee (15 of 21 counties). The GOP also chipped away at the Democratic advantage in the Tennessee House, continuing a slow erosion of the Democratic majority.

In the electorate, Republican identifiers represented a substantial plurality (40 percent) of the voting public followed by the Democrats (32 percent) and independents (28 percent). Self-identified conservatives, 82 percent of whom voted for the Republican ticket, accounted for 46 percent of the 2004 electorate. And finally, white evangelical or born-again Christians, who supported the Republican ticket by a 3-1 margin, comprised a 51 percent majority of 2004 voters.

Several other factors also point to a Republican advantage, despite the fact that the Democrats won the governorship in 2002, replacing a term-limited Republican incumbent. However, Governor Bredesen won by the narrowest of margins (50.6 percent of the vote) against a Republican opponent who had to overcome public dissatisfaction with outgoing Governor Sundquist's inability to resolve the state's continuing budget crisis, and a strong, relentless, reaction against Sundquist's decision to support a state income tax as a possible solution. Also, while Bredesen currently enjoys relatively high approval ratings, the continuing struggle to "reform" Tenn-care, the Volunteer State's expanded Medicaid program, may seriously erode his support, especially if the end product denies eligibility to hundreds of thousands of current beneficiaries and reduces benefits for those who remain eligible.

The 2006 elections will provide an early test of the Democrats' ability to staunch the Republican tide and to seize the advantage heading into the 2008 presidential election cycle. At the state level, Governor Bredesen appears likely to run for reelection, and the Democrats will have an opportunity to wipe out the GOP majority in the Tennessee Senate and maintain or expand the Democratic majority in the state House. Not having to confront a

Republican voter tsunami propelled by a popular sitting president and the gay marriage issue may further boost Democratic prospects for 2006.

At the national level, while a successful challenge to any of the incumbent Republican representatives appears unlikely, the retirement of Bill Frist, the very popular Senate majority leader, offers a significant opportunity and a substantial challenge for Tennessee Democrats. The Republicans regained control of Tennessee's U.S. Senate seats in 1994 when former Senator Fred Thompson won the election to finish Vice President Gore's unexpired term, and Frist scored a surprising upset over three-term incumbent, Jim Sasser. Since 1994, the Democrats either have offered token opposition (Houston Gordon against Thompson in 1996 and Jeff Clark against Frist in 2000) or have seen a serious challenger come up short (Congressman Bob Clement against Lamar Alexander in 2002 to fill the seat left open by Fred Thompson's unexpected retirement). Thus, the open seat election in 2006 offers two challenges—finding a credible candidate and winning the election.

The success of the Democrats in 2006 will tell us a great deal about the balance of power in the Volunteer State. If the Democrats can improve their standing in the state legislature, retain the governorship and win (or perhaps even come close to winning) the contest for the open Senate seat, the advantage might shift to them. If they lose ground in the state legislature, lose the gubernatorial contest and fail to mount a serious challenge in the Senate contest, the advantage will remain with the Republicans. More important, Democratic failures in all three arenas might signal Tennessee's return to the days of one-party politics—only with the Republicans instead of the Democrats as the dominant party.

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