

Tennessee: A Maturing Two-Party System

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Although Tennessee has long had a Republican presence in its political system, the two parties have only recently become competitive across the state. As a result, party organizations and activists have the opportunity to play an important role in the state's elections. Activists in the two parties grew increasingly polarized across the decade of the 1990s in terms of their ideologies and issue positions. Organizationally, both parties seem to be settling into their roles in the political system. Democrats take a more pragmatic approach to politics, while Republicans see more dramatic growth in the strength of their organizations.

Introduction

Tennessee's politics have long reflected the state's geographic distinctiveness. Stretching 430 miles from east to west but only 110 from north to south, Tennessee is traditionally divided into three regions: east, middle, and west. The geographic divisions shaped the state's entry into the Civil War, with opposition to secession in the east giving way to Confederate sentiments in the slave-holding middle and west. In the years that followed, Republicans dominated the eastern region while Democrats held sway in the rest of state, leading V.O. Key (1949, 75) to write that "Tennessee in a sense has not one one-party system but rather two one-party systems." The persistent factionalism within the Democratic Party was similar to that found in the Deep South states of the time. The Memphis-based organizational faction, led by E.H. Crump, was able to influence elections across the state. Crump's organization was consistently opposed by a more progressive faction that spawned national figures like U.S. Senators Estes Kefauver and Albert Gore, Sr. Republicans in Key's era dominated local and congressional elections in the East but had little impact on statewide races.

Both parties have become competitive statewide in recent years. While some vestiges of the regional divisions remain, Republicans have been able to win a variety of statewide races since the 1960s. Democrats, meanwhile, have controlled both houses of the state legislature almost without interruption since Reconstruction. As electoral competition between the parties has

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grown, so too have their organizations—both state and local—grown in strength.

Development of Political Parties in Tennessee

Lost in the hoopla surrounding the Florida election results in 2000 was the fact that Vice President Al Gore failed to carry his home state, losing to Texas governor George W. Bush by more than 80,000 votes. Had Gore captured Tennessee's eleven electoral college votes, the disputed outcome in Florida would have been moot and Gore would have captured the White House (Brodsky and Swansbrough 2002; Mason 2003).

Despite Gore's loss, it would be misleading to suggest that Republicans dominate Tennessee elections. Instead, a pattern of two-party competition has developed since the 1950s. Republican gains have been dramatic over that time period, but the GOP advantage is slight if it exists at all.

In presidential politics, Tennessee was a Democratic stronghold from Reconstruction through the 1948 election, with only one Republican (Herbert Hoover in 1928) able to win the state. Since 1952, on the other hand, Republican candidates have been quite successful, losing only in 1964, 1976, 1992, and 1996. The Democratic nominee in each of these years hailed from the South (Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton), which suggests that personal characteristics may play an important role in influencing the state's nonaligned voters.¹ Furthermore, many of the Republican victories have been by narrow margins. Only 1972, when Richard Nixon garnered two-thirds of the popular vote in his reelection bid, was a true landslide. Each of the last three presidential elections was decided by less than 100,000 votes.

Statewide elections for governor and U.S. senator have been even more volatile. Since 1977, governors have been limited to two consecutive four-year terms in office. The three incumbents who have run for reelection under this system (two Republicans and one Democrat) have been able to increase their vote margins in their second election. None of the three has been able to pass the reins of state government to a successor of the same party, however. The last time consecutive governors from the same party were elected was 1967. Control of the two seats in the U.S. Senate has fluctuated as well. Democrats held both seats from Reconstruction to 1966, when Howard Baker became the state's first Republican Senator. Baker was joined by fellow Republican William Brock from 1970 to 1976. Democrats held both seats from 1984 to 1994. In that landslide year for the GOP, Bill Frist defeated three-term incumbent Jim Sasser and lawyer-actor-lobbyist Fred Thompson won a special election to serve the remaining two years of Gore's unexpired term.

Table 1. Republican Strength in Tennessee, 1954-2002

Year	Percent of Presidential Vote	Percent of Gubernatorial Vote	Percent of U.S. Senate Vote	Percent of U.S. House Delegation	Percent of State House Delegation	Percent of State Senate Delegation
1954		0.0	30.0	22.2	18.1	15.2
1956	49.2			22.2	19.2	12.1
1958		8.3	19.0	22.2	17.1	15.2
1960	52.9		28.3	22.2	15.2	16.2
1962		16.1		33.3	21.2	18.2
1964	44.5		46.4/47.4*	33.3	24.2	24.2
1966		0.0	55.7	44.4	39.4	24.2
1968	37.9			44.4	49.5	39.4
1970		52.0	51.3	44.4	43.4	39.4
1972	67.7		61.6	62.5	48.5	39.4
1974		43.8		37.5	35.4	36.4
1976	42.9		47.0	37.5	32.3	27.3
1978		55.6	55.5	37.5	38.4	36.4
1980	48.7			37.5	39.4	36.4
1982		59.6	38.1	33.3	38.4	33.3
1984	57.8		33.8	33.3	37.4	30.3
1986		45.7		33.3	38.4	30.3
1988	57.9		34.5	33.3	40.4	33.3
1990		36.6	29.8	33.3	43.4	39.4
1992	42.4			33.3	36.4	42.4
1994		54.3	56.4/60.4*	55.5	40.4	51.5
1996	45.6		61.4	55.5	38.4	45.4
1998		68.6		55.5	40.4	45.4
2000	51.1		65.1	55.5	40.4	45.4
2002		47.6	54.3	44.5	44.4	45.4

*Special election to fill an unexpired term

East Tennessee traditionally sent two Republicans to the U.S. House of Representatives, while the rest of the seats were held by Democrats (Key 1949, 75). Republicans added a third seat in 1962 and a fourth in 1966 before capturing five of the eight congressional districts in 1972. This majority was short-lived, though, as the Watergate scandals ushered in a Democratic majority in 1974 that lasted for 20 years. The GOP recaptured a one-seat majority in 1994; Democrats controlled the delegation by similar margin following the 2002 elections.

Control of the state legislature has been in Democratic hands with but a few exceptions. In 1968, equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans were elected to the state House of Representatives. The one independent legislator supported the GOP, allowing the party to gain control by the narrowest of

margins (Lyons, Scheb, and Stair 2001, 91-92). Republicans held a majority of state senate seats following the 1994 elections, but that margin also lasted only until the next election cycle was complete. The fact that Democrats have been able to retain control of the assembly does not diminish the growth of the GOP, which has almost tripled its seats in both houses of the legislature since the 1950s.

Organizational development

Despite the persistence of the Crump machine in the West and a similar Republican organization in the East, modern state party organizations are relatively new in Tennessee. The Republicans established a statewide organization in the early 1960s. The activity was spurred by supporters of Barry Goldwater's ideologically charged policy views. The traditional machine had been regionally based, but the new organization emerged from urban areas across the state and soon established a headquarters in Nashville (Bass and DeVries 1976; Brodsky 1997). One of the early organizational leaders was future Senator Brock who, upon his defeat in 1976, helped transform the national Republican organization (see Klinkner 1994). Despite a relative lack of electoral success, the state party laid the infrastructure for supporting candidates in their campaigns. A national survey of state party organizations in the late 1970s ranked Tennessee's Republicans as "moderately strong" (Cotter et al. 1984, 28).

Organizational development is not a one-way street, however, and the state Republican organization showed signs of atrophy and factional splits by the early 1990s. In 1992, one fourth of the state's counties lacked Republican organizations (Brodsky 1997, 304). Within three years—thanks to reinvigorated leadership and success at the polls—the GOP claimed to have organizations in place in all 95 counties across the state.

Tennessee's Democrats began a program of organizational development in the early 1970s after losing the governorship in 1970 and Richard Nixon's landslide victory in 1972.² Jim Sasser, who became state party chair in 1973, is largely credited with changing the party's focus before being elected to the U.S. Senate in 1976. For the first time, party leaders and elected officials actively recruited candidates and worked together to raise funds (Bass and DeVries 1976, 299-300). Still, the party was classified as one of the weakest in the country in the late 1970s (Cotter et al. 1984, 28).

Organizational development in both parties has been hindered by continuous turnover in leadership. Between 1992 and 2002, five different people chaired the state Republican party. Seven Democrats held the same position during that period. The most effective chairs—especially for the Republicans—have been able to focus on organizational development and coalition-

building rather than divisive policy pronouncements that incite factional disagreements. As one former GOP chair noted, “The party doesn’t elect anybody but it’s a service organization that helps people get elected. . . . Somebody once told me that I wasn’t colorful enough in this job, but being colorful doesn’t equate to being effective” (Locker 1995).

Grassroots Party Activists, 2001

Tennessee’s grassroots party activists were surveyed as a part of the Southern Grassroots Party Activists Project in 1991 (see Brodsky and Brodsky 1995) and again in 2001. The respondents in both years were county chairs and other members of the county executive committees. The analysis that follows is drawn largely from the 2001 data, using the earlier data only to note significant changes over the intervening years.

Social and Demographic Characteristics

The social and demographic characteristics of the Democratic and Republican activists are, in many ways, similar to those found in other elite populations. Table 2 summarizes the party differences on these attributes. The pool of Democratic activists contains slightly more women, although both parties have a slight majority of male activists. The Democrats also have slightly more minority activists, but their 92 percent white is low only when compared to the Republican figure of 99 percent. Both parties had approximately the same gender and racial breakdowns in 1991.

Both parties recruit their activists from longtime residents of the state. Republican party activists tend to be “newer” arrivals to the state, with 15 percent having been in Tennessee less than 10 years, and about one in three having been in the state for less than 25 years. In contrast, Democratic activists are more likely have been in the state for longer, with only 10 percent having been in the state for less than 25 years. The key observation, however, is the fact that both parties have solid majorities (68 percent and 90 percent) that have been Tennessee residents for at least 25 years. Respondents from both parties are overwhelmingly southern in background. Among the Republican activists, 22 percent report having grown up outside the South (including overseas). For the Democratic respondents, this number falls to 13 percent. This pattern of slight partisan differences is consistent with the pattern of longevity in state residency, as well as similar to results from the earlier study.

Political elites, even at the grassroots level, tend to come from social and economic elite stratas, too. On socioeconomic matters, the two sets of activists are perhaps more similar to each other than to the general

Table 2. Demographic Profiles of Tennessee Political Party Activists, 2001

	Democrats	Republicans
Gender: % males	52	60
Race: % white	92	99
Income: % \$75,000+	27	37
Education: % college degree	40	52
Religion: % mainline Protestant	40	44
% evangelical Protestant	45	48
% black Protestant	8	1
% other or none	7	7
Church attendance: % weekly or almost weekly	69	83
Importance of religion: % great deal	59	67
Born-again Christian: % yes	66	71
Christian right: % feeling close	16	57
Age: % over 50	69	62
% over 65	33	24
Years lived in state: % 10 or less	4	15
% 25 or less	10	32
Regional background: % from North	13	22
(N)	(316)	(247)

Note: Entries are percentages. The number of respondents from each party is in parentheses. The Ns for individual items are sometimes lower, due to missing data.

population of the state, but partisan differences remain. More than one in three Republican activists report an income of more than \$75,000, while among Democrats this figure is one in four. In contrast, the 2000 Census shows that 16.3 percent of the state's population report household income of this level, with a median household income of just over \$36,000.³ Education levels reinforce both the atypical nature of the activists and of the differences between the parties. Slightly more than half (52 percent) of the Republican respondents report completion of at least a undergraduate degree. For the Democratic activists, this drops to 40 percent. Across the general population of Tennessee in 2000, slightly less than 20 percent report a Bachelor's degree or better. So, while there are differences between

Republicans and Democrats, with the GOP having activists of higher socioeconomic standing, both sets of respondents are unrepresentative of the general public.

The activists of both parties have much in common when it comes to religion. The overwhelming majority of respondents (92 percent of Democrats and 93 percent of Republicans) are Protestants. A significant number of Democratic activists (8 percent) are members of Protestant denominations traditionally strong in the African American community. Both parties also have a small number of respondents (7 percent in each) who have a non-Protestant religious affiliation or do not belong to a church. Beyond denominational preference, some minor partisan differences appear. While respondents of both parties are likely to report frequent church attendance and a great deal of importance of religion in their daily lives, Republican activists are more likely to report each. Similar majorities of both parties identify themselves as born-again Christians. Perhaps the only meaningful difference between Democratic and Republican grassroots activists in Tennessee has to do with the Christian Right. When asked about their feelings toward the conservative Christian movement, a majority of Republicans (56 percent) but only 16 percent of Democrats said they felt “very close” or “close.” This is consistent with the general affinity between the GOP and the Christian Right (see Wilcox 1996). So, while the activists of both parties in the state share a basic religious core, there is a striking divergence in their views toward one of the more visible organized movements present at the intersection of religion and politics.⁴ This mix of religion and politics is not new to Tennessee, whose voters opposed Democratic nominee Al Smith in 1928 at least in part due to his Catholicism.

Given the political involvement of the grassroots activists, one might expect them to be active in other political and civic organizations. The respondents were asked about their levels of activity, if any, in a number of different groups.⁵ Democratic and Republican activists reported similar levels of activity in business groups and civic organizations. However, a clear partisan difference was apparent when considering other groups. Democrats were more likely to be active in teachers’ organizations, labor unions, environmental groups, civil rights organizations, and women’s rights groups. Republicans, on the other hand, were more likely to be active in church groups (in spite of the nearly 70 percent activity rate of the Democrats) and anti-abortion groups.

Ideological and Issue Orientations

Political parties in the South have been in a period of significant change for some time now. The death of the one-party South has been well-documented (e.g., Black and Black 2002), and the emergence of competition has

had visible effects on grassroots activists. The growth of Republican strength across the South may be attributed to the mobilization of new (predominantly young) voters sympathetic to the GOP, as well as to the conversion of socially conservative Democratic voters as that national party increasingly took stands at odds with local preferences. These trends help shape the ideological and issue profiles of the party activists in the state.

Ideologically, Tennessee's grassroots activists represent very divergent views, and these views became increasingly polarized across the decade of the 1990s (see Table 3). In 1991, 80 percent of GOP activists identified themselves as conservative or somewhat conservative. Democrats were fairly evenly distributed across the ideological spectrum. Among Republican activists in 2001, 94 percent identify themselves as somewhat conservative or very conservative, while only two percent call themselves somewhat liberal or very liberal. The number of Democratic liberals increased from 30 percent to 50 percent, while conservative Democrats dropped from 27 percent to 16 percent.

The ideological divergence between the parties suggests that the activists hold strongly differing views on the issues, and there is evidence to suggest this is so. Respondents were presented with a series of policy statements and asked whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Table 4 shows the percentage of respondents, broken down by party, that adopted the conservative position on each issue. The responses here align with the pattern of the ideological identification across the parties. The GOP activists are solidly conservative, with a sizable majority taking the conservative position on every issue except for the question on an equal role for women.⁶ Indeed, excluding the equal role question, an average of just over 81 percent of the Republican respondents took the conservative position on

Table 3. Ideological Orientations of Tennessee Political Party Activists, 2001

Ideological Orientation	Democrats	Republicans
Very liberal	15	0
Somewhat liberal	35	2
Moderate	34	4
Somewhat conservative	15	44
Very conservative	<u>1</u>	<u>50</u>
	100%	100%
(N)	(303)	(244)

Note: Entries are percentages. The number of respondents from each party is in parentheses.

Table 4. Issue Orientations of Tennessee Political Party Activists, 2001

Issue	Democrats	Republicans
Economic Issues		
Government services, spending	13	79
Guaranteed job and living standard	51	93
Regulation of health care	28	84
Flat tax system	49	80
Civil Rights and Equality Issues		
Minority aid position	25	66
Hiring preferences	88	91
Equal role for women	5	7
Improve women=s situation	16	65
Gay job discrimination	42	85
Social Issues		
Abortion	17	72
Death penalty	53	89
School prayer	81	94
School vouchers	8	72
Handgun control	27	88
(N)	(316)	(247)

Note: Entries are the percentage of respondents who took the conservative position on the issues. The number of respondents from each party is in parentheses. The Ns for individual issue items are sometimes lower, due to missing data.

the 13 remaining questions. The Democratic activists hold more mixed views. They were overwhelmingly liberal on eight of the questions, overwhelmingly conservative on two, and fairly evenly divided on four issues. Excluding the equal role question for consistency, an average of about 38 percent of Democratic respondents take the *conservative* position on the remaining issues. These Democrats, then, are not a collection of liberal ideologues, but rather a group of moderate (and in some cases conservative) partisans that are closer to the political center than are the more homogeneous Republicans. The results mirror those for the ideological self-identification in 1991, in that there were fewer liberal Democrats (assessed via issue positions) in the earlier study.

The policies in Table 4 are divided into three broad categories. On economic issues, the Republican activists hold consistently conservative views. Eight out of ten GOP respondents take the conservative position on

the four issues of this type. Democrats hold liberal views on the provision of government services and the regulation of health care, but are more mixed on a flat tax and whether the government should guarantee people a job. The two groups of activists were most sharply divided on the government services question, and most similar in their stances on a possible flat tax. Across the four issues, the average difference in conservative responses was about 49 percent.

Issues of civil rights and matters of equality see less overall polarization, but this is mostly a result of two rather atypical response sets. On two questions dealing with government action to improve the position of minorities and women, respectively, two-thirds of Republicans took the conservative position while at least three-fourths of Democrats took liberal stands. When the issues of race and gender are cast in different terms, however, the grassroots activists of both parties took similar positions. On the question of hiring preferences for minorities, there was near unanimous opposition, with approximately 90 percent of each party taking the conservative position. Similarly, on the question of equal role for women in society, only about six percent of either party took the conservative stand. These responses indicate strong support for the *principle* of equality in both parties, but sharp differences emerge on the role of government in fostering equality. Equality for gays and lesbians was viewed differently, though. A strong majority of Republicans oppose protecting gays from job discrimination, while Democrats are split on the issue.

Turning finally to social issues, the activists were asked their views on some of the more powerful political issues of the last decade: abortion, the death penalty, school prayer, school vouchers, and gun control. These issues often are used as litmus tests by voters. One of them, school prayer, is marked by near universal support for the conservative position. Even among Democratic activists, more than 80 percent take a conservative stance. Democrats are more mixed in support of the death penalty, but here too a majority provided a conservative response. The three remaining issues represent the largest divide between the activists of the two parties. On abortion, school vouchers, and handgun control, there is an average difference in the conservative response of 60 percent, well more than the other sets of issues. Just as these issues have polarized the electorate and framed national campaigns, they also divide our sample of grassroots activists. The passage of time has served to polarize the activists, at least with respect to abortion. About a third of the Democrats adopted a pro-life position in 1991, while almost half of the Republicans were pro-choice. Activists in both parties are now more likely to reflect their national party's position on this issue.

The preferences of the activists can also be assessed by looking at their responses to a series of questions asking about federal government spending.

Each respondent was asked to say whether federal spending on a given issue should be increased, decreased, or kept the same. Table 5 shows the responses to these questions. Each cell in the first two columns represents the percentage of respondents in that party that support increased spending minus the percentage that favor decreased spending. A positive number indicates that more respondents support an increase in funding in that area, while a negative number indicates that more prefer spending reductions than increases. The first pattern to note is that Democratic activists have positive (pro-spending) responses to all issues except welfare programs.⁷ In contrast, the Republican activists support increased spending on defense, crime fighting, and social security, while supporting reductions in spending on environmental protection, schools, health care, and welfare programs. The margin by which Republican activists support increased spending on defense (84 percent) is only slightly larger than the margin by which they prefer a decrease in spending on welfare programs (82 percent). The second pattern to note is that, with the exception of spending on crime fighting, the differences between Republican and Democratic support for spending are roughly similar across policy areas. So, while direction may vary (such as the GOP favoring more spending than Democrats on defense), the general nature of the divide between the parties is rather stable.⁸

Factionalism in Tennessee

Politics involves conflict, and one of the effects of parties is to bring divergent groups together in an effort to successfully contest elections. One

Table 5. Orientation on Spending Issues for Tennessee Political Party Activists, 2001

Spending Item	Democrats	Republicans	Difference
Defense	22	84	62
Environment	50	-21	-71
Schools	75	-6	-81
Crime	50	37	-13
Social Security	71	13	-58
Health care	78	-11	-89
Welfare programs	-16	-82	-66
(N)	(316)	(247)	

Note: Entries in the first two columns are the percentage favoring increased spending minus the percentage favoring decreased spending. The entries in the third column are the Republican score minus the Democratic score. The number of respondents from each party is in parentheses. The Ns for individual items are sometimes lower, due to missing data.

by-product of this is the development of competing factions within the party. A successful party will deal with factionalism within its ranks, while other parties may fail, both organizationally and electorally, as a result of clashing factions. The activists surveyed here were asked to assess the level of factionalism present within their party at the state and county level. In both parties, the respondents indicate greater factionalism at the state level than at the county level.⁹ Republicans report slightly lower levels of factionalism at both levels. In 1991, Republicans reported lower levels of factionalism in the overall party.¹⁰

The sources of faction may be numerous, but ideological differences seem the most likely to cause problems. When asked to assess the level of disagreement within their state party on the basis of ideology, a slight majority of both Democrats and Republicans said there was “a great deal” or “fair amount” of such conflict. There are not meaningful partisan differences in the perceived levels of disagreement stemming from party leaders, new and old state residents, regions of the state, and urban/rural divisions.

Some cleavages may stem not from party personalities or population characteristics, but rather from issues. The activists were asked to assess the level of disagreement in their state party that stems from a range of issues. Of the four issues considered, only taxes was not associated with a substantial difference between the parties.¹¹ On the issue of abortion, Democratic activists reported disagreement about 15 percent higher than did their Republican counterparts, despite the fact that the views of the Democrats in our sample were more homogeneous on the abortion issue. Similarly, the Democratic respondents reported almost 20 percent more disagreement on racial issues. Finally, the Democrats again reported greater levels of disagreement on the issue of government spending. Two aspects of these results should be noted. First, the presence of greater disagreement among Democrats does not imply consensus among Republicans. Indeed, on these three issues, an average of about 44 percent of Republicans reported a great deal or a fair amount of disagreement. Second, the greater disagreement in the Democratic party is consistent with the nature of a relatively conservative state’s Democratic party operating in the shadow of a more liberal national party. Tennessee’s Democrats are likely to include pro-life, anti-affirmative action, and anti-government spending voices, as well as those embracing the national party’s agenda. Increased factionalism flows naturally from the character of the state.

An additional dimension of factionalism may be seen when we consider the attitudes of the activists towards the appropriateness of conflict *within* the party. Following the distinctions of purist and pragmatic perspectives found in the literature (for a useful summary, see Prysby 1998), respondents were asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements regarding

intraparty conflict. Those preferring consensus and unity in order to win elections score on the more pragmatic end, while those opting for a more open airing of disagreements, even at the cost of electoral success, are coded as being more purist in outlook.¹² The sample as a whole may be best characterized as having a mixed view, but leaning slightly towards the professional/pragmatic end of the scale. When breaking the activists down by party, the major difference is the larger presence of purists among the GOP (26 to 14 percent). Splitting the respondents further by whether they were a chair makes clear where the purist elements are concentrated. Within the Democratic party, chairs and other central committee members are relatively similar in their views on the pragmatic/purist distinction. The Republican party, however, is home to a significant distinction between chairs and nonchairs. The GOP chairs look much like their Democratic counterparts (that is to say, primarily professional or having some mix of views), but the Republican central committee members tend more toward the purist end. Indeed, only among this group do those scored as primarily purist outnumber those who are primarily pragmatic. No other group is even close to this. So, while the Democratic respondents may report higher levels of disagreement on select issues, Republican activists are more likely to embrace such disagreement as a vital element of party life.

Campaign Activity at the Grassroots

The primary goal of political parties is to win elections. While the primary responsibility for running campaigns falls to individual candidates, party organizations continue to play a role at election time. The grassroots party activists were asked to indicate if they had participated in a range of campaign acts in recent elections. Interesting differences may arise between members of the two parties, as well as between the chairs and other party activists (Clark, Lockerbie, and Wielhouwer 1998). The basic results for campaign activity, reported in Table 6, are therefore broken down by party and whether or not the respondents chaired their county organizations.

Turning first to the activities of the county chairs, the most obvious finding is that on most activities, the chairs of both parties behave in a similar fashion in terms of campaigning. The distribution of literature, telephone campaigns, posters and signs, media matters, and the organization of campaign events are all areas where Democratic and Republican chairs reported similar levels of activity. Two activities, however, stand out as a result of party differences. Republican chairs were more likely than their Democratic counterparts to report that they helped organize canvassing efforts. They were significantly less likely than the Democrats to report organizing voter registration drives. The other pattern of note is that in every comparison,

Table 6. Campaign Activities of Tennessee Political Party Activists, 2001

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Chairs	Members	Chairs	Members
Organized canvassing efforts	29	17	48	24
Organized campaign events	80	38	73	54
Organized fund-raising activities	70	34	57	49
Sent mailings to voters	48	32	57	52
Distributed campaign literature	81	62	86	82
Organized telephone campaigns	51	29	48	33
Distributed campaign posters, signs	92	66	86	83
Contributed money	88	74	82	86
Conducted voter registration drives	54	29	32	31
Utilized public opinion surveys	12	4	23	10
Dealt with media	59	20	55	28
Helped with campaign websites	9	2	11	7
(N)	(66)	(257)	(44)	(203)

Note: Entries are the percent who said that they engaged in the campaign activity in recent elections. Chairs are county chairs; members are other members of the county executive committee. The number of respondents from each party and position is in parentheses. The Ns for individual items are sometimes lower, due to missing data.

save one, the chairs reported higher levels of activity than did the central committee members of their respective parties.¹³ The size of the differences between chairs and nonchairs varies widely. The largest difference in the Republican Party is on dealing with the media, while the largest difference among Democratic activists is the percentage reporting they organized campaign events. Both parties have activities on which the activist groups do not differ by much.

When we turn to the nonchair respondents in the survey, a clear partisan difference becomes apparent. On a number of campaign acts, there is little meaningful difference between the two parties. On five activities, however, there are differences of at least 15 percent in the level of activity. In general, the activists from the GOP are more active than their Democratic counterparts. However, on these issues—organizing campaign events, organizing fund-raising, sending mailings to voters, distributing campaign literature, and distributing posters and signs—the Republicans were up to 20 percent more engaged.

Party Strength

Strong and vital parties are both a cause and a consequence of electoral competitiveness. Using a variety of measures, we are in a position to assess some degree of party strength in Tennessee, at least as seen through the eyes of this collection of grassroots activists.

Our first method of assessing the strength of the parties is to look simply at how close the respondents feel to their state and national party organizations. If, at the activist level, there exists a significant disparity in feelings toward one party or the other, this may be taken as an indicator of poor party health, or at least as a sign of national and state party differences. The general, and unsurprising, conclusion is that partisans feel close to their own party and distant to the opposition party. However, there are a number of interesting wrinkles within this broader conclusion. First, Democrats generally are slightly less likely to report feeling close to the Democratic Party (at either level) than Republicans are to report feeling close to the Republican party. Democrats are generally two to four times more likely to report feeling neutral about any given party organization than are the Republicans. Democrats are also slightly more likely to report feeling close to the Republican Party than Republicans are to say they are close to the Democratic Party. Second, the Democratic activists are more likely to report feeling close to the state party than to the national party, while Republicans are slightly more likely to report feeling close to their national party.

The second method by which we can assess the strength of the party is by considering the assessments of the activists with respect to changes in party effectiveness over the last ten years. This gives us a measure, albeit subjective, of trends in party capability in the state. A bit of caution should be used in assessing these questions, as some measure of wishful thinking may contaminate the results.¹⁴ Given that, however, we think these assessments can be useful, especially as a means of comparing the two parties. In particular, significant disparities between how the activists rate their own parties may be signs of real change. As it turns out, when such differences exist, it is always the case that Republican activists are more likely than Democrats to view their party as having gotten stronger. The most dramatic differences are on their assessments of organizational strength, campaign effectiveness, fund-raising, candidate recruitment, developing party workers, and party strength among voters. These areas of large differences in assessment are consistent with an emergent Republican party in the state.

Conclusion

Recent elections show that neither party has a lock on the loyalties of Tennessee voters, but both have strong supporters in the electorate. The volatility in election outcomes shows the importance of characteristics that individual candidates bring with them to their campaigns. Given the need to woo nonaligned or swing voters, the importance of party organizations becomes magnified (Schlesinger 1985).

Our survey of grassroots party activists in Tennessee indicates that both parties have reasonably vital local party organizations in many counties. Our cautious wording is not accidental. Many local party leaders are performing a variety of tasks in support of candidates, but others are not so active. Republicans are more likely to see their local organizations gaining strength than their Democratic counterparts, which suggests that Republicans overall are on a better trajectory. Democrats, on the other hand, seem to place winning above issue purism, at least compared to GOP central committee members. This pragmatic attitude is often associated with mature, developed party organizations. In the specific case of Tennessee, it may be a necessary response to a higher level of factionalism within the Democratic Party.

Issues matter, though, and the activists are increasingly polarized in their policy attitudes. As a result, they are more in line with their national party organizations than they were ten years ago. Still, Tennessee Democrats appear much more centrist than their Republican counterparts. This issue moderation, combined with their more pragmatic approach to political conflict, may allow Democrats to remain electorally competitive in the years to come. It might also explain how a state that elected a Democratic governor and Democratic majorities to the U.S. House of Representatives and the state legislature in 2002 could fail to give its electoral votes to a native son Democrat running for the presidency just two years before.

NOTES

¹Surveys conducted by the University of Tennessee's Social Science Research Institute indicated that a third or more of the Tennesseans were independents throughout the 1990s (Lyons, Scheb, and Stair 2001, 214-216).

²It is not uncommon for party organizations to find the motivation to change during times of electoral defeat. For evidence of this phenomenon at the national level, see Klinkner (1994) and Herrnson and Menefee-Libey (1990).

³In the 1991 activist data, 39 percent of Democrats and 46 percent of Republicans report a household income of more than \$50,000. The 1990 Census reports a median household income in the state of just under \$25,000.

⁴Given the intriguing arc of the Christian Right in American politics, it would be interesting to compare the responses in the present study to the earlier data. Unfortunately, no appropriate comparison question was asked at that time.

⁵The question allowed a range of answers, from very active to not at all active. A respondent is called active in a group if they answered “very active” or “somewhat active.”

⁶This question, almost regardless of the population being surveyed, rarely has more than a smattering of respondents who opt for the conservative position.

⁷The word “welfare” consistently triggers a negative response in survey respondents. A similar question asking about “aid to the poor” would likely yield a more positive response.

⁸The phrasing of the questions in 1991 limits explicit comparisons, but one example of change is the growth in the proportion of both parties in support for increased defense spending. In 1991, neither party had a majority agreeing with the statement that defense spending should be increased. In contrast, a majority of both parties favored increased spending on the environment that year.

⁹A response was counted as indicating factionalism if the respondent indicated very high or moderately high levels of factionalism.

¹⁰The 1991 survey asked only about factionalism within the party overall. It did not specify state or county.

¹¹About 70 percent of both parties indicated meaningful disagreement on this issue. Tennessee does not have an income tax. At the time of the survey, leaders of both parties were exploring options for increasing state revenue.

¹²The coding scheme used here was developed by Prysby (1998).

¹³The only exception is contributing money among the Republican respondents.

¹⁴For example, on no question did a majority indicate that the party was weaker now than it was ten years previously.

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