H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Randy Sanders.** *Mighty Peculiar Elections: The New South Gubernatorial Campaigns of 1970 and the Changing Politics of Race.* Florida: University Press of Florida, 2002. xii + 218 pp. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-2565-0.

**Reviewed by** Barclay Key

**Published on** H-Florida (December, 2004)

Through an examination of four gubernatorial campaigns in 1970, *Mighty Peculiar Elections* traces the electoral and tactical transitions from the rhetorical excesses of segregationist governors to the strategy of racial moderation that has come to characterize southern politics. Sanders examines the states of Arkansas, Florida, South Carolina, and Georgia, categorizing the former two as peripheral and placing the latter two in the Deep South. He argues that, despite several issues unique to each election, the four Democrats who won their respective contests collectively reflected changing racial attitudes among many white southerners. In this volume, the year 1970 marks that transition. The particular elections in this study were remarkable, or "mighty peculiar" in the eyes of one Georgia farmer, because the victors "eschewed the traditional politics of racial discord and demagoguery" (p. 1). Sanders certainly recognizes that racial moderates had served as chief executives in the South prior to 1970, but in his estimation, governors such as Florida's LeRoy Collins still came into office as avowed segregationists. Elections in this pivotal year produced winners who were never compelled to stake such claims.

The author acknowledges the gradual nature of changing racial attitudes, and he uses chapter 2 to highlight societal trends that distinguish the elections of 1970 from more infamous contests earlier in the decade. For example, Sanders contends that the Modern Civil Rights Movement "awoke a sense of guilt over the costs of segregation in some white southerners who now accepted integration without question" (p. 11). A recognition of the profound injustices wrought by the Jim Crow South, coupled no doubt with the embarrassing stigmas of racism and violence, precipitated moderation among many white Southerners, but the devastating economic effects of racial strife were arguably the most immediate motivation for many whites who readily chose financial stability over fights to maintain segregation. Sanders rightly notes how many southern businessmen advocated peaceful transitions when their communities began the process of desegregating public facilities, and while many whites did not necessarily favor desegregation, their general

compliance suggested that massive resistance was waning. Meanwhile, some African Americans began returning to the South by 1970, and their presence could gradually be felt in electoral politics where voting reforms enabled new political powers. Sanders even points to pop culture for evidence of broader changes, as the ***Beverly Hillbillies*** and ***The Waltons*** attracted millions of television viewers. Together, the author believes that these trends offer further evidence that the racial climate of the South was changing and that the region was winning acceptance from the rest of the nation.

Subsequent chapters examine each of the gubernatorial elections. In Arkansas, Dale Bumpers rose from political obscurity to win a primary runoff against the renowned Orval Faubus. While Faubus ranted about the perils of busing, Bumpers refused to engage in racial politics. The political novice acknowledged that all of the candidates were opposed to busing, but since the courts were still deliberating over its potential merits, Bumpers refused to make busing an issue. Instead, he emphasized the need for honesty and leadership in the state capitol. Scandals during Faubus's tenure as governor and in his personal life likely contributed to his defeat, and Bumpers's message of moderation propelled him to a comfortable victory over the Republican incumbent, Winthrop Rockefeller. While Rockefeller had pushed for some progressive reforms during his time in office, he was still perceived as a wealthy transplant, and white moderates eagerly returned to the Democratic fold with votes for Bumpers.

Although more politically astute than his Arkansan counterpart, the name Reubin Askew was recognized by only four percent of Floridians in the months preceding the Democratic primary. Attorney General Earl Faircloth was favored to win the party's gubernatorial nomination, but a late surge by Askew placed the two in a runoff. Due in part to the attorney general's acquiescence to the sitting governor's timely defiance of court-ordered desegregation plans, Askew defeated Faircloth by more than one hundred thousand votes. The Republican incumbent, Claude Kirk, gained notoriety when he suspended the Manatee county school board and placed the school system under his supervision. The governor, who had generally been compliant over desegregation orders, calculated that resistance to busing would ensure re-election. However, voters were unamused with the governor's antics, and they elected Askew by almost three hundred thousand votes. Like Bumpers, Askew had organized his campaign around themes of credibility and leadership.

Deep South states South Carolina and Georgia contained substantial numbers of African American voters, and their presence altered the political landscapes in these states. The 1970 general election in South Carolina included a Democrat turned Republican named Albert Watson. Endorsed by Senator Strom Thurmond, Watson "gravitated toward those elements of the Republican party in the South that sought to resist federal pressures to desegregate" (p. 121). In contrast, the Democratic challenger was Lieutenant Governor John West. Over the course of the decade, West's political career included legislative votes against measures that would close integrated colleges or that would repeal the compulsory school attendance law. While lieutenant governor, West attended and spoke at a dinner honoring the NAACP's Roy Wilkins. The election season featured Watson's fiery speeches, one of which was partly to blame for a mob of angry whites who overturned two buses that had carried black children to school in February. Over the course of the campaign, West was compelled to move to the right on many issues, an adjustment that cost him support among some African Americans. Yet the contrast between Watson and West remained stark, and voters chose West, the first South Carolina governor to garner more votes from African Americans than whites.

While West enjoyed a coalition of black and white support, Jimmy Carter's gubernatorial aspirations in Georgia required a different strategy. The Democratic primary included a popular former governor, Carl Sanders, as well as C. B. King, an African American attorney from Albany who was active in the SCLC's efforts there. Carter placed himself to the right of Sanders and relied upon some questionable tactics to win votes. He sought to depict the former governor as "a smug, citified dandy," a characterization that would appeal to lower-class whites whose votes were desperately needed. While Carter tried to draw class distinctions between himself and Sanders, he simultaneously courted segregationists and liberals. His campaign circulated a photograph that showed Sanders celebrating with an African American player for the Atlanta Hawks who was dousing the former governor with champagne. Carter also alluded to fictitious scandals in Sanders's administration. Conversely, and in spite of warnings to contrary, Carter openly campaigned in black communities. During the primary runoff with Sanders, Carter backed away from the negative campaigning, relying instead upon a populist approach that portrayed Sanders as a "bad loser" (p. 164). Even though Sanders won 93 percent of the black vote, Carter won the runoff and later defeated a Republican political novice in the general election. Although categorizing his campaign as one of racial moderation is debatable, Carter's later actions would distance his reputation from these dubious political tactics.

While he includes several manuscript collections and oral histories from the politicians in his study, author Randy Sanders relies heavily upon periodicals for his research. Several important assumptions form the foundation for his findings. First, Sanders believes that the wishes of most Southerners can be deduced by the people they elected to office. "Political campaigns do not initiate social change," he writes, "rather they mirror the electorate that decides the election" (p. 11). Second, the author asserts that television ads were important factors in separating the winners and losers in the 1970 elections. The soothing messages of Bumpers, for example, were more appealing than the angry sounds of Faubus in the Arkansas primary.

This work serves as a solid step toward understanding how Southern politics evolved in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. Sanders realizes that many white Southerners clung to racism in 1970, but he correctly notes that these elections provide insight into the transition away from the politics of overt racism. Indeed, he omits the gubernatorial election in Alabama because George Wallace did not reflect the moderation of other winning candidates. In spite of this exception, the author concludes that white Southerners were becoming increasingly ambivalent about desegregation, even if they disagreed with Civil Rights legislation and court-ordered compliance. Critics might rightly question if the election of these men reflected changing attitudes about race or just new political realities. Whites who preferred law and order to fighting desegregation might have considered desegregation the lesser of two evils. Nevertheless, ***Mighty Peculiar Elections*** proves that the infamous political rhetoric of segregationists was dying a slow, uneven death by 1970.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-florida

**Citation:** Barclay Key. Review of Sanders, Randy. *Mighty Peculiar Elections: The New South Gubernatorial Campaigns of 1970 and the Changing Politics of Race.* H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. December, 2004.

**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10033