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The Agency of Alienation: Catholics, African Americans, Jimmy Carter, and the Destruction of the New Deal Order

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The Agency of Alienation: Catholics, African Americans, Jimmy Carter, and the Destruction of
the New Deal Order

by

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Under the Direction of John McMillian, PhD

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ABSTRACT

The Jimmy Carter Era was situated between two crucial decades in American history. The historiography of the 1970s has traditionally been interpreted as a post-script to the radical changes of the 1960s, or a precursor to the more conservative 1980s. In the comparatively light scholarship that does examine Carter, he is often portrayed at the mercy of political and economic forces, which were responsible for his devastating electoral loss in 1980. It is my contention that this analysis of the Carter presidency is reductive and ignores the information available that suggests that while Carter did face historically unprecedented challenges in his presidency, his loss was as much a function of his political mistakes as the aforementioned trends and forces. Carter's political acumen allowed him to assemble competing interests into a winning coalition, but his mistakes ultimately ushered in a new era of conservative political supremacy in the United States.

INDEX WORDS: Seventies, Carter, New deal, Abortion, Coalition, Ethnic groups

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DEDICATION

For Dayton Lee, my older brother that was born after me, my inspiration, my role model, my best friend, my hero.

Employing someone who insists on only working part-time is difficult. Doing so while they cannot be flexible, work when needed or after hours during a challenging time, is near impossible. If not for the kindness, understanding and flexibility showed by those in my professional life, paying my bills and attending graduate school would have been an impossibility. So, I would like to dedicate this thesis to those who stuck by me, when all the incentives went the other way. Thank you, Brian and Page Olson, for always listening to me and supporting me, even going so far as to make new jobs, pay structures, and accommodations for my schooling, all because you believed in me. That support and faith was essential for my personal, professional, and academic growth and I will forever be in your debt. Thank you, Ahmet Toker, my long-time professional mentor, and life-long friend. Your mentorship and patience helped mold me into the man I am today, and without you, none of this would have been possible. Thank you, Michael Santiago, for giving me chance after chance, and always sticking by my side, even when I didn't deserve it. Finally, thanks to all the others who took the load for me while I focused on school instead of work. Rob Bennett, Darius Pinnick, Mahamudul Haq, Huseyin Erikli and all my other colleagues. Thank you.

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INTRODUCTION

Jimmy Carter's presidential election was as unlikely as it was remarkable. The 1970s were a time of intense change for the Democratic Party and the country. Several Supreme Court decisions changed the political landscape drastically, and the resignation of President Nixon dropped the electorate's faith in American institutions to an all-time low. Additionally, the Cold War was in full swing, and the unprecedented phenomenon of stagflation left many Americans confused and desperate for a change. As a result, the Democratic Party had to change to face new challenges, and an unprecedented number of candidates attempted to steer the Democratic Party in different directions, resulting in the highest number of primary candidates in US history in 1972 and 1976. Furthermore, no candidate from the South since the end of the Civil War had won the presidency, and Jimmy Carter was a one term governor from a state in the heart of the South, albeit a state with an increasingly progressive New South reputation. Moreover, despite Carter's Democratic credentials, Carter's policy proposals were often moderate, tending toward conservative, or even altogether unclear or contradictory. Therefore, going into the Democratic primaries, Carter faced a challenging ordeal. He could not count on consolidated support from the Democratic Party to secure the nomination, and he faced a stacked primary slate of competitive candidates.

Carter was very much the dark horse going into the primaries and managed to garner the support of the Democratic establishment after key wins in Iowa and Florida. He also defeated the looming menace that was George Wallace in his own territory, convincing many he was the definitive candidate. He was able to accomplish such an impressive feat by fusing together segregationist Southern voters, African Americans, Catholic, Jews and Evangelicals into a

coalition that closely resembled the constituencies that supported Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. However, although the coalition looked much the same, the political landscape was not, and Carter lost in a devastating defeat just four short years later. Not only was Carter part of a select few incumbent presidents that lost after running for reelection, but his reelection bid lost by the largest margin in American history. No other American president since has been able to reassemble that coalition, making Jimmy Carter the last New Deal president.

This begs the question, what happened between 1976 and 1980 that caused such a rapid and stark change in voter priorities? Contemporary sources often suggest that Carter's handling of the economy was the primary reason for his defeat, and that voters who were weary of high inflation, unemployment, and interest rates were ready for a conservative economic approach. This is likely partially true, but Carter ran on a platform of fiscal austerity that he largely held true to, and the previous Republican President Ford's economic policies were largely unpopular, signaling supplemental explanations. Furthermore, some scholarship after the 1980 election pointed to a rising Republican ascendancy as the cause of Carter's stark loss.¹ Additionally, the success of televangelist megachurches led some historians to question the importance of rising Evangelical power. Authors Daniel Williams and Bethany Moreton both explore this aspect of the 1970s in compelling ways.² Still others attributed Carter's loss to a silent partnership between corporate interests, conservative insiders, and declining union power. Kevin Kruse's *One Nation*

¹ See Andrew Busch, *Reagan's Victory: The Presidential Election of 1980 and the Rise of the New Right* (Lawrence, Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 2005), or Seth Blumenthal, *Children of the Silent Majority: Young Voters and the Rise of the Republican Party, 1968-1980* (Lawrence, Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 2018) for New Right propositions.

² Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2010), Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Walmart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2009)

Under God most directly relates to this phenomenon, but Kim Phillips-Fein's *Invisible Hands*, and Jason Stahl's *Right Moves* both address aspects that directly relate and contribute.³ While these explanations are compelling, the opening of the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library in 1986 allowed for new revisionist strains of inquiry into Jimmy Carter. As Jimmy Carter had written an autobiography, that was widely used in examining his political career, but access to presidential records allowed for more careful analysis. Recent works like Kai Bird's *The Outlier* and Jonathan Alter's *His Very Best* explore the Carter Presidency utilizing the newly available material.⁴ However, although many scholars have decided that the Carter Presidency perhaps warrants another look, what has perhaps yet to be explored sufficiently is the degree to which Carter's mistakes led to the shattering of the New Deal coalition, a gap this inquiry hopes to satisfy.

My goal is to illuminate Carter's mistakes and his declining reputation among African Americans and Catholics. An inquiry into relationships between an administration and constituencies is, of course, such a broad endeavor that it is impossible to account for all potential factors. Nevertheless, in order to attempt to understand why Carter was unable to maintain the political support he depended on; it is worthwhile to examine some of his policy positions in detail. To this end, I have limited the scope of this inquiry to Carter's 1976 Presidential campaign and his subsequent presidency. My analysis draws not just from existing scholarship, but also from archival sources at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta, Georgia. The main thrust of this inquiry is to determine what factors changed the political

³ Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York, Basic Books, 2015) , Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2009) , Jason Stahl, *Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture Since 1945* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2016)

⁴ Kai Bird, *The Outlier: The Unfinished Presidency of Jimmy Carter* (New York, Crown, 2021) , Jonathan Alter, *His Very Best: Jimmy Carter, A Life* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2020)

landscape between 1976 and 1980, such that Carter went from a close victory against Gerald Ford, to a staggering defeat against Ronald Reagan. Of course, there were political exigencies that contributed and have been covered in detail by reporters and scholars. My contention is that Carter's defeat was just as much a function of his own political failures as those external forces. Carter's political success in 1976 was due to the construction of an improbable alliance, and his failure in 1980 was at least partly due to his inability to maintain that alliance.

Chapter One: Carter and African Americans, An Unlikely Ally

After the successes of Civil Rights legislation, and a concurrent string of Democratic victories with Black voter support, many were quick to assume that the “Black vote” was synonymous with Democrats. However, while the Democratic Party had successfully attracted a majority of the Black vote, there were currents within African American communities that signaled concern for Black voter participation. In the 1970s, stagflation was ravaging the country, but it hit African American communities particularly hard. Furthermore, a strain of thought was gaining traction in those same communities that the best path to racial uplift was through economic opportunity, which threatened to shift some groups of voters to conservative candidates. Finally, the Southern populist backlash to integration signaled concern for Black voting power as the South searched for its Democratic identity. While Black votes had largely gone to Democrats since the 1930s, the biggest fear for Democrats was that many would simply stay home.

African Americans and the Democratic Party had quite the dynamic relationship in the twentieth century. Since the Republican Party was the “Party of Lincoln,” virtually all African Americans maintained Republican Party membership throughout Reconstruction, however state policies aimed at preventing African Americans from participating in democracy – including poll taxes, literacy tests, and other schemes – limited African American engagement to those that were more economically advantaged.⁵ In 1928, however, Democratic (and Catholic) candidate Al Smith made motions to woo the African American vote, and Black voter participation surged to over 300%. While Smith’s presidential run had turned out African American voters in

⁵ Douglas v. California, 372 U.S. 353 (1963), <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/372/353/>, page 372 U.S. 361.

numbers never seen before, Black voters did not reliably support Democrats. Calvin Coolidge soundly defeated Smith, in part because Smith had only tentatively courted the Black vote; the Democratic challenger from New York did not speak voluminously or specifically about issues that African Americans were most concerned with. African American mistrust of the Democratic Party resulted in a smaller turnout from them for the Democratic nominee in the 1932 election, but Franklin Roosevelt was able to handily beat the unpopular incumbent, Herbert Hoover, without them. While Roosevelt never courted the Black vote, the New Deal policies that he promoted were targeted toward the poor at a time when most of the African American population was economically disadvantaged. Thus, African Americans benefitted greatly from New Deal policies, and their support of FDR became near ubiquitous. As a result, the Democratic Party's political platform shifted rather radically, to support a new coalition of unionized workers, African American voters, Catholics, Jews, and other broadly ethnic and non-Protestant interests.

Al Smith's presidential run, FDR's New Deal policies, and increasing Black union representation put Catholics, Jews, and African Americans firmly in a solid Democratic coalition. While this coalition was clearly a winning formula for Democrats, the Solid South consisted of an electorally powerful voting block of segregationist Democrats, who opposed the goals of northern liberals. John F. Kennedy tried to thread this needle, courting the African American vote while being cautious of Southern segregationists.⁶ While initially African American support of Kennedy was tepid, a sympathetic phone call to Coretta Scott King from Kennedy shortly before the 1960 presidential election, while her husband, Martin, was in a Georgia jail for participating in a sit-in, garnered much favor with the African American

⁶ James H. Merryweather, "Worth a Lot of Negro Votes": Black Voters, Africa, and the 1960 Presidential Campaign" *Journal of American History* Vol 95, Iss. 3 (December 2008): 737.

community. This, combined with Kennedy's platform of securing voting rights for African Americans, and eliminating segregation in education, turned the tide in his favor; African American support for Kennedy was likely a decisive factor in his narrow victory.⁷ After Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, pushed even further to secure civil rights and voting rights for African Americans, the Democratic Party began drawing overwhelming support from Blacks.

As with Catholics, there was broad African American representation in Northern industrial states, and so courting their vote would be necessary to secure some of the bigger electoral states like Pennsylvania and New York.⁸ But the largest concentration of African Americans fell in the "Solid South," a Democratic region that was at odds with many Northern Democrats on the issue of segregation. This had historically posed quite the problem for Democratic presidential candidates, as it was difficult to appeal to staunchly segregationist southern states, while simultaneously courting the African American vote which obviously opposed segregation. This dichotomy between southern segregationist Democrats and African American Democrats exposed an opportunity for those that were able to navigate between the two disparate constituencies. While Kennedy had somewhat successfully navigated this impasse, Richard Nixon really illustrated the roadmap for successful Southern Strategy, by using racially coded language to lure segregationists away from the Democratic Party. Nixon's Southern Strategy not only allowed him to win in 1968 and 1972, but it also foreshadowed the path toward defeating the New Deal Coalition using racially coded language like "states' rights" and "law and order."

⁷ Chuck Stone, "Black Political Power in the Carter Era," *The Black Scholar* 4 (Jan 1st, 1977): 6.

⁸ Daniel K. Williams, *The Election of the Evangelical: Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford, and the Presidential Contest of 1976* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2020), 285

This new strategy of pulling southern votes away from the Democratic ticket using racially coded language was upsetting for many liberals and African Americans. A shifting of alignment for the Solid South could spell a major decline in Black political power, National Urban League President Vernon Jordan observed, when he said the 1976 election could be, “the most crucial election in recent history for Black people.”⁹ The Black vote had become much more significant with the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, after which African American registration rapidly jumped from 23% in 1964 to 61% in 1969. Furthermore, their main population centers were mostly in important battleground regions. Consequently, any successful Democratic nominee for the 1976 election would not just need the Black vote, they would need it in force.

Carter in Georgia

Jimmy Carter, while growing up, had friendlier relations with African Americans than most rural Georgians. His relationship with his surprisingly progressive mother, Miss Lillian, and childhood living among African American families (including Black playmates) gave him a more liberal view of race than might be expected.¹⁰ Carter did not merely consider race as a political issue; it was a moral and religious issue to him as well, and he consistently advocated policies that were in line with his religious beliefs. However, when Carter decided to run for the Governor’s seat of Georgia for the second time in 1970, he was keenly aware of how out of step his racial views were with most white voters in the state. To reconcile this, he would have to appeal to those voters, and he achieved this by using some racially coded issues in his campaign. Part of his platform pledged to “establish and maintain the highest standards of quality in public

⁹ Chuck Stone, “Black Political Power in the Carter Era,” *The Black Scholar*, No. 4 (Jan 1st, 1977): 6.

¹⁰ Kai Bird, *The Outlier: The Unfinished Presidency of Jimmy Carter* (New York, Crown Publishing, 2022), 19.

schools and colleges in Georgia, in spite of any obstacle brought on by integration, court rulings, local apathy or other causes.”¹¹ While subtle, the implication – that Blacks were diminishing the quality of Georgia’s schools – was not lost on voters. Furthermore, Carter’s campaigning also used racial allusions to discredit his competitors. The most infamous example of this came in the “fact sheets” his campaign distributed, which showed his competitor, Carl Sanders, getting sprayed with champagne by a Black member of the Atlanta Hawks basketball team.¹²

While Carter used racial allusions to garner the support needed to win him the rural White vote, he did not want to be portrayed as a racist. He denied any knowledge of the ads, despite his campaign greenlighting them. Carter had to maintain a delicate balance to win, but he remained committed to his moral and religious view of civil rights. He shrewdly pledged to Vernon Jordan, future National Urban League President that, “you won’t like my campaign, but you will like my administration.”¹³ Carter was correct: most African Americans did not like his campaigning, and he only pulled a paltry 5% of the Black vote in the 1970 primary election. But Carter was also correct that he needed the votes of segregationists, as they allowed him to beat out Democratic challenger Carl Sanders, and then handily beat the Republican candidate as well. Now that Carter had become governor, he would pursue a different path, as he illustrated in his inaugural address when he said, “This is a time for truth and frankness...and I say to you quite frankly that the time for racial discrimination is over.”¹⁴

Regardless of the racial allusions he deployed, Carter clearly put civil rights at the center of his gubernatorial objectives. He included a substantial number of African Americans in his

¹¹ Bird, *The Outlier*, 70.

¹² Williams, *Election of the Evangelical*, 46.

¹³ Bird, *The Outlier*, 70.

¹⁴ Jimmy Carter Inaugural Address 1971 found at jimmycarterpresidentiallibrary.gov/library.

administration and hung portraits of important Black Georgians in the Capitol building (the most notable was of Martin Luther King Jr). Furthermore, he passed several resolutions aimed at improving the lives of impoverished communities in Georgia, allowing for equal state funding for poorer and richer school areas, and increasing educational programs for convicts. Thus, although Carter was more conservative than many in the Democratic Party may have liked, he had accumulated a reputation among Black Georgians that he was not a segregationist and would advocate for their economic interests.

Economic issues were indeed the thing that most African American families were concerned with in the 1970s. The civil rights and busing struggles had given way to a new host of problems, mostly on the economic front as high inflation rates and rising deindustrialization disproportionately affected African Americans, who were overrepresented in the manufacturing sector. Furthermore, redlining, urban renewal, and discrimination in the ways the GI Bill was distributed meant it was increasingly hard for African Americans to economically compete.¹⁵ This worked in tandem with the “white flight” reaction to integration that pulled resources, businesses, and capital out of working-class neighborhoods and left them segregated and economically destitute.¹⁶

To further complicate matters, according to The National Bureau of Economic Research, a 20% drop in wages results in a 12-18% increase in youth participation in crime, meaning that not only did Black communities have to contend with falling purchasing power and rising unemployment, but a rising crime rate as well.¹⁷ Black communities were largely convinced that

¹⁵ Laura Kalman, *Right Star Rising: A New Politics, 1974-1980* (New York, W.W. Norton, and Co., 2010) 182.

¹⁶ Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹⁷ National Bureau of Economic Research Paper, Working Paper 5983, (March 1997), <https://www.nber.org/papers/w5983>

the causes of their problems were structural. A 1970 Black Buyers survey of 2000 urban households had over 90% of respondents say that “better educational opportunities” and “better job opportunities” would be “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful” in staving off the crime problem.¹⁸ Furthermore, consecutive administrations’ attempts at ameliorating criminal and economic issues had largely exacerbated them instead. While Johnson’s Safe Streets Act first attempted to leverage the aid of the federal government to stop rising crime rates, policy makers’ often held racial biases that shaped and corrupted the outcomes of the program.¹⁹ Nixon followed suit by eliminating some of the few protections of Johnson’s program, and introducing increasingly harsh sentencing reforms, and incentivizing prison construction.²⁰ Neither administration put forward proposals that would solve African American economic inequity at the root of the problem.

The economic woes of African American communities had multifaceted effects on Black participation and policy concerns going into the 1976 election. First off, economic opportunities and rising crime were front and center concerns for Black families. Furthermore, even well-intentioned policies that were intended to provide reprieve for African American communities could be tainted by non-Black administrators. Finally, most African Americans – along with most liberals – firmly believed the causes of the proliferation of crime and addiction were structural, often either educational or vocational, but in all cases economic. Thus, many African Americans were convinced that the way toward mitigating or reversing institutional and

¹⁸ Michael Javen Fortner, *Black Silent Majority: The Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Politics of Punishment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2015), 155.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2016), 3

²⁰ *Ibid.*,

economic inequalities was increased economic and vocational opportunities, and greater representation in government to bring attention to their plight.²¹

As governor, Jimmy Carter immediately went to work attempting to alleviate the plight of those ravaged by poverty and crime. He quickly created the Civil Disorders Unit, which consisted of four plainclothes personnel who would go in in place of police officers to identify causes of conflict and deescalate them. This was aimed at solving problems with a more reform-minded strategy, which would reduce a drastically burgeoning prison population.²² Furthermore, he put in place judicial reform, and placed a high focus on effective drug law enforcement. Since the majority of the crimes were being committed by youths, the Carter administration put a high emphasis on stopping youth crime and reforming the offenders to be productive members of society.²³ This included programs that educated, vocationally trained, and counselled inmates to prevent recidivism.²⁴ Impoverished communities wanted a stop to rising crime and addiction rates, but simultaneously, a large portion of those communities did not want to see young men's lives destroyed by lengthy prison sentences. Carter threaded this needle expertly, advocating harsher drug enforcement provisions, but simultaneously offering offender rehabilitation programs, which offered education, counseling, and vocational training.²⁵ Additionally, he attempted to address the structural roots of poverty in Georgia, creating the state's first housing

²¹ Fortner, *Black Silent Majority*, 147.

²² Barry Latzer, *The Rise and Fall of Violent Crime in America* (New York, Wilested and Taylor Publishing, 2017), 163 figure 3.16.

²³ Pre-Presidential Papers, 1976 Presidential Campaign, Issues Office-Sam Bleicher, Crime and Criminal Justice, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia, Box 33.

²⁴ A State in Action, Georgia 1971-1975, found in Pre-Presidential papers, 1976 Presidential Campaign Issues Office- Stuart Eizenstat, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia, Box 11.

²⁵ A State in Action, Georgia 1971-1975, found in Pre-Presidential papers, 1976 Presidential Campaign Issues Office- Stuart Eizenstat, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia, Box 11.

agency, its first transportation agency, and creating a finance agency that would make residential housing loans to low-income families at interest rates 2% below the prevailing market rate.²⁶

African Americans in the South were taking note of Jimmy Carter's progressive policy positions, and he had garnered a lot of goodwill in that community as a result. However, once Carter had decided to seek the Democratic nomination for the presidency, he faced a serious dilemma on which strategy to take. He could not simply neglect the Black vote and then pull the rug out from segregationists like he had before; the Black vote was too essential, and most were now aware of his civil rights positions based on the alliances he had cultivated with Black leaders. Carter's team knew that his identity as a Southerner was simultaneously one of his political strengths, but also was a potential liability. He obviously needed a powerful base of support in his home region to have a chance at securing the nomination. To do this, however, he would have to find a way to balance the opposed factions of African Americans, and poor White Wallace supporters. Leaning too heavily to one side might lose the other faction, but not taking a side at all could lose both, thereby eroding Carter's base of support. Both constituencies, however, were poor, and they both shared working-class concerns. Rising unemployment rates hit both groups exceptionally hard. As such, Carter's marginally higher concern for the unemployment side of the stagflation phenomenon over the inflation side was a winning message to both groups. However, the racial dialectic meant that the campaign had to use vague allusions and coded language to reach both constituencies.

The George Wallace Challenge, A Different Southerner

²⁶ Pre-Presidential Papers, 1976 Presidential Campaign, Issues Office- Stuart Eizenstat, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia, Box 3.

His largest obstacle in the South was the Democratic challenger, George Wallace, who rose to fame (or infamy) for standing in an Alabama schoolhouse door while protesting school integration, and proclaiming, “segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!”²⁷ Wallace represented the portion of the Democratic Party that was still anti-Black, and his 1968 independent run illustrated just how popular that message was in the Solid South. To beat out Wallace for the nomination, Carter would have to pull some of those racist voters away from Wallace to construct his own base of support. One of the ways Carter achieved this was by honing the rhetorical style he’d been known for previously, in order to appeal to a broader swath of presidential primary voters. He was able to simultaneously project two versions of a “fantasied South,” evoking both the “good ole boy” rural South and the “Black and White together” New South.²⁸ This allowed him to speak to both groups without alienating either of them. Meanwhile, Carter tended to hire local young men as his political advisors, eschewing the usual Washington elites. This was a calculated move designed to synergize with Carter’s identity as a Washington outsider, and gained his circle of advisors the notorious nickname, “The Georgia Mafia.” This populist outsider message ingratiated him with Wallace supporters, but he simultaneously crafted his image of a civil rights supporting New South Democrat. Although his closest advisors were entirely White, his campaign staff was 13% African American. Most importantly, Carter had gained the support of some key civil rights activists, most notably Andrew Young, and he used that support liberally to shore up support amongst African Americans and whenever his civil rights integrity was being called into question.

²⁷ George Wallace Inaugural Address, January 14, 1963.

<https://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/voices/id/2952/> (accessed 11/02/2023).

²⁸ Zachary J. Lechner, “Fuzzy as a Georgia Peach: The Ford Campaign and the Challenge of Jimmy Carter’s Southernness,” *Southern Cultures* 23, No. 4 (December 1st, 2017): 63.

Considering the threat and challenge that George Wallace posed, Carter's campaign strategy shifted to make defeating the Southern populist priority number one, and Florida was the best place to do it. If he could beat Wallace in his own backyard, he would be able to take him out of the race, or at least siphon off sizable portions of his support. As it stood, Wallace had already handily beat Carter in Mississippi, and internal polling showed that Wallace was leading 35% to Carter's paltry 7% in the Sunshine State.²⁹ This was a dismal prospect, but that same internal polling showed that Carter's lack of support was mainly due to his obscurity, as most voters did not know anything about the Georgian. This left Carter optimistic that a strong showing in the state could drastically increase his prospects. Furthermore, Florida was an excellent location for a showdown because of the same New South/Old South dynamics that were at play in Georgia. Although Florida was still firmly in the South – it was “Wallace Country” in some respects – the state had seen an influx of young progressives in recent years. After Arizona, Florida was the fastest growing Sun Belt state, and most of those transplants were receptive to Carter's more moderate message. Furthermore, the state governor, Reubin Askew, was a New South Democrat in Carter's vein, so he could likely count on his support. Finally, the Carter campaign had decided to bring the full weight of their influence to bear in Florida, spending twice as much there as in any other state. Carter's strategy paid off, resulting in an unlikely upset wherein he carried the state 35% to Wallace's 31%.

Carter's victory in Florida illuminates a few things about both campaigns. First, it suggests that that Southern support could be won by avenues other than racial appeals. Carter would not have been able to beat out Wallace without the staggering 74% of the African American vote that he was able to garner in the state. Furthermore, while the Black vote was

²⁹ Williams, *Election of the Evangelical*, 65.

essential, the largest proportion of Carter's votes came from young, economically mobile Florida transplants.³⁰ This illustrated that while Wallace's regional appeal and anti-Washington identity struck a chord in the South, a more moderate anti-establishment candidate without such racial baggage was a more appealing choice. Second, for fear of losing to Wallace, nearly every other candidate opted to not campaign in Florida, as the South was too strong a bastion to penetrate. Carter's Florida primary showed this to be a dire mistake. The South was not as monolithic as it once was, and the abundance of Southern African American voters gave Carter a strong, viable Democratic base of support with which to work. Finally, it showed Carter could simultaneously appeal to multiple socio-economic, racial, and regional groups by utilizing an optimistic message of fiscal austerity and compassion. The Florida primary was the last stand of George Wallace and sent a message to industrial Northeastern Black voters that Carter could carry the racially charged South, while still maintaining a civil rights platform.

The African American Vote and the Primary Campaign

Similarly, African Americans lifted Carter to victory in other important states during the nomination. Wisconsin was to be the clarion call for candidate Mo Udall, who fell left of Carter on nearly every issue. Udall had made outreach to minorities priority number one; he considered having a Black running mate, and he expressed support for the Humphrey-Hawkins bill, which African Americans overwhelmingly supported. (The bill aimed to symbolically set unemployment and inflation targets at 3% and moderate long-term interest rates). Carter, however, opposed Humphrey-Hawkins, making him vulnerable to candidates like Udall in the Wisconsin primary.³¹ But Carter's evangelicalism, Southern credentials, and New South idealism

³⁰ Williams, *Election of the Evangelical*, 154.

³¹ *Ibid*, 160.

appealed to Black voters, and they showed up to give him a razor thin victory in the state. Similarly, Pennsylvania was an essential battleground state wherein Carter leaned on his rapport with African Americans. While Carter had barely managed a victory in Wisconsin, Jackson would pose a more formidable challenge in Pennsylvania, and polls already showed Carter trailing. Carter's campaign again relied on the Black vote, pegging it as his "greatest edge" against Jackson in Pennsylvania.³²

During the primaries, the Carter campaign changed their message to allow for the burgeoning alliance he had cemented between Southern White Protestants and African Americans based on the thing they both had in common: evangelicalism. Carter had never been private about his deeply held beliefs; however, he had not actively promoted them either. While his religion of course informed his morality, his Southern Baptist beliefs meant that he took the doctrine of separation of church and state somewhat seriously. However, Carter shrewdly saw that he might be able to better appeal to Blacks and Protestants by emphasizing his religious faith. This was not without its risks, however, as Stu Eizenstat illustrated when he advised Carter that although evangelizing was helping amongst Evangelicals and African Americans, "they have hurt among liberals and particularly Jews."³³ Although his campaign was wary, Carter was persuasive, and found a way to appeal to Evangelicals while assuring Jews and secular voters that his doctrine of separation of church and state meant there was nothing to fear, which proved to be a massive boon to his fragile coalition.

³² Ibid, 162.

³³ Jimmy Carter Pre-Presidential Papers, Issues Office-Stuart Eizenstat, *Religion 2/75-6/76*, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia, Box 1, as quoted in Daniel K. Williams, *The Election of the Evangelical: Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford, and the Presidential Contest of 1976* (Lawrence, Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 2020).

While Carter had so far been wildly successful in walking the tight rope between utilizing Black support to land key states that would function as a solid base of support while courting segregationist Wallace voters, he quite seriously jeopardized his coalition by failing to maintain that balance effectively. Racial integration in housing was being hamstrung by Whites fleeing integrated neighborhoods and public spaces, a phenomenon that became known as “white flight.” To counteract that, and comply with the Civil Rights Act, Congress passed the 1968 Fair Housing Act and the 1974 Housing and Community Development Act, which stipulated that public housing could not be built in predominantly minority areas, except in “exceptional circumstances”. While this was intended to encourage integration, in practice, builders frequently used the exceptional circumstance loophole. Carter’s gaffe on this topic came when speaking on public housing units in an interview with the *New York Daily News*, “I see nothing wrong with ethnic purity being maintained,” Carter said. “I would not force racial integration of a neighborhood by government action.”³⁴ This was not only more conservative than even the existing law, but it was also counter to the stance on integration he had taken in his home state previously. This could have seriously eroded Carter’s African American support, as historian Daniel K. Williams illustrated in *The Election of the Evangelical*. His closest African American advisor, Andrew Young, threatened to withhold his support, citing the phrase’s “Hitlerian connotations, whilst others like civil rights activist Hosea Williams simply denounced him as a “sophisticated racist.”³⁵ Ultimately, the good will that Carter had garnered previously overrode most concern over the “ethnic purity” remark, but it would not be the last time that Carter diminished his chances through poor choices of words.

³⁴ Records of the 1976 Campaign Committee to Elect Jimmy Carter, Noel Sterrett Subject File, New Summaries, 4/76, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia, Box 89 as quoted in Williams, *Election of the Evangelical*.

³⁵ Williams, *Election of the Evangelical*, 163.

While Carter was able to rally delegates around his centrist message of intraparty unity, concerns still lingered. Carter's ethnic purity statement had done him no favors, and Wallace's rapid endorsement of Carter after his defeat left the campaign fearing that it would leave the wrong idea about Carter's racial priorities. The Carter campaign was by now quite proficient, however, at navigating racial issues. Wallace's endorsement of Carter was as close as he was going to get to ensuring the Southern segregationist constituency, which freed him up to tack back to the left and appeal to the African American and liberal groups he had alienated. Carter had furthermore decided to change course and endorse the Humphrey-Hawkins bill, that Black voters favored. He also stressed his priorities by finally clarifying that unemployment, rather than inflation, would be his primary target, and proposed a sweeping public works increase.³⁶ To the Congressional Black Caucus, and indeed many Black community leaders, this was the deciding issue in throwing their support behind Carter rather than the more inflationary-focused Ford. Furthermore, at the urging of Black political leaders, Carter constructed a delegate slate that was 13% African American (rather than the previous 7% put up by the DNC), which showed Black Americans that he was committed to their greater political representation.

Going into the general election, the Carter campaign was relatively unconcerned with his ability to win Black support. Although they had designated each ethnic minority a specific desk, and the Black Desk for the Carter campaign received the most funding, the campaign's main goal was simply to maximize turnout. Black voter turnout in the 1970s was on the decline, so getting people to the polls was important, but once they were there the campaign felt confident that they would prefer Carter over Ford. That is not to say they stopped searching for avenues

³⁶ Ibid, 200.

through which to appeal to African Americans, but rather they now appealed to them through less targeted methods.

One of those methods was Carter's "Farm Strategy." Although northern African Americans were predominantly involved in manufacturing, in the South the primary occupation of working-class Blacks was still agriculture. The Farm Strategy was designed to appeal to a large swath of working-class Southerners, both African American and White. While President Ford had paid lip service to farmers, realizing the importance of that constituency, farmers did not contribute much to his campaign and he took few actions on their behalf.³⁷ This presented a unique opportunity for Carter in the debates, which he jumped at. Carter called for tighter beef import quotas, such to protect domestic producers in overseas markets, and criticized Ford on his inaction.³⁸ While it is difficult to attribute success of talking points in a debate, it does show that Carter was still searching for ways to appeal to African Americans even if it was less targeted.

While Carter's debate performance was not phenomenal, his previous focus on solidifying the African American vote allowed him to take middle ground positions that appealed to a broad swath of Americans. Having an ideologically diverse coalition is a risky strategy at the best of times, and the 1970s were a time of ideological flux for many groups. It must have been even more frightening for Carter when his most solid base of support seemed to waver in the final week of the election. Three days before the election, Reverend Clennon King, an Albany minister and civil rights activist, sought membership in Jimmy Carter's home church of Plains Baptist. In response, the church closed its doors rather than admit King and three other African

³⁷ Ibid, 119.

³⁸ Records of the 1976 Campaign Committee to Elect Jimmy Carter, Issues Office-Stu Eizenstat, Farm Strategy, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia, Box 10.

Americans, citing a 1965 resolution that barred “Negroes and Civil Rights agitators.”³⁹ While Carter denounced the decision, the potential damage could have been catastrophic, however Carter’s allies saved him from the fallout. Martin Luther King Sr., Ralph Abernathy, and Andrew Young all not only reaffirmed their support, but encouraged Black voters to turn out for Carter. Even Coretta Scott King, who disagreed with Carter’s decision to not leave Plains Baptist over the issue, reiterated her support for Carter, claiming “If I’m ever needed, I’m for sure needed now.”⁴⁰ It is very easy to see how this October surprise could have dealt a fatal blow to the Carter campaign, but the unwavering support of his civil rights coterie may have persuaded a majority of African Americans that while the roots Carter came from could be backward, he himself was a man of virtue.

A Symbolic Victory

While Carter won the 1976 presidential election, he had failed to elicit the support he had hoped for. Only 53.6 percent of eligible voters turned out, the lowest since 1948.⁴¹ However, although overall turnout was poor, Carter’s showing with African Americans was astonishing. He had managed to garner the vote of 92% of African American voters, “the largest black vote in history, and the most influential single exercise of minority political power in this century.”⁴² Furthermore, the “Solid South” had completely gone for Carter apart from Virginia, and that was in no small part due to the Black vote. Specifically, the “Wallace Country” states of Alabama, Mississippi, and both the Carolinas had margins of victory for Carter that were almost certainly

³⁹ Wayne King, “Carter’s Church Upholds Its Policy by Refusing to Admit Four Blacks” *New York Times*, November 1st, 1976, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/11/01/archives/carters-church-upholds-its-policy-by-refusing-to-admit-four-blacks.html>

⁴⁰ Williams, *Election of the Evangelical*, 330.

⁴¹ Kalman, *Right Star Rising*, 178.

⁴² Stone, “Black Political Power”, 6.

due to African American votes.⁴³ While the African American votes had helped to deliver the Southern states to Carter, it is worth noting that although he lost the White Southern vote to Ford, he still managed to garner 46% of their vote as well. Carter had successfully managed to draw both groups into a coherent political coalition, a staggering feat.

However, while African American support was essential in allowing the Carter campaign to secure the South, and thus the White House, his actions in support of Black voters once in the office were tepid. He did make some movements toward the group that garnered praise, but by and large they were symbolic measures rather than substantive ones. His initiatives towards giving additional funding to historically Black colleges and universities and supporting Black owned businesses, for example, prioritized racial uplift, but the spending behind those initiatives was limited. Furthermore, while his signing of the Civil Service Reform Act, a symbolically crucial step and his most notable presidential action regarding African Americans, sent a hopeful message, its impact on Black communities was negligible. The bill targeted discriminatory housing practices that were disadvantaging African American families; however, the practice of redlining was already prohibited by the 1968 Fair Housing Act. Thus, signing of the Civil Service Reform Act sent the message that Carter was supportive of civil rights, but its impact was minimal.

Furthermore, while Carter's message of fiscal austerity was one that appealed to some conservative Democrats, it did not draw support from African Americans. Skyrocketing inflation and unemployment had hit Americans hard, but it had hit African Americans the hardest. The proportion of African American families in poverty in the 1970s and 1980s increased by almost

⁴³ Stone, "Black Political Power", 8.

50%, the number of middle-income earners shrank, and unemployment was rampant.⁴⁴

Additionally, the perception that Carter was more focused on foreign policy initiatives rather than domestic concerns did him no favors. Despite these concerns, however, African American support of Carter remained high. So, what was the cause of their continued support?

First, Carter's focus on unemployment rather than inflation upheld a campaign promise, and many African Americans saw that as the most reasonable path forward. The Humphrey-Hawkins bill that Carter signed in 1978 set the goal for unemployment at an optimistic 3%, and guaranteed that if those goals were not met, the United States government would create jobs to bridge the difference. The bill received strong African American support, and although the final version was weakened in the Senate, Carter's passage of garnered him broad African American approval.⁴⁵ Additionally, the Republican Party during the late 1970s had increasingly become enamored with neoliberal economic proposals to combat stagflation, policies that ran counter to the economic objectives of working-class Americans. While neoliberal policies suggested a lowering of tax rates to increase revenues, which might provide some relief to businesses (thereby stimulating job growth), they also promoted a cutting of initiatives like minimum wage protections, aid to education, and job training opportunities, all of which disproportionately benefited African Americans. Thus, when Ronald Reagan advocated for supply-side economics, what many heard instead was a denunciation of New Deal policies that African Americans were largely supportive of. The small number of African Americans that did support Reagan, often cited their belief in free enterprise and racial uplift through capitalism, however, Black

⁴⁴ Wornie L. Reed, "The Economic Status of the African American Family" PhD Dissertation, Cleveland State University, 1996.

⁴⁵ Don Wolfensberger, "The Humphrey-Hawkins Budget Debate and Minorities' Priorities: What Happened?" For the Congress Project Seminar On "Minority Group Leadership in Congress", Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, (January 2003): 1-17.

Americans by and large found that Jimmy Carter was the much more appealing option for ensuring their economic prospects.

Although non-White ethnic minorities showed they thought Carter was the best option, it was not a happy alliance. Hispanics and African Americans showed particular preference toward the Carter administration, with Hispanics favoring Carter by 18 percentage points while African Americans did so at a whopping 69 percentage point margin.⁴⁶ However, Carter's deficiencies had not been forgotten, and often loyalty to him began and ended at the ballot box, with many, according to presidential historian Gary Reichart, being "so uninspired they did nothing to keep him in office save cast a dutiful vote."⁴⁷ Furthermore, just as his administration claimed, the biggest concern with the African American constituency was turnout, and many just stayed home. This was nothing new of course; African American turnout in the 1970s was at its lowest point since the 1964 Civil Rights Act had passed. However, the mistakes that Carter made injected doubt into the constituency, causing many to question whether a Carter presidency would be preferable to a conservative one. This meant that it was harder for Carter to marshal support on the ground or garner the support of prominent African Americans.

African Americans in the 1980 Election

Despite this, the numbers indicate that although African Americans were not enthused about Carter, they did continue to support him. He garnered 83% of African American voters in the 1976 election, and in 1980 he likewise carried the same percentage. Additionally, he managed to garner a 1% higher total turnout in 1980 than in 1976, and more African Americans

⁴⁶ Everett Carl Ladd, "The Brittle Mandate: Electoral Dealignment and the 1980 Presidential Election" *Political Science Quarterly* Vol 96, No. 1 (Spring, 1981): 1-25.

⁴⁷ Gary W. Reichart, "Early Returns: Assessing Jimmy Carter," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20, No. 3 (Summer, 1990): 603-620.

went for Ford than Reagan. This meant that despite their reservations, Black Americans showed stronger for Carter in 1980 than in 1976. There were three primary reasons for this. One, while Carter's message of fiscal austerity did not appeal to African American voters, his focus on unemployment rather than inflation was certainly a boon to his coalition. African Americans were disproportionately affected by unemployment concerns, and thus Carter's concern here paid dividends.

Second, Reagan actively pushed the African American vote toward Carter. Reagan had been supportive of "states' rights," a code phrase for segregationist policies since the Civil War that some suburbanites were resurrecting. Similarly, the Klu Klux Klan threw their support behind Reagan shortly after the launch of his campaign, which also contributed to the perception. Furthermore, Reagan began his 1980 presidential campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, near the site where three civil rights workers were murdered in 1964, a move that Reagan's campaign manager knew would have racial connotations. To make matters worse, Reagan frequently characterized poor, Black women as "welfare queens," and he advocated for economic policies that would negatively impact African Americans. In the aftermath of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, African Americans mostly saw the path to acceptance through greater economic opportunities, and many Black voters did not think Reagan's economic approach would help them.

Finally, Carter's claims to be decent, humble, and honest resonated with many voters, and specifically with African Americans. His religiosity, his straightforward manner of speaking, and his distance from the Washington elite largely appealed to Black voters. Furthermore, Carter had taken steps to make his administration the most demographically inclusive in American history. He appointed more Blacks to positions within his administration than most people

expected, and he maintained the support of key civil rights icons who lent him credibility. His inclusive government also served to give him acute insight into what policies would put his government in harmony with African American concerns, and to help him to weather the many controversies that threatened to derail his campaign. African Americans were the last remaining constituency of Carter's New Deal Coalition that did not shatter and fall away.

Chapter II: Carter and Catholics, A Troublesome Alliance

Intro

In the 1978 midterm elections, Richard Viguerie's "Viguerie Company" and Paul Weyrich's "Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress" (CFSFC) threw their support fully behind pro-life candidates, advocating that voters solely support candidates who opposed abortion. A pair of staunch Catholics advocating a pro-life stance was unremarkable, however, the strategy they utilized was novel; Catholics and Protestants working together to advocate for "the family", a tentative alliance based on social issues that could bring the disparate groups together. As a conservative Catholic and a sharp political strategist, (Viguerie had pioneered the direct-mail strategy that became a hallmark of conservative political strategy, and Weyrich founded the Heritage foundation in 1974) the pair realized that using the abortion issue to bring Catholics into an alliance with socially conservative Protestants could achieve gains that Catholics alone had failed to generate, "The abortion issue is the door through which many people come into conservative politics, but they don't stop there", said Viguerie, "Their convictions against abortion are like the first in a series of falling dominoes."⁴⁸ The pair and their

⁴⁸ James Ridgeway, "The Pro-life Juggernaut," *The Village Voice* 30, Iss 29 (July 1985): 28-29 as quoted in Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010).

organizations promoted such ideas as the “Family Issues Voting Index” and the utilization of PACs to promote religious and conservative causes, which were in turn taken up by organizations like Falwell’s Moral Majority, and the Christian Voice, both of which Weyrich worked closely with. Midway through Carter’s presidency, it was becoming evident that the Catholic support he had relied upon to get elected, was dangerously close to defecting.

Catholic Political Activation and Cohesion

Catholic political cohesion in the mid-twentieth century is due in large part to the discrimination they had faced previously, which helped to shape their political ideology. The United States, although religiously diverse, had a strong Protestant majority, and the influx of Irish-Catholic immigrants fleeing the Great Famine prompted a wave of nativist backlash that resulted in widespread discrimination and loss of opportunities for the Catholic minority.⁴⁹ This further accelerated in the 1920s as anti-Catholic phenomena like immigration restrictive policies, discriminatory hiring practices in the form of “No Irish Need Apply” signage, and the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan presented new challenges for Catholics. In response, many Catholics found refuge from the hostility in the arms of the church, labor unions, and the Democratic Party, which allowed for greater social and economic opportunities through social and political unity.⁵⁰ While Catholics found safety and power in social cooperation, they still largely felt like outsiders in American culture, and although they had made major strides towards political mobilization locally, at the national level there was little political cohesion.

⁴⁹ Robert L. Frank, “Prelude to the Cold War: American Catholics and Communism,” *Journal of Church and State* 34, Iss. 1 (Winter, 1992): 2.

⁵⁰ Joseph M. Turini, “Catholic Social Action at Work: A Brief History of the Labor Collections at the Catholic University of America,” *The American Archivist* 68, Iss. 1 (April 2005): 131.

For that to happen, there needed to be some political animus to urge them to action, which they found in the proliferation of Communism. The late 19th and early 20th century had rightly placed the concern of Catholics firmly on economic, religious, and physical survival in the face of Protestant nativist discrimination. However, the 1930s saw an increased international concern with the spread of “godless” communism, and the Catholic Church was at the head of that charge. This focus on atheistic communism was not representative of the religious public as a whole, as Catholics had an outsized concern for the topic. The crusade against communism gave American Catholics a way to find a nationalistic ideal, and increasingly they were becoming a constituency that could be counted on to vote as a singular bloc. That political unity and advocacy resulted in the election of the nation’s first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy in 1960, with no small amount of Protestant support. His election gave American Catholics some measure of acceptance in religious and political culture, and they largely felt as though they were now operating from a position of equal footing, even if only temporarily.⁵¹

While denominational unity may have been delayed, Catholic political unity and advocacy was stronger than ever. However, new political realities revealed strong areas of concern for Catholic voting patterns. During the 1960s and 1970s, several legal rulings had put Catholics at odds with the Democratic Party. Abortion, an issue of specific import to Catholics, was legalized in 1973 with the *Roe v. Wade* decision; prayer in school was mandated to be voluntary with the Supreme Court decision *Engel v. Vitale* in 1962; and the IRS ruled against parochial schools in 1970. While Carter was obviously not responsible for any of these rulings, which were issued before he took office, they made Catholics increasingly wary of the Democratic Party and the perceived overreach of the federal government. The historical political

⁵¹ Moore, “Carter’s Catholic Problem,” 184

link that had connected Catholics with the Democratic Party had become more fragile, putting the once solid constituency in jeopardy. As many consultants both within and without the Carter campaign made clear to the candidate, Catholics would not fall neatly into their lap this time, and they were essential to the success of a Democratic candidate. If Carter were to win the presidency, he would have to find a way to bring Catholics back in the fold.

The Abortion Issue

When Carter started campaigning for president, a primary issue of concern for many Catholics was abortion, which put them at odds with the Democratic Party platform. The *Roe v. Wade* ruling, which legalized abortion, had effectively ensured the next election cycle would have abortion as a central political issue. This was a problem for candidate Carter as two of the Democratic Party's biggest constituencies, Feminists and Catholics, had opposed viewpoints on the issue. While Southern Baptists, Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, and Protestants all were either agnostic on the issue, or falling tepidly on the pro-choice side, for many Catholics abortion was paramount.⁵² Meanwhile, Carter's own Southern Baptist denomination was beginning to experience a shift in thinking around the issue.⁵³ Therefore, knowing that abortion would prove divisive in the upcoming primary, Carter's campaign crafted a nuanced statement. In keeping with his religious beliefs, Carter said he was personally opposed to abortion, but he would not support a constitutional amendment to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Carter had hoped a moderate stance on abortion would appeal to both culturally liberal Democrats and Catholics and help defuse the issue. Unsurprisingly, however, many members of both groups refused to be placated.

⁵² J. Brooks Flippen, "Carter, Catholics, and the Politics of Family," *American Catholic Studies* 123, Iss. 3 (Fall 2012): 31.

⁵³ Daniel K. Williams, *The Election of the Evangelical: Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford, and the Presidential Contest of 1976* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2020): 205.

Carter's previous history with the abortion issue further complicated his efforts. Carter had a personal and complicated opinion on abortion, treading carefully between the separation of church and state advocated by the Southern Baptist hierarchy, and his deep religious conviction. He clearly was disquieted by the prevalence of abortion, however his mother's experience in the Peace Corps in India had illustrated to him the necessity of some form of abortion healthcare. The result was a nuanced opinion, in which Carter personally opposed abortion, but did not think that it was the place of the government to legislate against it.⁵⁴ This was upsetting to many Catholics, who wanted the Supreme Court to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. To make matters worse, Carter had also written the foreword to a 1972 book titled *Women in Need*, which was a series of case studies that called for the greater availability of sex education, contraception, sterilization, and abortion, to help mitigate an "epidemic of unwanted babies."⁵⁵ Carter's support of the Supreme Court – decision combined with his seeming, albeit tentative, tolerance of abortion – made him a thoroughly unappealing candidate to many Catholics. This meant that potential Democratic challengers who shared Catholic sentiment on abortion, like Sargent Shriver or Ted Kennedy might appeal more effectively to Catholics, at Carter's expense.⁵⁶ Furthermore, opposition to abortion was marginally present in Baptist and African American communities, which could potentially further erode support for Carter during the primaries. The Carter campaign strategized that this could be overcome by reminding Catholic voters that just a decade earlier Kennedy had run and won on that same platform of separation of church and state. In doing so, Kennedy was able to alleviate Protestant fears that he would be beholden to the Pope and achieve a narrow victory. Nevertheless, many Catholics – who may have felt their religion

⁵⁴ Flippen, "Carter, Catholics and the Politics of Family," 33.

⁵⁵ Moore, "Carter's Catholic Problem," 193.

⁵⁶ Williams, *Election of the Evangelical*, 130.

was under attack – were wary of Carter, and so he needed a way to distinguish himself in an increasingly diverse Democratic field. His best opportunity to do so would be the first upcoming primary challenge, the contentious Iowa caucus.

Carter headed into the largely working-class and Catholic Iowa caucus with considerable apprehension. Iowa was a battleground state, and the caucus is often used as a bellwether to signal which candidates different groups should support. Normally, this would have been a good sign for the Carter team, as they were going into Iowa as the projected frontrunner, and a good showing at the first primary would solidify a lot of establishment support behind them. However, Carter’s reputation with Catholics was inadequate, and his campaign was concerned the Catholic voters might respond favorably to more liberal candidates like Shriver or Birch Bayh. This meant that Carter would have to be mindful with his statements on abortion to maneuver between the evangelical supporters in Iowa who were largely supportive of his abortion position and the Catholics who were not. While this would be difficult, Carter felt he could navigate the issue without too much trouble. His campaign advisors concluded his position on abortion was “as good as it can get and cannot be improved upon in any direction without corresponding loss in the opposition.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, in Iowa, Carter changed his stance. When asked by a reporter if he would support a limited amendment that featured a nationwide ban on elective abortions that were not medically necessary, Carter claimed that “under certain circumstances, I would [accept it].”⁵⁸ This was a significant departure from his previous policy statement, and it proved a boon to the Carter campaign in the Iowa caucus. Carter might not be fully on board with the Catholic agenda, but he was the only Democratic candidate now on record supporting abortion legislation.

⁵⁷ Pre-Presidential Papers, 1976 Presidential Campaign, Campaign Issues Office- Stuart Eizenstat, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia, Box 11, Folder 8.

⁵⁸ Williams, *Election of the Evangelical*, 136.

This statement allowed for a large burst in Catholic support where he needed it, but the change in stance initiated new trouble for Carter's relationship with Catholics and others. After such a major policy shift, a flurry of calls came into the Carter campaign headquarters, the most consequential of which was from the Shriver campaign which hoped to use the misstep to their advantage. Carter's staff reaffirmed his original statement on abortion, but the television news did not report it in time, and many pro-life activists had already showed up to support Carter for the caucus, unaware of the disparity between statements. Once the news broke, many felt deceived. Carter's impulsive shift in policy position further contributed to an already burgeoning perception that he was inconsistent, or disingenuous in his statements. This was a particularly damaging perception as Carter was trying to present himself as plain-spoken and sincere, (unlike "typical" politicians). In the aftermath of the Iowa Caucus statements, the Carter campaign forcefully reaffirmed his alliance with feminist groups by stressing that he would keep his religious beliefs out of policy making, but much of the damage was already done.

After such a consequential blunder, Carter's advisors realized their strategy would have to change. Carter was still polling ahead of Ford, but traditionally held political wisdom said that to win a national election the Democratic candidate needed at least 65% of the Catholic vote, and Carter's numbers were dwindling by the day. Although he claimed that he had not changed policy positions (he said his words were taken out of context), voters were not buying it. So, the campaign changed tack and instead foregrounded how he would not support Medicare funding of abortions, putting his policy more in line with the Democratic challengers who were threatening to edge him out. While for the time being he could not appeal to Catholics on the abortion issue without appearing disingenuous, he could focus on other policy positions that the working-class

members of the Catholic Church supported: a balanced budget, a reformed welfare system, and the strengthening of labor unions.

Carter's Union Strategy

Throughout the twentieth century, labor unions played a pivotal role in supporting New Deal-style coalitions and blue-collar workers traditionally supported Democrats. Labor unions were a strong constituency in the industrial Northeast and Midwest, both areas that boasted impressive electoral vote counts that the Carter campaign correctly surmised would be essential to victory. However, Carter was a troublesome candidate for labor union support, largely because he presided over a staunchly right-to-work state in the Dixiecrat South, which had been virtually bereft of union organization after the passage of Provision 14B of the Taft-Hartley Act, a section which allowed for the proliferation of right-to-work laws. Furthermore, labor unions had prodigious Catholic membership, meaning his recent blunders with Catholics in Iowa could seriously damage his chances with union voters. Nonetheless, his campaign realized that same Catholic union overlap posed a unique opportunity to win back some of the ground he had lost. If Carter could find a way to get the endorsement of the labor unions, there was still a good chance he could get win back the majority of Catholics.

However, union support for the Democratic Party in the early 1970s was not as strong as it had traditionally been. The Taft-Hartley Act had decimated union membership in the solidly Democratic South, and many unions were facing ideological change. A plurality of UAW membership, for example, had voted for the Republican Nixon in 1972 over the Democratic candidate George McGovern.⁵⁹ While some might have considered this a fluke, early internal

⁵⁹ Martin Halpern, "Jimmy Carter and the UAW: Failure of an Alliance," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, Iss. 3 (July 1996): 756.

UAW polling for the 1976 primary indicated that while Birch Bayh was the frontrunner, populist George Wallace was not trailing far behind. While George Wallace was a Democrat, he presided over a right-to-work state and labor leaders thought Wallace would run counter to their objectives. Furthermore, even if Wallace was unlikely to win, strong support for him would pull votes away from the Democratic candidate. This posed a particular problem for the UAW as polling indicated that their frontrunner, the pro-labor candidate Bayh, was unlikely to beat Gerald Ford in a general election, putting them in a difficult situation. The UAW needed a candidate that could appeal to Southern Wallace voters, would be sympathetic to union aims, and – most importantly – could win, after Carter’s good showing in the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary, the moderate dark horse seemed like he might be the solution to their problem. This was subtly displayed by UAW president Leonard Woodcock during a speech to Florida retirees, but the decisive moment came when Carter approached Woodcock in his hotel room after that speech. Woodcock was so impressed by Carter’s honest, straight-forward manner, and his sharp intellect, that he sought out Georgia representative Andrew Young to inquire about the plausibility Carter’s presidential bid.

At Andrew Young’s recommendation, UAW support of Carter was all but guaranteed, but as campaign advisor Stuart Eizenstat warned Carter, he would also need to support a national health insurance plan as a condition for robust union support. Carter agreed to the condition, and union support gave him the reinforcement he needed to shore up Catholic support in the northeastern strongholds where he had begun to lose ground. By allying with the UAW, Carter was able to successfully bring many disaffected Catholics back under his banner. After the Michigan primary, Carter called Woodcock and claimed “I know why I am still a candidate. I

will never forget it.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, the backing of one of the most influential unions helped demonstrate that Carter could fuse together the constituencies necessary for a successful campaign.

Crafting a Platform

Although Carter had faced significant hurdles in early primaries, his efforts within those battleground states paid dividends in securing the nomination. Carter had beaten the populist Wallace in his own backyard and won the support of the UAW, which showed many of the delegates that Carter had the ability to fuse together competing interests and form a winning coalition against the incumbent. Furthermore, while many in the Democratic Party found him too moderate, it did not take much effort for him to lean to the left on some key issues and win back those electors. In the final months leading up to the nomination, Carter softened his position on many issues important to liberals, pledging support for the Humphrey-Hawkins bill, shifting his rhetorical focus to unemployment (rather than inflation), and proposing a substantial increase in public works spending.⁶¹

While Carter’s attempt to solidify support from other constituencies was necessary to secure his nomination, he again faced the problem of maintaining Catholic support. In crafting his platform, he emphasized ethics reform, full employment, and national universal health insurance, all issues that his campaign assured him would garner Catholic support. There were other items in the platform, however, that caused concern for Catholics. Although the platform called for an increase in federal aid to cities and education, that increase notably did not extend to parochial schools, which Catholics greatly valued. Furthermore, while his platform devoted

⁶⁰ Ibid.,

⁶¹ Williams, *Election of the Evangelical*, 200.

two full pages to budget efficiency, the only cuts that it called for was a \$7 billion reduction to the defense budget, which was decidedly unpopular to the vehemently anti-communist constituency. Just as concerning was what was not included in the statement. It did not mention the concerns of labor unions, or a repeal of 14B of the Taft-Hartley Act, but many saw past this as the Democratic Party's platform repudiated right to work legislation and advocated repeal of 14B. More troublesome, however, was that it said nothing about abortion and neglected almost all the polarizing cultural issues facing the campaign. Additionally, while Carter had made a point of allowing Martin Luther King, Sr. to appear at the 1976 nominating convention – a gesture of goodwill that surely helped solidify the African American constituency – he neglected having a Catholic bless the convention proceedings for the first time in recent history, which had the opposite effect for Catholics. He further complicated matters in his convention acceptance speech by referring to “exclusive private schools” that a “political elite” sent their children to, never having to face injustice.⁶² While this was reportedly a reference to school integration, many Catholics thought he was referencing parochial schools. To remedy Carter's missteps here, his campaign proposed a tax credit for parochial schools that would be in keeping with the Supreme Court decision. However, in a move that foreshadowed Carter's unwillingness to expend political capital and inability to effectively balance constituencies, he instead proposed making funds available, “to all poor and middle-income parents and children, regardless of the schools they attend,” a proposal that proved divisive as many Catholics felt it showed lack of concern toward parochial schools specifically.⁶³

⁶² Jimmy Carter 1976 Acceptance Speech, https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/pdf_documents/assets/documents/speeches/acceptance_speech.pdf

⁶³ Moore, “Carter's Catholic Problem”, 191.

Another point of contention between Carter and Catholics was his choice of running mate. Carter's internal polling suggested a problem with northern Catholics, so the campaign put forth Ed Muskie and Ted Kennedy's names to help solidify support. However, Carter campaign insider Hamilton Jordan ranked Kennedy low for reasons of "integrity," and Carter was of the same opinion. Kennedy's conduct at Chappaquiddick, wherein he fled the scene of a car crash and ostensibly left a young woman to die, was still fresh in many Americans' minds and Carter did not want it associated with his campaign. Carter ended up selecting Walter Mondale, who sported impressive liberal and union credentials that the campaign thought would appeal to Catholic voters. However, Mondale was also an evangelical, and his selection over Kennedy and Muskie further contributed to the fear in Catholic voters' minds that Carter was not concerned with Catholics. While Carter had successfully put together a successful coalition of disparate interests to win him the Democratic nomination, he did so with limited Catholic support. If he was going to win the general election, he would have to gain far more support to cross the 65% Catholic voter support threshold that traditional wisdom said a Democrat needs to win the general election. The abortion issue had proved highly contentious so far, and the campaign did not want to run the risk of appearing to go whichever way the political winds blew, but they needed a win to put Carter back on the right track with Catholics.

The Playboy Interview

Going into the summer of 1976, the Carter campaign still enjoyed a huge 30-to-40-point lead over Ford, but was concerned about the frailty of their coalition, especially in the Midwest industrial states and the industrial northeast where Catholics were overrepresented.⁶⁴ Since the

⁶⁴ Pre-Presidential Papers, 1976 Presidential Campaign, Campaign Issues Office- Stuart Eizenstat, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia, Box 11, Folder 7.

1930s, when nationwide polling began in earnest, whenever the Democrat's Catholic support dipped below 60%, they subsequently lost the election.⁶⁵ Carter's Catholic numbers were still well below that threshold, steadily falling, and now directly under attack from the Ford Campaign. As such, Carter's team decided to grant an interview to *Playboy* magazine, in a move they thought would help shore up some support with Catholics.⁶⁶ This was a risky move, as many Catholics were socially conservative, but the possibility of convincing Catholics that he was not a Protestant zealot, who could separate his religious views from his politics, seemed preferable to the potential fallout. Carter himself did not seem terribly concerned about potential backlash from the *Playboy* interview, responding when questioned, "I don't believe I'll be criticized."⁶⁷ Additionally, his team believed that the interview would reconcile with some of the more young and culturally liberal members of his party.⁶⁸ Carter did not seem terribly concerned about potential backlash from the *Playboy* interview, responding when questioned, "I don't believe I'll be criticized".⁶⁹ Campaign advisor Hamilton Jordan said of the discussion, "we wouldn't do it [the interview] if it weren't in our interest."⁷⁰ Indeed, they had reason not to be too concerned, as Governor Jerry Brown's reputation had apparently benefitted from his interview, and even the likes of MLK Jr., had acquiesced to one. This was a way for Carter to win over the younger more culturally liberal voters and convince the nation's voting Catholics that he was not a religious extremist, but instead simply a man whose faith informed his morality.

⁶⁵ New York Times article, last accessed 02/01/2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/07/13/archives/carter-found-lagging-among-catholics.html>

⁶⁶ Flippen, "Carter, Catholics, and the Politics of Family," 34.

⁶⁷ Jimmy Carter Playboy Interview, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-playboy-magazine>

⁶⁸ Williams, *Election of the Evangelical*, 291.

⁶⁹ Jimmy Carter Playboy Interview, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-playboy-magazine>

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*,

The interview went well for the most part; it was a 5-hour session with a relentless Robert Scheer who was intent on squaring Carter's conservative Baptists beliefs on sexual morality with his stated commitment to pluralism as a Democratic candidate.⁷¹ As they were wrapping up the interview, however, Carter gave an impassioned response to the procedural question of whether he felt he had reassured voters about his religious beliefs. Carter responded that he didn't think he was any better than the guy who "screwed" other women whilst married, because he was human and was tempted, and acknowledged he had "committed adultery in his heart many times."⁷² While the article didn't reach newsstands until mid-October, in late September they released excerpts from the interview that caused an immediate backlash. Most of the controversy was centered around Carter's final answer. Some found fault with the casual use of profanity (screw was considered a light profanity) or were concerned with the Sunday School teacher's admission that he committed adultery in his heart. Still others bemoaned the fact that he had granted the interview in the first place, finding it unbecoming of a presidential candidate. As Ford remarked, "I don't think the President of the United States ought to have an interview in a magazine featuring photographs of unclad women."⁷³

Reception to the interview was unfavorable and accomplished precisely the opposite of what Carter had hoped to achieve. The campaign had agreed to the interview mainly with the goal of appealing to Catholics, and his favorability with them unexpectedly fell slightly. While the campaign was right that in general Catholics were more socially liberal than Protestants, they failed to realize the degree to which Catholics viewed the doctrine of separation of church and state as a major threat to the religious family unit. However, while his support amongst Catholics

⁷¹ Ibid.,

⁷² Ibid, 293.

⁷³ Ibid, 297.

saw only a minor drop, his favorability amongst evangelical Protestants plummeted. By granting the interview, Carter had placed himself on the side of secular humanism and the wrong side of the sexual revolution.⁷⁴ Carter had to find a way to remedy his grave misstep, and in response they created for the first time a Protestant Desk to try and win back support from what was before the interview an unassailable part of Carter's coalition.

A Victory Despite Himself

While Ford had correctly identified the glaring weakness in Carter's campaign strategy, and the *Playboy* interview had all but eliminated the sizable lead the Carter had accumulated, the amount of Catholic support Carter maintained helped carry him to victory. Both campaigns expected the Southern states to fully go to Carter, but the electorally rich northeastern states were up for grabs, and they would be essential for an electoral college majority. Although Carter fell short of the 60% support rate among Catholics that the campaign aimed for, he pulled a respectable 57% of the Catholic vote; what's more, the Catholics that did vote for him came from those consequential battleground states, ensuring enough electoral votes for victory. Some of this was likely the fault of the Ford campaign. During the second presidential debate, just weeks before the election Ford had asserted that Eastern Europe was not in the Soviet sphere of influence, and then doubled down on the statement, which caused an uproar (including in Catholic circles) and may have led to a last-minute Catholic defection to Carter. Furthermore, although the Ford administration saw some economic gains, the returns were not even distributed and working-class Catholics were not the chief beneficiaries, which some speculate may have likewise led them to Carter.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Ibid, 296.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 335.

But Carter had expended a good deal of political capital trying to appeal to Catholics and their support was essential to his success. The point seemed not to be lost on Carter, as soon after his inauguration he nominated Joseph A. Califano, a devout Catholic, as Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. Carter chose Califano for the position partly because he was a Catholic, and with the express goal of advancing his anti-abortion policy.⁷⁶ Once established, Califano quickly illustrated this by arguing against the use of federal funds to pay for abortion, a position that – though it was not exactly what Catholics wanted -- put Carter firmly back in their good graces. Additionally, Carter appointed a Catholic as America’s envoy to the Vatican, a position that had traditionally been held by a Protestant. While this, and Carter’s preferential appointment of select Catholics to the FCC both proved unpopular with Protestants and the Southern Baptist Commission, it must have assuaged some Catholic concerns about the new president. Carter’s inaugural address further illustrated his commitment to Catholic sentiment by putting the American family, which he foregrounded as the basis of society, at the heart of his governmental policy.⁷⁷ Carter’s seeming commitment to Catholic priorities resonated with Catholics, as the Vatican lauded Carter’s inauguration address and reaffirmed its commitment to defending the family, “from the many evils that can offend the unity, the stability, the fecundity, the educative function, the spirit of union.”⁷⁸ However, while Carter’s alliance with Catholics looked stronger than ever, the tribulations of the presidency would soon test that compact.

Union Support Once in Office

⁷⁶ Andrew R. Flint and Joy Porter, “Jimmy Carter: The Re-emergence of Faith-Based Politics and the Abortion Rights Issue,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, Iss. 1 (March 2005): 49.

⁷⁷ Jimmy Carter Inaugural Address,

https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/pdf_documents/assets/documents/inaugural_address_gov.pdf

⁷⁸ Flippen, “Carter, Catholics, and the Politics of Family,” 36.

While Carter won union support that was essential for his presidential campaign, once in office their alliance rapidly began to unravel. In the first months of his presidency the AFL-CIO was already hard at work drafting a labor law reform proposal, which was of singular import to union advocates. The issue at the heart of the reform was the repeal of section 14B of the Taft-Hartley Act, which would guarantee that new ownership of a plant would have to leave union contracts in place and allow for certification of bargaining agents by way of a card check process. While Carter advisors Eisenstadt and Johnson advised the president to take a leadership role in some if not all the provisions, Carter had claimed during the campaign that if a repeal measure passed Congress, he would support it but would not advocate for it. This put the Carter campaign and the union in a precarious position, as Carter could not afford to anger pro-business interests, and union membership was counting on a presidential endorsement.

After several rounds of negotiations, the union leadership agreed to drop 14B repeal, in hopes of gaining administrative support for the rest of what they wanted. This was a massive compromise on the part of union interests that could pay political dividends for both sides. Union leadership recognized that administrative support was essential in securing the gains the union hoped to advocate, and although labor law reform was important to unions, they had not lost sight of their predominant goal, a national health insurance plan. So, labor reached out to Carter with compromise, the importance of which was not lost on Carter's team. Campaign advisor Stuart Eizenstat said of the compromise, "It is difficult to overstate the importance of this matter in terms of our future relationship with organized labor. Because of budget constraints and fiscal considerations, we will be unable to satisfy their desires in many areas requiring expenditure of government funds. This is an issue without adverse budget considerations, which the unions very

much want.”⁷⁹ The proposal also held the potential to bring the UAW back into the AFL-CIO fold, a merger that could benefit both Carter and advance union objectives.

Carter reviewed the bill and although he was hesitant about some of the provisions, he gave his support to it. Once the legislation had been sent to Congress, however, he failed to effectively follow up. When questioned, Carter neglected to fully throw his support behind the unions, instead favoring a more cautious advocacy. Undaunted, the AFL-CIO continued solidifying support for the bill with considerable success. They garnered the support of the NAACP and the United States Catholic Conference, both strong members of the Carter coalition, and managed to pass the bill through the US House of Representatives by a sizable margin. Passing the legislation through the Senate, however, would prove more difficult. The AFL-CIO wanted to quickly move for a Senate hearing, to keep momentum going, but the Senate rejected the move for immediate consideration, killing much of that momentum and allowing business interests to launch a concerted campaign against it. Carter had the power to intervene and force the Senate to hear the proposal, and as many of his core constituencies supported the legislation, the AFL-CIO was hopeful the president would do so. However, Carter was worried about expending too much political capital at once and decided it would be preferable to have the hearing wait until after the Panama Canal Treaties, so as to not endanger that proposal.⁸⁰

Once the Panama Canal Treaties had passed, Carter was ready to move on the labor law bill, however, as they had waited so long for the provision, a new position would be required to fulfill their obligation. As they had allowed business interests to marshal an effective defense, presidential advocacy would no longer suffice. Now, the best thing Carter could do to appeal to

⁷⁹ Pre-Presidential Papers, 1976 Presidential Campaign, Campaign Issues Office- Stuart Eizenstat, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia, Box 232.

⁸⁰ Halpern, “Jimmy Carter and the UAW,” 761.

the union would be to apply as much political pressure as they could manage to stop the inevitable filibuster.⁸¹ Carter went to work attempting to get votes to break the filibuster, but the opposition had gathered a massive well of support to defeat repeal. This again, could prove a fantastic opportunity for Carter and his campaign to show the depth of their support for labor unions. Simply put, Carter did not care enough about the issue. He would not hold meetings on the matter, the telephone calls he made on it were only a few minutes long, and he would not expend any further political capital to help pass the bill. Union interests saw Carter's lack of action on the repeal of 14B as a devastating betrayal by the administration, and the resolution failed.

The prospects of continued union support were dire; however, the defining moment came when Carter failed to support a national health insurance plan. Union interests were pushing hard for the passage of a comprehensive health plan, especially after the failure of labor law reform, and Califano made sure that Carter was aware just how important this issue was to organized labor and to Catholics. However, the bill was at odds with Carter's primary goal of fiscal austerity, and while labor unions had made it clear just how vital this legislation was, national health insurance would be massively expensive, and Carter did not feel he could support that. Ted Kennedy and the UAW revised the plan in an attempt to garner presidential approval, but Carter would only support the plan if it was implemented in phases and then only if the economy permitted. Carter's failure to act on comprehensive health insurance or 14B repeal definitively collapsed the alliance, and the UAW officially withdrew their support of the president. This was a massive blow to the Carter administration's political fortunes. When Carter had failed to appeal to Catholics on social issues or religious grounds, he had leaned on their strong union affiliation

⁸¹ Ibid.,

to leverage a fragile success. Without union support to lean on, Carter's Catholic constituency and the Northeast which was a cornerstone of Carter's 1976 campaign strategy were thrown into jeopardy.

Return of the Abortion Issue

Carter's campaign problems with the abortion issue and the backlash to his *Playboy* interview had already illustrated that his coalition was tenuous at best, but once in office the problem only became worse as he tried to balance an increasingly vocal and organized feminist wing of the party with socially conservative Catholics and Protestants. While the 1976 election drew more peoples' focus on the immediacy of economic concerns, once the presidency was underway, the impetus of social conflict came roaring back. In 1976, Congressman Henry Hyde, a Catholic Republican, had introduced a rider to an appropriations bill that banned all Medicaid-funded abortions, though it made exception for those in which the pregnancy would endanger the woman's life. This did not draw immediate attention when it was introduced in 1976 as many thought it would be struck down by the US Supreme Court, who had recently ruled against states attempting to impose restrictions on abortion care. However, in a surprising 1977 decision, the Supreme Court upheld a similar Connecticut law in *Maher v. Roe*, signaling that it might sustain the proposed Hyde Amendment, bringing the abortion debate back to the fore. The amendment was consistent with Carter's position on abortion, so he praised the decision in a press conference. While his position was unremarkable to many, the follow up to his statements, however, drew immediate backlash. When asked about the fairness of women who could not afford abortion now, compared with those who were more financially well off, Carter responded, "Well, as you know, there are many things in life that are not fair, that wealthy people can afford,

and poor people can't. But I don't believe that the federal government should take action to try to make these opportunities exactly equal, particularly when there is a moral factor involved."⁸²

This statement incensed pro-life and socially conservative groups alike and exemplified how Carter's moderate sensibilities often incited disapproval from both sides. Liberals and pro-choice proponents denounced Carter, calling his remarks "defeatist," while anti-abortion advocates like Jerry Falwell thought Carter was "an abortionist run wild."⁸³ However, the biggest consequence of Carter's stance came from his women's liaison, Midge Costanza. Costanza had been a core member of Carter's team, essential for feminist outreach, and a prominent ERA supporter. When she heard Carter's remarks, she expressed concern, and secretly organized a meeting for women within the administration who were unsatisfied with the President's position. After the media caught wind of the meeting, Carter was livid and relocated his once close confidant Costanza's office to the White House basement. Her subsequent resignation must have been no surprise to Carter, but the optics were terrible. Carter's "Georgia Mafia" insiders already had a reputation for being womanizers, and Costanza had previously been vocal about being pushed out by the "boy's club," a view which was seemingly confirmed by the resignation.

The timing also could not have been worse. The 1977 National Women's Conference was slated to begin three short months after Costanza's resignation and tensions were now higher than ever. Costanza had quickly been replaced with Bella Abzug, a feminist and the first Jewish woman in Congress, who would serve as cochair of the National Advisory Committee for Women. Furthermore, the conference had attracted not just former first ladies' "Lady Bird" Johnson and Betty Ford, but also the current First Lady Rosalynn Carter as well, ensuring the

⁸² President's News Conference of July 12, 1977, americanpresidency.org, as found in Laura Kalman, *Right Star Rising: A New Politics, 1974-1980*, (New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2010), 260.

⁸³ Kalman, *Right Star Rising*, 260.

results would have political repercussions. The Women's Conference voted in a five-to-one majority to support passage of the controversial ERA, endorsed a resolution to restore Medicaid funding for abortions, and in almost as large a majority, approved a resolution in favor of lesbian rights.⁸⁴ While Carter's wife being in attendance signaled tacit administrative support of the resolutions, White House lobbying in favor of the ERA was seen as tepid and ineffectual. To make matters worse, the National Advisory Committee for Women opted to cancel a meeting with the President after he only allocated 15 minutes for it, and shortly thereafter Carter fired Bella Abzug, Carter's replacement for women's liaison after he had pushed the previous woman to hold the post out. While Carter's reasoning had more to do with loyalty, along with Costanza, Abzug had published a committee statement critical of his anti-inflation program without consulting with him first, Feminists were still incensed, and the move further distanced the President from his feminist supporters. Catholics, meanwhile, were appalled that the administration was seemingly siding with Feminists and the ERA over the administration's admittedly languid support of the Women's Conference, surprising the Carter administration which expected at the very least apathy from the constituency. The Carter administration's issue with abortion had not faded as they had hoped. Instead, it came back stronger than ever and his attempts to balance his divergent constituencies had only succeeded in alienating them both in equal measure.

A New Threat: Secular Humanism

While Carter must have known that his stance on the Hyde Amendment would draw criticism from the Catholic community, prior to the Women's Conference he believed his

⁸⁴ Ibid, 262.

moderate posture and Catholics' sexually liberal stance on issues like feminism were compatible. Now however, it had become clear that the Catholic ideology had shifted. The membership of the Catholic Church had become increasingly distressed with the dual trends of feminism and secularization, a trend exemplified by the ascension of Pope John Paul II that same year, to put the church more in line with its socially conservative laity. Although discord between working-class Catholics and more economically mobile upper-class Catholics had been widening, the issue of secular humanism became a solidifying issue that would bring the traditionally Democratic constituency together against what they perceived an existential threat to their way of life.

The concept of "secular humanism" had its roots in 19th century English Anglican tradition, but it became popularized in America primarily by Jerry Falwell as a term used to vilify the "three moral issues- pornography, abortion, and homosexuality" as "the worst symptoms of our moral decay."⁸⁵ That idea of moral decay, and the primacy of family issues, had been gaining significant traction amongst Catholic communities as well, despite Falwell's fundamentalist and often anti-Catholic reputation. While previously thought to be a more denominational concern, the recent decade's rash of Supreme Court decisions helped to reinforce the idea among many that the government was overreaching into the realm of religion, which stressed the gravity of the threat to all Christian peoples. That concern was further compounded by an increasingly adopted governmental trend towards the doctrine of "separation of church and state," which had become the norm. Many religious communities, meanwhile, viewed the separation of church and state as a shift toward irreligiosity, and to them it took on a

⁸⁵ Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010): 172.

particularly sinister cast when it was imposed on their children. This meant that religious groups increasingly came to view the educational arena as the battleground for religious liberty, and the implementation of sexual education classes in many districts only further confirmed this paradigm. Thus, parochial schools became to many Catholics the last stand to fend off the irreligious secular humanism that the government was advocating and took on increased importance. Shifting priorities had changed the ideological persuasion of Catholic voters, and the Carter administration simply did not recognize the threat in time to respond. The *Playboy* interview, Carter's moderate policy on abortion, his tentative support of the ERA and his Southern Baptist view of separation of church and state all played into the perception, held by an increasing number of Catholics, that the Carter administration and the Democratic Party had abandoned the religious family unit, and the concerns of Catholics.

While Catholics were particularly invested, because of their history with the abortion issue, they were not alone in their concern with secular humanism. Although Carter had leaned on his Southern Baptist tradition for his understanding of the importance of separation of church and state, that denomination itself was deep in the throes of change. A conservative wing gained control of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in 1979 and differing from Carter, they believed the role of the federal government was to enforce moral vision. To them, Carter's thoughts on religious liberty and the government's enforcement of it had encouraged the nation's increasing trend toward irreligiousness. Furthermore, sexual politics were also at the front of concerns for the new SBC leadership, placing their concerns firmly in line with Catholics. Evangelicals were similarly experiencing change in their denominational philosophy, as leaders and congregations alike were increasingly coming to fear the perceived threat of governmental intervention against religious norms. Whereas previously evangelical leaders like Billy Graham

had emphasized the importance of detachment between pulpit and politics, the threat of secular humanism invading schools and everyday life prompted newer religious leaders like Jerry Falwell to increasingly accept and advocate political activism from their congregations. In keeping with that new denominational philosophy, evangelicals changed their position on abortion as well, fearing it as one additional facet of the secular humanist threat. This changing ideological stance necessitated new alliances as the political and religious landscape had changed, and many opened events to Catholics that were previously closed, based on their new moral consensus. While the numbers do not bear out that Catholics flocked to evangelical or fundamentalist events in the wake of changing sentiments, a notable number did attend, illustrating that Catholics had found allies, albeit temporary ones, in the fight against secular humanism.

Parochial Schools: Enough is Enough

While Carter had made some critical missteps thus far, and there were rumblings of discontent, there was still dissension within the Catholic ranks. Most disapproved of his stance on abortion, but even though he was not fully supportive of national health care, his economic policy was favorable to many Catholics, and he had included some of them into key positions in his government. Catholics had noticed his attempts to appeal to them, even when he was hapless, and this helped maintain him some level of support within their community. However, the community had serious reservations about his presidential policy before he took office, and no policy had been proposed after he was inaugurated that would assuage their concerns. There was still an opportunity for Carter to read the political winds and attempt to solve his Catholic problem, especially considering how deftly he had alienated their main adversary, feminist

interests. However, in 1978 Carter made a fatal mistake that would sunder his relationship with Catholics and unite them almost fully in opposition to his administration.

Parochial schools were a fundamental piece of the Catholic experience in America, not only providing communal ties but also allowing Catholics to educate their children on sexual and religious mores outside the public school system. These schools had operated as a haven for Catholic children, insulating them from the perceived threat of sexual education and secular humanism in public schools. However, they not only served as secular educational institutions, but also to propagate religious instruction, which allowed them to operate as tax-exempt organizations. Catholics had begun to fear their security as an institution following the revocation of tax-exempt status for Bob Jones University in 1970, and while the reasoning given for the revocation was that the school prohibited interracial dating and marriage, many feared that parochial schools might be next. Carter's administration seemingly confirmed those fears in 1978 when his IRS Commissioner announced guidelines for revoking the tax-exempt status of all private schools if they did not meet minority enrollment quotas. Although Carter thought the establishment of the Department of Education would assuage fears surrounding the security of parochial schools, Catholics and Protestants alike were not convinced, and simply saw this as the further encroachment of the government on religious instruction. Additionally, though Catholics had a long tradition of parochial school enrollment, in recent years the predominant reason that parents of all denominations had given for enrolling their children in Christian schools was fear of secular humanism.⁸⁶ Therefore, this move threatened not just Catholics and their perceived

⁸⁶ Williams, *God's Own Party*, 134.

last line of defense, but all religious parents who were fleeing public schools for fear of irreligiousness.

The following year saw the founding of the nation's first Christian Right PAC, the Christian Voice, which included not only evangelicals and Protestants, but also a substantial number of Catholics. Traditionally, Catholics had been the foil for Protestant groups, but an increasingly secular federal government convinced both groups they had more to gain by working together, than against one another. This cohesiveness between previously opposed religious groups resulted in a powerful political coalition, which could muster its influence in a variety of ways. Financially, campaign finance laws that were enacted following the passage of the Federal Election Campaign Act allowed the proliferation of religious PACs, which some contend facilitated the rise of large interdenominational religious organizations.⁸⁷ Politically, they utilized their connections for achievement of their political goals. For example, in several political races, anti-abortion organizations (many of which had strong Catholic leadership), joined with evangelical Protestants and Moral Majority members, to elect conservative, "family-issue-oriented" candidates.⁸⁸ Finally, the diversity of their coalition allowed for more successful branding of their message. While the threat of secular humanism frightened some, supporting candidates who backed a "family first" message reached a far larger audience.

The Rise of the Moral Majority, a New Coalition

In 1979, Jerry Falwell formed his Moral Majority religious organization to advance social and cultural issues and combat moral decline. Falwell's organization was notable because of its

⁸⁷ Clyde Wilcox, "Political Action Committees of the New Christian Right: A Longitudinal Analysis," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 27, Iss. 1 (March 1988): 61.

⁸⁸ Williams, *God's Own Party*, 160.

meteoric rise to power, propelled by the opening of his denomination to nonfundamentalists. For example, in June 1979, the Moral Majority held a rally that attracted not only Protestants, but Catholics and Jews as well. He was able to appeal to groups of differing religious views and backgrounds by stressing his commitment “to fight a just cause....to fight for the family.”⁸⁹ This cross-denominational alliance was not inevitable and did not come from nowhere. In 1978, the president of Abortion Rights Mobilization had warned of a religious right-wing alliance taking shape in America, which combined fundamentalist evangelical elements in the South, with conservative Catholicism which was growing in the Midwest.⁹⁰ From the beginning, advisors to the Carter campaign had been warning of Carter’s Catholic problem, which if not addressed could lead to disaster. The coalition between Catholics and Protestants was short lived, as they had often intractable differences. Although on the surface Falwell’s Moral Majority was open to Catholics, at one time boasting a self-reported membership of “50 million Protestant evangelicals, 30 million morally conservative Catholics, plus a few million Mormons and Orthodox Jews,” Protestant anti-Catholic sentiment was stronger among Moral Majority members than even other Protestant organizations.⁹¹ Furthermore, while Catholics swung toward Reagan for a time, the divisions between more affluent socially conservative Catholics and working-class liberal Catholics had not disappeared. The result was a short-lived alliance, albeit one that for its time wielded considerable power. It is unclear whether there was a way to maintain a successful New Deal coalition for more than one exceptional election cycle. What is clear, however, is that Carter’s missteps with Catholics pushed them, for a time, firmly into the arms of the Republican Party.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 174.

⁹⁰ Flippen, “Carter, Catholics, and the Politics of Family,” 27.

⁹¹ Clyde Wilcox, Mark J. Rozell, Roland Gunn, “Religious Coalitions in the New Christian Right,” *Social Science Quarterly* 77, Iss. 3 (September 1996): 543.

CONCLUSION

Carter presided over one of the most difficult periods to govern in American history. Historians have increasingly decided that the Carter presidency warrants a second look, and in the estimation of many he receives higher marks than he received from journalists who covered his administration, and from the American public, who soundly rejected him in 1980. However, as this study has shown, his administration was far from blameless. The Carter campaign was fully aware of the importance of Catholic and African American support to his political viability, but he could not maintain that support. These were surely not the main reasons Carter's administration failed, but they are part of the story, as this thesis carefully detailed. Carter's gaffes with the respective communities, and willingness to sacrifice their concerns for political gains with other groups, contributed to his resounding electoral defeat.

In brief, Carter made the same mistake with both groups, to different effect. He made political gaffes that isolated him during the lead-up to the 1976 election, but more importantly once in office he sacrificed their interests to gain support from other groups. Once Carter had lost ground with Evangelicals, he had to change his focus from Catholics, in order to attempt to win his evangelical base of support back. Similarly, once Carter was in office, the racial focus he had supported in Georgia lost precedence to those same evangelical White voters. This left both groups feeling disaffected with a Carter presidency, but while Catholic voters abandoned Carter in considerable numbers, African Americans remained a base of support for him. Although it may be impossible to account for all the people of a particular group, by examining contemporary accounts from individuals in those groups, it seems clear that to both groups, it came down simply to a matter of options. Evangelical groups like the Moral Majority offered kinship to like-minded religious Catholics, if only temporarily, which gave them a place to go.

Furthermore, the rise of religious PACs gave inter-denominational groups a tempting political power. Conversely, African Americans would find no solace in the neoliberal policies of a Reagan administration. Furthermore, the rhetoric of “states’ rights” and strategic placement of the first stop of Reagan’s campaign made it clear where his priorities would lie. Carter’s neglect of his core constituencies could have allowed for both groups to dissolve into a strong theocratic movement, if not for the anti-Catholic and racially charged sentiments that many of the evangelical movement still harbored.

This study contributes to the historical literature on Jimmy Carter by acknowledging that although he had to deal with imperfect options, he made considerable mistakes as well. Furthermore, this study illustrates changing Catholic priorities during the 1970s, an area of inquiry that has yet to be sufficiently explored. Another area of inquiry that is tangentially related, but not fully developed here, is the effect that religious PACs had on political power in the 1970s and 1980s. A related study might explore how rising evangelical solidity and political power translated into changed public opinion. My research, in fact, suggests it may be a more significant factor in the political shakeup of the 1980s. While Black political power is well understood, there is more to learn about Catholic political priorities in recent American history. Catholics in America are one of the most evenly politically distributed constituencies, with high rates of non-party affiliation, which makes this inquiry salient in the present.⁹²

The Carter presidency is an area that warrants closer historical scrutiny. While often overshadowed by the surrounding decades, many of the trends which we saw emerge in the 1980s and 1990s had their roots during the tumultuous 1970s. Those trends, however, were not

⁹² Catholic Political Affiliation Poll, Pew Research, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/catholic/party-affiliation/>

inevitable. Had Carter more effectively navigated the political headwinds of his time, the Reagan Revolution might have been delayed or diminished. The current circumstances we find ourselves in, both good and bad, have much to do with former President Jimmy Carter.

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