van Nijnatten, F.J.C.M.

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Summary

The Presidency of Jimmy Carter is often considered an anomaly in American politics. At a time when the South of the United States was becoming a Republican stronghold in presidential elections, Jimmy Carter as a southern Democrat in 1976 succeeded in winning the entire region except Virginia. In 1980 the Republicans reclaimed the South, and strengthened their grip they initially obtained on the region after the presidential elections of 1972. Since Carter no Democratic presidential candidate has managed to win the South as an electoral block. It is often stated that as a southern Democrat Carter just plainly benefited from the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War, two crises that had affected the confidence of the American people in their government, as well as from a temporary economic downturn. However, there is more behind Jimmy Carter’s 1976 victory. A close examination of his pre-presidential campaign archives, on which this study is based, gives more insight into these additional causes.

The first of these causes lies in sectionalism. Carter was the first President from the Deep South of the United States since Zachary Taylor (1849-1850). Until well into the twentieth century, racial segregation prevented southern Democratic politicians from becoming President; they never gained approval from the more liberal Northern party faction. Carter saw his election in 1976 as proof that the South had definitively restored its connection with the rest of the country and he praised himself on playing an important role at that. Carter’s election is subject of debate in the literature on sectionalism in the United States, as historians, political scientists, sociologists and journalists disagree on the question to what extent the South, before Carter’s inauguration as President, had politically, socially and economically already become part of the American ‘mainstream’. Some scientists believe that the South has remained a separate region with its own customs and institutions, while others say that the South as a forerunner came to dominate other parts of the country.

Clues to Carter’s own views on sectionalism can be found in the not previously analyzed pre-presidential campaign archives, that cover the 1962-1976 period. Carter had to deal with sectionalism on a state scale in Georgia during his early campaigns, where he encountered social, economic and political contrasts between the conservative southern and more liberal northern parts. On a national level, it is clear that during his campaign in 1976 Carter played into chauvinistic sentiments among southern voters. Carter mapped his own bi-racial Southern Strategy and greatly benefited from a heavy turnout of black voters. Many southern
whites, however, after breaking from the Republican ranks to back their region’s ‘favourite son’ in 1976, abandoned the fragile Carter coalition during his Presidency.

In addition to sectionalism, the pre-presidential campaign archives also shed light on a second additional cause of Carter’s election as president, i.e. his position in the ideological debate during the 1960s and 1970s in America. Carter always held an ambivalent position in this debate, not only under pressure of segregation in the South, but also to keep all options open for his own political career. In the process of desegregation Carter was never on the forefront and only took liberal positions when he considered them to be politically safe. Brought up in a conservative district in Georgia, conservatism played an important role in Carter’s thinking and in his election campaigns. In order to have leeway he preferred campaigning from the center, without alienating voters from the left or right, and capitalizing on regional or national political developments. By stressing during his campaigns that he gave little for ideology and had a business approach to government Carter deliberately grew an image of a non-politician, a Democrat who was above ‘politics as usual’. His staff polished that image even more during the 1976 campaign. The campaign archives make clear, however, that from his first election as State Senator in 1962 Carter fully participated in the political game, also to his personal gain. His 1965 letter to Edward Kennedy, in which he praised his future nemesis, and subsequently denying seeking any help from the liberal Massachusetts Senator during his gubernatorial campaign, is just one example of Carter working the political scenes.

After being elected governor of Georgia in 1970, Carter tightened his grip on the Democratic Party of his home state. His victory in 1976 and his subsequent status as a party leader gave Carter the opportunity to do the same on a national party scale, one of his long-cherished wishes. As a political candidate as well as in elected office, Carter favored a balanced budget and he made it plain that he never had been a great admirer of the New Deal. In Washington, that approach put him on a collision course with what he considered ‘tax-and-spend’ liberals, who, in his eyes, had dominated the party too long. Although he won the support of the liberals for some of his policies, Carter never fully gained their trust and during the 1980 primaries Edward Kennedy attacked the President fiercely. Carter ultimately won his second nomination, but he could not prevent his party from going into further disarray. Besides the liberals, other party factions kept seeing Carter as an outsider and an intruder in Washington. Outside the capital, he was not able to hold together the fragile coalition that elected him, let alone broaden it. In 1980, conservatism took over at the polls.
Carter knew personal successes as the Panama Canal and Camp David Treaties, but inflation and the Iran hostage crisis eventually cost him support among voters. As President, he spoke of a New Foundation for the country, but he never succeeded in turning that into a compelling vision. Carter was seen as a righteous President, who warned his people that even a prosperous country as the United States had to deal with limits. Being criticized as a pessimist, Carter later took pleasure in pointing out that some historians called his notorious 1979 ‘malaise speech’, in which he pleaded for such measures as energy conservation, prescient. With Carter’s electoral defeat the post-war liberal consensus in America, that had been based on common economic and foreign policy goals and a certain acceptance of the federal government’s role in public life, definitely came to an end.

The fact that Carter was not able to get his vision across illustrates that he never mastered the so-called permanent campaign, the political and media campaign Presidents wage from the White House in order to enhance their chances for reelection. On the other hand, Carter had demonstrated during his entire political career that he knew how to campaign as a challenger. His experience as a candidate who had learned to sophisticate a campaign and to appeal to different voter groups at the same time was a third additional cause of his 1976 victory. The archives demonstrate that in his campaigns for Senator of Georgia (1962), Governor of Georgia (1966 and 1970) and President (1976) Carter was an exponent of the candidate-centered approach to campaigning. As he went from candidacy to candidacy, Carter made his campaigns more perfect, while sidelining Democratic Party officials on a regional, state and national level. Already in his campaign of 1962, Carter came up with the neutral theme of good government, which would return in all his further campaigns. Good government and an emphasis on his personal character allowed Carter to steer away from divisive issues like segregation or–later–abortion. That Carter in 1976, with the Watergate scandal still fresh in the collective American memory, insisted on good government came as no surprise; but as a candidate, it had been his central theme for fourteen years, and there was no need to trade it for any other issue during his first presidential campaign. Moreover, emphasizing any other political, social or economic issue could have endangered his position as a candidate of the center.

In addition to good government, Carter’s campaigns knew other constant tactical elements, such as media, playing the underdog, morality, and a grassroots candidacy. In 1970, Carter added voter polling on a structural basis. The constant elements all worked well for Carter as long as he was a challenger. In 1980, however, when he was the incumbent
President and had to defend his policies, certain tactical elements, like grassroots and being the underdog, lost their edge. No longer able to campaign intensively as a challenger, Carter was more or less forced to adapt to campaigns of other Democratic and Republican candidates. Carter and his campaign staff never found the adequate response to this new situation.

Political scientists disagree on the exact impact campaigns have on the electorate in the United States. However, it is clear that with their campaigns candidates try to get a positive image of themselves across and influence one another. By starting his campaign years in advance and putting a strategic emphasis on the Iowa caucus, Carter taught both Democratic and Republican candidates important lessons for the future. In addition to these two innovations Carter showed himself a master at copying and improving tactics other candidates had applied before him.

At the end of the 20th century a debate got underway in the United States on the political and social significance of the 1970s. Where some scientists point at the upcoming conservatism and the minor importance of Democratic politicians in those years, others believe that conservatism has remained superficial and has never really caught on as a broad political ideology. It is said that politicians like Jimmy Carter, intentionally or not, gave liberalism a new impetus during those years and deliberately pushed it beyond the old consensus. As President, Carter ultimately described his ‘ideology’ as populism, which ment he never really parted with the Georgia political tradition. Be that as it may, the experience of the Carter Presidency offered Democrats like Bill Clinton the political opportunity to lead the Democratic Party on the way of reinventing government in the 1990s, breaking liberal taboos such as the reform of the welfare system. Democrats finally seemed to recognize the limits Carter had stressed during his Presidency. In the ideological uproar Carter left the Democratic Party a certain legacy, while he also influenced future political campaigns and the debate on sectionalism in the United States. The campaign archives contain letters, strategy papers and other documents that are indispensable for a more comprehensive view of the political influence and career of Jimmy Carter. The archives also once and for all refute the widespread image of Carter as a non-politician.