

Jimmy Carter: Electoral Context and Background on Campaign Finance and Elections Policy

January 6, 2025

James Earl “Jimmy” Carter, Jr., the 39th President of the United States and former Georgia Governor, [died](#) on December 29, 2024. As Congress prepares for a [state funeral](#), this CRS Insight discusses selected aspects of the former President’s career and its relationship to elections and [campaign finance](#) policy. As President, Carter signed a significant amendment to federal campaign finance law. Although Carter did not have a major impact on federal policy related to election administration and voting during his presidency, substantial changes in American politics, political parties, and election law created the context for his political career and for his policy work afterward.

Political and Policy Foundations in Elections

Although Carter was a Democrat, the dominant party in Georgia before and during the 1960s, he was generally considered an outsider to the party establishment. In the [Turning Point](#) memoir of his 1962 State Senate campaign, Carter wrote that two federal court rulings on elections issues—[Baker v. Carr](#) and [Sanders v. Gray](#)—disrupted the party structure and fostered his first run for public office.

The 1962 Supreme Court ruling in *Baker v. Carr* held that redistricting claims were subject to judicial review (“justiciable”). Soon after, in *Sanders v. Gray*, a federal district court invalidated Georgia’s [County Unit System](#) as implemented. Georgia had used the county-unit method, which advantaged rural counties over more populous urban ones, in party nominating contests that were tantamount to election. (Legal analysis of these cases is beyond the scope of this Insight.) Practically, as Carter [observed](#), both *Baker* and *Sanders* led to the State Senate special election that Carter eventually won—after challenging a local party “boss” and mounting legal appeals in a [contentious Democratic primary](#). Carter [wrote](#) in *Turning Point* that the *Baker* and *Sanders* rulings “would transform the political scene in Georgia and would shape the future of my life,” including fostering his interest in elections policy. More generally, these rulings (and related developments throughout the 1960s) challenged electoral systems that diluted minority voting strength in the South prior to Congress’s enactment of the [Voting Rights Act \(VRA\)](#) in 1965.

Congressional Research Service

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IN12478

Carter and Southern Presidential Politics

As with his State Senate run, Carter positioned himself as a party outsider during the 1976 Democratic presidential primary campaign. As political parties scholar Elaine Kamarck has [written](#), Carter's team capitalized on recently adopted party [nominating-process](#) rules to build momentum in early primary states. Carter unified delegate support ahead of the Democratic National Convention, which avoided the [public acrimony](#) that marked the 1968 and 1972 party meetings. Carter also relied on a new [public financing program](#) for presidential candidates, and was the first person to win the presidency under the system.

Carter's general-election victory in 1976 relied in part on reversing [declining Democratic fortunes](#) in the Deep South. As Carter noted in his 1975 campaign autobiography, *Why Not the Best*, despite a century of popular support for Democratic presidential candidates, by 1964, after "[v]ast social and civil rights programs had been passed by Congress and President [Lyndon Johnson](#) ... supporters of [Republican nominee and Arizona Senator] [Barry Goldwater](#) took full advantage of the disaffection among Georgia voters and waged the best-organized presidential campaign in our state's history." In [1964](#), [1968](#), and [1972](#), Democratic nominees consistently lost in states such as Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina.

Carter initially fared better in the South than had other Democrats of his era. In 1976, campaigning on a post-Watergate message that highlighted [issues](#) such as ethics and government efficiency, Carter [won the presidency with 297 electoral votes](#). Those votes came from southern states, as well as states in parts of the Midwest and in the Northeast. His electoral advantage did not last, however. Carter [lost overwhelmingly](#) in 1980 to Republican Ronald Reagan, and after a primary challenge from Massachusetts Senator [Edward Kennedy](#). Carter won 49 of 538 [electoral college](#) votes, and carried no southern states except Georgia. No Democratic presidential candidate again won [southern electoral votes](#) until [Bill Clinton did so in 1992](#).

Elections and Campaign Finance Legislation in Office

In 1977, Carter proposed what campaign finance scholar Herbert Alexander in 1979 [called](#) "the most comprehensive election reform package a president ever submitted to Congress." Elements [ranged](#) from election-day voter registration to public campaign financing, direct election of the President, and [Hatch Act](#) amendments. Major changes related to elections and voting did not become law, but some elements of Carter's campaign finance proposals influenced legislation enacted in 1979.

Carter signed the [1979 amendments to the Federal Election Campaign Act](#) (FECA), the nation's primary campaign finance statute (which was then less than 10 years old) in January 1980. The 1979 amendments were arguably deregulatory compared with the 1974 and 1976 FECA amendments. Among other provisions, the 1979 amendments generally eased [political-committee](#) disclosure requirements that Congress determined were unnecessarily burdensome or duplicative. They also established exemptions for, or increased limits on, volunteer activities that previously triggered contribution limits. The amendments also eased some limits on party activity. Particularly noteworthy for Members of Congress, the amendments prohibited converting campaign funds to [personal use](#), although exemptions existed [until 1989](#). Carter supported the 1979 amendments, but also issued a [signing statement](#) expressing concern about the constitutionality of a provision limiting certain contributions by federal employees.

Carter's presidency predated some of the later [federal roles](#) in election administration, such as [registration provisions](#) enacted in the 1993 National Voter Registration Act or elections [funding authorized](#) in the 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA). Carter's Administration supported VRA enforcement, but major amendments to the statute came [before and after](#) his time in the White House. Carter became more involved in election administration issues after he left the presidency.

Connections to Elections Policy Post-Presidency

In the early 2000s, Carter cochaired two national commissions, both of which included some former Members of Congress, on proposed reforms to federal elections: one with former President [Gerald Ford](#), and another with former Secretary of State [James Baker](#). The [Carter-Ford](#) and [Carter-Baker](#) commissions recommended several post-HAVA changes, ranging from voter identification and registration standards to altering the presidential primaries' schedules. Aspects of those proposals [continue](#) to influence legislative or broader policy debates.

Carter's post-presidency legacy also includes extensive [Carter Center](#) work on developing election administration [guidelines and standards](#), primarily outside the United States. As of August 2024, the Carter Center had [observed or monitored](#) 125 elections in 40 countries.

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