

Southerners hope Kerry takes their votes seriously

Some Southern Democrats perceive a lack of interest on the part of candidates in winning their support

By Jeff Zeleny and Kirsten Scharnberg
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — The Democratic voters of Tennessee have seen John Kerry again and again in his television commercials. But he has paid far less personal attention to a state even his rivals concede he is likely to win, logging only two visits before Tuesday's primary.

Ever since the Massachusetts senator said last month that "everybody makes the mistake of looking South," many voters and Democratic leaders across the region have wondered whether he was telegraphing his intention to steer his presidential campaign away from Southern states. Those worries intensified when Kerry declined to appear at a weekend "Presidential Primary Celebration" in Nashville with the other two leading candidates.

So as Kerry arrived here Monday evening for a downtown rally on the eve of the election, loyal Democrats applauded excitedly when they caught a glimpse of the front-runner. They hoped, though, that it wouldn't be the last time he turned up below the Mason-Dixon line.

"There should be a Southern strategy in a national campaign for a Democratic candidate," said Tennessee party chairman Randy Button, who thought Kerry's decision to skip the weekend forum was "a mistake." "If you're looking at November, there are going to be some Southern battleground states. Tennessee is one of them."

After winning 10 states, and with polls showing him leading in Tuesday's contests here and in Virginia,

Kerry may all but cinch his fight for the party's nomination. But some Democratic strategists say he also may have passed up a chance to begin presenting himself as a candidate who is worth the voters' investment to challenge President Bush in the fall.

Indeed, when the nominee emerges to challenge Bush, each candidate faces a country with a narrow political divide. While each of the last three Democratic presidents have come from the South, the region was far less kind to its own native son, Al Gore, in the last presidential race; Some party leaders believe there may be little reason to think it will do otherwise, particularly if the nominee is a well-heeled senator from the Northeast.

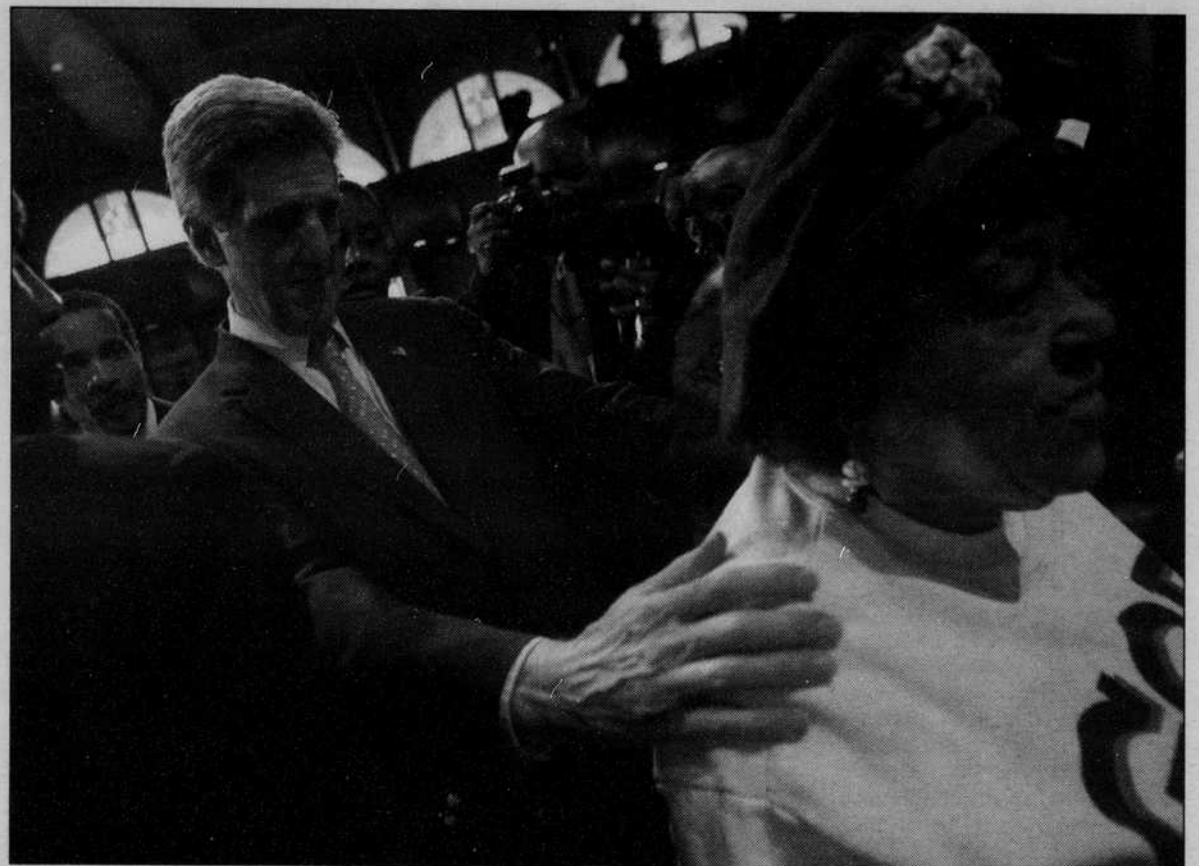
"There's no question that when certain issues are played up, Republicans will point to him being a Massachusetts liberal," said Alexander Lamis, who studies Southern politics at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. "But you have to confront those issues if you are to win elsewhere."

Mathematically speaking, the Democratic Party does not need to carry Tennessee or other Southern states to win the White House. But other Democrats argue that the lingering effects of a punishing economy accompanied by high job loss could trump the traditional cultural divide over abortion rights, gay rights and civil rights.

Kerry seized upon this earlier Monday as he delivered a speech outside a firehouse in Roanoke, Va., where he invoked a name that resonated well with the crowd of several hundred supporters.

"If you like what Bill Clinton gave you in those eight years," the senator said, "you're going to love what John Kerry gives you in the first four years."

As Kerry campaigned leisurely through Virginia and Tennessee, making only two public appearances



David P. Gilkey Detroit Free Press

Democratic presidential candidate Sen. John Kerry reads the back of Sammie Alford's shirt after a rally at Second Ebenezer Baptist Church in Detroit on Friday. Kerry cruised to victory in Michigan on Saturday. Primaries will be held in Virginia and Tennessee today.

during the day, Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina and retired Gen. Wesley Clark of Arkansas aggressively fought for what each campaign believed was second place. Each candidate is struggling to become the true alternative to Kerry as the race moves onto Wisconsin next week.

Though he has built his campaign around the practice of not attacking fellow Democrats by name — and usually not even by suggestion — Edwards has reminded Tennessee and Virginia audiences of his lineage in recent days.

"Folks in the South are tired of the Republicans taking the South for granted. They're tired of Democrats ignoring the South," Edwards said. "Let me say this in very simple terms: This is not about political strategy for me. I will fight for the folks I grew up with in the South."

Whether the strategy is effective remains to be seen. At a stop Monday in Morrison, Tenn., a hardscrabble town

where the local Carrier air-conditioning plant recently received word it would be closing, Edwards commiserated with the soon-to-be-unemployed workers.

"These are good, responsible people who have worked hard all their lives," Edwards said of the folks at Prater's Bar-B-Que. "Many of them worked at this plant for 20, 25, 30 years. These are the people who make America great and, by the way, these are the people that are the reason I'm running for president of the United States."

While the factory workers appreciated Edwards' visit, greeting him warmly and thanking him for caring about their plight, it didn't mean they were sold on his candidacy. In fact, their union was leaning toward endorsing Kerry, and several workers said they planned to vote for the Massachusetts senator on Tuesday.

"I'm going with Kerry because I think he has the best chance of beating

Bush," said James Mears, 49, who had worked at Carrier for more than three decades.

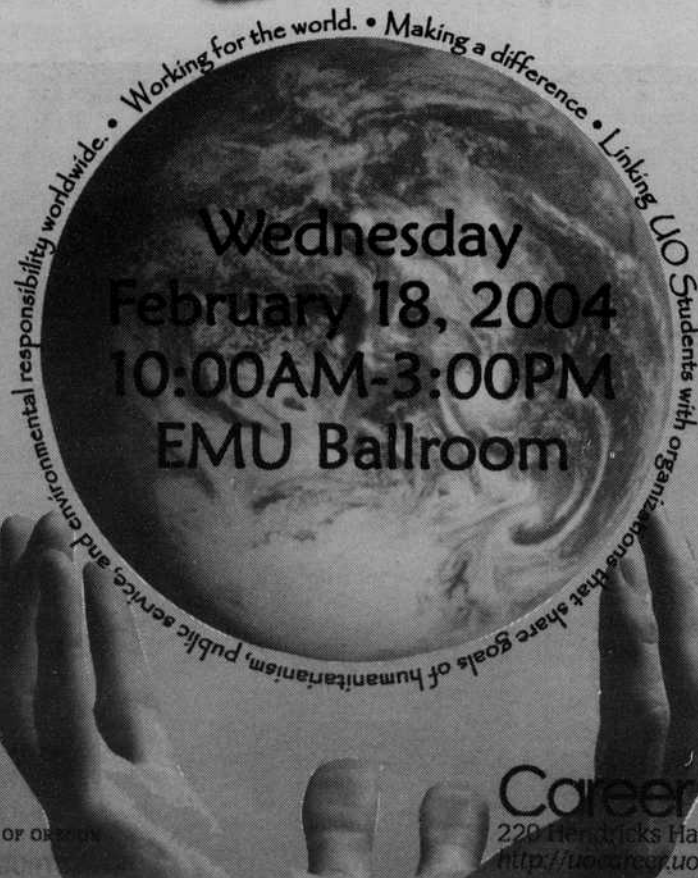
"But I'd like to see Edwards on the ticket as vice president," Mears added, unknowingly echoing the label that increasingly has been placed on Edwards, much to the annoyance of the senator and his staff.

In interviews, though, other Tennessee voters were not so forgiving of what they perceive as Kerry's lack of interest in their region after he campaigned so hard in Iowa, New Hampshire and elsewhere.

"I think a lot of Southerners look on those Northeasterners like Kerry with a great deal of skepticism," said Carrie Whaley, an undecided voter in Jackson, Tenn. "He's not even really visiting the South."

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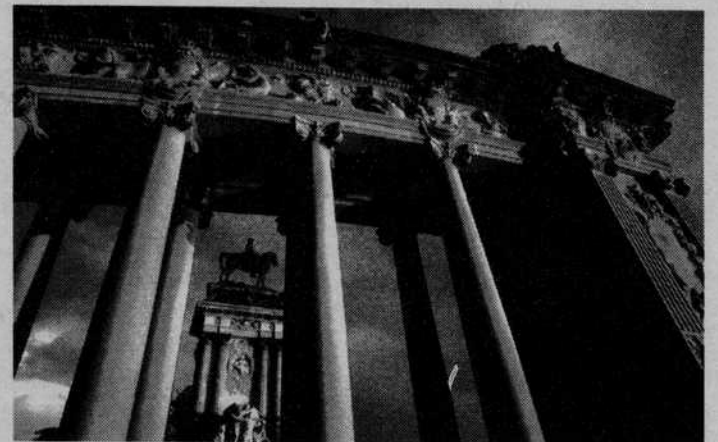


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