Political Culture and the Legacies of Antisemitism: The Heller-Campbell Congressional Race in South Carolina 1978

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Political Culture and the Legacies of Antisemitism:
The Heller-Campbell Congressional Race in South Carolina, 1978

Robert David Johnson

In early November 1978, Don Sprouse, an independent candidate running for South Carolina’s Fourth District congressional seat, convened his first major press conference of the campaign. The owner of a garage in downtown Greenville, Sprouse originally had garnered attention for his complaints about the city’s economic and political elite, as he championed interests of the white Christian working class through populist appeals. This reputation fueled his bid for Congress, where he billed himself “the people’s candidate” with a slogan of “Fight On Sprouse!”

Sprouse could not have differed more from the Democratic nominee for the seat, Max Heller. A Jewish refugee from Nazi-occupied Austria, Heller became first a self-made millionaire and then the two-term Greenville mayor. Sprouse had spent most of his 1978 effort calling for lower taxes and fewer government regulations. In the final week of the campaign, however, his rhetoric turned bitterly personal, portraying Heller as someone who “cannot turn to Jesus Christ in time of need.” In rhetoric splashed on front pages throughout the district, Sprouse urged the overwhelmingly Christian district to elect a Christian congressman. The blatant nature of Sprouse’s attack upon Heller’s religion and identity was rare for a modern US House race.

Until his congressional campaign, Heller’s Jewish identity had benefited his political career, but Heller had only run in the city of Greenville, not the more blue-collar Spartanburg or the rural portions of Greenville County that also formed part of the Fourth District. Two-thirds of the district’s voters worked either in blue-collar jobs, most notably in the textile industry, or in the service industry; the median education level was

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1. My thanks to Gunja SenGupta, who as department chair arranged research support for my trip to Greenville, and to Judy Wallach and Micki Kaufman for their assistance at multiple stages of the project. My thanks also for the helpful suggestions from the editors, which considerably improved the final product.


only the eleventh grade. The district offered fertile ground for populist appeals, even those pitched toward ugly beliefs.

On election night, Heller’s defeat seemed like a major upset. In retrospect, his political fate seems all but inevitable. By the early 1970s, the combination of the Cold War and school desegregation had heightened antisemitic sentiments in the South, especially the rural South. The nature of Greenville politics—where integration occurred through aggressive intervention by the business elite—rendered Heller, a member of that elite, uniquely vulnerable to a linkage between antisemitism, anti-elite sentiments, and a backlash to integration.

Ironically, while Sprouse’s attacks helped to end Heller’s career, they also tarnished the winner in the race, Republican Carroll Campbell, who would serve four terms in the House and eight successful years as South Carolina’s governor. But in a rapidly modernizing state, Campbell never quite escaped the ugly environment surrounding his path to Congress.

The historiographical discussion regarding antisemitism and American populism focuses on the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Richard Hofstadter saw populism as stimulating American antisemitism; critics urged greater context, as in Charles Postel’s argument that populism’s “anti-Semitism was metaphorical and absent discussion of actual Jews.” Examples from the era’s Southern populist politics bolstered both lines

of interpretation. The career of Georgia’s Tom Watson, the Populist Party’s vice-presidential candidate and later US senator (D-GA), showed how populist sentiments fueled antisemitism. By contrast, Mississippi governor and US senator James Vardaman (D-MS) shared Watson’s radical economic beliefs and intense racism, but hailed Jews as “wise, conservative, patriotic, and provident.”

Debate over the Hofstadter thesis, however, provides little insight into how populist sentiments shaped Heller’s electoral fate. Unlike at the turn of the century, Sprouse’s unapologetic antisemitism did not typify community attitudes. Indeed, Sprouse’s comments received such attention because of their striking nature. And the latent antisemitism the comments exposed was hardly incidental to the political climate—the issue dominated the campaign’s final week.

The term “populism,” of course, is amorphous. But in the postwar southern context, most populists lived in non-urban areas, distrusted the (political or economic) “Establishment,” worried about changing cultural values, especially about race, and lacked a college degree. These sentiments sometimes empowered anti-Establishment good-government crusades from the left, such as that of Florida Democrat Lawton Chiles, but the sentiment more often was linked to the right.

Most studies of the phenomenon have downplayed antisemitism in Cold War-era Southern populism. Dan Carter’s Politics of Rage discovered antisemitic hangers-on such as Willis Carto, Asa Carter, Bunker Hunt, and Alvin Mayall only at the fringes of George Wallace’s 1964 and 1968 presidential bids. Matthew Lassiter’s exploration of Republican growth in Charlotte and Atlanta positioned populism as grassroots, but more an ideology of suburban homeowners, taxpayers, and parents; antisemitism played a scant role his analysis. Kevin Kruse’s work on postwar Atlanta noted the Anti-Defamation League’s warning about far-right organizations playing “upon the fears, tensions, and insecurities

of the people,” but mostly examined the connection between populism and white flight.\footnote{12} White flight was largely absent from Greenville and Spartanburg Counties, and the district Heller lost in 1978 more resembles the southern districts Republicans gained in the 1994 and 2010 elections than the suburban Atlanta or Charlotte areas Kruse and Lassiter profiled.

Heller’s fate also offers insight into the political position of Jews outside the South’s large urban areas, where their ability to blend in might have led to an underappreciation of lurking antisemitic sentiments. Jews always formed a tiny portion (around 0.3 percent, for most of the twentieth century) of South Carolina’s population; even in the postwar period, only Arkansas and Mississippi had smaller Jewish populations.\footnote{13} Upcountry Jews sometimes benefited from this situation; as historian Diane Vecchio has noted, “The very fact that they were such a small minority in the Protestant South made their assimilation to the host society more likely.”\footnote{14} Jews who initially settled in the Upcountry—Greenville’s first synagogue dated from 1916—were disproportionately small merchants, and they enjoyed a measure of respect in the area’s Protestant-dominated culture.\footnote{15}

To an extent, these sentiments carried over into state politics. Unique among Southern states in the mid-20th century, South Carolina’s longtime Speaker of the House, Solomon Blatt, was Jewish. In some ways, however, Blatt’s career previewed difficulties Heller would experience. While Jews had actively participated in politics in the state’s largest cities (Columbia twice elected Jewish mayors before the Civil War), Blatt lost his only competitive race—a 1930 primary in lightly-populated Barnwell County, along the Georgia border—after a campaign, as he recalled, in which his “religion was whispered around against me.” A local power broker cleared the field for him two years later, and he avoided meaningful competition from that point. His political base came from his fellow legislators and his affiliation with the “Barnwell Ring,” which included a former governor and a powerful state senator.\footnote{16}
Blatt also embraced the era’s racial mores. During his first term as Speaker in 1938, he chaired a House committee designed to block admission of a Black candidate to the University of South Carolina’s law school. He was photographed at a Citizens’ Council rally in the 1950s. In 1966, speaking against a bill to reinstate compulsory public-school attendance, he asked, “Do you want some sixteen-year-old so-and-so holding the hand of your little granddaughter in the classroom? Sol Blatt doesn’t want that.” Federal courts overrode the Speaker’s obstructionism.17

For Southern Jews who did not share Blatt’s beliefs, Jim Crow’s erosion had destabilizing political and social effects. Heller, as it would turn out, was one such figure. His path to the United States began in 1937, as an eighteen-year-old Austrian who encountered five American girls at a Vienna café. He asked one of them, Mary Mills, to dance, though he spoke only a few dozen words of English. They talked for a couple of hours the next day (Heller bought an English dictionary to facilitate conversation), and Mills, a Greenville native, left her address. Heller used it the next year, after the Anschluss. Since emigration to the United States required affidavits from sponsoring US citizens, Heller requested Mills’ assistance.18 A local factory owner, Shepard Saltzman, sponsored Heller and his sister. One of Greenville’s most successful businessmen, Saltzman’s factory employed 400 people.19 With $1.80 in his pocket, Heller arrived in Greenville in August 1938; he went to work sweeping floors. Heller’s father had nine siblings; none survived the Holocaust. Only one of his mother’s sisters survived.20 Heller taught himself English and was promoted to assistant manager of Saltzman’s Piedmont Shirt Factory. He married Trude Schönthal, another refugee from Austria; the pair had three children.

The Greenville that greeted the Hellers was the heart of a fast-growing area dominated by the textile industry.21 After World War II, Heller founded his own shirt company, which employed Blacks and whites on equal terms. He sold the business in the 1960s, remarking, “I don’t

want to be the richest man in the graveyard.”  

Heller was active both in the local Jewish community and among Greenville business leaders. President of the local synagogue for several years, he regularly joined his wife and children in attending services. Heller also had a leading role in the local Chamber of Commerce, the Greenville Council on Housing, the Family and Children’s Service, the Symphony Association, and community hospitals.

Heller’s retirement coincided with a changing political environment in the Upcountry. In 1902, the textile boom had prompted the creation of a congressional district anchored by Greenville and Spartanburg. Before the Heller-Campbell race, the Fourth District sent seven white men to Congress, all conservative Democrats, and featured only two competitive contests—a 1953 special election and the 1968 Democratic Party primary. Resulting voter disinterest produced one of the lowest turnout rates in the country in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1968, when incumbent Robert Ashmore retired, four Democrats sought the nomination. On paper, the strongest was Nick Theodore, a thirty-nine-year-old Greenville state senator. But he fell just short of securing a spot in the runoff, and the seat went to James Mann, Greenville’s chief prosecutor. Theodore’s ethnicity (he was Greek-American) hurt him; around twenty percent of district’s Democrats said they would be less likely to vote for a candidate of Greek descent. This latent hostility to the “other” would re-emerge a decade later.

In national politics, the Upcountry trended away from the Democrats after the Civil Rights Act and the 1965 death of longtime US Senator Olin Johnston, a Spartanburg native. In Greenville’s case, the shift had occurred even earlier; FDR was the last Democratic presidential candidate to carry the county. In the 1968 presidential election, Democrat

22. Trude Heller, personal interview with author, January 23, 2017; Heller UNC OH.
Hubert Humphrey finished a distant third in the Fourth District. Mann, however, bested his Republican foe, former Wofford quarterback and Spartanburg businessman Charlie Bradshaw, by sweeping the thirty-one percent who voted for third-party candidate George Wallace.

Rightwing populist appeals permeated the rural South in the 1970s. The trend was especially pronounced in Spartanburg and Greenville, as part of a backlash among blue-collar whites to the actions of the local business elite. Understanding that obstruction against civil rights would harm the city’s economic position, Greenville business leaders championed the gradual integration of businesses and civic spaces. Public schools came last in the process, in 1970, after a court order in the middle of the school year.

While Greenville appeared to embrace integration, racial resentment remained strong. According to a 1968 poll, ninety-seven percent of white Democrats in the district expressed some degree of backlash sentiments; forty-nine percent harbored moderately or strongly anti-Black beliefs. Typifying these sentiments, one blue-collar Greenville resident hoped that “good, average Christian Americans,” the “so-called silent majority,” would “rise up like Americans should and speak out” against integration of public schools.

That silent majority included Carroll Campbell, a young businessman who chaired the Citizens’ Committee to Prevent Busing. In January 1970, he organized a motorcade to the state’s capital, presenting a petition signed by more than 100,000 people urging resistance to court-ordered integration. Born in Greenville in 1940, Campbell had a difficult upbringing. Help from an uncle allowed him to finish high school; he left college when his family ran short of funds. But he showed entrepreneurial skill, starting a company that managed parking lots and garages, then

29. South Carolina Secretary of State, Statement of the Whole Number of Votes Cast . . . on November 5, 1968.
34. Quayle, “A Survey of the Political Climate,” box 16, Mann Papers.
35. Lassiter, Silent Majority, 255.
buying a local pool hall and several Burger King franchises.\textsuperscript{37} Campbell typified a generation of southern conservatives who affiliated with the Republican Party from the start of their political careers.\textsuperscript{38} After an unsuccessful special election bid in 1969, he captured a state House seat in 1970.\textsuperscript{39} Described as a “picture-perfect candidate” with political talent “head and shoulders” above other local Republicans, conservative positions on taxes and government spending dominated his political agenda.\textsuperscript{40} This belief system, coupled with his down-home campaign style and telegenic family (a local wife and two young sons), paid off in 1972, when Campbell received more votes than any Greenville legislative candidate in history.\textsuperscript{41} Two years later, he tallied 66.4 percent of the vote in the Fourth District as the Republican nominee for lieutenant governor, although he lost the general election by a narrow margin.\textsuperscript{42}

While Campbell personified a new generation of Southern Republicans, Heller anticipated the evolution of the southern Democratic Party. In his decade in elected office, he combined a pro-business attitude with a belief that government could improve the lives of average citizens. He integrated the city staff and commissions, and championed greater transparency and ethics regulations.\textsuperscript{43} Like most southern Democrats of the day, he avoided either liberal positions on social issues or sharp critiques of US foreign policy.

In 1971, after two years on the city council, Heller ran for Greenville’s mayor. Employing the nonpartisan slogan “Bringing government and people closer together,” and benefiting from strong business support, he

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[40.] Sam Dawson interview; Warren Mersereau interview.
\item[41.] Dozier, “4th District.”
\item[43.] Max Heller oral history, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn505526 (henceforth Heller Holocaust Museum OH).
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Figure 1. Carroll Campbell (courtesy of US House of Representatives, Historical Office)
captured more than three-quarters of the vote. In 1975, he was reelected after city council Republicans discouraged anyone from opposing him. Two themes characterized Heller’s mayoral tenure. First, he restructured municipal government so people could feel “that the government is not removed from them.” A typical program, the “Hungry Ear,” allowed citizens to phone complaints (most were about garbage collection) directly to city officials, who then personally responded within a day or two. Heller also started regular town hall meetings. Programs like these are now routine. But at the time, as Greenville News reporter Dale Perry recalled, “City Hall was known mostly as a place to pay taxes and water bills.” There had never been “any serious effort to get people”—especially African Americans—“involved in their local government.” This record contrasted with the era’s highest-profile Southern Jewish politician, Atlanta mayor Sam Massell, whose race-baiting slogan (“Atlanta’s Too Young to Die”) marred his unsuccessful 1973 reelection campaign against a Black candidate. Second, Heller championed public/private economic development efforts, focused on the downtown. He narrowed Main Street to two lanes, trees planted in the newly created sidewalk area, with European-style open-air cafés. Reversing previous city policy, Heller aggressively sought federal development funds, securing a $7.5 million federal grant to facilitate construction of the Hyatt Regency Greenville, which created 600 new jobs and anchored a redevelopment of the city center.

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45. Heller UNC OH; Dick Riley interview.
51. Trude Heller interview; Roy Fuhrman interview; Heller Charleston OH; Darr, “Heller Devotes His Life to Public Service”; Whitworth and Neal, “How Greenville, South Carolina Brought Downtown Back.”
years into his tenure, a stunningly low two percent of Greenville voters disapproved of Heller’s job performance.\textsuperscript{52}

Antisemitism persisted in Greenville, but there was considerable variance between the city itself and the county. Less than one percent of Greenville’s population was Jewish; two longtime Jewish residents of the city recalled that because their numbers were so low, they generally avoided the overt discrimination faced by Blacks.\textsuperscript{53} But Heller’s oldest daughter, Francie, had a different experience when she attended Wade Hampton High School, which drew students from smaller towns in Greenville County. Several boys taunted her, asking about her horns or calling her the “Jew girl.” Although a member of a school sorority, she could not attend events at local clubs that prohibited Jews. Her parents still taught her to be proud of being Jewish; on Passover, she brought matzo to school and explained to her class its significance.\textsuperscript{54}

Nor did Heller himself avoid encounters with antisemitism. As chair of the board of St. Francis Hospital, he helmed a successful fundraising drive in the late 1960s; it concluded with a celebration at the Poinsett Club, which banned Jews as members. Club directors invited Heller and his wife to attend the event on a one-time basis; he refused. The resulting outcry led the club to change its policies and offer Heller an honorary membership.\textsuperscript{55} During his first mayoral bid, Heller received a few hate letters and nasty religious comments.\textsuperscript{56} Trude Heller, who had “never thought Greenville would vote for a Jewish mayor,” called the police after a bomb threat, but eventually “got a little blasé” about the threats.\textsuperscript{57}

Heller did not hide his religious beliefs upon taking office. In 1971, the new mayor told the Greenville ministerial alliance: “I’m not going to dare tell you how to pray. All I’m asking you is [to] have the kind of prayers where everybody can participate.” He later sponsored interfaith prayer breakfasts, which generated pickets from representatives of the fundamentalist Bob Jones University.\textsuperscript{58}

These incidents, however, should not obscure how Heller’s religious identity served as a political asset during his time as mayor. He perceptively sensed that “the fact that I was Jewish, some [non-Jewish] people

\textsuperscript{52} Hart, “A Survey of the Political Climate,” box 6, Heller Papers.
\textsuperscript{53} Harold and Barbara Rabhan, personal interview with author, January 23, 2017; Heller UNC OH; Diane Vecchio, “Jewish Entrepreneurs in the Carolina Upcountry,” conference paper, copy in author’s possession.
\textsuperscript{54} Francie Heller interview.
\textsuperscript{55} Harold and Barbara Rabhan interview.
\textsuperscript{56} Heller UNC OH.
\textsuperscript{57} Trude Heller interview.
\textsuperscript{58} Heller Charleston OH.
felt good within their own heart” in voting for him. “It was like saying, ‘Gee, you know, we’ve grown up,’” and moved past the city’s racial difficulties. Encouraging such sentiments, Heller positioned American exceptionalism as a central element of his political persona. “America was always dream land, to everybody in the whole world,” he observed. “So, while it was a terrible experience I went through as far as Hitler is concerned, I really never wanted to go anywhere but to America.”

One friend found Heller’s life something of a “Hollywood story”; Mark Shields, his 1978 political consultant, recalled Heller as a “memorable, even unforgettable, individual.”

A political confrontation between Heller and Campbell was far from inevitable. Campbell demurred challenging Mann in both 1974 and 1976, but in late 1977, he released a poll showing him defeating Mann. (Presumably, he trailed Heller, since the campaign did not disclose that result.) In January 1978, facing the prospect of his first difficult race as an incumbent, and amid allegations of misusing his staff to aid a coin collector to whom he had loaned money, Mann abruptly retired.

Surveying the scene shortly thereafter, South Carolina political reporter Lee Bandy recognized that national Republicans would champion Campbell’s campaign. But, he added, Heller’s ties to the business community would make him a “formidable” candidate. “Max will win,” a local Democrat predicted, pointing to the more liberal attitudes of younger voters, who had moved to Greenville for economic reasons.

Privately, Campbell’s campaign was more optimistic. His campaign manager, Sam Dawson, correctly anticipated the fundamentally conservative district shifting its allegiance to the Republican Party. Unlike Campbell, Heller also faced significant intraparty opposition from 1968 primary candidate Nick Theodore. Reflecting his approach to politics as mayor, Heller offered an essentially nonpartisan platform, promising strong constituent service, a foreign policy of peace through strength, and support for textile mills.

59. Heller UNC OH; see also Jim McAlister, “Max Heller: 20th Century American Pioneer.”
Since few policy differences separated the candidates, personality took center stage in the primary. Theodore maintained that his legislative experience would make him a more effective congressman. With backing from the National Education Association and political action committees representing realtors and auto dealers, he outsold Heller almost two-to-one on TV advertising.66 Heller, by contrast, stressed his rags-to-riches story; with a net worth of nearly $2 million, he declined donations from lobbying groups, committed to placing his holdings in a blind trust, and promised to shun all honoraria payments.67

Because both candidates were from Greenville, Spartanburg County seemed likely to decide the contest. With superior ties to county Democrats, Theodore looked to exploit what Charlotte Observer reporter Charles Shepard delicately described as a sense that “Spartanburg voters will be wary of the articulate, sophisticated Heller.”68 Many Republican-leaning voters also cast Democratic ballots for Theodore, whom they considered a weaker foe.69 By this point, Campbell’s campaign manager later observed, Theodore had developed the feel of a perennial candidate.70 A neutral Democratic official, the day before the primary, considered the contest “about 50-50.”71 Heller’s performance as mayor, however, carried him to a six-point victory. The two candidates nearly tied in Spartanburg County, and Heller won Greenville County by around 2,600 votes from a total tally of around 34,000.72

The primaries, political correspondent Walter Julian noted, set up a “classic confrontation ... between two extremely popular candidates.”73 Still, with Greenville state senator Dick Riley heading the Democratic ticket as the party’s gubernatorial nominee, one local Republican lamented, “Carroll might as well kiss it good-bye.”74 Late-summer surveys for both campaigns had Heller ahead by around twenty points; Heller’s

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70. Sam Dawson interview.
73. Julian, “Campbell, Heller in Classic Race.”
74. Lee Brady, “Democratic Primary Results Hurt GOP Chances in November,” The State, July 2, 1978; Dick Riley interview.
strongest ratings came from groups that confirmed his non-traditional appeal—voters aged sixty-five and over, professional and white-collar voters, and independents.\footnote{Hart, “A Survey of the Political Climate,” box 6, Heller Papers; Sam Dawson interview.}

“We are,” Heller commented during his mayoralty, “very conservative in Greenville.”\footnote{Jim McAlister, “Max Heller: 20\textsuperscript{th} Century American Pioneer.”} As the summer of 1978 turned to fall, the candidate aligned himself with other South Carolina Democratic House members, conservatives who strongly defended the textile industry.\footnote{Heller, “An Open Letter to All the Citizens of the 4\textsuperscript{th} Congressional District,” n.d. (October 1978), box 6, Heller Papers; Dozier, “4\textsuperscript{th} District.”} He favored reducing taxes “in a responsible way,” worried about inflation and deficit spending, and proposed running the “government as we would a very large business.”\footnote{Max Heller, “My Position on Kemp-Roth,” August 25, 1978; Max Heller for Congress press release, August 3, 1978; both in box 6, Heller Papers; “Ground Broken for Main Street Improvements,” Outlook: The Report of the Greater Greenville Chamber of Commerce, August 22, 1978.} But Heller’s campaign focused on non-ideological issues: ethics, good government, and governmental efficiency. Unusually for a 1970s congressional candidate, he released his tax returns, and disclosed the full extent of his net worth (mostly real estate and stock holdings in the company that bought his shirt factory); he chastised Campbell for
refusing to do the same. His upbeat TV ads mostly focused on testimonials from Greenville residents whose lives he had helped as mayor. The aim, as Mark Shields recalled, was to present Heller as a “man of the community, for the community, with a strong story to tell.”

Lee Atwater, Campbell’s political mentor, articulated a different philosophy: “Republicans in the South could not win elections simply by . . . talking about various issues. You had to make the case that the other guy, the other candidate, is a bad guy.” Campbell’s campaign reflected that lesson. The GOP nominee criticized Heller as a “big-spending” liberal, unfavorably comparing Greenville’s tax rate to other South Carolina cities; Campbell backed the Kemp-Roth tax-cut bill, and earned campaign visits from Jack Kemp and Ronald Reagan. His TV ads, locally produced by his campaign manager (one, on Social Security, featured Dawson’s elderly neighbors as the subjects), focused on economic questions. And Campbell’s decision to start TV advertising two months before Election Day bolstered his name recognition.

Campbell’s style placed Heller in a difficult position. Aggressively countering Campbell’s ads would have contradicted Heller’s long-cultivated image as a good-government reformer who preferred, as one local Democrat termed it, “a Mr. Nice Guy campaign.” Heller’s twenty-five-year-old campaign manager, John Rubin, expected the attacks to backfire, since “the electorate is not dumb.” Instead, left largely unrebutted, they tarnished Heller’s record.

Heller retained a passionate core of supporters in the cities of Greenville and (to a lesser degree) Spartanburg, but his background—apart from his faith—was a poor match for rural areas that welcomed Campbell’s populist appeals. Francie Heller remembered her father as

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81. Mark Shields interview.
83. Saunders and Hill, “4th District Candidates Contrast Styles, Issues.”
85. Sam Dawson interview.
86. Saunders and Hill, “4th District Candidates Contrast Styles, Issues.”
“always impeccably dressed with double breasted suits, blue silk ties, and a perfectly folded handkerchief in his front pocket.” Campaigning in a suit in rural Spartanburg County, Liz Patterson recalled, prevented Heller from coming “across as relaxed as the country folks would like”; unlike Campbell, he didn’t “talk and relate to good ol’ country folks.” The daughter of longtime senator Olin Johnston, Patterson knew the county well; she would become the last Democrat to represent the Fourth District in Congress after an upset win in 1986. Moreover, Greenville County residents harbored some jealousy of the county seat; it was almost, Patterson noted, “as if they felt the city folks and government weren’t paying any attention to their concerns.” Heller’s tenure as Greenville mayor made him vulnerable to such sentiments.

Campbell’s more aggressive style, the pro-Republican national mood in the 1978 midterm elections, and the greater potency of his key issues (taxes and spending) than Heller’s (good government and urban development) gave the Republican late momentum in the campaign. Still, most observers—both local and national—considered Heller the favorite as Election Day loomed. Campbell later cited internal polling showing him seizing a late lead, but at the time, the campaign told local reporters that they remained behind.

Voters had always understood Heller as the refugee from Nazi terror whom Greenville residents had welcomed, and who in turn had given back to his adoptive city. Heller described himself a “born-again Jew,” with Greenville his home. For most of the 1978 campaign, discussions of his religion retained this positive frame. Mark Shields recalled his own skepticism that antisemitism would not be a problem in such a fundamentalist Christian district, but Heller continually doubted that the issue would pose a major obstacle.

Beneath the surface, however, lay potential problems. Heller’s own polling showed that, in response to an open-ended question on what qualities they sought in a congressman, one of every eight Heller voters wanted to send a “moral, Christian man” to Washington. If the tenor

89. Heller, “Popi Max.”
90. Liz Patterson, personal interview with author, June 20, 2017.
92. Carroll Campbell to Alan Baron, May 4, 1983, box 2, Campbell Papers, University of South Carolina (hereafter Campbell USC Papers); Saunders and Hill, “4th District Candidates Contrast Styles, Issues.”
93. Heller Charleston OH.
94. Mark Shields interview.
of the campaign positioned Heller as something other than a “Christian man,” would these supporters remain loyal?²⁵

Prompted, it seems, by suggestions from Lee Atwater, a summer 1978 Campbell poll included several questions relating to Heller’s faith.²⁶ The previous year’s poll, when Campbell’s likely opponent was Mann, had not raised these issues. Asking voters “which phrases best describe Max Heller and which best describe Carroll Campbell,” two of the six options were “a Christian man” and “Jewish.” The poll also probed whether voters would be more or less likely to vote for a “Jewish immigrant.”²⁷ Campbell’s pollster, Arthur Finkelstein, blandly deemed these items “normal demographic questions.”²⁸ No results of the poll survive but given that one-fifth of the district’s voters had been less likely a decade earlier to support a candidate of Greek descent, it seems likely that a significant minority gave anti-Jewish responses.²⁹

Campbell’s post-primary poll also added two new Middle East-related matters, asking voters’ opinions about US aid to Israel and the sale of US fighter planes to Arab nations.³⁰ In a late August speech, Campbell deemed it “imperative that a congressman be objective in foreign policy and have absolutely no favorite nation in the world except America.”³¹ The remarks were “clearly a signal” on Jewish issues, one Heller supporter observed.³² They were, however, only that—a signal, much like the controversial poll questions, functioning as a type of dog whistle. In this respect, they fundamentally differed from the blatant antisemitism that Sprouse would offer.

As the campaign moved into October, Liz Patterson noticed Heller’s position softening in Spartanburg County. She had initially doubted that religion would affect the race. After all, despite concerns about anti-Catholic sentiment in the Upcountry, John Kennedy had carried the county in 1960 by almost thirty percent. But as she accompanied Heller meeting voters, Patterson encountered a “whisper campaign.” The owner of a rural gas station, for instance, asked her, “Do we really want a Jew?” Patterson consistently parried such concerns by arguing

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²⁶. Sam Dawson interview.
²⁸. Carroll Campbell to Alan Baron, April 26, 1983, box 2, Campbell USC Papers.
³². Warren Mersereau interview.
that Heller’s success as Greenville mayor showed what he could do for poorer sections of Spartanburg County. Still, in areas where, she recalled, “anything different bothers them,” Heller’s faith increasingly posed a problem.  

Heller had believed that, among other benefits, his municipal reforms would soothe rightwing populist passions. “I think one of the reasons people are angry,” he commented at the time, “is they feel it is useless to complain.”

It was, therefore, a supreme irony that his congressional bid was undone by a far-right populist, who entered politics because he believed Greenville officials had ignored his complaints.

An auto mechanic and former racecar driver, Don Sprouse owned City Wrecker Service’s Body Shop. The high-school dropout had a rather unsavory local reputation. During the mid-1970s, after he flouted city ordinances, the Greenville Police Department removed him from the duty roster (used when a motorist needed a wrecker service, and a reliable source of income for body shops). So Sprouse bought a radio ad criticizing city government.

The experience, Sprouse later informed the Greenville News, left him concerned with governmental secrecy. He started filing state public information requests—first about his own treatment, and then about the operations of the local school district. In the summer of 1978, friends urged him to enter the House race. Previewing themes that would typify later versions of rightwing populism, Sprouse’s platform endorsed “open government, drastic tax cuts, winning the battle against inflation, big cuts in foreign aid, and control of federal regulations.”  

During his battles with city government, Sprouse demonstrated a cleverness in attracting media attention. But well into October 1978, the Greenville News noticed that Sprouse had run “an unusually quiet, even lackluster campaign.” Spending nearly all of his time in rural areas of the district, his mostly self-financed effort spent less than $20,000. He called for an immediate, fifty-percent tax cut—an emphasis that threatened to siphon votes on the right from the Republican nominee. At first, Campbell’s campaign manager, Sam Dawson, told campaign aides

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103. Liz Patterson interview.
104. Heller UNC OH.
105. Sam Dawson interview; Dozier, “4th District.”
106. Dozier, “4th District.”
to “just ignore him.” But by mid-October, Dawson met with friends of Sprouse, hoping to pressure him out of the race. The proposal went nowhere; one Campbell aide later claimed that Sprouse demanded money to drop out.

Apart from Campbell’s polling questions and his oblique reference to the dual loyalty trope, antisemitism remained below the surface for most of the campaign. Then, on October 28, the Ku Klux Klan flooded the district with a newsletter. “We must,” the organization proclaimed, “defeat Max Heller who is the Jew mayor of Greenville. If we allow him to become a Congressman it’s another nail in America’s Coffin. Get out and shout against the Anti-Christ Rascal.” Heller downplayed the KKK attack, telling journalists that his “good experiences overshadow anything like this.”

Three days later, at the final debate, an audience member asked Heller whether he would support excessive military aid to Israel: the issue on which Campbell’s campaign had polled. The Democrat affirmed his commitment to American defense and spoke of a shared Judeo-Christian heritage linking the United States and Israel. An outraged Sprouse responded by turning the under-the-surface discussion about Heller’s identity in a different direction, proclaiming that, as a Baptist, he would owe allegiance to his religion and assumed that other candidates would, as well.

Two days later—less than a week before the election—came Sprouse’s press conference. Heller’s comment about Judeo-Christian heritage, the independent candidate charged, “tried to say there wasn’t any difference between Christians and Jews—that the religions were founded on the same philosophy. But I feel there is a great difference. He doesn’t believe in Jesus Christ.” “I don’t hate Jews,” Sprouse dubiously claimed. “This is

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not a religious slur.” Having invoked overtly religious bigotry, Sprouse then pivoted to themes more associated with his campaign. Positioning himself as a populist truth-teller standing up to elites, he complained that “people say you’re not supposed to bring things like this up in politics,” but it was, in fact, “the people’s right to know,” especially since the district was in “the Bible belt.” Sprouse concluded bluntly: “a non-Christian was not as qualified to represent the Christian people of the district as a Christian congressman.”

Campbell, politically astute, refused to comment. Local observers initially wondered whether Sprouse’s crude antisemitism might even generate a sympathy vote for Heller. The district’s most prominent newspaper, the \textit{Greenville News}, denounced Sprouse for having “insulted every thinking person in Greenville and Spartanburg Counties.” Still, the slur was news: the paper featured a front-page, three-column headline detailing Sprouse’s attacks.

The Heller campaign considered aggressively countering Sprouse’s statements, but ultimately the Democrat ignored the remarks. “What we didn’t count on,” a Heller campaign worker recalled, “is that the message [Sprouse] would ultimately blast out there in a way that had to be covered—when he went full anti-Semitic—changed the dynamic at the last minute.” Heller’s story was well-known. But his background had never been framed as Sprouse had done. Events over the campaign’s final week suggested that, especially in the district’s rural areas, Sprouse’s comments resonated.

A Christian minister who was friends with Heller told him that he sensed there was “something wrong.” In the campaign’s final weekend, the candidate, with a TV camera following him, asked a local clerk if he wanted to know anything about Heller’s life or policy positions. “I think I’ve heard quite a bit about you,” the shopkeeper responded. “What do you know about the Lord? I’m a little bit prejudiced towards people in the Lord.” Heller, his face almost frozen, had no response.

Showing how religious bigotry could complement a dual-loyalty trope,
some voters called Heller “Christ killer”; others asked campaign staff-
erers whether Heller would send US troops to defend Israel, or billions
dollars to Israel in foreign aid.

Mark Shields recalled that “Max
started to pick it up at plant gates as he was campaigning. ‘Gee, Max,
I didn’t know you didn’t believe in Jesus.’ That was the tip-off.” It
was almost as if, Shields felt, some former supporters, suddenly realizing
that Heller did not believe in Jesus Christ, concluded that the Democrat
had a character defect.

Russell Stall, then a teenager working as a volunteer for the campaign,
recalled the closing days as “ugly” and “awful.” Swastikas appeared
on some Heller campaign signs. One man, encountering Trude Heller
at a flea market, told her, “We don’t need no Jew killer here.”

One of Heller’s most active supporters, Warren Mersereau, lamented how
“Jesus Christ, savior” became the dominant frame in the campaign’s
closing days.

Two days before the election, Mark Shields told the Washington Post
that a Heller victory would show the power of “the American dream; it’d
be a triumph . . . of decency and decent instincts.”

On Election Day, however, Liz Patterson “thought it was going to be tough.” Heller wasn’t
getting the level of support she had expected; she “saw people who had
always been Democratic who shied away” from voting the party line.

Even so, initial returns from Spartanburg, gave Heller a 2,000-vote
lead. His election night party, at the Poinsett Hotel in downtown Green-
vilie, attracted such a large crowd that people struggled to hear the re-
sults on TV. Those in attendance were expecting a victory, but the news
suddenly turned sour. Normally Democratic rural areas of Spartanburg
County reported, and Campbell seized the lead, by around 1,100 votes.

A Campbell spokesperson later said, “We are amazed, floored, by Spar-
tanburg County.” Although more GOP-leaning Greenville County’s
votes were still out, Trude Heller recognized that her husband had lost.

124. Cliff LeBlanc, “Heller Questions Campbell’s Tactics,” Columbia Record,
October 1, 1986.

2004.

126. Mark Shields interview.

127. Charnes, “When Greenville, South Carolina, Had a Jewish Mayor.”

128. Tursey, “Campbell: Getting to Know Him.”

129. Trude Heller interview.

130. Warren Mersereau interview.

131. Lynn Darling, “On the Road with Mark Shields, Political Consultant,” Wash-
ington Post, November 6, 1978.

132. Liz Patterson interview.

133. Cliff LeBlanc, “Heller Questions Campbell’s Tactics,” Columbia Record,
October 1, 1986.

134. Harold and Barbara Rabhan interview.
When Greenville County reported, Campbell’s lead ballooned; he carried the county by 32,061 to 27,273, with Sprouse a distant third. A local reporter hailed Campbell for having “pulled the biggest political upset in the state.”\(^{135}\) The result “stunned” several Campbell campaign workers.\(^ {136}\) National Republicans, led by Ronald Reagan, offered their personal congratulations.\(^ {137}\)

In an election-night interview, Sprouse boasted that his remarks helped Campbell.\(^ {138}\) Democratic gubernatorial candidate Dick Riley maintained that Lee Atwater had a connection with Sprouse’s decision to run—a commonly-held sentiment in the district then and later.\(^ {139}\) The claim was hardly implausible, given Atwater’s reputation, especially since Sprouse, who had virtually no campaign organization, somehow managed to obtain the 12,000 signatures necessary to get on the ballot as a petition candidate.

No evidence has surfaced, however, to confirm any Atwater-Sprouse tie-in, and some reason exists to doubt any linkage. For much of the fall, Sprouse’s hard-right rhetoric threatened to siphon votes away from Campbell. It seemed, moreover, possible that Sprouse’s crude antisemitism would stimulate a pro-Heller backlash. Sprouse, then, best can be seen as a figure whose overt antisemitism brought to the surface latent prejudice, especially in rural areas of the district.

Against a generic Republican nominee, even with the effects of the Sprouse slurs, Heller might well have prevailed. But facing a candidate of Campbell’s political talents required Heller to fare better with three particular types of voters. First, despite his consistent support from Republicans as mayor, Heller failed to hold enough local GOP support—Dick Riley outpolled Heller by almost twenty-five percent in two majority-white precincts in southern Greenville. High turnout in GOP areas of the city intensified this problem. Bob Jones University anchored the city’s most Republican precinct, which Heller lost by 700 votes. The precinct’s turnout (1,661 voters) easily exceeded the combined turnout in five majority-Black Greenville precincts.\(^ {140}\)

\(^{135}\) Sam Dawson interview.


\(^{137}\) Ronald Reagan to Carroll Campbell, November 8, 1978; Norman Brinker to Carroll Campbell, November 15, 1978; both in box 94, Campbell Papers, Clemson University (hereafter Campbell Clemson Papers).


\(^{139}\) Dick Riley interview; Liz Patterson interview; Mark Shields interview.

During the campaign, local business leaders divided their support between Heller and Campbell, but national business political action committees almost uniformly sided with Campbell.\textsuperscript{141} Heller’s difficulties with Greenville Republicans foreshadowed similar struggles from Democratic state officeholders running for the Senate from red states—such as John Evans (Idaho, 1986), Mike Sullivan (Wyoming, 1994), and Tony Knowles (Alaska, 2004). Conservatives and Republican-leaning independents willing to vote Democratic when the key issue was local infrastructure or city services, as they did for Riley in the 1978 gubernatorial contest, refrained from doing so when the stakes were tax, defense, or social policy.\textsuperscript{142}

Partisanship provides less of an explanation for Heller’s two other problematic areas. Heller fared far worse than expected in Spartanburg County—a county so traditionally Democratic that it had backed the party’s nominee in both the 1948 and 1964 presidential elections, when only one other South Carolina county had done so. After Olin Johnston’s death, however, the Spartanburg party weakened.\textsuperscript{143} By 1978, Spartanburg was beginning a shift that would transform it into a Republican bastion—it was Donald Trump’s ninth-best South Carolina country in 2020.\textsuperscript{144}

Third, Heller not only lost the more rural areas of Greenville County—as expected—but was crushed in the region. Of the county precincts outside the city of Greenville, Campbell won all but three. Heller lost each of Greenville County’s smaller cities by at least twenty points. By contrast, in 1968, the last time the seat was open, Democrat James Mann carried these cities with between 58 and 69 percent of the vote. Unlike Heller ten years later, Mann had no appreciable falloff between his Greenville city and county totals.\textsuperscript{145}

No exit poll of the Fourth District race occurred, but it’s difficult to avoid concluding that antisemitism, intensified by Sprouse’s remarks, affected Heller’s standing outside the city of Greenville. First, as was clear from the various closing-days anecdotes, antisemitic sentiments resonated for some voters: the one in eight Heller voters who had indicated in the summer that they wanted a Christian man as their congressman ulti-
Figure 3. Precinct returns, Greenville County (image by author). Red precincts carried by Campbell, blue by Heller, darkness of shade correlates to winning margin.
mately, it appears, looked elsewhere. Second, the Spartanburg whispering campaign anticipated Heller’s difficulty in a county he needed to carry. Third, as seen in his exchange with the shopkeeper, Heller suddenly—just as Campbell was surging late in the campaign—had to explain elements of his personal identity that for his entire political career had been central to his positive appeal. Finally, the reminder that Heller was a non-Christian foreigner made him a convenient target for an electorate with significant pockets of populist resentment—against the elite, against integration, and, eventually, against Jews. Sprouse’s attacks, if nothing else, reminded those skeptical about the county’s recent social changes that Heller was not their candidate.  

Nearly four decades later, Liz Patterson recalled that she “hadn’t realized how dirty a campaign could be until this campaign.” These events, however, were of a particular time and place. Desegregation battles faded, Jewish integration into Southern culture accelerated, and migration into South Carolina from retired military personnel or employees of corporations that relocated to the state changed the composition of the Palmetto State’s electorate.

In this culture, suggestions that Jews had no political role in South Carolina were out of place. Indeed, the legacy of the 1978 campaign haunted Campbell, not Heller. Problems first emerged in 1983, when Alan Baron, a former Democratic consultant who published a weekly political newsletter, revealed that Campbell had polled about Heller’s religion. He also inaccurately asserted that Campbell had asked about voting for someone “who did not believe Jesus Christ was the savior.” Campbell’s office privately rebuked Baron but did not publicly challenge the report; the congressman considered the affair “a no-win situation.”

The next year, expanding on Baron’s inaccurate claims, although reflecting the common belief of many in Greenville, the 1984 *Almanac of American Politics* asserted that Sprouse had served as a stalking-horse candidate for Campbell, who won by “stressing that his opponent . . . was Jewish and did not believe in Jesus as his savior.” The congressman

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146. Warren Mersereau interview.
147. Liz Patterson interview.
149. Nikki McNamee to Bob Dreyfus, July 25, 1986; Nikke McNamee, “Reconstruction of the Telephone Conversations”; both in box 2, Campbell USC Papers.
obtained a de facto retraction, but his administrative assistant conceded it was likely he would “be pursuing these shadows forever.”

Campbell discovered as much in 1986, when he ran for governor. In July, two prominent Palmetto State Democrats alleged a connection between Atwater and Sprouse’s third-party effort. Even more newsworthy, Heller spoke out publicly for the first time. “People have to have high standards,” the former mayor stated in early October 1986, “and people can’t shrug their shoulders when politics get low.”

Campbell’s lawyer dismissed the state Democrats’ allegations as “discredited,” “unjust,” and politically motivated. He further claimed, less than credibly, that the campaign had polled about voters’ attitudes toward Jews merely “to determine the effectiveness of Mr. Heller’s campaign theme” of discussing his status as a refugee. Atwater denied all allegations, and charged one of his accusers, Sam Tenenbaum, with engaging in “Gestapo-like” tactics, although he later apologized for that remark. Sprouse said he never discussed the religious issue with Atwater.

This aggressive response reflected the Campbell campaign’s understanding that—whatever the Upcountry’s response to the ugliness of the 1978 campaign—an allegation of antisemitism would be fatal in a rapidly modernizing state. Campbell defeated the sitting lieutenant governor by three points and served two terms as a popular chief executive. But the 1978 events resurfaced during the 1996 South Carolina presidential primary when Campbell provided critical support to Bob Dole; Philip Gailey, editorial page director at the St. Petersburg Times, recalled the 1978 Fourth District contest as “one of the most shameful episodes of Republican Jew-baiting.”

Dole, whose victory in South Carolina stifled challenges from his right, eventually won the nomination; the debt he owed to Campbell, combined

151. Michael Barone to Carroll Campbell, March 7, 1984; Nikki McNamee to Bob Dreyfus, July 25, 1986; Carroll Campbell to Michael Barone, January 12, 1984; Carroll Campbell to John Sullivan, January 31, 1984; all in box 2, Campbell USC Papers.


with South Carolina’s impressive economic performance, placed the former governor on the short list for the vice-presidential nomination. The response to leaks that Campbell was a possible nominee, however, showed why his selection was unlikely. Even the conservative *New York Post* blared a headline: “‘Anti-Semitic’ Southern Ex-Gov on Dole’s Veep List.”158 Given that the former governor’s “baggage” from the 1978 campaign “might turn problematic,” some Dole advisors cautioned that selecting him was something to avoid.159

Though he chaired the South Carolina State Development Board under Governor Riley, Heller never returned to electoral politics. His 1978 defeat showed how a connection between antisemitism and populism in the rural South persisted well into the postwar era. At various points in the campaign, Heller faced direct attacks on his religious identity, subtle criticism of his status as a Jewish refugee and his political support for Israel, and amorphous populist blowback from the sense that he represented the elite. In this respect, Heller’s setback demonstrated the protean nature of antisemitism in US political culture—a lesson that resonates in our current political era as well.
