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The Other Beto

BY VICTOR SAADEH on NOVEMBER 26, 2018 • (0)

All eyes were on Beto O'Rourke this election cycle, and that is understandable. O'Rourke's infectious energy, youthful spirit, and commitment to reaching out to every Texan possible rendered him a national beacon of hope for Democrats across the country, even in defeat. But while O'Rourke won over millions across the nation, a more unconventional Democrat tried to accomplish the same goal in a different way: Phil Bredesen of Tennessee.

Phil Bredesen has long been an unconventional Democrat. Formerly the mayor of Nashville and governor of Tennessee, he focused more on the local politics of Tennessee, most notably playing a key role in securing an NFL team for the state. While in office, Bredesen often opted for GOP-esque policies like [opposing a state income tax and reducing Medicaid costs](#), and despite losing some favorability amongst his Democratic peers, he fared exceptionally well in the deep-red state. As governor, he won every county in his [2006 re-election bid](#), and in an era of exacerbated polarization he tried to win over his state yet again this year. By campaigning as a middle of the road Democrat willing to work across the aisle, Bredesen believed he could overcome the overwhelming support for the incendiary brand of the GOP Donald Trump used to carry the state by 26 points in the 2016 election.

For a while, Bredesen's tactic worked.

Bredesen found himself locked in a closer-than-anticipated race with Representative Marsha Blackburn following the retirement of Republican Senator Bob Corker. Following Corker's announcement that he would retire at the end of his term, many expected the race to be a foregone conclusion. Tennessee, long considered a ruby-red state, had not elected a Democratic senator since 1990, and showed no indications of shifting party preference anytime soon, unlike Texas. But Bredesen's unorthodox approach to the state yielded respectable numbers that kept him in the fight for a seat Democrats so desperately needed to flip the Senate.

Bredesen did all he could to distance himself from high-profile Democrats commonly disliked in Tennessee. In addition to [refusing to support](#) Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and turning away any potential help from Hillary Clinton, Bredesen also [supported the confirmation](#) of newly minted Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, a decision echoed only by one current Democratic senator. Bredesen portrayed himself as a man focused on finding solutions, regardless of who worked with him to find it.

All of these tactics stood out even more when compared to the rising star in Beto O'Rourke. While O'Rourke preached bipartisanship, even [winning an award](#) for his cross-country road trip with Republican Representative Will Hurd, his policies remained more liberal than your typical Democrat. He supported the [impeachment](#) of Donald Trump, even as high profile Democrats [backed away](#) from the idea, and also supported [universal health care](#), a concept that was [barraged with attacks](#) by the GOP throughout the election cycle. Beto masterfully packaged himself as a person who wished to work with and for all, while still



Academic – ish.

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running on a highly liberal platform.

While O'Rourke soaked up the spotlight, however, Democrats still kept an eye on the possibility of Bredesen scoring an upset win over a staunch Trump supporter in Blackburn. Through his critiques of the Affordable Care Act, hesitance to ban assault weapons, and criticism of his own party, Bredesen also created a unique image for himself. Touting himself as a man unconcerned with the party-line politics of today and focusing solely on what was best for his constituents, Bredesen made himself one of the best opportunities for the Democrats to retake the majority in the Senate, consistently being shown [ahead of or neck-and-neck with Blackburn in polls until the final month](#). With the Senate nearly split at 51–49 and at least [six seats in play](#), Democrats took advantage of whatever opportunity they had, even if it wasn't their ideal choice.

These numbers did not sustain long enough, however. Despite music superstar Taylor Swift's endorsement of Bredesen, coupled with his often favorable ratings, it was simply too difficult to overcome the "D" that was always attached to his name. In a deep-red state, especially in an era of heightened party polarization where party often supersedes policy, Blackburn's bare-knuckle conservatism proved insurmountable. Blackburn's popularity among Tennessee voters did not help either. With a 52.8 percent approval rating as recently as [July](#), Blackburn's embrace of the political incorrectness inspired by President Trump, as well as his policies, catered to the strong Republican roots in the state. From the start Blackburn hoped to ride the popularity of President Trump to victory, earning his endorsement, and that is exactly what she did.

In light of his closer than expected results, Beto O'Rourke will continue to garner the most headlines for his efforts, but Phil Bredesen, [Republican support and all](#), proved himself worthy of attention for running a close race with a self-proclaimed "hard-core, card-carrying Tennessee conservative," using tactics that yielded [vastly improved](#) numbers while bucking political trends.

Politicians rarely succeed in winning races where the opposing party holds a sturdy advantage, but it still happens. With Senators Jon Tester and Joe Manchin of Montana and West Virginia, respectively, once again securing re-election in deep-red states, coupled with the blue wave that dealt a noticeable blow to the GOP this midterm election, now was the time for Phil Bredesen to pull off an upset. But while Beto O'Rourke's campaign model may be suited for more liberal and toss-up elections, Phil Bredesen, despite his substantial defeat, provided a blueprint for Deep South Democrats to at least consider. By prompting constituents to look at him as a moderate, independent mind free of party influence, Bredesen showed that it is possible to win over a respectable amount of voters as a Democrat in deep-red territory.

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