

# [***Van Jones: Going home, I encountered a huge problem***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BFV-0Y21-DY7V-G15V-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Many were shocked last year when the Tennessee legislature [*dramatically expelled*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/06/us/tennessee-democrats-office-removal-vote/index.html) state representatives Justin Jones and Justin Pearson. Their offense? Breaching decorum by speaking out in favor of common-sense gun reform alongside Rep. Gloria Johnson - something it seems many of their constituents wanted them to do.

But nobody was more stunned by their expulsion than I was. I started my political career as a legislative intern in that majestic building in Nashville. The procedure unfolding on TV last year made the place seem like a circus. (After their expulsion, Pearson and Jones were [*both reappointed to their*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/02/us/politics/tennessee-house-justin-jones-justin-pearson.html) seats; the GOP-controlled Tennessee House recently [*passed a bill*](https://www.wsmv.com/2024/02/27/tennessee-house-passes-bill-that-would-ban-reappointing-expelled-members/) seeking to ban such reappointments.)

The Tennessee Capitol has always been a colorful place, with interesting characters and drama. But in my time, it was still an orderly body with a general sense of bipartisan fairness. The actions taken against what came to be known as the "Tennessee Three" seemed to be the opposite of any of that. So I went home to see with my own eyes if things were indeed as bad as they seemed.

And honestly, they're worse than I imagined. The GOP is [*imposing one-party rule*](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/07/tennessee-republican-partisanship-one-party-state/674732/) in a way that barely gives elected Democrats the right to speak - let alone have substantive input on any legislation.

When I was a legislative intern, the state of Tennessee [*was controlled by the Democrats*](https://ballotpedia.org/Party_control_of_Tennessee_state_government) and my boss was a man named Jimmy Naifeh. He was the House majority leader, soon to become the [*longest-serving Speaker of the Tennessee House of Representatives in the state's history*](https://our.tennessee.edu/2017/jimmy-naifeh/).

Naifeh is a Lebanese-American Christian. But even in my Southern home state, no opponent tried to score cheap political points based on his Arab background. He was still able to work with people on both sides of the aisle to get things done - without anyone ginning up some histrionic culture war against (say) a so-called "foreigner" trying to take over the state.

Tennessee was led by an Arab-American from the Democratic Party, and his identity just didn't matter.

I'm not saying the Tennessee government was a bastion of racial tolerance a few decades ago, far from it. But when I worked there, it was at least a functioning body, with both sides and all parties able to work together. It would have been impossible to imagine racial and partisan strife disrupting the chamber or erupting onto the global stage.

But when Republicans came into full control of [*Tennessee with the 2010 Tea Party movemen*](https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/93bcd9753f754311a629c32ea077b2f9)t, they imposed dramatic changes. They wasted no time [*gerrymandering the state*](https://gerrymander.princeton.edu/reforms/TN) to make it impossible for Democrats to ever get the majority again.

That's how you end up with a large [*Democratic-leaning city*](https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2023/0426/Blue-city-red-state-Why-Nashville-and-Tennessee-aren-t-in-tune) like Nashville without any actual Democrats representing them. Decades into this Republican supermajority, Tennessee ***politics*** are so polarized that according to the folks I talked to, Republican members won't listen, engage with or include the other side at all. And it's getting worse as time goes on. Almost all deals cut are between the right and the far right. Left-leaning or moderate Tennesseeans have virtually no say in their state legislature on the political matters that govern their lives.

So even on issues like gun violence - on which a large majority of Tennesseans [*in both parties*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/08/30/tennessee-legislature-gun-laws-melissa-alexander/) would like "red flag" laws - nothing gets done. And the carnage continues.

Yet when I talked to leaders on both sides of this divide, I found good people who earnestly wanted to improve their communities. Nobody at the grassroots level seemed primarily motivated by a desire to stymie the other party - or stick it to "the other side." They mainly just wanted to fix things for their constituents.

For example, I spoke with an inspiring progressive leader named [*Odessa Kelly*](https://twitter.com/OdessaKellyTN), co-founder and Executive Director of Stand Up Nashville. A longtime local organizer, she has proved remarkably effective at the tough task of developing mixed-use housing for her urban constituents. When she launched her 2021 Democratic primary challenge in Tennessee's 5th Congressional District, [*she planned to*](https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/2022/10/17/tennessee-aug-4-election-odessa-kelly-candidate-congress-dist-7/10066221002/) work to secure more housing and jobs for her constituency if she won.

The Tennessee General Assembly had other plans - redistricting plans. They intentionally carved the Democratic stronghold of Nashville [*into three separate*](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2022/politics/us-redistricting/tennessee-redistricting-map/) Republican-favored districts in early 2022. [*Despite winning well over 70% of Nashville's vote, Odessa did not win the seat*](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/11/08/us/elections/results-tennessee-us-house-district-7.html). Not exactly democracy at its finest.

Kelly told me that through the process, she saw herself as a warrior against aggressive government malfeasance and overreach.

And so did a White, male conservative I met named Matthew Shoaf. He is a district commissioner in Sumner County who had been similarly galvanized - but on the Republican side. His animating moment came during the height of the pandemic. He felt there was too much government interference and too little concern. Navigating lockdowns and shuttered businesses alongside looming vaccine mandates [*pushed him to*](https://mainstreetmediatn.com/articles/hendersonvillestandard/shoaf-announces-bid-for-county-commission-seat/) get more involved. So, he and a group of friends [*ran for office as a bloc*](https://apnews.com/article/election-conspiracies-local-government-religion-republicans-tennessee-758307fb4856c91138c085ad70505841) and took over county government. They get headlines for their right-wing views. But Shoaf said he is mainly working on local community development issues, just like Kelly.

These two leaders are from opposite sides of the political aisle - but they both share the same frustration with the state's power players who ignore local voices. One is a Black woman, the other is a white man. But they both expressed frustration to me about what they see as the racial dynamics keeping people apart and afraid of each other.

Unfortunately, these two local champions will probably never even meet, let alone find ways to work together. The state's toxic political environment has resulted in people with similar problems turning ON each other - rather than turning TO each other.

It was heartbreaking to see well-intentioned people forced to work within and respond to a bad incentive structure: one that makes Democratic voices irrelevant and Republican ones more extreme. I met good and decent individuals, red and blue, with similar complaints and challenges. But culture wars and gerrymanders cut them off from opportunities to work together on literally anything. [*That isolation*](https://tennesseelookout.com/2023/06/27/red-and-blue-state-divide-grows-even-wider-in-2023s-top-voting-and-election-laws/) is a tragedy.

One-party rule is the opposite of democracy. If Tennessee provides any kind of roadmap for us, it's this - when one side has overwhelming control, keeping that control can become the end-all and be-all. Little good gets done and life gets worse for everyone except those at the top. Let's hope we can avoid that outcome at the federal level.

One bright spot I found during my trip? The passion of the two Justins (whom I got to spend time with), is undeniable. They're part of a new generation of changemakers and leaders channeling that passion into a better tomorrow. They don't lose hope, even if the situation seems hopeless. Tennessee should act as a cautionary tale, sure. But the dynamic, spirited, vibrant people in my home state are also a source of enduring encouragement.

Opinion by Van Jones, CNN

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