Lessons from the Election of 1968

*Protests, populism, and progressivism all clashed in a battle royal. But what really drives election results?*

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*R.F.K. had a rawness that seemed to match the national mood.*

Photograph by Steve Schapiro / Corbis / Getty

Almost fifty years ago, on March 31, 1968, Lyndon Johnson stunned everyone by announcing that he would not run for a second term as President. Johnson had gone on television at nine o’clock that evening to address the nation on the war in Vietnam. It was not going well. In the past three years, the United States had dropped more tons of bombs on Vietnam than were dropped by all the belligerents combined in the Second World War. Twenty thousand Americans had died there, four thousand in the previous two months, following a surprise attack, known as the Tet Offensive, by North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces. Enemy losses were much higher, but that only made the war seem more horrific and out of control.

I was at home, sitting in the basement, where we kept our television set, listening to Johnson’s speech with my father. He was standing with his back to the screen, so that he would not have to look at Johnson. He was protesting Johnson’s policy on Vietnam. The only person present in the basement to appreciate the symbolism was me.

My father had already registered his opposition in a more substantive way. He had been working in Washington, D.C., for one of Johnson’s anti-poverty programs, but he had resigned because he felt he couldn’t work for an Administration that was propping up autocratic regimes in Saigon and napalming the Vietnamese. So we had moved back to Massachusetts, where he took a lesser job with, I assume, a lower salary.

In his address, Johnson announced a reduction of American air strikes and said that he would seek a negotiated settlement, but he also said that he was sending more troops. Then he said, “I have concluded that I should not permit the Presidency to become involved in the partisan divisions that are developing in this political year.” My father perked up. He did not, however, turn around. “Accordingly,” Johnson went on, “I shall not seek and I will not accept the nomination of my party for another term as your President.”

“He’s not running!” my father shouted to my mother, who was upstairs. She had refused even to listen to Johnson. That’s the kind of house I grew up in. “He’s not running!”

For antiwar liberals like my parents, who had marched in Washington the previous October in a giant demonstration organized by a group known as the Mobe (National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam), Johnson was a monster who had betrayed liberalism, and the knight who slayed him was Eugene McCarthy.

McCarthy was the senior senator from Minnesota, a liberal anti-Communist whose roots, like my parents’, were in New Deal politics. Unlike my parents, McCarthy had a spiritual side. As a young man, he had entered a monastery under the name Brother Conan but was kicked out for the sin of intellectual pride. McCarthy had always had a bit of *contemptus mundi*about him. Turning your back to the television set was the kind of gesture he would have understood.

In the beginning, McCarthy was a single-issue candidate. He was a dove. He ran against continued American military intervention in Vietnam. But he was also offended by the Administration’s insistence that its war powers were absolute, and by its increasingly transparent lies about the progress of the war. He had come to see the Administration as a danger to democracy. He was an enemy of what used to be called “the imperial Presidency.”

As unpopular as Johnson was in 1968 with Democrats like my parents, he was a man politicians thought twice about crossing. He had won the 1964 Presidential election, against Barry Goldwater, with the highest percentage of the popular vote in American history, and he knew how to squeeze his opponents. Even Democrats in Congress who knew that Johnson was driving the country off a cliff—and by the end of 1967, when four hundred and eighty-five thousand Americans were stationed in Vietnam, the folly of intervention had become plain—were loath to break with him publicly. But McCarthy did. In November, 1967, he announced that he was entering the Democratic Presidential primaries. He was running against a sitting President of his own party. Many people thought that he had committed hara-kiri—a noble act, possibly, but politically insane.

The New Hampshire primary, held on March 12, 1968, made those people think again. It wasn’t because McCarthy did especially well. Johnson’s name was not on the Democratic ballot, but he won easily as a write-in candidate, with forty-nine per cent of the Democratic vote. McCarthy got forty-two per cent, despite the fact that his name was the only name on the ballot, and even though he had five thousand New Hampshire students and two thousand out-of-state volunteers canvassing the state for him. McCarthy received about twenty-two thousand Democratic votes, roughly three votes for every campaign worker.

In national politics, twenty-two thousand was not an intimidating number of votes—twenty-two thousand people would not even fill half of Yankee Stadium—and New Hampshire was not a state that Democrats needed to carry. In the previous five Presidential elections, it had voted Republican four times. (The exception was the Johnson landslide in 1964.) The winner of the Republican primary, Richard Nixon, got eighty-four thousand votes, thirty thousand more than Johnson and McCarthy combined. But blood was in the water, and four days later, on March 16th, Robert F. Kennedy, the junior senator from New York, declared his candidacy.

If Kennedy hadn’t entered the race, Johnson could have fended off McCarthy. In 1968, the primaries played a minor role in the delegate-selection process. Thirty-six states did not even hold them. The parties controlled the process. The man who eventually won the Democratic nomination, Hubert Humphrey, Johnson’s Vice-President, did not enter a single primary.

Robert Kennedy is one of the great what-ifs of American political history. In 1968, he was just forty-two years old. He had the most glamorous name in politics; he wore the mantle of martyrdom; and he had transformed himself from a calculating infighter—he had managed his brother’s Presidential campaign, in 1960, and served as his Attorney General after the election—into a kind of existentialist messiah. At the 1964 Democratic National Convention, in Atlantic City, he had received a twenty-two-minute standing ovation just by appearing at the lectern.

There was a rawness in Kennedy’s face and voice that seemed to match the national mood. He was the personification of the country’s pain over its fallen leader. And he had the ability to reflect back whatever voters projected onto him. He seemed to combine youth with experience, intellect with heart, street sense with vision. He was a hero to Chicano grape pickers, to inner-city African-Americans, to union workers. He was a man of the times when the times they were a-changin’. Kennedy had haters. Having haters is part of the job of being a messiah. But he was salvific. He could rouse audiences to a frenzy and he could make hardened politicos weep. People thought that he could go to the Convention and steal the nomination from Johnson. People thought that he could beat Nixon.

Johnson was not salvific. “Waist deep in the Big Muddy, and the big fool says to push on,” I heard Pete Seeger sing in Washington in 1967. It’s a song about a platoon in the Second World War, but everyone knew who the big fool was. The line was electric. Pete was a sing-along performer, and the liberal audience (who else would be at a Pete Seeger concert?) roared it out.

It was as though they had forgotten that Johnson had pushed through two major pieces of civil-rights legislation: the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made discrimination by race or religion or sex illegal, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which guaranteed the franchise to African-Americans in the formerly segregated South. Those were the greatest legal advances in race relations since the Civil War amendments. But by 1968 Vietnam had eclipsed them.

Johnson had no experience in foreign policy. Much as Harry Truman had done, in 1947 and 1948, he allowed the generals and the policy hawks to convince him of a central fallacy of Cold War thinking: that America’s standing was at stake in every regime change around the world. He did not want to be the President who lost Southeast Asia to Communism.

By 1968, Johnson’s Great Society programs—legislation on education, health care, urban renewal, and transportation whose scope rivalled that of the New Deal—were dying because of the cost of the war, and he had imposed a ten-per-cent income surtax, a dependable way to become unpopular with just about everybody. Inflation, which had been low for most of the postwar era, had reached four per cent. (It went much higher: the country was on the brink of an economic retrenchment that took fifteen years to work through.)

The message of New Hampshire, therefore, was not that McCarthy was the answer to the nation’s troubles. It was that Johnson was the face of what many voters wanted to get away from. New Hampshire did not make McCarthy seem electable so much as it made Johnson seem beatable. That was the message that Kennedy had been waiting to hear, and he wasted little time jumping into the race. He was accused, rightly, of opportunism.

Although Johnson had served as John F. Kennedy’s Vice-President, there was no love lost between him and the Kennedys. He was not cut out for a part in Camelot. Colonel Cornpone, Jackie Kennedy used to call him. At the first Cabinet meeting after J.F.K. was assassinated, Robert arrived late, and everyone in the room rose as a sign of respect, except for Johnson. Five years later, Johnson was losing one war overseas; he could not engage on a second front at home. So, on March 31st, two weeks after Kennedy entered the race, Johnson made my father, briefly, a happy man.

After March 31st, the primaries became a mano a mano between Kennedy and McCarthy. As a campaigner, Kennedy was hot and McCarthy was cool, but McCarthy did not suffer from the contrast, at least among white liberals. He had established his own aura, the aura of the samurai: unswerving and ascetic.

On May 28th, he defeated Kennedy in the Oregon primary. It was the first time in twenty-seven consecutive races that any Kennedy had lost an election. On June 4th, Kennedy rebounded and won the big one, California. Minutes after declaring victory, he was shot in the Ambassador Hotel, in Los Angeles. He died on June 6th, along with the seeds of whatever future America he carried within him.

All the antiwar fury in the Democratic Party could now focus its hopes on McCarthy. I went with my family to see him on July 25th at an enormous rally at Fenway Park, in Boston. McCarthy’s wife, Abigail, who was closely involved in the campaign, defined McCarthy’s constituency as “academia united with the mobile society of scientists, educators, technologists and the new post-World-War II college class.” If that was your base in 1968, Fenway Park was the ideal place to address it.

Almost forty thousand people were jammed into a stadium whose official capacity is under thirty-eight thousand; five thousand more listened outside. McCarthy was introduced by Leonard Bernstein, a man practiced in podium histrionics. I can still hear him cuing McCarthy’s entrance—“Even now, entering from the center-field bleachers . . .” A door opened under the stands, and McCarthy walked across the field to a speaker’s platform at second base.

McCarthy had adopted the rhetoric of revolution. It was to be a revolution of reason and common sense, of course; McCarthy was a Midwesterner and a Catholic. He loathed the yippies and the student radicals; his student volunteers were encouraged to go “clean for Gene.” But the language of revolution was what you used to mobilize antiwar liberals in 1968. So McCarthy spoke at Fenway about the “power of the people” and called his campaign “a kind of uprising.”

McCarthy had a wry and slightly professorial tone. “Almost everything that the Church tried to give up at the Vatican Council has been picked up by the Defense Department,” he said at one point. I don’t think that line would have meant much in Cleveland, but it received knowing chortles and applause in Boston.

He got his loudest and most sustained reaction when he mentioned the Convention, then one month away, in Chicago. “Any visit to Chicago is always beset with some uncertainties, some dangers,” he said (applause indicating that understatement was always appreciated), “but I think that we shall succeed there.” He said it in the most nonchalant tone of voice imaginable, but the cheers went on and on.

Those were the cheers of desperation, tribute to a valiant effort doomed to come up short. Everyone at Fenway knew that McCarthy did not have the delegates. He would have to inspire a stampede at the Convention to rip the nomination from Humphrey, who stood to inherit Johnson’s delegates. In the minds of everyone who was old enough, there probably flickered the memory of a speech that McCarthy had delivered at the 1960 Democratic Convention, putting Adlai Stevenson’s name in nomination. “Do not leave this prophet without honor in his own party,” McCarthy had said, setting off a floor demonstration that threatened to steal the Convention from J.F.K. But lightning was not likely to strike twice, and in 1960 Kennedy won on the first ballot, anyway.

We watched every minute of the 1968 Convention in our basement, and there were some very late nights. What everyone remembers are the attacks by police and National Guardsmen on demonstrators in the streets outside. In fact, the networks did not devote much time to covering those. Out of thirty-eight hours of Convention coverage, CBS devoted thirty-two minutes to the demonstrators. NBC devoted fourteen minutes out of nineteen hours of coverage.

But the scene inside the hall—the Chicago Amphitheatre, on the South Side, near the stockyards—was tumultuous enough. The CBS reporters Dan Rather and Mike Wallace were roughed up by security personnel. After a vote on an antiwar platform plank failed, members of the New York delegation joined arms and sang “We Shall Overcome.” When Senator Abraham Ribicoff, of Connecticut, was giving a speech, the mayor of Chicago, Richard Daley, shouted at him, “Fuck you, you Jew son of a bitch, you lousy motherfucker, go home.”

The antiwar delegates lost every battle. A last-minute attempt to draft Edward Kennedy was aborted, and Humphrey won the nomination on the first ballot, with some seventeen hundred delegates, eight hundred and forty-seven more than the rest of the field.

The Convention left the Party fractured. McCarthy refused to endorse Humphrey, who began the fall campaign far behind in the polls. “Right now, you’re dead,” his campaign manager, Lawrence O’Brien, told him. He did come back, and nearly made up the difference. At the end of September, he at last broke with Johnson and announced that he would halt the bombing. At the end of October, McCarthy finally endorsed Humphrey. It was not quite enough. On November 5th, something happened that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier: Richard Nixon was elected President.

Americans tend to overread Presidential elections. It’s not that the results aren’t consequential. It matters which party, and which person in which party, is in the White House. The mistake is to interpret the election as an index of public opinion (itself something of a Platonic abstraction).

In close elections, such as those of 1960, 1968, and 1976, the vote is essentially the equivalent of flipping a coin. If the voting had happened a week earlier or a week later or on a rainy day, the outcome might have been reversed. But we interpret the result as though it reflected the national intention, a collective decision by the people to rally behind R., and repudiate D. Even when the winner receives fewer votes than the loser, as in 2000 and 2016, we talk about the national mood and direction almost entirely in terms of the winning candidate, and as though the person more voters preferred had vanished, his or her positions barely worth reporting on.

Millions more Americans voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and in 2012 and for Hillary Clinton in 2016 than voted for Donald Trump, but the Trump voter is now the protagonist of the national narrative. People talk about how Americans want to roll back globalization—even though most Americans who voted appear to want no such thing. The United States is one of the few democracies that does not have a coalition government, and a winner-take-all electoral system breeds a winner-take-all punditry.

The winner-take-all interpretation of the 1968 election was that, with the defeat of Hubert Humphrey, the nation repudiated liberalism. The election supposedly marked the demise of an ideological consensus that had dominated national politics since Franklin Roosevelt’s election in 1932 and that made politically possible the use of government programs to remedy the inequities of free-market capitalism.

But did Humphrey lose because he was a liberal, or because he ran a tone-deaf campaign? “Here we are, the way politics ought to be in America, the politics of happiness, the politics of purpose, and the politics of joy,” he chirped in the speech in which he announced his candidacy. The date was April 27, 1968. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been assassinated three weeks before. It was a bizarre moment to introduce a phrase like “the politics of joy.” And although Johnson had just been forced to withdraw from the race by two candidates who opposed his Vietnam policy, Humphrey did not mention Vietnam in the speech.

Even after he had the nomination in hand, he seemed reluctant to dissociate himself from a policy with which the electorate had clearly lost patience. Yet the popular vote was surprisingly close. The margin was eight hundred thousand votes, seven-tenths of one per cent of the total. Some of the Democratic base did not turn out, and some Democrats—my mother was one—voted but did not check a box for President (another symbolic protest performed for a local audience). Humphrey got twelve million fewer votes than Johnson did in 1964, and he still nearly won a plurality. It’s hard to believe that twelve million people consciously embraced liberalism in 1964 and consciously rejected it four years later.

O’Donnell argues that the lesson of 1968 is that “the peace movement won.” And although his McCarthy is not an entirely sympathetic figure—he relies considerably on Dominic Sandbrook’s 2004 biography, in which McCarthy comes off as sour and aloof—he is the hero of O’Donnell’s story. “The last word about Gene McCarthy,” he says, “should always be that no one did more to stop the killing in Vietnam than Senator Eugene McCarthy.”

This seems a stretch for any number of reasons, the most obvious being that McCarthy lost, and that the war continued for seven more years. Nixon didn’t want to be the President who lost Southeast Asia to Communism any more than Johnson did, and he had no idea how to end the war, either. More than a third of all the Americans killed in Vietnam were killed during his Presidency.

It wasn’t as though Nixon was winding things down. In 1970, he extended the war into Cambodia. In the last of the major campus disruptions, protesting students were killed at Kent State, in Ohio, and at Jackson State College, in Mississippi. In 1972, after running again on a promise to end the war, Nixon ordered the so-called Christmas bombing of North Vietnam: in the course of twelve days, some seven hundred and forty sorties by B-52s dropped twenty thousand tons of bombs. Sixteen hundred Vietnamese were estimated to have been killed.

The purpose of the Christmas bombing was to pressure North Vietnam to negotiate an end to the fighting, which finally happened in 1973. But, in 1975, the North Vietnamese marched into Saigon and united the country under Communist rule, exactly the outcome that France and the United States had been fighting to prevent for thirty years. By then, Nixon had resigned and Gerald Ford was President. When O’Donnell writes that “the peace movement drove U.S. forces out of Vietnam, not the North Vietnamese Army,” he is making the same mistake that every Administration made: imagining that it was decisions taken by Americans that determined the fate of Vietnam.

O’Donnell thinks that the nomination of Nixon marked the end of liberalism, at least in the Republican Party. That’s quite right: a certain type of Republican politician, the type represented by Nelson Rockefeller (the governor of New York, who ran a poorly mounted and hopelessly belated campaign against Nixon), George Romney (the governor of Michigan, who knocked himself out of the Republican primaries early by telling a reporter that he had been “brainwashed” about Vietnam), and John Lindsay (the mayor of New York, who some foolishly hoped might be Nixon’s Vice-Presidential pick), largely disappeared from the Party after 1968. But that leaves a question: Why didn’t their supporters become Democrats? This is where the diagnosis becomes complicated.

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People who write and argue about politics are ideologues. They hold a coherent set of positions that they identify as liberal or conservative (or some variant, like libertarian or leftist). But, to millions of voters, those terms mean almost nothing. These voters do not think in ideological terms, and their positions on the issues are often inconsistent and lacking in coherence. Given the option, they will sometimes identify as moderates or centrists, but this tells us very little about how they will vote.

The fact that voters are often responding to nonideological cues helps to explain the apparent volatility of the electorate from race to race. In 1964, for example, running against Goldwater, a conservative from Arizona, Johnson carried the neighboring state of California with fifty-nine per cent of the vote. Two years later, running as a conservative who had prominently backed Goldwater in 1964, Ronald Reagan was elected governor of California with almost fifty-eight per cent of the vote. In the 1968 Presidential election, forty per cent of the people who had voted for Johnson in 1964 voted for Nixon, even though Nixon’s opponent was Johnson’s own Vice-President. What cues were these voters responding to?

After Nixon’s victory, two books, both of which became enormously influential, proposed explanations. According to “[The Real Majority](https://www.amazon.com/Real-Majority-Examination-American-Electorate/dp/1556112971/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ots=1&tag=thneyo0f-20&s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1513963151&sr=1-1&keywords=The+Real+Majority),” by Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg, the 1968 election proved that, particularly in a time of extremes like the late nineteen-sixties, centrism was the winning position. Nixon got to the center, while Humphrey and the Democrats remained associated with the extremes.

Centrism requires a delicate balancing act, which Nixon, a man with many innate liabilities as a politician, turned out to be extremely good at. He opposed the Johnson-Humphrey Administration’s policy on the war, but had no policy of his own. (Nixon never made the claim, often attributed to him, that he had a “secret plan to end the war.” That phrase was invented by a reporter.) As long as the war was going badly, people who favored withdrawal and people who favored escalation both found in Nixon a congenial alternative.

At the same time, Nixon figured out a position to run on. He became the candidate of “law and order.” Goldwater had used that expression in 1964, and so had Reagan in 1966. It was a brilliant political slogan, a whistle heard by many dogs. It transposed political issues like civil rights and Vietnam into what appeared to be a straightforward legal position: crime is wrong and criminals should be punished.

To liberals who believed in the righteousness of the civil-rights demonstrations and the antiwar protests, the disruption and violence that accompanied them was caused by the overreaction of the authorities. For most voters, though, the disruption and violence were the fault of the demonstrators. Most people don’t like righteousness in others. They can be quite righteous about it.

For these voters, it was not a contradiction to profess support for racial equality and to condemn the marchers in Birmingham and Selma, or to be against the war in Vietnam and to believe that people like Tom Hayden and Abbie Hoffman should be locked up. In polls taken in 1968, only three per cent of voters who objected to Johnson’s policy in Vietnam were also sympathetic to antiwar protesters. My parents were part of the three per cent.

Politically, the most important event in the United States in 1968 was, therefore, the assassination, on April 4th, of Martin Luther King. Riots broke out in more than a hundred cities. Thirty-nine people died and twenty thousand were arrested. More than fifty thousand troops were deployed. Washington, D.C., became a war zone. In Newark, New Jersey, there were nearly two hundred fires. Large numbers of white Americans did not interpret this disorder in terms of social justice. They interpreted it as a breakdown of civil society. The rioters were not black or white; they were arsonists and looters (who happened to be black). Nixon showed that political advantage came from steering clear of the underlying issues. He gave people respectable reasons to vote for a candidate they favored for what they might have worried were not such respectable reasons.

The second influential post-1968 book was Kevin Phillips’s “[The Emerging Republican Majority](https://www.amazon.com/Emerging-Republican-Majority-American-Politics/dp/0691163243/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ots=1&tag=thneyo0f-20&s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1513963175&sr=1-1&keywords=The+Emerging+Republican+Majority),” published in 1969. This is the book that popularized what became known as the Southern Strategy. Like Scammon and Wattenberg, Phillips saw that millions of voters were repelled by what they regarded as extremism, but he gave a name to what he thought was the key issue. He called it “the Negro problem.”

The big news electorally in 1964 was that a Republican carried five Southern states: Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, and South Carolina. It was the first time those states had not gone Democratic since Reconstruction, and the reason was not obscure. The voting was white backlash against the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which Senator Goldwater had voted against. Goldwater was not a segregationist; he was a states’-rights conservative. But he flipped the South to the Republican Party.

The key to exploiting this shift in party alignment, as Nixon understood, was not to oppose the civil-rights movement but to force the Democratic Party to take ownership of it. The Kennedys had seen the perils in that, and they had been extremely careful about not appearing to be too close to King. But Johnson effectively put his personal brand on the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, and the Party thus had to take on the baggage of the urban rioting and the militancy of groups like the Black Panthers. Republicans didn’t have to say a word against integration. All they had to do was talk about law and order.

Still, Nixon didn’t carry the Deep South in the general election. George Wallace did. And Wallace didn’t use a dog whistle. Wallace was the dog. He was elected governor of Alabama in 1962, a time when the official logo of the Alabama Democratic Party was a rooster with a banner above it reading “White Supremacy.” The next summer, he achieved national recognition when he resisted the attempt to enroll the first black students at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa—the “Stand in the Schoolhouse Door.” (The confrontation was staged, to allow Wallace to make his point in exchange for letting the students enroll. Those students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, were quietly admitted through another door.)

A year later, Wallace ran in the Democratic primaries, and surprised many people by winning a third of the vote in Wisconsin and more than forty per cent in Maryland. In 1968, he ran as an independent, hoping to win enough electoral votes to deny any candidate a majority, giving himself leverage in choosing the next President.

Wallace came to Massachusetts several times in the summer of 1968 on drives for signatures to get on the ballot. I heard him on one of those trips. The crowd was small and mostly hostile. What amazed me was that Wallace gave the stump speech he delivered everywhere, which consisted almost entirely of taunts, insults, and threats. He did not reason with his opponents.

He called professors and Washington bureaucrats “sissy britches” and mocked “the bearded professor who thinks he knows how to settle the Vietnam War when he hasn’t got enough sense to park a bicycle straight.” As President, he said, he would seek indictments for “any college professor who talks about hoping the Vietcong win the war.” He liked to invite hecklers to come up to the stage after his speech. “I’ll autograph your sandals,” he’d say. He told reporters, “I’d let the police run this country for a couple of years. I’m not talking about a police state, but sometimes it takes a police state to run some people.” Voters did not need to be told who “some people” were.

Wallace won just three per cent of the vote in Massachusetts, but his act played well across much of the country, where he spoke to boisterously enthusiastic audiences. After a rally at Madison Square Garden, supporters marched out chanting “White supremacy!” People told reporters that they admired him because “he says what he thinks.”

Late in the race, one of the reporters who covered Wallace, Douglas Kiker, tried to explain the phenomenon. “It is as if somewhere, sometime a while back, George Wallace had been awakened by a white, blinding vision: they all hate black people, all of them,” Kiker wrote in *New York*. “They’re all afraid, all of them. Great God! That’s it! They’re all Southern! The whole United States is Southern! Anyone who travels with Wallace these days on his Presidential campaign finds it hard to resist arriving at the same conclusion.”

Wallace’s big mistake, late in the campaign, was to name as his running mate a former general, Curtis LeMay, who advocated the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam. LeMay terrified everyone, and Wallace ended up with thirteen per cent of the vote. He was also hurt, as Humphrey was hurt, by being seen constantly on television surrounded by angry protesters. Those were the scenes people were voting to get away from. But Wallace carried the Southern states that Goldwater had won in 1964, and, as everyone now recognizes, he offered a taste of demagoguery to come.

Objects in the rearview mirror often really are closer than they appear. It’s not that far from Wallace to Trump. The focus on Presidential elections makes it hard to see that from one election to the next pretty much the same people are voting, and most people do not change much over time. The Presidency is a beach ball bouncing along the surface, the winner an artifact of the circumstance that there are usually only two candidates to choose between. “Public opinion,” or the forces that move it, runs below the surface, and has a much slower tempo.

In “[Deeply Divided](https://www.amazon.com/Deeply-Divided-Politics-Movements-Post-War/dp/1511383984/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ots=1&tag=thneyo0f-20&s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1513963335&sr=1-1&keywords=Deeply+Divided),” a 2014 study, the political scientists Doug McAdam and Karina Kloos argue that since 1960 our politics has been driven by two movements: the civil-rights movement and what they call a “countermovement,” which could be broadly described as anti-integrationist. It includes racists, but it also includes many white Americans who acknowledge the principle of racial equality but resist involuntary race-mixing, people who accept and even defend de facto segregation. “The collapse of the postwar consensus,” McAdam and Kloos maintain, was not because of Vietnam; it “had everything to do with race.”

White voters abandoned the Democratic Party. In 1968, Humphrey got thirty-eight per cent of the white vote. In 1972, George McGovern got thirty-two per cent. In 1980, Jimmy Carter, a white Southerner, got thirty-six per cent. In 2016, Hillary Clinton, running against the toxic nitwit who is now the face of our politics, received thirty-seven per cent.

One thing that surprised analysts about Wallace voters was how young they were. To most observers during the campaign, it looked as though Wallace was appealing to older voters who were uncomfortable with social change or were unwilling to abandon old prejudices. These observers assumed that the United States would age out of those attitudes as the new day of tolerance and equality brightened. I’m sure we white Massachusetts liberals believed something like that. We thought that racial injustice and American exceptionalism were on history’s dust heap, only given a last breath by the election of Nixon in a crazy and fluky election year. We thought the gains of mid-century liberalism were lasting.

We were suffering under two delusions. The first was that ending de jure discrimination meant ending discrimination. We know better now about that. The other delusion, though, persists. This is the stereotype of sixties youth as progressive and permissive. There were such young people, of course, and they got a lot of press. But most young people in the nineteen sixties did not march for civil rights or protest the war in Vietnam. They had no sandals to autograph. Like young people in any era, most of them were like their parents.