

**History 211 History of US Elections**  
**Discussion Transcript for November 12, 2020**  
**Election of 1968**

**Main Readings: O'Mara (chapter 6)**

The 1968 election was dramatic, tragic and pivotal, but one of the main underlying points critical to our class was to perceive how the political parties were shifting in their targeting efforts. Many of the foundations of our current polarized and paralyzed political environment were born around 1968. Many of our current leaders came of age at this moment as well. The intensity of that period shaped their worldview in profound ways. The comments below address several of those elements. However, perhaps the funniest line of the semester came from a reflection this week that went in a slightly different direction. One of your classmates wrote simply in a footnote at the end of the reflection: "I would like to state for the record that while I do not identify much with the conservative youth groups of 1968, I do like to watch Lawrence Welk."

**OVERVIEW**

STUDENT COMMENT: "The Election of 1968 focused on the power of television and the Vietnam War's influence over choosing a President. Within *Pivotal Tuesdays* by Margaret O'Mara, she described the shifting of the Republican parties to a more rightward approach to policies and the rebirth of Richard Nixon. Nixon, the unlikely nominee, managed to gain the approval of voters, despite his previous losses, by using advertisement and media to his advantage. The Democratic party remained divided after the civil rights era and the varying opinions regarding the Vietnam war. In terms of a candidate, the party stayed fractured on who to nominate but landed on Hubert Humphrey. After Lyndon Johnson dropped out of the race, Humphrey and Eugene McCarthy battled for the broken Democratic party nomination. George Wallace ran against Humphrey and Nixon, fighting for segregationist and racist rights regarding the third party. The fight to the oval office was between Wallace and Nixon, who both used paid and free media to move up in the polls. This election changed the influence of civil rights and big party politics on the future of America."

STUDENT COMMENT: "Richard Nixon's unlikely rise to the presidency in 1968 came about from his ability to splinter the New Deal coalition and form a "silent majority" unified against cultural elites. The New Deal coalition was united against economic elites who prospered while most Americans suffered through the Great Depression. The coalition displaced the Republican Party as the strongest party and got Democrats elected at all levels of power. By the time of the 1968 election, 48% of Americans were Democrats and just 27% were Republicans (O'Mara, 111). The Democratic Party's white working class base was already beginning to splinter by the time of the election, primarily due to disagreement over civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965. A young Republican campaign worker named Kevin Phillips recognized the cleavage in the party, not just due to civil rights but due to greater social upheaval. In a memo titled, "Middle America and the Emerging Republican Majority," he outlined the potential for a Republican coalition against cultural elites (124). "War, youth in revolt, and ghettos on fire all seemed symptoms of the same national illness" - cultural malaise (111). Those

who had grown up with the New Deal were now adults and many of their children were now growing their hair long, doing drugs, and protesting. Still a very substantial, though much quieter, group of Americans “went to Church, not to antiwar demonstrations”(124). Nixon’s message of law and order resonated with the “silent center” who elected him president in 1968. Unlike Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Nixon was not able to form a coherent and lasting coalition. There were major consequences to his election, however, as he fractured the New Deal coalition, leaving Democrats weak, and made cultural issues a central theme for the Republican Party.”

### **DEMOCRATIC IMPLOSION**

STUDENT COMMENT: “By the end of 1968, the Democratic party was imploding. With an outgoing president supporting an extremely unpopular war, a new faction of the Democrats began vying for control: the more liberal wing of anti-war democrats. Fueled by an anger over Vietnam, the death of MLK, and the death of one of their truer representatives RFK, they clashed with police outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that year. Right outside of the convention center, fellow Democrats were being beat down by police forces for peacefully protesting. After the assassination of Bobby Kennedy a few months earlier, there was no candidate that invigorated the Left wing of the party, and as a result Hubert Humphrey was nominated. Without a sense of support from his own party, and his nomination being associated with the violence outside the convention, the Democrats seemed doomed.”

STUDENT COMMENT: “At the Democratic National Convention, Humphrey had won the nomination as previously stated but outside the convention had many protests against pro-war candidates. Anti-war groups rallied outside demanding justice and the decline of drafting. These groups petitioned for permits to march about 5 miles from the convention site and camp in Lincoln Park. However, the city declined all of these permits except for one afternoon rally, but their decline did not stop them from entering these spaces. The city also issued a curfew at 11 pm, and when the protesters disobeyed and rebelled, the police planned to use violence to clear the crowds. The Grant Park rally held 15,000 protesters, and the protesters decided to march to the convention center and hotels where the candidates stayed. The police used tear gas, batons, and physical violence to prevent them from moving closer. While being beaten, the prominent members of these groups started chants and protests, shouting, “The Whole World is Watching.” The world was watching, and the networks showed these riots and police violence instead of the Presidential candidate’s speeches. These attacks annoyed Humphrey, and he demanded justice after receiving his nomination. The riots continued for five days with more tear gas, arrests, mace, and batons thrown at them. After these horrific police attacks, seven defendants were charged by the government with conspiracy and creating violence. The defendants included: Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, David Dellinger, Tom Hayden, Rennie Davis, John Froines, and Lee Weiner. The movie, *The Trial of the Chicago Seven*, displayed the jarring trial and the corruption in the U.S federal courts. These men did not deserve to be arrested for expressing their freedom of speech, but by the government not providing permits, the government could make criminals out of protesters. The movie showed the abundance of power the police have, and police should not have tear gas and beat individuals to

death to stop their right to protest. After Humphrey's speech regarding the riots, the Democratic party could not repair the destruction the violence caused and the division in the country it created."

### **NEW NIXON**

STUDENT COMMENT: "The Southern Strategy employed by the Republicans for the 1968 election proved to be successful and would change how the south would vote in future elections. On top of this push to woo southern voters to the Republican side, Nixon's reinvention of his national image also gave him a huge advantage inside of the party itself. After serving as Eisenhower's Vice President and failing to beat Kennedy in the 1960 election, as well as losing in the 1962 California gubernatorial race, many Republican party officials saw Nixon as a qualified candidate, but also a loser. However, Nixon would go on to support and help campaign for many Republicans in the congressional and gubernatorial races of 1966. Nixon was also able to utilize TV in a much better way than he did in the 1960 presidential election. In the 1960 election, TV was Nixon's kryptonite. In 1968, TV helped Nixon win. Utilizing the "Mad Men" of Madison Avenue, he was able to revitalize his image on TV. While Nixon did not appear in these ads, they utilized his voice to narrate his messages accompanied by still shots of Vietnam, protestors, and violence in America. This spoke to the "silent majority," the Republicans who were not out in the street, but stayed at their homes, lived with their families, and paid their taxes. These tactics would pay dividends for Nixon as he would walk away with the presidency in 1968 and solidify the red-state vs blue-state rivalries for the next coming elections."

STUDENT COMMENT: "Richard Nixon's use of Laugh-In as a tool to improve his public image and the medium of television as a whole set a new precedent for what it meant to be a candidate for president. The presidency was always seen as dignified and above directly appealing to voters on popular shows which provided a cultural barrier to candidates appearing. Up until the mid 1970s, there was another restriction to candidates or presidents appearing on tv programs: the FCC's equal time requirements. Nixon managed to use a brief appearance to help affect the public's perception of him as a person through non-political means. This strategy allowed for candidates to "manufacture" charisma and charm in a way that was simply not possible before. Previously, to be charismatic and charming, the candidate could only use speeches and advertisements. However, with Nixon's appearance on a popular comedy show, this was completely turned on its head. The fact that he succeeded in changing his public perception directly inspired future candidates with image problems to turn to unconventional means to appeal to the public. The main example of this would be the hosting of SNL in 1976 by Gerald Ford's Press Secretary Ron Nessen. Nessen went on the show to attempt to laugh along with the show's ruthless jokes and portrayal of President Ford and make him seem more likeable. Nowadays, candidates and presidents regularly appear on popular comedy shows as a way to reach a wider audience and seem more likeable. None of this would have been possible without Nixon's early adoption and success with the method."