

The 1972 Election

Don't Blame Me, I Voted for McGovern.
1974 bumper sticker in cars with Massachusetts license plates

I became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1969, so I was unable to vote in the first two presidential elections (1964 and 1968) held after my arrival in America in 1963. I was eager to vote in 1972 and followed closely the campaign that preceded it, as well as the election and its aftermath. It was to be my first exposure to the peculiar electoral process that is innate in American politics.

I was not a registered member of any party and was not sure at first where my preferences for the upcoming 1972 election lay. Coming from Communist Cuba, anything that smelled of Socialism was suspect; on the other hand, the last Cuban president prior to Castro's seizing power was a brutal right-wing dictator, Fulgencio Batista, who had ruled the island as a corrupt mafia boss. Because of him, I despised autocrats. Any candidate that veered towards either extreme was not likely to get my vote.

I had moved to Orlando, Florida in the spring of 1972 to take an engineering position with an aerospace company. I was very busy the first couple of months after my move, becoming familiar with my job, exploring the city of Orlando and the surrounding areas, and visiting on weekends with my family in Miami.

One of the first things I did once my routine in Orlando became settled was to locate a Toastmasters International Club chapter in the city. I had been a Toastmasters member in Columbus, Ohio before my move to Orlando and had enjoyed the opportunity to practice and improve my public speaking skills. I was already thinking of going to law school and making oral presentations might become an important aspect of a future career as a lawyer.

The Toastmasters Club chapter I selected had its meetings in the Orlando downtown area, and was one of the oldest clubs in the country; it enjoyed a well-deserved reputation for the excellence of its programs. I felt unequal to the club's more experienced debaters, but appreciated the learning opportunity offered by being in their company.

On my second or third Toastmasters' meeting, the Vice-President – Education (VPE) who ran the club's programs made an announcement: in light of the upcoming general election, there would be a special meeting three weeks hence featuring a debate between a member speaking on behalf of the Republican presidential candidate (the incumbent President, Richard Nixon) and another representing the Democratic challenger (not yet selected, but virtually certain to be Senator George McGovern of South Dakota). Members wishing to participate in the debate were to submit their names to the VPE; he would select at random one participant for each side.

Orlando was a conservative southern town where Nixon was very popular (as he was throughout Florida) and at the next meeting the VPE announced that he had received 19 requests to speak on Nixon's behalf; however, he got none to represent McGovern. He announced the winner for the Nixon side and then asked: "Are there any volunteers to argue in favor of Mr. McGovern?" There was a stony silence, and then I surprised myself by raising my hand: "I'll do it."

I was glad I had three weeks to prepare, because I had not been fully aware of the Democratic platform advocated by McGovern. As I researched, I learned that McGovern was espousing a liberal agenda that included immediate withdrawal from Vietnam, amnesty for war resisters, abolition of the draft, jobs for all Americans, and a guaranteed family income well above the poverty line. Other controversial proposals, including legalization of abortion and promotion of gay rights, had also been considered but dropped from the platform. I realized this was too extreme a set of positions to advocate successfully at the debate, and resolved to limit myself to arguing for a negotiated exit from Vietnam and increased job opportunities for all Americans. My opponent's task was much simpler: he proposed four more years of a strong economy, success in foreign affairs exemplified by the recent opening with China, and law and order at home.

In the process of preparing my presentation I had become more sympathetic to the social aspirations of the Democrats, though in my heart I supported continuation of the Vietnam war until total victory was achieved. On the other hand, I was turned off by the glib rhetoric and heavy-handed conservatism of Nixon and his spokespeople. At the end, I became a sincere if limited proponent for the Democratic side, and went on to present a case on McGovern's behalf. When the debate was over, the polite but light applause I received made it clear that I had failed to persuade the listeners.

Shortly after the debate at the Toastmasters club, real life lined up with the audience's reaction to my arguments. McGovern's campaign, shaky from the start, disintegrated upon the revelation that his running mate, Senator Thomas Eagleton, had undergone psychiatric electroshock therapy for depression and had concealed this information from everyone.

McGovern's run for the president was doomed and the election yielded a landslide victory for Nixon.

There was a collective gnashing of teeth among Democrats after McGovern's debacle, and I sympathized with them. Things looked dire for the party and Nixon coasted on a wave of post-election popularity. Yet, his triumph lasted only until, months later, it was discovered that five men, acting on Republican orders, had broken into the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate hotel in Washington, D. C. The resulting investigation led to what became known as the "Watergate scandal," which prompted the decline in President Nixon's political support and led to his resignation in August 1974.

After the 1972 election I continued my evolution towards becoming a bona fide Democrat, but always remained skeptical of the duration of political triumphs or defeats. I decided I would never enter politics and would take with a grain of salt the declarations and forecasts that politicians of every stripe are always fond of making.

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