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1968: Presidential Election, 1968 - III

Introduction: *A Moment in Time, 1968*: A special series on the 40th anniversary of a year of upheaval, in a world seemingly out of control.

Content: In 1968, Republican electoral hopes seemed about to be realized in the triumph of Richard Nixon, but the contest almost did not work out that way in large part because of the campaign of George Corley Wallace, Jr. Elected Governor of Alabama in 1962 on the promise of “segregation now—segregation tomorrow—segregation forever,” Wallace entered the 1968 campaign as the candidate of the American

Independent Party. He hoped to force the election into the House of Representatives and become a power broker, seeking a reversal of civil rights enforcement.

Nixon, who was impressed with Barry Goldwater's harvest of southern electoral votes in 1964, feared that Wallace would erase the GOP's gains in the South and deny Nixon's election. As it turned out, both Nixon and Humphrey were hurt by Wallace's candidacy, but, on margin, Wallace probably hurt Humphrey more.

The South was beginning that migration into Republican ranks that would transform American politics in

the next generation. From that perspective, the 1968 realignment election was an event that was probably irreversible for the Democrats. Their commitment to civil rights was losing them their most loyal sectional base in the South, but it was elsewhere that the election that year was ultimately decided and that is where Wallace hurt Humphrey.

Nixon won 301 electoral votes, Humphrey 191, Wallace 46. The popular vote was much closer with the two leading candidates separated by only seven tenths of a percent or about 500,000 votes. The election was decided in three states, the results of which came in late. California, Illinois, and Ohio all went for Nixon

by 3% or less. Since outside the south Wallace's appeal was to working class Democrats, if Humphrey had received 2/3 of those votes he would have carried all three states.

He had fired up his campaign in the closing weeks, began to tilt away from support for the war and was fast closing on Nixon. According to the polls, faced with the prospect of a Nixon presidency, Democrats were returning to the fold in droves. With several more days Humphrey just might have won the election. His victory probably would not have spared the Democratic Party the decline in its regional and ultimately national fortunes over the next four decades, but would have spared the

nation the dark night of Watergate and the extended period of death and destruction after 1968 in Vietnam that politicians of all stripes had concluded was a lost cause.

**At the University of Richmond,
this is Dan Roberts.**

Resources

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