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Historical Hindsight and the Media in Critical Elections

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT – 2

INTRODUCTION – 2

EDITORIALS – 8

CRITICAL ELECTIONS – 10

DIVISIVE CAMPAIGNS – 14

1964 ELECTION: JOHNSON V GOLDWATER – 18

1980 ELECTION: REAGAN V CARTER – 23

EDITORIAL ANALYSIS – 26

 JOHNSON – 26

 NEW YORK TIMES – 27

 CHICAGO TRIBUNE – 31

 LA TIMES – 34

 REAGAN – 37

 NEW YORK TIMES – 37

 CHICAGO TRIBUNE – 41

 LA TIMES – 44

FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS – 47

BIBLIOGRAPHY – 50

Abstract

This thesis will aim to investigate the topics of critical elections and why we view them as such. It aims to closely examine two key elections, the 1964 election won by a Democrat, and the 1980 election won by a Republican, researching both the historical context of these elections that may have led them to become critical, and whether the way in which the elections were covered may provide any insight. To do this the editorial section of three newspapers, The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, and LA Times, will be examined to see if rhetoric varied at all between different sources about the election. The political editorials leading up to the elections will be analyzed, and through doing this it is seeking to learn whether the people of the time knew the potential impact of these elections or not. Some of the goals of this thesis are to investigate whether we can readily predict the historical impact of an event in the moment and seeks to find some information on why media assigns so much extreme rhetoric to elections. The expected result is to see that the newspaper editorials examined have some sort of indication that the upcoming election will be a critical one. After examining the editorials, it seems that the newspaper coverage of the campaigns does have some aspects in common. Namely, there is a large focus on foreign policy as well as a general air of political dissatisfaction throughout the editorials. It does seem that there are some indicators and consistencies when it comes to seeing if an election is critical in the moment, but to gain an even better understanding, examining the editorials of more elections may be necessary.

Introduction

A leading theory in the interpretation of American presidential elections and what they mean for American politics is the critical election theory. This theory states that some elections signify a political realignment and therefore are known as critical, however others are

less important and just show a continuation of the status quo. The amount of elections, when, and how they have been called critical over the years has varied, but in general there are a few that are widely accepted as critical that offer a good basis for how to classify other elections as critical or not critical. The two that seem to have the most consensus for being important critical points in election history are the 1896 election of McKinley, and the 1932 election of Roosevelt. The commonalities of these elections show us what a critical, or realigning, election really is¹. V. O. Key Jr., the first author to really try to explain the idea of critical elections, puts it all together rather succinctly. First, the voters must be seen to be unusually deeply concerned, a category that Key concedes is less empirical than his others. Second, electoral involvement must be relatively high, a metric that can be shown through the voter turnout percentages when compared to other elections before and after it. Third, and finally, the results of the election should show a difference between the divisions in the electorate from previous elections, and this trend should continue to be represented in following elections¹. In these ways the prior mentioned elections readily fit into that pattern. McKinley's 1896 election was a shift to republican ideals and the electorate reflected that for a while afterwards. The 1932 election showed a shift back to democratic presidents with Franklin D Roosevelt and the start of the New Deal era of policy. Based off Key's analysis of Critical Elections we can say whether the selected presidential elections of 1964 and 1980 are critical or not.

The 1964 election followed on the heels of the Kennedy assassination. Johnson was running on the democratic ticket opposite Barry Goldwater. The election was able to meet the first qualification, people were concerned about the way the country would move forward after the death of JFK, and growing involvement in the Vietnamese war and issues related to these

¹ V.O. Key jr., "A Theory of Critical Elections," *Journal of Politics* 17 (1955)

two. The second qualification can be seen in the voter turnouts in the following elections. In 1968, the turnout was down 1 percentage point, and in 1972 it was down by an entire 5.7 percentage points further². The third qualification is shown by the transition of conservative voters to the republican party that is helped to be cemented by this election, as well as the growth of republican voters in the south that can be seen to this day. This strongly shows a change in party alignment.

The 1980 election also shows all these requirements. The first requirement is shown in the rising conservative movement that was present in the country at the time and the general unpopularity of the incumbent Jimmy Carter at the time. The growing Reagan coalition heralded in the growing conservative culture of the United States. The second requirement can be seen in the higher voter turnout in the Reagan elections than in the following election of George HW Bush². The third requirement can be seen in the continuation of conservative culture and the fact that four of the six presidents since this election have been conservative, showing the ongoing American shift to the right.

The book *Electoral Realignments: A Critique of An American Genre* (2002) by David R. Mayhew³ can help summarize the current state of discourse on the elections. In his book, Mayhew seeks to establish more of an open and nuanced dialogue about the critical elections than what he had seen literature claim previously. Mayhew takes issue with the way many who write about this genre of elections seemingly inflate elections for non-empirical reasons to an exalted status among elections, and creating a dichotomy that causes many other elections to be seen as non-critical, even when the most “noncritical” election could have resulted in important

² “Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections” The American Presidency Project

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/voter-turnout-in-presidential-elections>

³ David Mayhew, “Electoral Realignments: A Critique of An American Genre” (Yale University Press, 2002)

policy changes or moments in American history that were either not able to have been predicted by a critical election, or inconsequential of the election. Whereas David Mayhew takes a critical approach to the ideas that other authors have on critical elections, James L. Sundquist represents the more mainstream view of the argument for critical election theory in his book *Dynamics of the Party System: Alignments and Realignment of Political Parties*.⁴ Sundquist is also somewhat critical of the way he sees contemporary media referring to critical elections, he maintains that the most important factor in determining if an election is critical in reality is whether or not any change in demographics or party-base in the electorate last, or are merely an effect of the election itself. If they do not last then these elections are merely deviating, and not actually critical. Sundquist further goes on in his book to explain what exactly, in his eyes makes an election critical, and to provide examples of elections that are and are not. Sundquist states that the permanence of a realignment in the voter base, and a magnitude are both major qualifications mentioned in his writing. These two represent the different ends of current literature on realigning presidential elections in the United States.

This thesis aims to follow some of the features of both Sundquist and Mayhew as well as looking at lesser investigated factors of critical election theory. Instead of personally determining what elections that have been past attributed as critical elections are or aren't actually critical, and focusing this thesis on that, instead it will look at the framework of critical elections already put before us by these authors, and using that choose elections that are critical, then looking at what type of ideas and consequences the media assigns to these elections in newspaper, and if those predictions hold true, especially in the case of the criticality of the election. This is

⁴ James Sundquist, "Dynamics of the Party System: Alignments and Realignment of Political Parties" (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1973)

different than what has been done previously, as it seems the contemporary media used in prior literature is mainly those from after the election that wrongly or correctly label an election critical. Taking this approach instead at looking at before an election, helps this thesis to be unique.

At this point, the reader is probably wondering why this is important. What makes this matter, what is trying to be gained from understanding this. From understanding matters and patterns of the past, one can more easily see and understand the patterns that will arise in the present and future. Looking at how critical elections become critical will help to establish the basis of whether we can attribute the importance of an election to it contemporarily or if only the future will tell what from the past holds importance. Perhaps insight will be able to be gleaned as well on what the reason is behind the extreme rhetoric that is expressed consistently accompanying elections. Is this an invention of recent times, or maybe something that has been around for a while at this point, that is what should hopefully be uncovered throughout this thesis, or at least hints should be found to it.

To attempt to answer the questions of this thesis, two elections will be chosen that exemplify the idea of a critical election and the contemporary media surrounding them will be examined. Two elections that seem to be good to use for this purpose are the election of LBJ vs. Goldwater in 1964, and the election of Ronald Reagan vs. Jimmy Carter in 1980. The purpose of looking at these two elections is to get a view on the narrative surrounding the election in the newspapers and see if that narrative accurately reflects the importance of these two elections. These two elections were specifically chosen because both represent a triumph for their respective political ideologies. LBJ winning represents a victory for modern liberalism, and Ronald Reagan's election represents a victory for modern conservatism, both helping these

ideologies to become more mainstream and crystalize their party's platform around them. LBJ's election having been important for the establishment of the Great Society, and Ronald Reagan's being similarly important for the "Reagan Conservative" movement of the time. Through looking at the narrative and diction that is pushed by the three newspapers, the LA Times, the New York Times, and The Chicago Tribune, it should be easy to see what the consensus is surrounding the election. Is the America that the elections take place in invigorated, is the turnout high, and how is this expressed through the newspapers? Though the wanting to know this raises another interesting question that should also be addressed. Is the narrative surrounding a critical election unique? Or is it just common among every election. Every four years personalities and pundits come out of the woodwork and tell us to come out and vote, to support our democratic process. They tell how our vote will make a difference, or how this election could be the end of the America, or the opposing political party, as we know it and signify major change. Every election since Bush at least has felt like this, and not every one of those elections was truly critical. So is this just how elections feel in general, has something changed, or is this just an incorrect assumption. This is what should be answered over the course of this thesis. How are these elections critical, at what point did they get this status, and is it a contemporary assignment of value, or a historical one? It is likely that not all of these questions will be able to get a clear answer over the course of this thesis, however, it seems most likely from the literature looked at that critical elections are almost always assigned that title retroactively, and that media is likely to assign high value to every election, just as part of the election cycle. The next step is to see if this theory holds true throughout the research.

Editorials

In order to later use as part of the analysis on public opinion of critical elections in the moment and how they compare to a more current historical perspective of them, a collection of editorials have been gathered from a group of several newspapers in the period. Editorials function as a more opinion-based news piece that is written by the Chief Editing staff at the paper that has published them. While an Editorial is written and produced by an editing department of a newspaper, and thus cannot accurately represent the views and opinions of the whole country of the United States, it is the hope that by looking at a variety of sources and their coverage of the election, that some insight will be able to be gleaned into how critical the election was viewed in the moment and what kind of issues were most concerning across several aspects of American Newsprint Media and how that does or doesn't factor into our current historical perception of these elections.

Each source observed had its own style of editorialization that helped to showcase some of the separate concerns and opinions on the elections of these various groups. The New York Times seemed to make an attempt to be somewhat unbiased in the 1964 election between Barry Goldwater and Lyndon B Johnson, however, they frequently voiced their concerns on some of the more worrying aspects of Goldwater's campaign, notably his more aggressive foreign policy or potential lack thereof, and his seeming willingness to use nuclear bombs when the need arises. While the NYT is often critical of Goldwater's campaign, it seems to support LBJ by default, but will still offer criticism against him when the need arises. For the 1980 election between Carter and Reagan, the approach seems to be somewhat similar. The NYT continues to point out things that they see may be an issue in this upcoming election, and whether they see either presidential candidate as being capable of solving this problem. This does, however, mean that they can be

somewhat critical of Carter, as Carter is the incumbent president for this election, though it does not seem as if they have any great love for Reagan either. The New York Times did, however, endorse LBJ in 1964 and Jimmy Carter in 1980.

The next paper from which editorials were pulled was the Chicago Tribune, which had a strong Republican bias, especially in 1964. Their 1964 editorial coverage was characterized in an attempt to point out the moral deficiencies of the democratic party at the time, whether this was calling attention to when the democrats tried to use dead republicans who they had earlier maligned against Goldwater⁵, calling the current white house chief of security a sexual deviate and security risk⁶, or lauding the new management that the Goldwater win had put the GOP under⁷. Strangely, in 1980 it does not seem as if the conservative Chicago Tribune was fully behind Reagan, and their inflammatory remarks had lessened greatly. The Tribune did support Reagan, but it also made sure to shine light on John Anderson. Another issue that seemed very important to them is what they saw as a failing foreign policy, which they did think Reagan could improve when compared to Carter, however, they said it would take more than the charisma for which Reagan was known⁸. Following the slant towards Republican and conservatism, it should seem obvious that the Chicago Tribune endorsed both Goldwater in 1964 and Reagan in 1980.

Lastly more editorials were pulled from the LA Times, which represents a more locally focused newspaper. In both 1964 and 1980 the papers seemed to be much more focused on policies that they wished would be changed rather than the election itself, where they seemed to

⁵ "Goldwater and Taft" (Chicago: Chicago Tribune, 1964)

⁶ "Who Knew About Jenkins?" (Chicago: Chicago Tribune, 1964)

⁷ "Under New Management" (Chicago: Chicago Tribune, 1964)

⁸ "Henry Kissinger's Prescription" (Chicago: Chicago Tribune, 1980)

seldom mention the candidates running for president directly. A large focus of their editorials was foreign policy, including many of the failings of the time that they witnessed, labor rights and laws, and complaints about various political shortcomings. While these editorials may not be important for specifically how important they saw the elections as, they do help to showcase what policies that these people would have thought of as at stake, and how the successes or failures in that policy following the rise of a new president represent how critical the election had really ended up becoming. The LA Times did seem to err on the conservative side, and did endorse Goldwater in 1964 even though they did not seem to agree with him politically on several issues, but later, as mentioned in their coverage on the 1980 election, began to not endorse candidates any longer for presidential elections.

Critical Elections

In research about United States presidential elections, there can often be seen a concept referred to as a critical election. V.O. Key is often credited as popularizing this idea, in an article that was published in 1955, but the idea has been around since before World War II. Effectively, the idea of a critical election is simple. It is an election that is seen as relatively more important than other elections. According to Key⁹, there are three characteristics that can be used to identify this variety of elections. The first is that the voters are unusually deeply concerned, meaning that for whatever issue there are large issues at play during these elections. The second is that the electoral involvement is relatively high, meaning that measures of voter turnout will be higher this year when compared to other elections; It is important to note, that this is not the sole way to test this metric, with electoral involvement also including grass roots movements,

⁹ Key, "A Theory of Critical Elections"

activism, and a great deal more facets. And lastly, there is a change in the political division of the voter base. Effectively, this would mean that for some reason or other, where once many people voted one party, now there seems to be a realignment of who votes for who. This is also the reason behind the other name of these sort of elections, realigning elections.

While Key helps to highlight the criteria that we can use in deciding what might be a critical election, and what is not one, he does not offer much else for the reader about these realigning elections or what they might mean in general about elections. Key does offer some empirical data about what he is suggesting though, mainly from polls taken about elections in certain new England cities over time, and uses these to say that two elections that he sees in particular as being examples of these realigning elections. The first is the 1896 election between the Democrat William Jennings Bryan, and the Republican William McKinley, in which the latter becomes the winner. The second is the 1928 election between the Democrat Al Smith, and the Republican Herbert Hoover, and once more the latter is the winner. Key shows us how these Republican realigning victories result in a sudden decline in votes casted for Democratic candidates, in some places by almost 40 percent¹⁰, followed by a slow return to around what it once was, a behavior that he claims empirically shows us that these elections are realigning ones. While Key is important to establishing the criteria used for the purposes of this thesis to determine what elections we will classify as critical and take a look at them, there are others too that have important ideas on what critical elections are and what they mean.

E. E. Schattschneider is another political scientist who discussed critical elections as well, however, his writings were more conversational and less empirical and made a couple of rather

¹⁰ Key, "A Theory of Critical Elections"

far reaching claims including that the same realigning election of 1896 that Key mentions, resulted in 30 years of the McKinley party alignment until the rise of Franklin D. Roosevelt in his election of 1932¹¹. The later political scientist Sundquist wrote about this phenomenon as well, and introduced the idea that rather than just one election resulting in a sudden realignment, multiple elections seem to create sort of a realigning era, or an era characterized by the realignment that has been observed¹². Another of these critical election genre social scientists, Burnham, later makes a full list of all the “realigning eras” as Sundquist might call them characterized by the realigning periods caused by realigning elections¹³.

While many of these political scientists embraced the idea of critical and realigning elections, and allowed it to influence their work, others still were and remain critical of it. V.O. Key even in years after his initial article attempted to backtrack on the ideal of critical elections and took a more neutral approach towards the idea in his further articles¹⁴. Another critic of the concept is David Mayhew, who wrote a book about this titled *Electoral Realignments: A Critique of an American Genre*. The book explains that Mayhew doesn't see many of the claims made by the critical electionists as being true, with at best the claims being misinterpretations of the data that has been collected, and at worst being claims made with very little or any supporting data in order to back them up¹⁴. This thesis aims to similarly take this criticality of critical elections as a way to examine whether what we see as a critical election may be a factor of our current outlook on history, rather than something that can be seen at the time.

¹¹ E.E. Schattschneider, “The Semisovereign People: A Realists View of Democracy in America” (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960)

¹² Sundquist, “Dynamics of the Party System: Alignments and Realignments of Political Parties”

¹³ Walter Dean Burnham, “Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics” (New York: Norton, 1970)

¹⁴ Mayhew, “Electoral Realignments: A Critique of an American Genre”

In order to do this, however, a frame of what can and cannot be considered a critical election is necessary to establish what elections are to be reviewed to establish the historical view of these elections and how it compares to this critical current view. To do this, we will use the three criteria that Key originally gives us. The first being that the voter base is unusually deeply concerned, the second that there is a relatively high electoral involvement, and the third and last being that there is some form of realignment in the voter base. To be considered a critical election for this thesis, a presidential election must meet these three requirements. There are several reasons that Key's framework is being used for this thesis rather than one's created or used by other critical election theory writers. One of the most important is the fact that it can be applied to any election to see whether it fits or not. Some of the other election theories, such as the realigning periods of every 36 years that Burnham discusses, can't be easily applied to every election in the same way, the elections either fit that strict criterion or they do not, there is not an in-between to examine. Another reason is that this criterion above all others helps to highlight things that can be looked for within newspaper editorials, at least with the 1st and 2nd criteria. One can see how concerned people are over issues by reading editorials and seeing how important these things seem to be to those writing about it, and then those issues to the public even further. The 2nd criteria can be examined by seeing through the writing how involved individuals and voters are in discussing the issues that are presented. While it is impossible to glean how many people voted in an election that hasn't happened yet from an editorial, it is possible to see how active the potential voters are in certain contexts. Not only this, but Key's framework specifically is one that can actually be proven one way or the other, with evidence to support it.

Divisive Elections

An inspiration for this thesis has been the idea that almost every election of the past 30 or so years has seemed critical. Almost every single one seems to be on the verge of deciding and creating something incredible, a new majority, or destroying something we have known, causing the extinction of one of our two major political parties. In both books *The Lost Majority*, and *Upending American Politics*, it is mentioned how in 2008 people believed that the election of president Barack Obama will create a sort of “New New Deal” since they saw Obama as having created a broad coalition of the majority of the American people¹⁵. Something that pundits from both sides saw as similar to the original New Deal coalition of 1932, which produced the only American president to serve for more than two terms and some of the most impactful legislation of US History with the New Deal policies that accompanied it. Two years later the *Lost Majority* calls back to the unprecedented record breaking loss that happened in the legislative houses during the midterm elections of 2010 where Republicans gained in both houses of congress and took control of the House of Representatives, beginning to set the stage for the gridlock and stalemate that would characterize the later part of the Obama presidency, where democratic concerns were sidelined by the republican controlled legislature, and the then president would veto the republican bills that were able to be put through congress¹⁵. The book adds even more to show this dichotomy between this language of permanent realignment and the truth of the reality that actually occurs, by discussing the 2004 re-election of George Bush, which many claimed showed that a republican actually could win a “high turnout election”¹⁵ only to see in the next

¹⁵ Sean Trende, “*The Lost Majority*” (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

Presidential election democrat Barack Obama win by one of the highest margins of a democratic candidate in decades. So, what does all this mean?

To some this might seem to represent a break down in the ability of political pundits and journalists to correctly predict what the course of our nation is. This is not the point that this thesis seeks to make, or the point that The Lost Majority necessarily wants to make either. In fact, the inaccuracy of the previously mentioned realignment ideas and the news speaking of permanent realignments and elections that have a vital importance, while things never seem to go anywhere does not necessarily seem to even be a creation of modern times as many would think. The oldest election that this thesis looks at is the presidential election of 1964, of LBJ vs Goldwater. In many ways this election is like our most recent elections, Goldwater was feared by many due to the fact that he often seemed to fully “speak his mind”. In the further sections you will read about how people feared Goldwater and what he said, and what his actions could mean for our foreign policy which was in a precarious position at the time. The editorials from this period frequently talked about how Goldwater and what he stands for could signal the death of the republican party, especially since it seemed that some Republicans that did not support him would actively side against him. In fact, at the RNC in 1964, the national convention in which the Republican Party decides who will represent them as the official presidential candidate of the party, there were several speakers who even outright spoke against Goldwater¹⁶. People saw this division as the end of the Republican Party as we knew it, however, the conservative newspaper The Chicago Tribune saw it as a signal of the new republican party and how things would be in the future¹⁷. Despite the unprofessional and often inflammatory and incorrect lines that are said

¹⁶ P.F. Boller, “Presidential Campaigns” (Oxford University Press, 2004)

¹⁷ “Under New Management”

in other editorials from the Tribune, like calling white house staff members sexual deviants, this is one area that they would prove to be correct in when it comes to predictions of the future, especially compared to other news outlets, when the 1980 election comes and the conservatism that started with Goldwater finds its foothold in the election of Ronald Reagan. The Goldwater loss in 1964 was decidedly not the extinction of the Republicans as some would say.

These connections and eventual results can tell us a lot about what happens when the impact of an election is attempted to be understood in the moment, and why things like hindsight bias may play a role in deciding what elections are critical or realigning. With hindsight bias in this case being our ability to “see things coming” after the fact just because we already know what all these events are leading up to. Many of the realignment perspectives seem to fall victim to this, especially with the more outrageous claims like that of a 36-year period of realignment being a thing. David Mayhew talks about this some in his book against realignment, specifically how some of these elections that fall onto that alleged 36-year cycle are a bit of a stretch, and others may fit the “realigning” idea better, but do not fall into that pretty 36-year period that the original author is trying to make work¹⁸. Another point of contention is that these re-aligning election supporters seem to center a lot of their work around 1896 and 1932 in particular, and sometimes seem to either ignore the almost century of presidential elections before hand or attempt to find ways in which to make it fit their theory. While realigning election theories seem to start falling out of line more and more in recent memory, it is likely that it never actually was too accurate of a way to categorize the underlying situations that caused what we observed. The

¹⁸ Mayhew, “Electoral Realignments”

realigning ideas seem to fail because of a small sample size that may not have been truthfully representative of the whole.

Another reason we may see greater deviations today than in the past is thanks to the growing polarization of the political parties. *Upending American Politics* discusses median voter theory, where a political party is most likely to try to shift towards the middle to pull in more voters, and the fact that it seems that in recent memory the Republican party has begun to pull itself further right instead¹⁹. According to the editors of the book, this is because of two forces at action, the first is the plutocratic elite who have been attempting to pull the party towards a more economically libertarian approach with minimizing government and deregulating business so as to serve the needs of the rich, and the second is the ethnonationalist rural communities who are being told the idea that the issues that are plaguing them are being caused by those that are unlike them¹⁹. The two forces pulling the people towards two extremes is creating polarization, especially when democrats are often forced to respond in kind. This polarization continues to make it harder for a “coalition of everyone” to survive for long in the political climate. The coalition of everyone being a voter base for a party that is composed of an extremely broad and diverse array of people. It is likely that the radical ideas that polarization is accompanied by will anger or alienate some members of the coalition, resulting in the coalition failing¹⁹. This phenomenon is seen by some as what is preventing the realignment perspective from being successful in the modern political climate.

These two alternatives seem to provide the possibilities for why the ideas of realignment might not actually be correct, and how elections that may have been seen in the moment as

¹⁹ Skopcol et al., “*Upending American Politics*” (Oxford University Press 2020)

critical, or by us years later as being critical, may not be. Either the realignment perspective was never right to begin with, or our modern political climate has lost the ability to be explained by the realignment theory. Hopefully by compounding two types of sources, editorials from the times of the elections themselves, and modern books on history, some insight can be gained into which, if either, of these theories may be more correct.

The 1964 Election

The 1964 election was between the two candidates Lyndon B Johnson and Barry Goldwater. Johnson represented the democratic party, with Barry Goldwater representing the GOP in turn. This election followed on the heels of the assassination of JFK, the previous president who LBJ served as the Vice President under. With JFK having been relatively well liked and many potential voters of the time seeing LBJ as a continuation of those policies, It was likely that LBJ could have been re-elected just by using the coalition that had been gathered by his predecessor.

For many Johnson was a more reasonable candidate as opposed to Goldwater, who even liberal republicans voted against. Barry Goldwater was characterized as being a candidate that spoke first and asked questions later, this issue lead to Goldwater himself often being discussed of as an issue, just as much as actual policy problems that were seen as important. In a book on presidential campaigns from Boller²⁰, Barry was noted to have a habit referred to as going to the right place yet giving the wrong speech. In St. Petersburg, a community that was known for its large retired population, he gave a speech advocating to lessen social security. In farming areas, he spoke ill of federal subsidies, and made such claims that lessening price supports for produce

²⁰ Boller, "Presidential Campaigns"

would actually be good for farmers. Perhaps worst were many of Goldwater's disturbing quotes on nuclear weaponry, with him advocating for the use of what he called "low-yield warheads" in the Vietnamese war, as well as him claiming wanting to launch one directly into the Kremlin. Because of these unwise words from Goldwater, much of the campaign of 1964 centered around quotes from the man, often out of context, being used as reasons for people to not vote for him. Another aspect of this election was the recent assassination of former president John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the Democratic Convention contained a touching tribute to the former president and the new presidential candidate for the democrats called it the "best convention he had been to." On the other hand, the Republican National Convention featured Nelson Rockefeller decrying the Republican candidate as an extremist and saying that such things cannot be allowed in American Politics.

For the purposes of this thesis it is also important to note the ways in which this election fits the definition of a critical election. That is, it follows the three criteria that were identified earlier. The first being a relatively high electoral involvement, the second being a high amount of concern over the issues of the election, and the third being a realignment of the voter base that persists or has influence over that of future elections²¹. Starting with the first of the factors, there was a high amount of electoral involvement during this election. A helpful and simple way to determine this, is simply to compare voter turnout between the elections surrounding the one in question. 1964 has a lower turnout than the 1960 election, but it has a higher turnout than the one before that, and higher turnouts than the elections that come after it according to the records from

²¹ Key, "A Theory of Critical Election"

the American Presidency Project²². This helps to show that the first criteria, a relatively high electoral involvement, is at least met.

For the second criteria, having people highly concerned in the issues that are at stake for the election, it is important to first discuss the issues that were on the table for the election. For this election, it seemed that the most major issues were of foreign policy, and the potential disastrous effects that a Goldwater presidency could have on it. By the time election day came around, a major concern for many was the Vietnam war, specifically with the recent Gulf of Tonkin incidents being fresh on the mind of many. The incidents occurred when a confrontation between American and Vietnamese military vessels occurred, and was seen as an act of aggression by Vietnam, thus drawing the United States further into the Vietnam war, which before that moment had just been one they were offering support to the side of France and the South Vietnamese²³. The fact that this event happened only months before the election caused many to worry about how LBJ would react, and then lead into what would happen if Goldwater then inherited the situation, especially after the man had advocated for the use of low-yield nuclear weaponry in the same war. Given the cold war atmosphere surrounding the Vietnam war, and the fact that the Cuban Missile Crisis was still in recent memory for many voters, the Cold War foreign policy was also a major issue for the election. Many believed that LBJ, who had already been working some foreign policy as both Vice President and then acting President, would be much more well equipped for handling the careful diplomacy necessary for the era. Meanwhile Goldwater, who seemed to say exactly what he was thinking even if it was not the time for it, was feared by many as a man who would potentially exacerbate many of the

²² "Voter Turnout of Presidential Elections"

²³ J. Colman, "The Foreign Policy of Lyndon B Johnson" (Edinburgh University Press, 2010)

problems that existed at the time. Many seemed to be almost fearful of what Goldwater would mean. This helps to show how this election fit the second criteria, there were important issues that were seemingly at stake, and people were concerned for what would happen if the country was lead by the wrong person for the job.

The third criteria are a realignment that continued into following elections. The one that happened in 1964 could be interpreted in a couple different ways. For one, there is the Great Society. This was made possible by a strong democratic majority in both the houses of congress, and having a democratic president be elected. While losses were seen in elections after this one, the democrats held a majority in both houses of congress for a while to come after this, showing at least a functional realignment of congress that had some legacy²⁴. Another consideration could be the party switch, and what Goldwater represented with growing American conservatism. The party switch is the explanation for the phenomenon which resulted with a sort of ideological swapping of the two political parties, with the democrats, who had in the past supported slavery, becoming a party that had some social justice in their platform, as well as becoming more popular in the north and less popular in the south²⁴. Related to this was the rise of conservative beliefs in the republican party, which many saw Goldwater as the face of. This caused a realignment that seemed to draw more and more conservatives in the party, something that could have helped to pave the way for the alignment of voters in 1980 which allowed for Ronald Reagan to become our 40th president. Regardless of which one someone interprets it as, it does seem that some sort of realignment happened.

²⁴ Boller, "Presidential Elections"

Lastly it is important to discuss some of the outcomes of the election that we can look back and see today. First it is important to look at the progress that was made with Cold War diplomacy. There of course was some diplomacy that occurred, specifically with progress made in certain aspects with relations towards the Soviet Union. On the other hand, little progress was made with the relations with China, and according to Colman in his book about LBJ's foreign policy, some say that the aggressive approach LBJ exhibited in China resulted in inspiring a resistance of China towards future attempts at diplomacy by other administrations²⁵. Another important outcome from the election was participation in the Vietnam war. The Vietnam war was a massive conflict that spanned through Nixon's presidency, and a fair amount of election happened during the tenure of LBJ. The same fracturing of the Republican party that many claimed to see in 1964, would be seen 4 years later, as the democratic party was divided against those who supported the war and those that were against it. It's hard to tell what exactly would have happened if Goldwater had won, whether this division between the democratic party would happen anyways or not, but this was one of the outcomes of LBJ being elected. The last important thing to talk about when it comes to the outcomes of the 1964 election is the Great Society, which was the name of Johnson's domestic policy. The great society sought to embrace the types of policies introduced in the new deal of FDR, which was a wide ranged social reform. The Great Society was a sweeping reform that focused on a "war on poverty" that included new social programs and welfare reform, as well as some racial issues. A major piece of legislation that focused on race was the voting rights act of 1965 that eliminated certain forms of voter suppression that were being weaponized against the black community. This election was very

²⁵ Colman, "The Foreign Policy of Lyndon B Johnson"

impactful historically, but it will be examined later what those going into the election thought of it, or what they thought could have been on the line.

1980 Election

The 1980 election was between the incumbent Jimmy Carter, a democrat, and the challenger Ronald Reagan, the nominee of the Republicans. The two nominees and rivals for the presidency were exemplary of two of the most unusual origins of presidents. Carter, famous for being a peanut farmer before he was president, and Reagan, as someone who hosted the General Electric Theater TV Program and starred in dozens of movies over the course of his life. This election fits into the three criteria frameworks for critical elections that this paper has been using. First of the criteria is the people being unusually concerned with the issues. There were several issues that were of importance during this election.

The election was characterized once more by the desire of the American people for improved foreign policy, something that many seemed worried they would not get either way. According to the book *Depression to the Cold War* by Siracusa and Coleman²⁶, many Americans were already fed up with the current president's foreign policy. Many saw the failures of the Iranian Hostage Crisis among other situations the USA had found itself embroiled in, with a total of 78% of Americans disapproving of the way the Incumbent had been handling foreign affairs²⁶. While the view of Carter on foreign affairs was dismal, the view of what Reagan potentially meant was almost as bad. According to the same book, a journalist by the name of Garry Wills referred to Reagan as coming across "patently unmalicious" when talking about war, something that he feared would give the candidate the power to authorize military action without having to

²⁶ Joseph Siracusa and David Coleman, "Depression to Cold War" pg. 246 (2002)

worry about the consequences of said action. Furthermore, Reagan's experience before the election was merely a few years as the governor of California, forcing him to rely on the fact that many disapproved of Carter and being "at least better than him."

Another issue of concern during the election, was the economy. Under Carter's tenure as president, the highest level of inflation in decades had been reached. Reagan had a solution that was embraced throughout his campaign that was referred to as Supply-Side economics. Because of the legacy of Reagan, this is often today referred to as Reaganomics. The basic idea is that lessening restrictions and tax rates will result in increased spending and investing by business owners and the wealthy. This would allegedly offset the decreased tax revenue and encourage economic growth that would combat high levels of inflation and unemployment. The idea of this "simple and painless solution"²⁶ appealed greatly to many people who were put off by the current economic failings, and the wealthy and business owners who stood to gain the most from it. This was another of the major election issues that many seemed concerned about.

The second criteria that the election must meet is that it should have high electoral participation. The most direct and usual way to fulfill this criterion is based off voter turnout. However, this election has a lower voter turnout than most, at 52.6%²⁷. There are, although, other measures of electoral participation. These include advocacy, grass roots activism and mobilization, and overall energization of the voter base. The low voter turnout reflects the dissatisfaction that the American people had with the current regime, yet something of note that might show a form of high electoral participation is the low percentage of registered republicans at the time. The Republicans only counted for 27% of American voters, compared to the 42% for

²⁷ "Voter Turnout of Presidential Elections"

Democrats, and Independents at 30% (Siracusa, Coleman pg. 245). This shows Republicans as being at a roughly 15% disadvantage by this metric, yet Reagan won the election by a 10% margin in the popular vote, and an extreme landslide of 440 votes in the electoral college (Leip). Because of this, Reagan must have in some way energized voter participation specifically among Republicans as well as Independents or Democrats who were able to be swayed. This satisfies the second criteria for the assignment of the value of critical.

The third criteria are that the election results in a realignment in the voter base that persists for several elections. As the above paragraph discusses, the fact that the Republicans were able to win in a landslide during this election with such a small share of the registered voters shows that some kind of realignment must have occurred during the course of this election. Reagan brought to the table his view of conservatism which was upheld after his election for years. Believing in small government, and small amounts of regulation, as well as his trademark Reaganomics. This belief in a more laissez faire economy was followed up by many of his successors. George HW Bush famously said “No new taxes” which was an appeal to and an attempt to uphold the ideas of Reagan Conservatism. Even after that, with Bill Clinton winning the election after Reagan’s Vice Presidents George HW; Clinton was known as a Blue Dog democrat, meaning that he sat more towards the center than other democrats, even being somewhat economically conservative. This too is likely a result of the Reagan realignment producing a larger popularity for conservative beliefs within the United States. Although some argue that Reagan may not have even truly been the one behind the realignment. Thirty-six years prior, in 1964 Barry Goldwater also ran as a conservative against Lyndon B. Johnson. While Goldwater ultimately lost and never became president, his politics did exert some influence over the direction of the republican party, specifically pushing it down a more conservative path and

beginning to cause the emigration of liberals from the party. Whether or not Reagan represented the peak of conservatism, or simply the crystallization and continuation of it can be debated, but either way there was certainly some sort of realignment that centered around this election.

Lastly, it is important to talk about the historical outcomes of Reagan's presidency so comparison can be made by the contemporary viewpoints brought up in the editorials that have been gathered. Foreign policy wise, there were successes and failures during Reagan's administration. Many know the story of how the Iranian hostage crisis was resolved on Reagan's first morning in office, claiming that Reagan's cowboy personality scared them into it. Other successes commonly attributed to Reagan include the fall of both the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall. Failures range from other commonly known stories like the Nicaraguan contra scandal to our involvement in Afghanistan that helped to create the terrorist groups that still cause trouble for the United States to this day. Economically, Reaganomics is most often talked about as a failure even if it still does influence some economic approaches. Despite his talk of conservatism and being anti-taxes, Reagan was forced to raise taxes at points in his presidency. The same occurred with his successor and VP Bush, who had even claimed there would be no new taxes under his tenure. Information on Reagan's checkered tenure as well as the analysis of the editorials associated with the lead up to his presidency will be continued shortly.

Editorial Analysis

Johnson (1964)

The period surrounding the 1964 election could best be characterized as tense. The election took place less than a year following the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy during a parade in Dallas. Not much longer of a time before that, the Cuban Missile Crisis was

on the mind of every single American, and perhaps the world. During the election even, we were reeling from the after-effects of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. It seemed that every year something massive was happening. Of course, it followed logically that these next few years would be important as well, and have many impactful decisions made by whoever came out on top. Even with this, it seemed political dissatisfaction was extremely vocal. So, what could news coverage provide us insight into? And is the news coverage we see indicative of people who understand their election to be critical? Between the editorials gathered a vast variety of views are expressed, each indicative in some way on whether we can consider the election a critical one, especially in the context of what was thought contemporarily.

The New York Times

The New York Times' seemed to portray a sort of indifference to the election that was common across the editorials from the other newspaper sources as well. Instead of focusing on election issues specifically, and what either candidate needs to do in order to win votes, or what may be important to the American citizens, the times often focused on the events that were occurring in the world, as related to what disastrous foreign policy that Goldwater if elected would bring about because of the precarious situation of the American government abroad at that time. Perhaps the indifference surrounding aspects of the election is indicative of the American people seeing it contemporarily as lacking in criticality, however, it seems that the concern over Goldwater more than makes up for the otherwise policy indifference.

The many fears about Goldwater ranged from the relatively lesser to the relatively "doomsday scenario" inducing. Among the latter category, is Goldwater's seemingly complete lack of reluctance to use nuclear weaponry. Among various sources on the election, and the

editorial titled “Goldwater on the Bomb,”²⁸ Goldwater advocated frequently for more ‘tactical’ nuclear armament use in various wars from the Vietnam to using it to resolve the Cold War by “launching one at the Kremlin.” In the editorial it’s discussed further about how these tactical arms, that Goldwater argues he should not even be solely responsible for the use of, are not the small payload arms that are no different conventional ones as how Goldwater argues. These weapons, according to the contemporary Defense Secretary McNamara, would be 5 times the power of one of the only two nuclear bombs ever actually used in warfare, the one dropped on Hiroshima. Obviously if a nuclear bomb of such power was ever used so casually, it would start a previously unheard-of variety of war that would result in casualties that McNamara estimated at 100 million Americans and Russians within the first hour. While other fears caused by the chance of a Goldwater presidency are not as grandiose as the potential for a massive nuclear war, they are still ever present and potentially disastrous in the New York Times editorial coverage of this election.

Only about a month before the election, the premier and current leader of Russia, Nikita Khrushchev, was removed from power in a coup by his fellow party members in the Kremlin. While Khrushchev was in charge of the Soviet Union and therefore presided over many of the great issues that influenced the atmosphere of the election, he was also one of the first men in power in Russia to ever speak out against Stalin, and was credited with even making it possible for others to do the same on occasion²⁹. With new leaders in the Kremlin, and a lack of information flowing out of it, it was impossible for the American intelligence and leadership to know exactly what to expect from whatever new faction had gained power. The New York

²⁸ “Goldwater on the Bomb” (New York: The New York Times, 1964)

²⁹ Barringer, “Son Tells of Khrushchev’s Last Days in Power” (New York: The New York Times, 1964)

Times in their editorial “Goldwater’s Foreign Non-Policy”³⁰ saw this as one more place where Goldwater would prove catastrophic for the United States. Since we did not yet know whether or not this new presence in the Kremlin was a threat that would be more opposed to us than Khrushchev or an opportunity that would allow for a better relationship with the Soviets, the New York Times did not think that Goldwater would fare well with either. A more hostile regime would be met with even more hostility by Goldwater, and one that wasn’t as hostile would likely still be met with hostility. According to the other editorial, Goldwater and the Western-Alliance, the Alliance of Western Nations against the “aggression” of the east in places like China and Russia was somewhat important to Goldwater, yet his viewpoints did not seem to line up with theirs. While Goldwater seemed to be tied together with the idea of aggression with the Soviets, the European countries wanted to begin to establish some sort of Diplomacy to the formerly hostile communist nations. On the other hand, Johnson seemed to agree with the allies and provide a much better alternative to them, not only in agreement. Being the Vice President, for three years and then later acting president, Johnson had far more experience than Goldwater on how to navigate foreign policy and diplomacy issues on a scale this large. With how unstable Russia seemed to be, as well as the starting of an instability within the alliance themselves, this is yet another situation that the New York Times saw as a potential disaster waiting to happen, seemingly voicing their opinion on how important it is that Goldwater do not become the next president of the united states.

As well the New York Times seemed to believe while Johnson may not be the perfect candidate, he was the one who should be the default in consideration. In the editorial “The

³⁰ “Goldwater’s Foreign Non-Policy” (New York: The New York Times, 1964)

Mysterious Ways of Lyndon Johnson”³¹ the New York Times in a way mocks the way that the incumbent and candidate had been drawing out his pick for the role of Vice President. They liken his slow choice to the stage-play and prestige that a magician might utilize to keep his audience invested. Yet despite all this teasing and playing fun that the Times Editorial staff does, they acknowledge that at this point a Vice Presidential pick may not even change the poll numbers that Johnson was leading with. In an editorial from later on in the election cycle, titled “The Halfway Mark” it can be seen that at this point, Johnson was already telling people that he was offering them a clear choice and making plans as well as talking about what he would be doing for foreign relations after the election. It was clear that Johnson thought he was a shoe in for victory, and it seems that later the election came around and confirmed it based on how high of a margin Johnson won by.

From the New York Times coverage of this election it seems that the view of the newspaper on this election was one that was important but not necessarily in the way that one may immediately think of an election as important³². It instead was one that was important in the fact that one candidate almost seemed to be the default option based on the potential outcomes of each candidate. Where Johnson seemed to convey a continuation of the status quo, and almost a safe choice. On the other hand, Goldwater represents a choice that could result in confrontations, and a choice that the New York Times seemed to convey, and fear was the wrong one. It does seem that this election was important and critical, but this was not centered on Lyndon B Johnson, but rather Goldwater, the values he represented, and the disaster that could happen if he was elected.

³¹ Reston, “Washington: The Mysterious Ways of Lyndon Johnson” (New York: The New York Times, 1964)

³² “Halfway Mark” (New York: The New York Times, 1964)

Chicago Tribune

While the New York Times seemed to display a center-left viewpoint of the election, the opposite could be seen in the Chicago Tribune. The Chicago Tribune represented a more right-wing paper, that frequently rebuked the actions of the Democrats as well as the members of the Republican party that proved hesitant to the nomination of the conservative Goldwater. This is seen rather frequently in their editorials like “Taft and Goldwater” as well as “Under New Management.” “Taft and Goldwater”³³ focuses on Democratic senators using former and deceased US Senator Robert Taft to make unfavorable comparisons to Goldwater, by claiming Goldwater was a conservative without conscience who did things like vote against the poor. However, this had in fact also been a claim used against Taft regularly while Taft was still in the political sphere. They go on to continue that this Taft “Conservative with a conscience” had actually continuously had the same claims leveraged against him that are now leveraged against Goldwater, whether it be the Democrats themselves making the claims or the New York Times or Washington Post publishing them. In “Under New Management”³⁴ the editorial staff of The Chicago Tribune complain about the complaints by “liberal” republicans that they refer to as “Kingmakers.” The sum of the editorial is the idea that the “liberal republican” is a thing of the past, with Goldwater ushering in a revolution of conservatives and being a very important figure whether he will win or lose in the future. Both of these show this idea being pushed into the ether by the Chicago Tribune that Goldwater was a very important person who both aligned with other past important Republican figures, and represented the new conservative path that the Republican party would be taking after him.

³³ “Taft and Goldwater”

³⁴ “Under New Management”

Another important thing to note about the Chicago Tribune is their reference to certain affairs that could have impacted the Democrats that was somewhat overshadowed by other events that were deemed more important, mainly the foreign policy events of the time that happened in the days before and after this one, like the deposal of Nikita Khrushchev. One such event was touched on in the editorial “Who Knew About Jenkins?”³⁵ with the Walter Jenkins scandal. The Jenkins scandal is a piece of history that isn’t fully known by many. In an article by Al Weisel,³⁶ many details of the event are explained. Walter Jenkins was a long-time aid of LBJ, who was one night discovered and arrested for disorderly conduct after engaging in a sex act with another man in the bathroom of a YMCA. Of course, while even today this would be used against a member of the white house staff, 1964 was an entirely different time in a wide variety of meanings. Some outlets refused to discuss it, with even the Chicago Tribune doing so for a while, and LBJ wanted to be the only one to talk to the press about it, but news of it still got out in different forms. It spread even further when it was realized that the same thing had happened once more in 1959. Those who did discuss it, however, had a variety of things to say, many of which were not positive. While of course it was not as accepted to be a gay man in 1964 at all, the Chicago Tribune turned their attention to the potential for blackmail that such a thing may have opened. It was known that Soviet intelligence forces used any potential way possible to infiltrate and gain information from the United States. This included exploiting things like sexual orientation to hold an individual socially hostage in exchange for information. The Tribune new this and put this question to play in their editorial. While no sign of blackmail was ever found after an investigation was launched, they questioned if LBJ may have known about the

³⁵ „Who Knew About Jenkins?“

³⁶ Al Weisel, “Lyndon Johnson & Walter Jenkins”

<https://web.archive.org/web/20090711182822/http://www.livefastdieyoungbook.com/outwalterjenkins.htm>

orientation of his aid, and even seemed to imply that LBJ knowing about such a thing and not caring is indicative that he is not a good fit for the position of President. This is not a kind thing to imply, but it does show just how invested in the election the Chicago Tribune was, and how important they thought it would be that Goldwater wins.

The Chicago Tribune also reiterates the idea of Lyndon B Johnson being the default candidate in one of their editorials. In “Billy meet Adlai!”³⁷ the editorial team discusses an apparently common political advertisement supporting LBJ where a showman named Billy Rose endorses him as the “comfortable pick” for the office of president. The editorial team opposes this, claiming that (as they endorse as the viewpoint of an Adlai Stevenson) many people are too focused on the short-term rather than the long-term. While the Chicago Tribune rebukes the idea of Lyndon B Johnson as a default or comfort pick, the fact that they felt the need to respond to such a thing reveals how pervasive such ideas likely were at the time.

The last editorial pulled from the Chicago Tribune, “Medicare goes on Ice,”³⁸ highlights the Medicare bill that was passed through the senate and supported by Lyndon B Johnson. First, they claim that this bill is an election year goal to rile up support within the voter base of LBJ and the second is the idea that such a bill would lead down a slippery slope to fully socialized healthcare within America that will cause strongly increasing taxes. As multiple healthcare bills have been passed since 1964, and there still is not socialized healthcare this was probably an unfounded concern on the part of the Tribune editorial staff. However, it does help to show that the more Republican conservative side of the political spectrum thought there could be large

³⁷ “Billy meet Adlai!” (Chicago: The Chicago Tribune, 1964)

³⁸ “Medicare goes on Ice” (Chicago: The Chicago Tribune, 1964)

things at stake if an LBJ presidency were to happen as well, something that can help to show when an election may be considered important or critical.

The editorials from the Chicago Tribune help to show a similar view of the election to the New York Times articles, many of them even having overlapping content being explored. The Chicago Tribune sees their political opponent as someone who is also going to lead to potential destruction as the next president of the United States. Yet in this case, it is not assured that the candidate that they do support is going to become president with any sort of ease at all. It showcases more the journalism of people who know that they are in a dire position and must say and do a lot so that those that are reading will buy into it and support it. Compared to the other two newspapers that were looked at and had editorials pulled from them, this paper was far more inflammatory which could showcase how critical those writing these editorials could see the election as being.

LA Times

The LA Times is a smaller newspaper than the other two that were examined, which both had more of a national reach. As such it can help to see the perspective of what matters more to the people who live in the specific area of Los Angeles, occasionally offering more of a look into more specific concerns of those in the Los Angeles area and public policy than the other newspapers might offer. Often these editorials do not seem as slanted in a certain direction and seem to just talk about the event or thing it is over.

Once more, dissatisfaction in the political way and the way that campaigns are handled is voiced in the editorial “Un-Grand Old Political Tradition”³⁹ they complain about the heckling

³⁹ “Un-Grand Old Political Tradition” (Los Angeles: The Los Angeles Times, 1964)

that has become common at political rallying and how this is not necessarily an invention of the present generation, but one that has always seemed to happen at times of political stress, specifically elections. There's not much to say about the editorial itself, which mainly focuses on how the heckling should not be done even though it has been done for so long. Although, it does show that in a way people are very concerned over the issues at stake during the election when they go as far as to chant LBJ at a rally being held to support Goldwater.

Another editorial that shows the concern over issues is about the issue of what will happen after the election year social security bill was passed. In the editorial "Taking Out and Putting In"⁴⁰ it is discussed how the amount of people paying into Social Security will not be able to support the amount of people that are able to withdraw the growing benefits offered and in that case, what would happen? Even to this day, growing social security expenditures continues to be an issue. It also discusses how the increase in benefits comes before the election, but the accompanying tax increase does not come until after. The concern over the social security issue and what it may be being used for does represent once again how the voter base ends up being concerned over the issues.

The other three editorials concern many of the foreign policy issues that have been discussed in the other newspapers. In "Patience Despite De Gaulle"⁴¹ it is discussed how the president of France De Gaulle has been causing issues in the western alliance that has resulted in distance being created between it and the United States. As a similar viewpoint with the New York Times editorials, it is not the brash actions of Goldwater that would be needed in a situation

⁴⁰ "Taking Out and Putting In" (Los Angeles: The Los Angeles Times, 1964)

⁴¹ "Patience --- Despite De Gaulle" (Los Angeles: The Los Angeles Times, 1964)

like this, but rather patience and the expertise that someone like Lyndon B Johnson may be able to better offer.

In “Afterthoughts on China’s A-Blast”⁴² it was discussed how China was recently able to produce an explosion with a nuclear device, a feat that was claimed to be an inevitability. Such a thing only increases the nuclear concern surrounding Goldwater, since if there is one more country that is a nuclear power, it means that potential use of a nuclear armament would only be more and more destructive than when a more limited amount had access. Once more it provides even more reason to worry about Goldwater’s plans to use “tactical” arms.

Lastly there is an editorial piece on the Gulf of Tonkin incident, which happened when a United States naval vessel had a confrontation with smaller vessels in Vietnamese controlled waters in the Gulf of Tonkin. This resulted in an escalation of US participation in the Vietnamese war, which could be impactful in the decision that would be made less than a month later in the presidential election. In the editorial “Tonkin Gulf: What Happened?”⁴³ the editorial team asks just that, what happened and why were the American people not informed about it. While it was revealed that a confrontation happened, it was not revealed what type of ships confronted the US Vessels, in what way, and whose ships they were. Of course, we would later find out they were North Vietnamese ships and it would be used as justification for entering the war further. While the Vietnamese War quickly became something that was not widely supported politically, with growing outcry against it throughout the 70s, it seemed to many that Johnson would be the better president to preside over it when compared to the one who had wanted to use nuclear weapons in an originally smaller conflict.

⁴² “Afterthoughts on China’s A-Blast” (Los Angeles: The Los Angeles Times, 1964)

⁴³ “Tonkin Gulf: What Happened?” (Los Angeles: The Los Angeles Times, 1964)

Reagan (1980)

Almost two decades after the coverage of the 1964 election, the 1980 election of Carter v Reagan was firing up. In many ways the themes between the two elections were very similar. It was a social program democrat against a small government conservative. The people were once more very dissatisfied with the politics at play, especially when it came to Carter's failings both domestically and abroad. And once again Cold War foreign policy was a large matter at play. Over this period the media outlets that we are examining remained largely similar to what they were. The New York Times continued to have a center-left bias and be supportive of the democrats. The Chicago Tribune was still a more right-wing paper, but it seemed to support the independent candidate John Anderson to an extent which makes sense as Anderson was from Illinois. The LA Times continued to provide more of a local and more California centric view of the election, which could prove interesting seeing as Ronald Reagan was the former governor of California. Let us see what specifically the papers were saying about this election.

New York Times

Once more the dissatisfaction in the current political landscape can be easily seen within the New York Times. In the editorial titled "The Usual, Imperfect Choice"⁴⁴ it is discussed how leading up to the finalization of the nominees in both parties, there still remains a vast half of the electorate who is not satisfied by either of the two major candidates. Set in early June, it is all but clear that Carter and Reagan will be the nominees of the parties at this point, and that John Anderson will be the third-party rival. However, plenty of people did not vote for these candidates in the primaries, George Bush was a strong rival to Ronald Reagan to the end, which

⁴⁴ "The Usual, Imperfect Choice" (New York: The New York Times, 1980)

is part of why he was eventually chosen by Reagan as his vice president. Even the incumbent president Carter had to worry some about Ed Kennedy during the democratic primary. Once it was clear that the two, Carter and Reagan, would be the candidates in the general election, the editorial claims there was great outcry about it, with many urging for reform to prevent other elections from ending up with disappointing candidates. In an election that is now considered critical, it is interesting to see just how dissatisfied many were by the results. Not to mention, that just as many seemed dissatisfied by the candidates in 1964, which can also be considered a critical election. Perhaps it could be possible that in some way this dissatisfaction to the major candidates is a sign of an election being critical. This dissatisfaction of the candidates is also something that has been seen in the past 2020 election, perhaps this could be a sign that this election too could be predicted to be critical.

Once more foreign policy could be seen to be of some importance, specifically this time in the form of defense spending and defense programs. Two editorials, “Peacemongers” and “Weak Programs for a Strong Defense” look at this. In the former⁴⁵, it is discussed how the foreign policy being discussed by the two presidents has seemingly taken a heavy shift from what it earlier was, according to the paper, in order to appease the wishes of the American people for a more civilized worldview than what they had previously been told or seen. Central to this seems to be the American participation in a treaty called SALT II, or in Reagan’s case urging for jumping right into a SALT III instead. The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (Two)⁴⁶ was a continuation of earlier talks between the Soviet Union and the United States. At its core its goal was to limit the creation and stockpiling of new strategic nuclear weapons between the

⁴⁵ “Peacemongers” (New York: The New York Times, 1980)

⁴⁶ “Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT II)” (The United States Department of State) <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/isn/5195.htm>

superpowers. Some of what it specifically did was limit the number of weapons that could be amassed, as well as restrictions on the creation of new land-based ICBM (Intercontinental Ballistic Missile) launchers. The willingness of both major candidates to take such a strong shift from what they had originally been speaking about is indicative of just how important the issue really was to the American people, the kind of importance that might only be seen during a critical election, as such an important thing serves to energize the voter base, especially if they know their candidate will actually portray what they want.

The latter editorial mentioned, “Weak programs for a strong defense”⁴⁷ discusses how both candidates aim to increase defense spending even though they don’t necessarily have any plans for it beyond that it should be bigger. It does not necessarily mention much more beyond what the last article had mentioned, as it was only published around 10 days later, but it does show that this participation in SALT II, as well as the defense programs of “let’s just increase spending” being a continuing issue throughout the election whether it be because of dissatisfaction or the American people wanting more spending. Whatever the reason, it was definitely an important issue considering how the USA was coming to realize another arms race may be coming, or that they were spread to thin in terms of the global military bases that were at play in the continuing Cold War.

The last two editorials discuss major public policy issues that would be at play. “An Ignoble Retreat on Busing”⁴⁸ discusses just that, what the New York Times offers would be the end of busing practices and potentially active desegregation of school systems if Reagan is elected as President. While this sounds like it is decidedly an important issue now, it may not

⁴⁷ “Weak Programs for a Strong Defense” (New York: The New York Times, 1980)

⁴⁸ “An Ignoble Retreat on Busing” (New York: The New York Times, 1980)

have been as important in the time. Busing is the act, still used today in many metropolitan area school districts, of using expanded bus routes and non-geographic based ways of determining what school a student must go to in order to provide variety in where and which school each student must go to, ideally to help prevent de-facto segregation. De-facto segregation in this context is that which occurs when through reasons other than specific legal and purposeful segregation, the effects of segregation still exist. So of course, this is undoubtedly an important issue, but at the time it seems that the democratic controlled congress did not support it according to the article. In the end it is likely that with how unpopular it was with seemingly most of the white people living in metropolitan areas, Carter's support of the issue may hurt him rather than help him unfortunately.

Lastly, is a second editorial on a public policy. This editorial, "The Environment and the Stump,"⁴⁹ is over the issue of Environmental Policy and gets back into what was discussed commonly within the section over Goldwater and Johnson. This is when one of the candidates is also seen as an issue to be discussed within the campaign. The editorial discusses many of Reagans misspeaking's and mistakes during the course of the election, ranging from mixing up one dangerous chemical in our environment with a harmless and beneficial chemical to when he claims that issues are much more under-control than they are and regulation is unnecessary and constricting. I'm sure many are aware of Reagan's famous statement that "If you've seen one tree, you have seen them all" about a discussion over protections for national parks. Perhaps there is something to the fact that candidates themselves often become issues within critical elections. Could this be part of what energizes someone to vote and the "realignment" that we see persisting after the election? Perhaps that could be other criteria for the identification of a

⁴⁹ "The Environment and the Stump" (New York: The New York Times, 1980)

critical election. “One in which a particular political candidate is seen as incredibly unappealing” such as in 1932 when Herbert Hoover, who many blamed for the horrible economic situations which would later be called the Great Recession, lost to FDR in an election that almost all of those earlier mentioned critical election authors saw as critical.

Chicago Tribune

As mentioned earlier, a popular topic in the Chicago Tribune’s editorial section during this election is the third-party candidate John Anderson. Instead of the Tribune of 1964 that fully through their hat behind Goldwater, this time around it seems the Tribune is much more willing to be critical of the republican candidate, but also to put some support behind John Anderson, or at least attempt to provide awareness for him. Two editorials specifically discuss Anderson, the conservative independent representative from Illinois. “John Andersons Strange Slide” and “The Anderson Platform.” The latter⁵⁰ of course discusses the platform of the third-party candidate. In fact, it came shortly after a large release from Anderson’s campaign of a 317-page long platform. The newspaper claims this is because to be successful Anderson needs to grab and demand attention, thanks to his unique position between the two larger parties. The editorial summarizes and comments on some of the larger points of the massive document. Anderson has a lot to say, which is always important in a 3rd party candidacy. Realistically, it is unlikely that a 3rd party candidate would ever become president when compared to the two massive American policies with grand name recognition. That is alright, as this is often not the goal of this sort of candidate. Instead it is to get the other candidates to talk about and continue to talk about their beliefs that the supporters they can rally flock to. Because of this, in fact, it could be said that a third-party

⁵⁰ “The Anderson Platform” (Chicago: The Chicago Tribune, 1980)

candidate is a symptom of a critical election. The important ideas that they put out effort to make known to the public show a form of activism, which is electoral participation, as well as making more people more concerned about the issues at stake than they may otherwise be. The two criteria for a critical election other than realigning.

“John Andersons Strange Slide”⁵¹ dives more into the problems that Anderson is facing as a third-party candidate. Of course, as a third-party candidate there are many issues that make it hard to compete with the larger candidates. Anderson was unable to get loans from many banks, as they feared he would not be able to pay them back, he found it hard to draw voter support, and when he had a televised debate with Reagan, something many thought would help him, he ended up losing ground in the polls instead. The editorial posits this may be because of the lack of a party apparatus, or perhaps because the dissatisfaction we thought was against the major parties was against politicians in general, which Anderson still most certainly was. This gives more insight into this idea that seems to be presented in many of these editorials that dissatisfaction was a major part in these critical elections. Does this dissatisfaction somehow represent a large upheaval in the voter base, perhaps one that may even let a third party win, or does it instead represent people wanting to jump ship from the idea of politicians and have something different. And if so, in that case, how does the disdain for politicians translate into an election that results in a realigning event. Does something occur during the presidency that re-energizes one parties support for their candidates? Perhaps to do so it almost forces some sort of presidential appeasement that continues the realignment onwards.

⁵¹ “John Andersons Strange Slide” (Chicago: The Chicago Tribune, 1980)

The other three editorials continue the trend of foreign policy being significant. Two discuss events seen as either performative or as a failure from Carter, and the last discusses the hope of a Reagan presidency foreign policy according to Henry Kissinger. The editorial “Iran’s Bad Bargain”⁵² discusses the Iranian Hostage Crisis, a roughly year and a half holding of staff of the American Embassy in Tehran hostage. Several fumbled negotiations and rescue attempts resulted in the crisis being drawn out longer than it could have been. People saw this as one of the peak examples of a failure of Jimmy Carter’s foreign policy and showed one of the examples of what people were so against continuing into the next presidency. In many individuals’ minds, this crisis was caused by Carter, so why would they elect him for another four years of actions like this? This among other foreign policy failures were a major issue that could have helped to “criticalize” the election. The editorial discusses a number of bad faith or optimistic bargains on Iran’s part in order to release the hostages and Iran to gain as much as they could over it. It included the unfreezing of assets credited to Iran, among others, and a “tiered” release based on what bargains were fulfilled and when. This all came around election day, and almost forced Carter to table it so that such news on what happened to the hostages would not affect his chances of victory.

The next editorial “The Politics of Peace Talks”⁵³ discusses one more aspect of Carter’s foreign policy. Many were starting to think that there may be ulterior motives with follow up talks to the breakthrough Camp David accords. Voices began to say that why else would the man who started them announce the new peace talks without taking any real steps towards it, if not to help Carter and show that Carter could succeed in some aspects of foreign policy. The editorial

⁵² “Iran’s Bad Bargain” (Chicago: The Chicago Tribune, 1980)

⁵³ “The Politics of Peace Talks” (Chicago: The Chicago Tribune, 1980)

even claims that Carter could just be announcing these peace talks so that he can gain politics points and him not actually planning to follow through post the election. This aspect of the election where people are now seeing the current presidents practices as insincere and an attempt to get some help to win, is likely indicative of that same political dissatisfaction that was discussed earlier, and another way to show that the dissatisfaction is fully pervasive into this election cycle and could show that the dissatisfaction is truly another aspect of a critical election, showing how involved the people may become.

The last editorial is titled “Henry Kissinger’s Prescription”⁵⁴ and continues to hit on the problem of Carter’s foreign policy. It discusses a Kissinger speech that rebukes the confusion and inconsistency of the Carter foreign policy and says that Reagan will be able to be consistent and achieve much more than Carter ever did. The fact that The Chicago Tribune has dedicated three of these chosen editorials to the foreign policy of Carter, or others discussing its failures or their distrust in it, shows just how much of a problem it could have been. Just like Goldwater’s foreign policy would have been a disaster, and he was not elected, Carter’s foreign policy was seen by many as a disaster and he was not re-elected. By parsing all these editorials, it seems obvious that there is something there with foreign policy, and that it may be one of the more important aspects of a Presidents platform when it comes to these elections. Or perhaps it is just important to not be bad at it, like those two candidates were feared to be.

The LA Times

The LA Times continues to show a bit of a different view than the New York Times or Chicago Tribune. The paper is more focused and seems to be more tailored to the local family or

⁵⁴ “Henry Kissinger’s Prescription”

reader, and more accessible than the other Newspapers editorials. As such, one of the editorials is dedicated to an overview of the candidates, two are public policy issues that could directly impact the reader, and the remainder discuss foreign policy and what could happen with the presidential candidates.

The editorial “A Good Look at the Candidates”⁵⁵ discusses the debate between Reagan and Carter, and what that showed us. It discusses many things that are unusual in this election. Both candidates being very “politician-like” even though Reagan started out as a movie star, and Carter started out as a peanut farmer. They also noted how Carter seemed to be on the attack which is uncharacteristic for an incumbent president. Perhaps many of these unusual happenings could be indicative of the important status of this election.

Some of the public policy and more domestic issues in the editorials are brought up by the editorials “Steel Shield” and “Families Dust to More Than Dust.” Steel Shield⁵⁶ refers to the US Steel industry and the problems that it has been facing. Under pressure from foreign steel and what they refer to as dumping, a practice in which a foreign producer will offer very low prices in order to drive local producers out of business so that they can step in, and claims that temporary relief like lessening environmental regulations and tax breaks cannot fix the problem. While big issues are of course of great importance during an election, it is interesting to see what small issues may also be at play, and how the candidates may pick up the issue and claim to do something to help in order to win their vote. The editorial continues to talk about how Carter has tried to help the steel industry, but has been overwhelmed and attempted to use a price trigger mechanism for when steel is sold under an unfeasible price, it can be taken care of swiftly. The

⁵⁵ “A Good Look at the Candidates” (Los Angeles: The Los Angeles Times, 1980)

⁵⁶ “Steel Shield” (Los Angeles: The Los Angeles Times, 1980)

steel industry says that this price still lets in some cheap steal since it is set so low, but the improvement of this, or Reagan saying he could fix it, could help either candidate to gain a bit of support for their dedication to helping blue collar industry.

In the latter editorial “Families Dust to More Than Dust”⁵⁷ it is discussed how public policy is affecting the traditional family at home. The editorial claims that unemployment and inflation lead to drug and alcohol problems, and that sexual equality movements also lead to reduced normal family life. This once more shows another issue of concern locally that could influence the choice in the upcoming election. Since to the voters this was caused by the economic issues that are currently at play, and Carter can be blamed for this issues, it looks like it may be another thing that is bad for Carter, and another issue that could be important to the people. Especially those in between on Reagan and Carter who might see family values as a large issue.

The last two editorials continue with the foreign policy trend. “In a Word, Censorship”⁵⁸ discusses the proposals by UNESCO along with the “communist and third world countries” about the maintaining of media that seeks to promote peace and unity. The LA Times sees this as a way in which the limited world government seeks to restrict the free speech of American media, and says that any organization that seeks to do this should not be an organization that is supported by the United States. This again showcases a smaller issue that could be something important to some voters. Would leaving UNESCO because of this benefit a candidate, or would it prove more beneficial to some to continue. Do enough people even care about this issue?

⁵⁷ “Families: Dust to More Than Dust” (Los Angeles: The Los Angeles Times, 1980)

⁵⁸ “In a Word, Censorship” (Los Angeles: The Los Angeles Times, 1980)

“Shrillness can Hurt”⁵⁹ discusses a meeting between European countries and the United States that seeks to continue in the spirit of the Helsinki Accords which help to maintain human rights throughout the nations that participated in it. This shows another large issue which continues to be relations with the Soviet Union. The editorial asserts that Russia violated the Helsinki Accords several times, but also that it has been beneficial to Russia. This seems to be one more issue within which the electoral might find importance to place on the election. It seems that there are many issues that are important to at least someone surrounding this election.

Findings & Conclusions

There are many things that the coverage of the two elections seem to have in common across the newspapers that could potentially point to there being some identifier of how it is possible to identify if an election is critical while it is happening. There were two major things that were namely noticed throughout both elections and all three newspapers. The first is that there is an air of political dissatisfaction that pervades the editorials that surround the election, and the second is that foreign policy seems to be extremely important, but it is possible that other unifying issues could stand in for foreign policy. The political dissatisfaction is apparent when editorials openly discuss the idea of one candidate as the almost default choice, which seemed to happen often in the 1964 editorials, and in 1980 when editorials like the one titled “The Usual Imperfect Choice” seemed to grow more and more common. Alongside this, one candidate would often be not ideal for America and cause people to become disinterested as they knew the choice, they would end up making. This is transparent through the fears produced by Goldwater in 1964, and the dissatisfaction with Carter’s foreign policy in 1980. Sentiments caused by such

⁵⁹ “Shrillness can Hurt” (Los Angeles: The Los Angeles Times, 1980)

dissatisfaction often seem to lead into presidential candidates becoming issues just as much as their policies have been. Foreign policy also seems to play a massive role, at least according to what can be seen in the editorials. This is, in fact, rather interesting that foreign policy seems to play such a large role in these elections. Typically, when we think of critical elections it is not foreign policy that is discussed, but rather domestic policy, and how these elections are seen to have changed and realigned the domestic policy of the time. This can be seen in the two elections that were mentioned earlier as the most called critical elections, 1896 and 1932. 1896 is the election of McKinley that led to a long portion of republican dominance of the presidential role which is well known, and the 1932 election was of course that of FDR, who served the most terms out of every president and rolled out the New Deal, a collection of policies that was extremely far reaching and continues to have wide and broad implications within our government to this day. This is what most people see when looking at these elections, and it is what I saw when choosing the 1964 and 1980 elections, as I saw what they meant for modern domestic policy, specifically in terms of conservatism and liberalism. However, it is now apparent that foreign policy probably played a great role in these elections, at least in the moment. It's likely that the other two elections did not exist in a vacuum either, specifically 1932. This election took place right before the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, something that would probably produce massive foreign policy pressure in the moment as well. In terms of the elections examined within this thesis, most of the editorials seemed to be about one or more foreign policy issues, especially those that were exacerbated by the Cold War. However, since both elections seem to have this in common there is likely something there. It is likely that critical elections as we know them could be more likely to occur when there is some sort of large outside pressure on the United States, such as that generated by the Soviet Union,

China, and Iran in the 1964 and 1980 elections. It seems likely that these two factors may play a large role in the environment that can generate a critical election, but is this enough to determine if one is a critical election or not, and are these factors even exclusive to a critical election? This may be impossible to tell just by the scope of this thesis alone, however, it does seem that there is some way to tell if the current election is critical from the media alone. In order to better refine these factors and perhaps identify more, in the future another project could be done that uses a similar framework to this one and looks at many other elections, both ones identified as critical and noncritical to compare and contrast the editorial coverage of both categories, rather than just two individual critical elections. Thanks to the small sample size of this thesis, based on two out of many presidential elections, it is hard to say whether the findings will hold up for all elections, but there at least has been some insight provided. Critical Elections may on top of the three criteria identified in the body of this work, also be those in which the voter base is greatly dissatisfied politically, especially in regard to a specific candidate, and there are large foreign policy pressures or issues.

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