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The 1968 United States presidential election was one of the most tumultuous and defining moments in American political history. At the center of this storm was Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic nominee, whose candidacy was marred by widespread discontent among various segments of the electorate, particularly young Americans. This unpopularity among youth was driven by a complex mix of social, political, and cultural factors that reflected the broader upheavals of the 1960s. Understanding why Hubert Humphrey struggled to connect with young voters requires an exploration of the political climate of the era, his positions on key issues, and the rising influence of youth activism that challenged traditional political establishments.

The Political Climate of 1968 and the Rise of Youth Activism

The year 1968 was a pivotal period marked by social upheaval, protests, and a desire for change among the younger generation. The Vietnam War, civil rights struggles, and the countercultural movement fueled a sense of disillusionment with mainstream politics. Young Americans, especially students, became vocal critics of government policies and societal norms.

Key Factors Contributing to Youth Unpopularity

- 1. Opposition to the Vietnam War:** The Vietnam War was a central issue for young Americans, many of whom viewed the conflict as unjust and imperialistic. Hubert Humphrey, as Vice President under Lyndon B. Johnson, was closely associated with the Johnson administration's escalation of the war, which alienated many youthful voters seeking an end to U.S. involvement.
- 2. Association with the Establishment:** Humphrey's political image was tied to the Democratic establishment and the Johnson administration. For many young voters, this made him appear out of touch with the anti-war movement and the desire for radical change.
- 3. Limited Appeal to Countercultural Movements:** The 1960s counterculture,

characterized by protests, music, and new social norms, often viewed traditional politicians skeptically. Humphrey's more traditional stance on social issues contrasted with the evolving values of the youth movement.

4. **Prolonged Democratic Convention Controversy:** The 1968 Democratic National Convention was marred by protests and allegations of party establishment manipulation. The chaos and perceived corruption further eroded young voters' confidence in the Democratic Party and its nominee.

Humphrey's Political Positions and Their Impact on Youth Support

Humphrey's policy positions and political record played a significant role in shaping his relationship with young voters. While he was a seasoned politician with a commitment to social justice, some of his stances clashed with the priorities of the youth demographic.

Support for Civil Rights and Social Programs

Despite his association with the Johnson administration's Vietnam policies, Humphrey had a notable record supporting civil rights legislation and social welfare programs. Young voters who valued these issues might have seen him as an ally, but this was not enough to overcome other barriers.

Stance on the Vietnam War

1. **Support for War Escalation:** Humphrey's backing of the Vietnam War, including increased troop deployments, made him unpopular among anti-war youth. Many believed he was a continuation of Johnson's policies that they vehemently opposed.
2. **Opposition to Peace Proposals:** His cautious approach to ending the war failed to resonate with a generation demanding immediate withdrawal and peace negotiations.

Position on Social and Cultural Issues

Humphrey's moderate stance on social issues did not align with the more radical positions of youth activists, such as those in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) or the emerging New Left movement.

The Role of the 1968 Democratic Convention and Media Coverage

The Democratic Convention held in Chicago became a symbol of party division and political chaos, further alienating young voters. The media coverage highlighted police brutality and protests, shaping public perception.

Impact on Youth Perception

- **Perception of the Democratic Party:** The chaos at the convention reinforced the idea that the Democratic Party was out of touch and incapable of leading the nation through its crises, discouraging young voters from supporting Humphrey.
- **Loss of Trust:** The televised clashes between police and protesters contributed to a sense of disillusionment with traditional political processes among youth.

The Emergence of Alternative Candidates and Movements

As Humphrey struggled to connect with young voters, alternative candidates and movements gained momentum, reflecting the desire for more radical change.

George McGovern and the Progressive Wing

McGovern's campaign appealed to the anti-war and progressive youth segments, emphasizing withdrawal from Vietnam and social justice reforms. His more left-leaning stance contrasted sharply with Humphrey's moderate approach.

The Impact of Third-Party Candidates

Candidates like George Wallace and others also drew votes away from Humphrey, particularly among disaffected youth who sought different avenues for expressing their dissatisfaction.

The Legacy of Hubert Humphrey's Unpopularity with Young People

Humphrey's unpopularity among young Americans in 1968 had lasting implications for the Democratic Party and American politics.

Political Consequences

1. **Divisions within the Democratic Party:** The youth movement's dissatisfaction contributed to party fractures that persisted into future elections.
2. **Shift in Campaign Strategies:** Later candidates recognized the importance of engaging with youth issues and activism to secure electoral success.
3. **Influence on Future Social Movements:** The 1968 experience underscored the power of youth activism, shaping political campaigns and policies for decades.

Broader Cultural Impact

The disconnect between Humphrey and young voters exemplified the generational divide of the 1960s, highlighting the need for politicians to adapt to changing social dynamics and the rising influence of youth culture.

Conclusion

Hubert Humphrey's candidacy in the 1968 presidential election was significantly hampered by his unpopularity among young Americans. His association with the Vietnam War policies, perceived alignment with the political establishment, and the chaotic Democratic Convention all contributed to a widening generational gap. The youth movement of the 1960s, characterized by anti-war protests, civil rights activism, and cultural upheaval, sought leaders who embodied their desire for radical change. Humphrey, despite his experience and commitment to social justice, failed to resonate with this vital demographic. His unpopularity among young voters served as a reflection of the broader societal shifts taking place at the time and underscored the importance of understanding and engaging the next generation in political processes. The lessons from 1968 continue to influence political strategies and youth engagement efforts today, emphasizing the enduring significance of connecting with young voters in a rapidly changing world.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why was Hubert Humphrey unpopular with young voters during the 1968 presidential election?

Many young people viewed Humphrey as associated with the Vietnam War and the establishment, which conflicted with their anti-war and reformist sentiments, leading to his unpopularity among youth.

How did Hubert Humphrey's stance on the Vietnam War affect his support among young voters?

Humphrey's support for the Vietnam War and his association with the Johnson administration alienated many young Americans who were protesting the war, reducing his appeal to the youth demographic.

Did Hubert Humphrey's background influence his popularity among young people?

Humphrey's long-standing political career and ties to the Democratic establishment made him less appealing to young voters seeking change and reform, especially during the tumultuous 1960s.

What role did the 1968 student protests play in Humphrey's unpopularity among young Americans?

Widespread student protests against the Vietnam War and social injustice positioned Humphrey as part of the political system they opposed, further diminishing his support among youth.

How did the other candidates in 1968 appeal to young voters compared to Humphrey?

Candidates like Robert F. Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy gained support from young voters through their anti-war platforms and calls for social change, contrasting with Humphrey's more traditional Democratic stance.

Was Hubert Humphrey's unpopularity among young people reflected in the election results?

Yes, Humphrey failed to secure strong support from young voters, which contributed to his overall loss in the election, especially in key states with large youth populations.

Did Humphrey attempt to reach out to young voters during his campaign?

Humphrey's campaign efforts to appeal to young voters were limited compared to his opponents, partly due to his association with the establishment and the Vietnam War stance.

How did the Democratic Party's internal divisions affect Humphrey's popularity among youth?

Internal disagreements within the Democratic Party, especially over the Vietnam War, alienated many young voters who saw the party as divided and unresponsive to their concerns.

In what ways did the cultural shifts of the 1960s influence young people's perception of Humphrey?

The countercultural movement emphasized anti-establishment sentiments and social activism, which made Humphrey's traditional political image less appealing to young, progressive Americans.

What legacy did Hubert Humphrey leave regarding youth engagement in politics?

Humphrey's unpopularity among young voters highlighted the growing importance of youth activism and the need for politicians to address the concerns of the younger generation in future elections.

Additional Resources

Hubert Humphrey: The Democratic Nominee in the 1968 Presidential Election and His Unpopularity Among Young People

The 1968 U.S. presidential election remains one of the most tumultuous and consequential in American history. At the heart of this political maelstrom was Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic nominee whose candidacy was marked by complex dynamics, including a significant disconnect with the younger generation. To understand why Humphrey struggled to garner enthusiasm among young voters, it is essential to explore his background, political stance, the socio-political climate of 1968, and the specific factors that contributed to his unpopularity with youth. This comprehensive analysis aims to shed light on these elements and provide a nuanced understanding of Humphrey's position in this pivotal election.

Background and Political Profile of Hubert Humphrey

Who Was Hubert Humphrey?

Hubert Humphrey served as a prominent figure in American politics for decades leading up to 1968. Born in 1911 in South Dakota, Humphrey's career spanned roles as a U.S. senator from Minnesota, Vice President under Lyndon B. Johnson, and a dedicated advocate for civil rights and social programs. Known for his charismatic oratory, unwavering commitment to liberal causes, and pragmatic approach, Humphrey was often regarded as a representative of the Democratic Party's progressive wing.

His political philosophy centered around expanding social safety nets, advocating for civil rights, and promoting active government intervention to address economic inequality. These stances earned him both admiration and opposition, but they also positioned him as a familiar and somewhat traditional figure within the Democratic establishment.

Humphrey's Path to the Nomination

Humphrey's journey to the Democratic presidential nomination was unconventional in 1968. By the time of the Democratic National Convention, he was serving as Vice President and was seen as the candidate of the party establishment. His campaign was rooted in his association with President Johnson's policies, especially the Vietnam War, which was increasingly unpopular among many Democratic voters and the broader American public.

Despite this, Humphrey's campaign was characterized by significant unity within the party's establishment, but it also faced formidable opposition from anti-war Democrats, civil rights activists, and a rising contingent of young, progressive voters seeking a different direction.

The Socio-Political Climate of 1968

Widespread Social Unrest

The year 1968 was a watershed moment in American history, marked by widespread protests, social upheaval, and cultural shifts. The Vietnam War had become a focal point of dissent, with young Americans leading protests against what many saw as an unjust and unwinnable conflict. The civil rights movement was reaching new heights, advocating for

racial equality and justice, often clashing with conservative forces.

The assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy further heightened the sense of chaos and disillusionment, leaving the nation polarized and restless. The Democratic Convention in Chicago became a symbol of this unrest, with protests turning violent and exposing deep divisions within the party and the country.

The Youth Movement and Its Political Expectations

Young Americans in 1968 were at the forefront of social change, energized by the ideals of peace, civil rights, and anti-establishment sentiments. The youth movement was increasingly skeptical of traditional political figures, favoring candidates who embodied change, rebellion, and progressive ideals.

This generation's political expectations included:

- An end to the Vietnam War
- Greater racial equality and civil rights
- Environmental concerns and social justice
- Democratic reforms that reflected their values
- A rejection of "business as usual" politics

Their discontent with older politicians, especially those seen as complicit or aligned with the Vietnam War, was palpable. This created a challenging environment for any candidate, like Humphrey, associated with the political establishment and the Johnson administration's policies.

Why Hubert Humphrey Was Unpopular With Young People

Association with the Vietnam War

One of the primary reasons Humphrey was unpopular among young voters was his close association with the Vietnam War. As Vice President, Humphrey was seen as a supporter of President Johnson's policies, which included escalating U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Although Humphrey claimed to be personally opposed to the war, he largely supported the Johnson administration's approach, and his political record reflected that stance.

This association made him a symbol of the status quo for many young Americans who viewed the war as unjust and destructive. The anti-war movement, led by students and activists, viewed Humphrey as part of the machinery responsible for prolonging the conflict. His refusal to oppose the war openly on the campaign trail alienated him from the

anti-war youth, who desired a candidate committed to ending U.S. military involvement.

Key points:

- Seen as Johnson's heir and supporter
- No strong anti-war stance during the campaign
- Symbol of the establishment's resistance to change

Perceived Conservatism and Lack of Progressive Reforms

While Humphrey championed civil rights and social welfare, many young people perceived him as politically cautious and ultimately conservative compared to the revolutionary spirit of the youth movement. His emphasis on maintaining the status quo and incremental change failed to resonate with a generation eager for bold reforms.

This perception was reinforced by his voting record on certain issues, which sometimes appeared to favor existing power structures over revolutionary change. For example, although Humphrey supported civil rights legislation, his perceived inaction or cautious approach on other social issues led to skepticism among young progressives.

Highlights:

- Seen as part of the political establishment resistant to radical change
- Did not champion the anti-establishment ethos
- Failed to articulate a compelling vision that aligned with youth aspirations

Failure to Connect with the Anti-War and Civil Rights Movements

The youth movement of 1968 was not monolithic, but there was a significant segment that prioritized anti-war activism and civil rights. Humphrey's connections to the Johnson administration and his cautious stance on the Vietnam War made him seem out of touch.

Furthermore, civil rights activists, while generally supportive of Humphrey's legislative record, sometimes viewed him as too aligned with political expediency rather than authentic advocacy. For young civil rights supporters, his message lacked the revolutionary fervor needed to mobilize their enthusiasm.

Key issues:

- Lack of a compelling anti-war message
- Insufficient engagement with radical youth groups
- Failure to inspire the youth with a vision of profound societal change

The Role of Key Events and Campaign Dynamics

Several events during the 1968 campaign further deepened youth disillusionment:

- The Democratic Convention's violent protests contrasted sharply with Humphrey's image as a traditional party figure.
- The emergence of third-party candidates, such as George Wallace, who appealed to conservative and segregationist sentiments, shifted the political landscape.
- The widespread media coverage of protests and unrest made Humphrey's campaign appear out of touch with the revolutionary energy of the youth.

Consequences and Legacy of Humphrey's Youth Unpopularity

Impact on the Election Results

Humphrey narrowly lost the 1968 election to Republican Richard Nixon, with third-party candidate George Wallace siphoning votes away from him, especially in the South. However, his unpopularity among young voters was a significant factor in his overall campaign performance.

Young voters, who had historically leaned toward Democratic candidates, especially during the New Deal era, showed tepid support or abstained altogether. This lack of enthusiasm contributed to the broader challenge Humphrey faced in uniting the Democratic base.

Lessons for Future Candidates

Humphrey's experience in 1968 offers valuable lessons for future political campaigns:

- The importance of connecting with the youth demographic's values and aspirations.
- The necessity of addressing key issues like war and civil rights with authenticity and boldness.
- Recognizing that being perceived as part of the political establishment can alienate potential supporters, especially during times of social upheaval.

Conclusion: The Complex Legacy of Hubert Humphrey and Youth Politics

Hubert Humphrey's 1968 presidential campaign is a compelling case study in the challenges of appealing to a generation seeking radical change in a period of societal upheaval. His association with the Vietnam War, perceived cautiousness, and inability to resonate with the anti-establishment sentiments of young Americans contributed significantly to his unpopularity among youth voters.

While Humphrey's record on civil rights and social welfare remains commendable, the political landscape of 1968 demanded more than traditional liberalism; it required a candidate who could embody the revolutionary spirit of a generation poised to redefine America's future.

In retrospect, Humphrey's experience underscores the importance of authentic engagement with emerging social movements and the necessity for political figures to adapt their messaging to meet the aspirations of a changing electorate. His story remains a vital chapter in understanding the intersection of youth politics, social change, and presidential campaigns during one of America's most turbulent eras.

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