

**From '68 to '08:
How the Times they are a-Changin' for the Better, Worse, and Not at all**

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The NET documentary '68: *The Year Nebraska Mattered* tells the fascinating tale of the Cornhusker State's role in one of the most memorable and tumultuous years in 20th century American electoral history. With interviews and rare archival footage, Bill Kelly and friends show how (1) Nebraskans who worked for Bobby Kennedy's successful Nebraska campaign still feel the pain of his assassination some 40 years later, (2) a hard-fought Democratic primary did not affect the general election outcome for the Republican Party, (3) Nelson Rockefeller ignited the liberal wing of the Republican Party while George Wallace's campaign was fueling race riots, (4) and Ronald Reagan got his start in presidential politics.

Four decades later, our nation is once again engaging in an unpopular war during a year that it will elect a new president. Once again, the Democratic primary had an upstart anti-war candidate (Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy in 1968, Barack Obama in 2008) and an establishment candidate who was supposed to coast to the nomination (Hubert H. Humphrey and Hillary Rodham Clinton, respectively) while the Republican primary was won by a military veteran, previous presidential election-losing GOP survivor whose time had come (Richard Nixon in '68, John McCain today). But what of the country itself? Do Americans view government in 2008 in much the same way as they did in 1968?

This short essay demonstrates how Americans' political attitudes about government and public policy have improved, worsened, and stayed the same since 1968. The data come from the American National Elections Study, a survey administered by the University of Michigan and funded by the National Science Foundation, which measures public political attitudes immediately before and after every presidential election since 1952. As the documentary suggests, the data tell the story of a nation that did lose some of its innocence in the year of the Kennedy and King assassinations, a violent Democratic convention, and an unpopular war. On the other hand, some attitudes about government and a great deal of voting behavior have held steady in the decades following that turbulent year, suggesting a resilience and consistency in the American people.

Attitudes and Identities on the Rise...

Table 1 shows the attitudes and group identities that have significantly grown since 1968. The first major story that had its roots in the '68 Nebraska primary is the rise of Republican identifiers in the American electorate. With Nixon's victory (and re-election in 1972) and the beginning of Ronald Reagan's rise in national politics, the percentage of Americans identifying themselves as Republicans grew from 33% to nearly 42% from 1968 to 2004, falling a bit (back to 39-40%) in 2008. Still, the Democrats no longer control, as they did prior to 1968, the nation's southern states in presidential politics. Indeed, the Democrats' stranglehold on Congress disappeared in 1994, not to be

won back until 2006. The age of Reagan, which got its start in the 1968 primary, has led to a significant increase in members of the GOP.

While Table 1 is bad news for Democrats, it is good news for Republicans. Bad news for all in Washington comes when we explore the percentage of people who believe that government officials are crooked. Barely a quarter of the public felt this way in 1968, while over 40% find reason to believe that our elected representatives are dishonest. Fallout from the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal are oft-cited culprits for this increase in cynicism and skepticism about government officials.

On the other hand, just as more voters are contacted by political parties in modern elections, the American people are much more willing to participate in the time-honored pastime of persuasion during an election season. In the modern era of resurgent political parties, the Democratic and Republican apparatuses are contacting 18% more voters than they did in 1968. By the same token we've seen an increase of 15% in the number of regular people who try to convince someone else how to vote on Election Day. This is somewhat surprising when viewed through the lens of the documentary's focus on the highly-motivated, involved politicians of 1968 Nebraska who were the project's interview subjects. Though not reported in Table 1, the number of Americans who consider themselves "strong partisans," on both the right and the left, has increased dramatically since 1968. Somewhat paradoxically, there are also more moderates than ever; signifying that while a sizable portion of the country is significantly divided, an equally sizable portion plant themselves squarely in the political middle.

Table 1

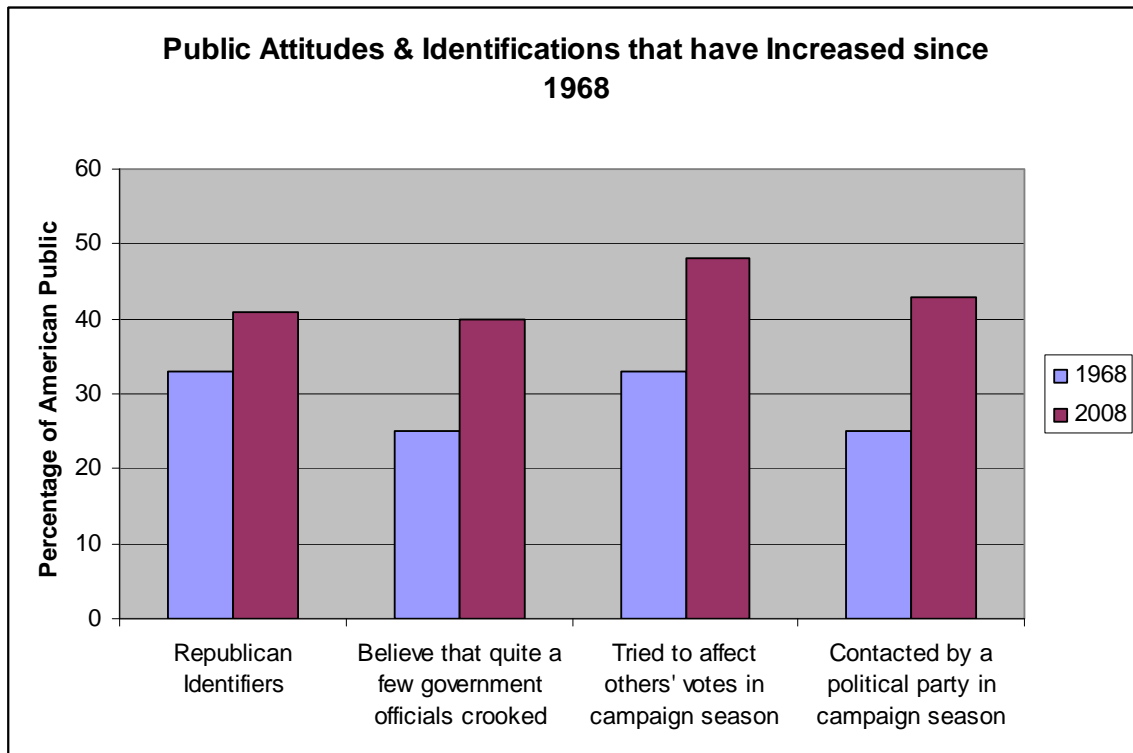


Table 2 reports the political beliefs, attitudes about government, and group identifications that have declined since 1968. Just as the last 40 years had an increase in

Republicans in the electorate, the past four decades hosted a decline of Americans in the Democratic Party (from 55% in 1968 to 45% in 2004, and back up to 49% in 2008). Similarly, the controversial Vietnam War hurt President Lyndon Johnson (a Democrat) in 1968 while the war in Iraq has decimated Americans' approval of President Bush (a Republican) in 2008.

Table 2

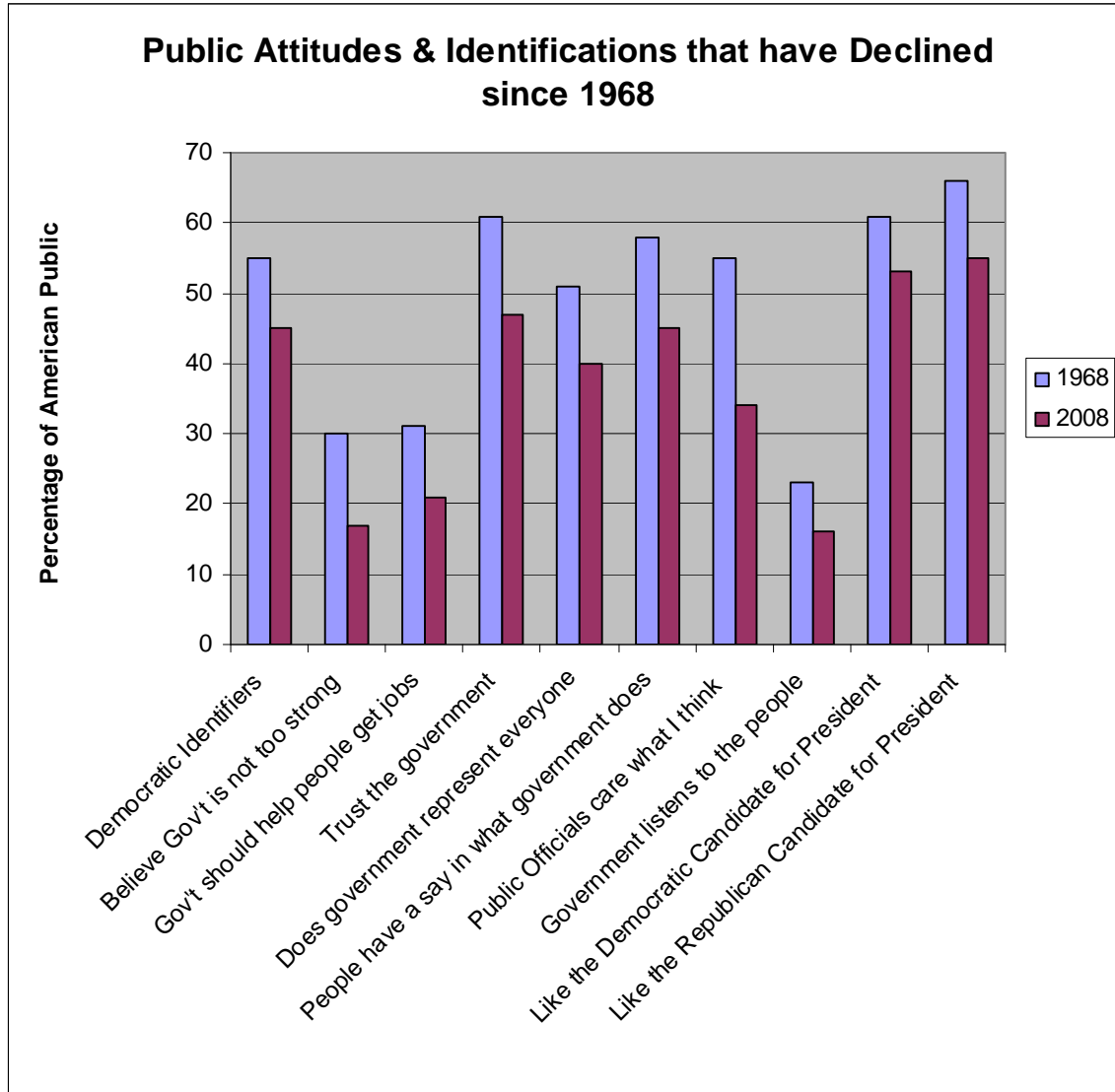


Table 2 reports more evidence that Americans' attitudes about their government have become decidedly more negative in the long aftermath of the '68 primaries. Fewer Americans think the government is not too strong, fewer think government listens to the people, and fewer think public officials care what regular people think about important issues of the day. Not surprisingly, then, the degree of trust Americans have in their government, a cornerstone of democratic health, has dropped precipitously. While 61% of the public thought that the government could be trusted to do what was right, only 47% of the public think so today. Trust in government has steadily declined since 1968;

it did spike up dramatically after September 11th, but just as quickly retreated to its two score decline.

As the attitudes about government have become more negative, it makes sense that Americans want the government to play less of a role in public life. Table 2 shows that while a third of the public thought the government should see to it that Americans are given a job less than a fifth of Americans think the same today. Concomitantly, Americans just don't seem to like the people running for the highest office in the land as much as they did 40 years ago, regardless of the candidate's partisan affiliation.

The picture that Tables 1 and 2 paint of the American electorate is not an especially pretty one. Since the landmark election of 1968, it seems as though sizable portions of the public think that the government is less deserving of trust and power just as the government (in the people's view) cares less about the people, is more crooked, and is too powerful! Table 3 provides evidence intimating that while some attitudes have worsened over time, many others are strikingly steady, speaking to the health of our republican democracy.

While Americans' partisan affiliations and willingness to try and persuade their neighbors how to vote have changed dramatically since 1968, many other political behaviors of 2008 are eerily similar to the behavior of 1968 America. The number of those casting a "split-ticket" ballot (presidential vote for one party, congressional vote for the other) is statistically identical. Despite the changes in Republican and Democratic partisan identification in the electorate, Americans in 2008 are voting for either congressional Republicans or Democrats at the same levels they were in 1968.

Table 2 demonstrated a dramatic drop in several measures of trust and confidence in government, but Table 3 shows that over 83% of Americans still believe that elections force politicians to pay attention to the public. That said, it is still true (9% in 1968, 13% today... a statistical tie) that most folks do not give money to candidates for office during election years.

From a policy perspective, just over a third of the public believes in 2008 – a year when one of the two major parties' candidates for president is black – that the government should make sure that African Americans get fair treatment when applying for jobs. The same was true in 1968 – a year when race riots and racially-motivated assassinations swept the nation. Not surprisingly, a solid majority still believes that the government wastes tax money.

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, American National Election Studies from 1968 and 2008 show that despite exceptionally unpopular wars, a decided majority of the American people want the United States to be involved in world affairs. Whether involved in Vietnam or Iraq, the American people see their nation as a, if not the, key player on the world's stage

The data presented in this short essay suggest a few conclusions about politics in the United States since 1968. First, Americans are far less trusting of the government and the elected officials that inhabit it. Second, Americans are more willing to participate in politics by talking with their fellow Americans than they were in 1968. Third, as much as things have changed, many others things have stayed the same. Indeed, the 1968 election electrified both Nebraska and the nation. Candidates for the highest office in the land not only visited the Cornhusker State, they actively fought for Nebraskans' votes. Just as Nebraskans gave upstart Bobby Kennedy a victory in '68, Cornhuskers gave Barack

Obama a much needed win in 2008. Whether Nebraskans cast their final ballots on the other side of the aisle for Republican John McCain as they did for Republican Richard Nixon in 1968 remains to be seen...

Table 3

