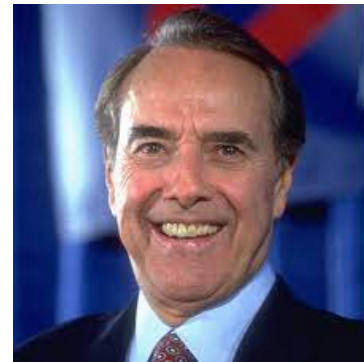


A Look Back At Politics In The 1960s And 1970s - A Remembrance To Goad Us To Preserve Representative Democracy In The U.S. Today
(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

Political pundits and journalist who cover politics spend much of their time describing the unworkable situation created by today's party polarization in Congress and in most state legislatures. The U.S. Senate provides the best example of this reality. Democrats must garner all fifty votes of their Senators to pass a Bill, because Republicans are committed to unanimously vote against any legislation proposed by the Dems.

An event last week prompted me to remember a time in U.S. politics when such polarization and recalcitrance were not the norms. The event was the service held at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.. to honor the life of Robert Dole. This former Republican Senator and GOP candidate for President received tributes from the members of both parties. President Joe Biden talked fondly about working with Dole for twenty-five years in the Senate, and that he could not remember one uncivil word that ever passed between them. More importantly, speakers portrayed his drive to get things done in the Senate, and how he worked with various Democratic colleagues to pass legislation such as Social Security reform. No one questioned his strong ties to the Republican Party, but they emphasized his even stronger commitment to working for the benefit of his country and the people he represented.



This tribute to Bob Dole sparked memories of my first involvement in politics in the 1960s. I grew up in a Republican household. However, when I came to disagree with my parents about some of their conservative views, I didn't have to immediately announce myself to be a committed Democrat. In that decade and for much of the 1970s, there were as many liberal Republicans as there were liberal Democrats.

In fact, each Party possessed liberal, moderate, and conservative wings. If you remember your recent American history, "the Solid South" meant that most Senators and Congressmen from the southern states were Democrats. At the same time, liberal New York often elected Republican Senators and members of Congress.

This diversity within both major Parties meant that heated debates and necessary compromises took place during each Party's internal deliberations. Furthermore, liberals, conservatives or moderates often reached across the aisle to form coalitions in support of various legislation. The major Civil Rights Acts passed under Lyndon Johnson would never have become law without liberal and moderate Republicans joining liberal and moderate Democrats to overcome the South's resistance to them.

Living in this moment, it is hard to believe that my first official ties to a publication was my appointment in 1967 as the Ohio correspondent for the Ripon Forum, a monthly magazine published by the Ripon Society, a liberal Republican research and advocacy group based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ohio at that time mirrored this party diversity, as conservative,

liberal, and moderate individuals represented the Republican Party. In Cincinnati, Charles P. Taft, the son of President William Howard Taft, served as a progressive member of City Council. Meanwhile, his nephew, Robert Taft, emerged as a moderate Congressman and then a U.S. Senator.

Meanwhile in Dayton, Ohio, voters supported a liberal Republican, Congressman, and Charles W. Whalen. Not only did Whalen support progressive domestic legislation, but he became one of the leaders in the House of Representatives opposed to the Vietnam War. I was fortunate to get to know the Dayton Congressman, and he hired me to write several position papers on the status of federal housing programs and the impact of the General Revenue Sharing Policy.

This liberal, conservative, and moderate diversity within both the Republican and Democratic Parties made it much easier for citizen-activists concerned about a particular issue to find political allies in these parties. The grassroots movement across the country opposed to the Vietnam War provides a good example of this broader opportunity for coalition building. For instance, Senator Mark Hatfield from Oregon, Charles Percy from Illinois, and Jacob Javits from New York were anti-Vietnam War Republicans, while Senator George McGovern from South Dakota, Senator Eugene McCarthy from Minnesota, and Senator Robert Kennedy from New York were their Democratic Party counterparts. Activists could temporarily join forces with representatives of either Party when a critical issue such as the War required such action.

In 1972, Senator McGovern won the Democratic nomination for President over former Vice President Hubert Humphrey, because of the thousands of anti-War activists who supported McGovern and helped organize the Senator's campaign in state primary campaigns across the country. Although I was still associated with The Ripon Society, I became McGovern's campaign chair in Ohio's Sixth Congressional District during both the state's primary and the fall campaign. During that era, activists had no problem having ties with members of both Parties when important issues were at stake.

Does looking back to how politics and government was functioning in the 1960s and 1970s teach us anything? Certainly it shows us a time when representative government and especially the two major political parties were in better health than they are today. This period of time was far from ideal, and major problems confronted the country such as the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. However, it still was a time when legislators worked across Party-lines to get things done, and democracy itself was not in jeopardy.

This "looking back article" is not the place for a thorough analysis of how things went wrong for our political and governmental systems. The growing influence of "big money" on politics was one major negative factor. The election of Ronald Reagan as President in 1980 marked the beginning of the end of diversity within the Republican Party, as liberals and moderates began to leave this more ideologically right wing organization. As the GOP became the Party of the wealthy and rural white voters, it foreshadowed the later emergence of Trump and the Party's inclination toward a more autocratic system.

As we roll up our sleeves to do what we can to restore a healthy representative democracy and to prevent the Republican Party from instituting a more autocratic governmental process, we need some positive remembrances to keep us from becoming too depressed about this

daunting work. Let this brief glimpse of politics during the 1960s and 1970s help serve this purpose.