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## Barry Goldwater

The 1964 election campaign and the rise of the GOP conservative movement

In the 1960's, the Republican Party in the United States started to move its political platform to the right. The party's conservative wing, their Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater and his election campaign of 1964 were decisive factors in this development. Bob Castelein investigates how the conservative faction increased its power, secured Goldwater's nomination and how it, despite Goldwater's defeat in the 1964 elections, ultimately managed to move the party platform in a more conservative direction.

The Republican Party (also known as the Grand Old Party, abbreviated to GOP) in the United States has seen a remarkable shift to the right in the post-World War II period. Its conservative right wing increasingly came to dominate the party and its course on a national, state, and local level. From the sixties onwards, the party platform has become more conservative, as well as the candidates the party nominated for elections. The man most often credited for this success of the GOP conservative movement in the late fifties and early sixties is the Republican politician Barry Goldwater (1909-1989). Born in Phoenix, Arizona, Barry Morris Goldwater was raised in a family of entrepreneurs with a Jewish background (even though he himself was an Episcopalian). From 1949 onwards, after a career in the family business and the Air Force, he pursued a successful career in politics on the side of the Republican Party. He became known as 'Mr. Conservative', served five terms as senator for Arizona in the Senate, and was the Republican presidential candidate in the 1964 Presidential elections. These elections, however, were won by a landslide by the incumbent President Lyndon Baines Johnson, a Democrat. Despite this apparent failure, Goldwater is still seen as an icon of American conservatism today. His influential role in the conservative

movement's dynamic period of the 1960s makes him an interesting subject of research in the context of the conservative movement in general.

From the sixties onwards, historians and political scientists have conducted research into the conservative movement, its development and its success. The perspectives they use are diverse. Some see the rise to power of the GOP conservative movement as an autonomous development, sparked by the convictions and efforts of a limited group of individuals, whereas others consider it to be a movement directly connected to developments in American society and politics. Although the research conducted so far is quite diverse in discipline and perspective, some aspects of the conservative movement are not yet fully explored. Most importantly, the question of how and why Barry Goldwater's failed presidential campaign functioned as a pivotal point in the development of the GOP conservative movement remains unanswered. Goldwater's nomination was the first real showcase of the power of the conservatives, but the elections went miserably for them. The success of the movement, however, did not seem to be stopped by this. On the contrary, it gained only more power and support. This rise to power of the conservatives culminated in the successful campaign of Ronald Reagan in 1980, marking the completion of a decisive shift to the right of the GOP. This apparently paradoxical course of events makes the developments around the 1964 elections interesting for research.

Many scholars still consider the GOP right to be the most powerful force within the party, their influence was most recently visible in the two Presidential terms served by Republican George W. Bush, an avowed conservative.<sup>1</sup> More insight in how the conservative faction of the GOP rose to power can help us understand the dynamics of the GOP conservative movement today.

### The rise to power of the GOP right: Goldwater's nomination

Goldwater's nomination to run for President on the Republican ticket was the culmination of a steady gain in power and influence of a new conservative movement. This movement operated within the Republican Party, but also to a great extent autonomously. This factor of the GOP right gaining in strength was complemented by circumstances within the party

1 Donald T. Critchlow, *The conservative ascendancy: How the GOP right made political history* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

that made it easier to secure the nomination for a relative outsider with a far from moderate program like Barry Goldwater. Notwithstanding Goldwater's own involvement in his nomination, his coming to the fore as a potential Republican nominee was to a great extent due to a conservative grassroots movement that, since the late fifties, aimed at having a conservative from the GOP run for President.

The first factor that contributed to this development was the growth of a conservative consciousness in the fifties. The magazine *National Review*, founded by William F. Buckley in 1955, was the first nationwide platform through which conservative ideas were discussed and spread.<sup>2</sup> The growth of conservative sentiment was described by *National Review* editor Frank Meyer as a delayed reaction to the New Deal policy of President Roosevelt and incorporated elements of economic libertarianism, social traditionalism, and militant anti-communism.<sup>3</sup> These nutshell mainlines of conservative ideology gave direction to the conservative movement. On the far right of the political spectrum, there was the extremist advocacy group called the John Birch Society (hereafter JBS), founded in 1958 around an ultra-conservative ideology against a supposedly conspiratory government. Because of their extremism, Goldwater did not want to be associated with the JBS, but was nevertheless wholeheartedly supported by them.<sup>4</sup> Although this strengthened his support within the GOP, his involuntary association with the JBS cost him votes in the Presidential election. JBS member Clarence Manion commissioned the ghostwriting of *Conscience of a Conservative* in Goldwater's name; an outline of conservative ideas according to Goldwater, based on his speeches. Although Goldwater was only mildly appreciative of this initiative, the book became an instant hit among conservatives.<sup>5</sup> The publishing of *Conscience of a Conservative* sparked a series of conservative books, all supportive of Goldwater. Of these, *A choice, not an echo*, by Phyllis Schlafly, was the most influential for the grassroots movement that in the end decided the outcome of the Republican primaries.<sup>6</sup>

2 Lewis L. Gould, *Grand old party: a history of the Republicans* (New York: Random House, 2003), 341.

3 Jerome L. Himmelstein, *To the right: the transformation of American conservatism* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990), 14-15.

4 Robert A. Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 136-138.

5 Ibid., 138-142.

6 Critchlow, *The conservative ascendancy*, 68.

This grassroots movement originated in the late fifties, when Goldwater first came to the attention of conservatives within the party. His successful re-election as Senator from Arizona in 1958 and his outspoken conservative principles made him the focal point of the hopes of GOP conservatives to see a conservative receive the party's Presidential nomination.<sup>7</sup> By 1960, 'Goldwater for President', 'Americans for Goldwater', and 'Draft Goldwater' groups had appeared all over the country, aiming at having Goldwater run for President in the Presidential elections of 1960.<sup>8</sup> Goldwater himself had no affiliation with these groups at all and in fact did not even intend to participate in Republican primaries but instead supported then-vice-President Richard Nixon as the Republican nominee.<sup>9</sup> After the elections, which Nixon lost by a small margin to John F. Kennedy, Goldwater started preparing to run in the 1964 Presidential election. His conservative supporters, who had already rallied behind him in 1960, focused their efforts even more, having mobilized a grassroots movement of previously unseen proportions by 1964. In the GOP primaries, Goldwater's grassroots supporters worked tirelessly to mobilize support for him and these efforts won him a considerable amount of votes.<sup>10</sup>

The competition Goldwater faced within the GOP for the Presidential nomination was of crucial importance as well. Republican heavyweight Richard Nixon, who served as vice-President under Eisenhower, decided not to run for President in 1964. He had lost the Presidential election of 1960 to John F. Kennedy as well as the 1962 gubernatorial elections in California and left the political arena for a while. Thus, with no obvious candidate present, a vacuum existed within the party that, among others, Goldwater intended to fill.<sup>11</sup> His main opponent was the Governor of New York, Nelson Rockefeller, a candidate from the more moderate Northeastern wing of the GOP. In the period before the Republican National Convention where the nominee would be elected, Rockefeller and Goldwater fought hard in primaries in several states. Just before the decisive California primary, the scales tipped to Goldwater's advantage. A year before, Rockefeller had married a divorced woman who left her husband and children for him.

7 Himmelstein, *To the right: the transformation of American conservatism*, 66-67.

8 Mary C. Brennan, *Turning right in the sixties: the conservative capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 33.

9 Critchlow, 44.

10 Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater*, 144; 194.

11 Gould, *Grand old party*, 348.

This of course to the displeasure of many socially conservative Republicans. Even though Rockefeller managed to restore his credibility to some extent by the time they campaigned in California, he was still distrusted by many conservatives. Just before the California primary, his wife gave birth to a son, focusing attention on Rockefeller's heavily contested personal life yet again.<sup>12</sup> The fact that this happened at such a decisive moment might have just cost him the votes he needed to win the nomination.

Ultimately, Goldwater won the nomination by an extremely narrow margin in the primaries.<sup>13</sup> His nomination was the culmination of a growing conservative movement both autonomously and within the GOP. The grassroots movement for Goldwater was indispensable to his success. At the Republican convention in July 1964, Goldwater was nominated as Republican Presidential candidate.

### Overcoming the defeat of the 1964 Presidential election

The Presidential elections were disastrous for Goldwater and the Republican Party. Lyndon B. Johnson won in all states, except Goldwater's home state Arizona and the five Southern states Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina, resulting in a landslide victory for the Democrats. Despite the fact that the first far-right-wing conservative candidate ever to run for President was defeated, the conservative movement within the GOP did not seem to be stopped by this. In fact, the Goldwater campaign created conditions and set in motion several developments that strengthened the conservative movement.

During the pre-1964 rise of the GOP's conservative faction, conservatives had gained an advantageous position within the party that they did not intend to give away. Even though some of Goldwater's most extreme supporters were removed from top positions within the party, the conservative faction remained a powerful force.<sup>14</sup> In Goldwater's nomination and presidential campaigns, a basis was created for subsequent conservative campaigns. This included an already mobilized grassroots movement for

12 Rick Perlstein, *Before the storm: Barry Goldwater and the unmaking of the American consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang 2001), 194-196.

13 Goldberg, 194.

14 Himmelstein, 69.

the conservative cause, large amounts of potential supporters willing to contribute to the cause, and a large network of political ties.<sup>15</sup>

The most important political figure for the conservative movement after Goldwater was Ronald Reagan. Reagan rose to fame within the party and with the public when he delivered his “A Time for Choosing” speech in support of the Goldwater campaign. By the time Goldwater had lost the Presidential election, it was clear that Reagan was the new leader of conservatism within the party. From just a few years after the failed election of 1964 onwards, Reagan helped to bring back the GOP right as the most influential faction within the party.<sup>16</sup> In the 1966 California gubernatorial election, Reagan won with a Goldwater-influenced program, further strengthening his position as the new main figure of the conservative movement.<sup>17</sup> With his charisma and celebrity-like status, he and his conservatism appealed to a far wider audience than Goldwater’s stern ideological rhetoric.

Goldwater’s electoral successes of 1964 – though limited – were also of great influence on the future course of the GOP. Goldwater’s electoral support in the Southern states (states below the Mason-Dixon line that were on the side of the Confederation during the Civil War) was unique for a Republican candidate. Until then, the Democratic Party could almost always count on a solidly Democratic electorate in the South: the ‘Solid South’. The gains that Goldwater made for the GOP in the South proved to be a permanent shift in the American electorate.<sup>18</sup> Over the course of the post-World War II period, white Southerners, who had previously consistently voted for the Democrats, had become dissatisfied with the party’s increasing promotion of civil rights. When the Civil Rights Act of 1964, outlawing major forms of (racial) discrimination and segregation, was passed, Johnson commented: ‘I think we just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come.’<sup>19</sup> He turned out to be right, as the Southern white ‘backlash’ against civil rights pushed a large part of the Southern electorate towards the Republicans.<sup>20</sup> As a Senator, Goldwater had

15 Ibid., 74.

16 Gould, 372.

17 Ibid., 368.

18 L. Sandy Maisel, *The parties respond: changes in American parties and campaigns* (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1998), 111.

19 Gould, 363.

20 Himmelstein, 75.

voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Even though he based his decision on his firm belief in states' rights (which he thought would be violated by the Act) rather than a racist opinion, the great majority of Americans considered it to be a vote against civil rights. In the Presidential election, this reputation damaged his campaign in the greater part of the United States, but won him enormous popularity with pro-segregationist voters in the South.<sup>21</sup> Many Southern Democratic politicians followed the example of Strom Thurmond, an influential Southern Democrat and governor of South Carolina, who defected to the Republican Party in 1964.<sup>22</sup> These new, conservatively oriented, Southern Republicans had a great impact on the GOP as their entry into the party meant that the balance between moderates and conservatives would permanently shift towards the conservative side.

The conservative cause was also aided by the political climate as it developed in the United States after 1964. This combination of racial tensions, domestic unrest and dissatisfaction with the Vietnam War significantly reduced President Johnson's popularity.<sup>23</sup> News of race riots, most notably those in Watts (Los Angeles) in 1965, where thirty-four people died and the National Guard had to restore order, reduced the electorate's disapproval of the GOP's civil rights record and furthermore increased disapproval of Johnson's liberal stance on domestic issues. So shortly after the GOP made a shift to the right under Goldwater, the American electorate came to be disillusioned with Democratic liberalism and more open to a more conservative policy.

Within a few years after the dramatic electoral defeat of Goldwater and the GOP in 1964, the party had restored itself and, due to the persistent influence of its right wing, embarked on a more conservative course. Even though their candidate had been defeated in the 1964 election debacle, the conservative wing maintained its strong position continued its rise to power, now led by Ronald Reagan. In the decades that followed, the gains made in the sixties by Barry Goldwater and the GOP right could be consolidated into effective conservative domination of the party and an influential role of conservatism in American politics.

21 Karl Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat revolt and the end of the solid South 1932-1986* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 236-237.

22 David Lublin, *The Republican South: democratization and partisan change* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 118-119.

23 Gould, 368.

The conservative movement, Goldwater and the events of 1964 shape the political future of the GOP

The Republican Party recovered surprisingly quickly from the electoral defeat of 1964 and so did its conservative faction. From the seventies onwards, the GOP right became the defining force within the party, culminating in the nomination and election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. These developments were to a great extent built on the conditions created by the conservative movement and Barry Goldwater in the sixties.

The Republican Party made its most spectacular revival in national politics in 1968, four years after Goldwater's defeat, with the election of Richard Nixon as President. Responding to the electorate's disillusionment with Johnson and his liberalism, Nixon pursued a conservative 'law and order' campaign.<sup>24</sup> Although conservatively oriented, he stood for a more moderate form of conservatism that appealed to a larger part of the electorate, especially compared to the ideological hard-liner Goldwater.<sup>25</sup> With Nixon, the GOP seemed to have found a candidate that moderates could live with, but who also catered to the wishes of the now very powerful conservative faction within the GOP.

Goldwater's gains in the South turned out to be permanent. He had shown that it was possible for a Republican to penetrate into the formerly Democrat-dominated Southern electorate. Following Goldwater's example, in the 1968 Presidential election Nixon developed a 'Southern strategy' to appeal to more conservatives in the American South.<sup>26</sup> Goldwater had shown that it was possible to appeal to white Southern voters by taking a conservative stance on the state rights versus Civil rights issue. In the 1968 Presidential election, all Southern states except Texas voted conservative. Unfortunately for Nixon, many conservative votes went to Alabama governor George Wallace, who ran an independent campaign on a conservative, pro-segregation platform. Wallace carried the five states of Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. All except Arkansas were states in which Goldwater won in 1964. The fact that Wallace did not participate in the

24 Ibid., 371.

25 Critchlow, 91-93.

26 Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: race and the Southern origins of modern conservatism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 106-109.



1972 election was a great advantage to Nixon. The pro-segregation voters who voted for Wallace in 1968 now voted for Richard Nixon as the most conservative alternative. In the 1972 Presidential election, Nixon even managed to win by the largest numerical margin in the history of United States.<sup>27</sup> This development was extremely important for the Republican Party.<sup>28</sup> In the South, a massive electoral realignment was occurring in which voters (mostly white males of very diverse socioeconomic status) shifted from the Democrats to the Republicans. In the Northern states however, no significant changes did occur until the eighties, except for a brief Democratic shift in 1964. This shows how much the Republican Party benefited from Goldwater's initiative of pursuing a more conservative program and trying to appeal to the Southern electorate.

In the early seventies the conservative wing of the GOP that had gained influence over the sixties experienced some major developments, further adding to its influence within the party. These developments, that again transformed the party, were set in motion by the new 'religious right' and the 'corporate conservatism' movement.<sup>29</sup> The new Religious Right organized itself around the objections of evangelical christians, who were alarmed about developments that they considered to be a 'tide of permissiveness and decay' in the United States. They took a conservative stance on conventional issues, but added to this an emphasis on moral traditionalism. This manifested itself in opposition to, among others, abortion, civil rights progress, and the advancement of women in public life.<sup>30</sup> Within the GOP, this movement created a faction of religious conservatives that grew into a force to be reckoned with. Over the course of the seventies, eighties and beyond, the party has, under the influence of the religious right, taken a more traditional moral stance on social issues. Another development was the rise of corporate conservatism: a growing association between conservative politicians in the GOP and the corporate world.<sup>31</sup> In the seventies, major corporations sought to acquire more influence on government policy and steer it towards their interests. Low taxes and deregulation of industry were the most important of these

27 Ibid., 137.

28 Maisel, *The parties respond: changes in American parties and campaigns*, 111.

29 Himmelstein, 97-98.

30 Ibid., 99-103.

31 Ibid., 129-130.

objectives and corporate America saw the GOP as the most likely political ally, due to the economic libertarianism of their powerful conservative wing. This alliance was not only to the benefit of the corporations: through their association with the business world, conservative politicians gained access to financial means and powerful corporate allies, stimulating the influence of the conservative wing within the GOP.

Columnist George Will commented in 2008 that when Reagan was elected in 1980, it was in fact Goldwater and his ideals who won the elections.<sup>32</sup> Even though Reagan did come from the GOP's conservative wing, which Goldwater helped gain power in the sixties, there were several significant differences over time. Sixteen years after Goldwater, Reagan pursued his own kind of conservative program, which in some critical points differed from Goldwater's. He pursued a harder line in foreign policy than Goldwater propagated and had his own approach to economics ('reaganomics'). Furthermore, he was affiliated with the religious right, a moralist conservative faction within the party with which Goldwater frequently had friction due to his libertarian opinions.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, despite these differences, Reagan's rise to power was made possible by the shift caused by Goldwater in the sixties. Goldwater had enabled the GOP right to gain an influential position within the party, caused a shift to the right of the party program and began to develop a permanent Republican electorate in the South. The main benefactors of these developments were the subsequent Republican candidates, especially Reagan. Sixteen years after Goldwater's failed campaign, the rise to power of the GOP conservative movement culminated in the election of Ronald Reagan as President.

## Conclusion

Barry Goldwater's 1964 Presidential nomination and campaign proved to be a pivotal point in the history of the Republican Party. After 1964 the party embarked on a markedly more conservative course and acquired a new Southern electorate. Even today, the GOP is still dominated by conservatives. Despite slight shifts in ideology over the years after 1964,

32 George F. Will, "What would Goldwater do?," *The Washington Post*, November 6, 2008, [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2008-11-06/opinions/36860013\\_1\\_republicans-senate-house-seats](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2008-11-06/opinions/36860013_1_republicans-senate-house-seats) (accessed March 27, 2013).

33 Himmelstein, 123.

the party and its program as they exist today were shaped fundamentally by Goldwater's conservative campaign, which incited a permanent shift to the right of the Republican Party. Furthermore, Goldwater's gains in the Southern states were expanded by his successors to the point at which the South had become predominantly Republican instead of Democratic. After 1964 and Goldwater, the Republican Party became a more conservative party, catering for a more conservative electorate.