

# Matt Yglesias

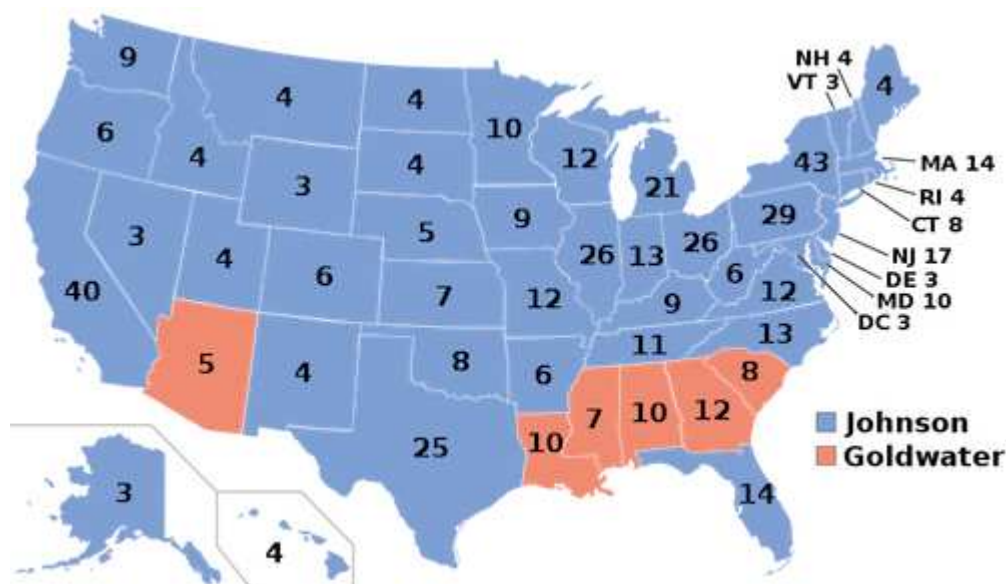
Oct 28th, 2009 at 5:28 pm

## Pining for the Crackpots of Yore

David Boaz reminds us [of an anniversary](#):

Forty-five years ago yesterday, the actor Ronald Reagan gave a nationally televised speech on behalf of the Republican presidential nominee, Senator Barry Goldwater. It came to be known to Reagan fans as [“The Speech”](#) and launched his own, more successful political career. [...] **Would that the current assault on economic freedom would turn up another presidential candidate with Reagan’s values and talents.**

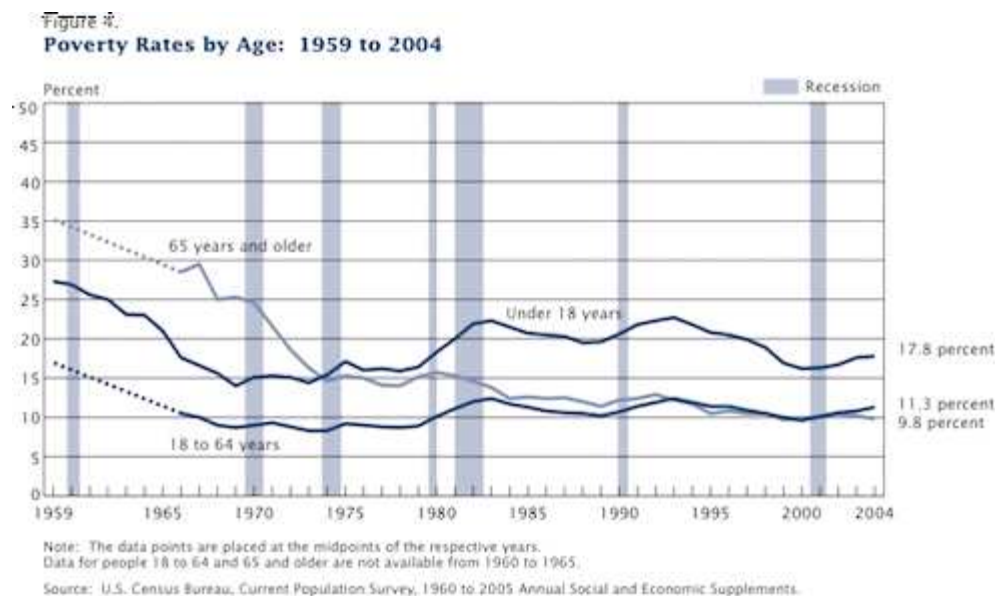
Goldwater was running on a strong platform of opposition to Lyndon Johnson’s agenda with regard to the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act and thus assembled the following impressive political coalition:



In the speech, Reagan warned that Johnson’s plans to reduce poverty were doomed:

Now—so now we declare “war on poverty,” or “You, too, can be a Bobby Baker.” Now do they honestly expect us to believe that if we add 1 billion dollars to the 45 billion we’re spending, one more program to the 30-odd we have—and remember, this new program doesn’t replace any, it just duplicates existing programs—**do they believe that poverty is suddenly going to disappear by magic?**

Fortunately, Johnson was re-elected and implemented policies that led to [large reductions in the poverty rate](#):



As you can see, the decline in the poverty rate was most significant among senior citizens. A sign that outside the “war on poverty” per se, other elements of the Johnson agenda like expansion of Social Security (Reagan and Goldwater proposed privatizing it, saying we should “introduce voluntary features that would permit a citizen who can do better on his own to be excused”) and the creation of Medicare. Reagan had warned in 1961, of course, that creating Medicare would [lead to tyranny](#) and in the speech Boaz so admires denounced it as a scheme of “forcing all citizens, regardless of need, into a compulsory government program.” When implemented, of course, Medicare proved so popular and effective that Reagan didn’t dare touch it during his eight years in the White house.

He also warned that re-electing Johnson would lead to the triumph of global Communism:

**Admittedly, there’s a risk in any course we follow other than this, but every lesson of history tells us that the greater risk lies in appeasement, and this is the specter our well-meaning liberal friends refuse to face—that their policy of accommodation is appeasement, and it gives no choice between peace and war, only between fight or surrender.** If we continue to accommodate, continue to back and retreat, eventually we have to face the final demand—the ultimatum. And what then—when Nikita Khrushchev has told his people he knows what our answer will be? **He has told them that we’re retreating under the pressure of the Cold War, and someday when the time comes to deliver the final ultimatum, our surrender will be voluntary, because by that time we will have been weakened from within spiritually, morally, and economically.** He believes this because from our side he’s heard voices pleading for “peace at any price” or “better Red than dead,” or as one commentator put it, he’d rather “live on his knees than die on his feet.” And therein lies the road to war, because those voices don’t speak for the rest of us.

As it happens, of course, the Johnson administration did make some very serious errors in foreign policy, but they were the reverse of the errors Reagan was warning about. On domestic policy, there were certainly some ideas that didn’t work well. What’s more, though the federal government was not involved in urban crime control policy in a major way, the school of thought to which the architects of Kennedy-Johnson domestic policy belonged made a major error of undue complacency in the face of rising levels of violent crime. But all things considered the record in terms of expanded access to education and health care, racial equality, and poverty reduction looks extremely strong. And, of course, no tyranny emerged! Eventually the Great Society liberals became unpopular and were turned out of office by conservatives who offered a considerably more moderate program than Goldwater’s 1964 agenda.

- [Comments](#)
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## 29 Responses to “Pining for the Crackpots of Yore”

1. *BGinCHI* Says:

[October 28th, 2009 at 5:49 pm](#)

Reagan was a corporate shill who had a lot of beliefs but neither intellectual depth nor principles honed outside Hollywood and the corporate world. He was therefore all style and no substance.

I'd say the GOP has a whole clown car full of these people right now, it's just that we're not stupid enough to believe them anymore.

Except 20% of us.

2. *Rich in PA* Says:

[October 28th, 2009 at 5:51 pm](#)

It's heartening to note that Reagan was 100 times the speechifier of any current Republican, Huckabee included. The talent deficit on the other side, even if you define “talent” as superficially as the ability to write (approve?) and deliver a good speech, is something to behold.

3. *Al* Says:

[October 28th, 2009 at 5:53 pm](#)

Matthew thinks that LBJ's policies actually went *back in time* and affected poverty rates prior to his election. WOW!

Matthew, do tell – where is it that Johnson hid that time machine you believe he had?

4. *Thomas* Says:

[October 28th, 2009 at 5:56 pm](#)

All Matt's missing is a causal link!

Seriously, poverty rates for seniors were falling prior to Medicare's adoption and prior to the Johnson administration's Great Society. And since Medicare's provision of health care is excluded from income for purposes of the poverty rate calculation it's difficult to see how it had any effect on the poverty rate in itself.

And, yeah, some of the ideas didn't work out. Like the idea that we didn't need to worry about how to pay the bill. Oh, wait, that's still open.

5. *LaFollette Progressive* Says:

[October 28th, 2009 at 6:02 pm](#)

The interesting thing about this chart is that it really doesn't show a great deal of poverty reduction in any age group *except* senior citizens. All the other Great Society programs provided relief for those in dire straits, but they did not generally lift people out of poverty or prevent them from sliding into poverty.

The one program that actually kept people out of poverty? Socialized health insurance.

Worth keeping in mind.

6. *LaFollette Progressive* Says:

[October 28th, 2009 at 6:06 pm](#)

*"And since Medicare's provision of health care is excluded from income for purposes of the poverty rate calculation it's difficult to see how it had any effect on the poverty rate in itself."*

Here's a helpful hint: if you have to pay for medical care out of pocket, and you get sick, you end up broke. If most of the costs are covered by an insurance plan, you don't end up broke. Not complicated.

7. *Lev* Says:

[October 28th, 2009 at 6:07 pm](#)

Well put, Matt.

I'm reminded of an interview—I believe it was for *The Atlantic* with Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam after their book was published—in which they argued that the country didn't really embrace Goldwaterism when electing Reagan in 1980, so much as that Carter failed and the GOP had better ideas on the issues of the day. Well, at least, more popular and comprehensible ones. Of course, even the suggestion of this interpretation enrages conservatives, but it strikes me as largely correct.

Of course, it's not unusual for movements to deliberately get history wrong. In fact, ideological movements frequently like to view history as a series of triumphs leading up to the present. And that's fine. It's not like conservatives can't get elected to office, so it only matters so much. But it can be a trap if conservatives think the only way to win office is to become more conservative, just like Reagan did. In the real world, Reagan became considerably less conservative to be elected president (he made peace with Medicare and Social Security between his failed election in 1976 and his successful one in 1980), and he became even less conservative while in office as president (i.e. supporting tax hikes, negotiating with the Soviet Union, taking the lead out of gasoline). Reagan was definitely a conservative, but he was also a smart politician who ultimately realized that an absolutist approach was impossible, so he tailored his goals differently. It's a shame that conservatives don't want to emulate *that* part of him.

8. *Tony K* Says:

[October 28th, 2009 at 6:23 pm](#)

In the book *New Literary History of America*, which just came out, there's a really good essay about the Reagan speech mentioned above:

<http://www.newliteraryhistory.com/ronaldreagan.html>

Actually, the whole book is interesting. Good stuff.

9. *Warren* Says:

[October 28th, 2009 at 6:29 pm](#)

Could we maybe let or make those red/pink states secede? I don't think they're ever going to get it. I would miss New Orleans, though (oh wait, New Orleans is already mostly gone...)

10. *Thomas* Says:

[October 28th, 2009 at 6:39 pm](#)

LaFollette, look up how the census calculates the poverty rate. It doesn't matter to the census whether you end up broke or not.

11. *scott* Says:

[October 28th, 2009 at 6:51 pm](#)

Any notice that map also looks eerily like what an Obama vs Palin 2012 map probably looks like as well? The more things change...

12. *Adam Villani* Says:

[October 28th, 2009 at 7:12 pm](#)

*Any notice that map also looks eerily like what an Obama vs Palin 2012 map probably looks like as well?*

Give Arizona more credit than that. Without McCain on the ticket, it would've been a lot closer there, and Obama would surely beat a Palin/Bachmann ticket.

13. *Cyrus* Says:

[October 28th, 2009 at 7:32 pm](#)

I agree that Reagan was a nut (fun fact: that time Sarah Palin quoted him in a debate about how "freedom is always just one generation away from extinction"? He was talking about Medicare) and that conservative criticisms of the welfare state are generally stupid and dishonest, but in fairness, I've seen charts like this before presented by liberals and they don't seem to prove nearly as much as it says. Like Al points out, poverty was trending down before LBJ came along.

14. *mds* Says:

[October 28th, 2009 at 7:45 pm](#)

Like Al points out, poverty was trending down before LBJ came along.

Yeah, LBJ unfairly gets a lot of the credit for the groundwork laid by the Republican administration that immediately preceded his.

15. *jefft452* Says:

[October 28th, 2009 at 7:52 pm](#)

*"they argued that the country didn't really embrace Goldwaterism when electing Reagan in 1980, so much as that Carter failed and the GOP had better ideas on the issues of the day"*

I would argue that the country never embraced Goldwaterism, nor Reaganism  
Poppy Bush ran on "a kinder, gentler America" kinder and gentler than what? The current Reagan administration

When he continued Reaganism, he lost to Clinton

W ran on "compassionate conservatism" not back to Reagan

16. [College Frat Boy » Matthew Yglesias » Pining for the Crackpots of Yore](#) Says:  
[October 28th, 2009 at 7:59 pm](#)

[...] post is from here. Visit the link to read more.If we continue to accommodate, continue to back and retreat, [...]

17. [Steve Sailer](#) Says:  
[October 28th, 2009 at 8:58 pm](#)

*“Eventually the Great Society liberals became unpopular”*

Eventually happened rather fast.

By 1966, the Democrats lost about 50 seats in the House.

By 1968, a liberal Democratic candidate with a strong track record, Hubert Humphrey, couldn't crack 43% of the vote running against Richard Nixon and George Wallace!

By 1972, George McGovern couldn't get close to 40%.

18. [Not as Stupid as Will Allen](#) Says:  
[October 28th, 2009 at 9:37 pm](#)

It's almost as if our local idiot racist thinks there was only a single issue that decided the election...it turns out there were lots of issues, but don't tell him that, it will ruin his track record of complete idiocy on every topic if he starts to recognize reality.

19. [jefft452](#) Says:  
[October 29th, 2009 at 12:58 am](#)

*By 1966, the Democrats lost about 50 seats in the House.*

yet still had a majority of over 150 seats

*By 1968, a liberal Democratic candidate with a strong track record, Hubert Humphrey, couldn't crack 43% of the vote running against Richard Nixon and George Wallace!*

as opposed to the oh so popular Nixon who got 43.something%?

*By 1972, George McGovern couldn't get close to 40%*

McGovern lost the labor vote because he was the first dem nominee to be anti-union since b4 FDR, my own rabid liberal dad voted against him

20. [superdestroyer](#) Says:  
[October 29th, 2009 at 8:25 am](#)

Doesn't the graph go against the progressive meme that the 1950's were great due to protectionism and high taxes. I thought the high taxes and centralized government planning meant everyone had a good middle class life style with good pensions.

20% plus poverty rates in the 1950's sort of disproves that high taxes and intrusive government are a great thing.

What the chart also shows is that all of the anti-poverty programs since 1965 have had very little effect.

21. *Minos* Says:

[October 29th, 2009 at 8:35 am](#)

I'd agree with commenters above who point out that the secular trend is rapidly falling elderly poverty from 1940-1965, \*not\* from 1965-present. In other words: Medicare didn't do it. Now one \*could\* make an argument for Social Security, which, conveniently began in 1940.

However, I think there's a \*much\* better explanation. If you were over in 1965, you were, by definition, born in the 19th century. The great depression almost certainly wiped out your savings (not because on inflation-deflation was on tap those days, but because you had to draw them down). Almost nobody had much of a retirement nest-egg by 1940.

Anyone will tell you that trying to build up savings for retirement in the last 20 years of your working life is pretty hard-what people saved between the end of the war in 1945 and 1965 would be meager.

Every year after 1940 is one more year that people had to recover their retirement finances after the Depression. If you retired in 1941, you had one year of savings. In 1960, you had 20 years, and by 1970, well, you could have been saving (if you were frugal) from age 35 on up. Not coincidentally, it's in the 70s that this secular trend bottoms out. What you're seeing is not the effects of the Great Society, but the post-war boom.

22. *joe from Lowell* Says:

[October 29th, 2009 at 8:52 am](#)

Doesn't the graph go against the progressive meme that the 1950's were great...

WTF are you talking about?

Since when did progressives start singing the praises of the 1950s?

Did you just make that up, or can you link me to some wingnut web site that argues that progressives sing the praises of the 1950s?

23. *JonF* Says:

[October 29th, 2009 at 8:54 am](#)

Re: By 1968, a liberal Democratic candidate with a strong track record, Hubert Humphrey, couldn't crack 43% of the vote running against Richard Nixon and George Wallace!

Your statement includes its own explanation: the Wallace vote, which consisted mainly of Southern Democrats who weren't ready to vote Republican but wanted to vote for a neo-Segregationist. With no Wallace in the race Humphrey would have won handily. Also, Vietnam was a major issue that year, with Humphrey unable to break free of the Johnson administration, while Nixon was promising a secret plan to bring "peace with honor" making him the anti-war candidate.

Re: McGovern lost the labor vote because he was the first dem nominee to be anti-union

Can you expand upon this? I am not disputing your claim, but I was only five years old in 1972, and I have never heard that McGovern was anti-Union.

Re: Every year after 1940 is one more year that people had to recover their retirement finances after

the Depression.

People with high enough income to save substantial sums for retirement were not likely to poor in any economy. No, the decline in elder poverty is due mainly to Social Security since this provided an income floor for seniors, preventing them from falling into absolute destitution.

24. *Cyrus Says:*

[October 29th, 2009 at 9:06 am](#)

Yeah, LBJ unfairly gets a lot of the credit for the groundwork laid by the Republican administration that immediately preceded his.

I'm more inclined to give credit to FDR than to JFK, the president immediately before him, but what do I know, it was all long before I was born. Either way, though, it's bad science to just look at trends from when LBJ took office going forward, it's low hanging fruit for criticism, and I'm just plain curious about how bad things used to be.

25. *Cyrus Says:*

[October 29th, 2009 at 9:13 am](#)

*WTF are you talking about?*

*Since when did progressives start singing the praises of the 1950s?*

*Did you just make that up, or can you link me to some wingnut web site that argues that progressives sing the praises of the 1950s?*

In the mind of someone as genuinely simple-minded as superdestroyer, “progressives unfavorably comparing today’s top marginal tax rate to that of the 1950s when the subject comes up” is *exactly the same* as “progressives think that 1950s America was right about the whole tax system, the structure of the welfare state, the role of government, and government’s effects on the economy.”

In the first statement (which does get made a fair amount, I think), he gets the general message that something about the 1950s was better than its equivalent today. In the second statement, his attention span fades out after about seven words. That’s about the limit of his analytical ability.

26. *joe from Lowell Says:*

[October 29th, 2009 at 9:39 am](#)

It seems as bit odd for Sailer to discuss political trends in the late 60s and early 70s without discussing Vietnam.

27. *Jason L. Says:*

[October 29th, 2009 at 10:48 am](#)

Thomas @4: *And, yeah, some of the [Great Society] ideas didn't work out. Like the idea that we didn't need to worry about how to pay the bill. Oh, wait, that's still open.*

[Federal debt to GDP](#) continued declining steadily long after the Great Society legislation. It only skyrocketed again when Reagan pushed through his budget-busting tax cuts.

28. *jefft452 Says:*

[October 29th, 2009 at 10:48 am](#)

*"Can you expand upon this? I am not disputing your claim, but I was only five years old in 1972, and*



*I have never heard that McGovern was anti-Union.”*

Not a lot, I was only 14 myself, (you might be better off doing a google search as it would be less biased than me anyway) AFL-CIO refused to endorse him because he would stiff us on procedural votes. When somebody said of Lieberman “he’s always with us – when we don’t need him, and never with us when we do” – I remembered the exact same words about McGovern. After he lost the election, he bought a group of hotels here in CT and promptly started a lockout. Last year he came out against card-check.

PS – my dad’s ’72 vote – he was up all night trying to convince himself to pull the lever for McGovern, in the morning I asked him and he still hadn’t decided what to do. No way in hell would he vote for Nixon, and just not voting was just not an option in my family. When he got home from work I was waiting to ask him what he did. He said “I just couldn’t do it, voted for LeMay.” I said “DAD! How could you do that?” He replied “Well, I knew he had no chance of winning.” It’s a good thing he was right about LeMay’s chances otherwise the WW3 would have been my dad’s fault.

29. [Colin](#) Says:

[October 29th, 2009 at 11:31 am](#)

So poverty had been falling, the Great Society was implemented, and then it mostly stabilized.

Yeah I wouldn’t hail that as a great success.

Oh, and you should also consider that social indicators improved after welfare reform was implemented.

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