August 8, 1974: Nixon resigns as president in response to public outcry on his involvement in the Watergate scandal. Gerald Ford takes the role and then runs for office in the following election of 1976 against Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter. Carter introduces the strategy of being an “outsider” and “untainted” by Washington, while Ford fulfills his “Rose Garden” strategy of being the incumbent. This short analysis of the 1976 election will outline the importance of honor and integrity the American voters feel when voting for a president. This will be presented by first introducing Ford’s strategy and complications, then Carter’s, and then how this relates to more modern elections.

Try as hard as he did to claim no involvement, Ford could not escape that he was the Vice President during the Watergate scandal. An analysis looking back on the election writes, “The sitting President lacked enthusiastic support from his party establishment and was associated in voters’ minds with the Watergate scandal … Probity and honor loomed large as voter priorities. Ford … could not escape the taint of his association with Nixon” (Christianson). This association followed him throughout the election. Further complications to Ford’s campaign was during the first debate. NYT newspaper wrote that Ford infamously claimed that, “There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and there never will be under a Ford Administration. … Each of these countries is independent, autonomous”. The newspaper interviewed Mr. Mazewski of the Polish-American Congress who claimed that the community usually votes Democratic, didn’t like Carter, but due to this statement most of them planned to back Carter (NYT, King). Central to reporting for the time, notably was to stick to dissected facts; at least for popular published news articles. Ford spent most of the campaign time doing photo ops or meeting with official leaders, this is the “Rose Garden strategy”. He shows he is the incumbent and can do presidential tasks. Another NYT article writes, “The advantages of incumbency have been made all too painfully clear to Mr. Carter” and that while Carter works hard campaigning, the “President stays in the privileged sanctuary of the Rose Garden”. However, shortly after the second debate, “The Earl Butz affair put him on a spot where he could not get by on generalities and photo opportunities” (NYT A.L.). Ford was unhappy about having to let Butz go as, “Ford Calls Him ‘Decent and Good’; Friend” and relied heavily on Mr. Butz to help win the Midwestern farm vote” (NYT, Robbins). These damaging controversies and associations put him at odds with the Black community, the Eastern European-American community, and a lot of the American community.

Carter’s strategy was that he was the outsider, a southernly man, and former governor. Looking back on the TV commercials from both, one can immediately notice the difference in outfit. Carter is seen regularly wearing workwear such as flannel and jeans, sporting his Georgian accent while Ford was seen wearing suits in all but two of them and is often seen in the white house or doing other presidential duties (livingroomcandidate). This would show the difference in approach between incumbency and “outsider”. As the outsider, Carter campaigned constantly across the country and Ford didn’t campaign until late season, “Carter’s success in attracting minority, rural, and lower and middle income voters across the nation allowed him to stave off a late-stage Ford surge” (Lechner). Very early into campaigning, Carter said there was a, “”deep hunger” for assurance among voters shamed by Watergate, by revelations of illegality by the CIA and FBI”, prompting that he can be of trust and the current administration cannot (NYT C.M.). Issues arose, however when Carter decided to do an interview with Playboy magazine in which he claimed to lust for other women in his heart. Ford responded, “On September 22, the day after the Playboy interview was distributed to media, Ford hosted 34 evangelical leaders in the White House Cabinet Room” wherein he was applauded for having said no to an interview with playboy (Perlstein). This hurt Carter’s outcome as some evangelical Christians no longer saw him a ‘born again, homely, southern Christian’.

Circumstances and correlations can be drawn between the 1976 and current election, but there are differences as well. A noticeable similarity is the issue of trustworthiness. The trustworthiness of Ford was questioned by Democrats, due to his history with Watergate, much like the modern Democrats question Trump’s history with the Russian probe. Another similarity is the running campaign of Trump in 2016 and 2020 being “untainted” by Washington – an outsider. A noticeable difference is Ford’s response to Butz in comparison to Trump’s response to Charlottesville as, “[Ford and other Republican presidents] showed they understood that there were not “many sides” to a controversy” (Greenfield).

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