

Excerpt from the Second Kennedy-Nixon Presidential Debate (October 7, 1960)

MR. LEVY: Mr. Vice President, you are urging voters to forget party labels and vote for the man. Senator Kennedy says that in doing this you are trying to run away from your party on such issues as housing and aid to education by advocating what he calls a me-too program. Why do you say that party labels are not important?

MR. NIXON: Because that's the way we elect a president in this country, and it's the way we should. I'm a student of history as is Senator Kennedy, incidentally; and I have found that in the history of this country we've had many great presidents. Some of them have been Democrats and some of them have been Republicans. The people, some way, have always understood that at a particular time a certain man was the one the country needed. Now, I believe that in an election when we are trying to determine who should lead the free world - not just America - perhaps, as Senator Kennedy has already indicated, the most important election in our history - it isn't the label that he wears or that I wear that counts. It's what we are. It's our whole lives. It's what we stand for. It's what we believe. And consequently, I don't think it's enough to go before Republican audiences - and I never do - and say, "Look, vote for me because I'm a Republican." I don't think it's enough for Senator Kennedy to go before the audiences on the Democratic side and say, "Vote for me because I'm a Democrat." That isn't enough. What's involved here is the question of leadership for the whole free world. Now that means the best leadership. It may be Republican, it may be Democratic. But the people are the ones that determine it. The people have to make up their minds. And I believe the people, therefore, should be asked to make up their minds not simply on the basis of, "Vote the way your grandfather did; vote the way your mother did." I think the people should put America first, rather than party first. Now, as far as running away from my party is concerned, Senator Kennedy has said that we have no compassion for the poor, that we are against progress - the enemies of progress, is the term that he's used, and the like. All that I can say is this: we do have programs in all of these fields - education, housing, defense - that will move America forward. They will move her forward faster, and they will move her more surely than in his program. This is what I deeply believe. I'm sure he believes just as deeply that his will move that way. I suggest, however, that in the interest of fairness that he could give me the benefit of also believing as he believes.

MR. McGEE: Senator Kennedy.

MR. KENNEDY: Well, let me say I do think that parties are important in that they tell something about the program and something about the man. Abraham Lincoln was a great president of all the people; but he was selected by his party at a key time in history because his party stood for something. The Democratic party in this century has stood for something. It has stood for progress; it has stood for concern for the people's welfare. It has stood for a strong foreign policy and a strong national defense, and as a result, produced Wilson, President Roosevelt, and President Truman. The Republican party has produced McKinley and Harding, Coolidge, Dewey, and Landon. They do stand for something. They stand for a whole different approach to the problems facing this country at home and abroad. That's the importance of party; only if it tells something about the record. And the Republicans in recent years - not only in the last twenty-five years, but in the last eight years - have opposed housing, opposed care for the aged, opposed federal aid to education, opposed minimum wage and I think that record tells something.