

23 Election Days (first draft)

In six days, the United States will, hopefully, be electing a new president, and, thinking about it, I found myself reliving the first presidential election that I am able to remember. It was the fall of 1936. I was not quite nine years old. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was in the White House and he was running for a second term against the Republican, Alfred M. Landon of Kansas. I believe Kansas is known as the Sunflower State, and Landon's campaign buttons featured a sunflower.

The country was still suffering from the depression, my mother was unable to find work, and we were on relief. Roosevelt had observed that one third of the nation was ill-clothed, ill-housed and ill-fed, and he was going to change that. And my mother and I believed him. In fact, most everybody I knew, and most everybody in New York believed him and saw FDR as their salvation.

My mother had been a member of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union which had strong ties to the Socialist Party of Norman Thomas, but in 1936, they undid those ties, and officially supported FDR. Knowing that many of their members had never voted for, and would never vote for a "capitalist party" (and the Democratic Party was a capitalist party) the ILGWU together with a few other New York unions created the American Labor Party. This enabled tens of thousands of people to vote for FDR on the ALP line, without violating their principles.

I do not believe there was another president, with the possible exception of Lincoln, who was more loved, and who carried the hopes and dreams of so many. Hoover's depression had wiped out jobs and businesses, closed banks, and dispossessed people from their homes. I have a vivid memory of seeing people's belongings on the sidewalks in my neighborhood. Apple sellers on corners were a reality. Every apartment house in the area had posted signs: "No Beggars and Peddlers Allowed".

My situation was compounded by the death of my father in 1931. We were left with nothing and my mother was unable to find work. Nor could her union be of help. They told her that there were no jobs for anyone, even active union members. She had taken a "withdrawal" from the union after she married, so she was no longer considered a member. However, she still saw herself as "union". She followed development in the union, and the union's position on national affairs. She was pleased with the election of David Dubinsky as union president, and was delighted with the creation of the American Labor Party. And in the fall of 1936, she bought our first radio to hear the campaign speeches of FDR. We sat spellbound as we listened to that magnificent voice assuring America that things would get better.

He certainly convinced me! Soon after school started, I had established a routine. As we lined up in the afternoon to leave school, I would work my way to the blackboard and grab a few pieces of chalk. Then, on my way home from school, I would write "VOTE FOR FDR" on sidewalks and building walls all over the neighborhood. There were a few empty stores that had been taken over by the local Democratic party, which was

obviously affiliated with Tammany Hall. A party functionary (usually referred to as a hack) sat behind a desk and dispensed palm cards, 4" x6" cards describing local candidates for office, as well as campaign posters and buttons. This was my introduction to campaign button collecting. I was never without an FDR button on my shirt or jacket. We did not have very high regard for the hacks, and had trouble reconciling their role with the noble cause of saving America that FDR had undertaken.

The American Labor Party did not have the funds to rent storefronts. They operated out of ILGWU union halls, but there were none in my neighborhood. It should be noted that a struggle ensued within the ALP in the early '40's, and by 1944, the left wing (pro-Communist, or if you prefer, not anti-Communist, faction) prevailed, the ILGWU and its supporters left and formed the Liberal Party. So New York now had two left wing third parties.

By the end of October 1936, there was no question with regard to Roosevelt's reelection. This was also the beginning of national polling, and a defunct magazine, The Literary Digest, undertook a poll predicting that Landon would be elected. When the results were in and FDR was overwhelmingly reelected, it was observed that the pollsters did their polling by telephone, and only wealthy people had phones in 1936.

On election day, I had a pocketful of chalk and was busy chalking up the neighborhood. I remember going to the polls with my mother, staying up to listen to the radio, though I do not remember whether they were able to report on the results. Only two states voted for Landon, which resulted in the expression "As Maine goes, so goes Vermont."