



Nixon, Kennedy, and the Changing Face of American Politics

Context is all, particularly when discussing numbers.
119,450.

If the above figure represented footsteps between your house and the nearest well or the amount of dollars in your bank account, it would seem a large enough number indeed. But in the context of a national political win it is slim, and when placed alongside a final tally of 68,836,385 votes cast, it is almost transparent. In terms of the popular vote in the presidential election of 1960, it represented a less than 0.1 percent margin between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. And while the Electoral College count won by the Democratic candidate (303 to the Republican's 219) suggests a more emphatic win, the slender popular vote triumph remains one of the most remembered aspects of this election, and stood as the closest in recent American political history until Bush faced Gore in 2000.

An oft forgotten statistic of the 1960 presidential election is the record turnout of eligible voters that shot past 63 percent, a ratio unreachd since William Howard Taft won in 1908 and not matched since. The historic percentage of Americans who took part in the democratic process, along with the razor-edge margin of Kennedy's victory, is enough to suggest that the country was at a turning point and struggled with the dilemma of what course the country should take. Kennedy may have stood for the idealism and hope of a new direction, but early on pundits placed even money on the ideological right-hand turn Nixon would chart if he stepped out from behind President Eisenhower and got his hands on the wheel.

A fair suggestion — on paper, then—Vice President Nixon looked an obvious candidate for the highest office in the land. A lieutenant commander in the United States Navy during the Second World War, Nixon returned to the United States with two service stars and a citation of commendation. After leaving the service, Nixon ran and won against a five-time incumbent Democrat to represent California's Twelfth Congressional District. During his tenure as congressman, he gained national notoriety as a patriot and ardent anti-communist for his involvement in breaking the Alger Hiss spy case. In 1950, Nixon sought a seat in the Senate and earned a reputation as a bare-knuckle political operator in his campaign against incumbent Helen Gahagan Douglas, whom he painted as a





Kennedy's age and inexperience could have handicapped his presidential bid, but he managed to look vital where Nixon looked haggard. (Art Selby/NBC Newswire/AP Images)

left-wing sympathizer in the notorious Pink Lady scandal (circulated on sheets of pink paper Nixon claimed that Douglas was "pink right down to her underwear"). Nixon won the seat and continued his anti-communist saber-rattling, which gained the attention of General Dwight D. Eisenhower who selected Nixon as his running mate for the 1952 presidential race. During two terms as vice president, Nixon cultivated an image as an international statesman with official trips throughout the world. He solidified his foreign policy credentials during a face-off with Nikita Khrushchev. While at the opening of the American National Exhibition in Moscow Nixon entered an impromptu debate with the Soviet premiere and handled himself admirably, extolling the virtues of capitalism over communism during the widely reported "Kitchen Debate."

Richard Nixon: war hero, seasoned politician, diplomat, patriot. Who wouldn't think that a sitting vice president with those bona fides would make a natural choice to assume the duties of the most powerful office in the world?

By comparison, John F. Kennedy looked like the dark horse with an outside chance. Privileged, erudite, inexperienced, handsome, politically green, and Catholic — many Americans felt justified in their dismissal and contempt of the Democratic candidate.

But Kennedy won, and Nixon didn't.

There are many factors that contribute to the outcome of even the dullest electoral battle, and this one was anything but dull. What made the election so exciting was not a clash of widely diverging agendas — to a great extent both candidates held similar hopes, namely to safeguard the country from the encroaching threat of communism, and to move the country into a positive direction — but the pivotal times in which it was held. A presidential candidate at the start of the 1960s would have to convince the public that he could protect the country in the lengthening atomic shadow of the Cold War, but that he could also adapt to the changes certain to develop in the coming decade. The victor would also have to prove equally adroit at turning a perceived weakness into an advantage.

Kennedy did and Nixon didn't.

John F. Kennedy confronted many challenges in his presidential bid, but how he faced three in particular helped define him not only as a true leader in the eyes of many Americans, but as a true leader for the times.

1. Media

The importance of the televised debates between candidates is clear, but out of the four debates it was the first that had the greatest impact, the largest audience, and showed one man as savvy about the importance of this young medium while the other failed to recognize it and let an all-important first impression tilt away from him.

There is the unavoidable fact of luck, both good and bad, that broke each way for the candidates. Kennedy broadcast the robust vigor of a man ten years his junior but, at his best, Nixon looked like a meek and frail man ten years older than he actually was. In truth, there was only a four year difference between them; Kennedy was forty-three and Nixon was forty-seven.

Nixon also had the bad luck of circumstance leading into the debate. An innocuous knee injury later flared into a full infection that required an array of antibiotics and a two-week stay at Walter Reed Hospital. Not only did this leave him in a poor position with regard to the debate, but it also meant time off the campaign trail, a fact that Kennedy and his people capitalized on and used to gain further momentum.

A poor showing in the televised debate cannot be blamed on chance alone. CBS executives invited Nixon to review the debate venue along with camera and lighting placement. He refused. Nixon likewise refused the offer of professional makeup application, opting instead to use an untrained adviser to apply



a thick pancake to hide a shallow growth of beard. And without an experienced communications adviser, there was no one on staff to dissuade Nixon from wearing a grey suit that folded him into the monochrome background.

Executives extended the same courtesies to Kennedy. He accepted.

Not only did Kennedy review the debate set along with long-time Democratic communications adviser J. Leonard Reinsch, he chose a dark blue suit for better contrast and accepted the application of makeup from a professional (although he appeared on set looking tan and rested, so little cosmetic work was required).

However, there was more to the story than just flimsy optics. Kennedy rested and prepared for the debate, whereas Nixon did not, or could not, due to his illness. And preparedness is the best foil against nerves. Ready for battle, Kennedy remained at ease but consistent in his comments and critique of Nixon's answers. By contrast Nixon, whose face appeared tight and grim, did little to further his case and betrayed his academic background on the debate team; at one point he rebutted a Kennedy answer with a terse "No comment."

Seventy-five million people watched the first debate and while the content was not memorable, Kennedy's star-making turn was immediate. A number of Southern governors who balked at supporting Kennedy threw the full weight of their recommendations behind him following the debate. Crowds at Kennedy rallies grew exponentially befitting, as journalist Theodore White wrote, a "television or movie idol."

Nixon wasn't a fool. He prepared for the next three debates in greater detail and never made the same mistake again. But it was too late. Despite successive claims that each debate was too close to call, it was generally held that Kennedy won them as a whole.

2. Religion

The thought of a politician's faith playing such a naked role in considering his viability for office may surprise us today, but it shouldn't. A recent election had its share of such concerns (with no shortage of "Is America Ready for a Mormon President?" headlines), and the American people have not even had the choice of a Jewish commander-in-chief. The voting public's wariness at having a Catholic president in the Oval Office can be ascribed to the usual characteristics of bigotry: tradition and ignorance.

The United States never claimed an official faith, and of course provided religious freedom in the constitutional bones of the country, but unofficially

the establishment religion was Protestant. From the cold strictures of Calvinists and Presbyterians through the North to the fiery theatrics of Baptists and the Pentecostals through the South, different temperatures of Protestantism ran through the country and were judged part of the American culture. Perhaps that has as much to do with tradition as the rebellious spirit of Martin Luther nailing his theses to the door, and signaling the start of a split from an oppressive and corrupt governing body — a country born of separation from British imperialism could well relate to such a pioneering spirit.

As important is the view of Catholicism as a “foreigner’s” religion. Well established as a Protestant country after the revolution, an influx of Catholic immigrants to America (from Ireland and Italy in particular) designated that faith as belonging to the “other,” deserving of scorn and contempt from “established” Americans. They could easily cloak their intolerance in patriotic concern over new citizens who took their lead from the infallible papal figure who lived in a far-off country.

Al Smith was the first Catholic to attempt the steep climb to the White House as the Democratic nominee in 1928. A product of Tammany Hall who managed to emerge unmarked by the corruption associated with that political machine, Smith graduated from a term as the forty-second governor of New York with eyes on the presidency. And while his Republican opponent Herbert Hoover benefitted from the roaring economic climate inherited from fellow GOP member and outgoing President Calvin Coolidge, Smith could not overcome the prejudicial sentiments toward Catholics. How else would a seasoned politician like Smith lose to a man like Hoover, who served the country in an appointed position but had never run for election in his life?

The specter of Smith’s failed 1928 run loomed large for Senator John F. Kennedy and the “problem” of his religion dominated strategic conversations early on in his campaign. His very candidacy reignited anti-Catholic sentiment in the country, stoked further by the propaganda campaign waged by the National Council of Citizens for Religious Freedom. A benign enough organization by name, the group was comprised of mostly evangelical Protestants who warned that as a Catholic, Kennedy was unfit to serve as president because “his church insists that he is duty-bound to submit to its direction.”

So pervasive was the anti-Catholic sentiment throughout the country that it came from unexpected sources. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, author of *The Power of Positive Thinking*, was a member of the aforementioned council who suffered a great backlash from the anti-Catholic cage-rattling and later



resigned from the organization and apologized for the sentiments. Even Martin Luther King Sr. claimed that he thought he could never vote for a Catholic.

"Imagine Martin Luther King having a bigot for a father," Kennedy remarked. "Well, we all have fathers, don't we?"

The turning point in this debate occurred in Texas when Kennedy addressed the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on September 12, 1960. Many advisers to Kennedy's campaign worried about their candidate fielding unscreened questions from an unfriendly crowd about religion on television. They need not have worried. Kennedy did answer questions, but his opening remarks to the congregation were measured and passionate.

"I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute — where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote . . . where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the president who might appoint him or the people who might elect him."

Kennedy went on to gently admonish those who might use the luck of religion as a factor for deciding who should run the country, which was not surprising. The deft work of a consummate gamesman occurred when he turned the Catholic "impairment" to his advantage. He managed to redefine a vote for him not as a vote for the "Catholic candidate" but as a vote *against* intolerance. He also managed to reach out to Catholics who might otherwise vote Republican and offer Protestants with more liberal views to shrug off a constraining tradition.

The advisers concerned about a hostile crowd sandbagging Kennedy in front of cameras also switched opinions. Footage from the speech appeared on television over the following seven weeks in forty states.

3. Race

The "black vote" was one of many demographics that were critical to Kennedy winning the election. Once again recent history obscures the past — African-Americans may overwhelmingly vote Democratic in recent years, but that was not always the case. In fact, Kennedy's work through the 1960 campaign, along with the Civil Rights legislation passed through his and Lyndon Johnson's administrations, started the association between African-Americans and the Democratic Party.

Fidelity with the Republican Party may have started with Lincoln and admi-

ration and respect for his work to end slavery, but a deeper root might again have sprouted from religion. The more conservative strains of Protestantism found an ideological bunkmate in Republicans, and the thought of political affiliations aligning with religious ones does not require a huge leap of logic. This political and religious team spirit made Kennedy an unlikely candidate for African-Americans. Not only would his candidacy as a Democrat count him out among large numbers of churchgoing blacks, but his membership in the Catholic church would put him out of the running completely.

Richard Nixon also had the advantage in courting the black vote. Not only did he have a long-standing history of support on civil rights, he developed a good relationship with Martin Luther King Jr. (much better than Kennedy's), and even received endorsement in 1960 from King's father.

The opportunity to adapt came late in October 1960, when Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested for demonstrating at a "whites only" section of the Magnolia Room at Rich's department store in Atlanta. He was taken into custody along with a number of black students, but was not released along with them. Already a leading face and voice of the Civil Rights movement, King was kept in jail on the grounds that his arrest violated the terms of a twelve-month suspended sentence he had received for driving with an invalid license. Authorities moved him to a remote prison in Georgia to face four months hard labor and all manner of threats to his safety in a racist prison system.

Nixon dithered. Despite his relationship with King and the Department of Justice at his disposal as vice president, Nixon feared alienating white voters in the South and did nothing.

Kennedy acted. When he received word of King's imprisonment from civil rights advisor Sargent Shriver (by way of Harris Wofford, who took a call from a tearful — and pregnant — Coretta Scott King), Kennedy placed a call. He spoke to Mrs. King, expressed his concern, and extended any help he could offer in the safe return of her husband.

Expecting resistance from Kennedy's inner-circle, Shriver appealed directly to Kennedy when he was alone. Kennedy responded in a manner that was beyond simple political gamesmanship. As Dr. King himself later said, Kennedy reacted out of "moral concern" that happened to also be "politically sound."

Shriver must have also known that the fallout from circumventing Kennedy's closest advisers would be great. The move made Robert Kennedy angry, and worried him that it would tip the tight race into an advantage for Nixon. At one point he even referred to Shriver and Wofford as "bomb-throwers." But



upon reflection, the injustice of Dr. King's treatment irked Robert Kennedy and offended his sense of legal fair play.

"You can't deny bail on a misdemeanor," he said, and called the presiding judge. Shortly after, the judge agreed to release Dr. King.

The Kennedy camp was careful not to solicit the story to mainstream press for fear of estranging Southern white voters. But black newspapers and editors in the North picked up on the story and lauded Kennedy for his efforts, and, just as important, lambasted Nixon for his silence. Two million copies of a pamphlet entitled *The Case of Martin Luther King Jr.* were distributed among black churches in the northern states, wherein "No Comment" Nixon suffered greatly in comparison to Kennedy, "a candidate with a heart."

It was enough to tip the balance in the election. Kennedy provided African-American voters with a reason to vote for a Catholic Democrat, and they did so in large numbers.

The ultimate success of Kennedy's campaign may have rested on luck as much as his charisma. Both Kennedy and Nixon spoke about foreign or domestic policy in similar terms and it is interesting to note that a closer look at their platforms reveals more similarities than differences (certainly more than has been seen between the two parties since). This is not just a factor of passing time leading to greater insight; many thought much the same at the time. Journalist Eric Sevareid wrote in the *Boston Globe* that he found little of substance to distinguish between both candidates, that they were examples of the "managerial revolution" coming to politics, and that "Nixon and Kennedy are its first completely packaged products."

Perhaps the greatest advantage Kennedy had over Nixon was not a better hold on policy or legislative acumen. In words and actions, Kennedy showed during the campaign that he had an idea not only for what America could become but a new idea for the presidency itself, one that acknowledged the change in attitude of the 1960s, and a desire to change along with them. Whether domestic (in his handling of civil rights issues), international (his idea of sending youth around the world as ambassadors in the Peace Corps), or interstellar (the drive to land on the moon), President Kennedy celebrated the greatness of his country and hinted at the heights it could reach.

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