

# "challenges at home and afar": the controversy and impact of the 1960 presidentialia...

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The United States presidential election of 1960 was held between Republican Vice President Richard Nixon, Democrat Senator John F. Kennedy, and Harry Byrd, an independent candidate. The year 1960 marks a tumultuous time in American history considering the building fear of communism. A spy plane was downed in the Soviet Union and stopped talks before they began between President Eisenhower and Nikita Khrushchev (Nemeth). The annulment of the summit increased concern for national security. Also, McCarthyism and "red-baiting" did nothing to quell fears about the perceived imminent annihilation of democracy.

Senator Hubert Humphrey stated that America's conflict with the Soviet Union and Communism as a whole was, "a conflict over a system of values" (White 89) and that it went, "far beyond economics, science, education" (White 89). In 1960 the citizens of the United States were looking for a president who could protect the nation and put their minds at ease. This paper will discuss the contentiousness of, the impact on future elections of, and the precedents created by the election of 1960. The 1960 election marks a significant and beneficial turning point in the strategies of presidential candidates and the voting practices of Americans. Kennedy was not the only man vying for the 1960 Democratic nomination. He was rivaled by Hubert Humphrey, Stuart Symington, Adlai Stevenson, and Lyndon Johnson (Nemeth).

Campaigning for the primary election was not very common at the time, but Humphrey and Kennedy decided to, and it turned out to be beneficial for Kennedy (Nemeth). However this victory did not distract from the issue of Kennedy's Catholicism, a heated topic given the Vatican's power at the time <https://assignbuster.com/challenges-at-home-and-afar-the-controversy-and-impact-of-the-1960-presidential-election/>

(Nemeth). After Kennedy won the primary, he chose Lyndon Johnson as his running mate. Johnson was a Senator from Texas and could help Kennedy win the South (Nemeth). Also, according to *American Decades 1960-1969*, he turned out to be a better campaigner than Nixon's running mate, Henry Cabot Lodge (Brucoli and Layman). As he had only been a representative for six years and a senator for two, Kennedy was generally less experienced and less well-known than Nixon (Bryant).

However, he successfully utilized the televised presidential debates to let the American public get to know him and his platform better (Streb). Richard Nixon, the Republican Party nominee, served as President Eisenhower's Vice President from 1953 until 1961. Nixon had the habit of "red-baiting," which was the practice of accusing another person of being a Communist (Brucoli and Layman, 1950-1959). Nixon's political power increased when his red-baiting led him to uncovering Alger Hiss as a Communist spy (Brucoli and Layman, 1950-1959). But despite his popularity from exposing Hiss and serving as Vice President, Nixon had to deal with campaigning for the vulnerable Republican Party which had been weakened during the 1958 congressional elections (Brucoli and Layman, 1950-1959). By 1960, Nixon had survived a 1956 initiative by some White House officials to get rid of him, revealed a Communist spy, and won the Republican Party nomination, putting him a good place.

In his acceptance speech, Nixon made the mistake of promising to speak in all 50 states which greatly reduced his strength as a campaigner (Brucoli and Layman, 1960-1969). In spite of his advisors' advice, Nixon kept his

promise to campaign in all of the states, but this action was not advantageous because late in the race he was in Alaska while Kennedy was campaigning in New York, a state with many more electoral votes (Brucoli and Fig 1. A map of the distribution of electoral votes throughout the United States in 1960. Blue signifies votes for Kennedy, red for Nixon, and pistachio for Byrd (U. S. Presidential Election: Electoral Vote, 1960).

Layman, 1960-1969). In the end, Nixon won four more states than Kennedy but had 84 less electoral votes as can be clearly seen in Figure 1 (Nemeth). At the beginning of the campaigning, a poll showed Nixon to be leading by only 53% to 47%, and regardless of electoral votes, the popular vote promised to be a close one (Brucoli and Layman, 1960-1969). During his campaign, Kennedy discussed his ideas about creating the Peace Corps, a minimum wage, and an economic strategy that would create a growth rate of 5 percent. Generally, Kennedy “urged greater national effort to meet challenges at home and afar” (“John F.

Kennedy Wins the 1960 Presidential Election”). “Afar” would seem to imply places like the Soviet Union, with whom America was having difficulties. Nixon did not imply much. His slogan was “Peace without Surrender” as, affirmed by Brucoli and Layman in American Decades 1960-1969, he thought that Kennedy would not be tough enough against the Russians. The Vice President “stressed his experience in government” since Kennedy would be the youngest president ever elected (“John F.

Kennedy Wins the 1960 Presidential Election”). The late 1950s and early 1960s was an important time in the Civil Rights Movement, and both

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candidates campaigned for votes from the African-American population (Beyerlein and Andrews). Though Nixon was recognized by blacks as being sympathetic to the civil rights cause (Brucoli and Layman, 1950-1959), he made a mistake when took for granted the Republican Party's popularity in the south (Brucoli and Layman, 1960-1969). When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was sentenced to four months hard labor, Kennedy stepped in and convinced the governor of Georgia to get involved and free Dr.

King after Mrs. King said that she didn't expect her husband to survive. It was Kennedy's involvement that caused Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr. to announce that he would be voting for Kennedy, not Nixon as originally planned (Brucoli and Layman, 1960-1969). Many black people followed suit which is not surprising since, as maintained by Beyerlein and Andrews, civil rights organizations encouraged and influenced African-Americans.

" It was TV more than anything else that turned the tide," said Kennedy a few days after winning the election (Brucoli and Layman, 1960-1969). He was referring to the presidential debates which were televised for the first time in American history (Bryant). The four debates were broadcast on television and on the radio, but many more people watched the debates instead of listening to them (Streb). This fact is important because, according to Matt Streb, the people who watched the first debate felt that Kennedy had been victorious, and those who listened to the debate thought that Nixon had won. Nixon's appearance did not help matters during that first round; he was in considerable pain from bumping his knee after having surgery on it,

he refused to wear makeup (Streb), and he “ seemed tense and tired” (Bruccoli and Layman, 1960-1969).

Nixon also wore an ill-fitting gray suit which blended with the backdrop of the studio, and his face was pale and stubbly (Bryant). Kennedy, on the other hand, had on a darker suit, looked well-rested, and “ had a deep, healthy-looking tan” (Bryant). As stated by Claudia Bryant, Nixon and Kennedy were equally prepared with their arguments, but Kennedy was by far the winner when it came to appearance. Kennedy used the debates to send a message to the American people and improve his public image (Bryant). Nixon seemed to be simply “ picking at Kennedy’s ideas rather than presenting his own” as if he were participating in a scored debate (Bruccoli and Layman, 1960-1969). The Nixon-Kennedy debates are frequently discussed not only because of they were the first televised, face-to-face debates (Bryant), but also because of their perceived effect on the election (Streb), despite most research showing that “ debates did not significantly affect vote choice overall” (Bryant).

Whichever the case, the Nixon-Kennedy debates had a large impact on future debates, and because the candidates were afraid of repeating Nixon’s mistakes, there were no televised debates until 1976 (Streb). Another contentious area of the election was religion. John F. Kennedy was a Catholic presidential candidate in a country that had only ever had Protestant presidents (Bryant). Some people said that Kennedy would be the “ Pope’s puppet” and began circulating anti-Catholic pamphlets (Bruccoli and Layman, 1960-1969).

After two Puerto Rican Catholic bishops said it would be sinful to vote for a candidate who they opposed, Cardinals Spellman and Cushing stepped in to say that the bishops were wrong and that no ecclesiastical figure could tell people how to vote (Brucoli and Layman, 1960-1969). As it turned out, Kennedy was his own greatest advocate. On February 16, 1959, he announced “ his opposition to church-state ties, an American ambassador to the Vatican, and federal funding of parochial schools” (Brucoli and Layman, 1950-1959). When that was not enough, Kennedy delivered a speech on September 12, 1960 about his Catholicism to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association (White appx. C).

In it he said that America would be “ the loser in the eyes of Catholics and non-Catholics around the world, in the eyes of history, and in the eyes of our own people...[if]...40, 000, 000 Americans lost their chance of being President on the day they were baptized” (Kennedy). Overall, Kennedy’s Catholicism seemed to affect the South and part of the Midwest the most. But Kennedy ended up winning most of the South and had not been expecting to win those Midwestern states anyway (Brucoli and Layman, 1960-1969). Obviously, his religion did not effect the election severely enough to cause him to lose. John Kennedy received only .

2% more votes than Nixon in the election of 1960 (Brucoli and Layman, 1960-1969). That was only 118, 550 votes out of 68. 8 million voters (Brucoli and Layman, 1960-1969; Nemeth), but Kennedy obtained 303 electoral votes over Nixon’s 219 (Nemeth). The controversy over the popular vote came when Republicans questioned the validity of the vote counts in

Illinois, New Mexico, and Texas (Brucoli and Layman, 1960-1969). Even if Nixon had taken Illinois and New Mexico, Kennedy led by 46, 733 votes in Texas and it would be difficult to disprove that he had won there, so nothing would really have changed (Brucoli and Layman, 1960-1969). In order to avoid a “ battle [that] would divide the country,” Nixon conceded the election to Kennedy, who not only became the youngest elected president in the history of the United States but also won by a margin “ so thin as to be, in all reality, nonexistent” (White 350).

Though he barely won the popular, Kennedy secured the electoral vote, and Nixon and President Eisenhower helped create a smooth transition into office for him (“ John F. Kennedy Wins the 1960 Presidential Election”). John F. Kennedy was victorious over Richard Nixon in the presidential election of 1960. That is a true statement, but there was so much more to the election than that. The popular vote was extremely close and made for a lot of tension within the country.

Not only did the United States elect its youngest president in history, it elected the first Catholic one. Beyond the election itself and the president, 1960 marked the start of new ways of campaigning and debating. It is now common for nominees to campaign for the primaries just like Kennedy and Johnson did, and televised debates have become a sort of tradition for the American people. These specific debates also marked the start of massive media participation in the elections, even though there were no televised debates again until 1976. During this election American demonstrated how much it values equal participation in elections by the candidacy of a Catholic



and the larger African-American voter turn out. It is because of the election of 1960 that presidential candidates and American voters have some of their current practices, expectations, and beliefs about elections that have overall improved the quality of elections.

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