

Campaign of the Century: Kennedy, Nixon, and the Election of 1960
Irwin F. Gellman
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The Making of Richard Nixon

By Donald A. Ritchie

Unlike the last presidential election, the loser in 1960 did not insist the election was rigged and stolen from him, did not press state officials to overturn the results, and did not whip his supporters into taking mob action, even though he had more legitimate claim to protest. Irwin F. Gellman argues that vote fraud in Illinois and Texas corrupted 1960's "campaign of the century." His account depicts John F. Kennedy as less of a hero and Richard M. Nixon as less of a villain than they are typically portrayed.

Gellman takes issue with nearly everyone who has written about that election, and counters with his own prodigious research in a wide range of manuscripts and oral histories. He believes that scholars have favored East Coast sources, particularly the accommodating Kennedy Library, to the detriment of the West Coast-based Nixon Library, whose records he describes as less helpfully organized and more difficult to find.

Most of all, Gellman rejects the romantic notions of the campaign perpetuated by Theodore H. White's immensely popular and influential book, *The Making of the President 1960*. He accuses White of having been seduced by Kennedy, who gave him ready access during the campaign, while Nixon, suspicious of White's politics, repeatedly declined to be interviewed. Gellman dismisses White for distorting the candidates and the issues and offers his own account as a corrective.

The election of 1960, whose popular vote was one of the closest presidential contests in history (although the electoral margin was wider), reflected voter uncertainty about both candidates. After eight years of the grandfatherly Dwight Eisenhower, Kennedy and Nixon represented a younger generation, more risky and less reassuring. Both were political centrists and Cold War anticommunists. Both straddled parties that were internally divided between liberal and conservative wings. And both tried to appeal to black voters in the North without alienating white segregationists in the South. Kennedy faced suspicion due to his Catholicism, Nixon for perceptions of past cutthroat politics. Doubts about both candidates persisted and the polls remained evenly divided throughout the race, with the lead tipping back and forth as Americans tried to make up their minds.

The question was how accurately voters perceived the choice. Gellman faults the media for not presenting a more honest picture of Kennedy's dicey health and philandering, and of the immense amount of money his wealthy family poured into the campaign for legitimate and illegitimate expenses. Although most newspapers endorsed Nixon—who was favored by their conservative publishers—the leading national news reporters liked Kennedy and distrusted Nixon, shaping their coverage. At the time, reporters followed a code that the private conduct of a politician was off limits unless it affected public behavior. Like alcoholism, adultery was a bipartisan failing, which kept the parties from exploiting it as an issue. Libel suits also posed potential peril in the days before the Supreme Court's Sullivan decision in 1964. Even if reporters had tried to file such stories, editors would have kept them from print.

Gellman has less trouble cataloguing Kennedy's flaws than in explaining the intense hostility towards Nixon. He admires Nixon and his two previous books about the former president (*The Contender*, 1999, and *The President and the Apprentice*, 2015) largely absolved Nixon of the charges of devious politics that dogged his congressional campaigns and vice presidency. That makes it harder to understand why so many prominent journalists mistrusted the Republican candidate. Nixon believed that reporters' animosity stemmed from his investigation of Alger Hiss, the former State Department officials accused of spying for the Soviets. Liberals in the press generally accepted Hiss' declaration of innocence, and even some of those who took the charges seriously regarded Nixon as a headline hunter.

Nixon worked to project an image of being cool, confident, and commanding, while much of the Washington press corps saw him as tense, suspicious, and insecure. They had been courted by him and felt his contempt. Gellman's assessment is that Nixon "possessed a moody intensity on which it was easy to project one's political fears, and reporters, whether sympathetic or not, were not immune to this temptation." On the other hand, he also notes that a deep-seated aversion for Nixon helped the normally fractious Democratic Party unify behind Kennedy.^[1]

For eight years, Eisenhower had sent his vice president to carry out the politicking that enabled the president to remain above the fray. Sensitive to that image, Nixon took the high road in 1960, encouraging his own surrogates to attack Kennedy for taking the low road. At their first televised debate, Nixon surprised many viewers by frequently agreeing with Kennedy and not being more aggressive. Even more surprising was his physical appearance during the debate. Hospitalized after a knee injury became infected, Nixon ignored his doctor's advice and checked out early to return to campaigning, which left him looking tired and haggard. Ike had not bothered to watch the debate and was taken aback when British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan told him "Your chap's beat," because he "looked like a convicted criminal."^[2]

President Eisenhower took pains to assure doubtful Republicans that his vice president was growing in stature. But Ike could not bring himself to credit Nixon with influencing any of his decisions, famously telling the press, "If you give me a week, I might think of one. I don't remember." Eisenhower's son said he was just trying to end a stressful press conference, thinking he would answer the question later, but the damage had been done. Ironically, Eisenhower had tapped Nixon for more varied and demanding assignments than any of his predecessors had used their vice presidents. He respected Nixon, but also condescended to him. While waiting for Ike to visit him in the hospital after the knee injury Nixon joked that the president would tell him he should have recovered faster.^[3]

Nixon had favored Kentucky Senator Thruston Morton as a running-mate to strengthen his appeal in the South, but accepted Eisenhower's favorite, the Boston Brahmin Henry Cabot

Lodge, Jr. As UN Ambassador Lodge reinforced the ticket's foreign policy credentials but was unlikely to counteract Kennedy's popularity in New England. Kennedy stunned his liberal supporters by choosing Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson, to retain the once Solid South, then eroding as a Democratic base. Lodge ran a less than energetic campaign. Senator Hugh Scott once told me that "the boys" in the party organization understood why Lodge would want to break every afternoon to take a nap but not why he insisted on changing into pajamas. Johnson barnstormed more strenuously but reduced his news value by giving the same speech over, and over, and over again. Johnson's most memorable moment came near the end of the campaign when he and Lady Bird were assailed by right-wing protesters in Dallas. The incident drew considerable press attention and roused offended Southern Democrats like Richard Russell to embrace the ticket more warmly. Gellman observes that Johnson could have avoided the confrontation if he had let the police clear a path for him.

Democrats enjoyed a large lead in voter registration and dominated Congress, especially after big wins following the recession of 1958, but Republicans had won the presidency by two landslide elections in a row under Eisenhower, showing voter volatility. As pollsters did their best to track public opinion, uncertainty prevailed. Gellman points out that contrary to many scholars' assumptions the televised debates did not dramatically alter the polling results, nor did Kennedy's call to Coretta Scott King after her husband's arrest. These events may have reassured supporters but did not appear to have shifted the polls.

Kennedy's religion proved to be his biggest obstacle and asset. After Al Smith was soundly defeated in 1928, the conventional wisdom held that a Catholic could not be elected president. Herbert Hoover had refrained from attacking Smith on religious grounds and let Southern Methodists and Baptists do it for him. Some Southern voters "went fishing" on election day rather than cast a ballot for a Catholic. Before Kennedy's religion was widely known, he led in the polls, but once it became a matter of discussion, Nixon pulled ahead. Yet American attitudes had matured since 1928. When a group of Protestant clergy raised questions about a Catholic president the public reaction was so negative that many evangelicals—including Billy Graham—retreated. In the end, the religious issue worked in Kennedy's favor. Gellman calculates that the shift of Catholics from voting Republican in 1956 and Democratic in 1960 was a deciding factor in the close race.

Opponents had tagged Nixon as "Tricky Dick," and he played into that image late in the campaign. An investigator for the Kennedys slipped the muckraking columnist Drew Pearson a tip that the billionaire Howard Hughes, whose empire thrived on federally assigned airline routes and government contracts, had provided the Nixon family with a generous loan. Nixon's hapless brother, Donald, had borrowed the money to finance his drive-in restaurants, and then declared bankruptcy and defaulted. When Pearson let the Nixon camp learn he was looking into the story, Nixon preemptively released his own version, omitting the Hughes connection. Pearson was then able to expose both the loan and Nixon's evasion. Coming near the end of the campaign, the charges rekindled the character issue and slowed Nixon's momentum. Although not illegal, the Hughes loan would haunt Nixon for the rest of his political career.

Going into the election, Kennedy took the lead in the polls and on election night appeared to be ahead by several million votes. Over the next days, however, his lead in the popular vote diminished as more returns trickled in. The chairman of the Republican National Committee encouraged local party officials to file complaints in eleven states, but later backed down and attention focused on Illinois (which Kennedy carried by only 8,858 votes, or .0019 of total Illinois votes cast) and Texas (where his margin was 46,257, or .02 of total votes cast). If the results had

been reversed in both states, Nixon would have eked out an electoral college victory. Gellman examines the evidence thoroughly but produces no new smoking guns. He interprets a comment Kennedy relayed to journalist Ben Bradlee that Chicago Mayor Richard Daley had assured him “with a little bit of luck and the help of a few close friends, you’re going to carry Illinois,” as an admission of fraud—which seems a stretch. Mayor Daley’s top priority that year was to defeat a Republican state’s attorney who had targeted his machine. Gellman cites historian Edmund Kallina’s conclusion that the state’s attorney was cheated out of the election, and that voting irregularities would have further narrowed the presidential margin in Illinois, but not enough to reverse the outcome. Still, newspapers turned up enough anecdotal evidence of abnormalities to reinforce the adage that encouraged Chicagoans to “vote early and vote often.”^[4]

In Texas, Lyndon Johnson had been cheated out of one race for the Senate and cheated himself to victory in another. After Texas had twice strayed from the Solid South in favor of Eisenhower, Johnson’s goal that year was to reclaim the state for the Democratic ticket. The difference between Eisenhower’s winning margin in 1956 and Kennedy’s in 1960 swung most prominently in the notoriously corrupt Webb County, along the Mexican border in southeastern Texas. Republicans charged voting irregularities, but Democratic state officials would not investigate. The state canvassing board claimed to lack authority to order a recount and insisted that even if the allegations were true, they would not have been sufficient to change the results. Nixon did not protest because he knew there was no procedure whatsoever for the losing candidate to get a recount in Texas.

The election of 1960 exposed the crazy quilt of state and local election practices, as well as the hurdles in determining the popular vote. Alabamians, for instance, voted for individual electors rather than for a slate, so the media had to calculate the candidates’ margins based on the highest vote for one of their party’s electors. Absentee ballots changed the outcome in California (putting it in Nixon’s column) a week after the election. The vote in Hawaii was so close that the state held a recount and did not decide the result until the end of December. Despite this troublesome history, and later hanging chads and inconclusive recounts, stiff resistance has remained to any effort to nationalize election procedures.

Richard Nixon likely performed his greatest public service by not challenging the election that year, which could have delayed a decision, impaired the next administration, and undermined public confidence in America’s electoral system. This clearly was not an easy decision for Nixon. Gellman quotes a poignant letter from Pat Nixon that their post-election vacation in Florida was “almost like a nightmare—tenseness everywhere,” with their daughters hearing “too much ugly discussion.”^[5]

Defeated politicians say that losing a close election is far worse than losing in a landslide. The narrowness keeps them revisiting the campaign to wonder what might have been done differently that would have reversed the results. Nixon, who suffered from insomnia, must have spent many a sleepless night reassessing his 1960 campaign, pondering whether he should have chosen another vice-presidential candidate, refused to debate, used makeup, or been more aggressive. His second thoughts shaped the markedly different type of presidential campaign he ran the next time, when he picked a border-state running mate to pursue a “Southern strategy,” avoided debates, better managed his media appearances, and sought to undermine the Vietnam peace negotiations.

A significant feature of the 1960 election was that both candidates became president, eight years apart. This reminds us that the real importance of studying past elections is not the

way they were fought, since circumstances change constantly, but who gets elected, why they won, and what they did with the office. Both Kennedy and Nixon would have a chance to prove themselves in the presidency. Both had significant accomplishments, but historians consistently rank Kennedy higher, not only because of Watergate, but because Nixon testified against himself in all those hours of surreptitious White House taping. The dark and calculating nature of those recordings revealed the side of Nixon that the Washington press corps had long suspected.

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[1] Irwin F. Gellman, *Campaign of the Century*, 57-58.

[2] *Ibid.*, 205.

[3] *Ibid.*, 154.

[4] *Ibid.*, 277.

[5] *Ibid.*, 274.