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election of 1960

The election of 1960 was in many ways a turning point in American politics. The youthful John F. Kennedy defeated Vice President Richard Nixon despite Kennedy's Catholic faith and relative inexperience. Much as Franklin D. Roosevelt pioneered the use of radio in the 1930s, Kennedy used television to "get the nation moving again" after eight placid years under President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

With overwhelming support from Republican Party regulars in all parts of the country, Vice President Nixon easily won the party's nomination. He chose Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., ambassador to the United Nations, as his running mate. The party platform stressed the need for experience in a dangerous world, and Nixon, having served as vice president for eight years, was qualified. He had only the tentative support of President Eisenhower but promised to continue his policies. By Labor Day 1960, Nixon led in the polls and seemed the early favorite to win the election.

Kennedy had been preparing for a presidential run since almost securing the vice presidential nomination in 1956. Just 43 years old, he was part of a wealthy Massachusetts family that had bankrolled his election to the House of Representatives in 1946 and the Senate in 1952. He was overwhelmingly reelected to the Senate in 1958 and used his experienced campaign staff to make an organized attempt for the presidency. His primary obstacles were his youth and his religious faith. No major party had nominated a Catholic since Alfred Smith in the election of 1928. He worked hard in the primaries to prove he could win votes in spite of his Catholicism, and at the Democratic convention in Los Angeles, he won the nomination. To appeal to Southern delegates, he chose Texas senator Lyndon B. Johnson as his running mate, a move that affected the course of politics for the next decade.

Nixon and Kennedy agreed on most basic issues, which Nixon continually stressed. That meant the campaign boiled down to the degree of the public's desire for change after eight peaceful years under President Eisenhower and varying perceptions of the men's images. For the first time, television was a deciding factor in the outcome of an election. The largest television audience in history—an estimated 70 million adults—tuned in to a debate between Kennedy and Nixon in the fall of 1960. Having prepared for the debate with friends and advisers, Kennedy appeared tanned and rested. Nixon, on the other hand, came fresh off of the campaign trail and appeared haggard and defensive. During the debate, the two seemed evenly matched, but television viewers credited Kennedy with the win. Radio listeners felt Nixon had won. They held three more debates, which addressed such issues as relations with Cuba, China, and the Soviet Union.

Kennedy's call for a more activist and imaginative approach to world problems appealed to voters, as did his youth and good looks. He won the 1960 election but by such a small margin that Nixon did not concede defeat until the following afternoon. Kennedy won 303 electoral votes to Nixon's 219. Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia won 15 electoral votes among "unpledged" Democratic and Republican electors. The popular vote was so close that Nixon almost demanded a recount. Kennedy received 34.2 million votes to Nixon's 34.1, a difference of just 115,000 votes.

Kennedy immediately began planning his campaign for reelection in 1964, but he was assassinated in 1963 before the campaign could become a reality.

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FURTHER READING

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