

1960

The Eisenhower years had given the nation an appearance of calm although the seeds of social and political change were fermenting. The 22nd Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1951, prohibited a third term for Presidents and the heir apparent to the Republican leadership was Vice President Nixon who had used his eight years in the nation's second highest office to travel, building alliances throughout the country and abroad. Another New York Governor, Nelson A. Rockefeller, was the major opposition to Nixon within the Republican party, representing the moderate to liberal portions of the party and possessing considerable access to the traditionally wealthy Republican contributors. However, Nixon had been plotting his course for at least four years and overwhelmed all other potential nominees by capturing almost 90 percent of the vote in 15 Republican primaries.⁹ Nixon had likewise been successful in the collection of delegates which assured his nomination before the convention began, prompting Rockefeller and Senator Goldwater, the only other prominent name mentioned for the top spot, to withdraw prior to the convention voting.

The Democratic nomination process was a fraternal battle between Senate colleagues. Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, who achieved national visibility in the 1956 convention, had worked hard in the intervening four years to build a strong network of potential delegate strength. The Senate Majority Leader, Texan Lyndon B. Johnson, was also interested in the nomination as were Senators Stuart Symington (Missouri), Hubert H. Humphrey (Minnesota) and Wayne Morse (Oregon). Adlai Stevenson still retained a band of faithful followers. The Massachusetts Senator proved his popular appeal by winning every contest primary he entered during the spring of 1960.¹⁰ This included a Maryland election on May 17, 1960 in which he attracted over 70 percent of the vote against Senator Wayne Morse and unpledged delegates. Maryland's Democratic Governor, Millard Tawes, had sought to control an unpledged convention delegation but announced he would vote for Kennedy four days prior to the primary.¹¹ Although nine names were placed in nomination, Senator Kennedy had collected a sufficient number of delegates for a first ballot nomination. In an excellent example of political compromise, Kennedy offered the vice presidential slot to his chief rival, Senator Johnson, who surprised many by accepting.¹²

The Democrats left their convention with an unusual but balanced ticket. It was the first time in American history that two incumbent Senators had run on the same national ticket and the first time in over 100 years that the Democrats had nominated a presidential candidate from New England.¹³ The Republicans were similarly well balanced and organizationally strong as the general election campaign commenced. Television played a unique and unprecedented role in the 1960 election with the first national debates between major party candidates aired to the entire viewing nation during the fall general election campaign. Kennedy, who would be the youngest elected President if successful, was able to project a reassuring image, while Nixon struggled to find the proper style for this new device in presidential campaigning.¹⁴ Also critical to the Democratic cause was the balance offered by the ticket with Johnson, a southern Senator, giving assurances against radicalism while Kennedy courted minority votes with a strong civil rights stance.¹⁵ The