



John F. Kennedy, age 29, sitting under a campaign poster in a room at the Bellevue Hotel during his 1946 campaign. On the mantle are photos of his parents. Photograph by Joel Yale for *Life* magazine.

John F. Kennedy: Public Perception and Campaign Strategy in 1946

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Editor's Introduction: *Boston politics in the 1940s were replete with backroom dealmaking, cigar smoke, and corruption; it was a world of insiders. In 1946, John F. Kennedy took on this hostile realm in a bid for the United States Congress. Kennedy's victory set his trajectory firmly on the path toward the White House. However, it was not Kennedy's unlimited coffers that propelled him into office; instead, it was his ability to shape public perception and outwork the other candidates, his innovations in campaign strategy, and his appeal as a naval war hero that swept him to electoral victory. The author argues that although money is an important factor in politics, it was not the determining factor in Kennedy's 1946 success.*

The author's research draws on the extensive oral history collections of the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum. The Oral History Program's goal is to "collect, preserve, and make available interviews conducted with individuals who were in some way associated with John F. Kennedy and his legacy." The collection comprises more than 1,700 interviews; interviewees include prominent public figures as well as private individuals who played distinct roles in Kennedy's life, career,

and/or administration.¹ HJM's editors caution, however, that although oral histories provide unique insights into history and politics, they need to be balanced by secondary sources. Firsthand participants, particularly close associates, advisors, and supporters, offer subjective perspectives. This article is based primarily on the reminiscences and memories of Kennedy's 1946 campaign team. It offers a unique glimpse into the emergence of one of America's most significant political figures. Seth Ridinger teaches in the history department at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts.

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With a well-known family name and a substantial fortune to accompany it, John F. Kennedy (1917-1963) had the makings for success. After a Harvard education and fresh out of the Navy, Kennedy decided to step into the competitive world of national politics. A successful bid for Congress would place the young upstart firmly on the trajectory that would lead him into the White House some fourteen years later. However, the Kennedy name in 1946, although well recognized, did not have the same force it later came to have. For this reason, many historians, biographers, and political scientists alike conclude that it was simply finances that placed Kennedy in the winner's circle in 1946. Presidential historian and Kennedy biographer Robert Dallek points out in *An Unfinished Life* (2003) that a "staggering sum" was spent on the Kennedy debut, about six times what was spent on the same seat six years later by Tip O'Neill.² Biographer Herbert Parmet agrees: Kennedy "knew he had the money to run the fight" and was not afraid to use it.³ It's no secret that money can go a long way in the world of campaign politics. And the cash flow for Kennedy's bid was copious. But as Kennedy biographer Geoffrey Perret observes in his biography, *Jack: A Life Like No Other*:

political history in the United States is replete with instances of people spending staggering sums to win elections only to come up empty-handed. Money in politics works synergistically, adding strength to a strong candidate, but often mak[ing] a weak one look stupid. Jack [Kennedy] possessed advantages his father's money could not buy.⁴

I would contend that Perret's interpretation is more accurate: money does not always equate to success. In fact, in 1946, Kennedy was up against a tough team of long-time local politicians. In that race for the Massachusetts Eleventh Congressional District, the Kennedy monetary supply, flowing

from the seemingly infinite purse of Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy, no doubt provided advantages for the candidate, but it was certainly not the determining factor. The Kennedy campaign team focused on two timeless components for electoral success: image and organization. How Kennedy was perceived by the public was just as important as how well his money was spent. In 1946, Kennedy was young, energetic, and the only World War II combat veteran in the race. In the post-war, pro-veteran era, this would be an asset of inestimable value. Along with some innovative retooling of old Boston political machinery, the Kennedy campaign team created a brand, outworked all opponents, appealed to the public's desire for a new leadership on Capitol Hill, and ultimately sold the Kennedy candidacy to the voters of the Eleventh Congressional District.⁵

Although the exact moment cannot be determined, it is safe to say that John Kennedy began to ponder a career in politics in 1944, shortly after the death of his older brother Joe, who was originally slated for the role of family politician. In late 1945 Kennedy began to explore his political options in Massachusetts.⁶ But before his big run, Kennedy spent his time building a reputation and laying the groundwork for his eventual bid.

After the war, and with help from his ambassador father, the aspiring politician was given a job as a correspondent for the *New York Journal-American*, a nationally syndicated paper owned by newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst. Kennedy's first assignment was the high-profile charter conference of the United Nations in San Francisco. The articles ran with a flattering byline, Lt. John F. Kennedy, and were accompanied by a picture of the young officer in his naval uniform.⁷ As a journalist, Kennedy also covered the June 1945 general election in the United Kingdom. His observations of post-war politics in the U.K. gave him valuable insight into the electoral mindset of a war-weary nation, insight he later used adeptly.

Ready to cut his political teeth, Kennedy began to promote himself throughout the Boston area in earnest. Beginning in October of 1945, Kennedy gave numerous lectures throughout the district, spoke at veterans' halls and women's clubs, and gave multiple interviews to local newspapers and radio stations.⁸ Networking and constructing a reputation do not necessarily depend on money, but instead require time, effort, and commitment. The establishment of the John F. Kennedy name in the Boston area was simply the foundation upon which a well-orchestrated campaign was later built.

Before declaring his candidacy, Kennedy first needed to decide what office to seek.⁹ Realizing he didn't want a position that could entangle him in state politics, Kennedy decided to move directly into the national arena.¹⁰ It was his first cousin Joe Kane, Ambassador Kennedy's most astute and

respected advisor, who agreed and convinced the Kennedy family that a move for Congress would be the most logical and advantageous step for the aspiring politician. According to campaign workers Kenny O'Donnell and Dave Powers, "Kane was a shrewd and cynical veteran manager of Boston political wars..., a gruff, bald-headed little man... [whose] knowledge of local politics was extensive."¹¹ Kane also pointed out that as a Congressman in an overwhelmingly Democratic district, the press could not easily hurt him.¹²

The Eleventh Congressional District was quickly chosen as the most advantageous for Kennedy's run. In 1946, the district consisted of Cambridge, Somerville, East Boston, the North End, and Brighton. It also covered the waterfront community of Charlestown, an area considered to be "heavily Irish."¹³ Even though Kennedy was not originally from the area, as O'Donnell and Powers explain, it was

an ideal stage for his political debut... [as it was] the birthplace of his mother.... [H]is maternal grandfather John F. ("Honey Fitz") Fitzgerald... had served as a Congressman in the... district before becoming" the mayor of Boston.¹⁴

The district also covered East Boston, where Kennedy's father was born and where his grandfather had served as a Democratic ward boss.¹⁵ Kennedy biographers Joan and Clay Blair observed that "both the Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys had roots—and relatives—in the district. The name John Fitzgerald Kennedy would automatically assure many votes."¹⁶

Kenneth P. O'Donnell and Dave Powers recalled that "a stroke of luck opened up just the right opportunity" for the aspiring candidate.¹⁷ James Michael Curley, the legendary local politician who was currently serving as U.S. Representative for the Eleventh District, had decided to forgo a reelection bid and instead run for his beloved post as mayor of Boston. Thus Kennedy, as well as several other hopefuls, could freely compete for the position. Not only was an ideal district found, but the incumbent was stepping down and clearing the path for a newcomer. The prospect of James Michael Curley simply stepping down from his seat in Congress, though, struck some as more than merely fortuitous; many historians and biographers, such as Robert Dallek in his 2003 biography of Kennedy, *An Unfinished Life*, and Geoffrey Perret in his 2001 biography *Jack*, claim that James Michael Curley was paid off by Ambassador Kennedy not to run for re-election in the 1946 race. Although there is no actual evidence to support the claim, information on both Curley and Ambassador Kennedy certainly

make it plausible.¹⁸ Whatever the case, the first major obstacle to an electoral victory was removed.

Kennedy had begun establishing a name for himself. But in the Eleventh Congressional District, he was still largely unknown, and, according to biographer Sean Savage, often viewed by opponents as a “silver spooned, carpet bagger.”¹⁹ This perception presented a challenge for the candidate.²⁰ The first move Kennedy took to shape the public’s perception was to build a campaign team. According to historian Thomas O’Connor, the veterans returning home from war were looking for a new kind of politician, someone different from the old-school politicians of the past.²¹ As biographer Vito Silvestri agrees, Kennedy was the “antithesis” of what Boston voters were used to. Kennedy was young and represented something new, and this was an advantage to be used.²² For this reason, the Kennedy team would also be made up of enthusiastic young volunteers to emphasize these differences. The vigor of the campaign, as well as its youthful appearance, were the first steps in creating the Kennedy image and shaping the public’s perception.



John F. Kennedy speaks at Memorial Day services in Cambridge, Massachusetts. May 30, 1946. Photo courtesy of JFK Library, Boston.

The next step was to develop a strategy consistent with, and complimentary to, the campaign's image of youthfulness. Because the Congressional seat was vacant, a throng of contenders stepped into the race. Among these ten candidates, two were particularly worrisome for Kennedy. The first was Michael Neville, the mayor of Cambridge and former Speaker of the House of Representative in Massachusetts. As campaign worker John Droney recalled, "He was going to be an opponent, and he was the logical favorite." For this reason, Droney said, "Cambridge was the key..., [and] if John Kennedy could do well in Cambridge, he'd win the fight easily."²³ John Cotter was the other potential threat to the Kennedy campaign; as a native son of Charlestown, he was expected to win in his own city, a fairly large region of the district. Therefore, the plan for the Kennedy team was simple: to gain as many votes in Cambridge and Charlestown as possible. According to O'Donnell, "Kennedy had little hope of beating Neville in Cambridge or Cotter in Charlestown, but ... figured that if he could win a sizable vote in those two communities and then run strongly throughout the rest of the district, he could win the primary."²⁴

The team had decided upon their strategy, and now they had to execute it. For the most part, it seemed that "Kennedy possessed qualities of intellect and personality" that would serve him well in politics.²⁵ One voter was so taken that she wrote Kennedy during the general election season, confiding that even though she was traditionally a Republican, he could count on her full "loyalty and cooperation" on election day.²⁶ Hirsh Freed, a young local attorney, told Kennedy, "I know that a group of seven Cambridge voters is voting for you, who would normally be expected to vote for Neville.... It is a fact that they are all with you."²⁷ Taking the campaign to the streets and introducing the candidate to as many voters as possible swiftly became a central strategy in the fight.²⁸ Candidates have knocked on doors before, but Kennedy did it with great energy and enthusiasm.

Kennedy's regimen quickly became arduous. He woke up around 6:15 in the morning and would be on the streets around 7:00. He often went to the dockyards and factories to shake hands with the workers on their way into work.²⁹ This method of campaigning had a positive effect on many voters. Accompanying Kennedy one morning, Dave Powers overheard one of the dock workers remark, "If this fellow, you know, gets up at 6:00 in the morning like we do... we're going to vote for him."³⁰ This was something the laborers were not used to; "none of the other candidates did that," Powers remembered.³¹ In these regards, "Kennedy was a maverick," recalled Thomas P. O'Neill, the man who later took Kennedy's vacated seat in 1952.³² And it would prove to be a successful method in the campaign strategy.

Kennedy traveled all over the district meeting voters. Dave Powers recalled that after shaking thousands of dock workers' hands in the morning, Kennedy would then walk "up Bunker Hill Street knocking on every door in that three-decker neighborhood."³³ As Kennedy partisan Dave Powers contends, "Most politicians are inclined to be lazy about campaigning. They go to rallies and meetings and dinners and luncheons, but they don't knock on people's doors."³⁴ Between his youthful appeal and his willingness to work hard, Kennedy began to gain an advantage in the race.

Kennedy worked hard and brought his methods to every possible home in the district. He "climbed creaking tenement stairs to knock on back doors and sat down in kitchens with voters."³⁵ As many rightly believed, "more votes could be collected in kitchens than parlors."³⁶ In addition, Kennedy went to the barber shops, the delis, bars, pool halls, and any other place that voters might be. In many instances, Kennedy would simply travel the streets shaking hands and talking to voters.³⁷ Anywhere that people were gathered for any reason, "you'd see Mr. Kennedy."³⁸ As campaign worker Thomas Broderick remembered, Kennedy "would go, go, go."³⁹ Kennedy's youthful zeal proved to be a potent force. Tip O'Neill remembered ringing doorbells for his own state election race at the time and finding many of his supporters had already been visited by Kennedy, and were rather warmly disposed towards him. "After visiting a few houses," O'Neill recalled, "I could see that Mike Neville was fighting a losing battle."⁴⁰ The street campaigning gave the campaign an appearance of "youthful idealism" and assisted in the campaign's positive appearance.⁴¹

The appearance of youth and zeal alone, however, would be unlikely to win Kennedy the nomination; what the team needed was a message that would resonate with voters. Fortunately for Kennedy, he was able to capitalize on a theme that many politicians evoke, but with which few succeed: *change*. After World War II, a new era was emerging. The leadership that had carried the country through the war was out of favor with Americans. Change was desired, and the youthful Kennedy was just the person to embody it.

One year prior to his own electoral race, Kennedy had witnessed defeat in the United Kingdom's 1945 general election while working as a newspaper correspondent. The young candidate believed that the Conservatives were swept out of office after the war due to an overwhelming national desire for change. The voters of the United Kingdom, although aware of the Conservatives' role in Britain's victory, voted by large margins for the Labour Party in 1945.⁴² As Kennedy recorded his thoughts at the time, "It is important in assaying this election to decide how much of the victory was due to a 'time for change' vote which would have voted against any

government in power.⁴³ Kennedy was convinced that to take advantage of the voter's sentiments he had to market himself accordingly.

"The new generation offers a leader" was the slogan Joe Kane came up with to sell their man.⁴⁴ Kane adapted the line from the introduction to Kennedy's 1940 book, *Why England Slept*.⁴⁵ According to this formulation, the "new generation" wanted to seize the reins of power from the old politicians that got the nation into World War II. The young voters, returning veterans, and other citizens as well wanted to cast out the old and install the new.⁴⁶ It was this simple thinking that resonated with the voters.

Boston, like most of America at this time, wanted a change from the traditional political players.⁴⁷ With only a few key exceptions, Kennedy knew that the people he brought in had to be new faces without political experience. From the beginning of the campaign, he "made it a point . . . to avoid alliances with well-known and established politicians and their followers," recalled O'Donnell and Powers.⁴⁸ Kennedy knew that to convey a theme of change, he could not be aligned with the old politicians. As campaign worker Peter Cloherty remembered, "It was a rather unique campaign inasmuch as there were a great many young people who I don't think ever had been interested in politics before."⁴⁹ The vast majority of Kennedy volunteers were all youthful new faces.⁵⁰

O'Donnell and Powers recalled how Kennedy "deftly moved his father's old political cigar-smoking friends into the background and replaced them with new young faces."⁵¹ The feeling of a new era was present: veterans were returning home and wanted to participate in the reshaping of their country.⁵² To win over voters, Kennedy sought to demonstrate that he was not like the old corrupt politicians. He consciously presented himself in a manner starkly different from traditional Boston politicians.⁵³ At one of his first speaking engagements, Kennedy was already setting the tone of his campaign by arriving at the event with only one aide, creating the appearance of a modest man, in contrast to the leading figures of the past with their velvet collars and entourages. Kennedy set himself "apart from the old familiar type flashy, hat-waving politician," O'Donnell and Powers remembered.⁵⁴ The method seemed to be working, because the more Kennedy distanced himself from the old-school Boston politicians, the more voters seemed to like him.⁵⁵

Kennedy was different from the candidates the Boston voters were used to. According to his supporters, Kennedy did not ask strangers how their mothers were doing or go to the funerals of people he didn't know, techniques used by other politicians.⁵⁶ Kennedy offered an appealing display of sincerity to the voters. In an age where political insiders and long-time politicians were running the show, Kennedy presented himself as an appealing alternative.⁵⁷

With the theme and tone of the campaign set, and the candidate working diligently, Kennedy and his team next set out to rebrand old yet effective methods of electioneering. Parties proved to be the key technique.⁵⁸ And they served the cause well. Throwing parties for the candidate to meet with potential supporters was a concept used early in the stages of the race. As Thomas Broderick recalled when he first met Kennedy, he asked the candidate if he was up for meeting some people. Upon Kennedy's agreement, Broderick called his sister, along with a few others, and organized the first of what became an integral aspect of Kennedy's first and subsequent campaigns, the house party.⁵⁹ Although offering free lunches at local pubs and regularly engaging in the night life was a normal part of Boston's political scene in the 1940s, Kennedy and his team approached these social events slightly differently. By staging these soirees, the Kennedy team hoped to bring fresh young faces normally absent from the ballot box into the campaign.



Opening Day, Fenway Park, Boston. April 1946

Ted Williams, Eddie Pellagrini, John F. Kennedy, and Hank Greenberg. Photo courtesy of JFK Library, Boston.

Campaign worker John Droney recalled how the plan “was to attract people who had never been in public life before and to meet people that ordinarily wouldn’t become interested in a campaign.”⁶⁰ By attempting to align fresh young faces with Kennedy, the campaign was perpetuating its public image of youthfulness and change.

This trend of close social interaction became so organized that several events would regularly be scheduled for a single evening. Every half hour the candidate could show up, mingle for a while, and quickly move to another venue. In some cases, singers or musicians were scheduled to warm up the crowds before the candidate arrived.⁶¹

These events ranged in size and scope. Some were small, with perhaps only fifteen people, while others consumed multiple floors of a three-family house.⁶² At these gatherings, Kennedy delivered the bread-and-butter issues to the largely working-class attendees. The main points were affordable housing for returning veterans and well-paying jobs to anyone willing to work.⁶³ Like any other political hopeful, Kennedy appealed to the desires of the district. But it was not the use of parties that made the Kennedy campaign different from other Boston races; it was his appeal to a new segment of society’s youth and returning veterans.

The gatherings provided not only an avenue to meet voters, but also a means to recruit volunteers. After each party, the campaign invited all attendees to join the Kennedy team. Volunteers immediately “started drifting down to the headquarters,” John Droney recalled.⁶⁴ As Dave Powers remembered it, Kennedy was so successful at the parties that everyone in attendance wanted “to do something” to help him win,⁶⁵ and they would all prove to be inestimable assets.⁶⁶ As campaign worker Peter Cloherty recalled, “I’ve never seen a campaign like it as far as having an overabundant supply of workers.”⁶⁷

Kirk Billings, one of the workers who ran the Cambridge headquarters, reflected on the volunteer work that took place on an average day: “We were constantly going over the voting lists to find where the Democrats were. We had four or five telephones going all the time, with volunteer girls calling up... and encouraging people to vote for Jack Kennedy.... We were as well organized as an organized group could be.”⁶⁸ The campaign disseminated cards to voters requesting information such as what ward they lived in, if they had a car, if they would like a Kennedy tag for their car, or if they would help out in some other way for the campaign.⁶⁹ This was just another simple method for the already large pool of workers to expand their ranks. Rose Kennedy recalled the constant and large numbers of volunteer workers in and out of the various headquarters: “friends from the Navy, friends from school

days and friends of no particular label: dozens of them drifting in and out for long or short periods, and all pleased to do what they could for Jack.”⁷⁰ With so many young people involved, the campaign had “a look that matched the slogan, ‘The New Generation Offers a Leader.’”⁷¹ The sheer power of the organization and the volume of volunteer labor made the Kennedy campaign a formidable force.

The next move the Kennedy campaign took was bold. It involved the entire family and appealed to a broad number of voters, especially women. The Kennedy family decided to have a formal tea and invite thousands of guests to meet the candidate and his family. The tea was scheduled strategically for June 15, just three days before the primary election. Furthermore, it was held at the Hotel Commander in Cambridge, a tactic designed to take votes from Cambridge’s own Michael Neville. According to Kenneth O’Donnell, “Invitations were sent to every woman on the locality’s voting list asking her to meet the candidate and his parents.”⁷² It was at this party that the Kennedy



John F. Kennedy speaking at a women’s club campaign event, 1946. Photo courtesy of JFK Library, Boston.

name was really used to his advantage. As O'Donnell remembered the situation, "for older women, the chance to get a close look at Rose Kennedy and the former Ambassador to the Court of St. James's... was irresistible. Younger unmarried girls were thrilled to shake hands with Jack."⁷³ As Tip O'Neill remembered the party, "[s]ome of the single girls showed up in the hope that lightning would strike, because Jack, after all, was still a bachelor."⁷⁴ Although parties were not an unusual method of campaigning, the use of the Kennedy name proved to be very effective electioneering. Nearly 1,500 guests showed up, so many that it caused a traffic jam in Harvard Square.⁷⁵

This "tea party" was an intentional and direct appeal to women voters.⁷⁶ As Kennedy biographer Geoffrey Perret recognized, Kennedy "was decades ahead of other politicians. He was one of the first to spot the crucial importance of the female vote."⁷⁷ Before 1946, the realm of politics had remained largely a men's game, and women's votes had not been purposefully sought. Kennedy was keenly aware that women were a powerful force in the Commonwealth and therefore actively sought their support.⁷⁸

Kennedy had already gained favor in Brighton by speaking at the Brighton Women's Club, which, according to campaign worker Thomas Broderick, may have been one of the "most influential organizations in Brighton."⁷⁹ With his direct appeal to an otherwise untapped political resource, Kennedy had another advantage over his opponents. Kennedy's own mother believed that women wanted to either mother him or marry him.⁸⁰ Tip O'Neill described Kennedy's ability to harness his appeal as "another innovative technique.... Women had been active in politics before, but nobody paid them as much attention as Jack did.... He certainly knew how to charm the ladies."⁸¹ In focusing on women's voting power, Kennedy was "ahead of his time."⁸²

Kennedy set up his main headquarters in Boston at 18 Tremont Street and ran operations from his hotel room at the Bellevue on Beacon Hill. But the campaign headquarters was relatively unimportant in comparison to the numerous command posts throughout the district; these gave the campaign its real power. "Jack's campaign was unlike anything that any of us had ever seen," Tip O'Neill remembered; "the Kennedys recruited a group of energetic and talented volunteers.... They were superbly organized, with each area in the district having its own Kennedy-for-Congress secretary and its own committee."⁸³ Taking Boston political machinery and stretching it far into the grass roots became a key element in the Kennedy recipe for success.

Because Kennedy brought in many volunteers, the campaign created a large infrastructure, one capable of dominating the political playing field. Joe Kane, Billy Sutton, and Kennedy broke down the district into wards and sub-wards in order to be more effectively managed by the workers. It wasn't

that Kennedy was doing anything new with his micro-managed style of ward politics; he was simply extremely well organized in the process.⁸⁴

East Boston's first ward was split into two sub-wards, one with a well-known Italian American leading it, and the other with an Irishman. Charlestown also had a well-known Irishman. All the other wards were similarly divided.⁸⁵ The commander of each post was responsible for organizing the campaign in his respective district, getting the vote out, and establishing lines of communication between the candidate and the voters.⁸⁶ A multifaceted organization was established to reach every voter. Kennedy took full advantage of his volunteers. His largest threat remained Mike Neville, so the team decided to put three campaign headquarters in Neville's backyard of Cambridge.⁸⁷

In Charlestown, where key advisor Dave Powers headed up the local Kennedy for Congress headquarters, Powers and the volunteers stuffed envelopes, made calls, and organized parties and street corner rallies to meet the candidate. As a testament to volunteer commitment, Dave Powers became about as popular as Benedict Arnold for not supporting the local candidate, John Cotter.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, Powers' commitment to Kennedy paid off in the end.

To garner support, the various headquarters distributed cards with the candidate's information. These cards were then dispersed by voters to their friends and family. With a simple exchange among acquaintances, the cards became easily and widely disseminated. The cards read, "Dear Friend... [Kennedy] is an alert and capable young man, well qualified to represent the district... Won't you enlist the efforts of your friends in supporting John F. Kennedy for Congress?"⁸⁹ A volunteer would address ten of these cards to ten or so of his friends and mail them off with hopes that a large support base would form. The campaign also made sure to create lists of any individuals wanting to help, or simply those who wanted a sticker for their car, or a banner for their apartment window.⁹⁰ The campaign's organizational structure and the energy of its volunteers gave the Kennedy campaign far reaching and effective grass-roots network.

Immediately following the conclusion of WWII in 1945, thousands of veterans returned home and registered to vote. The returning soldiers had known life before and after war and were now committed to taking control of policy for themselves. In Boston approximately 100,000 veterans returned home and quickly registered to vote.⁹¹ The magazine for young men, *PIC*, in its November 1946 issue, recognized "World War Two veterans as a potent force in American Politics."⁹² The overwhelming number of veterans returning from war all had one issue on their minds—the welfare of their

fellow comrades.⁹³ As Dave Powers recalled, “they [all] want a change in public office with the veterans taking over.”⁹⁴ It was this singular source of power that Kennedy successfully harnessed.⁹⁵

From his earlier experiences in England, Kennedy knew that there would be a political shift. In England, it had been to the left, but in the U.S. it would be to the opposite direction. For this reason, the candidate distanced himself from the national Democratic Party and focused more on the issues of his district. A particular emphasis was of course placed on his war record.⁹⁶ Kennedy’s war experience gave him immense appeal in the district and he intended to capitalize on it.⁹⁷ Moreover, Ambassador Kennedy polled the district to find that voters were much more likely to vote for a war hero over a local politician.⁹⁸ As O’Donnell remembered, many veterans voted for Kennedy because of his “impressive war record.”⁹⁹ Kennedy simply had to make sure that there wasn’t a single veteran in the district unfamiliar with his distinguished service.

Kennedy, no doubt with the help of his family, became commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars post in Boston. By becoming a leader within the organization, Kennedy could clearly identify himself with the large number of veterans in the district. He also joined the American Legion and continued to network with as many area veterans he could.¹⁰⁰

When John Hersey’s 1944 story about Kennedy’s heroic efforts in the South Pacific was reprinted in *Reader’s Digest*, Kennedy gained a good deal of additional attention.¹⁰¹ There were no doubt hundreds, if not thousands, of subscribers to the magazine in the Boston area alone. And to ensure that no voter went unexposed to the story of Kennedy’s heroism, Joe Kennedy distributed nearly 100,000 copies throughout the district.¹⁰² The campaign’s intention was to leave no doubt within Boston’s Eleventh District that a war hero was running for Congress.

For anyone who had been unaware of Kennedy’s war record, the campaign on several occasions released statements to the press glorifying the heroic candidate.¹⁰³ The campaign was actively shaping the public’s perception of their man. A May press release submitted by the campaign stated that even though “Kennedy’s service in the Pacific won citations for him and saw him wounded in action,” it was because of his “natural ability” and his “sound and experienced judgment” that the veterans waged “so vigorous a fight” for his election.¹⁰⁴ The Kennedy team also went so far as to declare that “one of the impressive features of the campaign has been the manner in which veterans of all branches of the armed forces have rallied behind his candidacy and have joined in the drive to send him to Congress to speak for the men who fought in World War II.”¹⁰⁵ The campaign energetically used Kennedy’s

war experience to shape the public's perception and build political capital. According to biographer Vito Silvestri, veterans began to view Kennedy as their "spokesperson."¹⁰⁶ In an additional effort to get the message out, Kennedy gave speeches glorifying the efforts and sacrifices not of himself, but of his navy comrades. By emphasizing the struggles and courage of the men under his command, Kennedy was cleverly engaging the crowd and implying his own courage and leadership abilities. As Silvestri concluded, Kennedy was establishing his "proof of character."¹⁰⁷ The campaign's efforts were so effective that by the end of the election cycle even the newspapers were referring to Kennedy as the "naval hero of the Solomon Islands."¹⁰⁸

Kennedy's naval experience in the South Pacific and his image as a war hero had a direct and influential impact on many voters in the district.¹⁰⁹ Along with his war record, the campaign's advocacy for veterans' issues was of paramount importance. Post-war Boston was overcrowded and economically troubled, and many returning soldiers lacked adequate housing.¹¹⁰ "This is one of our most pressing problems," declared Kennedy, arguing for the need to build homes "where families can live comfortably as human beings and with pride."¹¹¹ Price control was an issue to be taken up by Kennedy if elected, as well as adequate health care. As Kennedy noted in his platform, "a healthy populace is essential to the growth of a sound nation."¹¹² Being the only notable candidate with a war record, Kennedy's appeal to the veterans was much more potent—and hence more effective—than that of his opponents.

Veterans were returning home by the thousands in the spring of 1946, and Kennedy's appeal was so effective that many of them, independent of the campaign, set up their own autonomous committees to aid his election.¹¹³ The main group was the Kennedy for Congress Veterans Committee, which, among other efforts, sent out cards to veterans that asked, "Fellow veteran, [how] much of the legislation before the next Congress will concern veterans' problems—jobs, housing and hospital care." The cards also stated that Kennedy was just the right person to represent their interests.¹¹⁴ Kennedy was not only a veteran, but a perceived war hero, and many veterans trusted him as the guardian of their welfare in Washington. His main opponent, Mike Neville, had not served, a liability in the age of the veteran.

On the final day before the primary Kennedy made his closing stand as the veteran for Congress. June 17 was the annual Charlestown Bunker Hill Day parade. Kennedy marched in the parade officially as the commander of the VFW post number 5880 with a contingent of members stretching out in the hundreds behind him. The parade took him throughout the streets of Charlestown, where he was seen by hundreds, if not thousands, of potential constituents.¹¹⁵ Onlookers were constantly running up to the candidate to

shake his hand, remembered James Reed.¹¹⁶ After a long, exhausting day, it looked as though Kennedy had clinched the race.

Kennedy's war experience was a major asset to his campaign. He had a story that proved he could fight and prevail in adverse circumstances. Kennedy himself later recalled, "I was elected to the House right after the war because I was the only veteran in the race."¹¹⁷

The campaign's final responsibility was to make sure supporters got to the polls on election day. In each district there were volunteers with cars driving around and picking up supporters who needed a ride to the polls. Well-known faces in a district were placed at the polls to give a last minute show of support¹¹⁸, and veterans were positioned at every polling station to emphasize Kennedy's war record.¹¹⁹

On the morning of June 18, 1946, Kennedy and his two maternal grandparents went to the polls together and then spent the remainder of the day at the cinema waiting for the election results. Kennedy's hard work, his many volunteers, and a masterfully orchestrated campaign paid dividends. Kennedy defeated his opponents by large margins, winning 22,183 votes to Michael Neville's 11,341. Charlestown's John Cotter came in third with 6,677 votes, and the remaining seven candidates managed a total of only 12,104 votes.¹²⁰ Although not a majority, Kennedy carried just over 42 percent of the vote and won a resounding victory in the primary.¹²¹

In practical terms, of course, Kennedy had just won a seat in Congress. Though the general election was still to come, the Eleventh District was so overwhelmingly Democratic that Kennedy did not even campaign that fall. Peter Cloherty recalled that enrollment in the district ran "five or six to one Democratic. Once you were nominated, you didn't have to campaign in the November election."¹²² In the general election, Kennedy trounced Republican Lester Bowen, taking 72 percent of the vote.¹²³

Kennedy had successfully executed an energetic and effective campaign that sent him to Washington. He was a gifted candidate who surrounded himself with able and energetic volunteers. The young candidate created a campaign specifically for his time, one that appealed to youth, the returning veterans, and those craving change. The Kennedy team succeeded at shaping the public's view of their candidate. It was not just the Kennedy fortune that led to electoral victory in 1946; rather, it was a well-orchestrated campaign, an image of youthful idealism fighting for change, and the general perception of military heroism that ultimately put Kennedy in power.

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John F. Kennedy votes in the 1946 Massachusetts Democratic Primary. With Kennedy are his maternal grandparents, John F. "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald and Mary Hannon Fitzgerald. June 18, 1946. Photo courtesy of JFK Library, Boston.



U.S. Rep. John F. Kennedy poses for a photograph at 315 Cannon House Office Building after his election to Congress in 1946. U.S. Rep.-elect William Keating selected the office through a lottery held for incoming freshmen lawmakers. Photo courtesy of JFK Library, Boston.

Notes

1. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/About-Our-Collections.aspx#OHPProgram>.
2. Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy 1917-1963* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 130-131.
3. Herbert Parmet, *Jack: the Struggles of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Dial, 1980), 148.
4. Geoffrey Perret, *Jack, A Life Like No Other* (New York: Random House, 2001), 135.
5. It should be noted that a large portion of campaign information comes from insider sources; therefore, it can be reasonably expected that these sources are subjective and even biased towards Kennedy.
6. Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 117.
7. Parmet, *Jack*, 131-132.

8. Perret, *Jack*, 133-134; For radio stations see JFK, Personal Papers, Boston Office Files, Box 11A, Folder 011-023, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts. John F. Kennedy hereafter cited as JFK; John F. Kennedy Library hereafter cited as JFKL. Kennedy, like most aspiring politicians, joined many clubs and organizations, including the Bunker Hill Council of the Knights of Columbus. He also joined the Charitable Irish Society, The Boston City Club, the Central Labor Union, and the Harvard Club of Boston. See JFK, Personal Papers, Box 11, Folder 011-018 and folder 1 of 4 and 2 of 4, JFKL.

9. His candidacy was officially announced on April 22, 1946.

10. Joan and Clay Blair Jr., *The Search for JFK* (New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1976), 430.

11. Kenneth P. O'Donnell and Dave F. Powers, *Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye: Memoirs of John Fitzgerald Kennedy* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), 49-50; see also John Henry Cutler, *Honey Fitz, Three Steps to the White House: The Life and Colorful Times of John F. (Honey Fitz) Fitzgerald* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1962), 303. Kenneth O'Donnell met JFK's brother at Harvard after World War II and was brought into the campaign by Bobby in 1946. O'Donnell would remain a close friend and advisor through the Kennedy administration and into Robert Kennedy's campaign for president in 1968. Dave Powers likewise met JFK in 1946 and formed a friendship that lasted through the Kennedy White House years.

12. Nigel Hamilton, *JFK: Reckless Youth* (New York: Random House, 1992), 741.

13. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 48.

14. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 47-48.

15. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 48.

16. Blair, *The Search for JFK*, 396.

17. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 47.

18. Robert Dallek states that the Ambassador offered to pay the legal debts for Curley's recent fraud conviction and to help finance his run for mayor if he agreed to step down. Perret said, "Kennedy and Curley... cut a deal." See Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 122; Hamilton, *Reckless Youth*, 674; Blair, *The Search for JFK*, 396; Perret, *Jack*, 134; Jack Beatty, *The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley, 1874-1958* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1992), 456-457.

19. Sean J. Savage, *JFK, LBJ, and the Democratic Party* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 3.

20. Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 127.

21. Thomas H. O'Connor, *The Boston Irish, a Political History* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1995), 219.

22. Vito N. Silvestri, *Becoming JFK, a Profile in Communication* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 3.

23. John Droney, recorded interview by Ed Martin, November 30, 1964, (p.5-10), Oral History Program, JFKL.

24. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 62-63.

25. Hamilton, *Reckless Youth*, 764.
26. Mildred Flagg to JFK, June 23, 1946, JFK, Pre-Presidential Papers, Box 73, Folder F, JFKL.
27. Hirsh Freed to JFK, June 5, 1946, Hirsh Freed Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, JFKL.
28. Dave Powers Personal Papers, Box 9, Folder 1 – 10, JFKL.
29. Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 128.
30. Dave Powers Personal Papers, Box 9, Folder 1 – 10, JFKL.
31. Dave Powers Personal Papers, Box 9, Folder 1 – 10, JFKL.
32. Thomas P. O'Neill, *Man of the House: The Life and Political Memoirs of Speaker Tip O'Neill* (Large Print, Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988), 179.
33. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 63.
34. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 63; See also O'Neill, *Man of the House*, 179.
35. Cutler, *Honey Fitz*, 307.
36. Cutler, *Honey Fitz*, 307.
37. Thomas Broderick, recorded interview by Ed Martin, April 29, 1964, (p.8-30), Oral History Program, JFKL.
38. William J. Sutton, recorded interview by Jack Haynes, April 6, 1964, (p.13), Oral History Program, JFKL.
39. Thomas Broderick, recorded interview by Ed Martin, April 29, 1964, (p.8-30), Oral History Program, JFKL.
40. O'Neill, *Man of the House*, 113.
41. Savage, *JFK, LBJ*, 4.
42. For a discussion of Kennedy's learning experiences, see Barbra Leaming, *Jack Kennedy, The Education of a Statesman* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 187. In the U.K. general election of 1945 the Labour Party received 47.7% of the vote while the Conservatives only received 39.7%, see Bryn Morgan and Joseph Connelly, *UK Election Statistics: 1945-2000*, Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, Library, 2001.
43. John F. Kennedy, *The European Diary of John F. Kennedy, Summer 1945*, ed. Deidre Henderson (Washington D.C., Regnery Publishing Inc., 1996), 37.
44. O'Neill, *Man of the House*, 116; see also Perret, *Jack*, 135.
45. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 50.
46. O'Connor, *The Boston Irish*, 218.
47. O'Connor, *The Boston Irish*, 219.
48. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 56.
49. Peter Cloherty, recorded interview by John F. Stewart, September 29, 1967, (p.8), Oral History Program, JFKL.
50. Silvestri, *Becoming JFK*, 22.
51. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 56.
52. Hamilton, *Reckless Youth*, 771-772.
53. Thomas H. O'Connor, *Bibles, Brahmins, and Bosses: A Short History of Boston*. 3rd ed. (Boston: Trustees of the Public Library, 1991), 199.
54. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 53-54.

55. Silvestri, *Becoming JFK*, 23.
56. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 59.
57. James Michael Curley, mayor of Boston, and longtime politician, in 1946 was arrested, tried, and convicted of fraud while simultaneously serving his term as mayor of Boston. Curley exemplified the urban politician of the early 1900s. For many more of the controversial methods that Curley used to gain favor in his district, see any number of the examples in Beatty, *The Rascal King*, Chapter 3.
58. Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), 12.
59. Hamilton, *Reckless Youth*, 766.
60. John Droney, recorded interview by Ed Martin, November 30, 1964, (p.11), Oral History Program, JFKL.
61. John Droney, recorded interview by Ed Martin, November 30, 1964, (p.12-13), Oral History Program, JFKL; See also Perret, *Jack*, 136.
62. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 64.
63. Typescript, 1946 Election Platform, Pre-Presidential Papers, Box 98, Campaign Files 1946, JFKL; Perret, *Jack*, 157-158; Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 130.
64. John Droney, recorded interview by Ed Martin, November 30, 1964, (p.13), Oral History Program, JFKL.
65. Dave Powers, Personal Papers, Box 9, Folder 1 – 10, JFKL.
66. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 64.
67. Peter Cloherty, recorded interview by John F. Stewart, September 29, 1967, (p.7), Oral History Program, JFKL.
68. Kirk LeMoyne Billings cited in Hamilton, *Reckless Youth*, 757.
69. JFK, Personal Papers, Box 11A, Folder 011-025, JFKL.
70. Rose Kennedy, *Times to Remember*, (NY: Doubleday, 1974), 337.
71. Rose Kennedy, *Times to Remember*, 337-338.
72. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 64-65.
73. Ibid.
74. O'Neill, *Man of the House*, 117-118.
75. Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 131.
76. Rose Kennedy, *Times to Remember*, 344.
77. Perret, *Jack*, 138.
78. Hamilton, *Reckless Youth*, 765; O'Connor, *The Boston Irish*, 211, 220.
79. Thomas Broderick, recorded interview by Ed Martin, April 29, 1964, (p.8-30), Oral History Program, JFKL.
80. Rose Kennedy, *Times to Remember*, 343-344.
81. O'Neill, *Man of the House*, 117-118.
82. O'Neill, *Man of the House*, 118. For Kennedy's appeal to women, see also Savage, *JFK, LBJ*, 5.
83. O'Neill, *Man of the House*, 115.
84. Savage, *JFK, LBJ*, 1.
85. Dave Powers Personal Papers, Box 9, Folder 1 – 10, JFKL.

86. Parmet, *Jack*, 154.
87. Mark Dalton, “Who was very well known and a very good worker,” handled one of the headquarters, O’Donnell and Powers remembered, while John Dronney managed another and Bobby, Kennedy’s younger brother, headed up East Cambridge, Dave Powers Personal Papers, Box 9, Folder 1 – 10, JFKL.
88. O’Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 55.
89. JFK, Pre-Presidential Papers, Box 98, Folder Campaign Files 1946, JFKL.
90. JFK, Pre-Presidential Papers, Box 98, Folder Cambridge Lists, JFKL.
91. Perret, *Jack*, 135.
92. Robert Allen, *PIC*, November 1946, Dave Powers Personal Papers, Box 24, JFKL. Nearly 2/3 of all men between the ages of 18 and 34 were in uniform in 1945, James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 13.
93. Parmet, *Jack*, 144; See also O’Connor, *The Boston Irish*, 217.
94. Robert Allen, *PIC*, November 1946, Dave Powers Personal Papers, Box 24, JFKL.
95. Parmet, *Jack*, 144.
96. Parmet, *Jack*, 157.
97. As an example of the national desire to elect veterans to public office, Richard Nixon, a naval veteran, was elected to Congress in 1946, and Joseph McCarthy was elected to the U.S. Senate after serving in the Marines during the war. See Earl Mazo and Stephen Hess, *Nixon, a Political Portrait* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968), 34-44; and Jonathan Aitken, *Nixon, A Life* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1993), 114, 121-125.
98. Silvestri, *Becoming JFK*, 10.
99. O’Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 64; Silvestri, *Becoming JFK*, 18.
100. Perret, *Jack*, 140; See also Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 129-130.
101. O’Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 46. The story by John Hersey was originally published in *The New Yorker* and was reprinted as an abridged version in *Reader’s Digest Magazine*, most likely due to the insistence of Ambassador Kennedy.
102. Silvestri, *Becoming JFK*, 18.
103. A press release the week of May 26, 1946 directly refers to Kennedy as “naval hero,” Campaign press release, Week of May 26, 1946, JFK Pre-Presidential Papers, 1946 Campaign, JFKL.
104. Campaign press release, Week of May 26, 1946, JFK Pre-Presidential Papers, 1946 Campaign, JFKL.
105. Campaign press release, 1946, JFK Pre-Presidential Papers, 1946 Campaign, JFKL.
106. Silvestri, *Becoming JFK*, 24.
107. Silvestri, *Becoming JFK*, 11.
108. *Boston Herald*, April 23, 1946.
109. Savage, *JFK, LBJ*, 5; see also O’Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 54.
110. O’Connor, *The Boston Irish*, 210; Silvestri, *Becoming JFK*, 9.

111. Typescript, Election Platform, Pre-Presidential Papers, Box 98, Campaign Files 1946, JFKL.
112. Typescript, Election Platform, Pre-Presidential Papers, Box 98, Campaign Files 1946, JFKL.
113. For returning veterans see any *Boston Herald* from April 1946.
114. JFK, Pre-Presidential Papers, Box 98, Campaign Files 1946, JFKL.
115. Parmet, *Jack*, 160-161.
116. James Reed, recorded interview by Robert Donovan, June 16, 1964, Oral History Program, JFKL.
117. Kennedy, cited in Cutler, *Honey Fitz*, 309.
118. Hamilton, *Reckless Youth*, 769.
119. Dave Powers Personal Papers, Box 9, Folder 1 – 10, JFKL.
120. JFKL, Historical Resources, <<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/The+Election+of+1946.htm>>
121. Although Kennedy did not win an outright majority in the election, he did score more than 10,000 votes above the second place contender in a race divided ten ways.
122. Peter Cloherty, recorded interview by John F. Stewart, September 29, 1967, (p.2), Oral History Program, JFKL.
123. O'Donnell and Powers, *Johnny*, 71.