Constructing Camelot: John F. Kennedy and the 1946 Massachusetts special congressional election

Engel, Jamie

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Boston University
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Jamie Engel
Undergraduate Honors Thesis
Department of Political Science
Boston University

Advisor:
Professor David Mayers
Figure 1: Magazine cover from PIC "The Magazine for Young Men" published in 1946. Kennedy's campaign slogan, "A New Generation Offers a Leader" is prominently displayed in the background. (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library)
“By the fortunes of birth, I am a son of Massachusetts. By the processes of selection, I am a Democrat. By the Grace of God, I am an American.” –John F. Kennedy

**Introduction**

John F. Kennedy is perhaps one of the most prominent political figures of the 20th century. He is remembered not only for the accomplishments he achieved during his presidency but also the numerous accolades the Kennedy family accumulated throughout the 1900’s. His popularity, while certainly a product of his governing, can also be attributed to his assassination in 1963. The tragic death of a president eternally lives on in the American spirit and has resulted in the romanticized comparison between the mystical, ethereal Camelot; a popular literary and musical contribution of the late 1960s, and Kennedy himself. Kennedy’s wife, Jacqueline, was the first person to draw the association between King Arthur and Kennedy. In an interview conducted right after Kennedy’s death by Theodore H. White, author of *Making of a President 1960* and Time magazine contributor, Jacqueline described her husband as “a peacemaker who died in a campaign to pacify warring factions of mankind.”[1] Jacqueline wanted the American people to remember her husband as a martyr in a quest for peace and unity rather than a calculated politician devoted to incremental legislative change. The comparison was widely accepted by society and Kennedy was thus subsequently viewed as a liberal idealist peacemaker similar to that of King Arthur as portrayed in *The Once and Future King*, one depiction of the 12th century medieval tale.[2]

American fascination with the Kennedy mystique was not lost on me. I too was captivated by the glamour and history of the Kennedy clan. Often there is great attention paid to Kennedy’s Senate career as well as his time in the White House, but there is little focus on Kennedy before he was an international household name. I was interested in understanding
further the origins of the man who altered the nation’s political foundation thus changing national politics for years to come.

This is a study targeting the political debut of a great American figurehead. Before he was President, Kennedy was a soft-spoken and shy congressional candidate with little perceived political promise. The 1946 John F. Kennedy congressional campaign was successful because of the unique organization, image, and opportune timing of the congressional race. By obtaining a better understanding of the people, the stories, and the nuances of the Eleventh Congressional District, Kennedy was able to alter his campaign approach and win the election. The Kennedy campaign promoted a candidate who resonated with a large percentage of the electorate and campaign workers mapped out the greatest path to victory within the constraints the district presented. Through hard work, grit, and unwavering dedication, the Kennedy campaign team helped shape a legendary statesman; a leader who defied legend and lived on in American culture years after his assassination.

**John F. Kennedy Background**

Kennedy had always shown an affinity for politics and was often described as having an uncanny understanding of policy and governance. Growing up, many in the Kennedy family, including father Joe Sr., believed that Kennedy would end up pursuing a career as a teacher or writer after displaying his talent through published articles and the Pulitzer-prize winning *Profiles in Courage*. After the tragic death of his older brother, Kennedy began to ponder the reality of a career in politics. Kirk LeMoyne “Lem” Billings, prep school roommate, long time friend and later top campaign operative, expressed his opinions about Jack’s career in politics by saying: “A lot of people say that if Joe hadn’t died, that Jack might never have gone into politics.
I don’t believe this. Nothing could have kept Jack out of politics: I think this is what he had in him, it just would have come out, no matter what. Knowing his abilities, interests and background, I firmly believe that he would have entered politics had he had three older brothers like Joe.” Edward Crane, a Harvard acquaintance of Kennedy’s, recalled overhearing late night conversations between Kennedy and his friends in the library. When they were talking about public office, Kennedy assertively expressed that, “…the big decisions of the future are all going to be made at Washington, D.C.” Initially, Kennedy might not have been too keen about entering a career in public service, but he certainly made calculated moves to ensure that his resume reflected experience in the public sector. Shortly after returning home from the Pacific War in 1945, Kennedy secured a position at the New York Journal-American as a contributing writer. His first major assignment was to cover the high-profile United Nations conference in San Francisco. During this month long engagement in California, Kennedy filed seventeen 300-word stories, notably credited as Lieutenant John F. Kennedy, boosting his image as war hero and Navy veteran. Although this attention did little to enhance his standing in Massachusetts as a potential political figure, it did elevate his national recognition and provided him with powerful information on the post-war attitudes of the American people. When asked directly, Kennedy had a multifaceted answer for his introduction to public service.

“I was at loose ends at the end of the war; I was reluctant to begin law school again. I was not very interested in following a business career. I was vitally interested in national and international life and I was the descendant of three generations, on both sides of my family, of men who had followed the political profession. In my early life, the conversation was nearly always about politics. My father, who had directed much of his energy into business, nevertheless, as the son of a Massachusetts state senator, was himself interested in politics. My mother, also, shared the interest. Her father had been mayor and a United States congressman, and both my great uncles were state senators and my father’s first cousin was mayor of Brockton, Massachusetts…. But I never thought at school and college that I would ever run for office myself. One politician was enough in the family and my brother Joe was obviously going to be the politician. I hadn’t considered myself for a political success. When he was 24 he was elected as a delegate to the Democratic convention in 1940 and I think his political success would
have been assured. My brother Joe was killed in Europe as a flyer in August 1944, and that ended our hopes for him. But I didn’t even start to think about a political profession until more than a year later. When the war came I didn’t know what I was going to do, and in those days… and for those few months after the [war]… I didn’t find it oppressive that I didn’t know. In ’44 and ’45 I had been in the hospital for about a year recovering from some injuries I received in the Pacific. Then I worked as a reporter covering the San Francisco [United Nations] conference, the British election, and the Potsdam meeting—all in 1945. So there never was a moment of truth for me when I saw my whole political career unfold. I came back in the fall of ‘55[sic— it was 1945] after Potsdam, at loose ends, and the head of the Boston Community Fund asked me to help him during the drive…[which] meant making speeches for the first time in my life, and they seemed to be acceptable. The first speech I ever gave was on “England, Ireland, and Germany: Victor, Neutral, and Vanquished.” It took me three weeks to write and was given at an American Legion Post. Now, the speech went rather well. A politician came up to me afterwards and said that I should go into politics, that I might be governor of Massachusetts in ten years. Then I began to think about a political career. I hadn’t even considered it up [un]’til then. Later in the fall, James M. Curley was elected mayor of Boston and a congressional seat became vacant. This was the Eleventh Congressional District, which my grandfather once represented in Congress 50 years before. Suddenly, the time, the occasion, and I all met. I moved into the Bellevue Hotel with my grandfather [Honey Fitz] and I began to run…”

Beginning in October 1945, Kennedy began to promote himself by meeting with a series of local organizations and taking speaking engagements, foreshadowing his political intentions through action alone. He spoke with local papers and radio stations and described his naval career and the importance of veterans’ affairs in Massachusetts. He was sure to articulate his evolving political stance on issues relevant to the working people in the Commonwealth. Kennedy decided early on that he did not want to deal with the entrenched politics that burdened the state, declaring from the beginning of his candidacy that he was approaching the race with a renewed vigor and a new approach to campaign management. Kennedy therefore decided to skip any local elected positions and seek an elevated title in the national arena. The long, tumultuous road that led Kennedy into politics provided him with a unique perspective and understanding as to what it meant to be involved in public service. It was a deeply personal decision; by this time he had already lost his older brother whose political aspirations were well known. It seemed appropriate that his endeavor be accomplished in the Kennedy way: with a fierce passion and a
refusal to accept defeat. With his family and close friends by his side, Kennedy decided to be a political candidate. With this decision came the unspoken understanding that they would win this election and every election that came after. The Kennedy’s were known for their competitive spirit, and losing just wasn’t an option.

**Campaign Structure**

The campaign began with a question: Congressman or Lieutenant Governor? For Kennedy the answer was simple; he was going to run for Congress. For his father, on the other hand, the answer was not so easily decided. Maurice Tobin, the governor of Massachusetts, needed a Democratic running mate for the upcoming statewide election and placed Kennedy on his short-list of potential Lieutenant Governor candidates. Tobin even visited Joe Sr. to discuss the feasibility of Kennedy being on the ticket. Kennedy’s grandfather, beloved former Congressman and Mayor of Boston John F. “Honey Fitz” Fitzgerald, never hesitated in his advocacy for Kennedy to run for congress. This motivation might have been spurred by sentimental reasons because Honey Fitz himself had served as the representative for a congressional district that had previously included part of the Massachusetts Eleventh District. Kennedy did not declare which position he sought until three months into the campaign season because Joe Sr. proved difficult to persuade. The deciding factor seemed to arise when the very real possibility of Tobin losing the gubernatorial race to a Republican was brought to Joe Sr.’s attention. If that were to happen, Kennedy would serve under a Republican governor and expose himself to partisan attacks, a thought that was unsettling. Joe Sr. also realized that in the past thirty-two years, only one lieutenant governor had ever been elected as Governor. These factors further drove Joe Sr. to agree with his son’s preference for a congressional run.
Next, Kennedy needed to assemble a campaign team. Initially, Honey Fitz assembled the first team of campaign advisors for his grandson, obtaining the help of Billy Sutton and Patsy Mulkern, two notorious Boston political insiders. The two men took Kennedy on a tour of the district to familiarize the candidate with its neighborhoods. They also helped him establish residency at the Bellevue Hotel, where his grandfather was also living at the time. Kennedy was looking for people he could trust; specifically individuals who he had known previously that wanted to help him get elected. He therefore compiled a group of his friends, colleagues and respected locals from the district with guidance from Sutton and other political pros. David Powers, longtime Kennedy aid, explained “the difficulties of selecting men who are already state representatives or city councilors to handle your campaign [is] you always pick up their enemies to be against you because they’re against them, without necessarily picking up their friends.” There was no real advantage to having an abundance of political pros as advisors when the campaign was just beginning. Kennedy instead relied on his close friends from school, as well as friends of the family, to suggest potential campaign workers in the district. Mark Dalton, one of the initial campaign workers, reflected about the youthful image the campaign portrayed through its young, inexperienced staff.

“I don’t know whether this was done consciously or not or it merely happened naturally. I think some of the older men in politics, who had been in politics for years, thought perhaps that it was wrong for John to try to take this congressional seat when he had no political experience in this area and had not really done much in the district. So, one they may have thought it was wrong; two, another thing is their loyalties were to the older candidates. Mike Neville was a very attractive and well liked person and a very able candidate so many of the older men would have known him well and would have decided to stay with him rather than go with a new young fellow. And I think through the district that probably was the feeling of the older politicians that they would rather go along with an older candidate. Some of them might have felt that Kennedy might not win, but I think perhaps it was loyalty to the older people in the district. Now one of the older fellows who helped John tremendously was Bill Kelly. Bill Kelly in East Boston was one of the older figures in Boston politics and he played a leading role there. But the rest of us were fairly young, and I think a good deal of it happened naturally. There was a tremendous ferment after the war. The whole feeling of taking over—that it’s a new era. The young veteran wanted to do something, and he was naturally attracted to John Kennedy. The
older fellows through loyalty would remain with the older candidates; and the younger fellows didn’t know the older people and wanted to go with a new, young fellow. And it was exciting. There is no question about that.11

Regardless of initial intentions, the Kennedy campaign was distinguishable by the vibrant youth that campaigned for the first-time candidate. Their volunteer base far outnumbered those of their competitors and as the campaign continued, there were daily additions to the campaign’s volunteer roster.

While he had a lot of help during the campaign, there were still plenty of tasks that needed to be completed by Kennedy himself. Kennedy traveled all over the district to meet voters. Most mornings, beginning at 7 a.m., Kennedy would hit the dockyards and factories, shaking hands and sharing his campaign platform with the blue-collar workers of the district. Many people were surprised that a political candidate was taking the time to meet with them so early in the morning. One day, Powers overheard a worker exclaim, “If this fellow, you know, gets up at 6:00 in the morning like we do…we’re going to vote for him.”12 Kennedy was willing to work and this work ethic was reflected in his consistently full schedule. What set him apart from the other candidates was the time his campaign allocated for fieldwork. As many correctly believed, more votes could be collected in kitchens than in parlors. At the time, many politicians were known to approach campaigning in a laissez-faire manner. Most would go to luncheons, rallies, dinners and meetings but didn’t devote time to field operations. Kennedy understood the importance of connecting with the constituents on their own turf, and in turn, quickly developed a field team that was far superior to other campaigns.

Kennedy was always on the go. Campaign volunteers working with other candidates in the race were shocked to find that as they continued knocking on doors, that not only had many people been visited by the Kennedy campaign, but in most cases Kennedy himself had shared a
cup of coffee with them. Kennedy was a tough adversary in the race and his clearly marketed message of change for Massachusetts was difficult to discredit. His sincerity elevated this message and distinguished him from other candidates in the race because it was obvious that he refused to play into the typical expectations of political candidates. He participated in events that felt comfortable and appropriate to him and put voters at ease with his genuine and honest personality. As the race began to heat up, the Kennedy campaign team began to retool some classic campaign techniques to make them unique and effective for their candidate.

The house party was an essential campaign innovation that contributed critically to the overall success of Kennedy’s run for Congress. It was also a simple strategy to execute. Individuals would volunteer to host Kennedy and a few friends in their home to provide a forum for discussion. This was an opportunity for constituents to ask questions of the candidate in a less formal setting. At first, it began with one or two house parties a night, with Kennedy staying at each gathering for a couple hours answering questions and chatting with constituents. As the primary date grew closer, the house parties became so well orchestrated that Kennedy would be scheduled for multiple house parties in one night. Generally, he would arrive and speak for roughly half an hour, mostly addressing the “bread and butter issues”, which at the time were centered around housing and well paying jobs for returning veterans. He would answer a few questions, pay his respects to the host, and then quietly slip out the door in order to be on time for his next event. The house party had mass appeal; after people heard Kennedy speak, they wanted to contribute to the campaign in any way possible. To Powers, the secret to Kennedy’s success in two sentences was: “To meet him was to like him. And to know him was to want to help.”

The draw to the Kennedy campaign was triggered by emotion; the campaign could have hired people to work on behalf of the candidate, but constituents were lining up around the block...
to offer their assistance. The volunteers are what helped contribute to the strength of the
Kennedy machine and their volunteer corps continued to grow with the campaign.

During World War II, women were called upon to work in the United States. When the war
ended in 1945, women were expected to go back to conventional routines: tend to the house and
raise the children. Many women were dissatisfied with their lives and were thirsty for
involvement in groups and causes outside of their homes. The Kennedy campaign capitalized on
this yearning for involvement by creating the Kennedy teas and coffee hours. The Kennedy teas
became a staple in the Kennedy campaign scene, and were consequently included in all of his
subsequent races. The Kennedy teas were simple to organize and were quite similar to the house
party. One women would offer to host twenty of her closest friends in her home to listen to
Kennedy speak about his campaign. Many would last no more than an hour, but the events
offered a major gain for the campaign. Before this, the female vote was not sought after; politics
was largely a man’s game. Kennedy appealed to the women because he honestly felt that their
voices needed to be heard and that they had the potential to alter and affect the political realm.
Through the Kennedy teas, the Kennedy team was able to create a corps of volunteers who were
available during the day to assist with campaign duties. They required no pay; many of the
women yearned for recognition and validation from work outside of the home. Once other
politicians witnessed the astounding results yielded by the gatherings, they started implementing
similar tactics within their own campaigns; and were eager to capitalize on the previously
untapped resources of the female vote. It should also be noted that Kennedy was a bachelor
during the Congressional run. Some women, not all, were certainly hoping that their romantic
dreams would be answered and that the young, handsome, intelligent Congressional contender
might make her his wife. Whether they were there for the game of politics or in a conquest to
find love, it cannot be denied that women made an incredible impact on the Kennedy campaign. Three days before the primary election, the Kennedys threw a large reception for the women of Cambridge. Nearly 1500 individuals attended the event, proving the mass appeal of getting a closer look at Jack Kennedy and his family.

The Kennedy women also made a great impact on the campaign. Kennedy’s mother Rose, and his sisters Eunice, Patricia, and Jean, were celebrities in their own right and campaigned endlessly for him. One way they were able to contribute to the campaign was to organize and attend Kennedy tea receptions. Rose Kennedy and her daughters ran many teas and were the most active Kennedy family members during the 1946 contest. The election was certainly a family affair, which helped to further perpetuate “the Kennedy mystique”. The Kennedy family was considered Boston royalty and this popularity helped the campaign to recruit volunteers for the first time candidate. Kennedy utilized the varying help and support of his family members to great advantage during his congressional run. While many historians have asserted that Kennedy won largely due to the copious amount of money his millionaire father spent on the race, it is clear that more than money was needed to be successful. Presidential historian Robert Dallek explains in his biography *An Unfinished Life* that a “staggering sum” was spent on Kennedy’s political debut. It has been estimated that Jack spent anywhere from $250,000-$300,000 on the race, which was about six times what was spent on the same seat six years later by Tip O’Neill.

Although money was in abundance, campaign workers and volunteers saw little of that money at work because most of it was spent on advertising. Instead, the Kennedy team relied on the work of it volunteers and Kennedy family members to keep fueling the campaign. In a letter to her daughter Kathleen, Rose outlined family involvement in the campaign by further explaining, “Your father has kept out of it [Jack’s campaign] and is only doing a little work behind the
scenes so whatever success there is will be due entirely to Jack and the younger group.” Joe Sr. only funded Kennedy’s political endeavor and was not included in much of the decision-making. The Kennedy family role in the campaign was an important factor in catapulting Kennedy into public office, but not the only reason why it was successful. The Kennedy family helped to draw large crowds at events and increase media coverage of campaign activities. This also provided Kennedy and his siblings, all of who were younger than him, to reconnect and deepen their familial ties. Kennedy had been away at school while his sisters Eunice, Pat, and Jean and his brothers Bobby and Ted had been growing up. Their combined efforts on Kennedy’s congressional campaign further intensified the closeness of the Kennedy family and strengthened the overall campaign.

The slogan for the campaign was, “The New Generation offers a Leader”. The campaign utilized bumper stickers and pamphlets to get the word out to voters. The Kennedy campaign exploited their candidate’s military service to perpetuate his connection to the large returning population of young veterans. It was imperative to draw a strong connection between Kennedy and the new voting bloc in order to further the narrative created for the campaign. Other than touting this association in speeches and public engagements, the campaign invested in copies of *Courage, A Saga of the South Pacific* by John Hersey to distribute to voters in the district. This short story, a reprint from the New Yorker, chronicled Kennedy’s heroic encounter on his PT boat during the war.

On August 1, 1943, fifteen Patrol Torpedo (PT) boats received a mission to intercept Japanese destroyers that had escaped U.S. detection. One of the boats was under the command of Kennedy. When the patrol came in contact with the enemy ships, they were scattered. The superior Japanese force rattled the U.S. efforts and badly damaged their front. At the end of the
exchange, most of the U.S. boats had exhausted their ammunition and were ordered back to base. Three boats, including Kennedy’s, were told to stay behind in case they were met with another attack from the Japanese. The boats rendezvoused and prepared for a long night’s work. Around 2:30 in the morning, a Japanese destroyer barreled through the barricade the American ships formed and struck Kennedy’s boat. The impact sent Kennedy flying through the cockpit of the vessel and caused most of his crew to fall overboard. Kennedy’s immediate concern was locating his men. It didn’t take long to realize that two enlisted men were missing, apparently killed instantly during impact. One crewman, Patrick McMahon, was below decks when the collision occurred. He survived but sustained extensive burns and was unable to care for himself. In order to pull McMahon to safety, Kennedy towed him by holding his life vest strap in his teeth.

There was an urgent need to find land, but initially the crewmen clung to the remains of PT 109. After nine hours of clinging to the wreckage, it became apparent that the vessel would soon be completely submerged by water. Kennedy realized that they needed to find land. Kennedy organized the remaining crewmembers into two swimming groups and ordered them to head toward an island in the distance. It was an exhausting swim that took hours, but Kennedy and his men made it to “Bird” Island where they sought shelter.

Kennedy took it upon himself to get his men to safety, and spent many days swimming out to various straights and islands in an attempt to find help. Kennedy had little luck locating ships because the other PT commanders believed there to be no survivors from the collision. Eventually, on August 6, Kennedy made contact with two native islanders. They showed Kennedy a hidden boat on the island. Kennedy capitalized on the contact by scratching a note into a coconut. The message read, “NAURO ISL COMMANDER…NATIVE KNOWS POS’IT…HE CAN PILOT…11 ALIVE NEED SMALL BOAT…KENNEDY.” The natives agreed to deliver the message to Rendova, the main PT
base. All 11 men were eventually rescued. For his courage and leadership, Kennedy was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Medal. In addition, because of the injuries he sustained during the encounter with the Japanese, Kennedy was eligible for the Purple Heart. Hersey’s reprint of the story began, “While there were countless acts of valor by young Americans in World War II, we feel that an adventure of Lieutenant John F. Kennedy in the South Pacific theatre ranks high among them. It was a stirring example of high courage, resourcefulness, and the will to do.” The campaign printed copies and utilized them chiefly to better explain Kennedy’s character. They were sent out to everyone who was an eligible voter but not registered. Dalton recalled the copies of the story as being an effective tool in helping Kennedy appeal to a broader voter base. “...the John Hersey article on John Kennedy was used. Of course, that alone would have elected a man to Congress. It was a tremendous story on his experience there in the Pacific, and my recollection is that that was given wide distribution throughout the district. That made a tremendous impact on the people.

Powers, an integral part of the Kennedy campaign, famously commented, “...Without PT 109, there never would have been a president John F. Kennedy.”
Political Landscape

The Eleventh Congressional district was a diverse and thriving area in 1946. It was home to a diverse constituency and had a legacy of deep political involvement. In 1944, James Michael Curley was elected to the congressional seat in the Eleventh. Curley was living in Jamaica Plain because it was not a requirement to live in the district at the time; a loophole that Curley took full advantage of. In 1945, Curley was elected mayor of Boston, therefore opening up his congressional seat in the Eleventh District. The special election was set to take place on June 18, 1946 and within the staunchly Democratic towns, the Democratic primary was the only election that was hotly contested. Historically, the Democratic nominee would go on and beat the Republican rival with a healthy margin. The vacancy created by Curley allowed for Kennedy, and nine other hopefuls, to try their luck at winning the Democratic nomination.

The Eleventh District was made up of many towns and wards. Ward 1 was composed of East Boston where Kennedy’s father, Joe Sr., was born. Ward 2 was Charlestown, a heavily Irish Catholic area that showed strong support to Kennedy throughout the campaign. Ward 3 in Boston’s North End was Kennedy’s maternal grandfather, the beloved Honey-Fitz’s, old stomping grounds. He was a notorious political boss and a respected former mayor of Boston; a familiar connection that certainly helped Kennedy when he was first starting out in politics. The district also included Ward 22 in Brighton and parts of Cambridge. Wards 1,2 and 3 in Somerville were also allocated to the district.

Kennedy’s two major opponents in the race were Mike Neville of Cambridge and John Crotter of Charlestown. Cambridge represented 30% of the district and was a major focus of the Kennedy campaign. Local lore claims that the only names ever mentioned in Cambridge during
the election season were Kennedy and Neville. Strategically, Kennedy needed a good showing in Cambridge because it would be difficult to catch up in votes within the smaller wards of Boston. Across the district in Charlestown, the major contest was between Kennedy and Crotter. Crotter was a local boy; he was well known among the constituents and was well connected in Massachusetts politics. Not only had Crotter previously served as Mayor Curley’s secretary, but he had also previously run for Congress and served as an administrative assistant to former Massachusetts Congressman Higgins. He was very popular in the district and would pose a threat to Kennedy. In Ward 3 there was a candidate named Joseph Russo who was a sitting City Councilor. There was a major Italian-American voting bloc in Wards 1 and 3 that supported Russo’s candidacy, therefore the Kennedy strategy was to win over all of the uncommitted votes in those areas. There was also Somerville State Representative Catherine Falvey who campaigned in her Major’s uniform, which presented a compelling veteran-centric narrative. In 1940, Falvey became the youngest elected member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives but shortly after her reelection in 1942, she resigned to serve her country in the Armed Forces. Falvey, like Kennedy, exploited her wartime experiences on the campaign trail. Other candidates included Joseph Lee, a school committeeman and Francis Rooney of Somerville. There were a few other candidates with little public name recognition, perhaps most notably another candidate called Joseph Russo. All candidates were fighting for the Democratic nomination and were willing to employ any means necessary in order to win.

Early Kennedy backers often heard variations of “Are you out of your mind trying to sell a millionaire’s son from Harvard in this town?” There was a strong fear, at least initially, that Kennedy would be perceived as a carpetbagger. Kennedy had, after all, spent most of his young life splitting time between New York and Florida, with frequent trips abroad. Dalton addressed
this problem head on by explaining, “Well, first of all, the Kennedy family was extremely well known throughout the district. And when anybody tried to say that the Kennedys’ didn’t come from the district or that the Fitzgerallds’ didn’t come from the district that was treated as sheer nonsense. He was looked upon as a local boy. That was actually their reaction. They felt the Kennedys’ have been here; the Fitzgerallds’ have been here; this is essentially a local boy. Then, even if they felt he had not spent much time in the district, they were very proud to have a young man of this stature, a returning war hero, run as a candidate in the district.”37 By the end of the race, there was no doubt of the history that justified Kennedy’s connection to the district. To further illustrate his ties to the Eleventh, Kennedy declared his residency at the Bellevue Hotel, which younger brother Teddy remembered as being “a political Grand Central Station.”38 Kennedy was ready to dedicate his life to public service, and he began constructing a campaign structure that would ensure success.

**Campaign Platform**

Kennedy took advantage of the new political climate in Massachusetts when crafting his political platform. The returning veterans were disgusted with the current state of affairs in the United States as well as opportunities available to returning soldiers. The new generation of veterans was drawn to Kennedy because he understood the unique challenges they faced. Kennedy later reflected about his experience in the war by stating, “I firmly believe that as much as I was shaped by anything, so I was shaped by the hand of fate moving in World War II. Of course, the same can be said of almost any American or British or Australian man of my generation. The war made us. It was and is our single greatest moment. The memory of the war is a key to our characters. It serves as a break wall between the indolence of our youths and the earnestness of our manhoods. No school or parent could have shaped us the way that fight
shaped us. No other experience could have brought forth in us the same fortitude and resilience.

We were much shrewder and sadder when that long battle finally finished. The war made us get serious for the first time in our lives. We’ve been serious ever since, and we show no signs of stopping.”

The campaign platform catered to their fears and provided answers from those who had experienced the war firsthand. Kennedy’s stump speech began:

“The people of the United States and of the world stand at a crossroads. What we do now will shape the history of civilization for many years to come. We have a weary world trying to bind up the wounds of a fierce struggle. That is dire enough. What is infinitely far worse is that we now have a world which has unleashed the terrible powers of atomic energy. We have a world capable of atomic warfare. We have a world capable of destroying itself. The days which lie ahead are the most difficult ones. Above all, day and night, with every ounce of ingenuity and industry we possess, we must work for peace.”

He later goes on to explain that ruling out war was unrealistic because there could be another Hitler or another dictator who could pose a threat to world order. Instead, he offered that true leadership, at all levels in government, would see to it that there would not be an international problem at that scale ever again. He preached about the importance of honesty.

While he conceded that he only had the ability to articulate his viewpoints and ideas during the campaign, he vowed that when he went to Congress he would deliver on his promises through action. Contrary to the entrenched political rhetoric of his opponents, Kennedy emphasized that he would not fall victim to double-talk and sweeping generalities. It was important for him to clearly convey his position on the issues. He explained that he did not want to go to Congress “…under false colors.”

With stunning confidence, he told the voters that win or lose the campaign, the people of the district would know where he stood on all of the issues. He wanted them to see him as an individual, rather than a politician beholden to the political machine. Kennedy made his policy positions accessible to the general electorate. He was well aware that
the constituents of the Eleventh District were mostly working-class families. Kennedy therefore eliminated lofty and pretentious word choice from his platform to ensure that his ideas were relatable and understood by all audiences.

The first issue he tackled was housing. He realized that veterans who were returning to Massachusetts struggled to find adequate housing. He claimed to know many people who personally struggled with this within the District. Kennedy advocated for immediate housing for veterans coupled with a long-range housing program to safeguard against homelessness. Kennedy was appalled by the inadequate housing opportunities and saw the problem as twofold. He realized that in the short-term it was essential to get the thousands of veterans into proper housing. With an eye to the future, he recognized that the long-term goal was to have adequate housing for the entire populace. He clearly laid out a path to accomplish his goals. He voiced his support for the Veterans Emergency Housing Bill, also known as the Putnam Bill, which would provide subsidies for building materials and government guarantees to manufacture prefabricated houses. To solve the issue of housing for the general population, he promoted the National Housing Bill, also known as the Taft-Ellender Bill. This bill would initiate a long-range housing program of 15 million homes in ten years, helping with the construction of affordable housing projects subsidized by federal aid. Kennedy highlighted that the second bill was a product of bipartisan cooperation between the liberal Senator from New York, Senator Wagner, as well as Senators Taft and Ellender. He firmly believed that “…if we can produce for war, we can produce for peace.” He also believed that the work of a legislator should be handled diplomatically and with respect for the other political party.

The second issue included in his platform was price control. He closely aligned himself with former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and New York Mayor, O’Dwyer, in favoring the
continuance of price without crippling amendments until the threat of inflation had fully passed. Kennedy understood that there was great risk of hampering production if price control continued. He also acknowledged that there was a risk of tremendous increase to the cost of living and a drastic inflationary spiral that could destroy the economy if price control was removed too quickly. The intricacies of the issue were not lost on Kennedy, and he recommended that while it may result in the hampering of production in the United States for a short time, it was far safer to continue price control and avoid the risk of a drastic rise in the cost of living and inflation. He explained that he would staunchly oppose any attempt in the Congress to have a premature withdrawal of price control.

Kennedy also saw national health as a central issue to his campaign. He explained, “a healthy populace is essential to the growth of a sound nation.” He felt that every United States citizen was entitled to adequate medical care because the country had the resources to make this a reality. He went so far as to say that it was a “national crime” that it has taken so long to identify healthcare as an area for growth, and he blamed public leaders and health care professionals for the slow progress. Kennedy was careful to point out that he did not want a government takeover of healthcare. He said:

“I stand for free enterprise. I stand for democratic government in a capitalist economy. I oppose communism, fascism, Nazism, and socialism. I will oppose any health bill which will give the government power to order a doctor to go anywhere he does not want to go or to treat patients who he does not want to treat.”

He compared government control of doctors as being a stone’s throw away from controlling “…newspapermen, lawyers, working men, and businessmen…”, which would ultimately lead to a totalitarian government. The next issue was that of labor, something that was very important to the people in the Eleventh District. He understood that the political trend of the time was to curtail essential rights
of labor. He wanted to make clear that he stood for a living minimal wage, a reasonable number
of working hours, good working conditions, the right to organize, collective bargaining, and the
right to strike. His district was home to many factory workers and he firmly supported the basic
rights of labor as they were articulated in the National Labor Relations Act, the Fair Labor
Standards Act, the Pepper Amendment, as well as the Fair Employment Practice Act that
eliminated religious and racial discrimination in hiring practices. He would continue to work on
strengthening labor in the Congress.

The last pillar of Kennedy’s platform was foreign policy, a subject that he knew well. He
cited foreign policy as being the most important issue to the district and the nation; that war was
to be avoided at all costs. He outlined that he was a strong supporter of strengthening the United
Nations because it was the greatest opportunity for achieving peace. He stated that he regretted
that the United States failed to provide the leadership that would have made the United Nations
much stronger. He condemned the decision to allow a single vote by one veto of the superpowers
to stop action by the United Nations. This reality, which allowed Russia to hinder the progress of
the United Nations after the war, was also at odds with the way Kennedy saw the issue of land
ownership. He posed the question, “How can we oppose Russia’s claims for the United Nations
when we ourselves are taking land?” Kennedy proposed that the Pacific bases be placed under
a United Nations trusteeship. He felt that the United States should disclaim any claims to
territory, that it would present itself on the world stage as the leader of the free world. The threat
and fear of communism were running rampant throughout the world. Kennedy explained that in
order to prevent Russia from spreading its form of totalitarian oppression throughout the world,
it would be imperative to pin Russia against the conscience and power of the world in order to
force the Kremlin to yield. He claimed that action would be necessary in order to avoid war, and he vowed to give the people of the eleventh district that as their Congressman.

The Kennedy platform outlined the variety of issues facing the nation at the time. There were inadequate housing opportunities for returning veterans. Beyond securing shelter, many of these young vets struggled to find work. Most got jobs at local factories forcing labor issues to the forefront of most constituents’ minds. Kennedy showed a profound political understanding in the way he crafted his platform. He presented “pothole politics” issues, or rather issues that were highly relevant to the voters of the district while connecting them to the larger narrative on the world stage. He showed that he was well versed regarding the plight of the laborer; however, he possessed a high level understanding of the myriad of issues facing the country on a global scale. He constructed a platform that he hoped would resonate with the people he sought to represent.

**Campaigning in Charlestown**

The Kennedy campaign never used the word campaign manager and significantly altered traditional campaign management style. Kennedy initially offered the campaign manager job to Mark Dalton, a lawyer with close ties to the Eleventh. Dalton turned Kennedy down because he “didn’t feel up to it”.

After Kennedy pursued him for many weeks, Dalton eventually decided to run the Cambridge field office. This decision led to the establishment of neighborhood managers across the district instead of one centralized campaign manager. These ward secretaries were experts of local traditions and norms and they advised Kennedy on the most successful ways to connect with voters.

David Powers, the Charlestown Ward Captain, was but one example of the decentralized approach to campaigning that Kennedy employed. Charlestown proved to be an essential neighborhood for the Kennedy campaign and Powers was instrumental in shaping the Kennedy
strategy in Charlestown as well as across the district. He employed the larger Kennedy campaign tactics while also infusing his own personal political approach. He was an invaluable member of the Kennedy inner-circle and his efforts contributed enormously to his candidate’s success.

Powers was born in Charlestown, Massachusetts on April 25, 1912 to two Irish immigrants from Cork, Ireland. He had a difficult upbringing, living with his widowed mother, one brother, and eight half-siblings. His mother supported the family working as a domestic worker and maid until the older children could work and contribute to the family income. At the age of ten, Powers began selling newspapers to pay for his own costs. Around this time, Powers oldest sister married a man from South Boston who worked in the newspaper business. Soon after the marriage, Powers, his brother, and mother moved in with his eldest sister. His sister and her husband had ten children and it was crucial that all members of the family that were old enough generated an income. His sister’s husband, Bob Powers (no biological relation to David Powers) worked nights for a local newspaper. Early in the mornings, Bob would arrive back at their home in Charlestown to wake Powers to send him out to sell newspapers. It was through this early job that allowed Powers to become intimately acquainted with Charlestown. In recalling his childhood neighborhood, Powers described,

“All Irish, but a great neighborhood! Really, actually, they were all three-deckers and if somebody would die or somebody was sick...everyone pitched in...it’s an amazing thing...all my life, I’ve never known a neighborhood like it. One person’s troubles were everybody’s. It was the greatest neighborhood that I’ve ever lived in, heard about or read about in all of my life.”

This dedication and connection to the neighborhood was greatly exploited by Kennedy and the campaign team many years later. In his job selling newspapers, Powers had the unique opportunity to interact with hundreds of people daily. He sold the papers at the Boston Navy Yard and his most loyal customers were the sailors and the workmen; Powers later claimed that he sold to thousands of workmen in just a few hours. At this time, most of the workers were
living in Charlestown and walked to work, furthering their opportunities to socialize with neighbors and community members. As Powers recalled, everyone was involved with one another; it was a tight knit community and this was true in all aspects of daily life. Through this job, Powers soon knew almost all of the workmen on a first name basis. Throughout his childhood he also worked as an usher boy at his church. By the time he graduated high school, Powers was well known and respected. Before joining the military, Powers also worked as an enumerator for a local publishing house. In this role he was responsible for taking a mini-census each year in his neighborhood. This allowed him to build his already extensive network because he had to gather information about every individual in town. He worked in this job from 1930-1939 and he continued selling newspapers until 1942. Spurred by the death of his mother in February of 1942, Powers entered the military to explore opportunities outside of the neighborhood that shaped him.

Powers served for almost 4 years and was discharged on January 12, 1946 as a Staff Sergeant. Upon receiving his discharge papers, Powers immediately went home to begin taking care of his family. When he came out of the service he was on the 9-20 club, which was what the local veterans called veterans benefits because they picked up their weekly allowance of twenty dollars at 9 Beacon Street in Boston. Powers had saved all of his money while serving in the military and had a small savings of a couple thousand dollars to his name. He was unsure of what he wanted to do next; he contemplated going back to school under the G.I Bill among other things. Powers was still weighing his options on the night of January 21st, 1946. This was the evening that John F. Kennedy knocked on his door at 88 Ferrin Street in Charlestown. Powers recalled that the family had just finished supper when he heard the knock on the door. The distinction of supper is an important one; in Charlestown the meals are categorized as breakfast,
Children in Charlestown ate supper fairly early so they could get their homework done and go to bed at an appropriate hour. On this particular evening, the children were already in their room while Powers worked in the kitchen. The home had no central heat, which was typical of other triple-decker structures in the area; the fire in the kitchen was the only source of warmth. According to Powers, “The heart of the home in Charlestown, like many other places, is the kitchen. People spent more of their lives in these areas, when they’re not sleeping, they spend more of their waking hours in the kitchen than any other part of the home.”

Kennedy knocked on the front door. Initially, Powers thought that it might have been an old friend from childhood. He had just exited the service and many people were dropping by to say hello. It was soon obvious to Powers that the visitor was not from Charlestown because he came up to the front door. In Charlestown, everyone uses the back way that opens up into the kitchen. When Powers answered the door, Kennedy extended his hand in the darkness and said: “My name is Jack Kennedy…and I’m a candidate for Congress.” Powers invited him inside and they began to discuss the young candidates political ambitions. Kennedy explained that some of his early political advisors had recommended Powers for the Charlestown Ward Captain position. At first, Powers said that he had already promised his support to John Crotter, a local Charlestown man who had recently announced his candidacy. This did not deter Kennedy. The first conversation they shared consisted mostly of Power’s describing the district to Kennedy. He explained that, “The people in Charlestown were only looking for a decent place to live, and opportunity to give their children an education, and knowing where the next buck was coming from.” Kennedy was curious about what Powers had to say and was sincerely trying to get a better understanding of the district from those who knew it best. Kennedy left after only 20 minutes, apologizing for dropping in unannounced. He mentioned in passing that he was
scheduled to attend a Gold Star Mothers event at the American Legion in Charlestown two days later. He asked if Powers would accompany him to the event. Even though Powers was unsure of his feelings toward Kennedy, he agreed to attend.

Powers arrived at the Kennedy campaign office at the Bellevue Hotel two days later to find Kennedy surrounded by a group of newly recruited volunteers. All of them were young veterans, including Sutton and Eddie McLaughlin, who had served in the same PT boat squadron with Kennedy. Sutton asked if Kennedy wanted all of the men to join them at the event. Kennedy quickly said, “No, Dave and I.” At this early stage, Kennedy bucked the political norms of the time. Usually, established politicians would show up to events with a large number of their own people. Kennedy, in a move of strength, or perhaps naivety, chose to travel with only a few members of his team.

Powers recalled that Kennedy did not wear a hat on the way to the event. This was striking because most, if not all, politicians wore hats when appearing at public events. The political pros and advisors were constantly harping on Kennedy to wear hats, but he almost always refused. He wanted to distance himself from the habits and entrenched political practices of his predecessors. On this particular day Powers remembered looking over at Kennedy and thinking about how young he looked.

When Kennedy gave his speech, he started out quite strong. Powers didn’t remember him visibly showing any signs of nerves. Kennedy delivered his remarks with no notes and toward the middle of his speech he began to talk in circles and lost his train of thought. It was Kennedy’s first public appearance as a candidate, and Powers was repeatedly reminded of Kennedy’s age and political novice. Overall, the speech was underwhelming, until Kennedy uttered, “I think I know how all you mothers feel because my mother is a Gold Star Mother too.” The quote was
not included in the prepared speech; it came directly from the heart as he struggled to hold back tears on stage. Kennedy turned away from the audience to compose himself before continuing. When the speech concluded, mothers in the crowd rushed to Kennedy’s side. Powers recalled, “I had been to a lot of political rallies in Charlestown in my day, when you haven’t any money it’s a form of entertainment, and I really had never seen a reaction like this and now they’re all around him and in the background and I can hear them say… ‘he reminds me of my own Johnny, my own Joe, my own Pat, my own Mike…” Barbara Perry points out in her extensive research about Rose Kennedy, that women were generally taken by Kennedy. Most of the older women “wanted to take care of him… his wan appearance, resulting from malaria, chronic digestive ailments, and undiagnosed Addison’s disease, ironically became something of a benefit.” Kennedy was embarrassed by all of the attention and hated when people made a big fuss over him. He spoke for no more than ten minutes that day but he had captured the attention, and hearts, of the Charlestown Gold Star Mothers. Powers noted that Kennedy wasn’t a particularly gifted speaker; a sentiment that was later echoed by campaign worker Mark Dalton, “He was an excellent debater but not an excellent orator.” His compelling speech, coupled with obvious heartfelt sentiments, also motivated Powers to support his candidacy. Kennedy turned to Powers as they were walking home. He said: “Do you think you’ll be with me then?” and Powers responded, “I have already started.” The two decided to have dinner together that night at the Horse Shoe Tavern in Charlestown. Powers thought that Kennedy could easily win over some of the regulars. He had, after all, already convinced Powers to work for him. Powers was ready to begin campaigning for the young candidate.

Bit-by-bit, Kennedy grew into politics. Powers, and others, realized that the youth and vigor Kennedy brought to politics set him apart from the other candidates. “He was handsome-
he was tall and thin and his hair seemed curlier then and he was much thinner. But he had a real nice manner- you looked at him and you said: ‘There’s someone I can trust’ and he just sort of... he was the type of person every fellow would want for a brother- every girl would want to have for a date.”

He continued meeting with constituents and attending events in the district; attracting more attention to his campaign. Powers remembered, “He learned to like it. He may have started off doing something for his Dad or following in that tradition where Joe was going to do this... but, he learned to like it.”

Kennedy had been largely sheltered during his childhood years, not having been exposed to many working class people and problems of circumstance. As he came to know them, he began feeling connected to the communities he sought to represent. Kennedy said, “These are the types of people I want to represent in Washington—these are the type of people that need representation.”

A week after the Gold Star Mothers speech Powers opened a Kennedy headquarters on Main Street in Charlestown. Kennedy wanted to have a headquarters in every neighborhood, so this was often the first task completed by the ward managers across the district. Powers worked tirelessly to round up friends and neighbors to join the campaign in support of the young candidate. He sought individuals who believed in Kennedy’s message for change.

It was often asserted that Joe Sr. was spending a lot of money on the campaign. This claim can quickly be laid to rest when evaluating the Charlestown case study. The only money Powers ever recalled using was applied for the Charlestown headquarters rent. There was not one paid worker in Charlestown. Everyone was a volunteer who donated time because of a deep conviction that Kennedy deserved to serve the Eleventh District. One of the hardest things to do in politics is to harness enthusiasm for the candidate, but this was not a problem for the Kennedy campaign. Powers approached the surge in enthusiasm by practicing a simple mantra; the
minute a volunteer wanted to do something he gave that person something to do. There was no job too small or unimportant in the Charlestown field office and volunteers appreciated feeling as if their contributions to the campaign were making a difference.

To ensure success in Charlestown, Powers had a large map of the neighborhood showing each street of the ward pinned to the wall at the Kennedy headquarters. Kennedy wanted to visit every house and meet as many voters as possible. Many politicians in past campaigns would target certain homes in various areas of the district, usually seeking out individuals of prominence with considerable sway over their peers. Comparably, Kennedy and Powers would simply color in a street on the map once Kennedy had visited to ensure that he had covered every home by Election Day. The Kennedy campaign did not discriminate or distinguish one individual from another; all voters were important. The personal touch proved effective. One woman commented to Kennedy, “Young man, if you climbed up two or three flights of stairs to see me, I'll vote for you.” Even though Charlestown had a reputation for fiercely protecting their own, Kennedy began to see the trends shift in his direction away from Crotter. Kennedy was great on the “bread and butter” issues and pothole politics and the people of Charlestown appreciated his campaign’s effort to listen and incorporate their opinions into the platform.

Power’s deduced that the way to win Charlestown would be to win the Boston Waterfront. Powers understood that the Longshoremen had great influence. They were active in the community; they were constantly in taverns speaking with people in the neighborhood and were endlessly discussing politics. Charlestown was a community where politicians needed to work hard and pay particular care to the working class; longshoremen, truck drivers, light handlers and laborers. The campaign therefore exposed Kennedy to as many of these workers as possible, organizing campaign stops at local restaurants and bars that were frequented by this
bloc of voters, many of whom also happened to be veterans. However, the Kennedy campaign was thoughtful in the type of exposure they sought for their candidate. Kennedy did not attend any wakes during the 1946 campaign. Powers and other local campaign workers would attend without the candidate because of their own personal relationships with the deceased. If a politician goes to a wake of someone that didn’t know him, it was thought to have been showy. Kennedy felt that this type of campaigning was distasteful.

The Eleventh District was quite expansive, therefore Kennedy would dedicate only one day a week to Charlestown. His day would usually begin between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. by knocking on doors with Powers. Having learned from his initial rookie mistake, Kennedy would always knock at the kitchen door rather than the front door of the homes he visited. Kennedy would almost always introduce himself first and then allow Powers to drive the conversation because Powers was usually well acquainted with its residents. Because this practice usually took place in the morning, Kennedy mostly spoke with women. They would often comment on what a nice boy he was and encourage him to eat because they were concerned about his weight. The strong female interest in his candidacy led to the creation of the Kennedy teas in the evenings—they wanted the opportunity to speak with as many people in the household as possible. Many of the individuals in the community did not know who Kennedy was off of name recognition alone—which is why they were targeted by the campaign. Individuals from Charlestown had never met a candidate quite like Kennedy. Many politicians would walk door to door, but not in the way Kennedy did. He didn’t go to certain houses; he went to all of the houses. This was a new experience for Kennedy as well. He had never rubbed shoulders in such a way with blue-collar people. He would say, “Aren’t they nice?” He loved the Irish mothers and they adored him. Kennedy would charm the mothers during the day and then they would send their daughters to
the headquarters to get involved. The campaign would then ask the Irish daughters to invite 15 of their friends for a private tea with the candidate at their home. Kennedy would dedicate thirty minutes to each tea. It was an effective practice because the interactions with voters were casual. Kennedy and the women would sit around and have a casual discourse about politics and issues facing them personally.

Kennedy was always reflective in what he did and he was always striving to improve upon the progress that he made. After a long day of campaigning, Powers and Kennedy began to treasure the time they had together. They would often go downtown to Brigham’s on Tremont Street to grab a quick bite to eat. Kennedy would indulge in a hot fudge sundae or a chocolate frappe. The two men would debrief about all of the people he had met to insure that he committed their faces to memory. The personal touch that Kennedy extended to those closest to him is an aspect remembered by many of the campaign team. Powers and Kennedy continued their evening check-ins long after the campaign concluded.

The day before the election, on June 17th, 1946, Kennedy marched in the Bunker Hill Day parade in Charlestown, a local tradition. The campaign recruited local veterans to walk “three abreast” so that it looked like there were “several thousand” supporters for Kennedy. In reality, there were little more than 100 supporters but the optics left a mark on the ½ million-parade attendees. The campaign had been effective in all facets of its operations. It had promoted its candidate by illustrating the striking qualities Kennedy embodied. He was a young veteran who had a deep understanding of the issues. The campaign distributed various pamphlets highlighting the positive attributes Kennedy would bring to Congress, the courage of a war hero with the sensitivity of a grieving brother. He was a leader coming out of the new generation and it was up to the voters to decide who they wanted to represent them in Washington.
On Election Day, the Charlestown organization had at least two volunteers at each polling location with a car. There was an additional car with another volunteer driving elderly women to the polls. The campaign called these voters “suries”, or sure votes for Kennedy. On June 18, Kennedy garnered 42% of the total votes cast. He won the election with 22,183 votes but lost Charlestown to Crotter. Neville in Cambridge came in second with 11,342 votes, third went to John Crotter with 6,671 votes, and fourth was Joe Russo with about 5,661. Kennedy outworked all nine candidates in the race. The hometown candidates didn’t see how they would lose. Crotter took Charlestown for granted, as did Neville in Cambridge. They couldn’t imagine losing their home turf to Kennedy. They underestimated Kennedy’s power as a leader and an organizer. Kennedy did not think he could win by being John F. Kennedy, son of Joseph P. Kennedy and grandson of Honey Fitz. The voters across the district needed to see that the son of a millionaire understood their struggles and wanted to advocate for their needs. In Charlestown, the goal was to have Kennedy meet as many people as possible. The race could not be won with just money. In the words of Powers, “The only way he was going to win was house to house and door to door and he knew it.” And that’s exactly what he did.

Because the district was overwhelmingly Democratic, Kennedy didn’t have to campaign during the summer and fall months. The nomination was tantamount to election, as was the case in other districts where a majority of Democrats called home. There were often token general election opponents but it was usually a shoo-in after the primary. Kennedy won in a landslide against the Republican opponent Lester Bowen, securing 72 percent of the vote. Due to the incredible organization of the campaign, dedication of workers and volunteers, and attention to laying a solid groundwork, the Kennedy congressional campaign of 1946 was quite successful and foreshadowed many more masterful campaigns for races looming on the horizon. Jack
Kennedy, at the age of 29, became a representative in the United States Congress, but he was just getting started. Few would have guessed that this rising political figure would become so successful in just a few short years.

Charlestown is just one example of how the Kennedy team masterfully employed their campaign techniques and catered to the constituencies they were working with. While Kennedy came in second at the polls on Election Day in Charlestown, the campaign had a keen understanding of what it took to win the election overall. Through calculated branding and outreach, Kennedy was able to come up victorious in a race that few thought he could win.

The Election in a Broader Context

Across the Commonwealth, Democrats didn’t fair as well as Kennedy did on Election Day. The Democratic incumbent Governor Maurice Tobin lost to Republican Robert Bradford by nine points while Democrat Lieutenant Governor Paul Dever lost to Republican Arthur Coolidge.\(^87\) Nationally, Republicans picked up wins in almost every state. The adopted Republican slogan in 1946 was “Had Enough?” which illustrated rising tensions around the New Deal Democratic leadership. The 1946 congressional season was ultimately marked by two events that were not advantageous to the Democratic Party and the administration.\(^88\) The first came on September 20, 1946 when President Truman dismissed Secretary of Commerce Henry A. Wallace. Wallace was former vice-president and the only New Dealer left in the administration. He was well known for his staunch support of labor and progressive groups. His dismissal was triggered by a speech he gave criticizing the President’s anti-Soviet stances in United States foreign policy.\(^89\) This provided the Republicans with ample ammunition to use against candidates Wallace endorsed; they were all labeled “red” and communist sympathizers.
The second problem came in a seven-week national meat shortage leading up to the general election. On October 14, Truman issued an order that ended all meat price controls. This executive action drew sharp criticism from organized labor and the Republican Party. The mood of the country was favoring an end to all of the remaining wartime controls. These factors let to the 1946-midterm elections being some of the most successful for the Republican Party since the 1920’s. Across the nation the Republican’s swept House, Senate and gubernatorial seats. The Republicans increased their senate membership from 38 to 51 seats, while democrats slipped from 57 to 45 seats. In the House, the Republican Delegation rose from 190 seats to 246 seats while the Democrats dropped from 243 to 188, the lowest figure since the 1928 elections. Harry Truman did little to campaign for members of his party and the DNC took a lackadaisical approach to the election year. Republicans gained control of both the House and Senate for the first time since 1928. This landslide ended Democratic dominance created by FDR and the New Deal policies.

Conclusion

Perhaps Dave Powers said it best when he explained the motivation behind Kennedy’s political aspirations by saying, “When you know him- he would have been a great success in anything he did. But he was born to lead and he may not have-you know what they say if Joe had lived he would have been the politician-he would have done this or he have wouldn’t have. But I would have bet, no matter what happened, Jack Kennedy was going to become the President of the United States, because he was born to be and so that he…you know what…he had that shy manner but it was aggressively shy.” Whatever the initial motivations might have been, Kennedy chose to focus his energy on becoming a dedicated and effective public servant. Due to opportune timing, effective organizing techniques and a focused public image campaign, John F.
Kennedy was first elected to Congress in 1946. He would later go on to hold a Massachusetts Senate seat before propelling himself to the White House. His original campaign team was able to utilize postwar sentiments to capitalize on the changing political views of the nation. The people of the Eleventh District were demanding a change in governance and Kennedy provided an infusion of youth and service to the Boston political scene. Kennedy’s wife, Jacqueline Kennedy, later reflected on her husband’s career by explaining, “Jack’s life had more to do with myth, magic, legend, saga, and story than with political theory or political science.” This would indeed appear to be true. Kennedy rarely accepted the status quo and his approach to his own political career was no different. He focused on connecting with the people of the congressional district rather than appeasing entrenched political norms. In employing a young campaign team that had little regard for the limiting local traditions, Kennedy was able to secure his own niche in the Boston political arena, consequently redefining the procedures and tactics behind running a political campaign.

The legacy of John F. Kennedy lived on long after his death through the perpetuated image of difference and change that came to be associated with the mythical story of Camelot. Although he was unable to finish his time in office, Kennedy left behind a lasting political dynasty that influenced future campaigns. By creating this new approach to campaigning during the 1946 congressional campaign, Kennedy had begun constructing Camelot.
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Works Cited


