

Red States/Blue States: Mapping the Presidential Election

“He’s too young to be president.” “He doesn’t have enough experience.” Voters expressed these concerns some 48 years ago when a 42-year-old senator from Massachusetts threw his hat into the ring as a Democratic candidate for president.



Age was but one of John F. Kennedy’s challenges. He also had to convince tens of millions of Americans that religion should not be a factor in judging a candidate’s ability to lead. At the time, anti-Catholic sentiment was high and many voters feared that because Kennedy was Catholic, he would be obligated to follow the Pope’s orders and decisions. Kennedy overcame these two great obstacles, his youth and his religion, to receive the nomination at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, California in July 1960.

The campaign race was neck and neck through the fall and the outcome may have hinged on two key events. On September 26, 1960, over 70 million Americans tuned in to see Democrat John F. Kennedy and Republican Richard M. Nixon, side by side, in the first ever televised presidential debate. Kennedy, well-prepared, tanned, and smartly dressed in a dark suit, exuded calm and confidence. Nixon, who was recovering from a knee injury, and exhausted from extensive campaigning, sweated profusely under the studio lights. Although three more debates would follow, many voters judged the candidates based on their television appearance that evening. A poll of television viewers following the debate reported Kennedy edging out Nixon, 49 percent to 46 percent.

In late October, Kennedy decided to make a telephone call offering support to a distraught Coretta Scott King whose husband, Martin Luther King, Jr. had been unjustly jailed. Though his action risked losing white Southerners’ votes, news of the call was well-received by thousands of African-Americans. Some historians believe the call galvanized the black vote and led to a Kennedy victory.

On Election Day, November 8, 1960, the race was still close. Not until 3:30am on November 9, did John F. Kennedy pull himself away from the incoming results on television to make his way to bed in Hyannisport, Massachusetts. Even with a disappointing loss in Ohio, he had garnered 261 electoral votes, 8 votes shy of the target number - 269. About two hours later, a secret service security detail was sent to the Kennedy compound to protect the president-elect.



Kennedy won by approximately 118,550 votes, the slimmest popular vote margin since 1888. Although Kennedy barely won the popular vote, he clearly secured sufficient electoral votes, 303 to Nixon's 219. (Although Al Gore received 540,520 more popular votes than George W. Bush, he lost the electoral vote in the election of 2000.)

How did Kennedy win the 1960 election? Nixon actually won 26 states, but the 23 states Kennedy won held more electoral votes (see Election Results.) The number of electors for each state is based on its population (the number of senators plus the number of representatives.) Kennedy increased his total by winning several Northeastern and industrial states with big urban centers.

With the help of his Texan Vice-Presidential candidate Lyndon B. Johnson, he was able to deliver much of the South. Nixon won big in the farm belt and in the West, where states (with the exception of California) have fewer electoral votes.

Analyzing the 1960 Election Results

Challenge your students to analyze the results of the 1960 election. You may reproduce the map, *Election Results: 1960*, to help them with these discussion questions.

1. What do you notice about the 1960 election results? What patterns do you notice?
2. How many states did Nixon win? How many states did Kennedy win? How did Kennedy win the electoral vote?
3. How do you think the 2008 final results for the major parties will compare to the 1960 results? Might there be a change? If so, what might account for it? Why do you predict these results?

For further research:

1. Reflect on the patterns you identified on the 1960 electoral map. Why do you think these patterns emerged?
2. There is a third color, dark blue, on the map. Which candidate is represented by the dark blue color? Why did some electors vote for this person? How did this affect the election?

Election Results: 2008

Use “Mapping the 2008 Election” to predict and record the results of this year’s presidential election.

You may photocopy the 2008 blank map and use it in several ways.

1. Have students predict the results of the 2008 election. They should color states they believe will vote Republican in red and states that will vote Democratic in blue, or otherwise indicate the results. To bolster their prediction, encourage them to study the 2004 electoral map, polls, and news articles.

2. Have students identify swing states. They may leave these states blank, or outline them in the color they predict the state will vote.
3. On the night of the election, send a blank map home with students to record the results as they are announced (or can be filled in the next day.)

Resources:

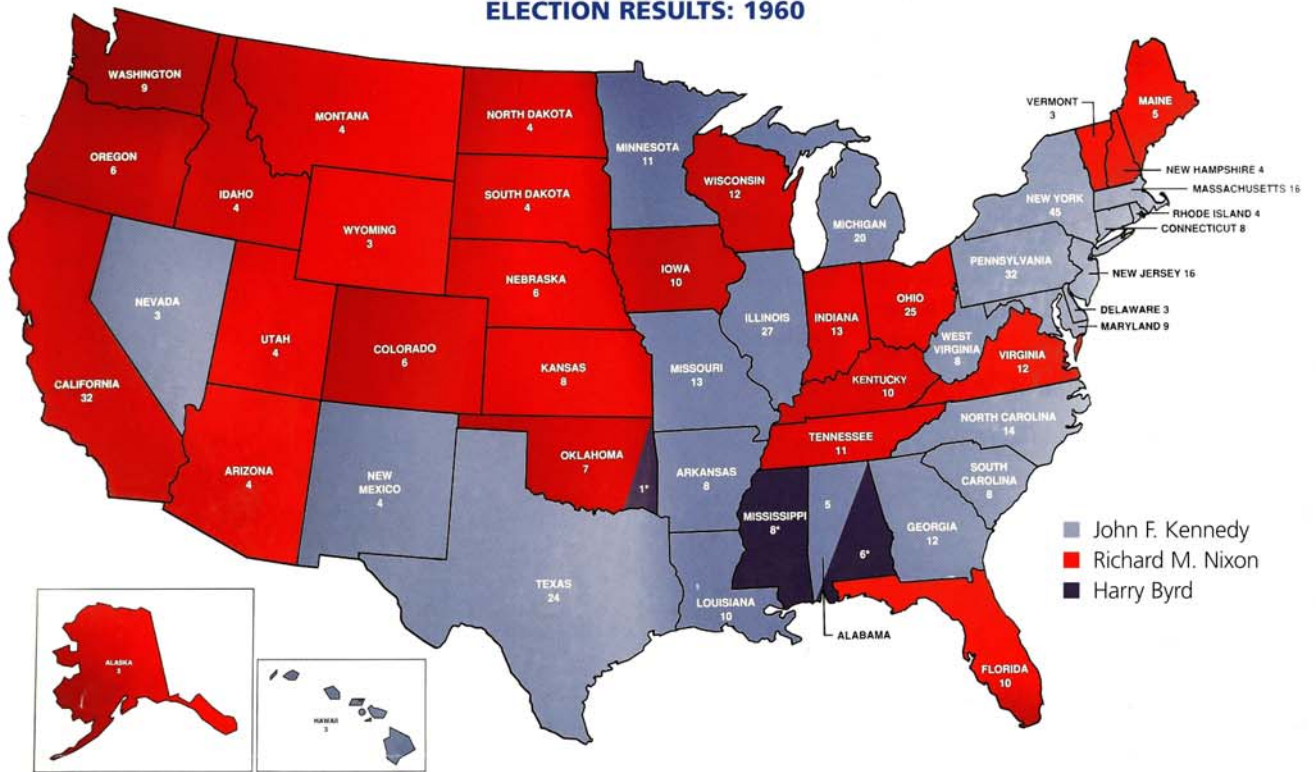
<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/JFK+in+History/Campaign+of+1960.htm>: A topic guide on the 1960 election. Includes links to JFK's announcement of his candidacy, audio recordings and transcripts from the Kennedy/Nixon televised debates, and his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention.

<http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/2008/>: Includes historical elections, timeline for this year's election, Electoral College calculator, popular vote and electoral votes from past elections, and explanation of Electoral College.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/topics/topic.php?topicId=1102#/primaries/>: Provides an interactive election map, up-to-date news on primaries, and news stories on candidates.

http://www.c-spanclassroom.org/Campaign2008_Resources.aspx: Provides a variety of lessons, excerpts from the Constitution, explanation of election process, and further links.

ELECTION RESULTS: 1960



MAPPING THE 2008 ELECTION

