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John Fitzgerald Kennedy
National Historic Site

The Legacy of 1952

The 1960 presidential campaign is remembered for frank discussions of religious tolerance, the first televised debates, and the fact that it was one of the closest elections in American history. Any analysis of the transformative nature of this campaign must begin with John F. Kennedy's campaign for the Senate in 1952 and the use of the "Kennedy Teas" and televised coffees.

During the 1952 campaign the Kennedy women introduced Jack Kennedy to nearly 70,000 women voters; a figure that nearly matches the 70,737 votes by which Kennedy beat Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. Noting the closeness of the figures, Rose Kennedy dismissed it as a coincidence, but she added, "I think the tea parties helped." Historians, Doris Kearns Goodwin and Thomas Whalen agree with Mrs. Kennedy's assessment of the teas and argue that the teas mixed politics, pageantry, and grass roots organizing in a truly innovative way.

The format of the teas and the coffees proved successful and would be used to varying degrees by Jack in his campaign for the presidency, and by Edward and Robert during their first senatorial campaigns. All of the Kennedy women and their growing families would continue to have an impact on the course of all of these campaigns. By mobilizing women, African Americans, and a "cross section" of potential voters, and mastering the new medium of television, Kennedy constructed a base which would serve as a template for future political campaigns.