

Irwin Gellman
What Happens Next – 04.10.2022

Larry Bernstein:

Irv, why did you write your book Campaign of the Century which explores the 1960's presidential race between JFK and Richard Nixon?

Irv Gellman:

Because it's been told wrong for six decades.

Theodore White's The Making of the President 1960 was excellent, but that was mis-told was Theodore White's idea that Kennedy was a hero and Nixon was a villain. Neither were heroes and neither were a villain. They were ambitious politicians that wanted to win the highest election of the United States.

Larry Bernstein:

Dwight Eisenhower was the President during the 1960 campaign, and Nixon was his vice president. Eisenhower was hugely popular and had won in a landslide in his previous elections in 1952 and 1956, why didn't Nixon benefit from Eisenhower's coattails?

Irv Gellman:

Eisenhower wanted to be loved by everyone and tried his hardest not to be a "partisan politician", even though he was. He was a bureaucratic politician who was able to manage people as he did in World War II. But Eisenhower's popularity did not rub off on Nixon. The Democrats had approximately 10 to 15 million more registrants than Republicans. Kennedy had a far better base than Nixon had.

When Eisenhower ran in 1956, he was running against a man he already defeated. Stevenson ran a very poor campaign. And as his campaign tanked, the Russians invaded Hungary and there was this rallying around the president to stop aggression.

Larry Bernstein:

Both Kennedy and Nixon were both in their 40s when they ran for President. It is such a contrast to the 2020 Trump vs. Biden when both were in their mid-70s.

Irv Gellman:

Kennedy was a great campaigner. He was charismatic, he had a young wife, a little child. He dressed nicely, smiled, and the press was seduced by him. They overwhelmingly favored him as a candidate.

Nixon took on Alger Hiss, and that became a cost celeb for liberals because there's no way that an Ivy Leaguer like Alger Hiss could be a communist spy. When Nixon ran for the vice presidency, he became the attack dog for Dwight Eisenhower. And all of these things made him the bête noire for Democrats.

Larry Bernstein:

The Press has favored Democrats in every election since 1960, why does the press matter given that the Republicans have won their fair share of presidential elections.

Irv Gellman:

Not quite. The nature of Republican victories come in the midst of a very unpopular war, assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. Republicans turn the South into a Republican solid South. Elections after 1968 become national elections, where before 1968, they were regional where Democrats had the South locked up.

Larry Bernstein:

Reading your book, I was shocked at how inconsequential the issues that were debated during the presidential campaign. They seem trivial given what the country was facing in the 1960s. As an example, Nixon focused on Kennedy's demand that Eisenhower apologize to Russia for the U2 flights.

Irv Gellman:

These two people were clones. If you substituted what Nixon said for what Kennedy said, they wouldn't have been materially different. The only difference was the personality contest. What I find remarkable about the election is the popular vote was a wash. The election was so close, the partisans on either side made this incredible distinction, when in fact they were very similar. And they were friends.

Larry Bernstein:

Why does Eisenhower think that Kennedy was going to be a poor executive?

Irv Gellman:

Eisenhower after he meets with Kennedy a couple of times, "Well, he won't be that bad." And then when Kennedy becomes President, Eisenhower goes back to saying, "This guy is just awful."

Larry Bernstein:

JFK had not been a strong advocate for civil rights when he was a US senator, in contrast Eisenhower had sent the 101st Airborne to Little Rock to integrate the schools. Why did JFK outperform Nixon in the 1960 election among black voters?

Irv Gellman:

Since 1936, Democrats have won two-thirds of the Black. That didn't change.

Larry Bernstein:

Martin Luther King was arrested during the height of the campaign and JFK gave King support. Was this important with Black voters?

Irv Gellman:

No. It was make believe. All Jack Kennedy did was call Coretta King and offer condolences. Kennedy got 68% of the black vote. Nixon got 32% of the vote. The numbers didn't change.

Larry Bernstein:

1960 had the first televised presidential debates. Over 100 million Americans watched all four debates! People make a big deal about Nixon's make-up melting under the hot lamps, while JFK looked cool and in control.

Irv Gellman:

The story is so badly exaggerated it almost rises to fable. Nixon did not look well. His shirt didn't fit.

Nixon told Eisenhower the day before the debate, he was gonna show him how nice a guy he was. And he was gonna use a debating technique where he agreed with Kennedy. And every time he agreed with Kennedy on that debate, his supporters went, "Uh!" Nixon wasn't Nixon in the first debate. If you listen to the second, third, and fourth debate, he's far more confrontational. Kennedy gets irritated.

You don't hear anything after the first debate where, "Oh, Nixon looks sick." You hear, "Go get 'em, Dick!"

Larry Bernstein:

I heard that radio listeners thought that Nixon won the first debate while TV listeners believed JFK won. Is that accurate.

Irv Gellman:

That's a fable. The results came from one small poll.

Larry Bernstein:

Hubert Humphrey was JFK's opponent in the primaries, why did Humphrey fade early?

Irv Gellman:

Hubert Humphrey, a very nice man had principles. He didn't have the killer instinct. LBJ looked upon Humphrey as a weak candidate to succeed him. And in (laughs) 1968 pretty much abandoned him for Nixon. His was a career of principle, and principle doesn't win elections.

Larry Bernstein:

The popular vote in the 1960 election was incredibly close. The electoral election depends on JFK's winning Illinois and Texas. There have been allegations of voter fraud that has been asserted won the election for JFK. Do you believe the voter fraud narrative?

Irv Gellman:

Yes, I believe the fraud in Texas and Illinois could have gone to Nixon. You can't prove it now, because it's 60 years after the fact. Deniers believe there was no such thing as frauds in national elections, which is an absurdity.

The mayor of Chicago, Richard Daley, tells Kennedy that he won by fraud. I interviewed Ben Bradlee who talked to Jack Kennedy at dinner the day after the election. And Kennedy told Bradlee about the conversation he had with Daley.

Texas is a whole different story. Johnson was running as vice president. And he was running in the Senate. Johnson had never won a statewide election without using fraud. And without exception, every author who writes Johnson's biography talks about the massive fraud in 1941 and 1948. And yet, his principal biographers, in 1960, don't mention it. I mean, not even a sentence.

Larry Bernstein:

How can we evaluate voter fraud in 1960?

Irv Gellman:

Well, you can't. The only way you can stop fraud is before an election, not after an election. The amount of people convicted of fraud (laughs) in Chicago were three. That's ridiculous. Every politician, judges were Democrats. Nobody was going to prove fraud. Nixon knew it would cause a constitutional crisis.

Nixon knew there was no way to challenge an election in Texas. When the state Republican Party in Texas challenged the election, they went up against Leon Jaworski, who went in front of a federal judge and said, "There were no civil rights violation, throw this out of court." And the judge, who went to high school with Jaworski, threw it out of court. Nixon knew there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell of changing the election in Texas. And if you couldn't change it in Texas, it was irrelevant changing it anywhere else.

Nixon wasn't going there. And deserves a great deal of credit for the way he handled it.

Larry Bernstein:

What lessons can be learned from the 1960 presidential campaign?

Irv Gellman:

Write good history rather than bad history. I was flabbergasted. There was no research on Kennedy's Catholicism, on the fraud in the election. If you're just counting numbers between the charisma of Kennedy and Nixon, they both received the same votes. How can one can be more charismatic than the other when it was a tie?

The one lesson that you talked about earlier, you don't stop fraud after an election. It's not possible. You can't bring all these people to trial. You can't say you committed fraud, we're going to do a do over.

Larry Bernstein:

What were JFK's legislative successes after winning the election?

Irv Gellman:

Other than the change in income tax, the major piece of legislation passed under JFK was the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act of 1962.

Kennedy said with a stroke of a pen, he would change black housing, segregation. It never happened. The change in the income tax laws did happen, because he was able to get bipartisan support. The problem that Jack Kennedy had as president is he had no connection with Congress. In his 14 years in Congress, in the House and the Senate, he had no legislation with his name on it. None.

Winning elections was his claim to fame.

Larry Bernstein:

JFK includes Republicans as members of his cabinet and senior executive roles. Here are three examples. JFK uses Dillon as Secretary of Treasury, Allen Dulles remains as CIA Director, and Nixon's VP candidate Henry Cabot Lodge is made Ambassador to Viet Nam that turned out to be a critically important position.

Irv Gellman:

Allen Dulles was already there and was a fixture. Dillon accepted his appointment as Secretary of Treasury and Eisenhower was angry that Dillon was going with the opposition. Lodge could work with both Democrats and Republicans. Kennedy was trying to bring in the loyal opposition into his administration.

Larry Bernstein:

How did the JFK Camelot myth get started?

Irv Gellman:

(Laughs). The way he died was so awful that it brings sympathy from everyone. When I was walking on campus and somebody told me that he had been assassinated, I was shocked. It was a terrible day for the vast majority of Americans.

Camelot was a fabrication. Jackie Kennedy got ahold of Theodore White made this up for a Look Magazine article. Kennedy would've been appalled that he was compared to Camelot.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you think has been under reported about JFK?

Irv Gellman:

His sexual affairs, his health, and corruption.

Larry Bernstein:

Why wasn't JFL's sexual behavior covered by the press during the campaign or during his presidency?

Irv Gellman:

1960 and earlier, your sexual conduct, was not mentioned. Now we have the memoirs of Mimi Alford, Once Upon a Secret. We have memoirs of Judith Exner, and a whole series of people who had affairs with Kennedy.

The raw data from these FBI files are now available and show him in the worst possible light.

Larry Bernstein:

Why didn't Nixon attack JFK for his sexual infidelities?

Irv Gellman:

Nixon was straight laced and he wasn't going to use sex in the campaign.

Larry Bernstein:

JFK did not disclose that he had a severe case of Addison's Disease. Did he have a duty to disclose it?

Irv Gellman:

There was no law that forced candidates for the presidency to disclose their health. And there's no law today.

Eisenhower, when he had his heart attack, it was heavily covered. When his colon was operated on, it was national news. When he had a mild stroke in 1957, it was nationally disclosed. Robert Dallek, who wrote a book on John F. Kennedy says that if he had disclosed his Addison's disease, he probably would not have been nominated for president. Theodore Sorenson, who was Kennedy's alter ego, says, "Yes, he would." But the real issue is, should they disclose or not?

Late in the campaign, there were requests for both candidates to get physicals. Nixon was more than willing. Kennedy said, "It already has happened."

Larry Bernstein:

Sounds like JFK's Aaron Rodgers moment.

Next topic is press conferences. Eisenhower had 200 press conferences in his two terms. This is a stark contrast with Biden who had six in his first 15 months. Why did Eisenhower have so many press conferences?

Irv Gellman:

Eisenhower had a weekly press conference because he wanted to go directly to the American public. He felt that the press was partisan, and that the best way to communicate with the American public was through a press conference. Richard Nixon thought that the press was not giving him a fair shake and the best way for him to communicate with the public was through his own speaking.

Larry Bernstein:

My dad told me that JFK's press conference performance was incredible.

Irv Gellman:

Kennedy really was charming with vigor and energy, and the way he used his Boston accent.

Larry Bernstein:

When you look at the election results from the 1960 election, the regional partisan results are so different than today. Kennedy won the South but lost California. Most of the individual states were extremely close like California, Texas, Illinois, Wisconsin and others. What happened in the cities and the growing suburbs?

Irv Gellman:

Of the 149 major cities, 20 or 30 went for Nixon and all the rest went for Kennedy. The urban split starts under FDR and accelerated. Nixon did very well in the suburbs.

Larry Bernstein:

JFK was the first Catholic president, what was the role of religion in the 1960 campaign?

Irv Gellman:

In 1960 Kennedy used his Catholic religion to win the election. The only percentage that changed radically in the 1960 election was that 78% Catholics voted for Kennedy. In 1956 about 50% voted for Stevenson. That's a 29% jump, that's huge.

The Republican National Committee thought that four to six million more Catholics voted in 1960 than in 1956.

Larry Bernstein:

Joe Biden's Catholic but he lost the Catholic vote, what happened?

Irv Gellman:

Biden did not appeal to various Catholic archbishops and priests for his stance on issues like abortion.

Larry Bernstein:

Today more men vote Republican and females vote Democratic, what happened in 1960?

Irv Gellman:

Kennedy was loved by women. They screamed, they found him so attractive. In 1960, more women voted for Nixon than voted for Kennedy. It was close, 51 to 49, but Nixon won the female vote.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode on a note of optimism. Irv, what are you optimistic about?

Irv Gellman:

I'm hopeful, more than optimistic. I'd like to think that my book brings more of a reality into how elections should be thought of. Not in terms of villains and heroes, but in terms of people that are doing the best that they can do. Both Kennedy and Nixon, and those people around them, truly believed that, they were on a righteous crusade, that their person was best for the nation. I find today so much cynicism in campaigning and elections, and- and marketing, and not thinking of what really is best, but what the polls are saying. And Campaign of the Century shows what really happened in the best sense of the word.