

Ronnie Eldridge Oral History Interview – RFK #2, 6/18/1970
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Eldridge, New York City district leader for the Reform Independent Democrats (1963-1968) and vice chairperson of Citizen's Committee for Robert F. Kennedy (1968), discusses the 1967 Tammany Hall Leadership fight and Robert F. Kennedy's feeling toward the reformers, among other issues.

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Ronnie Eldridge – RFK #2

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Second of Four Oral History Interviews

with

Ronnie Eldridge

June 18, 1970

New York, New York

by Roberta W. Greene

For the Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program
of the John F. Kennedy Library

ELDRIDGE: Where did we leave off?

GREENE: Well, I was going to start with the Tammany leadership fight in 1967. Specifically I wanted to know what you thought of Newfield's [Jack Newfield] account of that. Did it mainly come from you?

ELDRIDGE: Yes, it did. Well, he was there. He was involved in it practically the whole time because he was already doing the book anyway. And we were very friendly

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and he just was there most of the time. Then I did—for one thing I wrote notes about.... I don't even know if I have.... I just forgot that you were coming and I didn't look at the notes. So he used some of those notes. He got it a little mixed up. I have not gone through his account to find it. Do you want me to go through it now?

GREENE: Most of my questions will come from his book anyway because there was not that much written, so it may bring back some thought to you.

ELDRIDGE: Very good.

GREENE: Do you remember conversations with the Senator, Smith [Stephen E. Smith], Dolan [Joseph F. Dolan] about how much the Senator felt about Jones' resignation and about the opportunity to elect a new leader? That was probably the beginning.

ELDRIDGE: Right. We had long talked about it and it had been a long-standing thing that we wanted him to get more involved in politics. He was sort of—I can't remember—I mean he was hesitant about it but they decided they were going to do something about it. The first big error as far as the whole thing went happened on St. Patrick's Day. That was March of that June. What was that?

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GREENE: '67.

ELDRIDGE: So it was March 17th, '67. He came.... The county organization had a luncheon on St. Patrick's Day at the National Democratic club and vanden Heuvel [William J. vanden Heuvel] at that point had been very strong for his supporting Rossetti [Frank Rossetti] on an interim basis. I think Frank was chairman of the county committee, which was a separate post from being county leader. Some of us felt that that was a great mistake and he shouldn't do it. He went to this meeting and he made a speech which then sounded as if he was supporting him. Later in the afternoon, everybody got a little upset about it. I remember he then issued a statement which did not say he was supporting him and said that he was supporting him intermly which meant that his appointment as an interim county leader was....

There was a whole legal question as to how we would be elected interim county leader. We could get.... that's in the office files because Tim Hogan, I remember, wrote it. I don't really remember the whole thing, but it was a backtracking of it or a clarification of the fact that he was really not supporting Rossetti as the next county leader. That was in March. And then,

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I don't know; we went through a lot of talks and everything in between that and so it wasn't again until June.

GREENE: There was some talk of his interest in O'Rourke [Maurice J. O'Rourke]. Do you remember?

ELDRIDGE: Oh yeah. Very definitely. But that didn't really.... It all didn't come to a head. I mean it's the usual thing about you delay as long as possible until the election which was in July or the end of June.

GREENE: I think that's it, yeah.

ELDRIDGE: Yeah. And it really wasn't until a couple of weeks before that that they really began talking. And it became apparent that they wanted O'Rourke, or it may have become apparent earlier. To get Maurey O'Rourke, they had to amend the rules of the county committee which had been changed at the time that DeSapio [Carmin G. DeSapio] lost his district leadership fight in an effort to keep him from staying county leader. So what it meant was that the county committee had to agree to the fact that county leader did not have to be an elected district leader. And they met all kinds of resistance. The reformers didn't want it for several reasons. Nobody was that thrilled with Maurey, although he's always been liked by everybody,

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he's not thought of as the strongest candidate. So the reformers were split on that. Shanley Egeth wanted it very much so his part of the reform faction was opposed to it. A lot of the regulars were opposed to it. Rossetti's people were opposed to it because they wanted to elect Rossetti. So it was a very difficult thing to get moving.

I'm sure that the initial contact we had with Steve.... I mean I remember that somehow we landed up at Steve's office—Kretchmer, Blumenthal, a few people—discussing the whole thing. We said we didn't want to amend the rules. They worked on that. I think that was Joe's first activity, was to try to amend the rules to elect O'Rourke. It sort of didn't work. Once that happened.... Do you want to ask me more questions about anything specific?

GREENE: No, go ahead.

ELDRIDGE: I mean once that happened he really got forced into a position with me and then I always felt that that was, you know... I don't think that that really took it that seriously. Excuse me. [Interruption]

GREENE: Okay. You were talking about the development of the Tammany leadership thing. What occurred to me is: At what point did your interest become apparent, or did they come to you? Did you make an obvious....

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ELDRIDGE: Well, it was really Kretchmer and Blumenthal and a few people who started to say, "Well, why doesn't Ronnie run?" I sort of really didn't pay too much attention to it because it was kind of a far-out concept of the county organization. I don't exactly know at.... And Steve kept saying, "All right, well, fine, if that's what you want, you know, do it that way." Anyway at 8 o'clock in the morning—I don't remember exactly when, but we had talked also with Joe Dolan, and Joe had said the same thing: If we could possibly get the reformers together, then that would give us almost enough votes and we could add a few regulars.

The Senator called up—and I was in the but it was about 7:30 or 8:00 in the morning—and got on the phone and said something about the county leadership. And I said, “Are you really serious about it because I certainly don’t want to embarrass you or put you in any kind of position, and it’s no great, undying ambition of mine.” And he said no, he would be delighted and he thought it would be a real gas. If I could go ahead and get the seven votes of the reformers—I think it was seven or seven and a quarter votes—he could get the other votes to

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put it together. We then worked on that assumption.

We were split. I mean the first question “Do you amend the rules and put Maurey O’Rourke in?” That was answered by various factions and various reasons. The second then was what do you do with reform caucus. Shanley was one of the candidates. Martin Begun, another leader from the East Side, allowed his name to go in and there were several other names. The West Side leaders and the East Side leaders were always split in any case. And then my name came up. Everybody starting politicking for it, and we then entered into I don’t remember how long, but a long period of very painful negotiations.

The reformers met in caucus for about a week, I guess at a couple of times. They decided to go with a two-thirds vote. Previous to that we had always gone with a majority vote, and then we decided we did need to have one candidate against Rossetti. There was a split in the reform caucus between, you know, Egeth, me, and the position of making some kind of arrangement with Rossetti—in return for a few sports as officers or chairmen or something of the county committee, we would go along with Rossetti as executive. So those were basically

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the three positions. The minute, I think, that was established the need for a two-thirds vote it made it very difficult. We had these long meetings.

I remember the reformers couldn’t possibly believe that a woman could be county leader. I mean they even had me confused. I remember Jerry Tarnoff [Jerome Tarnoff] said a woman couldn’t sit in these discussions, that you couldn’t have political discussion with a woman. And I have been now through a lot of them, and I began to think that I’d never really been in any of them because I obviously was missing the whole point. We were very careful also not to say that Kennedy, you know, would just support me. I mean we really did want to protect him within the reform thing so this all had to be done very subtly. It sort of—if I got it, I’d have it, Kennedy’s support. We didn’t use that at the basic time.

Of course, that goes back to other things that we’ve discussed. It was always a basic problem for the reformers that they never really realized the power that they could exert on whatever moves he made so that it became some of the problem, too. We went through that week before the Committee met. We went through these long horrendous meetings, these long ballots. I suppose actually the first person—

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although in the meetings with Steve when we were discussing the possibility of amending the rules for Maurcy, and Kretchmer and Blumenthal, Kretchmer especially was, "Well, we should have one of our own people in. What do we need Maurcy for?" He had talked about me, more or less jokingly. We had a meeting at lunch at the Harvard Club that Lane [Richard S. Lane] arranged. I don't really remember why it was, whether it was about the Rossetti candidacy or for Shanley or what. But Martin Begun, who was one of the leaders and acting Dean of the medical school at NYU [New York University] and an old friend of mine, had said, "Why don't you run? You should be a candidate. I'd support you." It then turned out later that he also was really campaign manager for Shanley. He's a very sweet guy but not very strong. One of the reasons that I decided to do it was because I thought the candidacy might bridge the West and East Sides because if I didn't become the West Side candidate, a more militant West Side candidate would arise and who nobody would really support. So we went into it.

GREENE: Why was O'Rourke his initial choice? This is a name I don't know very well. Was this someone who was close to him, or what was the attraction?

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ELDRIDGE: He'd been the commissioner of elections and he's a very friendly Irishman who has very good ties into the regulars and a good relationship with the reformers. As far as being elections commissioner, he was very responsible to everybody and responsive and was fair. I guess he was an early supporter of Kennedy in '64. He came out of the regular organization. And I guess he was an Irishman.

GREENE: Seems sort of logical.

ELDRIDGE: Right. And he had some regular support or he thought he did. I don't think he had really much regular support so that in the long run, he also.... He campaigned for it; I'm sure that he convinced the Senator or Steve or somebody, and he was an old political operator who came out of a regular club so I guess he had that leader and a few others. He was somebody we could talk to but he certainly was not.... You know, I don't think we would really have supported him whole heartedly.

GREENE: I think the big question that occurs to me in reading Newfield's account is, did you or those supporting you feel that Robert Kennedy should have done more, or did you feel that he did as much as he could

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under the circumstances?

ELDRIDGE: Well, I think some people felt he could have done more. I didn't feel that way really. I didn't really.... I think that Joe, for instance, was much more open

about it in the last two days than I would have expected him to be. Then during that last caucus with his phone calls—mean he got really caught up in it. If Joe had really been acting the way he, you know, should have been as the Senator's agent not to let him get hurt, he most likely would have said by the end of the first caucus you couldn't get it. "Let's forget it." Instead he kept saying, "Go on and try some more." I mean I think it basically was the reformers' fault. It really was much less Kennedy's fault.

Steve went away. He was in Europe at the time. He left saying, "Well, just don't get anybody in trouble." Actually he really left before I became a serious candidate. Vanden Heuvel also left. He went someplace else and I remember jokingly said, well, you know, "Just take good care of him. Don't let the Senator get too badly bruised," or some such thing, and he left. So when he came back, there I was in this

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leadership fight. Steve, before he left, I think I had told him or he knew about it and he said, well, you know, fine, do whatever you could. I just think it was sort of a general ineptness.

Burns got into it to a degree, and I think John of all the people could have been.... It was that last night that was really the most crucial night. The reform caucus met the second time and it wasn't until about 4 o'clock in the morning that we finally came to some agreement. That agreement itself was a little cockeyed. First of all, Shanley never told us that we had two of the votes that we did have. We had never counted them in as a vote. That was Helene Rosenberg who was a very dear friend of mine, Marvin Rosenberg's wife, Marvin was a big Humphrey supporter—who would never vote for me. She saw it as a Kennedy take-over of the county organization. Shanley was more in the Humphrey thing. That's how it broke down. I forgot that really. It definitely, for a long time, broke down into a Humphrey-Kennedy axis. At one point, Alice Sachs told me that Humphrey had called her and told her she should become a candidate and he would support her—or Weisl [Edwin L. Weisl, Sr.], maybe called her for Humphrey. I'm not quite sure. But it was the kind of craziness that we

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got involved in. And Helene, who really, really was very close—and it really disturbed our friendship, I suppose forever—would not support me. We were just very good personal friends. So that when the time came that we finally came to this outrageous agreement—and whatever that was, that also was confused—we were never told that we could count on the Rosenberg-Osborne vote which I think.... Excuse me. [Interruption] I don't have the numbers. I think it was worth a quarter of a vote. It was very close. By the time the next morning came along, Kennedy got Walsh's [Joseph Walsh] vote, which I guess was a quarter of a vote. I'm not quite sure. Excuse me.

[Interruption]

GREENE: Okay. One thing I wanted to ask you about was Percy Sutton and Zaretski and the fact that they did not come out for you. Was that a surprise? Had you

counted on their support?

ELDRIDGE: Well, I think that Kennedy had counted on them as being two people that he'd be able to switch. Well we only needed to pick up something like a half a vote or

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maybe a vote at the most. I think it was a half or three-quarters of a vote. It's all fractionalized. And he had assumed that if we could get the whole reform caucus, which was seven and a quarter votes or something like that, that he could pick up a few more. He picked up about a half a vote. At one point I really almost think that we might even have won it not knowing about it because we never counted in that quarter of a vote from Osborne and Rosenberg.

What I started to say earlier was, the last caucus ended around 4 o'clock in the morning; called John Burns up and we told him. Then I guess Joe Dolan must have spoken to him. Kennedy was up in Canada. He was supposed to set up appointments for Kennedy. So he flew down in the morning, and when he got here there was nobody to see. There hadn't been any appointments set up. The other problem was that sort of the strategy of part of the reformers who had decided that they would go along with Rossetti was in a way—and Shanley also—was to delay the thing beyond a certain point. And that was 6 o'clock of the day that we had our final caucus, Rossetti had a caucus of regulars. By this time, nobody had done anything else and so he sort of tied up those votes. That's why the next

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day, when we tried to get Sutton and these people on the phone, they had already agreed by that time to support Rossetti and therefore they didn't even want to talk to the Senator. I mean they just avoided him. So it was those six hours and maybe that afternoon, you know, if somebody really wanted to step in that gap, Burns could have called him and said don't do this with a few people. I think, from what I gather, that he was more than annoyed that he flew down here and then really couldn't see anybody. He got Walsh and I think he might have gotten one other person; that was about all. But it was really, I mean it was basically the reformers' fault. It was the split in the reform.

GREENE: This guy Kinsolving, Charles Kinsolving. He was the reformer that finally broke the deadlock. Was that just a formality? Had it already been lost?

ELDRIDGE: The reformer that broke the deadlock. Which deadlock?

GREENE: Well, I mean he's the one that finally switched his vote to Rossetti and ended the whole thing.

ELDRIDGE: Right. He's the one.... And then it blew up and some of the other people had said they'd switch to me. I mean some of them are just stupid. They were

some

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or these people there. And they're just dumb and very unimaginative and haven't got any guts. So they were all sticking with Shanley and the other group was sticking with me and Kinsolving then said we haven't come to any agreement, I'm going to go with Rossetti. And Leichter [Franz S. Leichter] and a few others who had been party to it, when it was exposed and it was really kind of very bare when it finally became exposed, everybody got angry and that's when the caucus ended and everybody decided they'd go with me. What'd you ask me about? Kinsolving always had, interestingly enough, a good relationship with Rossetti. I think he sort of fancied himself as being the adviser to the county leader. He was perfectly willing to accept Rossetti and never had any problems with him. He's, interestingly enough, Paul O'Dwyer's campaign manager.

GREENE: I didn't know that, but I just read it in the paper.

ELDRIDGE: Yeah. It's very funny, but it's all very sad. They're really kind of sad people. The next morning when Shanley and that part of the caucus, Dick Lane and all these people, insisted on going to see the Senator, they went in and they said, "We've been

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told that you wouldn't support anybody but Ronnie Eldridge." He called me at the Commodore to tell me, and I, you know, agreed with him that, first of all, it was late and we weren't going to win and there was no point even—you know, I took my name out at that point. They really had not been told that and they sort of broke their agreement with us by going in and putting him in that position. He then just said simply that "I haven't given that commitment" and that "I would support a reformer that had the majority." But I think that they had been not a very great group to be admired. I mean that's basically the problem.

GREENE: Newfield, implied, as I remember I and I read this quite a while ago, but he implies that this was another example of Kennedy doing too little too late, you know. Piled on top of this was the mayoralty in '65 and gubernatorial in '66. Is this accurate?

ELDRIDGE: Well, I suppose if a week before he had said, "Ronnie Eldridge is my candidate," that, yeah, I most likely could have gotten it. When you think about it, I'm sure that most likely it would have happened.

GREENE: Did it damage your relationship at all?

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ELDRIDGE: No, no. I mean, first of all, that whole thing was really very impractical, although I remember that night. I had lunch with him that afternoon, but that night we had dinner at the Bethesda Fountain [Café] and Sorensen was having dinner at another table. Even Sorensen could realize, you know, he said, “My God, what a couple it would have been, I mean in *Time*, *Newsweek*, to have Kennedy handpick the leader of Tammany Hall to be a female reformer.” I think probably that nobody really took it that seriously all along. I don’t think they really thought that I could get all the caucus and that we most likely.... I should have pushed it. Maybe if I had been a little more aggressive, but I’m not used to being a candidate and doing that and I didn’t want to put him in a bad position. Thinking back on it, there were a lot of things we could have done.

We had a meeting with some of the reform legislators one night. We were talking about the different things we could do. And there was a split there as to whether you should publicize it or not publicize it, whether it should be done quietly or publicly. A lot of them advised that it should

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be very quiet. Some people decided though we should look for some press stuff, and Freddie Ohrenstein, for instance, was supposed to call Jimmy Wechsler. And again that was really my fault because I was kind of friendly with Jimmy but I wouldn’t think of calling him and saying I’m running for county leader. And Freddie never called him. So it wasn’t until after the thing that Jimmy even really knew about it, and he was furious. He then wrote a column about it the following week or something. But had Freddie called him, Jimmy most likely would have written a column and then people would have seen that the reaction of the press would most likely have been I mean really thinking about it, now, really, doing great, it would have had great style, you know, to have Carmine DeSapio’s successor be a housewife. Really too bad.

GREENE: Yeah. Newfield also quotes Kennedy as saying after this about the reformers that they’re a “sick” group. Is this just a remark that he threw away or do you think at this point his really was his view of the reformers?

ELDRIDGE: Oh, I think it always was. It’s a very destructive kind of thing. He never understood it because he

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really understood and appreciated power. The reformers really never did. And he knew how to use it; or he at least could use it. The reformers never knew how to use it, though, which is really too bad. No, I think he really meant it. He was very uncomfortable with them. He got none of the benefits from it. I mean he got rid of Jones, he got Rossetti. Rossetti, you know, even though we all denied it later, knew all along that he really had supported me and so Rossetti never trusted him, would never do anything for him. He just got nothing out of the whole thing, which was really too bad; we could have come out with something. I remember the *Post* ran a story—when they asked me, I was totally unused to

this thing and that morning when supposedly he was making calls and seeing people and I was at home, the phone was ringing like mad. The meeting was at noon, I guess, at the Commodore Hotel, and one of my kids got lost that day and I couldn't find him before I felt, and it was so wild. We went down in the car and got there and the press was all there and everybody taking my picture and talking to me. I was on the telephone in the coatroom outside of the meeting. Then I withdrew my name and everybody would say, "Is it true that Senator Kennedy

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was supporting you? And I'd say no, you know, and equivocate and everything. I really felt like Miss America through that all with the cameras. I forget what the point of that was. I don't know.

GREENE: His view of the reformers, I think, is what you were talking about.

ELDRIDGE: Or of what benefit came out of that.

GREENE: Oh, that he got nothing out of it.

ELDRIDGE: Yeah, I mean it was just so obvious. Oh, I know. So the *Times* ran a very straight story quoting me very straightly and never really saying that I was really being supported by Kennedy. The Post wrote a story that was really crazy. Tony Posendoff, whom I did know, was saying that although I had said I was Kennedy's candidate I really wasn't and everybody disowned it. The next day Tony Posendoff called me up and apologized and said he had gotten the story all wrong which I thought was really quite amazing.

GREENE: Where did he get that? Where did he get the correction from?

ELDRIDGE: I don't know if it was from Jimmy or from somebody else on the Kennedy staff or from somewhere but he really got the whole thing. So that was nice. We've since become friendly. But I didn't know him at all then. It was a funny kind of thing. It was the kind of thing

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also that now nobody would deny that I was Kennedy's candidate for the county leader and all that kind of stuff. At that time it was a lot of...

GREENE: It has a certain quaintness. In retrospect.

ELDRIDGE: Yeah, it really does. It really is very funny.

GREENE: Is there anything else on that?

ELDRIDGE: I don't think so. Rossetti, interestingly enough, had always liked me very much. We'd always gotten along very well. We always thought we had great things in common and we understood each other and we wanted the same things. For an Italian East Harlem, you know, plaster kind of buy, he was kind of smart about things like that. He took it very badly. He never really talked to me after that.

GREENE: So nobody got anything out of that on your side.

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ELDRIDGE: None, yeah. And from that time on, the county organization just went down. Kennedy came to one meeting at the county headquarters in it must have been late '67 when Rossetti was chairman county leader. They had just moved to a new headquarters on Madison Avenue. He just came in—it was our first meeting in the new headquarters—and Rossetti had, all over the place, hundreds of reprints of all the newspaper stories about his being elected county leader and one of the stories especially, about the fact that even though I said I was Kennedy's candidate, I wasn't. And I remember he was outrageous to Kennedy, introduced him and everything. And then he said to him, "We have some personal business. Would you mind leaving." Something like, "this is a regular leaders' meeting." This was incredible. But the Kennedy organization it never really meant that, and certainly after Rossetti, really didn't mean anything. And that's where we went.

GREENE: Well, I think we ought to stop for today.

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