

David Fox, Jr. Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 07/10/1964
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(1921 - 2008) Businessman; Chairman, John F. Kennedy's campaign, Cabel County, WV (1960), discusses the 1960 presidential campaign in Cabel County, among other issues.

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David Fox, Jr. – JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

David Fox, Jr.

July 10, 1964
Huntington, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: Mr. Fox, would you tell me how you became interested in the Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] candidacy and the manner in which you first found an interest in him as a presidential candidate?

FOX: Well, I always admired Senator Kennedy during his days in the Senate, and Matthew Reese [Matthew A. Reese, Jr.] of Huntington, who had been working for Senator Kennedy for some weeks before, asked me to serve as campaign chairman, called me one evening and asked me if I would serve as campaign [chairman] in Cabel County for the Democratic primary for Senator Kennedy. I was leaving town the next morning for the weekend, and I told Mr. Reese that I would think it over and just let him know when I got back Monday or Tuesday. The next day, just as I was leaving my home to catch the train, I had a call from Charleston from Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy]. He said, "Dave, this is Ted Kennedy," and turned on the usual Kennedy charm, and I just couldn't say no after he asked and made me feel so good. He said that they needed me down here in Cabel County as chairman. They knew it was going to be a tough fight but they'd appreciate it if I would accept the chairmanship. So right then and there I told him I would.

YOUNG: This was late in 1959?

FOX: No, this would have been....The primary was in May of 1960, so this would have been probably in January of '60, January or February of '60.

YOUNG: Had you had any contact with the Senator before that time?

FOX: None whatsoever. No, I had never met him. But, as I say I admired him while he was in the Senate.

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YOUNG: Mr. Fox, would you describe the political complexion of Cabel County, West Virginia, in 1960 just before the primary?

FOX: Well, Cabel County has a rather large Democratic majority, but this doesn't necessarily mean anything, because we elect as many Republicans as we do Democrats. I would say Huntington has many independent voters, and, as I said, just because we have a Democratic majority doesn't mean that we necessarily elect Democratic candidates. I'd like to say a few things about how we started Senator Kennedy's campaign. We had a tremendous amount of volunteers. There were three of us that started the campaign. I was chairman, and Andrew Houvouras [Andrew J. Houvouras] and Bob E. Myers were invaluable to me; they did as much or more work than I did in starting the campaign. We decided to set up two headquarters. We had one headquarters in the main part of town and then we had a headquarters not quite as large in the Hotel Pritchard. Right at the first of the campaign, we had....I can't think of the lady's name [Polly Fitzgerald?] now, but she was a good friend of the Kennedys; she came down and had a meeting with all the ladies we could round up.

YOUNG: This was a lady from out of state, not a native?

FOX: That's right; no, not a native. She was a good friend of the Kennedys. In fact, I think she was a relative by marriage. And then there was another lady who worked with us, a school teacher who had also worked for Senator Kennedy in the past. These two ladies came in. We must have had forty or fifty local ladies come in for a meeting, and they were briefed on what they could do in the campaign. Right after, Sargent Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.], President Kennedy's brother-in-law, came to Huntington and made his headquarters in Huntington. He was here approximately six or seven weeks. He had about fourteen or fifteen counties, I believe, in West Virginia under his jurisdiction. And, of course, there were other people from out of the state who came in and went to these various counties. They reported to Mr. Shriver.

YOUNG: Could you make a generalization about the people who volunteered? Were they people who normally were interested in politics or were many of them quite amateurish?

FOX: I would say that most of them were quite amateurish. They were friends of ours, and we were surprised at the amount of volunteers that we were able to get. Of course, it was very easy to get volunteers after Senator Kennedy made his appearance here; after men and women met Senator Kennedy, why, we really had more volunteers than we needed. We had a tremendous

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number of volunteers. Senator Kennedy was here in Huntington about seven or eight times. We had several meetings with him. We had a meeting with the Democratic executive committee, we had two or three luncheons, we had several receptions. One, I remember, we had a reception in the Pritchard Hotel ballroom where Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] was with him, and the ballroom was just packed. Well, the first appearance, I believe, was a reception that only President Kennedy attended. As I say, after that, why, everyone seemed to want to work for him. Anybody that would talk with him would be spellbound, and it was just very easy to get them to volunteer.

YOUNG: Do you have any personal memories of any meeting with the president that might be interesting?

FOX: Oh, yes. I was with the then Senator Kennedy many times. I drove him to various parts of the state. There were many days that we would meet at 6 o'clock to go to various plants around town to meet the shifts coming on and off, so the senator could talk with them and we could hand out literature to the workers. I remember... The largest plant we have here, International Nickel Company. We tried to get permission to have the Senator go into the plant and they wouldn't let us. They said that we couldn't even go inside the gate, that we would have to stay outside the gate in handing out the literature. And, of course, that made us a little angry. The fact is that they had a man standing by the gate at 6:30 in the morning to see that we didn't go in. It was raining one morning, I remember, and we were there between 6:30 and 7:00; it was the gate the cars went through. We would stop the cars. And he would just go up and shake hands with the men and hand them literature. I am sure that after he became president, the general manager of this plant should have had a very red face. I'll never forgive him for it; I thought it was an insult. In the first place he was a senator, and certainly he could have at least gotten into the plant.

YOUNG: Are there any other anecdotes in connection with Senator Kennedy's visit to Cabel County that you would like to tell me?

FOX: Well, I could tell quite a few, I think. I don't know of what interest they'd be, but I remember... What I marvel about the man and why I thought so much of him was that he had the ability to get down to the level that he had to get down to: If he was talking to a truck driver, he knew how to talk to this truck driver; if he was talking to a college president, why, of course, he could talk the

language of the college president. I remember taking him to Charleston one day. We passed a section of the road being repaired, and there was a

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flagman there. The flagman waved us on and the senator said, "Stop a minute I want to get out and talk to this man." So I stopped the car and he opened the car door and got out and chatted with the man for fifteen or twenty seconds. Of course, I know he was campaigning, but it was his ability to get to know the people. And in my opinion, that's why he was a great president. He could get down to the level of the people that he was in contact with.

Then another time, I was taking him to the airport and stopped for a stoplight, and my wife and children came in the opposite direction. I honked the horn and asked them to stop, and they stopped about a half a block down the road. And I said, "Senator Kennedy, that's my wife and children. You've met my wife, but my children have heard me talk about you so much I'd appreciate it if you could wait here a minute and let me get them. I'd like to introduce them to you." He said, "No, no, let me go to see them." So, he got out of the car and ran to my car and talked with them and autographed a piece of paper. I think that was about the biggest thrill of their lives.

YOUNG: Well, in the 1960 primary was Huntington and was Cabel County— were these two areas considered to be economically depressed?

FOX: No, I don't think so. We certainly don't rely on the coal industry as much as other sections do. We do have some companies here that rely on the coal business, but we certainly were not in a depressed area. I would say that Huntington was not a depressed area. We were diversified. We had International Nickel and C & O [Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Company] and steel plants here that really don't have anything to do with the coal industry at all.

YOUNG: Well, did Senator Kennedy, then talk much about economic issues in this particular area?

FOX: Well, the economic issue was one thing that he discussed, but, as I said before, I don't believe that was the main issue in Cabel County. The religious issue was, of course, one of the main issues. And also, his war record came up. But I would say that the religious issue was probably the main issue that was brought up in this county.

YOUNG: Well, would you indicate the nature of the opposition to Senator Kennedy by the people who felt that religion was an issue in the campaign?

FOX: Well, Huntington is known for its churches. It's been

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said, and it seems to me like I read it somewhere, that Huntington has more churches per capita than any city in the United States. I remember that four or five years ago we had 135 churches in Huntington. This is really a church town.

YOUNG: What is the leading Protestant denomination, the one with the most members—could you guess?

FOX: Well, I would say the Methodist church and then probably the Presbyterian. They probably run neck-and-neck.

YOUNG: Could you be specific, then, about some of the objections?

FOX: Yes. Well, there was a tremendous amount of literature put out by the churches. I have a whole file of literature from many, many churches here in town. In their weekly bulletins they would ask their members not to vote for Senator Kennedy because he was Catholic and then give various things that might happen. I remember that one of the pastors of a leading church here gave a sermon one Sunday and said that it wasn't that he objected to Senator Kennedy because he was Catholic; he wasn't afraid of what Senator Kennedy might do as president, but it would be breaking the barrier and he wasn't sure about some other Catholic who might become president. He was afraid of what might happen.

YOUNG: Well, were these religious attacks on different levels, in other words, different kinds of attacks by different denominations?

FOX: Yes, they were. There were several specific incidents that I remember. Of course, birth control was a big issue. They would say that Senator Kennedy if he became president would not approve of federal aid to any birth control clinics. And, of course, the parochial school issue, which everyone is familiar with, would come up from time to time, also.

YOUNG: Let's turn then from the matter of religion to the strength of the Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] candidacy in Cabel County. Can you tell me how well organized the opposition was and any stories with respect to conflict between the two groups within the Democratic party?

FOX: Well, they had quite an organization here in Cabel County. I would say that almost all the Democratic politicians were for Senator Humphrey.

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YOUNG: You mean all the regulars?

FOX: All the regulars. It wasn't necessarily, of course, because they were for Senator Humphrey. A lot of them, I recall, liked Senator Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] and maybe Senator Symington [Stuart Symington, II] and other candidates, but they wanted a "Stop Kennedy" movement, so they all got behind Senator Humphrey.

YOUNG: With the expectation, then, that his strength might go to Johnson at the convention?

FOX: That's exactly right. They wanted to kill off Senator Kennedy right now in West Virginia; that was their aim and they were...

YOUNG: May I interrupt a minute?

FOX: Yes, go right ahead.

YOUNG: Do you think that this support for Johnson represents a kind of West Virginia longing for the Old South and the Southern tradition, or were there many other factors?

FOX: No, I don't think that had anything to do with it, because personally I don't consider West Virginia South. We were on the side of the North and this is generally considered a Northern state; especially Huntington is certainly considered Northern. Even though we're in the southern end of the state, I think West Virginia is considered Northern.

YOUNG: Well, at the time after the victory of Senator Kennedy in the state, did both factions then close ranks in the fall general election and work for the victory of Kennedy?

FOX: Oh, yes. I was surprised: In most all instances, why, the wounds were healed and we all fought together for the election of Senator Kennedy and Senator Johnson as vice president.

YOUNG: Well, were the religious issues that were raised in the primary then raised again in the general election?

FOX: Oh, yes. Of course, not by the Democratic politicians. You mean by the people of Huntington? Oh, yes, very much so. I would say just as much as or more than during the primary. Of course, one thing we did to combat this.... Was it Dallas or Houston where he spoke in front of the Ministerial Association [of greater Houston]? Of course,

that was on TV. We showed that either once or twice besides the regular TV program. We paid—we got the film, and I think that either once or twice during the campaign we showed this film on one of our local TV stations as, of course, a way to combat the religious issue. Although during the general election, as I say, we closed ranks—this was a little unusual, I think, in that we decided to keep open our Kennedy headquarters. Although we worked very closely with the regular Democratic headquarters, we also had a Kennedy-Johnson headquarters, and the main reason for doing this was that we felt that we could get so many more volunteers. We could keep the volunteers that we had and get possibly more volunteers who would not work for the regular Democratic organization, who didn't want maybe the smear of politics, but who would work for a Kennedy-Johnson ticket—I should say really for Senator Kennedy—where they wouldn't work for the regular Democratic organization. And that was the only reason we had a separate headquarters. Although we did work closely with the Democratic headquarters and coordinated with them, we did have a separate headquarters.

YOUNG: I think I've asked you this question before, but I think it might be relative again. In the general election, then, did you notice members of any particular church or group volunteering more than other members? Were there more Catholics involved in this volunteer work, or did it seem to be a fairly good cross section of the general public?

FOX: No, it was a very good cross section of the general public. I think we had members of all religions. We had a minister of an Episcopal church here, a leading Episcopal church, who was very helpful in several things. He never actively came out and said he supported Senator Kennedy, but he did so many things for us we knew he was for Senator Kennedy. He was one preacher in town who certainly didn't say anything in the pulpit or wouldn't allow anything in his bulletins.

YOUNG: Well, was he frequently invited to give the invocation at political rallies?

FOX: That's right. Well, that's one thing that he did. And he gave us invaluable help in other things. But you're right: That's one thing he did do quite a bit of.

YOUNG: Mr. Fox, then let's move on to the presidency and the New Frontier. How did people in Huntington and Cabell County react to President Kennedy's treatment of West Virginia following his victory?

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FOX: Well, of course, some people—and I think they are the people that don't know the facts—think he used the poverty situation as a stepping-stone to the presidency. I don't feel this way at all. He didn't

use it a great deal in Cabel County. Huntington is in Cabel County, and part of it is also in Wayne County. Wayne County is a depressed area, and although I don't know anything specific that he has done for Wayne County, I know things specific that he has done for Cabel County and other parts of the state. I certainly don't think that he used the poverty issues as a stepping-stone. He was elected president, and I feel that immediately after becoming president he helped West Virginia. He said many times that West Virginia was responsible for sending him to the White House, and he repaid his debt, I feel, many times. There are several new plants that have come to West Virginia; there is North American Aviation, Republic Aviation.

YOUNG: Let's leave the whole subject of West Virginia, then, for just a minute. Would you react to this question: What parts of the Kennedy program on a nationwide basis do you think West Virginia voters have approved of to the greatest degree? Can you think of any broad general policies?

FOX: Well, of course, I'm not an expert on it, but I believe that most West Virginians approve of his Medicare program, I think that was a tremendous program, and I would say that most West Virginians certainly approve of that. And, of course, everyone approves of the Peace Corps, especially people, I think, in Cabel County because they were so close to Sargent Shriver. So many people saw Mr. Shriver and got to know him and were personally interested in him and what he did in the Peace Corps. I think that everyone agrees that the Peace Corps has been a wonderful thing.

YOUNG: On the other hand, has there been any Democratic criticism, or general criticism by either Democrats or Republicans, of any specific Kennedy program? Perhaps we should limit this to the people who did support the president; that might be more in keeping.

FOX: No. The people, the Democrats, that I associate with thought that the programs that President Kennedy got through Congress and tried to get through Congress were good programs. I think everyone or most everyone here thought his civil rights program—although it didn't pass Congress while he was alive, it certainly was his program—I think that everyone thinks that that's a fine program.

YOUNG: The issue of civil rights, then, is not a real issue in

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Cabel County?

FOX: No, it isn't. We're fully integrated and it really isn't, in my opinion, an issue here.

YOUNG: Mr. Fox, in concluding your remarks, are there any other reminiscences in connection with the Kennedy campaign that you feel might be important, any stories or anecdotes?

FOX: Well, one sticks in my mind. We were talking one day and someone mentioned that Senator Kennedy was going to have a rally in Nitro, West Virginia, and they were looking for someone to introduce him. Someone in the crowd said, "Well, Lew Burdette's [S. Lewis Burdette, Jr.] from Nitro; why don't we get him to introduce him?"

YOUNG: The baseball player?

FOX: That's right, the pitcher. At the time I think he was pitching for the Milwaukee Braves. And someone said, "Well, gosh, he's in spring training. How are we going to get him down here?" And someone else spoke up, "Well, I know Lou Perini [Louis R. Perini]. I'll just call him." So this person called Lou Perini—he's the owner of the Milwaukee Braves—and evidently got his permission, and Lew Burdette flew down to Nitro and introduced Senator Kennedy and then flew back to this team in Florida. The reason I bring this up: It just shows the organization that Senator Kennedy had. I've heard so many times that it was the Kennedy money that defeated Senator Humphrey and gave Senator Kennedy the election here in West Virginia. I disagree with that. Of course, money was very important, but I think that the organization that the Kennedys were able to put together in West Virginia was the real thing that got him the nomination here. It was people like myself and other volunteers in Cabel County and other counties throughout the state who devoted as much time as necessary. We certainly weren't paid for our time and didn't expect any pay; we did it out of admiration and loyalty for Senator Kennedy. I think that it was the volunteers, the hundreds and hundreds and actually thousands of volunteers in West Virginia, that won him the nomination.

YOUNG: Did you have any personal contact with President Kennedy after he moved to the White House?

FOX: Yes. I was fortunate and saw him several times. My wife and I attended the inaugural ball and I had an opportunity to talk with him for a few minutes at that

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time. He's been back in the state three or four times—he was in Wheeling once, in Charleston twice—and each time that he has been in West Virginia I have been able to see him and talk with him for a few minutes.

YOUNG: This has been an interview with Mr. David Fox, Jr., who served in Cabel County in the 1960 West Virginia primary as the chairman for the Kennedy forces. The recording has been made in the afternoon of

July 10, 1964, in the Uptowner Motel in Huntington, West Virginia, by William L. Young.

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