Lyndon Johnson ranks among the most skilled and productive politicians in United States history. From 1937 till his last day as President in 1969, Johnson introduced, sponsored, or supported much of the most important legislation of the twentieth century. In 1948 though, Johnson's political career came a mere 87 votes away from an abrupt end. In one of the most studied elections in United States history, Johnson's star rose from the House of Representatives, in which he had been an energetic and effective member for 11 years, to a post in the more powerful Senate. If he lost his Senate bid in 1948, he planned to return to Texas to devote time to KTBC, the radio station that he and Lady Bird owned. Johnson ran for the Senate in 1941, with his House seat as insurance, after Senator Morris Sheppard died of a brain hemorrhage. But the stakes in 1948 seemed much higher as he would have to give up his seat in the House of Representatives to run. In 1948, Lyndon Johnson unleashed an aggressive, modern, and crooked campaign because his political career stood in the balance.

In 1941, Johnson led by 5,000 votes through a count of 96% of the ballots. He ended up losing by 1,311. From his defeat, Johnson learned a few very important lessons. First, he realized that being labeled a strong New Dealer probably hampered more than it helped him. For the most part, Texans outside the poorer hill country disliked FDR and the sweeping liberal change he brought in the 1930s. When Johnson announced his 1941 candidacy on the steps of the White House, the picture did not sit well with most Texans.

In 1948, Johnson knew that if he was going to win a statewide race, he would have to shift right. Democrats had traditionally controlled Texas. When the national Democratic agenda shifted to the left in the 1930s, Texas Democrats, along with other southern Democrats, did not follow. Even though the Democrats controlled the state, it remained conservative. In 1948, Johnson did not stress the New Deal programs. He now talked about issues in a way that catered to Texans.
He began his conservative switch in 1947 when he voted for the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act; legislation that significantly set back the power unions gained in the 1930s. When President Truman attempted to veto the bill, Johnson joined in the coalition to override it. Through this bill, Johnson accomplished two important goals in preparation for his 1948 Senate run. He demonstrated his willingness to take a stand against what he deemed as union excesses, and, "with Truman considered a sure loser in 1948" because of his civil rights proposals, he separated himself from the President's liberal administration.\(^5\)

Johnson also took a more conservative position that appeared to be anti-civil rights. By criticizing Truman's legislation, he hoped to endear himself to Texas voters. He argued:

> It is the province of the state to run its own elections [an argument against ending poll tax]. I am opposed to the anti-lynching bill because the federal government has no more business enacting a law against one form of murder than another. I am against the FEPC (Fair Employment Practices Commission) because if a man can tell you whom you must hire, he can tell you whom you cannot employ.\(^6\)

He also disagreed with Truman on an issue that was especially important to Texans: control of the tideland oil off the coast of Texas in the Gulf of Mexico. Johnson supported state control, whereas Truman, and other big government liberals felt federal control of these valuable resources was best.

LBJ, being the consummate politician, knew how to maneuver. He knew he would have to mirror, to some degree, the conservative nature of his opponent, Coke Stevenson, if he was going to compete with one of the most popular politicians in Texas history. Stevenson, Robert Caro notes, "had run for public office twelve times-once for County Judge, five times for state legislator, twice for Speaker, twice for Lieutenant Governor and twice for Governor-and he had never been defeated."\(^7\) One Texas state legislator said, "Coke Stevenson was just like Coca-Cola." Stevenson was certainly not a man who actively sought public office. He had spent all of 1947 at home on his ranch, and it took the urging of his political friends to convince him to run for the Senate in 1948. He projected the image of the strong, silent type-a political oddity who did not speak unless asked a question. His ultra-conservative political philosophy suited most Texans: lowering of taxes, reduction of federal control within the state, promotion of a freer market, and "complete destruction of the Communist movement in this country."\(^8\)

Liberal critics would often argue that Stevenson was too conservative. They said that he made the deficit he inherited as Governor in 1941 a surplus by 1947, because he slashed state services. They called him a racist because he opposed black voting rights and did nothing to stop wartime lynching in cities like Texarkana. He was labeled an isolationist because he opposed the Marshall Plan and often called
European nations "beggars."

LBJ made use of these views in his campaign against Stevenson. Johnson's mantra throughout the campaign was "Preparedness, Peace, and Progress." By "preparedness," he meant increasing the military might of the United States. In 1948, the threat of communism frightened many Americans. The Soviets had solidified their control of Eastern Europe; the United States was caught in a face-off over West Berlin; in China, the Communists were prevailing over the Nationalists; and the Alger Hiss spy ring made Americans realize communism remained at their backdoor. Johnson made Stevenson's isolationism a key point in his campaign by associating it with communism. He often brought up the contemporary example of Chamberlain appeasing Hitler to demonstrate how an unchecked evil would only grow more powerful. By "peace," LBJ meant supporting the United Nations and international trade. This, of course, went against Stevenson's anti-U.N., anti-Marshall Plan stance, and it was another attack upon his isolationist philosophy. And by "progress," LBJ stuck by some of his New Deal guns by supporting subsidies for farmers, electricity in rural areas, conservation, education, an increase in social security benefits, an increase in the number of hospitals, and protection of labor through a minimum wage and humane working hours. This platform, particularly his stance on labor, demonstrates how Johnson was adept at playing both sides of the political fence in order to latch onto as many votes as possible. He gave the Texas liberals his "progress" agenda, while he catered to conservatives in helping defeat Truman's civil rights legislation and helping pass and uphold the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. Ultimately, the candidates views on communism and labor proved to be the most important issues. Stevenson's silent nature and rigid isolationism would be a hindrance, especially with the new type of campaign LBJ would run.

In his 1942 and 1944 primary campaigns for Governor, Stevenson had won by record-setting margins and avoided run-offs. But his campaign against Johnson was a different matter. Running as an isolationist for a Senate seat was not the same as running for Governor.

The primary election was scheduled for July 24. Stevenson felt he would win a majority of the votes and not have to worry about a run-off election. He enjoyed an enormous lead in the early polls, and he felt his popularity alone would carry him through. LBJ, of course, just hoped that he and the numerous other candidates could keep this from happening. Johnson was aided immensely by the number three candidate was George Peddy. Peddy was a "symbol of uncompromising conservatism," and was a veteran of both world wars and an ardent anti-communist who believed that the state should own and control the tideland oil supply. With views mirroring those of Stevenson, there was little doubt that Peddy would take a lot of votes away from the former Governor. Peddy's entry into the race concerned
Stevenson so much that he made it a priority to convince Peddy people to avoid the run-off between Johnson and himself (as only the two leading vote-getters would participate in a run-off) by voting for Stevenson on July 24.

Unfortunately for Stevenson, Peddy and his people only stepped up their campaign efforts and increased his poll share to 14.5% by July 21. In the election, three days later, Stevenson ended up with 477,077 votes (40%) and won 168 counties. Johnson garnered 405,617 votes (34%) and won 72 counties. Peddy surprised all by capturing 237,195 votes (20%). For Johnson, these were both good and bad election results. They were good, because he and Stevenson would both go into a run-off primary election. They were bad, because he now knew that he would have to win more than 70% of the 237,195 conservative Peddy votes; votes that would more likely go to the conservative Stevenson. But LBJ pressed on with only five weeks to change voters' minds.

With this daunting task ahead of him, Johnson stepped up his new, "modern" campaign with an incredible drive. The campaign contained multiple facets. The first facet was Johnson's means of meeting with the voters. Since June, he had used a new type of aircraft, a helicopter, to talk to and dazzle as many Texans as he could in the short amount of time he had. He dubbed the machine "the Johnson City Windmill." A reporter named Margaret Mayer said:

"Coming down on those rural people in those little towns who had never seen anything like it, with that tremendous roar and the dust swirling up, it was an awesome thing. As it was approaching, there was a lot of hurry-up: late-comers rushing to get there. But as it actually started to come down, there was silence-the silence of awe."

People would come from miles around to see it. Word often got around through the distribution of flyers by an advanced party that included the Beau Jesters—a barbershop quartet. During his five-week helicopter campaign, Johnson made roughly 370 landings in mostly rural areas. He even landed in north Texas one time during a Coke Stevenson speech! Robert Dalleck estimated that Johnson reached well over 175,000 rural voters during this helicopter campaign. His brother and campaign assistant, Sam Houston Johnson, gave a telling example of the value of this technological display:

"One old man in Kickapoo kept staring at Lyndon as he talked about farm prices, never hearing a word. Finally he turned to his wife and said, "If he can keep that damn thing from chopping his head off, he might make a good senator.""

Besides the helicopter, Johnson used other avenues on unprecedented scales. LBJ's efforts produced the "first modern mass media campaign." Johnson would go on to spend more money than anyone ever had on polling, billboards, newspaper ads,
radio spots, and mailings. He regularly mailed his *Johnson Journal* to thousands of rural voters. In articles like "Communists favor Coke," he painted a picture of Stevenson as a pawn of northern Communist labor bosses because he favored isolationism.\(^{22}\) Johnson also followed polls closely. In an average campaign, a candidate might only conduct three or four statewide polls, because they cost so much at $6,000 each. Johnson had them conducted by two or three firms once a week! He also used his knowledge of radio in a very productive way. Prior to 1948, political radio consisted of nothing more than speeches. From his experience at his radio station (KTBC), he knew more could be accomplished with the medium. Aside from speeches, he produced shows with clever scripts, music, and professional direction aimed at his positive points and Stevenson's negative points. Like polling, radio proved very expensive. A single statewide broadcast cost $5,000 to $8,000. LBJ performed a statewide broadcast nearly every day!\(^{23}\)

Stevenson's campaign looked nothing like LBJ's; it appeared, like Stevenson, old-fashioned. He felt that, because he was popular, spending excessive amounts on a campaign would seem wasteful, so he did very little. He delivered occasional radio addresses and purchased some full-page newspaper ads and billboard space. But the crux of his campaign was built on driving from county to county in an old Plymouth to talk to small gatherings of people at county courthouses. Although he probably reached as many as Johnson did on his helicopter campaign, he really showed little organization and lacked a solid agenda.\(^{24}\) In other words, without the physical effort or willingness to spend money like LBJ, Stevenson's campaign proved lackluster at best.

The striking difference in campaign costs acted therefore as an issue in itself. Texas campaign laws permitted candidates themselves to spend up to $10,000 in a party primary election, $8,000 initially and $2,000 in a run-off. Obviously, more was spent through both legitimate and dubious organizations and campaign committees such as, the "Dallas Veterans for Johnson" or the "Johnson-for-Senate" committee. Johnson's phone bills alone for the campaign exceeded $30,000! He received much of his campaign money from the likes of millionaire publishers, businessmen, and private oilmen. He even received backing from movie studio executives like George Skouras of Twentieth Century-Fox and Howard Hughes of RKO. But most of LBJ's campaign was funded by the brothers George and Herman Brown, who LBJ, as a Representative, had help attain major shipbuilding contracts during World War II. In 1946, he again helped them receive a $21,000,000 contract to build the navy and airforce bases on Guam. With LBJ in Congress, their net worth increased five-fold in a single decade!\(^{25}\) As they had done in 1941, they gave LBJ anything he needed. Stevenson campaigns were always adequately financed, but as a conservative rule of thumb, Stevenson felt the cost of a statewide campaign should never exceed $100,000. LBJ's campaigns always proved to be expensive. His 1937
House campaign was one of the most expensive in Texas history; in 1941, he spent even more. In 1948, he went on to spend in excess of a million dollars!

Another secret to LBJ's 1948 success, was his determination and energy. During a two-month period, Johnson made more than 350 speeches and worked an average of 18 hours a day on the campaign. From the middle of June to the end of July, he lost more than 25 pounds. He campaigned so intensely that, "his voice fell to a croak and his body ...shrank so much that his face became a caricature of itself."

The most famous example of his will to win was his reluctance to have painful kidney stones removed for fear he would lose precious campaign time. He first realized that he had the stones around the time he entered the race in early-May. He had them before and passed them. But each day, the pain and nausea only intensified. With doctors advising surgery and the primary election only a few months away, Johnson refused the operation and took pain-killers regularly. By mid-May, he was enduring fever and chill cycles that saw his temperature rise to 104 degrees. He went through six or seven shirts a day, but he never missed a public appearance or left a room until the last hand was shaken.

By May 27, the stones had still not passed. After doctors all but demanded he received treatment, he agreed to go to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota for a new treatment that would get rid of the stones and allow him to get back on the campaign trail within a week. He agreed to go on the condition that his out-of-state treatment not be released to the press. He worried that Texans would resent him for leaving Texas for treatment. On May 30, the experimental treatment, cystoscopic manipulation (removing the stones through the urethra), was performed successfully. In recovery, Johnson kept staffers and three phones in his room at all times. He still worked on his campaign in the hospital, calling Texas as many as 64 times in one day! Within a week, he returned to Texas, campaigning harder than ever.

The most infamous issue surrounding Johnson's 1948 victory was the tainted vote totals in south Texas that, more than anything else, won the election for him. The second lesson Johnson learned from his 1941 defeat came into play here. He knew ballot tampering played a big role in his losing by 1,311 votes to Pappy O'Daniel. Aside from shifting right politically, LBJ also learned that he must sit on the ballot boxes in as many counties as possible. He knew Stevenson would try to stuff the ballot boxes like O'Daniel did, so Johnson not only ordered his men to watch the voting stations but also instructed his men to outdo Stevenson's men in accumulating fraudulent votes. The run-off election was scheduled for Saturday, August 28. That evening, Stevenson led by 2,119 after 939,468 votes were counted. By 9:00 AM, Sunday, LBJ had gained the lead after 979,877 votes were
counted. By Monday evening, Stevenson regained the lead, and on Thursday, September 2, he was announced as the "official" winner by 362 votes.

Unlike Stevenson, Johnson had prepared for a close race, and besides having his men watch the voting stations for stuffing or withholding, he asked election officials that supported him, like boss George Parr, to withhold their vote totals until the official results were announced. Stevenson was no amateur; he realized Johnson might try to pull something. But he made a mistake in instructing his supporters to only watch the voting stations on Sunday.\(^{32}\) Johnson ordered his men to watch the stations the entire week. According to H.Y. Price, a Johnson campaign insider, LBJ went so far as to tap Stevenson's phones. Anytime Stevenson or his men called the stations and asked for votes, LBJ immediately called his watchmen and told them to be on their toes.

After the "official" results were announced on Thursday, the real conspiracy began. Early on Friday, September 3, election officials in a little southern Mexican-American town, dominated by George Parr, announced that the returns they released earlier in the week were incorrect. Officials in Alice, said they found an additional 203 ballots in their "Box 13." Of these 203 ballots, 202 were for Johnson, leaving only one for Stevenson! Officials from another Parr-dominated county-Duval-also announced that they had some ballots that were not included in their tally from earlier in the week.\(^{33}\) After these votes had been counted, LBJ had 87 more votes than Stevenson with a final tally of 494,191 to 494,104.

Of course, this sudden change was no accident. Voting stations in many south Texas counties were controlled by Parr. During Stevenson's three gubernatorial bids, Parr had supported him with large margins like he did with Johnson in 1948. But in 1944, Stevenson made a questionable decision. Parr had asked Stevenson to appoint Jimmy Kazen, a personal and political friend, to the position of District Attorney of Laredo County. Instead, at a military official's request, Stevenson appointed S. Truman Phelps to the position to clean up prostitution around the Laredo airforce base.\(^{34}\) Parr never forgave Stevenson. Besides, Parr liked LBJ because of his style and courage. Also, in 1946, Johnson had helped Parr receive a pardon for income tax evasion.\(^{35}\)

Stevenson, of course, was outraged and rightfully declared that LBJ's votes were fraudulent. Johnson countered with claims, also probably accurate, that many of Stevenson's votes were fraudulent. Stevenson initially sought justice with the state Democratic Executive Committee. After a debate that included many harsh accusations, the Committee agreed fraud played a part on both sides but awarded the election to Johnson by a vote of 29 to 28. The deciding vote was placed by Charley Gibson, a drunk committee member rushed in at the last minute by Johnson supporters.\(^{36}\) With a party convention dominated by Truman Democrats,
assuring Johnson of another sure victory, Stevenson realized that he would now have to seek justice through the courts.

On September 15, Stevenson sent representatives to the residence of T. Whitfield Davidson, a Federal District Judge in north Texas. The Stevenson men asked Davidson to place a restraining order on LBJ's inclusion on the November ballot. To validate seeking justice in the federal courts, Stevenson claimed that the election fraud violated his federal civil rights. Besides, a statewide recount would take too long for Stevenson to have a chance at being included on the November ballot. Davidson issued the order and scheduled a hearing for September 21 in Fort Worth. LBJ knew Davidson was conservative and a friend of Stevenson, but more than that political conflict, he did not understand why he was being treated as if he were guilty before the trial even occurred. He also felt that a statewide election fell under the jurisdiction of the state courts—not the federal courts.

Initially, Johnson's lawyers suggested an appeal to Chief Justice Fred Vinson, but it was too risky. Vinson could rule against Johnson, and there would still be time for Stevenson's placement on the November ballot. So, Johnson prepared for his Federal District Court appearance. By September 18, LBJ had hired the brilliant Washington, D.C., super-attorney Abe Fortas. Fortas realized that Johnson needed the quickest and most reasonable course of action possible, so he decided to appeal to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta immediately after the September 21 hearing. Knowing that the Fifth Circuit was in recess till mid-October, Fortas felt strongly that Justice Hugo Black, the liberal senior justice for the area that included Texas, would be compelled to review the case and make a decision.

At the September 21 hearing, Judge Davidson made the temporary restraining order permanent and ordered the investigation of election results in the southern counties of Duval, Zapata, and Jim Wells. The Johnson team, following their plan, quickly issued an appeal to Judge Joseph Hutchinson of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals on September 24 in New Orleans. Like Fortas had predicted, the Court would not be able to hear the case until October 14. So, on September 25, Fortas submitted the case to Justice Black in Washington. Black agreed to hear the case if attorneys for both parties could be present on September 28.

In the meantime, the investigative hearings that Judge Davidson ordered where set to begin on September 27. Davidson ordered the investigation of the three counties because of their peculiar returns. For instance, Duval county saw 99.4% of its ballots go for LBJ! During the investigation, county officials made it difficult to obtain poll tax records and tally sheets. Witnesses proved hard to come by, and much of the potential evidence had disappeared. Also quite bizarre was the fact that the final 203 names on the Jim Wells County's "Box 13" tally sheet were in a different color of ink and in a different handwriting than the previous thousand on...
the sheet. Strangely, they were also all in alphabetical order, like someone had just gone down the poll tax sheet and copied names down. Of the 203, "last-minute" voters at "Box 13," only 11 were located and questioned. All said they had not even voted!(41)

At any rate, the day after the investigation began, Justice Black heard both cases and sided with the Johnson camp by lifting the restraining order. Without much hesitation, Black passed down the ruling that Johnson's civil rights had been violated through his removal from the November election after the electorate of Texas had chosen him as the Democratic candidate. Anyway, Black said Stevenson should have first brought a voter fraud suit to a state court or even the United States Senate itself, "which has the right to determine its own membership."(42)

With a decision from the Supreme Court, Stevenson was finished, but a mystery lingers: who or what influenced Black's speedy, subjective decision? Some believe either the Texan Speaker of the House, Sam Rayburn, or Abe Fortas may have discussed the case and its repercussions with Black. Black's personal political ideology could have been the overwhelming factor. Robert Dalleck put forth the theory that Attorney General Tom Clark had a lot to do with it. Clark actively supported Johnson in the primaries by talking a few New York law firms into donating money to the Johnson campaign.(43) Clark probably would not have wanted his efforts to be in vain. With his position as both the head of the Justice Department and a strong Johnson supporter, Clark had both the means and the motive. Others like Rowland Evans, Robert Novak, and Ronnie Dugger felt that President Truman played a pivotal role.

The full weight of the Truman Administration and the entire liberal wing of the Democratic party now was thrown behind Johnson. For all his conservative transgressions during the 80th Congress, Lyndon Johnson was indefinitely preferable to Dixiecrat Coke Stevenson in the Senate.(44)

On September 25, three days before the Black ruling, LBJ met with Truman on the President's whistle-stop campaign tour of Texas. It is impossible to know exactly what was said, but Johnson did immediately turn to Truman-the man he had opposed on so many issues in the previous couple years-to help raise campaign money after Black's decision.(45)

Interestingly, Johnson never admitted to any wrongdoing in the election, but in an interview with Ronnie Dugger in the early-1970s, Johnson shocked Dugger by showing him a picture of the Jim Wells County officials smiling and holding the Precinct 13 ballot box. When Dugger asked what it meant and how Johnson had received it, LBJ said nothing and grinned. A few years later, Dugger interviewed Luis Salas—a Parr man and the head official at Precinct 13 in 1948. Salas admitted the late returns were fraudulent. Then Dugger was shocked when Salas pulled out a
photograph—the same photograph LBJ had shown him a few years earlier.\footnote{46}

The subsequent November election proved to be a mere formality. Johnson easily defeated the Republican candidate, Jack Porter, by a margin of more than two to one.\footnote{47} So by a margin of 87 (likely illegal) votes in the primary run-off, Lyndon Johnson's political career reached its next level. Students of history can only wonder: if Johnson had lost, would there have ever been full-scale American involvement in Vietnam through which 58,000 young Americans would die, or would the important legislative leaps of the 1960s ever have occurred? The year 1948 contains a moment that may very well have been the difference. Of course, the 1948 election did nothing to alleviate LBJ's all-consuming feeling of insecurity—it only added to it. He had grown up poor and attended a modest teachers' college. He had been defeated in his 1941 Senate attempt, and now, the future of this political giant "rested on the foundation of theft."\footnote{48} The jeers of "Landslide Lyndon" pushed him harder to legitimize his place in American history as one of its greatest legislators and as a future President.

5. Evans and Novak, 23.
9. Ibid., 316-7.
10. Ibid., 299.
11. Ibid., 323.
15. Caro, 179; Dugger, 310.
17. Caro, 217.
19. Dalleck, 304.
22. Dalleck, 324; Dugger, 319-20.
23. Caro, 192.
25. Ibid., 307-10.
28. White, 164.
32. Dalleck, 327-8.
33. Dugger, 328.
34. Dalleck, 330; Dugger, 323.
35. Caro, 191.
38. Dugger, 335
40. Dugger, 336; Dalleck, 340.
41. Dugger, 331; Dalleck, 332-3.
42. Dalleck, 341.
43. Ibid.
44. Evans and Novak, 25.
45. Dugger, 337.
46. Ibid., 341.
47. Dalleck, 343.
48. Dugger, 329