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***Introduction***

There was an old saying that proclaimed that no catholic would ever be elected President of the United States. That saying held true until the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960, but before that election, Kennedy had faced a defeat in 1956 when he ran for Vice President at the Democratic Convention under Adlai Stevenson. The Catholic “problem” also played out in the election of 1928 in which New York governor Al Smith had to face the anti-Catholic rhetoric.[[1]](#footnote-1) Smith and Kennedy both faced fierce opposition to their Catholic faith and though Kennedy became triumphant in 1960 Kennedy did loose the battle in 1956.

What role did Catholicism play in the defeat of Al Smith’s run for the Presidency in 1928 and John F. Kennedy’s runs for higher office in 1956 and 1960? This paper argues that Catholicism was a major hurdle in Al Smith’s campaign and John F. Kennedy’s run for higher office in 1956 and 1960 because anti-Catholic sentiment held by many American voters which backfired on both campaigns, both candidates were of Irish heritage which was the second most difficult thing that a candidate could have behind being Catholic, and that the party establishment went from being supportive of a Catholic candidate in the 1920s to being very weary in 1956 and 1960.

***The Candidates and Catholicism***

Before about 1976, nothing made voters more fearful of a political candidate than hearing that the candidate belonged to a church that was under the pope. For many candidates it was a death sentence if even a rumor began of this nature. But two candidates, Al Smith and John F. Kennedy both Democrats, rose to the challenge and faced head on what Protestants feared most. This would not be the first time that religion would be brought up as a so called “legitimate” campaign issue. Shaun A. Casey, a professor of Christian ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary says, “Well, I think it can go all the way back to 1800 when Thomas Jefferson ran. He was attacked as being an atheist.”[[2]](#footnote-2) They would each face opposition not because of stances on important issues but clearly on the stance of their faith. It is interesting to note here that this fearfulness did not come from either ones’ respected opponent. Herbert Hoover, the man running against Al Smith for the Presidency in 1928, writes; “Governor Alfred E. Smith… was a natural born gentleman.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Hoover goes on to say that Smith “…said no word and engaged in no action that did not comport with the highest levels… I paid a natural tribute to him when speaking in New York [Smith’s home state] during the campaign, and he did so to me when speaking in California [Hoover’s home state].[[4]](#footnote-4) Author John McGreevy would write; “Beyond explicitly religious periodicals Smith’s Catholicism provoked little establishment opposition…”[[5]](#footnote-5) Hoover would also vocally condemn Mabel Walker Willebrandt, who Hoover would later have as his Assistant Attorney General, when Mabel gave a speech in 1928 urging ministers in Ohio to oppose Al Smith because of Smith’s stance of opposition to prohibition.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Accordingly, when Kennedy lost the nomination in 1956, Kennedy went on to campaign for the Stevenson/Kefauver ticket during the 1956 presidential election, and Stevenson campaigned for John F. Kennedy’s run for the presidency later in 1960.[[7]](#footnote-7) But Kennedy would face fierce anti-Catholic opposition from both the party and the voters. So how did this rise of anti-Catholicism come about and how did it actually help each candidate win voters?

Smith was praised in many articles about his universality of tolerance. “…For most intellectuals Smith became a symbol…’of tolerance in American life—racial, religious, and social tolerance, accepting into the American family the city-dwellers who have come to us within the last century.’”[[8]](#footnote-8) Smith’s stance of tolerance in American life was so moving that his opponent in the 1928 election, Herbert Hoover, made a change of heart and began speaking for the promotion of religious tolerance.[[9]](#footnote-9) But as is seen Smith seemed to have no problems when it came to his Catholicism within the intellectuals and the parties themselves. But Smith was unable to change the hearts of many Protestant American voters, who would ultimately decide the election.

One aspect of the campaign that Smith did fail at was addressing the issue at all, instead Smith and almost anyone discussing it wanted to drop the matter all together.[[10]](#footnote-10) When Smith was challenged to answer a question about the differences that he may face if elected president regarding education either as an American choice or a moral obligation by the church, Smith at first claimed that he had never heard of such beliefs held by the Catholic Church.[[11]](#footnote-11) But after talking with his priest and his advisors, Smith came back with the reply of dismissal since Smith had never experienced such conflicts between the Catholic Church and the State.[[12]](#footnote-12) Smith’s reply generated a lot of support for his campaign. *Outlook* editors wrote; “It should forever make it impossible for the form of a public man’s religious faith to become a political issue in this country.”[[13]](#footnote-13) This stance on a religious issue may have supported a greater turnout in Smith’s favor during the November election, which will be explored later on.

After the 1928 election was finished with, and Herbert Hoover was the winner, the National Catholic Welfare Conference explained “the Catholics of this country feel that the Republican Party and the Republican Leaders… allowed this anti-Catholic campaign.”[[14]](#footnote-14) This cannot be entirely true based on the responses made by President Hoover and what Hoover and the party had to gain from it. Author Joan Hoff Wilson writes; “Voters in this election assumed that ‘rum and romanism’ played an important role in Smith’s defeat. But in fact…Catholicism [does not appear] in retrospect to have been a significant factor. …Smith ran better than two previous Democratic candidates of the decade…”[[15]](#footnote-15) What did the party have to gain with anti-Catholic sentiment when it comes to the very popular Herbert Hoover as McGreevy states?

To further prove this point, that Catholicism was not the deciding factor in this election, one must go no further than Presidential election results. In 1924 the country had the choice of either Republican Calvin Coolidge or Democrat John Davis. When the voters went to cast their ballots only the southern states voted for Davis.[[16]](#footnote-16) **[See Map 1]** Furthermore Davis lost to Coolidge by 25% of the vote, or by 7,338,513 votes.[[17]](#footnote-17) In 1928, when the race was between Republican Herbert Hoover and Democrat (and Catholic) Al Smith voters decided to also give Smith the southern states.[[18]](#footnote-18) **[See Map 2]** This voter breakdown is as follows: Smith lost the election by only 18% of the total vote, or by 6,374,938 total votes.[[19]](#footnote-19) When compared to the previous election, which there was no Catholic candidate, the looser, Democrat John Davis, lost by a wider margin, actually a 7% wider margin, than Al Smith did in 1928.[[20]](#footnote-20) Accordingly, what this all breaks down to is this. If Al Smith’s Catholicism was really the deciding issue, why is Smith’s loss less than when a Catholic was not running for president? When looking at voter turnout from these two presidential elections, there is an increase of nearly 8,000,000 votes, so it could be argued that Smith’s Catholicism actually helped him. I would not argue though that there was not anti-Catholic sentiment throughout the country, because there is clear evidence that anti-Catholic feelings did exist and were used against Smith in the 1928 election.

To compare and understand this possibility of Smith’s Catholicism actually helping him, the example of John F. Kennedy in 1960 is a great looking glass. Helen O’Donnell described John F. Kennedy when she wrote; “…he [John F. Kennedy] represented the ambitions of a larger Irish political class that had struggled for years against the ethnic bigotry and anti-Catholic paranoia of traditional American society.”[[21]](#footnote-21) This ambition of overcoming the bigotry all came to a head when John Kennedy entered and ran in the Wisconsin primary in 1960. Kennedy was in a bit of a challenge when it came to the Wisconsin primary. Wisconsin was the neighboring state of his challenger, Senator Hubert Humphrey, from Minnesota.[[22]](#footnote-22) If Kennedy entered and lost it would appear as though his Catholicism may doom him and the Democratic Party in the general election in November if Kennedy was to win the nomination, but if he did not enter the primary at all it would make Kennedy appear as though he were afraid to face the issue at all.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Well, when the primary day came, April 5, 1960, Kennedy came out on top. Senator Kennedy won 476,024 votes to Hubert Humphrey’s 366,753 votes, or by a 13% margin of victory.[[24]](#footnote-24) This win, in one of the most Protestant states, seemed to have proven once and for all that Senator John Kennedy could overcome the Catholic issue. But once all the votes had been counted the Kennedy team noticed that it had actually backfired. The election reporting found that Kennedy had won six out of the 10 total Wisconsin districts, and that it was Catholic voters who had pushed him over the edge to defeat Humphrey in those six districts.[[25]](#footnote-25) Senator Kennedy had lost the four most prominent Protestant districts, which were won by Humphrey.[[26]](#footnote-26) Kennedy’s win in Wisconsin “…was a cold bucket of water thrown on what should have been a clear victory for the Kennedy forces.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Kennedy’s victory was really no victory at all, because Kennedy had been trying to prove that he could win in Protestant states, but Kennedy’s Catholicism had actually driven out more Catholic voters that year which resulted in his “victory” which had actually had backfired on his campaign.

Now, if this historical happening in April of 1960 can be applied to Smith’s campaign there are some clear similarities. Smith had gained more votes than his predecessor for the presidency John Davis. Smith also lost by a narrower margin than Davis by 7%.[[28]](#footnote-28)[[29]](#footnote-29)

Smith’s campaign saw the Catholic issue as a hurdle that they could get over but anti-Catholic sentiment was rampant throughout the states. What affect this had on voters is unclear because Smith did experience anti-Catholic rhetoric, but lost by a narrower margin than his predecessor and a larger percentage of Americans voted for Smith than his Democratic predecessor.

***When Irish Eyes are Smiling***

In the 1800s, when immigration was in full swing in the United States, nothing could be more detrimental to your new life in the United States of America than being Irish, or greater yet being Irish and Catholic, which was shared by both Al Smith and John F. Kennedy’s ancestors.[[30]](#footnote-30) Being Irish would also be a hurdle that both Smith and Kennedy would have to overcome as well but both candidates took different roads to overcome it, or to not overcome it at all. As was stated above, John F. Kennedy embraced and stood up for the working Irish Americans that he so desperately wanted to represent in every public office that he held. On the other hand, Al Smith choose to distance himself from his Irish heritage, which may have lead more to his defeat than his Catholicism.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Al Smith grew up in the 4th ward of New York City.[[32]](#footnote-32) Growing up among many immigrants, none were more prominent than the ones that were his ancestors, Irish immigrants. Between the late 1840s and the early 1850s, between 200,000 and 400,000 immigrants that landed in New York City were Irish Catholics fleeing Ireland and the devastating potato famine.[[33]](#footnote-33)Not surprisingly, by 1855 Irish immigrants made up 28% of New York City’s total population and by 1860 New York Irish made up 13% of the total Irish population in the United States.[[34]](#footnote-34) “The phenomenal growth of Catholicism in the new world clearly alarmed the settled Protestant ethos of much North American life.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Smith’s actual family lineage is still quit a mystery and can be simply put by his daughter as “four different ethnic strains.”[[36]](#footnote-36)Though Smith’s actual bloodline heritage is lost to history, no heritage was stronger than the one he grew up around and that was Irish.

When Al Smith’s grandson recapitulated his grandfathers concern of his heritage he stated “…he [Al Smith] was 100% Irish…If someone said, well ‘this is the greatest Irishmen that ever lived’…he’d never correct them.”[[37]](#footnote-37) But when it came to when Smith got into public office, Smith seemed to have second thoughts on how far he wanted to connect himself to his Irish heritage. When Smith became governor of New York “…the one ethnic group, ironically, that Smith did not fight so diligently for was the Irish.”[[38]](#footnote-38) It is unclear why Smith seemed to turn his back on the heritage that he used to love so much once he got into office.

Author Robert Slayton states that Smith’s ethnic pride was simply “sentimental” and that Smith made no effort to actually fight for Irish immigrants.[[39]](#footnote-39) Al Smith did go to meetings that focused on Ireland’s freedom from Great Britain following World War 1, and even became the leader of an organization which goal was to raise money for impoverished Irish women in children but taking either deliberate action or speaking on behalf of Irish causes never came from Smith.[[40]](#footnote-40) It is possible that Smith did not want the support of Irish Americans simply because they were Irish and therefore distanced himself from his Irish heritage. This would also be used with John F. Kennedy and his Catholicism when Kennedy stated, “…”I believe in an America…where there is no Catholic vote, no anti-Catholic vote, no bloc voting of any kind…”[[41]](#footnote-41) So to conclude Smith’s very confusing stance with his Irish heritage it can be best said that “Al’s Irish identity, no matter how strong, remained cultural and nostalgic rather than political or nationalistic.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

John F. Kennedy on the other hand is a 180-degree turn from the actions that were taken by Al Smith. Kenny O’Donnell, the White House Appointments Secretary for President Kennedy, would later say, “You have to understand… he [JFK] came to represent the hopes of this entire class of people [Irish Catholics], who were kind of proud to see one of their own do well.”[[43]](#footnote-43) When John F. Kennedy became President, he surrounded himself with fellow Irishmen who would serve him during his time in office. This group of men would become known as the Irish Mafia, because of all their deep rooted ties of their Irish heritage, just like Kennedy’s.[[44]](#footnote-44) Towards the end of his short lived Presidency, just 4 months before his assassination, Kennedy wanted to create his own trip to his ancestral home of Ireland. “’Ireland?’ said Kenny O’Donnell when the President had first brought up the subject. ‘There’s no reason for you to go to Ireland. It would be a waste of time. If you go to Ireland, people will say it’s a pleasure trip.’ ‘That’s exactly what I want,’ Kennedy said. ‘I am the President of the United States, not you. When I say I want to go to Ireland, it means that I’m going to Ireland. Make the arrangements.’”[[45]](#footnote-45) The arrangements were made and Kennedy made it the last overseas trip of his presidency. Kennedy turned the visit into a family reunion by visiting Kennedy cousins who still lived in Ireland.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Kennedy gave a heart-warming speech to those who had gathered at the airport to see him off.

“If the day was clear enough, and if you went down to the bay, and you looked west, and your sight was good enough, you would see Boston, Massachusetts… I want to express… to you of this country how much this visit has meant. It is strange that so many years could pass and so many generations pass and still some of us who came on this trip could come home --here to Ireland--and feel ourselves at home and not feel ourselves in a strange country, but feel ourselves among neighbors, even though we are separated by generations, by time, and by thousands of miles.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

Kennedy clearly took a much different stance on his Irish heritage than Al Smith had done in 1928. Furthermore, Kennedy’s stance was much more successful because it opened American citizen’s minds about who Irish people where, what the Irish nation was about, and how Irish Catholics were just as much a part of America as a Protestants were.

***Who Does the Party Back?***

The last major role that Catholicism had in each of these elections was how the parties themselves saw the Catholic issue and how they responded to it. In the election the parties really did not seem to care much that Al Smith was a Catholic. As when Kennedy ran, though the party would support him once he had the nomination, seemed to be very concerned about his Catholic faith. These two different tracks are interesting to examine and to see how it played out during the elections.

There is no doubt, and I do not make the argument, that there were no anti-Catholic movements, speeches, or feelings during the election. There was a considerable amount of anti-Catholicism in the election but this did not stem or come from the parties. This anti-Catholic rhetoric came from religious leaders and Protestant voters. “Bishop James Cannon, fundamentalist leader and head of the Southern Methodist Episcopal Church, claimed a careful reading of the Bible proved that the Catholic Church was un-Christian and the ‘Mother of ignorance, superstition, intolerance and sin.’”[[48]](#footnote-48) This kind of talk and discussion further divided Protestants and Catholics and deepened the belief that Catholicism was un-American.[[49]](#footnote-49) It can be argued that no group or movement made more anti-Catholic statements or tried harder to make Catholicism and “issue” in the 1928 election more than the Klu Klux Klan. The Ku Klux Klan launched a fierce campaign against any Catholic, lest it be Smith, to run for public office. According to the Klan nothing posed a greater threat to the American way of life more than 1) African Americans, 2) Jews, and 3) Catholics.[[50]](#footnote-50)

The Klu Klux Klan began their vigorous campaign by proclaiming that Catholics were unable to have a full-fledged allegiance to the state because they would always have the Catholic Church above the United States of America and what it stood for.[[51]](#footnote-51) During the election, the Klan had no interest in actually understanding what Catholicism was, what it believed, and how it and American culture lived together. “…it [the Klan] preyed on the unarticulated and latent fears of many in the Protestant community, distorting them and giving them substance. Fears of a Catholic conspiracy sprouted everywhere.”[[52]](#footnote-52)

When it came to the party it wasn’t Smith’s Catholicism that worried them but his stance on the 18th amendment to the United States Constitution, which would implement prohibition.[[53]](#footnote-53) Smith had been in favor of the amendment when it first came up, but three years later, New York, which Smith was the Governor, was presented with a bill that would roll back the 18th amendments harshest stipulations.[[54]](#footnote-54) Smith finally agreed under heavy pressure from the outside to support the bill, which made many in the party question if Smith could stand firm on an issue. But when the Democratic Convention rolled around, Smith’s Catholicism was not a problem for delegates or for Democratic leaders. “…he [Smith] picked up support of delegates in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, and in all the New England States,” without even entering one single primary.[[55]](#footnote-55) The only major opposition group that used his Catholic religion against him during the convention was the Klan.[[56]](#footnote-56) Many Catholics, who were at the convention, approached Smith and said, “…do something about the Klan or they will rule the U.S.A.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

There is no opposition from party leaders or bosses during the election process. This anti-Catholic viewpoint was started by a racist group and that group led to the only major fierce opposition to Smith based simply on his Catholic beliefs.

***Conclusion***

For many years, most blamed Smith’s loss on his religious beliefs, but as history unfolds, and new information is brought forth, it can be seen that it was not simply his Catholicism that doomed his chances, but it had actually helped Smith win by a narrower margin than his Democratic predecessor. Smith and Kennedy choose different paths to align themselves with their ancestral heritage. Smith chose to walk softly and quietly while Kennedy wore his Irish roots proud and loud. Lastly, the Democratic Party seemed to switch its stance on a Catholic candidate. Smith rose through the ranks without any real opposition from the parties, while Kennedy was blasted nearly daily for his Catholic faith. The conclusion could be this, the Democratic party seemed to make progress in some areas, with its goals of fully supporting a candidate regardless of faith, but it also seemed to take a step back because in 1960 that support did not come until Kennedy had racked up the nomination.

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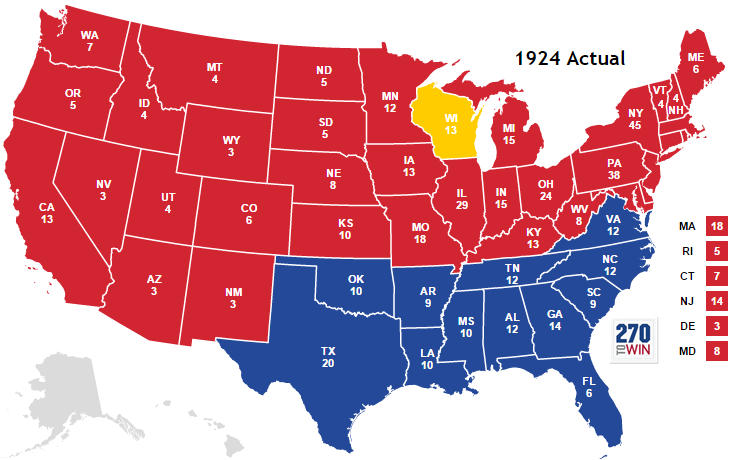
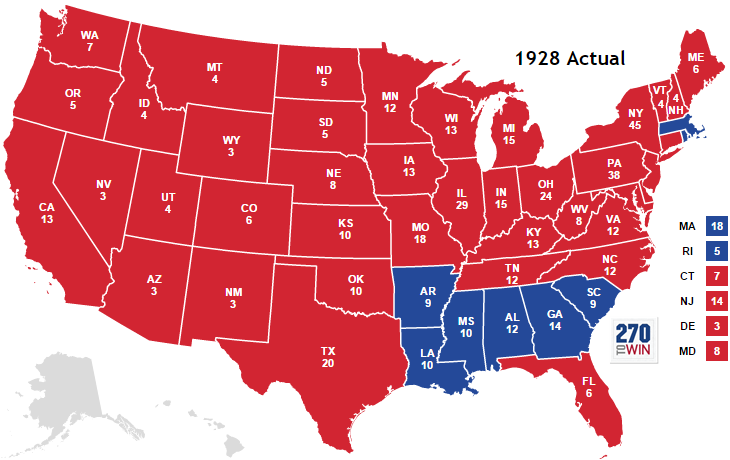
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