

The Democratic Primaries

Kennedy sought the Democratic nomination against a crowded field of opponents. One, Hubert Humphrey, commented about Kennedy, saying, "I wish he would grow up and stop acting like a boy." When he could see defeat on the horizon, Humphrey called Kennedy "the spoiled candidate" and Robert Kennedy "young, emotional [and] juvenile." He criticized Kennedy's father and the whole family, resulting in Kennedy remarking publicly, "I have never been subject to so much personal abuse." When Lyndon Johnson entered the nominating contest, he told Adlai Stevenson, who was also seeking the nomination, "Don't help that kid, Kennedy." He went on to joke with another senator, "Jack's pediatricians have just given him a clean bill of health."

On July 2, 1960, former Democratic President Harry Truman held a press conference regarding Kennedy's potential nomination. He talked about the dire circumstances of the Cold War, saying, "I am deeply concerned and troubled about the situation we are up against in the world now and in the immediate future." Truman spoke to Kennedy directly: "Senator, are you certain that you are quite ready for the country or that the country is ready for you in the role of president?" He continued, saying that the world needed someone with the "greatest possible maturity and experience." Truman finished his message to

All the Presidents' Ages



While John Kennedy is the youngest man ever elected president, Theodore Roosevelt (pictured) is the youngest to ever hold the office. Vice President Roosevelt was 42 years old when William McKinley was assassinated in 1901. Not counting Roosevelt, the last president to be in his 40s prior to Kennedy was Grover Cleveland, who was inaugurated in 1885 at age 47.

The six presidents who followed Kennedy, born in 1917, were all born within a decade of him: Lyndon Johnson (1908), Richard Nixon (1913), Gerald Ford (1913), Jimmy Carter (1924), Ronald Reagan (1911) and George H.W. Bush (1924). This cluster of presidential births is unique in American history.

The President Who Happened to be Catholic

John Kennedy overcame anti-Catholic sentiment to win the 1960 election — barely.

by David Wolfford

When John Kennedy ran for president in 1960, he overcame anti-Catholic bigotry and was plagued by questions about whether a Catholic could remain independent from the Pope.

A History of Anti-Catholicism

In the 1840s, Kennedy's ancestors arrived from Ireland with the first major wave of Catholic immigrants, which included Catholics from Germany, Italy, Eastern Europe and French Canada.

By 1850, Catholics formed about 5 percent of the nation — up from less than 1 percent at the time of the Revolutionary War. The growing Catholic influence was not always welcome. For example, an angry mob in Washington, D.C., threw into the Potomac River a block of marble sent by Pope Pius IX for the construction of the Washington Monument.

Over 3 million Irish, most of whom were Catholic, came to the United States from 1845 to 1890. Between 1890 and 1910, 9 million total Catholics immigrants — many Italian and Eastern European — further increased the Catholic population.

By 1928, the United States population was 16 percent Catholic, and the Democrat Party nominated Alfred E. Smith, the Irish-Catholic governor of New York, as its presidential candidate. Smith faced a whisper campaign that labeled him a drunkard. It was insinuated that New York City's new Holland Tunnel would connect to Rome. The influential Ku Klux Klan, with more than 2 million members, was

Kennedy by saying, "May I urge you to be patient."

Kennedy called Ted Sorensen, his main speechwriter, inviting him to Hyannis Port to draft a response to Truman. Sorensen brought a file titled "youth and age." In a televised press conference on July 4, Kennedy attempted to put this issue to rest. Speaking from a podium at the Hotel Roosevelt in New York, Kennedy went through Truman's various charges, but then he turned to what he characterized as "the heart of Mr. Truman's objections."

Kennedy cited his 18 years of service to the country — four as a naval officer and 14 in Congress. He said that in the last 20 years, he had visited almost every country and continent and, in the last few years, all the states. There was emotion in his voice as he spoke to the American people, stating that if his own experience was insufficient, then, "All but a handful of our presidents since the very founding of this nation should be ruled out. And every president elevated to that office in the 20th century should have been ruled out." That list included Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt and Truman himself.

He went further and referenced the writing of the Declaration of Independence by Jefferson, command of the Continental Army by Washington, the framing of the Constitution by Madison and even Columbus's voyage to the Americas as feats accomplished by men under the age of 44. He finished



Senator Kennedy rebuts President Truman's criticisms during a news conference at New York's Hotel Roosevelt on July 4, 1960.

by quoting Abraham Lincoln, who famously said before the Civil War, "I see the storm coming and I know His hand is in it. If He has a place and work for me, I believe I am ready." Kennedy exuded confidence. His manner as well as his words were assurances that he was up for the job.

Kennedy vs. Nixon

During the general election, Kennedy skillfully turned his youth into an asset. He said in one speech, "the New Deal and Fair Deal were bold

Horrors." An influential Protestant journal, *Christian Century*, called Smith a "representative of an alien culture." America was not yet ready. Smith received less than 41 percent of the vote.

Kennedy's candidacy 32 years later once again revealed America's concern for potential Roman influence. Polling showed that while his religion turned off a good number of voters, it would also bring him a sizable number of Catholic voters who were Republican or independent. As Kennedy's religion became one of the top issues in the race, his team decided to publicly and confidently discuss it, declare his independence from the Pope and cast critics as prejudiced. "There is an old saying in Boston," Kennedy said, "that we get our religion from Rome and our politics at home."

Campaigning in Appalachia

West Virginia, a state where Catholics made up just 3 percent of the population, was the pivotal Democratic primary in the 1960 presidential race. Few states had primaries, and those that did took on outsized importance.

Kennedy pollster Lou Harris recalled the challenges after surveying voters: "They'd pull the blinds, lock the door, and they'd say, 'If Kennedy



Kennedy watches as his daughter Caroline is christened on Dec. 13, 1957, at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York. Godparents are Robert Kennedy and Caroline Canfield, Jackie's sister.

staunchly anti-Catholic. When Smith's campaign train arrived in Billings, Mon., a cross burned above the town and several charges of dynamite exploded. Anti-Catholic crusaders distributed an estimated 10 million handbills, leaflets and posters with titles like "Popery in the Schools" and "Convent



Television debates were an innovation in the 1960 U.S. presidential campaign. Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard M. Nixon as they appeared in the fourth and final of these debates in New York City on Dec. 8, 1960.

measures — but this is a new generation.” He stressed that there were new concepts that needed different approaches. “We stand today on the edge of a new frontier — the frontier of the ’60s — a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats.”

By the end of August, polls showed Nixon and Kennedy in a dead heat. It seemed that his religion and youth were the main factors holding Kennedy back. After a now-famous speech before Baptist

was ready for the presidency.

On Sept. 26, 1960, Kennedy and Nixon squared off on national television. Kennedy wore a sharp black suit; Nixon, wearing gray, blended into the background. The first question of the debate went to Kennedy and addressed the issue of his age. The journalist asking the question mentioned that in the course of the campaign, Nixon had said that Kennedy was “naive and at times immature.”

Kennedy shot back, saying that Nixon and himself

AP PHOTO

*“There is an old saying in Boston,”
Kennedy said, “that we get our religion
from Rome and our politics at home.”*

gets elected ... all our children will have to go to parochial schools. And the Pope will tell Kennedy every move to make.”

Harris found that voters, even in 1960, believed the myth about Al Smith’s tunnel. The Klan was strong across the state. As reporter Ted White recalled, citizens made statements like “We’ve never had a Catholic president and I hope we never do.”

Kennedy turned the tide in part with his personal charm. He campaigned heavily in the state and spent freely from his campaign war chest. Kennedy flew around the state in a private airplane; his principal opponent, Hubert Humphrey, was in an old bus.

Kennedy was not reluctant to talk about his own well-known military service or that of his brother Joe, who died during World War II. “Nobody asked my brother if he was a Catholic or a Protestant,”

Kennedy said, “before he climbed into an American bomber plane to fly his last mission.” Kennedy made it clear he hadn’t defended American freedoms to later be unconstitutionally disqualified from office.

The issue lingered. Before the primary, the Kennedy campaign bought 30 minutes of TV time for a question-and-answer session with the candidate. Democratic celebrity Franklin Roosevelt, Jr., sat next to Kennedy as he spent 12 minutes of the 30 answering questions about religion.

West Virginians were also brought over because they knew the nation was watching. Harris recalled a follow-up interview with a swing voter who said, “We have enough trouble in West Virginia, let alone to be called bigots, too.” The Irish-Catholic defeated Humphrey 61 to 39 percent. This pivotal victory led to Kennedy’s nomination.

had come to Congress together in 1946. "I've been there now for 14 years, the same period of time that he has, so that our experience in government is comparable." He moved the discourse away from his age and focused on the programs that the candidates were for or against. "The question before us is: Which point of view and which party do we want to lead the United States?" When asked for his response, Nixon said, "I have no comment."

Another of the panel of journalists moved the debate toward executive leadership, commenting that the Nixon camp had stressed his time with Eisenhower. However, when asked about Nixon's contributions, President Eisenhower had said, "If you give me a week, I might think of one. I don't remember." Visibly sweating in the bright lights of the set, Nixon was on the defensive, trying to prove that he had a relationship with the president, saying that Eisenhower was being "facetious." He stressed that, "Through the years, I have sat in the National Security Council. I have been in the Cabinet. I have met with the legislative leaders."

Like a movie star ready for his close up, Kennedy looked into the camera and responded coolly to Nixon's comments. "Abraham Lincoln came to the presidency in 1860 after a rather little-known session in the House of Representatives and after being defeated for the Senate in '58 and was a distinguished

president. There is no certain road to the presidency." He moved back to the area that most mattered: "The question really is: Which candidate and which party can meet the problems that the United States is going to face in the '60s?"

By the second and third debates, Kennedy had moved the conversation away from his youth and onto the issues. During the fourth and final debate, Kennedy went on the attack, and it was Nixon who defended his experience in decision-making. Nixon returned fire, claiming that by stressing areas where the U.S. lagged behind other countries, Kennedy was "running down" the nation. In machine-gun-like fashion, Kennedy rattled off a response: "I really don't need Mr. Nixon to tell me about what my responsibilities are as a citizen. I've served this country for 14 years in the Congress and before that in the service. ... What I downgrade, Mr. Nixon, is the leadership the country is getting, not the country."

It was clear after these debates that Kennedy was able to lead the nation. The age issue had been put to rest. [JFK]

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Making a Stand in Houston

The issue remained front and center during the general election campaign, with 28 percent of American voters saying they would not vote for even a well-qualified Catholic. Outspoken Protestant leaders opposed his candidacy. The president of the Southern Baptist Convention declared he would not "stand by and keep my mouth shut when a man under control of the Roman Catholic Church runs for

Catholics in Washington Today

The days when Al Smith encountered burning crosses are long gone. Today 31 percent of the Congress is Catholic. Joe Biden is the first Catholic vice president; other prominent Catholics in Congress include Nancy Pelosi, John Boehner and Paul Ryan. The Supreme Court illustrates the change most starkly. Only 12 Catholics have ever sat on the nation's highest court, but six of those are currently serving.

the presidency." Six national church organizations with an overall membership of nearly 12 million took a public stand against a Catholic as president.

The persistent inquisition encouraged Kennedy to make a formal appeal. In Houston before the local minister's association, he took the podium and made what would become one of his most famous speeches. He declared, "I want a chief executive whose public acts are responsible to all groups and obligated to none; who can attend any ceremony, service or dinner his office may appropriately require of him; and whose fulfillment of his presidential oath is not limited or conditioned by any religious oath, ritual or obligation." He went on, "I am not the Catholic candidate for president. I am the Democratic party's candidate for president who happens also to be a Catholic."

In November 1960, Kennedy defeated Richard Nixon in one of the closest presidential elections in history. Most analysts say his religion hurt more than it helped. Yet Kennedy took nearly 80 percent of the Catholic vote nationwide; the previous Democratic candidate, Adlai Stevenson, barely earned 50 percent. The push helped Kennedy win states like New York and Pennsylvania that had large Catholic populations. [JFK]