Nixon’s Strategy, Kennedy’s Trap: Why Nixon Did Not Address Religion in the 1960 Presidential Campaign

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On November 8, 1960, one of the closest presidential elections in American history ended in victory for a young senator with a Bostonian drawl and in defeat for an incumbent vice-president. John F. Kennedy was the Democratic senator and arguably one of the most inexperienced candidates in history. He also practiced Roman Catholicism, a religion that has been viewed by some with skepticism or even fear since well before the beginning of the United States. Richard Milhous Nixon was the current vice president and Republican nominee.

Once the ballots were cast, it emerged that Nixon had fallen to Kennedy by 219 to 303 electoral votes. It was the closest popular vote margin of the twentieth century. Because of the closeness of this election, every political move Nixon and Kennedy made was significant and could potentially have impacted the result of the election. A critical and debatable political strategy by Nixon was to avoid the topic of religion throughout his campaign. What caused Nixon to leave this potentially advantageous topic completely unaddressed?

Nixon disregarded the topic of religion in order to represent himself, idealistically, as a defender of America and its principles of the division of church and state as well as freedom of religion. It was essential for Nixon to live up to these high standards set forth by the Constitution, especially amidst pressure from Cold War enemy Soviet Russia. However, what ultimately caused Nixon to never directly address Kennedy’s Roman Catholic faith was purely political in motivation. Although slightly Machiavellian, Nixon carried out this strategy because he thought it was the wisest political move to influence voters

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and win the presidential election. This was the best strategy for Nixon because it would put pressure on Kennedy to decide whether or not to follow Nixon’s lead or face anti-Catholic opposition head on. Further, Nixon was in the best position to win the presidency with this strategy because there was little to gain from attacking Kennedy’s Catholic faith.

**Cold War PR Tactic?**

The Cold War was an influence on the 1960 presidential election and Richard Nixon’s decision making. Having served as vice president for President Eisenhower, Nixon was familiar with the USSR, the other world superpower. During his campaign for the presidency in 1960, Nixon had to deal with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev on a variety of fronts. For instance, he handled the Kitchen Debates, exchanges over democracy in Poland, and the international tension surrounding the covert pilot caught flying over Russian territory. In order to deal with Khrushchev and support America’s alternative democratic ideals, Nixon needed to be able to prove that America was living up to its standards of freedom and choice. This issue became even more tangible to Americans when Khrushchev visited New York in 1960.

Due to the political climate of the Cold War, Nixon was obligated to appear as a tolerant candidate in order to avoid criticisms by Khrushchev. Therefore, it is likely that one of the reasons Nixon refused to speak about religion was to prevent Khrushchev from being able to label America as a hypocritical country where freedom of religion and racial equality did not apply. In fact, Kennedy’s religion was not the most important issue for many Americans because they were more concerned with their relationship with the USSR than any problems associated with electing a Roman Catholic president. In the midst of these Cold War tensions, “magnifying out of all proportion” the religious issue of the presidential election was thought to be detrimental to the overall unity and strength of America. Nixon was motivated not to speak of religion in order to concentrate on issues that were important to the American people such as Cold War foreign policy.
Religion: Kennedy’s Trap?

Nixon had no political need to address religion, because he believed Kennedy’s own attempts to deal with the issue would hinder the Kennedy campaign. This assumption was based upon the Democratic primaries, where Kennedy first proclaimed his Roman Catholic faith, though he constantly reminded voters of his strong belief in the separation of church and state. Vice President Nixon benefited from witnessing the head-to-head battles between Roman Catholic Kennedy and liberal Hubert Humphrey in the Minnesota and West Virginia primaries. For Nixon, these face-offs provided a view into the anticipated race against the Catholic candidate. Nixon and his campaign managers observed what strategies resonated with the American people. Because Kennedy won primarily Protestant states like West Virginia, Nixon and his staff were able to foresee that Kennedy’s charm could trump anti-Catholic bigotry. As a result, Nixon strategically downplayed religion in order to shift the attention of the election back to his strengths, such as experience, foreign policy, and the economy.

On July 28th, 1960, the day of his GOP nomination, Nixon announced that religion would not be addressed for the duration of his campaign. This was an attempt to put pressure on Kennedy and force him either to follow Nixon’s lead and try to beat a more experienced politician or to bring attention to his religion and then have to deal with anti-Catholic sentiment on his own. Nixon’s desire to capitalize on his political experience is reflected in the work of pro-Nixon cartoonists. As characterized by Los Angeles Times cartoonist Bruce Russell, Nixon would succeed because of his experience. (See Appendix: note the word hidden in his hair.) Nixon’s decision was based on his breadth and tenure of experience over Kennedy.

Despite Kennedy’s success in the Democratic primaries, Nixon and his staff continued with their political strategy because Kennedy was still facing anti-Catholic sentiment. In addition, polls suggested that religion would be damaging to Kennedy in the long term. In a poll concerning the influence of religion on the 1960 presidential election,
58.7% of those polled believed that religion would hinder Kennedy, and 11.8% thought a candidate's religion should not be held against him. Because this poll was conducted in April, Nixon was convinced that his initial strategy was correct and did not need to be changed. Nixon and his campaign staff appealed to the combined 70.5% of those polled, pressuring Kennedy to decide to either leave the issue unaddressed or bring attention to the topic. The pollsters asserted that, “A large majority of Americans believe that John F. Kennedy's Catholicism will hinder him if he is the Democratic nominee for President.”

In Nixon's view, Kennedy’s association with Catholicism was problematic in and of itself. Raising the topic further would be unnecessary and not represent any gain.

According to historian W. J. Rorabaugh, Kennedy’s talk of religion drew voters towards Nixon and away from himself. Nixon’s refusal to speak of religion throughout his campaign forced Kennedy to deal with the issue on his own. This strategy pressured Kennedy without ever compromising Nixon’s public image. This political ploy placed Kennedy in a situation in which he needed to address the elephant in the room. Nixon chose the less risky path, and left Kennedy to stand alone in justifying the influence his religion would play if he became president.

Nixon’s Best Option

Nixon decided to avoid speaking of religion in the election because it was the most beneficial short-term and long-term political decision for Nixon. As for the proximate causes, not speaking of religion would best position Nixon for the battleground states and protect himself from Kennedy’s tactics of shifting the issue of religion to his own advantage. However, what ultimately caused Nixon to disregard religion was his attempt to keep his political career alive for the long term as well as to maintain his public image as a politician that valued taking the high road.

Dr. Shaun Casey states that Nixon purposefully ignored religion during the campaign because his managers thought it would negatively impact his “need-to-win” states. In such a close election, ultimately decided
by 0.1% of the popular vote, the swing states were the deciding factors in the outcome of the election. For this reason, it was the wisest political strategy for Nixon to pursue the swing states as long as that strategy would not affect other states he needed to win. After the election, Theodore White wrote about the impact these swing states had on the 1960 presidential election: “If only 4,500 voters in Illinois and 28,000 voters in Texas had changed their minds, the sum of their 32,500 votes would have moved both those states,” and Richard Nixon would have been President of the United States.12 Years later, Rorabaugh wrote that Nixon’s decision was the most effective political strategy to put him in a position to win the election:

The percentage of Protestants who switched to Nixon was smaller than was the Catholic percentage shift to Kennedy, but because the Protestants outnumbered Catholics 66 percent to 26 percent, according to a 1957 census, the number of Protestant voters who voted against Kennedy for religious reasons probably did exceed the number of Catholics who voted for Kennedy for religious reasons.13

Based on analytics like these, Nixon purposefully targeted the larger group of voters, especially Protestant voters on the fence, who would appreciate Nixon’s focus on other important political issues instead of religion.

For most of the election, religion was viewed to be a negative issue for Kennedy. However, on September 12, 1960, Kennedy evolved his campaign strategy by addressing religion in a more open and direct way than ever before. On that date, America heard Kennedy explain to the Greater Ministerial Association, the most anti-Catholic men of Texas, that his personal religious beliefs would not interfere with his political duty to uphold the constitutional requirement of separation between church and state.14 Across the country, from both secular and religious communities, more American people began to voice that being a Catholic would not negatively influence Kennedy’s qualifications to be the President. In addition, American sentiment shifted to a perspective that there should not be prejudice against a candidate because of his religion and that in itself would be a form of bigotry.15 Because of
Kennedy’s recently gained control over the religious issue, Nixon responded, with the approval of President Eisenhower, by suggesting a “no-talk” plan to all candidates. Nixon employed this plan in order to demonstrate his commitment to focus on topics other than religion while also preventing Kennedy from being able to take full advantage of his success in Houston. As Eisenhower too supported the idea of not speaking of religion until after the election, Kennedy would have to either openly oppose the popular president or weakly conform to Nixon’s suggested “no-talk” plan.

Another reason Nixon refused to bring up religion was that he wanted to win the election as a principled, ethical candidate, rather than through negative campaigning. In April 1959, Ted Sorensen described Kennedy’s vulnerability as Democratic nominee in terms of religion, age, and position. He wrote that “The country had never elected a Catholic...never elected a forty-three-year-old...[and] only selected one Senator to be President in this century.” Rather than highlight these potentially negative characteristics, Nixon wanted to give the American people a look into his own character as a principled man. Historian Edmund F. Kallina Jr. supports this idea as he concluded that Nixon would rather lose as an honorable man than win by emphasizing the shortcomings of his opponent. Nixon, he wrote, “wisely foresaw that if he made a late speech on religion and then won the election, his victory would be tainted by the suspicion that religious preferences had determined the outcome.” Because Nixon was born and raised as a Quaker, not a mainstream religion by American standards, raising his opponent’s religion could have resulted in unwanted negative attention to his own. In retrospect, Nixon still believed that the discussion of religion in a campaign should not be tolerated. Even though he eventually lost the election, he maintained that it was a morally sound decision. This stance also hints at reelection and preserved his political career.

Nixon’s decision can be attributed to the idea that anti-Catholic sentiment was less exploitable in 1960 for Nixon than in earlier times in American history. When looking back on former presidential races, the 1928
election was similar to that of 1960 with candidates Republican Herbert Hoover and Catholic Democrat Al Smith. However, the outcome of the 1928 election was entirely different, as Hoover crushed Smith. As Nixon’s own managerial staff knew, anti-Catholic sentiment was strong enough in 1928 to be useful in crushing the Democratic opponent. Thanks to a wave of new thinking, appreciation of minorities, and a new perspective of religion during the 1960s, Nixon would not be able to harness the same anti-Catholic sentiment.

Nixon hoped to shift the attention of the public away from religion and towards certain strengths, such as his experience and ideology, where he would likely overcome the inexperienced, young Massachusetts senator. Even when pressed by political advisers in November, at the tail end of the campaign, Nixon refused to resort to focusing on the religious beliefs of his Democratic opponent. He refused because it would violate his campaign-long commitment to never speak of religion. In addition, Nixon would not attack Catholicism because of his own close ties with prominent Catholic officials such as John F. Cronin. With his own strong religious connection and those of other significant religious figures, criticizing his opponent about religion would only expose him as a hypocrite.

Nixon's Real Motivation

Rather than work to draw attention to religion in the election, Nixon abstained from mentioning religion in 1960 and discouraged any attention to the topic. Nixon was faced with a dilemma in trying to defeat the handsome knight from Boston, who was charming, wealthy, and eloquent. Rather than attempting to capitalize on remaining anti-Catholic sentiment in America, Nixon rejected speaking of religion outright because he knew he would be unable to beat the popularity of Kennedy. Instead of trying to attack Kennedy, a popular representative of the people, Nixon shifted focus towards winning on his own terms. Nixon intended to highlight his own skills and experience to minimize Kennedy’s growing popularity.
At the time, the 1960 election was thought to have been the climax of religious animosity in politics. However, in the recent past the issue of personal religious beliefs has continued to play a part in the mind of the American voter. For instance, Joseph Lieberman, who is Jewish, faced criticism in both his vice presidential candidacy of 2000 as well as his presidential run in 2004. In addition, President Obama faced widespread concern surrounding even the mere association with his Muslim heritage. Likewise, the election of 2012 saw religion come into question as Mitt Romney’s Mormon faith became a regular topic of concern and criticism. In fact, as Nixon did with Kennedy, Obama and his campaign managers paid close attention to how fellow GOP nominee-hopefuls addressed Romney’s faith and watched the response of voters. Rather than overcoming religious prejudice in politics, our society has been unable to break free from its tendency to judge a candidate on this matter. Ironically, all of these candidates are governed by a constitution that explicitly states the tenets of freedom of religion.

Despite fifty years of social advance, politicians are still judged by their religious beliefs. Nixon’s strategy exemplified a political world where experience, ideology and political identity were all that was necessary for a candidate to discuss about himself. America seems to be straying even further away from national issues and the candidate’s platform—which is what Nixon had advocated—and is focusing more on a candidate’s personal attributes and beliefs, with religion still as prominent an issue as it was in the past.
Appendix

*Where Richard Nixon Comes Out Ahead*
Notes


2. Ibid., 116.


8. Ibid.


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.


22. Ibid.


**Bibliography**

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