

Al Smith, Governor to Presidential Candidate:

Catholic Smith Against Protestant Hoover

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Alfred Emanuel Smith was the first Catholic presidential candidate in US history and left a significant legacy for the future of presidential elections. In the 1928 election, there were multiple reasons why he lost, but the main reason was his religion. Looking into the *Vote as You Pray: The 1928 Election in Washington County, Arkansas* by Justin Randolph Gage, gives insight into the local perspective of why Al Smith is unpopular, specifically looking into the effect his religion has on him and the overall status of catholicism during the period.

Catholics, during the 1920s, had significant and engrained mistrust within American culture. For most Protestant Americans, Catholics were seen as people who would institutionalize their beliefs and enforce them upon the people”¹. Catholics were also seen as oppressors of religious freedom throughout America, especially by anti-evolutionists”². Catholics were seen in American culture as “to do the bidding of Rome, Tammany Hall, or both”³ when the populous mistrusted immigrants. At the beginning of the election year 1928, there voiced both Anti-Catholic due to protestant mistrust and Catholic support for Anti prohibition”⁴. Al Smith’s Catholic status impacted him greatly during the election with the mass amount of Anti-Catholic sentiment at the time.

The majority of America sided with Hoover. Hoover won the election with a landslide from 444 to 87 against Smith. The main reasons for his were his pledge to keep prohibition and ban evolution”⁵. Hoover was also Protestant, the dominant religion in America then, compared

¹ Dumenil, Lynn. 1991. “The Tribal Twenties: ‘Assimilated’ Catholics’ Response to Anti-Catholicism in the 1920s.” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 11 (1): p21-29. <https://clarkcollege.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rlh&AN=9701136364&site=ehost-live&scope=site>., 21

² Gage, 391

³ Dumenial, 22

⁴ Gage, 401

⁵ Gage, 389

to Smith being Catholic. Smith being Catholic was the most significant barrier to gaining support for the 1928 election, with a massive anti-catholic sentiment in America.

The 1928 election was a very decided election within America. The majority of the country voted in favor of Herbert Hoover. The states that primarily voted for Al Smith were predominantly Democratic states ⁶. One battleground state, Arkansas, had a tight race, with counties that are typically Democratic, such as Texas, Florida, and Virginia, voting for Hoover⁷. Ultimately, Arkansas voted for Al Smith because the state's governor ran alongside him for vice president. Some counties did vote against Al Smith for Hoover because of the Methodists' anti-Smith movements⁸.

The main reason Alfred Smith lost was because of his religion. Despite being the first Catholic US presidential candidate, Alfred was not well perceived, especially for him running at a time when Catholic mistrust was high. There are other reasons why he lost, but covering the religious portion of the 1928 election is essential for understanding that religion is still a part of American politics and can significantly impact your voter base and support from the American people.

⁶ Gage, 389

⁷ Gage, 389

⁸ Gage, 391

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