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## Anti-Catholicism v. Al Smith: An Analysis of Anti-Catholicism in the 1928 Presidential Election

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# Anti-Catholicism v. Al Smith: An Analysis of Anti-Catholicism in the 1928 Presidential Election

## **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"With few exceptions, the details of past presidential elections are largely forgotten over the course of history. As specific campaigns and elections become more distant from contemporary society, people tend to focus on the larger picture of what that election produced, mainly, who actually became the president. And for the majority of the American public, the presidential election of 1928 is no exception to this. But as Allan Lichtman suggests in his book *Prejudice and the Old Politics: The Presidential Election of 1928*, —Presidential elections are central events of American politics, often bearing the detailed imprint of the society in which they occur. The careful study of a single election can test theories of social process and illuminate the meaning of a historical era || (Lichtman 25). In this regard, all past presidential elections are American studies' in their own right, and are of importance because they provide insight about a specific society at any particular time in our country's history."



*Michael Rooney*

### ***Anti-Catholicism v. Al Smith:***

#### *An Analysis of Anti-Catholicism in the 1928 Presidential Election*

#### ***Introduction***

With few exceptions, the details of past presidential elections are largely forgotten over the course of history. As specific campaigns and elections become more distant from contemporary society, people tend to focus on the larger picture of what that election produced, mainly, who actually became the president. And for the majority of the American public, the presidential election of 1928 is no exception to this. But as Allan Lichtman suggests in his book Prejudice and the Old Politics: The Presidential Election of 1928, “Presidential elections are central events of American politics, often bearing the detailed imprint of the society in which they occur. The careful study of a single election can test theories of social process and illuminate the meaning of a historical era” (Lichtman 25). In this regard, all past presidential elections are ‘American studies’ in their own right, and are of importance because they provide insight about a specific society at any particular time in our country’s history.

The campaign for the presidency of the United States in 1928 featured two men of drastically different backgrounds and mindsets: Herbert Hoover, the candidate for the Republican Party, and Alfred Smith, the Democratic Party’s candidate. Lichtman says of this election, “No burning issues had to be resolved by the election; no national crisis preoccupied the American public. Rather, the backgrounds of Smith and Hoover, their personalities, their careers in public service, and their approaches to politics gave the campaign its special significance” (5). Hoover and Smith stood for and represented two different and opposing sides of American society at the time, as will be discussed later in this paper. But one of the main differences between these two candidates, a difference that this paper will argue was the most significant and pressing issue which affected public opinion and perception at the time of the election, was Hoover’s and Smith’s religious affiliations. Though not interested

in Hoover's Protestant background to a great extent, the America public was deeply intrigued by and drawn into the fact that Al Smith was a Roman Catholic. The fact that Smith's religion played a role in the perception of the voting public is what leaves the 'detailed imprint' of the 1928 society and of this election in particular.

Al Smith's presidential nomination for the Democratic party in 1928, "marked the first time in American history that a Roman Catholic was nominated by either major party" (Hattery 37). And, as John Hattery simply puts it in his essay "The Presidential Campaigns of 1928 and 1960: A Comparison of The Christian Century and America", Smith's Catholicism begged the question, "Can a loyal and faithful member of the Roman Catholic Church function effectively as Chief Executive of the United States?" (36). In 1928, the answer to this 'dual allegiance' concern between the Catholic Church and the State, also known as 'religious question' or 'Catholic issue', was a resounding no. But this issue of faith influencing political discussions and affecting the public's perception of a candidate is not something that died with Smith's failed attempt for the presidency. It is, rather, a recurring theme in our country's history. John F. Kennedy is recognized for, among other things, being the first Catholic to be elected president of the United States in 1960. But, he did not win without first having to clarify that, "his religious beliefs and political responsibilities were compatible" (Dolan 6). And as recently as 2008, with the presidential campaign of Barack Obama, issues of religious affiliation and public perception made their way into public discussion once again.

While both Kennedy and Obama were ultimately able to successfully address such questions and issues, few recognize the fact that there was another politician, Al Smith, who was unable to successfully overcome questions regarding his religion. This paper will explore and illustrate the origins, the influence, and the extent to which anti-Catholic sentiment played a role in the outcome of the 1928 presidential election. It will argue that while there were ultimately other factors which worked against Smith, his Catholic faith significantly contributed to the outcome of the election by negatively affecting voting behaviors and the public's perception of what Smith was capable of achieving as president of the United States of America.

### ***Anti- Catholicism***

Before further exploring this point and analyzing specific examples of anti-Catholicism during the 1928 presidential campaign, it is essential to first define anti-Catholicism and place this presidential election in a historical and social context. Robert Lockwood, in his book *Anti-Catholicism in American Culture*, states: "Like any other prejudice, anti-Catholicism is a fundamental judgment that defines a group of people as a whole by negative and preconceived assumptions as to their thoughts, motives, and actions" (Lockwood 19). He goes on to say, "The bigot creates these assumptions- or inherits them- and they are used as the basis of all judgments on a particular group" (19). The anti-Catholic sentiment and propaganda which were prevalent in society prior to the election of 1928 were not something new to America. Lockwood asserts throughout his book that, "Anti-Catholicism is fundamental to the culture of the United States" (19). It is an emotion that dates as far back as the colonial days in our country's history. "Virtually every colony had some form of Catholic disabilities in their fundamental charters- denying

Catholics the right to hold office or freedom to practice their faith. Many of the new states in the union would have similar legislation on the books, if not formally enforced” (19). Lockwood puts into perspective the lasting impact of these laws by noting, “New Hampshire would not formally remove its law barring Catholics from public office until late in the nineteenth century” (19). Roman Catholics have had a seemingly difficult time since our country’s founding (and even before) assimilating and being accepted into mainstream American culture because of these common prejudices.

It is important to understand the reasons why Catholics and the Roman Catholic Church were negatively viewed in American society in order to better appreciate why Smith encountered so much criticism in 1928. Catholics were discriminated against as a result of, arguably, three main factors: who they were (immigrants), where they came from (foreign countries), and because they believed in and associated themselves with the strictly hierarchical institution that was the Catholic Church (allegiance to Rome and the Pope). These three factors all contributed to the perception that Catholics were, as Mark Massa S.J. suggests, “un-American” (Massa 7). Roman Catholicism was a religion that was, for the most part, originally brought to the country by European immigrants. Author Jay Dolan in his book, In Search of an American Catholicism, explains that when the Church became a real and substantial presence in America, during the time period of 1820-1920, it was largely defined and created by the massive immigrant movements into the country.

This “immigrant church” (Dolan 54), as Jay Dolan refers to it, struck fear in Protestant Americans whose ancestors had established the country with certain principles in mind such as, democracy, liberty, and freedom. It is ironic, given the emphasis in our country on religious freedom, that Catholic immigrants were ostracized so much from the society of that time. Though, by the nineteenth century, as Michael Williams points out in his book The Shadow of the Pope, “all of [the States in America] had stripped their constitutions of provisions discriminating against any religion, and had fallen into line with the federal principles” (Williams 3), this did not imply Catholics were accepted as equal citizens. As more immigrants came into the country from undemocratic European countries, believing in an undemocratic religion like Catholicism, Catholic immigrants were seen as posing a real threat to fundamental American values. Along with this, there was also a stereotypical and widely held belief among the people who were native to America that Roman Catholics were a type of combatant group acting on behalf of the Pope in Rome, with the intention of trying to extend Papal rule and Church authority to America. Relating this idea to the 1928 presidential election, Lichtman says, “Those who objected to electing a Catholic president alleged that Smith would obey the edicts of a foreign potentate, that Catholics were organized as a political phalanx to promote their own parochial interests, and that Catholics... would use public authority to propagate their faith” (Lichtman 69). (This is illustrated through *Figure 3* on page 30 of the paper). The thought that a large group of people living in America obeyed a figure like the Pope was an unsettling idea. And this idea, as seen through the previous quote, is something that hurt Al Smith in the election of 1928.

Fears among native Protestants resonated because religions such as Catholicism were “un-American” precisely to the extent that they did not share the Reformation/ Enlightenment principles on which Mr. Jefferson’s ‘lively experiment’ was

ostensibly founded” (Massa 3). This ‘lively experiment’ was, of course, America. Massa explains, “The Roman Catholic Church provided the single largest pool of ‘others’, particularly in the nineteenth century, with so many illiterate, hard-drinking immigrants arriving from nondemocratic nations like Ireland, Italy, and the Rhineland” (8). This quote plays very much into the harsh stereotypes with which immigrants were associated. But, it is an interesting quote in that it demonstrates how presidential candidate Al Smith was perceived and how he, in a way, personified Protestant Americans’ reservations about Catholic immigrants.

Alfred Smith was raised as a Roman Catholic by his family. His mother was Irish and his father was of German and Italian descent (nondemocratic nation’s stereotype). Born in 1873 in New York City, a city “that was felt by many rural and small-town Americans to be the least American part of America” (Moore 28), Smith “grew up in a country that was deeply divided between natives and immigrants” (Finan 4). In terms of education, Smith received no formal schooling beyond high school. Allan Lichtman notes that Smith often said his college alma mater was “F.F.M. - Fulton Fish Market” (Lichtman 10), which was near his childhood neighborhood. This also alluded to the fact that Smith viewed himself as one who had much practical and ‘real world’ experience. Despite his high school education, when compared to Herbert Hoover’s Stanford education, the perception of Smith was consistent with that of the stereotypical ‘illiterate’ immigrant that Massa spoke of in the preceding paragraph. Edmund Moore supports this, “There is much evidence in the letters of the campaign months that many educated Americans...regarded Al Smith as much below the presidential standard in educational and social background” (Moore 116). Lastly, part of Smith’s platform in 1928 was anti-Prohibition, something that played further into the un-American, Irish Catholic immigrant, ‘hard-drinking’ stereotype that plagued him. It is clear that based on his personal background, the Catholic Democrat personified the worries of much of the voting public in 1928 about ‘outsiders’ attempting to ruin the American ‘experiment’.

Because Catholic immigrants, as previously explained, stood for something which was perceived as a threat to Protestant America and the American ideals of democracy and liberty, certain groups formed in the nineteenth century in efforts to combat this problem. Nativist groups such as the Know-Nothing Party, the Ku Klux Klan, and the American Protective Association all practiced forms of anti-Catholic sentiment starting in the 1850’s. These anti-Catholic groups had the mindset that since Catholics, by the very nature of the religion, took an oath to obey the undemocratic hierarchical Catholic Church, The Catholic religious philosophy directly countered the principles on which America was founded. This is the idea that groups such as the KKK were against, and what they tried to make known to the public. The KKK wrote in their publicized Fellowship Forum, “The Roman Catholic Church is the most intolerant thing in the world—has been, is now, and forever will be” (Lichtman 70). Edmund Moore writes of the KKK, “No single reason for the organization’s success outweighed the exploitation of hostility toward the Roman Catholic Church” (Moore 27).

This was the conflict in which Al Smith found himself and that he encountered in the political realm of the 1920s. And though some nativist groups withered away before 1928, the resurgence of the KKK in the 1920's was a large reason why so much anti-Catholic propaganda surfaced during the campaign. Massa says that the, "Klan had one last hurrah in the presidential election of 1928" (Massa 32). Dolan supports this statement: "Anti-Catholic attitudes still remained an integral part of the Protestant ethos in the 1920s" (Dolan 132-133). Examples of KKK anti-Catholic propaganda will be dealt with in the '*The Campaign and Election of 1928*' section of this paper.

### ***The Catholic Issue***

This brief background illustrates the political and social scene in which the campaign and election of 1928 took place. It also sheds light on why concerns about the actual religious question surfaced on a national level in response to Smith's running for president. Though Al Smith had a successful political career as governor of New York State beginning in 1918, his impressive political achievements to that point were not enough to overcome anti-Catholicism and questions of dual allegiance during the presidential campaign. In April of 1927 Smith had not yet officially received the Democratic nomination for the presidency. But, based on his successful tenure as governor of New York State and the interest the Democratic Party had shown in Smith in the previous election of 1924, it seemed probable that Smith would win the nomination in the near future for the 1928 election. Author Donn Neal writes, "By mid- 1927 Smith was generally favored to win the nomination" (Neal 226). In anticipation of this, some people, such as Charles Marshall, wasted no time in raising and getting to the heart of the Catholic issue. This was publicly illustrated in the form of an exchange of letters between Charles Marshall and Al Smith appearing in the magazine *The Atlantic Monthly*. Though the 'Marshall-Smith exchange', as it has come to be known, took place before Smith had even received the nomination for the presidency, this primary exchange of letters can still be used as evidence of the skeptical feelings and rather legitimate concerns people had towards Smith based on the issue of his Catholicism.

Charles Marshall, "an Episcopalian lawyer" (Hostetler 16) from New York, initiated the conversation in the April 1927 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Entitled, "An Open Letter to the Honorable Alfred E. Smith", the purpose of the letter was to elicit a response from Smith on how he would resolve the theoretical and apparent practical conflict between issues of Church and State. Again, because Smith was a Roman Catholic, there was the question of whether he would adhere to Catholic Doctrine and obey Papal orders or follow his constitutional duties when issues of Church and State arose. Marshall asked Smith in the letter, "Is not the time ripe and the occasion opportune for a declaration, if it can be made, that shall clear away all doubt as to the reconcilability of her [the Catholic Church] status and her claims with American constitutional principles?" (Marshall 2). Marshall, after quoting from Catholic Doctrine as well as from the Constitution of the United States and several Supreme Court rulings, states:

Citizens who waver in your support would ask whether, as a Roman Catholic, you accept as authoritative the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that in case of contradiction, making it impossible for the jurisdiction of that Church and the jurisdiction of the State to

agree, the Jurisdiction of the Church shall prevail; whether, as a statesman, you accept the teaching of the Supreme Court of the United States that, in matters of religious practices which in the opinion of the State are inconsistent with its peace and safety, the jurisdiction of the State shall prevail; and, if you accept both teachings, how you will reconcile them. (Marshall 4)

This statement sums up the main point which Marshall wants Smith to address. The letter is well crafted and precisely written in that the first part deals with the theoretical conflict between the “doctrine of the Two Powers” (Church and State) as they call for their own and separate oaths, obligations, and loyalties. The second part of the letter then offers Smith three practical situations in which this conflict became a reality: in the debate of public schools versus parochial schools in the country, in the differing ways in which the Church and State regarded matrimonial issues, and finally in the “Mexican situation” (6), a problem which at the time illustrated conflicts and tensions between the Church and State in Mexico. Marshall makes a convincing argument that it, “Follows naturally on all this that there is a conflict between authoritative Roman Catholic claims on the one side and our constitutional law and principles on the other” (Marshall 4).

Al Smith’s response came in the May 1927 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Though at first he did not want to answer or acknowledge Marshall’s letter, for as he told one of his advisors “I’m not going to answer the damn thing” (Finan 194), Smith was eventually convinced that responding was, in fact, the right move. In “Catholic and Patriot: Governor Smith Replies”, Smith established his thoughts on the Church and State matter, as well as establishing his strategy for dealing with the inevitable Catholic issue. This strategy was to treat the Catholic issue as a non-issue and to respect the separation of Church and State by keeping religious issues out of political discussions. Essentially, Smith wanted to avoid the issue and acknowledge it as little as possible because he did not believe it was either legitimate or important. He says in his response to Marshall, “I should be a poor American and a poor Catholic alike if I injected religious discussion into a political campaign” (Smith 2). This is a rather important point which, as Michael Hostetler argues in his essay “Governor Al Smith Confronts the Catholic Question: The Rhetorical Legacy of the 1928 Campaign”, distinguishes Smith’s approach from John F. Kennedy’s approach on the same issue over thirty years later. Smith was convinced that the apprehension and anti-Catholic sentiment was a concern and the work of bigots. This is why Smith wished not to acknowledge the issue. Hostetler suggests, “Smith’s reply leaves tension unresolved as he tried to answer Marshall respectfully, all the while insisting that the issue is nonexistent and those who raise it are mere bigots” (Hostetler 19). Smith never acknowledges in this response or in his Oklahoma City campaign speech (to be discussed later) that the issue of dual allegiance was a real concern. In following Hostetler’s argument, I think this is where Smith made a calculated error in his handling of this situation. Though anti-Catholicism was the result of a great deal of bigotry, it was unfair and, to a certain extent, politically unwise on Smith’s part to assume all of this sentiment came from anti-Catholics. Simply because he had never encountered concerns about the Catholic issue while serving as governor, Smith felt confident that the issue should be of no legitimate concern in the presidential election.

With this said, Smith does bring up equally convincing counter-points to Marshall's argument which elucidate his mindset and strategy. Throughout his reply to Marshall, just as often as Marshall asserts that dual allegiance is an inevitable and real problem, Smith counters and provides actual instances which demonstrate it is not. He says in his letter of the supposed conflict:

Everything that has actually happened to me during my long public career leads me to know that no such thing as that is true. I have taken an oath of office in the State nineteen times. Each time I swore to defend and maintain the Constitution. I have never known any conflict between my official duties and my religious belief. (Smith 2)

Here, Smith illustrates that he, himself, never had a problem with issues of Church and State in practice. By this reasoning, he is convinced that it will not be an issue as president. Later, he also states that other Catholics have served in State positions that call for dual allegiance and similarly encountered no problems or questions. He says, "I know your imputations are false when I recall the long list of other public servants of my faith who have loyally served the State" (3). First, he makes notice of the priest who aided him with his use of Church Doctrine in this response, Fr. Francis Duffy. Fr. Duffy was a distinguished member of the United States Army and chaplain during World War I. There were also, of course, the many Catholic soldiers who fought in World War I in order to protect the same American principles as Protestants. Second, Smith shows that the Supreme Court of the United States was led by Catholic Justices and encountered no problem. "During one fourth of its history it has been presided over by two Catholics, Roger Brooke Taney and Edward Douglas White. No one has suggested that the official conduct of either of these men was affected by any unwarranted religious influence..." (3). Whether talking about politics, the military, or simply being an everyday citizen of the country, Smith tried to demonstrate that dual allegiance was not a problem.

There is a reason why so much attention should be given to this 'Marshall- Smith exchange', even though it took place before Smith received the official nomination for the 1928 ticket. It illustrates, in my opinion, three major concepts which unquestionably affected the perception of Smith and haunted him throughout the 1928 campaign. The first concept is that Smith was unable to separate himself from the idea of the hierarchal Catholic Church. One of Smith's criticisms of Marshall's initial letter, as Hostetler points out in his essay, was that, "Marshall mistakenly attributes the opinions of church leaders to all Catholics" (Hostetler 19). To counter this, the last part of Smith's response to Marshall was a personal creed which he himself followed, part of which was, "I believe that no tribunal of any church has any power to make any decree of any force in the law of the land, other than to establish the status of its own communicants within its own church" (8). By stating his personal beliefs, Smith was attempting to separate himself from institutional Church Doctrine which did not commonly apply in everyday practice to typical Catholics. He was trying to run for president as an individual, like his opponent, Herbert Hoover, was able to do. But instead, people grouped him, and all Catholics, into one stereotype (which is anti-Catholicism). The prevalent stereotypical view was that since Catholics adhered to a very strict structure of authority, they were unable to be true Americans. For example, because Smith heavily relied on Fr. Duffy to help write his response to Marshall, it "simply demonstrated... that the Governor was the tool of Father Duffy and the hierarchy" (Moore 156).

This idea of linking Smith together with the institution of the Catholic Church is what, then, leads to the second concept which is illustrated by the ‘Marshall-Smith exchange’: the fact that Smith’s perception suffered from the widespread sentiment of anti-Catholicism. Because anti-Catholic propaganda surfaced even after this 1927 ‘Marshall-Smith exchange’ and even after Smith had explicitly stated his personal beliefs, Smith was still very clearly the victim of society’s preconceived judgments and notions about Catholics. Allan Lichtman says, “Reasoned opposition to Al Smith was lost in a welter of anti-Catholic prejudice. Inflexible judgments against Catholics as a group were uncritically applied to Al Smith as an individual” (Lichtman 70). As mentioned earlier, Smith was of Irish, Italian, and German descent. He was opposed to the Prohibition laws. He was from New York City. And, he had no formal education beyond high school. These are all sub-issues which factored into and which were associated with the larger issue of Smith being a Catholic. Smith was unable to separate himself, even before being nominated, from the questions and fundamental accusations which Marshall brought forth in the first letter.

The third concept which is illustrated by the ‘Marshall-Smith exchange’ is the amount of interest the public had in this religious question. Both Edmund Moore and Christopher Finan reference the increase in sales of *The Atlantic Monthly* when these letters appeared in April and May of 1927 (Moore 67, Finan 195). Though Moore does acknowledge the logical fallacy that would suggest this increase was solely because of the two letters (Moore 67), it can indisputably be said that the increase was in part due to this exchange. The American society of the time was interested in this issue. Because this issue had never before arisen on this national level, people had a legitimate curiosity and interest in knowing how Smith could reconcile the question of dual allegiance. There were then, of course, the prejudices which prevented people, such as Charles Marshall, from ever giving Smith a chance from the start. But again, the fact that Smith’s Catholicism was even an issue, and the fact that Marshall chose to write this letter to Smith at all, demonstrates that the perception of what Smith was capable of achieving in the White House was skewed, however much, from the beginning of the 1928 presidential campaign.

### ***The Campaign and Election of 1928***

#### ***The Oklahoma City Speech***

Whereas the ‘Marshall-Smith exchange’ illustrates how Smith dealt with the Catholic issue prior to the campaign, his speech at Oklahoma City, Oklahoma on September 20, 1928 reveals how the Democratic candidate dealt with the issue during the actual campaign. By that point in the campaign, a great deal of anti-Catholic propaganda and criticism had surfaced throughout the country. There were even rumors that the Republican Party was secretly funding and supporting such efforts. Christopher Finan, who authors the most recent biography of Smith, writes of an example of the Republican Party’s chairman in Alabama, who “admitted disseminating 200,000 copies of an anti-Catholic pamphlet that he had written” (Finan 213). Not only was he not fired by the Republican Party, but he “was so unabashed by his reprimand that he continued to insist that the Catholic Church was ‘a very live and vital issue’ in the campaign” (213). Finan further illustrates Republican involvement in the anti-Catholic efforts:

As Smith prepared for his first campaign trip in early September [1928], the extent of Republican involvement seemed to become clear. On September 7, an official of the [Republican] Coolidge administration appeared before 2,500 members of the Ohio conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and urged them to use their church to help defeat Smith...At a time of extreme polarization between Catholics and Protestants, it sounded for many like a declaration of a holy war. (213-214)

The specific quote that this official delivered to the congregation was reiterated in Smith's Oklahoma City speech. Smith quoted the official, "There are two thousand pastors here. You have in your church more than 600,000 members in the Methodist Church in Ohio alone. That is enough to swing the election. The 600,000 have friends in other states. Write to them" (Smith 56). It is examples of anti-Catholic demonstrations and propaganda like these, which truly illustrate the significance of the religious question in 1928. Because of the controversy revolving around the Catholic issue, one of Smith's advisors said before the Oklahoma City speech, "We all felt that it was very important that he carry the fight in regard to the Ku Klux Klan and the religious issue right into the enemy territory" (Finan 215). The speech was, according to Edmund Moore, "The high point of the drama of the anti-Catholicism in the campaign" (Moore 179).

But, as I argued when referencing the 'Marshall-Smith exchange', during this Oklahoma City speech, Smith still never gave any credibility to the religious issue. He never acknowledged that the issue might have been raised by concerned voters, as opposed to only the anti-Catholic bigots to whom he attributed the concern. His perception of the source of the concern about his religious beliefs affected how he chose to address it. He says in the opening of his Oklahoma City speech, "In a presidential campaign there should be but two considerations before the electorate: The platform of the party, and the ability of the candidate to make it effective. In this campaign an effort has been made to distract the attention of the electorate from these two considerations..." (Smith 43). He is specifically referring to all of the attention that his Roman Catholic faith had received up until that point (and inevitably, thereafter). Smith goes on to say, "The Republican Party will leave no stone unturned to defeat me...I can think of no greater disaster to this country than to have the voters divide upon religious lines" (48, 52). And he closes the speech by saying to the audience:

I declare it to be in the interest of the government, for its betterment, for the betterment and welfare of the people, the duty of every citizen to study the platforms of the two parties, to study the records of the candidates and to make his choice for the Presidency of the United States solely on the ground of what best promotes interest and welfare of our great republic and all its citizens. If the contest is fought on these lines, as I shall insist it must be, I am confident of the outcome in November. (59)

To put this speech into a more contemporary context, Smith was attempting to formally address and put an end to the Catholic issue much like John F. Kennedy was able to do in his September 1960 speech to the Houston Ministerial Association in Houston, Texas. There, Kennedy "made a sweeping statement concerning his position on the separation of church and state...This probably did more than anything to clear the air and settle many questions about his religion and political ambitions" (Hattery 38). Further, Smith's speech at Oklahoma City was as important and essential during the campaign of 1928 as President Obama's 'Race Speech' on March 18, 2008 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was to his campaign in 2008. All three speeches are

comparable in that the candidates dealt with their backgrounds and, arguably, with the leading non-political issues with which they were faced in the hopes of suppressing the issues. But, while Kennedy and Obama were ultimately successful, Smith failed. John Hattery suggests that Smith's speech "was not an objective discussion of the issue, but a fervently emotional harangue. This tactic did little either to dispel the effect of the violently anti-Catholic propaganda that was circulating, or to sway the voter who was yet uncommitted and who had real, pertinent, and honest questions about the religious issue" (44). Smith did not deal with the Catholic issue effectively, and as a result of this, the anti-Catholic campaign against him was a significant success.

#### *Other Issues in the Election: The Counter-Argument*

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, Smith's Catholicism was not the only issue which came into discussion during the 1928 presidential campaign. Indeed, it was not simply Smith the Catholic against Hoover the Protestant. Rather, as Lichtman, notes, it was Smith running for the "Catholic-wet-foreign-urban Americans" and Hoover representing the "Protestant-dry-native-rural Americans" (Lichtman 16). An illustrated example of this description can be seen through *Figure 1* on page 27 of this paper. By this description of the two candidates, it is apparent how they stood for two differing sides in American society. While this paper is not meant to get into an in-depth political science argument, it is important to consider at least three of the political issues in the 1928 election and platforms of Smith and Hoover to understand critics' counter-argument to the claim I am putting forth.

This counter-argument suggests that Smith's Catholicism did not affect the ultimate outcome of the election, and that even if Smith had not been a Catholic, he still would have lost in 1928. Herbert Hoover, himself, is one of these critics. Edmund Moore points out that Hoover said following the election, "The issues which defeated the Governor were general prosperity, prohibition, the farm tariffs, and Tammany. Had he been a Protestant, he would certainly have lost and might even had a smaller vote...the religious issue had no weight in the final result" (Moore 151). The three issues I will briefly analyze are Smith's involvement with Tammany Hall, the difference in platforms between the candidates regarding Prohibition, and finally, the era of Republican prosperity which the country was experiencing at the time. I am choosing to look at these three political topics because I feel as if they provide the greatest challenge to my argument. In this section, I will also introduce two political cartoons produced by the Ku Klux Klan which illustrate the anti-Catholic campaign against Al Smith.

Edmund Moore suggests that Smith suffered in 1928 "because of his affiliation with an organization regarded over much of the land as uniquely iniquitous" (116). The organization to which Moore was referring is Tammany Hall. Besides being notoriously corrupt, Tammany Hall was popularly known as a 'political machine' associated with the Democratic Party and working on behalf of and being sympathetic towards New York City immigrants. Smith was a product of this organization in his early political years and his critics throughout the campaign kept revisiting this fact even though he had since disassociated himself from the organization. Moore admits that, "The reputation of Tammany was, indeed, a very important part of the campaign...but...relatively few voters understood that Smith had long since emerged from the position of a servant of the Hall"

(116-117). Many of the political cartoons in 1928, such as *Figure 1 and Figure 2* featured Smith with, among other things, the Tammany tiger (this was the symbol of Tammany Hall). Not only was Tammany Hall opposed by Republicans, but it was also opposed to by rural Americans who did not like the idea of an organization standing up for immigrants' rights. The corrupt Tammany worked for the immigrants because it drew so much of its support from the immigrants living in New York City. And, since Tammany was seen as such a pro-immigrant organization, the Tammany issue and criticisms that Smith faced can be, I think, grouped into and associated with the native American versus foreign American debate.

Another issue which critics say was dominant in the 1928 presidential election was prohibition. Because it was, unquestionably, a major political issue at the time, choosing to stand against it, as Smith did, was a bold platform. Hattery points out, "Smith was an outspoken wet, who did not agree with the principles of the Eighteenth Amendment and who stated on more than one occasion that he would actively work to weaken or repeal that Amendment" (Hattery 44). *Figure 3*, I think, makes clear that prohibition, especially, only drew more light on the fact that Smith was a Catholic. I would argue similarly to Edmund Moore on this issue. "There is convincing body of evidence that the very thought of the wet cause led by a New York Catholic magnified Smith's religion" (Moore 40). This is because, "Prohibition was in large measure the culmination of a moral and religious crusade which was geared to a great commitment on the part of the majority of the evangelical Protestant churches" (39). From this perspective, it is arguable that Smith's religion and his stance on prohibition were grouped together and almost indistinguishable. To those who argue that prohibition was the paramount issue in the election, I would suggest that, as the KKK's cartoon in *Figure 3* shows, Smith's Catholicism was as great, if not more so, of an influence in this election.

The final issue I want to discuss is that of the general prosperity which the country was enjoying at the time of this election. If we revisit the Allan Lichtman quote in the introduction of this paper, the prosperity of the country becomes clear. "No burning issues had to be resolved by the election; no national crisis preoccupied the American public" (Lichtman 5). Prior to the 1928 election, two Republicans had served as president. Because of this, the Republican Party's candidate, Herbert Hoover, was generally viewed as the deserving candidate in 1928. The claim that I am putting forth does concede that there were other factors which worked against Smith in this campaign and election. However, none of these three issues provide substantial evidence which would suggest that Smith's Catholicism did not significantly affect the ultimate outcome. If anything, his 'association' with Tammany, his stance on prohibition, and the prosperity of the country only emphasized and gave people an excuse to exploit his Roman Catholic faith in this election. When President Barack Obama became the first African American president of this country, we were in the midst of two wars and an economic recession. There was not 'general prosperity' in this country which would allow the voting public to focus on such non-political issues as race. However, because America in 1928 enjoyed no booming or significant problem, citizens were able to, and did, focus on issues like Al Smith's religion.

## *Results*

As demonstrated by the previously discussed ‘Marshall-Smith exchange’, the popularity of the 1928 election among the voting public was significant. Christopher Finan notes in his biography, “[Smith] had lost by a landslide: Hoover polled a record 21 million votes, defeating him by more than six million; Hoover’s margin was even larger in the electorate, 444 to 88...But something new happened in 1928: the turnout had grown by 7.5 million, a 26 percent increase over 1924” (Finan 228-229). I would argue that based on all of the propaganda and controversy that surfaced because of the Catholic issue, Smith’s Catholicism was not only the reason why so many citizens turned up to vote, but also the reason why Smith lost by such a significant margin. Allan Lichtman’s Prejudice and the Old Politics: the Presidential Election of 1928 is a quantitative study of the voting behaviors and voting results of the 1928 presidential election. He looks at and compares the voting behaviors of: Catholics versus Protestants, Wets versus Drys, Immigrants versus Natives, City versus Country, Blacks versus Whites, and Men versus Women. Of the data that he researched and uncovered, he concludes:

Of all possible explanations for the distinctive political alignments of 1928, religion is the best. A bitter conflict between Catholics and Protestants emerged in the presidential election of 1928; religious considerations preoccupied the public, commanded the attention of political leaders, and sharply skewed the behavior of voters. Regardless of their ethnic background, their stand on prohibition, their economic status...Catholics and Protestants split far more decisively in 1928 than in either previous or subsequent years. (Lichtman 231)

Though Lichtman made this argument in 1979 with statistical data, some people knew it was the case even soon after the election. Finan points out that George W. Norris, a Senator from Nebraska, said following the election, “The greatest element involved in the landslide was religion...The religious issue has done damage” (Finan 230). And while Finan also writes that in public, Al Smith would say that the reasons he lost the election in 1928 were “first to prosperity, second to prohibition, and only third to bigotry...in private, Smith reversed the order” (230). Smith told an advisor, “To tell you the truth, the time hasn’t come when a man can say his beads in the White House” (230). This last quote from Smith is in reference to his personal belief that his Catholicism was the paramount issue in the campaign and election, and that the country was not ready for a Catholic to be president of the United States in 1928.

## ***Conclusion***

Michael Williams includes a picture of a pamphlet in the conclusion of his book that reads, “For Hoover and America, or For Smith and Rome. Which? Think it over Americans” (Williams 297). This question further illustrates the religious question and issue of dual allegiance that was brought about because of Al Smith running for president. Allan Lichtman writes, “Nationally and regionally, the division between Catholics and Protestants dominates a statistical description of voter decisions; even Protestants without formal church affiliation and those from traditionally tolerant denominations resisted voting for a Catholic presidential contender” (Lichtman 76). Finally, in the November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1928 issue of *America* (a Catholic magazine) Jesuit Leonard Feeney wrote to Al Smith after the loss, “It goes without saying that we Catholics were a tremendous liability to

you in your recent campaign. Politically, it hurt you to be one of us. It ruined you... We didn't stand by *you* in the campaign. There wasn't a word in your favor uttered in our pulpits. You stood by us..." (Hattery 43).

Throughout this paper, I have attempted to illustrate the origins, the influence, and the extent to which anti-Catholic sentiment played a role in the outcome of the 1928 presidential election. And, though there were, most certainly, other factors which came into the political discussion of the two candidates, I have argued that no other issue was as prominent and influential as Al Smith's Roman Catholic faith. This is because Smith's Catholicism, and the stereotypes which accompany such a religion, affected the perception of what the voting public thought Smith was capable of achieving as president of the United States. This was based on the reasoning that, despite Smith's best efforts in the 'Marshall-Smith exchange' and the Oklahoma City speech, the question of dual allegiance was incompatible and irreconcilable. The anti-Catholic campaign against the Catholic Democrat was truly significant, widespread, and ultimately hurt his chances of winning in 1928. As Al Smith submitted to the audience in Oklahoma City, "In a presidential campaign there should be but two considerations before the electorate: the platform of the party, and the ability of the candidate to make it effective" (Smith 43). Though Smith had proven as Governor of New York that he was politically capable of being president, anti-Catholic stereotypes and propaganda convinced the public otherwise.

Why is the presidential election of 1928 deserving of our study? As I suggested in the introduction of this paper, the issue of faith influencing political discussions and affecting the public's perception of a candidate's ability to perform a role, is not something that ended with Smith's failed attempt for the presidency. Subjects such as faith and race are reoccurring topics in our political world. Though John F. Kennedy settled the Catholic issue and President Obama settled the race issue, America has yet to elect a candidate of Jewish faith, of Muslim faith, and of Mormon faith. As Republican Mitt Romney (Mormon) runs for president in 2012, it will be interesting to see what types of political cartoons and discussions will arise in reference to his religion if he receives his party's nomination. And, while clear progress has been made in our acceptance of difference, America has a long way to go before overcoming the stereotype that our president must be white, male, and Protestant. What happened to Al Smith in 1928 is an example of the impact that discriminatory propaganda and public sentiment can have on a candidate when controversial issues are escalated to a national level.