

John F. Kennedy's Image Repair on "The Catholic Issue" in the 1960 West Virginia Presidential Primary

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ABSTRACT: In 1960 Senator John F. Kennedy sought the Democratic Presidential nomination. Convention delegates at that time were not bound to follow their state's vote; party bosses chose the nominee. The "Catholic Issue" surfaced: If elected, would Kennedy follow dictates from the Catholic Church as he governed? JFK addressed this concern in the West Virginia primary in a mostly Protestant state. He engaged in image repair, mainly using denial, attack accuser, and bolstering. Kennedy's come from behind victory helped win the Democratic nomination and, ultimately, the Oval Office. He wrested control of the presidential nomination away from party bosses.

Keywords: John F. Kennedy, 1960, Democratic presidential primary, Catholic Church, West Virginia, Image Repair, denial, attack accuser, bolstering

Today we take the importance of primaries and caucuses in presidential campaigns for granted. However, in 1960 primary contests were on the wane. Levine noted that in the past "presidential hopefuls generally did not even need to campaign in primaries, which were relatively few in number" (1995, p. 56). The first presidential primary was held in Florida in 1901; initially the number of primaries grew quickly: 20 primaries were held in 1920 (Wikipedia, 2016) but "by 1960, only sixteen states still retained a legal, open primary" (White, 1961, p. 79).

Presidential primaries simply did not play the same role in the campaign in 1960 as they do today. In 1960 the party "bosses" chose their party's standard bearer. In 1928 the Democrats nominated Catholic Al Smith, but he lost in the general election. John F. Kennedy sought the Democratic presidential nomination in 1960 but the Democratic party bosses did not want Kennedy to be their nominee. Rorabaugh explained that Kennedy "knew that the older party leaders will pass him over for the nomination in 1960 as too young and too inexperienced as well as being

a Catholic who could not be elected.... So he decided win in the primaries to prove a Catholic could be elected" (2009, 199). Kennedy campaigned in the 1960 primaries to send a strong message about his electability to the Democratic party bosses.

In recent history, it has been essential for a presidential candidate to secure the nomination of the Republican or Democratic Party in order to win the White House. Davis explained that the "nominating process narrows the alternatives from a theoretical potential candidate pool of... millions... to only two candidates, one Republican and one Democrat, with a realistic chance of winning the White House" (p. 1). So, securing the Democratic or Republican party nomination for president is a necessary condition for ascending to the Oval Office.

Furthermore, evidence indicates that messages in the primary campaign can influence voters. A meta-analysis of the effects of watching presidential primary debates (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003) found that debates in both phases of the campaign had

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significant effects on viewers but primary debates had even larger effects on viewers than general debates.

The “Catholic Issue” and Kennedy in West Virginia 1960

The West Virginia primary was held on May 10, 1960. Kennedy’s strategy was to demonstrate that he could win votes in a state with many Protestants. The “Religious Issue,” the question of whether Kennedy would take orders from the Vatican if elected, was aired widely. Sorenson reported that “Kennedy’s religion... lay heavily on the minds of all Kennedy’s listeners. It cropped up in every poll and press interview. It gave rise to anti-Kennedy sermons in all kinds of pulpits. Even the Humphrey campaign song was sung to the tune of ‘Give Me That Old Time Religion’” (1965, p. 142). Rorabaugh confirmed that in WV, “Protestant ministers denounced Kennedy and anti-Catholic hate propaganda was widely distributed” (2009, p. 52). White recounts comments from people in WV: “A man ought to be a good Catholic, if he’s going to be one. And they believe in church-and-state and I don’t;” “We’ve never had a Catholic President and I hope we never do. Our people built this country;” “If they had wanted a Catholic to be President, they would have said so in the Constitution” (1962, p. 105). A Harris Poll “showed a sharply new awareness of the religious issue in the 95% Protestant state and a 60-40 landslide for Humphrey” (Sorenson, 1965, p. 139). Similarly, “The Wall Street Journal predicted a 60-40 Humphrey victory” 1965, p. 146). Of course, being Catholic is not wrongful act; however, it was clearly offensive to many voters, particularly in West Virginia. Some accusations are, of course false. Still, some of those who have been falsely accused must persuade the audience of that fact. For this reason Kennedy faced an uphill battle in West Virginia and in his quest for the Oval Office: He needed to respond to accusations that his religion disqualified him from the presidency. Henry (1988) examined Kennedy’s September 12 speech on this topic to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association.

This essay employs Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 2015a) to explicate the Massachusetts Senator’s defense. Political discourse has proven to be a fruitful ground for research on persuasive defense (Benoit, 1982, 2006a, 2006b, 2015b; 2016; Benoit & Anderson, 1996; Benoit Gullifor, & Panici,

1991; Benoit & Henson, 2009; Benoit & McHale, 1999; Blaney & Benoit, 2001; Dewberry & Fox, 2012; Drumheller & Benoit, 2004; Griffin-Padgett & Allison, 2010; Hormmes, 2012; Kaylor, 2011; Kennedy & Benoit, 1997; Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004; Liu, 2007; Muralidharan, Dillistone, & Shin, 2011; Peijuan, Ting, & Pang, 2009; Ryan, 1984; Shepard, 2009; Stein, 2008; Wen, Yu, & Benoit, 2012; Zhang & Benoit, 2004; Zhang & Benoit, 2009). Benoit (2015) provides a review of this literature. The next section explains the theory undergirding this analysis.

Image Repair Theory

Image Repair Theory offers a comprehensive list of strategies for repairing an image. Three key sources helped develop this theory Burke (1970, 1973), Scott and Lyman (1968), and Ware and Linkugel (1973). Benoit posits that a person’s or organization’s image, face, or reputation is important (2015; for other approaches to image repair, see Coombs, 2012; or Hearit, 2006). Threats to image are pervasive in society which means that it is vital to understand persuasive messages that could help repair a tarnished image. Five general strategies of image repair discourse are identified; three have specific variants or tactics for a total of 14 options for image repair.

Every accusation has two components: blame and offensiveness (Pomerantz, 1978). Image repair strategies can address one or the other of these elements (blame, offensiveness). It is also important to note that threats to an accused’s reputation arise from audience perceptions of the accused and his or her actions. The accused’s defense may well rely on information about the world and the people and events in it (commonly referred to as “facts”) but what ultimately matters is the perceptions about the accusations held by the audience. The goal is to use information and arguments to change the audience’s attitudes about the accused. Each of the 14 image repair strategies will be discussed in this section; see Table 1 for a summary.

Denial

Denial exists in three forms. People and organizations accused of wrong-doing can deny that the offensive act occurred, deny that they are responsible for the offensive act, or deny that the act was harmful. Furthermore, a rhetor can attempt to shift the blame for the

offensive act to another person or organization. If another person (or group, or organization) actually committed the offensive act, the accused should not be held responsible for that act. These image repair strategies concern blame (with the exception of the form of denial that argues the act was not harmful, which attempts to reduce offensiveness).

Table 1. Image Restoration Strategies

<u>Strategy</u>	<u>Key Characteristic</u>	<u>Example</u>
Denial		
Simple denial	did not perform act	Reagan did not trade arms for hostages
Shift the blame	another performed act	Obama “inherited” a poor economy from Bush
Evasion of Responsibility		
Provocation	responded to act of another	Candidate for office asserts his/her opponent attacked first
Defeasibility	lack of information or ability	Congress cannot allocate resources well without accurate census information
Accident	mishap	Negative effects of law were not anticipated by anyone
Good Intentions	meant well	This law was passed to help the poor
Reducing Offensiveness of Event		
Bolstering	stress good traits	politician: look at my accomplishments in office
Minimization	act not serious	The snail darter is a trivial part of the ecosystem
Differentiation	act less offensive than similar acts	Nixon: we are not widening the war in Southeast Asia; we continue to attack the VietCong
Transcendence	more important values	Clinton: more important issues than Monica Lewinsky
Attack Accuser	reduce credibility of accuser	accused admits he has lied before
Compensation	reimburse victim	Eminent domain pays for property taken by government
Corrective Action	plan to solve/prevent	Reagan implement changes after Iran-Contra recurrence of problem

Mortification

apologize

Trump apologized for offensive words on "Access Hollywood"

Evade Responsibility

This general strategy can appear in four potential forms. The accused may assert that the offensive act was a response to another offensive act committed by the alleged victim, so the defender's behavior should be considered a reasonable reaction to that provocation. Defeasibility argues that the offender lacked the knowledge or ability to prevent occurrence of the offensive act. The accused can argue that the offense was accident. Fourth, the defender can argue assert that the act had been performed with good intentions. Any of these strategies, if accepted by the audience, could reduce the accused's responsibility for the offensive act.

Reduce Offensiveness

Six different arguments can be used to diminish the offensiveness of the act. First, a persuader can work bolster his or her own image by highlighting positive qualities or actions in order to strengthen the audience's positive feelings toward him or her. Here the accused hopes that favorable feelings arising from bolstering can help offset the negative feelings prompted by the offensive act. Minimization argues that the act in question is not actually less offensive than appears. Differentiation contrasts the act in question from other actions that appear similar but are really more offensive than the accused's act. Transcendence tries to justify the act by placing it in a different context. A persuader can attack his or her accusers, hoping to reduce the credibility of the accusations or to imply the victim deserved what happened. Attacking accuser could also deflect attention away from the accused's behavior. Compensation offers the victim money, goods, or services to help reduce the negative affect toward the persuader. These six strategies may reduce the apparent offensiveness of the act, helping repair the accused's image.

Corrective Action

Corrective action is a proposal designed to make the situation better. This strategy can

take one of two forms. The rhetor can promise to restore the state of affairs before the offensive act (repairing the damage) or the accused can promise to prevent recurrence of the offensive act (preventing future offensive acts).

Mortification

The final image repair strategy admits that the accused committed the offensive act: An apparently sincere apology could help restore the accused's image with the intended audience. This strategy can take various forms, including admitting guilt, asking for forgiveness, expressing regret or remorse, and apologizing. There is no accepted standard for which of these elements must be present for a defense to qualify as "an apology." Functional Theory considers mortification to be somewhat amorphous without a fixed set of components. Furthermore, in English the phrase "I'm sorry" is ambiguous. An apology could be an expression of guilt ("I'm sorry I hurt you") but it could also be an expression of sympathy ("I'm sorry for what befell you"). Some rhetors may attempt to exploit this ambiguity, hoping that the audience will accept "I'm sorry" as an apology without actually confessing to any specific misdeeds. Arguably the weakest form of apology is a statement such as "I'm sorry if what I did offended you," which does not concede that the act in question was offensive (you may have been offended but what I did nothing wrong). Together, these strategies will serve as a critical lens for analyzing Kennedy's image repair on the "Religious Issue."

JFK's Defense of the "Religious Issue"

This analysis focuses on four defensive texts. First, on May 21, 1960 Kennedy addressed this concern in a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors (Kennedy, 1960a). Second, Kennedy and Humphrey engaged in a debate on May 4, 1960, in Charleston, West Virginia, where this issue surfaced (Stafford, 1960). Third, Kennedy also participated in a televised interview with FDR, Jr. (who was clearly in JFK's corner), on May 8, two days before the primary was held,

where the “Catholic Issue” was addressed (Sorenson, 1965; White, 1962). The Senator from Massachusetts also aired television spots in the state on this issue (Kennedy, 1960b). The main strategies employed by Kennedy to respond to the “Religious Issue” were denial, attack accuser, and bolstering.

Denial

Kennedy could not, of course, deny being a Catholic. Nor should he have done so. However, he the Massachusetts Senator offered a variety of denials in his speech: “I am not ‘trying to be the first Catholic President,’ as some have written”; “I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I do not speak for the Catholic Church on issues of public policy”; I am not “appealing, as is too often claimed, to a so-called Catholic vote”; “I have never suggested that those opposed to me are thereby anti-Catholic”; and I have never “suggested that the Democratic party is required to nominate me or face a Catholic revolt in November.” All of these statements combine to address concerns about Kennedy’s religion and his intentions as a presidential candidate, rejecting the accusation as false.

JFK also addressed the question about influence from the Catholic Church head-on. In his speech, he explained “There is only one legitimate question underlying all the rest: would you, as President of the United States, be responsive in any way to ecclesiastical pressures or obligations of any kind that might in any fashion influence or interfere with your conduct of that office in the national interest? I have answered that question many times. My answer was - and is - ‘NO’.” This passage disputed the claim that the Catholic Church would influence his decisions if elected president. In his television spot, he reiterated this argument:

The question is whether I think that if I were elected president, I would be divided between two loyalties: my church and my state. Ah, let me just say that I would not. I have sworn to uphold the Constitution in the 14 years I have been in Congress, in the years I was in the service. The Constitution provides in the First Amendment that Congress shall make no laws abridging the freedom of religion.

These statements deny the accusation that JFK would be controlled by

the Vatican. It adds to this declaration the argument that the First Amendment protects freedom of religion: If Kennedy were barred from seeking the presidency because of his religion that would violate his freedom of religion, one of the cornerstones on which America’s democracy was founded.

Kennedy also repeatedly (in his speech, the debate, and his advertisement) declared that he fully subscribed to the principle of separation of church and state. His speech was explicit in citing the Constitution: “I believe that the founding father meant it when they provided in Article VI of the Constitution that there should be no religious test for public office - a provision that brought not one dissenting vote, only the comment of Roger Sherman that it was surely unnecessary.” One who accepted the principle of the separation of church and state would not allow religion to interfere with presidential actions.

The televised question and answer session with FDR, Jr., returned to this argument. Sorenson reported that in the Q&A the Massachusetts Senator declared that “As President, I ‘would not take orders from any Pope, Cardinal, Bishop, or priest nor would they try to give me orders... If any Pope attempted to influence me as President, I would tell him it was completely improper” (1965, p. 145). This excerpt reinforces JFK’s denial that he would be influenced by the Catholic Church. White (1961) noted that in this session, JFK declared that

When any man stands on the steps of the Capitol and takes the oath of office of President, he is swearing to support the separation of church and state; he puts one hand on the Bible and raises the other hand to God as he takes the oath. And if he breaks his oath, he is not only committing a crime against the Constitution, for which Congress can [p. 108] impeach him - and should impeach him - but he is committing a sin against God” White, 1961, p. 107; see also Casey, 2009; Savage 2015; Sorenson, 1965).

Kennedy’s denial was crystal clear in these utterances. The president takes an oath on the Bible to uphold separation of church and state. Breaking this oath would open the president to impeachment and would commit a sin.

Attack Accuser

Kennedy refrained from smearing his primary opponents (despite the fact that, for example, Humphrey's campaign theme song concerned religion). Instead, JFK chose to attack the press, arguing in his speech that news coverage was responsible for obsession on this issue: "As reported in yesterday's Washington Post, the great bulk of West Virginians paid very little attention to my religion - until they read repeatedly in the nation's press that this was the decisive issue in West Virginia." Kennedy observes that the "Catholic issue" became important only after the press harped on it. However, the press focused on this issue rather than on policy concerns (see, e.g., Benoit, Hemmer, & Stein, 2010; Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005). In his speech he observed that when "I spoke in Wisconsin, for example, on farm legislation, foreign policy, defense, civil rights and several other issues... I rarely found them [these topics] reported in the press." This criticism accuses the press of ignoring policy concerns when they cover his campaign. He made the same argument concerning a specific newspaper article: "One article, for example, supposedly summing the primary up in advance, mentioned the word Catholic 20 times in 15 paragraphs - not mentioning even once dairy farms, disarmament, labor legislation, or any other issue." This example demonstrates that the press stressed this concern. Furthermore, "The Milwaukee Journal featured a map of the state, listing county by county the relative strengths of three types of voters - Democrats, Republicans, and Catholics." The newspaper's statement suggests that Catholics are a separate group from Democrats or Republicans, implying that Catholics would be loyal only to his Church. Attacking his accusers was likely intended to reduce the damage from these criticism by challenging the media's reputability.

Bolstering

Kennedy's television spot reminded voters of his governmental service: "I would fulfill my oath of office as I have done for 14 years in the Congress." His speech noted that he was elected to the US Congress in 1947 and the Senate in 1952. He reminded voters in his speech that he had served as a Naval officer. Kennedy was widely considered to be a hero,

saving members of his crew when the boat he commanded (the famous PT109) was sunk in WWII. The Democratic Senator's speech also stressed his ideals: "Every Presidential contender, I am certain, is dedicated to the separation of church and state, to the preservation of religious liberty, to an end to religious bigotry, and to the total independence of the office-holder from any form of ecclesiastical dictation." Attributing these views to other candidates suggested he was reasonable, not lashing out wildly against opponents. He also indicated that he supported separation of church and state, preservation of religious liberty, rejected religious bigotry, and believed in the independence of elected officials. The speech also gave an example of legislation related to the Church/State concern: "Federal assistance to parochial schools, for example, is a very legitimate issue actually before the Congress. I am opposed to it. I believe it is clearly unconstitutional. I voted against it on the Senate floor this year." Similarly he pointed to his opposition to an ambassador to the Vatican: "An Ambassador to the Vatican could conceivably become a real issue again. I am opposed to it, and said so long ago." Surely one who deferred to the Catholic Church would support an ambassador to the Vatican. Another statement in his speech worked to bolster his reputation: "I strongly support - out of conviction as well as Constitutional obligation - the guarantees of religious equality provided by the First Amendment - and I ask only that these same guarantees be extended to me." This statement implied that those who opposed his candidacy on religious were violating the Constitution. The First Amendment and Article VI of the Constitution, revered documents in the United States, served as touchstones in his efforts to repair his image. Kennedy's defense included several arguments that function to enhance his reputation.

Kennedy overcame his initial 60/40 deficit with voters to decisively win the West Virginia primary to win a decisive victory on the road to the White House. Rorabaugh "On election night Kennedy won, 236,510 to 152,187. Humphrey withdrew from the presidential contest" (2009, p. 57). Savage added that Kennedy's West Virginia win "also facilitated JFK's victories in the Maryland and Oregon primaries" (2015, p. 230). His image repair effort apparently succeeded in changing voters' preferences from 60/40 against

Kennedy to 61/29 in Kennedy's favor. It was not necessary for JFK to persuade everyone; he clearly managed to persuade enough to flip voters' preferences to win the primary. His defense in West Virginia did not silence his critics once and for all (see Ryan, 1988, who analyzed Kennedy's speech in Houston in September); but it blunted these criticisms and demonstrated he could win in an electorate that was mostly Protestant.

Implications and Conclusion

First, his success at dispelling this criticism allowed Kennedy to win the West Virginia primary (and other, later, primaries). His principle opponent, Humphrey, dropped out of the race after the West Virginia primary. The Democratic party bosses could not deny him the nomination after Kennedy demonstrated his ability to garner votes. Then, Kennedy went on to defeat Republican Richard Nixon in the general election and reach the Oval Office. The outcome of any presidential election turns on a myriad of factors. It cannot be said that JFK's image repair efforts "caused" his election as president, but it is highly unlikely that he could have done so without his defense against the "religious issue." His image repair effort was a necessary but not sufficient condition of winning the presidency.

This defense of JFK's image in the 1960 West Virginia presidential primary had

other important ramifications. Rorabaugh, for example, explains that "Kennedy rewrote the rules of American politics.... So he decided win in the primaries to prove a Catholic could be elected. After 1960, it was rare to be nominated without winning many state primaries" (2009, p. 199).

Bartels agrees that John F. Kennedy's West Virginia primary campaign was important "because it convinced powerful party leaders. . . that Kennedy could win Protestant votes" (1988, p. 15).

Another effect of Kennedy's image repair effort - and his subsequent win in the general election was to offer hope to other groups who had never attained the Oval Office. Rorabaugh explained that "Kennedy's victory... established that a Catholic could be elected president... women, African-Americans, Jews, and other minorities could imagine that other barriers eventually would fall in what was rapidly becoming the civil rights era. Kennedy's victory, therefore, offered a hopeful sign" to many (2009, p. 198). The United States has not yet elected a woman president, for example, but in 2008 and 2012 Barack Obama, an African-American, was elected to the Oval Office in 2008 and re-elected in 2012. Kennedy began to force open the doors of the White House to candidates who were not Protestant white men.

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