

Is this the Mormons' JFK moment? Maybe, maybe not.

by [David Gibson](#)

April 11, 2012

c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) With his path now clear to the Republican nomination, Mitt Romney is on the verge of becoming the first Mormon to head a major party's presidential ticket, a new milestone in America's embrace of religious groups that were once shunned by society.

Mormons had it especially bad as they routinely faced mob violence and government-led crackdowns in the nineteenth century; Joseph Smith, who founded Mormonism in the 1830s, was killed in Illinois just months after he announced a third-party bid for president in 1844.

"I think Mitt Romney's selection as the Republican nominee means as much for the United States as it does for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," said Richard L. Bushman, a leading scholar of Mormonism who teaches at Claremont Graduate University. "It demonstrates, once again, the capacity of the nation to expand its limits to include once despised minorities within the fold."

Bushman and others have said the closest analogy to Romney's breakthrough is the Democrats' 1928 nomination of New York Gov. Al Smith, the first Catholic to head a major party ticket, or the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 -- still the only Catholic to have attained the presidency.

Yet there are also significant differences between Romney's rise and Kennedy's success, experts say.

One is that Catholics have always comprised a bigger share of the population than Mormons -- upwards of one-quarter of all Americans today are Catholic, versus just 6 million Mormons, or about 2 percent, concentrated mainly in the Western U.S. That has given Catholics a larger profile in the minds of many people, and frequently made them appear to be a greater threat for their critics.

"Though 2012 is vitally important for the Mormon people, this is a less dramatic development for American culture overall than the nominations of Catholics Al Smith and John F. Kennedy, simply because the Catholic population is so much larger," said Richard Ostling, who wrote the book *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise*, with his wife, the late Joan Ostling.

"It is a breakthrough more akin to an observant Orthodox Jew, Joseph Lieberman, running as a vice presidential nominee," Ostling said, referring to John Kerry's running mate on the 2004 Democratic presidential ticket.

Ostling also argued that the attacks on Romney's Mormonism, while unseemly, don't compare with those that Smith or Kennedy endured. In fact, the religious barbs directed at Romney have been fewer in number but have also come from both right and left. When a Dallas megachurch pastor, Robert Jeffress, sparked controversy last fall by saying that Mormonism is a "cult" and suggesting Christians should not support Mormons candidates, "nobody ran to his flagpole."

Matthew Bowman, author of a new book, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith*, agreed.

"Many of the suspicions and fears that people have been expressing about Mormonism are strikingly similar to those expressed about Catholicism when Kennedy and Smith ran for president but, at the same time, they're largely marginal," said Bowman, who teaches religion at Hampden-Sydney College.

While part of the change may be due to concerted efforts by Mormons to assimilate into American life -- a path followed by American Jews and Catholics as well -- Bowman also believes American society has changed significantly in the last 50 years. The country is more tolerant now, and Americans may also view religion through a different lens.

"It's my impression that people today do find Mormonism odd -- but in a benign, and rather cute, way rather than in the ominous or hostile way that Americans a hundred years ago perceived Mormonism and Catholicism," Bowman said. "This is the Mormonism of the *Book of Mormon* musical -- they believe weird things, but they sure are nice."

On the other hand, he added, "if you'd told Woodrow Wilson that a hundred years after his election the two major party candidates would be a Mormon and a black man, his head would probably have exploded."