

From William C. Celentano to Barack Obama: Ethnic and Racial Identity in Italian-American Postwar Political Experience, 1945-2008

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According to conventional wisdom, political science has generally overlooked an in-depth examination of Italian-American voting behavior and politics (Martellone, 1991; Cappelli, 2008). This contention, however, hardly depicts the state of the art in the 1960s. After the number of Italian-Americans serving in the U.S. House of Representatives and state legislatures in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island had roughly doubled during the previous decade, this ethnic minority seemed a rising political group and consequently captured scholarly attention (Lubell, 1965, pp. 76-77). In particular, in the 1960s academicians drew upon the electoral history and events involving the Little Italy in the city of New Haven, Connecticut, as a microcosm for case studies to analyze ethnic politics. Specifically, at the beginning of that decade, in a path-breaking research on the mechanics of municipal politics, *Who Governs?*, Robert A. Dahl (1961) used the example of Italian-American William C. Celentano's 1945 rise to the mayoralty in New Haven in order to elaborate an influential three-stage theory for the political assimilation of immigrant groups in the United States.

The local Republican organization slated Celentano, an undertaker by profession, to lure his fellow ethnics into breaking away from the Irish-dominated Democratic Party. Defeated in 1939 and bypassed in the choice of candidates for the duration of World War II because his Italian descent made him a liability while his ancestral country was fighting against the United States, Celentano received again the Republican nomination in 1945 and, this time, managed to

win election to City Hall. He served for eight years until he lost to Richard C. Lee in an unsuccessful 1953 bid for a fifth consecutive two-year term (Domhoff, 1978, pp. 86-90; Rae, 2003, pp. 83, 227-28, 292-302, 305-8, 326, 407-11).

In Dahl's view, Celentano's experience was the epitome of the timing and mechanics for the accommodation not only of Italian-Americans but also of ethnic groups in general within U.S. politics. According to *Who Governs?*, while the great bulk of their own members are still in the working-class ranks, minorities rely on political brokers who belong to previously integrated groups – such as the Irish for New Haven's Italian-Americans – and receive nominations only for lesser public offices that are mainly confined to the representation of the wards or districts where the single ethnic communities reside. Then, as the minorities become more heterogeneous in terms of economic and social characteristics, they choose political leaders of their own ancestry. The latter replace the brokers from other national backgrounds of the preceding stage and are able to compete for citywide offices that require the support of voters of other ethnic extractions, too. This was the case of Celentano by the late 1930s. Finally, as the minorities establish themselves into the middle class, their politicians no longer need ethnic connections to run for major offices and ethnic politics is likely to become meaningless or even embarrassing to such candidates. At the same time, appeals to ethnic identity as well as the allotment of patronage and candidacies along ethnic lines by the major parties cease to be viable tools to mobilize the eligible voters of the nationality groups and to win their support at the polls (Dahl, 1961, pp. 34-36).

Dahl's thesis, stressing the progressive decline of the salience of ethnicity in politics, has not gone unchallenged and several alternative models have been formulated to account for ethnic accommodation within U.S. politics. In particular, in a 1965 article published in the *American Political Science Review*, focusing again on New Haven's Italian-Americans in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Raymond Wolfinger noted that their vote had remained cohesive into their U.S.-born second generation. He, therefore, challenged Dahl's assimilationist paradigm and argued that «ethnic voting will be the greatest when the ethnic group has produced a middle class, i.e., in the second and third generation, not in the first». Therefore, middle-class status was «a virtual prerequisite» for immigrant minorities to have their own leaders slated for major offices, namely to determine the best condition to make the rank-and-file voters of a nationality group cast their ballots as a cohesive bloc built along ethnic lines (Wolfinger, 1965, p. 905).

Other scholars have taken issue with Dahl and made the case for the persistence of ethnic voting into immigrant minorities' third generation. According to Michael Parenti (1967) and Richard Gabriel (1980), for example, the failure to become assimilated into American society in spite of widespread acculturation

let ethnic attachment continue to be a factor in voting behavior for Italian-Americans, especially in local urban politics, in the late 1960s. In particular, in the first edition of their study *Beyond the Melting Pot* Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1967) emphasized the tremendous importance that ethnicity still retained in New York City's politics in the 1960s. Furthermore, shifting from the local level to the national arena, in the view of historian Salvatore J. LaGumina (2000), ethnic concerns still affected political choices in the early 1960s. For instance, in 1962, President John F. Kennedy appointed Cleveland's Mayor Anthony Celebrezze to his own cabinet as secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare with the purpose of «placating Italian-Americans who pressured him for greater prominence» (LaGumina, 2000, p. 484).

Glazer's and Moynihan's interpretation apparently foreran the ethnic revival of the late 1960s and 1970s. Yet those years also saw the rise of Italian-Americans' racial consciousness. Having consolidated their middle-class conditions after the 1946 *G.I. Bill* had provided the offspring of the turn-of-the-century immigrants the first opportunity to rise above their working-class background (Vecoli, 2002, p. 81), Italian-Americans joined forces with other immigrant minorities of European extractions to counter African Americans' alleged encroachments in the civil rights era. As they were no longer included among the ranks of the lower classes, Italian-Americans feared that their achievements were threatened by African-American assertiveness. Against this backdrop, racial politics and class anxiety ended up prevailing over ethnic politics and efforts to curb affirmative action programs and busing became priorities in Italian-Americans' political involvement and vote orientation. Indeed, at that time, several emerging politicians of Italian ancestry built their careers – especially at the local level – as self-proclaimed spokespersons for white voters rather than as leaders of their respective Little Italies (Weed, 1973; Rieder, 1984; Formisano, 1991).

In New York City's 1969 mayoral election, candidates Mario Procaccino – a native of Bisaccia, in Italy – and John Marchi – whose ancestors had come from Lucca – harshly criticized incumbent John Lindsay's liberal approach to African-American claims, championed the racial grievances of white voters, and took a firm stand against blacks' urban riots. Significantly enough, after a record of previous failures in carrying the Italian-American vote, Procaccino managed to make an impressive showing in his fellow ethnics' neighborhoods only when he apparently came to share their anti-black sentiments (Vellon, 1999). Historian Mary C. Lizzi (2008) has recently suggested that Procaccino's image as the «white backlash candidate» resulted from stereotypes and misconceptions upon which Lindsay himself played to discredit his opponent. Nonetheless, Procaccino was indeed perceived as an anti-black political crusader in Italian-American districts such as Brooklyn, Bensonhurst, and Bay Ridge. Therefore,

this view eventually accounted for the 55 percent of the Italian-American vote he received (Lizzi, 2008, p. 67).

Likewise, it was a nationwide reputation for strong-arm methods against African American activists as police commissioner which enabled Frank Rizzo to secure two terms at Philadelphia's City Hall in the 1970s with the support of an electoral coalition of white ethnics from Italian, Irish, Polish, and Jewish backgrounds who feared black empowering (Paolantonio, 1993). When Rizzo promoted a referendum in 1978 to amend the city charter and let him serve a third consecutive term, in an emotional appeal to the electorate of European ancestry he stated that he was tired of his political opponents encouraging African Americans to «vote black» and urged his own supporters to «vote white». As a result, although Rizzo's proposal was defeated by 66 percent of the vote in Philadelphia as a whole, it received 85 percent of the ballots in the city's predominantly Italian-American districts (Featherman, 1979).

Similarly, after the race turmoil of the late 1960s in Newark (Mumford, 2007), although the bulk of his constituency was in the first ward's Little Italy, Stephen Adubato presented himself as the representative of white Europeans. As he explained to a reporter for the «New York Times», «Blacks have got all these special programs to help them get to college, or to rehabilitate their houses, or to help them find jobs. *We white ethnics* don't get any of these things. All we want is equity» (as quoted in Butterfield, 1971).

Indeed, by the time Glazer and Moynihan published a second edition of their study in 1970, they had to acknowledge that to New York City's Italian-Americans ethnic identification was less salient in politics than they had previously assumed. As they put it, «whether we say "Italian" or "Irish" is not important, and yet we know we are talking about roughly the same people. [...] the people are the same, and the issues are the same: their feelings that they have been ignored, have received little from government in recent years, and have borne the brunt of the costs involved in the economic and political rise of the Negroes» (Glazer and Moynihan, 1970, p. xxvi).

Actually, the polarization of electoral campaigns along racial lines saw the few cases of the resurgence of a cohesive Italian-American voting bloc between the late 1960s and the 1980s. When the choice at the polls was between a black and a white candidate the electorate of Italian descent rallied to support the latter regardless of his national ancestry. Italian-Americans cast 87.5 percent of their ballots for fellow-ethnic Hugh J. Addonizio when he ran against African American Kenneth A. Gibson in Newark's 1969 mayoral election (Levy and Kramer, 1972, pp. 174-75). Likewise, 95 percent and 92 percent of them backed Rizzo's further bid for City Hall in Philadelphia against black politician W. Wilson Goode in 1983 and 1987, respectively (Featherman, 1988, pp. 3-6). When African-American Congressman Harold Washington gained the Democratic

nomination for mayor of Chicago in 1983, 90.4 percent of the local Italian-American electorate voted for his white opponent, Bernard Epton, although he was not of Italian extraction (Kleppner, 1985, p. 219).

A quarter century later, not even the latest presidential race managed to turn this orientation upside down. No systematic data are available about the Italian-American vote nationwide because the previous demise of ethnicity in the political choices of the members of this ethnic group caused exit polls to discontinue questions about the Italian ancestry of the electorate. However, an online poll among the readers of «America Oggi» – the one Italian-language daily still published in the United States – contended that 71 percent of the respondents supported the African American Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, as opposed to 23 percent who backed his white Republican opponent, John McCain (Di Meo, 2008). This was a methodologically unsophisticated and impressionistic pre-election survey. Its outcome may have been also affected by the so-called «Bradley effect», the phenomenon named for Los Angeles' African American mayor Tom Bradley, who was defeated in California's 1982 gubernatorial election despite pollsters' prediction of his victory because many interviewees stated they would support the black candidate, instead of his white opponent as they actually intended to do, in order to prevent charges of racism (Payne and Ratzan, 1986, pp. 243-88).

In any case, such a majority for Obama did not necessarily mean that Italian-Americans voters had eventually overcome the racial divide and their white identification while casting their ballots. On the one hand, most of them regarded Obama as a post-racial candidate who downplayed traditional African American claims and focused on issues of common interests to the U.S. people as a whole, regardless of the color of their skin, in times of economic and financial hardships (Zamin, 2008). Indeed, by casting their ballots for the Democratic presidential candidate many Italian-Americans expressed their protest against the Bush administration rather than a fully-fledged endorsement of Obama. As 2000 and 2004 Republican voter Vincenzo La Gamba (2008) remarked in «America Oggi», the political failures of President George W. Bush had accounted for the election of Obama. It is significant for Italian-Americans' characterization of Obama in post-racial terms that La Gamba also made a point of stressing that the Democratic candidate was not a «black» but a «mulatto». On the other hand, the Italian-American vote for McCain largely resulted from lingering anti-black prejudice and stereotypes (Caruso, 2008). After all, it can be reasonably suggested that Italian-Americans were a significant component of the blue-collar and lower-middle-class Catholic electorate that enabled Hillary Clinton to carry Ohio, Pennsylvania, and other swing states against Obama during the primary season of the Democratic party in spring because such voters were not ready to support an African American candidate (Healy, 2008). Even in November's

presidential race, these categories of the Italian-American electorate were the most likely cohort of white voters to defect from Obama in cities such as New York (Roberts, 2008). Likewise, according to sociologist Jerome Kruse (2008), the significant presence of Italian-Americans in Staten Island contributed to turn Staten Island into the only borough of New York City that McCain managed to carry, though by a narrow margin.

Besides a consolidation of racial concerns as determinants of electoral behavior in the Little Italies, the 1980s witnessed Italian-American politicians' definitive emancipation from their fellow ethnics' support at the polls. John O. Pastore, who became the first Senator of Italian descent in 1950 after replacing Irish-American J. Howard McGrath as governor of Rhode Island five years earlier, would have never entered Congress without the massive vote of the disproportionate number of Italian-Americans in his native state, who retained a prevailing working-class status and, thereby, continued to be responsive to ethnic pride and appeals while casting their ballots (LaGumina, 1987; Morgenthau, 1989; Luconi, 2004, pp. 130-31). Conversely, in the 1980s, Dennis DeConcini in Arizona and Pete Domenici in New Mexico managed to win election to the Senate notwithstanding the lack of any meaningful presence of Italian-Americans among their constituents in their respective home states (Martellone, 1983, pp. 348-49; Fenno, 1991; DeConcini and August, 2006).

After all, during that decade, the Italian-American electorate turned a deaf ear to ethnic appeals upon entering the voting booths. Geraldine A. Ferraro bore the brunt of such a reorientation in the determinants of political and electoral decisions. A member of the U.S. House of Representatives from New York City's 9th Congressional district, she received the Democratic nomination for vice president in 1984 (Barone and Ujifusa, 1983, pp. 805-7; Romano, 2000, pp. 221-22). Her candidacy was – and still is nowadays – the highest form of political recognition that either major party had even granted an Italian-American throughout U.S. history. New York State's Governor Mario Cuomo – himself of Italian ancestry – recommended Ferraro's choice to Democratic presidential nominee Walter Mondale in order to appeal not only to women but also to Italian-American voters specifically (Shannon, 1986, p. 292). Ferraro sat on the board of directors of the National Italian-American Foundation, an organization that had been established to lobby for the advancement of Italian-Americans in U.S. society and, primarily, in politics (Cavaioli, 1983). She appealed to Italian-American ethnic pride in her acceptance speech at the Democratic convention and throughout her election campaign, whenever possible and appropriate. Yet, when the votes were counted, it turned out that Ferraro had received as little as 39 percent of the Italian-American ballots (Ladd, 1985, p. 14). Her pro-choice stand on abortion had prevailed over ethnic allegiance and had antagonized

most Italian-American voters on the grounds of the latter's social conservatism (Shannon, 1986, pp. 301-2).

Not even ethnic defensiveness managed to rally a majority of the Italian-American electorate behind Ferraro's candidacy. Rumors that her husband, real estate developer John Zaccaro, was in business with a few underworld bosses because he had lent them a warehouse revived the hackneyed stereotype of Italian-Americans' Mafia connections (Churcher, 1984). Yet such an outburst of blatant bigotry failed to touch a sensitive nerve among a majority of Italian-American voters and few of them showed solidarity for their fellow-ethnic candidate at the polls. As Ferraro (1985, pp. 235, 315) herself subsequently complained, «I was out there all alone, unsupported by other Italian-Americans in the barrage of ethnic slur. [...] I didn't expect so many in the Italian-American community to retreat in the face of all ethnic slurs».

In a few years, as Dahl had suggested, ethnic appeals even became a source of embarrassment for Italian-American voters. The 1996 campaign for the Democratic nomination in Providence's Second Congressional District offers a case in point. The manager of Italian-American contender Joseph R. Paolino Jr. maintained that, since this constituency had «one of the highest percentages of Italian-Americans in the country», it was about time the electorate of Italian ancestry had sent «one of its own to Congress» (McPhillips, 1996). Still this statement was counterproductive. Robert A. Weygand received the nomination with 49.2 percent of the vote, as opposed to Paolino's 36.6 percent. The latter also failed to gain significant support among Italian-American voters, who harshly criticized the statement of Paolino's manager because they were interested less in electing a fellow ethnic to Congress than in the enactment of effective measures to curb the ever growing number of Hispanic immigrants in their district (Krieger, 1996; Moakley and Cornwell, 2001, pp. 32-33).

In the 1990s Italian-Americans also failed to respond to the attempts of Italy at playing upon their identification with the land of their descent in order to mobilize the Little Italies as a political lobby on behalf of the interests of their ancestral country. The electorate of Italian extraction had a long tradition of efforts to pressure the White House and Congress into seconding the interests of the Italian government in foreign affairs. Such efforts dated back at least to a fruitless campaign to have the Wilson administration support Italy's nationalistic claims over the Croatian port of Fiume after World War I, gained momentum following Benito Mussolini's rise to power, and were revived in the postwar years after a brief period of discontinuity in the wake of the Fascist declaration of war against the United States on 11 December 1941 (Duff, 1967; Luconi, 2000; Venturini, 1985; Massaro, 1997).

Yet such a kind of political mobilization had come to an end by the late twentieth century. Most notably, in 1998 the Italian ambassador to the United

Nations, Francesco Paolo Fulci, urged Italian-American voters to support the inclusion of Italy among the new permanent member of the UN Security Council within a short-lived plan for the reform of this body (Ministero degli Affari esteri, 1998; Franzina, 1999, pp. 653-54). In particular, they were asked to send faxes to President Bill Clinton calling the exclusion of Italy to the benefit of Germany and Japan «a slap in the face» of millions of Italian-Americans (Camera dei Deputati, 2004, p. 14). Notwithstanding Fulci's efforts, as few as roughly 50,000 people out of a total population of about fifteen million Italian-Americans nationwide participated in this campaign (Tirabassi, 1998, pp. 52-53).

If ethnicity continued to play any role in Italian-American politics in the 1980s and 1990s, it was only for the negative implications that the Mafia-related bias had on Ferraro and other candidates. For instance, the efforts to discredit Italian-American politicians by means of unsubstantiated innuendoes linking them to organized crime have usually been held responsible for Mario Cuomo's decision not to run for president in 1988 and 1992 despite early polls that pointed to him as the likely front runner for the Democratic nomination (Pileggi, 1987; McElvaine, 1988, pp. 408-12; Germond and Witcover, 1993, pp. 115, 189; Incisa di Camerana, 2003, p. 328).

It was only on the occasion of Rudolph Giuliani's 2008 bid for the presidential nomination of the Republican party that Italian-American politicians eventually overcame the Mafia stigma. Sensationalist reporter Wayne Barrett (2000, pp. 26-27, 31, 46-47) tried to link somehow even Giuliani to organized crime, contending that his father, Harold, had worked as a loan sharking collection agent. Yet, as the U.S. attorney for the southern district of New York in the 1980s, Giuliani had effectively prosecuted the «Mafia's Commission» in the United States. Subsequently, as mayor of New York City, he had successfully wiped the control of organized crime from key local economic activities such as the Fulton Fish Market and trash hauling (Kirtzman, 2000, pp. 4, 164-67; Siegel, 2006, pp. 25, 167-72; Lupo, 2008, p. 265). As a result, such innuendoes were unable to scratch Giuliani's solid reputation. Indeed, while Cuomo even questioned the existence of such an organization as the Mafia in an attempt at defusing ethnic slurs targeting both the Italian-American community and himself (Raab, 2005, p. 276), Giuliani did not refrain from using that term as well as related jargon (Serafini, 2007) and even joked about his own «Mafia accent» (Sanjek, 1998, p. 155). Giuliani's perceived effective handling of the 11 September terrorist crisis added to his achievements as a prosecutor to break the last barrier against an Italian-American presidential bid (Thomas and Smalley, 2007), although Wayne Barrett (2006) further endeavored to discredit the mayor by suggesting that politicization had weakened security in New York City and had contributed to turn the latter into an easy target for al-Qaeda.

Following such a breakthrough, in contrast to the plight of his father two decades earlier, Mario Cuomo's son, Andrew, is now considered as a possibly promising contender for the White House in the near future (Maggi, 2008). Therefore, almost half a century after Dahl had offered his interpretation for the timing of Italian-American accommodation within U.S. politics, Giuliani's 2008 campaign for the presidency marked the definitive political coming of age for his fellow ethnics notwithstanding his devastating defeat in the Republican primaries. Although his liberal stand on social issues such as abortion and homosexuality doomed his efforts to secure the Republican nomination for the White House, it further demonstrated that Giuliani had transcended ethnic politics because his pro-choice orientation and support for gay rights contrasted with the conservative attitude of many Italian-Americans resulting from the Catholic faith of most of them (Powell and Cooper, 2008). Actually, in late 2007, before a single vote was cast in the Republican primaries, *Newsdays* had already pointed out that «Giuliani has turned his back on his Italian roots» (Iaconis, 2007).

By now, Italian-Americans have consolidated their middle-class status. According to the 2000 census, 28.9 percent of them hold a college or university degree, as opposed to 24.4 percent of the total U.S. population. In addition, 38.3 percent of employed Italian-Americans are professionals or managers, contrary to 33.6 percent of the total working population in the country. Finally, the average annual income of an Italian-American family is 51,246 dollars, while the national average is only 41,994 dollars (Egelman, 2006).

The sizeable growth of an Italian-American middle class nationwide caused the demise of ethnic politics for the members of this national minority. Actually, ethnic voting was strictly linked to the dynamics of neighborhood partisan organizations and the brokerage of local political bosses (Martellone, 1992). Nonetheless the latter's survival was possible only where the cohort of working-class eligible voters asking for political recognition, patronage, and other favors was large enough within the total number of constituents to keep partisan machines alive. Conversely, the entry into the middle class made them obsolete such *qui pro quo* mechanics and the related ethnic determinants of the vote (Boulay and Di Gaetano, 1985; Erie, 1988, pp. 140-42, 145-46; Krase and LaCerra, 1991).

Italian-Americans may still cast their ballots on the basis of the ethnic background of the candidates in local elections for minor offices, especially in non-partisan contests when there are no other paramount clues to distinguish one contender from the others (Byrne and Pueschel, 1974; Featherman, 1983). But, for them, the era of ethnic politics seems to be definitely closed at the state and national level.

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