

Giuliani's Italian American Voting Bloc?

Jerry Krase (January 17, 2008)



Why Rudy Giuliani can't rely on co-ethnicity to win. The limits of Machine Politics when it comes to Italian Americans as a potential voting bloc.

When I finished reading here at i-italy Dom Serafini's animated opinion piece, "Against Rudy Giuliani the Strategy is to Divide Italian Americans" that concludes with the phrase "all Americans of Italian origins should indeed vote for Rudy exclusively because he's Italian, which is by itself a good enough reason and a guarantee of everything America stands for." I thought to myself "Great! Italian Americans have finally become so together as a hyphenated ethnic group that they pose a threat and will no longer be ignored by the political powers that be. Then I thought of all the Italian Americans (and Italians) I know who find it difficult to agree on the time of day, even when they are looking at the same clock.

There is some history to the fact of Italian disunity, as well as their dissing themselves. I'll mention only a few instances which are close to home as to direct experience, and some about which I have written (see below). For example, people often speak of the "old days" when the Brooklyn



Democratic Machine was led by cigar-chomping Italian American icon Meade Esposito. In response to complaints by many Italian-American judge-wannabees that they were overlooked by him in favor of other hyphenated-wannabees, I asked him about it at a dinner where he was being honored by an Italian American organization as its "Man of the Year." Meade's matter of fact answer was that Italians were not noted for voting, or contributing. It was a very Italian response.

When I was campaigning for Mario Cuomo the first time he ran for New York State Governor we had great difficulty generating the hoped for, but never quite realized, overwhelming support from the large Italian American community. Most of the Children of Columbus found him too liberal for their own tastes. Cuomo became much more popular among his brethren as a powerful (but still misunderstood) incumbent. Another very Italian attitude. When Rudy Giuliani ran for Mayor of New York City he also evoked a less than enthusiastic response from many Italo-Americans who said his mob prosecutions showed he was against his "own kind." Like Cuomo, Giuliani became more popular with his own kind as he had patronage to dish out. Also as with Cuomo "it" was never enough. Beyond ancient and contemporary history, there is also ample theory as to why Italians might not vote for other Italians. The Political Machine got its name from the analogy of a mechanism that moves without thinking... automatically. Simple-minded ethnic and other voting blocs are part of the process; Women for Hillary, Blacks for Obama, Mormons for Mitt, Creationists for Mike. etc. Vote for me because I look, speak, pray, believe, like you do. Intelligent voters in real democracies vote in their interests. But in order to do so they must ask and answer the question "If this person is elected how will it benefit me?" My experience in politics, as both a partisan and a researcher, is that although Italian Americans hardly act in concert they are keen on electing people who they think best represent their interests. In fact, even the historically less than stellar rates of participation of Italian Americans reflected their all too often correct judgement that it really didn't make much difference who was elected.

In order for Italian Americans to be unified, they first must see themselves as sharing some common fate. There are very few issues which weld Italian Americans together (as Italian Americans) and are not cross cutting issues with other groups. Italian American business owners have far more in common with other business owners than with Italian American workers. One issue tested as a unifier has been "Stereotyping" and "Defamation," but too many Italian Americans themselves are more a part of the problem than the solution. By the way, both Mario and Rudy are big fans of Mafia genre films and television. Those who wish to build an Italian American "nationalism" frequently contrast themselves to Jews and Blacks as in "Why can't we be like them?" Frankly, I don't think that the experience of the Holocaust or slavery is devoutly to be wished for anyone. Perhaps it can happen in foreign policy: "Italy as the homeland for the Italian people ...?" This wouldn't even work in Italy today.

Although Rudy can count votes on the stereotype of Italians as tough, the fact is that Italian Americans are not monolithically conservative. It is true that many Italians have changed allegiances from the Democratic party. However it was never a real allegiance. Even when Italians were Democrats, they were liberal on economic issues (as in union contracts) but more conservative on social ones (such as abortion). Ironically, as Italian Americans have become more educated many have also become more liberal on social issues. Rudy is one of these "tough but liberal" conservatives. As to Ethno/Racial Italian solidarity it is doubtful that followers of Geraldine Ferraro, Nancy Pelosi, or Andrew Cuomo would even lip-sync praise to Giuliani. The best thing going right for him right now in the primaries is the pathetic array of candidates displayed by the Republican Party.

My free (for what it's worth) political consulting advice to Rudy Giuliani, if he really wants to get Italian Americans to vote for him, is to show how they will gain by his elevation. How will they prosper? How will their children not be left behind? This is the same strategy needed by the other (non-Italian-American) candidates to capture and wake up the sleeping giant. For his supporters to simply employ a strategy of saying, even screaming at the top of their lungs, that Italian Americans should vote for Giuliani because he is, like them, Italian-American is taking a big chance. Italian American voters are hardly the type to respond to "trust me" or "just say yes" campaign slogans.



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