

Obamania or Obamaphobia: Italians in a Post-Bush America

Jerry Krase (November 13, 2008)



Italian American intellectuals and Italians in Italy might have given great support to Barack Obama's historic Presidential triumph but Italian American voters, at least those in New York, can hardly expect much in the way of thanks from the new tenants of the White House.



Come si dice in italiano "yes we could". Sì, potremmo? In any case, we did it (lo abbiamo fatto). I begin this post-election reflection by quoting myself from i-italy when I recalled being asked by visiting European journalists if America was ready to elect a Black President, to which I replied that "America wasn't ready but America doesn't elect the President -- the electorate (a much smaller group) does. For example in 2004 about 60% of eligible voters voted and George W. Bush got half of that or about 30% of eligible voters; only 62 millions votes from a population of about 300 million; about 20% of the total population. So if only a fifth of America wasn't racist, Obama could win." Lucky for Barack, America is only 5.5% Italian.

On the other hand, election returns showed that New York City's Italian American politicians had "the luck of the Irish" (McCain-wise). According to the most recent estimates by the John Calandra Italian American Institute, Italian Americans make up 5.54% of la Grande Mela's population. As might be expected, things were especially sad (tristi) in Staten Island (almost 40% Italian). The Sunday (after the election) New York Times dissected the "Changing Electorate" finding among other things that White Protestants went 65% for McCain vs 34% for Obama. 54% of Catholics voted for Obama and 45% for McCain, but that figure included Hispanics who voted 67% to 31% in favor of Obama so I would estimate that the majority of white Catholics voted for the loser. 55 % of Whites voted for all-white McCain and (surprise, surprise) 95% of Blacks voted for half-white Obama.

From The Times data, I created some electoral stereotypes: The perfect Obamaniac was a young (18-29) black Jewish unmarried lesbian urbanite with a Ph. D. who thought her financial situation worsened during W's tenure and the perfect McCainiac was an old (60+) white Protestant, rural husband, with a Bachelor's Degree who thought his financial situation improved during W's tenure. How's that for polarized??

Just like "Obama," "tsunami" ends in a vowel and they swamped New York's Italian American politicians (politici). With what was left of the luck of the "really Irish," Democrat Mike McMahon defeated Republican Bob Straniere by a 2 to 1 margin in the 13th Congressional District and ended 28 years of GOP (and Italian American) control of the Bay Ridge, Bensonhurst, Dyker Heights, and Staten Island district. Losing Staten Island means that when 2009 begins no Republican will represent New York City in Congress. Similarly, Janele Hyer-Spencer (D) defeated Joe Cammarata (R) 55 - 45% in Assembly District 60 that covers Bay Ridge and Staten Island. Alec Brook-Krasny (D) 70% defeated Bob Capano (R) 70 - 30% in the 46th AD that includes Bay Ridge, Dyker Heights, Bensonhurst, Coney Island, and Brighton Beach. In Queens, State Senator Serphim Maltese (R) (in office for 2 decades) lost to co-ethnic Joseph Addabbo (D). It was predicted that the vote would be close but Obama's coattails gave Addabbo a 57.5% to 42.5% semi-landslide (semi-frana).

As I have written in my non-best selling book* Staten Island is the present and future of New York City's Italian Americans. Therefore it is important to point out that while Obama got 88 % of Bronx votes, 85 % of Manhattan's, 79 % of Brooklyn's and 74 % of Queens', only la bella isola di Staten carried for John McCain (52%) according to The Associated Press. In addition, my friend and City University colleague, John Mollenkopf was quoted in The Times as saying that: "Of the white Democrats who in the past have shown a propensity to vote for republicans in mayoral elections, in preference over black, or even white candidates who have strong black support - the Jewish neighborhoods were least likely to fall away from Obama, and the Italian neighborhoods the most." My own analysis would suggest that the two groups in this election, especially more Orthodox Jewish voters, were actually much closer in anti-Obama voting. I also suggest that the Italian American politics of the past on Staten Island, and elsewhere, that have based on narrow cultural and ideological appeals and simple demographic dominance, has to broaden as the population and sentiments of the borough, city, state, and nation as well as the Italian American electorate itself has changed.

Not to be outdone by Italian Americans in not jumping on the Obama band wagon, in Moscow (Mosca) Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi of Italy, told President Dmitri Medvedev of Russia that President-elect Barack Obama "has all the qualities to get along well with you: he's young, handsome and suntanned, so I think you can develop a good working relationship." Italians saw this as a gaff (gaffe). La repubblica reported: Berlusconi, prima gaffe su Obama_"E' giovane, bello e



abbronzato." We all, Italians and Italian Americans alike, should be grateful that il Cavaliere didn't take the opportunity to also reflect on the religion of Obama's Kenyan dad.

*The Staten Island Italian American Experience, Staten Island: The DaVinci Society of Wagner College, 2007.

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