

## **Politics in (Italian) America and Beyond.**

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### SYNOPSIS

The paper presents the first results of the Oral History Archive (OHA) project recently started at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute (Queens College, CUNY). The project's primary goal is to create a multimedia archive based on in-depth, video-taped interviews with current elected officials of Italian descent in the state of New York, a pool of over fifty individuals, most of whom long-time incumbents in their districts.

In addition, the OHA collects from a variety of sources—legislative archives, official statistics, the local press, and the Internet—a conspicuous amount of information about these individuals' political career as well as their districts' socio-economic and demographic composition.

We finally develop these materials into detailed biographical profiles, taking into account also the broader historical and political context of the State of New York and of its individual counties.

The project has a descriptive as well as an analytical goal.

From the descriptive point of view, we intend to determine how Italian immigrants and their descendants achieve and keep leading positions in the New York political élite, how they exercise power, and how they eventually get to lose it. We do this by concentrating on three key aspects of power: relational resources, organizational styles, and communication strategies. It is through these lenses that we look for "Italian signs" in American politics.

Analytically, we purport to use our case-study to shed a new light on the evolving meaning of "ethnic politics" in America today. Our research question is not the common one, i.e. "is ethnic politics a primordial, archaic form of politics, destined to disappear as the group acculturates and assimilates?" but rather: "may ethnicity still play a role in politics even within a highly acculturated and—some would say of the Italian-Americans—assimilated group? And if so, how and in what sense?" Here our descriptive and analytical goals converge: by identifying the Italian signs in our pool of American elites' resources, styles, and strategies, we try to devise some tentative answers to our broader research question.

For the purpose of this presentation, a special section of our pool of officials is highlighted, namely State legislators who represent districts in Queens County, including longtime incumbents and newcomers. Descriptively, the number of these individuals and the stature of some of them, allow us to cover a substantial portion of Queens' political history and to gain meaningful insights into broader political developments at state level.

Analytically, a few interesting suggestions emerge from our Queens study. First, several Italian/American politicians, especially those of older age, would confirm the old adage that "all politics in New York is ethnic politics": they acquired and maintained power by mastering all the techniques of **ethnic politics**: banking on their ethnic appeal vis-a-vis the electorate, pulling the strings of ethnic relations and connections to climb the ladder of power, and relying upon ethnically-based organizations to exercise power. This kind of politics, however, rarely works alone. The same individuals, and especially those who proved most successful, would also play by an older proverb: "all politics is local politics." **Local-politics** techniques—including individual casework, patronage, clientelism, and machine-style organization—are at least as important as their ethnic counterparts to gain and keep political loyalty even within one's own ethnic group; actually they tend to complement each other.

Furthermore, in some cases we also see at work a kind of politics based on **ideology** and **values**. In middle-class, suburban-style districts, for instance, we find that Italian/American identity is often inextricably linked to conservative-catholic, family-oriented values, which favors Republicans; in urban-style, working-class districts, instead, Italian/American politicians are more at ease playing the rhetoric of labor rights, and banking on Democratic party identification and the unions' organizational capacity.

Thus, except in cases when a given ethnic identity is under attack and the group's survival is threatened, a successful politician—"ethnic" or otherwise—must know how to use all of these techniques in different combinations.

The second major suggestion coming from our Queens study is that, with the passing of time, those Italian/American politicians who remain in power—as well as their younger challengers who sometimes belong to the same ethnicity—learn to adapt to the changing realities of their districts, where their group is diluted by the new immigration, and has sometimes lost the unity and cohesion of older days. This does not mean that ethnic politics is abandoned *tout-court* as obsolete. It remains as a political techniques that can be used to attract other ethnics, typically through "ethnic brokers." Just as Italian/American community leaders performed a broker role vis-a-vis Irish and Jewish politicians in the past, so Italian/American politicians today learn how to relate to Asian or Hispanic brokers to connect to the new immigrants. This too, of course, is "ethnic politics," although it does not require that the elected official and his/her voters share the same ethnic identity.

At the same time, local-politics techniques become increasingly relevant as the need arises to compensate for a weaker, less direct use of ethnic-politics techniques. The web of personal loyalties that is created and consolidated through patronage, clientelism, and machine-style organizations can be successfully directed outside the Italian/American ethnic circle that was a primary target in earlier times.

Finally, ideology and values that once cemented political loyalties in districts with a heavy Italian/American populations, can also be adapted to a new multi-ethnic reality. Indeed, some shrewd Italian/American politicians have readily discovered that conservative, family-oriented values may have an appeal that reaches well beyond white-ethnic catholic communities; while others of different persuasion have naturally found that the rhetoric of labor rights and socio-economic protection has an universal appeal that goes beyond the Italian (and, in general, European) working class of older days.

In conclusion, if our research question were: "is Italian/American ethnic politics a primordial, archaic form of politics, destined to disappear as the group acculturates and assimilates?"—it would be a misplaced question. Ethnic politics hardly ever exists in a vacuum. It comprises a set of political techniques (relational resources, organizational styles, and communication strategies) that any politician must learn to use together with other techniques, in a never-ending process of adaptation to a complex, changing environment.

By analyzing how Italian/American politicians succeed or fail in mastering this process and thus in achieving their primary goals—acquiring, expanding, and maintaining power—we hope to shed some new light on how the American political process works at the grassroots, both within and beyond the borders of "Italian" America.