

# TRANSCENDING BORDERS, BRIDGING GAPS

ITALIAN AMERICANA, DIASPORIC STUDIES,  
AND THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM

EDITED BY  
Anthony Julian Tamburri  
Fred L. Gardaphe

JOHN D. CALANDRA ITALIAN AMERICAN INSTITUTE  
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TYPOLOGIES FOR A NEW PERSPECTIVE  
ON THE ITALIAN-AMERICAN BODY POLITIC  
PRESENTING THE ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVE

Ottorino Cappelli  
UNIVERSITY OF NAPLES, "L'ORIENTALE"

Politics and government represent the missing piece of Italian-American studies, and one that we need to put back in place as rapidly as possible. While there exist a few historical and biographical accounts of Italian-American politicians, very little study has been produced by students of social sciences about how they operate. One of the reasons for this is that very little primary sources exist for scholars to examine. By founding the Oral History Archive, we at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute have started to fill this gap.

Now named in memory of Maria Federici—an Italian parliamentarian and a member of the Constituent Assembly (1946–48), as well as the founder of ANFE (Associazione Nazionale Famiglie degli Emigranti)—the Archive focuses its activity on the detailed study of elected officials of Italian origin, and endeavor that includes a series of in-depth televised interviews with each of them. The first bulk of these interviews, which is now available both as a video series and as a book, represents a unique foundation of primary sources for scholars and students of American and Italian-American politics.<sup>1</sup>

There are two ways to describe the subject of this research. First, at the most immediate level, it is the Italian-American experience in New York as told by those members of the community who have been successful in one particular social realm: the running for and the holding of elective of-

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<sup>1</sup> Up to now, the Oral History Archive has collected some forty hours of video-taped conversations with twenty elected officials of Italian origin who serve or have served in the legislative body of the State of New York, the Assembly and the Senate. These interviews are presented in abridged form in my *Italians in Politics in America. Conversations with Italian-American Legislators of the State of New York* (New York: John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, 2015). The book was co-produced by ANFE and funded in part by a grant from the Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale.

ficie. On a broader level, the subject is American politics per se, in particular, in New York, as seen through the eyes of one of its most numerous single components, Americans of Italian ancestry.

A cursory look at some numbers may give a better idea of the quantitative relevance of the subject. According to official 2010 Census estimates, close to eighteen million Americans claim direct Italian ancestry (5.6 percent of the U.S. population); in the State of New York they are more than two and a half millions (13.5 percent). The New York Conference of Italian-American State Legislators, in turn, has approximately forty-five members out of a total of 213 legislators. With one member out of five, the Italian Americans of New York are clearly over-represented in the legislature. Or, looking at the same phenomenon from another perspective, one-fifth of the population of New York (about four million people) is represented by an Italian-American elected official. Not to speak, of course, of the executive branch, where Governor Andrew Cuomo is now in his second term, two decades after his father left the same office, the late Mario Cuomo, an icon of American—and not just Italian-American—politics.

Americans of Italian ancestry, in sum, are an integral part of the American social fabric and an admirably successful component of its political class. This should not come as a surprise; for the American political system was conceived, since the nineteenth century, as a machine to integrate immigrants. Those who lacked two essential components of social power—wealth and status—would resort to politics, provided they had the necessary resources of numbers and skills. Lacking the former and having plenty of the latter, Italian immigrants seized the day. And, today’s anti-political sentiments notwithstanding, the formation of an Italian-American political class provided a crucial, albeit often unrecognized contribution to the advancement of their community at large.

To my knowledge, no one summed up this process better than former New York State Senator James Alesi during our interview for the Archive, when told us that,

[G]overnment was the vehicle that brought Italian Americans into mainstream America. Some of them were professionals ... but ... those who were not professionals, like my father, they grew socially ... because many of them were in government. That’s how they elevated themselves and gave themselves credibility in their own community. It is really the

opportunity to run for office that, I believe, elevated the Italian Americans ... that was the one thing that allowed you to gain status without being a professional.

All this, however, did not come without a struggle. And this is why our interviews dwell at length upon the early part of our protagonists' life: their growing up in close-knit ethnic communities, usually in urban areas; their developing a passion for politics, often through their family or closest friends; their first steps in the political arena, supported as a rule by networks of fellow ethnics. And once they get to this point, more often than not, we see a corollary of ethnic tensions and frictions, especially with the Irish, which accompanies their attempt to establish an Italian presence in American politics.

In this, our protagonists show more similarities than differences among themselves. Most of them share similar experiences in their primary political socialization, whether they come from New York City or from upstate, whether they are young or old, male or female, Democrats or Republicans, and whether they originate from a political family (sometimes even a local dynasty). Their individual stories, in other words, confirm a collective history of the Italians in America that sounds familiar—especially from literary accounts—though adding fascinating personal details that expand our knowledge and understanding of the role of ethnicity in American politics.

But it is when we follow them throughout their political career, from their first successful campaigns to the subsequent consolidation of their power and influence, that interesting differences start to emerge, offering a more articulated, complex picture of their politics. This is no place to dwell on these findings, but I will briefly sketch them out, in order to give an idea of what the Oral History Archive has achieved so far. In a few words, what we found is that there are four different typologies of Italian-American politicians, each dealing with the ethnic issue from a different angle. Few of our interviewees fit completely and exclusively one of these typologies, and many would exhibit elements of some or even all of them, but each sports some predominant type of political behavior—or, at the very least, of political rhetoric—that relates to one or the other of the following ideal-types.

*The Party Champion.* This type of politician shows a strong sense of party loyalty and emphasizes party identification over ethnic identity.

Most of those in this typology are Democrats who grew up politically in New York City and other urban areas at a time when Republicans were virtually non-existent and the Democrats hegemonic. As Italians, they endured harsh battles within their party to become accepted as potential candidates for office; they had to confront and ultimately replace their party leaders, who most often were Irish. So the ethnic element is there, undoubtedly. Yet when it comes to their appeal in general elections, the Party Champions would stress organizational loyalty and class representation over ethnic belonging, urging members of all ethnic groups to identify as Democrats and vote down the party line. This typology does not make a uniform bloc, however, and the reader of this book will find such type of cross-ethnic, party-political discourse among both conservative-leaning Democrats and progressive-leaning Democrats—or, if I may submit an Italian-centered label for the latter, “Mario Cuomo Democrats.”

The *Ethnic Politician* is the mirror opposite of the Party Champion, except that this typology too is found mainly in urban areas with a high concentration of immigrants and a predominance of registered Democrats. But elected officials in this category are mostly Republicans who, given the weakness of their party among the electorate of their district, must attempt to change the very rationale of how their constituents vote. Therefore, they encourage them to switch from disciplined (usually Democratic) party voting to cross-party ethnic voting. They will appeal first of all to Italian-American voters, irrespective of their party affiliation, by fostering ethnic identity and pride and trying to turn them into powerful electoral drives. Elements of such rhetoric can be found among both liberal and conservative Republicans in our panel of interviewees—or, if I am allowed to continue with my Italian labeling exercise, among both “Giuliani” Republicans and “Al D’Amato” Republicans.

The *Value-Oriented Leader* may come in support of the second typology when the need arises to reinforce the ethnic-political identity of potential Italian voters or, and most interesting, when voters from other ethnicities need to be recruited in favor of an Italian candidate. The emphasis in this case will be on “traditional family values”—*traditional family* considered a quintessential Italian value, but one that also appeals to a number of other immigrant groups, from Hispanics to South Asians. Quite understandably, such rhetoric tends to be more typical of conservative-minded Republicans, often (but not exclusively) found in middle-class suburban

areas. And it usually comes with a myriad of conservative stances, from anti-gay, pro-life, and (quite inconsequentially) pro-death-penalty positions, to less-tax, less-government messages. As the most influential politician to articulate this vision in our panel was Senator Serph Maltese, co-founder of the New York State Conservative Party, I would dub those in this category, “Maltese Conservatives.”

It is true that the vast majority of our interviewees from whatever party, referred to family as a crucial value for Italian Americans—and, incidentally, the emphasis on the Italian immigrant family was also an element of Mario Cuomo’s progressive discourse. But the value system of all Democrats in our group, both conservative- and liberal-leaning, bend primarily toward a pro-government, pro-welfare vision and often resort to a distinctive “wealth and business vs. the poor and those-in-need” kind of populist rhetoric. All of this is characteristically cross-ethnic and bears little peculiar relation to the Italian experience—except maybe for those more left-leaning like Senator Diane Savino, co-founder of the Working Families Party (“Marcantonio Progressives”?)

Finally, we have the *Local Interests Broker*, a typology that is actually omnipresent in American politics, irrespective of geography, party affiliation, and value systems. The electoral appeal of those in this category consists in their proven ability to deliver, to “bring the pork home.” The typology is vast and embraces different sub-types, ranging from the old-style machine bosses, to more modern policy advocates who focus meticulously on constituents casework, to plainly non-political, managerial-style problem solvers. But, their differences notwithstanding, they all share an eminently distributive approach to politics and invariably couch it in the language of responsiveness, perceiving themselves as providers of the material needs of their voters.

This notably crowded group also differs internally under two other important respects. First, the power base of Local Interests Brokers may reside either in their party’s political organization (in which case this typology may overlap with that of the Party Politician) or in a network of personal connections, often well rooted in a dynastic family fiefdom. Second, their capacity of ethnic outreach may vary according to whether they focus primarily on the interests and needs of their fellow ethnics (in which case this typology may overlap with that of the Ethnic Politician), or tend to care for all groups by flexibly adapting to the changing demographics of



their districts. Although the vastness of this category hardly warrants a single label, Italian or not, I am tempted to suggest again “Al D’Amato,” who in turn was famously dubbed “The Pothole Senator” and ostensibly took much pride in that.

It will not have escaped the reader that the above typologies are not peculiarly Italian—they identify different types of American politicians, independently of their ancestry. Yet, the fact that they took shape during our conversations with Italian-American legislators, and that we could easily find Italian names to label them and some of their sub-types, is in itself telling. What it reveals is that, having become an integral part of the American social fabric, the descendants of the Italian immigrants have generated a complex and internally differentiated body politics which is a microcosm of American politics and an excellent point of observation to study. This is, in fact, one of the most significant findings of our work, though hardly the only one.

I am confident that we are on the right track and that reading through the many pages of these first-hand narratives will make the journey as pleasant and fascinating for our readers as it was for us—the journey that brought the sons and daughters of Italian immigrants into positions of power and influence in their adoptive land.