

Lunch With a Candidate (for Senato)

Anthony Paonita (February 17, 2013)



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I've been inundated the past month with robot calls, leaflets, and emails from political candidates. There are links to videos, appeals to "work together," invitations to cocktail parties and forums.

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There's something different this time around, nearly five years after the last general election. Back in 2008, the list of candidates was limited, and there was barely a peep from any of them. This year, candidates are courting Italians in North America like never before. And no wonder. In 2006, when the center-left coalition led by Romano Prodi eked out a close victory over Berlusconi, many attributed some of the margin to "italiani all'estero," overseas Italians. This came as a shock to Berlusconi and his allies, who expected their overseas compatriots to vote for them.

I have a day job as a full-time magazine and website editor, so I can't really spend much time chasing candidates around. But a few days ago, I received a tempting invitation; I could have lunch with Renato Turano, who is running for the Senate on the PD list for North America. The venue, a chic (and very good) pizzeria called Ribalta, wasn't far from my office, the time and price were right.

So I ambled up to Greenwich Village, introduced myself to the small group assembled there, mostly younger Italians living in New York (and an American lawyer working for the federal government) and we waited. At least one thing was very Italian, the rather fluid idea of time and the loose way the lunch was organized. One very American thing: no one indulged in a wine or beer with the very good thin-crust pizza.

After awhile, Turano appeared. Now anyone who pays attention to the ever more frenzied appeals of ex-prime minister Berlusconi has heard him depict PD members as wild radicals. To hear him, these candidates are a hybrid of Fidel Castro and Kim Jong-un. Turano dispels that notion immediately. Dressed in a conservative suit, he radiated an easy prosperity; Turano owns a large baking concern in Chicago with his two brothers. The family came to the United States in the 1950s and did what generations of Italian immigrants did before them; they got to work and built a nice life for themselves.

We asked him why, as a prosperous businessman, he's putting himself on the line and running for the Senate. "I've kept my ties to Italy. We speak Italian in my family, our children do, our grandchildren do. We've taken vacations together to Italy. I don't want to lose that attachment."

Talking about his platform, he spoke about youth unemployment in Italy, and how he, under the Prodi government, helped set up exchange programs between Italian and American universities. It helped the Italians widen their horizons, get some good training and gain fluency in English—and it proved a tremendous aid to the post-graduation job-seeking efforts, because they were fully bilingual and skilled in how Americans do business, too.

In all, it was a pleasant way to spend a winter lunchtime in New York. It made me think about why I'm grateful to my immigrant father for my being able to straddle two countries, two cultures. And, perhaps owing to the smaller numbers involved, it was a pleasant throwback to a time when politics was less polished, and more up close and personal.



The ballot, even for overseas Italians in the Americas, is much more splintered this year, much more so than when in 2008 we got to choose only among the two main party blocs. Here's hoping that when the results are in, Italy gets a stable governing coalition that tackles the very real problems the country faces, from an unending economic crisis that's causing real pain (the closed storefronts in my hometown of Perugia are testament to that), to the challenge of finding useful employment for a new generation of young people. The jockeying for position and possible coalitions began months ago, so it's a real possibility that my naïve hope will remain just that.

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