

The Irish Routes of Success for a few Italian American Politicians

Jerry Krase (March 22, 2014)



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Astorino, Christie, and Cuomo have recently garnered much good and, even more, bad press. Their antics are best explained by comedian David Steinberg's "[Three Stooges Theory of Politics](#)," [2] which he presented in 1976 on Johnny Carson's Tonight Show. Of the three (Moe, Larry, and Curly) the leader Moe and second-in-command Larry are most relevant because Moe is in charge and Larry wants his job. Christie and Cuomo want to be President and Astorino wants to be governor. According to [normal">Men's Health Senior Editor Ron Geraci](#) [3], psychologists think all men are variations of Moe, Larry or Curly. "If you're a Moe, you're a hot-tempered guy who intimidates people with "verbal slaps and managerial eye pokes." Temperamental, bossy, paternalistic and hard-driving at work, Moes aren't any smarter than other folks but bang through life being furious at everyone, Geraci writes. But it's good to be Moe, at least in the office; many Moes end up as bosses." Larry's (Rob, Chris and Andy) are Moe wannabes.

It would be unkind to connect specific Three Stooges traits to individuals, but some more and less unkind direct comparisons can be made between the Italian American Moes and Larrys as to their positions on issues that are important to me.

Affordable Care Act: Astorino and Christie (Obamacare) no;

Cuomo Si.The Dream Act: Christie no; Cuomo si; Astorino si and no.

Living Wages: Christie no; Cuomo no; Astorino no.

Women's Right to Choose and Gay Marriage: Christie no, no; Cuomo yes, yes; Astorino hell no, hell no.

On most issues, such as fracking, Andrew Cuomo is on the right wing of the Democratic Party, just to the left of Christie who, after hugging Obama after Hurricane Sandy, has positioned himself in the middle of the Republican Party. Astorino is on the right of the middle wing of the Republican Party on most of the few issues he is willing to talk about. As to public appearances Astorino has the best voice, is fluent in Spanish and has the least hair. Cuomo is the sexiest but screeches nasally whereas Christie tends to snarl, and despite bariatric surgery, is the heaviest. As a Catholic radio host and program director, Astorino is the most Catholic and Cuomo is the least. Sometimes Christie is a better Catholic than Cuomo but not often. As to mental problems, Christie suffers from a rare form of amnesia, and even though he and Andy are co-equals as heads of the Port Authority, Andy remembers even less about who caused the George Washington Bridge traffic jams and, according to the [Nation](#) [4], "The two governors allowed aides to float a proposal for a much higher toll increase, after which the governors stepped in like knights on white horses to propose a smaller increase—even though that had been the original level they wanted all along."

It is important to consider what it is about Italian Americans that appeals to non-Italian Americans as they don't seem to appeal to Italian Americans, at least for their Italianita.

Leading Italian American scholars have agreed on several accounts. Richard Gambino (author of Blood of My Blood) remarked that beyond the extended family and close friends "all other social institutions were seen within a spectrum of attitudes ranging from indifference to scorn." Fred Gardaphe's "Signs of Italianita" are omerta (secrecy) and bella figura (good appearance). Combining their insights it seems that Italian Americans don't trust much but want to look good at it. Although Italian American politicians run the gamut of ideologies they fall increasingly on the right -- like



Italian American voters. When I asked people why people vote for Italian Americans, one non-Italian woman, seeing the good side of bullying, said she likes Chris Christie because “he tells people where to get off.” The most common of Astorino’s, Christie’s, and Cuomo’s “positive” qualities were being down to earth, tough, and passionate. Finally, both tactically, and because none are the sharpest tacks in the box, neither Astorino, Christie, nor Cuomo are perceived as fuzzy-headed intellectuals or policy wonks.

I wrote this piece on Saint Patrick’s Day; or should I say Il Giorno di San Patrizio given that Paddy was a Roman monk. Last week MSNBC’s Chris Matthews was kwelling about the phenomenal climb of the Irish from peasantry to aristocracy in American politics. For Daniel Patrick Moynihan the keys to their success were “indifference to Yankee proprieties,” “regarding the formal government as illegitimate,” and “alive to the possibilities of politics” and “effective technique(s) of political bureaucracy.” Italian Americans have done pretty well with only the first two. The third, which translates as “working together for the common good,” is as Italian as Irish soda bread.

According to [Azi Paybarah in Capital New York](#) [5] at the Society of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick’s annual bash Cardinal Timothy Dolan joked:

“...I’m happy to see Rob Astorino, the county executive. Rob, you think the odds are against you? You should have been in my place in the conclave in the Sistine Chapel this time last year, when folks thought I had a chance. You think you have trouble with name recognition? When I was going through the entrance way coming here somebody yelled out ‘Look honey, Governor Christie!’”

He also quipped:

“You got to admit a little nostalgia, don’tcha? Remember when the Irish ran all the politics in New York City, remember that? What do we got now? We got Astorino. We got Cuomo. We got de Blasio. We’ve gone from Tammany Hall to Mama Leone’s. Good lord, we Irish used to argue about jobs and rent and immigration and these three guys argue about whose mom’s lasagna recipe is the best.”

The Cardinal neglected to mention Astorino, Christie and Cuomo’s Irish connections. Both Astorino and Christie claim Irish heritage on their father’s side, and all three of them married Irish women. Chris married Mary Pat Foster. Rob married Sheila McCloskey, and Andy’s ex-wife is Kerry Kennedy. Even De Blasio’s wife Chirlane McCray could have distant Irish roots. Given their rather unremarkable personal attributes and charisma, perhaps part of their success is due to “marrying up.”

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