

Presidential Elections, The View from the Italian-American Community. Aileen R. Sirey on Hillary: “The Right Choice, For Women and for Us All”

Aileen Riotto Sirey (September 16, 2016)



Alileen Riotto Sirey, Founder and Chair Emerita, National Organization of Italian American Women:
“We can take joy that a woman has attained the nomination to the highest office in the land. But even putting gender issues aside, the Hillary I know is head and shoulders smarter, more experienced and better prepared to lead this country than Trump. We will certainly take even greater joy if she is elected.”

If the hand placed on that ceremonial bible on January 20, belongs to Hillary R. Clinton, a long and difficult journey will come to an end. It is a journey that began with Abigail Adam’s amazing letters to her husband John while he was attending the Continental Congress in 1776. Abigail lovingly requested that he not forget “the ladies.” She warned him, tongue in cheek, that “if particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold



ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.”

Unfortunately, John did forget. So did many who followed him. But Abigail and her sisters did not. She probably intended a bloodless rebellion, but it was not without its heavy casualties...and almost all came from the ranks of the ladies. From the ratification of the US Constitution in 1776, it took 72 years for the first women's rights convention to be held in Seneca Falls, N.Y.; it took 144 years for women to get the vote in the United States; it took 205 years before the first woman was nominated to national office and finally, it was 240 years later that a woman was nominated for President!

Why did it take so long? What primitive fears do men have about women and power that makes them dig in so hard? Is it the awesome power to bring life into the world that so frightens men into needing to control everything else? Whatever it is, it's time to get over it!

As for me, when Hillary broke that ultimate glass ceiling, I had a very personal moment. Tears welled in my eyes when she said, “I accept your nomination for President of the United States”, because in those seconds I was also remembering the voice of my dear friend. “My name is Geraldine Ferraro and I accept your nomination as Vice President....” It saddened me to think Gerry was not here to witness this important event in our history.... a moment we often spoke about.

The night that Gerry was nominated in July 1984, a handful of members of the National Organization of Italian American Women sat in my Riverside Drive apartment watching the event on television. CNN cameras were also in my apartment as they covered the convention and switched back and forth between my apartment and Gerry's mother's apartment. A big part of the story was that the first woman nominee for national office on a major party ticket happened to be the daughter of an Italian immigrant!

Italian American women have often been in the thick of the battle for women's rights. While Hillary doesn't claim Italian heritage, there were a surprising number of Italian American women who cut through the 'underbrush' ahead of her. The first woman elected Governor in U.S. (1975) was Ella Grasso, the first woman Vice Presidential candidate (1984) Geraldine A Ferraro, (both of whom served in Congress) and the first Woman Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi. Serving in congress now we have: Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR), Diana DeGetter (D-OR) Suzan DelBene (D-WA) Virginia Foxx (R-NC) Elise Stefanik (R-NY—also the youngest woman ever elected to Congress). Past members of Congress include: Susan Molinari, Marge Roukema, Connie Morella and Melissa Hart. We point with special pride to Congresswomen Rosa DeLauro, who is still serving after 25 years, and Nancy Pelosi, who have been in Congress 29 years.

Just last month our organization celebrated the appointment of Janet Difiore the Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals and of the State of New York, and Maria Vullo Superintendent of Insurance and Finance. We also can't forget that the first Saint in the US Mother Cabrini (1945) was Italian American as was the first woman pilot for a major U.S. airline (AA) was Bonnie Tiberzi (1973). Italian American Women have made many contributions in the struggle for parity with their brothers.

The battle for women's rights was and continues to be very difficult. Women, on average, earn less than men in virtually every single occupation for which there is sufficient earnings data. In 2015,



female full-time workers made only 79 cents for every dollar earned by men, a gender wage gap of 21 percent. (1) We need more provisions for child care, and women's health care to enable women to compete in the workplace.

At the highest levels of government we see the same inequality. Today women comprise 19.3% of the House of Representatives and 20% of the Senate while in the Scandinavian countries women claim 40% of the legislative bodies. We can't begin to mention the number women leaders of other countries, which number in the 80's.

Many years after her nomination Gerry and I were having a casual lunch when our conversation meandered to a discussion of politics. I asked her, "Do you think we will see a woman nominated for President in our lifetime"?

To my surprise Gerry responded, "We will have a Black president before a woman."

"Oh no, I don't agree," I said giving her my reasons. But Gerry was correct! I sorely regret that she is not here to see the election season of her friend Hillary. She would have enjoyed it.

Personally, putting gender issues aside for a moment, the Hillary I know is head and shoulders smarter, more experienced and better prepared to lead this country than the narcissistic, reality TV star with poor impulse control. I'd trust her any day!

We can take joy that a woman has attained the nomination to the highest office in the land...and we will certainly take greater joy if she is elected. There is no denying that we have made progress since Abigail made her polite request. But we have much more work ahead of us. Congress needs more women. Businesses need more female executives. And Hillary needs to be elected!

1. Institute for Women's Policy Research, 1200 18th Street NW Washington DC

* Aileen Riotto Sirey is the founder and Chair Emerita, National Organization of Italian American Women

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