

The Routes of Success for a Few Italian American Politicians

jerry krase (April 02, 2014)



Examining the personal qualities and ethnic ties of Westchester County Executive and Empire State Gubernatorial wannabe Robert Astorino, Empire State Governor and Presidential wannabe Andrew Cuomo, and Garden State Governor and Presidential wannabe Chris Christie. All of whom have recently garnered much good and, even more, bad press.

In my last column I noted the excess of successful Italian American politicians in the New York metropolitan area. Since I've already spent too much time on Big Apple Mayor [Bill De Blasio](#) [2], I shall turn my attention to the personal qualities and ethnic ties of Westchester County Executive and Empire State Gubernatorial wannabe [Robert Astorino](#) [3], Empire State Governor and Presidential wannabe [Andrew Cuomo](#) [4], and Garden State Governor and Presidential wannabe [Chris Christie](#) [5].

Astorino, Christie, and Cuomo have recently garnered much good and, even more, bad press. Comedian [David Steinberg](#) [6]'s explanation is the "[Three Stooges Theory of Politics](#)" [7] he



presented in 1976 on [Johnny Carson's Tonight Show](#) [8]. 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. As [Men's Health](#) [9] editor Ron Geraci noted, psychologists say all men are Moes, Larrys or Curlys. "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," 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 important issues.

[Affordable Care Act](#) [10]: Astorino and Christie, no; Cuomo, si.

[The Dream Act](#) [11]: Christie, no; Cuomo, si; Astorino, si and no.

[Living Wages](#) [12]: Christie, Cuomo, Astorino, no.

[Women's Right to Choose](#) [13] and [Gay Marriage](#) [14]: Christie, no, no; Cuomo, yes, yes; Astorino, hell no, hell no.

On issues like fracking, Cuomo is on the Democratic Party's right wing, just left of Christie who hugged Obama after Hurricane Sandy to position himself in the Republican Party's center. Astorino is to the right of Christie on most of the few issues he is willing to talk about. As to public persona, Astorino has the best voice, speaks Spanish fluently, and has the least hair. Cuomo is the sexiest but tends to screech 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 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. Even though he and Andy jointly run the Port Authority, Andy remembers even less about the George Washington Bridge traffic jams. Also, according to the Nation, "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."

Since they seem not to appeal to Italian Americans for their shared *italianità*, I wondered what it is about Italian Americans that appeals to non-Italian Americans. Leading scholars agree on several common traits. Richard Gambino (author of [Blood of My Blood](#) [15]) remarked that beyond the extended family and close friends they saw "all other social institutions" "within a spectrum of attitudes ranging from indifference to scorn." Fred Gardaphe's "Signs of Italianita" are *omertà* (secrecy) and *bella figura* (good appearance). Combining these insights it seems that Italian Americans don't trust anybody very much but want to look good at it. What's not to like? Although they run the gamut of ideologies they increasingly fall on the right—like Italian American voters. When I asked people why they vote for them, one non-Italian woman, seeing the good side of bullying, said she likes Chris Christie because "He tells people where to get off." Astorino's, Christie's, and Cuomo's most common "positive" qualities were being down to earth, tough, and (of course) passionate. Finally, both tactically, and because none are the sharpest tacks in the box, Astorino, Christie, and Cuomo don't pretend to be "fuzzy-headed intellectuals" or "policy wonks."

I wrote this 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](#) [16] kvelled about the phenomenal climb of the Irish from peasantry to aristocracy in American politics. [Daniel Patrick Moynihan](#) [17] wrote that their keys to success were "indifference to Yankee proprieties," "regarding the formal government as illegitimate," and "[being] alive to the possibilities of politics (and the) 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](#) [18] in Capital New York at the Society of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick's dinner [Cardinal Timothy Dolan](#) [19] 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's, Christie's 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](#) [20], Rob married Sheila McCloskey, and Andy's ex-wife is [Kerry Kennedy](#) [21]. 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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