



"Obama" Ends in a Vowel

Jerry Krase (October 31, 2008)



Will Italian Americans vote for their closest co-ethnic in the Presidential race? Barack Obama is the only candidate whose last name ends in a vowel...

With the United States Presidential Election Campaign about to end, I am sure that we will be barraged in the mass and not so mass media by last minute appeals to ethnic, religious, and racial prejudices. This is my own personal appeal to the ethnic consciousness of Italian Americans to vote for their closest co-ethnic in the Presidential race. Barack Obama is the only candidate whose last name ends in a vowel.



As is obvious to anyone who knows me, I will be voting for Barack H. Obama next Tuesday, November 4, 2008. There are many good reasons for casting my vote for him, the least of which is the fact that (like many Italian-Americans) his name ends in a vowel. Ethnic codes have long played an important role in American political campaigns. A few evenings ago I confronted the coding in the form of my ninety-five year old mother-in-law who, along with my wife, her brother and his wife were having dinner at my home. My wife's mother's family had been involved in Brooklyn Democratic Party politics since the turn of the 20th Century, so getting a read on Nana's take on the election seemed appropriate. Forget about party affiliation, the best indicators of political leanings are the talk show radio hosts one listens to. Nana likes Mike Savage, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, (and Bob Grant), so her children tried to convince her that Obama wasn't a Moslem (not that he shouldn't be a Moslem), and wasn't a socialist (ditto). I emphasized the vowel-ending name. Nothing worked. Luckily, she is no longer registered to vote and we live in New York State where if Obama loses, I will move to Europe. Speaking of which, I was in Berlin for an international meeting on "Migration and Museums" last week.

There I was told by informed sources that Europeans, if they lived in the US would vote for Obama, but if Obama was running for office in Europe, they wouldn't. I have been reasonably active in American electoral politics for a long, long time. In fact, when I was running for a Community School Board that oversaw public education in a racially, ethnically, and religiously contested area in the 1970s, my mother-in-law was working for the NYC Board of Elections at a voting station in the district. She related to me that when people asked her about my "background" (because my name was not an announcement of such) she told the Jewish voters that I was Jewish and the Italians that my mother was Italian. The Irish didn't vote because they sent their kids to Catholic school to avoid the Italians and Jews, I suppose. Nana was way ahead of her time. Yesterday I picked this off Irish National News (RTE) from the internet: "Obama's Heritage Traced to Ireland", (15 March 2007) "US Presidential hopeful Barack Obama can now count himself as one of the millions of Americans with Irish heritage. Research by the genealogy website ancestry.co.uk reveals that Mr Obama's great great grandfather was born in Ireland, although it is not yet known where. Falmouth Kearney sailed from Ireland to New York in 1850 at the age of 19 on the S.S. Marmion arriving on the 20th of March. He initially settled in Ohio, got married, had eight children, and later moved to Indiana, right next door to the state Obama currently represents in the US Senate. Mr Kearney was part of the great American migration to escape the 1840s potato famine in Ireland."

Someone told me in Berlin that there is now a Dublin watering hole called "O'Bama's." Not to be outdone by the Irish in stretching the boundaries of ethnic inclusiveness, in addition to my emphasis on Obama's Italian name-ending-vowel roots, Bob Blancato, the national Chair of the Italian American Democratic Leadership Council (IADLC) proclaimed in grand ethnic harmony that "The son of an immigrant himself, Barack Obama shares the values of Italian Americans -- family, work, education." It seems that without my knowledge, or consultation, the week before Columbus Day, the national organization of Italian American Democrats had enthusiastically endorsed Obama and Biden and pledged to work hard to elect them. Their press release claims that the "15-year old IADLC (IADemocrats@gmail.com) is a membership organization of community leaders from across the country who work to promote Italian Americans to high elected and appointed office and promote the interests of Italian Americans in the Democratic Party. Its advisory committee includes all the Italian American Democratic members of Congress and the three Italian American Democratic governors." Is a Little Italy "Ristorante Obama" far behind? The outcome of the racially-tinted 2008 US Presidential contest is important to me because in the sixties I was a community organizer who tried to work with black and white ethnics in the deteriorating cores of American cities.

They both were facing similar problems but couldn't get beyond issues that were only skin deep. Barack Obama's election will prove to me that decades of difficult, professionally unrewarding, and



occasionally dangerous work have been worth the effort. In my "Italian American" work, I have attempted to show similarities between the historical experiences of Italian- and African-Americans. As I wrote in "do the Correct Thing" here on I-italy, I don't expect Obama to get a majority of Italian American votes but I hope that, if they vote for "the other non-Italian guy," they do it for the correct reasons. And, by the way, "McCain" doesn't end in a vowel.

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