



Andrew Cuomo: Coffee, Tea, or Cappuccino?

Jerry Krase (November 07, 2010)



Given the unfortunate hot breakfast drink metaphors "Tea Party" and "Coffee Party" that have been brewed to simplify the already simple-minded partisan political debate in American politics over the past year, I have resorted to a "Cappuccino" allusion in this column to ask the non-musical question: "What does the election of Andrew Cuomo mean for New York State's Italian Americans?" My



informed guess is that, like his father Mario, Andy knows he owes little to the Italian American voter.

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With all the national attention on whether the Tea Partyniks have surpassed the Coffee Partyniks in the House of Representatives and elsewhere in the U.S. political landscape, few seemed to have noticed that the Executive Branch of New York State's government has just been almost taken over by Italian Americans in the corporeal form of Governor-elect Andrew Cuomo and State Comptroller-elect Thomas DiNapoli. This turn of events is something that I am very happy about, but for very different reasons than most voters. The best thing about Cuomo and DiNapoli is that they both also ran on the Working Families Party line. Cuomo put the Working Families Party in row “D,” or fourth favored placement, for the next general election. Also good news for those Italian Americans concerned about the natural, as opposed to political, climate in New York State was the “victory of Green Party candidate Howie Hawkins who garnered more than the 50,000 votes needed to give the Green Party a guaranteed line on state ballots during the next four years. Howie Hawkins is, I think, not Italian however.

On the other hand Italian Americans, who are receiving a State pension, should rejoice in DiNapoli's victory as the sole trustee for the \$129 billion State pension fund that is one of the world's largest. Not only was his Republican opponent a non-Italian, he also offered his Wall Street experience as a **positive** qualification for investment advice. Finally, DiNapoli is the only state-wide candidate who listed his membership in the Sons of Italy as part of his [biography](#) [2] (Member, Sons of Italy, 1983-present) at Project vote Smart.

Given the unfortunate hot breakfast drink metaphors brewed to simplify the already simple-minded partisan political debate in American politics, I use the Cappuccino logo to ask: “What does this all mean for New York State’s Italian Americans?” My guess is that, like his father Mario, Andy Cuomo knows he owes little to the Italian American voter. Since there are few exit pollsters who thought to ask Italian American voters for whom they voted, it would be necessary to do our own poll or to look at the county or assembly district data. Even before looking I would have bet that Italian Americans (especially the men) voted for Carl Paladino and that this would be indicated by Italian American districts having margins much lower than the 2-1 for Cuomo's Statewide average. State-wide elections are won and lost in the New York City Metropolitan area. Since we know from exit polls that 90% of blacks and 85% of Latinos voted for Andy, we can pretty confidently surmise that the Cuomo vote was shared among the racial and ethnic “rest of the electorate.” The final nail in the “Italian American vote for Andy” effort can be teased out of the returns for New York City and its Suburban Counties which clearly show that the more Italian Americans there are the less the vote went for Cuomo. The Richmond County (Staten Island) vote is most informative. Staten Island was only place in the Big Apple where the Republican Party won a congressional seat. There Michael Grimm got 51% of the vote and the Democrat Michael McMahon got 48%; despite moving so far to the right that you would think he was Silvio Berlusconi or even Roberto Maroni.



% Italian-American Population		% Vote for Cuomo	% Vote for Paladino
37.7	Richmond (Staten Island)	57	40
28.8	Suffolk	57	38
23.9	Nassau	60	36
20.8	Westchester	64	31
8.4	Queens	76	19
7.5	Kings (Brooklyn)	78	16
5.5	New York (Manhattan)	83	10
5.2	Bronx (The Bronx)	86	9

In the New York City press, Cuomo and Paladino were contrasts. For simplicity, I'll limit this piece to the Times where, for example, it seemed that Paladino was forged in Italy and Cuomo in Italian America. Obviously ethnic terms like "Italy" or "Italian" or "immigrant" were not frequently used, but many stories had emotional references such as "passion." One particular article was crammed with the ethnic crap, evidently to make up the difference. This despite the fact that, as I had shown in a previous I-Italy article, neither was especially active in Italian or Italian American causes.

[In New York Governor Race, Two Italian Identities](#) [3] by MICHAEL BARBARO told prospective voters that:

"Strategy sessions have been held at a restaurant called Sinatra's. "Sopranos"-style gold chains have shown up in campaign advertisements. Ethnic-tinged terms, like "goumada," and wisecracks about Sicilian grudges have been bandied about. And television news crews from Italy have descended on the candidates.

In the raucous race for governor of New York this year between Andrew M. Cuomo and Carl P. Paladino, an unexpected debate is mesmerizing the Italian-American community and increasingly spilling out into public view: Is the contest shattering long-held ethnic stereotypes or reinforcing them?"

More nuanced contrasts come from two other articles. The New York Times Magazine article "[The Making of Andrew Cuomo](#) [4]" by Jonathan Mahler starts with:



“LAST MONTH, ANDREW Cuomo took some time off from his job as New York’s attorney general, rented a recreational vehicle and drove upstate with his three daughters on an 11-day campaign swing with a little family vacation mixed in: “Camp Campaign” is how Cuomo joked about it with me. The trip infelicitously coincided with what turned out to be a historic heat wave across New York, and he couldn’t get the R.V.’s air-conditioning to work. At his first stop, a community college in Rockland County, Cuomo emerged from the Gulf Stream, his blazer slung uncharacteristically over his shoulder and a bead or two of sweat on his forehead, calling his new vehicle “a toaster oven on wheels.”

And ends with:

“Spitzer, ever the prosecutor, relished the role of combative crusader. Cuomo is casting himself as a very different sort of character. During our conversations about the Legislature, he repeatedly quoted a homespun homily — “You get more flies with honey than with vinegar” — from his grandfather Andrea, a grocer who came to America by boat from Southern Italy. “Everybody is bracing for a confrontation,” Cuomo told me. “I don’t believe there’s going to be a confrontation. The Legislature doesn’t want trouble. They want good news from a P.R. point of view. They need redemption. They need a friend. Eliot could have been their best friend. I think I can be their best friend.”

On the other hand, Gaia Pianigini’s [“A Village in Italy Embraces Paladino \[5\]”](#) article starts with:

“SANTA CROCE DI MAGLIANO, Italy — To many in this hilltop village in southern Italy, Carl P. Paladino is simply known as “O’Mericano,” or the American.

Most of the town’s 4,876 residents do not spend much time on the Internet and know little about United States politics. But word of mouth travels fast, and when the news hit that Mr. Paladino, whose family left here in 1926, was running to be governor of New York, residents were excited.”

And ends with:

“Mr. Paladino’s Democratic opponent, Andrew M. Cuomo, also has roots in Italy, in a town not far from Naples. But in rural areas of Italy, the connection to the local soil is more important than bonds of nationality.

As Teodoro Colombo, 75, a retired construction worker from Santa Croce, put it, “We always like our paesani better.”

Although Andy’s victory may create a political dynasty by being the first son of a New York governor to be elected to that office (his dad appointed me to the New York State Council for the Humanities), what I especially don’t like about the younger Cuomo’s campaign was his ineloquent, use of Tea Party rhetoric, especially since most of his life has been subsidized in one way or another



by taxpayers of one sort or another. To rail against government workers and unions makes me, a pensioner, shudder. In the past, New York State has made good use of our pension funds to borrow from as a last resort. My pension funded the state out of its last near bankruptcy and will probably be called upon again to do the same, involuntarily. The State is in financial trouble not because it gave out too much but because, in its wisdom, it collected too little and gave out rebates and reductions like a drunken sailor. New York City also mimicked President Bushes reckless tax cuts and over the years gave up potential sources of revenue such as the Stock Transfer Tax, carelessly abated Real Estate taxes, and lent public money to private groups to buy up public assets as a way to assuage individuals and corporations who threatened to move to places like New Jersey.

Public unions also allowed the State and City to defer payments into the fund while the stock market was rising (the value of the variable funds rose with the market so the argument was there was less need to make payments) with the promise of making it up in the future when the market, and the value of fund, declined. Of course you can trust politicians to keep their promises...he said jokingly. Everyone knows that the unemployment rate is rising because governments are firing workers and I am sure that the fired workers are not the friends and relatives of those in office. One needs to be reminded that Government is the only employer who takes back part of the wages it pays out and that our previous mischievous State Comptroller, Alan Hevesi's plea deal allows him to keep his felonious pension while workers whose pensions were undermined by his actions may lose theirs.

Since I began this essay with a bad food analogy, I am obliged to do the same at the end. In celebration of the end of the election season, Michael Barbaro in The New York Times announced: "[Out With the Lamb Chops and In With the Lasagna](#) [6]" November 3, 2010 and explained that the former Governor David A. Paterson's "Favorite Meal" was "Lamb chops" and the new guy, Andrew M. Cuomo's "Favorite Meal" was "Lasagna" with the parenthetic remark "(Just don't ask whose is better: his mother's or his girlfriend's.)" Given our own ethnic hyper-sensitivities we should be glad that, for comparison's sake, David didn't like fried chicken. One final note, this election must have been a boon for Italian and Italian American journalists. I have never seen so many such bylines in The Times.

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