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**Italians vs. Themselves:
The Rocky Path to Political Empowerment in Metropolitan Chicago**

Italian Americans have been part of Chicago since before it was incorporated as a city, and for at least the past half century there have been Italian Americans throughout the ranks of government in the city and its suburbs. While there has been a significant Italian presence in the Chicago area for much of its history — with numerous neighborhoods and suburbs identified as “Italian;” dozens of festivals celebrating the ancestral homes of these immigrants; and certainly the annual Columbus Day Parade, during which politicians of all backgrounds jostle for position at the front of the line of march — the same ethnic pride that gives the metropolitan area a robust Italian cultural flavor hasn’t translated into commensurate political power.

My task for this project, defined by the competency requirements, was to analyze the power relations between at least two racial, social or cultural groups in the United States.

The main group that I wanted to focus on is the Chicago-area Italian-American community. By employing both theoretical and qualitative research, I explored how they have risen to positions of political power over the last century, and what obstacles they have encountered along the way. I also endeavored to uncover their current state of political influence and what that can tell us about their political future in the metropolitan area.

That being decided, I still needed to identify that “other” group to which I would compare and contrast the Italian-American community. I have determined that there hasn’t been “one group,” such as the Irish or the Germans, who prevented Italian Americans from becoming a dominant political force in Chicago, or even a force proportionate to their numbers in the population. The “other” that the community has grappled with has been a combination of factors, not the least of them being Italian Americans themselves.

Certainly the Irish count as one of those factors, but you’d also have to take into account other European Americans — such as the Polish, Hispanics and African Americans — as well as the media and entertainment industries, which fueled racism against Italians and perpetuated stereotypes.

To identify the principal factors, though you have to gaze into the heart of the community itself, which came to America with a profound aversion to politics and even each other; steered clear of civic involvement for decades in pursuit of more immediate concerns like putting bread on the table; moved early and often, breaking up whatever political bases they may have established; and responded passively when their political turf was assaulted.

My research for this project consisted of:

- Scouring written accounts of the history of Italian Americans in Chicago to gain a historical perspective on their experience, including their early forays into political life, and the prejudice they encountered in every aspect of their lives, especially where it concerned politics.
- Interviewing a local historian whose work has concentrated on Italian Americans in Chicago to gain added insight from his decades of writing and research in this arena.
- Interviewing Chicago-area Italian Americans who have been active in local politics, either as candidates, officeholders or advisors to both, to document their experiences and perspectives.

Along the way, I discovered that the emergence of Italian-American political power in Chicago in the latter half of the 20th century hasn't been extensively documented. This is one area of analysis that I hope to add to with the interviews I've conducted.

A Note on Terminology — Ethnic labels such as “Italians” or “Irish” mostly refer to Italian Americans or Irish Americans, except for instances where I’m referring to people born in Italy or Ireland, etc.

Way Back When

Italians have been in Chicago since at least 1850, when the census listed four of them, Rudolph Vecoli writes (4). By 1920, Chicago ranked third in the United States after New York and Philadelphia in the size of its Italian population. (Vecoli 77) Drawn to the fast-growing industrial center that Chicago was, Guglielmo writes, more than 20,000 Italians gravitated to the Taylor Street area alone. Another 15,000 lived in adjacent areas in the Near West Side.

Italians found jobs in Chicago's many thriving factories and construction projects, as well as the mines and railroads in the city's vast hinterlands. Countless more opened

small businesses that catered to their language-limited paesani, providing basic services like tailoring and watch repair and specialty items like baked goods and imported food items.

Over the course of the next century, Italians worked their way into the warp and woof of Chicago economic fabric, but politically speaking, they remained stubbornly unwoven. When one examines the obstacles that stood in the way, it's easy to understand why.

Second-Class Citizens

First and foremost was a prejudice so virulent in the early decades that it boggles the modern imagination. The Chicago Tribune used the word "Dago" both casually and with impunity in stories in 1879 and 1886 (Vecoli 67, 145), which the Italian newspaper *L'Italia* protested to little effect. The Tribune, Vecoli writes, called Italian restaurants "Dago dives," and Italian neighborhoods "Dago Districts." In 1903, the Democratic Party attempted to exclude Italians as well as Mexicans from voting in their 'white primaries' since they did not qualify on color grounds. Congressmen in 1912 seriously questioned whether Italians were indeed "full-blooded Caucasians" (Gugliemo 6).

Political albatross

It has been well documented that criminals of Italian descent were drawn to the illicit opportunities and power available through politics during that time period, and that there were politicians of Italian descents who broke the law. But the same can be said of every other ethnic group of that era.

Candeloro writes, "The Italian-American electorate and political leadership was schooled in a milieu in which bossism triumphed over Jane Addams's reformism, one in which non-Italian bosses were often the best sources for patronage jobs, and in an atmosphere where most political campaigns were characterized by violence, intimidation, and hooliganism. The practical reality of this era is that almost all politicians of whatever ethnicity were corrupt." ("Chicago's Italians" 100)

Because of the ceaseless fascination that the news media and entertainment industry have had with the criminal activities of Americans of Italian descent, that involvement has cast a disproportionately long shadow over the community and its economic and political mobility. In the 1910s, Vecoli writes, "thanks mainly to the reporting of Chicago's English- and Italian-language newspapers, 'to be an Italian in Chicago was to be suspect as a member of the Black Hand or Mafia, a red-handed murderer, bomb-thrower, and extortionist'" (Chicago's Italians Prior to World War I). Numerous Italians from all over the Chicago area recalled in oral interviews to Vecoli

that by the 1920s and early 1930s, many Chicagoans assumed that they had criminal connections. Al Capone, writes Vecoli, “became an albatross around the necks of Chicago Italians seeking respectability.” (Encyclopedia of Chicago)

With the attention of the local press riveted on every move of every Italian-American mobster, these relatively few criminals attained a national superstar status that engendered a similar obsession on the part of Hollywood. Hand-in-hand, the news media and the entertainment industry have permanently polluted public perception of Italian-Americans in general, and Italian-American public servants in particular.

“They believe the newspapers,” says Anthony Fornelli, an Italian-American community leader on the national and local levels for more than half a century. “They believe the propaganda” (Personal Interview).

Fornelli calls the “The Godfather” “a great movie,” but it and its relentless stream of successors have had an enormous deleterious effect on public perception and consequent Italian-American ambition in the political arena. “If you achieve anything (and are Italian American) you must be ‘connected,’” Fornelli says, “and the ones not connected don’t want to run — you get that stigma.”

A 1960 graduate of the DePaul University School of Law and a past director of the Illinois Department of Financial Institutions, past chair of the Chicago Plan Commission, and past commissioner of the Chicago Zoning Board of Appeal, Fornelli notes that he has encountered that sort of prejudice every step of his career in public service. “(Others) would say, ‘Well, he’s successful, he’s got to be connected.’ We couldn’t be successful unless we had some reason behind it.”

Because of the pervasive stereotype of Italian Americans as a criminal people, the image of the Italian-American state representative or mayoral candidate as a “made man” endures to this day, despite strong empirical evidence to the contrary. As recently as 2011, Chicago Tribune columnist John Kass wrote about an aldermanic election under the headline, “What’s an election without talk of the mob?” (Chicago Tribune, March 20, 2011). Kass’ assessment seems patently absurd in light of the fact that a source no less authoritative than the FBI declared in 1999 that fewer than 1,200 Italian Americans were still involved in organized crime, a paltry .0068 percent of a total Italian-American population of 17 million. (Italic Institute) Furthermore, according to the Italic Institute, “historically Italian gang members never numbered more than 5,000.”

The Role of the Irish

As they began their halting ascent of the political ladder in Chicago, Italian Americans were often thwarted or co-opted by Irish-American politicians. Was this a power struggle based on ethnicities, though? My research suggests not.

Those who have been pulling the strings politically in Chicago through much of the 20th century were, in fact, Irish American, but any efforts on their part to keep Italians out of the most powerful positions in City Hall weren't rooted so much in ethnic differences as they were in the very function of a well-oiled political machine to sustain itself and prevent any great changes in the course or leadership.

Additionally, the Irish immigrants to the United States, who were hardly welcomed with open arms themselves, did have one great advantage over Italians and other subsequent immigrants, in that they already spoke the language when they arrived in this country.

Bear in mind that the men who ran Chicago for the better part of a half-century were both named Daley — either Richard J. or Richard M. — and while father and then son occupied the mayor's office, no Chicagoan, no matter what their ethnic or racial background, could hope to occupy that office or any other position of power in City Hall without their approval. Such is the nature of the political machine.

As it is and always has been in urban politics, the ethnicity of the mayor has always had a ripple effect through the halls of government. Were the mayors of Chicago for the last century-and-a-half African American or Hispanic or Polish, the political structure would have been recast accordingly, with the main ethnic group ruling the roost and the other ethnic groups fighting for scraps. It can be argued, though, that in that battle for those scraps, Italian Americans fought less enthusiastically than most, and the reasons for that are deep-seated.

Their Own Worst Enemies

From attitudes toward authority brought over from Italy, to the desire to simply work hard and make a good life for themselves and their families, to a general indifference toward politics and passivity in the face of political assault, the Italian-American community has been one of the greatest forces preventing the formation of a politic bloc or achieving upward political mobility.

"Italians didn't have much faith in the government they (left behind) in Italy," historian Dominic Candeloro tells me, and they brought that attitude here. The most articulate Italian leaders on this side of the Atlantic were radicals who held little sway over the hearts and minds of the larger immigrant population, Candeloro explains, the vast major of whom thought "they could make their own way in the world working, leaving it (politics) to the Irish" (Personal interview).

And then there was the unseemly matter of internal prejudice.

The first Italians came to Chicago in 1850 from Northern Italy (Candeloro, CAER 93). When the great waves of Italian immigrants — mainly from the south of Italy — came to Chicago around the turn of the century, the established “American” Italians took little interest in and avoided contact with them (Nelli). “If at all possible, ethnic group members tried to ‘look after their own’ whether in politics, crime, organized labor, or the professions,” (Nelli, p. 154). Except, apparently, for the Italians. “Early arriving northern Italians, however, did not consider ‘Southerners’ to be ‘of their own.’”

Even if their northern counterparts were inclined to coalesce with them politically, the “Southerners” who eventually made up the vast majority of the city’s Italian population would have shown little interest. In the early 20th century, most Chicago Italians cared little about aldermanic and mayoral campaigns, as nearly two-thirds of them weren’t even citizens. (Guglielmo 16). As late as 1924, only about 35 percent of Italian men and women in Chicago were naturalized, and in some neighborhoods these numbers were even lower. And what about the growing number of Italian immigrants who slowly chose to naturalize? When asked in 1923 why they had not voted in the mayoral election, the biggest reason pegged to 315 American citizens of Italian birth was “general indifference.”

A Question of Numbers

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, there were more than half a million residents of the Chicago area whose primary ethnic ancestry was Italian. (Chicago Area Ethnic Resources Handbook 93) As large as those total numbers are, they’re dwarfed by those of other ethnic groups. There are nearly 1 million (967,233) Chicago-area residents who are at least in part Polish; 1,625,703 who count German as at least their first or successive ancestries, and 1,214,150 whose primary or successive ancestries are Irish. (CAER)

“There’s always been the problem of numbers,” Candeloro says, noting that the Italian population in city of Chicago never exceeded 7 percent, which is “not really enough to win anything except on a neighborhood basis.” Observers may point out that Italian Americans have been a significant political presence in East Coast cities such as New York, Boston and Providence, R.I., but as Candeloro points out, the percentage of Italians in those places in some instances approach 50 percent.

Additionally, Guglielmo writes, those early 20th Century “Italian communities” never were exclusively Italian (21).

Dividing and Conquering?

“Then there’s the problem of gerrymandering,” says Candeloro, noting that, in order to get your candidate elected, you need not only numbers, but numbers in a given electoral district over time. This is a problem that Italians have faced from the 1920s to the 1970s, and possibly to this day, should a city of Chicago ward remap hold up that would effectively reduce the number of Italian American aldermen. The aldermen who face the biggest threat from a remap include Northwest Side Ald. Nicholas Sposato and Near West Side Ald. Robert Fioretti –someone often mentioned as a potential mayoral candidate. There are currently two other Chicago aldermen of Italian descent: Margaret Laurino and John Arena, both of whom represent Northwest Side wards.

From the 1920s, when Italian Americans were a burgeoning power bloc on the Near West and Near North Sides of Chicago, to the 1970s, when the number of Italian-American congressmen representing the Chicago area in Washington D.C. went from two to zero with redistricting, gerrymandering has chopped the political aspirations of the Italian-American community off at the knees.

Working hand-in-hand with gerrymandering were major construction projects like the Kennedy Expressway (1960), Dan Ryan Expressway (1961) U of I Circle (now known as UIC) Campus (mid-1960s) and Eisenhower Expressway (1970), which cut through the hearts of the city’s three largest Italian enclaves.

Whether or not these were acts of ethnic cleansing disguised as public works has been endlessly debated. Candeloro asserts, though, that the demise of these neighborhoods was preordained, with urban Italian Americans moving up the economic ladder and out of the old neighborhoods well before construction began. That diaspora was fueled by the home-loan and educational benefits earned by the literally tens of thousands of Italian Americans who served with honor during World War II, he notes.

Candeloro even credits UIC and the University Village Association with stabilizing Taylor Street’s legendary Little Italy, abating white flight and preserving its ethnic flavor for decades longer than if it had been left to its own devices. “Italian Americans never put up much of a fight when it came to preserving its inner city enclaves,” he reveals. “They were among the first white ethnic groups to pick up and move to the suburbs when their neighborhoods began to change.”

But well before there was gerrymandering and public works projects, there were powerful machine politicians who doled out favors and jobs to Italian residents to keep them politically indebted to their sponsors.

Favors for Votes

"I can buy the Italian vote with a glass of beer and a compliment."

-- John Powers, Near West Side alderman, 1920s

One of those machine politicians who knew how to keep the immigrant Italians indebted to him was John Powers, who enjoyed a career as boss of the heavily Italian 19th Ward for nearly 40 years (Nelli 91). Powers "represented the forces of evil and corruption" to social worker and reformer Jane Addams, who battled him for alderman in three campaigns in the 1890s. "'An Italian laborer,' decided Miss Addams after her unsuccessful campaigns against Powers, 'wants a job more than anything else, and quite simply votes for the man who promises him one'" (Nelli, 94).

Powers used his influence liberally in finding Italians jobs on the city clean-up crews, delivering coal to the needy in the dead of winter, getting Italian boys out of scrapes with the law, "furnishing bond for ward residents charged with crimes, obtaining exemptions from city ordinances for community businessmen, distributing turkeys at Christmas" (Nelli 95). He attended every wake, and at election time he did the rounds of the saloons, plying the *paesani* with free beer. (Candeloro "Chicago's Italians")

Nelli also notes that, in the early 20th century, Italian Americans viewed politics through distorted lenses. "Newspaper editors and other middle-class Italians, like their counterparts in the wider community, seemed unable to recognize or accept the realities of core-area and ethnic group politics in Chicago. Reflecting their orientation, they viewed politics as a struggle between good and evil, and this outlook formed a basic factor in their lack of achievement in the political arena. To inner-city immigrants, politics represented a means of obtaining jobs or neighborhood facilities. Machine politicians recognized these expectations and adjusted their actions accordingly" (91).

Nelli writes, though, that "it appears that Powers' hold over the ward could have been broken in the years prior to his retirement in 1927 had reform elements and the Italian community worked together to effect his defeat" (93).

That challenge came to a head in the 1921 aldermanic election, when labor leader Anthony D'Andrea ran against Powers.

D'Andrea began amassing power in the 1910s, Nelli writes.

"He steadily built a solid base of support through his positions as business agent for the Sewer and Tunnel Miners' Union, president of the Hod Carriers' and Laborers' local organization, and president of the Unione Siciliana. These labor unions and the Unione, the largest and most influential Italian fraternal group in the city, provided D'Andrea a ready nucleus of voting strength when he began to test Powers' control over the ward." (105)

The 19th Ward aldermanic race of 1921 would have tested even the toughest of candidates. "I don't think Chicago politics have ever been run by Marquess of Queensbury rules," says Candeloro, but the 19th Ward aldermanic race of 1921 was particularly nasty and violent.

The contest featured not only a propaganda war played out in the newspapers, as well as literature distributed door to door, but also violence and intimidation, according to Nelli. Bombs exploded at a D'Andrea rally, as well as at Powers' home. "Both sides resorted to bombings as a technique of political 'persuasion' (and) "Chief of Police Charles Fitzmorris dismissed the bombings as 'politics.'" (107).

"February 22, election day, marked the sordid culmination of a bloody and vicious campaign" (110). Powers triumphed by the narrow margin of 381 votes. Not more than three months later, D'Andrea was dead. He suffered fatal wounds from a shotgun attack on May 11, 1921: "a brutal show of force from opponents and a warning to ambitious D'Andrea followers" (123).

Then, Nelli says, an equally effective blow to the political aspirations and muscle of Italian Americans was struck: The number of wards in the city was increased from 35 to 50, and existing ward boundaries were changed. "In the process, Boss Powers managed to have the huge West Side Italian colony, which provided a majority of votes in the old 19th Ward, carved up and distributed as groups of minority residents in four new wards: the 20th, 25th, 26th, and 27th" (123)

After the gerrymandering, Nelli says, "it was not until the election of Albert Prignano in the Near West Side's 20th Ward in 1927 that Italians had a compatriot alderman." (223)

"Mayor" Capone

Despite the 1923 gerrymandering and increase of the number of Chicago wards, an Italian was elected alderman by the end of the 1920s, and Italians were able to begin to flex their political muscle because of one man whose name would become legend. In his introduction to Nelli's book, Richard Wade, general editor of the Urban Life in America book series, referred to Al Capone thusly: "Indeed, at 32 years old, he became the town's youngest 'mayor.'" (ix)

Capone bought considerable influence with his contributions to Mayor Bill Thompson, and many Italians who would not have had a career in politics had a seat at the table because of Capone. Disenfranchised by the more Americanized Italians who came before them and lacking any real political outlet in the existing power structure, southern Italians, writes Nelli, "did not make their political presence in the city really felt until the 1920s when, under the leadership and guidance of [crime bosses] John Torrio

and Al Capone, they found politics and its urban handmaiden, crime, to offer an increasingly important source of money as well as a means of social mobility” (154).

Despite their nascent political influence, there was “never anybody really standing up for Italian issues,” Candeloro says. “They were there to get jobs for their (family and friends).” It would be decades before a “clean” Italian-American politician would get elected in Chicago, Candeloro says.

The dysfunctional relationship between the non-Italian ward boss and his Italian constituents continued well into subsequent decades. Fornelli, who served as a precinct captain in the Near West Side 28th Ward for a few years in the first half of the 20th century, explains, “You were beholden to your committeeman for a job. You went to your precinct captain to get something done,” for matters ranging from garbage pickup to someone needing a job. “Everything you did, you owed to the precinct captain and on election day is when he collected,” Fornelli says, adding that as long as the precinct captains delivered the votes on election day, “the mayor left them alone.”

Fornelli acknowledges that there was a criminal element in those early Italian neighborhoods, but contended that it was their perceived influence, not their actual maneuverings, that deterred Italian Americans from seeking public office. “When two or three Italians got together it was (called) a conspiracy,” he said. “So you couldn’t elect them.” Consequently, he said, “Those people who were good, capable and knowledgeable didn’t want to run for office.”

Those who chose to run for higher office tended to pursue judgeships, Fornelli says. But even those positions were subject to political influence, since candidates for federal judgeships are nominated by U.S. senators, and in the past those nominations were made based on the recommendations of City Hall.

Even as Italian Americans ascended the political ladder, they continued to serve as beasts of burden for the political power structure. “You could elect an Italian as alderman and you could send him to the state house, (but) your state rep is usually picked by your ward committeeman,” Fornelli says, noting that it’s hard for an officeholder who is so beholden to vote on behalf of the electorate.

“You knew in those days, if you wanted to run, you had to go to certain people,” he explained. “They controlled the Democratic Party, they controlled certain wards and certain districts.” Fornelli ruefully recalls a pair of state reps who he preferred not to name — one a “chalk man” for a bookie and the other a guy who “played softball in the neighborhood” — who “did crosswords (in the General Assembly) until it was time to vote,” and then voted the way those who pulled his strings wanted him to.

An early machine politician who chaffed at the bit was Roland Libonati. “A brilliant lawyer,” according to Fornelli, Libonati was also “one of Al Capone’s lawyers.” In

fact, that's Libonati sitting two seats from Capone as the mobster talked to Chicago Cub Gabby Hartnett at Wrigley Field in 1931.



One would think that Libonati's association with Capone might have hampered him politically, but according to Todd Purdum — author of "An Idea Whose Time Has Come," about the battle for the Civil Rights Act of 1964— Libonati's career ended because he refused to march in lockstep with Mayor Richard J. Daley on a key vote in Congress.

As Purdum tells it, on Oct. 28, 1963, "Libonati — who had caused so much trouble in the first place — proved to be a pain in the president's neck, refusing to accept the new compromise. Kennedy was so irked that he ducked out of the meeting to telephone Libonati's patron, Mayor Daley. 'Roland Libonati is sticking it right up us,' Kennedy complained. 'He's standing with the extreme liberals who are gonna end up with no bill at all. 'He'll vote for it,' Daley exclaimed. 'He'll vote for any goddamned thing you want!' ... Indeed, later that night, Libonati sent word to the White House that he would support the president."

But Libonati "changed his mind yet again" the next morning. Even without his backing, the compromise bill went to the Judiciary Committee and "the Kennedy team prevailed," Purdum writes. "The biggest loser was Libonati, who confided to a colleague that he had received word from the Daley machine that his political career was over."

Libonati did not run for reelection in 1964 and returned to Chicago, where he resumed the practice of law.

A photo of Libonati standing next to President Johnson (to the right of the President) as he signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 isn't as widely known as the previous photo.



From those decades of subservience grew a desire on the part of some in the community to seize the reins of power rather than always to be stuck in the traces. “That’s why you wanted the political strength,” Fornelli explains.

A New Day Dawning

“An independent Italian-American politician was unheard of before Tony Scariano came along,” Candeloro says. “Until about 1960, you can write off just about everybody.”

Scariano, an assistant U.S. attorney in Chicago from 1949 to 1954, served as state representative from the south suburbs from 1956 to 1973, when he was appointed by Gov. Dan Walker to the Illinois Racing Board. He later served as an Illinois Appellate Court Judge from 1985 to 1996.

A 2014 Chicago Tribune obituary said the following of Scariano: “Demonstrating his stand against the political status quo, Mr. Scariano was one of the architects of the state’s first Open Meetings Act, aimed at providing the sunshine of public disclosure and input into the often-secretive closed-door meetings where government business was transacted. His push for greater powers to investigate organized crime also earned him enmity from party regulars. In Springfield, Mr. Scariano often decried the bossism of state Democratic politics under Mayor Richard J. Daley.”

The other two rising Italian-American stars in the local political firmament were Frank Annunzio and Marty Russo.

Succeeding Libonati in the 7th District, Annunzio was first elected to Congress in 1964 and served until 1993, surviving one redistricting but retiring when a second contest in a new district loomed.

A New York Times obituary points out that as a member of the House Banking Committee, Annunzio championed the rights of the consumers against abuses by credit card companies. He also “championed such diverse causes as the survival of the neighborhood savings and loan and the minting of commemorative coins to raise money for civic projects.”

Additionally, “Annunzio played important roles in arranging the financial package that helped New York City weather its financial crisis in the 1970s, in granting federal loans that assured the survival of the Chrysler Corporation and in minting commemorative coins that helped finance the restoration of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island” (New York Times). He attracted nationwide attention when he urged credit card holders to cut up or burn their cards to help force down interest rates.

Annunzio “epitomized the Italian and ran on that, always,” Fornelli says, adding that he was a major protagonist in getting Columbus Day proclaimed a national holiday. Another passion of Annunzio’s was Villa Scalabrini, a nursing home in west suburban Northlake that was founded in 1951 by the Missionaries of St. Charles, a religious order created in Italy in the late 1800s to minister to the spiritual and temporal needs of Italian immigrants. Still in operation today under the stewardship of Presence Health, the Villa primarily served Italian Americans for decades. It was opened in 1951 by the Rev. Armando Pierini.

“A key figure in his community,” according to his 1998 obituary in the Chicago Tribune, Fr. Pierini was also the founder of the Fra Noi newspaper and a leader behind the formation of the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans. “Father Pierini was a very humble man,” Fornelli says, adding that the Italian-born priest was also “a very good fundraiser” in the Italian-American community.

According to the Tribune:

“In 1972, Fr. Pierini didn't hesitate to write a letter with U.S. Rep. Frank Annunzio that they sent directly to Frank Sinatra, asking whether he would perform at a benefit to raise funds for Villa Scalabrini. Sinatra responded almost immediately to Fr. Pierini's passionate request. ‘You print the tickets and I'll be happy to pay for the rest,’ he said.”

“Frank Annunzio latched on to the Villa Scalabrini as the good thing he could do in life,” Fornelli says. “He helped the Villa Scalabrini and as such was well-known in the community as an activist.”

Annunzio represented the 7th Congressional District from 1965 to 1973, and the 11th District from 1973 to 1993. Following the Census of 1970, Congressional districts were redrawn, and “a circle was drawn around the city,” Fornelli says. “His district was given to the 6th District, which was run by an Irishman.” The 11th District was represented by Roman Pucinski, who opted to run for U.S. senator. “He took a chance because of Muskie,” Fornelli says, noting that the Polish-American Pucinski was hoping to ride the coattails of fellow Polish American Edmund Muskie, a U.S. senator from Maine who was running for the Democratic nomination for president in 1972.

Annunzio left his district to run in Pucinski’s Northwest Side district in 1972, inching past Republican candidate John Hoellen by only 15,000 votes. “That was a great victory,” Fornelli says. “We had to work hard to get it.”

But, “after 18 years, he lost it” following another remap, according to Fornelli. “Frank was told he couldn’t run anymore. And it was time,” Fornelli says. “He was getting old, forgetful. It was time for him to go.”

While Annunzio had built his reputation as the area’s Italian-American congressman, the downside, according to Fornelli, was that “other politicians didn’t look at him as the representative of their people, but as the representative of the Italian people.”

With more and more Italian Americans moving to the suburbs, Annunzio lost his base, Fornelli says. “Committeemen on the Northwest Side wanted their people, and he wasn’t their people.”

Fellow Italian American Marty Russo also served in Congress through the 1970s and ’80s, and he, too, lost his seat to redistricting in 1992. Unlike Annunzio, who played up his Italian heritage and actively supported Italian-American interests and concerns, Russo “ran as a mainstream candidate,” Fornelli says.

Russo was first elected to Congress in 1974 at the age of 30, “in a 2-1 Republican District,” Russo said in an address before the American Academy of Craniofacial Pain in Washington, D.C., in March of 2014. Russo told his audience, “I’m a first-generation Italian American. My father came here from Italy in 1920. He worked three jobs. His mantra was, ‘Work hard, get a good education, and be a man of your word.’”

In addition to serving as deputy whip during his tenure in Congress, Russo was on the House Ways and Means Committee from 1979 to 1992. He was vice chairman of the Subcommittee on Health and — as a proponent of healthcare coverage for all

Americans — proposed a single-payer healthcare bill in 1991. In “The Politics of Health Care Reform, Lessons From the Past, Prospects for the Future,” Mark A. Peterson calls Russo, “a major advocate of single-payer reform.”

Russo served nine terms before redistricting caught up with him. Losing to fellow incumbent William Lipinski, “a darling of the Democratic machine” (Candeloro.), Russo became a lobbyist and now runs his own lobbying firm.

An Associated Press story from Nov. 13, 1991, explains the 1992 redistricting that forced out both Annunzio and Russo.

“(Russo and Lipinski) both climbed the local political ladder with the help of Mayor Richard J. Daley’s vaunted Democratic machine. But now much of Russo’s district is being pushed into Lipinski’s territory, so he’s moving there, too.” That same story also noted, “Annunzio, a member of Congress for 27 years, survived a tough race in 1990, but this time he may retire rather than fight.” Annunzio’s choice, the story pointed out, would have been to challenge one of two veteran Democratic congressmen, Sidney Yates or Dan Rostenkowski. “I’m not going to run to be a hero,” Annunzio told the AP.

The community had to wait until the late 1970s to capture a statewide office, when Democrat Jerome Cosentino was elected Illinois treasurer in 1978, retaking the post in 1986 after a four-year hiatus. Even that was a pyrrhic victory, according to Fornelli, who point out that Cosentino ran unsuccessfully for secretary of state in 1982 and 1990.

The treasurer’s office has “about 200 jobs, strictly clerical,” Fornelli points out, but “when he tried to run for secretary of state (a post that carried about 5,000 patronage jobs) he lost twice.”

No Italian American has held statewide office in Illinois since Cosentino. It was also apparent in other arenas of power that the more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

The Old Boys’ Network

Fornelli had long contended that the closed door for Italian Americans in Chicago wasn’t limited strictly to politics.

In the 1970s, while he served as president of UNICO National, the nation’s largest Italian-American service organization, he commissioned an ethnic analysis of the executive suites of the leading corporations in Chicago. The study originated at the

request of the Polish American Congress and the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans, and was later expanded to include blacks and Latinos.

The study revealed that although Italians made up 4.8 percent of the population of the Chicago metropolitan area, they represented just 1 percent of directors and 2.9 percent of officers of the 106 largest Chicago corporations. At least the Italians made out better than the other groups: Poles, who then accounted for 6.9 percent of the area's population, made up just 0.3 percent of the directors and 0.7 percent of the officers of those corporations; Latinos, then 4.4 percent of the population, claimed just 0.1 percent of directors and 0.1 percent of officers; and blacks, then 17.6 percent of the area population, made up just 0.4 percent of directors and 0.1 percent officers.

"We found there was an old boys' network," Fornelli says. He also noted that a cursory reading of the numbers led some to believe that Italian Americans were making greater inroads into the corporate mainstream than they actually were, because many of the Italian-American led corporations were family-owned.

Knowing the political history of the community, it's easy to posit impediments well beyond an old boys' network. The insular nature of the community and its historical disdain for the halls of power most certainly came into play, as no doubt did discrimination based on a presumption of mob connections. What Fornelli's study proved beyond a shadow of a doubt is that, in the highest political and corporate echelons of the city, Italian Americans were being under-represented.

A Network of One's Own

The redistricting that took out both Annunzio and Russo was a watershed event for the Italian-American community of Chicago. It was this decimation of political power that spurred the creation of the Italian American Political Coalition.

A handful of attorneys and businessmen met at the law offices of Amari & Locallo to form the IAPC. Leonard Amari doesn't believe that the redistricting was aimed at ridding the system of Italian-American congressmen because of their ethnicity, though he firmly believes that Italian Americans were targeted because of their relative passivity. "The group that wouldn't complain, or complain the least, was the Italian Americans," he says.

In an account of the founding of the IAPC penned in 2008, Amari writes, "all of the founding board members were united in one purpose, to react to the disenfranchisement of our community in the political process, to do what we could to encourage people from our community to run for public office, and to be active in politics at every level."

“Our mission,” Amari writes, “is to register folks from our community to vote, to encourage Italian Americans to seek public office, to raise funds and to create mailings and any other vehicle available to us, in order to demonstrate that our community can impact the outcome of an election.”

The IAPC organizes endorsement sessions before each election. In addition, it hosts an annual Mayors’ Reception aimed at uniting municipal leaders of Italian descent, and a Togetherness Reception to which elected officials of every ethnic background at every level of government are invited. (Amari)

Cook County Commissioner Peter Silvestri has been involved in the IAPC for 20 years and is the first elected official to serve as the group’s president.

He says the advantages of IAPC are two-fold. “To the community as a whole, it provides an opportunity to be heard. And for candidates, it provides a chance to build support from the Italian community that crosses party lines.” Overall, the IAPC “gives us better opportunity to be recognized as a group,” Silvestri says.

Attorney and Immediate Past President Richard Pellegrino says that the group has at times endorsed non-Italians over Italians, noting that the five values that the IAPC looks in candidates are, “Fairness, equity, no negative stereotyping of anyone, honesty and loyalty to the citizenry.”

Biogotry’s Ugly Head

Even with advances in the latter half of the 20th century, Italian Americans who vied for elected office still have had to contend with prejudice and baseless character attacks. Perhaps the most egregious example arose when west suburban attorney Aldo Botti ran for chairman of the DuPage County Board in the 1990 Republican Primary against Jack Kneupper, a former state senator who had held the job since 1978.

“Botti’s upset win rocked DuPage County GOP regulars, setting up a factional war within DuPage County government and its dominant Republican party,” writes political scientist Paul Green. From the moment Botti took office in December 1990, he was “at loggerheads with other DuPage Republicans, including many of his county board members, most other elected DuPage local and state government officials and most important of all (then State Senate President) James “Pate” Philip,” Green writes (“DuPage County Republicans avoid showdown, but rival camps deeply divided”).

During the race, Botti was the target of anti-Italian slurs by those opposing his candidacy. “They said I was Italian (therefore) I was Mafia, organized crime,” he recalls. The attacks were particularly galling, Botti said, because, “I’m from hardworking,

immigrant parents. Most of us had top-secret clearances in the military (in World War II).”

The bulk of the character attacks came not from the voters, Botti says, but from the party regulars. “The majority of people are not prejudiced,” Botti says. “There were a few who were movers and shakers who were prejudiced and who would cause you harm, hurt your right to earn a living.”

Asked how he dealt with the prejudice and name-calling during his campaign, Botti says, “I told them what I thought of them. It was not good politics. Perhaps the smart thing would be to let it roll off my back, but that’s not my personality.

Botti served one term as chairman of the DuPage County Board, but the imbroglia took its toll. He chose not to seek reelection in 1994.

Salvatore “Sam” Tornatore, one of four Italian Americans who now serve on the DuPage County Board, acknowledges the contributions made by Botti and others who ran for office in a much tougher environment. Botti, he says, was one of those “Italian-American pioneers, going out there and running for office and blazing the trail.”

Botti maintains that national Italian-American groups historically have not responded as vigorously to attacks on their community’s character as the Anti-Defamation League or the NAACP, for example. “Italian Americans let it roll off their backs. They don’t fight it as vociferously.”

So Italians seeking public office have had two handicaps to deal with, according to Botti: “the portrayal of the Italian American as criminal” and the lack of an aggressive pushback from national Italian-American groups.

Slow to Die

Without exception, each of the elected officials I spoke to mentioned that they had encountered some degree of prejudice toward Italian Americans in their political campaigns and public service. Even those who have brushed such incidents aside noted that they had either heard or heard of comments directed at them that drew a connection between them and organized crime.

For some, like Botti and Fornelli, the attacks were personal, virulent and damaging. For others, incidents ranged from offhand remarks to comments meant in jest.

When asked whether he had encountered anti-Italian prejudice on the campaign trail, Hillside Mayor Joseph Tamburino says, “Sure I did, especially when I first started. It

was a question of lack of trust. Some people might think all Italian Americans are connected to organized crime.”

Hawthorn Woods Mayor Joseph Mancino says that when it happens to him, “I always acknowledge it and I generally treat it as humor. Which is how it mostly is intended. (But) humor or not, I acknowledge it directly. And I explain that I’m a proud American.

“I never let it slide off my back,” Mancino notes. “I address it directly. Anytime I’ve had to do that, it completely disarms people. I also talk about true ethnicity with them. What our heritage really means (in terms of characteristics that Italians truly value, such as hard work, integrity and family).”

Mancino, who was born in Sicily in 1965 and moved with his family to the Chicago area when he was a young boy, shares with them the story of the Italian immigrants. Those stories stress that, in Italy, “We were farmers and cooks and seamstresses, and we came here to chase the American Dream,” Mancino explains. “That really works well for me and at the same time enlightens them.”

Pellegrino — who was mayor of Indian Head Park from 1999 to 2007 and served in a variety of public capacities such as board member of the Pace Transportation Service and executive director of the West Central Municipal Conference — has also encountered prejudice in the course of his political career.

He recalls an incident in 1999, after he was elected mayor. A local reporter approached him with questions about village business, but also asked him about an episode of “The Sopranos.” He took offense to the fact that the reporter might have assumed that he had some kind of insight into the life of the fictional mob family portrayed on the HBO show, and he told her, “I’ll tell you one thing — no one named Soprano ever took the bar exam for me.”

Prejudice is out there, he says, but “I think it’s more subtle. In some circles, there is an undercurrent that still exists. And we must be vigilant about it.”

To counter these prejudices, Pellegrino says, “You have to be engaged in the (political) arena. Local government is of critical importance. It has such a tremendous impact on our quality of life: by being involved in the arena and demonstrating our abilities and encouraging future generations to become involved.”

Silvestri expresses thoughts of a similar nature. “When you are Italian American and you run for office and you get elected, you continue to decrease the influence of that (prejudicial) effect.”

Pellegrino reflects that, in spite of the obstacles and prejudices, “I think we’ve had a tremendous success in Illinois” in fighting these prejudices and getting elected to office, at least at the more local levels.”

Berwyn Mayor Robert Lovero says he has encountered anti-Italian comments, but that it is “very, very minimal” and would often cast the commentator in a bad light. “I don’t think these type of comments ring true with the general public as they might have at one time,” he concludes.

Catherine Adduci is president of River Forest, an upper-middle-class community that was once home to so many prominent mobsters that it is now a popular destination for bus tours that traffic in the Chicago-area’s mobster past. Being an Italian American from River Forest, Adduci has heard comments such as “you’re part of the mob” or “you’re tied to the mob,” but she tends to ignore them because “it’s irrelevant, actually.”

She says that in her community, where the median household income is \$600,000, residents are more likely to associate Italian Americans with the Italy they have traveled to, and their perceptions of Italy are of a place where some of their favorite foods or clothing designers originated, and not as the place that spawned a breed of American criminals.

Political Sea Change

As prejudices faded and political machines loosened their grip on power, Italian Americans throughout the Chicago area have answered the call to represent their communities in government. Many of those opportunities have emerged in the suburbs, with most of them occurring on the municipal and county level and in the state legislature.

“Italians have been more successful getting elected as state legislators, county judges, and suburban mayors,” Candeloro writes. “The number of Italians in the larger electoral units has never been great enough to challenge successfully other ethnic groups, and the Mafia image has made it difficult for Italian politicians in larger districts. However, in electoral units such as the city wards and the suburbs like Chicago Heights, Blue Island, Evergreen Park, Elmwood Park, Highwood and Melrose Park, Italian Americans have been successful” (Ethnic Chicago 255)

Amari points to the large number of Italian American mayors and village presidents in Chicago’s vast suburban girdle. For him, it has been a simple matter of geographical evolution, as Italians, who traditionally resided in one of five Chicago neighborhoods, moved up and out of the city.

A surprising number of these new political opportunities have opened up in recent years in the Republican Party. With the changing of the political guard in DuPage County, long a Republican stronghold, the party is now opening doors that it once slammed in the face of Aldo Botti, and Italian American candidates are passing through in increasing numbers.

Dennis Reboletti has served two terms in the Illinois House and is mounting a campaign for the senate that's likely to succeed. Angelo Saviano and Franco Coladipietro have parlayed successful tenures in the House into successful runs for the presidencies of Elmwood Park and Bloomingdale respectively.

And Salvatore Tornatore, Gary Grasso and Peter DiCianni all sit on the 18-member County Board that once tried to shun Botti. Each and every one did so under the aegis of the Republican Party. (It could be argued that the fourth Italian-American commissioner, Robert Larsen, would have been spared any lingering prejudice because of his surname.)

That political sea change has been engendered by a major shift in population, according to Tornatore. There has been "an infusion of Italian Americans" into DuPage County in the years since Botti's campaign, he notes, "and with that came more Italian Americans who ran for elected office."

Nowadays in DuPage County, "you may find more Italian Americans (in political office) than any other ethnic groups," Tornatore observes. "Because of that, you don't hear any of those disparaging remarks. It wouldn't be tolerated. It's definitely a change."

Ethnicity vs. Party

Amari believes that Italian Americans have an obligation to help one another, regardless of party affiliation or political leaning. "When you get to the top of the ladder, you don't pull it up," he says. He offered the example of one local Italian-American elected official, a Republican, who assisted his daughter, a Democrat, when she ran in the 2014 Democratic Primary for a judgeship.

Asked if Italian-American voters support Italian candidates these days, Silvestri says, "My personal experience has been yes." However, he says, Italian voters don't vote solely on ethnicity. "I don't think it's lockstep," but in general, "Italian Americans support Italian Americans unless there's some issue (that trumps ethnicity)."

Italian American voters will look critically at the candidates, and vote for whom they believe will do the best job in office, Tornatore asserts. "I think that quite frankly Italian Americans are pretty good at sizing up people and voting" for them based on their qualifications.

But all things being equal, he adds, they will vote for fellow Italian Americans, even if it means crossing party lines. “Italian Americans in their heart may vote for another Italian simply because of that last name,” he said, “even if they have never pulled a Republican ballot in their lives.

“At the end of the day it becomes about family and putting food on the table and being loyal,” and party labels aren’t as important as making life better for the voters, Tornatore says. “Party labels don’t matter as long as (the voters) know you. Party labels are for people who don’t know the candidate.”

Governing Diversity

While elected officials such as Silvestri and Coladipietro represent areas that continue to be Italian strongholds, others, such as Berwyn Mayor Robert Lovero and Bellwood Mayor Frank Pasquale, govern municipalities where Italian Americans are small minorities.

When Lovero moved to Berwyn in the early 1960s, the population was “predominantly Czech, with Irish, Polish, German and some Italian,” he says. And if anything, the community has become more diverse since then. “We’re a real diverse community, ethnically and racially. We have a larger Latino population (which he estimates at about 50 percent of the population) and a forming demographic of African Americans.”

Lovero, who is “three-quarters Italian and one-quarter Hispanic,” says reaching out to the town’s ethnic groups is a necessity. “I’ve worked very hard with groups (on) Latino rights. I’ll pretty much work with anyone who comes my way that will help the residents of the city of Berwyn.” He says that the mayor’s office “wasn’t something that was handed to me. I’ve worked hard to get to where I’m at – I think they realize that.”

“My ethnicity comes out all the time,” Lovero says. “The way I approach my view of myself is I’m an American, with Italian and Hispanic heritage.” He believes that his twin ethnic identity appeals to both the Italians and the Hispanics in his community. “The Italians in my community have a certain affinity because of our shared heritage.” But at the same time, he said, “some of the Latinos look at me as part Latino.” And the general population looks at his accomplishments, not his ethnicity.

When Pasquale moved to Bellwood as a high school teacher 51 years ago, the near west suburb “was predominantly white,” but “right now we’re 75 percent African American; 12 percent Hispanic; 9 percent white. We have a lot of diversity here.”

Having been reelected three times and looking forward to his fourth victory, he says that he can't play on any sort of ethnic or racial politics and expect to stay in office. "There's never been a racial issue," Pasquale says. "These residents, they don't buy that. If it were a black-white issue, I wouldn't be sitting here. I've gotten a lot of support from African Americans."

Pasquale says that the only time when ethnicity becomes an issue in his town is during campaigns, when, "My oppositions' platform has been, 'Why should a predominantly African-American town have an Italian-American mayor?' I tell them, 'Tell me what you're gonna do for the village that I'm not doing' and they can't."

Pasquale says that Bellwood's African-American residents are politically "very sophisticated." Many have moved to Bellwood from Chicago, he explains, and they don't want race-based political battles like the ones they witnessed in the city. "They're the first to come to my defense. They say, 'you just keep doing what you're doing, mayor.' Sometimes I get complaints, but it's not about my ethnicity."

In addition to serving as a county commissioner, Silvestri was village president of Elmwood Park for 24 years, until 2013. According to the 2010 Census, about 20 percent of Elmwood Park's approximately 25,000 residents are of Italian heritage. Asked how his ethnic strategies may have changed when running for county commissioner, in a district where the concentration of Italians isn't as high as that of Elmwood Park's, Silvestri says that he has "never run as an Italian American." When he campaigns, it is "as a candidate for all of the people of our district." His district has sizeable Polish, Mexican and Irish populations, and he has to convince those groups, as well as others, that he will represent them all. "It's true in elections, it's true in business, it's true in life," Silvestri says. "If you seek the support of others, you don't want to discriminate against others who support you."

Tornatore says that elected officials who are Italian American have to appeal to more than just their own ethnic group. "You can't rely only on Italian Americans to vote for you, (but) that base is really important."

Catherine Adduci's hometown of River Forest may be at the other end of the socio-economic spectrum from towns such as Berwyn and Bellwood, but she also is the chief municipal official in a town where Italian Americans are not a dominant ethnic group.

In affluent River Forest, ethnicity doesn't count for much, according to Adduci. "The real difference here is 53 percent of River Forest is female. I'd say that probably weighed more than my ethnic background. The combination (of being Italian American and a woman) has helped."

In Hawthorn Woods, a village of about 7,600 in far northern Lake County, “there are definitely not” enough Italians to form any type of voting bloc, according to Mancino. “There’s just a handful of us,” he says, noting that his ethnicity works in his favor in unexpected ways. “I’ve had constituents talk to me about my ethnicity – I’m an immigrant – and they’ve shared stories about their parents and grandparents. They see it as an accomplishment to come here as an immigrant and (be elected to public office).”

What’s In A Name?

Anthony Scariano was an adamant supporter of selecting judges based on merit appointment rather than Illinois’ system of an elected judiciary, and with good reason (Tribune obituary).

Voters don’t often have the same amount of information on judicial candidates that they have on candidates for other offices, and hence fall back on casting their votes for judicial candidates based on the candidates’ gender and perceived ethnicity.

Leonard Amari’s daughter, Katherine, was one of two candidates in the March 18, 2014, Democratic Primary race for judge in the 10th Sub-Circuit, which included north and northwest parts of the city of Chicago, as well as a few suburban townships.

On the ballot and in campaign materials, she used her married name, Katherine A. O’Dell. There was a strategic reason behind this, Amari explains. When it comes to judicial contests, he says, “Irish female surnames are the most successful in Cook County.”

In observing elections over the past 44 years, Amari notes that “the only time ethnicity matters is how hostile the name is. If (voters are) unfamiliar with the candidates, they’ll (often) vote for the least hostile name.”

O’Dell’s opponent in the 10th Sub-Circuit race was Anthony C. “Tony” Kyriakopoulos. By emphasizing her Irish married name and de-emphasizing her Italian surname in the race against a Greek American, Amari said before election day that, “We’re hoping they’ll vote for her instead of the ethnic name.”

O’Dell’s campaign did produce ethnic-based mailings to each of the four main groups in the area — Polish, Irish, Irish, and Hispanic — featuring endorsements by popular leaders and organizations representing each group. According to Amari, that sort of appeal isn’t limited just to ethnic groups: “Policemen vote for policemen and firemen vote for firemen,” he explains.

O'Dell lost to Kyriakopoulos by a relatively narrow margin of 7,806 to 6,409 (54.91 percent to 45.09 percent). However, in the four suburban townships, the results were considerably closer (Cook County Clerk's Election Results).

One could argue that O'Dell lost in spite of all the ethnic maneuvering that her campaign engaged in. But considering that O'Dell was pitting her scant decade of experience "mainly in property tax appeals" (Tribune endorsement) against a candidate with two decades of experience as an assistant state's attorney and four years as a judge, and the endorsements of the Democratic Party, Chicago Tribune, police and firefighters unions, and a handful of retired judges, her narrow loss can be seen as a victory for shrewd ethnic campaigning that kept the candidate's Italian heritage artfully in the background.

Asked if having an Italian name helps or hurts them, most Italian Americans feel that it either doesn't matter or actually helps to a small degree. Either way, none of them have gone to any lengths to hide their ethnic background.

"I wear it proudly, Adduci says. "(Adduci) is my maiden name. I talk about it proudly, as we all should."

"In my community's case, I don't think it helps or hurts," Tamburino says. "We still have quite a few Italian Americans living in Hillside. (For) the younger people, it doesn't make much difference."

"I think that being Italian American is neither a detriment or a benefit. People look beyond that now," Silvestri says. "I think more people than ever vote for a candidate than the ethnicity or party label. You reach out to everybody; you want everyone to support you."

In contrast to what Aldo Botti encountered in the early 1990s, "I don't think it's a detriment anymore (in DuPage County), and in some areas it may be a benefit," Tornatore says. "You'll still get the crowd who (makes a connection between a candidate or Italians in their community and fictional depictions of Italians they see on TV), but those are the minority."

Pasquale says that, when it comes to his ethnicity, in his town, "I make nothing at all of it." He pointed out, though, that with a name like Pasquale, "it's hard to hide my ethnicity." Yet, "I've never heard anyone (refer to him as) 'the Italian mayor.' I feel very fortunate. I treat everyone — white, black, Hispanic — the same. I don't see color. Tell me your problem and I'll try to help you. I think they respect that."

Mancino says that he draws upon his heritage, insofar as the values his parents instilled in him, but he stressed, "I'm not an Italian, I'm an American." He said he treats

his ethnicity “the same way as I’d treat anything else in my life. I don’t downplay it, I don’t up-play it. It’s just part of who I am. It’s not a focus in general.”

Does Ethnicity Still Matter?

I posed that same question to each of my interviewees. The answers spanned the spectrum from the heartily affirmative to the strongly negative.

At one end was Leonard Amari, who says, “If you don’t (believe ethnicity matters), you’re naïve.” Amari believes that voting along ethnic lines could help to correct the injustices of the past, when Italian Americans were shut out of the process for a variety of reasons. Those who “vote Italian” do so, he said, “because we feel like we’ve always been on the outside looking in.”

For an elected official such as Pasquale, who governs a town where there are few Italians, “If you do think that ethnicity matters, you don’t have any place in politics. You have to deal with so many different people. And there’s the trust issue.” He says that voters may not trust a candidate to work for their interests if they think the candidate only cares for the well-being of one group in particular.

Tamburino thinks there is still a place for ethnicity in modern politics, as it helps public officials empathize with their constituents. “You have to be able to identify with them, one way or another.” He concedes, however, that it matters much more to older voters than to younger ones, who are exposed more to other cultures and the world at large, so that their circles aren’t confined only to their own ethnic groups.

Does it still matter if a federal judge is Italian American? Pellegrino thinks so. The reason might be intangible, but it is no less real. He mentioned arguing as a lawyer before the U.S. Supreme Court, which counts two justices — Samuel Alito and Antonin Scalia — Italian descent. “I felt tremendous pride looking up at the Supreme Court in October 2013.”

Prospects for the Future

Compared to when he first ran for office some 30 years ago, Silvestri says it is both “easier and harder” to be an Italian-American candidate nowadays: easier, he says, because “people accept Italian Americans as part of mainstream America”; harder in that the Italian-American community is “not as cohesive as it was.”

Whatever influence ethnicity has on their personal identities and political agendas, every person I spoke to agreed that it's harder to make that influence felt when you're sitting on the sidelines.

"Get involved, you can make a difference," Russo says. "You need to get involved, and stay active. Taking the time to get involved is the best way to make sure that you're at the table, and not on the menu" (Craniofacial conference).

Italians in Chicago may not have had the citizenship, numbers, inclination or opportunity to achieve real political power during the first half of the last century, and the wall of prejudice that stood in their political path may have seemed at times insurmountable. But if anything, the presence of identifiable Italian Americans in the local political arena is not on the wane, but on the upswing, with city aldermen, county commissioners, suburban mayors and presidents, and state representatives serving in numbers that belie the community's presence in the voting district.

Given half a chance, those intrinsic qualities of hard work, integrity, loyalty and family that allowed Italian Americans to carve out a place for themselves in a sometimes hostile society at large are finally allowing them to do the same in the political arena, despite the obstacles that stood before them — and that they placed in their own way.

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