Mafia-Related Prejudice and the Rise of Italian Americans in the United States

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Mafia-Related Prejudice and the Rise of Italian Americans in the United States

**ABSTRACT** Italian immigrants to the United States and their offspring have long been the target of prejudicial accusations concerning their allegedly prominent role in criminal activities. This article investigates the influence of such an ethnic bias on their political ascent. Although politicians of Italian descent have benefited from connections to gangsters and racketeers, especially in the Prohibition years, underworld-related charges have for the most part limited their political success because they have undermined voters’ trust in candidates of Italian ancestry. The Mafia-connection stereotype gained momentum in the aftermath of the revelations of the Kefauver Committee in the early 1950s. However, it continued to have significant influence on the election campaigns of Italian Americans at least until Geraldine Ferraro’s 1992 bid for the US Senate. Despite the progressive assimilation of Italian Americans, the perception of members of this ethnic group as potential criminals has persisted, and still haunts politicians of Italian extraction. Significantly, even Italian-American candidates have recently resorted to the Mafia prejudice to discredit fellow ethnic opponents.

**KEYWORDS** Mafia, organized crime, ethnic prejudice, Italian Americans, politics and elections 1890-1990

Nativism has long shaped the attitude of American society towards new comers of foreign ancestry.¹ Italian immigrants, one of the largest nationality groups whose members began to arrive in significant numbers in the United States in the 1870s, have been subject to widespread, though inconsistent, forms of prejudice: accusations of being dangerous radicals, union-busting strike-breakers, a popish fifth column or undesirable people in general. However, the most persistent anti-Italian bias has been the tendency to perceive individuals of Italian descent as bloodthirsty criminals, prone to illegal

activities. In 1913, for example, a reporter for *Outlook* defined Italians as an ‘aggregation of assassins, blackmailers, kidnappers, and thieves that have piled up a record of crime in the United States unparalleled in a civilized country in time of peace’. Unlike other ethnic smears, which faded away as Italian mass immigration came to a halt in the 1920s and the offspring of turn-of-the-century immigrants were progressively assimilated, the association of Italian Americans with the underworld continued to thrive. In 1970, for instance, in the attempt to explain why law-enforcement agents had long ignored the activities of a prominent Irish-American gangster, a spokesperson for Manhattan’s district attorney admitted that ‘when we went after organized crime, we only went after Italians’.

While the survival of the perception of those of Italian background as mobsters has had numerous consequences for Italian Americans, this ethnic bias has primarily affected their political success, since trustworthiness is key to the career of any seeker of public office. As early as 1891, for instance, the lynching of eleven gangsters of Sicilian origin in New Orleans—where 78 per cent of the articles devoted to the Italian community by the city’s leading daily, the *Times Picayune*, had since 1889 focused on crime—was easily exploited in order to ostracize Italian Americans from local politics.

**Organized crime and political ascent**

Of course, the relations between organized crime and a number of Italian-American politicians is undeniable and largely documented, especially for the 1920s and 1930s, as gangsters of Italian ancestry got increasingly involved in politics in order to secure the police protection and other advantages necessary for safeguarding their illegal activities in the heyday of Prohibition. The prevailing party control over courts and police in the United States encouraged mobsters to establish political connections and seek a free hand in the running of bootlegging, vice and gambling operations from the politicians they had helped to win elective offices. The intimacy of gangsters and politicians was obviously a traditional feature of large cities, and one that antedated

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Prohibition. But, as the illegal trafficking in alcohol became a sort of national industry after the enforcement of the Eighteenth Amendment, a few Italian Americans seized this opportunity to climb up the criminal ladder, simultaneously facilitating the rise of fellow ethnic politicians.6

The accommodation of Italian Americans within the political establishment through the intervention of gangsters was part of the function of organized crime as an alternative path to social mobility for newcomers to US cities, a point repeatedly stressed by scholars.7 In general, actual Mafia connections worked relatively well in the inter-war years—as Italian Americans began to be successful in politics—and were hardly detrimental to the careers of would-be politicians of Italian background as long as they ran for local offices and the criminal activities carried out by Italian Americans were confined primarily to the ‘Little Italies’ or to operations, like bootlegging, of which a significant cohort of the American population did not overtly disapprove.8

Mafia paranoia
This situation changed in the 1950s. While an overemphasis on the Italian ancestry of several of the most notorious gangsters of that time matched the political coming-of-age of Italian Americans in the United States, Mafia-related prejudice placed a stigma on individuals of Italian descent seeking higher offices in the eyes of the society at large, regardless of whether or not there were actual links to the mob.

The election of John Pastore to the position of US Senator from Rhode Island in 1950, which made him the first member of his ethnic group to hold a seat in the United States Senate, has usually been regarded as symbolic of the emergence of Italian Americans in national politics.9 In addition, in 1950 the three leading candidates for mayor of New York City were of Italian descent.10 Besides these two unprecedented events, however, the year 1950 also

witnessed the sudden acceleration of a Mafia paranoia that associated Italian Americans with the underworld, and developed into a sort of national syndrome to which both the media and more authoritative sources contributed.

In 1950 Chicago Confidential, a bestselling book by newspapermen Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer and a follow-up to their 1948 less successful New York Confidential, brought together unrelated anecdotes about gangsters of Italian background to claim the existence of a nation-wide Italian- manned criminal organization ‘run from the above, with reigning headquarters in Italy and American headquarters in New York’. In the same year the proceedings of a senatorial committee chaired by Estes Kefauver of Tennessee added its apparently more reliable voice to the journalistic sensationalism of Lait and Mortimer. Established to investigate organized crime in inter-state commerce and collect information for the drafting of more effective federal legislation to control inter-state gambling, the Kefauver Committee enjoyed a large popularity and influence because its main hearings were broadcast on television. Its spectacular revelations about the involvement of such notorious Italian-American gangsters as Frank Costello, Joe Adonis, Albert Anastasia, Tony Accardo or Charles Fischetti in illegal activities reached an estimated audience of 20-30 million people.

In 1951 Senator Kefauver authored a sensationalized narrative of the results of his investigation, a volume entitled Crime in America, through which he further disseminated the conclusion of his senatorial committee that ‘a sinister criminal organization known as the Mafia’ was controlled by Italian Americans and was ‘the direct descendant of a criminal organization of the same name originating in the island of Sicily’. Such statements, however, were inconsistent with evidence from the same enquiry demonstrating that people of different ethnic backgrounds were at the head of a number of criminal organizations in the United States. The Committee’s Third Interim Report itself claimed that ‘the two major crime syndicates . . . are the Accardo-Guzin-Fischetti syndicate . . . and the Costello-Adonis-Lansky syndicate’, acknowledging, therefore, the existence of other-than-Italian individuals in prominent positions in organized crime. While many racketeers mentioned in the report

had Italian-sounding last names, that was clearly not the case of Jewish gangster Meyer Lansky.14

References to the key role played by Italian Americans in racketeering did not lessen after the exposures and revelations of the Kefauver Committee but in fact acquired an ever-growing political dimension. In 1951 and 1952 Mortimer and Lait published two additional volumes of their ‘confidential’ series which further stressed the alleged Italian-American hold over criminal operations throughout the United States.15 In another bestselling work, which also came out in 1952, Pulitzer prizewinner Ed Reid outlined the rise of the Italian Mafia as a major factor influencing urban politics in the years that followed the end of the Second World War. In particular, Reid argued that Italian-born insurgent Democrat Vincent Impellitteri, who had been elected mayor of New York City in 1950 running as an independent candidate on the Experience Party ticket, was linked with the notorious Italian-American mobster Thomas ‘Three-Finger Brown’ Lucchese. Reid also echoed accusations that an all-Italian Costello-Adonis-Genovese syndicate had supported Ferdinand Pecora, Impellitteri’s opponent and the Italian-American regular Democratic nominee for mayor in 1950.16

Reid further described the political connections of Lucchese and other mob bosses of Italian descent in *Shame of New York*, a volume which came out in 1953 and pointed to the relations with gangsters not only of Impellitteri but also of other prominent Italian-American politicians like Tammany Hall leader Carmine De Sapió, Judge Louis Valente, Democratic district leader Francis Mancuso and Generoso Pope, a former chairman of the Italian division of the National Committee of the Democratic Party.17 Although Reid’s book drew extensively upon the 1952 hearings of the New York State Crime Commission, most of its sensational revelations—as a reviewer remarked—offered ‘little that is new in the way of substantiation’.18 A few years later *New York Times* reporter Warren Moscow elaborated on the allegations against Impellitteri and maintained that—through the brokerage of another Italian-American politician, radical Congressman Vito Marcantonio—Lucchese had also engineered the appointment of Impellitteri, then a politically obscure figure, as president of New York’s city council in 1945, a position that paved his way to the mayoralty.19

Although the biographers of Marcantonio and Impellitteri, in their scholarly works published several decades later, were to find no evidence to substantiate those charges, the accusations helped to link politicians of Italian descent with organized crime in the eyes of the general population. Consequently, references to an ‘Italian connection’ in the case of Italian-American candidates has usually come to equal ‘Mafia connection’ in the opinion of the American public.

Senator Kefauver himself further contributed to make Mafia-related matters a political issue when he sought the Democratic nomination for the White House in 1952. Campaigning on his own record as the leading racket-exposer in the country, Kefauver had a major opportunity to remind the electorate of the findings of his committee during his unsuccessful bid for the presidency in the Democratic primaries.

Even reputable scholars joined the almost unanimous chorus of concern over both the prominent role of Italian Americans in the underworld and the involvement of gangsters of Italian ancestry in politics throughout the country. In 1953, for instance, sociologist Daniel Bell argued that backing from mobsters was instrumental in the rise of Italian Americans in the hierarchy of urban political machines. Although his own conclusions were limited primarily to the case of New York and a few other large cities, Bell also elaborated a general theory of ethnic succession in the power structure of organized crime that followed the immigration waves. In his view, Italian Americans had replaced East European Jews in the highest positions in the mob by the early 1950s.

While academia ended up corroborating mainly sensationalist charges with presumably more authoritative findings, a further boost to the identification of Italian Americans with organized crime resulted from the hearings of another senatorial investigating committee, chaired by John McClellan of Arkansas, before which a lesser gangster of Italian ancestry, Joseph Valachi, revealed that he was part of a large, ethnically exclusive criminal organization known by the Italian name of ‘Cosa Nostra’ (Our Thing), that controlled the great bulk of illegal activities in the United States. In this context, Valachi reiterated the allegation that Italian-American politicians like Marcantonio had ‘prominent associations’ with gangsters. Criminologist Donald Cressey relied primarily on Valachi’s testimony to conclude that the ‘Italian organization . . . controls all but an insignificant proportion of the organized crime of

23 Bell, ‘Crime as an American way of life’.
The conception of the almost unchallenged Italian monopoly over criminal activities in the United States was further validated by the findings of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, which stated in its final report that ‘today the core of organized crime in the United States consists of 24 groups operating as criminal cartels in large cities across the Nation. Their membership is exclusively men of Italian descent.’

The media, too, imbedded the stereotype of the Italian American as a mobster in the collective imagery of the American people. Such television series as *The Untouchables* in the 1950s, the 1969 publication of Mario Puzo’s novel *The Godfather*—which was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for sixty-seven weeks—and its commercially successful screen adaptations helped popularize the reputation of Italian Americans as gangsters. Remarkably enough, at least 300 crime stories in the manner of the saga of the Corleone family were published between 1969 and 1975. It is, therefore, most likely that, as author Jerre Mangione has maintained, ‘*The Godfather* has done greater damage to the image of Italian Americans, perhaps more than anything else written about them’. However, twenty-one films featuring an Italian-American main character as a mobster had already been produced between the end of the Second World War and the release of *The Godfather* in March 1972.

### The impact of the Mafia stereotype

The emergence and consolidation of a sort of Mafia paranoia which considers organized crime in the United States as an Italian-dominated alien conspiracy has deeply affected the political rise of Italian Americans. The corollary of this theory, pointing to individuals of Italian descent as potential criminals, obviously prejudiced the career of a number of Italian-American candidates running for elective offices, as soon as their ethnicity became a likely concern for voters, because of its supposedly crime-related implications. For instance, an Italian-sounding surname gave candidates a 39 per cent disadvantage, the highest for any ethnic group, in California in the early 1970s.

This, of course, is not to suggest that Italian-American politicians have played no part in the underworld in the last few decades. In 1979, for exam-

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ple, Mayor Angelo Errichetti of Camden, New Jersey got involved in the Abscam investigation, a federal probe that provided an insightful example of the inter-connections between politics and illegal activities. As it turned out, Errichetti offered arms, counterfeit money and certificates of deposit, a list of briiable state and city officials, and even the use of Port Camden as a depot for drugs, to FBI agents who had disguised themselves as representatives of an Arab ring seeking political co-operation for its criminal operations in the United States.32 Two years later, New York’s Congressman Mario Biaggi was convicted of federal racketeering.33

Nonetheless it seems extremely difficult to draw a line between political corruption in general and specific participation in organized crime. Moreover, although there is evidence that several politicians of Italian ancestry were on good terms with members of the underworld and profitted by such relations in terms of personal advancement, it can hardly be denied that the media have made a point of associating Italian Americans in the field of politics with organized crime in the last few decades. Sam Donaldson, a former White House correspondent for ABC News, provided a typical example of this ethnically biased self-assignment when he maintained that candidates with surnames ending in a vowel—namely those of Italian ancestry—should naturally be investigated for their possible underworld links.34

Actually, accusations, allegations and even innuendoes have increasingly haunted Italian-American politicians in the wake of the post-war heightened sensitivity of the American public to the role of Italian Americans in organized crime. For instance, it was hardly by chance that, while Rufus Elefante had played a prominent part in Utica politics since Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1930 re-election as governor of New York State, charges that his political machine had long prevented probes into local rings—primarily prostitution rackets—were brought up only after three Uticans of Italian background who had no political connections were discovered among the participants in the 1957 convention of some sixty suspected Italian-American mobsters in Apalachin. Following the revelation of the alleged Mafia connections of Utica’s Italian Americans, the supposed intimacy of Dominic Assaro, the city’s first mayor of Italian descent, with local gangsters grew into a major political issue in the 1960s.35 In the same years, suspicions of relations with criminals weakened the administration of Mayor Hugh Addonizio in Newark, New Jersey.36 Rumours of ties to mob boss Angelo Bruno and the exposure of the

questionable bookmaking operations of his son-in-law similarly plagued even such a law enforcement legend as Philadelphia’s Mayor Frank Rizzo in the 1970s and 1980s.37 Hints at links to corrupt unions and the underworld also characterized James Florio’s successful campaign for governor of New Jersey in 1989.38

The case of Joseph L. Alioto provides an insightful example of how Mafia-related prejudice handicapped Italian-American aspirants to high elective offices. A successful lawyer elected as mayor of San Francisco in 1967, Alioto earned praise for his ability in mediating labour disputes and improving race relations. He also made a reputation for himself as an articulate spokesman for greater devolution of authority and financial resources to local administrations. Such effective leadership launched Alioto into national politics to such an extent that he was entrusted with the nominating speech for Hubert Humphrey at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. A potential vice-presidential candidate himself in 1968, Alioto kept an eye on the 1970 race for governor of California after Edmund Muskie was selected as Humphrey’s running-mate. Yet his political career suffered a severe setback in September 1969, when Look magazine revealed Alioto’s alleged Mafia connections. Such charges were unsubstantiated and Alioto was eventually awarded libel damages. Yet, four months after the article came out, Alioto gave up his campaign for governor and, despite re-election as mayor in 1971 by a much smaller plurality than in 1967, his plans to capture the statehouse went amiss again in 1974. He also declined to seek a third term the following year.39

In the face of President Ronald Reagan’s huge popularity in 1984, it would be naive to suggest that the charges that Tony Zaccaro—the husband of Democratic vice-presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro—was tied to underworld figures or that Ferraro herself was linked to a supposedly Mafia-dominated charity had no more than a negligible effect on the defeat of the Mondale-Ferraro ticket. In addition, Ferraro’s liberal stand was clearly at odds with the views of the bulk of voters, and the tax avoidance scandal involving her family was possibly more damaging than any mob-related rumour.40

Nonetheless Ferraro still enjoyed a double-digit lead over State Attorney General Robert Abrams in New York State’s 1992 Democratic primary for the senatorial nomination before the *Village Voice* published a lengthy account of how Mafia-tied unions had supposedly financed her first congressional bid and also of Zaccaro’s alleged connections with as many as two dozen mobsters.41 These innuendoes were promptly echoed by a lesser candidate, Elizabeth Holtzman, who repeatedly ran a television commercial reproducing the cover of the *Village Voice* and questioning why Ferraro and her husband had done business with crime figures. Two weeks after those eleventh-hour allegations came out, Ferraro lost the Democratic nomination to Abrams by 36 to 37 per cent of the vote. Unlike the 1984 election, the outcome of the 1992 Democratic primary was deeply affected by the Mafia issue. Four voters out of ten thought that the allegations against Ferraro were serious, and fewer than one in ten who believed that a candidate’s honesty was all-important voted for her.42

Mario Cuomo probably decided against running for president in 1988 and 1992 for fear that the media could eventually accuse him or his kinsfolk of connections with mobsters. Actually, rumours that Cuomo or some members of his family had acquaintances in organized crime began to circulate in 1987, as he emerged as a potential front-runner for the 1988 Democratic nomination, and lingered long enough to surface again in Cuomo’s characterization as a ‘mafioso type’ in Gennifer Flowers’s notorious tapes in early 1992.43

**Backlash**

While identification with their Italian backgrounds has increasingly damaged Italian Americans running for major elective offices in the eyes of the population at large since the 1950s, indignation at the supposed ethnic defamation underlying such allegations has simultaneously ceased to be a significant asset for a politician of Italian ancestry among fellow ethnic voters. In the last few decades, waving the bloody shirt of ethnic slurs with reference to Mafia-related accusations has not proved as efficacious as it had throughout the 1950s

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for candidates of Italian descent who have appealed to the solidarity of Italian-American communities at the polls.

Chicago’s Italian Americans rallied in support of Daniel Serritella in the 1930s in the face of the accusations of his links to Alphonse Capone, and opposed Democratic mayoral candidate Anthon J. Cermak who made Italian-American gangsterism a campaign issue in 1931.\textsuperscript{44} Similarly, after charges of links to organized crime had been brought up against the incumbent Philadelphia councilmen Louis Menna and Michael Foglietta following their being summoned before a federal grand jury investigating rackets in eastern Pennsylvania, the Italian-American electorate in Philadelphia nominated them, both as Republican ward leaders and candidates for another term in the city council, by a landslide in 1951. Two years later, Republican Magistrate Joseph Molinari became the top vote-getter among Philadelphia’s Italian Americans after the county district attorney had accused him of being on the payroll of a local criminal syndicate. Playing on the allegation that the district attorney had smeared the reputation of Italian Americans by such ethnically derogatory references secured for Molinari, until then a rather obscure incumbent who had been appointed to fill a vacancy, both a large majority among his fellow ethnic voters and re-election to the city’s court of magistrates.\textsuperscript{45}

Conversely, interviews with Italian-American informants have shown that the allegations of Look magazine already mentioned—that Alioto had had meetings with well-known Mafia representatives—failed, in the 1970s, to galvanize enthusiasm for the incumbent mayor due to resentment on the part of his fellow ethnic voters in San Francisco at his claims of ethnic defamation.\textsuperscript{46} Likewise, a decade later, the Italian-American sympathy with Ferraro at the polls, due to ethnic reaction to the innuendoes of her family’s ties to the mob, was similarly negligible. As Ferraro herself later acknowledged in her autobiography, despite her repeated attempts to stir up the ethnic pride of the population of Italian ancestry with reference to her bid for vice-president: ‘I was out there all alone, unsupported by other Italian Americans in the barrage of ethnic slurs. . . . I didn’t expect so many in the Italian-American community to retreat in the face of all the ethnic slurs.’\textsuperscript{47} Indeed, the percentage of the Italian-American vote for Ferraro was as low as 39 per cent nationwide.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{44} Nelli, \textit{Italians in Chicago}, 232-4.
Even such a previous Democratic stronghold as Philadelphia’s Italian-American community gave Ferraro only 43 per cent of its votes.49

Comparing the different attitudes of the Italian-American electorate to the Mafia prejudice over the years, one might conclude that organized crime no longer controlled the Italian-American vote in the 1970s and 1980s as it had in the previous decades. Yet, while mobsters were likely to influence the electoral behaviour of the Italian-American community in Capone’s Chicago in the late 1920s and 1930s, that was hardly the case with Philadelphia in the 1950s. After all, no evidence against Menna and Foglietta emerged from the grand jury hearings to initiate criminal cases, and Molinari was eventually cleared of all accusations of links to local racketeers.50

Rather, it was a decline in Italian-American sensitivity to the Mafia prejudice which can more easily explain the waning appeal of calls for ethnic solidarity for most voters of Italian ancestry in response to mob-related accusations against fellow ethnic politicians. The ethnic militancy and anti-defamation campaigns of the 1960s and early 1970s provoked the emergence of alternative representations of Italian Americans, and pacified in part the anger of Italian Americans for the derogation of their ethnic community by a systematic association with organized crime. For instance, the backlash of Italian Americans over the negative implications of *The Godfather* for their reputation forced films and crime novels to supplement the traditional mobsters of Italian descent with law-abiding Italian-American characters, usually law-enforcement agents. At the same time, the use of the term ‘Mafia’ ceased to be restricted to Italian Americans involved in organized crime, and was extended to other minorities in the United States and other peoples abroad so that expressions like ‘black Mafia’, ‘Chinese Mafia’ and even ‘Soviet Mafia’ have come into use.51

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A major setback in the fight against underworld-related prejudice, however, resulted from the fact that the most militant ethnic organization denouncing the anti-Italian defamation underlying innuendoes of Mafia connections in the early 1970s, the Italian-American Civil Rights League, was headed by a reputed racketeer, Joseph Colombo, Sr. His shooting on 28 June 1971 at a rally to boost Italian pride seemed to corroborate suspicions that those who claimed that Italian Americans had nothing to do with organized crime were indeed gangsters themselves, and discredited further campaigns against the stereotype that Italian Americans were generally involved in illegal activities.52

A vehement protest from New York City’s Italian Americans, after the president of Baruch College, Joel Segall, had used the expression ‘the 80th Street Mafia’ in a memorandum, forced him to resign in 1986.53 In general, however, while third- and fourth-generation Italian Americans have increasingly been assimilated into US society, issues related to their specific national ancestry have no longer been paramount concerns for most of them.54 For instance, in San Francisco—Alioto’s home town—the response of the local Italian-American community to the initiatives of the Anti-Discrimination Committee of the Order Sons of Italy in America in the mid-1970s was negligible.55 At the same time, a few Italian Americans have come to perceive the Mafia stereotype as part of their own ethnic folklore rather than as anti-Italian prejudice. For instance, references to The Godfather have begun to bulk large in Italian-run restaurants and pizzerias or in Italian-American festivals.56

Remarkably, Italian-American candidates themselves have started playing on the Mafia prejudice for election campaign purposes while opposing fellow ethnic politicians. For instance, only one day after Ferraro announced that she would seek her party’s nomination to challenge Republican Senator Alfonse D’Amato—himself an individual of Italian descent—in the 1998 elections, her opponent’s aides hurried to associate Ferraro with a mob-linked union leader, Arthur Coia, the president of Laborers’ International Union of North America, who had been under federal investigation for his alleged ties to the New England Patriarca organized-crime family.57 In addition, even such

a long-time victim of Mafia-related ethnic smears as Ferraro herself tried to exploit the hackneyed identification of Italian Americans with the underworld. Specifically, she had her own campaign manager, David Eichenbaum, answer D’Amato’s innuendoes by hinting at the incumbent Senator’s relations with allegedly mob-connected individuals like Philip Basile, a supposed frontman for a family of New York State racketeers.58

Limited progress
While D’Amato and Ferraro long stood out as the leading contenders in the 1998 senatorial election in New York State, before Charles Schumer eventually defeated both of them,59 there can be no doubt that Italian Americans have made major inroads into politics in the past quarter century. Remarkably, as in the case of Senators Dennis DeConcini from Arizona, Pete Domenici from New Mexico and Mike Enzi from Wyoming or Congressman Romano Mazzoli from Kentucky, candidates of Italian ancestry were elected from constituencies where their fellow ethnics made up only a negligible cohort of the voters.60 Furthermore, for a few of them, personal integrity was key to success at the polls. For instance, Domenici’s ‘honesty’ was the paramount campaign issue for as many as 39 per cent of New Mexico’s voters who cast their ballots for him in 1978.61

Yet the almost automatic emergence of suspicions of ties to the mob, whenever an Italian American runs for elective office, has undeniably been a factor limiting the success of politicians of Italian background seeking top positions. Of course, Italian Americans have at least a candidate—New York City’s Mayor Rudolph Giuliani—who could wage his own campaign for the US Senate or even the presidency without fearing any setback from Mafia-related innuendoes because of his strong anti-crime record. Nonetheless Giuliani is an exception rather than the rule.62

As Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shetter have repeatedly suggested, prosecutions, investigations and revelations have increasingly become common weapons in political battles in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal.63 In addition, negative perceptions of Italian Americans as potential criminals still prevail in US society. For instance, according to a recent survey, 74 per cent of Americans still associate Italian Americans with organized crime.64

In this context, the fact that Italian Americans are less concerned about Mafia-related ethnic prejudice than they used to be, and even themselves engage in mud-throwing election-campaign strategies, makes it most likely that allegations of Mafia connections will continue to affect, and curb, the rise of Italian Americans in US politics. After all, following D’Amato’s accusations against Ferraro, the *New York Post*—which, though not an authoritative newspaper, is representative of the feelings of many average voters—commented that, even if Coia ‘has never been convicted of anything related to those charges’, Ferraro’s ‘association with Coia calls into question the quality of her judgement at the very least, considering her longstanding difficulties dealing with the organized crime issue’.

In sum, even though some Italian-American political progress in the past decades has been dramatic, and a few members of this ethnic minority are firmly entrenched in positions of power, Italian Americans are not yet completely integrated into the US political system. Until Mafia-related prejudice is definitively overcome, so that politicians of Italian ancestry are uniformly accepted as legitimate candidates for office without being systematically forced to prove that they are not criminals themselves or that they have no connections in the underworld, Italian Americans will hardly have achieved political parity in the United States.

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