holds on local patronage to lure the Italian into mainstream.

However, admission of ethnic Americans into the ranks of a partisan political machine was not only a symbol of social and political integration but also a device through which party bosses endeavored to strengthen their hold on local patronage. Thus, the Italian became an important element in the Democratic machine of Pittsburgh.

Mass emigration from Italy to the United States took place from the early 1920s through the late 1920s. By the time the Italian community reached the heights of its influence in the mid-1930s, the political landscape of Pennsylvania had undergone a profound transformation.

For political machines to secure the votes of national groups, they had to create a kind of accommodation that allowed for the translation of community interests into political action. This process involved the recruitment of community leaders, the creation of political organizations, and the provision of patronage and political support.

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Building a Democratic Community

Italian-Americans in Pittsburgh's Political Machine

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CHOLARS OF ethnicity have long concerned...
registering and voting Democratic. Although the Irish contributed to mobilizing the Italian-Americans politically, they often disregarded immigrants’ calls for recognition in the hierarchy of the Democratic party and on its tickets. As a result, either the Italian-Americans gained footholds in the ranks of local Democratic organizations after a long struggle with the Irish, or they crossed party lines and joined the GOP.²

In the case of Pittsburgh’s Italian-Americans, however, neither pattern of political behavior accounts for the pre-New Deal Republican alignment in their community. David Lawrence, who became the chairman of the Democratic Committee in Allegheny County in 1920, was an Irish-American. So was William J. Brennen, who held the same position between 1901 and 1919. Nonetheless, in the Steel City, the Irish were split between the Democratic party and the GOP. For instance, state senators James J. Coyne and Malachai “Max” G. Leslie, part of the triumvirate who ran Pittsburgh’s GOP in the ’20s, were of Irish ancestry. So was Joseph Armstrong, another Republican, who served one term as mayor (1914-1918) and two as chairman of the Allegheny County Board of Commissioners (1924-1931).³ So, unique Pittsburgh conditions, rather than the Irish hegemony within the local Democratic party, brought the Italian-Americans into the GOP before 1932.

The Steel City had been a Republican stronghold since the first Italian immigrants arrived. Democratic Mayor George Guthrie (1906-1909) was the only exception in a long series of Republican chief executives which dated back to the election of Andrew Fulton in 1883 and came to an end only with Democratic William McNair’s victory in 1933. In those 50 years, besides winning almost all the elective positions in both the city and the county administration, the GOP managed to control also the offices to which the minority party was legally entitled in Allegheny County. Indeed, it was the Republican machine itself which helped choose Democratic candidates. Taking advantage of the negligible number of Democratic registrants, some Republican workers usually switched their party allegiance to vote in the Democratic primaries. Republican bosses even kept some local Democratic politicians on public payroll. The GOP generally met with very little opposition since Democratic leaders were afraid that if they challenged the machine instead of appeasing it, they would offend their Republican patrons and lose their share of the spoils. As a result, until Franklin D. Roosevelt carried the city in 1932, Pittsburgh was virtually a one-party Republican arena, and the Democratic minority was almost an adjunct of the GOP.⁴

Irish-American Republican bosses were not interested in curbing the political rise of Pittsburghers with Italian ancestry. For instance, John Fugassi, one of the first Italian-American leaders, was an Armstrong protegee. A musician from the province of Genoa, Fugassi became alderman of Pittsburgh’s 3rd Ward in 1907 and was appointed police magistrate in 1914. After Armstrong was elected county commissioner, Fugassi served in several capacities in the county administration. By the same token, state Senator Leslie was the political mentor of John Verona. Working in precinct politics, Verona, who worked in a junkyard, reached an aldermanic position in 1923 and the Republican leadership of the 3rd Ward in 1926. He also held the position of police magistrate between 1926 and 1928. Although the core of Verona’s power was the Hill District, Italian-Americans from every ward came to his office seeking favors.⁵ The GOP heavily relied upon nationality groups to carry Pittsburgh on election day. Indeed, destitute immigrants and their offspring were potential Republican supporters because the machine could, in exchange for a vote, meet their immediate needs through its patronage networks.⁶

In attempts to mobilize the “foreign vote,” the GOP targeted Italian-Americans, who ranked fifth among groups of Pittsburgh’s foreign-born in 1910 and became the largest group by 1930. Moreover, with its disproportionate number of unskilled laborers, the Italian community was an ideal reservoir of votes to win in exchange for jobs and political services. Yet reaching out to them was not an easy task. Italian immigrants tended to cluster in enclaves located primarily in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 8th and 12th wards. Almost all had a sojourner mentality. Distrustful of non-Italians, few bothered naturalizing or learning English. Most of their fraternities, such as the Atleta Beneficial Association, admitted only those immigrants coming from a specific Italian province or even village, and barred from membership all other fellow ethnicities, let alone those who were not of Italian descent.⁷ Therefore, to make inroads into the Italian-American community, Pittsburgh’s Republican bosses usually had to resort to Italian-American chieftains. Indeed, a party worker who was fluent in the language of his constituents and could join their associations was more likely to carry his district on election day. Italian-American Republican heelers acted as intermediaries between their own community and the GOP machine, encouraging fellow ethnics to become
involved politically and to trade their votes for a wider range of favors and services. These political brokers provided the Italian-Americans with political jobs, secured them contracts with the county and city administration and handled petty criminal charges in the courts. GOP henchmen even handed out food baskets and coal buckets to help the needy. For instance, Verona’s political organization, the Amerita Club, distributed clothing, toys and food at Christmas time.8

This well-oiled machinery broke down in the early 1930s after the Depression hit Pittsburgh. By the beginning of November 1932, the Republican organization was in such bad shape financially that it was forced to call off its traditional pre-election rally of party workers for lack of funds to rent a meeting hall. GOP bosses even deserted the Republican headquarters to dodge henchmen’s requests for money to wage the presidential campaign. Hence, Italian-American ward and precinct captains were left to their own devices and, in such hard times, could no longer cope with the problems of hunger, unemployment and foreclosures in their community. Not only did the personal prestige of these political heelers seriously decline, but some even ended up in financial distress themselves. The most outstanding example was the case of Michael De Rosa Jr., the alderman and Republican leader of the 12th ward, who ran out of money in his fruitless effort to take care of his constituents.9

After Roosevelt’s victory in 1932 and a Democratic triumph in Pittsburgh’s municipal elections the following year, the GOP lost most of the patronage it had previously used to staff its own machine. Conversely, the Democratic party became the major dispenser of political plums and managed to free itself from Republican control. By exploiting Roosevelt’s relief programs and the Democratic hold on both the city and the county administration, Lawrence created a powerful political organization which turned Pittsburgh into a Democratic bailiwick and served as a foundation for his mayoral and gubernatorial campaigns throughout the 1940s and ’50s.10

At the other side of Pennsylvania, the early New Deal marked the return of two-party politics to Philadelphia, which had previously been a Republican bastion where, as in Pittsburgh, the Democratic party was a branch of the GOP. Philadelphia Demo-
Republican and Democratic committee members of Italian ancestry, providing quantitative data to illustrate the leading role of political patronage in establishing Lawrence’s machine among Pittsburgh’s Italian-Americans. The party’s voters elected committee members in even years during the spring primary. While Democrats chose representatives only for the county committee, Republicans cast their ballots for that committee, as well as for the executive committees of their own wards. A perusal of election returns for both the Democratic and the Republican County Committee, and for Pittsburgh’s 32 GOP ward executive committees, provides names of members of these bodies. Furthermore, a scan of Polk’s Pittsburgh Directories has yielded information on their occupations.

Bruce Stave has used the same method and sources to demonstrate that the establishment of Pittsburgh’s Democratic machine stemmed from control over patronage. Emphasizing the increasing dependence of Democratic workers on public payroll, however, Stave investigated the Democratic County Committee as a whole, not concentrating on ethnic composition. Although he stresses that the percentage of Italian-American members increased from 9.7 percent in 1934 to 14.7 percent in 1960, his study includes no ethnic breakdown for data concerning the occupation of Democratic workers.

Conversely, this research has exploited a name check to identify committee members of Italian descent. No election return books for party offices are available before 1934. That year, although federal positions were already in Democratic hands, the GOP still controlled some political plums because Republican administrations were in power in both Pennsylvania and Allegheny County. Moreover, Pittsburgh’s Democratic Mayor, William McNair, was at odds with Lawrence and usually made appointments after consulting local Republican leaders. As a result of these factors, 12.5 percent of the Italian-American Republican committeemen in 1934 were on public payroll, and Stave calculates that in 1936, 17.6 percent of all county public employees were Republicans. Such data suggests that in 1934, when the GOP retained some patronage, its Italian-American workers already enjoyed fewer opportunities than the average committee member.

For Republican committee workers of Italian ancestry, however, hard times were still to come. In 1934, Pennsylvania chose a Democratic governor. The following year, Republicans lost most of Allegheny County’s offices and associated political plums. In 1936, just before Roosevelt’s re-election, maverick McNair resigned. Democratic stalwart Cornelius D. Scully, a product of Lawrence’s machine, served as mayor pro tempore one year and was elected to a full four-year term in 1937. Over the coming four years, then, Pittsburgh Democrats expected to strengthen their hold on federal, state and local patronage. As a result, in 1938, no Italian-American Republican worker was on public payroll. Conversely, the percentage of Italian-American job-holders among Democratic committeemen increased from 9.7 percent in 1934 to 13.8 percent in 1938. Republican allegiance had become so detrimental to the acquisition of political rewards that in several voting precincts of Pittsburgh’s Italian-American neighborhoods nobody ran for the Republican committee in 1938. Yearning to keep their share of patronage, some GOP operatives even rushed to get on the bandwagon of the new majority party. Election returns illustrate the influx of Italian-American Republican heelers into the ranks of Lawrence’s machine. In particular, a comparison between the 1934 and the 1936 listings of party officials shows that at least 9.7 percent of the Italian-American Democratic committee members elected in 1936 had served in the Republican organization two years before. This figure may even underestimate the real size of the Italian-American bolt because, as the result of a name check, it does not include those party switchers who may have “Americanized” their last names. This percentage is nearly 4 percent above the 6 percent calculated by Stave for all the Republican workers who went over to the Democratic party between 1934 and 1938.

**Patronage, Patronage, Patronage**

CHARLES PAPALE and John Verona were among the most outstanding Italian-Americans to leave the party, and their cases highlight the importance of access to patronage. Papale, De Rosa’s chief rival for GOP leadership of the 12th ward in the early 1930s, joined the Democratic party in 1933 after Republican Mayor John S. Herron dismissed him from the position of police magistrate. State Representative John Scorza, Verona’s nephew, was available to fill the vacancy created in the court of magistrates, but Herron refused to appoint him. The following year, despite his uncle’s efforts, the Republican machine did not endorse Scorza for re-election to the Pennsylvania House.
of Representatives. Besides thirsting for revenge, Verona also hoped to make some money with the state administration. When the election of a Republican governor in 1934 appeared to be wishful thinking, Verona defected to the Democratic party.21

After joining Lawrence’s machine, Verona retained his previous rank as chairman of the 3rd Ward, but as a Democrat.22 Papale was even promoted to the Democratic leadership of the 12th Ward.23 In the early 1930s, while De Rosa and Papale were fighting for power within the Republican organization, police captain Nuncio Marino was the leading Democratic heelers in the 12th ward.24 The decision to bypass Marino in selecting the chairperson of the 12th ward gives additional evidence that former Republican committee members, rather than long-time Democratic stalwarts, were the core of Lawrence’s machine in Pittsburgh’s Italian-American community. Oral history further corroborates this thesis. According to Frank Ambrose, a friend of Lawrence’s and himself a public worker, such switchers as Verona and Papale made up “the nucleus of the Democratic party.”25

Italian-American chieffains who bolted from the GOP carried with them the votes they still commanded in their own precincts and wards. Indeed, the personal power of party heelers became particularly important in Pittsburgh, starting in the late 1920s when Republican Mayor Charles Kline had granted ward chair holders almost complete control over the distribution of municipal patronage in the ward.26 Italian-Americans were already yearning for political leadership of their own. In the early ’30s, this attitude was exemplified by the tendency of Unione, Pittsburgh’s Italian language weekly, to support members of the community running for elective offices regardless of their party allegiance.27 The very fact that bestowance of political jobs in their neighborhoods required the approval of a fellow-ethnic healer may have enhanced the prestige of Italian-American party workers. It is also likely that Kline’s policy made the Italian-American electorate more dependent on Republican organizers because, to the average voter, the provider of favors and jobs became the flesh-and-blood ward leader, along with his precinct aides, rather than an abstract and far-off party organization. After all, in those years, Pennsylvania’s Italian-Americans usually relied so much on committee leaders for political services that they tended to associate the image of their own party with the captain of their own ward rather than with state or national personalities.28

It seems, therefore, easy to theorize that due to the personal influence of Italian-American party workers, their accommodation in Lawrence’s machine strengthened the Democratic party in their communities. While the Republican organization was crumbling in 1932, the bulk of Pittsburgh’s Italian-Americans turned Democratic and gave Roosevelt a 62 percent majority.29 Yet, between 1932 and 1934, when most Italian-American workers left the GOP, those voting Democratic increased another 6.8 percent. It has even been suggested that Verona’s shift of allegiance in 1934 was responsible for bringing the 3rd Ward over to the Democratic party almost overnight.30

**Patronage: Lawrence Hangs On**

The ACCOMMODATION of Italian-American workers in Lawrence’s machine and their growing share of patronage can also account for the persistence of Democratic pluralities among fellow ethnics in Pittsburgh after the GOP came back to power in Pennsylvania in the 1938 gubernatorial election. The new Republican hegemony in the state induced several Italian-American communities to gravitate again toward the GOP, especially after World War II.31 That was the case among Philadelphia’s Italian-Americans. Indeed, deprived of its previous allowance of state patronage and unable to exploit federal positions after the 1939 Hatch Act barred most federal job-holders from political activities, the Democratic organization in Philadelphia did not control enough political posts in the city and the county administration to keep the allegiance of the local Italian-American community.32

Conversely, Lawrence had plenty of patronage to appease Pittsburgh’s Italian-Americans. Despite the Republican hold on most state positions during the James Administration (1939-42), the percentage of Italian-American Democratic committee members on public payroll nearly tripled in those four years (13.8 percent in 1938 to 38.2 percent in 1942). These figures further increased after Lawrence was elected Mayor. When he first took office in 1946, 40 percent of the Italian-American Democratic officials were political job-holders. The percentage peaked during Lawrence’s second term. In 1948, 48.8 percent of the Italian-American members of the Democratic County Committee made a living in the federal, county or the municipal administration.

Lawrence also saw to it that Italian-Americans’ representation among ward chair-holders did not diminish. When Verona died
unexpectedly in 1937, James Lovuola, also of Italian heritage, replaced him as leader of the 3rd Ward. Verona’s longtime political lieutenant in the Hill District, Lovuola held a position in the municipal administration as city assessor. He was also a former Republican worker who had followed Verona into the Democratic fold in 1934. Lawrence’s organization selected Lovuola instead of Daniel Verona, the son of the committee kingpin who had briefly served as acting chairman after his father’s death but who was a political newcomer. The choice of Lovuola is, therefore, another example of Lawrence’s preference for GOP-trained chieftains. In 1952, Lawrence again showed his tendency to give Italian-Americans recognition within his own machine. Papale refused to support the county committee’s slate in the primaries, so Lawrence ousted him from his job on the Pittsburgh Board of Water Assessors and from the 12th Ward leadership. Yet Papale’s replacement as ward chairperson — Victor Martinelli, an employee of the city Highways and Sewers Department — was another Italian-American. Moreover, in 1952, the number of Democratic ward captains of Italian ancestry rose to three after the election of Frank Mazzei in the 17th Ward. The accommodation of Italian-Americans occurred also at a lower level. In 1936, 5.1 percent of Pittsburgh’s Democratic County Committee were of Italian ancestry. Equaling the Italian-American share of slots among ward leaders, this percentage grew to 9.7 percent by 1954.

With all these members of the Italian-American community in Lawrence’s machine dependent on his patronage, it is hardly chance that so many became staunch Democrats. Indeed, despite a Democratic debacle statewide, 74.6 percent of Pittsburgh’s Italian-Americans supported the Democratic gubernatorial candidate in 1938. In subsequent years, until 1952, the Democratic vote among Pittsburgh’s Italian-Americans never fell below 68 percent. That year, Papale’s dismissal and his subsequent campaign for Eisenhower contributed to a relatively disappointing performance for Democrat Adlai Stevenson.

**Musmanno: Despite Lawrence**

ITALIAN-AMERICAN Democratic chieftains helped consolidate the party’s hold within their community, but others within the community profited from Lawrence’s machine. The growing number of Italian-Americans within the Democratic hierarchy and on public payroll underscores their increasing influence in the virtually one-party politics of Pittsburgh. Indeed, Italian-Americans’ political rise matched their accommodation in the Democratic party. For instance, after spending years in political jobs, in 1951 Assistant City Solicitor Emanuel Schifano was slated and elected to Pittsburgh City Council on the Democratic ticket. The last Italian-American councilman before Schifano had been Republican Frank W. Bonini, who represented the 3rd Ward (1902-1910) while Pittsburgh had a two-house council. Yet, after 1951, the practice of granting the Italian-Americans at least one seat in the city council became a cornerstone of the ethnic strategy of Lawrence’s machine. Richard Caliguiri, Pittsburgh’s only mayor of Italian ancestry, started his career in the city administration in 1956 with “a letter of introduction from his ward chairman.”

Few Italian-Americans had a successful political career without Lawrence’s support. The case of Michael A. Musmanno, however, is evidence that membership in the Democratic organization was not always necessary in Pittsburgh politics after the New Deal. Unlike most ethnic Italians, who did not primarily concern themselves with issues and aimed at sharing Democratic patronage, Musmanno left the GOP as a result of growing dissatisfaction with Republican conservatism during the Depression. Musmanno campaigned for Roosevelt in 1932 while a Republican judge of Allegheny County Court because the GOP he complained, neglected the destitute in hard times. The Republican party “opposed old age pensions, unemployment insurance... a more liberal workmen’s compensation law... granting of relief for the great masses of people out of work.” Conversely, in Musmanno’s opinion, “the Democratic party will do something for the suffering population of today.”

Musmanno was a pragmatic idealist, yet he also became a maverick Democrat who did not refrain from reprimanding his own party when it rejected open primaries, encouraged machine politics, or mucked party workers. A former miner who had risen to judge of Pittsburgh’s Court of Common Pleas in 1933, Musmanno embodied the dream of the immigrants’ son who had succeeded in making his way up the social ladder in the face of discrimination and bigotry. He was quite influential in Pittsburgh’s Italian-American community. An advocate of labor rights, he was also popular with locals of the America Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Although Musmanno had a reputation as a powerful vote-getter among workers and ethnic Italians, Lawrence distrusted him because of his independence and his publicity-seeking tactics. Lawrence never accommodated Musmanno in his own organization and often tried to curb his political aspirations.

In 1950, however, launching a timely crusade against communism in Pittsburgh, Musmanno exploited the widespread anti-communist feelings of the Cold War and forced the Democratic party to slate him for lieutenant governor. Despite his defeat, the
following year Musmanno challenged the machine again. He proffited from the absence of Lawrence, who was on a long European vacation, and waged a successful campaign for the Pennsylvania Supreme Court against the candidate of the Democratic organization, Grover C. Ladner.44

On both occasions, Musmanno relied heavily on his ethnic appeal to win a large share of the Italian-American vote. He employed that strategy especially in 1951, when he charged that Democratic leaders opposed him because they did not want a Catholic with a “foreign-sounding” name as one of Pennsylvania’s associate justices.45 Musmanno’s won 74.7 percent of Pittsburgh’s Italian-American vote in 1950 and 94.6 percent in the 1951 Democratic primary elections. Yet, despite Musmanno’s anti-machine stand, his ethnic appeal also benefitted Lawrence’s candidates. Indeed, the Democratic organization managed to appropriate Musmanno’s candidacy and used it to boost its whole slate. In 1950, for instance, rumors circulated publicly that Richardson Dilworth, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate, was prejudiced against Italian-Americans.46 To dispel such allegations, Musmanno, in a letter from the Allegheny County Democratic Committee mass-mailed to Pittsburgh’s Italian-American voters, was quoted as saying that Dilworth represented a “symbol of hope” for all Americans of Italian origin.47

With Musmanno as his running mate, Dilworth carried the Italian-American community with 72.9 percent of the vote. Moreover, the Democratic party won 70.1 percent of the Italian-American vote with Musmanno on its ticket in November 1951. Placing himself in the Democratic fold, even such a foe of machine politics as Musmanno ended up strengthening Lawrence’s control on the voting behavior of Pittsburgh’s Italian-Americans. #

Notes


9 S-T, Nov. 6, 7, 1932; Pittsburgh Press (hereafter, “Press”), Nov. 6, 1932; Thomas E. Williams, Will Pennsylvania Go Democratic?, Nation (Nov. 9, 1932), 452; S-T, Nov. 9, 1932; P-G, Nov. 10, 1936.


13 Weber (1988), op. cit., 75; Press, Sept. 17, 1933; Sept. 18, 1933; P-G, Nov. 9, 1933; Nov. 7, 1935.


15 Election return books are in the Archives of Industrial Society and the Office of the Prothonotary of Allegheny County.

16 Stave, op. cit., 162-82.


18 Stave, op. cit., 170.

19 For more on this point, see Migliore, op. cit., 70.


21 P-G, Sept. 13, 1933; S-T, Apr. 18, 1933; Jan. 12, 1937; Dec. 4, 5, 1939.

22 S-T, Apr. 29, 1936.

23 P-G, Nov. 7, 1935.

24 De’ath, op. cit., 52.

25 Interview with Frank Ambrose, July 11, 1984, in Michael P. Weber Oral History Transcripts, AIS. (In the transcript, both names are misquoted).

26 Press, July 25, 1931; S-T, Mar. 27, 1933.

27 Union, e.g., Apr. 17, Aug. 21, 1931; Sept. 15, 1933; Feb. 23, Mar. 2, Apr. 13, 1934.


29 This figure was arrived at by assuming that election returns of the voting divisions in which at least 52 percent of the registered voters were of Italian descent are approximately representative of the vote of Pittsburgh’s Italian-American community. Ethnic concentration of voting divisions was determined through a name check of the few lists of voters’ streets held by the AIS, and supplemented by census tract data and Polk’s Pittsburgh Directories. The raw votes by division come from either The Pennsylvania
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