

# Shades of White

As American society continues to divide along racial and ethnic lines, a new category - the ethnic white male - is appearing or reappearing. In recent decades, white ethnics have been lumped into the category of "just white" to deny them any possible benefit from affirmative action racial policies. Now that affirmative action is in disarray, the new ethnic white male category seems to be an attempt at the political level of dividing white males according to "shades of white."

The term "ethnic white male" was recently used in a political editorial in the Sacramento Bee newspaper, a newspaper aligned with the Democratic Party. The term was used to describe Leon Panetta, the Italian American Chief-of-Staff for President Clinton. Panetta was described as an acceptable candidate for Governor of California on the Democratic side because of his ethnic credentials.

In appearance, Panetta is darker and his features more ethnic looking than the usual successful Italian American politician. Perhaps that is why the term "ethnic white male" seems more fitting than it would be for lighter and less identifiably "Italian" looking Italian American males. Presumably, because the Democratic Party in California has not nominated a white male in the last three gubernatorial elections, Panetta would be an acceptable party candidate since he is not "just white."

Italian Americans have not generally identified themselves as "just white." They have always recognized their distinctiveness as a people in American life. Italian Americans are more likely than most other ethnic groups in the United States to identify as ethnics - to be racially sensitive to ethnicity and to report intense ethnic experiences. They are even perceived as culturally distinct by members of other ancestry groups.

Yet, this distinctiveness was ignored by the American establishment where it suited their purposes - namely with regard to the nation's racial policy. There was no way that Italian Americans were going to be allowed to benefit from racial policies designed by those aligned with other racial and ethnic groups. Yet, for much of their history in this nation, Italian Americans were not really treated as a desirable race of people by the more established ancestry groups.

"Today, those who identify themselves as Italian American occupy an eerie limbo - not oppressed explicitly enough to enjoy protected legal status - yet not so firmly entrenched as to constitute part of the power elite," says noted Italian American philosopher Raymond Belliotti in his recent book, "Seeking Identity." According to Belliotti, "Italian Americans have been submerged in the cruel, overly broad category of 'White Europeans,' a category which eviscerates their particularity and renders their special grievances invisible. Italian Americans are given the shroud but not the substance of privilege."

Now it seems, in the post affirmative action era, that Italian Americans are arriving at a new status that may be helpful to the political class; that of "ethnic white." But

isn't that what Italian Americans have always been - ethnic Americans. Not quite "dark" enough, yet not quite "white" enough. Not the right "shade of white." Whatever the case, it now seems that they are about to be recognized as a distinct ethnic and political force to be courted.

During the 1996 Presidential elections, the Democratic National Committee targeted white ethnic voters, especially in the mid-Atlantic states. A look at the election results indicates it may have worked. In the case of the Italian American vote, an Italian American Democratic Leadership Council was established by the party to attract votes from this ethnic group. Italian Americans are concentrated along the Atlantic seaboard where they make up a large percentage of the population of such states as Rhode Island [20%], Connecticut [19%]; New Jersey [19%]; New York [16%]; Massachusetts [14%]; Pennsylvania [12%] and Delaware [10%].

Recently, the Republican Governor of California, in conjunction with the State Legislature, recognized the large and distinctive Italian population of the state - over 2 million - and appointed a California Italian American Taskforce to work with the state's institutions on issues of concern to Italian Americans.

White ethnic Americans from Eastern and Southern Europe, heavily Catholic, have never been fully accepted in American life. Just as they were excluded before the 1970's by monoculturalism [no hyphenated Americans need apply], they are now excluded by an exclusive multiculturalism [not all ethnic groups need apply].

The increasing recognition of white ethnic political power is occurring at the same time that white ethnics, especially Italian Americans, are organizing along ethnic lines to compete with the better organized and established power of other ethnic groups aligned with the established order.

In his landmark book "The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics," author Michael Novak describes the new ethnicity among white Americans as "not a call to separatism but to self-consciousness. It does not seek division but rather accurate, mutual appreciation"

According to Philosopher Belliotti, "the Italian American vision of ethnicity promotes group pride and solidarity but not prejudice, a vision in which our past is honored but not necessarily determinative of our future; a vision in which we can celebrate our common legacy without forsaking our allegiance to our adopted land."

Novak describes white ethnics as progressive, politically independent, and alienated from both the corporate power of the Right and the media and institutional power of the Left. Both represent the Establishment and do not speak for them. According to Novak, white ethnics, almost a third of the population of the United States, are the most potent swing vote in American national politics. By historical accident, they are concentrated in the 10 largest states in the electoral college and they vote in higher proportion than any other group. For now, no party has a firm grip on the white ethnic vote.