

The Politics of Ethnicity

The most interesting result of Jimmy Carter's remarks on "ethnic purity" was not so much the fuss over his wording as the fact that most of the Presidential aspirants turned out to agree with his policy. None of the candidates favors Federal initiatives to break up ethnic neighborhoods (though most would step in to stop housing discrimination). In the post-liberal politics of 1976, ethnicity is very much in and the melting pot is very much out. The last decade has brought a new sense of ethnic pride and awareness in the U.S., and politicians have done considerable homage to the country's ethnic subcultures.

When a social trend like this is discerned, academic researchers are quick to fasten onto it, and in some cases they have been the first to do the discerning. Spurred on by grants from the Rockefeller and Ford foundations, scholars have embarked on dozens of ethnic-research projects. In 1972, Congress gave its own blessing to ethnic scholarship by passing the Ethnic Heritage Studies Act, which authorized \$15 million for research. The research has turned up some interesting—and often surprising—judgments about the political views and impact of American ethnic groups.

Myths: According to political sociologist Richard Hamilton of Canada's McGill University, ethnic ties are the main influence on voting behavior. In his book "Restraining Myths," published last year, Hamilton argues that a person's contacts with his family, school, church and neighborhood are more important in determining his political outlook than his economic status or any other factor.

As expected, ethnic cohesiveness is strongest in traditional neighborhoods. Yet, Hamilton finds, ethnic ties persist even in the newer suburbs where third-generation families still tend to socialize with people of the same ethnic and religious background. Thus, despite upward mobility, Hamilton reports that white Protestants tend to be the most conservative group at every income level, and Catholics tend to be more liberal than any other group except Jews.

Hamilton also finds that upper-middle-class elites, who seem culturally assimilated, actually follow many of the same group instincts as neighborhood ethnics. These elites, he argues, grow up in similar suburbs, attend the same privileged schools and live in similarly

affluent enclaves. In fact, writes Hamilton, it was the elite readers of the elite publications—mainly the white Protestants—who were the most hawkish in their support of the Vietnam war. They were also the group most affected by the mass media's eventual turn against that war in the late '60s. "They, in short, 'came around' to the moderate blue-collar position," Hamilton concludes.

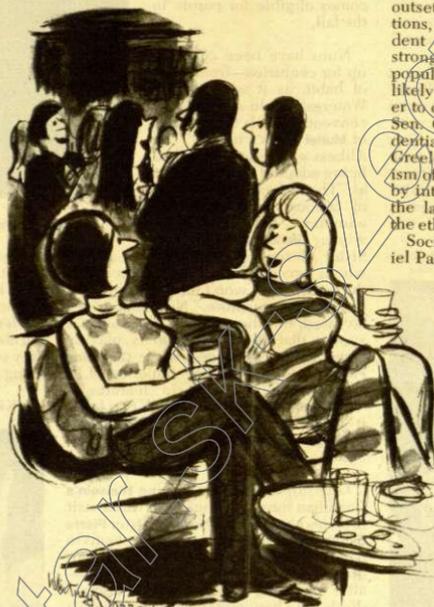


Illustration by Whitney Brown Jr., © 1976 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.
 "This year I'm not getting involved in any complicated issues. I'm just voting my straight ethnic prejudices."

The block-voting habits of the working classes were analyzed by Mark Levy and Michael Kramer in "The Ethnic Factor," published in 1972. Reviewing a dozen years of election returns from 2,000 precincts, the authors found that white ethnics were so tied by tradition to the Democratic Party that they generally voted for Democrats even when the candidate took some positions more liberal than their own. Slavic-Americans, for example, are the least assimilated white ethnic group and the closest to blacks at the lower economic levels, yet they consistently produced healthy majorities for liberal Democrats. Even Irish-Americans, the most assimilated of the white ethnics, supported Demo-

cratic candidates by a margin of 2 to 1.

Sociologist Andrew Greeley, director of the Center for the Study of American Pluralism in Chicago, has also offered impressive evidence that the hybridized American is not a reactionary hardhat. In "Ethnicity in the United States," published in 1974, Father Greeley presented statistics to measure the response of white ethnics—mainly Irish, Italian and Slavic Catholics—against those of "mainstream America" on key social issues. Greeley reported that the Catholic ethnics were more likely than other Americans (except Jews) to have opposed the war in Vietnam from the outset; that after the Watergate revelations, they turned against former President Richard Nixon earlier and more strongly than did other segments of the population, and that they were less likely than the average Democratic voter to defect from the party when liberal Sen. George McGovern was its Presidential nominee in 1972. Unfortunately, Greeley concluded, the political liberalism of white ethnics had escaped notice by intellectuals and journalists because the latter had willfully misinterpreted the ethnic factor in U.S. politics.

Sociologists Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan—a political figure himself—published a controversial essay in *Commentary* magazine in October 1974 that offered several reasons why the politics of white ethnics have been misunderstood by liberal intellectuals. White ethnic solidarity, they argued, confounds the "liberal expectancy" that the emphasis on individual achievement in modern societies dilutes the ties of family and ethnic heritage.

Class: Ethnic cohesiveness also lies in the face of another theory favored by liberal intellectuals—the Marxist assumption that class interests based on economic status overshadow differences based upon religion, language and other ethnic attachments. As it turns out, said Moynihan and Glazer, the modern American welfare state has forced ethnics to function as economic self-interest groups in order to achieve a larger slice of government benefits.

It also seems likely that liberals have misunderstood white ethnics because they have seen them in juxtaposition to blacks—the whites' neighborhood cohesion, their clustering in schools and jobs have all been too glibly regarded as symptoms of racial bias. One of the main contributions of the new research on ethnicity has been to focus on the positive, rather than negative, side of white ethnic solidarity. And that is one of the reasons that politicians besides George Wallace now find it acceptable to cultivate the ethnic voter again.

—KENNETH L. WOODWARD