

ASPECTS OF GERMAN INFLUENCES IN WISCONSIN POLITICS

Talk given by Frank P. Zeidler in Madison, Wisconsin on December 10, 1998 and sponsored by the Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies.

Some years back I asked a librarian at the Milwaukee Public Library if he had anything on German humor. He responded by asking me, "Is there such a thing?" Similarly when one inquires about German influence on Wisconsin politics, the initial tendency to respond is with the question, "Is there such a thing?" The German-American population in Wisconsin has been considered singularly unsuccessful in attaining higher office or in exerting any major direct influence on public policy. Thus Hense-Jensen and Bruncken in their two volume, "Wisconsin's Deutsch-Amerikaner" in 1900 noted that, "It has been often shown with astonishment that a state with so overwhelming German population as Wisconsin yet never sent a German to the Federal Senate, and only once had a German Governor, who moreover was merely elected as Lieutenant Governor, and only through the accidental death of the elected highest officer achieved the top." (My translation.)

It is true in Wisconsin in many regional areas and local districts Americans of German descent were elected to various offices, but seldom to the highest office. In this century Governor Philipp, Gov. Schmedeman, and the Governors Walter Kohler, Senior and Junior, and Governor Heil were of Germanic extraction. I understand that the present Governor has some German ancestry.

In the counties where there was a substantial German settlement in the last century -- namely eastern and southeastern Wisconsin -- one still finds persons in public office with names indicating German descent, but ever less. In Milwaukee the presence of German Americans in city and county elected offices has greatly diminished. In Milwaukee, often thought of as a German city, in the present Common Council four of the 17 seats are occupied by persons with German-American names. No city wide elected officer in Milwaukee is of German-American descent, to my knowledge. In the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors three of 25 seats are held by persons with German-American names. In the Milwaukee County Circuit Courts, German-American names are more numerous. About twelve of forty judgeships are occupied by persons with such names.

What this indicates at least in southeastern Wisconsin is that there is no voting bloc that can be recognized as a unified German-American bloc vote. I think this fact is well recognized by elected officials and by those campaigning for public office. In my experience events conducted by German-American societies with the possible exception of German Fest in Milwaukee are not much attended by public officials, whereas other ethnic events tend to so be. This is because the voting of Americans of German descent is fractionated.

Persons of German-American extraction are found in all of the major and most of the minor political parties, proposing issues and policies without recognition of the origin of their ancestors, but also being active without achieving much popular recognition.

At this point one might well conclude that there is not enough influence of the German-American population on the politics of Wisconsin to warrant further discussion. However, it must be noted that while there is no major unified German-American voting bloc, there are still blocs of votes that reflect some aspect of German-American culture, and further the influence of ideas advocated by Americans of German descent have had and still have a pervasive and persuasive influence in Wisconsin political life. Thus for example I think it is safe to say that the major effort to create social legislation, including welfare legislation, came from German Americans, as did the drive for honest and effective government. In the latter case in the last century there was the great German-American press concern over corruption in the national government and in this century over corruption in the Milwaukee city and county governments.

There have been times when there was a kind of unified German-American voting bloc in Wisconsin history. In the last century German Americans of whatever type were unified in advocating rights for immigrants and for their full participation in citizenship. Some of these struggles took place in the middle of the 19th century. One champion of such rights was Carl Schurz, one time resident of Wisconsin, probably the greatest orator in English of his time in the United States, and a man with excellent judgment about public policy. In the 1890's there was a unified bloc among German Americans when Lutherans and Catholics joined to oppose the Bennett Law. This law required among other things teaching English, American history, reading and arithmetic in the English language. Lutherans saw it as an attack on the right of the parent to teach a child in German (which language may have been thought necessary for correct understanding of Scripture). To the Roman Catholics the law meant public interference with their system of parish schools.

Still another occasion occurred when there was a bloc of German-American votes. In the second decade of this century many Wisconsin German Americans opposed the entry of the United States into the First World War on the side of Great Britain and France.

With these exceptions however, the German-American vote has always been a fragmented one, and one which could largely be ignored by candidates for public office. The reason for this fragmentation is that persons who came from German states and places where some variety of German was spoken, were themselves fragmented by past experiences and beliefs. One can detect among the German-American element great divisions which took place as the result of place of origin, of religion, of economic status, and of social class among other things. The concept of a modern unified Germany was not the case prior to 1871 and the Franco-Prussian war.

Before Bismarck began the move to a unified German state, people coming from German lands were fractionated by origin. The North Germans spoke a dialect hardly understood by middle and South Germans. They were a different people. Settlements in Wisconsin by people coming from different sections of the present German lands had their own local customs and ideas. To the non-Germanic people however they were all of one kind.

Even more significant were the religious differences persons brought with them from the German states. The major divisions were Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, and Rationalist or Free Thought groups. The divisions these groups had with each other in Europe have still not

been erased in this nation, and some like the Lutherans have gone through further theological divisions which have lessened their impact on public policy and political views.

In economic views German Americans were divided as to occupation and economic status. There were the working class, the small business class, and the larger owners. The political expression of these categories of people and their ideas in Wisconsin manifested itself early.

One of the first displays of German-American political activity was support for the Democratic Party. The reason for this was that among the Wisconsin Whigs, forerunners in part of the Republicans, there was the Know Nothing Movement, which was directed against full acceptance of European immigrants, particularly those with a German dialect. The movement was also against the Irish. Since the Irish were also highly displeased with Great Britain and since people of English ancestry in the United States tended to be Whigs and later Republicans, the Irish became Democrats. They dominated that party in Milwaukee at least, and thus were able to recruit the German population. This tie between a large portion of Wisconsin voters of German descent persisted for a long time, especially in the industrial cities of the state. However the Germans in the Democratic Party, at least in Milwaukee, deferred to the Irish leadership and to the superior Irish skill in political matters.

In the late 19th century and early in this century there began a drift of German votes to the Republican party, largely because persons of German descent in Wisconsin frequently advanced in the economic scale. For example in Milwaukee Charles Pfister was the leader of the Republican Party early in this century.

In the last century and early in this century Germans were leaders in the Populist and Socialist movements of the state. Names associated with these movements are Schilling, Grottkau, Seidel, and Berger. These movements, also had a base in labor organizations which frequently were headed by German Americans, until the 1950's.

A factor which held part of the German vote in the Democratic Party was the fact that the Whig and later Republican parties seemed to represent organizations like the American Protective Association, but even in this organization there were prominent Germans. In the Milwaukee area German Catholics were in a voting bloc with the Irish and Polish Roman Catholics, and of course frequently did not carry a dominant voice therefore in the competition for public office on the Democratic ticket.

Conversely among the more conservative and fundamentalist Lutherans it is my impression that there was a shift toward the Republican party not only as a party of Protestants, but also a party in which the conservative values of religion will be maintained. German Americans in the major political parties of this day and of the past may have advanced ideas to the candidates and did the active work of campaigning, but did not and do not seem to hold leadership positions. Another body of Lutherans influenced by the labor movement, and active industrially, tended to be liberals or socialists and, at the present liberals in the Democratic party.

Of the German-American influence of church members in the major parties it might be said that they tended to set the standards of the kind of political conduct expected of the public officials. I

have thought for sometime that the major influence in early Milwaukee was the political and social influence of Roman Catholicism which had certain standards of conduct for the poor, for how one should act in government or seats of power and in labor-management relations. These standards were reflected by public officials, German and otherwise, who professed the Catholic faith.

The Lutherans promoted a very high standard of public office holding -- no graft or corruption, and faithful and continuous public service, but at modest salaries. The ethical milieu establishment by these two dominant religious groups influenced what people expected of their elected officials.

Of more spectacular influence, however, were the German Americans associated with the rationalist or forethought movement. From this movement came not only demands for strict honesty in government and ending of graft and boodling, but for social and labor legislation to advance the condition of the working poor. Much of the present day local, state and national legislation comes from this German-American movement. I mention the eight hour day, the safe work place, decent housing, clean water, recreational development and parks, worker's compensation, old age pensions, public health care, and social security.

It was however not only rationalists that proposed these ideas, but also some persons of German extraction who had church affiliations and who promoted public housing, public libraries and public recreation, public radio and public television.

There was a difference among persons of German-American descent over school and education issues. There were champions of parochial education and champions of public education. There were German Americans who emphasized private and parochial higher education and some who advocated public education. These differences still exist, chiefly in the Milwaukee area.

As to service in public office, the early German press and some German-American candidates for office were strong proponents of civil service. This was especially true of the Socialist Party movement in Milwaukee with its large number of members of German-American parentage. At the present time this concept is under attack, but in the past it served the public well.

In recent times persons of German-American extraction, at least in the Milwaukee area, have been very active in promoting civil rights and racial harmony. Though there was also a sentiment among the Milwaukee German-American population of needing to distance one's self from the large influence of African-American and Latino peoples, yet the most outspoken champions of civil rights were German Americans, some coming from religious commitments and others from philosophical commitments. They worked for legislation and political expression which would give other cultures equal rights.

The most difficult problem German Americans in the last century and in this century had as far as public policy was concerned was their attitude to war and peace. Many of the earliest of the German Americans who settled in Wisconsin were persons not only seeking religious freedom, but also persons seeking to avoid the wars of Europe and military service. Although some of the earliest German immigrants in the Milwaukee area went to serve in the Mexican War of 1846

and Germans formed military companies, there was a widespread aversion to war among the common people. This manifested itself in resistance to the civil war among some German Americans, partly on the grounds that it was a war which would enhance Republican and therefore British ancestry people, but also on the grounds of pacifism. Nevertheless a very high proportion of German Milwaukeeans served in the war and suffered enormous losses. This antiwar sentiment was picked up by the German socialists in Milwaukee who held that wars were conflicts between capitalists and that the working class should not fight them. This sentiment did not strongly emerge in Wisconsin in the Spanish American War, but in the rumblings that appeared before the First World War, there was a strong sentiment to stay out of the war, not only for reasons of ancestry but for pacifist reasons. The German-American resistance to this war led pretty much to the shattering of the German-American culture of the state. It also led to a hostility to the election of some German Americans to public office on the grounds that they were traitors.

The effect of this war was to indicate to German Americans that while they thought they could be full participants in American society and government, this was not so, and further that there was latent hostility to their culture which could be readily whipped up.

The conditions of the rise of the Hitler and Nazi movement in Germany after 1932 produced some German-American sentiment of support, but by far among most of the German Americans there was opposition to his movement. Also this issue did not arise because the nation was involved in a Great Depression and Depression issues between Republican and Democrats occupied the public mind; and to a lesser extent the world Communist movement was considered even more troubling than the Hitler movement. The Second World War did not produce an anti-German backlash much as an anti-Japanese backlash, although some German Americans were carted off to camps for internment.

By the time of the Second World War, the descendants of German Americans were already in the third and fourth generation for the most part, and felt themselves thoroughly American, and for the most part also were in this state involved in the Republican party, the Democratic Party and the Progressive Party. In Milwaukee and a few places in Wisconsin there was a Socialist movement, mostly with German-American members. The German-American voters then were fractionated into at least four parts, and in no part were they dominant statewide, or even locally in many places. Their policies were indistinguishable from the party politics. The German-American influence only could manifest itself as ethical teachings about human conduct which some of the political figures may have picked up.

It should be noted that there is a common belief that persons of German-American descent have a distaste for politics -- that is for political conniving. While German Americans like to be in organizations, the organizations they join are cultural and not political, and often by consensus the organizations refuse to consider political matters. This distaste is said to account for the relative lack of interest in German Americans in seeking public office, and for their interests in industrial or commercial work. I do not know how to measure this, but it is my impression that this is the case. This also may account for the relative lack of influence on the part of Americans of German descent in the field of government and political policy.

Now in viewing some of the aspects of public policy in which I think there was considerable German American input, I mention the eight hour day policy, the worker's compensation policy, old age pensions or social security, public health care, the open school house at night and recreation centers, vocational education, slum clearance, public housing, civil service, better race relations, public transportation, efficient municipal services, higher education, library extension, public broadcasting, vocational education, there is an underlying theme that this has required public enterprise and public initiative. There has been a feeling that where a public need is to be met, and private initiative or profit motivation is not meeting it, then the people through their governmental agencies must do so. This underlying attitude reflects three parts of the German cultural heritage, one is the tendency to form strong communal support groups -- almost closed-in groups, another is the Christian ethic, and the third is the rationalist belief in the dignity of the individual human.

Today I note that these concepts which have some German roots, though not exclusively so, are under challenge across a wide spectrum of government, from the federal level to the state level. These concepts are being challenged by the new concepts that the shrewd pursuit of self interest somehow results in the good of the whole society, that the government can do no good except to have police powers and courts -- a kind of anarchistic concept, and the market determines all values and all activities.

Thus the concepts of economic and cultural support for all people regardless of income and status that some of the early German Americans held is more or less successfully attacked through down sizing government social activities, privatization, and increase of military and police systems. There is also an attack on the concept of federalism -- a federal union of states which motivated the persons in the 1848 liberal revolution of Germany.

As for a German-American response to this, let it be said that German Americans are in all the parties and leading the conflict in the major parties on both sides. I have seen no scientific attempts to ascertain what people of German-American descent are thinking about the current issues. I suppose this in part is due to an attempt to ascertain who is of German descent since the Germans have tended to disappear in the so-called melting pot. Although I would judge that most of the persons of German descent living in the rural and small town areas of Wisconsin now reflect the Republican view for various reasons including religious commitment,, it would be interesting to see what some of the German Americans of German descent in the urban areas are thinking about in terms of political development. I don't think persons can fully escape their cultural heritage and so it would seem that the great divisions which occurred among people living in Germany, divisions over religion and economics, and social status may be replicating themselves here.

German-American political figures of the past include Huebschman, Domschke, Deuster, von Cotzhausen, Wallber, Koch, Schilling, Grottkau, Pfister, Berger, Seidel, Baensch, Esch, Froehlich, Otjen, Roehr, Kronshage, Fricke, and Fehr. These are some of the names of the past and almost none remembered any more. They were German-American leaders in the various parties, influencing their parties in most cases in the second tier of political leadership. They were not of one mind. The basic main thrusts of the political ideology came from the human experience of the ordinary people, and it was to this experience that the leaders gave expression.

Will some persons of German-American heritage either here in Wisconsin or nationally give us a new view of a kinder, more just human society for the nation and the world? One would hope so. The United States would benefit from another Carl Schurz of this generation.

Are there any conclusions that one can derive from a cursory examination of German-American influence in Wisconsin political life? I think so.

One conclusion is that German Americans are not so likely to find satisfaction in participation in political affairs as they are in community and cultural groups. The hurly-burly of political competition is not attractive to many German Americans. For religious people among them, the competitive boosting of oneself and the denigration of one's opponent may even seem immoral. There seems a pacifist strain to be found among German Americans to be expressed by avoiding quarreling and trying to get along.

Yet another conclusion is that the cultural and ethical values German Americans have advocated have resulted in publicly accepted value and ethical systems, especially in the concepts of honest government and of government acting in the interests of the people as a whole. In this latter subject, the social support systems that prevailed in the state until recently can largely be attributed to Americans of German descent. Also the benefits accruing to working people in the eight hour day, worker's compensation, safe work places, and retirement benefits are easily traced originally to German immigrants. Also the most notable record of German-American participation in the political life in the state is that of clean municipal and county government.

Less clear evidence of German-American political activity, but present nevertheless, is the consistent support of the federal union, the institution of civil service, the extension of health care services, and the protection of human rights.

On the question of public education, the record of German Americans is mixed, with a large contingent favoring sectarian education. However at least in the Milwaukee school system the concept of the lighted school, of municipal recreation and adult education, of vocational education, and of educational radio and television had strong support among persons of German descent.

When these facts are considered along with the activities of Americans of German descent in agriculture, industry, and commerce, the conclusion is that the German-American political influence helped create the reputation of the state as socially progressive.
