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Ralph J. Perk, the “New Ethnicity”, and the Making of Urban Ethnic Republicans

ABSTRACT

Historians seeking to explain the late twentieth century rightward shift of urban ethnic whites have tended to ignore the shifting meaning and content of white ethnic identity in this transition, and the utility of these changes to conservative political discourse. This article, focusing on the ethnic strategies of the Republican mayor of Cleveland, Ralph Perk, seeks to illustrate the importance of the “New Ethnicity” of the 1970s, and its reconceptualization of white ethnicity as a series of “values”, in the making of urban ethnic Republicans. In doing so it reorients our understanding of Perk – the “Ethnic Mayor” – and places ethnicity at the heart of the conservative insurgency reshaping urban and national politics during this period.

In October 1984, less than a month before Election Day, the *New York Times* travelled to Cleveland, Ohio, to gauge political sentiment amongst the city’s “ethnic” voters.¹ These descendants of southern and eastern European immigrants – many traditional Democrats – had demonstrated surprising support for Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party four years earlier, and were again expected to be crucial to the election’s outcome in a major industrial swing state. National political figures, including Democratic vice-presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro – the first Italian “ethnic” on a presidential ticket – were flocking to the city to meet ethnic leaders, hold photo-ops in the city’s ethnic restaurants, and secure the vital “ethnic vote”.²

¹ I use “ethnic” here as it was used during the 1970s and in 1984, to represent white, European-American ethnic groups, largely southern and eastern European, Catholic and typically working or middle-class. From hereafter I will use “white ethnic” to describe these groups. In 1960s and 1970s Cleveland but also the nation, Jews and Irish-Americans were typically considered ethnically (if not racially) distinct from the “ethnic” designation. Also excluded from this “ethnic” designation, and identified by “race” rather than “ethnicity”, were Hispanics (less of a feature in Cleveland politics, also seen as distinct but also racially so, neither “ethnic” nor “white”), Asians and African-Americans.

² “Ethnic Democrats Seen as a Top GOP Priority”, *New York Times* [NYT], 18 Oct. 1984, D27.

However, the “ethnic vote” seemed oddly elusive. Instead, the *Times* discovered in Cleveland a heterogeneous constituency, riven by cleavages of age, occupation, class and geography. In the West Side market and Slavic Village neighbourhood, older residents or those laid off by the city’s steel mills and auto plants decried Reagan’s impact on white ethnic concerns. But in the streets of rejuvenated Murray Hill or the city’s suburban shopping malls, small business owners and real estate brokers, themselves of European ethnicity but often younger or more removed, spatially or emotionally, from their heritage, dismissed traditional partisan or ethnic affiliations as irrelevant. Those still employed in the auto and steel industries, shrugging off the recent layoffs, noted the growing availability of overtime work and increased disposable income, confessing, ‘You vote for who gives you the most, whether he’s a Democrat or a Republican.’ Many explained their changing political loyalties using a middle-class, conservative language of low taxes, opposition to welfare, individual aspiration and hard work, self-identifying as homeowners or taxpayers rather than workers, Catholics or “ethnics”: ‘We’ve had to work hard all our lives for everything we have, and don’t like to see things given away to people who don’t really need it’, declared small business owner Cindy Kowalczyk. 34-year-old steelworker John Chaya personified the new ethnic conservatism. ‘I got tired of the Democrats being bleeding hearts’, Chaya told the *Times*. ‘It got to the point where it was bleeding me.’ By contrast, ‘the Republican Party is more sensitive to the needs of the guy in the middle.’ Explaining his own interests in highly individualized terms, devoid of ethnic content, Chaya was certain of why and for whom he was voting. ‘Things are good for me on the job. My taxes haven’t been raised ... I’ll stick with Reagan.’³ In November, large numbers of Cleveland’s European ethnic voters followed his lead, helping Reagan improve on his strong 1980 showing in Cuyahoga County and contributing to the Republican capture of the state.

³ Ibid.

What had happened to Cleveland's "ethnic vote"? Why did many "ethnic" voters articulate their increasingly conservative electoral preferences in such non-ethnic terms? And why were these trends so pronounced in a traditionally Democratic city known for its diverse European ethnic communities?⁴ The answers to these questions lie in the guise of an unlikely figure: Ralph J. Perk, Republican mayor of Cleveland from 1971 until 1977. Perk – 'The Ethnic Mayor', as the *Washington Post* labelled him in 1973 – utilized his eastern European heritage to mobilize diverse European ethnic communities behind his mayoralty.⁵ Despite his underwhelming record in office and inability to halt Cleveland's slide towards fiscal crisis, Perk won three successive elections during the 1970s, reversing decades of Democratic hegemony in the city, established a powerful political organisation built upon ethnicity, and converted many once-Democratic white ethnic voters to the Republican cause. To do this, Perk offered a new and transformative ethnic discourse, couched not in traditional indicators of ethnic distinctiveness or particularism but in the universalist language of property, work, neighbourhood and individual achievement and aspiration, which captured the changing landscape of Cleveland – and the changing meaning of ethnicity – during the 1960s and 1970s. In this way, Perk's reconfiguration of ethnicity opened white ethnic Clevelanders up to the Reaganite conservatism which would sweep through urban white constituencies – and much of the nation – in subsequent decades.

Although less substantial than the historiography of post-war Sunbelt conservatism, the rightward shift of working and middle-class urban ethnic whites during the 1960s and 1970s

⁴ At the start of the 1970s there were less than 30,000 registered Republicans in Cleveland, compared to 209,000 Democrats. See "Garofoli, Perk Take Different Routes", *Cleveland Plain Dealer* [CPD], 1 Aug. 1971, A4.

⁵ "Ethnic Cleveland", *Washington Post* [WP], 13 Aug. 1973, A1.

has received reasonable scholarly attention.⁶ Few of these works, however, have moved beyond national politics to interrogate the local dynamics involved in this transition.⁷ Fewer still, it seems, have considered its intersection with the concept of ethnicity itself; in particular the emergence of a “New Ethnicity” – a politics of which Ralph Perk was a notable agent – during the same period.⁸ Instead, in both popular and scholarly narratives, Perk and his white ethnic strategies have been remembered in one of two rather limiting guises. In the first, Perk is a parochial, even anachronistic political curiosity, notable for his folksy, heavily-accented appeals to his beloved “etnics”.⁹ In the second, Perk represents the forces of white ethnic “backlash”, his openly ‘racist appeal’ ensuring he joined Philadelphia’s Frank Rizzo, Roman Gribbs of Detroit and Minneapolis’s Charles Stenvig in a cadre of white “law and order” mayors, each attractive to fearful urban whites at the start of the 1970s.¹⁰

Intriguingly, these two images mirror the dual representations attached to white ethnic affirmation during the 1970s. First, as an Old World adjunct to Tom Wolfe’s “Me Decade”: an ethnic ‘revival’ or ‘reverie’, a largely performative quest for belonging and identity, defined by trivial, commodified visions of white, European ethnicity, from television shows

⁶ For examples, see Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1969); Richard Scammon & Ben Wattenberg, *The Real Majority* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1971); Stanley Greenberg, *Middle Class Dreams: The Politics and Power of the New American Majority* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Thomas Edsall & Mary Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1991).

⁷ For exceptions to this rule, see Ronald Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), and Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

⁸ Exceptions include Matthew Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 180-87, and Joe Merton, “‘The Republican Party is Truly the Party of the Open Door’: Ethnic Americans and the Republican Party in the 1970s”, in Robert Mason & Iwan Morgan (eds.), *Seeking a New Majority: The Republican Party and American Politics, 1960-1980* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2013), 57-75.

⁹ Edward Whelan, “Ralph Perk’s Flight to Washington”, *Cleveland Magazine*, May 1974, <http://clevelandmagazine.com/in-the-cle/the-read/articles/ralph-perk-s-flight-to-washington>; “Ralph Perk, 85, a Republican Who Led Cleveland in the 1970s”, *NYT*, 23 Apr. 1999, A23.

¹⁰ On Perk’s ‘racist appeal’, see Thomas Campbell, “Cleveland: The Struggle for Stability”, in Richard Bernard (ed.), *Snowbelt Cities: Metropolitan Politics in the Northeast and Midwest since World War II* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 122-23. On his ‘law and order’ candidacy and appeals to white racial anxieties, see Leonard Moore, *Carl B. Stokes and the Rise of Black Political Power* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 134-43, and Deborah Atwater Hunter, “The Aftermath of Carl Stokes: An Analysis of Political Drama in the 1971 Cleveland Mayoral Campaign”, *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Mar. 1978), 337-54. For contemporary press coverage of Perk which makes this point, see “Conservative Victories in Major Cities Reflect Continuing Racial Polarization”, *NYT*, 3 Nov. 1971, 32.

and national cuisine to Hollywood films and ancestral “roots trips”.¹¹ Alternatively, as an urban, northern, analogue to the “southern strategy” of George Wallace and Richard Nixon; an interpretation in which ethnicity and its inherent complexities and cleavages are collapsed into a monolithic whiteness, integral to the construction of a new national conservative coalition founded upon racial backlash.¹²

However, this analysis of Perk’s ethnic strategies argues that neither of these two rather reductive interpretations is accurate, and that the “Ethnic Mayor” warrants greater historical significance. Both readings largely reinforce a ‘primordial’ view of ethnicity, anchored around Clifford Geertz’s ‘assumed “givens” of social existence’ – language, national origin, social custom, race.¹³ Neither captures either the dynamism or mutability of the “New Ethnicity” of the late 1960s and 1970s – including its politically constructible quality – nor the import of the spatial, cultural and demographic changes affecting Cleveland’s white European ethnic communities, and which defined their politics, during this period. Instead, the significance of Perk’s ethnic strategies lies in their active reconfiguration of ethnicity, to reflect, first, the inherently negotiable, unstable nature of ethnicity; second, the increasingly context-specific quality of white European ethnicities, defined as much by ethnic whites’ lived experience as Geertz’s “givens”; and third, a diverse local white ethnic constituency, increasingly suburban, consumerist, middle-class – even post-ethnic – able to

¹¹ For examples, see Edward Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 205-08; Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 72-129; Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 83-84. For the ‘Me Decade’, see Tom Wolfe, “The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening”, in Wolfe, *The Purple Decades* (London: Picador, 1993), 265-93.

¹² See Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 177-87; Dan Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich : Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996); Edsall & Edsall, *Chain Reaction*; Patterson, *Ethnic Chauvinism: The Reactionary Impulse* (New York: Stein and Day, 1977), 158-85; Thomas Sugrue & John Skrentny, “The White Ethnic Strategy”, in Bruce Schulman & Julian Zelizer (eds.), *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 171-92.

¹³ Clifford Geertz, “The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States”, in Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 109. Writing contemporaneously, Milton Gordon described these signifiers as part of ‘the conventional language of ethnic identification’. See Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 26 [emphasis added].

select from a menu of distinct identities (or, in Mary Waters' phrase, 'ethnic options').¹⁴

Together these trends proved crucial to both the transformation of ethnicity and the rightward shift of urban ethnic communities during the 1970s, yet are rarely identified by historians exploring the intersection between white ethnic identity politics and the rise of conservatism.

Thus this paper joins with Matthew Lassiter's criticisms of historians' overemphasis on simplistic, overly rigid 'race-reductionist narratives to explain complex political transformations' and ignorance of sectional and demographic differences and changes within purportedly homogenous white communities.¹⁵ This is not to say that race was absent from Ralph Perk's ethnic strategies; racial subtexts and anxieties were embedded within them, and Perk's use of ethnicity at times employed a racial conservatism which ignored, or even worked to preserve, the existence of white, and indeed white ethnic, privilege in Cleveland. But by becoming fixated with race and whiteness alone, we overlook their interplay with other important identities such as class, region or ethnicity. We ignore those other identities' power and agency in late twentieth century political change. We obscure the significance of local contexts, the fluidity and complexity of ethnicity and contemporary white ethnic politics, and the diversity of the constituency such a politics purported to represent. Indeed, like Lassiter's 'color-blind' southern white suburbanites, many ethnic whites in Cleveland increasingly identified with an ostensibly ethno-racially neutral "ethnic" discourse which identified them not as Poles, Slovaks, or even whites, but as almost post-ethnic "homeowners", "taxpayers", or "guys in the middle". Such a discourse reflected the changing context and composition of white ethnic Cleveland by the 1970s, and Perk's ability to create

¹⁴ Mary Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Ethnic Identities in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Richard Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 290-319; Stephen Cornell, "The Variable Ties that Bind: Content and Circumstance in Ethnic Processes", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 19 (2) (1996), 265-89. The literary scholar Werner Sollors also identifies ethnicity as 'voluntary', 'multiple-choice', or 'optional'. See Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 33-35.

¹⁵ Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 4-5.

a political language and vision of ethnicity which responded to these trends proved critical to the Republican ascendancy of the late twentieth century, both in the city and beyond. In this sense, then, an analysis of Ralph Perk offers a more perceptive vision of white ethnicity, a more temporally, contextually, and politically sensitive brand of white ethnic conservatism than simple racial backlash, and a more valuable insight into the changing currents of urban politics, conservative Republican strategy, and European ethnic identity at a critical juncture in contemporary American history.

Born to first-generation Czech immigrants in Cleveland's Broadway-Fleet community, where he began working life selling ice door-to-door, Ralph Perk was elected as a Republican city councilman in 1953 and then, in 1962, as Cuyahoga County Auditor. Perk was the first Republican to hold countywide office for nearly fifty years, yet he proved a popular County Auditor, winning re-election on two further occasions, often with bipartisan support.¹⁶ After two unsuccessful mayoral campaigns in 1965 and 1969, in which he lost to incumbent Carl Stokes by less than 3,500 votes, Perk took control of City Hall in 1971, when a three-way race, the polarisation of city politics during the Stokes years, and the heavy mobilisation of white ethnic voters each contributed to his becoming the first Republican mayor of Cleveland for over three decades.

Perk's Cleveland was a city in flux. It was home to as many as 45 different ethnic – or “cosmo” – communities, each divided by language, culture and nationality and each with their own network of fraternal orders, political clubs and unions. These largely working-class

¹⁶ Cleveland Memory Project, Ralph J. Perk timeline, <http://www.clevelandmemory.org/mayors/perk/timeline.pdf>; “Perk Candidacy Good for the City”, *CPD*, 26 May 1969, 16-A. Perk's popularity is illustrated by his increasing margin of victory in County Auditor elections. He steadily increased his majority from 20,000 votes in 1962 to nearly 100,000 four years later and 143,000 in 1970. See “Perk Extends Victory Story”, *CPD*, 29 Sept. 1971, 8.

communities had traditionally wielded considerable influence on city politics, their votes crucial to three decades of Democratic domination of City Hall. Yet by the late 1960s white ethnic political and cultural power was waning, undermined by major structural and demographic changes. Cleveland's economic base was changing rapidly: deindustrialisation, suburbanisation and the completion of a new innerbelt freeway in 1965 incentivized the flight of industry, jobs, and citizens from the central city. 80,000 blue-collar jobs left the city between 1953 and 1964, replaced by 30,000 largely suburban white-collar positions. The number of ethnic whites resident in Cleveland shrunk dramatically as many, often younger, ethnic whites left old urban neighbourhoods for newer suburbs such as Mayfield, Lyndhurst and Garfield Heights on the city boundary.¹⁷ This suburbanisation of labour and residents rendered the "cosmo vote" increasingly difficult to locate and threatened to break down traditional ethnic loyalties or bonds of community: parishes or neighbourhoods defined by ethnic or national origin were depopulated, ethnic media, institutions and political clubs dwindled, and, amidst white ethnic residential assimilation in the suburbs and an influx of black migrants into the inner city, differences of language or nationality became subsumed within larger "white", "ethnic" or "Catholic" identities.¹⁸

Against this backdrop of white ethnic assimilation, racial succession had become a growing reality in Cleveland, where the black population had almost doubled between 1950 and 1965 and now totalled over one third of the electorate. Traditional white ethnic control of the city council and the county Democratic Party was challenged by increasing black political

¹⁷ Leonard Moore, "Carl Stokes of Cleveland", in David Colburn & Jeffrey Adler (eds.), *African-American Mayors: Race, Politics and the American City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 82; Campbell, "Cleveland: The Struggle for Stability", 109-16; Carol Poh Miller & Robert Wheeler, *Cleveland: A Concise History, 1796-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 157-58; Bernard (ed.), *Snowbelt Cities*, 268-70. Indeed, by 1960 under half of Cleveland's white population lived in the inner city, compared to over 60 percent just a decade earlier. The population of suburban Mayfield grew by 193 percent in this period, and the community of Lyndhurst by 240 percent. Residential and generational change meant that the number of foreign-born ethnic whites resident in Cleveland fell from 20 percent of the population in 1940 to half that in 1960.

¹⁸ Avery Guest & James Weed, "Ethnic Residential Segregation: Patterns of Change", *American Journal of Sociology* 81 (5) (Mar 1976), 1088-1111; Andrew Greeley, "The Catholic Suburbanite", in Greeley, *The Church and the Suburbs* (New York: Paulist Press, 1963), 53-61.

power, reflecting ethnic whites' suburbanisation and the fragmentation of their traditional bloc votes. In 1967, after two years building a powerful black insurgency outside of the local Democratic organisation, African-American Carl Stokes ousted incumbent Ralph Locher to become the first black elected mayor of a major American city, winning 95 percent of the black vote in the process.¹⁹ Stokes's tenure was notable for major efforts at economic revitalisation – notably an infusion of federal urban aid into the city and an ambitious regeneration programme for the deprived inner city, Cleveland Now!, supported by the city's mainly WASP and Jewish business sector – and a concerted effort to increase black personnel in city agencies and the police department. The symbolic power of his mayoralty and his endorsement by both the city's financial and media elite and the federal government in Washington gave Stokes a national profile and a strong platform for his agenda. But these efforts were undermined by what biographer Leonard Moore calls his 'confrontational and careless style of governance', including a breakdown in relations with the police, allegations of corruption, fiscal mismanagement and racial favouritism, and open conflict between the administration and the city council and Democratic Party. Such conflict convinced Stokes to further institutionalize black political power in the city, creating the all-black 21st District Caucus, independent of the traditional Democratic organisation, which would campaign for further black political representation and nominate its own candidates for office.²⁰

This changing urban landscape presented a considerable challenge to Cleveland's older white ethnic politicians. Many struggled to remain relevant, unable to master a new politics of rights, rewards and representation and new political concepts such as federal urban aid and black power while their traditional constituencies fragmented. By the decade's end, former Locher strategist Bronis Klementowicz could observe, 'The machine has eroded. The

¹⁹ Campbell, "Cleveland: The Struggle for Stability", 111, 116; "Negro in Running for Cleveland Mayor as Race Issues Intensify Battle", *NYT*, 24 Oct. 1965, 77; "Negroes Show Voting Power in Contest with Racial Issues", *Ibid.*, 3 Nov. 1965, 31; "Cleveland Negro Defeats Mayor", *Ibid.*, 4 Oct. 1967, 1.

²⁰ For an excellent survey of Stokes's record in office, see Moore, *Carl B. Stokes*.

wards have changed. The ethnic vote isn't what it once was.²¹ Perk, however, recognized the need for a new white ethnic politics, one that could, in the wake of such transformative changes to the city and its politics, organize increasingly disparate communities, rebuild white ethnic political power, and, in its mobilisation of voters behind a unified white ethnicity, come to rival Stokes's insurgency. In the aftermath of his 1965 defeat, Perk, saluting the black template, concluded that the result was 'a good lesson' for ethnic whites: 'The Negro community voted en mass [sic] for their candidate, and proved to us that real strength can be achieved in unity only'.²² Over the next decade this realisation would prove central to Perk's development of a new white ethnic politics in Cleveland responsive to the broader political and structural changes affecting the city, and a new white ethnic conservatism capable of realigning metropolitan – and national – politics.

Perk's first major contribution was the creation, in 1965, of the American Nationalities Movement of Greater Cleveland [ANM], which sought to build a new, collective means of both practical political organisation and cultural identity amongst the city's individual white ethnic communities. In its founding language, the ANM reflected the secular decline of traditional modes of white ethnic organisation in the city and the nascent reality of black political power. 'We must solve our own problems', Perk declared at its inaugural meeting in April 1965, 'for if we leave it to others ... there is no hope.' While Perk recognized the particularities of language, culture and nationality as a means of mobilising the 23 individual white ethnic groups gathered within the ANM, he preferred to identify common political interests or experiences which could transcend group differences: 'We nationalities today are finding more points of common interests and common purposes... something new, a new sense of brotherhood among the oppressed, and a strong sense of justice and unity'. Such collective identity, he argued, carried considerable potential as a

²¹ "Garofoli, Perk Take Different Routes", 4-A.

²² History: the Nationality Movement of Cuyahoga County', n.d., Box 1, Folder 2, Ralph J. Perk Papers (MSS 4456), Western Reserve Historical Society [WRHS], Cleveland, Oh.

means of political mobilisation; Perk eulogized the ‘great potential of strength among the nationality groups... which if unified can exert great force locally and nationally’, almost replicating Stokes’s use of race for the same ends.²³

Perk’s strategies in these early years reflected this emergent ethnic strategy. On the one hand, Perk’s development of a political apparatus along ethnic lines acknowledged conventional identifiers of white, European ethnicity. His 1965 and 1969 campaigns were notable for the formation of individual nationality group chapters, with each group in the ANM – from Croatians and Czechs to Italians and Ukrainians – forming their own “Ralph Perk for Mayor” committee; each recruited voters from their own lodges and clubs, secured endorsements from their own media, and organized leafleting and letter-writing campaigns amongst their own group.²⁴ Yet on the other, Perk also attempted to forge a new, politicized vision of ethnicity, influenced by both a diverse white ethnic constituency and the shifting urban dynamics of Cleveland. While he continued to address conventional nationality group forums, the substance of Perk’s speeches tackled universal issues such as sanitation, senior citizens, taxation – Perk’s campaigns ran hard against Stokes’s proposals to introduce a new citywide income tax – and public safety, particularly salient in the wake of the 1966 Hough riots (Perk pledged to allocate 10 percent of any budget savings directly to the police). He surrounded himself not with old-fashioned ward-heelers or émigrés from eastern Europe but young, college-educated advisers, themselves advertisements for white ethnic assimilation and mobility. Even the majority of donors to his mayoral campaigns were middle-class white

²³ Ibid.; “Perk Starts Nationality Unity Drive”, *Garfield Heights Tribune*, 15 Apr. 1965, copy in Box 2, Folder 17, Ibid. Perk often drew analogies between the ANM’s activity and Stokes’ mobilisation of black voters, which itself had, ironically, actively replicated an earlier Democratic machine tradition of mobilising individual national and ethno-racial blocs for votes. In 1969, Perk told the *Plain Dealer* that, ‘if 80-85% of Mayor Stokes’ supporters can turn out and vote for him, then there is no reason why 80-85% of our supporters cannot come out and vote for Ralph Perk.’ See “Perk Law, Order Talk Cheered”, *CPD*, 22 Oct. 1969, 6-A.

²⁴ “History: the Nationality Movement of Cuyahoga County”.

ethnic suburbanites, not embattled inner-city whites.²⁵ Perk was thus mindful of a changing ethnicity, incorporating a variety of sub-groups, meanings and identities, even before the emergence of a new white ethnic identity politics at the end of the 1960s.

The American Nationalities Movement soon began to draw attention from beyond Cleveland. In 1968 Perk was invited to speak at Princeton University, pre-empting Kevin Phillips' *The Emerging Republican Majority* as he identified ethnic groups as 'the formula for victory in 1968' and 'the greatest source of untapped political strength available'. To access this lucrative resource, Perk recommended a renewed appeal to ethnic identity politics, but he also warned that 'nationality groups are learning to think for themselves'. Mirroring his strategy in Cleveland, Perk advocated equivalent appeals on broader issues such as crime – 'safety on the streets is the subject of all discussions in nationality neighborhoods' – patriotism, and taxation.²⁶ The Princeton address was picked up by the Nixon-Agnew campaign, who appointed Perk state director for ethnic groups for both Nixon-Agnew and the GOP. Here he successfully replicated the model he had developed in Cleveland, organising individual group chapters with individual executive committees.²⁷ In Cuyahoga County, where the *Plain Dealer* observed a GOP 'resurgence' thanks to 'a citywide Swiss-watch operation' and 'new political ideas and techniques', Perk's efforts reduced the 1968 Democratic vote from 71.5 percent four years earlier to 54 percent, while surrounding counties showed strong swings to the Republicans.²⁸ Democratic officials warned candidate Hubert Humphrey that white ethnic voters in Cleveland's 26th Ward – 'the most dyed-in-the-wool Democrats in our ... area' – were trending towards Nixon. 'When a red-hot foreign

²⁵ "Perk Made an Honorary Polish Vet", *CPD*, 7 Jun. 1965, 5; "Negro in Running for Cleveland Mayor"; "GOP Challenger Mirrors Old-Style Ethnic Values", *CPD*, 2 Nov. 1969, 1-A; "Trials Beset Him, But Perk Keeps Faith", *Ibid.*, 21 Oct. 1973, 1-A.

²⁶ Perk speech to Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, 3 May 1968, copy in Box 2, Folder 17, Perk Papers.

²⁷ Letter, Jim Howard to Spiro Agnew and Leonard Garment, 9 Sept. 1968, Box 3, Folder 44, *Ibid.*; Nationalities for Nixon-Agnew press release, n.d., *Ibid.*

²⁸ "1969 No Political Slouch, Either", *CPD*, 12 Apr. 1969, 9-A. All election data from Dave Leip's Atlas of US Presidential Elections, <http://uselectionatlas.org/>.

nationality Democratic area goes for Nixon in a city like Cleveland, that is a big red flag.’ Even in October, after a significant counteroffensive from the AFL-CIO, campaign aides in Ohio noted that, ‘the ethnic thing is the biggest problem we face’.²⁹ Much of this was down to Perk and the ANM’s work in recognising ethnicity as a potent organisational tool.

Perk’s success in using ethnicity as a means of practical electoral mobilisation in Cleveland during the late 1960s is evident, but it also presents us with a puzzle. If traditional ethnic identities were losing salience by the 1970s, submerged by the forces of assimilation and suburbanisation, and, as the *Plain Dealer* surmized in 1971, ‘the nucleus of the Perk vote [was] evaporating’, how was Perk able to use ethnicity to such great effect in the precincts of Cleveland?³⁰ The answer – and the significance of Perk and his strategies – lies in his reformation of ethnicity to reflect its changing meaning by the 1970s – more political than cultural, embedded not in practices or customs but “values” and experience – and his deployment of it not just as an organisational tool, but as a discursive or rhetorical strategy.

If we are to understand ethnicity as Werner Sollors’ series of ‘mental formations [and] cultural constructions ... constantly being invented anew’, then it is clear that during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the concept of ethnicity in American politics underwent significant reinvention.³¹ The collapse of the post-war “consensus”, and its normative values of ethnic assimilation – captured by works such as Will Herberg’s *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1955) and Milton Gordon’s *Assimilation in American Life* (1964) – created a cultural and political vacuum in many urban white ethnic communities already materially challenged by

²⁹ Letter, Dan Tyler Moore to Hubert Humphrey, 14 Aug. 1968, “Cor., by State: Ohio-Pa.”, Box 5-1, 1968 Presidential Campaign Files, Hubert Humphrey Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Mn; “Ohio – Get Out the Vote”, n.d., “Ohio: Correspondence and Misc.”, Box 12-7, Ibid.

³⁰ “Next 48 Hours are “Do or Die” for Ralph Perk”, *CPD*, 31 Oct 1971, 1-AA.

³¹ Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, 9, 14.

deindustrialisation, economic and racial transition, and the flight to the suburbs.³² New ethno-cultural concerns triggered by the social and political upheavals of the period, from race and crime to morality and identity, threatened to eclipse, or at least rival, a traditional distributional politics of economic need.³³ The black civil rights revolution, as both social movement and legislative phenomenon, upended the norms of American ethnic and racial politics; many ethnic groups – now formal “minorities” – rejected traditional ideals of integration, individual rights and colour-blindness (even whiteness) in favour of critiques of American society that emphasized collective disadvantage, discrimination and difference, as they competed for government resources in a polity increasingly sensitive to group rights claims.³⁴ In response, activists on both the left and right developed a “New Ethnicity” which transcended old distinctions of nationality and, in its powerful assertion of a collective “white ethnic” group identity, sought to address white ethnic interests and grievances, many of which, they argued, had been ignored in the rush to support minority group advancement.³⁵ From eastern Europeans demanding representation on equal employment opportunity boards in Pittsburgh to the creation of a ‘white NAACP’ in Newark for ‘white ethnics ... this country’s largest minority group’, white ethnic communities were encouraged to unite, organize and pursue rights, representation and reward from employers, foundations and government, adopting the example of the African-American insurgency. In Cleveland itself, a new, younger generation of activists – eschewing party political labels and following the 21st

³² For the post-war faith in ethnic assimilation, see Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1955); Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*; Eric Goldman, *The Crucial Decade – And After* (New York: Knopf, 1962), 128-32. For an analysis of assimilation’s unravelling in New York City and the persistence of ethnic and racial conflict, which illustrates the importance of dwindling Irish and Italian political power alongside growing black militancy in driving this process, see Nathan Glazer & Daniel Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of New York City*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970).

³³ For a contemporary account of the emergence of a new ethno-cultural politics in this period, see Scammon & Wattenberg, *Real Majority*. For two more recent analyses, see Byron Shafer and William Claggett, *The Two Majorities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), and Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010).

³⁴ For the powerful legislative impact of the civil rights revolution, see John Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

³⁵ On the left-liberal basis of much of the ‘New Ethnicity’, see Joe Merton, “Rethinking the Politics of White Ethnicity”, *Historical Journal* 55(3) (Sept 2012), 731-56.

District Caucus's template— demanded equal representation for white European ethnics on city commissions and launched campaigns against local (often non-ethnic) business interests, charities and politicians – including the WASP Republican congressman William Minshall, who had voted against proposed ethnic studies legislation in Congress – deemed unsympathetic to white ethnic interests. Observing ‘a gnawing frustration among ethnic Americans, an alienation, choked and volatile’, the *Plain Dealer* noted the emergence in the city of ‘a viable, dynamic and contemporary ethnicity that is no longer too proud to ask, too humble to beg’, and that, ‘on various local issues, ethnics are beginning to act as a group.’³⁶

Much of the “New Ethnicity” distanced itself from traditional notions of ethnicity or the “nationality” issues of the past; a ‘cynical politics’, according to local ethnic activist Albert Bellew, of proclamations, days of observance, and ‘musical grandfathers’. This was a political rather than sociological phenomenon, its understanding of ethnicity rooted in individualized, and often politicized, ideas of self, feeling and experience. Italian-American activist-priest Geno Baroni, a veteran of civil rights campaigns, promised a ‘revolution of [ethnic] consciousness ... a revolution of [ethnic] self-assertion’, with ethnic loyalties awakened by an ‘indignation at having been alternatively ignored and castigated.’ Slovak-American academic Michael Novak articulated a transformative “New Ethnicity”, located not in traditional forms of ethnic group identity but which ‘grows out of personal experience ... a growing self-confidence and social power; a sense of being discriminated against ... a sense of injustice’ – a subjective, individualized process. Like Bellew, he distinguished between an ‘old ethnic politics’, of ‘national picnics ... a few words (badly) in another tongue ... a mazurka or a polka ... honor[ing] the symbols’, and a ‘new ethnic politics’ of identity and

³⁶ “A White NAACP Set Up in Newark”, *NYT*, 4 May 1973, 79; “Ethnics’ Strongarm”, *CPD*, 24 Sept. 1972, 6-A; “Ethnics Come of Age as Power Bloc Here”, *Ibid.*, 7 Feb. 1972, 5-A; “What Became of Our Dream?, Ethnics Ask”, *Ibid.*, 17 Jan. 1971, 1-AA.

consciousness, ‘ a source of values, instincts, ideas and perceptions’.³⁷ Interestingly for Republicans, at the heart of this emergent “Ethnic Power” – ‘the newest rallying-cry in American politics’, as *Newsweek* dubbed it in 1970 – were motifs not just non-ethnic but also inherently conservative; a point recognized by the political analyst Richard Scammon:

We all recognize a new kind of ethnicity in America today ... It is not only pride in heritage and past achievement, it is a concern over present situations and values ... much of the voting of so-called white ethnic Americans concerns itself not with voting for the “...ski”, or the Italian, but for a value system which the ethnic may feel to be under attack ... It is often in the defense of these values ... that a good deal of this new ethnic political vitality may be sensed.³⁸

Admittedly, Perk continued to practice a “cynical” ethnic politics: presenting a radio show as ‘Cleveland’s number one ethnic’, crooning Bobby Vinton’s part-Polish ‘Melody of Love’ or regularly appearing at ethnic festivals or functions (‘[Perk’s] entertainment is shaking hands at a Slovenian picnic’, one aide quipped).³⁹ However, for Perk ethnicity also increasingly functioned as a discourse within which could be identified a number of powerful, tightly-interwoven tropes, or “values”. Many of these had little to do with nationality, religion or heritage; some of them appeared, contrarily, to ignore or transcend ethnicity, while others fused ethnicity with identities of race, place or class. Some spoke to white ethnic aspiration, others to white ethnic *ressentiment*. Yet each reflected a changing local context; a fragmented constituency increasingly difficult to locate; a dynamic, politicized conception of ethnicity;

³⁷ Ibid.; Geno Baroni, “Ethnicity and Public Policy”, in Silvano Tomasi & Michael Wenk (eds.), *Pieces of a Dream: The Ethnic Worker’s Crisis with America* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1972), 4; Michael Novak, “The New Ethnicity”, *Center 7* (Jul-Aug 1974), 18-25; Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 288-90.

³⁸ “Ethnic Power!”, *Newsweek*, 21 Dec 1970, 30; Scammon quoted in Perry Weed, *The White Ethnic Movement and Ethnic Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 217.

³⁹ “Trials Beset Him”; “GOP Challenger Mirrors Old-Style Ethnic Values”. On Perk as “Cleveland’s number one ethnic”, see Box 86, Folder 1337, Perk Papers.

and, together, a nascent urban white conservatism capable of expanding opportunities for Republicans in urban ethnic communities.

The first of Perk's ethnic "values", colour-blind meritocracy, positioned itself in opposition to racially redistributive programmes and Mayor Stokes's forceful attempts at the integration of city schools, housing and the police department – even the county Democratic Party – during the late 1960s. While this trope benefited from the immediate context of Stokes's often polarising approach to politics, enabling Perk to present himself as a candidate of racial moderation, it was also actively constructed by white ethnic ideologues such as Novak, who contrasted ethnics' pursuit of 'moderate success in America ... [through] loyalty, hard work, family discipline and gradual self-development', with blacks' desire 'to jump, via revolutionary militance ... over the heads of lower-class whites.'⁴⁰ Consequently, Perk's use of colour-blind meritocracy juxtaposed a collective historical memory – albeit a highly selective one – of ethnics' up-by-the-bootstraps assimilation, built upon ethnic "traditions" or "values" of individualism, sacrifice and self-reliance, with the more recent efforts of African-Americans bulwarked by state-sponsored civil rights protections. In doing so, it enabled Perk to overlook the deep-rooted structural inequalities – and ethnic complicity in those inequalities – which Stokes and his mobilisation of black political power had sought to confront, and depict himself as the guarantor of a purportedly colour-blind racial moderation – strategies still central to contemporary conservative politics.

For example, Perk regularly denied press suggestions he was the "ethnic" candidate, preferring instead to invoke the language of meritocracy and a superficially inclusive racial universalism. Officially announcing his 1969 candidacy, Perk asked 'all of [Cleveland's] residents to take my hand – all of its residents.' The next mayor, he argued in a column for the *Plain-Dealer*, 'should be chosen solely because he is the person most qualified and best

⁴⁰ Novak, *Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, 30.

fitted for that office.’ Identity politics – in particular Stokes’s utilisation of black power politics to secure a greater black voice in city governance – had been destructive to Cleveland, Perk argued, inflaming racial tensions and exacerbating divisions: ‘The people of Cleveland can no longer afford to elect a person because he is a Republican or Democrat, white or black, Catholic, Protestant or Jew’.⁴¹ A perceived bias in the Stokes administration’s allocation of jobs, funds and programmes designed for economic revitalisation was a regular theme of the campaign. Perk’s team homed in on alleged discriminatory practices in the allocation of Cleveland Now! monies, which they claimed had been disproportionately channelled towards black neighbourhoods and businesses and even, during the 1968 riots, black militants, and heralded Perk’s ‘honest and nonpartisan’ approach to economic revitalisation and neighbourhood development. And as mayor, Perk pledged that, unlike under Stokes’s administration, ‘opportunities in public service ... will be wide open to any citizen, irrespective of ethnic origin’.⁴² Such statements may have been purely rhetorical – conflicting with the efforts of Perk’s ANM allies to guarantee equal ethnic representation on city decision-making bodies, or ignoring the historical role of strategies identical to Stokes’s in securing white ethnic advancement in Cleveland – but they remained deeply effective in urban white constituencies smarting from the perceived defeats of the Stokes years.

Perk’s 1971 campaign for a non-partisan mayoral primary election, in which any number of candidates could run with the top two contesting a run-off, was another example of this rhetorical strategy. Here Perk used a dispute between the county Democratic Party and Stokes’s 21st District Caucus to position himself as the defender of colour-blind meritocracy. Stokes’ attempts to build an independent black political machine outside of an allegedly racially unrepresentative and discriminatory Democratic apparatus – including running his

⁴¹ Statement by County Auditor Ralph Perk, 25 Jun 1969, Box 5, Folder 85, Perk Papers, emphasis in original; ‘The Job for the Next Mayor – as it Looks to Perk’, *CPD*, 4 May 1969.

⁴² ‘Perk Draws Growing Number of Nationality Endorsements’, 15 Oct. 1969, Box 5, Folder 85, Perk Papers; Perk remarks to ‘Ethnic Expo’, Shaker Heights High School, 28 Apr. 1975, Box 88, Folder 1378, *Ibid*.

own slate of largely (but not exclusively) black candidates against incumbent Democrats – were denounced by Perk as ‘not only wrong but racist; not only unfair but un-American’. Perk’s aide Nicholas Bucur denounced Stokes’s efforts to draft his own candidate, black School Board President Arnold Pinkney, as an independent as ‘racial trickery’ designed to encourage the white vote to split between the two main parties, and positioned Perk as a voice of racial moderation. Perk called for a superficially meritocratic primary system in which only the two most popular candidates, regardless of race or party affiliation, took part in the run-off – overlooking racial inequalities built into the county party’s selection process – while claiming Stokes had practiced ‘racism in reverse’ as mayor and ‘cultivated the art of racial politics ... more than anyone in this country.’⁴³ He received support for his position from the *Cleveland Press*, who accused Stokes of ‘separatism’ and ‘dividing the party along racial lines’, and, from a large number of white and black Democrats disillusioned by Stokes’s further attempts to unseat the county party’s candidate for the Democratic primary and several other county Democrats (many of them, in Stokes’s defence, black).⁴⁴

Indeed, there was some evidence that Perk’s strategy stirred not only white ethnic conservatives, but communities of colour too. His colour-blind conservatism and appeals to meritocracy chimed with a black middle-class constituency in Cleveland hostile to tax increases for social welfare programmes or the construction of public housing in black middle-class communities. As one resident of Lee-Seville, an East Side area targeted by the Stokes administration for new public housing construction, decried, ‘I had to work fourteen hours a day seven days a week to earn a down payment on my house ... why should I say, “Come on Charlie, you can have it all for free”?’ Perk capitalized upon these divisions to

⁴³ Statement by Nicholas Bucur, Chairman of Committee for a Non-Partisan Primary, 18 Jan. 1971, Box 33, Folder 616, Carl B. Stokes Papers (MSS 4370), WRHS; “Perk Blasts Stokes, Enters Mayor Race”, *Cleveland Press*, 1 Apr. 1971, 1.

⁴⁴ Moore, *Carl B. Stokes*, 180-81.

increase his share of the black vote by almost five times between 1971 and 1973.⁴⁵ Endorsing Perk for re-election in 1973, the city's largest African-American newspaper, the *Cleveland Call and Post*, praised Perk for his 'fairness' in ensuring black communities lost little of the ground made under Stokes in terms of access to city jobs and services. 'It is high time that Black voters stop contributing to the polarisation of Cleveland on racial lines', the *Call and Post* declared. 'If we expect white voters to consider Negro candidates on their merit, then we must consider white candidates on their merit.'⁴⁶

The second, a related but more explicitly economic message based around hard work, individual aspiration and achievement, aligned white ethnicity and purportedly "ethnic" values of sacrifice and thrift with Perk's record of fiscal probity as auditor and then mayor. In one of the many oppositions employed by Perk, it drew a contrast with the alleged fiscal mismanagement of the Stokes administration and the impatience of the black communities he represented. "Ethnics" became non-ethnic "taxpayers" or "homeowners", their values shaped by their history of hard work and struggle, their everyday lives burdened not by ignorance of their cultural traditions or the plight of their homelands but by property tax hikes designed to pay for increased city services. These strategies enabled Perk – and many other conservatives – to develop a vision of white, European ethnicity shaped by values such as frugality or modesty, and ally it with a traditional conservative ideology hostile to fiscal or racial redistribution and activist government. Perk's 1968 Princeton speech, where he praised 'simple, unpretentious' ethnics and their 'plain values of perseverance, thrift, and rugged honesty', was one such example of this discursive strategy. Such values led, in Perk's view, to an innate white ethnic suspicion of welfare and state assistance or "handouts": 'They

⁴⁵ Ibid., 105; "Perk Out in Front", *Time*, 5 Oct. 1973, 21-22.

⁴⁶ Editorial, *Cleveland Call and Post*, 13 Oct. 1973, copy in Box 30, Folder 441, Perk Papers.

[ethnics] seek nothing for which they cannot pay through hard and honest labor.⁴⁷ Such a suspicion, he argued, made ethnics natural Republicans.

Perk's 1969 campaign for mayor was notable for these themes. In the run-up to the autumn campaign, advisers encouraged Perk to focus almost exclusively on Stokes's record of overspending and taxpayer waste as mayor during his first term in office, and to promote Perk's own image as 'a hard worker'. Press releases and campaign brochures circulated within white ethnic communities dwelt not on Perk's Czech heritage but compared his record of 'honesty and thrift' as auditor – the same ethnic "values" he had eulogized in his Princeton speech – with 'the last of the great spenders' Stokes. The mayor, Perk declared, had turned City Hall into 'a welfare office'; Perk aligning Stokes with costly redistributive programmes antithetical to "ethnic values" of sacrifice and self-reliance, whilst also constructing a pejorative and implicitly racialized image of the current administration's profligacy and disarray.⁴⁸ Major campaign addresses at the Polish Women's Hall, the Slovenian Auditorium or the Croatian Home may have included polka bands, Polish pastries and sauerkraut or Croatian sign-offs of "*hvala ti i doviđenja*", but they dwelt largely on fiscal issues, spending cuts and, in particular, the burden of taxation. In each speech, Perk pledged his opposition to tax rises, attacked a 'mess of inefficiency [and] duplication' at City Hall, and styled himself as 'the champion of the small homeowner' who would deliver an 'efficient, economical' city government and strive 'to obtain some kind of tax relief for the man whose life savings is invested in his home'.⁴⁹ In this vision, white ethnicity represented a collective imaginary or value set of hard work and self-denial, which, despite its evident historical blind spots (for example obscuring the role of the New Deal state in supporting white ethnic home

⁴⁷ Perk speech to Woodrow Wilson School, 3 May 1968.

⁴⁸ Letter, Bucur to Perk, 23 Sept. 1969, Box 32, Folder 434, Perk Papers; Press Release, "Perk Draws Growing Number of Nationality Endorsements"; Perk quoted in *Cleveland Press*, 15 Jun. 1969.

⁴⁹ "Perk Swears in 1,000 as Campaign Managers at Polka Rally", *Cleveland Press*, 24 Oct. 1969, A13; "Perk Opens Campaign", *Ibid.*, 9 Oct. 1969, C7; Perk speech to Croatian Pensioners Banquet, Croatian Home, 12 Oct. 1969, Box 5, Folder 85, Perk Papers.

ownership), enabled Perk's "ethnics" to understand the need for fiscal caution, limited government and reduced taxation, regardless of the cost to city services, more than most.

Two years later, against the backdrop of Stokes's abortive attempts to introduce a citywide income tax, Perk reiterated similar themes. The proposed "Stokes Tax", put forward to avoid cuts in city services, was aligned with the mayor's alleged fiscal recklessness – the city's deficit stood at \$27million – or the spectre of increased social welfare spending, and contrasted with Perk's own record of budgetary restraint.⁵⁰ In opposition to Stokes and his consistent, and at times heavy-handed, demands for programmes to improve the lives of the city's poor, Perk praised ethnic whites for having, 'taught us not to be afraid of hard work, or ashamed of being poor', before they entered the middle class. He even called upon his own personal experience of growing up 'ethnic' and 'very poor' on Cleveland's East Side, where '[I] faced many obstacles, and yet dared to dream.' White ethnic stoicism and self-reliance, represented by Perk's proposed layoffs and budget cuts, was often subtly juxtaposed with the impetuous, even unreasonable demands and expectations of poor blacks and their political representatives. 'When they [ethnics] came here in large numbers, they didn't call up City Hall to say, "build us a recreation center"', Perk declared in a 1971 interview. 'They built their halls themselves.' Equally, at an ANM dinner in 1975 the mayor paid tribute to 'our ethnic philosophy of hard work – of product instead of complaint.'⁵¹ Such statements deliberately ignored or obscured the historical role of labour unions or redistributive federal programmes in supporting white ethnic advancement (and restricting opportunity for others, especially blacks), thus also servicing Perk's own conservative ideology of low taxes and reduced government. Yet they were often internalized by white ethnic audiences: polling conducted during the 1969 campaign revealed Perk received the highest ratings amongst "ethnic" and "foreign-born" voters on taxes, while his victory two years later was heralded by

⁵⁰ Moore, "Carl Stokes of Cleveland", 100.

⁵¹ "What Became of Our Dream, Ethnics Ask"; Perk speech to the American Nationalities Movement, n.d. [1971], Box 88, Folder 1377, Perk Papers; "Nationalities Honor Perk at Banquet", *CPD*, 6 Oct. 1975.

one white ethnic citizens' group as 'a victory not only for you [Perk], but for all taxpayers'.⁵² Indeed, as mayor Perk continued to utilize this narrative of ethnic probity, individualism and hard work against the backdrop of a citywide programme of fiscal retrenchment, in which services were cut, city transit and sewerage systems sold off, employee pay and overtime reduced and recruitment frozen. Media proposals for Perk's 1973 re-election campaign recommended the equation of Perk's ethnic background with his record of 'fiscal common sense' – notably turning the city's deficit into a surplus by the end of 1972 through the sale of city assets – and balanced budgets. Perk himself, borrowing from Stokes's own rhetorical playbook, was not shy in linking his own life story to this wider white ethnic narrative of restraint, sacrifice and self-made achievement: 'Our ethnic people see in their present mayor a symbol of their own aspirations', he told a high school audience in April 1975.⁵³

The third of Perk's "values" celebrated the urban ethnic neighbourhood, a significant totem in the political world of the 1970s.⁵⁴ Conceptualising such spaces as much as a symbol as a discrete place, it equated them with an imagined sense of stability, place and community in fact long since eroded in Cleveland by suburbanisation, urban renewal programmes, discriminatory housing policies and ethnic white affluence and mobility, yet also spoke to suburban ethnics who had established new communities on the city periphery. As above, the sectional – "nationalities" or "ethnics" – became the seemingly universal – "homeowners" or "citizens" – while Perk's defence of white ethnic neighbourhoods' "traditions" or "stability"

⁵² Market Opinion Research, 'A Study of Candidates and Issues in the Cleveland Mayoral Election'; Telegram, Southwest Taxpayers to Perk, 2 Nov. 1971, Box 30, Folder 409, Perk Papers. [emphasis added].

⁵³ Command Inc. Radio-TV-Transit advertising proposal for Mayor Ralph Perk re-election campaign, 14 Aug. 1973, Box 30, Folder 409, Ibid.; Perk remarks to 'Ethnic Expo'. Sadly for Perk, this rhetorical strategy did not translate into policy success as mayor. Despite his attempts at efficiencies the city sunk further into debt and over half of the federal subsidies for economic development received by the city during his tenure were either misspent or went uncontracted. Perk's relationship with the city's business leaders collapsed completely. See 'City Awaiting Leadership Renaissance', *CPD*, 20 Aug. 1972.

⁵⁴ Neighbourhood preservation and revitalisation was a key part of the white ethnic movement's national agenda – and national politics – during the 1970s. See Suleiman Osman, "The Decade of the Neighborhood", in Schulman & Zelizer (eds.), *Rightward Bound*, 118-19; Benjamin Looker, *A Nation of Neighborhoods: Imagining Cities, Communities and Democracy in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 259-89, 309-35.

fused with contemporary anxieties over the black inner city, conservative calls for “law and order” – thus Perk’s pledge to increase police investment – or the pastoral image of the ethnic enclave defended by white ethnic advocates and activists. In his 1975 book *Affirmative Discrimination* sociologist Nathan Glazer paid tribute to European ethnic communities for possessing ‘a marked social order: stable neighborhoods ... strong organizations centered around the church, formal ethnic associations ... the local political organization ... the local small businesses of members of the group.’ One did not need to still reside there to have a sense of its value. The Italian-American writer Nicholas Pileggi documented how, even after they had left the old enclaves behind, suburban “Saturday Italians” returned to eat, to shop, and – most importantly – to survive: ‘It is only with a trunk filled with Italian market produce that a Saturday Italian can face six days in the suburbs’, Pileggi concluded. White ethnic ‘streets, stores, familiar smells and sights and sounds ... are identity, life, *self* [for ethnics]’, Novak argued more viscerally. ‘Take away such things, and part of them dies.’⁵⁵

Like these writers, Perk recognized the value of neighbourhood for white ethnic Clevelanders on both sides of the metropolitan divide, even whilst suppressing the structural explanations for the decline of such communities or ethnic whites’ own historical agency in this process through suburbanisation or racial discrimination. To launch his 1969 campaign, Perk chose a series of three neighbourhood meetings over a large downtown rally, and in planning Perk’s strategy, aides advised that, ‘the tone ought to be set that Cleveland is a city of neighbourhoods ... refer to your audience as “Neighbours ...”.’⁵⁶ Perk followed this counsel to the letter. As someone ‘who grew up in and still lives in a neighbourhood with a very strong ethnic flavour’, he told the Croatian Home, only he could claim to speak for the

⁵⁵ Nathan Glazer, *Affirmative Discrimination: Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 188-89; Pileggi, “Saturday Italians”, *New York World Journal Tribune*, 15 Jan. 1967, 14; Novak, *Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, 69. Elsewhere Novak argued that all political programmes should be measured against the criterion that, ‘what helps family and neighbourhood is good; what injures them is bad.’ See *Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, 274.

⁵⁶ “Perk Opens Campaign”; Letter, Bucur to Perk, 24 Sept 1969, Box 32, Folder 434, Perk Papers.

interests of white ethnic neighbourhoods. He offered not just a working knowledge of neighbourhood concerns but, as a lifelong resident of such a community, an innate, felt, lived experience of them; they were part of Perk's *self*. 'Garbage collection and recreation centers are more important than having ... an office full of high-salaried yes men', he declared in a 1971 attack on Stokes. 'Snow removal is more important than being a judge in a Playboy contest ... [or] \$200 suits.'⁵⁷ Like white ethnicity, neighbourhood represented authenticity, solidity, commonality. And in his addresses to ethnic audiences, Perk consistently equated white ethnic neighbourhoods of family-owned houses with stability, respect for the law and a deep emotional and material investment in one's community. Such appeals carried considerable weight in the wake of the major demographic shifts affecting Cleveland, and spoke to deep anxieties over black residential advancement within urban ethnic communities.⁵⁸ Yet their symbolic content did little to ameliorate the flight of industry, jobs and residents from the central city overseen by Perk in this period.⁵⁹

Alongside this rhetorical glorification of the ethnic neighbourhood, direct appeals to "homeowners" – especially the "small homeowner" – were a regular feature of Perk's addresses to white ethnic audiences. Such appeals, aligning white, European ethnicity with homeownership and aspiration, enabled Perk to transcend spatial divisions between suburban and urban ethnic whites. 'The time has come', he declared in opening his 1969 campaign at the Polish Women's Hall, 'to remember the small homeowner.' At the Croatian Home the same year he described himself as 'the champion of the small homeowner.' Such strategies enabled Perk to oppose much-needed citywide tax increases, arguing such policies worked

⁵⁷ Perk speech to Croatian Pensioners Banquet, Croatian Home, 12 Oct. 1969, Box 5, Folder 85, *Ibid.*; "Perk Blasts Stokes, Enters Mayor Race", *Cleveland Press*, 1 Apr. 1971, 1.

⁵⁸ The Slovak-American writer Paul Wilkes, who was brought up in Cleveland, captured ethnic anxieties over this process of neighbourhood transition in a *New York Times* essay on his old East Side neighbourhood of Buckeye-Shaker. See "As the Blacks Move In, The Ethnic Move Out", *NYT*, 24 Jan. 1971, SM9. Perk's papers also contain many letters from ethnic constituents alerting him to the spate of black-on-white crimes committed in transitional ethnic neighbourhoods such as Buckeye Road. See Box 1, Folder 1, Perk Papers.

⁵⁹ Between 1965 and 1980 the city's population fell by nearly a third, from 810,000 to 574,000. See Campbell, "Cleveland: The Struggle for Stability", 124.

against ethnic group achievement. Elsewhere Perk merged homeownership, ethnicity and other identities, including religion, class and even parenthood, with “values” such as family, hard work or morality. Speaking to Polish-Americans in 1969, he praised the ‘home-loving family people of this city ... who want to build a good society.’ Addressing an audience of Croatians in 1973, he noted that, ‘Wherever there are Croatian churches, there are clean neighbourhoods, there are good people.’⁶⁰ These rhetorical themes relied upon an individualized, conservative worldview in which the stability and integrity of ethnic neighbourhoods, often implicitly opposed to the disorder of the black ghetto, could be explained by the presence of “good” or “home-loving” individuals and not deeper structural forces and inequalities intrinsic to urban life.⁶¹ Such an outlook militated against the need for state intervention in racial and urban problems and thus proved a key component of Perk’s own brand of small-government, colour-blind conservatism.

Even Perk’s family home played a material and metaphorical role in the development of this discursive thread. He and his wife Lucille continued to live in the two-storey frame house on East 49th Street, sandwiched between the Willow Expressway and the Republic Steel mills, they had purchased for \$6,500 back in 1946. The house played a significant role in Perk’s ethnic campaigns, appearing in photo-ops, interviews and even a poem he read to launch his 1969 mayoral bid, a signifier of his ethnic localism, modesty and authenticity.⁶² Having signed off his 1969 campaign with a rally on the front lawn, Perk repeated the event four years later as part of a week of ‘neighbourhood activities’, in which a flatbed truck was decorated in the style of the house’s front porch to ‘dramatize his [Perk’s] attachment to the

⁶⁰ “Perk Opens Campaign”, *Cleveland Press*, 9 Oct. 1969, C7; Perk speech to Croatian Pensioners Banquet; Perk speech to Polish Women’s Hall, 8 Oct. 1969, Box 5, Folder 85, Perk Papers; Perk quoted in “Ethnic Cleveland”.

⁶¹ Benjamin Looker argues that this glorification of the ethnic enclave served as a means of diagnosing the ‘social sickness’ of the ghetto amid discussion of an “urban crisis”. See Looker, *Nation of Neighborhoods*, 143.

⁶² The poem read, ‘I am a candidate for mayor of Cleveland / Here I was born / Here I married a Cleveland girl / Here by God’s blessing our family came to us / And here, in the same neighbourhood, same home, we have lived our lives together / My home city has been good to me.’ See Perk, statement announcing candidacy for mayor, 25 Jun. 1969, Box 5, Folder 85, Perk Papers.

city' and its neighbourhoods. Journalists visiting Cleveland to interview Perk were entertained in the kitchen of the house, where they dined on Lucille's tuna salad and photographed the mayor and his wife washing up together.⁶³ By contrast, the more affluent Stokes's large suburban pile was assailed as a potent example of his lack of commitment to "homeowners" and "citizens" at a time of neighbourhood change and transition; a theme Perk, fusing his own ethnic authenticity with racial and class-based resentments, regularly employed before white ethnic audiences.⁶⁴

Nonetheless, Perk's rhetorical defence of the neighbourhood did not always ring true. His calls for limited government and opposition to tax increases, often couched in terms of white ethnic aspiration and his defence of the "small homeowner", tended to work less in the interests of urban ethnic communities, who saw their services reduced or neglected, and more for developers and business interests who benefited from Perk's tax cuts and tax abatement policies or his redirection of urban renewal funds to downtown projects.⁶⁵ His increasing national profile, including regular trips to Washington and an abortive 1974 Senate bid, led to allegations Perk was distant and aloof from neighbourhood-level concerns. One white ethnic neighbourhood group from Perk's own East Side ward, the Citizens to Bring Back Broadway, retaliated against local service retrenchment by dumping their uncollected refuse outside of the mayor's office, while in 1976, when it emerged Perk had been approached by the national Republican Party to draft its election-year urban affairs platform, community groups protested that the mayor was 'unfit' to contribute. 'Mayor Perk does well in responding to invitations to participate in parades and ethnic festivals', declared the Buckeye-Woodland Community Congress, 'but when it comes to serious issues of inadequate city services, vacant and vandalized houses, street crimes ... redlining and disinvestment ... issues which

⁶³ List of 'People for Perk' campaign events, Oct. 1973, Box 30, Folder 411, Ibid.; "Ethnic Cleveland".

⁶⁴ "Perk Quips Poke Needle at Stokes", *CPD*, 30 Oct. 1969.

⁶⁵ For a critique of these policies, see Todd Swanstrom, *The Crisis of Growth Politics: Cleveland, Kucinich and the Challenge of Urban Populism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 107-13.

face old ethnic neighbourhoods – he is unavailable’.⁶⁶ Such criticisms revealed the material limitations of Perk’s rhetorical strategies – and his politics – for those left behind in transitional, under-resourced urban environments.

The final “value”, aligning ethnicity with authenticity, combined the populist politics inherent to late twentieth century conservatism with the New Ethnicity’s defence of tradition and localism against what Novak labelled, ‘the high WASP culture, of modernization and of professionalization’.⁶⁷ Many have identified within the wider ethnic revival of the 1970s a quest for authenticity in reaction a perceived cultural crisis and the sterile, homogenising forces of mass culture. In Perk’s hands, however, this ethnic authenticity was distinctly political. As above, it recalled the ethnic historical memory of hard work and self-reliance. It called upon the ethnic home and neighbourhood as powerful political symbols. It employed overlapping identities of class and race to construct a powerful and threatening image of racial or socio-economic inversion. Above all, it reassured ethnic voters that Perk was one of them. Indeed, within this trope Perk, like his home on East 49th Street, stood as an exemplar of this authenticity: humble; homespun; genuine; in touch, unlike his opponents, with his “roots”. The much-publicized story of Lucille’s rejection of a White House invitation in favour of her local bowling night conveyed this image perfectly. So too did Perk’s self-professed ‘square values’, his criticism of and evident discomfort with black-tie events at downtown’s City Club or “silk stocking set” audiences, his background as ‘the guy next door who used to deliver ice’.⁶⁸ So did, above all, Perk’s ethnicity: his unwillingness to relinquish

⁶⁶ Memo, Harry Volk to Perk, 24 Nov. 1976, Box 30, Folder 412, Perk Papers; Campbell, “Cleveland: The Struggle for Stability”, 124; “Buckeye-Woodland Rails at Perk on GOP Plank”, *CPD*, 1 Aug. 1976, 10.

⁶⁷ On populism, class and conservatism, see Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 221-68; Novak, *Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, 271. In outlining the ‘New Ethnicity’, Novak had suggested it reflected a ‘discomfort with the sense of identity one is *supposed* to have... universalist, melted, “like everyone else.” Similarly, white ethnic activist Geno Baroni feared, “[My] nephews and nieces will grow up like Wonder Bread – no crust, no identity’. See Novak, ‘The New Ethnicity’, 18-25; Baroni, quoted in ‘The Melting Pot Didn’t’, *NYT*, 30 Dec. 1979, DX5; and for Novak’s anti-modernity and attacks on a WASP ‘superculture’, see Novak, *Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, 124-25, 239-43.

⁶⁸ “GOP Challenger Mirrors Old-Style Ethnic Values”; “Cleveland’s Polish Heart Beats On”, *CPD*, 7 Apr. 1974.

his heritage a symbol of reassurance and solidity within a politically uncertain, racially transitional urban environment.

The campaigning Perk thus presented himself as an independent, authentic underdog fighting powerful, non-ethnic interests; typically Stokes's 21st District Caucus or the city's largely WASP and Jewish business and media elite who endorsed Stokes over Perk. Perk was the self-professed 'average neighbour and average citizen', his white ethnic constituents the 'little guy, the guy in the middle', whereas Stokes represented the 'big people', a large, sophisticated (and increasingly black) "establishment" with little concern for white ethnic communities; an image made more potent by the changing political and racial power structure within the city.⁶⁹ In his Polish Women's Hall speech in October 1969, Perk allied himself with 'the working people, the little man, the forgotten families of Cleveland'. 'I stand with these people', Perk declared, 'I am one of them!' At the Slovenian Auditorium the same month Perk swore in every member of his 1,000-strong audience as campaign managers, declaring his preference for 'his people' over external advisers.⁷⁰ Celebrating his 1971 victory – a result which rejected the endorsements and predictions of party organisations, business and the press – Perk heralded his constituents – 'Ralph Perk's Poles on Kosciusko, Sowinski and Pulaski Avenues' – and described the outcome as 'a victory for the people ... ignoring and shattering the image-makers and the professionals'. This brand of ethnic populism adroitly linked ethnicity to a gritty, indigenous knowledge and authenticity. Its blend of ethnic pride and assertion, championing the "values" and "common sense" of Perk's supporters, with more implicit racial and class-based resentments, typically targeted at Perk's opponents, swept him to a surprising popular victory. As one white ethnic constituent wrote, 'everyone and everything was against Perk [in 1971], except the people'.⁷¹

⁶⁹ "Perk Quips Poke Needle at Stokes"; "Perk Draws Bead on Stokes, Co.", *CPD*, 19 Oct. 1971, 20-D.

⁷⁰ Perk speech to Polish Women's Hall; "Perk Swears in 1,000 as Campaign Managers at Polka Rally".

⁷¹ Perk speech to the American Nationalities Movement, n.d. [1971], Box 88, Folder 1377, Perk Papers.

Stokes, and his status as a wealthy, black national celebrity, was a regular target of this trope, illustrating the complex interplay of race, class and place within Perk's ethnic strategies. Comparisons were regularly drawn between Stokes's nationwide fame and Perk's localist authenticity. 'The problems of Cleveland need to be solved at Cleveland City Hall,' Perk declared, announcing his 1969 candidacy, 'not by a mayor travelling from Boston to Los Angeles, from New York to Miami Beach'. Appearing before a meeting of largely white ethnic Democrats for Perk on the city's West Side, Perk personally attacked Stokes's use of a mayoral limousine, his \$100-a-plate fundraisers (Perk preferred 98-cent chicken dinners), and his decision to educate his son privately rather than in the city's public schools. Alluding to both his own home and Stokes's suburban residence, Perk declared, 'I get up every morning, look out the window, and see the urban crisis'; similarly, an aide to Perk gushed: 'The guy [Perk] actually lives it [urban life]! He knows what it means.' Both statements conveyed the authenticity of Perk; his first-hand knowledge and experience – urban, ethnic, real.⁷² Stokes, Perk argued, spent 'more time trying to be a national political figure, a TV personality, a recording artist ... than he does administering the city', while his 1971 opponent, the wealthy WASP Democrat James Carney, was 'a millionaire businessman from the suburbs' who would prioritize downtown development over neighbourhood needs.⁷³ Each candidate's lack of local, and ethnic, authenticity was, for Perk, suggestive of their lack of concern for the city, and thus its white ethnics.

Again, there is much evidence that these strategies had a demonstrable impact on white ethnic audiences. During his 1971 campaign, the Polish Committee for Ralph Perk described him as 'a friend of all the little people in our city of Cleveland'. Congratulating Perk on his victory, one white ethnic Clevelander described the result as 'the greatest little people's event in the history of Cleveland'; Republican state representative George

⁷² Perk, statement announcing candidacy for mayor; Moore, "Carl B. Stokes", 135; "1969 No Political Slouch"; "GOP Challenger Mirrors Old-Style Ethnic Values" [emphasis added].

⁷³ "Perk Blasts Stokes, Enters Mayor Race"; "Cleveland's Polish Heart Beats On".

Voinovich, whom Perk had defeated in the primary, informed him his victory was reward for ‘your sacrifice to the little people in Cleveland.’⁷⁴ Even after taking office, Perk continued to use this strategy to convince ethnic whites he had not sidelined them, even if some of his policies suggested otherwise. A speech at an “Ethnic Expo” in April 1975 saw Perk trumpet his ‘continuing membership in the “little people” club’, juxtaposing himself and his supporters – ‘Mayor Perk’s “little people” – with ‘those the media would consider great – the minority that constitutes themselves and the so-called “establishment”’. Authenticity and ethnicity were interchangeable – Perk defined “little people” as ‘the people of our ethnic communities’ – and the mayor had, in his affirmation of his own ethnicity, proved he was one of them: ‘The “little people” ... can directly identify with me, they know I am one of them, they know I have not abandoned them ... They are proud when I publicly proclaim my pride in my own ethnic heritage, in the life and achievements of my ethnic group’.⁷⁵ In these extracts, Perk’s trope of “little people” was both non-ethnic, a signifier of his humble origins and attentiveness to local concerns, his sincerity and solidity, his suspicion of large institutions and established interests, and ethnic, evidence of his familiarity and earthiness, his own comfort with his “roots”. This duality enabled the “little people” discourse to transcend divisions of class, age and origin and unite older urban ethnics with younger, aspirational ethnics who had moved out to the suburbs. It successfully melded ethnicity with class resentments and anxieties over racial transition, a sense of something forgotten, lost or scorned in a changing urban environment, and an innately conservative worldview. So successful was it that it would play a significant role in Cleveland politics well after Perk left

⁷⁴ “Cleveland Needs Ralph Perk”, statement by Polish Committee for Ralph J. Perk, n.d. [1971], Box 6, Folder 88, Ibid.; Telegram, Stella Walsh to Perk, 3 Nov. 1971, Box 30, Folder 409, Ibid.; Telegram, George Voinovich to Perk, 2 Nov. 1971, Ibid.

⁷⁵ Perk remarks to ‘Ethnic Expo’. Again, ethnic Clevelanders responded to and even internalized Perk’s ‘little people’ discourse. Ethnic supporters interviewed at Perk’s 1975 inauguration ceremony aligned ‘little people’ with their own identities as “nationality people”, “ethnics” or “the average guy”. One even told the *Plain Dealer*, ‘I’m one of the little people he [Perk] talks about’. See “‘Little People’ for Perk”, *CPD*, 11 Nov. 1975.

office, notably in the campaigns of his contrasting successors, urban populist Dennis Kucinich and pro-business conservative Voinovich.⁷⁶

While Ralph Perk's mayoralty did little to arrest Cleveland's decline, there is little doubt that his ethnic strategies, practical and discursive, proved rather more significant. By the time of his departure from office in 1977, Perk had won three consecutive elections, advised two Republican presidents on ethnic affairs and urban policy, and halved the ratio of Democratic-to-Republican registration in Cleveland. 'You go to Republican meetings nowadays, you find average blue-collar workers, real ethnic Americans', Perk exclaimed, repositioning the Republican Party as the guardian of ethnic "values". 'There's been a tremendous rise in ethnic power all over this state.'⁷⁷ Indeed, the ANM reaped further city and statewide success beyond the 1970s, delivering Voinovich's three terms as mayor of Cleveland as well as Republican mayors in other traditionally Democratic cities across Ohio. Taras Szmagala, who coordinated Nixon's national ethnic campaign in 1972, underlined the importance of the ANM in developing the collective unity Perk had regarded as necessary for ethnic political power. '[It] was so important from an organisational point of view. Perk and the Nationalities Movement ... helped bring "ethnics" into the Republican Party as a solid group.'⁷⁸

Perk's use of ethnicity as a discourse defined by shared values or experiences reached well beyond Cleveland, permeating national politics by the end of the decade. Perk captured

⁷⁶ "Battle for Ethnic Vote", *CPD*, 25 Sept. 1979, D20; "Rhodes-Voinovich Alliance Working Well for Both", *Ibid.*, 9 Oct. 1978, B5.

⁷⁷ Perk, remarks to Republican mayors' conference, Chicago, 30 Apr. 1977, reproduced in Paul Kesaris (ed.), *Papers of the Republican Party, Part 2: Reports and Memoranda of the RNC Research Division, 1938-1980* (Frederick: University Publications of America, 1986), Reel 10, Reel 15, Frame 246; "Ethnic Tide and Nixon", *WP*, 2 Oct. 1972, A23.

⁷⁸ RNC research report, "'72 Election Report: The Cities – Cleveland", 27 Nov. 1972, reproduced in Kesaris (ed.), *Papers of the Republican Party*, Reel 12, Frame 0197; "Splintering the Great Coalition", *Time*, 20 Nov. 1972; Author's interview with Taras Szmagala, Washington D.C., 11 Mar. 2007.

the attention of conservative strategist William Gavin, who, in his 1975 treatise of “urban conservatism” *Street Corner Conservative*, had suggested the Republican Party could capture white ethnic votes if it abandoned identity politics and instead ‘understands and appreciates the entire reality of the urban conservative experience’.⁷⁹ In the run-up to the 1980 presidential election, Gavin, now working for Ronald Reagan, reaffirmed Perk’s strategy: ““Ethnics” must mean something *more* than Captive Nations Week ... Their lives and values, not just their heritage, are essential to our nation.’ He identified a “community of values” in which ethnics could unite with white southerners, union members, religious conservatives, even minorities, around ostensibly universalist “values” such as family, faith, neighbourhood, and work and build a new conservative Republican coalition. In another memo, Gavin wrote, ‘We are not going after the “ethnic” vote as such: we are going after a “community of values” vote ... Let’s not fall into the same old trap of praising “ethnics” as ethnics – we are praising their values.’⁸⁰ This approach enabled Reagan to win large numbers of ethnic votes in 1980, and formed the basis of his appeals to Perk’s constituents as President. ‘The “shared values” concept is one which proved extremely successful with Catholics and ethnics in 1980’, observed a White House “Ethnic/Catholic Strategy” document in 1982, ‘and should serve as the basis for our relationship with these groups.’⁸¹

The story of Mayor Ralph Perk reveals that ethnicity is a significant, if often misunderstood, factor in explaining the rise of conservative Republicanism during the later twentieth century. Ethnicity, reinvented in the late 1960s and 1970s, enabled conservatives such as Perk to craft a traditional Republican message for traditionally non-Republican

⁷⁹ William Gavin, *Street Corner Conservative* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1975), 106, 112-13.

⁸⁰ Memo, Bill Gavin to Martin Anderson, n.d., in “Gavin, William, 1978-79”, Box 3, Deaver & Hannaford Inc. Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Palo Alto, Ca.; Memo, Gavin to Peter Hannaford and Anderson, 10 Apr. 1979, in *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Memo, Dole to Meese, Baker and Deaver, re: “Ethnic/Catholic Strategy”, in “Proposed Action Plan for Ethnics”, 2 Nov. 1982, OA12450, Morton Blackwell Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, Ca. George H.W. Bush would deploy a similar strategy in 1988, telling an ethnic audience, “We’re talking values, values that join all of us”, and that while his opponent Michael Dukakis could speak Spanish, “I speak our language of ethnic values and pride in America.” See “Bush Lists Foreign Policy Goals”, *Los Angeles Times*, 3 Aug. 1988, B1; “Bush, Courting Ethnic Vote, Counters Dukakis’s Themes”, *NYT*, 23 Jul. 1988, 1.

constituencies, built not necessarily around cultural tokenism or racial reductionism but positive appeals to shared “values” and symbols – faith, family, neighbourhood, thrift – or achievements and aspirations – meritocracy, hard work, home ownership. Whilst clearly not open to all, this message came cloaked in a superficial universalism and inclusivity, translated easily to Republicans, and was given additional power by its sensitivity to temporal changes such as suburbanisation, ethnic affluence or racial transition and thus its ability to reach across generational, spatial and socio-economic cleavages within white ethnic communities. Such a revelation gives us a more nuanced insight into the changes affecting white urban precincts across the industrial Northeast and Midwest during the 1970s, yet also helps explain the wider rightward shift which took place nationally at this time.

Yet to grasp this point, historians of contemporary political change must change the way they define ethnicity. Rather than identifying it through seemingly static, “primordial” identifiers, we need to think instead like Perk, and reframe ethnicity as an evolving, fluid discourse: Sollors’ ‘cultural construction’ which is under constant reinvention. The case of Ralph Perk illustrates exactly that. It shows us how, in the hands of “New Ethnicity” ideologues but also through wider structural and demographic changes affecting ethnic Clevelanders, the politics of ethnicity was recast during the 1970s; ethnic affiliations grew more unstable, optional, even post-ethnic, and white, European ethnicities became defined less by nationality, language, or place and more by amorphous “values” borne of ethnics’ lived experience. Such a shift was advantageous for conservatives, who benefited both from the increasingly protean, individualized nature of ethnicity and the increasing politicisation of these values.

Ralph Perk’s success lay in his ability to identify this changing political and demographic terrain, and to reorient white, European ethnicity – and the political strategies and meanings attached to it – to fit it. He understood ethnicity not solely as nostalgic

celebrations of language, homeland and culture, nor narrow appeals to racial grievances, but as something fluid and dynamic. The “Ethnic Mayor” used ethnicity not simply as a means of political organisation, nor as election-year identity politics, but as an active discourse which, whilst innately conservative in content, could be recast to suit the changing terrain of 1960s and 1970s Cleveland and an increasingly diverse, fragmentary ethnic constituency. Such a discourse, developed around the defence of totems such as meritocracy, hard work, neighbourhood, and authenticity, offers an urban, northern equivalent to Matthew Lassiter’s ‘suburban strategies’ of the Sunbelt South, and provided for many ethnic whites a conduit to the conservative Republicanism of Ronald Reagan and beyond.⁸²

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⁸² Matthew Lassiter, “Suburban Strategies: The Volatile Center in Postwar American Politics”, in Meg Jacobs, William Novak & Julian Zelizer (eds.), *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 327-49.

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