"An ethnic presence in the White House?" Ethnicity, identity politics, and the presidency in the 1970s

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This paper excavates the relationship between the presidency and an emergent white, European 'ethnic' identity politics during the 1970s. Rather than a response to cultural drift or backlash politics, presidential efforts to harness 'ethnic' identity politics reflected a shifting institutional context. Yet despite establishing the White House as a critical centre of the new politics and devising policy and political responses to it, the attentions of the presidency were not always propitious. Instead, the presidency's efforts profoundly influenced the terms by which ethnic politics was received politically, with destructive consequences for this politics' potential political incorporation, its interactions with other advocacy groups, and its long-term future. Historians seeking to explain the fate of the 'ethnic' moment of the 1970s should thus pay closer attention to the presidency as a contributor to both its rise and demise.

In September 1976, his electoral momentum stalling, Jimmy Carter made a surprise campaign visit to Polish Hill, Pittsburgh. The former Georgia governor, a Southern Baptist for whom a balanced ticket was typically white-black, not Irish-Italian, selected Polish Hill over a large official party rally downtown, much to the anger of labour and party bosses and Pittsburgh's Democratic mayor (O'Rourke, 1991). Standing on the steps of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church, after eating kielbasa at a local butcher, Carter pulled on a red and white 'Polish Power' t-shirt and proclaimed his commitment to ethnicity, extolling the "ethnic identity which separates us as individuals and the cultural pluralism and diversity that unite us as a nation."[1] It worked. Aides observed that Carter's ethnic jaunt "really turned us around with the Catholic voters", amongst whom, they had feared, support for Carter was "soft" and "weak." After Carter's victory in November he appointed the visit's advance man, activist-priest Geno Baroni, to a senior position within his new administration.[2]

Carter was not alone in playing to white, European ethnicity during the 1970s. Richard Nixon systematically appointed Poles and Italians to executive positions on the basis of their nationality and oversaw new legislation to support the teaching of white, European ethnic cultures and history. His successor, Gerald Ford, appointed the first ever White House Special Assistant for Ethnic Affairs and convened a series of White House conferences recognising the importance of ethnicity to public policy. In the 1976 presidential election, Ford lauded the nation's "ethnic treasure," whereas Carter preferred "ethnic heritage" (or, rather more clumsily, "ethnic purity"), but despite their semantic differences both candidates agreed on the centrality of ethnicity to American politics and public life (Naughton, 1976). Even at the decade's close, ethnic identity politics and the presidency remained inseparable: the two party platforms for 1980 pledged to make ethnics "an integral part of government"

[1] Press Release, "Carter Praises Dignity of Diverse Cultural Heritages," 11 September 1976, "Urban Ethnic Affairs," Box 203, 1976 Presidential Campaign Files, Jimmy Carter Library [JCL], Atlanta, Ga.
[2] Memo, Ron Atkinson to Terry Sunday and Urban Ethnic Desk, 21 September 1976, Ibid.; Memo, Tom Tatum to Hamilton Jordan, 23 August 1976, Ibid.

and praised "Ethnic America" as "a beautiful mosaic;" *Newsweek* quipped that Republican presidential aspirants "drop[ped] more Polish names than a social climber in Krakow."[3] During the 1970s, the *Washington Star* observed, the nation's highest office had "gone ethnic with a vengeance" (Ikenberry, 1970).

Such scenes would have baffled political observers from the decades either side of the 1970s. President Eisenhower had condemned the corrosive presence of ethnic identity politics in the nation's political culture, publicly opposing his own party's creation of an All-American Origins Division to target ethnic voters before abolishing it. The decision of Eisenhower's successor, John F. Kennedy, to appoint the Polish-American John Gronouski to his cabinet was condemned in Congress as divisive and ethnic tokenism (Unknown author, 1962; Krock, 1963; Weed, 1973), while the political scientist Walter Dean Burnham described presidential appeals to ethnic identity in 1966 "as archaic as appeals to Civil War loyalties" (Burnham, 1966). And in the 1980s, as sociologist Richard Alba identified the "twilight of ethnicity" amongst Americans of European ethnic origin, Ronald Reagan offered a reconfigured, almost post-ethnic vision of white, European ethnicity, based on universalistic 'values' such as faith, family, and neighbourhood, which welcomed ethnics into a wider national community (Alba, 1985).[4]

Why was the 1970s so distinctive, even unique? Why did the presidency recognise, even reify ethnicity and ethnic difference to an unparalleled extent, and why did it become the critical centre of ethnic identity politics during this time? To answer these questions, scholars have pointed to the 1970s' cultural context of disengagement and rootlessness, with

[3] 1980 Democratic Party platform, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29607; 1980 Republican Party platform, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25844; "Beyond the Melting Pot," *Newsweek*, 20 October 1980, p. 35.

[4] In the run-up to the 1980 presidential election, Reagan aide Bill Gavin urged his colleagues to, "Remember the major point: we are not going after the 'ethnic' vote as such… Let's not fall into the same old trap of praising 'ethnics' as ethnics – we are praising their values." See Memo, Bill Gavin to Peter Hannaford and Martin Anderson, 10 April 1979, "Gavin, William, 1978-79", Box 3, Deaver & Hannaford Inc. Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Palo Alto, Ca.

a renewed ethnic consciousness providing a means for national leaders to redefine community, identity, and self in the "lost decade" (Schulman, 2001; Gerstle, 2001; Looker, 2015; Hurup, 1996). Yet far from regarding it as a cultural fad or nostalgic paean to a lost past, presidential actors assigned ethnicity great agency and permanence and identified its re-emergence as an expression of an imminent political future. For others, the changing political context of the 1970s is critical, specifically the ascendancy of "an atavistic cultural populism" (Sugrue & Skrentny, 2008) based on ethnic *ressentiment* towards racially redistributive programmes and harnessed by conservatives for great electoral reward (Jacobson, 2006; Formisano, 2004; Rieder, 1985). Yet the presidency's engagement with ethnic identity politics, propagated by liberal Democrats as much as conservative Republicans, rarely adhered to this 'backlash' narrative. Instead, the White House often viewed ethnic reassertion as an opportunity to confront pressing social needs, reduce group polarisation, and address a perceived ethnic cultural and socio-economic inferiority (Rosow, 1971; Merton, 2012).

Instead, then, this paper argues that it is the *institutional* context of the 1970s that explains why the presidency actively embraced ethnic politics during the decade and assumed greater centrality than other actors. Although the power and visibility of the presidency made it attractive to ethnic advocates, the ethnic moment also coincided with a critical juncture in American political development: an ever more diverse, pluralistic interest group landscape; declining, divided party organisations; a polity transformed by the civil rights revolution; and a sense of electoral vacuum, even realignment. This transformative context made the White House a significant locus of ethnic identity politics in the 1970s, encouraging presidential actors to engage with and facilitate this new politics as they sought to negotiate new institutional realities. However, it also ensured the presidency, not ethnic activists or representatives, would often define the terms by which this nascent politics was received, with significant and eventually destructive implications for its long-term future. Historians

seeking to explain the fate of 'ethnic' identity politics beyond the 1970s might thus pay closer attention to the presidency as a contributor to both its rise and demise.

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The new ethnic politics of the 1970s only loosely constituted an organised movement, often lacking the "dense social networks and connective structures" identified by Sidney Tarrow as integral to effective social movements (Tarrow, 1998). While calling on the rights-based "master frame" (Tarrow, 1998) of the African American and minority rights insurgencies of the 1960s, it struggled to match these movements' commonality of claim or purpose. Yet during the 1970s white, European ethnicity became, to use Eric Porter's descriptor of race in the same period, a "resource... something of value" (Porter, 2004). Activists propagated a new collective 'ethnic' identity that transcended distinctions of nationality or language. 'Ethnic' calls-to-arms, such as Michael Novak's *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, gave voice to ethnics' alienation and difference; what Novak defined as "the 'New Ethnicity'... [a] sense of discomfort with the identity one is *supposed* to have – universalist, 'melted', 'like everyone else'… a sense of being discriminated against… a sense of injustice" (Novak, 1974, 1971; Greeley, 1971; Ryan, 1973; Wenk et al, 1972; Krickus, 1976). New national organisations, from Baroni's National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs to the Ethnic Millions Political Action Committee, articulated ethnics' cultural and socio-economic disadvantage and advocated for their needs. Federal civil rights agencies bore witness to ethnic lobbying campaigns for access to civil rights protections and affirmative action regulations, while ethnic demands for neighbourhood revitalisation funds or ethnic heritage studies reached, with the support of legislative champions, the floor of Congress. In local politics, avowedly 'ethnic' mayors were elected in Philadelphia and Cleveland; in Illinois and New York, ethnic

activists made claims on local governments for increased representation and inclusion in anti-poverty and entitlement programmes.

Yet it was the presidency which emerged as the principal site of ethnic political mobilisation in the 1970s. Ethnic activists called for special consideration in presidential policy and a discrete representative or office for ethnic issues in the White House, and made sensitivity to the 'New Ethnicity' a sine qua non for prospective presidential candidates. In return, the White House invited ethnic activists to policy summits and conferences, designed ethnic-conscious policies and public philosophies, worked to extend civil rights legislation to ethnics and sensitise other institutions to the importance of their concerns, and identified ethnic voters as key components of impending electoral majorities. It utilised the rhetorical and practical template of the civil rights revolution to cater to ethnic concerns of disadvantage and discrimination, and spoke a language of ethnic particularism that emphasised group diversity and distinctiveness. "The White House has discovered ethnics," pronounced the ethnic weekly *Jednota* in 1976.[5]

Ethnic leaders and activists targeted the presidency for a number of reasons. Many perceived the federal bureaucracy to be unsympathetic to ethnic claims, while the major political party organisations were deemed either to be unrepresentative of ethnics or unwilling to recognise them as a special interest group.[6] The presidency also possessed specific outreach mechanisms – notably the Office of Public Liaison – which became important sites of ethnic advocacy. And in the wake of the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, which established a new politics of compensatory justice, the White House served as an essential arbiter of ethnic claims and, by extension, ethnics themselves. Its recognition of

[5] *Jednota*, 19 May 1976, copy in "President's Comm. on Urban Dev and Neighborhood Revitalization (1)," Box 15, President's Handwriting File, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library (GFL), Ann Arbor, Mi.
[6] Letter, Victoria Mongiardo, Director of Ethnic Affairs for NCUEA, to Jim Johnson, 26 January 1978, Box 2, Papers of the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs Records, Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa.; Memo, Baroni to Wexler and Mongiardo, 14 June 1978, "[Voting Patterns and Values of Ethnics] 6/78," Box 52, Stephen Aiello Files, JCL.

ethnic concerns served as evidence of official validation of the new politics, of ethnic parity with other advocacy groups, and of tangible ethnic group progress and reward. However, although some executive actors were compelled by the moral case for special consideration for ethnic Americans, many saw ethnics largely for their potential electoral value – "where the ducks are."[7] Ethnic advocates in Congress found themselves excluded from White House outreach to ethnics, while ethnic-conscious initiatives developed at the local level or within Congress or the parties went unheralded or even defunded by executive actors, lest they detracted from the White House's political objectives. Most important, executive actors often identified engagement with ethnic politics as a means of negotiating the changing institutional context of the 1970s: responding to a crowded and competitive interest group environment; circumventing fragmented party organisations; managing and extending the civil rights revolution; constructing new electoral majorities. The remainder of this essay will demonstrate how executive initiatives in each of these settings established a visible and superficially powerful relationship between ethnic activists and the presidency with potential mutual benefits for both parties. Yet the essay will also suggest that while this relationship was reciprocal, it was not equal, with destructive consequences for the potential political incorporation of ethnic politics, its interaction with other interest groups, and its eventual longevity.

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Writing in 1967, the political scientist Theodore Lowi identified the emergence of a new governing regime in American politics, "interest group liberalism," in which pluralist

[7] Memo, Tom Huston to the Middle America Group, 20 January 1971, Box 3, Patrick Buchanan Files, White House Special Files [WHSF], Staff Member & Office Files [SMOF], Nixon Presidential Materials Project [NPMP], National Archives, College Park, Md.

interests organised and laid claim to federal resources (Lowi, 1967). Interest groups organised on the basis of ethnicity, including the new ethnic politics, formed a significant element of this new regime, developing a growing presence both in Washington and beyond (Weed, 1973; Paul & Paul, 2009). In response, the presidency of the 1970s developed specific institutional mechanisms – individual offices or special assistants for ethnic constituency groups with direct access to senior White House staff – which recognised the distinctiveness of ethnic group claims and formalised ideas of ethnic pluralism within the executive. Yet these new structures reflected as much the changing institutional context of the 1970s as the actual power or impact of the new ethnic politics (Peterson, 1992). They responded to the proliferation of race-conscious political organising and public policy unleashed by the civil rights revolution, as well as the concurrent institutional embrace of "participatory democracy" noted by Sidney Milkis. They enabled presidents to circumvent alternative institutions in the construction of coalitions behind legislation or campaigns, while providing activists with the potential access to the White House essential to the new interest group politics (Milkis, 1998; Seligman & Covington, 1989; King, 1990). While these new mechanisms contributed to perceptions of an expansive, ascendant ethnic 'movement,' initially handing the new ethnic politics considerable legitimacy, difficulties over their implementation and their failure to fully recognise ethnics as distinctive ensured the new politics struggled to retain that legitimacy.

The new administrative structures were initially established through the Office of Public Liaison (OPL). Although the OPL and its functions were neither new – having been maintained on an ad hoc basis since the administration of Franklin Roosevelt (Pika, 2009) – nor unique to ethnic groups, the 1970s were notable for the introduction of new forms of interest group liaison which recognised white, European ethnicity and its essential distinctiveness. While these structures were not necessarily extensively staffed – rarely

exceeding two or three permanent staff members – they expanded across the decade to draw in senior White House staff and established a precedent that gave white, European ethnics equal status to other interest groups deemed worthy of separate consideration in presidential policy. Under Nixon, staff members with direct access to the president – notably Charles Colson and, after Colson demanded the centralisation of ethnic outreach activity within the White House, his assistant Michael Balzano – were given responsibility for liaison with ethnic constituencies deemed supportive of the administration's objectives (Hult & Walcott, 2004).[8] Nixon's initiatives were expanded by Ford, who, having initially explored the creation of a cabinet committee for ethnic Americans, appointed the first dedicated White House Special Assistant for Ethnic Affairs, Myron Kuropas, in 1975, replicating positions for African Americans and Latinos. Despite initial pronouncements stating his opposition to the new interest group politics, Ford's successor, Carter, offered further continuity, even expansion.[9] By the close of 1978, Carter had established a network of 30 constituent liaisons ("group advocacy units") at both White House and cabinet level, including two staff with responsibility for ethnic affairs, before forming a new White House Office of Ethnic Affairs the following year. The Office was headed by Stephen Aiello, who unlike his predecessors operated separately from the OPL structure, attended Cabinet meetings, and enjoyed parity with similar mechanisms for African Americans, Latinos, and Jewish groups.[10] Although

[8] Huston to the Middle America Group. Nixon also maintained outreach liaisons with other ethnic and racial interest groups, including African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, although the administration demonstrated rather less interest in these constituencies' concerns. As Nixon informed Haldeman in late 1971, "the place for us is not with the Jews and the Negroes, but with the white ethnics." See H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York, 1995), p. 450.

[9] Carter had previously declared that he "wouldn't bring anybody on board to take care of a particular constituency group… it would just be contrary to what I want... I don't like to segment my staff to be responsible for old people or farmers… blacks or Spanish-speaking people." See Carter, Remarks and Q&A with the Hispanic Media, 12 May 1978, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=30794&st=&st1. Yet by the end of his term in office, he had reversed this policy and constructed a powerful and extensive OPL apparatus under the leadership of Anne Wexler, who declared: "This is an age of special interests… you've gotta deal with them." See "To Anne Wexler, All the World is a Potential Lobbyist", *NJ*, 8 Sept 1979, pp. 1476-79.

[10] Aiello recalled the new Office "formalize[d] and institutionalize[d] a practice that had been going on since the inception of [the Carter] administration, but raised it to a level of senior staff, gave it a visibility that the other offices had had." See Stephen Aiello exit interview, White House Oral Histories – Exit Interviews, JCL.

Joseph Pika has argued that OPL staffers have "seldom had the standing to shape policy," the work of the White House special assistants suggests otherwise (Pika, 2009). Kuropas established a series of White House conferences linking ethnicity to public policy goals in the areas of education, mental health, the census, and neighbourhood revitalisation, each of which recognised ethnic entitlement to consideration, as a unique interest group, in public policy. Aiello, meanwhile, encouraged the Carter White House to sponsor a consultation on the civil rights needs of white, European ethnic groups and push for separate ethnic inclusion in civil rights protections and bilingual education instruction.[11]

These structures should have yielded reward for the new ethnic politics, not only in ensuring access to the presidency but also in providing institutional validation of their legitimacy in national politics. Yet throughout the 1970s, ethnics struggled to retain this legitimacy. In part, the reasons for this were practical and political. By placing much of its ethnic outreach within the OPL, a large and diverse administrative structure not explicitly oriented to ethnic identity politics, the presidency ensured the new ethnic politics could often become lost amongst the claims of competing groups. Jan Peterson, who handled ethnic issues as part of a much broader portfolio within Carter's Office of Public Liaison until mid-1978, regularly reported on a perceived "lack of interest in [ethnic] concerns by this administration… due to the absence of a systematic contact" and demanded "more than one-third of a person" to represent ethnic groups.[12] As Peterson's comment illustrates, OPL officials who provided ethnic group liaison often held simultaneous responsibility for

[11] Meeting Schedules, "Ethnicity and Education," n.d., "Ethnicity and the 1980 Census," 1 June 1976, and "Ethnicity and Mental Health," 14 June 1976, all in "Final Report of the Special Assistant for Ethnic Affairs (2)," Box 55, William Baroody Papers, GFL; Myron Kuropas and Alda T. Whitt, "Final Report of the Special Assistant to the President for Ethnic Affairs," n.d., in Folder "Final Report of the Special Assistant to the President for Ethnic Affairs (1)," Ibid.; Ford administration position paper, "Neighborhood Policy for a Pluralistic Urban Society," 5 May 1976, "Final Report of the Special Assistant for Ethnic Affairs (2)," Ibid.; "Civil Rights Issues of Euro-Ethnic Americans in the United States: Opportunities and Challenges," consultation sponsored by the US Commission on Civil Rights, 3-4 Dec 1979, copy in "[Civil Rights Issues: Ethnics] 12/79," Box 21, Aiello Files.

[12] Memo, Peterson to Midge Costanza, 11 May 1977, "[Correspondence: Ethnic Groups] 3/77-3/78", Box 52, Midge Costanza Files, JCL; Memo, Peterson to Costanza, 21 June 1977, Ibid.

outreach to several other constituencies, be it labour (Balzano), religious groups and veterans (Theodore Marrs, under Ford), or women (Peterson). Equally, rather than providing the promised "unity in diversity", these new administrative structures often led to political conflict between ethnic interest groups. When ethnic representatives secured special assistants or offices, they often encountered criticism from other minorities. Asian American advocates decried Carter's Office of Ethnic Affairs for white, European ethnics as "another case of benign neglect for the third largest minority group in the country," while Carter's African American liaison reported on "rising resentment within the Black community over special aid and 'favouritism' shown [to] new immigrants," particularly Latino groups, by the administration.[13] Yet the problem was also philosophical. Many executive actors continued to identify race and colour, not ethnicity, as markers of group distinctiveness. While separate auxiliaries were often quickly established for African Americans and Latinos, equivalent offices for ethnics were often only introduced reactively or as a late bid to shore up electoral support. Some refused to acknowledge ethnic Americans as in any way distinctive and opposed the rush to ethnic pluralism. Elly Peterson, the deputy director of Ford's 1976 election campaign, argued "ethnics were really Americans" and blocked attempts to create ethnic-conscious structures within Ford's re-election committee, demanding the White House "drop the business of special brochures, buttons, headquarters for ethnic groups."[14] Similar objections regarding ethnic (in)distinctiveness would undermine ethnic claims for much of the 1970s.

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[13] "White House Sets Up New Office of Ethnic Affairs," *APAFEC Newsletter*, n.d., "Office of Ethnic Affairs, 2/80-11/80," Box 7, Aiello Files; Memo, Louis Martin to Carter, 4 September 1979, "Black Community [CF, O/A 413]," Box 39, Hamilton Jordan Files, JCL.
[14] Memo, Peterson to Rogers Morton and Stu Spencer, 29 July 1976, "Staff Memoranda – Peterson, Elly (1)," Box B9, President Ford Campaign Files, GFL.

The 1970s marked the culmination of decades of structural change that had transformed the nature of party politics in ethnic communities. Locally, changing labour and residential patterns and the thinning of traditional bonds of ethnicity and class rendered ethnic constituencies more difficult to locate and weakened the traditional means of reaching those constituencies: fraternal and parish organisations, labour unions, and especially local party organisations (Merton, 2017). At the local and national level, reforms of both political parties transferred power away from traditional urban machines to groups of issue-oriented activists often detached from working-class ethnic communities (Shafer, 1988; Ware, 1989; Miroff, 2007). Ethnic activists and presidential actors alike recognised the challenges they faced in reaching ethnic voters within this context. Nixon aides acknowledged that party and fraternal organisations were now "out of touch with the day-to-day concerns of the second and third generation ethnic." Likewise, Baroni's National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs observed that "the organisations traditionally serving these [ethnic] communities – the Catholic Church, the unions, the Democratic Party – have lost their ability… to address the needs of these communities."[15] These contextual challenges forced the presidency to innovate in its attempts to reach ethnic voters, supplanting party organisations deemed incapable of building majorities and ensuring it would be the executive which would serve as the critical centre of ethnic identity politics in the 1970s. Yet while these innovations centralised presidential power and increased the autonomy of the presidency, they also encouraged candidate-centred campaigns and symbolic approaches to ethnic issues. Such approaches further weakened party organisations and undermined attempts at long-term majority-building that may have

[15] Memo, Ilmar Heinaru to George Bell, 19 January 1971, "The White Ethnic Vote," Box 342, H.R. Haldeman Files, WHSF, SMOF, NPMP; NCUEA Annual Report, 1974, "NCUEA: Report of Activities, Jan 1976-Jan-1977," Box 50/36, Papers of the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs (NCUEA), University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend, In.

incorporated the new ethnic politics into more enduring political coalitions in the style of the labour or civil rights movements.

Despite much contemporary discussion – often led by former office-holders – of an "imperilled" presidency in the 1970s, the ethnic strategizing of the 1970s granted the White House considerable autonomy from party organisations.[16] The Nixon administration's Committee for the Re-election of the President maintained an ethnic campaign budget fifteen times greater than that of Democratic opponent George McGovern or the Republican National Committee (RNC), whose ethnic auxiliaries Nixon gutted or simply ignored when they threatened to conflict with White House objectives. Rather than the RNC, whose "normal ethnic group operation", chief of staff H.R. Haldeman observed, "will do us no good," White House auxiliaries such as Democrats for Nixon were utilised to reach out to traditionally Democratic ethnic constituencies in 1972, pulling in many ticket-splitting ethnic Democrats temporarily but denying the party an opportunity to bring ethnic voters into its organisation (Brown Jr., 1974).[17]

Nixon's successors also found innovative means of reaching out to ethnic voters without recourse to the traditional parties. Ford's White House conferences on ethnicity and public policy and use of presidential committees on Neighborhood Revitalization, the Bicentennial, and American Pluralism enabled his administration to locate policy development for ethnic constituencies away from a recalcitrant Congress, while appeasing ethnic activists' demands for recognition. Carter's network of group advocacy units was designed not only to improve access to constituent groups, but also as a response to a declining, divided party organisation, enabling the White House to build its own coalitions behind policy and legislation (Hult & Walcott, 2004; Seligman & Covington, 1989; Heclo,

[16] This term is often attributed to former President Gerald Ford. See "Two Ex-Presidents Assess the Job," *Time*, 10 November 1980, p. 30. For more on the tensions between the presidency and the party system, see Milkis, 1993.
[17] Memo, Haldeman to Dent, 23 September 1970, Box 9, Harry S. Dent Files, WHSF, SMOF, NPMP.

1999). Carter's public liaison chief Anne Wexler admitted that the units served as "a substitute for a weak Democratic Party organisation," with the aim of attracting an "ethnic community... alienated by the Democratic National Committee" in the wake of both the McGovern-Fraser reforms of the early 1970s and a 1977 DNC decision to refuse to add ethnic Americans to its list of 'minority' interest groups deserving of special claims status and additional participatory mechanisms.[18]

Yet despite their novelty, these examples had detrimental consequences for ethnic activists' efforts to develop an enduring presence in national politics. White House-led outreach encouraged the pursuit of impermanent presidential majorities and short-term electoral strategizing, without the kinds of programmatic input that might have provided more solid foundations for majority-building. Executive actors operated separately from their party as "independent entrepreneurs" in search of new, often transient, constituencies (Milkis, 1998). Nixon's initially substantive ethnic agenda, exemplified by the progressive Rosow Report developed by staff in the Department of Labor (Rosow, 1971), was jettisoned after disappointing results in the 1970 midterms and as aides warned Nixon that "the very real requirement for this administration is not merely to do some good for ethnics, but to get the political credit for the good we do." Similar imperatives predominated under Ford, where OPL chief William Baroody, a veteran of the Nixon White House, advised the President that the "ultimate goal" of ethnic outreach was "to recreate the New Majority of Richard Nixon and expand it." Carter's decision to appoint a Special Assistant "with attendant high visibility and publicly perceived access to you" was recommended "given the political importance of

[18] Anne Wexler interview, Jimmy Carter Presidential Oral History Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia, http://millercenter.org/president/carter/oralhistory; Memo, Michael Berman, Haft and Torricelli to Wexler, 17 April 1978, "Ethnic [3]", Anne Wexler Files, JCL; "Democrats Move to Drop Ethnics", *GOP Nationalities News* 7 (September 1977), copy in "Lithuanian, Meetings with Mondale 1/78-6/78", Box 2, Aiello Files. The Democratic reforms of the early 1970s had expanded the influence of issue-oriented activists and underrepresented groups while eliminating consideration of European ethnics as a "special population group." For more on their impact, see Miroff, 2007.

Ethnic-Americans in key states."[19] Such efforts, often devoid of party input or substantive policy outputs, typically succeeded in securing at best temporary electoral majorities, hindered by personal rather than party leadership and split-ticket voting by ethnic voters, which failed to incorporate ethnic activists into the political structures of either party (Levy & Kramer, 1973).

Likewise, centralisation typically encouraged only largely symbolic leadership from the White House on ethnic issues. In the hands of the presidency, ethnicity was often purely performative. Visible events such as Ford's White House policy conferences or Nixon's proclamation of a National Heritage Day garnered considerable short-term publicity but delivered little long-term or substantive for ethnic activists. Nixon, who ordered aides to "Get some symbolic things for Poles, Italians... no more" (Kotlowski, 2001), rejected an appeal to ethnic Catholics on "social and economic issues" as "remorseless nonsense"; yet he threw the White House behind calls for federal aid to Catholic parochial schools, cognisant of the "max political advantage... in Chicago and NY" to be gained, despite the fact that such a policy was constitutionally impossible after the 1971 *Lemon v. Kurtzman* Supreme Court ruling.[20] Unhappy at his exclusion from legislation introducing ethnic heritage studies – legislation designed by ethnic congressional advocates Rep. Roman Pucinski (D-Ill.) and Senator Richard Schweiker (R-Pa.) – Nixon refused to allocate more than a token $2million for the programme and rejected RNC entreaties to invite ethnic leaders to the White House to celebrate its passage.[21] Ford's presidential committee on neighbourhood revitalization was largely designed to provide "<u>maximum visibility</u> among… white ethnic communities," as his

[19] Huston to the Middle America Group; "Talking Points for Meeting with President Ford," 12 August 1974, "Office of Public Liaison (1)," Box 63, Baroody Papers; Memo, Anne Wexler to President Carter, 16 March 1979, "Census 1980 Ethnic Americans," Box 9, Wexler Files, emphasis added.
[20] Ehrlichman notes of meeting with the President, 19 August 1970, Box 4, John Ehrlichman Files, WHSF, SMOF, NPMP; Memo, Roy Morey to Ken Cole and Ed Harper, 16 September 1971, Box 46, Charles W. Colson Files, Ibid.; Memo, Nixon to Ehrlichman, 28 January 1971, Box 9, President's Office File, Ibid.; Memo, Buchanan to Ehrlichman, Haldeman and Colson, 23 September 1971, Box 3, Buchanan Files.
[21] Memo, Pasztor to Colson and Malek, 12 June 1972, Box 1, Michael P. Balzano Jr. Files, White House Central Files, SMOF, NPMP.

Domestic Council chief reminded him that "neighborhood is a motherhood issue this election year."[22] Identified by one Domestic Council staffer as "a short-range, political gimmick" for "a powerful and significant interest group," the committee was central to Ford's appeal to ethnic voters for 1976, but received negligible material support before its eventual dissolution.[23] Such an approach reflected Baroody's view that an "unsophisticated" ethnic constituency could be sated with "symbols and… themes."[24] Symbolic, short-term politics thus often delivered immediate recognition for the new ethnic politics, but yielded little in the way of long-term sustenance.

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The presidency's engagement with ethnic politics also served as a response to the new politics of group rights and compensatory justice which emerged in the wake of the African American political protest and civil rights legislation of the 1960s. The presidency had been a significant site of civil rights initiative during the 1960s, and this legacy ensured it served as the locus for much of the ethnic lobbying of the 1970s, as ethnics jostled to demonstrate their entitlement to government-guaranteed rights and rewards. Even when they did not, White House aides practiced an "anticipatory politics" (Skrentny, 2002), collecting data to identify ethnic disadvantage or victimhood and using policy templates taken from the civil rights legislation of the 1960s as a means of appealing to voters of European ethnic origin. Thus it was the presidency, not the federal bureaucracy or the courts, that led the drive to include

[22] Memo, Baroody to Connor, 18 June 1976, President's Handwriting File, GFL; Memo, Cannon to Ford, 27 August 1976, "Urban Development and Neighborhood Revitalization Committee, July–Sept 1976," Box 38, James Cannon Files, GFL.
[23] Memo, F. Lynn May to Cannon, 3 June 1976, "Urban Development and Neighborhood Revitalization Committee, May – June 1976," Ibid. Indeed, while Ford was happy to endorse the creation of the committee within his own Domestic Council, he refused to endorse any similar legislative initiatives from Congress, despite the recommendation of his Cabinet. See Memo, Connor to Cannon, 21 June 1976, in Ibid.
[24] Presentation, William J. Baroody, "Constituency Groups", 27 October 1975, in Folder "Campaign 1976 (2)," Box 48, Baroody Papers, emphasis in original.

ethnics within civil rights protections, be it through executive orders, White House conferences and commissions, or symbolic appointments and patronage. These actions illustrated the significant cultural and institutional legacy of the "minority rights revolution" (Skrentny, 2002) for the 1970s presidency. Yet their politicised quality typically offered ethnics recognition without tangible reward and served to exacerbate, rather than reduce, group conflict and division.

Calls for ethnic participation in the minority rights revolution often came from representatives of the new ethnic politics. Whereas previously civil rights advocacy had emphasised the importance of integration, assimilation and individual rights for ethnic groups, the rules had changed by the 1970s. Public policy had become a matter of "indemnifying damages rather than righting wrongs" (Lowi, 1969). Thus while some ethnic advocates articulated their claims through the language of ethnic pluralism, arguing that ethnic participation in civil rights protections was essential for a pluralistic society, many constructed critiques of American society that emphasised collective disadvantage and difference, analogising themselves to constituencies of colour as they competed for federal resources and sought recognition as formal 'minorities.' Yet in an increasingly competitive civil rights marketplace, federal civil rights agencies, less attuned than the presidency to the electoral value of ethnic inclusion, were often less convinced by ethnic pleas. Skrentny has shown that many agency officials believed the discrimination faced by ethnics was not analogous to that faced by African Americans (Skrentny, 2002), and ethnic advocates voiced concerns that agencies such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) were "'owned' by blacks, Hispanics, and women."[25]

[25] Memo, Kaptur to Rubenstein, 3 December 1977, "Office of Ethnic Affairs 8/77 – 12/79 (1)," Box 33, Aiello Files.

Faced by these obstacles, the presidency often led the drive for ethnic inclusion. When their appeals to the EEOC failed, ethnic activists lobbying for inclusion in federal affirmative action programmes found a sympathetic ear in the Nixon White House, which urged the Office of Federal Contract Compliance to issue new guidelines in 1973 prohibiting discrimination against "white ethnic minorities" who "continue to be excluded from executive, middle-management and other job levels because of discrimination based upon their... national origin" (Carmell Jr., 1973-74).[26] Likewise, responding to ethnic lobbying, Carter's Office of Ethnic Affairs recommended European ethnics as a specific category in the U.S. Census and sought to pressure the EEOC into issuing new guidelines for discrimination which included national origin and ethnicity.[27]

On other occasions, the presidency created its own internal civil rights protections and initiatives, either to bypass less sympathetic institutions or to anticipate ethnic demands. Collecting data on ethnic underrepresentation in executive positions, the Nixon administration established its own ethnic appointments 'Game Plan' – an internal affirmative action programme, developed by political strategists and personnel staff – even though ethnic activists had not sought greater White House representation. By 1974, the Game Plan had appointed over 150 ethnic Americans to positions on presidential boards and commissions.[28] After encountering opposition from federal agencies, the Carter White House proposed executive orders to include Italian-Americans in new federal guidelines on bilingual education, even though Italian activists had demanded access to affirmative action, and to extend 'national origin' in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act to include ethnic Americans.

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[26] "Guidelines Because of Discrimination or National Origin," reprinted from *Federal Register* 38, 19 Jan 1973, copy in author's possession.
[27] Platform Plank, "Including Ethnic Americans in the Process of Government and Affirmative Action Efforts," Box 1, Aiello Files.
[28] Memo, Jerry Jones to Michael Balzano, 3 Jan 1972, Box 1, Balzano Files; "Ethnic and Minority Census," 3 Jan 1972, copy in Ibid.; "Ethnic Appointments to Boards and Commissions," 15 Aug 1973, "Ethnic Leaders Briefing, 2/19/74," Melvin Laird Papers, GFL.

"Includ[ing] Ethnic Americans in the processes of government at every level," Carter's Office of Ethnic Affairs reported, "would add credence to the administration's sensitivity to ethnics and end the systematic discrimination and exclusion of ethnics from the government bureaucracy."[29]

These interventions serve as testament to the power of the minority rights revolution and its influence as both discursive and practical toolkit on the presidency. In each case, presidential actors – often political operatives – utilised existing civil rights strategies and policy models to develop their own ad hoc initiatives, couched in the language of minority rights, which sought to pre-empt the demands of the new ethnic politics and secure political rewards.

Yet despite this, the presidency failed to secure ethnics a permanent place in the minority rights revolution. This failure owed much to ethnics' inability to transcend the binary, colour-oriented logics of the minority rights revolution and cross its invisible threshold of disadvantage or difference: a threshold typically defined by institutions other than the presidency (Skrentny, 2002).[30] But some responsibility also lay with the executive. The White House's attempts to promote ethnic inclusion in civil rights programmes via executive orders or in-house strategies were often highly politicised. For instance, Nixon's 'Game Plan' explicitly noted "the votes to be had because of our record in placing ethnics [in executive positions]." Such efforts only increased the inter-group antagonism that these programmes were designed to redress.[31] These strategies constructed divisions between

[29] Memo, Esteban Torres to Jack Watson, 28 July 1980, "Education, Department of 11/79-4/80," Box 2, Aiello Files; Stephen Aiello to David Rubenstein, undated, "Affirmative Action 2/80 – 10/80," Box 1, Ibid.; Draft Executive Order on Including Ethnic Americans in the Processes of Government and Affirmative Action Efforts, n.d., "Affirmative Action – Executive Order on Ethnic Americans 1/80 – 5/80," Box 18, Ibid.; Memo, Butler and Belford to Jordan, 16 May 1980, "Special Assistants' Reports, 1980 [CF, O/A 647]," Box 55, Jordan Files; "Draft Executive Order on Including Ethnic Americans…."

[30] Instead, these groups often enjoyed more success at the local level, as in the case of affirmative action and ethnic studies legislation for Poles in Illinois or bilingual education instruction for Italians in New York.

[31] Jerry Jones, "Ethnic and Minority Census," 3 January 1972, "Appointments: Administrative Ethnic Appointments," Balzano Files.

ethnics and other so-called 'official minorities', reinforcing the racial binaries ethnic activists had sought to dislodge. Nixon aides demanded OEO grants be "shifted from black, Spanish-speaking and Puerto Rican communities to poor Jewish and Italian neighborhoods," while Aiello urged Carter to include ethnics in bilingual education programmes which "only benefit Hispanics" even though "we – non-Hispanics – are paying for it."[32]

This politicisation of minority rights, and its reassertion of binary racial distinctions, ensured racial minorities objected fiercely to potential ethnic inclusion in anti-discrimination protections, and derailed attempts at multi-ethnic coalition-building. Such objections were particularly problematic for the Carter White House, whose efforts at ethnic inclusion threatened to further destabilise a disintegrating Democratic coalition. In 1978 it shelved plans to shift the definition of 'minority' in affirmative action regulations from a term reflecting race to one of socio-economic disadvantage, when it received angry complaints from African Americans and Latinos who feared increased competition for a smaller number of programmes (Reinhold, 1978). Thus while the presidency of the 1970s was undoubtedly shaped by the civil rights revolution, its attempts to push for ethnic inclusion within civil rights legislation often proved politically divisive and undermined the conciliatory premise of ethnic pluralism.

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The 1970s was notable for a wider sense of electoral possibility, even realignment, with predictions rife of the imminent collapse of the New Deal coalition and a likely conservative realignment in American politics (Phillips, 1970; Hacker, 1970; Scammon & Wattenberg, 1971). Ethnic voters were identified as particularly malleable, and for many presidential

[32] Memo, Buchanan to Nixon, 10 November 1972, Box 2, Buchanan Files; Aiello Exit Interview.

actors, the new ethnic politics represented a chance to capitalise on this sense of opportunity. Yet rather than reinforcing a teleological narrative of conservative triumph or liberal decline, the presidency's engagement with ethnic politics in the 1970s illustrates a climate of political flux or uncertainty.[33] Across the decade, there were various expressions of purportedly 'ethnic' political activism, from anti-busing protesters in Boston to neighbourhood organisers in Cleveland and depolarisation project workers in Detroit, much of which transcended traditional distinctions between 'left' and 'right,' 'liberal' and 'conservative.' Polling revealed ever-growing political independence or disengagement among ethnic voters, not an attachment to a particular ideology or party (Levy & Kramer, 1973; Nie et al, 1974).

Faced with this ambiguity, presidential actors on both the left and right imposed their own protean definitions upon the ethnic upsurge and assigned it considerable, perhaps even exaggerated, meaning. For conservatives in both the Nixon and Ford administrations, ethnic voters were central to a prospective 'New Majority' coalition to be formed from the wreckage of New Deal liberalism. GOP strategist and White House aide Kevin Phillips recommended "pursuit of an increasing portion of the Northern blue-collar electorate... Northern Catholics, blue-collar Poles, Slavs… Italians," using a blend of racial conservatism and economic populism (Phillips, 1970). Envisioning the making of "a political dynasty… to dominate American politics" after Nixon's 1972 re-election, Patrick Buchanan declared: "Our future is the Democratic working man… Northern, Catholic, and ethnic."[34] At the same time, advisers to Nixon's 1972 opponent, liberal Democrat George McGovern, urged him that ethnic voters were "key to your getting the nomination, winning the election and achieving a breakthrough in social progress during the 70s," prescribing a combination of Phillips's economic populism

[33] There is now a vast literature on the conservative resurgence of the 1970s, much of which presupposes the simultaneous demise of liberalism. For examples, see Schulman & Zelizer, 2008; Sandbrook, 2012; Kalman, 2010; Phillips-Fein, 2011.
[34] Memo, Buchanan to Nixon, 10 November 1972, Box 7, Buchanan Files.

and an expanded Great Society liberalism.[35] Four years later, Democratic pollster Patrick Caddell identified ethnic voters as a key component in an impending "political realignment... the construction of a political coalition based on a successful Carter administration," this time built upon a post-liberal vision of localism, small government, and fiscal restraint. These competing ideological visions and ethnic strategies reveal a more complex political landscape, and a presidency struggling to divine not just the political or ideological direction of the ethnics but also that of its own era. An analysis of the ethnic presidency therefore illustrates the shortcomings of scholarship that identify the ethnic politics of the 1970s as an expression of liberal declension and conservative ascendancy, and the importance of Matthew Lassiter's counsel to historians to transcend the "polarization thesis" so prevalent in much of the historiography (Lassiter, 2011).

Yet while initially bestowing it with great legitimacy, this sense of flux had damaging consequences for the politics of ethnicity, leading not only to conflicting approaches to ethnic political mobilisation, but also towards the ethnics themselves. Ethnics were theorised by the presidency as analogous both to racial minorities, and so deserving of government-guaranteed rights, and to reactionary whites opposed to such policies. At times ethnic Americans and their identities could be defined in such broad terms as to render 'ethnic' meaningless. Despite his sensitivity to the political opportunities that ethnics presented, White House officials regularly blurred ethnicity, class, and other identities. Charles Colson, for instance, recommended a joint strategy for Eastern European ethnics and union members because "by and large we are talking about many of the same people." For Colson, 'ethnic', 'blue-collar,' and 'Middle America' should "be considered together and interchangeable." Although Baroody envisioned ethnics as distinct and "peripheral," he also described them as "average

[35] Memo, Ken Schlossberg and Gerry Cassidy to George McGovern, 12 Apr 1972, Box 785, George S. McGovern Papers, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.

Americans," made up of 'blue collar ethnic and Roman Catholic working-class elements."[36] Many failed to recognise ethnics as distinctive at all. Until late 1979, for instance, the Carter administration failed to record ethnic appointments as it did for black, Latino, or Asian appointees – ethnics were considered 'white' – and it assigned initial responsibility for its 1980 ethnic campaign to Franklin Lopez, a Latino.[37] In sum, despite (or perhaps because of) the sense of political possibility or opportunity attached to ethnics, 'ethnic' was an ambiguous, politically-constructed label representing an amorphous constituency of multiple identities. This ambiguity of meaning, identity, and objective served initially as an asset in enabling ethnics to attract the attentions of the presidency and assume considerable potential power in the 1970s. But it soon became a weakness, inhibiting the development of a coherent collective identity or purpose and enabling presidential actors to impose their own, often arbitrary definitions of ethnic needs and interests from above. The presidency ensured ethnics, in contrast to other ethnic and racial interest groups, lacked, or were denied, the foundations necessary to articulate collective goals, make political claims, and secure long-term legitimacy and recognition.

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At first glance, the attempts to build what Myron Kuropas called "an ethnic presence in the White House" offered considerable potential for a fledgling ethnic identity politics.[38] Ethnic activists gained considerable visibility through their engagement with the presidency, and saw White House recognition of their distinctiveness as evidence of their growing legitimacy

[36] Memo, Colson to Haldeman, 14 September 1970, Box 38, Colson Files; Report on ethnic voters, n.d., Box 62, Ibid.; Presentation, Baroody, "Constituency Groups", emphasis in original.
[37] Memo, Vicki Mongiardo to Anne Wexler, 3 April 1979, "Appointments, Ethnic Political 11/78 – 6/80", Box 1, Aiello Files; Memo, Aiello to Belford, 17 July 1980, "Weekly Reports 3/80-9/80," Box 10, Ibid.
[38] Author's interview with Myron Kuropas, Chicago, 27 September 2008.

in American politics and their right to special consideration in the making of public policy. "This day," Baroni proclaimed after the Ford administration's 1976 White House conference on ethnicity and neighbourhood revitalisation, "will provide the impetus for promoting the special programmes so important to ethnic America."[39] Given the significant resources on offer within the presidency, the new specialist structures it provided for interest group outreach, and the failure of alternative institutions to recognise ethnic distinctiveness and entitlement, ethnic advocates saw great value in the presidency. White House sponsorship of ethnic claims was a considerable breakthrough for what was still barely an organised movement. For the presidency, too, the opportunities were considerable, but not correspondent. In some cases, the executive's facilitation of the ethnic moment reflected genuine empathy or a response to the specific needs or claims of ethnic Americans. In the majority of others, it indicated electoral opportunity, political gain, and, above all, a response to a shifting institutional context.

Consequently, although ethnic politics in the 1970s came to centre on the presidency rather than other institutions, this arrangement did not prove conducive to this politics' long-term prospects. The presidency's formalisation of outreach to ethnic interest groups initially recognised expressions of white, European ethnic difference as legitimate, yet this sense of difference was not recognised by all and contributed to growing group conflict by the decade's close. Centralisation of power within the White House enabled the presidency to sidestep ineffective political party organisations, yet also led to the prioritisation of personalised, symbolic ethnic strategies and shallow, short-term majority-building. The presidency's politicised attempts to include ethnics in civil rights protections engendered hostility to ethnic claims amongst competing minorities, destabilised political coalitions, and

[39] Ethnicity and Neighborhood Revitalization Conference Proceedings, 5 May 1976, "Final Report of the Special Assistant for Ethnic Affairs (2)," Box 55, Baroody Papers.

devalued the assumption that an ethnically pluralistic society or polity would also be cohesive. Despite bipartisan enthusiasm for the opportunities presented by ethnics' political mobilisation, the presidency's failure to define ethnics and their concerns adequately or consistently left them without the collective identity and legitimacy necessary to prosper in a polity based upon group recognition.

Thus although the rhetorical symbols of white, European ethnicity may sometimes resurface in presidential politics, the 'ethnics' of the 1970s have since largely been returned – politically, at least – to a homogenous Euro-American mass and contemporary presidential politics pays limited heed to their distinctiveness. Yet the complex relationship between the presidency, ethnicity, and identity politics during the 1970s is still of significance. First, the presidency's engagement with ethnic politics challenges many scholarly assumptions about the politics of white ethnicity, the presidency, and the 1970s. Executive engagement with the new ethnic politics was neither an illustration of the cultural drift and fragmentation often associated with the decade, nor a manifestation of an ascendant conservative politics of racial backlash. Instead, it reflected the transitional institutional context of the 1970s: a context shaped by interest group liberalism and the civil rights revolution, but also weakened political parties, unstable coalitions, and a wider sense of political vacuum or opportunity. Second, it casts a different light on the presidency of the 1970s, illuminating an institution that was neither inert nor 'imperilled,' but that responded creatively, if not always successfully, to a new ethnic politics at a transitional moment in American political development. Finally, the essay offers an insight into why some social or political movements fail to gain traction, and underscores the importance of that same institutional context to this process. While the ethnics' own lack of common claim, purpose, and identity undermined their efforts at political mobilisation and recognition, institutional, and specifically presidential, explanations were also critical in thwarting the attempts of ethnic activists to secure longer-term

incorporation in national politics. Any interpretation of the demise of ethnic identity politics should take into account the limitations of pluralistic outreach mechanisms, the decline of traditional party structures, the politicisation of the civil rights revolution, and the tendency of presidential actors to impose their own, often uncertain meanings or definitions on ethnic interests. Thus, while the “ethnic presence in the White House” was never more than temporary, its broader implications for historians of social movements and political institutions are more enduring and worthy of further study.

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