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Nathaniel Weyl

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National Origins of the Phi Beta Kappa Membership

NATHANIEL WEYL

SINCE MANY PEOPLE ARE CURIOUS about the frequency of occurrence of their family names, the Bureau of Old Age and Survivors Insurance (BOASI) of the then-Social Security Administration compiled a list of the 1,514 most common family names in the United States together with the number of times they appeared on BOASI rolls as of mid-1956. Each of these common surnames was borne by 10,000 or more persons on Social Security rosters. In aggregate, the names accounted for 56.4 million of the 117.3 million people on BOASI rolls at the time, or 48 % of the total.

When this list was made available to the public, it seemed evident to me that it would provide a shortcut for estimating the comparative contribution of Americans of different national stocks to various areas of leadership and service. The first step was to select surnames from the BOASI list which were representative of a given national stock until a large and accurate sample was obtained. This involved discarding names which are borne extensively by more than one national-linguistic group, for example, *Lee* because it can be both English and Chinese; *Gordon* because it is frequently Jewish, rather than Scottish; *Brown* because an estimated 31 % of the Browns are Negro; *Miller* because it is often the result of a name-change from Muller. Since BOASI uses a coding system which gives the first six letters of the names only, *Martin* had to be discarded, although it is preponderantly English, because of Martínez and Martino.

The second step was to compare the frequency of occurrence of the batches of surnames chosen to represent specific national stocks on specialized leadership rosters with their frequency on Social Security (BOASI) rolls. These frequencies were expressed as percentages of the totals. Their quotients, when multiplied by 100, were termed *performance coefficients* since they measured the performance of the national stock (or rather the sample of names chosen to represent it) on a specific leadership roster. Thus, a performance coefficient of

200 represents double the average representation; 100 is the national average; 50 is half the national average, etc.

The samples varied widely in comprehensiveness. The four English-speaking groups (Scots, English, Irish, and Welsh) represented 10.1 % of the estimated populations of those stocks in the United States. The coverage for the foreign-language stocks (German, Dutch, Scandinavian, Jewish, French, Italian, Spanish, Slavic, Greek, Hungarian, and Chinese) was somewhat poorer, averaging 7.2 %. The Slavic, Italian and Hungarian samples are not highly reliable because they cover only 0.9 %, 2.8 %, and 2.2 % of the estimated number of people of those provenances in the United States in 1960. The Greek and Chinese samples are poor because each contains only one name (*Pappas* and *Wong*). Moreover, some national and ethnic groups had to be excluded from consideration because no representative surnames could be obtained for them from the BOASI list. These included Negroes, American Indians, Japanese, Asian Indians, Syrians, Lebanese, Turks, Portuguese, and Finns.

The name samples were used to find out the comparative representation of 15 national-linguistic groups in past and present Phi Beta Kappa membership. There were three different listings of members: the 1776–1922 period from Oscar M. Voorhees' compilation, *Phi Beta Kappa General Catalog 1776–1922*; 1923–1961 membership, which the National Office of the Society was kind enough to analyze for me, and 1962 new members from file cards.

The performance coefficients of the 15 national-linguistic groups during the three different periods were as follows:

*Performance Coefficients in Respect to Membership
in the Phi Beta Kappa Society*

Category	1776–1922	1922–1961	1962
Number of cases	65,958	115,000	4,463
All	100	100	100
English	101	141	82
Scots	96	169	91
Irish	49	112	101
Welsh	98	117	95
Jewish	84	695	506
German	61	177	76
Dutch	104	187	78
Scandinavian	44	183	123
French	59	131	34

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Category	1776-1922	1922-1961	1962
Italian	5	42	0
Spanish	0	11	7
Slavic	3	71	0
Chinese	12	229	0
Greek	0	115	0
Hungarian	0	neg*	0

* Less than 5 members.

The most significant column is the second, containing the performance coefficients for the 115,000 Phi Beta Kappa members of the 1922-1961 period. The 1776-1922 era includes years in which Phi Beta Kappa was merely a college secret society organized for social purposes. Moreover, the U.S. population was a very different mixture of national stocks then than it was in 1956, the year to which the Social Security table of 1,514 names and their frequencies applies. As for the 1962 Phi Beta Kappa elections, they are probably indicative of broad trends among the quantitatively important national groups, but, since only 4,463 persons were elected in that year, the absence of small minority groups, such as Chinese, Greeks and Hungarians, is of no statistical significance.

The most obvious thing about the table is the strong position of Jews in Phi Beta Kappa. The Jewish representation in 1923-1961 was almost seven times the national average; by 1962, it had apparently fallen to five times the national average. Almost half of this Jewish lead is explained by proportionately much greater Jewish than non-Jewish college attendance. Thus, Glazer and Moynihan in their excellent study, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, quote a 1955 study showing that 62% of the Jews of college age were in higher educational institutions as against 26% for the general population. An analysis of more recent census data (Herman P. Miller, *Rich Man, Poor Man*, p. 123) shows that 22% of the Jews, but only 9% of the Protestants and 7% of the Catholics were college graduates.

The fact that the Chinese, with a performance coefficient of 229 for the 1923-61 period, are in second place will not surprise anyone who has made even the most cursory investigation of their gigantic strides during recent years in American scholarship and in the professions.

The four English-speaking groups have an unweighted average performance coefficient of 135, the three North European groups

(German, Dutch, and Scandinavian) one of 182. Between 1923–61 and 1962, all of these groups suffered declines, the drop being more than 50 % in the cases of the German and Dutch, but only 10 % in the case of the Irish. Within the English-speaking groups, the Scots were firmly in the leadership during 1923–61; that leadership role was assumed by the Irish in 1962 Phi Beta Kappa elections.

Finally, there are two special English groups worth considering separately. The first of these comprises the bearers of three English clerical names: *Clark* and *Clarke*, meaning clerics, clerks or persons literate in Latin at the time surnames were adopted, and *Palmer*, meaning those who had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and were therefore entitled to carry palm branches or a palm leaf, but also in general itinerant monks or pilgrims. These names were borne by 385,972 persons on Social Security rolls in 1956. (The reason these names, rather than such seemingly clerical surnames as *Pope*, *Bishop*, and *Abbott* were chosen is that the latter include people who played the role of Pope in miracle plays, the servants of bishops, the retainers of abbots, etc.)

The performance coefficients of the three chosen clerical names in Phi Beta Kappa membership were 213 in 1776–1922, 186 in 1923 to 1961, and 123 in 1962. This is consistent with the theory that the literate and scholarly families tended to choose intellectual spouses more or less consistently from the time family names were first adopted during the period of the Crusades until the present time.

The second special English group consists of five Puritan names and one old Dutch name. They are: *Coolidge*, *Hooker*, *Huntington*, *Lyman*, *Trumbull*, and *Van Dyke*. They were chosen because the late Ellsworth Huntington used them in his brilliant 1935 study of the Puritan contribution to American leadership, conducted under National Research Council sponsorship, *After Three Centuries*. Unfortunately, the performance coefficient for these Puritan names in 1923–1961 Phi Beta Kappa membership was not calculated and in the 1962 list there were no representatives of the Puritan names. The performance coefficient of the Puritans in 1776–1922 Phi Beta Kappa membership, however, was 790, or more than treble that of any other group. From other sources, there is impressive evidence of continuing, though declining, Puritan leadership in American science and scholarship.

Delray Beach, Fla.