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1 New Race Politics

The Changing Face of the American Electoral Landscape

Democracy in the United States always has been characterized by dynamism – states entered and attempted to leave the union, political parties were born and faded away, and the composition of the electorate underwent continuous alteration as women, minorities, and young people were included as eligible voting citizens. The United States is experiencing another set of changes that portend a potentially important reconfiguration of American democracy, and among the most significant is the introduction of a substantial number of immigrants to the polity. Overwhelmingly from Latin America and Asia, immigrants and their children currently make up more than 20 percent of the U.S. population. As a consequence, more than one-third of Americans consider themselves to be a race other than white. What difference will an estimated twenty-two million potential new voters – the combined total of the eleven million foreign-born Americans who became naturalized citizens since the 1990s and the eleven million who are eligible for naturalization now or within the next few years (Fix, Passel, and Sucher 2003) – make for campaigns, election outcomes, political identities, and democratic representation? To what extent will blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans engage in a racial pluralism forged in identity politics? Should we expect racial groups to cohere politically? To what extent can racial identity be used to mobilize Latino and Asian American populations? Alternatively, will the majority population engage in a countermobilization response to increasing numbers of minority Americans? The dynamic racial and ethnic environment of the nation alters the racial context of politics, taking us beyond the black-white divide in American politics, and changing how we think about race and ethnicity.

The nation's current demographic makeup stands in sharp contrast to its ethnic and racial composition of twenty-five years ago.[1] Once the nation's largest minority group, the percentage of African Americans remained virtually unchanged between 1980 and 2000, increasing only slightly from 11.7 percent to 12.3 percent. In contrast, Latino and Asian American populations have experienced explosive growth, with Latinos replacing African Americans as the largest minority group in the United States. In 1980, Latinos made up 6.4 percent of the American population, but by 2000, the percentage grew to 12.5 percent. The U.S. Census Bureau projects Latinos will constitute a quarter of the total U.S. population by 2050. Although Asian Americans still account for a relatively small proportion of the population, they are nevertheless among the fastest-growing minority groups in the country, more than doubling in size from 1.5 percent to 3.6 percent of all Americans in 2000. The size of the Asian American population is projected to double again to 8 percent by 2050.

Unique geographic patterns of foreign migration to the United States are also noteworthy, for immigrant populations are highly concentrated in some states, and growth rates vary substantially among locations. Immigrants are concentrated in states with disproportionately large electoral significance, drawn to the immigrant gateway cities of New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Antonio, Miami, and Chicago. The large number of electoral college votes held by California (fifty-five), New York (thirty-one), Texas (thirty-four), Florida (twenty-seven), and Illinois (twenty-one) always has garnered these states a great deal of attention by political observers, and now the changing demographics of these states have focused even more attention on them. For example, the percentage of Latinos residing in California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas exceeds their proportion at the national level (12.5 percent). In some instances, the difference is dramatic – over 30 percent of the population in both California and Texas is Latino. The percentage of Asian Americans residing in these electorally important states also is worth noting, with the percentage of Asian Americans living in California (10.9 percent) nearly triple the percentage of Asian Americans at the national level.

All new immigrants, however, do not reside in traditional "gateway" metropolitan areas, and although there are a number of metropolitan areas

[1] Percentages are from U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990 Census of Population and Housing, and U.S. Census Bureau 2000. The racial classification system used by the U.S. government in the census includes "Hispanic" as ethnicity rather than race. Although there are important distinctions between the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino," the authors in this volume use the term "Latino" to refer to people in the United States with Latin American heritage.

that continue to be popular destinations for new Americans, these cities have experienced relatively moderate growth in immigrant populations compared with a set of "emerging gateway" locations (Singer 2004). In contrast, "reemerging," and "preemerging gateways" have seen a significant increase in the number of immigrants settling in their cities. These new immigrant destinations include locations as diverse as Atlanta, Dallas, Raleigh-Durham, and Las Vegas. New patterns of immigrant settlement foreshadow a dynamic political environment in traditionally white-black and mostly-white locations, signaling the potential for multiracial coalitions of voters. The changing face of the American population is thus the starting point for the study of a new race politics in the United States.

A NEW IDENTITY POLITICS IN A DYNAMIC RACIAL ENVIRONMENT?

What are the political consequences of these changes in the racial landscape of the United States? Political theorists have taken up anew the question of how "identity politics" will influence the conduct of contemporary government. Political theorists such as Amy Gutmann (2003), Seyla Benhabib (2002), and Iris Marion Young (2002) signal optimism in the democratic possibility of political coalitions based in race and ethnicity. Alternatively, another perspective best exemplified by Huntington (2005), argues the growing diversity will have the negative consequence of creating ethnic balkanization. The expectation that demographic shifts will produce political consequences is based on prior examples of ethnic-based collective action and the gains in political equality that often have accompanied such action. The notion that people with shared ethnic and racial backgrounds naturally will join together is intuitively appealing. Public celebrations of ethnic identity and the successful collective action strategies of African Americans during the Civil Rights movement are but two examples of the palpable appeal of racial identity in inviting group mobilization. Equally compelling is the normative premise linking citizen participation with political equality; more voice, particularly among those traditionally disadvantaged, will lead to more favorable political outcomes that enhance equality. The presence of a critical mass of racial minorities signals the possibility that disadvantaged groups can better mobilize individuals and increase their input in democratic politics. Grounded in this way, it seems reasonable to hope and expect that political mobilization around race can produce higher levels of political participation among minority Americans.

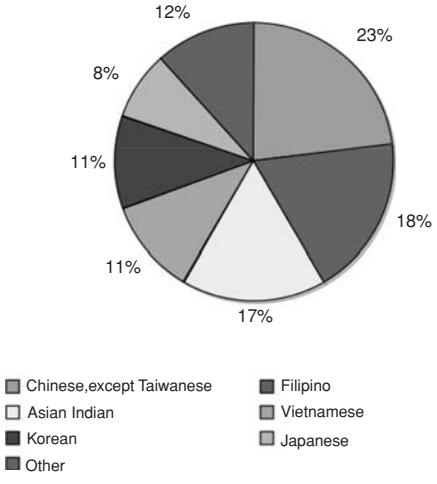

Figure 1.1. Composition of Asian Population: 2000. *Source:* U.S. Census Bureau.

In analyzing the significance of race for voting, scholars have most often utilized the mutually exclusive racial categories of black, white, Latino, and, to a lesser degree, Asian American. The U.S. government classifies "Hispanic" as an ethnicity rather than a race, and people who identify as one of the categories of "Hispanic" can be of any race. There is some confusion about the definitions of the terms race and ethnicity, and how they are related. Although authors sometimes use these terms interchangeably, the term "ethnicity" commonly refers to one's cultural background or country of origin, whereas "race" is most often used to describe the larger grouping into one of the four categories of white, black, Latino, and Asian American.

Because the influx of a large number of Latinos and Asian Americans is a recent phenomenon, we know surprisingly little about their patterns of voting participation, partisan affiliation, and group mobilization. In an attempt to go beyond the black-white binary, analysts most frequently have combined what are often highly distinctive groups – Mexicans and Cubans, or Japanese and Vietnamese – into the panethnic racial categories of Latino and Asian American. Yet there is tremendous diversity within the larger racial categories, and Figures 1.1 and 1.2 present breakdowns of the national origins of Latinos and Asian Americans in the United States in 2000. Although the vast majority (66 percent) of Latinos are Mexican, a third are from other locations. The ethnic diversity among Asian Americans is even more pronounced, and no single group constitutes a majority of the population. Not only does country of origin differ to a substantial

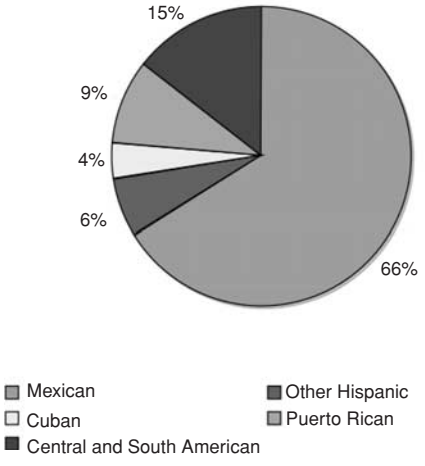

Figure 1.2. Composition of Hispanic Population: 2000. *Source:* U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 2000.

degree among Asian Americans, but so, too, do language and religion. Although most immigrant Latinos in the United States share Spanish (some from South American nations speak Portuguese), there are differences in dialect, as well as variation in adherence to the Catholic Church. Similarly, there are important within-group differences in terms of immigrant status and socioeconomic status. Similarly, there is important variation within the category of "black" or African American, and more than 15 percent of the foreign-born residents of the United States come from a sending country in the Caribbean or Africa. Although positive stereotypes of West Indian values and high levels of economic assimilation among the well-educated African immigrant population are widespread and familiar, foreign-born blacks nevertheless face a continual struggle against racism shared with native-born African Americans (Kasinitz 1992; Waters 1999; Foner 2001; Rogers 2006).

To be certain, the ubiquitous use of the "big four" racial categories of white, black, Latino, and Asian American has produced political consequences. In the wake of the recent shift in demographics, a continued reliance on such a categorization of America's newest voters also has theoretical implications in that such a classification system limits our ability to understand the new race politics. The use of the "big four" racial categories speaks not only to the state's need to measure race and enforce race-sensitive policies but also to the stark reality of continued ignorance and racism regarding ethnic diversity. Despite significant progress in racial equality over the last half century, the persistence of racial stereotyping

has produced political and economic inequality among individuals categorized by race. Such categorization signals the continued importance of race in American society for things material as well as psychological. For example, in a recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, more than twice as many blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans than whites report experiencing racial discrimination in everyday social interactions, including being threatened or attacked, insulted or called names, and treated with less respect. Although ethnicity may be a primary identification for immigrants and their children, the imposition of racial identities by the state has the political effect of instituting a racial hierarchy. The ubiquity of the four racial categories has theoretical consequences as well. In order to assess the contours of the new race politics in contemporary America, it is important to explore more deeply the connection between politics and the multiplicity of identities within American society.

ECHOES OF OUR PAST AS A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

A large influx of new voters and the presence of ethnic voting blocs, however, are far from unprecedented in the history of the United States. Robert Dahl's landmark 1961 work on New Haven, Connecticut, is a study of the politics of ethnicity, political identity, and assimilation (Dahl 1961). Despite what Dahl characterized as the "astonishing tenacity" of ethnic factors in political behavior, the importance of ethnicity was soon eclipsed by the prominence of race in American politics. Between 1881 and 1930, the United States experienced a massive influx of foreign immigrants, when 27.6 million people arrived in America. For the most part, these newest entrants came from countries in eastern, central, and southern Europe, in particular Italy, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Poland, and Germany. The fractious events of the Civil Rights era and the struggles of African Americans against racism speeded a reconfiguration of the political landscape from multiple ethnicities to a binary analytical lens of black and white, the change reflecting the realities of stratification and inequality between people categorized by race. By mid-century and into the 1960s, second- and third-generation Italians, Irish, and Jews – groups marked as distinctive from and less desirable than the white Protestant establishment – continued to assimilate through educational certification, diversified labor market participation, dispersed residential settlement, and intermarriage, moving from the categorization of ethnic to white ethnic to simply white (Ignatiev 1987; Waters 1990; Alba 1992; Jacobson 1998). The assimilation of these groups contributed to the decline in interest in ethnic voting. In

addition, the demise of most of the powerful political machines reinforced the shift from a focus on ethnicity to a focus on race.

Although they came in fewer numbers, immigrants from China, Mexico, and the Caribbean also found their way to the United States during the early twentieth century, although federal immigration policies of the 1920s made it more difficult for Asians and Africans to enter the country (King 2000; Tichenor 2002; Ngai 2004). For the most part, it was America's big industrial cities such as Boston, New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, St. Louis, and San Francisco where immigrants settled. By 1930, one-half to three-quarters of the populations of these cities were composed of immigrants and their children. These newest residents found work in the industrial sector in automobile plants, garment factories, and construction, quickly forming a new working class with ethnicity and immigrant status at its core.

Like many of America's newest immigrants, those who entered the United States in the early twentieth century found themselves at a disadvantage. The difficulties they faced made integrating into the political system challenging. A large number of these immigrants did not speak English and were poorly paid. These factors hampered their ability to involve themselves in the democratic system. In addition, the political system as it stood in the 1920s was, in many ways, not very welcoming to new participants. As a response to mass immigration, many states instituted restrictive electoral laws such as literacy tests and property requirements in order to limit immigrant participation (Sterne 2001). States play a pivotal role in determining the process and ease with which immigrants will integrate into the system. In many cases, states have been and continue to be stringent in conferring the full rights of citizenship upon immigrants (Aleinikoff 2001). The passage of California's Proposition 187 in 1994 limiting social services to illegal immigrants is an example of the active stance states often take regarding immigrants.

In the wake of the recent surge in foreign migration, one pivotal question facing the nation is how will new immigrants integrate themselves into the political system? The immigrant experience of the early twentieth century suggests a path new immigrants might follow in order to integrate themselves fully in the democratic system. Much attention has been paid to the role of the political machine and its party bosses of the early twentieth century as well as unions in bringing the ethnic-based working class of this time period into the political system. Networks of civic associations also played an important role in bringing new residents into politics and acted as "alternative yet mutually reinforcing modes of incorporation" (Sterne

2001, 34). The political party machines of the early 1900s did a great deal to mobilize America's newest residents and integrate them into the political system, providing immigrants with much needed services, including jobs, financial assistance, and mediation. The assistance immigrants received and the one-on-one contact immigrants enjoyed with the parties provided a connection between the government and America's newest citizens and a link to the political system. Similarly, unions such as the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) played an important role in teaching immigrants of the early twentieth century how to participate in the democratic process. Labor leaders of this time period held that participation in the electoral process went hand-in-hand with employment in industry (Sterne 2001). Immigrant union members were indoctrinated with the notion that industry and politics were indelibly linked. The role of the civic association in immigrant political incorporation in the early twentieth century often is overlooked, for not all immigrants came into contact with party machines or labor unions. For many immigrants, it was associations such as settlement houses, ethnic groups, neighborhood organizations, and churches that provided immigrants with a civic education and brought them into the democratic system. These organizations were more accessible to immigrants, offered solidarity among fellow newcomers, and more specifically addressed their needs (Sterne 2001). In all these ways, immigrants were brought into the political system in the early 1900s, and their incorporation had a dramatic and lasting effect on the political landscape.

The entrance of these immigrants into the United States, most of whom were working class and living on a modest income, coincided with another pivotal phenomenon – the Great Depression. The combination of an economic depression and heavy foreign migration resulted in a significant readjustment in the party loyalties of the citizenry and the contours of the political party system. With the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929, an already financially insecure immigrant population found themselves depending more on the assistance of the state. There were only so many services parties, unions, and civic associations could provide. In Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), immigrants found a sympathetic leader, and the "New Deal" promised much-needed assistance in the form of a social security program and public works projects, for example. Thanks to the parties, unions, and associations, America's newest citizens became educated in and motivated to participate in politics, and in many ways, the affinity immigrants felt for the Democratic Party was actualized through active political participation (Sterne 2001). This influx of a large number

of new citizens supportive of the Democratic Party resulted in a significant shift in the contours of the political party system.

The election of FDR in 1932 had momentous consequences, and the formation of the New Deal coalition ushered in the fifth party system and the realignment of the nation away from the Republican Party toward the Democratic Party. As Burnham (1970) noted, realignments tend to occur when the existing party system is unable to cope with social, economic, or cultural problems facing the country. As a result, realignment occurs when the electorate's party loyalty undergoes a lasting change thereby transforming the minority party into the majority party. As Kristi Andersen argues in her study of the creation of the Democratic majority (1979), the realignment that took place at the start of the FDR presidency was not the result of a conversion of large numbers of Republicans to the Democratic Party. Instead, the shift in the party system was the result of significant demographic changes in the United States. In particular, the mobilization of large numbers of new immigrants (many of whom were urban, Catholic, and "blue collar" workers) infused the Democratic Party with new supporters. The combination of an economic depression and the emergence of an active immigrant pool, therefore, changed America's party system to what is still present today. The political effects of America's recent experience with immigration are now in the making, and it is to the electoral consequences of the new race politics to which we now turn.

THE ELECTORAL CONSEQUENCES OF IMMIGRATION

When considering the effects of a large influx of immigrants into the United States, the natural question to ask is how integrated into the political system will these immigrants become? Will they become citizens and how will they engage in politics? Trends in naturalization suggest the pool of potential participants in the political system is expanding, and many of America's newly naturalized citizens possess qualities that make active political participation likely. At the same time, there is a large pool of immigrants not yet naturalized, and it remains to be seen which of these future citizens will become politically incorporated.

Naturalization is the process by which immigrants are invested with the rights and privileges of American citizenship. Following a period of time in which rates of naturalization were trending downward, there has been an increase in the rates of immigrants becoming citizens. In 1970, 64 percent of the nation's legal immigrants became American citizens, but

this dropped to 39 percent by 1996. But by the end of the 1990s, the percentage of immigrants who have naturalized has risen to 49 percent, and by 2002, the number of naturalized citizens stood at eleven million (Fix, Passel, and Sucher 2003a, 2003b).

Who are these newly naturalized citizens? In general, immigrants from Europe, Canada, and Asia have been the most likely immigrants to become citizens once they entered the United States. By 2001, approximately 65 percent of the immigrants from Canada and European nations had naturalized, and the percentage of Asians who chose to naturalize increased between 1995 and 2001. By 2001, 67 percent of Asian immigrants become U.S. citizens. The story is different for immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries. Although the percentage of Latino immigrants who naturalized was lower than immigrants from Europe and Canada, there has been an increase in the number of Mexicans and Latin Americans who have become citizens. By 2001, 34 percent of Mexican immigrants became citizens – an increase of 15 percent. The proportion of Latin Americans who became citizens also rose from 40 percent to 58 percent between 1995 and 2001.

In general, America's newest citizens possess moderate levels of English proficiency, education, and income. Of those who have recently naturalized, 48 percent report that they speak English very well. In terms of education, 91 percent report having at least a ninth grade education, whereas more than a third (35 percent) have a college degree or higher. In terms of economic standing, poverty rates among newly naturalized citizens are fairly low with only 11 percent living below the federal poverty level (Fix, Passel, and Sucher 2003a, 2003b). Rates of naturalization show no signs of slowing in the near future. An estimated 7.9 million immigrants are eligible to naturalize and become citizens immediately. The remaining immigrants (approximately 2.7 million) are soon-to-be-eligible to become citizens, and most of them are of the age to become citizens. Once the five-year residency requirements are satisfied, they will be eligible to naturalize. This means that the American population will be absorbing approximately eleven million newly naturalized citizens in the next five years.

This large number of potential citizens possesses markedly different characteristics from recently naturalized immigrants. Among these future citizens, 60 percent possess limited English proficiency compared to 52 percent of the recently naturalized immigrants. Regarding levels of education, 25 percent of soon-to-be-naturalized immigrants have less than a ninth grade education compared to 9 percent of those immigrants who have recently become citizens. Poverty rates among these sets of immigrants