

Ethnicity, Neighborhoods, and California Politics

Immigration has transformed California's ethnic landscape. Since 1965, the state's Latino and Asian populations have grown rapidly, and demographers project that by 2030, no ethnic group will constitute more than 50 percent of the state's population. Historically, rapid change in the ethnic composition of California society has engendered group competition and conflict. Thus, experience suggests that the current demographic changes might create new tensions in ethnic group relations. At the same time, the very diversity of California's population complicates the nature of these relations and tensions. In particular, the most recent demographic changes test the assumption that such conflict is likely to occur between a white majority and a coalition of minorities. As California becomes a "majority minority" state, political competition *among* minority groups is increasingly common. This development has led to heated controversies and more complex policy debates on a range of ethnic issues, including whether and how the government should use ethnicity as a criterion for distributing public benefits.

In *Ethnic Context, Race Relations, and California Politics*, Bruce Cain, Jack Citrin, and Cara Wong describe public attitudes toward the changing ethnic composition of California and explore how these attitudes are related to people's preferences on important policy questions. In particular, the authors focus on the influence of ethnic context, or the ethnic composition of neighborhoods, on the formation of these attitudes and preferences. Although prior research has attempted to gauge these contextual effects, this study is almost unique in analyzing the influence of ethnic context on the conduct of minority group members as well as whites. The data come from a survey of the California electorate conducted just before the vote on Proposition 209, which forbade the use of ethnic preferences by public agencies in California. By matching survey responses to precinct-level census data and controlling for individual-level variables (such as educational attainment, ideology, and social background), the authors probe the relationship between ethnic context and the racial attitudes and voting behavior of whites, Latinos, Asians, and blacks.

Ethnic Group Differences and Similarities

The study found substantial differences in such attitudes and behavior across these groups. Compared to the three other groups, whites were less likely to say that their race or ethnicity was an important part of their political identity. They were also more likely to support Proposition 209 and Proposition 187, which denied governmental services to illegal immigrants, and to regard affirmative action programs as unnecessary and unfair. These differences cannot be explained by ethnic context or any other individual-level variable considered in this study.

At the same time, there was broad consensus among the groups on a number of ethnic issues. A large majority of every ethnic group was either neutral or positive about members of different groups moving into their neighborhoods. Despite differing attitudes about the need for affirmative action, respondents from all four ethnic groups also tended to agree on the egalitarian principles of merit and non-discrimination as the primary criteria for job promotion and educational opportunity.

Most respondents also seemed to favor the effect of their own group on neighborhoods and to agree that people tended to be happier living and socializing with others of the same background. Although whites seemed most worried about the effects of a heavy influx of black residents on property values and blacks were most concerned about hostile attitudes in largely white communities, the authors warn that it would be misleading to conclude that Californians favor residential or social segregation. As other studies have shown, people of all ethnic groups indicate that they prefer to live in neighborhoods where members of their own group make up the majority, but not all, of the neighborhood's households. In addition, the authors note that realism rather than prejudice may underlie the belief that it is easier to socialize with people of similar backgrounds.

This "separatist" opinion does not imply that Californians do not value friendships with members of other

ethnic groups. Indeed, the rising rates of intermarriage in California between whites and Latinos and between whites and Asians belie such a claim. Although respondents expressed considerable doubt about the feasibility of achieving a “color-blind society,” the data do not contradict public acceptance of diversity in the workplace, in higher education, or in public life generally.

Ethnic Contexts and Their Effects

The authors found that multi-ethnic neighborhoods are not the primary locus of ethnic divisions in state politics. Previous studies have argued for the so-called “threat hypothesis,” which predicts that racial tensions will be highest where different groups interact the most. In general, however, the data indicate that perceptions and attitudes varied little by ethnic context. Indeed, where differences existed between whites and nonwhites, they often were in the direction of *greater* tolerance and agreement between whites and nonwhites in mixed areas than in homogenous ones.

Another major finding is that attitudes on racial and ethnic issues do not seem to be formed at the local level. The few observed neighborhood variations are better explained by differences in individual characteristics than by neighborhood influences. This pattern indicates that racial attitudes are largely acquired through experiences that cut

across localities. To use the example of Proposition 209, voting intentions were not related to what residents perceived in their local areas but to their general political orientations and what they learned from the respective pro- and anti-209 campaigns. This result suggests that mass media, for example, may be more important than local contexts in forming racial and ethnic attitudes.

The final major finding concerned the relatively negative feelings many Californians have about illegal immigrants. Respondents from all four ethnic groups had distinctively more positive views about legal immigrants than illegal ones. For this reason, the authors recommend that policymakers distinguish between legal and illegal immigrants in assessing programs that affect such groups.

Conclusion

The authors found no evidence that ethnic group relations are particularly troubled in highly diverse areas or that these areas will serve as cauldrons for future problems. Instead, racial attitudes seem to be influenced more by political and social background than by local context. The authors also found that resistance to ethnic diversity is not more likely among those who live in multi-ethnic neighborhoods. For these reasons, the authors conclude that ethnic tensions are not preordained to increase as Californians continue to adjust to the state’s shifting ethnic landscape.

This research brief summarizes a report by Bruce Cain, Jack Citrin, and Cara Wong, Ethnic Context, Race Relations, and California Politics (2000, 102 pp., \$12.00, ISBN: 1-58213-051-5). The report may be ordered by phone at (800) 232-5343 [mainland U.S.] or (415) 291-4415 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas]. A copy of the full text is also available on the Internet (www.ppic.org). The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California. This project was supported by PPIC through an Extramural Research Program contract.
