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Authors

Shelley, Fred M.
Jablonsky, Thomas J.
Harris, Betty J.

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by

Fred M. Shelley,
Thomas J. Jablonsky and
Betty J. Harris

PLACE, POLITICS AND ETHNICITY
IN THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CITY

FRED M. SHELLEY
University of Southern California

THOMAS J. JABLONSKY
University of Southern California

BETTY J. HARRIS
University of Oklahoma

INTRODUCTION

Throughout American history, ethnicity has been an important component of the social and political geography of American cities. Concentrated ethnic settlement eased and facilitated the adjustment of immigrants and native-born migrants to urban life, while enabling the maintenance of cultural ties with compatriots. In many cases, concentrated ethnic settlement also provided a buffer against prejudice and discrimination, and political activity provided a means to overcome discrimination while helping to secure better lives for themselves, their relatives, and their fellow ethnic group members. Meanwhile, urban political leaders observed and coveted the large blocs of votes found in the cohesive ethnic neighborhoods of their cities. Hence ethnicity has long been a major influence in the political history of many American cities.

During the past two decades, fundamental changes have occurred in the ethnic composition of many American cities. The liberalization of immigration laws in the 1960s resulted in a substantial influx of Latin American and Asian immigrants. Meanwhile, Whites continue to desert central cities for suburban residences while Blacks remain concentrated in urban centers. The result has been an increasing demographic domination of central cities by non-Whites. Concomitantly, the Civil Rights Movement resulted in significant changes in Federal law intended to expedite the integration of minorities into American society. Such programs include the Voting Rights Act, affirmative action law, and school desegregation efforts. The increasing concentration of non-White ethnic groups in American cities in conjunction with these fundamental changes in Federal policy concerning local government has added a new dimension to the role of ethnicity in the politics of American urban centers.

Increasing concentrations of non-Whites in central cities has resulted in major political successes among Blacks, Hispanics, Asians and many other ethnic groups. The initial election of Black mayors in Los Angeles, Chicago, Atlanta, Detroit, Philadelphia and Baltimore among other major cities generated nationwide publicity, as did the initial election of Hispanic mayors in San Antonio and Denver. In most cases, non-White mayors were first elected only following bitter, divisive and racially polarized campaigns (O'Loughlin and Berg 1977; O'Loughlin 1980). In other cities, electoral procedures used to elect local government officials have been challenged in the courts on the grounds that they perpetuate ethnic and racial discrimination. For example, it is well established that at-large election procedures have hindered the electoral success of minority group members (Berry and Dye 1978).

Local government deals with the articulation and resolution of conflicts over immediate and tangible rewards and costs. Funds for education, health care, police and fire protection, transportation and other public services are limited, and competition for influence over the disbursement of these

funds is often intense. Competition is heightened by the fact that decisions benefiting certain communities or neighborhoods can often be implemented only at the expense of other areas (Wolpert, Mumphrey and Seley 1972; Wolpert 1976). For example, a proposal to construct a new freeway may be beneficial to outlying communities but result in the large-scale destruction of inner-city neighborhoods along its route.

The nature of local politics in the United States thus encourages intense competition between places for access to governmental resources. Moreover, American ethnic communities tend to be clustered in space, and this clustering has often resulted from past or present governmental actions which restrict the mobility options available to ethnic group members. The spatial concentration of American ethnic groups within a place-oriented political system has magnified the importance of ethnicity in urban politics in the United States, and the fundamental role of ethnicity in urban politics has evolved in accordance with major changes in society.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the impacts of ethnicity in the politics of the contemporary American city. The importance of ethnicity is seen as derivative of the structure of local politics in the United States and the processes which have resulted in the establishment and maintenance of ethnic identities and communities in American cities. As such, the paper is intended to provide a context for the remaining papers in this session which focus on the recent political behavior of specific ethnic groups in particular cities.

ETHNICITY, CONFLICT AND URBAN POLITICS

The Tenth Amendment to the United States Constitution reserves all powers not specifically mentioned in the Constitution to the States. Each State can and does authorize the formation of local governments including municipalities, counties and special districts. However, the State reserves the right to expand, circumscribe or eliminate local government powers as it sees fit, subject only to due process of law. Despite the American tradition of local autonomy in municipal government, the degree to which actual local governments possess real autonomy is problematic and illusory (Clark 1985).

Although local autonomy in the United States is severely circumscribed, individual Americans turn to local government for satisfaction of immediate demands. Housing, education, transportation, health care, crime prevention and other public services are administered on a day-to-day basis by local governments, and routine citizen grievances regarding the provision of these services are handled by local officials. In other words, day-to-day interaction between citizens and organized government -- what Taylor (1985) has identified as the "scale of experience" -- occurs at a local level, and the individual citizen expects and demands a significant voice in the provision and administration of these services.

Ethnic identity is an important form of self-reference to many Americans. Moreover, ethnicity is often associated with territory. Throughout the history of the United States, American cities have been characterized by sharply defined ethnic communities, in which minority groups have settled for the sake of security and employment opportunities. Many cities including New York, Chicago and Los Angeles have institutionalized the separation of ethnic communities by identifying, mapping and marking their boundaries. The visitor to any such community will immediately recognize appropriate cultural symbols, often associated

with signs in the native language. Identification of the ethnic heritage of the neighborhood is easy, and many ethnic neighborhoods -- South Boston, Harlem, Hamtramck, Over-the-Rhine, East Los Angeles, and Calle del Ocho to name a few -- are household words. Thus, the typical description of America as a giant "melting pot" may not be accurate at all: perhaps more realistic is an analogy with a "salad bowl" in which each ingredient retains its individual and distinctive characteristics yet contributes to the overall flavor and composition of the whole.

For many migrants to large urban areas, residence in an ethnic community facilitates adjustment to a new, challenging and often confusing urban environment. In many cases, the ethnic migrant could find friends, relatives and other persons who spoke his or her native language and shared a common culture, language and customs. Schools, churches, and benevolent associations and lodges aid the maintenance of cultural ties as do shops, restaurants, taverns and other businesses owned and operated by ethnic group members. Newspapers and other periodicals, often published in the language of the community, are also important in the effort to establish and maintain a sense of place in the neighborhood (Jablonsky 1986).

Frequently, the sense of place typical of an urban ethnic community was heightened by discrimination and prejudice. Throughout American history, ethnic groups have been singled out for discrimination in employment and economic advancement, from the posting of "No Irish Need Apply" signs in Boston factories in the 1840s to "Jewish quotas" in many universities in the 1920s to prejudice against Blacks, Hispanics and Asians characteristic of many American cities today. Discrimination in employment was often associated with discrimination in housing and education. Until the 1940s, for example, racially restrictive covenants allowed developers and realtors to refuse to allow members of ethnic groups to live in certain areas of cities, while segregation of schools was universal in the South until the Supreme Court outlawed school segregation in Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954.

In many cases, political activity represented a means by which ethnic community members could escape discrimination and at the same time work to achieve benefits for their relatives, friends and neighborhoods. Ambitious young ethnic Americans, victimized by overt discrimination in their efforts to enter business and the professions, often turned to politics and government service as a means of advancement. In turn, the activities of successful ethnic politicians resulted in an influx of governmental resources, including public services, city jobs and contracts into their neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the ethnic neighborhoods were recognized by city political leaders as rich sources of votes in elections. Hence ethnic political leaders were courted by party officials anxious to ensure delivery of large voting blocs at election time.

The role of ethnicity in urban politics is enhanced by the fact that political culture of many large American cities is conducive to ethnic competition in the political arena. Political culture refers to local attitudes about the nature and function of politics and government in society. Three main political cultures -- moralistic, individualistic and traditionalistic -- are recognized in the United States, and each is associated with a specific area of origin in Colonial times (Elazar 1984). Moralistic political culture, associated with rural New England, sees the purpose of politics to promote the common good, while traditionalistic political culture, which originated in the plantation-oriented South, views politics as a means of preserving the pre-industrial social order. Individualistic political culture originated in the Middle Atlantic colonies, which even during Colonial times were recognized for ethnic,

cultural, religious and economic heterogeneity and diversity. Now characteristic of most large cities, individualistic political culture views politics as a means by which participants compete to achieve benefits and tangible rewards associated with political activity. Individuals, communities and ethnic groups become active in politics in order to achieve specific personal and group benefits. Thus, politics is an intensely partisan and competitive activity.

Individualistic political culture is consistent with political conflict among individual immigrant groups as well as between ethnic American and the Anglo-American elite dominant in most cities. The political history of many cities has been characterized by often bitter struggles between ethnic groups to achieve political power. Ethnicity has played a key role in the development and maintenance of urban political machines. The ward-boss system characteristic of many urban areas arose in conjunction with the role of ethnicity in American urban politics. The typical ward boss served as a liaison between the community and the local government (Gosnell 1937). The ward boss could provide government jobs and contracts for constituents, could help the needy and disadvantaged, and could help local residents deal with red tape and bureaucracy. In return, the boss was expected to turn out the vote for machine-backed candidates for local, state and national offices on election day.

RECENT CHANGES IN THE ROLE OF ETHNICITY IN AMERICAN URBAN POLITICS

During the past two decades, the ethnic politics of many American cities has changed dramatically. Two primary reasons underlie this fundamental change. First, the ethnic composition of many cities is changing rapidly. The power of the urban political machines based upon coalitions of European ethnic minorities has diminished as city populations have declined, suburbs have grown, and second- and third-generation ethnic Americans have become increasingly assimilated into Anglo-American culture. The increasing dominance of central city areas by ethnic Americans of non-European origin has also served to restructure the politics of many cities. A second reason for change in American ethnic politics considers the increased involvement of the Federal government in urban policy. This increased role has two main components -- a large-scale increase in Federal funding for public service provision, and the impact of Federal court decisions on urban policy. All of these considerations have resulted in a substantial shift in the character of ethnic political conflicts in American cities today.

Prior to the New Deal, the Federal role in the provision of urban public services was extremely limited. Public services were provided with revenues raised primarily through local taxing efforts. In education, for example, the lion's share of revenue for educational expenditures was raised through local taxes, although the state's contribution to local educational funding increased steadily during and after the Great Depression in response to recognition of large-scale fiscal disparities between poor and wealthy school districts (Reynolds and Shelley 1988). The New Deal initiated a more active role for the Federal government in local government. Especially during the 1960s, more and more programs providing Federal funds for local public service provision were initiated and implemented. The National Defense Education Act, enacted in response to competition with the Soviets in space exploration in order to improve education in science and mathematics, and the National Defense Highway Program which provided funds for the construction of the Interstate Highway System were early examples.

Increased federal funding for local projects resulted in substantial increases in the availability of monies for public services and facilities. This, in conjunction with the changing social and demographic character of the city, resulted in a substantial intensification of conflict between neighborhoods over the disbursement of these funds and the location of these facilities. Projects and policies which benefited certain neighborhoods were prone to impose significant costs on other areas. Frequently, the identification of particular territories with certain ethnic groups resulted in the articulation of such conflicts in ethnic terms. Refusal to locate facilities in minority neighborhoods, for example, was often interpreted in terms of racial prejudice.

The federal impact on local politics, however, has gone far beyond the mere disbursement of public funds. Indeed, the allocation of Federal fiscal resources is accompanied by requirements that the local administration of federally funded programs be undertaken in a manner consistent with federal law. And, federal requirements concerning urban policy have intensified in light of changes resulting from the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. Several significant changes have impacted ethnic politics: the reform of immigration law; the implementation of anti-discrimination requirements in education and other federal programs; the development of affirmative action law; and the Voting Rights Act. The result of these changes in Federal law and policy has been a fundamental reorientation of ethnic political conflict in major American cities.

As previously indicated, American immigration law underwent substantial reform in the 1960s. In the nineteenth century, immigration into the United States was unrestricted. It was at this time that large numbers of immigrants from Europe had moved into the United States and established their ethnic communities, particularly in Eastern and Midwestern industrial cities. Following World War I, the United States began to take measures to close its borders. The Asiatic Barred Zone policy, adopted in 1917, banned the immigration of persons from southern and eastern Asia, including China, Japan and India. In 1924, a policy establishing national quotas for each country of origin was established. The quotas were based on the 1890 census, so that those countries which had sent the most immigrants to the United States prior to 1890 were given the largest quotas. The result of this law was to restrict immigration from southern and eastern Europe as well as non-European parts of the world.

In 1965, a large-scale liberalization of immigration law was enacted. The new law removed the old quota system and replaced it with hemispheric quotas which did not take national origin into account. In addition, provisions in the new law allowed unrestricted immigration on the part of political refugees. This provision enabled the immigration of thousands of Vietnamese, Haitians, Hmongs and Cubans among others into the United States. The result of these reforms was a massive upsurge in immigration into the United States from non-European origins. By 1980, over 80% of immigrants into the United States came from Asia or Latin America. The main destination areas changed in addition. Although many of the larger industrial cities of the East and Midwest, including New York and Chicago, remained attractive to these "new" immigrants, other cities such as Los Angeles, Washington and Miami -- cities not previously known for large-scale ethnic settlement -- drew large numbers of non-European migrants. By the late 1980s, non-Hispanic Anglo-Americans had become a distinct minority in both Miami and Los Angeles.

The result of the "new immigration" along with the continuing tendency for non-immigrant Caucasians to leave the central city has resulted in an interesting new ethnic mix in many cities. Black Americans began to leave

the rural South for industrial cities in the North during and after World War I. Although America's Black population at the turn of the century was overwhelmingly rural, by the 1970s, American Blacks were more highly urbanized than the population as a whole. More and more cities now contain majority Black populations: Atlanta, Baltimore, Detroit, Newark and Washington, D. C. for example. Those cities which have received large flows of Latin American and Asian migrants have particularly interesting social geographies, and these demographic changes have had substantial effects on local politics. Miami, for example, is evenly and bitterly divided between White, Black, Puerto Rican and Cuban Americans, with sharply contrasting political views (Webster 1978). In Chicago, meanwhile, the Hispanic voting bloc on the City Council has been wooed by both Black and White aldermen as these larger factions struggle for control of the city's government.

The reformed immigration laws were concomitant with a number of other Federal policy initiatives and court decisions which influenced urban politics and ethnic conflicts. During the 1950s and 1960s, a series of Supreme Court decisions outlawed racial segregation in public facilities, and these decisions were buttressed by the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The most important of these decisions was Brown vs. Board of Education, which outlawed segregation in public schools. Following Brown, many cities underwent lengthy periods of litigation involving allegations of discrimination and segregation in their schools. In particular, litigation revolved around the extent to which cities had previously been responsible for perpetuating segregation, and consequently the extent to which they were responsible for implementing policies such as busing programs in order to eliminate vestiges of segregation. Busing programs were highly controversial and became major political issues in Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles and many other cities, as White parents objected strenuously to mandatory busing programs.

Similar decisions and laws involved racial segregation in other spheres including housing, employment, transportation and health care. At the same time, new laws implementing affirmative action programs were enacted and implemented. Affirmative action programs had profound implications for urban service provision. For example, they mandated quotas for minority employment in city government for teachers, police officers, firefighters and other occupations. In addition, considerable controversy was generated when some cities implemented policies requiring quotas for minority contractors working on city-funded projects. Minority hiring and contracting issues also generated considerable political controversy and litigation.

The Voting Rights Act was one of the most significant impacts of the Civil Rights movement. This law guaranteed Federal enforcement of the voting rights of minority citizens. The Voting Rights Act was applied to urban ethnic politics in conjunction with a series of reapportionment decisions handed down by the Supreme Court in the 1960s. The combined impact of these decisions redefined the political arena within which ethnic conflict took place. In 1962, the Supreme Court ruled in Baker v. Carr that the malapportionment and gerrymandering of Congressional districts violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and was thus unconstitutional. Later cases including, Reynolds v. Sims and Avery v. Board of Supervisors of Midland County, extended this principle to state and local government.

In combination, the Voting Rights Act and the reapportionment decisions resulted in a long series of court challenges to procedures used to elect municipal officials in racially diverse urban areas. Litigation was particularly intense in southern cities characterized by substantial Black

minority populations, but in other parts of the country Hispanics, Native Americans, Asians and others also sued to overturn existing electoral procedures on the grounds of ethnic discrimination. Three particular allegations surfaced in this litigation. At-large electoral systems were challenged in many cities (O'Loughlin and Taylor 1982). In other cities, gerrymandering against minorities was alleged. In a few others, liberal annexation procedures were seen as discriminatory, especially in instances in which White-dominated areas were annexed whereas minority neighborhoods were not. All of these practices were challenged in the court system, with varying degrees of success.

CONCLUSION

Ethnicity has been a fundamental influence on American urban politics since the middle of the nineteenth century. In recent years, substantial changes in the demographics and migration patterns of American ethnic groups have influenced the politics of many cities, resulting in the increased political success of non-White ethnic politicians as well as new patterns of conflict among ethnic groups in different and changing urban neighborhoods. Fundamental changes in the role of ethnicity in urban politics have also been triggered by recent adjustments in the relationships between federal, state and local governments regarding the provision of urban services and the management of locational conflicts. In future years, continued evolution of the locational and demographic dynamics of American ethnic groups can be expected to have profound implications for politics and government at local, state and national levels of analysis.

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