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Author

Wong, Janelle

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Racial and Ethnic Politics in California: Continuity and Change, Sandra Bass and Bruce E. Cain, eds., 2008

*Review of Racial and Ethnic Politics
in California*

Janelle Wong
University of Southern California

I read the first volume of *Racial and Ethnic Politics in California* as an undergraduate at UCLA 15 years ago. That volume still sits on my shelf. It is a reminder of the kind of research on ethnic and racial politics that compelled me to pursue a path in the field.

The third volume of *Racial and Ethnic Politics in California*, edited by Sandra Bass and Bruce Cain, was just released from Berkeley Public Policy Press. The subtitle of the book, *Continuity and Change*, aptly describes both California politics and the latest volume in the *Racial and Ethnic Politics in California* series. Like the first volume, the third offers a clear story about the ways in which racial and ethnic diversity drive contemporary politics in the Golden State. Two essays stand out in this regard. First, geographer Ali Modarres presents a succinct overview of demographic trends in California. He suggests that immigration, especially from Asia, is a driving force behind increased racial integration in the state. Nonetheless, racial segregation remains a stubborn fact of life for almost half of all residents in California. Modarres is right to point out that if California stakeholders passively allow segregation to prevail, rather than actively working toward a residentially integrated California, entrenched political conflict and inequality will be the state's destiny.

Ricardo Ramirez and Luis Fraga present an outstanding analysis of Latino political incorporation. The phenomenal growth of Latino communities in the state is arguably the most important demographic trend affecting politics in contemporary California. They point out that this growth is a product of births in the state, not immigration. Over the course of the next two presidential election cycles, Latinos will become the majority ethnic and racial group in the state. And although voter turnout lags substantially behind population share, Ramirez and Fraga observe that Latinos account for the vast majority of those newly registered to vote since 1990. They ask what this growth means for California politics, particularly in terms of shifts in political influence, representational equality, and policy outcomes. The answers to these questions are not only important to scholars of Latino politics, but central to our understanding of the future of California politics as well.

The third volume also reflects the increased political complexity that has accompanied growing racial and ethnic diversity in the state. While the first volume focused on emergent Asian and Latino communities and potential areas of empowerment, the third volume concentrates more on established patterns of interaction, participation, and leadership. This is an appropriate change in focus. These topics require more sophisticated theoretical and methodological tools. Thus, Melina Abdullah and Regina Freer bring to bear the concept of “womanist leadership praxis”

to better understand black political leadership in California. The concept embraces intersectional identity theory, which assumes that race, gender, class, and other positionalities operate simultaneously and in relation to one another. The concept also emphasizes a social movement-driven leadership style. This conceptualization allows the authors to move beyond standard accounts of “political incorporation” in their assessment of black political achievement.

Wendy Tam Cho tackles unwieldy Federal Election Campaign data to conduct a rigorous analysis of Asian Americans’ campaign contribution patterns. Her study represents “second wave” research on racial and ethnic politics. It moves beyond descriptive analysis of political participation and representation to more specialized studies of specific types of political behavior within and across groups. Cho shows that Asian Americans do not contribute as much or as widely as earlier studies claim, nor do they give in ways consistent with theories of rational behavior. In fact, Asian Americans tend to contribute to candidates outside their own districts and to low-profile candidates who are not likely to win. Cho challenges earlier assumptions about Asian American campaign donors and strategic political decision-making more generally.

The third volume of *Racial and Ethnic Politics in California* includes strong essays on coalition building. Some of the contributors highlight factors other than race and ethnicity as the basis for political coalition-building. For

example, Manuel Pastor argues that region may soon be the most important basis for political mobilization in his essay, "Elections, Economics, and Coalitional Politics: Investigating California's Future(s)." Kenneth Burt offers a fresh take on coalition-building between racial and ethnic minorities and the labor movement in his excellent contribution.

Two essays that depart from traditional studies of racial and ethnic politics in California include Kim Geron's analysis of racial and ethnic politics in the Central Valley and Central Coast regions and Elsa Chen's study of felony sentencing. Geron's study is very much in the tradition of Browning, Marshall, and Tabb's *Racial Politics in American Cities*. It traces the political incorporation of racial and ethnic minorities in places like Stockton, in San Joaquin County, and Orange Cove, in Fresno County. It serves as an important reminder that studies of Los Angeles and San Francisco do not tell the whole story of racial and ethnic politics in California. Chen's research on racial and ethnic disparities in California felony sentencing provides a new window from which to view racial and ethnic inequality in the state, even in the face of growing political representation for many of the state's previously disenfranchised minority residents.

A few gaps remain in terms of the groups and topics covered in the volume. A discussion of the contested meanings and definitions of "race" and "ethnicity" would

be useful in the introduction. The role that some of the fastest growing groups in the state, such as South Asians and Filipinos, will likely play in shaping the political landscape is not addressed. In addition, with a few exceptions, the potential challenges that accompany differences in national origin, class, and generation *within* various racial groups are given short shrift. Additional attention to religion, transnationalism, and multiracial identity would be welcome. A few typos and errors distract the reader a bit. Finally, there could be more and stronger links between the essays to avoid repetition or slightly conflicting information.

That said, the latest volume in the *Racial and Ethnic Politics in California* series is a valuable resource in the field, particularly for undergraduate courses on California politics or on race, ethnicity and politics. The essays will no doubt spark the interest and passions of young scholars today just as those in the first volume propelled my own engagement with the field.