

Latinos, Asians Figure Prominently In California's New Electoral Landscape

By Susan Pinkus

With a new century rapidly approaching, a new, strikingly different electoral landscape is emerging in California. The ongoing changes in the ethnic and racial populations in California are affecting the way politics and campaign strategies are carried out in the Golden State. The 1998 general election saw only the beginning of a transformation in voter coalitions, and demonstrated the impact of steadily growing ethnic and racial groups on turnout and outcome.

California is one of the nation's most multi-cultural states. Candidates who run in statewide elections are often frustrated in their efforts to design strategies that address each ethnic and racial group without alienating any of them.

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Whites comprise roughly 56% of the voting age population in California, according to estimates from the state's finance department. Further, finance department projections indicate that by 2010, whites' share of the voting age population will have shrunk to 50% and by 2030 to 41%. Latinos, however, currently account for roughly a quarter of voting age Californians, and their share of the VAP is expected to grow to 32% by 2010 and 41%—the same as whites—by 2030. This significant increase will have a major impact on California's political process, especially as Latinos become more politically active, mobilized, and energized to vote.

Whites have voted in disproportionately higher numbers than other ethnic and racial groups, but current trends show that situation is changing. In a November 1978 *Los Angeles Times* exit poll, 75% of the electorate was white. In the November 1998 exit poll, 64% of the electorate was white, while the number of black, Latino, and Asian American voters increased. That share remained small—only 13% Latino (up 5 points from 1994), 13% black (up 8 points from '94), and 8% Asian American (up 4 points from '94). Even so, as whites lose more of their “advantage” in terms of VAP and differential turnout, these ethnic groups will become more important in the political process. This is especially true of Latinos and Asian Americans. While black voters have been extremely loyal to the Democratic party, and neither party thinks that will change,

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The Legacy of Proposition 187

Part of the Proposition 187 legacy, the 1994 anti-immigration initiative, has been an increase in citizenship among California's immigrants. With citizenship comes the right to vote. What does the growing number of Latino voters mean for the state and for the politicians trying to figure out how to run in a diverse cultural arena?

According to Rudy de la Garza, vice president of the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute and professor of government at the University of Texas, there is a new phenomenon in Latino voting. “Before the 1975 Voting Rights Act, white candidates needed Latino voters because they were spread across state Assembly districts. However, after 1975, white candidates did not need Latino votes to win because districts that were majority-minority were created, thus concentrating most Latinos into several districts, but guaranteeing a few Latino legislators. And because of this redistricting, Democrats lost seats in the state Assembly.” [An overwhelming majority of Latinos were and still are Democrats, but by concentrating the influence of their vote, Democrats were at a disadvantage.]

“But times have changed,” he continues. “Latinos are spilling out of those predominantly Latino districts and living in white districts. They are once again helping whites win in their districts.”

Latino candidates are coming increasingly into their own, which will likely spur more turnout in their communities. Additionally, Latino candidates are running in traditionally white districts. In 1998, Cruz Bustamante became the first Latino elected to statewide office in California since 1871, when Romualdo Pacheco became lieutenant governor. There was also a Latino nominee, Republican Rueben Barrales, in the race for the state's controller. And in the US House, Loretta Sanchez was re-elected in the 46th district.

Most Latinos Are Political Moderates

An increased number of Latino candidates and involvement by Latino voters has been accompanied by a greater Latino representation among officeholders. The 1998 election saw Latinos increase their numbers in the state legislature from 18 to 24. Some of the winners were Democrat Deborah Ortiz, who was elected over Republican Chris Quackenbush for the

state's 6th senate seat, and Democrat Antonio Villaraigosa from Los Angeles, who was re-elected and serves as Assembly speaker. Also, Lee Baca was elected sheriff of Los Angeles County while Ron Gonzalez became the first Latino mayor of San Jose by forming a coalition of white and Latino voters.

The new Latino politicians are trying to steer their caucuses and their parties toward the political center. In doing so, they reflect their constituency. In the *Times*' exit poll, 24% of Latinos considered themselves politically liberal and 28% politically conservative. A full 48% said they were moderates.

"The Democratic Latino caucus has a more moderate to conservative, private-sector approach to government," says freshman Assemblyman Dean Forez. "I want to make sure that the Latino caucus will stay in the middle."

Recent Republican Gains Among Latino Voters

Although Latinos in California have overwhelmingly registered as Democrats for many years, going back to Cesar Chavez who fought for the rights of migrant workers, their partisanship should not be taken for granted. De la Garza wonders, "As the Latino vote expands, will they remain Democrats?" Three of the new Assembly seats won by Latinos went to Republicans. GOP Assemblyman Rod Pacheco won the open primary in the 60th Assembly district by forming a new coalition of conservative Republicans and moderate Latinos. By campaigning on conservative issues and issues important to Latinos, he won the Republican primary and then the general election. Subsequently he was elected the Assembly minority leader by the Republican caucus.

The election of Pacheco by the state GOP legislative leadership was a calculated move by the Republicans to demonstrate that all are welcome to their party. As Gregory Rodriguez, an associate editor at Pacific News Service and research fellow at the Pepperdine Institute for Public Policy, wrote in a *Times* column, "While a much smaller presence on the other side of the aisle, the new Republican Latino caucus will... counterbalance GOP extremism." In the same article, Pacheco contended that his "mere presence served to remind his Anglo colleagues of the need to take into account minority opinions before jumping headlong into potentially racially charged issues."

According to De la Garza, "It is a mistake to assume Latinos are conservative on social issues. They are conservative but not as conservative as core Republicans. They are not conservative on cultural issues, and that is why Latinos are more Democratic than Republican." Latinos are liberal on welfare and do not want to deny immigrants benefits; they are pro-immigrant, although they don't necessarily advocate allowing more immigrants into the state. They prefer traditional family values, but their divorce rate is high.

Harry Pachon, president of the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, adds, "There's a disconnect between Latinos' voting and their religion" because most Latino politicians favor abortion rights. Also, they support banning assault weapons and Saturday night specials. To win over Latinos, Republicans will have to change the way they present themselves on such issues. They are clearly out of step with how the majority of the public, including many Latinos, thinks on these issues.

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Overcoming an Anti-Latino Reputation

One important realization the GOP has come to is that they must get away from Governor Pete Wilson and a Republican party that is perceived as anti-immigrant and anti-Latino. Since 1994 when he supported and campaigned for Proposition 187, Governor Wilson has also backed Proposition 227 (to end bilingual education in the public schools) and Proposition 209 (to end affirmative action). Invoking the name "Governor Wilson" in any campaign ad and linking a Republican candidate to the governor were good strategies for Democrats. They used Wilson's face in ads on Spanish TV that vilified him, and bumper stickers that said, "Adios, Pete Wilson" were hugely popular.

Wilson evokes such anger among Latino immigrants and some Asian Americans that most Republicans shied away from asking for his help in campaigning. It will take several election cycles for the Republican party in California to overcome the backlash generated within the Latino community by Wilson's ties to anti-immigrant initiatives.

To illustrate the decline in Latino support for Republicans in statewide elections, consider that in 1990, Wilson, then the Republican challenger for governor, garnered 35% of the Latino vote compared to 59% for Democratic challenger Dianne Feinstein. But with Wilson's anti-immigrant rhetoric starting in 1994, he only mustered 23% of the Latino vote in his re-election bid, while challenger Kathleen Brown received 72% of their vote.

Partly because of the Wilson legacy, Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole received a mere 18% of the Latino vote in 1996 compared to 75% for Bill Clinton. And in this election cycle, Republican nominee Dan Lungren received

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only 23% of the Latino vote, compared to 71% for the Democratic challenger Gray Davis.

Asian Americans Have Little Party Loyalty

Since the 1994 election, Asian Americans have doubled their share of the electorate. According to Don Nakanishi, director of the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA, “Asian American participation is up partially because of the campaign finance scandal in 1996. It did not turn off voting. In fact, it had the opposite effect. Asians became more interested and committed to vote and were encouraged to run for office.”

Nakanishi also notes there has been more of a concerted effort this election cycle to get out the vote by Asian American organizations. An organization named CAUSE (Chinese Americans United for Self Empowerment) has begun leadership and candidate training classes to prepare young Asian Americans to run for office. Although the black community and women’s groups have been doing this kind of training for years, this marks the first time it has ever been done in Asian American communities.

Currently, Asian Americans are a less monolithic group when registering to vote than Latinos. In the *Times* exit poll, two-thirds of Latinos were registered as Democrats, 21% as Republicans, and 8% as decline-to-state. (Latino party registration has not changed in the 20 years the *Times* has been doing exit polls in California.) Among Asian Americans, 45% are Democrats, 37% are Republicans, and 17% are registered as decline-to-state.

This group voted overwhelmingly for Democratic gubernatorial candidate Gray Davis (65%), with only 35% of their vote going to Republican nominee Dan Lungren. In the US Senate race, however, the Republican candidate was Matthew Fong, the first Chinese American to run for US Senate in California. Chinese American voters overwhelmingly went for Fong, who beat Democrat Barbara Boxer by three points among all Asian American voters (51 to 48%).

“Asian Americans don’t vote straight party line,” says Stewart Kwoh, executive director of the Asian Pacific-American Legal Center. “Their vote depends on candidates and issues, not party affiliation.” Kwoh believes that “the parties cannot take Asian Americans for granted. They have weak party loyalty. Most of the voters are new immigrants who have no emotional ties or political stakes in either major party.”

According to Kwoh, “Asian Americans supported Gray Davis because he has proven that he is a friend of Asian Americans going back to the days when Jerry Brown was governor. Lungren, on the other hand, while in Congress vehemently opposed redress for Japanese Americans, and it would have been extremely unlikely for Japanese Americans to vote for the Republican candidate.”

Don Nakanishi believes that California’s Republican party must do some deep soul-searching if it hopes to attract the Asian American vote in future state elections, a view similarly held by Latino leaders regarding their own growing voting community. In the wake of modest but important GOP gains among these voters in 1998, California Democrats might also do well to heed a word to the wise in the new millennium as California continues to reveal its new electoral face.

D’Amato Comes Up Short (and Other Interesting Tales From New York)

By Lee M. Miringoff

This year’s New York Senate race pitting GOP three-term Alfonso D’Amato against Democratic challenger Charles Schumer was one of the most closely watched contests in the nation. Public pollsters tracking the candidates’ fortunes and misfortunes were also under close scrutiny.

New York was not immune from the 1998 national political discourse, which tested the legitimacy of public polls. How could President Clinton be surviving with a high approval rating as consistently measured in the public polls? What is it about those polls and pollsters? Typical questions about

sampling (how can so few respondents be representative?), respondent selection (why has no one I know ever been interviewed?), and new queries about refusal rates crept into the popular media.

Schumer Reads From His Own Script

The cloud hanging over the interpretation of the Empire State battleground was that Senator D’Amato had a reputation for pulling close races out of the fire in the closing days. The expectation was that he might do it again. The reality was that