

Race, Immigration, and Political Independents in America

A Book Prospectus

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Précis

This book is centrally motivated by puzzles and paradoxes that emerge from bringing together two salient trends in contemporary American life, one familiar to students of racial and ethnic politics and the other familiar to students of parties and elections. The first trend is the remarkable transformation in the U.S. racial and ethnic landscape since the civil rights era. We are currently witness to a “Fourth Wave” of immigration on a scale unseen since the early twentieth century and unique in its composition of new Americans. As late as 1970, only one out of every four immigrants to the U.S. claimed an Asian or Latin American home country; by 2000, this proportion jumped to almost three out of every four. Sometime this century, white Americans will no longer comprise a majority of the nation’s adult population. Such changes have propelled scholars and pundits to prophesize Panglossian hopes for multicultural democracy and Manichean fears of “race wars.” A central point of contention in this debate is whether the experiences of these new groups will more closely resemble that of black Americans or that of earlier waves of immigrants from Europe.

The second trend is the large numbers of Americans over the last half-century who have moved away from identifying with either the Democratic or Republican parties. Since the late 1950s, the proportion of Americans who identify as a political Independent has roughly doubled, with nearly 40 percent of respondents in the 2000 National Election Study labeling themselves Independents. It is no surprise, then, that come election season in America today, Independents and undecided voters find themselves drenched under a downpour of attention. Beyond the short-term issue of how these Independents will vote is the longer-term debate of whether the rise of Independents reflects a decline in the power and prominence of parties in America. A central point of contention in this debate is whether self-identification as an Independent is politically meaningful vis-à-vis a person’s vote choice and general political orientation.

There is no shortage of good scholarship on these two trends, but much of it is limited in important ways. Studies of the politics of new immigrant-based groups generally share two limiting assumptions: first, that the demographic categorization of individuals into pan-ethnic implies a corresponding mobilization of a politicized “Latino” and “Asian American” identity; second, that the concepts and theories used to explain black-white relations are appropriate to explaining race relations in a multi-racial, multi-ethnic context. Studies of party identification generally share three limiting assumptions: first, that partisanship is a linear, uni-dimensional choice between identifying as a strong Democrat and a strong Republican (with Independents at the midpoint by virtue of their indecision, apathy, or ideological moderation); second, that political ideology too is a uni-dimensional choice on a liberal-to-conservative continuum that anchors one’s party identification; third, that race and ethnic differences in party identification are either inconsequential or reducible to the exceptional case of black Democratic partisanship.

The thesis of this book is that these limitations can be addressed by profiting from what we know about racial formation and immigrant assimilation and, from doing so, explaining “Independents” as a political identity at the intersection of our racial, ideological, and partisan identities. First, while partisan choice is often considered unmediated by group dynamics and social identities, we argue that one’s partisanship and race/ethnicity are group identities that interact and intersect in important ways. The most obvious case here is the intimate linkage of strong racial identity as African Americans and strong Democratic Party identification. Less obvious is the case where racial conservatism may clash with policy liberalism to incline some whites to identify as Independents.

Second, our ideological beliefs and policy preferences do not always anchor our identification with a political party straightforwardly. Most conventional accounts assume pluralism – that the policy agenda resulting from the two-party system faithfully represents the needs and interests of the polity – and, by corollary, that individuals can place their own political needs and interests comfortably within a liberal-to-conservative ideological continuum. This assumption is likely to run afoul of two kinds of individuals: those individuals with such extreme and intensely-held positions on a single issue that any differences between the parties on that issue are indiscernible, and those individuals within marginalized and newly emerging groups (e.g., racial and ethnic minorities) who are more likely to hold issue preferences for which there is little policy competition between the two parties.

For Latinos, Asians, and other immigrant-based groups, the intersections of ethnicity, ideology, and political identity are formed out a context of acculturation and assimilation into *terra incognita*. Not all individuals share a common base of familiarity or experience with American party politics. Immigrants, in particular, often come from political regimes and cultural contexts that do not fit easily within the Democrat-to-Republican, liberal-to-conservative continua characterizing U.S. politics. The upshots are three central dimensions to immigrants’ social and political acculturation that are likely to define their party identification: the degree of information uncertainty about the U.S. party system, the degree of ideological assimilation (adherence to core tenets of the American ethos, relevance of a liberal-conservative ideological spectrum), and the nature of ethnic identity formation (e.g., Anglo-conforming, symbolic ethnicity, racialized identity, and the like).

These dimensions – information, ideology, and identity – form the micro-foundation of our revised general account of party identification. We employ these dimensions to articulate the racially and ethnically distinct pathways to political Independence. For African Americans, the story is one of the factors that decouple the link between one’s racial group identification and one’s Democratic Party identification. For Asian Americans and Latinos, the story is one of “rational skepticism” in a novel political and social world of uncertainty and low information. For white Americans, the story is one of disaggregating the commonly homogenized racial category of “whites” into three distinct kinds of Independents: those who conform to previous political science models, those members of issue publics who care so intensely about an issue as to reject identification with either party, and those partisan “ambivalents” who identify as Independents as a result of irreducible cross-cutting identities (specifically, between race, religion, and ideology).

This revisionist account is demonstrated using multiple opinion surveys, from the American National Election Studies to more selective data like the Latino National Politics Study, multiple waves of the National Black Election Studies, the National Black Politics Study, the Pilot National Asian American Politics Study, the Multi-city Study of Urban Inequality, and media polls from *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*.

N.B.: see the attached “Chapter Outline and Synopses” for more details.

Audience

This book should appeal to a wide cross-section of audiences. Our principal audience should be political scientists and sociologists who study parties and electoral politics, racial and ethnic politics, political sociology, and immigrant political incorporation. The topic, and our findings on it, should also draw the notice of non-academics. As such, we aim also to make our research accessible to potentially interested political consultants, party activists, policy analysts, and interest group advocates. We further aim to complete the manuscript this summer, in time for potential publication during the 2006 mid-term election campaigns.

Format, Style, and Length

We anticipate a relatively slim volume. Our manuscript – in standard format with double-spacing, TimesRoman 12 point font, 1-inch margins – should approximate 350 pages in length. The empirical body of the book – chapters Three through Five – will include a substantial number of tables and figures (on average, about seven per chapter, tables and figures combined). In terms of style, we plan to write this book to be within the reach of non-scholarly audiences as well as political scientists. We hope to do this with the following steps: animate each chapter with topics of current relevance; use technical details and disciplinary jargon only sparingly within the text; present any tables and figures that appear in the main body clearly and vividly; reserve any necessary methodological discussion and more detailed tables for our appendices.

Timetable

At present we have finished a draft of Chapters One, Two, Three, and Five. We have also completed rough drafts of Chapters Four through Five. More detailed and technical versions of Chapters Three through Five are presently either under review or soon to be submitted for publication in peer-reviewed political science journals. We have also completed a substantial portion of the analysis for our final empirical chapter (Chapter Six) and anticipate completion of this chapter by late 2006. We anticipate completing the introductory and concluding chapters by February 2007. A full manuscript should be available by March 2007.

Chapter Outline and Synopses

Intro: A Tale of Two Trends

We begin with two sets of vignettes: one on the electoral prominence of undecided voters and political Independents and the other on the changing face of racial and ethnic politics in America today. These vignettes are then set in the backdrop of two trends – the rise of public apathy, alienation, and distrust on the one hand and the post-1965 influx of immigrants from Asia and the Americas on the other. We outline how these two trends come together in the rise of political Independents and close with a sketch of the book.

Chapter One. Party Identification: The Historical and Ontological Origins of a Concept

This chapter traces the origins of the study of party identification. We start with the mid-century debate over “responsible” party politics and show how, through the development of the Michigan and Downsian models of partisanship, the study of the “party in the electorate” has come to take a singular form. Today, party identification is defined in almost every instance as a linear scale, measured in opinion surveys, of self-identification from strong Republicans on the far political right to strong Democrats on the far political left and Independents at the midpoint. While there have been ample criticisms of this linear view, they have been largely treated as technical footnotes, rather than concerns at the core of either school of thought on party identification.

Chapter Two. Identity, Ideology, and the Interactive Dimensions of Independents

We reinvigorate the force behind these methodological criticisms by considering political Independents anew, through the lens of racial identity and immigrant assimilation. The chapter begins by tracing the historical evolution of Independents in the study of party identification, with the tension between instrumental (viz. voting behavior) and intrinsic (viz. one’s social identity) conceptions of independence. We theorize Independents as a meaningful and multidimensional identity, one that interacts in important ways with one’s primary social group identities and ideological predispositions. The chapter concludes with our expectations for the distinct pathways to identifying as an Independent for African Americans, whites, and immigrant-based groups like Asians and Latinos.

Chapter Three: Rational Defection, Upward Mobility, and Black Autonomy

We begin our empirical analysis with the case of African American party identification. While black partisanship is distinctive for the predominant role of a racially-defined group calculus, we argue that the link between individual choice, group interests, and the coordination of collective choice in favor of the Democratic Party is neither automatic nor simple. We demonstrate that exit from the Democratic Party occurs under three conditions: when the sense of group identity is attenuated, when commitments to black autonomy are intensified, and when evaluations change as to which party best serves the interests of African Americans.

Chapter Four: Immigration and Identity Formation Under Uncertainty

Unlike the case of African Americans, the partisan choices of immigrant-based groups like Asian Americans and Latinos are mediated by social and political identity formation under uncertainty. For Latinos and Asians, non-partisanship can be a rationally adaptive strategy given minimal effort by either political parties to incorporate these new political actors, low information about

the benefits of political and civic involvement, uncertainty about one's social group attachments, and ambivalence about one's core political predispositions. In addition, we show evidence of important differences between Latinos and Asian Americans, and within these pan-ethnic groups, in their identification with the U.S. party system.

Chapter Five: Ambivalence, Extremism, and White Partisan Flight

A strong test of our alternate account of political Independents is its ability to shed new light on white Americans, the almost exclusive province of previous research. We show evidence for two yet unconsidered routes to Independence for whites: policy extremism (being so far to the right or left as to be at odds with both parties) and partisan ambivalence (holding irreconcilably conflicting views – e.g., racial conservatism and policy liberalism). In both cases, those who are far from the middle ideologically, end up violating the assumptions of a linear model of partisanship by identifying as Independent.

Chapter Six: From Identity to Politics

Much of the focus on political Independents centers on whether identifying as a non-partisan has any bearing on partisan behavior, with the best evidence weighing against the behavioral distinctiveness of Independents. We argue that the paucity of such evidence results less from the irrelevance of Independence as a political alternative and more from the lack of tangible choices in a given election – e.g., elections with a racially/ethnically diverse slate of candidates; elections with third party candidates or referenda that engage salient single issues or extreme ideological viewpoints. By better understanding *why* individuals identify as an Independent, we argue, we can better understand *when* that non-partisan identification will lead to non-partisan behavior.

Chapter Seven: Exit, Voice, and Identity

We review the book, recasting its theoretical contribution and empirical findings vis-à-vis the historical role of political parties in incorporating racial/ethnic minorities and the current debates over ideological polarization, identity politics, and the putative decline of parties. Borrowing from Hirschman's seminal work on duopolies, we reconsider what party responsibility warrants vis-à-vis the rise of political Independents and the emergence of new ethnic groups. In doing so, we examine the troubling normative underpinnings of much political science research on party identification vis-à-vis race and consider the conditions under which the U.S. party system might recapture Independents and lower the barriers of entry for political newcomers to the United States.

Authors' Background Information

Zoltan Hajnal is an assistant professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego and former research fellow at the Public Policy Institute of California. His research interests include minority representation, urban governance, inequality, political participation, and direct democracy. Hajnal is the author of numerous articles in journals such as *The American Political Science Review*, *The Journal of Politics*, *Urban Affairs Review*, and *Social Science Quarterly*. He recently received the American Political Science Association's award for Best Paper on Urban Politics and has forthcoming book titled *Black Leadership, White Response: Why White Americans Vote for Black Incumbents* (Cambridge University Press). He holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago and a B.S. from Yale University.

Taeku Lee is an assistant professor of political science at the University of California at Berkeley. His primary research interests are in racial and ethnic politics, public opinion and survey research methods, social movements and political behavior. Lee is the author of *Mobilizing Public Opinion: Black Insurgency and Racial Attitudes in the Civil Rights Era* (University of Chicago Press), awarded the American Political Science Association's J. David Greenstone Award for the best book on politics and history and the Southern Political Science Association's V.O. Key Award for the best book on Southern politics. He is co-editor of a forthcoming volume, *Transforming Politics, Transforming America: The Civic and Political Incorporation of Immigrants in the United States* (University of Virginia Press). Lee has also written on the role of identity, language, trust, discrimination, and institutions in shaping contemporary race relations and ethnic politics in the US. Prior to coming to Berkeley, Lee was an assistant professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and a Robert Wood Johnson Scholar at Yale. He holds degrees from the University of Michigan (A.B.), Harvard University (M.P.P.), and the University of Chicago (Ph.D.).