

UC Berkeley

California Journal of Politics and Policy

Title

Unpacking Racial Discourse in California Proposition Politics: A Review of Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California by Daniel Martinez HoSang

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/23s4c1gg>

Journal

California Journal of Politics and Policy, 3(1)

Author

Kelleher Richter, Kelly

Publication Date

2011-01-24

DOI

10.5070/P27C7N

Peer reviewed

Unpacking Racial Discourse in California
Proposition Politics: A Review of *Racial
Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of
Postwar California* by
Daniel Martinez HoSang

Kelly Kelleher Richter
Stanford University

In recent public discussions about California's deep fiscal and institutional problems, issues of race and ethnicity have commanded less emphasis than many academic and political commentators believe they merit. Daniel Martinez HoSang's new book, *Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California*, provides a corrective. HoSang argues that "The state simply cannot solve the myriad crises it chronically faces—related to

prisons, budgeting, resource management, health, education, transportation, and the like—without coming to terms with the racial propositions that underlie all of these issues."¹

Racial Propositions analyzes the rhetorical strategies of leading political groups and actors in a set of California ballot initiative debates between 1946 and 2003. Applying a critical lens to "political language, symbols, and modes of address," HoSang highlights congruity in how Californians on all sides of contentious policy debates framed issues of race and ethnicity across this long period.² He argues that a foundational political discourse of "racial liberalism" stressing individual rights, opportunity, tolerance, and fairness proved malleable to disparate groups and actors, helping give rise to the elisions of contemporary

Review of: *Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California* by Daniel Martinez Hosang. 2010. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

“color-blind” racial discourse and narrowing the range of politically viable arguments for racial justice activists.

HoSang marks the genesis of modern California’s “racial liberalism” in the mid-1940s, rising from Gunner Myrdal’s psychosocial critique of American racial attitudes and the strong civic nationalism expounded alongside United States participation in World War II. Although he notes that the discourse of “racial liberalism” has been “variegated and contested” historically, HoSang for operational analytical purposes seems to embrace a pre-mid-1960s definition of what modern “liberal” civil rights ideology encompassed. He frames it as focused on the legal protection of individual citizenship rights and opportunities and on the promotion of a civic culture of tolerance to shame individual racists rather than the active promotion of race-conscious public policies to ameliorate private discrimination and historical structures of inequality fostered by state policies (the reinvigorated “liberal” civil rights agenda of the mid-1960s onward).³

HoSang laments how most California groups and actors supporting minority rights policies in proposition debates between 1946 and 2003 framed their rhetoric defensively within the discourse of “racial liberalism,” writing that, “nearly all the ideological investments and emphasis were placed on the dominant liberal notions of antiracism, the importance of individual tolerance, the role of extremists as the main purveyors of racial discrimination, and a

representation of California as an exceptional site of progress, inclusion and diversity.”⁴

Racial Propositions presents exciting new pieces of historical evidence about ballot initiative debates well known to California scholars, including 1964’s Proposition 14 to repeal the state’s housing antidiscrimination law, the mid-1980s symbolic English-only language propositions, and slew of mid-to-late 1990s propositions to limit undocumented immigrant access to public services and to end existing state affirmative action and bilingual education programs. The book also fruitfully discusses proposition debates that have received less scholarly attention to date, including 1946’s defeated Proposition 11, which sought to establish a state Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), two 1970s initiatives to curtail state-level school desegregation and school busing, and 2003’s defeated Proposition 54 to bar state and local government collection of racial and ethnic data. HoSang’s analysis of the 1946 FEPC debate is particularly engaging in showing how at a very early historical date assorted conservatives eschewed racially tinged rhetoric for “colorblind” pro-tolerance, pro-democratic rhetoric to frame employment civil rights as extremist policy.

While *Racial Propositions* is largely about past political debates and is marketed in part as a work of history, the book lacks the broad temporal contextualization and narrativity that are hallmarks of a disciplinarily trained histo-

rian. HoSang is less concerned with building a comprehensive argument about how ballot initiative debates factored into broad transformations of California racial and ethnic politics over the past 60 plus years than he is with analyzing and comparing discrete moments when issues of race and ethnicity surfaced prominently in the state's direct democracy system.

Such a comparative case approach to analyzing the past, while useful for a discursive analysis project, limits HoSang's ability to adequately capture the contingency of when and why specific policy debates resonated with the California public. Because *Racial Propositions* further emphasizes the rhetorical framing of policies in the politicized sphere of direct democracy, rather than exploring the historical nuances of the specific policy questions in their own right, the book is most approachable for readers who already possess a foundation in California and U.S. civil rights, education, and immigration policy history.

HoSang's discursive analysis of his historical source evidence is sophisticated and original yet he layers a framing theoretical lexicon upon it that feels disjointed and flattens the complexity of California racial and ethnic political history. In particular, HoSang's use of the concept of "political whiteness," defined by other scholars as a hegemonic political subjectivity encompassing the material and cultural benefits and interests of a "white" racial identity, is problematic to describe the political behaviors of broad

ranging Californians spanning six decades of dramatic societal change. While the California electorate remained disproportionately white during the long period HoSang analyzes in contrast to an increasingly diverse state population, the period as a whole was marked positively by civil rights progress, minority political empowerment, and multi-ethnic diversity of opinion at the ballot box.

Describing minority opponents to school busing, immigrant access to public services, and bilingual education programs as embodying or acquiescing to "political whiteness" imposes an awkward label on actors who most assuredly would have rejected it and diminishes the historical complexity of multi-ethnic concerns and conflicts. California's white civil rights policy opponents and immigration restrictionists have capitalized politically on minority support to disavow claims of racial bias, often dubiously, but to frame complex historical policy questions as if they could all break down along lines of a "white" interest and implied non-"white" interest reifies the socially constructed racial categories HoSang finds problematic.

Like many ambitious works of scholarship, *Racial Propositions* pushes its arguments beyond its topical evidence, making bold claims about how ballot initiative debates shape public attitudes. HoSang argues that ballot initiative debates are "important institutional locations" that "shape and condition the very terms with which people analyze and assess issues in public life and the identity po-

sitions they claim for themselves and ascribe to others.”⁵ While these debates undoubtedly are important state political events and sites of public conversation about race and ethnicity, it is not clear from a broad historical perspective that they have borne the pivotal political and cultural significance HoSang suggests.

Even within his analysis of various proposition debates, HoSang seems to overstate the role of select leading political groups and actors in defining public conversations on issues, ignoring the rich, unwieldy grassroots and media dimensions of direct democracy politics that can counter even the most coordinated efforts at political messaging. It requires a logical leap to believe that historical evidence of high-level political rhetoric in various ballot initiative debates alone can offer firm insight into how ordinary Californians thought about issues of race and ethnicity historically.

Despite some shortcomings, *Racial Propositions* is a great starting point for California scholars seeking to consider how a critical lens of race and ethnicity can offer new insight into state politics. HoSang presents a powerful argument about the problematic gaps in sophistication and honesty in California public political discourse about race and ethnicity given persisting racial and ethnic disparities. With the current state fiscal and institutional crisis in the context of a “graying” California electorate and “browning” California population, more critical introspection into

the roots of such disparities will be key to finding policy solutions that ensure the future health of the state.

Notes

¹ Daniel Martinez HoSang, *Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 271.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 13–14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

Kelly Kelleher Richter is a Ph.D. candidate in U.S. history at Stanford University.