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Commentary

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Introduction

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The US is known as a nation of immigrants, but will it soon be a nation of immigrant voters? It is undisputed that the demographics of the US are shifting, primarily due to the growth of Latino and Asian-American population. The most recent Census Bureau analysis predicts that the US will be a majority minority country, with the share of Whites falling below 50% of the population by the middle of the 21st century. Although the electorate does not mirror the population exactly, this shift will inevitably lead to more Latino and Asian voters. The majority of these new Latino and Asian voters will be native born, most likely second or third generation immigrants. Until recently, there has been little research on this electorate asking whether their priorities could tip the balance in an election. The articles in this issue, commissioned as part of a training offered at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism on immigrant voting and the politics of immigration reform, grapple with this question of voter preferences and others related to the civic engagement of Latino and Asian communities.

Immigration remains one of the most divisive issues in American politics. The year 2013 was thought to be the year that a long-awaited compromise bill would address the issue of the approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants residing in the US. However, at the time of the publication of this issue, the Senate-approved comprehensive immigration reform legislation, S.744, remained stalled in the Republican-led House of Representatives. Political leaders in the House have espoused a “piecemeal” approach of passing discrete bills that could eventually comprise part of a larger immigration package. The bills include efforts to increase technology visas, expand electronic employment verification, add agricultural worker visas, and enhance penalties for immigration violations. Noticeably missing in the House is a bill that offers a legalization process for undocumented

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immigrants. Republicans chose to focus their efforts on enhanced enforcement through the measures contained in the Strengthen and Fortify Enforcement Act (SAFE Act), which passed the House on a party-line vote in the Judiciary Committee in June, 2013. In an evaluation of how SAFE would fare on the House floor, Wong examines factors such as the share of Latinos in a district, partisanship, and whether proposed reforms are moderate or extreme. Notably, he concludes that the share of Latinos in a district can “dampen the effects of partisanship.”

Some political commentators have suggested that, for many Republicans, supporting immigration reform will provide fodder for primary challengers from the right. Others argue that the Republican party will pay a heavy price in the long-term, particularly in national elections, for ignoring immigration reform.

Already, as Bergman, Segura, and Barreto assert, states like California provide an important lesson of what may come. Historically, Republicans in California enjoyed significant support from Latino voters until the passage of Proposition 187, a law promoted by Republican Governor Pete Wilson to restrict undocumented immigrants’ access to education and other services. Bergman et al. and DiCamillo argue that Proposition 187, perceived not only as an anti-immigrant law but as an anti-Latino measure, drove Latinos into the arms of Democrats in California at a crucial moment when the Latino population was growing exponentially in California. Twenty years later, the current strength of the Democratic party in California can be attributed to disproportionately high support among ethnic voters, a trend that began after the passage of Proposition 187. Will a similar trend occur at the national level if Congress fails to pass immigration reform? Bergman et al. suggest that is a likely possibility, but Republicans have an opportunity to stem the tide by passing immigration reform. However, will passing immigration reform be enough to bring Latinos and Asians back to the Republican party? Both DiCamillo and Ramakrishnan and Yeung explore this question in their research.

DiCamillo’s insightful analysis on the power of the expanding voter population in California both reinforces and challenges certain conceptions about ethnic voters. Notably, DiCamillo challenges the notion that ethnic voters are more aligned with Republicans on social issues. He points to support for gay marriage and marijuana legalization among ethnic voters under 35. Like Ramakrishnan and Yeung, DiCamillo finds that ethnic voters believe that government should do more to solve the nation’s problems. In particular, ethnic voters in the poll strongly favor policies such as drivers’ licenses and in-state tuition for undocumented residents. Given that both these laws have been approved in California demonstrates the power of the ethnic vote in California.

Until recently, not much attention has been paid to the Asian-American electorate, a group once thought to be too small to impact elections. However, as the

fastest growing racial group in the US, Asians can no longer be counted out. In a report from a pre- and post-election survey, Ramakrishnan and Yeung provide a valuable and unique contribution to the literature on Asian-American voters by examining the policy preferences of Asians by country of origin. They estimate Asian Americans consisted of 3% of the voters in the 2012 presidential election. In fact, Asian Americans overwhelmingly supported (68%) President Obama, although only 35% of these voters identified as Democrats. As Ramakrishnan and Yeung note, this finding alone points to an electorate that votes based on policy preferences, not party affiliation.

Presumably this conclusion leaves the door open for Republicans to woo Asian Americans in future national elections. But the question arises whether Asian Americans could find areas of policy agreement with Republicans. The survey covers a broad array of fascinating subjects beyond immigration, such as education and healthcare. Notably, in each of these subjects, Asians evince a role for government. These findings based on national data echo DiCamillo's conclusion based on the California Field Poll that ethnic voters prefer government to be engaged in national policy issues. Given these findings, the Republican platform of limited government may hold little appeal for Asian Americans.

Ethnic voter preferences can only impact elections if ethnic voters choose to exercise their electoral power. Data consistently show lower rates of registration and voter turnout in Latino and Asian communities, particularly among naturalized citizens. Two papers by Garcia Bedolla and Vélez in this collection examine a new experiment of online voter registration in California to spur civic engagement. In the first of these papers, concluding that fewer naturalized citizens utilized online voter registration than would be expected based on their share of the population in California, Garcia Bedolla and Vélez offer concrete policy prescriptions to address this gap and assert that online voter registration should remain an important tool in civic engagement.

In their second paper, which examines the differences between Latinos, Asians and Whites in online registration in CA, Garcia Bedolla and Vélez explore whether this method helps engage Latino and Asian voters or discriminates against them, particularly those who live in low and middle-income communities. Garcia Bedolla and Vélez provide evidence to counteract the presumption that online registration advantages wealthy voters over low and middle-income registrants. They also demonstrate that the gender gap in California politics, with more women supporting Democrats, can be attributed to Latinas and Asian women. These important analyses may provide guidance for policymakers for other states considering online voter registration.

Many of the predictions contained in this journal will be tested in upcoming elections in 2014 and 2016. For those interested in handicapping the upcoming

2014 mid-term elections, Bergman et al. offer insight into specific districts and consider significant contextual factors, such as the notion that Latino voters may stay home. But 2014 will not be the end of the story. If the recent past is any indication, the tale of Latino and Asian civic engagement is a story that scholars and journalists will continue to follow for decades to come.