Ethnoracial Politics

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Synonyms
Minority politics; Racial and ethnic politics

Definition
Ethnoracial politics refers to politics involving categories that include African Americans, American Indians and Alaska Natives, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders. Collectively, these groups are sometimes referred to as “people of color,” while most of the rest of the American population could then be labeled “non-Hispanic White.” However, the difference is in the eye of the beholder, and differential treatment can emerge for many reasons, so even those classified as non-Hispanic White may find themselves fighting for equal treatment or opportunity. In the early twenty-first century, the best examples of this have been the people from the Middle East and Muslims.

Introduction

Ethnoracial politics is about difference and the struggle for equality. For populations that have been deemed fundamentally different, there have been long battles for equal treatment and opportunity.

The key characteristic of ethnoracial politics is marginalization of a population. At different times in American history, categories of people have found themselves the target of efforts to reduce their chances for economic, political, and social opportunities. Because of this, ethnoracial politics tends to involve issues such as political and economic equality, political incorporation, sovereignty, and immigration.

The term ethnoracial – rather than just racial – grows out of the fact that the US Office of Management and Budget defines “Hispanic” as an ethnic label, not a racial one, although this could change by the 2020 census. So, to make it clear that we are referring to the politics of all five groups noted above, scholars have increasingly taken to using the term ethnoracial politics.

Social and Economic Equality

The quest for social and economic equality is one of the oldest concerns in ethnoracial politics. Africans resisted their enslavement in colonial America, although the extent of legal and societal discrimination made formal political opposition
extremely difficult. Over the next century, Mexicans and Asian immigrants also found themselves fighting for equal rights in America, and, as the lands of indigenous peoples were swallowed up by the United States, native peoples also struggled for equal treatment.

African American activists often led the way, enduring imprisonment, torture, and deadly violence. By the mid-twentieth century, they began to achieve landmark victories, such as the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Supreme Court decision, which found government-mandated segregation of schools unconstitutional. The next decade, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination in a wide variety of circumstances, including employment and business that served the public, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which empowered the federal government to act against states that sought to prevent Blacks from voting.

Today, much of the focus has shifted to educational and economic concerns. The battle for equal treatment is by no means over, but the past half century has shown that reducing openly discriminatory treatment does not guarantee equal opportunity or equal outcomes. Widespread disparities between ethnoracial groups continue to be found in schooling, housing, employment, wealth, and poverty. African American activists have often been joined by Hispanics in the push for policies which might reduce these disparities. Many Asian American groups have also supported these efforts, but a much smaller percentage of Asian Americans are disadvantaged in these ways. American Indian groups have also joined these coalitions, although native activists often place their greatest emphasis on other issues. In addition, American Indians and other indigenous groups sometimes are in the unique situation of controlling territory – often referred to as reservations for American Indians. American Indian reservation leaders often place more emphasis on economic development or access to natural resources. And so, while greater educational opportunity or job training is important to them as well, there have also been battles over control of business opportunities, most notably gambling casinos, although by no means limited to them.

Casinos have rarely been a source of wealth for Indian nations, but they can give reservations a modest economic boost, so many American Indian tribes have fought for exclusive rights to casino gambling in their states. These goals have usually not been shared by other ethnoracial groups.

**Political Incorporation**

A related effort has been the push for greater political incorporation. Full political incorporation requires the ability to participate in politics, the ability to have representatives of your choosing, and the ability of those representatives to participate in shaping public policy (see Browning et al. 1984, for an important formulation of political incorporation). People of color continue to struggle for full incorporation.

Today, legal barriers to basic participation are gone, but other obstacles remain. One concern is the way that legislative district lines are drawn. States – and often cities and counties – are divided into multiple legislative districts, and there are many ways to draw district lines to reduce the influence of a group of voters, either by spreading them out across several districts, so that they are too few in number to wield power in any of them, or by concentrating them in as few districts as possible, also reducing their influence below what it could be. In recent years, another widespread tactic has been to increase barriers to voting or remove procedures that had made voting easier; in either case, people of color are among those most likely to be disadvantaged by those changes.

Even where barriers to participation have been fully removed, there are challenges for representation. Some ethnoracial groups are too small to wield a great deal of influence at the ballot box, except in a few places. The largest groups, African Americans and Latinos, are able to dominate some districts, but their representatives have not always been able to play a significant role in governing coalitions, sometimes finding their interests opposed by a majority of other legislators (e.g., Pinderhughes 1987).
Sovereignty

Sovereignty has been a major concern for indigenous peoples. Sovereignty refers to control, typically over a physical space, and regaining it has been a key goal of many American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian groups. Each population experienced substantial loss of territory and considerable deprivation, and has worked to regain control over some of their ancestral lands.

In fact, some indigenous activists have argued that their efforts should not even be considered part of ethnoracial politics. American Indians, they contend, belong to different nations and should not be seen as racial minorities (see, e.g., Wilkins 2007). Racial minorities came into existence through immigration—sometimes involuntary—but indigenous people are not immigrants, by definition.

This is also reflected in other political struggles of native peoples, such as efforts to regain rights to subsistence activities such as hunting, fishing, and harvesting. These rights were granted in treaty agreements with the United States, but, over the decades, they became the target of challenges, often from non-Hispanic Whites. Indigenous peoples have had to wage court battles to protect or restore those rights, sometimes facing intense bigotry in their fight.

Immigration

In recent decades, immigration has become a major issue in ethnoracial politics. This issue has been important primarily to Hispanics and Asian Americans. In the 2010 census, almost two-thirds of Asian Americans were immigrants, giving them a pressing interest in policies that determined whether relatives or friends could immigrate to the United States.

Immigration might be an even bigger concern for Hispanics. While only about a third were immigrants in 2010, almost as many were children of immigrants, so that two-thirds of Hispanics were either first or second generation. In addition, large numbers of Hispanic immigrants do not have legal authorization to be in this country, often putting them in a very tenuous position and greatly restricting the life chances of unauthorized youth.

Although positions on immigration cut across party lines, some partisan divisions exist. Supporters of the Republican Party have been the most intense opponents to creating a path to legalization for unauthorized immigrants, arguing that such a move would reward lawbreakers. President Obama’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program instituted a partial path for many who came illegally as children, and Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA) program would have expanded this to some adults, but DAPA was put on hold by a federal court order in 2015 and was strongly opposed by many Republicans.

Identity and Coalition-Building

The most important question for ethnoracial politics is how it will shape larger political coalitions. Given continued high levels of immigration, it is possible that people of color will outnumber non-Hispanic Whites by the middle of this century, with potentially dramatic political effects (Bowler and Segura 2012). Whether that will happen is a more complex question than it seems, and turns on questions of identity.

To understand this, one needs to understand that ethnoracial categories are social creations. The classification scheme currently used was created in the 1970s; before that, there was no consistency in the collection of ethnoracial data. In response to this disorganized state, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) devised the ethnoracial categories that are used today, while emphasizing that these were not based on scientific findings and were for administrative purposes only. Predictions of a non-White majority tend to assume that these categories will continue unchanged, but we know that they have changed in the past and are likely to change in the future.

If the OMB categories did not change and people continued to follow them, then it is indeed very likely that people of color will outnumber non-Hispanic Whites by the middle of the twenty-
first century. However, large numbers of those identifying as Hispanic also identify as White (although considerably less would do so if “Hispanic” was one of the options in the racial categories). In addition, we know that “mixed” ancestry children, those with a Hispanic or Asian parent and also a White parent, sometimes identify as White, and the children of those children may be even more likely to identify as White. Without question, many Americans will continue to identify as Asian or Hispanic, but, if large numbers with Asian or Hispanic ancestry chose to identify as White, the predicted non-White majority might take much longer to materialize, if it ever does.

For Americans that socialized to accept the existing ethnoracial categories, it may seem unthinkable that large numbers of Americans will “cross” these boundaries. However, history shows that deep differences can disappear over time. A century or so ago, immigrants from eastern and southern Europe were seen as profoundly alien and never able to become fully American (e.g., Jacobson 1998). Those views have vanished today, of course. Societal dividing lines are drawn in our minds, making those lines very susceptible to change over the course of a generation or so (e.g., Alba and Nee 2003).

We know that there are other ways people do not identify with the OMB categories as well. For example, most of those who fall into the “Asian American” category do not first identify themselves as Asian American but instead choose an ethnic or national identity such as “Vietnamese” or “Korean American.” The same is true for many Latinos, especially those who are immigrants. “American Indian” is an equally diverse category, and many of those who would fall within that category prefer to be identified by tribal affiliation, such as “Ojibwe” or “Hopi,” or by a specific band within the tribe.

In addition, we cannot be sure how Asian Americans and Latinos will view their political interests in the coming years. In the first few decades of the twenty-first century, large numbers have turned against Republican candidates, but many Republican leaders are trying to change the image of their party. Immigrants and their descendants may influence policy change, but the overall impact would likely be less if they were more evenly divided in their political party allegiance.

Immigration may have significant consequences for African American politics and identity as well. For many decades, minority politics and Black politics were seen as virtual synonyms, and what we call ethnoracial politics focused largely on the battle for greater equality for African Americans. In the early twenty-first century, however, a tectonic shift occurred, as Hispanics surpassed African Americans as the largest population of color in the United States. One major question is how Blacks will adjust to this change of status. At times, there have been tensions, such as competition in Los Angeles between a mayoral candidate backed by African Americans and one supported by Latinos, but there seem to be enough commonality of interests for enduring Black-Brown alliances to be forged.

Immigration could trigger change even within the African American population, however. While still relatively small, there is a growing stream of immigrants from Africa, joining a continuing flow of African-ancestry immigration from the Caribbean. These immigrants could bolster the influence of long-established African American groups, if they join forces, but there have been tensions— as has often occurred between immigrants and native-born groups. Continued discrimination against darker-skinned Americans may eventually lead to stronger coalitions between all African-ancestry Americans, but such alliances are not going to happen automatically and will likely require that both immigrants and long-established African American groups make some political adjustments.

**Conclusion**

The most important factor influencing the future of American ethnoracial politics is discrimination. If people of color continue to be treated as fundamentally different, experiencing exclusion and unequal treatment, they will have a powerful incentive to form coalitions to fight against that
treatment. Today, there is a fierce debate over to what extent such discrimination will continue.

It is unlikely that all people of color will enjoy equal conditions in the near future, but it is possible that some will experience much better conditions, while others do not. Although conditions have improved markedly for African Americans in the past half century, it is clear that they still experience high levels of poverty, substandard housing and schooling, higher levels of imprisonment, and other undesirable conditions which will not be eliminated soon.

On the other hand, many Asian Americans live in far more favorable conditions. In part, this reflects the fact that many Asian immigrants came with high levels of income and other resources and also that they arrived after civil rights laws had outlawed the worst types of discrimination, which had created such difficult conditions for large numbers of Black Americans. While there are significant numbers of Asian Americans in poverty and substandard housing, the vast majority do not experience this. Intermarriage rates – between Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans – tend to be very high by the third generation, also suggesting lower levels of discrimination.

Hispanic Americans seem to fall in between these two populations. By the second and third generation, many Latinos are prospering, although large numbers of immigrants struggle with considerable challenges, such as low levels of education or lack of legal status. Many Hispanics do not experience the levels of discrimination faced by African Americans, but hostility toward Latinos – and especially native-Spanish speakers – is not hard to find. If Hispanics do indeed find themselves making considerable progress over the next few generations, their political preferences would likely be less distinct from those of non-Hispanic Whites. Some argue, however, that Hispanics will continue to experience unequal treatment, making them more likely to continue to ally themselves with a coalition of other marginalized groups (see, e.g., Telles and Ortiz 2008).

Finally, the contours of American ethnoracial politics could be reshaped yet again. In the immediate years after World War II, no one anticipated that Latinos and Asian Americans would emerge to become substantial political forces. Could other groups face growing marginalization and come to identify more as people of color?

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, the most likely possibilities include Americans of Middle Eastern ancestry and Muslims. Concerns over terrorism have led to periods of strong hostility toward these groups. The Office of Management and Budget classifications defined people of Middle Eastern ancestry as White, but in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, many experienced bigotry more commonly felt by people of color. While it is impossible to know what the future holds for these groups, their recent experiences provide more evidence that ethnoracial politics is dynamic, and that some groups can “exit” while others “enter” into the marginalized status which is at the heart of that politics.

Cross-References

▶ Minority Groups and Politics
▶ Politics and Ethnic Conflict

References

This chapter explores the paradoxes and contradictions that nourish the transformation of ethnoracial identities. It looks at particular religious and...  

First, an ethno-racial hierarchy whereby those who are constructed as “white” receive increased privileges (relative to “non-whites”) in the geographical, cultural and political reality they occupy.