

White Backlash: Immigration, Race and American Politics

Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan Hajnal (Princeton University Press, 2015)

241pp

'When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending the best,' Donald Trump said during his presidential announcement speech in June 2015. Most agree that Trump's stunning poll numbers in the Republican primary owe a great deal to his successful ownership of the immigration issue. While most of the Tea Party's oeuvre – guns, god and fear of government – strikes an alien note among Europeans, their opposition to immigration translates very well across the Pond.

While immigration ranks first among British voters and near the top in most West European countries, it is only recently that this issue has risen toward the top in American politics. Europeans often entertain the misconception that the US is merely a nation of immigrants. But throughout its history, America has had an ethnic 'core' group, just like European nations. Prior to the 1960s, the core was White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. Even Irish-Americans like John F Kennedy, the first Catholic president, struggled to be accepted as all-American. Since then, the circle has expanded to include all non-Hispanic whites, but non-'whites' - including white Hispanics like Marco Rubio – remain outsiders. However, with the 1965 relaxation of immigration quotas tied to country of origin which discriminated heavily in favour of northwestern Europe, the share of nonwhites has soared. Latinos are now the largest minority, Asians are the fastest growing, and whites are declining in absolute number among younger age groups. Already over half America's babies are nonwhite. By the early 2040s, the country will be.

Those changes portend seismic shifts in American politics, but they are some way off. Whites and older people are much more likely to vote, hence the electorate remains 75 percent white, ten points more than the population. As Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan Hajnal point out in their meticulously-researched *White Backlash*, white America is shifting steadily toward the Republicans and conservative social policies in reaction to a growing Hispanic population. In 1950, the share of minorities and whites voting for the two main parties was about the same, but by 2012, the authors show, 59 percent of whites voted Republican compared to just 18 percent of minorities, the largest 'racial partisan gap' in the nation's history. Whereas the racial composition of the two parties' supporters diverged by around 15 points as recently as 1996, this reached a whopping 35 points by 2012. Just 10 percent of Republican voters are minorities, but nearly half of Democratic voters are, buoyed by a rising tide of Hispanic voters. Here is a radical overhaul of US voting patterns, a far cry from the bygone days when most whites supported the liberal policies of an FDR or LBJ. Today, race is a far more important determinant of how an American votes than income, education, age or gender.

The book's main point is that Hispanic immigration and population growth, combined with growing media coverage of Latino immigration, is powering a white backlash against the Democrats and redistributive social policies.

This is not merely asserted through anecdote or a few handpicked statistics, as is the case with many accounts on the subject, but is demonstrated by a sustained and rigorous

crunching of a mountain of data. This is a great strength of the book, and sets it apart from similar work in the field. However, the statistical training which is a mainstay of US political science is both a blessing and a curse. While it provides the power needed to make strong generalisations, its emphasis on scientific language and tables can get in the way of the story. Abrajano and Hajnal are able to overcome this to some degree – indeed, most of their contemporaries rarely even write books - but they are unable to fully escape its clutches.

Most of the book reads well and flows easily, but the uninitiated may recoil at regression tables, not to mention terms like ‘robust to’, ‘multinomial logit’, ‘dummy variable’, ‘residuals’ and other desiderata. Like the authors, I find these terms second nature, but most intelligent readers lack statistical training. The editors should have insisted on graphic presentation of the data, with model details consigned to footnotes and appendices.

This aside, the account is compelling. It is one thing to show that whites are increasingly voting Republican while minorities back the Democrats, but a reasonable retort is that minorities are younger, poorer, and more likely to be immigrants than whites - and this is what actually explains the partisan gap. The authors’ models put paid to these notions, showing that when one compares, for example, a young, white, native-born, university-educated voter with a young, nonwhite, university-educated voter, the gap remains substantial.

We know the Democrats’ stance on immigration appeals to minorities, especially Hispanics. Less commented upon is that the immigration issue is driving whites out of the Democratic party at a steady rate which adds up to a torrent. Consider two individuals who identify as Republican and consider themselves conservative. One has a positive view of undocumented immigrants, another negative. The individual with the positive view is far more likely to have voted for Obama in 2008, the one with a negative perception for the Republican McCain. The same is true for Independents: those with negative views of illegal immigrants, all else being equal, were 68 percent more likely to have voted for McCain than pro-immigration Independents.

In several models, the authors show that those who oppose immigration or have negative perceptions of Latinos are less likely to be Democrats, and if Democrat are more likely to switch out of the party. White Democratic identifiers who dislike immigration are drifting into the Republican camp much as white anti-immigration Blair voters shifted toward the Conservatives and UKIP. The result is an increasingly minority-dominated Democratic party squaring off against an almost completely white Republican party. The best British analogy is Labour and the Tories in London.

Experimental studies that flash images of Latino immigrants in front of white American respondents generally find that whites answer subsequent questions on immigration more restrictively than if the immigrant image is Asian or white. Studies also find that whites don’t easily differentiate legal from illegal immigrants, and associate both with Latinos, whom they link with welfare dependency and crime. As a result, voters in states with larger shares of Latinos are more likely to oppose immigration and vote Republican. They favour cutting back on health and education while building more prisons. This translates into reality since individual states rather than Washington control the budget for these activities. This echoes

the problem of 'more diversity equals less solidarity' raised by authors such as David Goodhart in Britain and Robert Putnam in America.

Demographics alone is not enough to account for change. The media's need to sell papers, claim the authors, drives even liberal outlets like the New York Times to portray immigrants in a negative way three times more often than in a positive light. The more stories published on Latino immigration in a given three-month period during 1980-2010, the more whites subsequently supported the Republicans against the Democrats.

In the future, the opinions of whites – assuming they don't expand their circle of whiteness to include Latinos - will matter a great deal less. One of the fascinating findings of the book is that as the share of minorities increases in a state, policies become more conservative, but once a threshold is crossed, more minorities produce more left-wing policies. California's white share dropped from 70 to 40 percent white between 1980 and 2010. At the same time, spending per pupil nosedived from among the highest to among the lowest in the US while spending on prisons tripled. By 2012, however, with 19 percent of the California legislature composed of Hispanics and the Democrats firmly in control, spending on education began to rise while funding for prisons declined.

This may be, but too few states have undergone a California-style ethnic transition to 'majority minority' status to be certain of the 'U'-shaped relationship between minority increase and public spending. The recent increase in California's public spending on K-12 education is taking place at a time when whites still form the majority of the state's legislators and California has only recently emerged from a wrenching budget crisis.

The book is not without flaws: there is a tension between the racial polarisation thesis, which pits whites against all minorities, and the anti-Latino thesis. The two are not identical. The book claims right-wing Americans have a favourable opinion of Asians. In states with a large Asian population, whites respond by becoming more liberal and endorsing the Democrats, the opposite of their reaction to Latinos. But Asians are the fastest-growing minority. If the authors are correct, we should expect growing diversity to pull whites both toward, and away from, the Democrats. Meanwhile, as Asians become more established, the Republicans may benefit from new Asian votes the way Conservative parties in Canada and Britain have.

In addition, the number of Latino immigrant stories may be important in the rise of immigration to prominence, but nowhere in the book do we hear that the end of the recession and Obama's winding up of bloody overseas engagements may have released bandwidth for immigration to emerge.

Let's say the authors are right. This implies that the S.S. Washington will chart a more conservative path until minorities make up a similar share of America's population as they do in California, i.e. some time around 2050. But this assessment sidesteps the minority 'backlash' against the Republicans. Indeed, fully 41 percent of whites still vote Democratic while less than 10 percent of African-Americans, and a mere 25 percent of Latinos and Asians, opt for the Republicans. Meanwhile the immigration issue only ranks sixth in America while it hovers near the top in most West European countries - with minority

populations just a third as large. Immigration may be intruding into the consciousness of white America, but the failure of this wolf to howl during the last forty years is equally worthy of comment. None of which detracts from the fact White Backlash is a highly important and timely read.