Race and California Electoral Politics

By Bob Wing and Jan Adams

As the decade of the 1990s commenced, California Governor Pete Wilson and the Republican Party thought they saw a grand opportunity for politically dominating California that might also project Wilson into a successful presidential run.

Their strategy was simple--and racially charged. It was to galvanize the predominantly white voters of the state behind the Republicans on the basis of a thinly disguised appeal to their fear that people of color would soon dominate the state. Through a series of now infamous political initiatives, Propositions 187, 209, 184, 227 and 21, Pete Wilson and the Republican Party sought advantage by turning California into a racial battleground.

These were not simple "back to the 1950s" attacks. They were much more sophisticated, calculated to appeal to white voters who did not see themselves as racist. They were also crafted to politically split people of color along lines of class, documented versus undocumented, immigrant versus non-immigrant, and black versus Latino versus Asian.

At one level, Wilson and his party scored signal victories. Each of the controversial initiatives passed on the strength of an overwhelming vote by the white majority.

But, politically, the strategy may have backfired. The California Republican Party enters the new millennium sharply divided. Pete Wilson has been driven from politics. Latinos have flocked en masse to the Democratic Party, which in turn is riding a high crest. In 1998 only the second Democrat since 1967 captured the governorship and in election 2000 the party swept California's local and presidential contests. For a variety of reasons, including the party's own reaction to its recent reversals, the Republicans now face an uphill battle in California.

In 2001, white people became a minority of California's population. This dramatic demographic transformation foreshadows the changing color of the entire country. And it is led by the most populous states: California, New York, Texas and Florida. People of color are already the majority in California, New Mexico and Hawaii. The social, economic and political implications of this powerful trend may be enormous and, to one degree or another, underlie many issues and conflicts in the U.S. today.

Looking backward, Wilson's racial/political gambit looks like a last ditch effort to stave off and prepare for the growing political power of people of color. However, one must remember that despite being a minority of the state's population, white people still cast more than 70 percent of the votes in California. This is primarily because the people of color of California include so many people who are ineligible to vote: it is disproportionately under voting age and almost half non-citizen.

In fact, in his excellent *Paradise Lost*, author Peter Schrag correctly points out that the most fundamental imbalance in the Golden State is that the voters are mostly white and relatively affluent, and those who benefit the most from state spending (especially students) are mostly people of color. Furthermore, he states, over the past three decades, these white voters have

systematically undercut state spending through measures like Prop. 13 and allowed California's infrastructure, schools and social services to degenerate from being the envy of the country to a dismal state that ranks near the bottom in just about every category. Finally, Schrag argues, through terms limits, statewide referenda and constitutional amendments, the white majority has, wittingly or not, shrunk the power of the institutions most susceptible to the political influence of people of color--the legislature, the city councils, etc.--and transferred that power to the arenas where whites continue to exercise most of the power--lobbyists, statewide political initiatives and popular referenda.

The conservative social and racial agenda of the Republicans in the 1990s shifted the entire political spectrum of California to the right, even as people of color have begun to exercise new clout. Not surprisingly, many Democrats, led by Governor Gray Davis, have tacked rightward to appease conservative white voters and thereby protect their political futures.

While the Democrats seem to have a lock on many local contests—especially Congressional, legislative and city council battles—the statewide contests (like Governor, presidential primaries, Senatorial etc.) may still be quite competitive. However that assumes that the state's Republicans show a willingness not so far witnessed to choose candidates that appeal to the new political calculus. If recent voting trends continue, the Democrats need to win only about 45 percent of the white vote to carry the state. However new political dramas within the Democratic Party itself may be in the offing.

Thus, at the beginning of the new millennium, California's political picture is extremely complicated. This working paper is a preliminary inquiry into the impact of race on electoral politics in California. We examine demographic, registration, and voting trends as a whole and by racial/ethnic group. (In this preliminary analysis we do not review data on Native American electoral participation because this data is not readily available. Certainly Native Americans are affected by many of these political trends. In addition, Prop. 5 represents a new watershed in the influence of Native tribes in California politics.) Our purpose is to begin to gain more detail and perspective on the political trends and prospects of the different groups in themselves and what they may mean for California as a whole, especially for advancing a progressive social and racial agenda in the state. Based on our preliminary findings, we make certain speculations about the lessons of the past and the challenges of the future.

Demographics

The sweeping character of demographic change in California can be illustrated thusly: In 1960 immigrants accounted for less than 10 percent of the state's population and the dominant mother tongue of foreign-born people living in California was not Spanish, not Chinese, not Tagalog, but English (spoken with the accents of Canada, England, Australia and Ireland)!

Since then people of color, led by Latinos from Mexico and Central America, have become the majority not only of California's foreign-born, but of the population of the state as a whole.

Since the military conquest and occupation of the northern part of Mexico, including what is now California, by the United States in 1848, many white Californians have felt haunted by the specter of people of color. Historically, whites, led by businessmen, have alternately sought

racially-coerced labor that could be exploited to build railroads, farm fields, and run factories; only to be followed by periods when fear of Yellow Hordes or Mexican Zoot Suiters taking "white jobs" and dominating culture or politics would motivate them to expel and exclude Mexicans and Asians.

This great racial drama has reemerged with a vengeance since the removal of racist immigration exclusions in 1965. This reform opened the way to tremendous new migrations to the United States from Asia and Latin America, and California is one of the main gateways.

The results, shown in the accompanying graphic, have been dramatic. Whites have steadily and precipitously fallen from 77 percent of the population in 1970 to 47 percent in 2000. Latinos have elevated from 12 to 29 percent and Asians from 3 to 11 percent. Native Americans and blacks have been fairly constant.

California Population by Race, 1970-2000

	White	Black	Latino/a	Asian	Native American	Mixed
1970	77%	7.5%	12%	3%	0.5%	
1980	67%	7.5%	19.2%	5.2%	1.1%	
1990	57%	7.0%	25.8%	9.1%	0.8%	
2000	47%	6%	29%	11%	2%	5%

Overview of Patterns of Registration and Voting

Before delving more directly into race and ethnicity, we here provide an overview of registration and voting in California. What we find, not surprisingly, is that the older, more affluent, citizens predominate. Citizenship status, age, education, homeownership, and income--each of these factors enhances the white vote and diminishes that of the people of color, relative to their proportions of the population.

California voters are still overwhelmingly white. In 2002, whites constituted approximately 78 percent of all registered voters and about 73 percent of those who actually vote, even though they are less than 47 percent of the total population. Slightly more white voters are registered Republican than Democrat.

The majority of voters have high incomes. 52 percent of actual voters in 2000 made $60,000 per year or more; 37 percent of the total have incomes of more than $75,000 per year. The median income of Californians as a whole hovers around $46,000 per year.

The majority of voters are 40 years old or older. Those between 40 and 64 make up 39 percent of the electorate and people over 65 are 13 percent, meaning that 52 percent of the electorate is over 40.

There are more female than male voters. Women voters are 53 percent of the total.

Over the last thirty years, Democratic Party registration has fallen from 54 percent in 1970 to 45 percent in 2001. Republican registration has fallen somewhat more mildly, from 41 percent to 35 percent. Both parties lost 5 percent in the 1990s.

The most dramatic change over the past 20 years has been the rise of people who are registered as "other" or "Nonpartisan": from 5 percent in 1970 to 11 percent in 1990 to 19 percent in 2001.

A Closer Look at Race and Voting Patterns

For most of California history, whites had a virtual monopoly on political power that allowed them to broker among themselves what the fate of the "others" would be. In the last couple of decades the vast influx of people of color--and their organization into voting blocs, political, community and trade union organizations--has ended such untrammeled white political power.

The hard-edged attacks on people of color, including immigrants, by California's Republicans over the last decade, especially in the form of anti-immigrant and racially charged statewide initiatives such as Proposition 187, 184, 209, 21, and others--have helped shape the state's new political calculus.

In an attempt to defend themselves against these onslaughts, many Latinos and Asians have opted for citizenship, registered to vote, and punished the Republicans at the polls. These trends have also been given impetus by the new federal welfare laws, which deprive non-citizen immigrants of many rights and benefits.

From 1990 to 2000, a major change occurred in the racial composition of the California electorate. In that decade the combined votes of people of color in California increased by 43 percent while those of whites dropped by 1 percent. People of color increased their percentage share from 21.5 percent in 1990 to 28.5 percent in 2000, a dramatic increase in just ten years.

Of course this 28.5 percent falls far short of the percentage of people of color in the total population (53 percent). However, most elections are decided by razor thin margins in which a change of 2-3 percent would change the outcome. Therefore this increase in the vote of people of color was enough to cause a sea change in the state's political dynamics.

Formerly dominated by a Republican coalition centered in Los Angeles County, Orange County, San Diego County, San Bernardino County and Fresno County, the state now appears to be led by a Democratic coalition centered in Los Angeles, the nine Bay Area counties, Sacramento and, increasingly, San Diego and even Orange.

The weight of the people of color vote was enhanced by two other factors. First, people of color, especially blacks and Latinos, tend to be more politically united than whites, who tend to split

down the middle. Specifically, blacks and Latinos are considerably more liberal and Democratic than whites. While slightly more whites register and vote Republican than Democratic, 69.8 percent of Latinos and 79 percent of African Americans are Democrats. They often vote Democratic in even larger percentages, Asians are more evenly divided in party registration, but also increasingly vote Democratic in statewide elections.

Second, people of color tend to be geographically concentrated. This means that the votes of people of color are also concentrated in particular electoral districts, enabling them to leverage their vote into local representatives rather than being scattered and less effective.

We now move to take a closer look at each people of color group.

African Americans

The African American population and vote has slightly declined, but is consistently more liberal and Democratic than the rest of the population.

The census shows the African American population falling from 7.5 percent to 6 percent of California. However, much of this apparent drop may actually stem from some people choosing the new racial category of "mixed" than from an actual decline. The "mixed" category was newly introduced in 2000, and was chosen by 5 percent of California's population. (The irony, of course, is that the vast majority of people who are considered, or consider themselves, to be black, white, or Latino in the United States are of mixed ancestry.)

From 1990 to 2000, the African American vote declined from 950,000 to 900,000. More important from a political standpoint, their percentage share of the total vote fell from 8 percent to 5 percent. Obviously this percentage decline resulted more from increased voting by others than by the small drop in black voters.

Despite this drop, the African American vote remains quite potent. This is for two reasons. First, African Americans are probably the most cohesive section of the electorate. They overwhelmingly vote liberal and Democratic. 79 percent are registered Democratic and at least that many vote Democratic. They thus continue to play an important role in the Democratic coalition, especially on its liberal and progressive wings, and especially at the local level. The underside of this is that they are sometimes taken for granted by the Democrats and their interests and voice ignored in statewide contests.

Second, African Americans tend to be geographically concentrated, especially in particular sections of Los Angeles and the Bay Area. They are therefore a major factor in many local elections, including contests in the major cities. This can sometimes be leveraged into important power at the statewide level, witness Willie Brown's long tenure as Speaker of the Assembly and the recent election of Herb Wesson as speaker.

We do not have an overview of the trends in the number of black elected officials in the state as a whole. However, we do know that the number of African American Assembly persons has fallen from a high of 11 down to 6. The introduction of term limits has probably hastened this decline

by unseating popular black incumbents who otherwise may have kept office despite changing demographics.

Asian Americans

The Asian American vote is growing but still small and diverse. It is difficult to identify clear political trends among Asians.

In percentage terms, Asian Americans are the fastest growing group in the state, up 20 percent from 1990-2000. However, although the Asian American vote is growing, it still constituted only 5 percent of the statewide vote in election 2000.

Since Asian Americans are the most ethnically diverse and class divided grouping of all peoples of color, it is not surprising that their voting patterns are also complicated. These complications tend to undercut the impact of the Asian vote.

First, in percentage terms, there are more non-citizen Asian Americans than any other racial/ethnic group in California. Approximately 51 percent of all Asian Californians are non-citizens and, as a consequence, ineligible to vote.

Second, Asian Americans who are citizens have the lowest rate of voter registration of any racial or ethnic group in the state. When the low rate of citizenship and the low rate of voter registration are combined, the result is that Asian Americans only make up 6.2 percent of all registered voters, compared to 12 percent of the total population.

(Interestingly, Asian Americans who are registered to vote actually have the highest turnout rate of any racial or ethnic group. However, this does not offset the previous two factors.)

There are still other factors that tend to undercut the impact of Asians in electoral politics. Unlike other peoples of color, Asians tend to be geographically dispersed. There are only a few local electoral races where Asians are a large part of the electorate. Thus they are often unable to leverage their votes into power, and can often be basically ignored, both at the local and state levels.

In addition, Asian voters are much less cohesive than blacks or Latinos. Asian voters tend to be split in party registration, a pattern similar to white voters in California. Slightly more are Republicans (41 percent) than Democrats (37 percent), and an unusually high percentage (22 percent) are "other," mostly Nonpartisan.

On the other hand, the best of the still inadequate exit poll data on Asian Americans, that of the Los Angeles Times, indicated that 63 percent of California Asian American voters chose Gore over Bush in 2000. In general exit polls and other data about Asians are often based on samples that are so small as to render the studies invalid. This is also why we have no useful data indicating whether or not there are any important political distinctions among Asians by nationality.

Still, it seems that the Asian vote is quite volatile. In the 1980s it was hypothesized that many were "Reagan Democrats" while more recently they may be tilting more Democratic. Certainly many Asians felt attacked by the Republican racial onslaught of the 1990s.

There are currently four Asian Americans in the state legislature and two in the state's Congressional delegation.

Given the dramatic increase in the numbers of Asians in the state, the political clout of Asians can be expected to increase. But it is still unclear what the political direction of that impact might be.

Latinos

Unquestionably, Latinos are the most powerful new force in California politics over the last two decades, and there is no end in sight to this trend. In the decade between 1990 and 2000, their vote rose by 61 percent and their share of the total vote jumped from 10.0 percent to 16.1 percent.

Due to the size, party partisanship and geographic concentration of Latino voters, there are now 26 Latinos in the California legislature. In 2000, there were 49 Latino mayors in California, up from 29 a decade before, and six serve in the U.S. Congress from this state. A Latino, Cruz Bustamente, was elected Lieutenant Governor of the entire state. Clearly, Latinos are a force to be reckoned with.

Impressive as those numbers are, the Latino vote at 16 percent of the total still significantly lags far behind their share of the population. Now at 29 percent, the Latino share of California's population is projected to continue to rise into the foreseeable future. Undoubtedly their political clout will continue to rise as well, especially since the percentage of Latinos who are citizens will probably rise even as the Latino population as a whole surges.

The surge of Latino voters in the 1990s was, in part, a response to the Republican attack upon them and other immigrants and people of color in the forms of Proposition 187, 227, 184 and 209, as well as the new federal welfare laws. Many Latinos realized they could not defend themselves without becoming citizens, registering to vote, and voting. Moreover, these Republican-led attacks helped move Latino political opinion leftwards and toward the Democratic Party. 70 percent of Latinos are registered Democrats compared to only 16.3 percent Republican; 85 percent voted for Clinton in 1996 and 74 percent voted for Gore in 2000.

Another critical factor in the political mobilization of Latinos has been their strong participation in the labor movement, which has apparently benefited both labor and Latinos. A startling 47.7 percent of Latino voters in the 2000 presidential election were union members or had union members resident in their households. The statewide figure for all voters was 29 percent.

The Latino vote carries even more weight because it tends to be geographically concentrated. The huge migration of Latinos into Los Angeles County has transformed the political complexion of the county, not to speak of dozens of localities throughout the state. Formerly

dominated by conservatives, LA County's political profile now virtually matches that of the historically more liberal Bay Area. A similar process is underway in San Diego.

(As far as we are aware, there is not enough data available to successfully disaggregate the Latino vote by nationality or nativity, so we cannot make any statements in that regard.)

Currently there are six Latinos in the 40 member California State Senate. All are Democrats. There are 20 Latinos in the 80 member Assembly; 18 are Democrats. All told there are 50 Democrats in the Assembly, meaning that Latino Democrats need only 8 additional votes to select the Speaker of the Assembly and it is virtually impossible for anyone to be so chosen without their consent. Two Latinos were elected Speaker of the Assembly in the last decade.

Finally it is important to note that only two of the 26 Latino legislators won office by defeating an incumbent. All the others won seats that were vacant, due primarily to the new term limits law. In other words, turnover caused by terms limits has greatly speeded the access of Latinos to elected office.

Reapportionment 2000

As usual, the decennial 2000 census became the basis for reapportionment of Congressional and legislative seats. Since the most dramatic demographic change in California from 1990-2000 was the increase in Latinos, some Latinos and other progressives saw this as an opportunity to significantly increase the political power of Latinos. However, the legislature, though controlled by Democrats and with Latino members holding significant power, instead opted to produce what many are calling an “incumbent protection plan.” Instead of pressing to take advantage of the demographic changes to create more Democratic and Latino opportunities, they made a deal with the Republicans to lock in the existing situation. Consequently, only 17 of the 173 Assembly, Senate and Congressional districts have a party registration difference of less than 10 percent.

Some Major Lessons

1. The increase in Latino voting power has changed the political equations in California over the last decade.

2. Both the Latino and the Asian American vote have increased significantly in the last decade, and will continue to do so.

3. Increased Latino and Asian American voting power has led to the election of more Latino and Asian American officials. This change is more evident at the local level, but is beginning at the statewide level (the legislature and its leadership, statewide offices) as well, especially for Latinos.

4. The growing Latino vote largely benefits the Democratic Party and has been the key element in the new hold of Democrats over state politics, the state's presidential elections, as well as many local jurisdictions, especially in and around Los Angeles.

5. Black/Latino/Asian voting coalitions have increased potential to affect the outcome of elections and the political configuration within local and state elected bodies.

6. The increased people of color vote may also increase the strength of people of color and the more liberal sections within the Democratic Party.

7. White voting power has dropped and will continue to do so. This lessens the fortunes of the Republican Party.

8. White voting power is strongest at the statewide level and in the rural areas. However, conservatives, led by the Republican Party, have sought to retain conservative white political power by utilizing ballot initiatives and statewide constitutional amendments. They also promoted term limits, which shifts expertise and power from inexperienced legislators to permanent lobbyists.

9. Since Prop. 13 in 1979, conservative white voters, led by the Republican Party, have drastically undercut the infrastructure, educational system and social service benefits of California which are increasingly utilized by people of color.

10. The big issue: how can people of color and white progressives take advantage of the new electoral trends to create a more progressive and racially just state?

Opportunities and Challenges

Since very little change in the distribution of state legislative seats by party is going to happen in the next few years, progressive forces can no longer make their presence felt simply by fighting close elections on behalf of more progressive candidates. The time has come to look for other ways to have an impact.

1. Local races may be more competitive than state legislative races. Is it a time to consolidate local bases?

2. Races for statewide offices such as Governor may be more volatile than state legislative races. Can progressive forces make themselves felt on the state level?

3. In the absence of competitive legislative contests, can new voters be enticed to participate? How?

4. In some districts, packing in more Democrats may have made existing centrist Democratic districts more liberal. Are there spots where progressive forces should push for more progressive candidates within the Democratic Party?

5. Given the increase in non-partisan and third party registration, what might be the role for third parties in local or statewide elections?