

UC research shows Latinos and Asians need different strategies to increase political participation in California

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UC RESEARCH SHOWS LATINOS AND ASIANS NEED DIFFERENT STRATEGIES TO INCREASE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN CALIFORNIA

By the early 21st century, more than 50 percent of California's residents will be Latinos and Asians. According to Steven Erie, a professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego, in spite of their numbers, these two groups are highly underrepresented among California's voters and public officials, and will require distinctly different strategies to increase their political participation.

"Latinos and Asians have comprised over two-thirds of the state's population growth since 1970, and their numbers are clearly on the rise," said Erie. "Whether or not the challenge of minority political inclusion is met will have a profound bearing on the future of democratic participation and social harmony in California."

According to Erie, "top-down" reapportionment and redistricting have become effective political empowerment devices for Latinos, but what is now needed are more effective "bottom-up" citizenship and voter mobilization campaigns. In particular, a low citizenship rate among potentially eligible Latino immigrants remains a fundamental empowerment barrier.

In his research, Erie also found a need for interethnic coalition building to achieve Latino intragroup unity.

"There are tensions between the Mexican-origin community and the burgeoning Central American refugee community," he explained. "The prospects for Latino crossover alliances are strongest with African Americans and Asian Pacifics. For example, aspiring ethnic political brokers already are eyeing a marriage of Latino votes and Asian Pacific money."

Compared to Latinos, Erie concluded that Asian Pacifics (a census designation for people from Asia or the Pacific Islands or whose ancestors originated from there) need to more effectively use redistricting as a means to achieve political empowerment. But, in terms of grassroots mobilization, Asian Pacifics are not in need of citizenship campaigns, as they show high rates of early naturalization.

Asian Pacifics, however, have exhibited low voter registration and turnout rates, and, like Latinos, are in need of targeted voter registration, get-out-the-vote, and civic education programs, Erie said.

"Lack of leadership remains a significant barrier for Asian Pacifics. There is a need to increase the political involvement -- as candidates, not just as campaign contributors -- of Asian Pacific business entrepreneurs."

According to Erie, a potential source of future leadership is the growing pool of Asian Pacific political aides in state government. He believes that the term limitations and staff cutbacks mandated by Proposition 140 may encourage many of these aides to seek elective office.

Like Latinos, Erie found intragroup tension among Asian Pacifics that needs to be addressed in order to pave the way for real political incorporation.

"The 'rainbow model' of minority coalitions presupposes a political unity within California's diverse Asian Pacific community," Erie said. "A pan-Asian coalition faces the formidable task of melding together a dozen larger and three dozen smaller nationalities. Asian Pacifics are best positioned to form crossover alliances with Latinos on the basis of similar political attitudes and complementary political resources."

Erie's conclusions are based on the report, "Paths to Political Incorporation For Latinos and Asian Pacifics in California," which he co-authored with Harold Brackman, a consultant for the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and James Ingram III, a graduate student at UCSD. The report was just published by the California Policy Seminar, a joint program of the University of California and State Government. Erie will discuss his findings at a California Policy Seminar briefing March 19 from 10:00 a.m. - Noon in the State Capitol Building, Room 113, in Sacramento.

To attend the briefing or receive a copy of the report, please call the California Policy Seminar at (510) 642-5514.

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