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978-1-107-03045-9 - Black-Latino Relations in U.S. National Politics: Beyond Conflict or Cooperation

Rodney E. Hero and Robert R. Preuhs

Excerpt

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## I

## Introduction

Relations between blacks and Latinos in American politics and society have become an increasingly relevant concern, arguably growing more important and complex over time. Though these matters have been studied extensively, virtually absent in the research is a systematic assessment of minority intergroup relations *at the national level*. Nearly all the research on such relations in governmental decision-making institutions has focused on urban/local politics, while another body of research has focused on mass attitudes (cf., for example, Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Telles et al. 2011; Nelson and Lavariega Monforti 2005, along with many other studies, a number of which are examined in Chapter 2). This book examines black-Latino relations in national politics with the central goal of describing and assessing them, and seeking to better understand their nature – specifically, whether those relations are most often characterized by conflict, independence, cooperation, or something else. To study this question, we examine an array of evidence that provides a firm basis for assessing black-Latino relations at the national level, which is essential if we are also to consider what might explain those relations. But, again, as things stand, because the existing research generally focuses on local politics or other dimensions of black-Latino relations, there has been little to no adequate evidence on which to base either empirical assessments or the theoretical understanding of black-Latino relations in national politics.

In later chapters we develop a great deal of evidence on Latino-black relations. In doing so, we keep in mind that most if not all politics, policy, and political issues are significantly different at the national level from those at other levels in U.S. politics – because of the differences in the

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“essential character” of the various levels, that is, unique “geography” of authority and particular types of policy responsibilities. Additionally, the role of ideology and of political parties tends to be substantially different at the national level and in local politics (cf. Trounstein 2010). Different geography leads to different constellations and configurations of interests at various levels; social relations may be affected by formal governmental or institutional settings. Highlighting such points, James Madison referred to the notion of the geography of politics as “sphere,” while E. E. Schattschneider later (1960) spoke of similar ideas as “scope” (of conflict). When that different geography or scope is formally coupled with the different types of policy responsibility of the national government (versus state and local governments) – as it *always* is in some way(s), and to some degree, as broadly delineated in the U.S. Constitution (and in state constitutions) – the distinctiveness of the national government is further evident, as is that of local and state governments. Because of these fundamental differences between the levels of government in the political system (Miller 2007; Peterson 1981), it is plausible to think that *interminority group relations* might *also* be different at the national level – but this possibility has not been examined much if at all in the American politics research literature.

To learn the actual nature of black-Latino relations at the national level is an empirical matter, of course, but very little empirical evidence exists that would allow systematic assessment of those relationships. Addressing this empirical void is a principal concern of this study. We further articulate the core questions and more fully elaborate the analytical approach and the explanatory perspective that animate our exploration later in the present and in subsequent chapters. First, however, we provide an example regarding a rather different aspect and process, though it is a familiar one, of American politics which (also) illustrates the differences in black-Latino political relations, and we suggest these relations seem to vary with the levels of government, the issues at stake, and other factors, such as the role of political parties.

The election of Barack Obama as president of the United States in 2008 is universally recognized as a major event in American political and social history. Not only was Obama the first candidate of African American background to be elected president, but he was also the first African American to be nominated by one of the major political parties. The stages of the selection process that culminated in his ascendance to the presidency suggest several points, including some especially germane to central concerns of this book – delineating and examining political

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relations between blacks and Latinos in U.S. national-level politics. In the nomination stage of the presidential selection process, which is a series of state (or “subnational”)-level primaries and caucuses, Obama received considerably less support from Latino voters in the Democratic primaries than did his major opponents, including Hillary Clinton, a U.S. senator from New York state (and wife of former U.S. president Bill Clinton, 1993–2000). Some observers claimed that the modest levels of Latino support for Obama were attributable to dislike between blacks and Latinos, some going so far as to claim that Latinos wouldn’t vote for a black candidate because of racial bias and/or intergroup antipathy: intergroup tension was the alleged reason for weak support for Obama. However, in the later national election – where the issues and choices are different and the popular vote is aggregated through the electoral college – about two-thirds of Latinos voted for Obama, a percentage a bit higher than for most previous Democratic nominees in recent presidential elections, and substantially higher than white voters. Thus, the earlier allegations that Latinos would be reluctant to support a black presidential candidate turned out to be unfounded or at least overstated.

An interpretation emerged that Latinos did not harbor animosity toward Obama, based on race or similar considerations, but they simply liked the other candidate for the Democrat nomination more. Also, the candidacy of a black candidate may not have had the same symbolic attachment for Latinos as for blacks. Hence, the different voting preferences during the nomination stage were not necessarily a sign of conflict but of different choices and policy emphasis. There is another, very plausible, and not mutually exclusive, reason for this. In the general election (as compared to the nomination stage) the greater commonality of policy preferences and general ideology – particularly issues of economic and social equality of blacks, which was also significantly abetted by the *interparty* rather than *intraparty* nature of the contest – might be expected to override black-Latino differences that otherwise exist. And as it turned out, the Latino vote for Obama (of about two-thirds) was substantially higher than among whites, though not as high as among blacks. Interestingly, then, the ultimate outcome of this election, which has often been characterized as indicative of a “post-racial” society in the subnational primary arena, was interpreted by some as indicating interminority group tension. However, assessments of black-Latino relations in the (more) national arena of the presidential selection process led to a different assessment.

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So, what might this outcome suggest to us about black-Latino relations in American politics? Is a strong general “comity” between blacks and Latinos the prevailing pattern – as the high Latino support for Obama in the 2008 general election seemed to indicate, and as has often been assumed to have been the case historically? Or is conflict common between blacks and Latinos in recent years, as echoed with some frequency in numerous research findings (cf. Telles et al. 2011, 13)? A considerable amount of scholarship finds that relations between blacks and Latinos are often competitive, even conflictual, especially in the urban/local spheres and are similarly manifested in groups’ attitudes toward one another, as some survey research indicates. Are these findings of intergroup tension representative of the overall situation? However accurate they may be, it is very unlikely they tell the whole story, given that they assess just one level of and/or one set of actors in the complex system of American government.

Group relations, and indeed virtually all aspects of American politics, are influenced by the larger institutional structure of the U.S. political system (see Madison, *Federalist* #10). One such feature is “federalism” which has various manifestations and implications (see Madison, *Federalist* #39 and #10). The nomination and election process for choosing the president suggests this. But because governmental authority is allocated or “divided” and/or “shared” geographically or territorially among the national, state, and local “levels” of government, politics is different in these levels. Indeed, the geographic and the policy authority *within* levels of government “go together” and are essentially two sides of one coin; that also pertains to differences in the geographic, and the types of policy, authority *between* levels of government. That basic reality suggests an inadequacy of drawing general conclusions about many aspects of American politics if the national level is not considered. But to this point black-Latino relations have essentially only been studied at one level of the governmental system, the urban/local level. Though clearly important, that specific focus overlooks another major arena of American politics.

Here, we explore black-Latino relations at the national level through the extensive data we have collected and examine. It may be that forms of intergroup relations other than conflict and cooperation exist, and these may likewise vary across levels of the governmental system (cf. Rocha 2007a; Telles et al., 2011, chapter 1). Carefully assessing the evidence on black-Latino relations in national politics – what forms these relations may take, among other things – is the major focus of this book. And if that analysis reveals patterns of black-Latino relations that are different

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from those frequently shown in research at other levels of government – and our findings are clearly different from those at the local level – possible explanations can be considered.

Our brief account of relations between blacks and Latinos at two junctures in the 2008 presidential process implies that the political context – the arena, institutions, the prominence of different policy issues – matters for politics, group relations, and policy decision making. The apparent impact on intergroup relations in the different arenas, venues, and stages and the choices presented as suggested in the presidential electoral processes seem to also be manifest in institutions of governance – national, state, and local governments – in the American system. Indeed, this has long been argued by such luminaries as Madison (*Federalist* #10; also see Schattschneider 1960; Peterson 1981), and has been broadly understood and generally accepted in American politics scholarship. Yet the potential or actual implications of such ideas are often overlooked and as a result their possible ramifications and utility for analytical purposes are not always fully appreciated. The ostensible absence of appropriate data with which to assess the nature of black-Latino relations in national politics poses an obstacle to studying the questions, and we grapple with and at least partly remedy these limitations in this book

National and state (and local) governments are, importantly, interconnected and also have some concurrent powers and together constitute the American “compound republic” (Madison, *Federalist* #39). At the same time, the several levels of government are very different in a number of ways that have consequences for many issues in American politics. Along with a number of other important claims in *Federalist* 10 (and elsewhere), Madison asserted that under the federal Constitution, “the great and aggregate interests” (or policy issues and concerns) would be “referred to the national legislature” (or government) while “local and particular” issues would be referred “to the State legislatures.” Notably, Madison referred to the national government as the “general” government, implying that other state and local governments had more particular or narrower domains of policy responsibility. The importance of the greater geographic breadth of national policy responsibilities is amplified when we consider that different types of policy often lead to different types of politics, which could well include political relations between groups supporting and opposing policies (Lowi 1964). If these arguments are accurate in general (again see Madison; Schattschneider 1960; Peterson 1981), by extension they also could pertain to policies of interest and relevance to black-Latino relations. And this remains so

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even when we acknowledge the considerable fluidity and complexity in American federalism over time and into the present.

In this study, in examining black-Latino relations in several venues and processes within national politics, we ask if there is evidence of conflict or of other types of intergroup relations. Does the nature of relations (conflict, and so on) vary in the several dimensions of the behaviors of the major actors in national politics we examine: in advocacy groups' testimony at congressional hearings and in amicus brief filings; in the issues identified as most important by minority advocacy/interest groups *and* in the positions these groups take on those issues considered by Congress; in the votes of (minority) representatives in Congress; and in other indicators of behavior and types of analysis? The national government is a unique and crucial access point in the American system and there are, further, institutions and processes that are unique to and within this level of government. It is important to analyze this arena, and we do so by examining numerous activities of minority advocacy organizations seeking to influence policy and of elected officials (minority members of Congress), and the interplay within and between these actors in the national policy-making process.

The particular questions we ask have not previously been posed and the research approach we take has not previously been pursued, though there have been studies of related matters. On the one hand, a large number of studies have examined black-Latino relations at the urban government level, in school district politics, and occasionally at the state level, as well as of mass attitudes (we discuss these in Chapter 2). On the other hand, a number of studies have examined various aspects of the behavior of black and of Latino members of Congress (MCs); but those studies have focused on these representatives separately and have given scant attention to *inter-minority* group relations and politics. Our study is novel in addressing black-Latino intergroup relations at the national level as well as in the extent and variety of evidence we bring to bear, which includes the activities of several sets of political actors across several aspects of the policy process. We believe our study is also novel in the theoretical insights we draw upon and develop to assess black-Latino relations at this level of government. Together these provide basic, essential, and varied knowledge along with a distinct analytical approach on black-Latino relations; in so doing, the study advances research on black-Latino relations. Whether we look and where we look for evidence (the levels of government, the range and types of data) has implications for what we find, and the conclusions we draw. Examining this particular

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set of previously unstudied and certainly under-studied questions, and in the way we do, furthers the understanding of black-Latino relations in U.S. national politics.

But what makes these issues important in the first place? Black-Latino relations are an important component of America's social structure and social change. It is especially significant because of the evolving demographic diversity in American society and the way intergroup relations manifest, affect, and are affected by politics. Given the general importance of (interest) groups in American politics, especially emphasized by the highly influential "pluralist" interpretation, the situation of and the relationships between the two largest minority groups – who will be the major elements of the country's likely "majority-minority" composition at some not-too-distant date – seems patently worthy of extended attention. The rather large body of research that has emerged on the topic affirms this (see, e.g., Telles et al. 2011; Nelson and Lavariega Monforti 2005; and other studies considered in Chapter 2). And black-Latino relations will surely have implications for other groups in the society and for the political system as a whole. Both groups are socioeconomically disadvantaged and their efforts to influence the political system and public policy – whether independently or in combination, or if there is conflict – are important issues of empirical democratic theory generally and (in) equality and representation in the political process more specifically (cf. Griffin and Newman 2008).

Under what circumstances, in what jurisdictional settings, and by what types of policies do the two groups advance similar or divergent policy concerns and preferences are all important issues. Furthermore, and beyond strictly group characteristics and policy preferences, exploring whether the governmental structure of the American political system affects intergroup relations is an interesting, if largely neglected, question. If group and intergroup goals, resources, and associated group attributes were the only or overriding explanations of intergroup relations, we would expect black-Latino relations to be basically similar at the national level and the local/state level; that is, there would primarily be scaled-up or scaled-down versions of essentially similar intergroup relations. However, as we will see, this does *not* seem to be the case, which suggests something else is going on, that other factors merit scrutiny. Our major findings – of "nonconflict," and "independence" between blacks and Latinos in national-level politics – suggest that perhaps the institutions of the governmental system, factors "hidden in plain sight," may condition or mediate intergroup relations and thus influence the degree

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of contentiousness; these factors seem to help explain the proverbial “dog that didn’t bark.” Our research endeavor and analyses thus offer a different vantage point for understanding racial/ethnic diversity and intergroup relations in American politics. And the different vantage point leads to a different view of such relations.

The questions we analyze both emerge from and inform several bodies of scholarship. Our work is clearly imbedded within research on race/ethnicity in American politics and should shed light on understudied aspects of this area. When we consider the activities of black and Latino political “elites,” specifically, interest or advocacy groups and members of Congress, we delve into the interest group, the Congress, and “representation,” and judicial research literatures, among others. Distinctive attributes of the national government, which differ from those of local and state government, are, we suspect, important. The unique geographic breadth and the particular nature of policy authority of the national government are most directly significant, but the differences of the U.S. Congress and the Supreme Court set it/them apart within the structure and levels of government. Local government legislative bodies, city councils, are vastly different from the U.S. Congress in the types of authority they wield and the capacity they have; and there is, of course, nothing comparable to the U.S. Supreme Court in local governments. (The types of policy responsibilities and activities at the national level, and their differences from other levels are apparent in the data presented throughout the empirical analyses, in Chapters 3–7). These points should be remembered as we now turn to delineating and placing our analysis in broader perspective by discussing several background issues. We summarize recent social developments, discuss earlier expectations and subsequent findings about black-Latino relations, and further elaborate upon several substantive and theoretical arguments that guide our analysis.

## Background

The importance of understanding contemporary and evolving black-Latino relations is underscored by thinking about it in broader historical terms. By the middle of the twenty-first century, the American racial and ethnic landscape will reach a new milestone; white non-Hispanics will no longer make up the majority of the country’s population. Instead, what are commonly considered racial and ethnic minority groups are expected to jointly comprise about 50 percent of the population, up from 34 percent in 2008, according to U.S. Census estimates (U.S. Census 2008a);

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in other words, the United States will be a majority-minority country. The Hispanic/Latino and Asian populations have been growing rapidly while the black and the white populations are increasing modestly by comparison. Latinos in 2009 comprise about 16 percent of the nation's population, surpassing blacks (who currently make up about 13 percent) in 2003. And in some U.S. states – including the nation's two largest, California and Texas – majority-minority populations have already been realized, with Latinos as the plurality minority group in both these states. By 2050, the Census Bureau estimates that black and Latino populations will remain the two largest racial/ethnic minority groups, but with Latinos comprising 30 percent and blacks accounting for 15 percent of the population. Combined, blacks and Latinos will roughly equal non-Hispanic Whites.

This basic information is relatively familiar to many scholars and those interested in public affairs; less clear, however, is what these developments might mean for relations between blacks and Latinos and more generally for American politics and society. The historical condition of blacks/African Americans has been viewed as the core of the “American dilemma” of race; yet at the same time, America has an image of itself as “a nation of immigrants.” Concurrently, the Latino experience in the United States has been interpreted as having “racialized” as well as “ethnic” and “immigrant” dimensions (see, e.g., Schmidt et al. 2010; Hero 1992; Skrentny 2002). What do these varying characterizations of these groups suggest, and what do changes toward an increasingly multiethnic society imply, for American politics generally and for minority intergroup relations, particularly those between blacks and Latinos? Despite much popular discussion, references to, and considerable speculation about multiethnic politics and about “moving beyond a ‘black/white’ paradigm,” few studies of American national politics have considered such questions directly (see, e.g., Clarke et al. 2006; McClain 1993; McClain and Karnig 1990; Meier and Stewart 1991; Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Kim 1999). The present study is an effort to engage these issues.

*The Promise of the Multiracial Coalition*

In a 1990 Martin Luther King Jr. Day speech, Cesar Chavez, the leader of the United Farm Workers (UFW) and an important figure in Latino/Chicano civil rights history, underscored the similarities in the struggles for equal rights shared by blacks and Latinos in the United States. Chavez recalled King's 1968 letter of support for Chavez's first fast in which King

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wrote, “Our separate struggles are really one. A struggle for freedom, for dignity, and for humanity” (Chavez 1990). The notion that blacks and Latinos share a similar struggle for civil, economic, and political rights is neither new nor objectively naïve. While the black struggle is the basis for most of the civil rights era legislation in the 1960s and 1970s, Latino rights became a part of a range of laws and other policies adopted during this era (Skrentny 2002). Affirmative action programs aimed at boosting economic and, importantly, educational equality have been applied to both groups, and the current animosity toward groups that benefit from affirmative action programs seems to vary by region, based on the size of the black or Latino population. Where the black population is large, blacks are perceived as the “undeserving” beneficiaries, while similar animosity is applied toward Latinos in regions with larger Latino populations (cf. Fox 2004).

By almost all measures of objective data, blacks and Latinos share a subordinate status to whites. Both blacks and Latinos have substantially higher unemployment rates than do whites (U.S. Census Bureau 2008b); they are almost two to three times as likely to live in poverty as whites, and they have median family incomes of around two-thirds the income of white families (U.S. Census Bureau 2008c). Blacks and Latino students are more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to score well on standardized college entrance exams than white non-Hispanic students, and both are also more likely than whites to face suspension and other disciplinary actions in school (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 2008). Blacks and Latinos have higher case rates of AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) than whites, yet are also more likely than whites to lack health insurance (Kaiser Family Foundation 2008). The list goes on, and the gaps between whites and blacks or Latinos – while reduced in some instances and over a very long time frame – persist. The ratio between black and white unemployment rates, for instance, is about the same in 2008 as it was in 1972 and roughly comparable patterns emerge for Latinos. In short, there are ample grounds to assume that politically, economically, and socially, black and Latino struggles are similar; indeed, they have important commonalities and are “one” in some important ways. Shared subordinate status provided a basis for multiracial coalitions that emerged in the national and some localized governmental contexts.

One of the more visible manifestations of this coalitional impulse was led by Jesse Jackson, the well-known black civil rights leader and 1988 Democratic presidential primary candidate who formed PUSH (People United to Serve Humanity) in 1971 with the goals of “economic