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The New Electoral Politics of Race (review)

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have faded from public view, “multiracial movement” was all about classification. Actually, for most people joining multiracial organizations in the 1990s, classification was a minor concern. Moreover, such an interpretation misses the cultural conditions (e.g., social stigma attached to interracial families and identities) and institutional practices (beyond the always important recognition of the group-making capacities of statistical agencies) that have helped to create the desire for social recognition in the first place. The continuing creation of multiracial organizations and their growing media visibility suggest that this “population” is attempting to strengthen its sense of groupness. The future size and political visibility of one (or several) multiracial population(s) will hinge in part on whether this community of interests strengthens what are now very weak institutions and further elaborates a cultural identity. What is certain, however, is that the “counting of multiracial individuals” will play a role in that process.

The New Electoral Politics of Race.

By Matthew J. Streb. University of Alabama Press, 2002. 259 pp. Cloth, \$39.95.

Reviewer: DAVID WEAKLIEM, *University of Connecticut*

This book explores the conflict between race and class divisions in politics by examining recent gubernatorial elections in seven states. The argument rests on the principle that the salience of race to white voters depends on the size of the black population. Consequently, appeals to racial themes will be more effective in states with large black populations. Working-class voters are particularly susceptible to such appeals, and so the presence of a large black population provides conservative politicians with an opportunity to split the traditional Democratic coalition. Although explicit appeals to race are generally not acceptable in contemporary American politics, it is possible to achieve the same affect by discussion of issues such as welfare or crime.

This is a familiar argument and has already been explored in a number of studies. Streb’s contribution is to focus on the behavior of politicians rather than voters. Although there is some analysis of exit poll data, the heart of the book is a series of narratives of recent gubernatorial election campaigns. Streb has extensive analyses of Alabama, Georgia, Arkansas, and Virginia and brief discussions of three northern states. His results confirm that Republican candidates made more effort to play on white interests and fears in states with larger black populations. Democrats tried to defuse racial appeals by focusing on issues such as a proposed state lottery. Streb also seeks to consider the effect of class composition on party strategy. Alabama, for example, combines a large black population with a large number of working-class whites, while Georgia has a large black population but a smaller number of working-class whites. His

definition of class, however, will not satisfy most sociologists, since it is based entirely on income. Moreover, no clear difference along this dimension emerges from his analysis. Hence, the book does not make much contribution to the analysis of the relationship between race and class in electoral politics.

Streb presents his study as an attempt to solve a “puzzle”: why race continues to have an important impact on voting choices even though explicit racial rhetoric has largely disappeared. However, this question is a puzzle only if one assumes that votes are determined by positions on the issues of the day. When one considers evidence on the general staying power of group cleavages, it does not seem surprising that blacks should continue to vote Democratic in overwhelming numbers.

Overall, the book is likely to have more appeal to political scientists than to sociologists. Streb makes little or no reference to the sociological literature on class or race, and his basic conclusions are not surprising. However, the accounts of the election campaigns are interesting, particularly in showing the extent to which state politics reflect idiosyncratic local concerns. In Virginia, for example, a Republican candidate won largely on the basis of a promise to repeal a car tax, even though polls showed that most voters did not believe that he would carry out this promise. The narratives also illustrate that divisions between left and right are often very muted at the state level. Democrats tend to emphasize improving education, while Republicans emphasize cutting taxes, but issues such as abortion and gun control seem to play little role. Since all the elections studied occurred in the late 1990s, it is not possible to say how widely the evidence can be generalized. Nevertheless, they indicate that state politics should not be regarded as national politics in miniature. The case studies also show that party strategy can have a substantial effect on voting patterns. In Arkansas, Republican Mike Huckabee was able to win almost 48 percent of the black vote, not far short of his performance among whites. At the other extreme, the Republican candidate won only 5 percent of the black vote in Alabama. It would be interesting to see if such distinctive state patterns persist over time.

Although its theoretical contribution is modest, *The New Electoral Politics of Race* is well written and contains a good deal of interesting material. If nothing else, it can remind political sociologists that there is a lot going on below the national level.