IMMIGRATION AND THE FUTURE OF BLACK POWER IN U.S. CITIES[1]

Karen M. Kaufmann

Department of Government and Politics, University of Maryland, College Park

Abstract

As a result of urban immigration and White flight over the past three decades, the demography of U.S. cities has changed rather dramatically; approximately one-half of the largest hundred cities are now composed of minority majorities. Many urban scholars expected these demographic shifts to enhance the prospects for minority electoral alliances. In reality, however, few such alliances have emerged. This paper looks to explore the barriers to effective coalition building between native-born African Americans and their immigrant counterparts. In the first half of the paper, I explore the psychological barriers to mass coalitions, focusing on the negative stereotypes and perceived zero-sum conflict that exist between native-born African Americans and Latino immigrants. The second half of the paper argues that material and symbolic incentives fuel ongoing competition between Blacks and Latinos in the political sphere. The paper concludes with a discussion of how immigrant-induced diversity coupled with existing racial hierarchies work against future Black empowerment. Even when changing urban demography makes Whites a numerical minority, White voters often retain their status as urban power players through their ability to divide minority voters at the polls. Divisive electoral strategies that offer political rewards to one group at the expense of others threaten Black incorporation in the urban arena. Unless minority leadership changes the incentive structure embedded in the traditional modes of municipal governance, Whites will persist in their economic dominance, while disadvantaged immigrants and Blacks will continue to make political choices that yield small, short-term rewards at the expense of greater social and economic justice.

Keywords: Immigration, Black Politics, Urban Politics, City Politics, Minority Coalitions

INTRODUCTION

Profound levels of immigration over recent decades have transformed the social, political, and economic landscape of the urban United States. As of the most recent census, approximately one-half of the largest hundred U.S. cities boast minority majority populations. While White flight from central cities was an early contributor to this transformation, new immigrant settlement has been the principal engine of

demographic change in recent decades. The vast majority of new immigrants come from Asia and Latin America. In percentage terms, Asians represent the fastest growing immigrant collective; in absolute numbers, however, Latinos have posted the greatest gains and currently comprise the largest minority group in the nation.[2]

Many urban scholars, undoubtedly fueled by notions of "rainbow" coalitions, expected these demographic shifts to enhance the prospects for minority representation and, in the process, to replace many business-centric local governments with minority-led, progressive regimes. While immigration has certainly left its mark on the racial composition of many U.S. cities, the promise of sustainable minority coalitions and new progressive governments remains unmet. If anything, contemporary urban politics suggests that immigration-induced diversity may actually threaten the prospects for future Black empowerment.

A good deal of scholarship on immigration aims to explore the economic ramifications that large-scale influxes of immigrants pose for native-born African American and White populations. Do high levels of immigration depress wages? Do immigrants displace native-born workers in urban labor markets? Do immigrants impose excessive financial burdens on the local and state agencies that fund necessary public services? Considerable evidence suggests that immigrants are good for cities; yet contrary findings suggest that struggling, native urban dwellers are worse off in the face of mounting immigration (Borjas 1998, 2001; Grogan and Proscio, 2001; Lim 2001; Lowenstein 2006; Waldinger 2001). Whether immigrants are a net gain to or a net drain on native workers and local resources is an ongoing source of contention. A less debated point, however, pertains to growing hostilities between new immigrants and Black natives; perceived competition and negative outgroup stereotyping remain all-too-common features of urban life (Gay 2006; Johnson et al., 1999; Kaufmann 2006; McClain et al., 2006; Vaca 2004).[3]

While many scholars continue to evaluate the economic impact of urban immigration, relatively few consider the political ramifications of changing urban demography. U.S. cities are the birthplace of Black political power and continue to be the most likely venue for African American political incorporation. Black populations, in proportional terms, are shrinking in many urban areas as immigration and high immigrant birthrates contribute disproportionately to population growth. To the extent that immigrants build political alliances with native-born African Americans, current levels of Black empowerment may be sustainable in the long run. Contemporary realities suggest, however, that Black-Latino electoral coalitions are the exception and not the rule. Recent big-city mayoral elections in Houston, Denver, Miami, New York, and Los Angeles illustrate an ever more obvious urban fact: Blacks and Latinos seldom rally behind one another's candidates in local elections.[4]

The fate of urban Blacks and their ability to achieve descriptive representation has almost always required Black politicians to attract multiracial electoral support. The number of cities with sizeable Black majorities is small, and this is especially true among larger cities. Early Black victories in local politics resulted from electoral coalitions of Blacks; Latino immigrants; and higher status, liberal Whites. The basis for these early alliances was rooted in group interests, as minorities and liberals were often mutual outsiders to conservative governing regimes (Sonenshein 1993). White support for the first generation of Black mayors rarely exceeded 20%; nonetheless, high levels of Black voter participation, combined with support from Latinos (where present) and White voters, resulted in pathbreaking electoral victories (Pettigrew 1972). Over the past forty years, the number of African American city council members and mayors has risen considerably, and local politics remain the principal locus of Black political power. In spite of racial progress in the municipal realm,

Black candidates for national office continue to experience limited success, particularly when African Americans comprise electoral minorities. African American candidates are hard-pressed to attract sufficient racial crossover voting so as to be able to win most gubernatorial, senate, and congressional races (Reeves 1997; Tate 2004).

Given the relative growth of urban minority populations over the past half century, conventional wisdom would predict increasing gains in minority representation. These expectations, based on historical coalitions between African American and Latino urban dwellers, assume that minority majority status in demography translates into minority political dominance in local elections. In spite of growing minority representation, there are still very few urban areas where Black and Latino officeholders correspond proportionally to their numbers (Browning et al., 2003). Immigration, which has fueled the vast majority of urban change over the past three decades, provides few new voters in the short run, and is responsible in part for the continuing electoral dominance of White voters in many cities. Beyond questions of citizenship and immigrant mobilization, the absence of sustainable political alliances between Blacks and Latinos may constitute the most pernicious barrier to future Black representation and, more generally, to greater minority incorporation.

This article looks to explore the various impediments to sustainable minority coalitions with an eye to their implications for Black and Latino empowerment. The first section reexamines some of the seminal perspectives on urban coalition building in a contemporary light. Many of the assumptions that informed our earliest understandings of urban political behavior seem less applicable today when accounting for changing demography and evolving social and political attitudes. The second section pertains to the priorities and operating procedures of most municipal governments and the extent to which they provide too few incentives for minority coalition building. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how the development of Black-Latino alliances is hindered by pessimistic attitudes regarding the expected gains from minority empowerment. To a large degree, individuals rely on past experiences to make assessments about future payoffs (Downs 1957). As city leaders across the racial spectrum have embraced conservative governing paradigms that reinforce status quo power relations, urban minorities have become increasingly discouraged with politics as an efficient means of community uplift (Reed 1999; Thompson 2005). All the same, it is not clear that minority mayors and city councils are bound to status quo governing arrangements. To the extent that alternative governing paradigms, providing substantially greater minority access to public resources are feasible, African American and Latino voters may find renewed impetus to cooperate at the ballot box.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF URBAN COALITIONS

According to much of the traditional urban politics literature, coalitions are formed on the basis of overlapping interests, shared political ideologies, dynamic leadership, or a bit of all three (Browning et al., 1984; Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967; Gilliam 1996; Sonenshein 1993). Carmichael and Hamilton's seminal work *Black Power* makes a strong case for the preeminence of material interests over other factors. They persuasively argue:

> The third myth proceeds from the premise that political coalitions can be sustained on a moral, friendly or sentimental basis, or on appeals to conscience. We view this as a myth because we believe that political relations are based on

self-interest. . . . Politics results from a conflict of interests, not of consciences (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967, p. 75).

From this view, the biracial coalitions that elected the first generation of Black mayors were not tenable over the long haul. White voters (no matter how liberal) were unlikely to partner with Blacks in a full-fledged effort to reform racist institutions that advantage Whites over Blacks.

Other urban scholars place more emphasis on shared ideology as the essential link between Whites and minority voters. Browning et al. (1984) argue that liberalism was a necessary precondition for minority incorporation to occur in the ten northern California cities that formed the basis for their study. Sonenshein (1993) reinforces this ideological account when he attributes Tom Bradley's political ascent and sustained popularity as mayor of Los Angeles, in part, to the shared liberal values of Bradley's multiracial coalition.

The notion that ideological unity forms a solid basis for political alliance calls for some skepticism. Was the glue that held the Bradley coalition together really a shared liberal ideology that promoted social welfare and redistribution? Probably not, as there is little evidence that Bradley engaged in much redistributive politics (Davis 1990; Meyerson 2004; Sonenshein 1993). Rather, during the 1960s and 1970s, when Whites dominated urban governments and minority victories were hard fought and rare, one could argue that the shared ideology linking liberal Anglos, African Americans, and Latinos was as pragmatic as it was political. Simply put, it was better to be in power than out of power.

The Bradley coalition, like many biracial and multiracial coalitions during this period, brought disparate groups of people together in pursuit of a common goal: to open the doors of City Hall to outsiders. For racial minorities, these victories provided symbolic validation, as well as access to desirable public jobs and contracts. For the well-educated and sometimes affluent Jews who often partnered in these early alliances, they gained access to the elite business networks from which they had been previously excluded (Sonenshein 2001). This is not to say that the groups who made up these history-making coalitions were not well intentioned or committed to the larger goal of racial equality; nonetheless, the importance of group interests to the creation of these early coalitions cannot be understated.

Comprehending coalition politics in the contemporary era requires us to reconsider some of the basic assumptions that informed earlier work. Minority mayors and city council members, for example, are no longer novelties (Browning et al., 2003). Few groups face hardened barriers to political inclusion as they did thirty years ago. Blacks and Latinos—once reluctant coalition partners out of numerical necessity—often have more options in the current environment.[5] Latinos, in particular, have gone from being the perennial bridesmaids of urban politics to becoming powerful independent political forces in many cities. African Americans, conversely, have lost their uncontested place atop the minority political hierarchy. Black voters in most U.S. cities are typically better organized than are Latinos. The sheer number of Latino voters coupled with their own growing organizational capacity, however, has made them worthy competitors in a growing number of urban settings. As conceded by political scientist Raphael Sonenshein in a recent assessment of the "ideology versus interest" debate surrounding urban coalitions,

Urban liberalism has become ill-defined. Conservatism also has little coherence. Can cities become less liberal *and* less conservative at the same time? The shift in ideological lines caused by the surge of reformist white moderates and conser-

vatives and the rise of Latinos has raised new issues concerning the roles of ideology and interest in urban politics (Sonenshein 2003b, p. 343).

One thing that hasn't changed much over the past thirty years is the drive to be included among the political establishment. For Blacks and Latinos, however, political inclusion does not necessarily imply interminority cooperation. White voters, even when not in the majority, are pivotal swing constituencies that provide coalitional options beyond the Black-Latino alliance. Recent mayoral elections provide numerous examples of electoral coalitions in which Whites join forces with Blacks or Latinos in support of White candidates over minority candidates (Browning et al., 2003; Crummy and Simpson, 2003; Greene and Roberts, 2003; Kaufmann 2004; Mindiola et al., 2002; Rodriguez 2001; Williams et al., 2003).

Given the economic disadvantage and power disparities that typically exist between urban Whites and their Black and Latino counterparts, minority voting behavior that gives preference to White candidates over more politically liberal, minority contenders is certainly counterintuitive. Why would Blacks and Latinos, especially those who dwell in the lowest tiers of the urban economic hierarchy, choose to vote for Anglo moderates over minority liberals? Why would Blacks in Miami and Latinos in Houston abandon otherwise long-standing Democratic Party loyalties, choosing to place their collective fate in the hands of Republican candidates?

Social psychologists and political scientists suggest that ingroup preferences in the form of racial pride or ethnic solidarity are at times sufficiently commanding to override typically powerful partisan considerations (Brewer 2001; Kaufmann 2004). To the extent that minorities abandon their party ties in favor of their own racial brethren, this may be an apt explanation. Beyond the ethnic solidarity perspective, urban scholars also point to competition and racial animus as barriers to interracial cooperation (Bobo and Johnson, 2000; Johnson and Oliver, 1989; Mindiola et al., 2002; Olzak 1992; Vaca 2004). Many Blacks and Latinos harbor hostile attitudes toward one another, and, in some cases, attitudes that are more negative toward each other than they are toward Whites. In spite of ongoing Anglo racial dominance, which, through cultural and institutional discrimination, relegates people of color to an inferior status in many walks of American life, ethnic minorities often reserve disproportionately large amounts of ill will for their subordinated brethren. As regularly noted by political scientists, Blacks and Latinos have ample policy-based reasons to vote in tandem. In spite of these apparent shared interests, however, interracial competition for jobs, housing, status, and political power undermine the prospects for mass political alliances (Bobo and Hutchings, 1996; Gay 2006; Grenier and Castro, 1998; Jennings 1992, 1994; Johnson et al., 1999; Jones-Correa 2001; Kaufmann 2006; Lim 2001; Lublin and Tate, 1995; McClain 1996; McClain and Stewart, 1998; McClain and Tauber, 2001).

SOURCES OF BLACK-LATINO CONFLICT

Social science research points to a variety of explanations for the ongoing hostilities between African Americans and Latino immigrants. Negative stereotypes combine with intense interracial competition and status resentments to frustrate mass minority alliances in urban politics. It is not unusual for African Americans and Latinos to collaborate in the policy arena, and cooperation is quite common in the context of local organizations that provide community-based services (Burns 2006; Grogan and Proscio, 2001). On the electoral front, however, elite cooperation is less reliable, and,

even in those rare instances where Black and Latino elites rally behind a consensus minority candidate, competitive distrust and hostile feelings between Black and Latino voters can be sufficiently powerful to sunder such elite-led arrangements (Browning et al., 2003; Kaufmann 2004).

As has been illustrated in many studies, outgroup negative stereotyping is pervasive among Blacks and Latinos (Bobo and Massagli, 2001; Bobo and Johnson, 2000; Kaufmann 2006; Mindiola et al., 2002; Wilson and Taub, 2006). For Latino immigrants, many come to this country with negative views of African Americans, although advanced education and social contact appear to mitigate the intensity of these views (McClain et al., 2006; Suro 1999; Vaca 2004). The findings from the McClain et al. (2006) study indicate that new Latino immigrants feel closer to Whites than to Blacks[6] and African Americans are more likely to feel commonality with Latinos than vice versa (Kaufmann 2003b; McClain et al., 2006). On balance, this research finds no reservoir of good feelings between Blacks and Latinos that would facilitate cooperation between their respective voters.

Beyond the negative stereotypes, intense competition between Blacks and Latinos creates difficult climates within which to build political alliances. Past research suggests that feelings of competitive threat may be more prevalent among African Americans than among similar-status Latinos. For example, findings from the Multi-City Study on Urban Inequality indicate that 61% of Blacks in Los Angeles believe that the availability of more good jobs for Latinos means fewer good jobs for Blacks. By contrast, only 35% of Latinos see their economic fortunes inversely tied to Black economic success (Kaufmann 2006). Regarding politics, 54% of Blacks perceive Latino political gains in zero-sum terms, compared to 25% of Latinos. In general, Blacks are more likely to see immigrants as direct competitors for valued resources and status, and these zero-sum orientations are unquestionably detrimental to the prospects for minority mass alliances.

Racial stratification in the United States provides the ongoing impetus for interminority conflict. A recent study by Claudine Gay (2006) concludes that resentment over status inequality is at the root of anti-Latino sentiments among African Americans. She finds that Blacks who live in neighborhoods where they are, on average, better off financially than their Latino neighbors are much less likely to express negative views of Latinos; conversely, Blacks who live in neighborhoods where Latino incomes exceed Black incomes are the most likely to hold negative stereotypes. The same logic applies to zero-sum orientations; African Americans who perceive Latinos to be "richer" than African Americans are much more likely to see economic and political gains by Latinos in zero-sum terms (Kaufmann 2006). To the extent that racial stratification and pervasive inequalities continue to characterize urban environments, one can predict that status resentments will continue to fuel negative stereotypes and zero-sum orientations.

ARE BLACK-LATINO COALITIONS RATIONAL?

While contemporary urban scholarship correctly identifies the intense competition and psychological barriers that hinder the development of interminority coalitions, the subtext in much of this work is the seeming irrationality of it all; scholars assume that Blacks and Latinos would *obviously* be individually and collectively better off if they governed in unity. This perspective assumes that minority mayors and legislators are particularly responsive to poor urban communities, especially in contrast to White-led administrations. This assumption, regardless of how reason-

able it appears, is not a matter of fact. The preponderance of evidence to date suggests that minority representation does quite little to advance minority interests above and beyond policies and programs that already exist under White regimes. With this observation as a starting point, I incorporate insights from urban political economy research (Peterson 1981; Stone 1993) and social-choice theory (Downs 1957; Riker 1962, 1967; Riker and Zavoina, 1970) to offer an interest-based explanation for the absence of multiracial urban electoral coalitions. This argument maintains that minority-specific rewards in the realm of local government are largely inelastic. Given the perceived fixed quality of minority-directed benefits, Blacks and Latinos have powerful incentives to compete with one another for control of these resources. To the extent that the pool of minority benefits such as government jobs, appointments, contracts, and redistributive monies will not be appreciably larger under a minority-led regime than it is under a White-led government, minority groups will be better off as the most powerful minority in a coalition with Anglos than as the second most powerful in a minority-led administration. For Blacks and Latinos, the impetus for political inclusion is not so much about *opening up* new sources of minority opportunity as it is about *controlling* those already established. From this perspective, the absence of minority coalition building at both the elite and the mass level generally constitutes rational, group-interested behavior.

THE INELASTICITY OF THE MINORITY PIE

During the first few decades of the civil rights movement, the political objectives of urban minority leaders were clear: they were looking for access to the halls of power—for descriptive representation, and for a more equitable share of public resources (Browning et al., 2003). Increasing municipal employment opportunities, greater numbers of administrative positions, access to government contracts, and improved civilian oversight of the police were among the premier achievements of Black incorporation (Browning et al., 1984; Mladenka 1989; Sonenshein 1993). Civil rights activists and liberal visionaries probably never presumed, however, that these first-round victories would constitute the proverbial pot at the end of the rainbow some thirty years later.

Black mayors and city council members were able to create opportunities for lower-level public employment, some higher-level administrative jobs, and even greater numbers of government contracts (Kerr and Mladenka, 1994), but they were not able to overhaul the racially biased institutions that play favorites with the downtown business elite. Nor did they develop new redistributive programs that would help the ever-growing numbers of urban poor. Black incorporation generated considerable rewards for middle-class African Americans, but was much less successful at creating community uplift for those most disadvantaged (Gilliam 1996; Nelson 2000; Reed 1986). To this day, municipal jobs, administrative appointments, and access to government contracts remain the principal spoils of minority empowerment (Burns 2006).

In the 1970s, Michael Preston (1976), among others, argued that the first generation of Black mayors were constrained from better serving their racial brethren because they often led cities that had been among the most devastated by White flight and deindustrialization. With an ever-shrinking tax base, this cohort of Black mayors—under constant scrutiny—was hard-pressed to increase taxes and social services. As time moved on, however, and as Black mayors became more common-

place, their policies continued to mirror those of White mayors. Black, Latino, and Anglo mayors all operate under a similar paradigm, which privileges business interests over those of the working class and the poor (Nelson 2000; Reed 1986; Stone 1993). The business elite are an integral part of urban governing coalitions and, not coincidentally, the central players in most mayoral election campaigns (Stone 1989; Swanstrom 1998). Enhancing the pot of local monies allocated to job training, public housing, child care, public health services, and the like is simply off the table of policy options in most major cities. Funding for these kinds of local initiatives largely comes from the federal and state governments; as federal and state agencies have cut their budgets, so, too, have local commitments eroded over the past several decades (Judd and Swanstrom, 2007; Nelson 2000; Ross and Levine, 2000).

The "minority pie"—that bundle of jobs, contracts, and appointments often earmarked for racial and ethnic minorities—is relatively inelastic; it does not necessarily increase with demand, minority leadership does not provide a good deal more of it, and, interestingly enough, White leadership typically does not yield less of it.[7] In the early years of minority incorporation, public jobs and contracts were—like most other things—the province of dominant Whites. Over time, however, many urban regimes in racially diverse cities have ceded control over certain categories of municipal jobs to middle-class and working-class minorities. According to recent research on municipal employment patterns in multiracial cities, Blacks and Latinos posted significant gains in nonmanagerial employment in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, especially in those departments that have traditionally served minority clientele, such as health, housing, public welfare, and community development. During the same time period, however, Latinos and African Americans made only modest inroads into the managerial ranks, falling well short of proportionality in all departments, save public welfare (Kerr et al., 2000).[8] To a large degree, access to public jobs, certain administrative appointments, and a portion of government contracts is the concession that the White power elite have made to minority interests in return for reciprocal cooperation regarding the lucrative and highly exclusionary development agenda (Hajnal and Trounstine, 2004; Stone 1989; but see Peterson 1981). Given the enormous value that the business community attaches to control over land use and economic development funds, this co-optation strategy that trades public jobs for control over development spending has been a boon to business interests (Logan and Molotch, 1987).

The other part of the minority pie is redistributive spending that mostly benefits the poor and working class. Unlike the public jobs and contracts essential to the ongoing operation of local governments, redistributive programs such as publicly subsidized health care services, welfare, and housing assistance are often politically contested and almost always controversial. Cities are generally loath to raise local taxes to provide such services; the beneficiaries are almost never members of the governing coalition, whereas the opponents to redistributive programs almost always are. Given federal retrenchment regarding poverty programs and the reluctance of state and local governments to fund such efforts, it comes as little surprise that redistributive spending constitutes a fairly miniscule portion of a typical city government budget.[9] Cities with highly participatory minority electorates spend ever so slightly more on redistributive programs than do cities with little minority turnout (Hajnal and Trounstine, 2004), and cities with large minority populations do *not* have higher redistributive expenditures per capita than cities with smaller minority populations (Craw 2003). In general, these findings suggest that redistributive spending, as a proportion of total municipal expenditures, is both small and also quite inelastic.

To the extent that urban Blacks and Latinos have a material stake in the operations of local government, public jobs, contracts, and administrative appointments are the stakes. One might argue that these are akin to a patronage set aside to reward minority groups who end up in the winning governing coalition. From a more cynical perspective, one might even characterize them as the "carrot" that keeps minority politicians from mobilizing the poor and making more strident demands on local treasuries (Mollenkopf 2003; Reed 1999; Stone 1989, 1993; Thompson 2005).

THE MYTH OF SHARED INTERESTS

In cities with a single, numerically dominant minority population, there should be little contest over spoils. Public jobs, administrative posts, and minority set asides will primarily be directed toward members of this dominant minority group.[10] In the multiethnic city, however, the minority group that garners the top spot (*vis-à-vis* other ethnic minority groups) in the political arena gets a disproportionate amount of these resources. Recent evidence from large cities—the Giuliani administration in New York, the Riordan regime in Los Angeles, and the Webb administration in Denver, for example—all suggest that the dominant minority group in the governing coalition (Latinos in New York and Los Angeles, Blacks in Denver) receive disproportionately large shares of public goods (Hero and Clarke, 2003; Kaufmann 2003a; Sonenshein 2003a). In this "winner takes most" system of minority rewards, the prospect of being in the winning coalition is a powerful incentive to coalesce with White voters against competing minority groups. If the pool of municipal rewards for minority voters doesn't grow when minority candidates succeed, if it doesn't grow when liberal White candidates win, and if it doesn't shrink much when conservative White candidates prevail, then rationality dictates that Black and Latino voters each strive to be the largest minority group in the winning coalition.

There certainly was a point in time not too long ago when the incremental gains of minority electoral success were unmistakable. Victory at the ballot box for African Americans meant new access to a pool of important public resources, not the least of which were middle-class jobs in the public sector. Political failure during this time period was akin to economic exclusion. During the late 1960s and the 1970s, Blacks and Whites constituted the main players in the urban arena. The main objective of Blacks was to mobilize their racial brethren while attracting a sufficient number of White voters to form a winning majority. The main objective of Whites was also to mobilize their voters and to minimize racial defections (Nelson and Meranto, 1977; Pettigrew 1972). In the contemporary multiracial context, however, strategies are more complex.

If one thinks about multiracial urban elections as a three-player game, the overarching objective of each player is to be part of the winning coalition (Riker and Zavoina, 1970). In this three-player configuration—assuming for the moment that all three parties control equal shares of the votes and that there are no racial defections—there are three possible winning coalitions: Latino-White, Black-White, or Black-Latino. Given the relative inelasticity of minority rewards, the rational goal of minority voters should be to end up in the winning coalition *and* ahead of all other minority groups. In the three-player scenario thus described, minorities are always better off in a coalition with Whites than with the other minority group. (See Figure 1.)
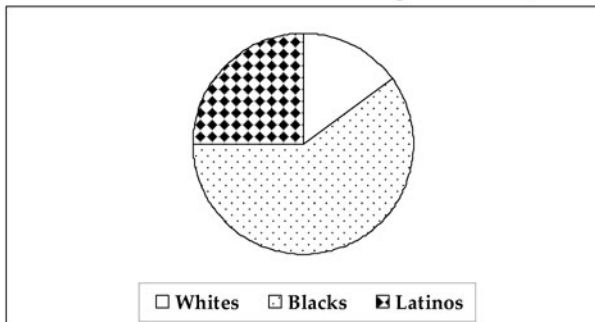
Scenario #1 Latino-White Winning Coalition

☐ Whites ☐ Blacks ☒ Latinos
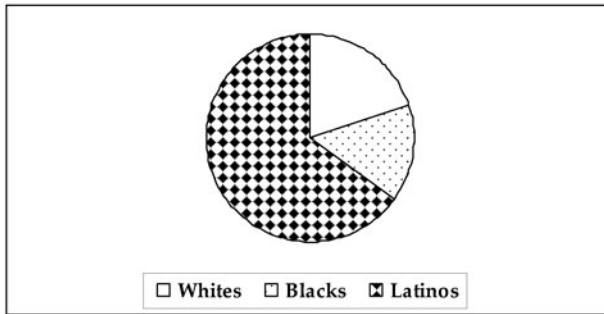
Scenario #2 Black-White Winning Coalition

☐ Whites ☐ Blacks ☐ Latinos
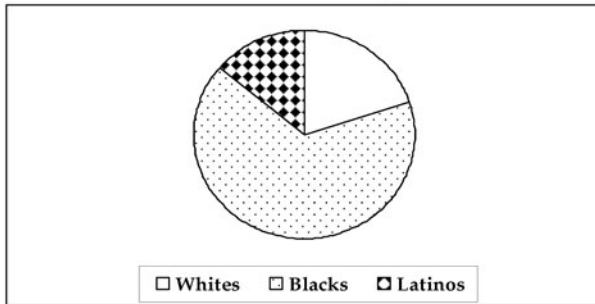
Scenario #3 Black-Latino Winning Coalition (Blacks dominant)

☐ Whites ☐ Blacks ☒ Latinos

Note: Pie charts represent the proportion of municipal jobs allocated by racial group in three hypothetical election scenarios. Municipal jobs do not constitute all jobs, but rather are assumed to be those in departments and job categories traditionally allocated to racial and ethnic minorities.

Fig. 1. Hypothetical Coalition Payoffs Assuming Inelasticity of Minority-Directed Jobs

THE INDIVISIBILITY OF SYMBOLIC REWARDS

Material gains are certainly not the only spoils of minority empowerment; there are substantial symbolic rewards as well (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Gilliam and Kaufmann, 1998). Heightened political interest, increased voter turnout, and above-average levels of regime approval are common among racial minorities when coethnic candidates win political office. This is true for both African Americans and Latinos

(Hajnal 2001; Howell and McLean, 2001; Kaufmann 2003a; Stein et al., 2003). It is also true that these symbolic benefits are narrowly group specific. Simply put, Blacks receive little in the way of symbolic reward by the election of Latinos—and vice versa. The psychic boost that accompanies empowerment—ethnic pride, enhanced efficacy, improved levels of trust in local government—is not a divisible good across different racial groups. In the same way that the material rewards of minority empowerment are largely inelastic and zero-sum, the symbolic gratification of descriptive representation is also not easily shared. From this vantage point, there appears to be no compelling reason for Blacks or Latinos to go out of their way to support each other's political candidates. In fact, quite the opposite behavior seems to be the case.

From a rational-choice point of view—and given the zero-sum quality of local government spoils—African Americans and Latinos only share a gripping interest in building electoral coalitions when they equally, and independently from one another, have little or no access to the selective rewards of a given municipal regime. When, for example, Blacks and Latinos coexist under the control of a conservative urban regime that provides virtually no benefits to either group, they share an interest in overturning such a regime as, by definition, some access will be better than none. If, however, one group is given preference over the other by an existing Anglo-led regime, the preferred group has little impetus to align with the less preferred. History-making elections—those where no racial minority had ever previously held the reigns of power, and where Blacks, Latinos, and liberal Anglos came together in electoral unity (e.g., Federico Peña in Denver, Tom Bradley in Los Angeles, David Dinkins in New York, Harold Washington in Chicago)—are clearly the outliers of urban voting behavior. Twenty years ago, when minority elected officials were uncommon and when optimistic illusions about what could be gained through political empowerment were widespread, rainbow coalitions seemed both rational and plausible. In contemporary urban politics, where the rewards of minority empowerment are more often than not zero-sum, there is simply little rationale for Blacks and Latinos to provide each other with electoral support.

WHAT WHITES WANT

The central supposition of this viewpoint is that Latinos and African Americans compete over that portion of local government benefits traditionally earmarked for minorities, while Whites basically control the remainder. In this simplified version of the three-player bargaining game, Whites only have an interest in the fate of minority set asides to the extent that it leverages them uncontested jurisdiction over land-use decisions and development spending such as downtown redevelopment and economic-development monies. Assuming that Whites are otherwise indifferent between building coalitions with Blacks or Latinos, one can imagine an equilibrium outcome whereby Whites form alliances with the group most able to secure them a place in the winning coalition. If demographic changes and political events don't threaten status quo arrangements, biracial electoral alliances that place Whites in the winning coalition should, theoretically, be maintained in perpetuity.

From a White vantage point, the economic-policy arena remains relatively unchanged, regardless of who controls the mayoralty. Because Whites are disproportionately privileged—even in minority-led regimes—they should be as equally well-off with Latinos as they are with Blacks. It is conceivable that Anglo-led biracial coalitions could be undermined in a multiracial setting, if the outgroup tries to underbid the ingroup by conceding their opposition to policies that may disadvan-

tage some members of their group (agreeing to property tax rollbacks or union concessions, for example). In the short term, this kind of strategy might reward the low bidders by providing them with greater access to a static, if not shrinking, number of urban jobs and services. In the short-term, underbidding may also yield desirable symbolic rewards for groups still waiting for descriptive representation. On the other hand, the long-term outcome of this strategy is that the symbolic rewards of empowerment will eventually fade, leaving only a diminished pool of minority resources. Furthermore, it is not in the interests of Whites to engage in this bidding game for too long. If the policy environment becomes too hostile to minority interests, or if the pool of material rewards gets too small, this may create new incentives for minorities to cooperate with one another. The status quo trade-off of minority set asides for control of land-use decisions and the development agenda will almost always be preferable from a White-elite point of view.

A PREPONDERANCE OF THE EVIDENCE

Urban politics in the new century is marked by continuing and growing conflict between Blacks and Latinos. Recent municipal elections across the country punctuate the intensifying competition in the urban marketplace between African Americans, who see their numerical proportions and their relative status in many governing coalitions slipping, and Latinos, who are just now finding their political voice in a variety of new places. Time after time, election accounts provide idiosyncratic rationalizations for why the voting behavior of Blacks and Latinos fails to cohere. At some point, however, the wishful optimism that explains away interracial competition in local elections as if it were epiphenomenal will need to be challenged on its face. Perhaps Blacks and Latinos fail to cooperate for rational, group-interested reasons. It is only reasonable for Blacks and Latinos to govern in unity if they derive more benefits from unity than from division. To the extent that minority politics in the urban setting is often little more than a zero-sum game, Blacks and Latinos have few incentives to build electoral alliances with one another, especially when coalition opportunities with Whites yield greater short-term rewards.

REVISITING THE INELASTICITY ASSUMPTION

The group-rationality argument is founded on the assumption that minority-led regimes do not expand the pool of minority benefits by much, and not sufficiently in any case to offset the losses incurred by one group having to share with the other group. If White voters have few claims on the selective rewards of interest to minority voters, and if minority spoils are ostensibly fixed, then minority groups are generally better off in winning coalitions with Whites than with other minorities.

Diminished political expectations within African American and Latino communities derive in large part from the recent history of minority empowerment and the failure of minority-led administrations to produce meaningfully higher levels of resources for communities of color (Reed 1986). As urban economist Paul Peterson (1981) argues, the mobility of capital—of business entities and taxpayers—deters local politicians from pursuing progressive, redistributive policies. As regime theorist Clarence Stone (1993) further maintains:

> A regime of lower class opportunity expansion involves the same difficulties as progressive regimes, plus some of its own. To be done on a significant scale,

enlarged opportunities for employment and for business and home ownership require altering practices in the private sector, but without driving away business investment. Achieving these goals calls for coordination among institutional elites, but not on a purely voluntary basis (Stone 1993, p. 21).

In Stone's view, enhancing the scope of the minority pie—especially improving opportunities for lower-income minorities—requires coercion on the part of leaders. Those groups that control private resources will not be inclined to redistribute or relinquish such assets voluntarily. To the extent that business elites and private industry are essential to the governing capacity (and, in some cases, reelection efforts) of minority administrations, they retain a privileged position in most urban regimes, regardless of who is nominally "in charge." As a result, Black and Latino mayors are often tentative in the demands they place on their economically powerful regime partners, and their acquiescence conditions urban voters to have modest expectations (Stone 1993). Conservatism and hesitancy on the part of minority leaders does not necessarily mean that the pool of minority-directed resources *cannot* be expanded; it just has not been.

Given the relative newness of minority political power, ethnic communities become enriched by feel-good symbolic politics. Satisfaction with symbolic gains and economic opportunities for middle-class minorities may suffice in the short-term, but may also lead to alienation and declining efficacy in the long-term (Gilliam and Kaufmann, 1998; Thompson 2005). As Michael Preston (1976) warned so presciently thirty years ago:

> The rise of black mayors can thus become a two-edged sword; that is, it may become a temporary source of black pride on the one hand, *but* it may, on the other hand, also become a signal that the system doesn't work for blacks. The question thus becomes: *will the emergence of black mayorships be a political advantage to blacks or will it lead to increased political cynicism?* (Preston 1976, p. 28).

In a sense, the contemporary voting behavior of Blacks and Latinos who opt for Anglo coalition partners while mobilizing against other minorities may already indicate a growing cynicism among urban voters. Group behavior appears to be motivated by short-term payoffs—to be a part of winning coalitions that provide small rewards. The better payoff for Blacks and Latinos, however, may be to focus on a long-term coalition strategy whereby, over time, and with growing mass support, they are able to build progressive governing coalitions that dole out more than symbolic gratification. This "better payoff" assumes, of course, that such progressive governing regimes are achievable.

Ironically, the contemporary logic of racial voting behavior in U.S. cities puts Whites in the position of proverbial kingmakers. There can be little doubt that, if Black and Latino voters avoid political alliances with one another, White voters will continue to call the shots when it comes to the priorities of municipal government, and, on balance, fewer racial minorities will be elected. The divide-and-conquer strategy so evident in contemporary urban politics may benefit some Blacks in the short run, as African Americans have a long history of successful political mobilization that allows them to reliably deliver votes on election day. In the long-term, however, it is doubtful that Blacks will retain a privileged political status over Latinos. As noted by Bobo et al. (1994), a rank order of discrimination places African Americans at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy. Latinos are routinely perceived by Whites as more desirable neighbors and marriage partners (Bobo et al., 1994; Charles 2001; Emerson et al., 2001). On average, White employers give preference to Latino job seekers and tenants (Neckerman and Kirschenmen, 1991;

Waldinger 1997; Wilson 1996), and one prominent study finds that Whites favor Latinos as coalition partners in school board elections (Meier and Stewart, 1991). While Blacks and Latinos may be theoretically interchangeable as political allies, in practice, Whites give preference to Latinos over Blacks in many different walks of life, and there are good reasons to believe that as Latino political organizations grow in their numbers and political expertise, Latinos will become privileged players in the urban political arena. If African Americans and Latinos fail to find common ground—a basis for sustainable reciprocal support at the ballot box—Blacks will likely experience eroding levels of descriptive representation and political access.

Minority representatives may legitimately believe that the mobility of capital poses real barriers to changing the budgetary priorities of urban governments. And while there is admittedly little evidence to support the notion that urban regimes can feasibly expand the pot of minority rewards and redistributive monies, some might argue that governing arrangements over the past two decades have been guided more by inertia and caution than by any particular structural constraints. Contemporary minority leaders appear to have bound themselves to short-term considerations, given the small pool of jobs and services available to them and their constituents. It may be time, however, for these leaders to look beyond these short-term payoffs in exchange for a longer-term inducement: a policy agenda that actually increases minority access to the significant assets and *real* power that local governments control. If Black and Latino leaders are able to provide a fundamentally different set of programs and policies from that of White leaders, and if they are genuinely more responsive to the needs of the disadvantaged, regardless of race, this may provide the necessary incentives for sustainable minority alliances. Whether or not this scenario is ultimately achievable is a question that only history can answer. Given the stakes, however, it seems a challenge well worth undertaking.

Corresponding author: Professor Karen M. Kaufmann, Department of Government and Politics, University of Maryland, College Park, 3140 Tydings Hall, College Park, MD 20742. E-mail: kkaufmann@gvpt.umd.edu

NOTES

1. The author would like to acknowledge Linda Williams and the participants in the American Politics Workshop at the University of Maryland for their constructive feedback and support. I owe special debts of gratitude to Joshua Dyck, Jim Gimpel, Joe Oppenheimer, and Clarence Stone for their counsel and encouragement. Finally, I am grateful to Larry Bobo for inviting me to present this work as a part of the Stanford University lecture series "Black Metropolis: Post-Katrina Politics and Urban Culture."
2. Consistent with much of the scholarship on immigrants and minority groups, I use the terms *Latino* and *Asian* to refer to socially constructed groups; nonetheless, I acknowledge that these categories are blunt labels that belie the internal diversity within these immigrant collectives.
3. While this essay addresses immigration in a broad sense, the political implications of recent immigration pertain primarily to Latino immigrants. As such, I focus on the impediments to Black-Latino alliances as the absolute numbers of Latino immigrants and the growing levels of their respective political activity warrant particular attention.
4. The terms *race* and *ethnicity* are used interchangeably throughout this manuscript. The terms *Whites* and *Anglos* are also used interchangeably and refer specifically to those who are not of Latino origin.
5. For evidence supporting the reluctance (and instability) of these early Black-Latino coalitions in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, see Mollenkopf 1992; Grimshaw 1992; and Kaufmann 2004.
6. Findings from a national sample of Latinos in a survey conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center, Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University in 1999 do not confirm

McClain's findings that Latinos see more in common with Whites than Blacks. Rather, results from this national sample show that approximately one-third of Latinos see themselves as having some or much in common with Whites and that an equivalent number see commonality with Blacks (Kaufmann 2003b).

7. The case studies in Browning et al. (2003) provide considerable support for this argument. In particular, findings from Atlanta (a case of long-term Black empowerment) and Baltimore (long-term empowerment followed by White Democratic leadership) suggest neither surge nor decline in access to public goods once levels of access have been established (Owens and Rich, 2003; Orr 2003).

8. The Kerr et al. (2000) study determines proportionality as the percentage of ethnic group employed in a particular department/percentage of ethnic group in the municipal work force.

9. According to a study conducted on municipal spending priorities in the mid-1980s, on average, less than 8% of budgets are allocated to redistributive programs like affordable housing, welfare, and health care (Hajnal and Trounstine, 2004).

10. For an excellent historical example of how the Irish, as the dominant ethnic group in many political machines, reserved a disproportionately high amount of patronage for their ethnic brethren, see Erie (1988).

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