

BOOK REVIEW

Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California, by Daniel Martinez HoSang

(Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010. 372 pp. Paper, \$24.95.)

Reviewed by Nisha N. Vyas

R*acial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California* is an engaging examination of the role of race in California initiative campaigns. Daniel Martinez HoSang, associate professor of political science and ethnic studies at the University of Oregon, presents a detailed narrative of ten campaigns that implicate race and Civil Rights concerns from 1946 through 2003. By applying a critical race theory framework, he demonstrates how these propositions, taken together, expose political subjectivities rooted in racial ideologies. HoSang also asserts that an unspoken embrace of colorblindness as the dominant racial ideology led to failures in protecting important Civil Rights gains. His work contributes to the antiracism struggles of progressive activists as well as scholars.

Racial Propositions begins by asking why California, a solid “Blue” state, passed measures that banned public services for undocumented immigrants, public affirmative action programs, and bilingual education programs in public schools in the 1990s. These actions were largely considered to be out of step with the liberal politics ascribed to the state’s electorate. To answer that question, HoSang begins by expanding the lens to show that California’s history of racially polarizing ballot-initiative campaigns neither began nor ended in the 1990s. As he examines initiative campaigns between 1946 and 2003, themes of how race and racism were talked about—or not talked about—emerge.

In explaining the success of initiatives that rolled back Civil Rights gains, HoSang rejects the popular “backlash theory.” This is the belief that a mostly

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white, working-class electorate expresses its alienation from measures it considers favorable to “special interests” defined by race, gender, or sexuality. He argues that this is a problematic explanation because it obscures systemic racism as the root cause of racial inequity and has led campaigns to adopt misguided strategies in their attempts to protect Civil Rights aims at the ballot box. HoSang offers two alternative concepts to describe the forces that, he believes, shape public attitudes about race and the state’s power to address racial inequality. The first is *racialized liberalism*, which describes a liberalism that claims to disavow white supremacy but fails to recognize white racial privilege (19). The second and central concept that HoSang introduces is *political whiteness*: a political stance and perspective rooted in white racial identity. Although political whiteness is subjective, its assertions are presented as objective truths. Thus “it operates instead as a kind of absent referent, hailing and interpolating particular subjects through various affective appeals witnessed in claims to protect ‘our rights,’ ‘our jobs,’ ‘our homes,’ ‘our kids,’ ‘our streets’” (21). It is hegemonic in nature and therefore elastic as it is “transformed and renewed through struggles such as ballot-initiative campaigns” (22). It has the “capacity to shape the terms [to] which [it is] opposed”; that is, it creates a baseline for acceptable tenets of societal beliefs about race and equality (22). HoSang’s chronological accounts of the initiatives he profiles in support of this framework assist in crystallizing these concepts. The narratives are carefully weaved together to support his assertion that racialized liberalism and political whiteness shaped the campaigns and their outcomes.

The chapters on the initiatives are engaging descriptions of the political actors involved, the particular historical moments, the campaigns themselves, and their aftermaths. HoSang profiles ten campaigns spanning from 1946 to 2003, including measures such as antidiscrimination laws in employment and housing; restrictions on the implementation of school desegregation policies; the declaration of English as the official state language; the elimination of affirmative action policies in public hiring, contracting, and education; the elimination of most bilingual education programs in public schools; and an attempt to bar the collection and analysis of racial data by state and local governments. All of these contests except for the last—the so-called Racial Privacy Initiative—represent victories for racial conservatism.

The patterns that emerge from HoSang’s holistic view of the initiative campaigns show that despite the obvious racial implications of their causes, racially conservative individuals and organizations were able to deflect accusations of racism by advancing colorblindness as the dominant racial theory. They knew their audience, they knew how to speak to that audience, and they knew how to deflect criticism. Colorblindness—the disregard of racial characteristics at the expense of acknowledging racial privilege—allowed conservatives to distance themselves from overt, gross forms of racism largely associated with the South.

Yet it also enabled them to argue that it should be beyond the state's power to interfere with individual decision-making in housing, employment, education, and other arenas of public life. This shows up in the appeals to Proposition 1 (1976) voters that "our children" would get lost in "dangerous neighborhoods" if they were bused to schools outside "our neighborhoods." Such patterns in racially conservative electoral messaging indicate their ability to adapt to and manipulate social standards of acceptability with respect to racial attitudes.

Racial liberals, however, are also complicit in the obscuring of racism throughout these initiative battles. Challenging the "backlash theory," the book succeeds in demonstrating the failure of this group to develop coherent political strategies that would defend Civil Rights and antidiscrimination efforts. For example, the organized liberal opponents of Proposition 14 (1964), which repealed the state's one-year-old fair-housing law, addressed white voters with arguments that undermined their appeals for "fairness," "tolerance," and ultimately racial equality. They argued to white voters that without fair-housing laws, there would be violence in the "ghettos" that would spill over into white communities. Paradoxically, they also argued that the Rumford Fair Housing Act, which they strove to defend from Proposition 14, would do very little to desegregate communities; this argument aimed to assuage fears regarding declining property values. Aside from being an incoherent strategy—why work so hard to protect a law that does not do anything?—the campaign appealed to the fears and economic interests of white communities at the expense of communities of color. HoSang repeatedly demonstrates this tension within each campaign.

It is when he turns to Proposition 187 (1994) that HoSang shows how reconstructing racial ideology in California politics may be successful in protecting Civil Rights goals, particularly by diverging from racialized liberalism. While Proposition 187, which barred undocumented immigrants from accessing healthcare, public education, and other social services, succeeded at the polls, the measure did inspire an emergent mobilization of grassroots immigrant activists. The coalition that formed diverged from traditional liberal groups and openly addressed the racism that animated the Yes on 187 campaign. The grassroots group was comprised of immigrant communities who would be directly and indirectly affected by the law. The increase in electoral participation on the part of Latino and Asian communities in the state is attributed to the shift that occurred in 1994. The impact it has had on the initiative process is significant: since 187, opponents of immigrant rights have failed to even qualify initiatives for the ballot, let alone have any success at the polls. Messaging regarding race, therefore, lasts well beyond one initiative contest. HoSang argues that this lingering positive effect is a direct result of the left's insistence on a more explicit racial framing.

Racial Propositions teaches us that campaigns to protect the rights of racial minorities at the ballot box have largely failed because they have tried to ignore

race in their messaging in order to appeal to “colorblind” voters, and have treated people of color as objects of campaigns, rather than as constituents of them. HoSang asserts that to succeed, campaigns that purport to protect Civil Rights gains and advance social justice need to be rooted in a coherent racial ideology, and must engage communities that are directly impacted. In this way, the book works as a contribution to political activists as well as scholars.

There are tensions, however, when addressing a dual audience. The book’s messages are both scholarly and practical but its language is decidedly academic; this may limit its accessibility. Further, the concept of political whiteness may be polarizing to a reader who is not already familiar with (or who does not buy in to) critical race theory or critiques of racial hegemonies. Where the author may fall short is in persuading the traditional racial liberals who bear the brunt of his critique. Can, for example, a Democratic political operative read this book and be persuaded to change course and not throw the movement “under the bus,” so to speak, in order to win one initiative battle? Yet in light of past failures and the emerging political power of diverse communities, perhaps the better question is: can he or she afford *not* to change course?

Contemporary activists and political actors would do well to examine the historical lessons that HoSang illuminates when protecting or advancing the rights of traditionally marginalized interests. Although the last campaign analyzed in the book was in 2003, this text has much to offer in understanding more recent initiative campaigns. For example, consider the outcome of Proposition 8 in 2008, which amended the state constitution to bar same-sex marriage until the decision was reversed by courts in 2013. As progressive critiques of the campaign have suggested, the official anti-8 movement failed to engage communities of color as allies; this argument reinforces HoSang’s thesis. California initiatives continue to implicate race in various ways; this book offers a historically grounded but also timely analysis for progressive political strategies to advance antiracist policies.