The rising tide of Asian immigration in the United States:

Implications for interethnic relations in a divided society

Thematic axis “Circulation, flows and exchanges”

The Pew Research Center recently released a report on current migratory trends to the United States, stating that Asia is now overtaking Latin America as the source of the largest number of immigrants. Projections suggest that in 2065, the largest immigrant group in the nation, accounting for 38% of the total, will be Asian. Such dramatic growth will place the share of the American population categorized as Asian by the U.S. Census at 14%, compared to 6% today. This immigrant “group”, hailing from countries as distant as Yemen and Japan, is not simply perceived as racially separate ; for historical and geographical reasons, it has a distinct socio-economic profile : in 2010, Asian-born men were more likely to be employed than U.S.-born men, and a slightly lower proportion of Asian immigrants lived in poverty than did the U.S. population overall (Batalova 2011).

What are the consequences of this development on interethnic relations in a society whose understandings of race are still largely organized around a black-white binary? How do populations categorized as Asian fit into the American racial hierarchy? Historian Madeleine Hsu recounts a story of physical exclusion of Asian immigrants based on race to the achievement of “model minority” status in recent decades (2015). Socio-demographers Jennifer Lee and Frank Bean note that rates of intermarriage with white partners is higher among Asian immigrants and U.S.-born Asian-Americans than among their Latino counterparts, and significantly higher than among the African-American population (2012). These trends suggest that Asian immigrants are undergoing a remarkably rapid process of integration. On the other hand, what racial views do Asian immigrants themselves add to these dynamics? Vilna Treitler theorizes from a sociological standpoint that Asians, like other ethnic groups before them, will soon be considered part of the white majority thanks to individual and collective efforts to distance themselves from racially stigmatized groups (2013).

This paper aims to explore the implications of these findings and theories for the future of political parties and partisanship in the United States, as well as for public opinion on issues such as immigration policy and affirmative action. Proximity to Asian populations seems at times to influence the political behavior of the white majority, pushing white voters towards the Democratic party, more representative of America’s growing diversity, and to espouse more progressive political views (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015). However, opinions held by Asian voters themselves will play a greater and greater role in elections and policy debates. Their standpoint on the appropriate response to the United States’ resident population of undocumented immigrants (of whom 11% were Asian in 2010) and the future of racial quotas in university admissions, for example, will be increasingly relevant in the coming decades.

Keywords : Asian immigration, United States, integration, interethnic relations, diversity

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