

Still Waiting for the Rainbow Coalition? Group Rationality and Urban Coalitions¹

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Rapidly changing urban demography, growing numbers of minority-majority cities and liberal optimism fueled a popular myth in the waning years of the twentieth century that Blacks and Latinos would come together under the banner of minority solidarity and welcome in a new generation of progressive urban leadership. Since the dawn of the new millennium, however, the myth of multiracial urban coalitions appears to have been debunked. Recent big city mayoral elections in Houston, Denver, Miami, and Los Angeles illustrate an evermore obvious urban fact; Blacks and Latinos seldom rally behind one another's candidates.²

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 appears to border on the irrational. Why would Blacks and Latinos, especially those who suffer at the lowest ranks 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 longstanding Democratic Party loyalties, choosing to place their collective fate in the hands of Republican candidates?

Social psychologists and political scientists suggest that in-group preferences in the form of racial pride or ethnic solidarity are at times sufficiently commanding to override less

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² The terms race and ethnicity are used interchangeably throughout this manuscript.

powerful, explicitly political 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 pride perspective, urban scholars also point to competition and racial animus as barriers to interracial coalitions (Bobo and Johnson 2000; Johnson and Oliver 1989; Mindiola et al. 2002; Olzak 1992; Vaca 2003). Many Blacks and Latinos hold hostile attitudes toward one another, in some cases attitudes that are more negative toward one another than they are toward whites. In spite of ongoing Anglo racial dominance that, through cultural and institutional discrimination, relegates people of color to an inferior status in many walks of American life, ethnic minorities reserve disproportionately large amounts of ill-will for one another. As often noted by political scientists, Latinos and Blacks 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; Grenier and Castro 1998; Jennings 1992, 1994; Johnson et al. 1999; Kaufmann, in press; Lim 2001; Lublin and Tate 1995; McClain 1996; McClain and Stewart 1999; McClain and Tauber 2001).

While contemporary urban scholarship correctly identifies the intense competition and psychological barriers that hinder the development of inter-minority 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. The purpose of this paper is to explore the reticence of Latinos and Blacks to carry out the much ballyhooed agenda of interracial cooperation at the ballot box. Joining some insights from the urban political economy literature (Peterson 1981; Stone 1993) with social choice theory (Downs 1957; Riker 1962, 1967; Riker and Zavoina 1970), I propose an interest-based

explanation for the absence of multiracial urban electoral coalitions. This paper 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 rewards. 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 the latter coalition, than the second most powerful group in a minority-led administration. From this view, the absence of minority coalition building at the mass level generally constitutes rational, group-interested behavior.

The first part of this paper 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 plausible today when accounting for changing demography, recent history, and evolving political attitudes. The second section lays out an interest-based argument paying particular attention to some of the key theoretical assumptions that sustain this point of view. Voting patterns in recent local elections in Houston, Texas and Denver, Colorado provide some preliminary empirical support for this thesis.

Finally, I conclude the paper with a discussion of how the development of Latino-Black coalitions 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 a majority of urban leaders have embraced conservative governing paradigms that reinforce status quo power relations, urban

minorities have become increasingly discouraged with politics as an efficient means to community uplift. Nonetheless, there is no reason that the past needs to define the future.

The Building Blocks of Urban Coalitions

According to much of the traditional urban politics literature, coalitions are formed on the basis of shared interests, overlapping political ideologies, dynamic leadership, or a bit of all three (Browning, Marshall and Tabb 1984; Carmichael and Hamilton 1967; Gilliam 1996; Hinkley 1981; 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.” (p.75)

From this view, the biracial coalitions that elected the first generation of Black mayors were not sustainable 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 urban whites and minority voters. Browning, Marshall and Tabb (1984) argue that while liberalism was a necessary pre-condition for minority incorporation in ten Northern California cities. 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 begs some elaboration. 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 rare and hard-fought, one could argue that the shared ideology linking liberal Anglos, African Americans and Latinos was as pragmatic as political. Simply, it was better to be in power than out of power.

The Bradley coalition, like many biracial coalitions during this period, brought very disparate groups of people together in pursuit of a common goal – opening 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 composed these path-breaking multiracial coalitions were not well-intentioned or committed to the larger goal of racial equality. Their goodwill is not in question. 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, Marshall and Tabb 2003). Few

groups face hardened barriers to political inclusion in the same way they did thirty years ago. Latinos and Blacks – once reluctant coalition partners out of numerical necessity – often have more options in the current environment.³ Latinos, in particular, have grown 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 American cities are better politically organized than are Latinos. The sheer number of Latino voters coupled with their own growing organizational capacity, however, has made them worthy competitors in many urban settings. As conceded by political scientist Raphael Sonenshein (2003b) 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 conservatives and the rise of Latinos has raised new issues concerning the roles of ideology and interest in urban politics.” (p. 343)

One thing that hasn’t changed much over the past thirty years is the drive to be included among the political establishment. It is still better to be in power than the alternative. For Latinos and Blacks, however, 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.

The Inelasticity of the Minority Pie

³ 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.

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 a more equitable share of public resources (Browning et al. 2003). In fact, enhanced minority access to municipal employment, greater numbers of administrative positions, new government contracts, and greater civilian oversight of the police were among the premier achievements of black incorporation (Browning, Marshall and Tabb 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 councils were able to create opportunities for lower-level public employment, higher-level administrative jobs and even greater numbers of government contracts, 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 were 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 three principal spoils of minority empowerment.

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 those cities that had been 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, their policies continued to mirror those of white mayors. Black, Latino and Anglo mayors all operate under a similar paradigm that 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 1988). 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 2003; Nelson 2000; Ross and Levine 2001).

The minority pie -- that bundle of jobs, contracts and appointments often earmarked for racial and ethnic minorities – is relatively inelastic; it doesn't increase with demand, minority leadership doesn't get you more of it, and, interestingly enough, white leadership typically doesn't get you less of it.⁴ 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 from which they derive a disproportionate benefit (Hajnal and Trounstein 2004; Stone 1989; but see Peterson 1981). In the early years of minority empowerment public jobs and contracts were – like most other things – the province of dominant whites. Over time, however, various urban regimes in

⁴ 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)

racially diverse cities have ceded control over many municipal jobs to middle-class minorities. As Browning, Marshall and Tabb illustrate in their most recent study (2003), levels of minority employment in the public sector tends to mirror demographic proportionality irrespective of minority incorporation. Furthermore, given the enormous value the business community attaches to control over land use and economic development, this co-optive strategy that trades public jobs for control over development spending has been a boon to power players in the business world (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 that are essential to the ongoing operation of local governments, redistributive programs like publicly subsidized health care services, welfare, and housing assistance are politically contested and always controversial. Cities are 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.⁵ 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). Thus it seems that redistributive spending as a proportion of total municipal expenditures is both small and 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. They

⁵ 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).

are akin to a patronage set aside rewarding 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 (Reed 1999; Stone 1989, 1993; Mollenkopf 2003).

The Myth of Shared Interests

In cities with a single, numerically dominant, minority population, there should be little contest over the spoils. Public jobs, administrative posts and minority set-asides will primarily be directed toward members of this dominant minority group.⁶ 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 the pie. 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 disproportionate shares of public goods (Hero and Clarke 2003; Kaufmann 2004; Sonenshein 2003a). In this “winner-takes-most” system of minority rewards, besting competing minority groups is a powerful incentive to coalesce with white voters if it means being in the winning coalition. 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 – rationality dictates that the primary concern of Black and Latino voters is to be the largest minority group in the winning coalition.

⁶ 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).

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 was middle-class jobs in the public sector. Political failure during this time period was akin to economic exclusion. During late 1960s and 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 1971). 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 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: Black-White, White-Latino or Latino-Black. 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 so described, then, minorities are always better off in a coalition with whites than with other the other minority group.

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 is common among racial minorities when co-ethnic candidates win political office. This is true for both African Americans and Latinos (Hajnal 2001; Howell and McLean 2001; Kaufmann 2003; Stein et al. 2003). It is also true that these symbolic benefits are narrowly group-specific. Simply, 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 no compelling reason for Latinos or Blacks 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 social choice point of view – and given the zero-sum quality of local government spoils – blacks and Latinos only share a gripping interest in building an electoral coalition when they equally, and independently from one another, have little or no access to selective rewards of a given municipal regime. When Blacks and Latinos coexist under the control of a conservative urban regime that provides virtually no benefits to either group, for example, 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 electoral support.

What Whites Want

The central supposition of this theoretical viewpoint is that Latinos and African-Americans compete over that portion of local government benefits 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 their uncontested jurisdiction over 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 that 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 white-led biracial coalitions could be undermined in a multiracial setting if the out-group tries to underbid the in-group by agreeing to reduce the

size of minority earmarks (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 greater access to a shrinking number of urban jobs and services. In the short-term, under-bidding may also yield desirable symbolic rewards for groups that are 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, while that which remains is 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 pool of minority rewards gets too small, this may create new incentives for minorities to cooperate with one another. The status quo tradeoff of minority set-asides in exchange for control of the developmental agenda will almost always be preferable from a white point of view.

Evidence of Group Rationality from Recent Urban Elections

Urban election returns over the past several years point to increasing disunity between racial minority groups. Mayoral outcomes in Houston, Los Angeles, Denver, Miami and New York, point to growing reticence on the part of Latinos and African Americans to support each other's candidates at the ballot box. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore each of these elections in depth, all of them in fact follow the general pattern described in this work. The following discusses several exemplary cases where Black and Latino voters rationally avoid alliances with one another – even when their choices appear ideologically incoherent and seem to conflict with their general policy interests.

Conservative White voters join Blacks to elect a Moderate White Democrat – Denver

Federico Peña's election in 1983 and Wellington Webb's subsequent election in 1991 are often cited as exemplars of minority incorporation. Denver, a majority white city, was governed for 20 years by two minority mayors representing two different racial groups. Peña and Webb were both initially elected and subsequently reelected by multiracial coalitions (Kaufmann 2003a). Webb won his third term in 1999 by garnering 80% of the vote in a largely uncontested primary election, but term limits precluded his seeking a fourth term (Martinez 1999).

The most recent Denver mayoral contest (in 2003) featured a wide field of possible contenders including Latino and African American Democrats, as well as a number of Anglo Democrats and Republicans. A local white businessman, John Hickenlooper, faced the Latino City Auditor, Donald Mares, in the non-partisan runoff election. Hickenlooper beat Mares by a wide margin of 65 to 35 percent. While both candidates were Democrats, Hickenlooper ran particularly well in white neighborhoods, upper-income neighborhoods and among Republicans. He also garnered a narrow majority of votes in Denver's predominantly black precincts (Green and Roberts 2003). Conversely, Mares ran well in largely Hispanic precincts while splitting the remaining Democratic vote more or less evenly with Hickenlooper (Green and Roberts 2003).

Were ideology the electoral motivation in this contest, Blacks should clearly have supported Mares. He was the more economically liberal of the two candidates and had stronger ties to labor leaders in Denver. From a group interest driven point of view, however, one would have expected Blacks to side with Hickenlooper because, in this case, choosing the moderate Anglo fulfilled both of the group rationality criteria -- that Blacks be in the winning coalition and that they finish ahead of Latinos. As expected from this social choice viewpoint,

Wellington Webb, the incumbent Black mayor, and Penfield Tate, the African American primary candidate, endorsed Hickenlooper despite his relative conservatism and in spite of his campaign pledge to scale back public jobs. It is quite understandable that Hickenlooper would be attractive to city Republicans and fiscally conservative, white Democrats. His appeal to large numbers of the city's Black Democratic constituency, however, is not at all obvious from an ideological standpoint.

Latinos abandon incumbent Black Democrat for Cuban-American Republican – Houston

The two most recent Houston mayoral elections provide similarly strong anecdotal support for the rationality thesis. Latino voters flip-flopped on a Hispanic Republican candidate in two consecutive elections: supporting him in large numbers when he faced a Black incumbent in 2001 and largely deserting him for a white Democrat in 2003. Political analysis in 2001 pointed to in-group preference as a logical rationale for Latino loyalty toward Sanchez. The partisan reversal of Latinos in 2003 sheds serious doubt on the ethnic pride thesis. Rather, I would suggest that Latino voting in both cases fits well within the group rationality framework.

In 2001 Houston's Black Democratic incumbent, Lee Brown, faced Republican city council member Orlando Sanchez in the non-partisan open primary. Eighty-eight percent of Blacks voted for the incumbent Brown while 62% of Latinos supported the Cuban Republican, Sanchez. White voters also went heavily for Sanchez with 60% versus 27% for Brown (Rodriguez 2001). In the runoff election, racial solidarity ran even higher with over 90% of African American voters backing the incumbent while an astonishingly high 72% of Houston Hispanics pulled the lever for the Republican. The majority of Latinos in Houston

are neither of Cuban descent nor Republican, thus the interesting story coming out of the 2001 mayoral election were the record numbers of Mexican-American Democrats who crossed party lines to support a politically conservative Cuban. Local observers attributed the disproportionately high levels of Latino turnout and partisan defection to ethnic solidarity (Mindiola et al. 2001; Vaca 2002). As Houston is over one-third Latino, and as the city has never had a Latino mayor, the ethnic pride argument seemed plausible, but not entirely convincing. There are, after all, important cultural differences between Mexican Americans and Cuban Americans, not to mention the relatively low level of perceived commonality they feel toward one another (Kaufmann 2003b).

Any lingering speculation about the role of ethnic solidarity in the 2001 mayoral election was promptly quelled by the election results in 2003. As is the case in many American cities, term-limits create opportunities for regime change and open-seat elections. Lee Brown, the incumbent was not able to stand for election again. This time the primary contenders were businessman Bill White (D), State Representative Sylvester Turner (D) and now former city council member Orlando Sanchez (R). White, the political novice, and Sanchez, the Republican, eliminated the African American, Turner, in the non-partisan open primary; the 2003 runoff election featured a white Democrat running against the Republican Sanchez. The partisan dynamics in 2003 mirror those in 2001, but changes in the racial composition of the candidates were accompanied by changes in racial voting behavior. According to exit polls reported in the *Houston Chronicle*, Sanchez was considerably less appealing to Latinos than he had been two years previously when running against the Black incumbent, Lee Brown (Mack 2003). Whereas Latino voters overwhelmingly supported Sanchez in 2001 with 72% of the vote, their support declined to only 44% in 2003. On the

other hand, Latinos provided stronger backing to the Democrat this time around as he garnered 56% of the vote. Black voters, as they did two years earlier, gave near unanimous support to the Democrat with 96% of the vote, and white voters were split fairly evenly between the Republican Sanchez (52%) and the Anglo Democrat White (48%).

Local observers weakly argued that Latinos had soured on Sanchez over the past two years as they came to know him and his policies better (Williams 2003). Without analyses using individual-level survey data, it is impossible to rule out this explanation. Nonetheless, racial patterns in both elections appear both obvious and consistent with the group rationality view. When faced with the prospects of continuing subordination to Blacks in the Brown administration, Latinos overwhelmingly backed the Republican Sanchez. They reverted to their Democratic roots, however at the prospects of a new, Anglo-led urban regime.

A Preponderance of the Evidence

Urban politics in the new century is marked by continuing and growing conflict between Latinos and Blacks. Recent municipal elections in Miami, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Denver and Houston all punctuate the intensifying competition in the urban marketplace between Blacks, who see their numerical proportions and their relative status in governing coalitions slipping, and Latinos, who are just finding their political voice in many 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 needs to be challenged on its face. Perhaps Latinos and Blacks fail to cooperate for rational, group-interested reasons. It no longer makes sense to find excuses for

the absence of cooperation when the preponderance of evidence runs counter to the normative sense of many as to how the world should work. It is only rational for Blacks and Latinos to govern in unity if they get more from unity than division. To the extent that minority politics in the urban setting is little more than a zero-sum game, Latinos and Blacks have little incentive to build electoral alliances with one another when coalition opportunities with whites present a viable alternative to place in the winning coalition.

Revisiting the Inelasticity Assumption

The group rationality argument is founded on the assumption that minority-led regimes don't 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.

Widely held perceptions of inelasticity derive in large part from the recent history of minority empowerment and the failure of minority-led administrations to produce higher levels of resources that benefit minority communities. (Reed 1986). As urban economist Paul Peterson argues, the mobility of capital -- of business entities and taxpayers -- deters local politicians from pursuing progressive, redistributive policies (1981). 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.” (p.21)

From 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 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 doesn’t necessarily mean that the minority pie, as such, cannot be expanded, it just hasn’t been.

Given the relative newness of minority political power, ethnic communities have 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). As Michael Preston (1976) warned so presciently almost 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?” (p.28)

In a sense, the contemporary voting behavior of Latinos and Blacks that opt for white 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 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, overtime, 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.

The perceived zero-sum quality of minority rewards may be just a perception. And while there is little recent 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 any particular structural constraints. Contemporary minority leaders have somewhat rationally 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, to look beyond these short-term payoffs in exchange for a longer-term inducement: a policy agenda that actually increases minority access to the real money and real power that local governments control. Whether or not this redistributive scenario is ultimately achievable is a question that only history can answer. Given the stakes, however, it seems a challenge well worth undertaking.

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