Politicized places: When immigrants provoke opposition

Many take for granted the idea that, in all cases, an influx of new immigrants to an area will appear threatening to established residents and such close contact helps explain racial tensions. Though this notion of “racial threat” helped explained previous chapters in American history, it remains an open question whether or not this theory applies to newer situations, with other ethnic dynamics. The most salient such situation now in American life relates to the movement of Latinos into many new areas.

A 2011 study published in the American Political Science Review, “Politicized Places: Explaining Where and When Immigrants Provoke Local Opposition,” examined more than twelve different surveys relating to immigration and local anti-immigration ordinances, spanning the years 1992 to 2009. The study, by Daniel J. Hopkins of Georgetown University, focuses on how the distribution of anti-immigrant sentiment varies over time, as both demographics and the level of national media attention fluctuate. Prominence of immigration in the news media was measured by counting mentions of the issue by CBS, ABC and USA Today.

The study’s findings include:

- When the immigration issue is not producing national headlines, established residents in changing counties are just 0.1% more likely to want a decrease in immigration than people living in counties that are demographically static.
- During a period of high national attention to immigration, anti-immigration attitudes among established residents in fast-changing counties increase by 9.9%.
- When immigration is not nationally prominent, residents of fast-changing counties are 7.3% less likely to hold pro-immigration attitudes than those counties where the population mix is stable. That gap increases to 15.1% when immigration becomes a prominent national issue.
- A survey of anti-immigrant local proposals from 2000-2006 shows that 58% came about
during or just after immigration reform had been raised prominently as a national issue.

- Communities where there is rising unemployment and where the immigrant population exceeds 20% have only a slightly increased probability of proposing anti-immigrant ordinances; the increase under such negative jobs conditions goes from 0.54% to 0.72%.
- Localities in counties with an average of 1,940 crimes per 100,000 people in 1999 had a 0.54% probability of advancing anti-immigrant proposals; however, localities in counties with much higher crime rates — on average, 6,347 crimes per 100,000 people — actually had a lower chance, 0.43%, of proposing such ordinances.

The study’s author states that ethnic and racial surroundings appear to affect Americans’ political attitudes far less than previously thought: “Those who live near larger proportions of immigrants do not consistently exhibit more negative attitudes.” Rather, the author concludes, “day-to-day encounters can be shaped by salient national issues.”

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