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TOMORROW'S MAJORITY: ETHNIC MINORITY VOTERS IN THE U.S. ELECTION CAMPAIGN AND THE HOT-BUTTON ISSUE OF IMMIGRATION

THE ATLANTIC ACADEMY'S ROAD TO THE ELECTIONS
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HENRIETTE RYTZ
GERMAN BUNDESTAG

ABOUT THIS SERIES

On November 8, nearly 200 Million registered voters are called upon to elect the next President of the United States of America, all 435 members of the House of Representatives as well as thirty-four of the one hundred senators. As in 2008, there is no incumbent, which is why both parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, will determine their candidates in primary elections. Thus, maybe fundamental changes but at least new accents in some policy fields should be expected.

With a monthly publication series, the Atlantic Academy will focus on this road to the elections in November. Political and economic scientists analyze policy fields as well as their roles in the (primary) elections and formulate expectations for a new presidency and Congress.

The United States is the number one destination of immigration in the world (OECD 2013a). Looking from Berlin or Brussels, the refugee crisis is the defining political issue of the day and the European Union seems to be the world's new melting pot. Yet compared to the significance that immigration holds for the American story, the influx of one (or even two or three) million people to Europe within a short period of time, as we are experiencing now, appears moderate.

Immigration is the reason why the fabric of contemporary American society is so colorful. The large waves of immigration of the 19th and early 20th century are a thing of the past, but even today 13.1% of the U.S. population of 323 million people (U.S. Census Bureau 2016) was not born as U.S. citizens (OECD 2013b). The number of undocumented immigrants in the country, most of them from Mexico, is still close to 11 million, despite a steady decline since 2008 (Warren 2016: 2). While Europe is currently the number one destination for refugees, the number one destination for immigration on a global scale remains the United States.

The founding of the United States, its expansion, even its dominance of international politics in the 20th century, is a story of immigration. The country was created by refugees, at a time when Europe was attractive neither to religious minorities, nor to people desperately struggling to make ends meet, nor to new political thinking. The United States became a beacon for people from all over the world to find peace, well-being, and personal freedom.

The American dream, promising a rocket career from dish washer to millionaire within one's lifetime, is in fact an immigrant's dream (how realistic it may be, given entrenched structural inequalities, is another question). It is nurtured by the stories of immigrants that have made America incredibly rich (just think of names like Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, or Ford) or continue to do so (like Hamdi Ulukaya, the founder and CEO of America's most popular yoghurt brand, who was born a Kurdish peasant's son in rural Turkey). The prospect of a better life is what brings people to the United States, and the strong optimism that American society characterizes is a reminder of this heritage.

THE MOST ETHNICALLY DIVERSE U.S. ELECTORATE EVER

The ongoing run for the White House does not reflect this heritage. Although immigration makes up America's DNA, the issue is set to become the most divisive issue of the campaign. On the one hand, the field of Republican candidates, in particular front-runner Donald Trump, has turned immigration into a hot-button issue. Trump is also the candidate who presents himself as the most aggressively anti-immigrant of all – leading even strong conservatives to distance themselves from his racist campaign. On the other hand, the most recent additions to the American fabric, Hispanics and Asian Americans, tend to see the issue of immigration as particularly important when deciding what candidate to vote for. [*] Alienating this fastest growing group within the U.S. electorate could prove fatal for Trump.

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[*] It is the second most important issue after jobs and the economy, according to a February 2016 survey by the Washington Post and Univisión News.

In fact, a presidential hopeful called Donald Trump is nothing the Republican Party leaders had hoped for. Having lost the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns by considerable margins, the party establishment quickly realized that it would not be able to ignore Hispanic and other ethnic minority voters next time. In 2004, George W. Bush had easily won 40 percent of the Hispanic vote. In 2012, Mitt Romney scored a meager 27 percent (Pew Hispanic Center 2012: 4). During the campaign, pundits had consistently made the point that carrying at least 40 percent of the Latino vote would be necessary to win the White House. Shortly after voters had re-elected President Obama, the GOP leadership published a brutally honest analysis concluding that "America is changing demographically, and unless Republicans are able to grow our appeal (…), the changes tilt the playing field even more in the Democratic direction" (Barbour et al. 2013: 7).

The GOP establishment was determined not to repeat the mistakes of the two previous campaigns. In the 2016 campaign, the emergence of candidates such as Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz, both with Hispanic roots, or Jeb Bush (who has already withdrawn from the race), former governor of Latino stronghold Florida and married to a Mexican-American, has not been coincidental. Given the growing size of the Hispanic electorate, a recent study comes to the conclusion that even more than 40 percent will be needed this time (Damore/Barreto 2015). In fact, the 2016 electorate will be the most ethnically diverse ever. Almost one third of all eligible voters will be Hispanic, black, Asian or another racial or ethnic minority (Pew Research Center 2016).

Donald Trump seems to ignore these facts so far – and the GOP establishment is alarmed. As of March 2016, the controversial billionaire is comfortably leading in the polls, making it not impossible but unlikely that he will still be surpassed by his main contenders Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio. The party's two previous presidential nominees, John McCain (2008) and Mitt Romney (2012), have both come out openly against Trump, blasting him for endangering U.S. democracy (New York Times 2016c). The editorial board of the "National Review", a renowned conservative magazine, has distanced itself from Trump (New York Times 2016b). If party colleague Chris Christie (the former New Jersey governor who dropped out of the race in February) is holding onto him it is likely because he is hoping for a shot at the vice presidency.

The bad news for the Republican Party is that the demographic challenge, which is an ideological challenge for them, cannot be expected to lose steam. On the contrary, by the year 2050, ethnic minorities will make up the majority of the American fabric (Pew Research Center 2008).

The Democratic Party seems much better prepared for this challenge, as it has traditionally been far more popular with Hispanic voters. An immigration-friendly agenda has helped greatly. President Obama carried a whopping 67 percent of the Latino vote in 2008 and an even larger 71 percent in 2012. Bill Clinton scored similar margins (Pew Research Center 2012), although in the 1990s that particular group of voters mattered less due to its smaller demographic size.

While Donald Trump's popularity reflects the growing conservative "angst" regarding immigration, Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton battle each other over the issue on the far left of the political spectrum. Before the important March primary election in Florida, a large swing state with one of the strongest Latino communities in the country,

they debated the issue in a debate hosted by Univisión, America's largest Spanish-language TV channel – both trying to seem as immigration-friendly as possible (New York Times 2016d).

There are differences between the two Democratic candidates, however, which can be explained by their political agendas and careers. Sanders is closely connected to the labor movement and revered by his supporters as the champion of social issues. He voted against the 2007 comprehensive immigration bill that promised a long-needed reform, including a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. The labor unions were strongly against it, fearing competition from immigrant workers. The bill was never passed, although even then-President George W. Bush strongly supported it. Unlike Sanders, Clinton voted for the bill and sponsored further pro-immigration legislation during her time in the Senate (slate.com 2016).

The fact that Sanders still fares strongly with Latino voters is due to the framing of his message. His promise of less social equality and more upward mobility appeals to recent immigrants who are still working their way up. However, this approach leaves out problems like xenophobia and discrimination, which Clinton, on the other hand, promises to tackle (Cnbc.com 2016). This might explain why Clinton, as of March 2016, leads comfortably by 2 to 1 among Hispanic Democrats. Sanders, though, is much more popular with younger voters, also among Hispanics (Washington Post/Univisión 2016).

If Hillary Clinton is able to both keep this advantage and win the nomination, she has great chances at becoming president. Although an image change is normal when a candidate becomes a nominee (primaries are usually decided by political activists, elections by a far more complex field of voters), it is difficult to imagine how a Republican nominee Donald Trump would be able to change his message from aggressively anti-immigrant to sufficiently immigration-friendly to win every second Latino vote.

THE DILEMMA OF POLITICAL MAJORITIES PAIRED WITH POLITICAL GRIDLOCK

The political divide over immigration between liberals and conservatives, between the Democratic primary campaign and the GOP primary campaign, is a product of the strong polarization of U.S. politics. Democrats and Republicans have moved further apart ideologically than they have been for decades, making political compromise – the essence of a political system based on checks and balances – extremely difficult. The result is a national parliament unable to tackle many pressing challenges.

This gridlock in Washington has also affected policy reform with regard to immigration. The 2007 immigration bill that Congress debated when President George W. Bush was still in office was Congress' last promising major attempt at comprehensive immigration reform. President Obama has been trying to circumvent the gridlock in Congress by using his executive power. After Congress had failed several times to pass the DREAM Act, which would have allowed children of undocumented immigrants who were raised in the United States to stay and attend college, President Obama took the matter into his own hands in 2012. Following his executive order, the so-called dreamers are now eligible to apply for a residence permit. In 2015, he expanded the measures to shield as many as five million undocumented immigrants from deportation (The Hill 2016).

In November 2014, President Obama also announced a package of measures, including enhanced border security and a program that would make it easier for high-skilled worker to take up jobs in the United States. The White House expects these measures to significantly boost U.S. economy (White House 2015). However, several measures have been currently put on hold, as the Supreme Court is debating a challenge to President Obama's immigration action by a coalition of 26 states. The decision is expected in the summer of 2016 (New York Times 2016a).

Looking to 2017 and the policy agenda of the new president, the biggest question mark is, therefore, less what will be on the agenda but rather how it will be passed. Much will depend on the majorities in Congress. The new president would need majorities of his or her party in both chambers in order to pass reforms. It is unlikely that a president Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders would be able to count on such majorities. However, given the growing Hispanic electorate and the failure of Republican front-runner Trump to embrace these voters, the Democrats' chances of keeping the keys to the White House are very good. In the end, Hispanic and other ethnic minority voters could get the president they want but not the policies they need.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Henriette Rytz is a foreign policy advisor in the German Bundestag. Prior work expe-
rience includes stints at Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) Berlin and the U.S.
House of Representatives. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the Free University
Berlin.