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Review Of "Dangerously Divided: How Race And Class Shape Winning And Losing In American Politics" By Z. L. Hajnal

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In *Dangerously Divided,* Zoltan Hajnal shows that Black people (and, to a lesser extent, other people of color) disproportionately lose out in American elections and policy. With smart analyses and compelling figures, he describes the scale of this representation gap between white Americans and everybody else. The book convincingly demonstrates that race, far more than class, is key to predicting who wins and loses in American politics.

And yet, in framing these features of American politics as surprising and in describing their causes with almost no reference to racism or white supremacy—I counted only eleven total uses of either of these terms in the body of the text—the book may contribute to the very problems it seeks to address.

The best parts of Hajnal's book are his analyses showing that white people win the most in almost every arena of American politics. Hajnal compiled data going back as far as 1948, not only from surveys and polls but from election outcomes at the local, state and national level *and* from federal budgets. Throughout, tidy figures clearly show the gaps between how often different groups win in elections and policy outcomes.

The book is essentially four distinct studies, tied together by the overarching concern with how much race defines winners and losers in American politics. Chapters 1, 2 and 3 describe the first study, showing that there are stark differences in the political preferences of white voters when compared to every other major racial group, and that candidates preferred by Black voters win their elections the least often, at every level from local races to the Presidency. In the second study, reported in Chapter 4, we learn that Black Americans' policy preferences—what they tell survey researchers they want the government to do in terms of spending—are also less frequently satisfied than those of any other group, though no group's preferences win out consistently. In both these studies, Hajnal demonstrates that the win-lose gap between Black and white people is larger than the same gap between class groups, genders, ages, or religions—that race is the strongest dividing line in American politics.

The third study is on immigration and white backlash, showing that increasing immigration and a growing Latinx population are associated with whites' increasing attachment to the Republican party.

In the final study, in Chapters 7 and 8, Hajnal shows that when Democrats are in power—holding the Presidency and/or controlling Congress—the racial gap in preferred-policy implementation is substantially reduced; in other words, there is much less difference between how often government spending levels reflect white people's preferences compared to how often they reflect those of Black people and other people of color. Further, white people, including lower-income white people, *also* win more when Democrats are in charge; in other words, Hajnal writes, "Democrats are simply

more responsive to the public's preferences as a whole than are Republicans" (p. 218). Moreover, by many other measures of well-being—average income, the poverty rate, and the unemployment rate—Black Americans do better under Democrats, gaps between Black and white Americans are reduced, *and* whites do better as well. Everybody wins more, in other words.

While I think the book's conclusion that race is the most important division in American politics is right as far as it goes, it relies on presenting race, class and other important social categorizations as independent axes of division, in a competition for which "matters most." The book is pitched as an argument against a class-only analysis of politics, but one of the key features of race in the United States is the tight linkage between race and class: Black and Brown people are disproportionately poor and working class (and vice versa). Hajnal often writes that his analyses call into question books like Gilens' *Affluence and Influence* (2012), but both books are entirely consistent with the conclusion that it is rich, white people who are the most likely to get what they want in American politics.

Where Hajnal's book really goes astray, though, is in writing about *why* that is the case. On the whole, it treats structural and systemic racism as unimportant, white racism as natural, and the racial divide it documents as surprising (e.g. "How can a nation that long ago triumphed over slavery now find itself so deeply divided by race?, p. 14). In addition to being somewhat internally contradictory (if racism is human nature, why is a racial divide surprising?) this approach does a deep disservice to decades of work on how racism and white supremacy operate in the United States.

With a few exceptions, like a good overview of DuBois' argument about the material and psychological benefits of white supremacy for white people (p. 16) and discussion of an array of racial inequalities in the final chapters, Hajnal writes as if the fundamental problem of racial division in the United States is that partisanship and race are interwoven. He contrasts the current situation—where 90% of Republican voters are white, but only a little over half of Democrats are—with the time, in the 1960s and earlier, when the two major parties had roughly the same racial composition. Since then, he writes, "racial fissures have opened and slowly but inexorably expanded" (248) and "racial divides in the ballot box have spilled over into racial animosity and racial conflict outside it" (258). Neither the '60s nor any era preceding it could be understood as a time of racial harmony in the United States; as long as white people dominated both parties, and neither party emphatically embraced civil rights, Black, Latinx and Asian-American people had no clear political home. But that did not mean that there was no political divide between white people and people of color, in terms of either political views or who won and lost in American politics.

Moreover, *Dangerously Divided* is often written as if both race and "racial divisions" are natural and symmetric. Hajnal asserts that "race and racism are, unfortunately, simply part of who we are" and that since race is "one of the most visible dividing lines, it almost inevitably becomes a central focus of our societal divisions" (p. 15). While Hajnal is clear that Black, Latinx, and sometimes Asian Americans are disproportionately on the losing side of these divisions, the book almost never assigns blame or even agency to the white people who perpetrate and benefit from racism. This extends to the accounts of "racial threat" throughout the book, implying it is a law of nature for white people to react negatively to increasing Black and Latinx populations, and that politics only enters in later.

But sociologists know that this gets the relationship between power, racial categories, and racial hierarchies essentially backwards (e.g. Morning 2008; Omi and Winant 1994). Black scholars and

others have been pointing out at least since DuBois' *Black Reconstruction* (1934) the ways that white elites have actively created and maintained racial categorizations and hierarchies, from slavery through Jim Crow, from redlining through our current era of mass incarceration. In this context, it is anything *but* surprising that there is political distance between white people and everyone else.

In this book, Hajnal points out a genuine problem with the US political system. I believe he may be doing so in order to help resolve racial inequality in our politics and beyond. His tendency to drastically understate the degree of racism in the United States (e.g. "America's historic record on race is obviously less than stellar," p. 84) may be an attempt to make what he has to say more palatable for white readers. But while the book's documentation of the *effects* of white supremacy on political outcomes is robust and convincing, by frequently treating the underlying causes as natural, agentless, and unexpected, it ultimately fails to contribute to a better understanding of racial divisions in the United States.

Du Bois, W. E. B. 1934/2007. *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. Edited by H. L. Gates. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gilens, Martin. 2012. *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Morning, Ann. 2008. "Ethnic Classification in Global Perspective: A Cross-National Survey of the 2000 Census Round." Population Research and Policy Review 27(2):239–72.

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