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The New Politics of Immigration: “Balanced-Budget Conservatism” and the Symbolism of Proposition 187

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the politics of the new immigration restrictionism as manifest in Proposition 187, passed by California voters in 1994. I first show that restrictionist sentiment and immigrant scapegoating have a long history in U.S. immigration politics, briefly reviewing three periods of early nativism: 1870s to the 1890s; 1900 to World War I; and World War I and its aftermath. I then make two principal arguments. First, I argue that the new nativism embodied in Proposition 187 — which would bar undocumented immigrants in California from receiving social services, including public schooling — corresponds to specific features of the late twentieth-century political-economic landscape. In particular, I link the focus on the alleged tax burden of immigrants and their costly use of social services to ongoing economic transformations, the retrenchment of the welfare state, and what Plotkin and Scheuerman (1994) call “balanced-budget conservatism.” Second, following Edelman (1977), I show that Proposition 187 is symbolic in that it derives from and evokes beliefs about immigrants' responsibility and blame for the current economic and fiscal crisis. In addition, I suggest that Proposition 187 may represent a new kind of symbolic politics in which alienated voters — those who bother to vote at all — use their ballot symbolically to express anger and “send a message.”

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