

Competition theory of ethnic/racial conflict and protest

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Competition theory of race and ethnic conflict specifies three mechanisms under which racial/ethnic conflict and protest occurs. The first reflects a familiar “racial threat” argument, suggesting that the magnitude of response by dominant groups depends on the *timing and size of the incoming group* and on the *clarity of ethnic distinctions* made between newcomers and residents (Blalock 1967). Thus, particularly large and concentrated waves of newcomers perceived as ethnically or racially distinct are especially likely to receive a hostile response. Furthermore, as migration and immigration of distinct ethnic and racial populations surge, the potential for protest or violence directed against ethnically distinct newcomers becomes more likely (Koopmans & Olzak 2004).

The literature has also identified other strategies for containing ethnic/racial competition. For example, Lieberman (1982) and Massey and Denton (1994) analyze residential and occupational segregation as alternative strategies for constraining competition and maintaining racial dominance (see also Bonacich 1972). In this view, the magnitude of response – in the form of violence, repression, or residential discrimination directed toward a racial minority – depends upon the pace of change and the relative size of the populations characterizing these demographic shifts.

The second dimension of competition theory emphasizes *forces of economic competition* among ethnic and racial populations. Scholars who emphasize the economic aspects of competition theory of ethnic/racial conflict express these ideas in terms of the interplay between two types of boundaries: ethnic boundaries and productive niches (Barth 1969). As ethnic and

racial groups enter a population, competition for limited resources ought to increase (all else being equal). Economic contraction further intensifies competition over increasingly scarce resources, raising the potential that dominant groups will restrain or exclude less powerful competitors (Olzak 1992). This argument also implies that marketplace competition will raise perceptions that unfair competition is occurring (Bobo & Hutchings 1996), increasing the chances that tensions will spill over into violence.

Specification of economic competition processes that spark ethnic conflict depend upon the distribution of members of different ethnic and racial groups into productive niches (Hannan 1979). Economic competition rises to the extent that *niche overlap* occurs. This happens when new groups invade another’s niche, which can be fueled by in-migration, economic contraction, or upward mobility of a disadvantaged group. Conflict arises when members resist the entry of members of an ethnically distinct group into their niche.

A third mechanism by which competition processes spark protest and conflict concerns the political/power domain. This line of argument from competition theory emphasizes that mobilization arises when *newcomers pose threats to the power balance and political control* by dominant groups. In this view, powerful ethnic groups mobilize collective action in response to a potential loss in political control (Olzak 1992; Tolnay & Beck 1995). Such power-threats may be instigated by a recent arrival of a racially or ethnically distinct population (to a city, state, or country) that threatens the political balance, or by a sudden shift in political opportunities afforded by new or expanded voting rights. In this view, politically threatened groups will mobilize against such changes in an effort to restore the status quo. Using this perspective, lynching and ethnic violence, anti-immigration protest,

disenfranchisement, racial gaps in arrests and incarceration can all be understood as a response to real or perceived threats activated by a minority population's increased political leverage.

While distinguishing the demographic, economic, and political features of competition is analytically useful, in practice they often occur together and are mutually reinforcing. Thus, the economic and power-threat dimensions of ethnic competition are likely to escalate when the surges of immigrants or migrants are large in proportion to the size of the native-born population. Furthermore, it appears that even small changes in levels of neighborhood homogeneity have substantial impacts on perceptions of racial threat. Residential *desegregation* also ignites racial violence, especially in situations where racial homogeneity was initially high (Olzak, Shanahan, & West 1994).

Of course, the impact of competition on protest and conflict is also shaped by human capital factors, such as training, skills, and education that newcomers bring with them. And the nature of citizenship status and voting rights of a population will greatly influence perceptions of political threats to a dominant ethnic population, creating a heightened sense of political competition where political challenges are more credible (Koopmans & Statham 2000). Finally, there are likely to be threshold effects of increasing the size of the minority population, above which additions to a minority population are no longer perceived as threatening (Keen & Jacobs 2009).

Forces of racial/ethnic competition have the capacity to expand and contract group boundaries that can effectively redefine race/ethnic identities. For example, Olzak and Shanahan (2003) find that the rate of attacks on African-Americans around the turn of the nineteenth century in US cities systematically rose when major court decisions increasingly rested upon the court's ability to draw distinctions between white versus black identities. Gullickson (2010) has also documented how occupational differences (and racial threats from declining differences) help to explain variation in the

salience of the mulatto–black boundary lines during this same period. Others have explored how the dynamics of pan-ethnic boundaries may be related to competition processes (e.g., Kim & White 2010).

Competition theories have also explored the conditions under which ethnic and racial protest occurs. For example, competition theory has been used to analyze anti-busing protests (Olzak, Shanahan, & West 1994) and race riots (Olzak, Shanahan, & McEneaney 1996), which have often been characterized as protest. These studies draw on resource mobilization arguments to suggest that disadvantaged ethnic or racial populations will mobilize when their access to resources rises substantially. Competition theory also provides an explanation for backlash movements that arise in the wake of social movements for expanded civil rights. In this view, dominant groups whose power is threatened will mobilize against disadvantaged groups. If successful, such practices maintain existing apartheid conditions, which heighten the salience of ethnic boundaries and further aggravate ethnic tension.

Forces embedded in globalization have also been linked to ethnic competition and conflict. As a result of the uneven exposure to globalization (including increase trade flows, foreign direct investment, exposure to the Internet and other information and social technologies), competition among ethnic groups rises, as does the salience of ethnic boundaries. Existing violations in the form of ethnic exclusion from educational or political opportunities likely encourages ethnic protest challenging state authorities (Olzak 2006; Wimmer, Cederman, & Min 2009; Olzak 2011). Whether real or perceived, ethnic inequalities in exposure to globalization ought to generate ethnic discontent, which in turn increases the likelihood that violent insurgent movements will become organized along ethnic lines.

SEE ALSO: Ethnic movements; Globalization and movements; Racist social movements; Riots.

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