Postbellum Electoral Politics in California and the Genesis of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882

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Abstract

After the Civil War, the Democratic party carried an important electoral penalty from being associated with the war. To deal with this penalty, the party took increasingly anti-immigration positions to compete with Republicans. This led some Republican strongholds such as California to become competitive and also forced Republicans to embrace stricter immigration proposals. In this paper, we argue that adopting anti-immigration and raising awareness against immigration made California increasingly competitive in electoral terms. This electoral competitiveness can serve to explain the genesis of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

Keywords: Immigration, Chinese Exclusion Act, Anti-Chinese Movement, Political Economy

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1 Introduction

Economic historians and historians have had a longstanding interest for the topic of immigration in postbellum America. There are two reasons for this interest. The first is that the volume of migrants was historically unprecedented – more than 22 million foreigners arrived between 1865 and 1910 (Bohanon and Van Cott, 2005, p. 529). The second is that there was a strong nativist backlash against immigrants that culminated in a series of legislative actions against Asian immigrants first (in the 1880s) and later against eastern Europeans (from the 1890s onward) (Timmer and Williams, 1998). To explain the backlash, economists and historians have tended to emphasize how native workers perceived the effects that immigration had on their wages (Goldin, 1994) who saw incentives to mobilize politically to find ways to reduce immigration (Wong et al., 2018).

However, there is a problem with that narrative. Large numbers of immigrants were entering the United States as early as the 1840s and the perceived effects on wages were present in the 1850s (Margo, 2000, p. 144). The nativist backlash was immediate (Cohn, 2000) but it never translated into any form of anti-immigration policy at the federal level until the 1880s. What policies were adopted were adopted at the state-level. And even the most extreme policies adopted at that level were relatively modest in scope and effect. Why are there close to four decades separating the begininning of a nativist backlash and the adoption of anti-immigration rules in 1882, most notably the Chinese Exclusion Act (Fong and Markham, 1991, 2002; Lee, 2002; Seo, 2011; Peng, 2021) which was “the first law in American history to ban any group of people from entering America solely based upon race" (Seo, 2011, p. 826). Our answer is that the Civil War altered political incentives enough to make immigration a potential wedge-issue in swing states.

Following the end of the Civil War, the Democrats were stuck with a major electoral disadvantage. States that had contributed large contingents of Union soldiers were unlikely to vote for the Democrats – a party associated with the initiation of the war. As a result, a large block of demographically important states were locked in for the Republicans. Michigan, Pennsylvania,

Ohio, Wisconsin, Illinois, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts were (and remained until the 1890s) Republican strongholds that amounted to roughly a third of the electoral college. In each election, Republicans would waive "the bloody shirt" (Luthin, 1960; Arrington, 2020) – evoking the blood spilled by Union soldiers because of Democrats who had favored secession – at great electoral cost to Democrats. For the latter, the main way forward was to target a few states such as California, Indiana, New Jersey and New York (Arrington, 2020).[1] In these states, anti-immigration policies offered Democrats a way to negate their Civil War induced disadvantage.

California was particularly appealing for Democrats for three reasons. First, the state was growing rapidly (its number of electoral college votes doubled from 4 to 8 between the 1860 and 1884 elections. Second, the main foreign-born population of the state – Asian immigrants coming mostly from China (roughly 10% of California's population) – was the object of intense hostility from native whites. Third, because they were not white, Asian voters could not vote. This limited the risk of alienating a portion of the state's electorate. As soon as the Civil War ended, Democrats put forward anti-Chinese proposals in an attempt to compete in California. This made California into a swing state (Seo, 2011, p. 825). Realizing that Democrats were making headway, Republicans followed suit in the 1870s. By the 1880 election, both parties had strong anti-Chinese planks that were virtually indistinguishable from each other.

Using county-level electoral results in California for the 1868, 1872, 1876 and 1880 elections, we find that larger Chinese-to-White ratios made a county more electorally competitive in all elections. We also find that the effect of ratios on margins of victory is getting smaller over time. This is consistent with the fact that Republicans started emulating Democrats in their anti-Chinese policies so as to negate the electoral competitiveness of the Democrats.

We argue that this constitutes evidence of our narrative that the Civil War reconfigured political incentives in ways that would lead to bipartisan support for anti-immigration policies in general and anti-Chinese policies in particular. As such, national-level nativist policies

[1]New York was an especially early hotbed of anti-immigration politics (Hirota, 2020).

could be adopted even though nativist hostility to migrants had been present with little policy consequences for more than four decades.

2 Nativist Backlash, the Civil War and Policy Actions

Immigration to America picked up noticeably during the 1840s and 1850s (Davis et al., 1972; Cohn, 2000; Margo, 2000). In states like New York and Massachusetts, an almost immediate nativist backlash was directed at Irish and German immigrants while states like California directed its backlash at the Chinese (Fong and Markham, 1991, 2002; Fisher and Fisher, 2001). Generally, this took the form of sporadic outbreaks of mob violence and harassment against immigrants. However, translating this backlash into policy was much more difficult. Actions prior to 1880 were contained at the state-level, were of limited scope and had limited effects. It is only in the 1870s that federal legislation became politically possible and only in 1882 that a strong anti-immigration piece of legislation – the Chinese Exclusion Act – is adopted.

The backlash of the 1840s and 1850s is quite illustrative in terms of understanding the lag between the backlash and policy action. This period is marked by the rise of the Know-Nothing Party in the 1850s which was able, by 1855, to control virtually every New England state and secure large delegations in Congress (Cohn, 2000, pp. 361-362, 374). Unsurprisingly, such electoral successes led to the adoption of state-level anti-immigration policies. However, such laws always a limited scope and yielded equally limited effects.[2] The most extreme example is that of Massachusetts. The state deported foreigners who sought help from almshouses (Hirota, 2016, p. 1). This was mostly aimed at Irish immigrants. However, only 715 of the 33,436 Irish passengers who arrived to Massachusetts between 1837 and 1845 were deported back to Ireland (Hirota, 2016, p. 215) even though it also deported larger numbers to other American states. In the 1850s, Massachusetts adopted even stricter deportation criteria so that, from 1851 to 1863, some 15,438 persons were deported back to England, Canada or other US states (Hirota,

[2]One example of state laws of limited scope is that of state passenger laws which allowed inspectors commissioned by the state government to refuse entry to people deemed to exhibit a mental or physical defect (Hirota, 2016, p.3).

2016, p. 216-217). Yet, this pales in comparison to population increases from the census. The increase in foreign-born population in Massachusetts between 1850 (Census Office, 1853, p. 53) and 1860 (Census Office, 1864, p. 226) represented, annually, 9608 people whereas the average annual deportation number is 1287 (roughly 13%). Moreover, Massachusetts was an outlier in that it was probably the most aggressive states.[3] Other states adopted quite mild policies that failed to come close to matching Massachusetts' nativist policies.[4] With milder (or no) policies in other states, immigrants could (and did) change their ultimate destination when migrating (Cohn, 2000, p. 377). Numerous states, notably those of the Midwest, saw immigration as a way to increase their population and thus their influence in Congress (Hirota, 2016, p.186). As such, they were unlikely to enact any anti-immigration policies. Without federal restrictions on immigration – through changes to the Naturalization Act of 1790 – the capability of states to enact strong restrictions on immigration was limited and so was their capacity to curb the actual numbers.[5]

One reason for why there was a lag for federal politicians to take anti-immigration policy actions is that states like California were not tremendously important initially (only 4 out of 296 electoral college votes in 1856). However, that is not sufficient as states such as New York and Massachusetts – with large backlashes against immigrants – weighed quite heavily. The other necessary detail relates to the fact that the Democrats had a unified voting bloc in the slave-holding southern states. The non-slave states can be broken into two groups: the coastal (e.g. New York, Massachusetts) and non-coastal (Iowa, Wisconsin). The latter group exhibited weaker anti-immigration feelings notably because it allowed them to grow demographically

[3]For example, Hirota (2016) presents New York as one of the most aggressive states in term of deportation. Yet, it pales next to Massachusetts. The deportations from New York between 1850 and 1860 amounted to 2505 (roughly 250 persons per year) (Hirota, 2016, p. 219). The census figures for 1850 (Census Office, 1853, p. 111) and 1860 (Census Office, 1864, p. 346) place the decadal increase in foreign-born population at 332,681 which suggests that only 0.8% of immigrants to New York were deported. It is only in the 1850s that deportations increase in numbers.

[4]For example, Louisiana had a law allowing officials to refuse entry to immigrants who could not support themselves but the state rarely enforced that law (Hirota, 2016, p.11).

[5]Cohn (2000) points to lower immigration levels in the late 1850s. He assigns importance to the nativist backlash as a factor in curbing immigration levels. However, he assigns does not assign that effect to *policies* but rather to *hostility* from locals which deterred immigrants from coming to America. Cohn (2000) reports multiple cases of violence and rioting against immigrants (p. 373-374).

(which secured more votes in the electoral college and seats in Congress). Putting too much weight on immigration topics meant that the northern states could divide and allow Democrats to sneak in (as was the case in states like Illinois and New Jersey in the presidential election of 1856).[6] This helps explain why the Know-Nothing Party rapidly disintegrated soon after its electoral successes of the 1850s despite the popularity of its anti-immigration positions within the North.

The Civil War altered this dynamics entirely.[7] First, the Civil War's burden had solidified the Republican coalition in the North as veterans and their families were solidly opposed to the Democrat party. This made it hard for the Democrats to break through in states such as Illinois, Pennsylvania and Ohio which had sent some of the largest contingent of troops for the Union cause (Dyer, 1908, p. 11-13).[8] Second, in the 1868 election, there were still some states (Texas, Mississippi, Virginia) in the South that could not participate in the election. Third, the politics of the Reconstruction era meant that, until after the election of 1876, many pro-Reconstruction Republicans were in power in many Southern states (Egerton, 2014). With their electoral base weakened for most elections until 1880 and with a more monolithic pro-Republican voting bloc in the North, Democrats needed to find ways to compete in presidential elections by catering to marginal states outside the south.

The issue that made them competitive in key states was the advancement of anti-immigration policies (Seo, 2011). This can be seen by the fact that Democrats frequently nominated New York politicians – a state that was a hotbed of anti-immigration feeling and which frequently supported Democrats during the post-war years.[9] However, New York was far from sufficient.

[6]Hirota (2016) makes a similar claim when he states that "many national politicians, regardless of their partisan affiliation, feared that promoting a nativist federal policy would alienate voters (p. 186). However, in this passage it is unclear if he is referring to the entire pre-1882 policy or if he is referring only to the post-war years.

[7]It should be pointed out that our argument has a close cousin in the form of Robert Higgs' proposed ratchet effect whereby crises such as wars alter incentives in favor of permanently larger governments (both in scope and scale) (Higgs, 1985; Higgs and Twight, 1986; Higgs, 1987,9). Our argument compares to his in the sense that anti-immigration policy are only made possible because the war altered incentives in ways that favor greater government intervention in the realm of immigraton and labor mobility.

[8]It is also worth noting that, during the war, President Lincoln made decisions in ways to avoid high casualty in electorally important states. As such, all else being equal, these states suffered less and they recompensed the Republicans with loyalty at the polls (Anderson and Tollison, 1991).

[9]Horatio Seymour (presidential candidate in 1868), Horace Greeley (presidential candidate in 1872) and Samuel

Inroads into the midwestern and western states were necessary. Pushing for anti-Chinese policies was one key way the Democrats found to extend to other states such as California. One historian argues that southern Democrats explicitly picked the Chinese question to create a West-South alliance “dedicated to white supremacy and defeat of Northeastern radicalism" (Tichenor, 2009, p. 104). Initially, Republicans “did not want to stray too far from the party’s records on civil rights and equal citizenship" (Seo, 2011, p. 826). However, they were also “well aware of the need to court crucial swing voters in the West if they hoped to keep the highly rewarding presidential office under their control" (Seo, 2011, p. 826). As such, they gradually shifted their position in favor of anti-immigration positions in general and – in the case of California – anti-Chinese positions in particular. As such, by the late 1880s, anti-immigration policies had bipartisan support. From there it became increasingly possible for federal-level policies to be enacted and implemented so that nativist feelings could finally begin to translate into policy actions.

3 Empirical Strategy and Data

Our argument above essentially predicts that Democrats moved first on anti-immigration policies and that, upon realizing the electoral threat, Republicans followed later. The problem with this argument is that white immigrants could vote which limited the gains from advancing nativist rhetoric. This is why we focus on California.

First, the state had a particularly strong nativist backlash against Asian immigrants (who were labelled as Chinese). Second, the state was also increasingly important in terms of electoral college votes. In fact, it handed its six electoral college votes over a 1.8% margin to the Republican candidate in the 1876 election. The Republican candidate, Rutheford B. Hayes, had won the election with 185 electoral college votes against 184 for his opponent. California switching sides would have cost Hayes the victory.

Third, the state fits the pre-war narrative described in section 2. Peng (2021) notes that anti-

Tilden (presidential candidate in 1876) were all from New York. Winfield Hancock (the 1880 presidential candidate), although his home state was Pennsylvania, was a resident of New York during the 1880 election.

Chinese feelings did not translate into policy actions for many decades. A part of the lag, Peng (2021) argues, is explained by changes in economic circumstances.[10] Another part of the lag is due to the fact that many state-level policies were ruled unconstitutional.[11] As such, California experiences the same lag between the backlash and the policy responses as elsewhere in the country.

Fourth, and most importantly, Asian immigrants could not vote. Under the Naturalization Act of 1790, only free white men were eligible for citizenship and suffrage. This essentially excluded political participation for Asian immigrants and limited their electoral influence (Hirota, 2020, 12).[12] More importantly, it also made Asian immigrants an easier political target. In states like New York, large cohorts of Catholic immigrants from Quebec, Ireland and Southern Europe onward had caused nativist backlashes in the 1840s and 1880s (Hirota, 2014,0). However, this backlash was self-limiting because white immigrants could acquire citizenship and vote. As such, more extreme proposals were too risky for viable candidates for office to endorse (Hirota, 2020). California's unique setting excludes that counterweight.

California is thus ideal to study the shift due to the Civil War that permitted the adoption of federal-level policies aimed at curbing immigration starting with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. To do so, we look at presidential election results in Californian counties between 1868 and 1880 using the following econometric specification:

$$|margin|_i = Chinese/White_i^{'}\delta + x_i^{'}\beta + \epsilon_i \tag{1}$$

[10]For example, during the years when the transcontinental railroads were being completed, Chinese workers were employed on railroad construction outside California. When they were completed in 1869, numerous workers returned to California at the same time that the state's manufacturing sector was exposed to greater competition from east coast manufacturers. This renewed calls for action against the Chinese (Coolidge, 1909).

[11]The Workingmen's Party of California, the most influential labor organization that affects the politics of California in the late 1870s, provides a good example of this. After seizing control of the legislature in the late 1870s, the Workingmen's Party rewrote the state constitution. The 19th article of the revised constitution prohibited municipal works and corporations from hiring Chinese and authorizes cities to remove Chinese from within the city limits to specified areas. The U.S. Circuit Court declared the new state constitution unconstitutional in violation of the 14th amendment and the Burlingame Treaty in 1880.

[12]This can be best in a referendum in 1879 against more Chinese immigration which passed with the overwhelming majority of 154,638 to 883 (United States Immigration Commission, 1911, p. 73). With such low counts of pro-immigration votes in a state with 10% of its population being of Chinese origin, it is clear that the Chinese did not influence electoral outcomes as well.

where the absolute value of *margin* between Republicans and Democrats is our measure of electoral competitiveness. Using the absolute value allows us to disregard which party wins in a given county and concentrate exclusively on how competitive a county is as lower values indicate tighter elections. The county-level results are taken from Burnham (1955). Our coefficient of interest is δ which measures the effect of the ratio of Chinese to White population in a county i on the competitiveness in that county. The ratio is built using the data from the Census Office (1883a, p. 382). Our assumption is that counties that had large Chinese population relative to the white population yielded closer contests as they were key to shifting the state's allegiance in presidential elections. The vector $\mathbf{x}_i$ contains relevant control variables that we use: the log of population, the log of manufacturing wages, and either the log of manufacturing output per capita or the ratio of the manufacturing to farming sectors. These variables are meant to control for other socio-economic determinants of competitiveness and are constructed from volumes 2 and 3 of the Census of 1880 and volume 3 from the census of 1870 (Census Office, 1872,8,8). The descriptive statistics are below in table 1.

The presidential elections occurred in 1868, 1872, 1876 and 1880. In only one of these years is the election in the same year as the census data we have. This has two consequences in terms of our methodology. First, we will have to match the dependent variable for the elections with the closest census year (i.e. 1868 and 1872 results will rely on values from the 1870 census and 1876 and 1880 results will rely on values from the 1880 census). Second, it prevents us from using a panel approach as we only have two periods of control variables. As such, we will rely on four separate ordinary least squares specification (i.e. one for each election).

Before we proceed, we should also point a key prediction of our narrative in section: we expect the effect of the Chinese to white ratio (measured by the coefficient δ) to fade over time. This is because Democrats in 1868 were the first to adopt anti-Chinese policy. Republicans followed after. Republicans tended to be, prior to the 1870s, more divided on anti-Chinese policies (Seo, 2011). This was true even in state-level politics as early as the 1850s (Stanley, 1973, pp. 82-83, 85). By the 1860s, Republicans still opposed some anti-Chinese policies at

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

VARIABLES	(1) N	(2) mean	(3) sd	(4) min	(5) max
Absolute Margin, 1880	52	9.499	8.440	0.100	29.65
Absolute Margin, 1876	52	12.08	9.620	0.272	48.24
Absolute Margin, 1872	49	20.18	12.70	1.014	46.29
Absolute Margin, 1868	49	16.55	13.77	0.208	68.21
Chinese/White Ratio, 1880	52	0.109	0.110	0.00430	0.702
Chinese/White Ratio, 1870	49	0.110	0.112	0.00404	0.563
Manufacturing/Farm Ratio, 1880	52	2.972	16.51	0.00579	119.6
Manufacturing/Farm Ratio, 1870	48	1.822	6.331	0.0430	44.18
Log of Manufacturing Wages, 1880	52	5.896	0.319	5.256	6.786
Log of Manufacturing Wages, 1870	48	5.951	0.359	4.780	6.862
Log of Population, 1880	52	9.217	0.878	6.290	12.36
Log of Population, 1870	49	8.813	0.963	6.064	11.91
Log of Manufacturing Output PC, 1880	52	3.504	1.040	0.538	5.807
Log of Manufacturing Output PC, 1870	48	3.907	0.919	1.514	5.523

both the state and federal levels (Stanley, 1973, p. 213). This was in line with the post-war political ascendancy of the Radical Republicans who had pushed for the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1868 (Fisher and Fisher, 2001). In contrast, Democrats, such as Henry Huntly Haight who was elected governor in 1867 with a strong majority, had consistently promoted strong anti-Chinese policies (Stanley, 1973, p. 214). According to Stanley (1973), the late 1860s – marked by a near Democratic victory in the state during the presidential election of 1868 and a 11-point victory by Haight in the 1867 gubernatorial election – constitute the reversal point for Republicans. At both the federal and state levels, Republicans began adopting increasingly anti-Chinese policies. By 1871, "racial issues no longer distinguished Republicans from Democrats" in state politics (Stanley, 1973, p. 215). By 1877, the same could be said to apply to federal politics as both parties adopted highly similar policies (Fisher and Fisher, 2001, p. 59).[13] Because Democrats were faster to jump

[13]Quite tellingly, in the 1880 election (where both major candidates had adopted anti-Chinese planks), there was a major scandal in California which probably threw to the state to the Democratic presidential candidate. In October 1880, a forged letter purportedly sent by James Garfield (the Republican candidate) to an "Employers

on the anti-Chinese policies bandwagon, we expect that larger Chinese-to-White ratios would matter more in the elections before Republicans began adopting more anti-Chinese policies. As Republicans became more anti-Chinese, we expect the effect on electoral competitiveness to wane.

4 Results

The results from the regressions confirm our intuition to some extent: the ratio of Chinese to White people in a county makes that county more electorally competitive in presidential election. This applies for all elections.

First, we ran multivariate regressions in OLS with each of the different elections. The results are depicted in table 2 below. Each pair of column represents an election with two different specifications. The difference in each pair is that one column relies on the log of manufacturing output (capturing the marginal product of labor in manufacturing) and the other measures how important was the agricultural sector relative to manufacturing sector (with the assumption that the Chinese were disproportionately engaged in manufacturing). As can be seen, all columns report that the Chinese to White ratio reduces the absolute value of the victory margin in a county. The effect is always significant above the 10% level and is often significant above the 5% level.

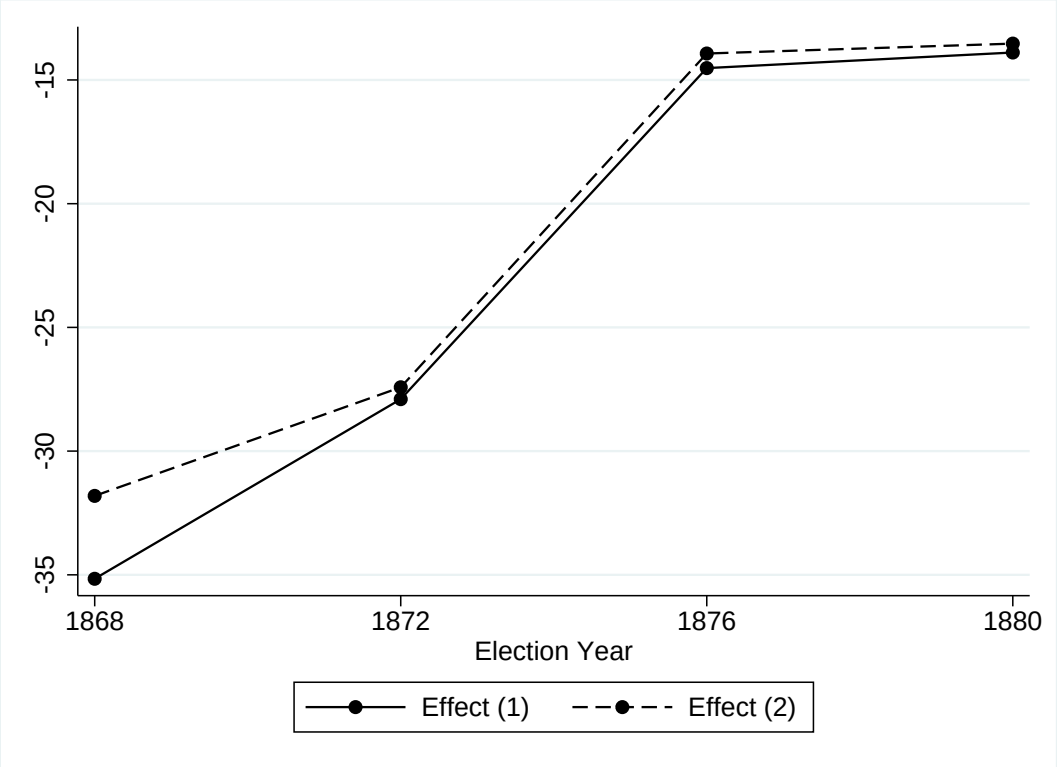
Most importantly, the coefficients are quite large. As the ratio is expressed in decimal points (i.e. one Chinese to ten Whites is 0.1), our coefficient imply that a one extra Chinese per 100 whites reduced the margin of victory by between 0.135 and 0.352 percentage points. To provide context to those proportions, the election of 1876 could have tipped to the Democrats had they been able to get less than 1% of the California's republican voters to switch sides.

Union" was reproduced in a Democrat newspaper. The letter showed Garfield essentially arguing that his party's plank was a decoy to win California even though he was secretly favorable to Chinese immigration (Arrington, 2020). The letter, which is widely believed to be a forgery, can be seen as an attempt to essentially distinguish between two candidates who held the same view in the electorally crucial state of California.

Table 2: Ordinary Least Squares Results of Absolute Electoral Margin

VARIABLES	(1) Model 1 1880	(2) Model 2 1880	(3) Model 3 1876	(4) Model 4 1876	(5) Model 5 1872	(6) Model 6 1872	(7) Model 7 1868	(8) Model 8 1868
Chinese/White Ratio, 1880	-13.89*	-13.53*	-14.52**	-13.93*				
	(6.947)	(7.186)	(6.949)	(7.268)				
Log of Manufacturing Wages, 1880	-0.430	1.354	2.332	4.173				
	(4.023)	(3.761)	(5.500)	(4.584)				
Log of Population, 1880	-2.274*	-1.642	-2.749**	-1.584				
	(1.283)	(1.506)	(1.245)	(1.313)				
Log of Manufacturing Output PC, 1880	1.409		1.227					
	(1.328)		(1.509)					
Manufacturing/Farm Ratio, 1880		0.00650		-0.0591				
		(0.0442)		(0.0418)				
Chinese/White Ratio, 1870					-27.90**	-27.42**	-35.16***	-31.81**
					(12.88)	(13.13)	(10.72)	(12.47)
Log of Manufacturing Wages, 1870					8.189	7.096	14.65*	8.979
					(7.544)	(6.671)	(7.506)	(7.185)
Log of Population, 1870					-3.696**	-2.813	-6.651***	-6.302***
					(1.730)	(1.987)	(1.843)	(2.259)
Log of Manufacturing Output PC, 1870					-1.031		-4.336**	
					(1.918)		(1.799)	
Manufacturing/Farm Ratio, 1870						-0.265		0.0577
						(0.161)		(0.146)
Constant	29.57	18.10	20.96	3.778	11.02	6.135	9.198	22.44
	(24.64)	(25.67)	(34.13)	(30.91)	(36.62)	(36.49)	(33.99)	(35.18)
Observations	52	52	52	52	48	48	48	48
R-squared	0.073	0.055	0.080	0.076	0.122	0.132	0.289	0.224

Figure 1: Effect of Chinese/White Ratio on Absolute Victory Margin



The evolution of the coefficient for the ratio of Chinese to White is also consistent with our explanation. Its importance diminishes monotonically from election to election. This can be seen in figure 1. The line labelled "Effect (1)" refers to the coefficients for Chinese to White ratio from the odd-numbered columns of table 2 while "Effect (2)" shows the even-numbered columns of table 2. As we pointed out above, we expect that Democrats initially got important returns from adopting anti-Chinese policies. However, as Republicans realized the electoral cost of appearing pro-Chinese in California, they adopted increasingly hostile proposals. This blurred the difference between them on this key topic so that it minimized the electoral advantage conferred by endorsing anti-Chinese policies.

More importantly, the results depicted in figure 1 suggest that bipartisan support for anti-Chinese policies in the late 1870s – which is well documented by historians such as Fong and Markham (2002) and Tichenor (2009) – was born out of political needs. More precisely, the need to negate the electoral advantage of the early mover (i.e. the Democrats) on anti-Chinese

policies. From there, our results explain well the fact that the 1880 election was fought between two presidential that defended important restrictions against Chinese immigration. A sense of inevitability to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 appears as neither party appeared willing to take any other stance than massive restrictions of Chinese migration. As such, the decades-long period of federal inaction in terms of immigration policy in the face of a clear nativist backlash came to an end.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we used the state of California to explain why there were many decades separating the onset of a nativist backlash against immigrants and the adoption of federal immigration control policies. We argued that pre-war politics came with incentives that made politicians unwilling to engage in national-level policies to deal with immigration. The Civil War altered those incentives by pushing Democrats to attempt to create a West-South alliance to secure presidential victories. California was seen as a key state to capture and adopting anti-Chinese policy proposals was the way to do so (especially as Chinese immigrants could not participate in elections). As Republicans saw the inroads of Democrats in California and realized that it could cost them the presidency, they began adopting very similar anti-Chinese policies.

Using the county-level results, we found that counties with large Chinese populations were more electorally competitive all else being equal. Moreover, and consistent with the fact that Democrats were the first mover, the effect diminishes over time as Republicans began to adopt anti-Chinese proposals. These results provide evidence for the narrative that we propose whereby the Civil War altered incentives in ways that made possible the adoption of immigration control policies.

Our results and arguments should be seen as complementary to those already advanced by historians and economic historians rather than as substitutes. For example, Hirota (2016) argues that the few northeastern states such as New York and Massachusetts that had strong nativist

constituencies developed bureaucracies that both advocated for federal intervention and later implemented federal policies. Our explanation complements his in the sense that politicians saw greater returns to listening to immigration control bureaucrats from New York or Massachusetts and also hiring them to implement policy. Others emphasize the importance of nativist feelings. Our explanation complements theirs by providing a channel by which they were converted into federal policy.

This complementarity is important. Given the rising importance of immigration policy discussions across the western world, this complementarity – even for historical cases such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act – can provide key insights into understanding the determinants of policy changes today.

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