



**Baodong Liu, James M. Vanderleeuw.** *Race Rules: Electoral Politics in New Orleans, 1965-2006.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007. xiv + 165 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-1967-9; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7391-1968-6.



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**Published on** H-Urban (July, 2008)

## New Orleans in Black and White

In *Race Rules*, Baodong Liu and James Vanderleeuw provide an analysis of New Orleans politics from the mid-1960s through the post-Katrina elections in spring 2006. As the title indicates, the authors identify race as the dominant factor in the city's electoral behavior. The assumption is hardly surprising and the conclusions less than earth-shaking, but the authors work diligently to lift their work from the realm of the obvious. Their treatment of race and urban politics in New Orleans leans heavily on statistical analysis and the authors develop useful hypotheses to explain voter attitudes and choice.

*Race Rules* begins not with an examination of the 1960s but with an analysis of the 2006 New Orleans mayoral campaign. The dislocations caused by Hurricane Katrina altered the racial characteristics of the city, producing a more racially balanced electorate. Thus the 2006 election neatly illustrated several theses explained in detail in later chapters. Hurricane Katrina battered the city August 29, 2005, and caused levee breaches in several key areas. The storm surge also produced failures in interior floodwalls that lined and contained drainage canals reaching into the heart of the city. The failures resulted

from faulty or inadequate engineering designs as well as the ferocity of the storm. Floodwaters paralyzed much of the city for several weeks and prevented evacuees from returning. The damage (and population disruptions) extended to other parts of the metropolitan area, including downriver St. Bernard Parish and Jefferson Parish, adjacent to and west of New Orleans.

Mayor Ray Nagin thus faced two barriers to reelection in 2006. For some voters, the election provided an opportunity to hold the mayor accountable for his record after the storm. The mayor would face questions regarding the pace of recovery, whether or not the city was fully prepared for the disaster, and policies that would shape redevelopment. The mayor's second barrier was the changing nature of the electorate. Whatever the precise numbers, it was clear that the relative power of African American voters in New Orleans had declined. For the first time since 1977, white politicians in New Orleans perceived a real chance for election to the city's highest office. Yet Nagin prevailed over his white opponent, Mitch Landrieu (brother to Senator Mary Landrieu and son to Moon Landrieu, New Orleans mayor, 1970-78),

in the runoff. According to Liu and Vanderleeuw, Nagin won by appealing to race identity and by polarizing the electorate. Comparing the 2006 results to those from the 2002 election, during which Nagin bested an African American opponent, showed a complete turnaround. Nagin's 2002 white support diminished greatly, while his black votes increased dramatically.

Chapters 2 and 3 recap theories of racial politics in urban America and the role of race in electoral battles. These themes will be familiar to political scientists and historians of the South and civil rights. As the authors state, "The main theme of this book is that race is the group identity that most profoundly defines the political dynamics in urban America" (p. 18). Theorists classify those dynamics, summarized by the authors, as "a formal institutional approach, a political economy approach (regime analysis), and an electoral approach (political incorporation)" (p. 18). Though drawing on all three concepts, the authors present their own thesis in chapter 3: a "racial conflict and racial accommodation thesis" (p. 38). In brief, Liu and Vanderleeuw posit a model in which conflict and accommodation vary according to the likelihood of a balanced bi-racial contest. When one race is numerically dominant, electoral conflict subsides; when voter registration tends to be balanced, electoral conflict increases. The result is an inverted U-shaped curve on a graph measuring racial dominance (white to balanced to black) along the horizontal axis and the extent of racially divided voting along the vertical axis.

The authors move back in time to the mid-1960s starting in chapter 4 and review the history of municipal elections in New Orleans. During the last decades of the twentieth century, racial dominance in New Orleans shifted from white-dominant to balanced to black-dominant, setting up a test of the authors' main thesis. In the 1969 mayoral contest, black support helped to elect Moon Landrieu. By 1977, the increased black population and voter registration produced the city's first black mayor, Ernest Morial, who won with the support of 95 percent of the black votes cast as well as 20 percent of the white votes. No white politician has won the office since that year. Blacks won bi-racially contested elections in 1982 and 1994 with votes fitting the pattern suggested by Liu and Vanderleeuw.

More interesting, perhaps, are the elections in which the two major candidates were African American. The results of such contests (in 1986 and 2002) also showed racially polarized voting. In each case, whites rallied behind a favorite candidate (Sidney Barthelemy in 1986

and Ray Nagin in 2002) and provided the margin of victory. Liu and Vanderleeuw are less helpful in explaining these elections, though they mention Barthelemy's Creole (mixed-race) background and Nagin's pro-business rhetoric.

Chapter 5 provides additional statistical analysis in support of the racial conflict portion of the authors' thesis. Careful examination of mayoral and council elections at the precinct level produces the predicted U-shaped curve for both primary and runoff elections. Chapter 6 examines cross-racial voting and the racial accommodation side of the primary thesis. White voting for black candidates receives special attention and the authors conclude that accommodation voting signifies a strategic, not ideological, choice. Whites search for signals, e.g., the endorsement of the daily newspaper, that indicate what the authors label "less threatening" candidates (p. 113). Unfortunately, evidence on ideology (party affiliation) is not explored for the 2006 mayoral runoff, a contest in which local Republicans urged conservative white neighborhoods to vote for Nagin as the "business candidate." Antipathy toward the (Democratic) Landrieu family was evidently the "signal" that that group required. Chapter 7 summarizes the research and suggests that redevelopment patterns in the city may lead to a continued balance between white and black voters. This will lead, if the model proves accurate, to increasingly polarized voting and electoral conflict.

*Race Rules* presents a thesis that is clearly stated, logically argued, and supported with impressive statistical evidence. For urban historians, the book offers a look at one southern city's electoral history and the ever-present interaction between race and politics. This reviewer's reservations about the work within the context of history fall into three categories. The first two are relatively minor, but the third is more substantial.

First, the book may not fit upper-level and graduate-level needs in history classes. It is more appropriate (as the publisher clearly suggests) for classes in political science and urban studies wherein discussions of statistical methods and ecological inference are understood and appreciated.

Second, a series of annoying inconsistencies in the text, e.g., discrepancies between graphical data and amounts in the text, occasionally blunt the force of the argument. The authors do not always make clear whether figures apply to the city or the metropolitan area. Liu and Vanderleeuw seem too content to accept many of the uninformed stabs at population estimation and evacuation

figures that circulated immediately after Hurricane Katrina and since. Surely the estimates of evacuees in Houston and Atlanta (p. 9) require more careful study. A total of such estimates from residents in every nearby community (many of whom graciously and generously sheltered displaced residents, this reviewer included) would easily top the pre-storm populations of New Orleans and the metropolitan area. The Atlanta estimate is derived from an October 2005 article and was likely out of date by the time of the mayoral primary.

The authors also accept the conventional wisdom regarding the storm's alleged racially skewed physical affects, alleging that "Katrina â| showed her 'racial discrimination'" (p. 98). The damage of the storm spread throughout the city without any significant racial difference. Media reports highlighted the mostly black Lower Ninth Ward, but mentioned much less often the nearly all white, similarly flooded Lakeview neighborhood. While the authors are certainly correct regarding the post-storm alterations in population by race, the new distribution (which may or may not remain permanent) is the result of repair and redevelopment patterns and poli-

cies, not the initial patterns of damage.

Third, *Race Rules* takes a binary approach to the race issue. This is consistent with the available statistical evidence (e.g., voter registration figures), but hardly matches the history of New Orleans. From pre-Civil War times to the present, the African American Creole population of New Orleans has influenced history and politics in ways beyond the ability of mere black and white research to convey. *Race Rules* barely mentions the Creole population and investigates gradations of color not at all. It cannot be a coincidence that this population has produced the African American mayors of New Orleans and that in many elections white cross-over voting follows subtleties of color, class, and origin far more than the variables of incumbency and newspaper endorsement. (Although, it must be said that the daily newspaper follows the same subtleties in making its endorsements.)

These reservations do not diminish the utility of *Race Rules*. Its central thesis deserves further investigation in other cities and Liu and Vanderleeuw deserve credit for the research they accomplished and their understanding of the electoral history of New Orleans.

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**Citation:** Robert Dupont. Review of Liu, Baodong; Vanderleeuw, James M., *Race Rules: Electoral Politics in New Orleans, 1965-2006*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. July, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14705>

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