UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

October 24, 2017
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‘Contested Transformation’

When voters elected Barack Obama president in 2008 and re-elected him four years later, they seemed to be validating political scientist Pei-te Lien’s research about the racial and gender transformations taking place among America’s political leaders.

A year prior to Obama’s groundbreaking election as the nation’s first black president, Lien, a professor of political science at UC Santa Barbara, and colleagues had completed the Gender and Multi-Cultural Leadership Project, a national survey and study that explored how race and gender affect politics today. The research project specifically examined black, Latina/Latino, Native American and Asian American elected officials in state and local governments, mostly as members of state legislatures, city councils, county commissions and school boards. The team documented the demographic shifts in governing in their resulting book, “Contested Transformation: Race, Gender and Political Leadership in 21st-Century America” (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Now, for publishing what has been described as the first comprehensive study of racial and ethnic minorities holding elective office in America at the beginning of the 21st century, Lien and her colleagues have received the 2017 Distinguished Career Book Award from the American Political Science Association’s Race, Ethnicity and Politics section.

“We wanted to give justice to the pioneers who are not getting recognition and were being neglected, and show their importance to democratic governing,” said Lien. “Many of these people are also firsts in their communities.”

Lien co-authored the book with Carol Hardy-Fanta of the University of Massachusetts Boston, Dianne Pinderhughes of the University of Notre Dame, and Christine Marie Sierra of the University of New Mexico.

“We were extremely happy that our association appreciates our years of hard work,” Lien said. “With that award, people will know that this work is precedent-setting and valuable for research and teaching as well as for practices.”

Said Bruce Bimber, chair of UCSB’s political science department, “Professor Lien’s work is an important part of the political science department’s emphasis on how people’s identities shape their engagement in public affairs as well as how they fare in society and democracy. We are happy to see her receive this well-deserved recognition.”

“Contested Transformation” shows how political leadership by people of color is changing the American political landscape on a variety of issues and how the effort to seek racial and gender equality in political representation continues. Using data from the Gender and Multi-Cultural Leadership National Database and Survey, the book examines commonalities and differences across race and gender groups, paths to public office, leadership roles and policy positions. It also looks at many obstacles candidates of color had to overcome in the 21st century to win an election. Among the barriers that people of color historically have faced in their quest to succeed in politics are racial and gender biases, the advantage of white male incumbency, a lack of start-up funding, a lack of role models and the lack of a supportive network.

With populations of ethnic minorities increasing nationwide, the face of political representation in America is becoming more multicultural, according to Lien. However, research shows the population of people of color is growing at a much faster rate than that of their representation in government. And progress can be halted, Lien noted, by racial resistance, bigotry and hostile election laws and other legislation.

“History shows that when there is progress, there is setback,” she said. “There are people who refuse to change. They feel threatened by diversity. This gives a reason for all of us who care about developing America’s multicultural leadership to be vigilant for the worst. We cannot be content about our nation’s progress. Whatever success we made can be contested later. But we cannot give up, we must keep on trying.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.