Divided They Conquer: The Success of Armenian Ethnic Lobbies in the United States

Author: Gregg, Heather S.

Citable URI: http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/97604

Publisher: Inter-University Committee on International Migration

Date Issued: 2002-08

Abstract:
The end of the Cold War has sparked considerable academic and policy debates on the direction and aims of US foreign policy. One aspect of that debate has centered on the role of ethnic groups in influencing foreign policy and determining the national interest. Two broad camps are visible in this debate. The first camp argues that ethnic lobbies are highly influential and a threat to US foreign policy and the national interest (Schlesinger, Jr.: 1992; Huntington: 1997; Smith: 2000). The second camp sees these groups as moderately influential but largely beneficial; specifically, they promote American interests abroad (Clough: 1992; Shain: 1999). Neither of these camps, despite their conclusions, has offered rigorous case studies aimed at measuring the impact of ethnic lobby groups on the US foreign policy process nor divulging how these groups attain their alleged influence. One US minority in particular, Armenian-Americans, has achieved considerable success in gaining political and material support from Congress. Such achievements include roughly $90 million in annual aid for the state of Armenia; maintenance of Section 907 of the Freedom of Support Act, which blocks aid to Armenia’s rival Azerbaijan; the stalling of an arms deal with Turkey; and increased support for official US governmental recognition of the Armenian genocide of 1915-1921. This case study of Armenian lobby groups in the US argues that the amount of aid and support for Armenia and Armenian issues is best explained by the intense lobbying efforts of Armenian-Americans in the United States. The lobbying success of this small US minority is largely the result of two factors: an intense inter-community rivalry between two factions within the Armenian-American population, which has led to hypermobilization of this ethnic group’s resources, and the formation of key alliances in Washington including members of Congress and other lobby groups and organizations.

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The term “Armenian lobby” (or “Armenia lobby”) is used to determine the coalition of all special interest groups (advocacy groups) and individuals who seek to influence U.S. foreign policy in support of Armenia, the Armenians, and their interests. The Armenian lobby, and namely the Armenian-American one, has a worldwide fame. (See Heather Gregg, Divided They Conquer: the success of Armenian ethnic lobbies in the United States. Working paper #13, Aug 2002/The Rosemarie Rogers Working Papers Series, Center for International Studies, MIT, p. 11.)

This has grave implications for ethnically and religiously divided societies. Relations between groups may be fine when economic prospects are good for everyone, but in times of crisis there is competition between groups for resources. Despite the long history of ethnic and religious conflict between groups, the West has embarked on a path of officially promoting a new type of multiculturalism resulting from high levels of immigration of ethnic groups from around the world. In the United States, the Republican Party has become the party of White Christians. In 2004 and 2006, White evangelical or born-again Christians made up a quarter of the electorate, and 76 percent of them voted Republican despite the fact that most were lower middle class. Therefore white ethnic groups tend to feel more American and less of their ethnic background than other groups. (See Position Papers, Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act at http://www.anca.org (accessed Nov 22, 2009.)

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Non-white ethnic groups have not been so easily assimilated. It divided the US into the North (anti-slavery) and the South (pro slavery – basis of economy). Some Northern whites were against slavery for ethical reasons. Most Northern whites were against slavery because they feared they could not compete with unpaid slave labor. Abraham Lincoln was against slavery. When he became President the Southern states left the Union to form their own country based on slavery. This led to a Civil War (1861 – 1865). The Northern States won and slavery was abolished.