

CHAPTER 1

Race, Immigration, and the American Welfare State

IN NOVEMBER 1994 more than five million California voters went to the polls and sent a message to Washington. Frustrated about the alleged costs of undocumented immigration, they passed Proposition 187, also known as the “Save Our State” initiative, by an overwhelming margin. “S.O.S.” barred undocumented immigrants from access to welfare and other non-emergency services and required social welfare providers to report suspected undocumented immigrants to immigration officials. While the measure was overturned by the courts before it was implemented, a number of states subsequently passed similar legislation.¹

Proposition 187’s most enduring legacy, however, came in 1996. That year, as part of its overhaul of welfare, the federal government barred states from using federal funds to provide welfare coverage to most *legal* immigrants who had lived in the United States fewer than five years. Congressman E. Clay Shaw (R-FL) explained the logic behind this move: “Quite frankly . . . when we’re cutting benefits and cutting welfare for our citizens, I don’t see why we should stretch and say that we have an obligation to those that aren’t even citizens of our own country.” Twelve years later, as the Great Recession that began in 2008 deepened, many communities looked to further cull non-citizens from their public assistance rolls. The assumption that immigrants are less deserving, that they should be the first to be cut from the social welfare rolls when budgets are tight, now appears virtually unquestionable in many circles.²

Opponents of these legislative efforts have argued that the federal restrictions in 1996 were unprecedented and represented a major departure from previous federal policy, denoting the emergence of a “new nativism” that blatantly targets Mexican immigrants in particular. State-level restrictions on unauthorized immigrants, they claim, were redundant since undocumented immigrants had never been granted welfare assistance.³ Others disagree, claiming that these exclusions represent nothing more than simple cost considerations or a continuation of America’s historic unwillingness to extend welfare benefits to non-citizens.⁴

These debates led me to wonder: exactly how did immigrants fare historically? After all, the modern welfare state was born on the heels of the largest surge in immigration in American history. Between 1890 and

1930, more than twenty million people arrived on our shores. By the eve of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, fourteen million immigrants were living in America. Like today, these immigrants represented 12 percent of the population. Did these immigrants, many of them from Europe and Mexico, find their way to local social assistance when they arrived? Were they entitled to assistance in the midst of the Great Depression? How important was citizenship or legal status for access to New Deal programs and the nascent welfare state?⁵

When I began my search for answers to these questions, I found there was little published information on the subject. The vast literature on race and welfare focuses overwhelmingly on relations between blacks and whites. It demonstrates that racial divisions have profoundly affected the size and character of the American welfare state. Yet European immigrants, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans do not figure in this tale.

This book recounts the untold story of the politics of race and immigration in the development of the American social welfare system from the Progressive Era to the New Deal. It compares the incorporation of Mexicans,⁶ European immigrants, and blacks into our social welfare system and examines the influence of race and immigration on the scope, form, and function of social welfare provision across three separate regions: the North, South, and Southwest. By looking across groups, it tries to tease apart the relative influence of race, formal citizenship, and legal status for access to the social safety net.

Understanding how different groups were treated by our early welfare system is important because access to or exclusion from the welfare state can have immediate and long-term consequences on group outcomes like wealth accumulation.⁷ But the welfare state can also reflect a particular set of social relations, so the study of welfare state incorporation can also tell us something about where Mexicans fit into America's racial hierarchy, a subject of recent vigorous scholarly and public debate. Are Mexicans following the path of southern and eastern European immigrants, groups once thought to be racially distinct and inferior but now assimilated and treated simply as white? Or is theirs a path of blocked mobility due to enduring discrimination, an experience more akin to that of African Americans?⁸

Welfare scholars have often taken sides in this debate, at least implicitly. Some work suggests that the experiences of Mexicans and other minorities with the welfare state differ only in degree, not in kind, from the experiences of blacks. Authors who take this view slip comfortably between talking about "blacks" and "minorities," sometimes allotting a line or two to the treatment of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, or Native Americans without investigating the similarities and differences in treatment across groups. Other scholars endorse a black exceptionalism

perspective, which assumes that the welfare state's treatment of blacks is unique and that understanding black-white relations is sufficient to explain why the welfare state evolved as it did. In this line of thinking, the experiences of other minority groups are either politically insignificant or assumed to closely hew to the experiences of European immigrants and their descendants. Most social welfare scholars, however, simply ignore groups other than native-born blacks and whites. While there is much important work yet to be done on the black-white divide, the silence of the literature as a whole on other groups nonetheless reflects and reinforces a binary vision of American race relations. This book questions whether that vision—of an American welfare state in black and white—is truly warranted.⁹

This book demonstrates that blacks, Mexicans, and European immigrants were treated quite differently by both the Progressive Era relief system and the New Deal welfare state. European immigrants were largely included within the contours of social citizenship, while blacks were largely excluded. Mexicans straddled the boundaries of social citizenship precariously until relief officials forced them out—expelled from the boundaries of social citizenship *and* the nation.

By the eve of the Depression, when relief spending was still a local—not federal—responsibility, cities with more blacks or Mexicans typically invested the least in social assistance and relied more heavily on private money to fund their programs. Cities with more European immigrants, by contrast, invested more in relief and relied more heavily on public funding—even more, as it turns out, than cities with more native-born white residents. This was true even after taking into account differences across cities in levels of urbanization, need, or a city's financial ability to fund programs. The source of funding was an important feature of a relief system because private relief officials were more likely than their public counterparts to blame individuals for their poverty and believe that charity was a gift, not an entitlement; that the poor should be supervised while on the "dole"; and that the able-bodied should be forced to work for assistance. A city's choice to fund relief with public or private funds, therefore, might have a substantial effect on the treatment poor individuals would receive.

Disparities within communities mattered, too. Prior to the New Deal, blacks had less access to welfare assistance than any other group. Mexicans were often barred from Mothers' Pensions, the cash welfare programs for needy and deserving mothers, but they had greater access than blacks to less generous forms of relief like food baskets and clothing. But Mexicans were also sometimes expelled from the nation simply for requesting assistance. Relief offices in the Southwest cooperated with the Immigration Service to deport individuals who applied for welfare,

and relief offices throughout the country used their own funds to forcibly expel dependent Mexicans and Mexican Americans from the nation. Relief officials rarely behaved so aggressively toward European immigrants. They often refused to cooperate with the Immigration Service and sometimes even protected destitute European immigrants from being deported. European immigrants could also rely on relief officials to access Mothers' Pensions and other vital sources of assistance.

After FDR came into office in 1933, the federal government got involved in the business of relief, and federal non-discrimination provisions opened up forms of social protection to blacks and Mexicans. Greater access to welfare, however, brought with it greater stigma, especially for blacks who, unlike Mexicans, had previously escaped the label of being "overly dependent" on the dole. Yet despite the advent of nationalizing reforms meant to standardize relief policies across the country, disparities in access did not disappear because state and local welfare offices were charged with implementing many of the federal programs. Blacks typically lived in communities with low benefit levels for all programs, and local relief officials often limited black access. Mexicans, meanwhile, often lived in communities with a stratified benefits system: very high benefits for Old Age Assistance, from which they were excluded, and low benefits for General Assistance, upon which they were forced to rely.

European immigrants, by contrast, typically lived in areas with uniformly high benefit levels, and they received generous access to the least demeaning social insurance programs. Indeed, when it first passed, Social Security did not cover agricultural and domestic workers, thereby excluding the vast majority of blacks and Mexicans from social insurance. But European immigrants were more likely than even native-born whites to work in occupations covered by Social Security, and they were also more likely to be nearing retirement when the program was instituted. Consequently, they ended up contributing little to the system but by design benefited almost as much as those who would contribute their whole working lives. For retirees of European origin, Social Security was more akin to welfare than insurance but without the means test and without the stigma.

THE MYTH OF THE BOOTSTRAPPING WHITE ETHNIC

The broad inclusion of European immigrants in the early social welfare system stands in contrast to our national mythology that European immigrants worked their way up without any help from the government. That view implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—suggests that differences in individual initiative explain persistent economic and social disparities

between whites and blacks. Indeed, since 1994, when the question was first asked by the General Social Survey, between two-thirds and three-quarters of American residents have agreed with the following statement: “Irish, Italian, Jewish, and other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without special favors.” Similarly, more than 80 percent agreed that “today’s immigrants” should work their way up like their European counterparts did a century ago without any assistance. Many native-born white Americans believe that today’s immigrants—especially Mexicans—are less self-sufficient than their own European ancestors. In the run-up to welfare reform in 1996, Representative Bill Archer (R-TX) said, “My ancestors, and most of our ancestors, came to this country not with their hands out for welfare checks.” Writing a letter to the editor of the *Buffalo News*, a reader expressed a similar attitude: “Our ancestors came here legally and did not place great demands on government services.” Even some of the best historical scholarship has helped perpetuate the myth that European immigrants did not benefit much from early social welfare programs.¹⁰

Given this lore, it is surprising how much European immigrants benefited from welfare programs and how little their formal citizenship or legal status impeded their access to relief. Contrary to T. H. Marshall’s view that social citizenship or social rights always followed civil and political rights,¹¹ formal citizenship was not a prerequisite for social citizenship. Non-citizens were generally entitled to care in almshouses, to outdoor relief, and to Mothers’ Pensions. While there were public charge provisions built into immigration law that allowed for the deportation of some recent immigrants, such provisions were rare until the 1890s, unevenly applied during the first third of the twentieth century, and hardly ever enforced after FDR took office in 1933. Moreover, non-citizens were granted wide access to New Deal programs such as Federal Emergency Relief, Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, Aid to Dependent Children, and many others. Federal officials even ensured that the Social Security Board would not cooperate with immigration officials to locate deportable aliens, assuring immigrants that they could apply for Social Security cards even if they had entered the country illegally.

Given that immigration to the United States was severely curtailed by the 1921 and 1924 Immigration Acts and was virtually blocked in 1929 at the onset of the Depression, it might be tempting to assume that questions about the inclusion of non-citizens in the New Deal had been rendered moot. This was not the case. It was a matter of serious concern to policymakers, social workers, congressmen, the general public, and especially non-citizens and their families. Rumors circulated in the press that there were a million or more aliens on relief and that FDR’s administration refused to collect and share data on aliens’ use of welfare

programs. There was intense debate about whether non-citizens should be included in the welfare state, and letters sent to the White House, local news stories, and early public opinion polls all make clear that nativism was very strong during the Depression. A Chicago resident complained in 1935, for example, that “the majority of Foreigners think its [*sic*] smart to get on relief, drive a car, have two, or three others in the family working and live off of a big-hearted Uncle Sam. They should kick them all back to Europe as the majority of them are absolutely nogood [*sic*].”¹² Indeed, immigration officials speculated that nativism had become even more widespread and pronounced than in the period that spawned immigration quotas. Most Americans concluded that aliens should not receive relief and that those who did should be expelled from the country.

Impelled by catastrophic economic conditions and nativist sentiments, politicians passed citizenship requirements for a few state and federal relief programs. But despite strong opposition to alien inclusion, work relief programs—especially the WPA—and Old Age Assistance were the only programs that were limited to U.S. citizens. These restrictions, however, were generally short-lived and unevenly applied. Even when non-citizens were formally barred from assistance, European immigrants often found ways to overcome these barriers. Mexicans, however, were not as fortunate. Citizenship restrictions were more enduring in areas with more Mexicans, and where citizenship restrictions existed, Mexicans found them harder to circumvent. The presumption that all Mexicans were foreign even when they were American citizens also limited their access to relief in many places. This presumption became a mechanism not just for denying benefits but also for allowing relief officials to expel more than forty thousand Mexicans and Mexican Americans from the nation in the first few years of the Depression.

EXPLAINING DISPARITIES IN TREATMENT

What explains these three different trajectories of inclusion, exclusion, and expulsion? There are reasons, in fact, why we might not have expected big differences in treatment across groups. Each group contained many members who were desperately poor and reviled, and blacks, Mexicans, and southern and eastern European immigrants each suffered from significant discrimination at the hands of native-born whites. Some historians, including David Roediger, have argued, in fact, that southern and eastern European immigrants were neither perceived nor treated as “white” when they first arrived in large numbers in the 1890s. It was only after the United States closed its doors to mass migration from southern and eastern Europe in 1924, perhaps even as late as World War

II, that the boundaries of whiteness even began to expand to include Italians, Poles, and Jews.¹³ What, then, explains the stark differences in treatment?

Scholarship on the role of race in the development of the early welfare state points to several possible explanations, including the role of politics and institutions, regional economies and labor relations, attitudes of elite reformers, and mass opinion. Some scholars, for example, call attention to the state and the role that organizational arrangements, policy decisions, and institutional legacies play in welfare state development. According to Robert Lieberman, Jill Quadagno, and Ira Katznelson, in the years between Reconstruction and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, poll taxes and literacy tests excluded most blacks from voting, ensuring that there was little competition for public office. As a result, white southern senators gained control of key congressional committees. During the deliberations over the 1935 Social Security Act, these southern senators ensured that the final bill excluded the vast majority of African Americans from Social Security and Unemployment Insurance, and relegated blacks to “decentralized, often racist, public assistance programs.” White workers, on the other hand, were given access to a wide array of social insurance programs that would help them weather the hazards of old age or temporary unemployment. By examining differences in the institutional structure of Unemployment Insurance, Old Age Insurance, and Aid to Dependent Children, Lieberman shows that these early disparities had a lasting effect: “By keeping poor blacks at arm’s length while embracing white workers, national welfare policy helped construct the contemporary political divisions—middle class versus poor, suburb versus city, and white versus black—that define the urban underclass.”¹⁴

These studies have made a strong case for the influence of the South and mass disenfranchisement on national welfare policy. Yet the focus on black exclusion has obscured the concurrent battles over the inclusion of non-citizens in New Deal programs. Indeed, the inclusion of non-citizens in the Social Security Act was not a foregone conclusion. The principal competing old age insurance bill—the Townsend Plan—excluded non-citizens. Even after the Social Security Act had passed, some congressmen tried to drop non-citizens from the benefits of the act. The omission of these debates from scholarship has left us ill equipped to historicize contemporary efforts to limit welfare to American citizens. And it has also prevented us from properly questioning whether the broad inclusion of European immigrants in New Deal programs had a lasting effect on their descendants, too.¹⁵

The black-white frame, moreover, has led scholars to focus too narrowly on the North and South, either ignoring the Southwest altogether or dividing it awkwardly between the two. I make no claim that the

Southwest's influence on federal policy matched the influence of the South, at least for the period under study here. Nevertheless, the political context of the Southwest—where the vast majority of Mexicans lived—was distinctive and left its own legacy on the scope, form, and function of the social welfare system that developed there.¹⁶

Instead of politics, other scholars argue that labor arrangements explain early welfare disparities. Lee Alston and Joseph Ferrie argue that the reason southerners sought to limit the “scope and scale” of the Social Security Act was to maintain their system of labor control. Southern senators did not push for the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers and greater control over welfare programs because they did not want blacks to receive any type of social assistance. During this time, many southern blacks and poor whites who were loyal, productive, and displayed the “appropriate” measure of deference had access to a wide range of benefits, provided privately by their employer. What southern planter elites feared was that *federally funded* social benefits would undermine employers' paternalistic authority and jeopardize their access to cheap, dependable labor.¹⁷

These authors point to a crucial feature of the southern labor regime. However, their study is limited to the South—a region distinctive along many dimensions—making it difficult to ascertain that paternalism is truly the key. They gain causal leverage by examining the decline in southern resistance to federal control as planters' use of paternalism waned with greater mechanization. Comparing across regions of the United States, however, can reveal how different types of farm-labor arrangements—paternalistic versus migratory labor systems, for example—influenced the scope of welfare provision before and after federal intervention.

Instead of politics or labor, Linda Gordon and Gwendolyn Mink trace the origins of racial and gender inequality in the American welfare state to the attitudes of the white women reformers who helped pass and implement Mothers' Pensions—the forerunner to Aid to Dependent Children. Mink and Gordon argue that one of the primary purposes of Mothers' Pensions was to facilitate the cultural assimilation of southern and eastern European immigrants. Reformers extended pensions—or regular cash grants—to immigrant women and in return, the reformers expected the women to conform to Anglo norms about child-raising and housekeeping. But the social worker's emphasis on cultural and gender conformity “prescribed not only [women's] separate incorporation into the welfare state but also [their] subordination within it.” Black women were not fully incorporated into the reformist agenda because prevailing stereotypes defined black women as workers, not mothers—permanently outside the Anglo cult of domesticity. Exclusion and enforced conformity

to Anglo norms tarnished the early welfare agenda and shaped the possibilities for subsequent programs, restricting their vision and scope.¹⁸

Mink and Gordon's attention to social reformers is well placed, and they are among the few scholars of this period to consider immigrants, but they focus little attention on Mexicans. Did social workers try to assimilate Mexicans as they did European immigrants? Or did they exclude them from their reform efforts as they did blacks? Perhaps more important, how do we adjudicate between theories that focus on political or labor arrangements and those that focus on the agency of welfare elites? Should we think of social workers as operating independent of these contextual forces? Or are social workers largely controlled by state and capitalist interests, as some scholars maintain?¹⁹

Finally, a host of studies focus on how public opinion shapes our social policies. Some of these studies focus on demographic context and find that people are more generous in homogeneous societies and more likely to support redistributive policies that benefit members of their own group. Support for the welfare state, according to Joseph Carens, originates from a "sense of common bonds, from mutual identification by the members of the community." These attachments are "more likely to emerge when people share a common language and a common culture and when they belong to groups that have developed habits of cooperation with other groups." Studies consistently show that in communities with more blacks, white support for redistribution and actual spending on redistributive programs is lower. And states with more blacks and Latinos tend to adopt more punitively oriented welfare programs. Inspired by this research, some scholars have argued that there may be a universal tradeoff between diversity—whether racial, ethnic, religious, or linguistic—and redistribution. According to this argument, the increasing diversity that comes with immigration may decrease class consciousness, social solidarity, levels of trust, or generosity among members of the host society, all factors presumed necessary for the development and preservation of a generous welfare state. But if immigration hampers redistribution, as some of these scholars maintain, how do we explain the generous treatment of European immigrants and the high social spending in cities with large numbers of foreign-born whites?²⁰

Instead of demographic context, some public opinion scholars argue that whites are ambivalent about welfare because of their negative stereotypes about the work ethic of subordinate groups, especially blacks. Martin Gilens famously argued that whites' stereotypes about black work ethic have driven much white opposition to welfare spending since the War on Poverty. Studies also show that people who are prejudiced against Mexicans or those with "cool" feelings toward Asians and La-

tinians are more likely to support a one-year delay or even an outright ban in the provision of benefits to certain immigrants. But we know less about how or even whether stereotypes about welfare dependence influenced social welfare provision in the past, nor do we have a clear idea about which groups were stereotyped as especially dependent in the early twentieth century.²¹

Moving beyond Black and White

The existing scholarship has done much to advance our understanding of the determinants of welfare state development. But the literature's heavy reliance on a black-white framework has left us ill equipped to understand the treatment of groups like Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and European immigrants. It has also led welfare scholars to focus on too narrow a set of outcomes: studies of benefit levels and support for or actual spending on redistributive programs tend to dominate the field. But as the sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen reminds us, the "amount of money spent" on the welfare state "may be less important than what it does." Toward that end, some scholars have studied the welfare state's function as a mechanism of social control, where it works to quell social unrest or racial insurgency and where it is deployed to scrutinize and manage the behavior of the poor by telling them what they can buy, how many children they can have, how they should spend their days, or how they should raise their children.²² Along these lines, this book argues that in certain times and places, the welfare state may be best viewed as an extension of the Immigration Service, where one of its functions becomes not the provision of assistance but rather the expulsion of individuals or even segments of an entire population from the nation. In the most extreme cases, the welfare office quite literally turned into an immigration bureau or became an extralegal arm of the Immigration Service, expelling those immigration laws could not touch.

Ignoring citizenship and legal status restrictions may have even led scholars to underestimate the role of Mexican-Anglo relations on more traditional welfare outcomes. We see this most clearly when we look at welfare benefit levels. Scholars have long noted the uniformly low welfare benefits in the South, a fact often blamed on southern whites' reluctance to provide benefits to poor blacks. But we do not find uniformly low benefit levels across the Southwest. In fact, in some southwestern states, Old Age Assistance benefits were among the most generous in the nation. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that Mexican-Anglo relations were unimportant in shaping the southwestern relief system. Indeed, southwestern states could offer generous Old Age Assistance benefits to white residents and withhold them from Mexicans because

Mexicans were largely excluded by citizenship restrictions that southwestern states were particularly slow to drop. We need to pay closer attention to citizenship and legal status restrictions in social welfare provision, and we should be especially mindful of how these restrictions may interact with more traditional welfare outcomes.

Moving beyond black and white may even help us better understand the treatment of African Americans or the role of the South in welfare state development. The inclusion of white non-citizens in the American welfare state certainly puts the exclusion of black Americans in stark relief and raises important questions about the relationship between formal citizenship, substantive citizenship, and social citizenship that we have not yet fully resolved. What is more, one of the challenges of understanding southern resistance to black inclusion has been finding a way to adjudicate between competing theories that highlight politics, class, race, or other factors. The South was different from the rest of the country on so many dimensions that it is hard to know with any certainty which factor or combination of factors made the difference. Comparing across groups and regions gives us another point of traction on some of these thorny questions.

Three Worlds

This book offers a new perspective that focuses on the intersection of labor, race, and politics, an approach that yields important insights into the role of both race and immigration in welfare state development. Blacks, Mexicans, and European immigrants inhabited three separate worlds in the first third of the twentieth century, each characterized by its own system of race and labor market relations and its own distinct political system. From these worlds—and each group's place within them—three separate perspectives emerged about each group's propensity to become dependent on relief. The distinct political systems, race and labor market relations, and ideologies about each group's proclivity to use relief, in turn, influenced the scope, reach, and character of the relief systems that emerged across American communities.

These three worlds were defined as much by regional political economies as by each group's social position. In 1930, 90 percent of European immigrants lived in the North, 69 percent of blacks lived in the South, and 87 percent of Mexicans lived in the Southwest. Regional differences in labor markets and politics were, in turn, partly products of the differing racial and immigrant concentrations in each region. European immigrants, especially from southeastern Europe, settled in large industrial sections of the Northeast and Midwest and worked primarily in skilled and unskilled manufacturing jobs. Blacks and Mexicans lived largely in

rural areas and worked disproportionately in agriculture. But the regions in which blacks and Mexicans lived were governed by starkly different systems of farm-labor relations. The relationship between black tenants and white landlords in the South was shaped by both debt peonage and an ethos of paternalism. Both of these practices developed after emancipation as a way for planters to retain their labor force. Paternalistic landlords provided non-monetary assistance—housing, garden plots, medical care, assistance in old age, and intercession with legal authorities—to loyal and productive workers who displayed the appropriate amount of deference. Though such paternalistic relations could be found in some sections of Texas, much of the West either had never developed such relations or had long abandoned them. Mexicans were more often migrant laborers, unattached to any single employer, and therefore largely outside the system of debt peonage and paternalistic relations.

Blacks, Mexicans, and European immigrants also occupied different positions in America's racial and color hierarchy. Blacks were unambiguously non-white and deemed racially inferior and inassimilable and were subject to exclusion and segregation. Southern and eastern European immigrants were seen as racially distinct from and inferior to northern and western European immigrants. And racism against southern and eastern Europeans led directly to national origin quotas designed to exclude them from the nation. Yet however racially inferior these "new" immigrants were deemed to be, they were nonetheless treated by most American institutions—including the courts, the census, political parties, unions, schools, realtors, and social workers—as white.²³ Race and color at the turn of the twentieth century were not perfect synonyms as they were at the turn of the twenty-first. As a result, southeastern European immigrants could be both white *and* racially inferior to other whites. To the extent that their racial fitness was suspect and their patriotism and allegiance to America questioned, many native-born whites thought these deficiencies required the new immigrants' immediate and thorough assimilation. Mexicans, by contrast, occupied a more liminal position in America's racial and color hierarchy. Guaranteed many of the privileges of whiteness by law, they nonetheless increasingly suffered from many of the liabilities of non-whiteness in practice: separate neighborhoods, separate schools, and separate accommodations, to name a few. But the color line they faced in the Southwest was not as insidious as the one blacks faced in the South. This early liminal status and the growing hardening of opinion that Mexicans were not "really" white and perhaps forever "alien" had important implications for their experience with relief.

Finally, the political context in which each of these groups lived—itsself also partly a product of each region's racial and immigrant context—varied significantly and helped shape access to and the development of

welfare services. Northeastern cities were often rife with machine politics and other institutions—like settlement houses, unions, and schools—that encouraged the political incorporation of immigrants and sometimes mediated access to relief. Mexicans were far less likely to live in machine cities or in areas with other institutions bent on their assimilation. Cities in the Southwest were more likely to be run by Anglo municipal reformers who worked to pass progressive structural reforms designed to eliminate the “evil” influences of machine politics and especially the power of the immigrant vote. In the South, blacks were largely disenfranchised by poll taxes, literacy tests, and white primaries, tools that were also sometimes used to disenfranchise Mexican Americans. Disenfranchisement led to one-party rule and the election of racially conservative southern Democrats who did their best to maintain the racial, political, and economic status quo.

Because these three groups lived in such distinct worlds, federalism and the local control of relief had profoundly different consequences for each.²⁴ Blacks and Mexicans had far greater access to services provided directly by the federal government. Whenever local government provided or even administered benefits, blacks and Mexicans were often shut out. In addition, the communities in which Mexicans and especially blacks lived set benefits lower and spent less on welfare. Relief offices in communities with more Mexicans were more prone to cooperate with the Immigration Service and to establish more rigid and unyielding restrictions based on citizenship. Local control did not present problems for European immigrants—even aliens. While the federal government and northern states sometimes passed laws excluding non-citizens from benefits, local administration and control often led to *greater* overall welfare spending, protection from immigration agents and discriminatory legislation, as well as access to quite generous relief assistance, at least by the standards of the day. The consequences of decentralized policymaking were thus not the same for all disadvantaged groups.

The racial, political, and labor market context had a direct influence on access to assistance and on the scope of welfare provision. For example, western grower and southern planter interests influenced local social welfare spending as well as individual access to assistance but in different ways. While southern planters were reluctant to subsidize local relief provision and saw relief as a threat to their labor supply, western growers saw relief as a subsidy to the agricultural industry because it allowed a large pool of migrant workers to remain nearby and at the ready between harvests. As such, western growers sometimes encouraged Mexican migratory laborers to get on the “dole” prior to the New Deal, profoundly influencing the politics of relief provision in the Southwest. Western and southern agricultural elites’ attitudes toward relief eventually converged

but only after the advent of federal relief drastically altered their incentives. The regional contrast brings the importance of labor market context into strong relief. In addition, differences in political incorporation influenced access to assistance via naturalization rates, as well as through patronage. Because political parties and other institutions failed to incorporate Mexicans, their naturalization rates were extremely low, ensuring that citizenship restrictions, where adopted, would disproportionately affect them. European immigrants were not only encouraged and assisted to naturalize but sometimes rewarded for doing so with patronage jobs or access to social services.

The Role of Social Workers in These Three Worlds

These racial, political, and labor market differences also had a strong indirect effect on access and on welfare state development through its influence on the views and actions of social welfare workers, including caseworkers, relief officials, and reformers. Social workers during this period were typically white, native-born men and women. Many were college educated and had received specialized training volunteering in settlement houses, on the job, or, increasingly, in schools of social work. Social work was in the midst of professionalization in the Progressive Era, as social workers endeavored to carve out their own areas of expertise. As the gatekeepers of relief, they played a crucial role in this story.²⁵

Regional political economies and racial regimes influenced public and private social workers' perceptions and characterizations of the three groups. Because planters opposed blacks' use of relief and because white social workers believed they could not assimilate racially, blacks were generally excluded from a host of social services or relegated to underfunded, segregated charities prior to the New Deal. Because of this exclusion, social workers came to see blacks as the group least likely to depend on the dole in the first third of the twentieth century, a belief that was often rationalized on cultural or biological grounds.

Social workers saw Mexicans in a very different light. Because growers were content to let them use relief and because social workers were initially cautiously optimistic that Mexicans could assimilate, Mexicans had greater access to relief than did blacks. But this access came at a price. As social workers grew increasingly pessimistic about the prospect of Mexican assimilation, they also came to believe that Mexicans were lazy, thriftless, and disproportionately dependent on relief. They began to frame Mexicans' use of relief as an illegitimate burden on "American taxpayers" and as a subsidy to the agricultural industry. Social workers exaggerated their use of relief, lobbied for Mexicans' exclusion from the country, and worked with immigration officials to deport those who

sought assistance. A lack of political power made it difficult for Mexicans to challenge these constructions and their poor treatment.

Though the public often saw southern and eastern European immigrants as welfare dependent, too, social workers firmly rejected these characterizations. Partly because of the new immigrants' socioeconomic mobility and high naturalization rates, social workers were convinced that these immigrants were capable of assimilation and, with appropriate intervention—even coercion—they would develop into fine Americans. Social workers did not frame the provision of relief to European immigrants as an illegitimate burden; rather, they framed it as the natural humanitarian response, perhaps even necessary for their full Americanization. They lobbied against immigration restrictions that targeted southern and eastern Europeans, selectively cited data to try to convince the public that these immigrants were not dependent on relief, lobbied against citizenship restrictions for assistance, found loopholes in laws that barred non-citizens from work relief, and protected destitute European immigrants from immigration agents.

Though Progressive and New Deal era social workers were profoundly influenced by the worlds in which they lived, they were not simply passive products of their environment, blindly responsive to local public opinion, business interests, or political pressure, although these forces certainly influenced their actions at times. Nor should we think of them simply as “street-level bureaucrats” remaking policies handed down to them. Of course, public relief workers were, in some sense, arms of the state—officials charged with implementing local, state, and, after 1932, federal policies. Whether appointed through patronage or the civil service system, public relief workers often had to answer to elected officials. Elected officials, therefore, had the power to shape the public relief force, not to mention many of the rules and regulations under which they would operate. Yet many relief agencies, especially in the South and Southwest where most blacks and Mexicans lived, were funded by private—not public—funds prior to the Depression. Moreover, public and private relief officials not only tried to resist political interference, they actively constructed populations as deserving or undeserving, wielded data to prove their preconceptions, and made sustained efforts to convince local and national legislators and the broader public of their “expert” opinions. In addition, federal relief officials like Frances Perkins and Harry Hopkins had tremendous influence over the shape of federal legislation. Rather than simply street-level bureaucrats, Progressive and New Deal social workers were also poverty experts, public opinion shapers, advocates, and policy-makers. They could be powerful allies or tireless opponents. Which role they chose to adopt often made the difference in which groups got benefits and which groups did not.²⁶

One advantage of this three worlds approach is that it helps us think about racial, political, and labor market contexts as whole systems rather than separate, mutually exclusive variables. Previous attempts to explain racial disparities in social welfare provision have sometimes been framed in stark either/or terms: race or class, individual attitudes or institutions. These debates have helped advance our understanding of the determinants of social welfare provision and racial inequality. But they can also at times mask the ways in which race, labor, and politics were so thoroughly entangled in this period. For example, racial attitudes about group welfare use were not simply a reflection of their position in the racial hierarchy. Rather, these attitudes were also informed by local labor relations and the extent of their political incorporation. Mexicans were perceived to be especially “dependent” and an illegitimate burden because assistance was seen as a subsidy to the agricultural industry that encouraged migratory workers to get on relief between harvests. Low naturalization rates confirmed to social workers that Mexicans would never become true Americans and that expulsion was a natural solution. Low rates of naturalization, however, were products of the municipal reform movement’s refusal to politically incorporate Mexicans, as well as the severe racism that they faced.

The three worlds approach also highlights the cumulative disadvantages that blacks and Mexicans faced, especially compared to European immigrants. Mexicans and blacks were treated so differently from European immigrants because so many forces were set against them. During the Depression, social workers, politicians, planters, and eventually growers all conspired to exclude them from social assistance—or in the case of Mexicans, expel them from the nation. Not so for European immigrants. Social workers and elected officials often fought for their inclusion, and industrial employers made no special effort to exclude them from relief.

To be clear, this is not a simple story about regional variation; it is that, but it is also much more. Esping-Andersen used the concept of *three worlds* to discuss qualitative differences in the scope, form, and function of welfare provision across three types of countries: liberal, corporatist, and social democratic.²⁷ Here *three worlds* refers to local and regional differences in political and labor market contexts *as well as* group-level differences in labor market position, political incorporation, and racial or color status. Indeed, while most blacks, Mexicans, and European immigrants lived in different regions of the country, their experiences usually differed markedly from those around them, even within those regions. These differences were sometimes even more pronounced when their co-ethnics represented a large fraction of their community. So while social welfare spending was very low in the South, it was lowest in communities with the most blacks, and poor southern whites still had much greater

access to assistance than did poor blacks. Furthermore, their differential treatment was not always confined within the regions in which most of their compatriots lived. Blacks in the North were often served in segregated charities. Midwestern relief agencies joined their southwestern colleagues in targeting Mexicans for repatriation. And European immigrants were not targeted for expulsion in the Southwest.

THE STUDY

This book focuses on blacks, Mexicans, and European immigrants because they were the three largest minority groups in the United States during the Progressive and New Deal eras when the modern American welfare system was coming into being. Much of the debate about immigrants and welfare today remains focused on Mexicans, so understanding their historical treatment is crucial to placing current debates about immigration and welfare in historical context. Comparing Mexicans against blacks and European immigrants, moreover, can help disentangle the effects of race and color from citizenship and legal status. There are important stories to be told about the incorporation of Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese, and Native Americans in the Progressive and New Deal eras, but I must leave those for other scholars to tell.

The conclusions in this book are drawn from analyses of census, public opinion, and city-level relief spending data, alongside in-depth investigation of materials in national, state, and local archives, relief agency reports, congressional hearings and debates, social welfare conference proceedings, and the contents of contemporary journals, popular magazines, and newspapers. The book aims to be national in scope. By aiming for breadth and generalizability, however, I risked losing some of the rich nuance, detail, and traction on causal narrative that comes with case studies of local communities. This proved especially important in investigating the treatment of non-citizens since the subject has received so little scholarly attention. Therefore I sometimes pay special attention in this book to two cities: Los Angeles and Chicago. Each city contained significant numbers of blacks, Mexicans, and European immigrants, helping me further tease apart group- and region-level effects. I chose not to highlight any single southern city because there were no southern cities with sizable Mexican and European immigrant populations. Moreover, though Mexicans in the Southwest often lived in rural areas and worked as migrant laborers, many spent the winter months in cities like Los Angeles, and it was there that they came to the attention of social workers. As my research progressed, however, I discovered that what transpired in these cities was not always representative of what happened in cities

within each region. In some ways, Los Angeles and Chicago represent polar extremes of treatment on key issues. I highlight this fact whenever warranted using evidence from other cities.

The story begins in chapter 2, with a detailed description of the three worlds, focused on the factors—labor, race, and politics—that will best explain the differential incorporation of blacks, Mexicans, and European immigrants into the American welfare state and the scope, form, and function of relief provision across regions. Chapter 3 explores the relief systems that had emerged in different parts of the country by the eve of the Great Depression. It describes and explains the racial patterning of local social welfare provision across the 295 largest cities, focusing not only on spending levels but also on the sources of funding. Chapters 4 and 5 examine social workers' views about the welfare dependence of each group prior to the Depression and the degree to which those views reflected, diverged from, or helped shape public opinion. Chapters 6 and 7 look at expulsion, a previously unacknowledged function of the welfare state. Chapter 6 examines variation in the extent to which relief officials cooperated with the Immigration Service to expel dependent aliens, and chapter 7 details variation in relief officials' efforts to use their own funds to expel destitute individuals from the nation. Chapters 8 through 10 focus on the New Deal and how federal intervention affected each group's access to relief. Chapter 8 is centered on the first New Deal and access to Federal Emergency Relief, as well as the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Public Works Administration, and the Civil Works Administration. The subsequent battle over citizenship and legal status restrictions in the Works Progress Administration, and the local implementation of those restrictions, is the subject of chapter 9. Chapter 10 focuses on the Social Security Act and the disparate treatment of blacks, Mexicans, and European immigrants in the administration of Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, Aid to Dependent Children, and Old Age Assistance. The conclusion summarizes the principal findings and offers some reflections on the boundaries of social citizenship and the role of race and immigration in American social welfare provision.