



# The New Nativism: Proposition 187 and the Debate over Immigration

*Robin Dale Jacobson*

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“A very well-crafted, important book. I recommend it highly.” —Howard Winant, author of *The New Politics of Race*

In 1994, California voters flocked to the polls in record numbers because of a ballot measure-Proposition 187-that was designed to deny social services to undocumented immigrants. A majority of voters favored the proposition, and accusations of racism flew in all directions. A U.S. District Court ultimately overturned it, but to this day Proposition 187 represents a watershed moment in the immigration debate.

Examining the dynamics of that political battle, *The New Nativism* questions racism as the motivating factor for political action both at the time and in the high-stakes, hotly contested immigration debates of today. Robin Jacobson’s work, based on in-depth interviews with supporters of Proposition 187, unpacks the role race played in their support of the measure. Jacobson finds that rather than being motivated primarily by racism, proponents connected racial identity, ideas of fairness, and traditional American values in surprising, often contradictory, ways. As individual activists on both sides of the debate struggled to make sense of their political and ideological commitments in light of immigration issues, the meaning and import of race and citizenship were conflated in their minds.

Investigating a key moment in grassroots political activism, *The New Nativism* sifts through the claims of racism that dominate current immigration debates and humanizes the discussion in important and potentially controversial ways. Moving beyond inflammatory headlines and polarizing rhetoric, Jacobson reveals that it is not so much prejudice but the very act of defining race that lies at the center of modern American politics.

Robin Dale Jacobson is assistant professor of political science at Bucknell University.

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