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Interracial Politics: Asian Americans and Other Communities of Color

The Los Angeles rebellion of 1992 was a flashpoint in which the struggles of blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans converged with explosive consequences. Dubbed the nation's first "multiracial" riot, it drove home the point that racial dynamics in the United States cannot be understood through a simple black-white framework. The events in L.A. were only the most dramatic example of interminority conflicts that have emerged in many American cities during the post-1965 era, as economic restructuring and immigration have brought racial/ethnic groups into more extensive contact with one another, reshaping their identities and relationships and creating new pressure points for conflict. Rapid economic and demographic change has also opened up new possibilities for coalition and cooperation among racial/ethnic groups, from electoral politics to grassroots community activism. Asian Americans,

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often depicted as an "interstitial" group and a potential "swing vote," have played and will continue to play a key role in interracial conflicts and coalitions in American politics.¹

Political scientists have studied majority-minority relations and black-white dynamics

for some time, but they have only recently turned their attention to interactions between Asian Americans and other communities of color. As a result, there are relatively few political science works on this topic, but there is a growing body of literature in sociology, ethnic studies, law, and history. We review and assess this literature in this article, with an emphasis on the thematic content.

In the first section, we discuss works that focus on overt conflict and cooperation among Asian Americans and other communities of color in the electoral arena, as well as works that explore racial/ethnic group attitudes that have clear implications for the prospects of conflict and cooperation. In the second section, we discuss works that look more broadly at how ideology, power dynamics, and racial hierarchy shape patterns of conflict and cooperation among these groups, particularly outside of formal political institutions.

The two categories of works that we examine are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive: some works span both categories, some defy both. Still, it helps us to recognize the distinction between those works that focus primarily on observable intergroup behaviors and attitudes and those that are explicitly concerned with contextualizing group interactions within the American racial hierarchy. We conclude with some suggestions about future directions for research on this topic.

Electoral Politics, Policy Issues, and Attitudes

Little has been written on Asian-American participation in electoral and policy competition among elite, in large part because Asian Americans have been too few in number, relatively inactive in electoral politics, and underrepresented among policy elites. However, with the recent rapid growth of the Asian-American population, and the deepening and diversification of Asian-American modes of political participation, a growing number of scholars have started asking questions about Asian Americans' acquisition of partisanship, voting behavior, and political participation (Cho 1999; Lien 1997; Ong and Nakanishi 1996; Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989; Cain, Kiewiet, and Uhlaner 1989). Some predict that because of their rapid population growth, geographical concentration in key electoral states, and weak partisanship, Asian Americans may become a swing vote that plays a pivotal role in American politics (Cho and Cain 2001; Nakanishi 1991).

This burst of interest in Asian-American politics has also produced works that examine Asian-American collaborations with other groups of color in the realm of electoral politics. This is not to say that Asian Americans have been meaningfully incorporated into all of the literature on cross-racial conflict and cooperation. Many of the leading works on bi/multiracial coalitions in urban politics continue to focus primarily if not exclusively on two or more of the following groups: white liberals, blacks, and Latinos (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1997; Falcon 1988; Gilliam 1996; Henry and Muñoz 1991; McClain and Stewart 1995; Mladenka 1989; Sonenshein 1993). Still, there are

several recent works that highlight Asian Americans' political interactions with other communities of color, exploring empirical cases of and prerequisites for coalition building.

For example, scholars have written about Asian-Latino political cooperation in the San Gabriel Valley of Los Angeles county during the past decade. Recognizing their shared interest in fighting discrimination and patterns of political exclusion, these two groups have joined forces to defeat discriminatory local ordinances and secure favorable state assembly and senate redistricting plans (Fong, 1994; Horton 1995; Saito 1994, 1988). Similarly, in New York City in the early 1990s, Asian Americans, Latinos, and blacks formed a multiracial coalition to promote a redistricting plan that linked Chinatown to the predominantly Puerto Rican and black Lower East Side. Although the plan was defeated, and the redrawn District 1 ended up linking Chinatown to white areas to the west, the coalition's cross-racial, working-class emphasis was embraced by the victorious candidate, Kathryn Freed (Saito 2001; Saito and Park 2000). The multiracial coalition of blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, and whites that formed in Houston in the late 1990s was more successful: It was instrumental in getting Lee Brown elected as mayor and in defeating Proposition A, an anti-affirmative action measure (Saito and Park 2000).

Scholars have also analyzed instances in which Asian Americans' experiences with interracial electoral politics were difficult and clearly unsuccessful. Both Michael Woo's failed bid for mayor of Los Angeles in 1992 and Ted Dang's unsuccessful campaign for mayor of Oakland in 1994 indicate that Asian-American candidates may not necessarily count on strong support from non-Asian people of color (Fong 1998; Saito 2001; Sonenshein 1994).

Reviewing the available empirical evidence, Saito and Park (2000) argue that bi/multiracial political alliances are most likely if: (1) racial/ethnic groups set aside short-term, group-specific considerations to address fundamental issues related to social change; (2) they resist narrow race-based politics while at the same time recognizing the importance of race in American society; (3) individuals and organizations build and sustain relationships across group boundaries over time as a basis for promoting collaborative efforts; and (4) each group contains organizations that serve as vehicles for community mobilization, leadership training, resource building, etc. Oliver and Grant (1995), who argue that bi/multiracial coalitions are only feasible on the local level and are likely to be

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issue-oriented and temporary rather than enduring, identify different prerequisites. In their view, residential propinquity (local spaces of interaction in which individuals from different groups develop relationships and trust) and relative parity in status and resources (e.g., citizenship and education) are the most important factors. By these measures, Asian Americans are most likely to form alliances with whites, Latinos, and blacks, in that order.

In addition to the works on electoral alliances, a substantial literature now exists on the leading policy issues affecting Asian Americans and other groups of color. Much of this literature examines the contours of public opinion about immigration and affirmative action as general issues and in the form of specific initiatives such as California's Proposition 187 and Proposition 209 (Bobo and Johnson 2000; Chin et al. 1996; Cho and Cain 2001; Citrin et al. 1997; Hing and Lee 1996; Lien and Conway 2001; Ong 1999, 2000). They suggest clear points of commonality and difference between Asian Americans and other communities of color. On immigration, for example, blacks tend to be closer to whites in viewing it negatively, while Asian Americans and Latinos tend to view it more positively. Strong black support for Proposition 187 prompted black leaders to engage in a national-level debate about how to protect black jobs without fanning the flames of anti-immigrant agitation (Park and Park 1999). On affirmative action, on the other hand, Asian Americans tend to be less negative than whites but also considerably less positive than blacks and Latinos. These points of contact and difference have clear implications for the likelihood of cross-racial collaboration on these issues.

On at least one occasion, Chinese Americans have clashed directly with other groups over the issue of race-based remedies in education. In the renowned case, *Brian Ho v. San Francisco Unified School District*, Chinese-American plaintiffs seeking to increase Chinese-American enrollments at Lowell High School successfully challenged school desegregation practices (that had been instituted pursuant to a lawsuit by the NAACP in the 1980s) that had benefited not only blacks and Latinos but also certain other Asian descent groups such as Korean Americans and Filipino Americans (Dong 1995; Ong 2000; Yamamoto 1999). This case reminds us that the "Asian American" rubric may obscure as much as it reveals.

Studies that examine interracial contact also help us to understand the prospects for and barriers to cooperation between Asian Americans and other communities of color. Some studies have focused intensely on numerous sites of interracial contact, including residential areas, workplaces, networks of friends, and public spaces (Bobo, Johnson, and Suh 2000; Green, Strolovich, and Wong, 1998; Hum and Zonta 2000; Lee 2000; Lee and Fernandez 1998; Lien et al. 2001; Massey 2000; Massey and Denton 1993; Umemoto 2000). These studies indicate a distinct structuring of interracial contact and racial attitudes in the United States: blacks and whites are the most distant from one another in terms of daily contact, material conditions, and attitudes toward racism, with Asian Americans and Latinos falling somewhere in between. Importantly, both Asian Americans and Latinos show considerable internal heterogeneity here along ethnic or national origin lines (Bobo et al. 1994; Lee 2000; Uhlaner 1991). Blacks live

the most “hypersegregated” lives of any racial/ethnic group in the United States (Massey and Denton 1993). Asian Americans live significantly less segregated lives than African Americans, and are also somewhat less segregated from whites than Latinos are (Hum and Zonta 2000; Massey 2000).² Once again, Asian Americans and blacks, in particular, appear to lack the extensive contact and shared experiences that facilitate coalition building.

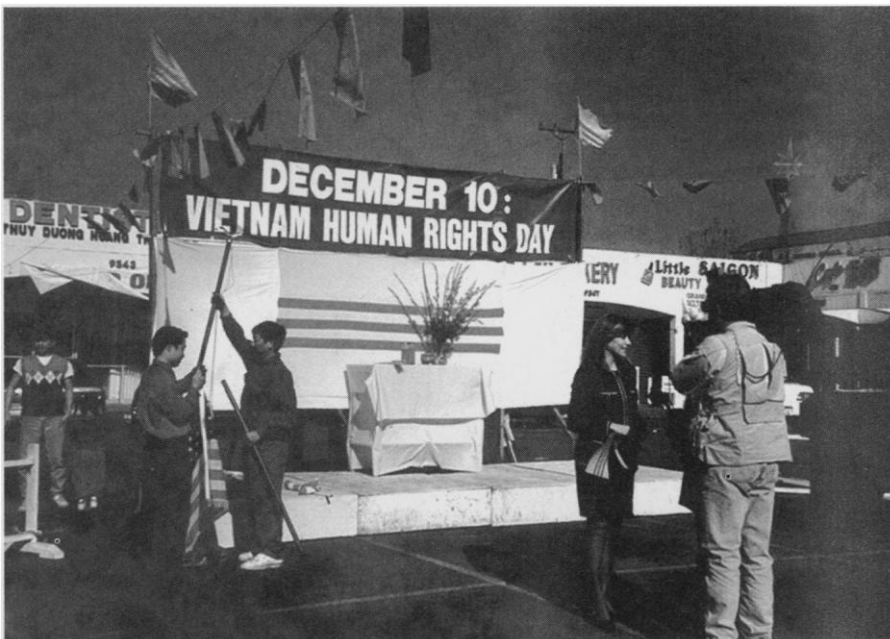
Group perceptions of discrimination and identity also shape the prospects for conflict and cooperation between Asian Americans and other groups of color. Studies show that most Americans think that blacks face the highest level of discrimination of any racial/ethnic group and that both blacks and Latinos face the greatest barriers to opportunity and advancement. While roughly 40 percent of Asian Americans report having personally experienced discrimination (Bobo et al. 1994; Lee 2000; Lien et al. 2001; Uhlaner 1991), few Americans (Asian Americans included) believe that Asian Americans as a group face special obstacles (Bobo, Johnson, and Suh 2000; Lee 2000; Uhlaner 1991). These data suggest that Asian Americans on the one hand, and blacks and Latinos on the other, may not readily identify with each other or perceive strong common interests, despite their shared experience of racial discrimination in the U.S.

While opinion studies find that blacks express a stronger sense of sharing a racially linked fate than do other groups (Bobo and Johnson 2000; Cain, Citrin, and Wong 2000), panethnicity is an increasingly important theme in Asian-American politics and analyses of Asian-American politics (Espiritu 1992; Kibria 1997; Lai 2000; Lien 1997; Lien et al 2001; Tuan 1999).³ Scholars have shown that a sense of shared fate or collective identity shaped Asian American political opinions about Proposition 187 and Proposition 209 (both initiatives of profound concern to communities of color), and that it shapes their views of education and employment issues more generally (Bobo and Johnson 2000; Cain, Citrin and Wong 2000; Cho and Cain 2001; Lien 1997). However, the development of a strong racial identity may be a double-edged sword when it comes to cross-racial coalition building: group identities may politicize people and awaken them to their shared interests with members of other racial groups, but they may also prevent people from seeing past their own group boundaries.

Racial Hierarchy, Power, and Ideology

The second type of scholarship on conflict and cooperation between Asian Americans and other groups of color seeks to situate group interactions within the context of racial (and/or economic) hierarchy. Rather than focusing on and describing overt intergroup behaviors and attitudes alone, these works allude to groups’ different positions in society and the economy in order to explain why they interact with each other in the ways that they do.

Apart from a few scholars who characterize Asian Americans as virtually “white” in terms of their status in American society (Hacker 1992; Ignatiev 1997), most concur that Asian Americans occupy a distinctive “third” position in the American racial hierarchy somewhere in between black and white.⁴ Characterizations of this



Building Electoral Alliances. Congresswoman-elect Loretta Sanchez (D-CA) appearing at a Vietnamese American event in December 1996. Seven of the top 10 congressional districts with the largest percentage of Asian Americans are in California. Photo by Daniel C. Tsang.

“third” position vary somewhat: Ancheta (1998) discusses how Asian Americans have been subordinated differently than have blacks—i.e., via the denial of citizenship; C. Kim (1999) argues that Asian Americans have been “triangulated” vis-a-vis whites and blacks through simultaneous processes of relative valorization and civic ostracism; others worry that Asian Americans might serve as a “buffer zone” between whites and blacks (E. Kim 1997) or as a “racial bourgeoisie” (Matsuda 1993). What these scholars agree on is that the Asian American experience has been at once distinct from the white and black experiences and importantly conditioned by them. Even though the answer to Gary Okihiro’s (1994) now-famous question—“Is yellow black or white?”—is “neither,” it is important that the question be posed in just this way. Asian-American politics must be understood as deriving from the uniquely liminal, ambivalent position(s) that Asian Americans occupy in the American racial order.

Only recently have scholars begun to address the intermediate or buffer position that Asian Americans occupy between whites, or *haoles*, and Native people in Hawaii (Trask 1999).⁵ Articles in a recent issue of *Amerasia Journal* (Fujikane 2000; Trask 2000; Yoshinaga and Kosasa 2000) contend that the Asian American experience in Hawaii has not been one of immigrant success against all odds but rather one of “settler colonialism” (Fujikane 2000). While Asian Americans in Hawaii frequently complain about anti-Asian discrimination on the part of *haoles*, these articles argue, they are much less willing to acknowledge their own role in dispossessing

native people of their resources and benefiting from the latter's political, economic, and social subjugation. However, as on the mainland, statements about Asian Americans in Hawaii should be strongly qualified by attention to intragroup differences, such as national origin. For instance, Japanese Americans are the most powerful Asian American group in Hawaii, and stand in a hierarchical relationship to Filipinos there, just as Asian Americans as a whole do to native people.

Scholars have analyzed the influence of racial hierarchy on conflicts between Asian Americans and Native Hawai-

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ians. At issue between the two groups is whether Asian Americans have benefited from Native Hawaiian subjugation, and if so, what should be done about it. As the Native Hawaiian sovereignty movement has gained momentum in recent years, it has become increasingly critical of the role that ascendant Asian-American (especially Japanese-American) politicians, business elites, and intellectuals play in thwarting Native Hawaiians' claims to land, water, and other natural resources (Trask 1999, 2000). In response to the movement, some Japanese Americans and other Asian Americans have issued apologies and called for reparations for Native Hawaiians, while others have strongly denied any wrongdoing (Yamamoto 1999). Clearly, there is dissension within the Japanese-American community in Hawaii over what stand to take regarding the sovereignty question (Yoshinaga and Kosasa 2000).

How do racial hierarchies originate and reproduce? In the post-1965 era, no single myth has done more work in this regard than the model-minority myth, which holds that Asian Americans are hardworking, law-abiding, thrifty, family-oriented, education-revering people who have made it in American society and should serve as a "model" for other, less virtuous minorities, especially blacks.⁶ As Asian Americanists have been saying for more than a generation, the model-minority myth functions ideologically to reproduce racial hierarchy in America by essentializing and homogenizing Asian-American experiences, exaggerating Asian-American prosperity and downplaying Asian-American needs, arousing black resentment towards Asian Americans, delegitimizing black demands for social programs, and legitimating racially discriminatory arrangements (Chun 1995; Lee 1999; Osajima 1988). Despite this persistent critique, major opinion makers such as politicians, the media, and business elites continue to embrace this myth. Indeed, studies have shown that institutional powerholders

sometimes cite the model minority myth as a justification for giving preferential treatment to Asian Americans over blacks (Gotanda 1995; Hatamiya 1993). To the extent that Asian Americans themselves buy into this myth and evince feelings of superiority toward blacks, the racial hierarchy becomes that much more entrenched (E.Kim 1997; K.Park 1997).

Several scholars have examined the issue of affirmative action and the calculated representation of Asian Americans for particular political purposes (Omi and Takagi 1996). During the controversy over Asian-American admissions quotas at selective universities in the 1980s, conservatives depicted Asian Americans as victims of pro-black affirmative action programs, when they were actually being harmed by quotas intended to preserve the whiteness of student bodies (Takagi 1992). Similarly, proponents of Proposition 209 in California insisted that "preferential treatment" for blacks and Latinos rendered Asian Americans victims of "reverse discrimination" (Park and Park 1999), and Republican Governor Pete Wilson publicly cited the *Brian Ho* case as a source of his doubts about affirmative action. Asian Americans have a very complicated relationship to affirmative action (Ong 2000), but that reality is obscured by the ideological maneuverings of conservatives bent on eliminating these programs.

The scholarship on black-Korean conflict—or conflict between Korean immigrant merchants and black customers/neighborhood residents—explores the way in which racial/economic hierarchy shapes intergroup conflict.⁷ Adapting Bonacich's middleman minority framework (1973), much of this literature focuses upon the proximate urban economic formation within which Korean merchants (middlemen) come into contact with poor blacks (the masses) and thus bear the brunt of the latter's frustrations (K.C. Kim 1999; Light and Bonacich 1988; Min 1996; Ong et al. 1994). Some works, however, theorize more broadly about the impact of power relations, racial ideology, the social construction of racial categories and meanings, and patterns of racial hierarchy upon black-Korean conflict (Abelmann and Lie 1995; Cho 1993; Ikemoto 1993; C. Kim 2000; K. Park 1997). The implications of black-Korean conflict for Korean-American political mobilization and incorporation in various cities has received considerable scholarly attention (E. Park 2001; J.S. Park 2000; W. Park 1994).

While black-Korean conflict has been memorialized in popular films and television programs, Latino-Korean conflict remains a relatively obscure phenomenon. Aside from a few works on Latino-Korean tensions in the Los Angeles garment industry (Bonacich 1994) and Latino participation in the Los Angeles rebellion of 1992 (Navarro 1994), scholars have paid little attention to the matter, reinforcing the popular perception that Latinos and Asians do not experience the kinds of conflicts that blacks and Korean Americans do. Yet the sustained conflict between Latino store employees and Korean-owned produce stores that is occurring in New York City at the time of this writing belies this perception and suggests the need for more research on Latino-Korean interactions.

Racial hierarchy generates differential group experiences that make coalition building difficult, and creates

fault lines along which intergroup conflict is likely to occur. However, scholars have shown that processes of racial subordination may also encourage cross-racial alliances by subjecting racial/ethnic minorities to similar forms of mistreatment or disempowerment and convincing them that they share certain short-term and long-term interests. In New York City, the Coalition Against Anti-Asian Violence has built a thriving multiracial grassroots alliance dedicated to fighting racially motivated violence and police brutality. Perhaps the most notable and successful cross-racial coalitions between Asian Americans and other groups of color outside of the electoral arena have been in the area of labor organizing. On more than one occasion, Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates has joined forces with the predominantly Latino Local 11 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union to pressure Korean conglomerates to renew labor contracts with union workers in Los Angeles (Omatsu 1995; Saito and Park 2000), thus extending the historical tradition of Latino-Asian labor cooperation in California (Almaguer 1994). In these instances, class commonalities decisively overrode the fragmenting pull of racial/ethnic identities. Although a few individual activists such as Grace Lee Boggs and Yuri Kochiyama have worked to link the black and Asian-American struggles through their writings and personal activism, instances of black-Asian cooperation have been few (Boggs 1998; Choi 1999; Kochiyama 1994), in part because of the reasons we previously discussed.⁸ Despite the difficulties, many scholars urge Asian Americans to persist in efforts at cross-racial collaboration (C. Kim 2000-2001; E. Kim 1997; Matsuda 1993; Omatsu 1994; Yamamoto 1999).

Conclusions

Scholarship on interracial politics, generated by scholars in various fields, lays an indispensable foundation for our understanding of conflict and cooperation

Notes

1. Although we focus on the post-1965 period in this article, conflict and cooperation between Asian Americans and other communities of color date back into the 1800s.
2. This was not always the case. Historically, whites used restrictive covenants, terror, landlord discrimination, local decrees barring business and land ownership, and various other means to ghettoize Asian immigrants (Chan 1991; Hing 1993).
3. In a five-city study of Asian Americans, Lien et al. (2001) found that roughly 60% of respondents claimed to have a sense of shared ethnic group fate and more than half expressed a sense of racial or panethnic shared fate.
4. Not all scholars agree that Asian Americans are advantaged relative to blacks. For instance, a few argue that Asian Americans (specifically Korean Americans) stand in a horizontal relationship with blacks insofar as Korean Americans have economic power but lack political power and blacks have political power but lack economic power (Chang 1994; K.C. Kim 1999).
5. Although Native Hawaiians justly consider themselves an indigenous people rather than a racial/ethnic minority, they have also

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Abelmann, Nancy, and John Lie. 1995. *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

between Asian Americans and other communities of color. But much remains to be done. We need to know more about the connection between Asian-American panethnicity and cross-racial conflict and collaboration. Under what circumstances does panethnicity promote or hinder alliances? Do cross-racial conflict and collaboration, in turn, promote or hinder panethnicity? It would also be useful to complicate the picture with more systematic attention to intra-Asian diversity along the lines of national origin, generation, class, gender, etc. Does it make sense to talk about "Latino-Asian" conflict or does that broad label obscure more than it reveals? In addition, we need to theorize more fully the relative positions of Asian Americans and Latinos in the racial hierarchy. Are Asian Americans closer to Latinos than to blacks in the racial order? Does this help us to explain why Asian-Latino conflict has been relatively infrequent and Asian-Latino cooperation relatively common?

We might also think about investigating further the now-familiar notion that Asian Americans may become a powerful swing vote in American politics. Is this happening as expected or has something gone awry? Studies of grassroots mobilizations and alliances around particularly salient issues such as Proposition 187 and Proposition 209 would complement nicely the public opinion data that we currently possess. Finally, it might be useful to try to lower the barrier between the two main categories of scholarship identified above. For instance, scholars might consider undertaking the unorthodox task of tracing the impact of patterns of racial hierarchy upon electoral activities and outcomes or policy attitudes.

Clearly, this is an exciting time to work in this area. Ongoing demographic changes both heighten the intellectual challenge (by making the subject matter a moving target) and raise the political stakes of doing such scholarship. We hope that political scientists will take up this challenge and move to the forefront of future efforts to understand interracial conflict and cooperation in American politics.

been racialized by whites in ways that make their inclusion in this article reasonable.

6. Apparently, there is a fine line between being successful and being too successful: a 1993 *Los Angeles Times* poll of Southern Californians shows that Asian Americans are widely viewed as having achieved too much economic success and as trying too hard to achieve that success (Lee 2000; McClain and Stewart 1995).

7. Note that naming this "black-Asian" conflict would obscure that of all Asian-American groups, Koreans alone occupy the small business niche in black urban neighborhoods, which places them in a precarious, tension-ridden position of racial and class superiority over their customers and makes intergroup conflict likely.

8. Los Angeles's Black-Korean Alliance, which shut down following the rebellion of 1992, was ill-conceived from the start in that it involved black clergymen, politicians, and community leaders—but not the black activists who were leading the boycotts and protests against Korean-owned stores. As such, the Alliance had no leverage against these activists at all. The same problem was replicated in Black-Korean cooperative alliances in other cities, with the same results.

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