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Asian Pacific-American Public Opinion and Political Participation

Studying Asian-American politics with public opinion data is a relatively new phenomenon. Only in the last decade have a number of surveys (collected mostly at the local or regional level) been taken, reflecting expanded interest in the growing Asian-American population and the development of ethnic sampling and interviewing techniques.¹ While most research on Asian-American political behavior focuses on voting, some work examines other forms of political participation. Recent scholarship concerns not only individual characteristics, but also contextual and institutional factors.

A central goal of the literature is to explain the extent and sources of participation. How active are Asian Americans in the political process? What factors account for their involvement? What explains the “puzzle” of low participation in the Asian-American population—a community that, *prima facie*, based on average socioeconomic resources, would

be expected to participate at much higher levels (Brackman and Erie 1995; Lien 1997; Nakanishi 1986, 1991; Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989)?

Participation as a Three-Step Process

For as many as three-fourths of voting-age Asian Americans who were born outside of the United States, the “simple act of voting” may not be so simple at all (Dalton and

Wattenberg 1993; Kelley and Mirer 1975). In order to cast her ballot, a potential voter must engage in a three-step process—naturalization, registration and turning out—that involves, at each turn, a set of costs. Time and information gathering, as Downs (1957) argued, are perhaps the most significant; becoming a citizen requires a minimum of five years; registering to vote and going to the polls may require an extraordinary amount of information and resources. This may be particularly onerous in a state such as California (with its many ballot initiatives), where it is estimated that 40% of the Asian-American population resides. When one adds to the

Downsian equation factors such as language barriers, lack of familiarity with the U.S. system, social discrimination, and economic hardship for working-class immigrants, it comes as little surprise that Asians have one of the lowest citizenship, voting registration, and turnout rates among voting-age Americans. To conclude that Asians are politically inactive overlooks the role of institutional barriers to Asian-American political incorporation.

In other important ways, Asians demonstrate a substantial desire to be engaged in American society. Immigrants from Asia become naturalized much earlier and at rates much higher than immigrants from other parts of the world. In 1997, among immigrants who entered the United States in 1982, the rate of naturalization for Asians was at least twice as high as that for immigrants from Canada, Mexico, and the United Kingdom (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 1998, 1999).

Except for immigrants from Korea and Laos, each Asian group also has a naturalization rate that compares very favorably to the rate among Cuban immigrants, who demonstrate some of the highest rates for any ethnic group in the United States. Asians possessed the highest growth rate of citizenship of all racial groups during the 1990s (Lien 2001).²

Furthermore, among Asians registered to vote, turnout is higher than for Latinos and comparable to non-Hispanic whites in off-year elections; turnout rates are three to four percentage points lower than whites in presidential elections. Clearly, naturalization and registration are critical to raising voting participation rates for these new Americans.

While Asians show substantial increases in citizenship rates, registration is a different story. During the 1990s, the rate of registration among Asian-American citizens was substantially lower than the rate of registration among white and black citizens (Table 1). Moreover, this gap in registration grew for both presidential and midterm elections, especially in 1998. This dip reflects perhaps both the extraordinary growth rate of new citizens and the negative influence of campaign-finance investigations against Asians after the 1996 presidential election.³

Analysis of the first two immigration generations (using the census datasets cited in Table 1) identifies substantial interethnic-group differences in participa-

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tion rates (Lien 2000, 2001). Between 1994 and 1998, Filipinos consistently achieved the highest citizenship rate and Asian Indians scored the lowest in two out of three elections. Generally, Japanese Americans are the most likely to register and to vote; Vietnamese and Korean Americans rank consistently among the lowest. Widespread differences in the length, condition, and demographic makeup of ethnic immigration and settlement may account for the observed ethnic gaps (for a review of multiethnic history and development, see Chan 1991; Kitano and Daniels 1995; Min 1995; Takaki 1989). Japanese Americans, for instance, are the only Asian-American group in which a majority was born in the United States. Nevertheless, after controlling for differences in socioeconomic status, demographic background, social connectedness, and political context, citizens of Chinese ancestry are still estimated to register at lower rates and Korean Americans less likely to turnout than other comparable Asians.

Participation Beyond Voting

Another way to examine the political activism of Asians is to look at the extent of their participation beyond

voting. The nonvoting activity most frequently associated with Asians has been campaign donations. Yet, surveys have found anywhere from 10% to 18% of Asian Americans having given a campaign donation—generally lower rates than for whites and blacks (Lien 1997; Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989). Furthermore, Cho (1999a), using data from the Federal Election Commission, finds that when Asians make donations, they typically prefer candidates of shared ancestry who have little chance of winning and are likely to reside outside of the donors' districts. Her findings help illustrate the strength of ethnic identity in shaping Asian-American political behavior.

There is also little evidence that Asians are more likely to contribute than to engage in other forms of participation. Asians in a 1984 California survey report higher frequencies of contacting officials (26%), contacting media (25%), and in working with others to solve community problems (24%) than donating to campaigns (Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989). In a 1993 *Los Angeles Times* poll, nearly as high a percentage of Asians (11%) report having contacted officials (Lien 1997). In the 2000–2001 pilot study of the National Asian American Political Survey (PNAAPS), donating money to a political campaign is the only the fourth most frequently reported nonvoting activity (12%), following community work

TABLE 1
Percentage Distribution of Voting and Registration in the Elections of 1990–1998 by Race

	Asian	Latino	Indian	Black	White
November 1990 Election					
Citizenship	51%	59%	96%	93%	96%
Registration	28 (56)	32 (55)	52 (55)	59 (64)	67 (70)
Voting	20 (72)*	21 (65)	35 (66)	39 (67)	49 (74)
Weighted N (×1000)	4,547	13,756	1,019	20,064	142,492
November 1992 Election					
Citizenship	53%	58%	99%	95%	98%
Registration	31 (62)	35 (63)	61 (63)	64 (70)	74 (77)
Voting	27 (88)	29 (83)	51 (84)	55 (85)	67 (91)
Weighted N (×1000)	5,070	14,688	944	20,777	143,962
November 1994 Election					
Citizenship	55%	59%	99%	96%	98%
Registration	29 (52)	31 (53)	56 (56)	59 (61)	68 (69)
Voting	22 (76)*	20 (64)	37 (66)	37 (64)	50 (74)
Weighted N (×1000)	4,772	17,476	954	21,514	145,027
November 1996 Election					
Citizenship	57%	61%	99%	96%	98%
Registration	33 (58)	36 (59)	61 (62)	64 (67)	72 (73)
Voting	26 (79)	27 (75)	45 (73)	51 (80)	60 (83)
Weighted N (×1000)	6,580	18,426	1,385	21,918	145,343
November 1998 Election					
Citizenship	59%	61%	98%	96%	98%
Registration	29 (49)	34 (55)	57 (58)	61 (64)	68 (69)
Voting	19 (66)*	20 (60)	35 (61)	40 (66)	47 (68)
Weighted N (×1000)	7,327	20,321	1,476	22,603	146,501

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *Current Population Survey: Voter Supplement File*, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998 [Computer files]. ICPSR version. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census [producer], 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 1992, 1997, 1999.

Note: All populations are age 18 and over. Each racial category is exclusive of any others. Entries in parentheses for registration are rates among citizens; entries for voting are rates among the registered. All tests of significance are conducted with reweighted data calculated by subtracting the mean adult weight from the final adult weight for each case in order to adjust the size of standard errors. *Chi-square test fails to reject the hypothesis of no racial difference between whites and Asians. All other white-nonwhite differences are statistically significant at the .05 level or better.

TABLE 2
Percentage Distribution of Participation Beyond Voting Among Asian Americans

During the past 4 years, have you participated in any of the following types of political activity in your community? (ACCEPT MULTIPLE ANSWERS) [Yes responses shown]

	Chinese	Korean	Vietnamese	Japanese	Filipino	S. Asian	All
a. Written or phoned a government official	6%	4%	7%	15%	17%	17%	11%
b. Contacted an editor of a newspaper, magazine, or tv station	4	7	6	5	9	14	7
c. Donated money to a political campaign	8	7	12	20	12	12	12
d. Attended a public meeting, political rally or fundraiser	7	8	14	22	19	20	14
e. Worked with others in your community to solve a problem	16	11	12	27	23	36	21
f. Signed a petition for a political cause	10	23	7	24	17	16	16
g. Served on any governmental board or commission	2	2	4	1	2	2	2
h. Taken part in a protest or demonstration	5	7	14	7	7	9	7
i. Worked for a Political Campaign	—	1	—	3	—	1	—
j. Other	1	2	—	1	2	1	2
N	308	168	137	198	266	141	1218

Source: The Pilot National Asian American Political Survey, 2000–2001.

(21%), signing a petition (16%), and attending a public meeting or rally (14%) in the past four years (Table 2).

And, contrary to stereotypes that portray Asians as politically quiescent, there is a history of Asian-American protest dating at least to Asian Americans' nineteenth-century involvement in mining and railroads (see Chapter 1 in Lien 2001 for a review of the pluralistic means of political participation adopted by Asian Americans prior to 1965). In 1968 and 1969, San Francisco State College and the University of California, Berkeley were the sites of Third World strikes, which prompted panethnic political consciousness among Asian-American students and helped give rise to Asian-American Studies programs and other professional organizations such as the Asian Law Caucus (Espiritu 1992; Wei 1993). During the 1992 riots in Los Angeles, more than 30,000 marched in Koreatown to denounce both the police brutality that ignited the incident and the violence that had turned on the Korean-American community (Zia 2000).

Communities differ in their favored modes of participation beyond voting. In the PNAAPS, a higher percentage of South Asians than other Asians report having worked with others to solve a community problem (36%), written or phoned a government official (17%, tie with Filipinos), or contacted media (14%). A higher percentage of Japanese signed a petition (24%), attended political gatherings (22%), or donated money to political campaigns (20%). And a higher percentage of Vietnamese participated in political protest and demonstration (14%) than other Asian American groups (Table 2). Two media surveys of the Vietnamese in Orange County, California and San Francisco Bay Area report similar findings.⁴ For example, 50% of respondents in Orange County and 28% in the Bay Area—localities that have seen large-scale protests in the Vietnamese community in recent years—reported participation in a demonstration.⁵

Explaining Voting Participation—Individual and Contextual Factors

To a certain extent, voting-behavior theory developed from observations of non-Asian Americans (e.g., Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1998; Conway 1991; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980) may be used to understand the behavior patterns of Asians (Junn 1999; Lien 2000). In general, voting participation may be influenced by five sets of variables: *socioeconomic factors* such as education and income; *demographic factors* such as gender, nativity, age; *social connectedness* or *ties* such as those indicated by residential mobility, marital status, and employment status; and *political connectedness* such as association with a party, union, church, or other organized social group that enhances awareness and participation. In addition, registration and turnout—particularly the latter—may be affected by the amount of campaign stimuli in the *political context*: media coverage, candidate and party evaluation, significance of office, issue salience, and certainty of outcome (Collet, Grofman, and Griffin 1998; Jackson 1996).

There are additional considerations to bear in mind when studying Asians, however. First, socioeconomic status, the cornerstone of traditional theories of participation, does not adequately explain patterns of participation among Asians. Past studies either find educational achievement and family income to be of no effect or of less effect on Asians than on whites or blacks (Cho 1999b; Junn 1999; Lien 1994, 1997, 2000; Nakanishi 1986, 1991, 1998; Tam 1995; Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989). Second, most Asian-American communities contain large numbers of immigrants. Many of the studies cited above and new studies by Wong (2001) and Ramakrishnan and Espenshade (forthcoming) find that immigration-related

TABLE 3
Percentage Distribution of Partisanship Among Asian Americans

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or of another political affiliation?

	Chinese	Korean	Vietnamese	Japanese	Filipino	S. Asian	All
Republican	8%	21%	15%	9%	20%	13%	14%
Democrat	32	43	12	40	40	44	36
Independent	3	12	15	20	14	23	13
No, do not think in these terms	33	8	31	18	13	6	20
Not Sure	23	15	27	11	10	10	16
Refused	1	1	1	4	3	4	2
N	308	168	137	198	266	141	1218

Source: (see Table 2)

variables such as English-language skills, citizenship status, nativity, immigration generation, and length of stay in the U.S. may have significant impact on the participation of Asians. Third, the unique status of Asians—being simultaneously perceived as nonwhite, affluent, and foreign—may shape their group interactions, heighten their consciousness of group identity, and invite targeted mobilization efforts by community elites and organizations (Espiritu 1992; Kim 2000; Lien 2000; Saito 1998; Uhlaner 1991; Wong 2000).

Asian immigrants' exceptional speed of naturalization may be attributed to the lack of proximity to the homeland, emigration driven more by political than economic motives, high educational and/or occupational background, and ability of U.S. citizens to sponsor the emigration of family members (Jasso and Rosenzweig 1990; Portes and Mozo 1985). The acquisition of citizenship by Asians may be influenced most by their length of stay in the U.S. In their analysis of the 1994 census data, Ong and Nakanishi (1996) also find that those who are younger, who are proficient in English, and who have more education are more likely to become citizens. However, the effect of education diminishes after a bachelor's degree, because immigrants with advanced degrees are more likely to be in the United States on temporary visas.

When education, family income, age, tenure in the same residence, or membership in labor unions increases, the likelihood of Asian-American voting registration increases as well (Lien 2001). Likelihood decreases with foreign birth or midterm elections, but is not influenced by gender, marital status, or residing in Hawaii or California.

Similarly, the probability of registered Asians voting increases with education and age and decreases in midterm elections—as it did most notably in 1998—but is not influenced by gender or employment status. Unlike with registration, however, voting is more likely among those who are married or reside in states with higher numbers of ethnic elected officials, such as Hawaii and California; it is not influenced by income, nativity,

length of residence, or union membership. These results suggest that voting turnout may be more influenced by contextual than individual factors. Ramakrishnan and Espenshade (forthcoming) find that participation increased from the first generation to the second, but that the picture is less clear for later generations. In 1998, participation increased in the third generation and beyond, but those generations showed a decrease in participation (compared to the second generation) in 1994 and 1996.



Taking sides. Although survey data indicate that Asian Pacific Americans may be moving toward the Democratic Party, there is considerable variation between APA subgroups. Here, Vietnamese Americans offer their support at a rally for George W. Bush during the 2000 presidential campaign. Photo by Daniel C. Tsang .

They also find that living in states or metropolitan areas with higher percentages of Asians does not increase the likelihood of voting among Asian-American citizens except for those in the third and higher generation.

One interesting aspect of Asian Americans' involvement in the political system is the acquisition of party identification. In the PNAAPS, 36% of the respondents identified

as Democrat, 14% as Republican, and 13% as Independent, but 20% did not think of themselves in partisan terms and 18% were either uncertain about their party identification or refused to give a response (Table 3). Significant group differences exist in patterns of party affiliation. For example, respondents of South Asian, Korean, Filipino, and Japanese origins are more likely than Chinese or the Vietnamese to identify as Democrat. Wong (2001) finds that education and length of residence are two of the strongest predictors of partisan identification for Asian Americans. She attributes the influence of length of residence to experience with the political system; such experience is often reinforced through strong English-language proficiency, media exposure, and the naturalization process. Contact from political parties may increase identification, but only 41% of respondents in the PNAAPS reported ever being contacted by parties, candidate organizations, or other political groups in the previous four years. Of those contacted, 60% reported receiving contact from the Democratic party, which may explain the greater Democratic affiliation noted above.

Two indicators of political context—Asian-American candidates and community-based organizations—have received extensive research attention. According to the elite mobilization hypothesis (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993), Asians residing in localities with higher numbers of Asian-American candidates may be expected to participate at greater rates than Asians residing elsewhere. Although there is little data to allow direct testing, individual-level analysis using census data supports this: other conditions being equal, Hawaiian Asians participate at higher rates than Asians in California who, in turn, register and vote at higher rates than eligible Asians in all other states (Lien 2001). Qualitative evidence using case studies also suggests that Asian-American candidates in “high profile” elections are not only able to mobilize non-Asian contributors and volunteers, but also to build coalitions between diverse Asian-American ethnic groups (Lai 2000). The mobilization function of ethnic candidates cannot occur, however, without the assistance of community elites (e.g., community activists, community-based organizations, and the ethnic media) (Lai 2000, 41). These organizations fill a representation void between community members and other political leaders and institutions (Lai 2000, 43).

Based on her study of Chinese-American immigrants’ political incorporation in New York and Los Angeles, Wong (2000) contends that because mainstream institutions have not been committed to incorporating nonwhite immigrant communities into the political system, a new institutional dynamic is shaping immigrants’ participation. In particular, labor organizations, religious institutions, community-based nonprofits, and ethnic voluntary associations have taken the leading role in immigrants’ political mobilization. Some of these institutions are

binational or transnational in their orientation. Furthermore, though they sometimes act ambivalently toward nonwhite immigrants, these institutions are responsible for organizing a vast majority of political activities related to immigrant incorporation and voter

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education. They also mobilize participation in both voting and nonvoting activities such as petitions, demonstrations, and protests.

Conclusion

Much of the “puzzle” of Asian nonparticipation may be explained by viewing voting as a three-step process, considering the role of institutional barriers and contextual elements, and examining participation beyond voting. Asian Americans who are registered are nearly as likely to vote as their white counterparts, and Asians engage in many forms of political participation. Donating to political campaigns is not the most common form of nonvoting participation, and, contrary to media accounts, Asians are not as active in making campaign donations as whites.

Our review finds that factors traditionally useful for studying the mainstream electorate will need to be applied carefully when studying Asians. Key independent variables—such as income, education, length of residence, and gender—may be insignificant, or their influence may be greatly altered by Asian Americans’ unique combination of relative affluence, recent immigration, and non-white status. Political context, as measured by the presence of ethnic candidates or the efforts of community organizations, may increase participation by raising awareness, generating interest, and creating linkages to and opportunities for participation.

One should take caution, however, when making generalizations about the political participation of Asians. Not only is the population internally diverse, dispersed, and in flux, but research on Asian Americans has varied greatly in study sites, field dates, coverage of ethnic groups, interview language, and interview mode. Even the best studies often have a biased and small sample. These problems create challenges, but they also present intriguing opportunities for political scientists seeking to advance the study of American ethnic political participation.

Notes

1. In this article, the terms “Asian” and “Asian American” are used interchangeably.

2. The growth rate between 1990 and 1998 in the share of U.S.

citizenry was 89%. This is much higher than that of 54% for Latinos, 49% for Native Americans, 21% for blacks, and that of 5% for Anglo whites.

3. There are numerous media accounts of the "Asian-gate" scandal. Analysis of the impact on Asian Americans can be found in articles by Wu (1997) and Wang (1998).

4. The studies, of 600 Vietnamese Americans in both locales, were conducted by Pacific Opinions, Inc., for *The Orange County Register* and *The San Jose Mercury News* in January and July 2000. Christian Collet, president of Pacific Opinions, directed both studies.

5. For more on particular incidents in the Vietnamese community, see Sanchez (1999) and Mangaliman (2000). The large discrepancy in numbers between Orange County and San Jose may suggest that nonvoting activities are affected by local political opportunity structures and primary and secondary migration patterns that affect the disposition of an ethnic community.

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