

**Article:** “Asian American Identity: Shared Racial Status and Political Context”

**Authors:** Jane Junn and Natalie Masuoka

**Issue:** December 2008, Volume 6, No. 4

**Journal:** *Perspectives on Politics*



***This journal is published by the American Political Science Association. All rights reserved.***

---

APSA is posting this article for public view on its website. APSA journals are fully accessible to APSA members and institutional subscribers. To view the table of contents or abstracts from this or any APSA journal, please visit the website of our publisher, Cambridge University Press (<http://journals.cambridge.org>).

This article may only be used for personal, non-commercial, or limited classroom use. Permission for all other uses of this article should be directed to Cambridge University Press at [permissions@cup.org](mailto:permissions@cup.org).

# Asian American Identity: Shared Racial Status and Political Context

Jane Junn and Natalie Masuoka

Amidst rising levels of ethnic diversity in the United States, scholars struggle to understand how group consciousness functions among other non-black minority groups such as Asian Americans and Latinos. Most of the literature in this area focuses on the relationship between identity and immigration incorporation or the debate between national origin and panethnicity. We argue that the Asian American community offers an important case study to understand how social context and one's perceived racial position influence an individual's sense of group attachment. Thus, the Asian American case presents new insight beyond the black politics model into how racial identification influences individual political attitudes and behavior. We present findings from a unique embedded survey experiment conducted in 2004 that reveals a surprising degree of malleability in Asian American racial group attachment. This is a striking contrast to the findings demonstrated by blacks whose racial identification is relatively more stable over various contexts. We seek to explain these findings by advocating for a more explicit consideration of the structural incentives and costs of adopting racial and ethnic identities by highlighting the significance of U.S. immigration policy and its role in creating group-based stereotypes and racial tropes.

The arrival of tens of millions of immigrants to the United States over the last several decades has transformed the demographic landscape of the nation, expanding both the size and diversity of racial minority populations. A quarter of new Americans today are from Asia, and Asian Americans are among the fastest growing groups, increasing from less than a million people in 1960 to roughly 14 million. Indeed, the dramatic growth of the Asian American population has recently earned them the status as a decisive swing vote in state elections in California, New York, and Washington. But even more importantly, the demographic movement beyond the black-white racial binary in the United States presents us with new questions about the role of racial identity in politics.

In today's diverse environment, racial identities are not created equally. There are distinctive historical conditions, migration patterns, and government policies that influ-

ence the politics of group affinity in particular ways for Americans classified by race. The importance of racial group consciousness for political behavior should be treated as a hypothesis rather than an assumption. Making the connection from shared classification in a racial category to group-based political behavior is neither simple nor obvious for non-black minorities, particularly those whose population growth is attributed to new immigration. It is unclear how new immigrant members will adopt and apply the racial and ethnic categories imposed upon them.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the shared historical experience of profound structural, economic, and social bias aimed against blacks coupled with comparatively low migration rates of new black immigrants leaves less room for maneuvering.<sup>2</sup> Michael Dawson's theory of the "black utility heuristic" remains a powerful explanation of strong racial group identity among blacks, and has had important influence on the language social scientists use to understand the interaction between racial identity and politics. The contemporary study of racial identity in the United States is based largely in concepts developed from the black case, and it remains an important foundation for the politics of race.

But the persistence of Asian American racial identification demonstrates that the processes of racial categorization also influences the group identities of minority groups who do not share the same history of subjugation and degree of discrimination that is key to explaining black racial group identity. Asian Americans have been historically situated in a triangulated position in relation to the black-white binary, and therefore represent a critical

---

*Jane Junn is Associate Professor of Political Science and Associate Professor, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University (junn@rci.rutgers.edu). Natalie Masuoka is Assistant Professor of Political Science, Tufts University (natalie.masuoka@tufts.edu). The authors would like to thank the editors and the anonymous reviewers of Perspectives on Politics, and panelists at the 2006 Western Political Science Association Annual meeting for their helpful comments and suggestions. Research for this paper was sponsored by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE).*

case to examine how racial identification influences political behavior in a multiracial political environment. Using the dynamism of racial construction and the implicit comparisons across groups in the racial order of the U.S. as a backdrop, we analyze the dynamics of racial group consciousness among blacks and Asian Americans by examining the results of an embedded survey experiment designed to activate group identity. The findings from the experiment raise a number of questions about how to study and think about how racial group consciousness is manifested in politics once we consider racial identity beyond black and white. We introduce a set of theoretical imperatives outlining how to better understand the formation of racial group identity among non-black minorities. In particular, we advocate for more explicit consideration of the structural incentives and costs of adopting racial and ethnic identities by highlighting the significance of U.S. immigration policy and its role in creating group-based stereotypes and racial tropes.

### **Asian Americans as a Critical Case Study**

Though Asian Americans have been in the United States for centuries, the relatively small size of the population, their residential concentration in a few states, and the perception of Asian Americans as politically quiescent are all reasons why political scientists have only recently begun to study Asian Americans.<sup>3</sup> Yet, competitive elections in the 2008 Presidential primaries recently highlighted the political significance of Asian American voters in delegate-rich states such as California and New York. Talk of an “Asian American” vote entered the national discourse and renewed speculation about how Asian American political preferences compare with those of whites, blacks and Latinos. The possibilities for an Asian American vote rest on the assumption that those classified as Asian share a sense of racial identity, and that group consciousness has political consequences.

The formation of a monolithic Asian American bloc has been challenged in the social science literature. This population is diverse in terms of national origin and language. No one group is predominant and, according to the 2000 Census, more than 6 national origin groups are combined as Asian American, including Chinese (23 percent), Filipino (18 percent), Asian Indian (17 percent), Vietnamese (11 percent), Korean (11 percent), and Japanese (8 percent), along with an “other Asian” category (12 percent). Some scholars have suggested that these diverse groups of Asian Americans may favor distinctive national origin groups over a pan-ethnic racial identity.<sup>4</sup> It is also important to underscore that racial formation and the definitions applied to racial categories in the U.S. are uniquely American constructs, and represent new categories to immigrant Asians. New immigrants may not adhere

to the categories imposed on them upon their entry into the U.S. and so cannot be expected to automatically identify with a pan-ethnic racial category.

In addition to the internal diversity among Asian Americans, the relatively high levels of social and residential integration could also mitigate racial identity formation. They are more likely than blacks and Latinos to be economically integrated with whites. In particular, high average levels of formal education drive a similarly high degree of occupational status and income earnings.<sup>5</sup> Taken together, these resources produce a population that is less likely to reside in ethnic enclaves and more likely than other minority groups to live in racially integrated neighborhoods and attend racially diverse schools.<sup>6</sup> To the extent that classic assimilation models are correct, this level of economic and residential integration suggests that Asian Americans will more quickly become incorporated into American society compared to other racialized immigrant groups with fewer resources for mobility. Citing these social and demographic trends, political observers from both ends of the ideological spectrum predict the rapid assimilation of Asian Americans into the U.S., while presumably leaving behind an Asian or Asian American political identity.<sup>7</sup>

The notion that Asian Americans are less constrained by negative racial stereotypes portend a diminution in Asian Americans racial group identity and a gradual assimilation into mainstream, white America. Yet at the same time, we also see Asian Americans highlighted as a distinctive racial group that is, in some cases, critical to the outcome of a national election. Speculation about Asian American racial identity vacillates between these two perspectives, and there is little theoretical grounding to explain how or why Asian American racial group consciousness is exercised in certain events but not in others. Political scientists have generally accepted the idea that Asian Americans are racially triangulated between white and black,<sup>8</sup> and that this racial position most likely has implications for Asian American racial identity. But even if an Asian American racial consciousness can be found, it may not function as racial group identity does for blacks. We argue that racial identity for Asian Americans exists as a more latent identity compared to blacks, and we find Asian American racial group consciousness much more susceptible to the surrounding context than that demonstrated by blacks. Given this latent characteristic, we ask how and what helps to activate a sense of group membership in political terms among Asian Americans?

### **Activating Racial Group Consciousness: Evidence from a Survey Experiment**

In order to determine if a racial group consciousness has political consequences, we test the relative ease with which

identity can be activated in specific political contexts. One common context in contemporary politics in which minorities may take part in is a campaign that either highlights or promotes a particular minority candidate. Minority candidates have been found to have a positive impact on levels of political efficacy and trust particularly among those of the same racial background.<sup>9</sup> The concept of descriptive representation asserts that the notion of shared characteristics—particularly race, ethnicity, or gender—invite feelings of solidarity, familiarity, and self-esteem among members of that respective group.<sup>10</sup> Recent empirical studies also suggest that minority candidates can mobilize their respective minority communities thereby increasing turnout levels beyond that expected for a white candidate.<sup>11</sup> Underlining these studies is the argument that shared racial group identity is the key explanatory mechanism behind these patterns.

Although scholars speculate that descriptive representation is linked with racial group consciousness, we do not know the causal direction between the two. If, as hypothesized, minority candidates do have a mobilizing effect—either in terms of turnout or heightening perceptions of political efficacy—then we should expect descriptive representation to activate group consciousness. We are able to identify that causal direction by relying on experimental methods. By including a manipulation that highlights the importance of descriptive representation, we can show whether racial group identification is heightened in a positive direction. The use of experimental methods also highlights the influence of short-term communications on racial identification. Since experimental methods create a specific context for a short period of time, we also recognize that an experimental design also tests the malleability of racial identity and the degree to which identity is driven by context. Thus, racial group identity may not necessarily be a stable psychological predisposition, but instead a perception that may be cued by outside contexts.

We hypothesize that, in terms of racial group consciousness, the more active that group consciousness is, the harder we would expect it to be to move. In this regard, groups with strong and deeply held racial identity should show a smaller increase, if any, in group consciousness as compared to those members of groups for which racial identity has latent political content. If racial group identity among Asian Americans has such a latent political content, we would expect respondents to reveal a stronger sense of group consciousness when they are reminded of the political consequences of being Asian American. To the extent that blacks' racial political identity is more active than it is for Asian Americans, claims for group-based political action may have less efficacy in eliciting stronger racial consciousness among blacks. However, we also expect to find higher levels of racial group consciousness for blacks compared to Asian Americans in the absence of any reminder of the racial bases of group political action.

### *Data and Methods*

To test our hypotheses, we turn to data from the 2004 Ethnic Politics Survey collected during November of 2004 and self-administered via the Internet by Knowledge Networks of Menlo Park, California. Respondents were selected for the Knowledge Networks panel using standard methods of random digit dialing. Hence, the resulting interview data is a random probability sample of the U.S. population of blacks and Asian Americans. The Knowledge Network panel is not limited to those with Internet access: those households without the Internet are provided access by Knowledge Networks to assure a nationally representative sample. Unlike other surveys, the dataset offers the ability to compare political attitudes across racial minority groups and our analysis here utilizes valid data collected from 416 black and 354 Asian American respondents.<sup>12</sup>

This survey included an embedded experiment that was designed to measure the effect of descriptive representation on racial group consciousness. Respondents from each racial group were randomly assigned into two groups. Half were assigned to the condition and were exposed to pictures of U.S. presidential cabinet officials—Ronald Brown and Rod Paige for the black respondents, and Norman Mineta and Elaine Chao for the Asian American respondents. The photographs were placed on the same screen and introduced with the text: “Both President Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have included diverse Americans in their cabinets.” Underneath the photographs was identifying information about the cabinet official, and a description of their position. For example, the caption under Elaine Chao's picture read, “Elaine Chao, the first Asian Pacific American Secretary of Labor, serves under President George W. Bush.” The images were balanced to include photographs of both a Republican and a Democratic appointee, and text accentuated the race of the officials.<sup>13</sup>

For the dependent variable, we included five distinctive measures of racial identification and consciousness relying on several previously developed questions tapping group identity as well as some new instrumentation. The first measure is the classic “close to” question which represents the most common measure of group identity in the study of political behavior.<sup>14</sup> The second question is the “linked fate” question that has been established in studies on black political behavior.<sup>15</sup> The third measure asked the respondent's preference for a racial or ethnic descriptor such as a hyphenated “Asian-American” or “Black-American” or simply an “American.” The fourth measure included three statements on the importance of cultural homogeneity within their racial group. Finally, the fifth measure was a new question asking respondents about how important their race is to their ideas about politics. The question asked, “Now, thinking about your political identity, how important is being black/African

**Table 1**  
**Racial Consciousness with Descriptive Representation Manipulation (%)**

		Race of the Respondent			
		Black		Asian American	
		Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment
<b>1</b>	<b>Close to</b>				
	Close to own racial group	79	84	<b>67</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Linked fate</b>				
	Strongly agree & agree	<b>56</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>56</b>
	Neither	31	28	44	39
	Strongly disagree & disagree	13	7	10	6
<b>3</b>	<b>Racial political identity</b>				
	Very important	50	47	16	16
	Somewhat important	30	35	<b>38</b>	<b>49</b>
	Not at all important	18	17	44	34
<b>4</b>	<b>Most important to be</b>				
	Black	11	8		
	Both Black and American	56	61		
	American	31	29		
	<b>Most important to be</b>				
	Specific ethnic group			6	2
	Asian			8	6
	Specific ethnic & American or Asian & American			<b>46</b>	<b>56</b>
				40	34
<b>5</b>	<b>Racial cultural identity</b>				
	B/A children study African/Asian language	32	34	60	60
	B/A marry other B/A	24	21	10	14
	Learn B/A history and culture	97	94	88	88
<b>N</b>		208	208	174	180

Source: 2004 Ethnic Politics Pre-election Study.

Statistically significant relationships are shown in bold.

American or Asian/Asian American to your ideas about politics?” The appendix provides the question wording for all of these items.

The logic of the experimental frame was to reinforce positive images of blacks and Asian Americans as legitimate and powerful actors in U.S. national politics. The impetus for this manipulation is based in theories of descriptive representation described above which is assumed to evoke a positive sense of racial group identity. To measure the effect of the primes, we use chi-square tests to compare the difference in responses between the control and treatment groups on each of the on the racial identity questions. We focus on the extent to which racial group identity can be heightened through the use of short-term communications and if the magnitude of the effect varies by racial group.

**Analysis and Findings**

What difference did viewing the faces of U.S. cabinet officials have on the extent to which blacks and Asian Americans express racial group identifications? The results are

presented in table 1, pairing the marginal distributions for the measures of racial identification for the control and treatment groups. Any differences can be attributed to the efficacy of the stimulus, and statistically significant relationships are bold in the table.

Results for black respondents conform to our expectations of the importance of a frame of descriptive representation for three of the measures of racial consciousness, though for only one measure are the differences statistically significant at the .05 level. Viewing the U.S. cabinet official headshot photographs did most to influence responses on the question about linked fate, increasing from 56 percent who agree and strongly agree in the control group to 64 percent among those who viewed the stimulus. Blacks in the treatment group were also more likely to say they felt close to other blacks, and somewhat more likely to say they thought that being black was “somewhat important” to their political identity, though these differences were not statistically significant. For the remaining two measures of what is most important to be, there were only small differences, with

the descriptive representation manipulation having an effect in increasing the likelihood that those who viewed the prime would say that it is most important to be “Both black and American.” There was no discernible effect for any of the measures of racial cultural identity.

Asian Americans showed strong results from the experimental manipulation, demonstrating substantial malleability from exposure to the descriptive representation stimulus. There are large and statistically significant differences between the treatment and control groups for three measures of racial political consciousness, including feelings of closeness to other Asians/Asian Americans, linked fate, and racial political identity. In addition, Asian Americans viewing the stimulus were more likely to say it was most important to be a specific ethnic group and American (i.e., “Chinese American”) or Asian American, thereby favoring the inclusion of “American” in their self-categorization. Alternatively, there are no differences in the measures of racial cultural identity between those who viewed the U.S. cabinet officials headshots and those who received no treatment.

While the results within groups are interesting, the findings comparing black and Asian American racial consciousness are most illuminating. In terms of feelings of closeness to members of one’s own racial group, nearly 80 percent of blacks in the control group respond affirmatively. While the proportion is roughly two-thirds of Asian Americans in the control group, the proportion jumps to nearly the identical proportion for blacks among Asian Americans who receive the descriptive representation treatment. Similarly, comparing positive responses to the linked fate question shows that Asian Americans who see the Asian American U.S. cabinet officials feel the same degree of linked fate as blacks who have not been primed to think about racial group representation. The question on racial political identification, however, shows important differences between blacks and Asian Americans. Though the experimental manipulation has efficacy for Asian Americans in increasing the proportion who say that being Asian American is “somewhat important” to their racial political identity, the proportion overall who say race is important to them in their racial consciousness is much smaller overall than for blacks. The vast proportion of blacks—more than 80 percent say being black is at least somewhat important to their racial identity. In contrast, between a third and 44 percent of Asian Americans say that being Asian American is “not at all important” to their political identity. Though viewing the racial group representation prime has efficacy for Asian American racial consciousness, important differences remain between blacks and Asian Americans in terms of the extent to which they report their race being a factor in their ideas about politics.

In terms of the measures of racial consciousness asking about preferred identity label and cultural identity, there were also important differences between blacks and Asian

Americans. A direct comparison cannot be made between the choice of identity labels among respondents in the two groups because the set of response categories differs, but the data show that Asian Americans are more likely to say it is most important to be “American” at the expense of other racial or ethnic labels than are blacks. Among the three measures of racial cultural identity, there are also interesting differences for two of the items. Exposure to the racial group descriptive representation frame had no influence on any of the items for either blacks or Asian Americans, and respondents in both groups are nearly uniform in their agreement that black and Asian American children should learn about their history and culture. Where the two groups differ, however, is in the importance of children marrying others of the same racial background, and the desirability of learning an African or Asian language. Among Asian Americans, more than half agree that it is important for children to learn an Asian language, but this is not surprising given the fact that more than two-thirds of Asian Americans in the United States are foreign born, and whose first language is likely one other than English. Blacks are overwhelmingly native-born, but nevertheless a third of those interviewed said it was important for black children to learn an African language. Finally, while a quarter of the black respondents agreed with the statement blacks should marry other blacks, a smaller fraction of Asian Americans agreed that children should marry within their racial group.

The results from our analysis affirm previous research that demonstrates that blacks have an active racial identity. Though blacks have a stronger racial consciousness than Asian Americans, is surprising how close the two groups are in terms of group identity. It is unexpected because of the degree of internal diversity within the Asian American population, since the high proportion of foreign-born could mitigate feelings of racial group solidarity. Asian American as a race is a distinctly U.S.-based concept, and one that may be novel to immigrants. Asian Americans from Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Thai, Vietnamese, Taiwanese, and other backgrounds are culturally, linguistically, and religiously distinctive. It is a shared racial identity—an imposed racial classification—that unites Asian American political consciousness rather than claims to Asian culture or other descriptive characteristics. These data strongly suggest that Asian American political identity is not an oxymoron.

### **Shared Racial Status and the Formation of Asian American Group Identity**

The findings from the embedded survey experiment leave us with some explaining to do. Why do the marginal distributions on the group consciousness items for Asian

Americans look the way they do, particularly in comparison to those for blacks? Social identity theory would suggest that the experiment encourages people to feel a sense of commonality with one's in-group.<sup>16</sup> This explanation makes the assumption that the in-group is an obvious given for Asian Americans. But if we recognize the ethnic diversity within the Asian American population, the clear identification of the in-group is not so obvious. Indeed, the experimental stimuli present one photograph of a Chinese American and another of a Japanese American. The survey sample is a representative sample of the U.S. population of Asian Americans from a variety of national origin groups. Thus, we do not know whether Asian American respondents are making an association by ethnicity, culture, or language. Instead, it appears that Asian Americans have identified a shared racial status with the representatives pictured in the experimental stimulus.

The assertion that Asian Americans cohere based on a shared racial status is not new, but has been recently overshadowed as scholars have focused on differences by country of origin.<sup>17</sup> To be sure, divisions based on national origin exist, particularly given the fact that more than two-thirds of the Asian American population is foreign born. National origin differences relating to homeland politics matter to new immigrants and this presents a challenge to mobilize Asian Americans as a collective group. However, we should not assume that shared national origin, culture or language are the only factors with which Asian Americans can find commonality. Indeed, studies on group consciousness have emphasized politicized consciousness—an awareness of the group's marginalization that, in turn, spurs commitment to collective action—as key to explaining the link between group identity and politics.<sup>18</sup> There are a number of other dimensions along which Asian Americans could form a shared sense of group consciousness.<sup>19</sup>

Scholars of black politics point to the role of race and its influence on individual life chances. According to Dawson, it is race rather than other individual characteristics such as class that structure black worldviews.<sup>20</sup> Black individuals are classified as a group based on their racial phenotype which is linked to a variety of negative stereotypes.<sup>21</sup> Yen Le Espiritu contends that Asian Americans, like blacks, are also subject to a similar process of racial lumping, and that their individual experiences are framed by the fact that this lumping occurs.<sup>22</sup> People of Asian origin share a set of physical characteristics that allows racial group status to be assigned quickly and at face value. Whether of East Asian, South Asian, or Southeast Asian origin, Asian Americans, like blacks, both races are readily identifiable and racialized at first sight. The acknowledgement that Asians are lumped together visually as well as by the U.S. government as a racial category provides the foundation for a racial identity that is directed at politics.

Yet the key to the formation of black linked fate is the idea that blacks share a common history as a subjugated racial group. For blacks, the experiences of slavery, Jim Crow, and the persistence of barriers to mobility have demonstrated a historical pattern that underscores the inference that unless the fate of the entire racial group improves one's own individual life also will not change. Blacks continue to link their own individual life chances to that of the racial group even as their individual socioeconomic status improves.<sup>23</sup> For Asian Americans, however, this inference has less resonance because the majority of Asian Americans in the U.S. today immigrated after 1965 and therefore do not share the experience of a long history of racial discrimination. Further, structural barriers inhibiting Asian American individual life chances appear to be less rigid than that experienced by blacks as evidenced by their relatively faster rates of assimilation and integration into the mainstream economic sector.

Why, then, would shared racial status matter to Asian Americans? We conceptualize the structuring of racial political identity as a complex interaction between policies of the state, institutions, political economy, and the stereotypes that result to create incentives for people categorized by race to either adopt or turn away from a group-based political identity.<sup>24</sup>

First, state-sponsored racial classification places limits on how people can identify, and there are clear incentives to accept this scheme of racial classification. "Asian" has persisted as a non-white racial group throughout most of the history of the United States, nor does it appear that this racial classification will disappear in the near future.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the history of the United States, assignment to a racial group has carried important consequences, among them freedom, voting enfranchisement, property ownership, and citizenship rights. The imperative for the U.S. government to classify people by race in the census emanates from none other than the notorious three-fifths compromise codified in the nation's founding document. The census began to enumerate Asians as a separate racial category in 1860 when Chinese in California were first counted. While racial classification has shifted throughout the twentieth century, Asian categories has been consistently included as a distinctive racial group.<sup>26</sup>

By counting groups of people through the census, the state establishes those who are recognized members of the polity and which social categories are acceptable.<sup>27</sup> Racial classification has been most significant to Americans classified as something other than white since federal and state laws made explicit discriminatory practices against blacks, Mexicans, Asians, and others. Categorization has both political antecedents as well as implications, and Asian Americans have historically provided a critical link in the racial triangulation of minority Americans by serving as a buffer group between other groups at various points in the continuum. As long as Asians are differentiated as separate

and non-white, those so classified will continue to understand their identity as racialized.

Second, immigration policy plays a critical role in determining the structural advantage and disadvantage for new immigrants.<sup>28</sup> Yet, many scholars have overlooked the role of institutions in favor for more individual-level explanations for immigrant behavior and attitudes. Many point to Asian Americans' relatively high levels of socioeconomic status as evidence of their successful assimilation into American society or even the byproduct of a superior ethnic culture. But the size and composition of the Asian population today has been fueled primarily by new immigration, and federal immigration policy offers a more accurate causal explanation for the contemporary composition of the Asian American population. U.S. immigration policies create preferences for certain types of immigrants and disproportionately award the status of lawful permanent resident for those who match those favored characteristics. This results in a particular configuration of immigrants, both lawful and undocumented. Past policies aimed at Asian immigration favored poor and unskilled workers to serve as railroad workers, miners, and farm workers. The current policies privilege legal entry for workers with high-level professional skills and advanced degrees, and is responsible for determining the shape and composition of Asian migration to the U.S. today. We recognize that immigration policy creates a selection bias that explains the highly-educated and skilled Asian American population on the one hand, compared with the size of the relatively poor and uneducated Latino immigration population on the other.

Thus, the relationship between socioeconomic status and assimilation for Asian immigrants today is not the same as that for European ethnics that entered the U.S. a century earlier. Traditional assimilation theories, which were used to explain European ethnics in the nineteenth century, note a direct and positive relationship between socioeconomic status and assimilation.<sup>29</sup> We argue that the trajectory of incorporation for today's Asian immigrants is different from that experienced by Europeans or even today's Latino immigrants given that Asians enter the U.S. under very different economic circumstances. Among Asian immigrants, many enter the U.S. with an already extensive array of individual resources. Since the relationship between socioeconomic status and assimilation is unique for today's Asian immigrants, the relationship between assimilation and ethnic identification may also be different for Asian Americans. According to Dahl (1961), ethnic identification for European ethnics faded as Europeans assimilated into U.S. society and acquired higher levels of socioeconomic status.<sup>30</sup> With greater individual resources, European ethnics did not need to rely on their ethnic identity or ethnic community. Some claim that this pattern is occurring for Asian Americans today and that they will follow a similar trajectory.<sup>31</sup> While there

are longitudinal data to counter this contention, Asian Americans clearly enter U.S. society under very different circumstances, and we know that their relatively high levels of socioeconomic status cannot be explained entirely by ethnic assimilation. Thus, we remain skeptical that Asian Americans will follow a traditional path to assimilation in terms of racial identity.

Third, as a result of racial categorization and the selection bias of immigration policy, Asian Americans are subject to specific racialized tropes that influence their individual life chances regardless of their length of residence in the U.S. As long as an Asian American is classified as "Asian," the prevalent racialized tropes of the time will be applied and treatment as a racial "other" will encourage Asians to maintain a sense of racial group identity.<sup>32</sup> Racial tropes have implications for the incentives and costs people face when identifying with a racial or ethnic group. The most dominant trope is the "model minority" stereotype that frames Asian Americans as hard working, smart, and successful.<sup>33</sup> The term model minority is applied to Asian Americans as a whole, but is perceived as an individual-level trait.<sup>34</sup> So while Asian Americans might connect their racial identity with a particular set of stereotypical characteristics, the positive and more individualistic frame of their identity as a "model minority" provides fewer motives to form group racial identity than more economically deprived groups. Similarly, if Asian Americans believe they have greater opportunities and hold higher status than others in society, there may be less reason to engage in group solidarity to achieve political ends.<sup>35</sup> But this is tempered by the "forever foreigner" trope of Asian Americans as inscrutable, untrustworthy, and perpetual outsiders. The image has the effect of a glass ceiling, preventing Asian Americans from full social integration. Indeed, some have argued that the construction of Asian Americans as a model minority works hand in hand with the characterization of Asians as perpetual foreigners.<sup>36</sup>

Model minority is clearly a more positive racialized trope than coolie, but it is not without negative consequence. Dueling contemporary tropes of Asian Americans as simultaneously a model minority while forever foreigner create a unique context of incentives and costs for racial group consciousness. Lauded for some characteristics and considered suspicious for others, Asian Americans exist in a distinctive racial position from other minority groups in the United States. Thus, Asian American political identity is forged out the complex interaction of all of these factors—the diversity of the population, the history of anti-Asian racism in the United States, the contemporary bias within immigration policy for high-skilled workers that produces a particular selection bias among Asian immigrants, and the competing stereotypes of Asian Americans as simultaneously a model minority while remaining forever foreigner.

## Latent Solidarity: Asian American Political Identity

The structural factors of racial categorization, immigration policy and racialized tropes help to construct Asian American group identity based on a shared racial status. Rather than the clearly politicized racial identity of blacks, the contours of Asian American group consciousness take shape as latent solidarity. Like blacks, racial categorization for Asian Americans persists, and is readily identifiable on face value. In this sense, racial group membership is not a choice, and categorization as a race other than “white” will always be there and will always play a role. Yet, this racial distinction also means that the formation of Asian American racial group consciousness depends on the particular context. In our survey experiment, we tested one specific context, and the manipulation demonstrated that stronger perceptions of Asian American racial group identity can be elicited when respondents are primed with political role models. We recognize that there are potentially a myriad of other contexts in which racial group identity among Asian Americans can be enhanced or diminished.

Most quantitative studies on racial identity and attitudes in the U.S. rely on cross-sectional public opinion studies that capture individual responses at one point in time. For the most part, these are devoid of measurements of the social context that acts as the respondent’s frame of reference. But social identities are formed in response to the specific context of one’s surrounding social environment and interactions with others. To properly explain the formation of racial group consciousness, we must also take into account how particular social contexts activate or dampen racial group identification. Clearly, the role of context on group identity will vary by racial group, and we demonstrate that, for Asian Americans, the formation of racial group consciousness is contingent on the context. It is distinct from that found for blacks in which racial group consciousness is not as strongly influenced by the given environment. The over-determinacy of race on the individual life chances for blacks makes racial group consciousness a salient and persistent mechanism for black political worldviews.<sup>37</sup> For Asian Americans, race has less of a hold on individual life chances. Different forms and degrees of racialization among blacks and Asian Americans in U.S. politics are critical variants to exploit in identifying contextual frames that are salient to the activation of racial identification. However, to say that Asian American racial identity is malleable does not make it any less important to the study of politics. Indeed, the fact that the formation of racial group consciousness is a response to a given event or issue makes racial identity just as intricately linked with politics as other similar forms of group identification such as partisanship.

Further, analyses comparing the magnitude of racial identity measures across various racial groups often dis-

count groups whose level of identity does not reach the same levels of group consciousness as blacks. Identities are not created equally, and what is important is not the magnitude of difference but rather why the differences occur in the first place. The imperative of this kind of a relational analytic strategy goes beyond the simple but useful act of comparing marginals across the racial groups. Instead, a relational strategy forces analysts to reconsider the way we study racial identity, highlighting the possibility of presenting different models to explain the activation of racial identity, and the significance of group consciousness for political participation.<sup>38</sup> The perspective requires both an appreciation of the historical specificity and unique experiences of each group’s construction as racially distinctive, as well as sensitivity to the malleability of those identities in different contexts. It is this very reason why it is important to understand the racial formation of those placed in the “middle” of the racial hierarchy. The politics of racial identity cannot be effectively examined by considering a single group in isolation, because racial tropes may exist in opposition to the dominant stereotypes for other groups.<sup>39</sup>

Most importantly, we argue that racial identity should be thought about in a structural as well as constructed sense. We pointed to the role of U.S. immigration policy and the selection bias it creates by producing an Asian American population with high levels of formal education and social standing. Calling Asian Americans a model minority may be an accurate description of a selected set of Asians who successfully emigrated to the United States. But those qualities cannot be extended to characterize either Asian culture or Asian Americans in general, nor can they be applied in comparison to other minority groups with different trajectories of fortune. Overlooking structural factors has led analysts to misappropriate the economic success of Asian Americans to the realm of cultural difference in comparison with other U.S. minorities. What these final observations underscore is just how substantial the complexities are in disentangling the sources and contours of political consciousness based in racial categories. In the multi-racial U.S. polity today, we now have the opportunity to consider racial dynamics beyond the binary of white and black. This situation signals tremendous possibilities for empirical innovation and theoretical rigor as we progress in the study of race, ethnicity, and politics.

## Appendix A. Question Wording for Racial Identification and Group Pride Manipulations

### 1. Close to Measure

Here is a list of groups. Check ones you feel particularly close to, indicating the group is made up of people who

are like you in their ideas and interests and feelings about things.

Democrats  
Republicans  
Men  
Women  
Hispanics/Latinos  
Blacks/African Americans  
Asians/Asian Americans  
Whites  
Gays and Lesbians

## 2. Linked Fate Measure

How strongly do you agree with the following statement, “as things get better for [WHITES; BLACKS/AFRICAN AMERICANS; HISPANICS/LATINOS; ASIAN AMERICANS] in general, things get better for me.”

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Neither  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

## 3. Political Identity Measure

Now, thinking about your political identity, how important is being [WHITE; BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN; HISPANIC/LATINO; ASIAN/ASIAN AMERICAN] to your ideas about politics?

Very important  
Somewhat important  
Not at all important

## 4. Most Important to Be Measure

**For Black Respondents**

Which is most important to be?

Black  
Both black and American  
American

**For Asian American Respondents**

Which is most important to be?

Specific ethnic group (e.g., Chinese)  
Specific ethnic group and American (e.g., Chinese American)  
Asian  
Asian and American  
American

## 5. Racial Cultural Identity Measure

**For Black Respondents**

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Black children should study an African language.

Blacks should marry other blacks.

It is important that blacks learn about black history and culture.

Black people should shop in black owned stores whenever possible

### For Asian American Respondents

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Asian/Asian American children should study an Asian language.

Asians/Asian Americans should marry other Asians/Asian Americans.

It is important that Asians/Asian Americans learn about Asian/Asian American history and culture.

## Notes

- 1 Longstanding discriminatory practices aimed against Asian Americans and Latinos existed prior to the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. The formation of racial group consciousness is rooted in these historical experiences of racial discrimination among those Asian Americans and Latinos whose families emigrated to the U.S. before 1965. Although this population represents a small share of both these communities, the legacy of racial discrimination continues to be felt by new immigrants as they enter the receiving country; Hero 1992; Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004; Wong 2006.
- 2 Cohen 1999; Dawson 1994; Rogers 2006.
- 3 There is a growing literature on Asian American political participation. See Cain, Kiewiet, and Uhlaner 1991; Lien 2001; Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004; Nakanishi 1991; Tam 1995; Wong 2006.
- 4 Tam 1995.
- 5 While high socioeconomic standing is an average across all people classified as Asian American, the distribution of educational and income resources within the Asian American community is bi-modal, with those from less developed nations occupying the lower end of the economic spectrum; Zhou and Gatewood 2007.
- 6 Lai and Arguelles 2003.
- 7 Huntington 2004; Haney-Lopez 2006.
- 8 Kim 2000.
- 9 Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Tate 2003.
- 10 Dovi 2002; Mansbridge 2003; Pitkin 1967.
- 11 Barreto 2007; DeFrancesco-Soto 2004; Gay 2001; Lai 2001; Leighley 2001; Tate 2003.
- 12 The demographic composition of the black sample is comparable to the black population in the U.S. However, the Asian American sample varies from that in the national population in some respects. In particular, Asian Americans in the survey are more

- likely to be native-born. Similar to findings from other surveys of Asian Americans, our sample leans toward Democratic respondents and those who are comfortable using English.
- 13 The experimental stimuli can be found on the website: <http://fas-polisci.rutgers.edu/junn/index.shtml>
  - 14 See, e.g., Miller et al. 1981; Conover 1984; Leighley and Vedlitz 1999.
  - 15 Dawson 1994.
  - 16 Tajfel and Turner 1979.
  - 17 McClain and Stewart 2006; Ramakrishnan 2005; Segura and Rodrigues 2006.
  - 18 Conover 1984 and 1988; Miller et al. 1981.
  - 19 Kibria 2003; Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004; Masuoka 2006; Tuan 1996; Wong 2006.
  - 20 Dawson 1994.
  - 21 The literature on implicit racial priming also assumes that racial phenotype cues negative racial thinking. Emphasis on visual cues rely on the idea that blacks are classified into one racial group based on visual recognition; Mendelberg 2001.
  - 22 Espiritu 1992. For a contemporary discussion of Asian American panethnicity, please see Okamoto 2003; 2006. See also Wong 2006. The experimental stimuli can be found on the website: <http://fas-polisci.rutgers.edu/junn/index.shtml>
  - 23 Dawson 2001.
  - 24 This is related to the social construction of race argument posed by Omi and Winant 1994. However, Omi and Winant are concerned with how “race” is created more generally while our goal in this paper is to identify how social forces influence individual self-identification with racial categories. See also the argument posed by Marx 1998.
  - 25 Anderson 1988; Haney-Lopez 2006. For further discussion on the implications of racial identity, also see Lee 2007.
  - 26 Gibson and Jung 2002 note the following: “As an extreme example of inconsistency in the classification by race over time, a person who was included in the Asian Indian category in 1980 and 1990 census tabulations, might have been included in different categories previously: Hindu in 1920–1940, Other race in 1950–1960, and White in 1970”; (5).
  - 27 Anderson and Fienberg 1999; Kertzer and Arel 2002.
  - 28 Junn 2007; Tichenor 2002; Zhou and Lee 2007.
  - 29 Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964.
  - 30 Dahl 1961.
  - 31 Lee and Bean 2004.
  - 32 See also Masuoka and Rim 2007.
  - 33 The term originated in print in a 1966 *New York Times* article on Japanese Americans by William Peterson. Peterson praised the group for their cultural values and a work ethic that contributed to them not becoming a “problem minority.” The popular media picked up on the “model minority” term, applying it to Chinese Americans, and then to Asian Americans more generally. Since the 1980s, some argue the term has been appropriated and promoted by political conservatives to demonize the individual-level pathologies of other racial minorities in order to assign blame for poverty; Kim 2000. For background on Asian American history, please see Chan 1991; Okihiro 2001; Takaki 1998.
  - 34 Kim 2000; Lowe 1996; Tuan 1996.
  - 35 Chong and Kim 2006.
  - 36 Rim 2007; Tuan 1996.
  - 37 Dawson 2001.
  - 38 Junn 2006.
  - 39 Kim 2000; Lee 1999.

## References

- Alba, Richard, and Victor Nee. 2003. *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Anderson, Margo. 1988. *The American Census: A Social History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Anderson, Margo, and Stephen Fienberg. 1999. *Who Counts?: The Politics of Census-Taking in Contemporary America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Barreto, Matt A. 2007. Si Se Puede! Latino candidates and the mobilization of Latino voters. *American Political Science Review* 101 (3): 425–41.
- Bobo, Lawrence, and Frank Gilliam. 1990. Race, sociopolitical participation and black empowerment. *American Political Science Review* 84 (2): 379–93.
- Cain, Bruce, D. Roderick Kiewiet, and Carole Uhlaner. 1991. The acquisition of partisanship by Latinos and Asian Americans. *American Journal of Political Science* 35 (2): 390–422.
- Chan, Sucheng. 1991. *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*. Boston: Twayne.
- Chong, Dennis, and Dukhong Kim. 2006. The experiences and effects of economic status among racial and ethnic minorities. *American Political Science Review* 100 (3): 335–51.
- Cohen, Cathy. 1999. *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Conover, Pamela J. 1988. The role of social groups in political thinking. *British Journal of Political Science* 18 (1): 51–76.
- . 1984. The influence of group identification on political perception and evaluation. *Journal of Politics* 46: 760–85.

- Dahl, Robert. 1961. *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Dawson, Michael. 2001. *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1994. *Behind the Mule Race and Class in African American Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- DeFrancesco-Soto, Victoria M. 2004. "Identity Fluidity in the Voting booth: Social Group Identification and Latino Vote Choice." Presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, September 2–5.
- Dovi, Suzanne. 2002. Preferable descriptive representatives: Will just any woman, black, or Latino do? *American Political Science Review* 96 (4): 729–43.
- Espiritu, Yen Le. 1992. *Asian American Panethnicity Bridging Institutions and Identities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Gay, Claudine. 2001. The effect of black congressional representation on political participation. *American Political Science Review* 95 (3): 589–602.
- Gibson, Campbell, and Kay Jung. 2002. "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States," Working Paper Series No. 56, Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, September 2002, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056.html#intro> Accessed June 10, 2007.
- Gordon, Milton. 1964. *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Haney-Lopez, Ian. 1996. *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*. New York: New York University Press.
- . 2006. "Colorblind to the Reality of Race in America," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 3, The Chronicle Review, <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v53/i11/11b00601.htm> Accessed March 3, 2007.
- Hero, Rodney. 1992. *Latinos and the U.S. Political System Two-Tiered Pluralism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Huntington, Samuel P. 2004. *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Junn, Jane. 2007. From "coolie" to "model minority": U.S. immigration policy and the construction of racial identity. *DuBois Review* 4 (2): 355–73.
- . 2006. Mobilizing group consequences: When does ethnicity have political consequences? In *Transforming Politics, Transforming America: The Political and Civic Incorporation of Immigrants in the United States*, ed. Taeku Lee, Karthick Ramakrishnan, and Ricardo Ramírez. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Kertzer, David, and Dominique Arel. 2002. Censuses, identity formation, and the struggle for political power. In *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity and Language in National Censuses*, ed. David Kertzer and Dominique Arel. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kibria, Nazli. 2003. *Becoming Asian American: Second Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kim, Claire Jean. 2000. *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lai, Eric, and Dennis Arguelles. 2003. *The New Face of Asian Pacific America: Numbers, Diversity, and Change in the 21st Century*. San Francisco: Asian Week.
- Lai, James. 2001. "Beyond Voting: The Recruitment of Asian Pacific Americans and Their Impact on Group Electoral Mobilization." Ph.D. diss. University of Southern California.
- Lee, Robert. 1999. *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Lee, Jennifer, and Frank Bean. 2004. America's changing color lines: Immigration, race/ethnicity and multi-racial identification. *Annual Review of Sociology* 30: 221–42.
- Lee, Taeku. 2007. From shared demographic categories to common political festinies. *Du Bois Review* 4 (2): 433–56.
- Leighley, Jan. 2001. *Strength in Numbers? The Political Mobilization of Racial and Ethnic Minorities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Leighley, Jan E., and Arnold Vedlitz. 1999. Race, ethnicity, and political participation: Competing models and contrasting explanations. *Journal of Politics* 61 (4): 1092–114.
- Lien, Pei-te. 2001. *The Making of Asian America Through Political Participation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Lien, Pei-te, M. Margaret Conway, and Janelle Wong. 2004. *The Politics of Asian Americans Diversity and Community*. New York: Routledge.
- Lowe, Lisa. 1996. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mansbridge, Jane J. 2003. Rethinking representation. *American Political Science Review* 97 (4): 515–28.
- Marx, Anthony. 1998. *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of South Africa, the United States and Brazil*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Masuoka, Natalie. 2006. Together they become one: Examining the predictors of panethnic group

- consciousness among Asian Americans and Latinos. *Social Science Quarterly* 87 (5): 993–1011.
- Masuoka, Natalie, and Kathy Rim 2007. “Developing a Framework to Study Racial Group Attachment: Asian American Vote Choice and the Mediating Effect of Immigration.” Presented at the Midwestern Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL. April 12–15.
- McClain, Paula, and Joseph Stewart. 2006. *Can We All Get Along?: Racial and Ethnic Minorities in American Politics*. 4th ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Mendelberg, Tali. 2001. *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages and the Norm of Equality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Miller, Arthur, Patricia Gurin, Gerald Gurin, and Oksana Malanchuk. 1981. Group consciousness and political participation. *American Journal of Political Science* 25 (3): 494–511.
- Nakanishi, Don. 1991. The next swing vote? Asian Pacific Americans and California politics. In *Racial and Ethnic Politics in California*, ed. Bryan Jackson and Michael Preston. Berkeley, CA: IGS Press.
- Okamoto, Dina. 2006. Institutional panethnicity: Boundary formation in Asian-American organizing. *Social Forces* 85 (1): 1–25.
- . 2003. Toward a theory of panethnicity: Explaining Asian American collective action. *American Sociological Review* 68: 811–42.
- Okihiro, Gary. 2001. *The Columbia Guide to Asian American History*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. 2d ed. New York: Routledge.
- Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. 1967. *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ramakrishnan, S. Karthick. 2005. *Democracy in Immigrant America: Changing Demographics and Political Participation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Rim, Kathy. 2007. Model victim or problem minority? Examining the socially constructed identities of Asian-origin ethnic groups in California’s media. *Asian American Policy Review* 16: 37–60.
- Rogers, Reuel. 2006. *Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and the Politics of Incorporation: Ethnicity, Exception, or Exit*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Segura, Gary, and Helena Rodrigues. 2006. Comparative ethnic politics in the United States: Beyond black and white. *Annual Review of Political Science* 9: 375–95.
- Tajfel, Henry, and John Turner. 1979. The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. Stephen Worchel and William Austin. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Takaki, Ronald. 1998. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. Boston: Little and Brown.
- Tam, Wendy K. 1995. Asians—A monolithic voting bloc? *Political Behavior* 17 (2): 223–49.
- Tate, Katherine. 2003. *Black Faces in the Mirror: African Americans and Their Representatives in the U.S. Congress*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tichenor, Daniel. 2002. *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tuan, Mia. 1996. *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?: The Asian Ethnic Experience Today*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Wong, Janelle S. 2006. *Democracy’s Promise: Immigrants and American Civic Institutions*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Zhou, Min, and J.V. Gatewood. 2007. Introduction: Revisiting contemporary Asian America. In *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, ed. Min Zhou and J.V. Gatewood. New York: New York University Press.
- Zhou, Min, and Jennifer Lee. 2007. Becoming ethnic or becoming American? Tracing the mobility trajectories of the new second generation in the United States. *Du Bois Review* 4 (1): 1–17.