

New Directions in the Study of Asian American Politics, Part I: Affirmative Action

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INTRODUCTION

Almost 20 years have passed since the groundbreaking *PS* symposium on “Asian Pacific Americans and the New Minority Politics.” Spearheaded by Andrew Aoki and the late Don Nakanishi, the issue called for a new vision of minority politics and highlighted the ways that the Asian American case does not neatly fit into mainstream academic understandings of race, ethnicity, and politics (Aoki and Nakanishi 2001). Asian Americans are currently the fastest-growing immigrant group in the United States and they will play a significant part in reshaping American politics. This community’s rapid growth and integration into the fabric of the American polity complicate existing theories and frameworks in political science chiefly due to the high numbers of immigrants and the diversity of the community. Two decades later, many of the themes that Aoki and Nakanishi highlighted in their introductory article are still relevant, presenting challenges and opportunities for a new generation of scholars.

This article discusses two research projects that examined Asian Americans’ attitudes about affirmative action in higher education and employment. Vivien Leung analyzed how social exclusion affects Asian Americans’ support for affirmative action. Leung’s project, which used recent national-survey data, suggests that experiences of exclusion shape Asian Americans’ attitudes toward affirmative action. Daeun Song’s project analyzed Chinese American political activism against the backdrop of growing opposition to affirmative action in higher education. Using a mixed-methods approach, Song examined the nuances of Chinese Americans’ racial and political identity relative to the US racial hierarchy and grassroots political mobilization efforts. Both scholars situate their work in a larger conversation about affirmative action and its far-reaching implications.

EXPERIENCES WITH DISCRIMINATION AND SUPPORT FOR AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Vivien Leung

Affirmative action is a hot-button issue in the landscape of contemporary Asian American politics. The term generally refers to a set of policies designed to address structural

inequalities or alleviate discrimination among disadvantaged groups. Although “affirmative action” refers to a wide range of policies affecting education, housing, and employment, this article focuses on policies related to higher education and professional settings. Whereas 65% of Asian Americans support such affirmative-action policies, support among Chinese Americans has decreased noticeably (Ramakrishnan and Wong 2018). Recent lawsuits have shone the spotlight on grassroots, anti-affirmative-action activities among Asian Americans, most of whom are Chinese American (Poon and Wong 2019). Which factors predict support for affirmative action among Asian Americans? My project investigated the determinants of Asian Americans’ views on affirmative action.

Asian Americans often are referred to as a “model minority,” inhabiting a “racially triangulated” position between Blacks and whites (Kim 1999). In fact, narratives of Asian Americans as a high-performing “model minority” often are used to denigrate Blacks and Latinos for “underperforming.” The model-minority myth also leads to the belief that Asian Americans do not need governmental assistance and do not suffer discrimination (Gee et al. 2009; Ng, Lee, and Pak 2007; Yoo, Miller, and Yip 2015). However, this is not the case. Asian Americans are a predominantly immigrant group and also often are stereotyped as “forever foreigners” who are unassimilable into American society (Wong et al. 2011). These experiences with discrimination mobilize members of other minority groups to participate in politics and shape their political views (Barreto et al. 2009; McClain et al. 2009; Oskooii 2020). Drawing on these findings, I hypothesize that Asian Americans who experience overt discrimination are more supportive of affirmative-action policies than those who have not experienced discrimination.

Because expressions of bias and discrimination range from subtle comments to overt prejudice, experiences with microaggressions also may increase support for affirmative action. Microaggressions are casual ways in which bias is communicated toward individuals on the basis of their perceived group membership (Nadal et al. 2014; Sue 2010). For Asian Americans, microaggressions include “Where are you *really* from?” and “You must be good at math!” The first is an example of the “forever-foreigner” stereotype, which categorizes Asian Americans as unassimilable. The second is an example of the “model-minority” stereotype, which assumes that all Asian

Americans are academically gifted (Fiske 2018; Tran and Lee 2014). Although Asian Americans are a diverse and heterogeneous community, these two stereotypes cut across national-origin groups (Chao et al. 2013). I hypothesize that these experiences reinforce the US racial hierarchy (Kim 1999), leading to solidarity with other minorities and increased support for affirmative-action policies designed to alleviate racial disparities.

I used the 2016 National Asian American Survey (NAAS) to study the effects of experiencing discrimination and microaggressions on support for affirmative-action policies in the workplace (Ramakrishnan et al. 2017). I operationalized microaggressions with a question about whether individuals received poor service in restaurants and stores, had their English ability questioned, had their name mispronounced, or were assumed to be good at math and science. To measure discrimination, I created a scaled measure using items about whether individuals were unfairly denied a promotion, unfairly fired, not hired for a job, abused by police, or refused housing. I also included controls for national origin, citizenship status, gender, and socioeconomic factors. Support for affirmative action was a scaled measure of several items that asked individuals for their opinion on preferential hiring and promotion of Black Americans in professional settings.

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experience. Experiences with discrimination have a larger impact on the decision to support affirmative-action policies than microaggressions.¹ Individuals who are US born, have an annual income of less than \$50,000, have a low level of educational attainment, and identify with the Democratic Party also are likely to support affirmative action. Perhaps unsurprisingly, being Chinese American is negatively associated with support for affirmative action. Chinese American grassroots anti-affirmative-action organizations increased in number and notoriety in the months leading up to high-profile federal lawsuits (Kim 2019; Wong, Lee, and Tran 2018). In a subset model of Chinese Americans, the only predictor associated with support for affirmative action is being US born. This generational gap may be due to the vastly different socializing experiences that foreign-born Chinese and US-born Chinese Americans undergo.

These findings suggest that the ways in which individuals position themselves in the US racial hierarchy plays an important role in their views about affirmative-action policies. I find that experiences of discrimination and microaggressions increase support for affirmative action. Individuals

of lower socioeconomic status also are more likely than their higher-status counterparts to support affirmative-action policies. This analysis reinforces Poon et al.'s (2019) race- and class-based approach to understanding diverging attitudes on affirmative action among Asian Americans. My research establishes that Asian American support for affirmative action varies depending on nativity and socioeconomic attainment, especially among Chinese Americans. Future research could explore the generational divide among first-generation and US-born Chinese Americans and the circumstances that lead to a divergence of views on affirmative action within the Asian American community.

DIVISIONS IN THE ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY: CONFLICT OVER AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Daeun Song

For decades, affirmative action has been an integral—and deeply debated—aspect of college admissions in the United States. The idea that colleges should consider race as a factor in the admissions process has been welcomed by many as a solution to historical racial inequities in American society. However, others dismiss the policy as an outdated form of “reverse racial discrimination.” That latter stance gained strong footing when Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) filed a lawsuit against Harvard University in 2014, alleging that the university discriminated against Asian Americans in undergraduate admissions. This was followed by a federal

complaint against Harvard by the Coalition of Asian American Associations, composed of 64 advocacy organizations and led by two conservative Chinese American organizations. Three years later, the Trump administration signaled its stance behind race-blind admissions practices, announcing its own investigation of Harvard and withdrawing Obama-era guidance on affirmative action.

Supporters of the Harvard lawsuit frequently suggest that the University of California provides a model for college admissions. In 1996, California voters enacted Proposition 209, which effectively eliminated state- and local-government affirmative-action programs in education, contracting, and public employment. Eighteen years later, State Constitutional Amendment 5 (SCA5)—aimed to reintroduce consideration of race in college admissions—was proposed with strong backing from the Democratic majority. Although SCA5 initially was expected to pass easily, things changed after several ad hoc Chinese American organizations worked to squash the effort. They mobilized support by cautioning Chinese American parents that the revival of affirmative action would sanction racial discrimination against their

children. As a result, State Senators Leland Yee, Ted Lieu, and Carol Liu, who voted for SCA5 when it cleared the Senate in January 2014, expressed a change of heart. By late February 2014, the bill was defeated.

Despite opinion polls indicating that most Asian Americans generally support affirmative action (Orfield and Whitla 2001; Park 2009; Ramakrishnan 2014; Ramakrishnan and Wong 2018), the SCA5 debate revealed ideological cleavages within the Asian American community. This debate signaled the emergence of conservative identity among affluent first-generation Chinese Americans who mobilized against affirmative action on a national scale. Chinese Americans comprise the only major racial group within the Asian American community to strongly oppose affirmative action in recent polls (Ramakrishnan and Wong 2018).

Using a mixed-methods approach, my work examines the deepening divergence among Asian Americans regarding affirmative action and the rise of conservative Chinese American activism more generally. How have Chinese Americans developed and consolidated their oppositional stance on affirmative action in the SCA5 debate and the ongoing Harvard lawsuit (i.e., *SFFA v. Harvard University*)?

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What role have narratives of immigration, race, racism, and educational opportunity in the United States played in their political engagement in this debate? I use the case of SCA5 and affirmative action more generally to demonstrate the fragility of Asian American panethnicity in the face of changes in the dynamics of Asian American immigration. More specifically, I argue that the most recent Chinese immigrants are more dubious of affirmative-action policies than those who arrived in earlier waves, US-born Chinese Americans who trace their ancestry to earlier migration waves, and other Asian Americans. The more recent Chinese immigrants, therefore, are closer to the modal position of whites than they are to other racial and ethnic minorities. Moreover, I find that broad anti-racist and anti-xenophobic messaging does not work well for this growing population, which mostly sees themselves at the periphery of America's racial hierarchy or, in many cases, believes their interests align better with the Republican Party's message of hard work, capitalism, and freedom. This has implications for the growing alliance between Asian Americans and Democrats. Furthermore, the evidence from 20 semi-structured, in-depth interviews of Chinese organizational leaders and key activists reflects a critical mix of their racial positioning; adherence to racial, ethnic, and "classically American liberalism" political ideologies; internalization of values and norms from place of origin; and their fraught relationship with the model-minority myth.

The SCA5 and ongoing affirmative-action debates should not be viewed only through the lens of division within the Asian American community but also relative to the larger framework of the American racial hierarchy. The framing and the rhetoric of current SCA5 and affirmative-action debates reflect Asian Americans' racial triangulation (Kim 1999). The two intertwined themes of a weakened sense of panethnicity Asian American identity and the racial triangulation of Asian Americans as inferior to whites but superior to Blacks and Latinos should be examined altogether. Therefore, my work takes an additional step toward analyzing the SCA5/affirmative-action debate relative to other racial groups. My research questions what it means for Asian Americans' relations with other racial minorities and with white conservatives. The research also examines how both pro- and anti-affirmative-action groups in the Asian American community frame their arguments and the depth of their understanding of the complex racial positionality of Asian Americans (Kim 2018).

Debates about affirmative action in higher education provide an opportunity to investigate the formation of Chinese Americans' racial and political identity and to consider how these processes are shaped by the racial hierarchy and

grassroots political mobilization efforts. In this sense, affirmative-action inquiries are not the ends but rather the means for analyzing the ultimate question of Chinese American identity and political engagement and its implications for Asian American politics.

CONCLUSION

The debate surrounding affirmative action is far from over. Although a judge ruled in favor of Harvard in the *SFFA v. Harvard* lawsuit, SFFA filed an appeal and the case may reach the US Supreme Court.² The California legislature also recently advanced a bill (i.e., ACA5) to reinstate affirmative action in state and other public institutions. The measure appeared on the California ballot in November 2020 as Proposition 16 and did not pass.³ The debate about these events and others will be shaped by Asian Americans and also could be a key politicizing moment for many in the community. As our projects demonstrate, affirmative action is a divisive issue in the Asian American community and it has ramifications both within the community and beyond. Our research finds that affirmative action is especially divisive among Chinese Americans, particularly between those who are foreign born and US born. Further research into affirmative action and the Asian American response to it needs to consider the nuances that we highlight in our work, especially along national-origin and nativity lines. The second part of this article series, by Tanika Raychaudri, Nathan Chan, and Chinbo Chong, delves deeper

into Asian American identity, participation, and partisanship, all of which are fundamental to an understanding of Asian American politics. ■

NOTES

1. Although discrimination has a larger net effect on support for affirmative action than experiences with microaggressions, individuals are much more likely to report experiencing the latter than the former. In the 2016 NAAS, about 15% of Asian Americans reported ever experiencing discrimination. In contrast, about 70% of Asian Americans reported experiencing some form of casual microaggression in the past month.
2. See www.nytimes.com/2020/02/18/us/affirmative-action-harvard.html.
3. See www.dailycal.org/2020/06/15/ca-assembly-passes-bill-focused-on-reinstating-affirmative-action.

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