

# The Study of Asian American Politics: Looking Back, Looking Forward

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## HOW HAS ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICS AND OUR KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF IT CHANGED OVER THE PAST 20 YEARS?

### Okiyoshi Takeda:

One area in which Asian Americans have made significant progress in the past 20 years is in the number of members of Congress. In 1999, there were only six Asian Pacific American members. In the House, there were only four: Patsy Mink (D-HI); Robert Matsui (D-CA); Robert Scott (D-VA, who is one-quarter Filipino and three-fourths African American); and David Wu (D-OR). In the Senate, the two senators were both from Hawai'i: Daniel Inouye (D) and Daniel Akaka (D, who was part Native Hawaiian and part Chinese).

By the 116th Congress (2019–2020), the number of Asian American members increased to a record number of 17: 14 in the House (counting only voting members) and three in the Senate (Cohen, Rundlett, and Wellemeyer 2019).<sup>1</sup> The three senators are Mazie Hirono (D-HI, Japanese American), Tammy Duckworth (D-IL, half Thai), and Kamala Harris (D-CA, half Asian Indian and half African American, and who ran unsuccessfully for the Democratic presidential nomination but was nominated for vice president in 2020). In the House, there are seven Asian American members from California, and even a Vietnamese American woman (Stephanie Murphy) representing a district in Florida where there are few Asian Americans.

However, Asian Americans are still underrepresented in Congress. We do not yet know what the exact number of Asian Americans will be in the 2020 census, but their current proportion of the US population is estimated to be 7% to 8%. Multiplying the number of House members (435) by 7% results in slightly more than 30, which is more than twice the current number (14) of Asian American House members. If Asian Americans are equally represented in proportion to their population, there should be seven or eight senators, rather than only three.

Another aspect about Asian Americans that has changed in the past 20 years is that they have shifted from favoring Republicans to favoring Democrats. In 1992, when the data on Asian Americans' voting records were much more questionable, it appears that only about 30% voted for a Democratic presidential candidate ("Infographic: Democratic Shift" 2014). But in 2016, according to the National Asian American Survey, 69% voted for Hillary Clinton (Ramakrishnan et al. 2017, 14).

The next question is why Asian American voters shifted that way. There is a National Public Radio story titled "How Asian-American [sic] Voters Went from Republican to Democratic." This article draws heavily on an interview with Karthick Ramakrishnan, who stated that Asian Americans take a progressive stance on "taxes...social safety net, [and] supporting the Affordable Care Act" (Khalid 2015). This is supported by the 2016 Post-Election National Asian American Survey, which found that 51% of Asian Americans "strongly agree" and 28% "agree" that "[the] federal government should do more to reduce income differences between the richest and the poorest households." In addition, 33% of Asian Americans feel that "the cost of medical care" is a "very serious" issue and 18% said it was a "serious" issue (Ramakrishnan et al. 2017, 52, 35).

### Pei-te Lien:

Although the question is about change, I actually see more continuities than changes over the years. We continue to still need more representation and more voting turnout. However, reflecting on the days in the early to mid-1990s, when I did my dissertation on the voting behavior of Asian Americans, I was complaining about how little empirical survey-based data I could find. Certainly nowadays, with the availability of mass-based, large-scale opinion surveys on Asian American political attitudes and behavior, I don't think anybody can complain that the reason people don't study Asian Americans is because there are no data. There's no such excuse anymore.

Also, after I finished my dissertation and started teaching a course on Asian American politics, I had a difficult time finding teaching materials from current politics, for there was so little (mainstream) media coverage of the community. And then the 1996 presidential campaign-finance controversy involving several Asian-born donors happened. I said to myself, "Okay, the only reason we could make a news headline was by having bad news." Right? That rule seemed to be so obvious 20 years ago. But, nowadays, I would say that bad news may continue to drive the news attention, but we also have positive coverage such as how we achieve representation and political empowerment, being the small but critical vote in a swing race, especially in many of the local races—even if our vote also can matter in state and national races.

More than two decades ago, as a freshly minted PhD and in the aftermath of the Asian American campaign-finance

controversy, I was asked this question by someone in the Asian American press: “Can we ever expect to see an Asian American president?” I was reported as the only person saying “never” or “absolutely no,” a response I will forever regret to have made. It was unimaginable then for me to anticipate the situation now, when we actually have an unprecedented number of three Asian American—rather, Asian Pacific Americans—prominently covered by the mainstream media in terms of their candidacy and performance in presidential debates.<sup>2</sup> On this particular point, I would say, “Yeah, that is definitely a change.”

#### WHICH TOPICS IN ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICS ARE MOST PRESSING AT THE MOMENT?

##### Pei-te Lien:

I am most concerned about challenges to inter-ethnic and interracial relations involving immigrants from China. Due to a series of recent phenomena associated with the rising of China in world politics, actions and decisions by new and recent immigrants from mainland China have triggered unprecedented amounts of attention and scrutiny from the US mainstream media and society. They not only have helped sustain both the “model minority” and “perpetual foreigner” stereotypes of the Asian American community; they also have resulted in inter-ethnic tensions between Chinese and Asian American groups, as well as cross-racial tensions with other nonwhite Americans.

Asian Americans’ relationship to the ethnic or ancestral homeland has always been suspect, especially those who are perceived as being associated with the “enemy” home country in Asia. A classic example is the internment of Japanese Americans—two thirds of whom were US-born citizens—during World War II after the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan’s Imperial Military Service. Another example is the solitary

education. A case in point is the legal case against race-conscious admissions policies at Harvard University. Although I do not believe these immigrants represent the majority opinion of Asian Americans, I am afraid their decisions to join the white-led conservative camp as part of the legal strategy to end affirmative action are hurting simultaneously the progressive-based cross-racial alliance and the panethnic coalitions that have been the trademark of the making of Asian America. Furthermore, I fear these kinds of self-serving acts by privileged immigrants have contributed to racial hysteria and Sinophobia against Chinese and other Asian Americans, which has characterized our history as “strangers from a different shore” whose immigration and citizenship have long been the subject of racialized and gendered discrimination.

Another casualty of this type of conservative immigrant activism is intra-Asian relations, such as when Asian Americans find the need to dis-identify themselves from immigrants originating from mainland China, so as to avoid being unfairly lumped together by the mainstream media and US society as one and suffering from unfair scrutiny or discrimination due to the perception that all Asian Americans are alike. A related pressing issue triggered by the affirmative-action case concerns the deepening class gaps among Asian Americans between the relatively well-off middle-class communities and the less well-off working-class communities. Contrary to the image of a “model minority,” many in the latter are people fleeing war-torn homelands as political refugees and/or from postcolonial societies in Asia (and the Pacific Islands) whose welfare has been heavily influenced and exploited by Western imperialism.

Because of the complex nature of the issue and the stakes involved, I suggest that, rather than retreating from debating affirmative action, we educators and concerned citizens have a greater responsibility and need to outreach and discuss the issue and political consequences with the new Chinese (but also other Asian) immigrant communities.

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confinement of Dr. Wen Ho Lee—a naturalized citizen born in Taiwan—in a federal prison for nine months based on wrongful accusations of espionage for China in the late 1990s. In fact, a recent study shows that China-born Americans were disproportionately targeted under the federal Economic Espionage Act, even if they were significantly more likely to be innocent than defendants of other races. These cases demonstrate the continuing evidence of racial persecution and continuing need for civil rights and racial justice work in the twenty-first century.

Yet, since early 2014, several groups of immigrants from Asia—but especially those from mainland China—have been leading the efforts to undermine affirmative action in higher

##### Sara Sadhwani:

Great work has been done in the last few years. A recent special issue on Asian Americans honoring the work of Don Nakamishi in the journal *Politics, Groups, and Identities* was a major success, with new voices such as Christian Dyogi Phillips and Taeku Lee’s application of intersectionality to the study of Asian American women (Phillips and Lee 2018); Davin Phoenix and Maneesh Arora’s examination of the role of fear in political behavior (Phoenix and Arora 2018); and Julie Lee Merseth’s work on Asian American involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement (Merseth 2018). In addition, the Russell Sage Foundation recently commissioned a special

edition at the *Journal of Social Sciences* that also will examine Asian American political behavior using data from the National Asian American Survey. All of this work adds dimension to our understanding of Asian American political incorporation and signifies the growing importance and recognition of our subfield.

Yet, despite these advancements, there are a number of areas that remain understudied. In particular, I would like to highlight Asian Americans as a voting bloc of rising significance. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) are, of course, already a key constituency in California, where they comprise 13% of likely voters (Baldassare et al. 2019) but also play a growing role in key swing districts across the country in places such as Houston, Atlanta, Virginia, New Jersey, and Nevada. This is evidenced by the number of non-Asian members joining the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus due to large AAPI constituencies in the districts where they serve. Furthermore, although the 2016 election hit home the fact that a large majority of Asian Americans support the Democratic Party, more than a third still register as independents, which might suggest that given different candidate options, the Asian American vote could still be up for grabs.

Finally, the interplay between panethnic and national-origin identities remains an ever-important area of study for Asian American politics. The Asian American identity is, of course, a construction, yet one that powerfully shapes the beliefs, ideology, and behavior of those who identify with it. We continue to need scholarship in this area to unearth the ways in which panethnic and national-origin identities are activated and acted on. ■

#### NOTES

1. We note that the official US House of Representatives homepage, "Press Gallery: Asian Americans," has an incorrect number of Asian American members because it omits T. J. Cox (D-CA). <https://pressgallery.house.gov/member-data/demographics/asian-americans>. Accessed February 15, 2020.
2. These comments were made on August 29, 2019, when Tulsi Gabbard, Kamala Harris, and Andrew Yang were still active presidential candidates.

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