

Q&A with Leaders and Practitioners: Christine Chen of APIAVote

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Our understanding of the politics of race, indigeneity, and ethnicity is informed not only by the work of scholars, but also by the work of leaders and practitioners, many of whom are pioneers in their respective fields. The *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics (JREP)* is proud to continue our Q&A series with Christine Chen, executive director of Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote (APIAVote). Our hope is that forums like these will help advance our collective scholarship by better informing our research agendas, validating some of our claims, and building more bridges between the worlds of research, politics, and policy.

Christine Chen is a community leader and civil rights activist who has worked since 1990 to engage with Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities in a variety of sectors. She has promoted leadership and civic engagement in her roles as the founder and executive director of APIAVote, as member of the executive committee for the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, and as former executive director of Organization of Chinese Americans and founder of APIA Scholarship Fund. In these various roles, Chen has focused on building civic infrastructure within AAPI communities and working effectively in coalitions with other communities of color.

Q1: What is APIAVote? What does it do?

APIAVote is a national nonpartisan organization that works with local community partners in 25 states to mobilize Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) to increase electoral and civic participation. We work to ensure our communities have a voice and are represented, through investments in research, in-the-field organizing, media campaigns, and more.



Q2: Why is this work important?

Giving our communities a voice and building our political power not only allows us to decide the future for ourselves and our families, but also ensures that we have a seat at the table where policy decisions are made. We believe that our votes are a key way to build this power, yet there remains a voting gap between AAPI voters and other voters. While white and black Americans registered to vote in 2012 at about 73% of eligible voters, Asian Americans had a voter registration rate of 56%, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders had a registration rate of 58%. Our communities deserve better—and our work to register, educate, and amplify AAPI votes helps advance our communities' interests.

Q3: What is APIAVote doing that parties and candidates do not already do?

Most AAPIs report no contact by candidates or the political parties—we work to fill this gap, by providing AAPIs with the information and the tools to be fully engaged in the political process. In addition, APIAVote and our partners focus on registering and engaging new voters who are currently being ignored. We also push to amplify the visibility and recognition of our communities among parties and candidates, pushing both sides of the aisle to better understand the needs of our communities, and ensuring that we are included in the democratic process.

Q4: What are some of the challenges in getting Asian Americans more engaged?

One major challenge Asian Americans face is language access—immigrants form the largest share of the Asian American electorate, and, many in our community do not speak English fluently. Pushing for increased language access, from translated ballots to bilingual poll workers, is critical for us. APIAVote works to translate as many materials as we can, and with Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC, we run an election hotline, 1-888-API-VOTE, that provides bilingual voting assistance in various Asian languages.

In addition, many Asian immigrants come from countries where democratic values and engagement are not common practice. At a minimum, we need investments in proportion to the size of the community, the fastest growing racial groups in the United States.

Q5: What strategies have you found that have been most effective?

We learned from our voter hotline that low-propensity voters and new voters often are not fully informed about who is on the ballot or what offices are in play. This information gap is especially apparent during non-Presidential years. In 2015, when APIAVote sent a mailer to Virginia voters about local elections, we received a number of calls from limited English proficient voters who did not realize local elections were being held. They asked us for information about the candidates because they had very little to go by: materials from candidates and parties were not being translated into Asian languages.

Q6: How did you first get involved in politics? Is it something that was part of your household growing up, or something you picked up in college or afterwards?

When I turned 18, my parents took me to the voting booth and we went to dinner afterwards. It was simply a tradition that we continued when I was still living in Ohio. I didn't necessarily understand the importance of it back then, but the practice of casting my vote was instilled immediately. In addition, in high school while serving as an officer for student council, I participated in the campaign for a bond issue to fund the construction of a new high school, middle school, and elementary school.

Still, even back then, I didn't think much about politics even though I had engaged in this bond issue.

Then, in college, I ran for undergraduate student government and won the presidency at The Ohio State University. Reflecting back on that time, I realize that I built a non-traditional campaign, which focused on typically dis-engaged voters. Campaigns for these elections at Ohio State typically relied on turnout from the Greek community. In my campaign, I built a diverse coalition by reaching out to students of color, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) students in residence halls, and commuter students. Many of these communities already knew me as a trusted leader from my prior years of student leadership. Still, it was critical to explain why the student body presidency mattered, and why they needed to turn out to vote. I find many of those strategies and lessons, of voter education and voter mobilization, to be applicable even today to the work I do at APIAVote.

Q7: What can AAPIs learn from African American and Latino communities?

We need to ensure that no particular party takes the AAPI community for granted. There is a need to hold both parties accountable and to focus on local elections as well. So much attention is built around Presidential cycles, but these new base of voters can even make more of a difference in local elections if they are properly engaged.

The AAPI community also needs to learn how to build stronger institutions to be able to scale up operations to keep up with the growth of the community. There is much we can learn from African American and Latino communities in this regard. And we need more investments. We can no longer rely primarily on volunteer programs; we need to develop paid programs in order to have a large impact, especially for the work that continues after Election Day. For example, Presidential cycles allow us to re-energize our base of voters in hopes we can build a pipeline of those who can continue to do this work the following year for local elections and to tap them for appointments on the local state and federal level. Looking ahead, our performance at the ballot box also needs to be translated and integrated into our advocacy efforts on legislation and policy.

Q8: What are your biggest hopes for the 2016 elections?

My biggest hope for this year's election is a record turnout from our communities—where the headlines for days and weeks after Election Day

reflect on how our votes shaped the outcome of the election. A byproduct of this record turnout is the development of a new base of voters and community leaders who will continue their work on civic engagement between election cycles.

Q9: In your opinion, what does it mean for Asian Americans to achieve full political equality, and what will that look like in the future? When can we realistically hope for this change to occur?

Full political equality relies, in part, on closing the voting gap and getting more AAPIs in elected office. But it needs to be more than that. Full political equality for our communities can only happen when we are woven into the political fabric and narrative of this country, when no issue or topic debated or discussed leaves AAPIs out of the conversation. Full political equality is when all of our community members can feel empowered and strong about understanding and feeling comfortable in the political process.

Q10: What can political scientists do to help groups like AAPIs get more visible and achieve political equality?

My hope is that, no matter the topic, political scientists will include AAPIs in their research. Inclusion of this rapidly growing community is essential to understanding American society and politics—where it is today and where it will be in the future. Research and data are also critical to making our communities more visible and helping to debunk assumptions; we have learned this through our various multilingual surveys and data briefs. There are many opportunities for political scientists to get involved, and we hope that more will do so.