

Message from the Editors

Asian American Pacific Islanders 2040: Creating the Future in an Uncertain, Unpredictable World

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The 2016 presidential election exposed a fundamental flaw in the ability to project into the future. In a contentious election season, we have witnessed how the unexpected can disrupt scientifically based forecasts and demographic projections, and pose a serious challenge to the development of an Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) population trajectory through the year 2040.

Indeed, the weeks and days leading up to presidential, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House elections of November 8, 2016 were filled with dramatic swings, and October surprises. Much of this election cycle has challenged historical convention, expert predictions, and research-based projections. We must now question our own demographic assumptions and view the associated social, economic, and political implications as uncertain, rather than inevitable. Planning for the future and envisioning a spectrum of possibilities could become a Sisyphean exercise, we hope instead, that we can use the opportunity to exercise democracy and our democratic values.

This election cycle has taught us a lesson about expecting uncertainty, it has also revealed harsh realities that we, as a community and a nation, can and must address. Given the potential power of uncertainty, we must transform how AAPIs prepare for the future by embracing a broader agenda and by anticipating a degree of unpredictability in the projections. Given the deep divisions, we must examine our position in these struggles and consider the role of AAPIs in shaping a vision of America that reflects the noblest values.

The uncertainty has direct bearing on the goal of Nexus' 2040 Special Issue (published in two parts), which is to develop a vision for the

future based on an anticipated high population growth rate. For example, immigration was a central theme during the presidential election, and it will carry over into the next administration. New legislation, policies, and programs can have massive impacts, which can affect population projections. While the math behind demographic projections can be relatively precise, with rounded estimates given in six digits, the projections are not necessarily accurate when the fundamentals are in question. This problem applies to our projection that Asian Americans will account for one in ten Americans by 2040 (Ong et al. 2016a; Ong et al. 2016b). This prediction, however, is built on those calculated by the U.S. Census Bureau (Colby and Ortman, 2015). The Census numbers, based on historical trends, attributed nearly two-thirds of the 98.1 million net increase between 2014 and 2060 to international migration. Because most immigrants are expected to be from Asia and Latin America, the mathematical outputs are the basis for the much-heralded transformation to a majority-minority nation in the early 2040s. Historical trends, however, do not predict the future with certainty. The dynamics of the recent election cycle may challenge the assumptions behind the demographic model. For example, if immigration slowed dramatically over the next half century, then that demographic transformation would be pushed back a decade or more. At the extreme, if net migration is zero, non-Hispanic whites would remain the majority into 2060.

A dramatic reduction in immigration would mean an equally significant lowering in the growth of the AAPI population, which would translate into not coming close to being one in ten by the end of the next quarter century. Equally important, there would be a very different demographic composition of AAPIs than originally calculated, with proportionately more native, third-generation, and multiracial AAPIs. The smaller overall size of the Asian American population would reduce AAPIs role in American society—AAPI political power, economic contributions, and cultural influences. The shift in future composition would translate into a different set of policy priorities, and decentralize the immigrant-centric concerns of the previous quarter century.

Deconstructing the uncertainty in the demographic projections leads us to a more important reality. The election was a response to a demographic shift over the last quarter century, compounded by an angst anchored in economic disruptions and dislocation. There was a fear of a loss in privilege, a displacement from what had been perceived as a secure and predictable position in the societal structure. The symptoms of an increasingly globalized economy and widening income inequal-

ity are attributed instead to immigration (along with the demonizing of competition from China and Mexico). Under this scenario, immigrants become the scapegoat for all real and imagined ills. Reactionary efforts to reimpose the old structure also legitimize other forms of stratification and inequality along the lines of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Therefore, it is not surprising that the election exacerbated tensions and heightened intergroup conflicts.

Scapegoating rooted in massive societal changes is, of course, not new. History has shown that minorities are frequently the victims when the dominant group sees its security as being threatened by emerging demographic trends. AAPIs have been on the receiving end since at least the nineteenth century. The history of discriminatory and exclusionary immigration policy is the history of AAPIs. But, AAPIs are not the only ones who have suffered racialized injustice. At the end of the twentieth century, California's transition to a majority-minority state triggered a similar wave of xenophobia.

In 1994, in the midst of a deep recession, and with the backing of a California governor hoping to reverse his low poll ratings, this xenophobia culminated in the passage of Proposition 187. The initiative was ostensibly aimed at undocumented immigrants ineligible for public benefits, but had its origins in the broader anti-immigrant movement. Justifiably, the proposition was found to be unconstitutional because it infringed upon the federal jurisdiction over immigration. Additionally, opposition against Proposition 187 became a rallying point for immigrants and their supporters, sparking the political mobilization of Latinos and Asians. A similar anti-immigrant sentiment that swept through California a quarter century earlier manifested itself in this election. This timing is not surprising because the same demographic shift, that occurred in California a decade ago, is just now taking place nationally, and we could be witnessing California's history repeating itself at a national scale. One could also speculate that the future trajectory for the country could follow the course of events of the Golden State. The transformation was traumatic and painful, but ultimately California has survived and entered a new, more inclusive, and promising era.

So, how do we move forward toward 2040 given the uncertainty created by the election? While the nation will have a new president, deep societal chasms will persist. Lingering bitterness will undoubtedly color the political discourse over the next few years. What is known is that the outcomes will shape immigration policy, and in turn shape demographic

dynamics that will lead to diverging projections. Precisely how this will play out is unknown.

Despite the uncertainties, it is clear that we should not abandon the legislation, policies, and programs that the contributing authors are advocating for in AAPI Nexus volume 14. The spotlighted problems and challenges continue to exist, and the solutions and agenda remain important and worthy goals. But, we should expand our vision. The election revealed that AAPIs have a stake in the core principles and beliefs that form the bedrock of a free and democratic society. We cannot take that for granted. Instead, we must become more vested in the struggle to ensure that the nation adhere to the best and most noble of these values. It is also imperative that we take a stance on the growing income and wealth inequality because, as Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis so articulately argued, “[w]e may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can’t have both” (Lonergan, 1941, p. 42). The AAPI community must embrace the larger agenda of meaningful social justice, particularly for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable.

We must engage politically to voice AAPI priorities and advocate for the appointment of fairness-oriented U.S. Supreme Court Justices whose legacies will transcend that of individual presidential election cycles. Moving forward, AAPIs must pursue both our specific interests and support broader agendas, in particular with other communities of color. Broadening the agenda can help address the spectrum of issues relating to an AAPI population that is increasingly diverse in conditions and character. The new growth of AAPI ethnic groups in the rural areas of the Midwest or in new urban areas points to the changing geography of the AAPI community. The increasing rate of interracial relationships may lead to a growth in multiracial Asian Americans and to new discussions relating to identity. Additionally, although socioeconomic heterogeneity has long existed among AAPIs, selective immigration has also had an impact on issues and the discourse surrounding inequality and inequity among AAPIs and beyond.

In pursuing the agenda, we must have flexibility in a world with greater uncertainty and do as the adage states, “hoping for the best but preparing for the worst.” There is, for now, not a singular future, but a multitude of possible outcomes. We must act, with the potential of uncertainty in mind, but with renewed purpose in asserting our place within a national narrative and a social discourse that reflects the vision of a more perfect Union.

While the preceding provides broad and perhaps abstract guidelines, we also have specific recommendations for President Donald Trump. We must call on President Trump to be a leader to all Americans, by using his executive authority to reauthorize the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and to move away from divisive campaign rhetoric and move toward inclusive and collaborative administration. President Trump has pledged to address economic success, which could potentially benefit AAPIs. President Trump's probusiness stance should include programs that help small businesses, stimulate innovation, and build growth-oriented infrastructure. We hope that his administration will seriously evaluate any new tax plans in terms of the impacts on the national deficit and disproportionate burden on middle- and low-income families, the very segments of society he pledged to help, in closing the wealth gap. It is important to have fair international trade, with policies that protect American workers and help to secure good new jobs in a globalized economy, but it is equally important not to needlessly heighten international tension, which can lead to irrational scapegoating of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. We hope that President Trump will join AAPIs to protect the gains of the previous half century in civil and voting rights, nonracist immigration policies, women's and LGBTQ rights, and ensure health care for all.

Finally, AAPIs need to think beyond one presidential cycle. Whoever will be president in 2021, 2025, 2029, 2033, 2037, and 2041, can either shore up the foundation for future social progress, or turn back the clock. AAPIs will not be on the sidelines to see how this unfolds, and instead AAPIs will be continuing to mobilize and engage. Developing and advocating for an agenda for the future must be seen as an ongoing commitment, and as an effort that is informed and responsive to the new realities and challenges that emerged from the 2016 election. AAPIs must remain not only more steadfast and more vigilant but must also be engaged at the table of policy discourse. A dedication and commitment for a better tomorrow must be accompanied by a maximization of our engagement in the political process to bend the arc of history toward justice.¹ AAPIs cannot depend on the inevitability of any one trajectory, but AAPIs can make history together through leadership, practice, and action.

Notes

1. The concept of the arc of moral history can be traced to nineteenth-century antislavery abolitionist Theodore Parker and was rearticulated by civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

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