

The State of Asian America:  
Trajectory of Civic and Political Engagement  
A Public Policy Report

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*Editor*

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## Preface

# The State of Asian America Trajectory of Civic and Political Engagement

Fifteen years ago, Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc. (LEAP) and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center published their first joint public policy effort, *The State of Asian Pacific America: Policy Issues to the Year 2020*. With the inauguration of President Bill Clinton and the shift from a Republican to Democratic administration, 1993 marked a dramatic change in U.S. politics. Asian Americans were then an emerging yet underrepresented and near “invisible” minority. The report’s timely release provided significant data and policy perspectives on major issues and concerns affecting the Asian American population. It highlighted the increasing significance of this community, and the need for appropriate knowledge and understanding of its unique needs.

The year 2008 marks yet another remarkable moment in American politics. Following an exciting and unprecedented primary season, the nation is poised on the brink of history, with the expected nomination of the first African American (defeating the first viable female candidate) for President of the United States.

Given this dramatic backdrop, LEAP’s fifth major publication, *The State of Asian America: Trajectory of Civic and Political Engagement*, published in conjunction with the University of California AAPI Policy Multi-Campus Research Program (MRP), is particularly salient. The upcoming election has renewed public interest in political participation, galvanizing women, young people and entire communities of color. Regardless of who wins the White House, change is sure to come. The issues that will define November’s election—the economy, energy, education, healthcare, immigration, globalization, foreign policy, the environment, race, gender and ethnicity—are issues pertinent to all Americans, including Asians.

## Is it safe to say that we are now part of the dialogue?

Since 1993, the Asian American community has grown and matured tremendously. Due in large part to higher levels of civic engagement, Asian American visibility has increased on all levels and in all sectors of society.

This report discusses the extent and variety of ways in which Asian Americans are civically engaged—as individuals working towards any collective, common good—from volunteers in religious, professional, political and community-based organizations to citizens exercising their right to vote. Linked by a constructed racial category, many have come to embrace the umbrella term “Asian American” as a means to establish a unified identity, and therefore a more powerful voice in the political arena. Still, institutional barriers continue to limit full Asian American participation, and creative solutions are necessary to overcome these challenges.

As college students, grassroots activists, educators, journalists, entrepreneurs, politicians, artists, corporate executives, foreign and native born, transnational citizens, young and old, Asian Americans must continue to be involved and assert influence throughout the American landscape. Asian Americans must strive to shape policy and to inform politicians and the public alike about matters relevant to Asians. We hope this publication illustrates the nature and impact of Asian American civic engagement and offers meaningful and insightful suggestions towards future empowerment. (Due to limited funding, this report focuses only on Asian American civic engagement. In the future, every effort will be made to include Pacific Islander communities.)

The realization of this ambitious project is due to the vision of Professor Paul Ong of the UCLA School of Public Affairs and the UC AAPI Policy Multi-Campus Research Program. The catalyst and driving force behind this report, Professor Ong is the nation’s leading expert on public policy issues facing the Asian and Pacific Islander population. We are extremely grateful for the leadership and commitment that he provided to ensure the success of this endeavor.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the notable team of writers who contributed their expertise to this report. We also express

our utmost gratitude to the faculty and staff of the UC AAPI Policy MRP and to the Board of Directors of LEAP for their unwavering support of our collaboration.

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# ASIAN AMERICAN CIVIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT<sup>i</sup>

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## Introduction

Increasing Asian American civic and political engagement has emerged as a central concern and goal among community leaders and organizations, in large part because high levels of participation translate into tangible benefits to the community and a more active role in influencing public policy.<sup>ii</sup> As one community leader characterized it in a survey conducted by Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc. (LEAP), “civic engagement is being able to be involved in your community on a very broad level. It’s about knowing what you want to see in your community and making that happen...[and] it means helping your community empower itself.” Looking forward, a different leader hoped that “the API voice will be[come] much stronger both from the top, elected [officials and] decision makers, and from the bottom, voting [and grassroots] engagement.” Another optimistic leader said, “I think civic engagement will increase in the next 10-20 years. [Foreign-born] Asians being in the U.S. longer and having the time to acculturate and become well versed in English, will start to realize that to make a difference, they will have to come together with other groups they identify with to form a common agenda.”<sup>iii</sup>

Voluntarism and voting, the two most widely accepted forms of engagement, are seen as keystones to being a full and active member of American society. The actions are performed by individuals of their own volition, grounded in a sense of communal responsibility. This

nation provides few material incentives to do either, nor impose any sanctions for failing to participate. Nonetheless, there are broader implications for the nation. Participating in these ways makes civil society more vibrant and strengthens democracy. Conversely, a low or declining level of civic and political engagement has been interpreted as a weakening of the fabric that binds the country.

For immigrants, civic and political engagement takes on a special meaning because it is viewed by many natives as an indicator of the degree that immigrants want to become a part of American society by making contributions to the “greater good.” While an immigrant can volunteer regardless of status, participating in voting requires the additional step of acquiring citizenship. Naturalization itself is seen as a commitment and allegiance to the United States. Engagement is not only a symbolic indicator of self-incorporation into the nation’s fabric, it also promotes the cross-group interaction that promotes greater understanding and strengthens networks across ethnic lines.

Asian American civic and political engagement has become a major concern because this population has grown to be a significant group and will continue to grow in absolute and relative terms. From 1990 to 2007, the number of Asian Americans increased from 7.3 million to 13.4 million, and from 2.9% of the total population to 4.4%.<sup>iv</sup> If we include those who are part Asian American, then the respective figures for 2007 are 15.2 million and 5.0%. By 2030, the Census Bureau projects that there will be 22.6 million single-race Asian Americans, comprising 6.2% of the total population. If we add in those who are part Asian American, then the combined population would comprise over 7% of all Americans. There will also be a recomposition of the Asian American population by 2030 as the number of U.S. Asian Americans will grow faster than the number of foreign-born, but even then, immigrants will comprise a majority of Asian Americans, particularly adult Asian Americans.

The population growth has made Asian Americans a potentially important political and civic force. They have already achieved that status in Hawaii, where Asian Americans form a plurality, and they have emerged as a potential key swing vote in California (Ong et al. 2006). However, as we will discuss later in this chapter and the next,

there are barriers limiting their political impact. As a growing population, Asian Americans can also have an impact on civil society through volunteerism.<sup>v</sup> The growing number of Asian Americans also make them a potentially important source of volunteers, particularly in communities where they comprise a large share of the total population. Voluntarism is critical in helping organizations fill niches that the governmental sector is unable to fill.

Given the importance of Asian American civic and political engagement, Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc. (LEAP), with collaboration from the UC AAPI Policy Multi-Campus Research Program (MRP), established a project to study this phenomenon. LEAP is a national, nonprofit organization aiming to achieve full participation and equality for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders through leadership, empowerment, and policy. Implicit in LEAP's mission to increase both the quantity and quality of Asian American leaders is the idea that those leaders will spur Asian American communities to greater levels of integration and civic participation in the larger U.S. social, economic, cultural, and political spheres. The UC AAPI Policy MRP promotes and coordinates applied and policy research on topics relevant to California's growing Asian American and Pacific Islander population. The MRP serves as a bridge linking UC researchers to community organizations, the media, and elected officials and their staff to integrate research, teaching, and community outreach in ways that inform and enlighten public discourse on important public policy issues.

This current project is a part of LEAP's series on *The State of Asian Pacific America*, which was started jointly with the UCLA Asian American Studies Center in 1993. The series has covered policy issues ranging from immigration, economics, and race relations, to questions related to culture and the arts.<sup>vi</sup> The current project focuses on the issues that are key to the current immigration debate and which lie at the heart of achieving full participation by Asian Americans — immigration, labor and the economy, civic participation, politics. Without a clear picture of the shape, character, and likely movements of Asian American communities, local, regional, and national leaders will be left to speculate on what issues and policies are most important to Asian Americans and what those policies might

mean in and to Asian American communities in the future. One of the project's goals is to provide a road map for Asian American civic engagement. To that end, this project was conceived as a means to initiate increased levels of civic participation amongst Asian Americans at the local level as well as make current regional and national efforts more effective.

One of the project's major objectives is to produce a policy report examining the forms and levels of participation, the challenges and barriers, and the opportunities and potentials. To accomplish this, the project assembled a team of renowned Asian American scholars trained in economics, political science, sociology, ethnic studies, public affairs, and law.<sup>vii</sup> Contributors were asked to evaluate the positive and negative aspects of trends, and then propose ways to promote beneficial activities and to address the likely barriers in the future. To assist the writers to explore what lies ahead, the project has developed a population projection that breaks the Asian American population by nativity given the importance of immigrants in the equation. (See Appendix C for a 2030 Asian American population projection by nativity.) We believe that the information in the essays will help community leaders and organizations, elected officials and policy makers, and other stakeholders understand the enormous task before us if we are to improve the civic and political landscape for Asian Americans. There is a critical need to stimulate and focus discussion about ways to intervene to take advantage of potential opportunities and to meet new challenges as we strive to promote greater civic and political engagement within the Asian American community.

The contributors use their respective orientations within their disciplinary fields to frame the discussion. Economists focus on the market, problems of collective action, and direct economic gains. Political scientists, on the other hand, are concerned with political engagement and participation in relation to the state. Finally, sociologists concentrate on the social dimensions of group action. They are interested in social capital, networks, and cultural aspects that enable or hinder civic engagement and influence the capacity to participate. They recognize that engagement is not a purely individual activity but that it is related to social structures and institutions.

Ultimately, the writers pick up on many of the themes touched on by survey respondents in Appendix B.

## Levels of Participation

Four essays in this book examine the level of civic and political engagement. They draw on a range of available data to gauge the extent and nature of participation. Karthick Ramakrishnan provides an overview of volunteerism and voting; Pei-te Lien narrows the focus by examining voting among Asian immigrants; Park, et al., also examines another important Asian American subpopulation – civic engagement among college students; and Kang presents an interesting view by examining engagement in an emerging arena, the Internet. While each essay offers unique and important insights, they share a common thread. They find that Asian Americans are active participants but at the same time face a number of barriers and challenges. Identifying the impediments to participation is a critical step in formulating policies and programs to increase civic and political engagement.

Karthick Ramakrishnan's chapter, "Political Participation and Civic Voluntarism," examines the extent to which Asian Americans are equal to other racial and ethnic groups when it comes to participating in community organizations and in the political process. Participation rates among Asian Americans are generally low compared to other racial and ethnic groups, although there are significant differences across various Asian national-origin groups. When Asian Americans do participate, such as in making campaign contributions or creating vibrant community organizations, they tend to remain more invisible and less influential in the eyes of government officials. Using population projections for the Asian American community over the next few decades, Ramakrishnan projects that there will be an increase in absolute participation rates among Asian Americans. Yet it is possible that Asian Americans will continue to lag behind other racial and ethnic groups due to the aging general population that will also lead to increased participation among non-Asians. To mitigate this effect, Ramakrishnan offers strategies to address the major challenges related to the future of Asian American civic and

political engagement: increasing participation rates, making community organizations more viable, and getting government officials to pay more attention to Asian American community organizations.

Pei-te Lien, in "Political and Civic Engagement of Immigrants," focuses on Asian immigrants, who comprise a large majority of voting-age Asian Americans. Using public data sets and a specialized survey of Asian Americans, the chapter addresses several important questions: Is this a barrier or an asset to political participation, and to what extent? How does the political participation of foreign-born Asians in the U.S. compare to U.S. born Asians, as well as other foreign-born and native populations? Lien answers these questions by exploring Asian American political participation with a focus on the role of nativity and the growth of foreign-born Asians in the U.S. While the process of political engagement often presents barriers for immigrants, there are also potential incentives to political participation. Using survey data to analyze trends in recent Asian American political participation, Lien debunks the notion of an absolute foreign-born disadvantage. Lien then explores differences within the Asian American population that are easily hidden in aggregated data and briefly examines political participation beyond voting. Finally, Lien offers reasons for optimism about the future of Asian American political and civic engagement, suggesting that political parties and civic institutions can foster this engagement through strong support of immigrants' rights, as well as the maintenance and enforcement of voting rights.

Julie Park, Monica Lin, Oiyen Poon, and Mitchell Chang's chapter on "Asian American College Students and Civic Engagement" provides some insight into a generation that has just become of age. Opportunities to become civically engaged in college are an important way for students to develop social responsibility that benefits both the individual and society. The current trend indicates increasing participation rates among college students in community and political activities, but where do Asian Americans fit in the picture? The authors address that question by analyzing data about Asian American college freshman in the areas of community service, political engagement, and capacity for civic engagement. The authors aim to move beyond stereotypes that focus on Asian American performance

in the classroom and instead provide a broader scope of the Asian American college experience as it pertains to civic and political participation. While Asian Americans have the highest volunteerism rates among young adults ages 18-24, their political participation rates are much lower. The data also reveal important differences within the Asian American population by gender, citizenship, and native language. Immigration and population projections therefore shed light into the future of Asian American undergraduate civic engagement. Ultimately, the authors suggest strategies for students to influence their community through volunteer service and political involvement over the course of their studies and beyond.

Jerry Kang's chapter, "Engaging Online," also provides a glimpse into the future by studying Asian American participation in the new technological arena in the form of the Internet. The Internet has rapidly become a familiar mode of communication at work, at home, and on the street. Notwithstanding substantial variance among subpopulations, Asian Americans on average are well connected to the Internet. How does this connectivity affect Asian American civic engagement? Jerry Kang first addresses that question by examining how Asian Americans use the Internet. While some Asian American online communities are ethnic-specific and link immigrants to their countries of origin, others are pan-Asian with a more domestic or political focus. Because the Internet allows individuals that are physically separated to interact in a meaningful way through shared interests, Asian diasporas can use online networks to bridge physical distance. Kang then discusses the untapped potential of the Internet to influence Asian American voting behavior and inform and facilitate the electoral process. Finally, Kang explores how online engagement can alter the ways that race functions both off- and online, and the meaning this holds for Asian Americans.

## **Racial and Ethnic Identification**

While voting and volunteerism are actions taken by individuals, it is impossible to escape the reality that we are tied to and influenced by our association with socially constructed groups. One of the most enduring classification schemes in American society is along

race lines. In her chapter, Yen Le Espiritu examines how the formation and reification of Asian Americans as a racial group can be driven by efforts within the population to achieve a greater voice in the civic and political arena in a racialized society. However, such efforts are a response to a reality that is manufactured and codified by governmental practice, and a primary example of that is the way the U.S. Bureau of the Census collects demographic data. Because so much is at stake in being included in the official statistics, it is critical that Asian Americans be represented in the decennial enumeration of the population, a position clearly articulated by Terry Ao. Finally, the essay by Claire Kim examines how powerful forces external to the population impose a pernicious identity on Asian Americans. Racial identity's influence on politics is inescapable, and the challenge is how to use this influence constructively while combating its worst features.

Yen Le Espiritu, in "Asian American Panethnicity: Challenges and Possibilities," examines the role of panethnicity in Asian American civic and political engagement, paying particular attention to the role of post-1965 immigration. Espiritu suggests that although Asian ethnic groups were always civically engaged, the notion of Asian American civic engagement was borne out of the Asian American movement in the 1960s alongside the concept of Asian American panethnicity. At the same time, changes to immigration law resulted in shifting demographics of the Asian population in the U.S. As this population became more diverse, Asian American panethnicity was increasingly contested. Espiritu's analysis shows that ethnic-specific identities and panethnic identities are not mutually exclusive; both exist simultaneously and both serve as a resource for the development of Asian American political participation and empowerment. In the next two decades, as the United States competes internationally with China's and India's growing economic influence, it is likely that domestic anti-Asianism will correspondingly rise, making pan-Asian efforts a political necessity. The challenge for Asian American leaders will be to identify and articulate shared interests and ideology within the socially and economically diverse Asian American community, to solicit new membership, and to groom fresh leadership, especially from within the ranks of the less affluent, underrepresented Southeast

Asian communities.

The social construction of Asian Americans as a racial group is codified in governmental practices, and Terry Ao explores one important aspect: the collection of demographic data by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. In "Connecting the Dots: Understanding the Importance of Census Participation to Civic Engagement," Ao argues for active participation by Asian Americans in the decennial enumeration because of the downstream implications. Non-participation in the Census among Asian Americans may lead to an undercount, which can create future problems for appropriating funding, enforcing voting rights, addressing language barriers to voting, and reapportionment and redistricting. To increase Asian American participation in census surveys, Ao proposes strategies for breaking down barriers to participation. Increasing the accuracy of the Asian American census count, she posits, ultimately strengthens the backbone of future civic engagement in the community.

Claire Jean Kim examines the implications of Asian Americans' presumed foreignness for their civic engagement. Her chapter, "The Usual Suspects: Asian Americans as Conditional Citizens," addresses this issue by analyzing how Asian American political officials, advocates, and scholars have responded to the campaign finance scandal associated with the U.S. presidential election of 1996, a watershed event in which Asian Americans were racialized as politically suspect by both political parties and the media. Kim begins by stating that while all agree that the event powerfully invigorated the enduring notion of Asian Americans as foreigners inclined toward treason, they differ on whether the scandal was a temporary setback in the narrative of Asian American political incorporation or merely a reminder of the ideological processes that will always relegate Asian Americans to the margins of the nation's political life. Kim concludes with the proposition of "conditional citizenship" as a way of conceptualizing the political status of Asian Americans and discusses the implication of this status for Asian American civic engagement.

## Institutional Factors

The last three essays focus on how institutions can facilitate and hinder Asian American civic and political engagement. An institution, in the abstract form, is a set of norms and values that influence behavior, but the institutions discussed here are the more concrete forms. Chi-kan Richard Hung examines the relative size and composition of Asian American nonprofits, which traditionally have played a critical role in bridging Asian Americans, and especially Asian immigrants and the larger society. Taeku Lee focuses on another key American institution, political parties, and analyzes how partisanship is associated with attitudes and other forms of engagement. Finally, Marlene Kim examines both the historical and contemporary relationship between organized labor and Asian Americans. While changing individual behavior is fundamental to the goal of increasing Asian American civic and political engagement, these essays remind us that this also requires strengthening Asian American community organizations and making other institutions more inclusive of Asian Americans.

In "Growth and Diversity of Asian American Nonprofit Organizations," Chi-kan Richard Hung points out that civil society has been an important part of Asian American life since the early days of immigration. As the Asian American population grows, nonprofit organizations are playing an increasingly important role for the community and civil society at large. In this chapter, the author Hung looks at Asian American nonprofit organizations in the ten largest U.S. metropolitan areas and investigates patterns of development. He categorizes these organizations into four functional types: religious, cultural, service, or public interest organizations. The distribution of organizations between these groups illustrates the heterogeneity of the Asian American community, as does the balance between nonprofits that serve a particular Asian ethnic group and pan-Asian organizations that serve the entire Asian American community. Hung also looks at the distribution of organizations across regions. While financial records indicate that Asian American nonprofits are relatively small, public interest and service organizations are typically larger than religious and cultural groups and tend to have more of a pan-

Asian focus. As the Asian American population grows, especially outside central cities where current Asian American nonprofits are concentrated, some organizations will need to expand into these new communities to continue addressing Asian American needs that go unmet by mainstream organizations.

Taeku Lee's chapter "Civic Engagement as a Pathway to Partisanship Acquisition for Asian Americans" focuses on how party affiliation is an important marker of political orientation and activism. Historically, political parties in the U.S. were more willing to incorporate immigrants and new citizens into their ranks than they are today. Given this reluctance to include Asian Americans, how does a majority (and growing) immigrant Asian American electorate become politicized? What barriers exist to Asian American political participation and what factors can encourage participation? The author examines the relationship between civic engagement, partisanship, panethnic identity, and the political incorporation of Asian Americans. Lee also focuses on the institutional role of political parties and their relationship to Asian Americans. When choosing party affiliation between Democrats and Republicans, the emerging trend among Asian Americans is toward Democratic partisanship. Yet in many surveys the majority of Asian American respondents choose not to identify with a party at all. Lee considers this absence of partisanship and ultimately looks to civil society and different expressions of civic engagement as an alternative arena to political parties for the politicization of Asian Americans.

Marlene Kim, in "Organizing Asian Americans into Labor Unions," examines labor unions as an important institution for engaging workers in a wide variety of civic activities. Although historically some labor unions reflected the racist views and practices of society and excluded Asian workers from belonging to unions, today this is no longer true. Union membership among Asians is on the rise due to successful organizing efforts by a new generation of Asian American labor organizers, and tens of thousands of Asian workers have already joined unions with diverse memberships. The author assesses the future of Asian American unionization and potential challenges. The major barriers to union organizing faced by Asian Americans today are the same barriers faced by all workers: weak

U.S. labor laws and resistance from employers. The diversity within the Asian American community, as well as projected community demographics over the next few decades, also presents an obstacle to organizing Asian workers. While the perception of Asians as apolitical may still be a challenge to overcome, the increase in union participation among Asian Americans has had important spillover effects that continue to increase other types of civic engagement in the community. Unions are instrumental in the legislative and electoral process — educating their members about the legislative process, lobbying their elected representatives, and participating in mobilization efforts for legislation that advances Asian workers and communities. Union voter education, registration, and mobilization efforts have elected worker friendly representatives, and efforts that have targeted Asians have led to large increases in the Asian vote and to Asians having a political voice and newly acquired political clout.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Collectively, the essays in this policy book provide insight into the nature and extent of Asian American civic and political engagement, and into the forces that shape participation in civil society. In the absence of any intervening action, recent history can indicate the direction in which we are headed. Demographic dynamics, institutional practices and individual behavior have systematic and predictable impacts on outcomes. These same factors will influence what will unfold over the next two decades. The Asian American population will grow, and the increase will translate into more engaged Asian Americans. At the same, there will also be more who will not be engaged. Past trajectories, however, do not define our destiny. It is important to recognize that the future is not necessarily preordained unless we fail to act. It is naïve to believe that we can overcome all barriers to civic and political engagement, but it is not unrealistic to close the racial and ethnic gap in participation through concerted and self-conscious action. The challenge is to help more Asian Americans to become meaningfully incorporated into American society and politics, to have a more effective voice in multiple public arenas, and to make greater contributions to the collective good. This should occur

both within Asian American communities and within the larger society, thus strengthening these communities internally and building bridges to non-Asian ones. There are no simple solutions. Directed social change requires both large and small acts, and innovative thinking. Hopefully, this book will enhance the effort to inform, identify, formulate and implement policies and programs that will enable us to promote greater Asian American civic and political engagement.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> We are indebted to Lucy Tran, the LEAP staff, the UCLA AASC staff, and the UC AAPI Policy MRP staff for their assistance. We alone, however, are responsible for the content.
- <sup>ii</sup> See Appendix A for discussion on concepts and definitions.
- <sup>iii</sup> See Appendix B for summary of LEAP surveys.
- <sup>iv</sup> The 1990 counts are from the Bureau of Census, "1990 Summary Tape File 1 (STF 1) - 100-Percent data," <http://factfinder.census.gov/>, downloaded May 26, 2008. The 2007 figures are from the Bureau of the Census, "Annual Estimates of the Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2007 (NC-EST2007-03)," <http://www.census.gov/popest/national/asrh/NC-EST2007-srh.html>, downloaded May 26, 2008.
- <sup>v</sup> See Appendix A for discussion on concepts and definitions.
- <sup>vi</sup> *The State of Asian Pacific America: Policy Issues to the Year 2020*, LEAP Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute and UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1993, Los Angeles, Ca.; Paul M. Ong, lead author, *Beyond Asian American Poverty: Community Economic Development Policies and Strategies*, Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute, LEAP, Los Angeles, CA., 1993 and 1999; Paul M. Ong, editor, *The State of Asian Pacific America: Economic Diversity, Issues and Policies*, Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute, LEAP, Los Angeles, CA., 1994; Bill O. Hing and Ronald Lee, editors, *Reframing the Immigration Debate*, Los Angeles: LEAP Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute and UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1996, Paul M. Ong, editor, *The State of Asian Pacific America: Transforming Race Relations*, Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute, LEAP and UCLA AASC, Los Angeles, CA., 2000.
- <sup>vii</sup> While the essays in this volume cover a wide array of themes related to Asian American civic and political engagement, more needs to be written on this topic. It is ultimately impossible to cover everything in this report alone. In

particular, a detailed discussion of the role of religion and the media in Asian American civic engagement is missing from this report. Among the themes that are covered, there is greater focus on political engagement and less discussion about broader civic engagement and volunteerism outside the political realm.

## Appendix A:

# Concepts and Terms Related to Civic and Political Engagement

This appendix lists the definitions and concepts of civic and political engagement that are most relevant to this policy book. The coverage here is not intended to be comprehensive, and there are other conceptualizations that are appropriate in a different context. A starting point is situating engagement within society.

Modern societies are organized between three sectors: the market, the state, and civil society. These sectors, and the institutions within them, can operate independently or interact with one other. The market is the site of production of goods and services, where private institutions undertake economic activities that are motivated by profit. The norms and values of the market, such as utility maximization and consumer autonomy, stress the role of the individual and therefore undermine activities that focus on collective outcomes. The state is a set of governing institutions with a formal structure, where political decisions take the form of laws, rules, and regulations. Within this setting, public institutions deliver public goods and services. The state typically regulates the market, to address market failure or equity concerns, though some believe that the state over-regulates the market and therefore limits its efficiency. The concept of political economy, based on the relationship between the market and the state, explores the overlap between these sectors. Within a capitalist or socialist society, the political economy is a particularly large configuration.

Civil society includes institutions and organizations that fall outside of the market, the state, and the family (Carnegie UK Trust, London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society, and UCLA Center for Civil Society, nd). However, civil society increasingly overlaps or interacts with these other sectors, blurring the boundaries between them (*Ibid*). Thus, civil society is defined in many different ways. We characterize civil society as being comprised of voluntary organiza-

tions and institutions that serve a collective good, including groups such as nonprofit organizations, professional associations, and labor unions (*Ibid*). In part, civil society addresses normative notions about how the market and the state should function, and attempts to make up for deficiencies. As the role of the state declines, the public sector increasingly depends upon civil society to help deliver public services.

Civic engagement is vast, nuanced, and, like civil society, can be defined in a multitude of ways. Civic engagement takes place within civil society or through interactions between civil society and other sectors, and can include both individual and collective action. Because the definition of civic engagement is subjective, we will be precise in our use of the term. In contrast to civics, the study of government and the role of citizen participation and input, civic engagement has two main components: voluntary action and the production of public goods.<sup>i</sup>

Volunteerism is central to the notion of civic engagement. If an activity is mandatory or prohibited, it is no longer civic engagement. As such, the state can greatly influence this engagement through laws, or a lack of laws, that govern individual interaction with the state. In order for an activity to fall within the scope of civic engagement, it must not be coerced but should happen voluntarily out of social responsibility or obligation (Carnegie UK Trust nd; London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society nd).

Volunteerism that contributes to public goods is, however, problematic because there are economic disincentives.<sup>ii</sup> By definition, public goods are goods (and services) that are non-exclusionary, that is, everyone benefits. The classical example is the security provided by a nation's armed forces. This creates a problem of free riders, which occurs because individuals benefit regardless of whether they pay for the production of the public good. One way of overcoming this problem is requiring compulsory contributions, and the government does this through taxes that are then used on public goods. There is no similar mechanism in civil society, so volunteerism entails a degree of noncompulsory sacrifice and altruism.

Political engagement is a subset of civic engagement that occurs through interaction between civil society and the state. It includes

voting, participating on neighborhood councils, and working with political parties. The state plays an important role in facilitating civic and political engagement through allowing, or prohibiting, activities such as voting. In the U.S., voting is voluntary rather than compulsory and produces the public good of an engaged citizenry. The American regime of civic engagement allows citizens to interact with the state through the electoral process. Historically, however, there have been significant barriers to voting in the U.S., particularly for immigrants and people of color. The shift from prohibiting to allowing voting is a relatively recent one, particularly for a large number of Asian immigrants.

Outside of political engagement, civic engagement activities do not necessarily involve interactions with the state. Civic engagement often comes about when civil society interacts with the nonprofit sector to address market externalities such as pollution.<sup>iii</sup> Pollution clean-up campaigns encourage and facilitate volunteerism and result in a public good of lower levels of pollution. Civil society also interacts with the market to produce civic engagement. This is evident through citizen action to promote regulations that affect businesses, advocate for solutions to problems that concern the private sector, or distribute information, such as a list of reputable service providers. This serves to indirectly regulate the market for a particular service and reflects opinions about how the market ought to function and regulate itself.

Civic engagement is sometimes a precursor to social capital, the connections within and between social networks (Putnam 2000). Robert Putnam famously charted the decline of American social capital through waning participation in civic groups such as labor unions and bowling clubs. In following up to his work, economists have found that civic engagement declines as communities become more heterogeneous (Costa and Kahn 2003). While the definition of community is limited by the data being used, this finding generates some important questions about civic engagement for a group as diverse as the Asian American community (*Ibid*). Because civic engagement produces social capital through relationships and networks, lower engagement rates ultimately lead to lower levels of social capital. At the same time, the level of civic engagement is simultaneously influenced by the amount and nature of social capital. When a society undergoes

a demographic change, such as that associated with immigration, the networks across ethnic groups (bridging social capital) are initially weak. One way to build those networks is through encouraging civic engagement that transcends ethnic divides.

Institutions play an important role in facilitating, hindering and shaping civic engagement. The market, state, and civil society are largely organized through institutions, and an institution is defined as a set of shared norms and values that govern behavior (Carnegie UK Trust nd; London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society nd). Institutions such as labor unions, churches, and families can also interact with civil society to influence individual behavior both within and beyond an institution. Ethnicity and culture, though not thought of as formal institutions, clearly have a set of shared norms and values and therefore also fall into this category.

An institution may or may not be a site of civic engagement and, when it is, the degree of civic engagement may vary. The more that an institution is closed off, by distinguishing between members and non-members, the less it can be an arena for civic engagement because it is unlikely to produce a public good. In this case, the benefits of an activity are concentrated and bestowed upon the institution's members. Institutions with porous barriers between members and nonmembers yield more diffuse benefits and therefore are much more likely to fall within the arena of civil society. Business district associations that address problems of their district members are an example of a group with concentrated benefits. In contrast, the Lions Club may draw members from the business community but the benefits of their activities, often community-wide service projects, are more diffuse. The League of Conservation Voters creates very diffuse benefits through a focus on broader civic engagement.

Of course, not all actions within an institution can be classified as civic or political engagement. Country clubs are a prime example, since most, if not all, activities do not produce a public good. Labor unions and religious institutions also engage in activities that include, but are not limited to, civic and political engagement. For example, religious institutions have a spiritual aspect that falls outside of the realm of engagement.

Despite declining membership, labor unions continue to play an

important role in promoting and facilitating civic and political engagement at the institutional level. They are organized in a way to encourage public service, set up volunteer opportunities, and promote political participation. This can take the form of nonpartisan encouragement to vote or partisan influence to vote for a particular candidate or issue position. When unions engage in partisan activity, they tend to align with the Democratic Party. Critics of unions assert that they are too focused on group interests, sometimes at the expense of the individual.

Religious group membership is perhaps the most common group affiliation in the U.S. Religious groups often have nonprofit legal status granted by the state. Similar to other types of membership groups, religious groups foster a sense of group belonging and establish norms that dictate compulsory behaviors associated with group membership. The act of bringing people together produces a good that may or may not exclusively benefit members, depending on the intent of the institution and whether or not the good is excludable. By internalizing the benefits of membership, religious institutions, like other membership groups, can prevent free riders and encourage membership. On the other hand, religious institutions may decide or be mandated to encourage civic and political engagement through activities with diffuse benefits. These benefits, real or perceived, may accrue to the religious institution's members or society at large.

Finally, family is another important social institution and refers to a group of people that share a genetic, emotional, and/or co-habitational relationship. Family units may, but do not necessarily, serve a reproductive function through child bearing and rearing. Similar to unions and religious groups, the institution of family can interact with civil society to influence an individual's civic and political engagement activities.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> By definition, public goods are subject to free riders. The free rider problem, which occurs when individuals lack the incentive to pay for their consumption of a good, has two components. First, free riders reap the benefits of a public good but do not contribute anything in return. Second, free riding can create a spillover effect that discourages others from paying for their consumption, thereby creating more free riders. If membership is excludable, a group can avoid the problem of free riders and their spillover effects.
- <sup>ii</sup> See for example, Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965.
- <sup>iii</sup> Nonprofit organizations are economic units legally defined and recognized by the state. Often times, nonprofit legal status allows an organization to accept tax-deductible contributions from private and public institutions. Nonprofits exist to fulfill a mission in the private or public interest and, in contrast to private institutions, nonprofits do not earn accounting profit.

## Appendix B:

# LEAP Survey of Community Stakeholders

To examine how engagement plays out among Asian Americans, LEAP conducted a survey of staff and leadership within Asian American community organizations. Participants in LEAP's Civic Engagement Conferences, as well as recipients of the LEAP e-newsletter, were asked to provide their opinions of issues related to civic and political engagement, the level of participation among Asian Americans, barriers facing this population, and future trends. Although the respondents are not a random representative sample of typical Asian Americans, their responses nonetheless provide insight into what Asian Americans think about civic and political engagement.

Like the literature on the topic, individuals have broad and wide ranging definitions of civic engagement. Stakeholders most frequently defined civic engagement through community involvement in settings such as schools, community organizations, churches, and government institutions. Some specifically mentioned involvement on a voluntary basis; others were vague about whether the involvement should be voluntary or could be paid. Stakeholders often distinguished between individual and institutional engagement. Individual engagement includes knowledge gathering activities, such as discussing politics and following current events, as well as action oriented activities, such as voting, volunteering, serving on a jury, or running for public office. Institutional engagement occurs when organizations engage with government, politicians, or other decision makers on behalf of constituents or interests.

The survey responses did not provide much insight into unique forms of engagement in the Asian American community or unique organizational or institutional avenues in which engagement takes place. Although stakeholders were not detailed in their answers, we believe that engagement can have a cultural dimension that makes it unique. Engagement can also take the form of a unique organizational or collective effort. Within the Asian American community,

unique organizational engagement happens through independent organizations that serve the Asian American community. Other types of organizational engagement involve Asian American branches of mainstream organizations, such as the Bar Association or the Chamber of Commerce.

Stakeholders had more to say about general barriers to civic engagement. Cultural barriers were cited most often and survey answers leaned toward a narrower discussion of barriers to political engagement rather than a broader discussion of barriers to civic engagement. Apathy, which can take the form of passive indifference or active refusal to take action, was often cited as an initial barrier. The latter is most evident among those who distrust the U.S. political system. A lack of access to information about the political process and current events was also frequently mentioned as a significant barrier to engagement. This can result from a lack of available materials in a particular language, lack of access to the Internet or other sources of information, and lack of educational outreach by community organizations.

Some barriers suggested by stakeholders are particular to different populations. For low-income individuals struggling to make ends meet, political and civic engagement is often perceived as a luxury that takes resources, such as time and money, away from basic needs and responsibilities. For these individuals, the opportunity cost is too high to warrant their engagement. Elderly and disabled populations lack mobility to participate in activities that require traveling. People of color and immigrants can be dissuaded from political and civic engagement activities after encountering racism in the process, not to mention the other forms of prejudice that can deter participation among a variety of populations.

Within communities and organizations, a lack of intergenerational mentors and role models can limit engagement opportunities for new individuals or groups. Even if role models do exist and knowledge sharing takes place, established or entrenched leadership—in government, on boards, and among high-level staff—can also limit leadership opportunities and engagement, particularly among the young, immigrants, and others that are not currently represented in leadership roles.

When asked about specific barriers to engagement in the Asian American community, stakeholders discussed some of the barriers already mentioned, but in a more nuanced way. One person pointed out that for Asian immigrants or those with close ties to their country of origin, the corrupt political system of their home country may lead to a distrust of politics that dissuades engagement in U.S. politics. As another person put it, "I believe that culturally among Asians there's a certain amount of cynicism about how much the political system can do for them." And while people of color collectively face significant barriers to political and civic engagement due to individual prejudices and institutional racism, yet another person felt that Asian Americans sometimes experience more subtle forms of racism than Blacks and Latinos.

Language was the most frequently cited barrier to engagement in the Asian American community. Language barriers between the Asian American community and other communities, as well as language barriers between different Asian American ethnic groups, create significant challenges for engagement by and within the Asian American community. A lack of media coverage about important political and policy issues, especially within the Asian American ethnic media, was also cited as a huge barrier to accessing knowledge to inform political and civic participation. Stakeholders acknowledged that the complexity of the Asian American community can also make it difficult to find a unifying message that engages and mobilizes the entire community. Diversity can lead to divisions between and within Asian American ethnic groups which undermine not only political and civic engagement activities but also the very notion of a unified Asian American community.

Because Asian Americans sometimes experience, as one stakeholder put it, a "reluctance to speak up/speak out based on cultural norms," political and civic engagement activities are sometimes incompatible with the cultural norms of a particular Asian American ethnic community. Spending time and money on such activities may conflict with cultural values or expectations to share those resources with family. The insular nature of some Asian American ethnic communities may also dissuade civic engagement activities that reach outside one's own community.

Looking forward, stakeholders were asked about specific ways to facilitate greater civic and political engagement in the Asian American community. At an individual level, they felt that civic engagement within the community could be facilitated through improved media education via television, newspapers, radio, and the Internet. Opportunities for skills building and leadership development, perhaps through increased participation on volunteer boards, would also heighten civic engagement. Additionally, individuals could promote engagement by helping to leverage financial resources for nonprofit organizations and political campaigns and parties. Boosting voter registration and participation among Asian Americans is an obvious way to increase political engagement, and stakeholders felt it would likely be associated with more Asian Americans running for, and getting elected to, public office.

Ultimately, stakeholders felt that civic engagement would increase if the Asian American community mobilized around a common platform seeking visible, sustainable outcomes. Such a platform should be built around an understanding of a common problem and a common solution and would be, according to one stakeholder, “so compelling that it overcomes cultural norms not conducive to civic engagement” in the Asian American community. Yet, as another said, the challenge is “getting folks to find value in shared heritage and culture.”

When discussing best practices in Asian American civic engagement, stakeholders did not distinguish between organizations that simply offer opportunities to volunteer and organizations that actively promote civic engagement, such as referral organizations for volunteers to connect with organizations that need assistance or groups that promote political engagement through voter registration. While there are a number of mainstream groups that fulfill this function, it is unclear whether an Asian American organization has sprung up to fill this void in the community.

Stakeholders also touched on arenas for engagement outside of community organizations. College campus-based organizations, while typically more social in nature than community-based groups, were also mentioned as an important site for Asian American civic engagement. Business community activities through the Asian Amer-

ican Chamber of Commerce and Asian American media programs were also mentioned. Conferences and summits were discussed as another important venue for networking and information gathering to increase civic engagement in the community.

Most stakeholders were hopeful that political and civic engagement would increase in the Asian American community over the next 10-20 years. They acknowledged that engagement would depend on shifting demographics, such as age and immigration. They hoped to see more Asian Americans running for elected office, more Asian Americans donating to political campaigns, and higher Asian American voter turnouts. To achieve this, they felt it is not only important to build leadership capacity and raise awareness within the Asian American community, but that it is also essential for the community to strengthen cross-cultural collaborations and alliances with other communities.

## Appendix C:

# Asian American Population Projection by Nativity

The projection of the Asian American population in 2030 by nativity starts with the two sets of projections produced by the Census Bureau. The first dataset, the 1996 National Population Projections, uses the cohort-component model to generate U.S. population projections by age, sex, race, and Hispanic-origin for the period of 1995-2050. These projections are based on a 1994 population estimates using 1990 Census data, and updated with observed fertility and survival rates, and net immigration statistics. The Bureau used three different sets of assumptions about fertility, mortality, and net immigration to produce a low, middle, and high series of population projections. Net immigration incorporated projected changes in legal, refugee, and undocumented immigration. The projections are created for 5 race groups: American Indians, Eskimo, and Aleuts; Asian and Pacific Islanders; Blacks; Hispanics; and Whites.

The second dataset from the Bureau of the Census is the 2004 Interim Projections released by the U.S. Census Bureau in March of that year. Similar to the previous dataset, the cohort-component method is used to produce national projections by age, sex, race, and Hispanic-origin for the period 1999-2100. Compared to the demographic assumptions used in the 1996 National Population Projections, the Bureau slightly reduced fertility, left mortality unchanged, and slightly elevated immigration rates. The projections were developed for the following race groups: non-Hispanic White alone, Hispanic White alone, Black alone, Asian alone, and all other groups (American Indians and Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, and everyone who reported more than one of the major race categories on the 2000 Census.)

According to the Census Bureau's 2004 projections, there will be 22.6 million Asian Americans (not including Pacific Islanders) in 2030. This is only slightly lower than the earlier 1996 projection of 24.8 mil-

lion for APIs in 2030. However, some care needs to be taken in comparing the two numbers because of a change in definition. The two sets of projections are based different racial classifications. Starting in 2000, individuals could declare one or more races, while earlier decades allowed for only one response. Moreover, 2004 projections do not contain a breakdown by nativity.

To produce a 2030 projection of Asian Americans by nativity, the following approach was used. One, the 1996 National Population Projections for APIs were decomposed into separate projections for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. This was done first by making projections of PIs, and then subtracting the PI projections from the API projections. Two, the Asian American projections are refined by breaking them down by nativity. The major assumption is that Asian Americans comprise most of the projected immigration assigned by the Bureau to its API projections. Three, the projections of immigrants are further refined by decomposing their counts into those who arrived during the decade between projections and those who survived from the start of the decade to the end of the decade. Four, the information from the previous steps are used to estimate the nativity composition of the Asian Americans in the 2004 Interim Projections.

The figure below summarizes the final Asian American projections by nativity based on the mid-range series. In 2000, an estimated 6.9 million APIs were foreign born, comprising about 60.9% of the total estimated API population. Most adult APIs were foreign-born (78.3%). Using the mid-projections for 2030, an estimated 13.0 million APIs will be foreign born, comprising about 52.2% of the total estimated API population. Most adult APIs will continue to be foreign-born (66.4%).<sup>1</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Using the low-projections for 2030, an estimated 7.5 million APIs will be foreign born, comprising about 44.9% of the total estimated API population. However, foreign-born will be a majority of adult APIs (56.3%).



Part I  
Levels  
of  
Participation



# Political Participation and Civic Voluntarism

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Political participation and involvement in community organizations are the hallmark features of civic engagement in a democratic society. Public involvement plays an important role in ensuring that political institutions and leaders take the voices of residents into account when making decisions affecting their communities. While scholars have concerned themselves about overall declines in political and civic participation (Putnam 2000), it is also important to pay attention to inequalities in participation across different racial and ethnic groups. This is especially true for political outcomes, where absolute levels of participation are less important than relative differences in participation, with the latter playing a significant role in determining which groups have more say than others in the formulation and implementation of policy decisions. However, group differences are also relevant for civic participation: not only do civic inequalities lead to political inequalities, but the ability of communities to provide public goods and services also depends critically on the civic infrastructures already in place. Thus, it is important to pay attention to group inequalities in civic participation and political participation because they pose significant challenges to the vitality of American democracy.

This chapter examines the extent to which Asian Americans are equal to other racial and ethnic groups when it comes to participating in community organizations and in the political process — with activities ranging from voting to making campaign contributions, writing to elected officials, and attending local government meetings. We make these comparisons using national data where available, and also using state-level data from California, the state that accounts for

about 35% of the Asian American population in the United States and serves as a harbinger of the country's anticipated "majority-minority" status by mid-century. The general finding is that participation rates among Asian Americans are low compared to other racial and ethnic groups. We also show that even when Asian Americans do indeed participate, such as in making campaign contributions or creating vibrant community organizations, they tend to remain more invisible and less influential in the eyes of government officials.

We also examine the extent to which participation may be affected by such factors as age, length of residence in the United States, and residence in ethnically concentrated areas. Given the changes in all of these factors over time — with longer-term immigrant residents in the United States, the growth and aging of the immigrant second generation, and the growth of Asian American populations in various metropolitan areas — we project the likely trajectories of Asian American participation in the coming decades. Finally, we offer suggestions on ways to address the major challenges related to the future of Asian American civic and political participation: increasing participation rates, making community organizations more viable, and getting government officials to pay more attention to Asian American community organizations.

## **Political Participation**

Many scholars who study political behavior define civic engagement as including activities that are explicitly political — such as voting, attending public hearings, and writing to elected officials — as well as activities related to voluntary participation in sectors of society that are outside the realm of politics, the family, and the market (Putnam 2000; Verba et al. 1995). For a small proportion of individuals, engaging in civic voluntarism serves as a substitute for political participation; this is especially so for youth who tend to favor community service over political participation as a more direct means of improving their communities (Longo and Meyer 2006). For most others, however, civic participation is intimately connected to political participation (Verba et al. 1995). Participation in community organizations connects people to politics in several ways: it helps individ-

uals develop *skills* that are relevant to politics (such as writing to public officials and mobilizing groups towards a common cause); it provides them with greater *knowledge* of politics by facilitating interactions among people who share common interests and concerns; and it provides them with *opportunities to be mobilized* by political campaigns that look to organizations as sources of votes, campaign contributions, and campaign volunteers (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Thus, for several reasons, understanding the role of participation in civic engagement requires us to pay attention to involvement in activities that are explicitly political as well as those that are commonly classified under “social capital” or “civic voluntarism.”

*Voting:* Voting is the most common type of political activity in the United States today and is arguably one of the hallmark features of participation in a democratic society. Voting in U.S. elections has consistently been lower than in other advanced industrialized countries, although in the past two decades, gaps in voter turnout between the United States and other countries have diminished considerably. Still, in 2006, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimated that turnout in the United States was about 20 percent below that of Germany and France, and 55 percent below Italy’s (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2007).

Voter participation in the United States is notable not only for its generally lower levels of turnout, but also for its significant levels of participation inequality across racial and ethnic groups and along socioeconomic lines. For instance, in the 2004 Presidential election, the voting rate among Asian American adults (37%) was comparable to voting among Latino adults (32%), and considerably lower than the rates for African Americans (68%) and Whites (73%). As Table 1 indicates, varying rates of citizenship among adults accounts for a large portion of this gap, as only two-thirds of Asian American adults were citizens while 95% of Black adults and 98% of White adults were citizens in November 2004. Still, even after taking citizenship gaps into account, voting among Asian American adult citizens is about 40 percent (or 20 percentage points) lower than voting among eligible African Americans and Whites.

**Table 1. Citizenship and Voting Rates in November 2004**

	Voting Rates Among Adult Residents	Citizenship Rates Among Adult Residents	Voting Rates Among Adult Citizens
<b>Asian American and Pacific Islander</b>	37	68	55
White	73	98	74
Black	68	95	72
Latino	32	59	55

Source: Current Population Survey Voter Supplement, 2004

There are several reasons why voting among Asian American citizens lags behind Whites and Blacks. Length of stay in the United States plays an important role, as recent immigrants are less likely to hold strong party identification and be mobilized by political campaigns (Ramakrishnan 2005; Wong 2006; Hajnal and Lee 2006). A similar story holds true for the immigrant generation, and the relatively high proportion of first-generation immigrants among the Asian American electorate helps account for the gaps in participation with Whites and Blacks. Participation among Asian Americans also increases with age and indicators of socioeconomic status such as educational attainment, income, and homeownership (Lien et al. 2004; Ramakrishnan 2005). Still, even after controlling for all of these factors, Asian Americans lag considerably behind African Americans and Whites in terms of voting participation.

*Campaign Contributions:* Giving money to political causes may affect policy outcomes directly by improving the likelihood of victory or defeat for ballot propositions. Money can also influence policy outcomes indirectly, both by shaping access to elected officials and by affecting the election outcomes of candidates who are friendly to a group’s issues.<sup>1</sup> The question naturally arises as to whether members of certain racial or ethnic groups have greater access or influence than others when it comes to campaign finance. Results from surveys in California indicate that there are indeed significant gaps in

the rate of political contributions across racial and ethnic groups (Ramakrishnan and Baldassare 2004). Just as in the case of voting and signing petitions, Whites are the most likely to give to political causes and candidates (26%), followed by Blacks (20%), Asian Americans (17%), and Latinos (10%). These gaps in giving remain even after controlling for age and socioeconomic status. There is no national survey that compares Asian American campaign contribution activity with those of Whites, Blacks, and Latinos. Evidence from the Pilot National Asian American Political Survey (Lien 2004) indicates that contribution rates among Asian Americans (12%) are similar to those found in the general population in surveys such as the American National Election Studies (Mutz and Sapiro 2000). However, variation in sampling design and questionnaires limit the comparability of the data, and so we cannot say for certain whether or not Asian Americans lag behind Whites in their giving to political causes and candidates.

*Signing Petitions:* In regions with state and local ballot propositions, participation in petition signatures is another important type of political participation. Gathering petition signatures is important to civic engagement because it helps set the agenda on what questions appear on state and local ballots and, just as importantly, what questions or issues do not appear. As past studies have indicated, there are sizable differences in the rate of petition signing across racial groups (Ramakrishnan and Baldassare 2004). For instance, in California, Whites have the highest rates of participation (44%), followed by Blacks (39%), Asian Americans (38%), and Latinos (29%). National-level data show an even greater gap in petition signing among Asian Americans when compared to Whites. For instance, the Social Capital Benchmark Survey (Putnam 2000) shows that Asian Americans are about one-third less likely to sign petitions as Whites (29% versus 42%, respectively). Also, just as in the case of voting, these differences are not solely the result of differences in age and socioeconomic status. Controlling for these factors still leaves intact the lower rates of participation among Asian American citizens when compared to Whites.

To the extent that Asian Americans share the same policy prior-

ities as other groups, this difference in petition gathering may not lead to any racial differences in policy influence. However, petition gatherers may be less likely to target Asian Americans precisely because they do not share the same policy priorities as Whites. Also, even if Asian Americans are asked to sign petitions, they may be more likely than Whites to feel that such petitions are tangential to their concerns or run contrary to their interests. Thus, to the extent that Asian Americans have policy priorities and preferences that are significantly different from Whites, their lower rates of participation in signing petitions represents less power in setting the legislative agenda of ballot propositions.

*Attending Public Meetings:* The ability to influence politics and policy does not stop on Election Day. Indeed, much of the task of governance occurs between elections, and involves public officials who have never run for elected office. The types of issues brought up in public hearings and meetings are usually local in nature, relating either to schools, land use, or the provision of government services. Through public hearings and meetings, citizens and non-citizens alike have the opportunity to influence the policy process. However, participation rates in public meetings are generally much lower than for voting because they require greater time commitments to participate and to get informed about particular issues, meeting times, and locations. Participation in public hearings also tends to be more challenging for first-generation immigrants who are more likely to face linguistic and cultural barriers to speak up in front of government officials (Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2006). The only data that allow for comparisons in public meeting participation between Asian Americans and other groups comes from the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC). There, the data indicate that participation gaps with Whites are small relative to the other gaps we have seen so far: 36% of Asian Americans and 38% of Whites have participated in meetings on local issues, and the differences between the two are not statistically significant. Latinos and African Americans have slightly higher rates of participation (42% and 43%, respectively), but these differences lose their statistical significance when controlling for various demographic factors.

*Writing to Elected Officials:* In addition to responding to those who attend government meetings and public hearings, elected officials also pay considerable attention to letters from constituents. Constituents send emails and letters to express opinions on policy (Lee 2002), but also often request assistance with navigating federal, state, and local bureaucracies. As other studies have shown (Verba et al. 1995), requests for assistance are most common among those writing their local and state representatives, while expressions of policy opinion are more common among those writing elected officials at the national level. Both these types of requests have implications for influence over public policy. If some groups are more likely than others to write their elected officials for assistance, they are also likely to enjoy a greater ability to navigate government bureaucracy in ways that benefit their interests. Group disparities in writing letters on policy issues also have significant implications for the relative ability of each group to influence legislative agendas and agency enforcement.

Data from the PPIC statewide surveys in California indicate that Asian Americans are considerably less likely than White residents to write to elected officials (24% versus 35%, respectively). This gap remains significant even after controlling for age, socioeconomic status, and immigrant generation. Finally, gaps in participation are also evident at the national level when comparing participation rates in the Pilot National Asian American Political Survey (12%) and the American National Election Study (25%).

*Attending Political Rallies:* Attending rallies and speeches have a less obvious effect on public policy than many of the other activities considered so far because they play only a minor role in influencing the election outcomes and setting the legislative agenda. Still, rallies provide an avenue for participation and political expression for those who lack the monetary resources to contribute to campaigns or the political knowledge necessary to participate in local meetings. Indeed, attendance at local rallies is also open to those who are not citizens of the United States, a fact that could influence the relative level of participation among Asian Americans. However, research from California and elsewhere suggests that Asian Americans lag behind

other groups in this measure of political participation (Ramakrishnan and Baldassare 2004; Putnam 2000). Regardless of whether one is looking at citizens or noncitizens, Asian Americans are considerably less likely to participate in political rallies than Whites or Blacks, a finding that holds true even after controlling for various demographic factors.

## Civic Participation

While much is known about the relationship between race, immigration and political participation in the United States, far less is known about the “other half” of civic engagement — those activities relating to volunteerism and civic association. The study of group differences in volunteerism and civic association (hereafter *civic voluntarism*) is important to the study of politics for several reasons. First, civic associations often serve as important conduits to more formal means of political participation, either through the acquisition of relevant political knowledge and skills (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), or through attempts by political actors to mobilize those who are already involved in the civic life of their communities (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Thus, while the group differences in writing elected officials and contributing money to politics may point to inequalities in political access in the contemporary period, group disparities in civic voluntarism may lead to continued inequalities in political participation over the long term. Finally, civic voluntarism also has significant implications for public policy since community organizations are important actors in the provision of public goods. With state and local governments in various regions experiencing severe budget shortfalls, many expect civic associations, religious groups and charities to provide public goods in the absence of government spending (Marimow 2003).

The Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement allows us to compare participation rates of Asian Americans to other racial and ethnic groups. As shown in Table 2, there are significant differences across racial groups in civic volunteerism. The table presents results for the most basic measures of volunteerism — rates of par-

ticipation in the previous 12 months, the number of organizations in which volunteers participate, and the intensity of participation as measured by the number of hours spent volunteering.

**Table 2. Volunteerism among adult residents, by race/ethnicity**

	<i>Overall</i>	<i>Asian American</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Latino</i>
Volunteered in organization (%)	27	<b>18</b>	31	19	14
<i>Among Volunteers</i>					
Number of organizations	1.5	<b>1.3</b>	1.5	1.4	1.3
Recruited to participate (%)	49	<b>43</b>	50	46	46
Hours volunteered per year	139	<b>107</b>	138	168	127

Source: Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement, September 2006

When we consider the most basic metric of volunteerism — whether or not the respondent has done any volunteer work in the previous 12 months — Whites have the highest levels of participation. Nearly one-third of White respondents report having volunteered, while only about one in six Asian Americans had done so, a level comparable to the participation rate among African Americans and slightly higher than the participation rate among Latinos. The gap in volunteerism between Whites and non-Whites is also apparent in the number of organizations in which volunteers participate. Whites who volunteer participate in an average of 1.5 organizations, while the corresponding figures are 1.4 for Blacks, 1.3 for Asian Americans, and 1.3 for Latinos. Asian Americans are also less likely than Whites to be recruited to volunteer for an organization. Among those who volunteer, 43% of Asian Americans were asked to do so or followed the lead of a friend or family member. By contrast, 46% of Blacks and Latinos and 50% of Whites were recruited into volunteerism. Finally, the intensity of participation as measured by hours volunteered is lower for Asian Americans than for any other racial or ethnic group in the United States. It should be noted that these same group differences in voluntarism are also present in a state such as California, where the Asian American population is much larger and more established (Ramakrishnan and Baldassare 2004). This holds

true, not only for overall participation rates, but also for the intensity of participation among volunteers. Thus, the growth of the Asian American population, in and of itself, is unlikely to lead to any large-scale changes in civic voluntarism.

Much of the differences in civic voluntarism between Asian Americans and Latinos, on the one hand and Whites and Blacks on the other, can be attributed to varying mixes of immigrant generations. Even more so than in the case for voting, we find strong differences in civic voluntarism across immigrant generations. As we see in Table 3, the likelihood of volunteering increases by over 70% from the first immigrant generation to the third generation and beyond. Indeed, by the third generation there are no significant differences in the participation rates of Asian Americans and Whites (32%). Thus, while Asian Americans still lag considerably behind Whites in terms of voting participation, the same is not true for civic voluntarism.

**Table 3. Differences in Volunteerism Within the Asian American Population**

<i>By Immigrant Generation</i>	
First-generation	17
Second-generation	20
Third generation and higher	29
<i>By National Origin*</i>	
Japanese	25
Korean	22
South Asian	22
Filipino	21
Chinese	17
Vietnamese	14
Hmong	13

\* Note: National origins are calculations based on the nativity of parents, and are therefore unavailable beyond the second generation. The Current Population Survey does not include information on national origin for groups other than Latinos.

Source: Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement, September 2006

There are also important differences in participation rates by national origin, which are in line with expectations regarding the positive relationship between socioeconomic status and civic participation. Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, and South Asians, who are among the most well-to-do Asian Americans, have the highest rates of civic voluntarism among first- and second-generation immigrants. On the other hand, Hmong and Vietnamese Americans, who tend to fare less well in terms of educational attainment and income, have lower levels of civic voluntarism. Controlling for education and income wipes out any national-origin differences in civic participation among Asian Americans. Still, looking across racial and ethnic groups, introducing controls for education and income leaves Asian Americans less likely to participate than Whites, suggesting that other factors related to civic outreach by existing organizations and the attitudes and priorities of Asian American residents may also play a significant role (Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2006).

Finally, in our understanding of civic voluntarism, it is important to examine not only *whether* people engage in voluntary activities, but also the types of organizations in which volunteers are involved. As indicated in Table 4, Asian Americans who volunteer are most likely to do so for religious organizations (39%). This emphasis on religious organizations is even stronger for Asian American volunteers than for Whites and African Americans, suggesting that studies of Asian American civic participation need to pay far greater attention to religious institutions (Wong et al. 2008). Next, Asian American volunteers focus their energies on organizations catering to children and youth, followed by social and community service organizations and health organizations. These differences are in line with overall patterns of volunteerism in American society.

**Table 4. Differences in Volunteerism By Organization Type**

	<i>Overall</i>	<i>Asian American</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Latino</i>
Organization types (main group)					
- Religious	35%	<b>39%</b>	34%	35%	43%
- Children / Youth	20	<b>20</b>	19	28	20
- Social / community service	13	<b>10</b>	13	11	12
- Health	8	<b>10</b>	8	6	5
- Adult education	4	<b>4</b>	4	5	4

Source: Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement, September 2006

So, to summarize: The relationships between race, immigrant incorporation and voting participation in the United States are by now well established. Studies based on state- and national-level datasets have shown that Asian Americans are generally less likely to vote in elections than Whites and African Americans. Furthermore, factors related to immigration such as nativity, length of stay in the United States, English language ability, and country of origin characteristics all bear a significant relationship to voting participation (DeSipio 1996; Tam Cho 1999; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001). These gaps in voting also extend to other types of political activities such as writing to elected officials and attending public hearings, as well as to civic activities. Thus, instead of finding compensation for the lack of Asian American political voice at the ballot box with participation in other civic and political activities, we find a worrisome pattern of compounding inequalities in participation, with Asian Americans at a distinct disadvantage.

### **Projecting Future Patterns**

While the present-day snapshot reveals many significant gaps in participation between Asian Americans and other racial/ethnic groups in the United States, many of the anticipated changes in the Asian American population over the next 30 years should help to improve Asian American civic and political participation. These changes include the continued aging of the Asian American population and the growing proportion of native-born residents and long-

changes include the continued aging of the Asian American population and the growing proportion of native-born residents and long-term immigrant residents. Given the relevance of these factors to future trends in participation, it is worth considering *why* these factors have an important bearing on political and civic participation.

Previous studies have consistently shown that age bears a significant relationship to political participation, with low levels of involvement among young adults for virtually every type of political activity — from voting and signing petitions to writing elected officials and working on political campaigns (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba et al. 1995). The reasons for low participation among the young are also relatively well established. Apart from the fact that they are less likely to be homeowners or have children and that they are more residentially mobile than older adults, the young are less likely to participate because they have had fewer experiences that produce the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in politics.

In the study of immigrant populations, length of stay in the United States is another important factor in predicting political and civic participation. Duration of stay in the United States can lead to higher participation for several reasons. First, as immigrants live longer in the country, they are more likely to come in contact with mainstream political and civic institutions that are beyond the confines of their ethnic enclaves and institutions (Gordon 1964). They are also more likely to acquire politically relevant information, strengthen their party attachments and gain experience in dealing with government agencies (Cain et al. 1991; Wong 2000; Jones-Correa 1998). Finally, just as longer stay in a given neighborhood gives citizens a greater sense of having a stake in local and state politics, longer stay in the United States can give immigrants a stronger stake in national politics. It is possible that greater experience with the political system can also lead to lower participation as immigrants experience varying levels of distrust or frustration with government agencies. However, most of the empirical evidence for Asian Americans indicates otherwise — greater exposure to the political system from staying longer in the United States has meant a higher likelihood of political participation. Longer stay in the United States has also meant greater participation in community organizations by

Asian Americans (Ramakrishnan 2006).

The relationships between the immigrant generation and political participation are a little more complicated. For Whites, there is no straight-line generational pattern in voting participation as there is for other types of social and economic outcomes such as homeownership and income. Instead, studies have found a pattern of “second-generation advantage,” where participation increases into the second generation but declines thereafter (Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001). Among Latinos, voter turnout is relatively flat across immigrant generations. For Asian Americans, however, voting increases from the first generation to higher immigrant generations — suggesting that assimilation-related factors play a significant role, but that race-related barriers such as ascribed foreigner status continue to serve as a drag on participation among second- and third-generation Asian immigrants (Kim 1999). This linear increase in participation can also be found for other political activities such as signing petitions and attending public hearings, and also for civic voluntarism.

In the coming decades, the Asian American population is projected to get older. The proportion of second-generation immigrants is expected to increase, even though first-generation immigrants would still constitute the majority of the adult population. Finally, given the continuous rise in immigration since 1965, the average length-of-stay among first-generation Asian immigrants is also expected to increase. All of these factors should help increase the level of Asian American participation in the years ahead.

There are, however, some important caveats. First, other racial and ethnic groups in the United States are also expected to get older, with non-Hispanic Whites constituting the vast majority of residents over age 65. Thus, even with increases in their absolute levels of participation, the Asian American population is still likely to lag behind Whites in political participation. Since participation in civic voluntarism tends to drop off among seniors, this may be less of an issue for civic voluntarism. Also, the growing size of the Asian American population may have some unforeseen effects on political and civic participation. If California is a harbinger of Asian American civic engagement in the rest of the United States, significant participation gaps would continue to remain, even with increases in the number of

Asian American elected officials in Congress and in local offices.

So, what can be done to reduce the gaps in participation between Asian Americans and other groups? Given the high proportion of first-generation immigrants in the Asian American population, it is advisable for organizations providing training for the naturalization exam to also provide training in skills that are necessary for effective political participation. For example, in the case of writing a letter to a local official, relevant skills include finding out who to send a letter to, knowing how to compose a formal letter, and following up on the letter by attending local meetings. For many immigrants, limited English proficiency may constrain their ability to engage in such activities. In cities where there are large proportions of Asian immigrants with limited English proficiency, city governments and community organizations can encourage participation by providing translation and other forms of language assistance.

In addition to providing relevant skills, recruitment and mobilization are also necessary prerequisites to increasing the level of civic engagement among Asian Americans. Many studies have shown that parties and campaigns conduct only limited outreach to Asian American communities. Our research indicates that this lack of outreach also applies to mainstream civic organizations. Immigrants are more likely than the native-born to say that they lack sufficient information about volunteering opportunities. Also, among those who do volunteer, immigrants are less likely to say that they were recruited to participate by someone in the organization. These results therefore indicate the need for more active recruitment efforts, not just by political parties and campaigns but also by community organizations seeking to increase the civic participation of residents.

There are other solutions that extend beyond efforts targeted at individuals. For instance, there is a new body of research which shows that, even when Asian Americans create or participate in community organizations, those ethnic associations receive far less attention from public officials than more established organizations serving White residents (Wong 2006; Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2006; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008). Another issue involves redistricting: it is challenging to draw districts with sizable Asian American voters because of their smaller numbers and greater resi-

dential dispersion than African Americans and Latinos (Lien 2001). Still, it is possible to draw districts for state and local government offices with significant Asian American populations in several metropolitan areas such as New York City, Central New Jersey, northern Virginia, Chicago, Houston, and the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Alameda in California (Lai and Geron 2008).

With the necessary skills, recruitment, and institutional support, Asian Americans can finally hope to bridge the gaps in participation with members of other racial and ethnic groups for activities that extend well beyond the ballot box.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Past studies have shown that, although individual political donations rarely have direct effects on legislative votes, institutional actors who give money to legislators do have a greater degree of access to the shaping of legislation (Hansen, 1991).

# Political and Civic Engagement of Immigrants<sup>i</sup>

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This essay examines the current status, trend, and future prospect of Asian American civic engagement through the lens of political participation. It pays particular attention to the role of nativity and assesses the extent to which immigrants or foreign-born persons of Asian descent, as compared to their U.S.-born counterparts, are able to participate in the formal political process as citizens and voters as well as in other types of political and civic activities.<sup>ii</sup> Because the Asian American voting-age population is dominated by the foreign-born, a main purpose of this essay is to empirically appraise whether being foreign-born is a barrier to or an asset in political participation. Another issue addressed here is whether if and how much immigrants' engagement with the home country of origin affects their political participation in the United States. Supporting the central thesis that Asian American immigrants are vital to the community's growth and political empowerment, I find that the large presence of the foreign-born is not a liability but an asset to the community's political and civic engagement.

Five major findings are worth highlighting: First, foreign-born Asian Americans not only show strong inclination to become politically incorporated through the acquisition of U.S. citizenship but would become registered and vote once eligible—often at equal or higher rates than their U.S.-born counterparts. Second, Asian immigrants' relative disadvantages in participation resources due to language and socialization barriers compared to the U.S.-born may be compensated by their concern over immigrant minority status in the hostland and transnational ties to the ethnic homeland. Third, the rapid and consistent waves of new migration from Asia and Asian immigrants' greater aptitude for political incorporation have helped put Asian Americans on top of the growth chart in terms of the share

and size of the U.S. voting-age population, U.S. voting-age citizens, as well as the American electorate in elections since 1990. Fourth, first generation immigrants from Asia not only have become voters but also candidates and elected officials and have contributed more to the community's growth of electoral leadership than immigrants in any other major racial and ethnic groups. Fifth, in part driven by concerns over the issue of immigration and immigrant rights, Asian Americans are growing in their ability to be seen as a politically cohesive and consequential group of voters. In light of the centrality of the foreign-born sector, the essay ends with a speculation of the future for political empowerment in terms of challenges and needs to better engage Asian American immigrants in the American political process.

### **The Rise and Significance of the Foreign-Born Population**

A distinctive feature of the Asian American population, as compared to other major U.S. racial and ethnic groups at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is the rapid growth and predominance of the foreign-born. From 1970 to 2000, U.S. Census data show that the foreign-born among Asians (including Pacific Islanders) increased twelve-fold or from half a million to over 4.5 million (Gibson and Lennon 1999; Schimdley 2001). By comparison, foreign-born Blacks grew nine-fold and foreign-born Latinos grew over seven-fold during the same period. Whereas the foreign-born sector in both the African American and Latino communities also experienced phenomenal growth, only foreign-born Asians were able to reverse their status in the community from a numerical minority to a majority in the post-1965 era. Foreign-born persons constituted 32% among Asians in 1960 and 36% in 1970; they were 59% of the Asian population in 1980 and 63% in 1990. In Census 2000, 8.2 million foreign-born residents in the United States identified themselves as from Asia, which accounts for a quarter (26%) of the nation's total foreign-born population (Malone, Baluja, Costanzo, and Davis 2003). At 69% of the total Asian (alone) population in 2000, as compared to 40% among Latinos, 20% among Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, 6% among Blacks, 5% among American Indians and Alaskan Natives, and 3% among non-Hispanic

Whites, foreign-born persons constitute a disproportionately large share of the Asian population than in any other major racial/ethnic groups in the United States (Lien 2006a, Table 8-1).<sup>iii</sup>

The observed trend of the rapid and consistent growth of the foreign-born sector in the Asian American population is estimated to continue in the near future, with projected growth to 13 million in size by 2030. Although just over half of the total estimated Asian (and Pacific Islander) population may be foreign-born in 2030, those who were born as non-U.S. citizens are estimated to remain a majority constituting two-thirds of the voting-age persons then. Immigration has been a key driver in the growth of the Asian American population in the post-1965 era. However, new migration from Asia is expected to play a declining role in Asian population change, while births in the United States to immigrants and their descendants is expected to play a growing role in the years to come. In fact, a new report released by the Pew Research Center projects that by 2050, fewer than half (47%) of the Asian (and Pacific Islander) population will be foreign-born, while one-third (35%) will be in the second generation (Passel and Cohn 2008). Because foreign-born and U.S.-born persons do not share the same political rights upon entering the United States, and children of immigrants may have different socialization experiences than their foreign-born parents, one key element in the following analysis is to compare the foreign-born to the U.S.-born in their patterns of voting and other participation in the electoral arena.

### **Voting Participation as a Three-Step Process**

The fascinating growth of the Asian American population in recent decades portends great potential to expand the community's electoral base. Nevertheless, as a majority-immigrant community, Asian Americans' ability to participate fully in the U.S. electoral process needs to be understood as a three-step process (Lien et al. 2001). In order to cast her ballot, an immigrant voter must engage in a three-step process of becoming naturalized, becoming registered to vote, and turning out (or mailing in the ballot before or) on Election Day. A set of barriers or costs is involved at each turn of the process. Becoming a citizen requires, among other things: a minimum period

of continuous residence and physical presence in the United States; an ability to read, write, and speak English; a knowledge and understanding of U.S. history and government; and the ability to pay a continuously rising application fee which jumped from \$400 to \$675 in July 2007.<sup>iv</sup> For those immigrants who have survived the naturalization process, their franchise can be wasted by their failure to become registered to vote, which is a procedure foreign to many Asian immigrants who came from systems with government initiated voter registration.<sup>v</sup> Registering to vote and casting the vote either in person or by mail require the acquisition and/or possession of information, time, skills, and other resources (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). This may be particularly onerous in a direct democracy state such as California where it is estimated that 40% of the Asian American population lies. When one adds to the equation unique factors such as language barriers, lack of familiarity with the U.S. system, social discrimination, and economic hardship for working-class immigrants, it comes as little surprise that Asian Americans have one of the lowest citizenship, voting registration, and turnout rates among voting-age persons. Nonetheless, because voting in the United States is a three-step process, it is both inaccurate and premature to draw conclusions from these unadjusted statistics about the political aptitude and behavior of Asian Americans.

### **Are Asian Americans Politically Apathetic?**

To assess whether Asian Americans are intrinsically apathetic, Table 1 reports the percentage distribution of nativity, citizenship, voter registration, and voting across adults of four major racial and ethnic groups in the November 2004 elections using the US Census Current Population Survey Voter Supplement file.<sup>vi</sup> Consistent with the population characteristics described earlier, Asians report the highest foreign-born rate among voting-age persons. Three in four Asians, compared to 57% among Latinos, but only one in 10 among Blacks and one in 20 among (non-Hispanic) Whites were foreign-born in 2004. This racial disparity in nativity is translated into racial gaps in citizenship, with Whites having the highest rate (98%), followed by Blacks (95%), and distantly by Asians (69%) and Latinos (59%).

Underscoring the central and critical role of immigrants in Asian American political empowerment, a lofty two-thirds of citizens among Asians acquired their citizenship through naturalization, a rate much higher than the 27% among Latinos and the single-digit figures among Blacks and Whites.

Despite having a much higher proportion of foreign-born persons in the adult population, Asians were able to score better than Latinos in overall citizenship rate because a much higher percentage of foreign-born Asians than Latinos had become naturalized. In fact, at 59%, foreign-born Asians and Whites are equal in their naturalization rates, which more than double that for Latinos. Studies looking at the naturalization rates from long-term perspectives consistently find immigrants from Asia to have become naturalized at an earlier time and at rates higher than immigrants from Mexico and many other parts of the world (Baker 2007; Simanski 2007). Asian immigrants' exceptional speed of naturalization may be attributed to their greater employment of early naturalization (Barkan 1983) which may, in turn, be related to a lack of proximity to the ethnic homeland, emigration driven more by political than economic motives, high educational and/or occupational background, and the ability of U.S. citizens to sponsor the immigration of family members (Portes and Mozo 1985; Jasso and Rosenzweig 1990). The acquisition of citizenship by Asian individuals may be most influenced by their length of stay in the U.S. In their analysis of the 1994 census data, Ong and Nakanishi (1996) also find that those who are younger, who are English proficient, and who have more education are more likely to become citizens as well. The effect of education diminishes after the level of bachelor's degree because immigrants with advanced degrees are more likely to be in the United States on temporary visas.

Because not all foreign-born persons at any given point in time are eligible to or able to successfully petition for naturalization, the racial disparities in nativity and citizenship directly impact the rates of voter registration where only slightly over one-third of voting-age Asians (and Latinos) were registered to vote—rates that are half of the national average and less than half of the rate among Whites. A similar pattern of racial gaps is found in the rates of voting among voting-age persons. Yet, when voting and registration rates are ex-

amined among eligible persons (citizens for registration and registered voters for voting), at least half of Asian American citizens (53%) reported registered and as high as 85% of registered Asians reported voting in 2004. Although there is still a deficit of 22 percentage points between the registration rate of Asian American citizens and their White counterparts, and Asians are still at the bottom in terms of registration rates among eligible persons, the voting rate of registered Asians exceeds that of registered Latinos and is only a few percentage points less than registered Blacks or Whites. This exercise shows that, for a majority-immigrant community such as Asian Americans, the major source of the apparent deficit in their voting participation lies in the first two steps of voting. Once these institutional barriers are crossed, there is no evidence that Asian Americans are apathetic in voting participation.

### **Is There a Foreign-Born Disadvantage in Voting and Registration?**

Are immigrants inherently disadvantaged by their foreign-born status in voting participation? Foreign-born persons do not possess U.S. citizenship unless through naturalization.<sup>vii</sup> Not all foreign-born persons are ready, able, or willing to petition for naturalization even if they meet the length of residency requirement. Although a recent research shows that as high as seven in ten non-citizens among Asians expected to become US citizens in the next few years (Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004), only a fraction of the voting-age persons who are foreign-born may be eligible to become registered voters at any given point in time. Nevertheless, being foreign-born may not necessarily link one to a lower likelihood to participate in U.S. elections. When voting and registration rates are calculated only among eligible persons, the results in Table 1 show that Asians who are foreign-born practically registered and voted at rates equal to their U.S.-born counterparts in 2004. Just over half of citizens of Asian descent, whether born in the United States or not, registered to vote, and more than eight in ten registered voters of Asian descent, foreign-born or not, voted in 2004 presidential elections. Thus, for Asians, the foreign-born generation possesses about the same level of aptitude to

ward voting and registration as the U.S.-born generations.

The myth of the foreign-born disadvantage also does hold true for other groups of immigrants. For naturalized Latino immigrants, they not only do not show a lower propensity to become registered than the U.S.-born, but the reverse is true regarding their turnout. Close to six in ten Latinos citizens, either by birth or by naturalization, registered to vote in 2004. Almost nine in ten Latino immigrants who registered to vote turned out to vote, a rate significantly higher than the 80% turnout rate among registered U.S.-born Latinos. The foreign-born sector of registered voters among Blacks and Whites is also found to have a higher voting rate than the native-born sector. Nevertheless, the native-born sector of these two groups report a higher voting registration rate among citizens than their foreign-born counterparts. This shows that the role of nativity in registration and voting may vary by race. Still, among the registered of all races, the foreign-born sector voted at rates at least on par with their native-born counterparts. For communities with a foreign-born majority, the status of being foreign-born also does not form a natural barrier to voter registration among voting-age citizens.

### **How Exceptional is the 2004 Election Cycle?**

Is the 2004 election cycle the exception or the norm in terms of the effect of the foreign-born or nativity factor on voting? We answer this question by looking at the longitudinal data provided every other year in the Current Population Survey which began asking questions about respondents' and their parents' country of birth in 1994. Table 2 reports the registration and voting rates among eligible persons by nativity for the four major races in the six election cycles between 1994 and 2004. Among Asian American citizens, the pattern of equal registration between the foreign- and the native- born did not become apparent until the 2002 election. Prior to that, foreign-born citizens registered at lower rates than the U.S.-born. Among Latinos, the disadvantage of foreign-born citizens in registration rates was apparent only in midterm elections, and nativity was a non-factor in registration rates in both 2000 and 2004 presidential elections. For Asians and Latinos, whenever U.S.-born persons had an edge in registration

rates, the gap was much smaller in presidential than in midterm elections. The heightened campaign stimuli in presidential elections might have helped close the registration gaps. Nevertheless, for both Black and White immigrants who became naturalized, being foreign-born was consistently linked to lower registration rates in all six elections. The small share of the foreign-born population and the lack of immigrant-targeted voter registration drives may explain the persistent foreign-born disadvantage. These observed trends in voter registration rates suggest that the 2004 figures are not a one-time phenomenon.

The lower half of Table 2 shows that nativity as a factor in political participation operated differently in influencing voting turnout than registration rates among eligible persons in the six election cycles. Once foreign-born persons crossed the citizenship and self-registration hurdles and became registered voters, they typically participated in elections at rates that were either equal to or higher than their native-born counterparts. This was particularly true among Latinos where the foreign-born consistently outvoted the U.S.-born. For Asians, the observed pattern of foreign-born advantage in voting turnout only applies to one election cycle (2000). In midterm elections, foreign-born Asians consistently voted less than U.S.-born Asians. Nevertheless, in presidential elections, foreign-born Asians did not vote much differently than their native-born counterparts. Thus, we may reject notions of absolute foreign-born disadvantage in voting turnout even among Asians. The longitudinal analysis also allows us to conclude that the 2004 findings on voting turnout is within the norm set in previous presidential elections.

### **How Different Are Asian Ethnic Groups in Their Participation Patterns?**

Although the Asian population in the United States has historically been lumped together as one by U.S. society, government, and politics, it is a population with multiple ethnic origins and a wide range of population size, growth rate, and income and education levels as well as immigration history and settlement patterns across ethnic groups (for a review, see Min 2006). Japanese Americans, for

instance, are the only Asian American group in which a majority was born in the United States since the 1940 Census. The unique nativity status of Japanese Americans is shown in Table 3, which reports ethnic group differences in voting participation among Asian American adults of the first two immigration generations in 2004. The Japanese have the lowest percentage share of the foreign-born, while Koreans have the highest. Correspondingly, the share of citizenship acquired through naturalization is also lowest among the Japanese and highest among Koreans. The Vietnamese report the highest citizenship rate, in large part because of the high naturalization rate among immigrants who arrived mostly as political refugees. Conversely, Asian Indians as a community with the most rapid growth between 1990 and 2000 due to new migration from Asia report the lowest citizenship rate as well as naturalization rate among the foreign-born. As a consequence, Asian Indians report the lowest voter registration and voting rates among voting-age persons. The Japanese, in contrast, report the highest rates.

Ethnic groups differ in members' ability to satisfy naturalization requirements and to become registered and vote after satisfying the self-registration requirements. When the citizenship barrier is considered in studying voter registration statistics, all the six major ethnic groups report comparable rates of voter registration—with a slim majority among citizens having registered to vote and with only six percentage points separating the community with the highest (Japanese) and the lowest (Vietnamese) rates. The role of nativity in voter registration varies across ethnic groups. Whereas U.S.-born citizens have much higher registration rates than foreign-born naturalized citizens among the Chinese and Japanese communities, exactly the reverse is true in Filipino, Korean, Asian Indian, and the Vietnamese communities where citizens with immigrant background are more likely to become registered. When the self-registration hurdle is considered, a somewhat different set of ethnic dynamics emerges in voting turnout. Among registered voters, the Japanese report the highest turnout rate of 91%, while Filipinos report the lowest rate of 81%. And whereas registered U.S.-born Asian Indians report a higher turnout rate than their foreign-born counterparts, foreign-born naturalized citizens of all other Asian ethnicities who became registered

all report a turnout rate that is either on par with or higher than that of their U.S.-born counterparts.

Compared to data collected in elections 1994-2000 and reported by Asian ethnicity in Lien (2004), there are some consistent patterns but also important differences in findings across time. For example, immigrants continue to dominate the voting-age population of the first two generations by a nearly 9 to 1 margin. Second, Asian Indians continue to report the lowest share of citizens among voting-age persons and lowest naturalization rate among the foreign-born. And third, the Japanese continue to report the highest rate of voting among voting-age persons and the registered. Like other American voters, the participation rates of all Asian groups surge in high-stimulus presidential elections and decline in midterm elections. And true as before, once crossing the barriers in the first two steps of the voting process, some Asian American groups may report higher rates of turnout than those among non-Hispanic Whites. However, perhaps indicative of changing times, Filipinos are no longer the group that leads others in citizenship and naturalization rates. Also, the Vietnamese are no longer the group that has the lowest registration rate among citizens. Instead of ranking at the bottom in terms of voting turnout as they did in the 1990s, Koreans are placed second only to the Japanese in terms of turnout in 2004.

### **How Unique is the Foreign-born Factor? Multivariate Results**

To assess the unique role of the foreign-born factor in voting participation, we need to understand and sort out the significance of other factors that may influence participation. We begin with four sets of factors based on well-established theories of political participation (e.g., Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Conway 1991; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1998; Leighley 2001). In general, voting participation can be influenced by *socioeconomic* factors such as education and income. It can also be influenced by *socialization* factors such as gender and age and the degree of *social connectedness* or *ties*, as indicated by residential mobility, marital status,

employment status, and union membership. In addition, voting registration and turnout – particularly the latter – can be affected by the amount of campaign stimuli in the *political mobilization context* as shaped by media coverage, candidate and party evaluation, significance of office, issue salience, certainty of outcome, election types, and regional political culture (Jackson 1996). On top of these traditional theoretical frameworks, some researchers argue for the inclusion of factors related to *international migration* such as nativity (being foreign-born vs. U.S.-born) and length of stay (as a percentage of political life in the U.S.), which may affect adult (re-) socialization as well as the related institutional constraints of citizenship and registration requirements (Lien 2004; Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004; Wong, Lien, and Conway 2005).

Findings of the applicability of these theories to predict the voting registration and turnout of Asians are not consistent, in part because of the variation in data source and methodology. Because of substantive differences in major population characteristics between Asians and non-Asian groups, it seems increasingly clear that the conventional indicators of voting participation such as socioeconomic class, group- and family-based social ties (such as gender, union, employment status, and marital status) may be relatively less significant for Asians than for whites and, to some extent, blacks and Latinos (Nakanishi 1991; Lien 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2004; Cho 1999). Nevertheless, focusing on Asians as a whole, research using census data shows that some of the conventional indicators such as education, income, age, length of residence, and length of U.S. stay are useful predictors of the voting participation of Asians (Ong and Nakanishi 1996; Lien 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004). Greater length of stay in the U.S. as a percentage of political life spent here may have a positive effect because of its relationship to immigrant political socialization (Cho 1999; Wong 2001). Geopolitical context may have an effect in that the heightened levels of participation for residents in Hawaii and California may reflect the greater elite incorporation and participation in the electoral processes in these two Western states (Lien 2001, 2004; Lai 2000). However, the net effect of mobilization context may be less significant in shaping voting registration than turnout. In the former process, individual characteristics may matter more.

Research using the 2000 election data finds that, after controlling for differences in a variety of conditions, including the percentage of time spent in the U.S., naturalized foreign-born citizens as a whole may be associated with a higher tendency to become registered than their native-born counterparts, while foreign-born registered voters as a whole may not have a significantly different voting tendency than their U.S.-born counterparts (Lien 2004). Everything else being equal, foreign-born Latinos are observed to be more likely both to become registered once naturalized and to vote once registered; foreign-born blacks are more likely to vote but not more likely to become registered than their white counterparts. U.S.-born Asians, on the other hand, are significantly less likely to become registered and to vote once registered than their non-Hispanic White counterparts. Focusing on Asians alone, research using pooled data from 1994 to 2000 elections similarly finds that, other conditions being equal, foreign-born naturalized citizens are more likely to become registered but no less likely to vote once registered compared to their U.S.-born counterparts. Moreover, different from predicting registration among citizens which is more influenced by individual characteristics, voting turnout among the registered is more likely among those Asians who reside in higher empowerment states such as Hawaii and California. Looking into how the nativity factor operates in each of the six major ethnic groups, the pooled census data show that, among eligible persons and net of other factors, being foreign-born may be associated with a higher likelihood to become registered but only for Chinese, Korean, and Asian Indian Americans. Being foreign-born in general cannot be associated with a higher likelihood to vote except for Koreans.

### **How Active Are Asians in Other Means of Political and Civic Participation?**

So far, research shows that naturalized citizens may not be disadvantaged in the voting process by their foreign-born status. Rather, their immigrant background may sometimes provide an extra incentive for them to seek greater political incorporation. This can happen when immigrants sense a hostile political environment that

threatens to deprive themselves or their friends, relatives, and immigrant children of access to education, health care, and other governmental services associated with U.S. citizenship (Pantoja, Ramirez, and Segura 2001; Pantoja and Segura 2003; Barreto 2005; Ramakrishnan 2005; Bedolla 2005). Immigrants may also seek greater political incorporation out of concern about the people and status of the ethnic homeland (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Blanc, 1994; Karpathakis, 1999; DeSipio 2006; Lien 2006b; Rogers 2006). Voting participation, however, is only one of the indicators of political engagement and one that is restricted to citizens and registered voters. Legend has it that Asian Americans, because of their affluence and immigrant background, prefer to participate in the American electoral process through other means than voting (Erie and Brackman 1993). How active are foreign-born Asians in non-electoral activities that do not require U.S. citizenship? And is being foreign-born a positive or negative factor of participation in these political activities?

The Pilot National Asian American Survey (PNAAPS)<sup>viii</sup> provides an unprecedented opportunity to empirically examine participation beyond voting by nativity. Participation beyond voting is gauged by responses to a question asking whether respondents had participated in a range of political activities in their communities during the past four years. Lien, Conway, and Wong (2004) find that, compared to voting and registration, few Asian Americans participated in activities like working with others in the community to solve a problem (21%), signing a petition for a political cause (16%), attending a public meeting, political rally or fundraiser (14%), donating to a campaign (12%), or writing or phoning a government official (11%). Still fewer participated through taking part in a protest or demonstration (7%), contacting an editor of a newspaper, magazine, or TV station (7%), serving on a governmental board or commission (2%), or working on a political campaign and other activities (2%). Comparing the U.S.-born to the foreign-born samples, it is clear that in most cases those who were born in the United States are more likely to participate across all activities than those who are immigrants. For example, 30% of the U.S.-born sample stated that they had worked with others in their community to solve a problem versus 18% of the immigrant sample. Also, more of the U.S.-born (18%)

report writing or phoning a government official than immigrants (9%). However, differences between the U.S.-born and immigrants are less pronounced when one examines taking part in a protest (10% of U.S.-born versus 7% of immigrants).

Communities differ in their favored modes of participation beyond voting. In the PNAAPS, a higher percentage of South Asians than other Asians report having worked with others to solve a community problem (36%), written or phoned a government official (at 17%, they are tied with Filipinos), or contacted media (14%). A higher percentage of Japanese signed a petition (24%), attended political gatherings (22%), or donated money to political campaigns (20%). And a higher percentage of Vietnamese participated in political protest and demonstration (14%) than other Asian American groups. When differences in socioeconomic status, political engagement, civic involvement and mobilization, acculturation and racial group concerns, migration-related variables are controlled, multivariate results show that being foreign-born is associated with a lower likelihood to participate in non-electoral activities. Among the immigrant sample, the results show that neither citizenship status nor ethnic origin indicators are significant to predict participation likelihood, but having received education mostly outside of the United States is associated with a lower participation likelihood.

How much do Asian immigrants get involved with people and government of the home country and how does it affect their participation in U.S. electoral and non-electoral politics? Because of their foreign-born status and the continuing influx of new immigrants from Asia, Asian Americans may have a greater interest in politics related to their home country origins than to the host country of the United States. Over half of the PNAAPS respondents (56%) report paying very close or fairly close attention to news events happening in Asia. Nevertheless, respondents are just as likely or even more likely to follow news events about Asian Americans as they are to keep up on stories about events in Asia. Most of immigrant respondents also maintain strong social ties with people in their countries of origin. A large majority of them report having contacted individuals in their country of origin at least once a month. However, when asked if they had ever participated in any activity dealing with the

politics of their home countries after arriving in the United States, a lofty 94 percent answered “no” to the question. Finally, everything else being equal, Lien, Conway, and Wong (2004) find that being active in homeland politics is associated with a greater, not lower, likelihood to participate in non-electoral activities while it has no impact on voting and registration. These results clearly show that not only do immigrants’ connections with the country of origin not take place at the expense of their participation as voters in the United States, but also there may be a complementary relationship to activities beyond voting.

## Looking Forward

Historically excluded by racist immigration policies, Asian Americans have come a long way to become a major non-White community in the United States and one that reports the highest growth rate due to international migration at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If current population trends hold, Asian Americans not only are expected to continue their lead in the growth of the foreign-born population, but they are also poised to reap the most political gains from this stellar phenomenon. This assertion may sound counter-intuitive, given that the foreign-born sector of the Asian American population is one that often receives the most amounts of scrutiny and doubt in the popular media and mainstream politics regarding their ability to become socially, culturally, and politically “assimilated” (e.g., Wang 1998; Wu 2002). Yet, a main purpose of this chapter is to help debunk the foreign-born myths through the exercise of scientific data gathering and analysis. Below, I first provide four reasons for optimism about the future of Asian American political and civic engagement. Then, I offer comments on the areas of need to better engage the immigrant-majority community in the American political process.

First and foremost, the large presence of the foreign-born is not a liability but an asset to the community’s political and civic engagement. At both aggregate and individual levels, research shows that Asian American immigrants not only may not be considered as less participatory in the voting process than their U.S.-born counterparts, but they also show strong inclination to become politically incorpo-

rated through the acquisition of U.S. citizenship and would become registered and vote once eligible—often at an equal or higher rates than their U.S.-born counterparts. Immigrants' relative disadvantages in participation resources due to language and socialization barriers compared to the U.S.-born may be compensated by their concern over immigrant minority status in the hostland and transnational ties to the ethnic homeland. Their foreign-born status may be a source of political mobilization, for getting citizenship and becoming voters are seen as safeguards against the loss of jobs and benefits related to anti-immigrant initiatives or legislation such as the California Proposition 187 in 1994, the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, and the 2005 Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act (H.R. 4437). Being foreign-born is being associated with a lower likelihood to participate in non-electoral activities, including making campaign donations, contacting officials and the media, and working with others to solve community problems. Nevertheless, contrary to popular perceptions, immigrants' transnational ties and homeland concerns not only do not inhibit their political incorporation into the hostland, but they may also help motivate participation in non-electoral, civic activities in the hostland.

Second, analysis of multi-year U.S. Census election data shows that Asians have the highest growth in terms of the share and size of the voting-age population (VAP), voting-age citizens (VAC), and the American electorate in recent years than any other major racial and ethnic group in the United States (Table 4). Between 1994 and 2004, the Asian American community doubled its size of the VAP, while the Latino community gained 54%, the Black community gained 14%, and the (non-Hispanic) White community grew by a mere 5%. Among the VAC, Asians had a more moderate growth rate (44%), which was still much higher than the 21% for Latinos, 4% for Blacks, and 3% for Whites. Likewise, among voters, Asians led others by having a growth rate of 48%, compared to the 27% for Latinos, 10% for Blacks, and 12% for Whites. Similarly distinctive and steadily upward trends are seen in the percentage share of the VAP where Asians jumped from 2.5% in 1994 to 4.5% in 2004, of the VAC where Asians moved from 1.5% in 1994 to 3.4% in 2004, and of the share of the elec-

torate where they increased from being 1.2% in 1994 to 2.4% in 2004. Although Latinos also experienced steady growth, their growth rates are far less dramatic. Black shares in the VAP, VAC, and the electorate seem to have peaked in 2000, while White shares in all three measures of community strength are in a steady decline. This Asian American distinction is inconceivable without the corresponding rapid and consistent growth of new migration from Asia.

Third, there is a dramatic growth in the number of Asian American elected officials at state and key local level offices in recent decades. The total number of these elected officials grew from 120 in 1978 to 346 in 2004 (Lien 2006a). The growth rate is particularly sharp at the local level where the change is from 52 to 260 during this 26-year period. In 2004, 35% served at the school board level, 31% at the municipal level, and 23% at the state legislative level. More importantly, first generation immigrants constitute 42% of Asian Americans holding state and local elective positions, according to a recent, first-ever nationwide survey of state and local nonwhite elected officials.<sup>ix</sup> In comparison, only 8% of Latino and 1% of Black elected officials in the survey are foreign-born. Second generation Americans or those are U.S.-born but with foreign-born parents are 26% among Asians, 28% among Latinos, and 1% among Blacks in the survey. Those third generation respondents who themselves and their parents are U.S.-born but not their grandparents are 24% among Asians, 22% among Latinos, 17% among American Indian and Alaskan Natives (AIANs), and 3% among Blacks in the survey. These statistics show that Asian American elective leaders have a much closer and more personal experience with immigration than their Latino and Black colleagues. Defying the myth of assimilation over generations (Dahl 1961), first generation immigrants from Asia not only have become voters but also candidates and elected officials and they contributed more to the community's growth of electoral leadership than immigrants in other demographic groups. Breaking the traditional Japanese and Chinese dominance in electoral leadership and adding ethnic diversity to the arena, these immigrant male and female elected officials are increasingly from Korean, South Asian, and Southeast Asian backgrounds.

Fourth and finally, Asian Americans are growing in their ability to be seen as a politically cohesive and consequential group of voters.

To present a more sophisticated and accurate political profile of the immigrant-majority population at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Lien, Conway, and Wong (2004) gathered and analyzed the multilingual and semi-national PNAAPS data and make the following summary observations:

Asian Americans are ethnically and racially diverse, socially connected with other groups in American society, and are interested in becoming politically integrated into the U.S. mainstream. Although most immigrants maintain a strong ethnic bond with homeland cultures and peoples and are more concerned about language barriers than other issues, the majority of community members do not show a deficiency in using English outside of the home nor a greater interest or involvement in homeland politics. Rather, an overwhelming majority of Asian Americans believe they are informed politically, show some or higher interest in U.S. than in homeland politics, pay attention to news regarding Asians on both sides of the Pacific, and turn out to vote once they have met the citizenship and voter registration requirements. Among those who are citizens and registered to vote, the majority are not fragmented, but exhibit similar patterns in terms of voting behavior and political attitudes. Far from belonging to a monolithic, issue-free community, members in each ethnic group have a different degree and set of issue concerns, but they also share a similar level of experience with racial and ethnic discrimination. Although most prefer an ethnic-specific rather than a panethnic identity, the majority respondents are also amenable to the panethnic Asian American label under certain contexts. The potential for unity is shown as well in their favoring the election of political candidates of Asian American descent and public policies addressing the concerns and needs of the nonwhite immigrant community (p.18).

Their findings of a relatively cohesive political outlook among voting-age Asian Americans are being echoed in exit polls conducted by several leading community organizations. In the 2006 midterm elections, for example, the Asian American Legal Defense and Edu-

cation Fund (AALDEF) surveyed over 4,700 voters in 25 cities in nine states and found each Asian ethnic group voted as a bloc for the same top-ballot Democratic Party candidates, and every group selected economy/jobs as the most important issue for the 2008 presidential candidates to address (AALDEF 2007). Possibly because over eight in 10 respondents were foreign-born naturalized citizens, each ethnic group in the survey also reported large proportions of support for legalization of undocumented immigrants, for reducing the amount of time it takes for the government to process immigration paperwork, and opposition to criminalizing the undocumented. In early February of 2008, about three in four Asian American registered voters were found to vote for presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary elections in California, New York, and New Jersey (AALDEF 2008b).

Asian American immigrants are vital to the multiethnic community's growth and political empowerment. To keep the momentum going and to help deliver the full potential of the majority-immigrant community, we need to support and maintain a thriving, immigrant-friendly civil society. We need tenacious, aggressive, long-term efforts at the grassroots level in citizenship and voter education and in turnout campaigns. And we need to proactively protect the voting rights of the majority foreign-born and mostly non-native-English-speaking new Americans by ensuring them equal access to citizenship, voter registration materials, and the ballots.

Civil society organizations such as labor unions, worker centers, religious institutions, community-based nonprofits, and ethnic voluntary associations have taken on the leading role in immigrants' political mobilization because mainstream institutions are not committed to incorporating nonwhite immigrant communities into the political system (Wong 2006b). Political parties, as an institution linking government to its people, were key to the successful incorporation of European immigrants in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America. However, current political parties have failed to mobilize immigrants en masse into the political system because of a weakened local party structure and changing campaign tactics, the selective mobilization strategies and maintenance of existing party coalitions, and wrongful

assumptions of the political apathy of immigrants.

Based on her study of the political incorporation of Chinese and Mexican immigrants in New York and Los Angeles, Janelle Wong, a professor of Political Science and American Studies at the University of Southern California, finds that civic institutions are able to turn new Asian and Latino immigrants into citizens and voters or to engage them in other political actions such as petitioning, demonstrations, and protests that do not require legal status. Civic institutions are better able than political parties to do so because they have a stronger and closer connection to immigrants they serve. Some of these institutions are binational or transnational in their orientation. Others may find it more efficient to serve and mobilize immigrants if they take immigrants' concern about the people, culture, and society in the country of origin in mind. Nevertheless, because civic institutions are limited in resources and they often have other priorities and goals than political mobilization to tend, and because of the rising significance of nonwhite immigrant voters, both national and local political party organizations should be urged to invest in and construct issue-based coalitions with immigrant communities by adopting a long-term approach "through regular mass voter-registration drives, voter-education programs, and the establishment of a stronger presence in immigrant communities" (Wong 2006, 175).

Asian Americans' equal access to voting rights protection is being ensured by the passage of amendments to the 1965 Voting Rights Act, as well as by the 1993 National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) and the 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA). Yet, as shown in Table 1, in as late as 2004, Asian American citizens still lag much behind in their voting registration. In 2006 midterm elections, poll monitors and pollsters working in 25 cities in nine states received more than 200 complaints of voting problems from Asian Americans (AALDEF 2008a). The language gap is an important challenge for the non-native English-speaking immigrants to become citizens and registered voters. In 2000, as many as eight out of ten Asians at or over the age of five spoke a language other than English at home. About two in five Asians reported that they could not speak English very well. The need for English and citizenship classes and other social services can present a great burden to the major gateway cities

and other localities where these immigrants tend to come in strong, rapid, and steady numbers. Moreover, within each of the major non-white immigrant-impacted communities, there is often enormous diversity in socioeconomic class status, length of U.S. stay, ethnic origin, religion, language, and other aspects of culture that may greatly affect the resources and the extent of political participation. Using English proficiency as an example, as high as 62 percent among the Vietnamese, but as low as 23 percent among Asian Indians and 24 percent among Filipinos reported speaking English less than “very well” in 2000 (Shin and Bruno 2003).

Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act amendment of 1975 and 1992 was to protect the voting rights of Asians, Latinos, American Indians, and Alaska Natives by offering bilingual assistance to these language minorities who resided in jurisdictions where either the voting-age citizens of any language minority were at or exceed 5% of the population or 10,000 in number. A recent study on the relationship between the voting rights act and the election of minority elected officials finds Section 203 to be more critical to the election of Asian and Latino than Black officials (Lien, Pinderhughes, Hardy-Fanta, and Sierra 2007). For instance, 84.5% of school board members, 75% of municipal officials, and 62% of state legislators of Asian descent are elected from jurisdictions covered by Section 203.

Another study of the effect of Section 203 suggests that the provision has positive impact on Latino turnout and a neutral or slightly negative impact on Asian Americans (Jones-Correa 2005). Whereas the latter study leaves open the answer as to the racial discrepancy in result, one factor can be the compliance problems identified and reported by community organizations. For example, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) found that ballots had been mistranslated and the translated materials and signs could either be missing, hidden, or otherwise unavailable to voters (Magpantay 2004). They also found that many poll sites had too few interpreters or they spoke the wrong language or dialect. Sometimes, non-minority poll workers exerted hostile attitudes towards limited-English voters and resisted or even thwarted the rendering of language assistance by making rude and disparaging remarks about language assistance and Asian American voters or by illegally creat-

ing new voting requirements that only applied to Asians. Many Asian American voters were turned away from the polling sites and further discouraged from returning to vote because of these discriminatory attitudes and behavior. Many of these problems lingered in the 2006 elections.

In addition to the lack of English assistance and other compliance problems related to Section 203, the implementation of HAVA, which requires identification of certain first-time voters and provisional ballots for voters who may otherwise be prevented from voting, has created a new layer of barriers to Asian American access to voting. According to a new report released by the AALDEF (2008a), which monitored 172 poll sites in nine states and the District of Columbia in November 2006 elections, Asian American voters were observed to be improperly singled out and targeted for identification checks. Although HAVA only requires identification from first-time voters who did not become registered by January 1, 2003, many long-time Asian American voters were demanded to show ID. When Asian American voters' names were missing or incorrectly transcribed in voter lists at poll sites, poll workers refused to offer these voters provisional ballots, as required by HAVA. The report also found poll sites to be confusing and poll workers were unable to direct voters to their proper poll sites or precincts.

About one in eight Asian American voters in the 2006 AALDEF exit polls was a first-time voter in an U.S. election. Over four in ten were limited English proficient and almost half (47%) of these were first-time voters. Because of the greater interest and mobilization efforts in presidential elections, the participation of first-time voters in the 2008 elections is expected to be higher. It is imperative that voting problems identified by community-based civil rights organizations be taken seriously and addressed. We also need to encourage congressional leaders to consider adopting changes that can strengthen voting rights provisions. One recommendation made by the Asian American Justice Center<sup>x</sup> is to lower the numerical threshold for Section 203 coverage from 10,000 to 7,500 so as to enable several Asian American language minority populations whose numbers may still fall short of the existing threshold in 2010 to benefit from language assistance. Above all, greater volunteer participation by

Asian Americans from all sectors and walks of life in community-based citizenship and voter education, adult English classes, voter registration drives, voter turnout drives, and election monitoring efforts should be encouraged and supported.

**Table 1. Percentage Distribution of Voting and Registration by Race and Nativity in November 2004**

	Asian	Latino	Black	White	All
Foreign-born	76%	57%	10%	5%	16%
CITIZENSHIP	69	59	95	98	91
-By Naturalization only	66	27	5	3	8
-among Foreign-born	59	28	50	60	44
REGISTRATION	36	34	65	73	66
-among Citizens	53	58	69	75	72
-Foreign-born	53	59	63	70	61
-U.S.-born	52	58	69	75	73
VOTING	31	28	57	66	58
-among Registered	85	82	87	89	88
-Foreign-born	85	87	90	91	88
-U.S.-born	85	80	87	89	88
Weighted N (x1000)	9,711	26,968	24,598	152,805	215,694

Source: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY, NOVEMBER 2004: VOTER SUPPLEMENT FILE [Computer file]. ICPSR04272-v1. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census [producer], 2005. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2006-01-16.

Note: Entries are for voting-age persons who can be solely or partly of the racial origin except for Latinos who can be of any race. Each racial category is also mutually exclusive of each other. Thus, Asians stands for non-Hispanic Asians, Blacks for non-Hispanic Blacks, and Whites for non-Hispanic Whites. Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders as well as American Indian and Alaskan Natives are included in the "All" column. Dates of interviews were Nov. 14-20, 2004; sixty percent of interviews were conducted by phone.

**Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Voter Registration and Voting by Race and Nativity in November Elections, 1994-2004**

	Asian	Latino	Black	White
<b>% Registration Among Citizens</b>				
1994 Foreign-/U.S.-Born	48/59	47/54	51/61	67/70
1996 Foreign-/U.S.-Born	57/60	57/59	62/67	69/73
1998 Foreign-/U.S.-Born	45/57	51/57	55/64	64/69
2000 Foreign-/U.S.-Born	51/54	57/58	59/68	64/72
2002 Foreign-/U.S.-Born	49/50	52/54	58/63	63/69
2004 Foreign-/U.S.-Born	53/52	59/58	63/69	70/75
<b>% Voting Among the Registered</b>				
1994 Foreign-/U.S.-Born	73/78	75/62	77/63	78/73
1996 Foreign-/U.S.-Born	79/80	86/72	87/80	84/83
1998 Foreign-/U.S.-Born	63/70	69/56	66/66	71/68
2000 Foreign-/U.S.-Born	84/81	85/76	93/84	88/86
2002 Foreign-/U.S.-Born	61/67	64/57	66/68	71/71
2004 Foreign-/U.S.-Born	85/85	87/80	90/87	91/89

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *Current Population Survey: Voter Supplement File*, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004 [computer files]. ICPSR version. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census [producer], 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 1997, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2006.

Note: All populations are of age 18 and over. Each racial category is mutually exclusive of each other. "White" stands for non-Hispanic whites. Entries in parenthesis for registration are rates among citizens; those for voting are rates among the registered.

**Table 3. Percentage Distribution of Voting and Registration Among Asian Americans in 2004 by Ethnicity**

	Chinese	Filipino	Japanese	Korean	Indian	Vietnamese	All
Foreign-born	88	86	54	93	88	88	86
CITIZENSHIP	65	68	70	64	47	82	65
-By Naturalization only	82	80	34	89	74	86	78
-among Foreign-born	60	63	44	61	40	80	59
REGISTRATION	35	37	39	34	25	40	33
-among Citizens	54	54	55	53	53	49	51
-Foreign-born	51	57	46	54	60	54	53
-U.S.-born	66	41	61	41	34	19	46
VOTING	30	30	35	29	21	33	28
-among Registered	86	80	91	87	83	83	85
-Foreign-born	86	81	95	87	83	83	85
-U.S.-born	86	75	89	83	88	82	85
Weighted N (x1000)	2,023	1,502	412	886	1,264	992	8,523

*Source:* (see Table 1). *Note:* All populations are of age 18 and over. Only Asian adults (including mixed-race persons) who are of either first or second generation, which covers 90% of Asians surveyed, are included in the analysis.

**Table 4. Percentage Share of the Voting-Age Persons, Citizens, and Voters by Race in November Elections, 1994-2004**

	Asian	Latino	Black	White
<b>Share of Voting-Age Persons</b>				
1994	2.5%	9.2%	11.3%	76.4%
1996	3.4	9.5	11.3	75.1
1998	3.7	10.3	11.4	73.9
2000	3.9	10.7	11.6	73.1
2002	4.0	11.1	11.6	72.5
2004	4.5	12.5	11.4	70.8
N in 1994 (x1000)	4,772	17,476	21,514	145,027
N in 2004 (x1000)	9,711	26,968	24,598	152,805
% Change 94-04	+103	+54	+14	+5
<b>Share of Voting-age Citizenry</b>				
1994	1.5%	5.9%	11.5%	80.5%
1996	2.0	6.4	11.3	79.6
1998	2.4	6.8	11.8	78.3
2000	2.5	7.1	12.0	77.7
2002	2.7	7.6	11.9	77.0
2004	3.4	8.1	11.8	75.9
N in 1994 (x1000)	4,631	13,159	22,409	144,731
N in 2004 (x1000)	6,677	15,955	23,330	149,544
% Change 94-04	+44	+21	+4	+3
<b>Share of the Electorate</b>				
1994	1.2%	4.2%	9.4%	84.7%
1996	1.7	4.8	10.5	82.4
1998	1.7	4.9	10.9	81.9
2000	1.9	5.8	11.7	80.0
2002	2.0	6.1	11.2	80.0
2004	2.4	6.0	11.2	79.9
N in 1994 (x1000)	2,003	5,934	12,749	89,468
N in 2004 (x1000)	2,975	7,551	14,064	100,412
% Change 94-04	+48	+27	+10	+12

*Source and Note:* see Table 2.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> For practical purposes, the term “immigrants” is being used interchangeably with the “foreign-born” in this project. In reality, “foreign-born” is a broader term than “immigrants” and should be preferred. According to the US Census Bureau, a foreign-born person is anyone who is not a U.S. citizen at birth. The foreign-born population in the United States includes naturalized U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents (immigrants), temporary migrants (such as foreign students), humanitarian migrants (such as refugees), and people illegally present in the United States <<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/immigration.html>>.
- <sup>ii</sup> Data for this effort come mainly from the U.S. Census Current Population Survey Voter Supplement files, 1994-2004, which permit both a multiracial analysis, comparing the participation rates of Asians to other major racial and ethnic groups among voting-age persons, and a multiethnic analysis among Asian respondents who are either immigrants themselves or children of immigrants. To cover other types of political and civic participation that do not require US citizenship, I rely on the 2000-01 Pilot National Asian American Political Survey which surveyed the political attitudes and opinion of six major Asian American groups residing in five metropolitan areas.
- <sup>iii</sup> This is based on analysis of the Census 2000 Summary File 3, the 1-in-6 sample, race-alone data. Direct comparison of racial figures between the 2000 census and earlier censuses is difficult because of the addition of a mixed-race category in Census 2000.
- <sup>iv</sup> See the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website at <[www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov)> for the latest set of requirements and changes.
- <sup>v</sup> Most countries, except the United States and certain Latin American countries, have automatic voter registration (Mackie and Rose 1991).
- <sup>vi</sup> The Current Population Survey (CPS) is a monthly survey of about 56,000 households conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The November data consist of responses to two sets of questions—the basic labor force questions given every month and the supplemental questions on voting and registration asked every other November after the general elections. The universe of this data series consists of all adult persons in the civilian noninstitutional populations of the United States living in households of all 50 states and the District of Columbia. A major redesign implemented by the Bureau in 1994 added new questions on nativity and place of birth and permitted a rare but limited opportunity for this research to analyze the effects of nativity, country/place of birth, and ancestral origin on the voting registration and turnout rates of U.S. voting-age persons of Asian (including mixed racial) descent. Another major CPS revision in 2004, which began to phase out the 1990 sample and phase in the 2000 sample, may improve data quality and

add confidence to the results reported for the 2004 cycle. However, the adoption of a new question format on race that permits the reporting of mixed origins has complicated the comparison of results between the 2004 elections and earlier ones. To maximize comparability, I use a definition of race that includes persons who may be solely or partly of the racial origin.

- vii The exception is for biological or adopted children born abroad by U.S. citizens and who do not acquire U.S. citizenship at birth. In 2000, Congress passed the Child Citizenship Act, which allows any child under the age of 18 who is adopted by a U.S. citizen and immigrates to the United States to acquire immediate citizenship. The law became effective on February 27, 2001.
- viii The PNAAPS is the first multi-city, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual sample survey of the political attitudes and opinion of Asian Americans. A total of 1,218 adults of the top six Asian ethnic origins residing in the nation's five major population hubs of Asians were surveyed by phone between Nov. 16, 2000 and Jan. 28, 2001. The survey was sponsored by a research grant from the National Science Foundation (SES 9973435) and supplemented by a community grant from KSCI-TV of Los Angeles. Pei-te Lien is the principal investigator.
- ix The Gender and Multicultural Leadership Survey, 2006-7. Principal investigators are Christine Sierra, Carol Hardy-Fanta, Pei-te Lien, and Dianne Pinderhughes. Details of the survey methodology and findings are available at <<http://www.gmcl.org>>.
- x The organization is led Karen K. Narasaki, whose statement before the US House Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on the Constitution legislative hearing on H.R.9 on "A Bill to Reauthorize and Amend the Voting Rights Act of 1965: Part II" is being cited here.

# Asian American College Students and Civic Engagement

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## Introduction

The current political climate reflects the growing significance of civic engagement among undergraduates. The heightened energy and excitement surrounding the 2008 presidential candidates indicate a renewed interest in politics, community involvement, and a spirit of change. Especially among the college-age population, the momentum behind the upcoming elections is building through mediums ranging from political email campaigns to YouTube videos to student-run political debates. Indeed, college student participation in community and political activities has demonstrated a substantial upward trend over the years. In their national analysis of first-year college students, Pryor, Hurtado, Sáenz, Santos, and Korn (2007) note that the percentage of freshmen who engaged in volunteer work prior to college rose steadily over the past two decades from 43.7% in 1987 to 70.7% in 2006. Though such statistics provide a broad snapshot of college students from around the country, where do Asian American students fit into the picture?

This chapter centers Asian American young adults within a discussion about civic engagement by highlighting findings from 35 years of data on Asian American college freshmen. It will also address future directions for Asian American undergraduate student civic engagement, taking immigration and population trends into account. Calling attention to Asian American civic engagement within the college context achieves at least two main goals. First, it will help scholars, practitioners, and policy makers move beyond racial stereotypes of this group and consider their complete college experiences,

including their involvement outside the classroom. Doing so will help facilitate efforts to develop curricular and co-curricular practices that can better serve the learning and development of this fast-growing population in higher education. Second, examining these patterns of civic engagement will shed light on how Asian American students, as part of the future of our nation, are positioned for greater participation in a democratic U.S. society.

To put our discussion in context, we will begin by outlining the significance of having opportunities to become civically engaged while in college. We will then explain how an exploration of the civic engagement patterns of Asian American college students is critical to combating popular stereotypes about Asian Americans as passive or uninvolved in non-academic activities. Our review of civic engagement trends spanning 35 years will address three areas: community service, political engagement, and the capacity for civic engagement. Overall, we found high rates of volunteering and community service among Asian American students, as well as an increase in the percentage of students who express the desire to be a leader in their community. We also found that consistently over the years, Asian American students have been more likely than the overall population of college students to rate environmental cleanup and the promotion of racial understanding as very important or essential life objectives. Lastly, although the percentage of Asian American students who discussed politics and worked on political campaigns dipped during the 1990s, the percentage of students pursuing these activities since the year 2000 has increased slightly. We conclude by discussing how Asian American college students are positioned to influence their communities through volunteer service and political involvement.

## The Significance of Civic Engagement During College

The importance of helping college students cultivate a commitment to the public good is central to the ongoing dialogue regarding what it means to be an educated citizen in the U.S. (Checkoway 2001; Dee 2004; Galston 2001; Ostrander 2004; Rhoads 1998; Sax 2004). Many colleges and universities seek to foster a sense of civic respon-

sibility among students by encouraging their involvement in community or political activities. While campuses generally do not support partisan activities, they allow students to do so, encouraging students to be politically engaged regardless of party or ideological affiliation. These activities often include volunteer work, service learning courses, student government, or political actions such as voting or demonstrating at the local, state, and national levels. Through various types of civic engagement, the expectation holds that students will develop altruistic or socially conscious attitudes and behaviors that persist even after college.

Claims about the individual benefits of civic engagement, especially with respect to service involvement, are supported by empirical evidence. Studies link motivation toward participating in community service with identity development processes (Lavelle and O’Ryan, 2001; Rhoads 1998; Youniss and Yates 1997). In these cases, community service was found to contribute to the process of developing one’s self-identity as well as increasing one’s level of social responsibility. By performing community service work, students felt they gained an increased knowledge of self through meaningful interaction with others, which then led to further personal and social identity development (Rhoads 1998; Youniss and Yates 1997). Furthermore, encouraging civic engagement is important because volunteerism during high school and college has direct and indirect effects on civic engagement in the post-college years (Astin, Sax, and Avalos 1999).

Along similar lines, Asian American student participation in co-curricular activities appears to be especially valuable in facilitating positive college experiences that include opportunities to build leadership skills or prepare for future careers or graduate school (Liu and Sedlacek 1999). Additionally, studies on Asian American involvement in pan-ethnic or ethnic/cultural student organizations illustrate the significance of collective action and social networks. Findings show that such involvement plays a crucial role in heightening ethnic awareness and commitment to one’s racial/ethnic community interests (Inkelas 2004), challenging the campus racial climate (Rhoads, Lee, and Yamada 2002), and improving students’ sense of social ability and belonging on campus (Wang, Sedlacek, and Westbrook 1992).

Because “education for citizenship” is much more complex in a diverse democracy, students of higher education must be prepared to “understand their own identities, communicate with people who are different from themselves, and build bridges across cultural differences in the transition to a more diverse society” (Checkoway 2001, 127). Thus, civic engagement is linked not only to student development, but to the development of ethnic awareness and identity. Given that civic and political engagement during college is a foundation for later-life community involvement (Astin et al. 1999), it is critical to understand how Asian Americans are being prepared to be involved in their communities in college and beyond.

### Asian American Students and Civic Engagement: More than Model Minorities

Research on Asian Americans and civic involvement during college is rare in the educational literature. This lack of research on Asian Americans in higher education contributes to a widespread misunderstanding of their student experiences in college. Without sufficient data to contextualize Asian American students, the dominant “model minority” myth will persist in limiting public perceptions of who these students are and the types of activities in which they are engaged. One negative implication related to the model minority view is that Asian American students are seen as being concerned only with academic undertakings (see Kao 1995; Sue and Okazaki 1990; Suzuki 2002). Such a narrow perspective could easily lead to assumptions that Asian Americans are less involved in non-academic endeavors or leadership opportunities without understanding how Asian American students are affected by co-curricular experiences. Additionally, longstanding racial stereotypes often depict Asian Americans as shy, quiet, passive, and traditional (e.g., Leslie, Constantine, and Fiske 2001; Lin, Kwan, Cheung, and Fiske 2005) – unwilling to challenge the status quo. Such stereotypes further mischaracterize Asian Americans as a group with little interest in becoming activists, community leaders, or politically engaged citizens. These common portrayals of Asian Americans could be harmful if they deter students from participating in service, political, or

other civic-oriented activities. Moreover, elected officials might overlook Asian Americans as an important segment of the population due to stereotypes of passivity and a perceived lack of community involvement.

At a time when Asian Americans are currently the fastest growing college-going population (Pryor et al. 2007), higher education institutions that serve as primary socialization environments for so many young adults cannot afford to risk under-serving students and marginalizing their college experiences. We can better comprehend and address Asian Americans' unique needs only if we obtain a fuller, more accurate view of this undergraduate student population. In this chapter, we aim to provide a comprehensive account of Asian American college students and their civic engagement patterns to inform higher education policy and practice. Researchers, educators, and policy makers concerned about the status of Asian American students must first acknowledge and understand the varied factors affecting this diverse group before taking appropriate action to support their all-around success and improve the overall quality of experiences in higher education.

## Data and Method

The data presented in this chapter are from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) Freshman Survey, a nationally representative study of first-year college students at over 600 colleges and universities that is administered on an annual basis and housed at the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute. It is the country's largest and most longstanding comprehensive study of college students. Typically, first-year students complete the CIRP Freshman Survey at the beginning of freshman year. Using national norms that are based on selectivity and college type, student responses are statistically weighted to reflect the national population of first-time, full-time college students during the appropriate time period.<sup>1</sup>

In 2007, the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute released a report entitled *Beyond Myths: The Growth and Diversity of Asian American College Freshmen, 1971-2005* (Chang, Park, Lin, Poon, and Nakanishi 2007). Being the largest compilation and analysis of data on

Asian American college students to date, the report focused on the 361,271 Asian/Asian American first-time, full-time college students at four-year institutions who took the CIRP Freshman Survey between 1971 and 2005. This chapter builds on some of the report's findings with respect to Asian American students' participation in, and their capacity for, various types of civic engagement, including community service and political involvement.

To show some of the variation among Asian American college freshmen, we conducted several analyses that uncover how responses vary by gender, citizenship, and language heritage. Language heritage refers to whether a student speaks English as his or her first language. While we are unfortunately unable to disaggregate by ethnicity, we believe that highlighting differences within the larger group allows us to illustrate the heterogeneity of the Asian American college student population. Examining whether distinctions exist between native English speakers and non-native English speakers, as well as Asian American students who are U.S. citizens versus those who are not, is also important in this study of civic engagement. Asian Americans are challenged by popular perceptions that they are un-American or "perpetual foreigners" (Ancheta 1998). Thus, we were curious to see if Asian American subgroups based on English language heritage and citizenship status show differences in their levels or frequency of civic engagement.

To draw inferences about the future of Asian American college student civic engagement, we define "civic engagement" as both volunteerism through community service and political engagement, including participation in electoral politics. Primarily presenting statistics from CIRP data on Asian American undergraduates, we also include analyses of trends in young adult voting and community service to conclude this chapter with recommendations that encourage a greater level of civic engagement, particularly in the area of political involvement, among Asian American young adults.

## **Civic Engagement Trends for Asian American College Students**

### Community Service and Volunteering

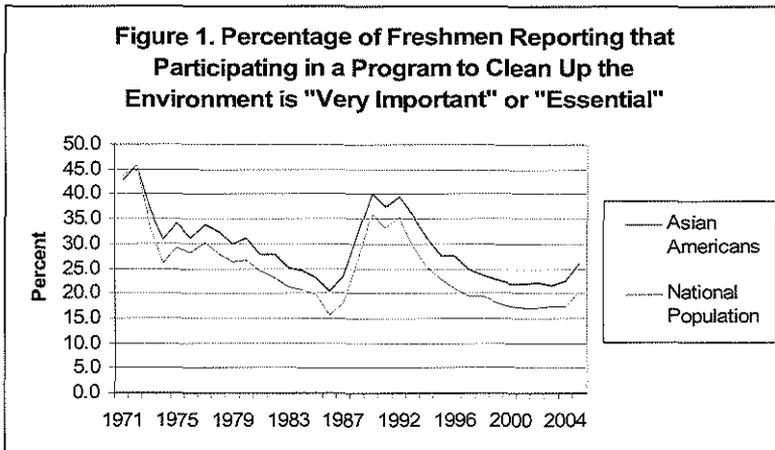
Overall, we found that an increasing proportion of Asian American freshmen over time were engaged in community service activities prior to college. Like students nationwide, Asian Americans are entering college having spent substantially more time volunteering during the high school years. In 1990, 47.5% of Asian American freshmen had not volunteered during the past year, compared to 46.2% of the national population. By 2005, only 32.0% of Asian American college students had not volunteered in the past year, compared to 29.4% of the national population. However, Asian American students (25.7%) were slightly more likely than the national population (23.6%) in 2005 to have volunteered three hours or more during the last year of high school.

We did not see marked differences between native English speakers and non-native English speakers, or U.S. citizens versus non-citizens, in their rates of volunteering. In 2005, 36.1% of Asian American freshmen who were native English speakers reported volunteering on a frequent basis, whereas 35.9% of non-native English speakers stated they had volunteered at that same rate. Asian American students who were U.S. citizens were slightly more likely than their peers who did not hold citizenship to report volunteering frequently, 36.4% compared to 34.5%.

We found that Asian American women were consistently more likely than Asian American men to have reported performing volunteer work or community service during the past year. In 2005, 83.9% of Asian American male students indicated they had performed some form of volunteer work over the last year, whereas 91.3% of Asian American female students reported volunteering. There has been a consistent gender gap between Asian American men and women in this area over the decades surveyed. When Asian American freshmen report on the likelihood that they will volunteer or perform community service during college, another gender gap emerges. In 2005, women were 18.4 percentage points more likely to state that there was a “very good” chance that they would volunteer or become involved in community service in the upcoming years.

Interestingly, Asian American men and women also differ in whether they aspire to participate in a community action program. In 1971, when the question was first asked on the CIRP Freshman Sur-

vey, roughly the same percent of Asian Americans across genders said that participating in a community action program was a very important or essential life objective for them. However, the general trend has been that Asian American females have become more likely than their male counterparts to prioritize community action program involvement, with 34.5% of women versus 25.9% of men rating the item as a top objective in 2005.



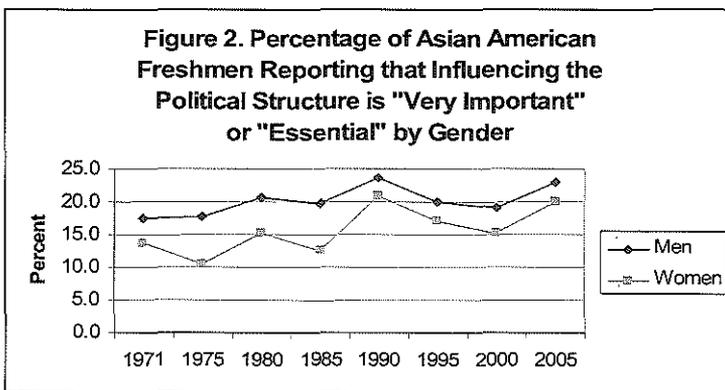
One item on the survey asks students how important it is for them to participate in a program to clean up the environment (see Figure 1). Over 40% of Asian American students in 1971 said that this goal was essential or very important to them, but the percentage of students indicating this sentiment declined steadily in subsequent years, with only 20.4% of Asian American students stating that such programs were a main concern to them in 1986. However, the proportion of Asian American students prioritizing environmental clean-up programs once again climbed to 40% by the early 1990s, only to decline again by the new millennium. Data from the most recent years suggest there may be an upward trend in the percentage of all students agreeing that participation in environmental programs is very important or essential, possibly reflecting a growing awareness of issues such as global warming and the need to “go green.” Furthermore, as Figure 1 shows, Asian American students have consistently been slightly more likely than the national population of

college freshmen to state that participating in programs to clean up the environment was a top priority for them.

## Political Engagement

Civic engagement encompasses activities devoted to community betterment, and political participation is a critical element of broader civic participation. Asian Americans are exerting stronger influence in the political process by running for office, coordinating campaigns, and supporting candidates at the local, state, and national levels. We wanted to assess the level of such engagement among Asian American undergraduates, especially during the early college years when most students become eligible to vote. We found general decreases in discussing politics and keeping up to date with political affairs. The greatest declines were during the 1990s, although some increases have occurred since 2000.

The CIRP Freshman Survey includes a number of items that point to the likelihood that students will become involved in political activities. The first item we examined is Asian American students' desire to have an impact on the political structure. Chang et al. (2007) found an increase in the percentage of Asian American students who stated it was essential or very important for them to influence the political structure, from 15.8% in 1971 to 21.4% in 2005.

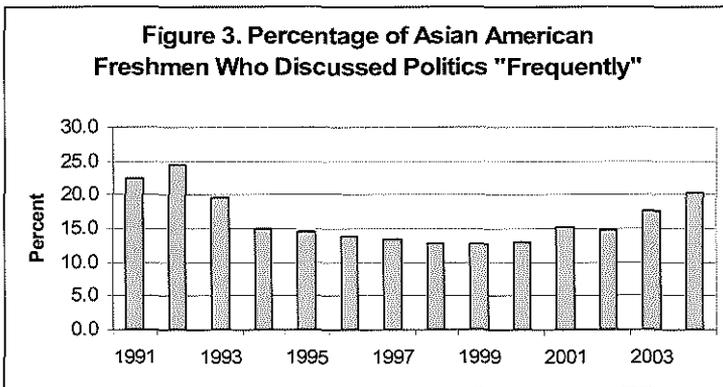


Comparing Asian American women and men in their responses to this political objective, we see a slight split by gender that has per-

sisted since 1971 (see Figure 2). The widest gap of over five percentage points occurred in the mid-1980s, but the difference narrowed by 1990. In 2005, men were still slightly more likely than women to view influencing the political structure as a higher priority.

Also of interest is the emphasis that Asian American students place on keeping up to date with political affairs. The proportion of Asian Americans who reported that following politics was very important or essential to them increased between 1971 and 1990, from 40.7% to 48.2%. However, there was a steep decline of over 20 percentage points between 1990 and 2000 with regard to the same objective, from 48.2% to 26.5%. The national population experienced a similar decline, from 43.5% in 1990 to 28.1% in 2000. Since 2000, the percentage of Asian American students who strongly desire to keep up with political affairs has increased steadily, up to 34.6% in 2005, but it remains unclear whether this rising trend will continue.

Several CIRP Freshman Survey items measure actual participation in various political activities. Figure 3 shows the percentage of Asian American students who stated that they discussed politics frequently in the past year, indicating that the proportion of students who did so dipped during the mid-1990s but has increased incrementally since 2000.



As for their tendencies to participate more actively in politics, 15% of Asian American college students in 1971 stated that they had worked on a local, state, or national campaign during their senior

year of high school. This number dropped to the single digits for most of the 1980s and 1990s. By 2005, 12.6% of Asian American college students reported having worked on a political campaign in their last year of high school.

Although the CIRP Freshman Survey has never included an item asking students about whether they have voted or plan to vote, the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) has collected data on the Asian American young adult vote since 1992. Asian Americans between 18 and 24 years old were among the least likely to vote in the 2004 presidential election; only Latinos in this age group were less likely to vote (Lopez, Kirby, and Sagoff 2005). Just 35.5% of Asian American voters in the 18- to 24-year-old category cast a ballot in the 2004 national election, compared to 47% of the overall 18-24 population. Ironically, CIRCLE research also found that Asian Americans ages 18-24 are the most likely group to say that the government needs to do more to solve problems (Lopez, Levine, Both, Kiesa, Kirby, and Marcelo 2006). Whether or not young Asian American voter turnout will improve in the 2008 presidential election is yet to be seen. However, in a press release after Super Tuesday, CIRCLE (2008) stated that the overall young adult voter turnout increased in every state except for New York.

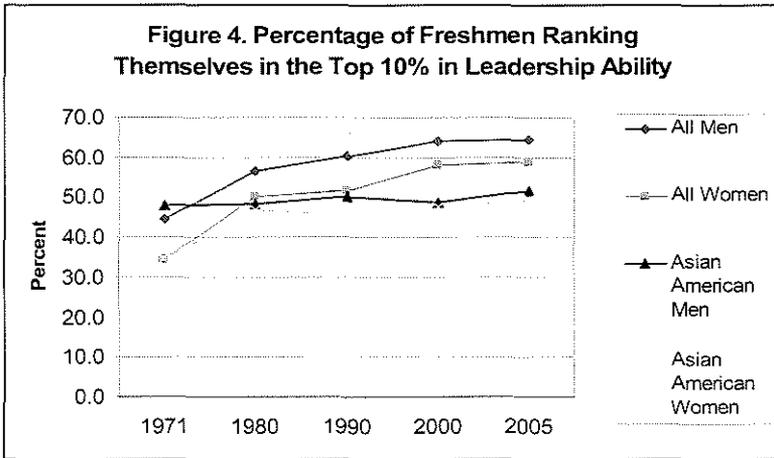
## Capacity for Civic Engagement

In addition to examining various measures of Asian American students' community and political engagement, we looked at particular attitudes, values, and behaviors that underscore their propensity to be effective and involved citizens. Several items on the CIRP Freshman Survey reflect the likelihood that Asian American students will engage in civic and political activities. First, how confident are Asian American students in their public speaking and leadership abilities? As noted earlier, stereotypes portray Asian Americans as docile and quiet – less likely to make their voices heard. How have Asian American students changed over the years in their self-rated abilities to speak in public and be a leader? We found that Asian American students have become more likely to rate themselves positively in public speaking and leadership ability over the years. Also, a greater

percent of students in recent years expressed a desire to influence social values and become a community leader.

Between 1971 and 2005, the total of Asian American students rating themselves in the “top 10%” in public speaking compared to “the average student” grew by over 10 percentage points, from 19.1% in 1971 to 30.3% in 2005. Specifically, Asian American males (32.1%) were slightly more likely to rank themselves as high in public speaking ability compared to Asian American females (28.7%) in 2005.

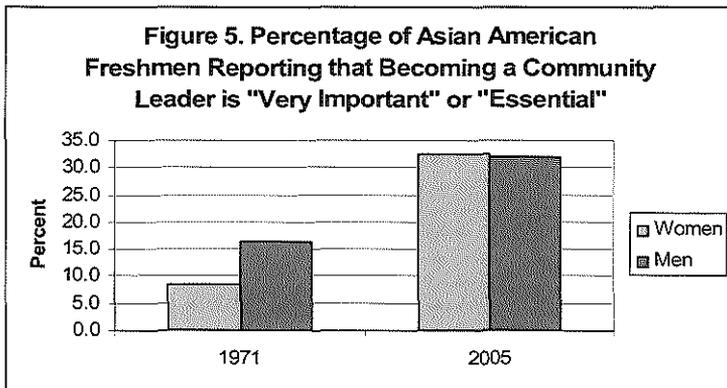
With respect to self-reported leadership ability, we compared Asian American men and women to the overall freshman college population across the decades (see Figure 4).



We found notable differences between Asian Americans and the national first-year college population, as well as differences between men and women within each group. First, Figure 4 shows that in 1971, Asian American women and women from the general first-year college population were roughly equal in their self-rated leadership ability. In contrast, a slightly greater percentage of Asian American men in 1971 rated themselves as being in the top 10% in leadership ability compared to men from the overall college freshman population. However, since 1980, men from the total first-year college population have exceeded the other three comparison groups in their self-rated leadership ability. Furthermore, during the 1980s a similar proportion of female students overall and Asian American male stu-

dents rated themselves in the top 10% in terms of leadership. But since 2000, higher percentages of women from the total first-year college student population have rated themselves in this top leadership category compared to Asian American men. In 2005, a slightly higher percentage of Asian American men than women rated themselves high in leadership ability, whereas men from the overall first-year population were 15 percentage points more likely than Asian American women to consider themselves in the top 10% of potential leaders. In 2005, 64.5% of men overall, 58.7% of women overall, 51.6% of Asian American men, and 49.4% of Asian American females rated themselves as having top leadership abilities.

One key gender gap has closed over the years for Asian American freshmen. As Chang et al. (2007) reported, the percentage of Asian American freshmen stating that becoming a community leader is essential or very important to them rose from 13.0% in 1971 to 32.3% in 2005. In 1971 Asian American men were 10 percentage points more likely than Asian American women to respond in this way regarding community leadership (see Figure 5).



However, by 2005, approximately the same proportion of Asian American men and women expressed a strong desire to become a community leader, as shown in Figure 5. In fact, the percentage of Asian American women was slightly higher than the percentage of Asian American men in 2005 (32.6% versus 32.0%). For Asian American women, the change in self-ratings showed an enormous gain of

over 20 percentage points from 1971 to 2005.

We also assessed responses to the importance of becoming a community leader according to Asian American students' language heritage and citizenship. In 2005, 33.1% of Asian American students who were not native English speakers stated it was a very important or essential objective for them to be a community leader, versus 31.8% of native English speakers. In regards to citizenship, 33.4% of non-citizens and 32.1% of U.S. citizens indicated that being a community leader was very important or essential to them. The data suggest that Asian American students who do not speak English as a first language or who are not yet citizens are just as interested in becoming community leaders as their peers.

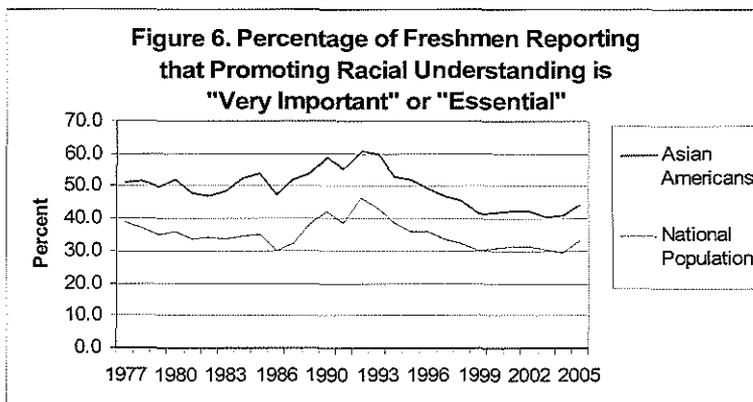
When looking at the survey item measuring the importance of influencing social values, 29.8% of Asian American first-year students in 1971 reported this was an essential or very important priority for them. By 2005, the percentage had risen over 10 percentage points, to 42.3%. Although we cannot be sure of which social values Asian American college students are interested in swaying, a breakdown of their responses to various social and political issues can provide helpful insights into specific areas about which they may be concerned. Table 1 shows the percentage of Asian American freshmen who agreed somewhat or strongly with certain issues over the years; dashes indicate that the item was not included on the CIRP Freshman Survey that particular year. Additionally, the column in Table 1 labeled 2005a provides the national freshman population's response to the item in 2005 for the purpose of comparison (Pryor et al. 2007).

**Table 1. Asian American and National Population College Student**

	1971	1980	1990	2000	2005	2005a
A national health care plan is needed to cover everybody's medical costs	---	68.1	78.9	---	78.1	73.6
Abortion should be legal[ized]	---	62.0	67.5	61.7	62.2	55.2
Affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished	---	---	---	49.5	47.7	48.5
Federal military spending should be increased	---	---	18.6	---	25.7	34.2
It is important to have laws prohibiting homosexual relationships	---	44.8	32.6	25.1	24.7	27.4
Marijuana should be legalized	39.0	31.6	15.4	30.0	32.9	37.7
Racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America	---	---	13.9	18.1	17.3	21.0
Same sex couples should have the right to legal marital status	---	---	---	63.6	65.8	57.9
The death penalty should be abolished	60.0	36.8	27.8	35.4	37.1	33.3
The federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns	---	---	86.9	89.2	84.6	78.7
Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now	---	72.2	---	55.4	63.2	68.2

We can see that over time, Asian American student support for a national healthcare plan and military spending has grown, while they have become less likely to support laws prohibiting homosexual relationships. In 2005, they were slightly more likely than the national population of college freshmen (see column 2005a of Table 1) to support national healthcare, abortion rights, same sex marriage, abolishing the death penalty, and increased gun control.

Finally, the question capturing a student's commitment to promoting racial understanding may be a critical indicator of the extent to which Asian American students will participate in political activism. We found that consistently over almost 30 years that Asian American students were more likely than the overall first-year college student population at four-year institutions to rate promoting racial understanding as an important or essential objective in their lives, as shown in Figure 6.



The difference between the groups' responses was highest in 1985, when Asian American students were 18.6 percentage points more likely to place a high priority on promoting racial understanding. In 2005, Asian American students were 10.8 percentage points more likely than the national population to state this. Overall, fewer students from both the overall first-year and Asian American college student populations have rated this item as a high priority since the early 1990s. However, recent years have seen a slight increase in students from both groups who indicated that advancing racial understanding was a top life objective.

Notably, we found that Asian American first-year students who were not native English speakers were actually slightly more likely than their native English-speaking counterparts to put a high priority on promoting racial understanding. Of those students in 2005 who were not native English speakers, 46.5% stated that improving racial understanding was very important or essential to them, whereas 42.4% of native English speakers declared the same. Similarly, 47.5% of Asian American students who were not citizens, compared to 43.4% who were, reported that helping to achieve greater racial understanding was a fundamental goal for them.

Increasingly, Asian Americans entering four-year colleges and universities have a desire to influence political structures, serve as community leaders, improve race relations, and to be volunteers in their communities. According to the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), today's Asian

American young adults are more likely to be engaged in volunteerism than other racial/ethnic groups (Lopez et al. 2006). CIRP data shows that since 1971, there has also been an increase in Asian American students who rated themselves in the top 10% among their peers in leadership and public speaking abilities. All of these findings present promising trends in expected levels of civic engagement for Asian American students.

Despite the increasing numbers of Asian American students who wish to influence the political structure, the number of Asian Americans in the 18- to 24-year-old age range participating in electoral politics through voting remains relatively low, especially compared to the numbers of Asian Americans in that same age category who are engaged as organizers, activists, and volunteers in local communities. CIRCLE found that Asian Americans are shown to be the most engaged young adult population in community volunteerism and organized fundraisers, but their involvement in electoral politics did not equal their level of volunteerism (Lopez et al. 2006). Thus, a gap exists between the community engagement and political engagement of Asian American college-age students. The concluding section addresses several of the ways that Asian American energy for community involvement can possibly be channeled into greater political participation.

## **Future Challenges and Opportunities for Civic Engagement**

### **Sustaining Asian American Student Activism**

When it comes to civic engagement, Asian Americans can point to a strong historical legacy. In the 1960s and 1970s, Asian American college students participated in the San Francisco State University student strike and the movement to establish Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies programs (Umemoto 1989). At the core of the demands for these academic programs was a call for curricula relevant to the experiences of Asian Americans and their under-served communities. Students wanted academic experiences that would provide them with expertise they could use to solve community problems. Although many of the alumni of the Ethnic Studies movement

have gone on to establish Asian American community-based organizations such as the Asian Law Caucus in San Francisco, few have pursued careers in electoral politics. For Asian Americans, electoral politics remains “the final frontier” (Fong 2001).

What kind of legacy will current Asian American students leave for future generations? Unfortunately, Asian American young adults are still among the least likely to exercise their right to vote. According to CIRCLE, young people in the 18- to 24-year old age range were found to be more likely to participate in their communities and in electoral politics if they followed current events (Lopez et al. 2006). They were also more likely to vote or volunteer if they were asked to do so. However, unlike earlier generations of students, Asian American first-year college students now are less likely to keep up with political affairs or to discuss politics, although recently more students have been pursuing these activities (Chang et al. 2007). It seems there is enormous potential among Asian American college students to make a notable positive difference in shaping the nation’s civic and political landscape. Thus, for the benefit of all college-going young adults, higher education institutions may want to consider increasing efforts to provide service learning opportunities for undergraduates, create more campus-community partnerships, and establish other connections between classroom learning and heightened community or political awareness that will encourage college student civic engagement.

## Awakening the Sleeping Giant

Similar to Latinos in the U.S. two decades ago, Asian Americans are now being called the “new sleeping giant” because of the unfulfilled potential they hold to demonstrate a significant impact at the polls (Ong, Ong, Poon, Nakanishi, Scheven, Terriquez, and Lee 2006). The ability of Asian Americans to exert their political power depends in part on whether the population’s young women and men will become more politically engaged than they are currently. Research on Asian American political engagement and the young adult vote suggests that the Internet can be an important tool to increase the political involvement of younger Asian Americans.

In the time since the Internet has become a part of daily life in the U.S., English-speaking Asian American young adults have been found to be the most active Internet users in the nation (Spooner 2001). According to Tolbert and McNeal (2003), Internet use significantly raises the probability of voting. However, Asian Americans are not as likely as other Internet users to discuss politics (Wellman, Haase, Witte, and Hampton 2001). This finding is consistent with analyses by Chang et al. (2007) who concluded that today's Asian American freshman college students are less likely to participate in political dialogue than their predecessors.

To reverse this trend, Kurien (2007) argues that the Internet can be a critical mechanism for civically and politically mobilizing Asian Americans. Websites such as Sepia Mutiny ([www.sepiamutiny.com](http://www.sepiamutiny.com)), Angry Asian Man ([www.angryasianman.com](http://www.angryasianman.com)), and Reappropriate ([www.reappropriate.com](http://www.reappropriate.com)) collectively receive hundreds of thousands of hits, showing the interest among their young readership in political and social issues. These websites represent informal sources of news about Asian American communities. Their high levels of readership suggest that the web can be leveraged further to increase political activity among Asian American young adults.

Some campaigns have been fueled by Asian American student activists through such websites. Visitors have sent numerous accounts of anti-Asian American hate and bias incidents on college campuses across the country to be posted on the Angry Asian Man website. In 2005, a 21-year-old Asian American student at the University of Michigan, Eugene Kang, ran for a position on the Ann Arbor City Council (Jang 2005). Posts publicizing Kang's historic run for office were published on Angry Asian Man, calling area readers to register and vote for him. Kang lost his party's primary election by just 96 votes. Despite this result, his attempt to become elected into public office can be seen as a significant accomplishment for any college student and serves as an example of the untapped promise of Asian American political involvement.

Another example that reflects the powerful influence of the Internet is the infamous "macaca" incident from the 2006 Virginia Senate race, when Republican candidate George Allen was caught on video greeting S.R. Sidarth, a Virginia native of Indian descent as

“macaca,” telling him, “Welcome to America!” After the clip was posted online and went viral, history was made in what *Rolling Stone* magazine called “The First YouTube Election” (Dickinson 2006). Allen, previously mentioned as a future presidential contender, lost the race. As the incident shows, when Asian American college students become involved in politics, their very presence can cause the public to ask the simple, crucial question: Who is an American? By continuing to challenge the perpetual foreigner myth and leverage the potential of the Internet and social networking, this and future generations of young Asian Americans are well positioned to make a unique impact on the course of U.S. politics.

## Growing Leadership among Asian American Students

The findings presented in this chapter suggest that Asian American students are prepared to realize their civic and political potential. A significant number of Asian American first-year college students wish to shape the political structure and see the government take more action to address community problems. Many identify with having solid leadership and public speaking skills – two competencies that are very important for serving as elected officeholders or assuming other community leadership positions. If these patterns keep following an upward trajectory, more young Asian Americans will view themselves as highly qualified for leadership roles both on campuses and beyond, thus giving Asian Americans stronger footing to step into positions of community influence and political power.

Another critical skill is the ability to build multi-racial coalitions and support (Saito 2001a), which Kang needed to achieve given the relatively low numbers of Asian American residents in Ann Arbor, Michigan. However, with the passage of anti-affirmative action measures in several states over the last decade, many Asian American students are missing out on opportunities to benefit from racially diverse learning environments (Hing 2001). This raises concern, given that cross-racial interaction has been linked to higher levels of interest in civic issues for students (Chang, Astin, and Kim 2004). Racial diversity in higher education is critical not only to expose Asian American students to varying viewpoints in the classroom but to mo-

tivate them towards greater political and community activism.

One way higher education and community organizations can encourage Asian American students to become more politically involved is to provide more internship experiences directly related to politics and capitalize on the tendency for Asian American college students, especially women, to indicate interest in community action programs, as demonstrated by the trends data we presented. While there are internship opportunities targeting Asian American college students in Washington, DC, a considerable number of them are unpaid. Given an under-representation of Asian Americans in political careers, organizations looking to increase minority young adult involvement in political leadership should seek out Asian American college students for their participation and offer support for those with financial needs. Existing internship and fellowship programs, such as the Capitol Fellows Program in Sacramento or the University of California's Washington Center, should be conscious in their outreach efforts to ensure that Asian American young adults are not being unintentionally excluded from these position openings. Use of Internet-based publicity would likely be a viable and low-cost means of increasing Asian American applications.

Providing college-age Asian Americans with constructive opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue about current events, and connecting them with volunteer experiences in the community may be another strategy to increase their political involvement. Overall, there is a renewed call for institutions of higher education to fulfill their missions of service and learn to develop well-rounded, civically engaged leaders (Ehrlich 2000). For Asian American Studies programs, one method to increase Asian American civic engagement is to call on majors and minors to fulfill a civic engagement course requirement involving service learning that draws students into local communities. Such requirements should also provide opportunities for engagement in electoral politics. Moreover, service learning courses within other departments should incorporate Asian American community sites when possible in order to raise awareness about the diverse needs of Asian American populations.

As the number of Asian American college students continues to grow and the desire among these students to be engaged in their com-

munities as volunteers, activists, and leaders increases, colleges and universities have a responsibility to provide intentional service learning or civic engagement curricular and co-curricular opportunities for all students. As the trends data indicate, the 1990s were unpromising years for community and political involvement for both Asian American students and the overall national college-going population. There were notable declines in commitments to promoting racial understanding and environmental clean-up, discussing politics, and keeping up to date with political affairs. Since 2000, however, greater percentages of students have expressed a desire to be involved in their communities through civic and political education and action, particularly in the area of community service. If higher education institutions can create avenues for Asian Americans and other college students to link their service experiences with continued commitments to community involvement and social change, we might see a growth in concerned Asian American citizens who are more apt to engage in political activism, including electoral politics.

Although these increases in civic engagement are hopeful, the future is uncertain for Asian American young adults. Thus, it is critical for universities and community-based organizations to actively promote civic engagement for Asian American students during these formative college years to set the stage for greater civic and political participation in future decades. By providing opportunities like service learning courses, internships, and diverse learning environments, higher education can work to help Asian American college students improve their societal impact through civic engagement. Now is the time for higher education and community leaders to address the gap between Asian American civic involvement and Asian American political participation — to fulfill their missions of serving the diversity of their students and serving their communities.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Weighting is used to readjust the over- and under-representation of certain types of institutions based on 26 stratification cells. Cells are based on control (public or private), type (four-year college or university), and selectivity (average SAT composite score of the freshman class). A detailed explanation of cell stratification and weighting can be found in Appendix A: Research Methodology of *The American Freshman: Forty-Year Trends* (Pryor et al., 2007).



# Engaging Online

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## Introduction

The Internet has rapidly become a familiar communications medium at the workplace, at home, and on the streets. To appreciate the speed of penetration, consider that fact that back in 1997, according to U.S. census statistics, less than a fifth of American households (18.6%) had Internet access at home. But by 2003, a majority (54.6%) did, and over a third of those with connections had broadband (U.S. Department of Commerce 2004). Still more recent surveys have found that over two-thirds of Americans have access to the Internet at home (68.1%), and over two-thirds of the connected enjoy broadband (USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future 2007). Without question, we are getting increasingly “wired.”

Fortunately, this trend has not passed Asian Americans by. To the contrary, Asian Americans appear to have Internet access that is at least as high or higher than the rate enjoyed by other racial groups, including non-Hispanic Whites.<sup>1</sup> Of course, with any “model minority”-consistent statistics, we should be wary of upward biased measurements. Specifically, these surveys are conducted in English (sometimes also Spanish), which means that Asian Americans (a third who have limited English proficiency) who are not able or willing to answer long surveys over the telephone in English are undercounted. This selection bias inflates the numbers because those with limited English have lower Internet connectivity.

In addition, we should be mindful of the large variance among the various ethnic communities that constitute Asian America. Ten Asian American ethnic groups have high school completion rates that are below the national average. Further, thirteen percent of Asian

Americans live in poverty, compared to the national average of 12% (APALC 2006). Because education and income correlate positively with Internet use, the high averages about Asian American connectivity conceal substantial variance, with specific subpopulations potentially many standard deviations below the mean.

Still, it remains fair to say that Asian Americans as a racial group are on average well-connected to the Internet. *What then are the implications for Asian American civic engagement?* By “civic engagement,” I mean the various ways in which individuals engage social, legal, and political institutions that extend past the boundaries of the family or the marketplace. This capacious definition includes not only politics in the forms of voting, donating time and money to campaigns, and debating political options but also engagements with civil society. Moreover, such engagements do not have to be serious or lofty; instead, they can revolve around hobbies (e.g., hiking), interests (e.g., gadgets), aesthetics (e.g., runway fashion), even celebrities (e.g., fan clubs).

The Internet clearly has had a large impact on civic engagement, defined in this broad sense. But even in core political domains, we see remarkable findings. For example, the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that during the 2004 campaign, 52% of Internet users went online to get information about the elections; 35% used e-mail to engage in political discussions; 11% directly engaged in campaign activities, such as donating money and volunteering. The survey found that 23% of respondents claimed that using the Internet for political engagement encouraged them to vote (Rainie et al. 2005).

Data specific to Asian American usage are limited, but what exists indicate that the Internet is a vitally important source of political and government information. A special 2001 Pew report found that nearly half of (English-speaking) Asian Americans used the internet to “get political news and information” (49%) and to “visit a government Web site” (47%) (Spooner 2001). These proportions are comparable to those for Whites and higher than for African Americans and Latinos, although as explained above, the Asian American figures may be biased upward.

Given the growing importance of the Internet, it seems worthwhile to examine, even speculate about, its implications for Asian

American civic engagement. This essay answers that call. The first part examines how Asian Americans are using online communities right now, with special focus on ethnic-specific forms of Internet-mediated engagements. In part two, this essay explores a specific aspect of political engagement - voting - which may soon be strongly influenced by the Internet. Finally, the third part reaches out still farther in time, to imagine how the increasing significance of computer-mediated communications might alter or disrupt how race operates both online and off, and what that might mean for Asian America.

## I. Now: Online Communities

The academic literature has highlighted various Asian American online communities. For instance, a much publicized example is SAUNET, the South Asian Women Network (<http://sawnet.org>), which is a "forum for and about women from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka" (South Asian Women's NETwork). It is a moderated mailing list for adult women only, run by a group of volunteer moderators, with a companion website regularly updated with news links and resources on useful topics (e.g., "domestic violence").

The book *AsianAmerica.Net*, edited by Professors Rachel Lee and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, pulls together additional case studies (Lee and Wong 2003). For instance, Kim-An Lieberman describes how Vietnamese nationalists, both in the United States and elsewhere, have taken strong political stances online on Websites and newsgroups. In turn, these cyber engagements have helped shape a modern Vietnamese identity and even a translation of the Vietnamese language to ASCII text. Vinay Lal critiques the Hindu Student Council's Global Hindu Electronic Network (GHEN), which he suggests propagates Hindutva philosophy and "aggressive Hindu nationalism." Yuan Shu describes the rise of two different Chinese language networks — Chinese News Digest (created in direct response to the political strife that would lead to the Tiananmen massacre) and Chinese Media Net (self-styled as a CNN for Chinese) — which have come to cater to different political viewpoints for Chinese in North America. Emily Noelle Ignacio describes how Filipinos in America

and the Philippines use the Internet to share jokes that both reaffirm and reproduce Filipino culture and identity.

These examples display certain patterns. First, these online communities tend to be ethnic-specific. Second, and related, they tend to be transnational, linking immigrant communities with their countries of origin. Why might this be so?

Anyone who reads or writes a blog knows that the Internet decreases the cost of producing and distributing information such that speakers who would not have had the audience necessary to survive in the print world may nevertheless flourish in cyberspace. The Internet also decreases the significance of physical distance or geographic dispersion especially when what is being exchanged is information. When groups are talking in a chat room or exchanging posts in a web forum, the physical distance separating the community members is essentially irrelevant. Accordingly, the underlying economics of information production and exchange on the Internet permits widely dispersed populations who share some common interest or connection to form online communities that both substitute for and enhance offline communities.

This technological advantage seems perfectly suited for the needs of various Asian diasporas: communities tied together by ethnicity, culture, immigration experience, and language can bridge physical distance through online networks. Put another way, although the Internet can help facilitate a local condominium association's deliberations, the Internet provides comparatively far greater cost savings in facilitating communications across thousands of people separated by thousands of miles spanning oceans.

Another factor that likely influences community adoption of online technologies is the intensity of interest within that community. Again, we should not be surprised that ethnicity drives some of that interest. Immigrants and their children are often highly motivated to maintain homeland connections. Familial, social, and cultural ties are powerfully felt.

I do not want to exaggerate these observations. For example, there are many Asian American online communities that are pan-Asian in framing and participation, with focus on domestic politics or social exchange. A political example is [modelminority.com](http://modelminority.com), which

has the following subtitle: "A Guide to Asian American Empowerment." A more social example is <AsianAvenue.com>. In some sense, what is taking place online tracks the ways in which Asian people have formed social, civil, and political communities off-line. The typical pattern is to construct an ethnic-specific social or civil institution by tapping into shared culture, experience, history, and language. But soon thereafter, and often simultaneously, pan-ethnic social and civil institutions are built, with less emphasis on culture and homeland countries and more emphasis on politics and domestic matters.

In short, Asian Americans are participating in various online communities. Not surprisingly, many of the most vibrant, thriving communities are ethnic-specific and transnational. But as in the offline world, there are many communities that are pan-Asian and more domestic and political in orientation.

## II. Soon: Online Voting

The Internet has had a general positive effect on Asian American participation in both civic and political processes. In this part, I discuss how in the near future, the Internet might have an especially significant impact on online voting. By "online voting" I mean to adopt a broad definition. In its boldest form, it could mean casting a valid vote remotely "through any computer-mediated device (e.g., desktop computer, cellular telephone, personal digital assistant, Internet appliance) connected through a network, such as the Internet" (Kang 2001, 1155 n.1). Or, more modestly, it could mean online-assisted voting, which could entail reading some bar code or radio frequency identification (RFID) tag on the ballot sheet with one's mobile phone, and immediately receiving contextual information including specific voting recommendations, all inside the traditional ballot booth.

Any discussion of online voting should raise alarms associated with direct-recording electronic (DRE) voting machines, which have failed abysmally. Manufactured by incompetent and untrustworthy firms, they have been adopted pell-mell by non-expert government bureaucrats without sound scientific or engineering advice. These machines feature remarkably poor security and suffer from an embarrassing lack of transparency, which further erodes trust. That said,

these failures are political more than technological. In other words, I am confident that over the long term, we will see computer voting that generates voter-verifiable paper audit trails that ensure voting integrity and secrecy.<sup>ii</sup>

For readers skeptical that online voting will ever become commonplace, consider the fact that we already allow remote voting in the form of snail mail via absentee ballots. For example, “in the 1978 California general election, 314,258 absentee votes were cast (4.41% of all votes cast); but by the 2004 general election, 4,104,179 absentee votes were cast (32.61% of all votes cast)” (Alvarez et al. 2005). For those who think that hacking threats make online voting a fantasy, consider how mainstream online banking has become, which allows massive fund transfers at the click of a key. In sum, online voting is not so implausible; certainly, online-assisted voting is just around the corner if not here already.

## Getting Out the Vote

If lower voting turnout is driven partly by the transaction costs of voting (physically getting to the ballot box through rush hour traffic or bad weather), then online voting can increase turnout. Because Asian Americans, at least English speaking ones, are as well connected to the Internet as any other racial group, there is no reason to be concerned about a negative disparate racial impact on Asian Americans. Whether there is a disparate impact on other racial minority groups is an important but separate question (Alvarez and Nagler 2001).<sup>iii</sup>

What about the non-English speakers? Current immigration and demographic projections predict that by 2030, Asian Americans will make up 7.1% of the United States population. What’s interesting is that a majority of them (52.2%) will probably still be foreign-born. Will these Asians, many of them with limited English skills, be left on the sidelines?

Perhaps not. Consider how online (or online-assisted) voting can tackle the critical problem of limited English proficiency, which is a serious obstacle to voting. For instance, one exit poll study of the 2006 midterm elections by the Asian American Legal and Education

Fund (AALDEF) reported that “nearly half of all [4,700] voters surveyed (46%) needed interpreters to vote, and 38% used translated written materials” (AALDEF 2007, 2). In a state such as California, ballots often feature complex initiatives or referenda on a broad range of issues as complicated as term limits and HMO regulation. Even native speakers have difficulty understanding what’s going on. For those with limited English, understanding is nearly impossible.

Unfortunately, translating ballot and election materials into just a few of the popular Asian languages — Mandarin, Hindi, Tagalog, Korean, Vietnamese — is cost-prohibitive in the print world. Although federal law (the Language Minority Provision of the Voting Rights Act) and state election law sometimes require translations, often the trigger for such requirements (a minimum percentage of voting-age citizens must be members of a single language minority group) is not technically satisfied. Even when it is, the requirements are sometimes resisted or inadequately implemented (Electionline.org 2006).

Here the Internet could be leveraged, either by the state or by private actors, to produce and distribute the relevant explanatory materials in Asian languages. Very crude translations can be made available at nearly zero marginal cost using existing services such as Google translate <<http://translate.google.com>>. More accurate translations created by bilingual humans are more expensive to produce, but once created, they can be distributed at nearly zero marginal cost. Examples of such multi-lingual voter education and ballot translation initiatives exist. But, just-in-time translations, available in a multitude of Asian languages — all made possible through the Internet — could be a substantial boon to Asian voting.

### **New Intermediaries**

But maybe the suggestion that motivated voters will engage in online translations of difficult ballot materials to make the right policy choice is naively optimistic. Frankly, even when our English is excellent, we will often not know how to vote on a particular question (think about some complex referendum) or candidate (think about some school board or judicial retention election). Often, choosing in-

telligently between one option and the other requires research that we simply lack the time or interest to complete. In such cases, we will not vote at all, or at least not on that matter — unless we can turn to trusted intermediaries for recommendations. By “trusted intermediaries,” I mean individuals, organizations, or entities that can serve as rough proxies for one’s own values and judgment. Examples include: political parties; ethnic press, which for example, has covered the 2008 presidential election aggressively (Santos 2008); local politicians; political action committees; nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)<sup>iv</sup>; media celebrities; and public intellectuals.

Again, such recommendations are regularly made through paper voter guides from the local peace officer association, the Republican party, and the like. But as explained, paper mailings are expensive. By contrast, spreading recommendations through the Internet is cheap. Thus, new breeds of political intermediaries are made possible. The restraint is no longer the cash necessary to print and distribute voting guides; instead, the constraint is the degree to which the voters’ trust and cognitive attention can be won by a particular intermediary.

So, in the actual online voting scenario, imagine the following: [Consider] the electronic extension of the paper voter guides we already receive in the mail before Election Day. But the e-version can be far more than an html or pdf version of the paper mailing. Instead, it could be a website that frames the ballot website and “checks” off the recommended votes with the user having to do nothing but click the “submit” button. In fact, on 12:01 a.m. Election Day, trusted political organizations could send to their constituents or target audiences an e-mail with the appropriate URL for this assisted voting site. Two clicks, and you are done. To be sure, security protocols may require some changes in this approach of facilitated e-voting. In addition to the e-mail, there may have to be small software programs, a.k.a. “applets,” delivered as well (Kang 2001, 1168).

In the more modest online-assisted voting scenario, imagine receiving just-in-time election recommendations in the ballot booth — all with explanations why, to the extent that we are curious. No doubt some will complain that such technology-assisted voting invites not

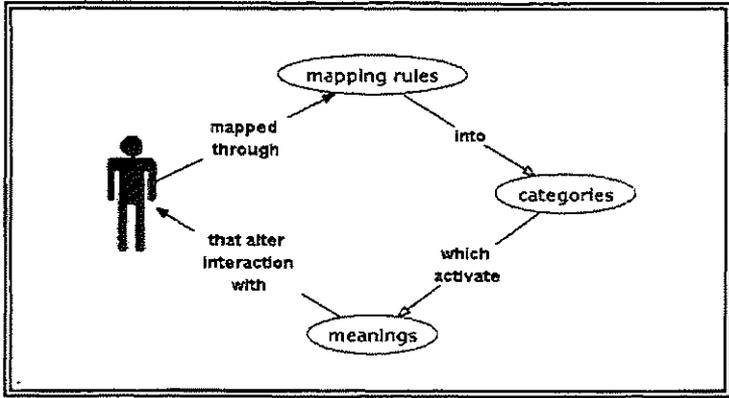
individualized deliberation but mindless adherence to some third party's recommendation. (There may also be some legal constraints against cell phones with cameras being brought into polling booths in order to deter vote buying.)<sup>v</sup> But a more realistic assessment asks whether individualized deliberation is the accurate baseline for comparison. As compared to randomly voting for or against some initiative, or not voting on that item at all, or even voting straight along crude party recommendations, online-assisted voting enables a citizen to defer to a trusted intermediary (such as Amnesty International or the Sierra Club), who is more narrowly tailored to her particular values or loyalties.

Online(-assisted) voting enables a new set of intermediaries poor in money but rich in community trust to engage in political recommendations. My guess is that there are many such potential intermediaries within the Asian American communities. So, a political action committee such as the 80-20 Initiative, ([www.80-20initiative.net/](http://www.80-20initiative.net/)), which tries to produce 80% of the Asian American vote to swing an election, could be more effective through just such technologies. Grassroots organizations such as AsianAmericansforObama.com ([www.asianamericansforobama.com](http://www.asianamericansforobama.com)) could do the same for their preferred candidate. Celebrities, as well as elected political officials, could communicate their judgments. Indeed, even academics and their think tanks could provide useful recommendations on various policy initiatives or specific candidates (Kang 2008).<sup>vi</sup>

### III. Later: Cyber-race

In the prior part, we focused on a concrete problem — voting — and speculated how Asian Americans could do more of it and differently, via the Internet, in the near future. Let us now speculate still further along the time horizon to ask a provocative question: In what ways might online engagements alter the fundamental ways that race functions both online and off? To appreciate this as an intelligible question, we must first parse a simple model of “racial mechanics.”

Consider the following diagram, which explains how race influences a simple bilateral interaction between some perceiver and target individual.



As I have described in prior work:

Through law and culture, society provides us (the perceivers) with a set of racial categories into which we map an individual human being (the target) according to prevailing rules of racial mapping. Once a person is assigned to a racial category, implicit and explicit racial meanings associated with that category are triggered. These activated racial meanings then influence our interpersonal interaction (Kang 2005, 1499).

The refrain that “race is a social construction” familiar in Critical Race Studies can be recast in terms of this racial mechanics model. Each of the ovals — the racial *mapping rules*, the racial *categories*, and the racial *meanings* associated with those categories — are provided neither by nature nor deity. To the contrary, each is a product of human culture, history, politics, and agency—in these senses, social constructions.

To be more concrete, consider the set of racial *categories* that are in operation today, and how they have changed over time based on both the “science” of the day as well as administrative understandings (consider, e.g., shifting census categories). Back in 1977, the Census considered “Asian or Pacific Islander” as one of the four principal racial categories (with American Indian or Alaskan Native, Black, White, and Some Other Race). As of 1997, the Census added a new racial category by segmenting Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Is-

lander off from the Asian category (with American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African American, White, and Some Other Race) (U.S. Census Bureau nd(b)). For those curious why Latino/as are not mentioned, "Hispanic" has always been deemed an "ethnicity" variable, not a "racial" one. Thus Hispanics may be of any race.

Consider also how *mapping rules* are socially constructed. For example, when it was first passed in 1790, the federal naturalization statute only permitted "free white persons" to naturalize. After the civil war, in 1870, that statute was amended to include persons of African descent or nativity. But what about Asians? In *Ozawa v. United States*, 260 U.S. 178 (1922), the Supreme Court clarified that Japanese were not "white" because that term should be understood to mean "Caucasian." Whatever the Japanese were, they were certainly not Caucasian.

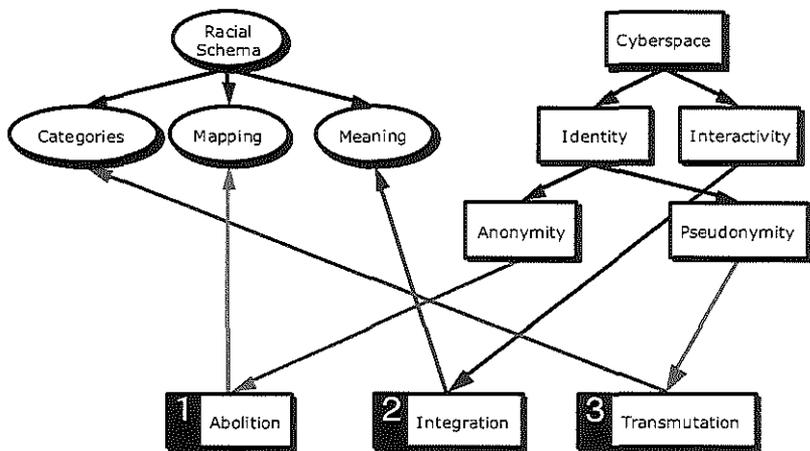
The very next year, Bhagat Singh Thind took advantage of *Ozawa's* "white equals Caucasian" formula and argued that the best science of the day recognized "Hindus" as Caucasian (*United States v. Thind*, 261 U.S. 204 [1923]). Accordingly, Thind should be deemed White and allowed to naturalize. When confronted with this logical but undesirable consequence of their prior holding, the Supreme Court simply changed its mind. The Supreme Court backtracked and said that "white" really should be understood in terms of its plain meaning, not according to any scientific discourse, which was itself confusing. And according to this plain meaning, the legislature that passed the naturalization statute would have instinctively rejected Thind as not White.

Finally, it should be obvious that the racial *meanings* associated with the Asian American category are highly malleable, changing sometimes dramatically. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Asians (consider the Chinese) were viewed as lying illegal immigrants cheating themselves through the Chinese Exclusion laws to infiltrate the United States. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, East Asians became the model minority. Of course, the "model minority" stereotype can quickly transmogrify into the "yellow peril" (Kang 1993). But one cannot deny that stereotypes and attitudes toward Asian Americans have changed substantially, and in complex ways, in the past century.

Having sketched out a model of racial mechanics, we now focus

on the Internet. First, we have already observed that cyberspace allows for greater *interactivity* with other persons who may not be within the same geographic community but nevertheless inhabit some joint community of interest. Second, the Internet allows identity to be expressed or performed differently because we typically avoid the architecture of face-to-face interactions. In particular, the Internet often allows for both racial *anonymity* as well as *pseudonymity*. For example, in text-based interactions, we cannot see the human body, which means that we cannot apply informal visual-based mapping rules to place an individual into a racial category according to looks. To be sure, text may provide information (e.g., surname or ancestry, “slang,” or even zip code), which can be used to map roughly or tentatively an individual into some racial category, but such information need not be shared, in which case, racial anonymity is preserved. As for pseudonymity, in various online arenas including virtual worlds such as Second Life, an individual can create some identity, represented by name and avatar, which persists over time, but need not in any way represent a race generally or represent the same race that that individual represents off-line. In other words, online we can engage in a form of “cyber-passing.”

By cross-applying the racial mechanics model with the flexibilities introduced by Internet communications, we can see that the Internet can potentially disrupt racial mechanics in three ways. First, anonymity can disrupt “racial mapping” in pursuit of what might be called an *abolition* paradigm. Second, greater interactivity can alter the cache of “racial meanings” in pursuit of what might be called an *integration* paradigm. This is just a cyber version of the social contact hypothesis, which suggests that under the right circumstances of repeat cooperative engagements, attitudes between groups can improve. This is the liberal hope latent in racially integrated schools and neighborhoods. Finally, pseudonymity can challenge our complacent acceptance of the various racial categories given to us by culture and law (and their connection to biology) in the pursuit of what might be called a *transmutation* paradigm. If we flit through multiple identities online, perhaps our very conception of racial identity can be reworked in anti-essentialist ways. Schematically, the three options look like this:



To repeat, Internet anonymity disrupts racial mapping to produce abolition. Internet interactivity reforms racial meaning to promote integration. Internet pseudonymity unravels our presumptions about racial categories in the service of transmutation.

In prior work, I have examined these three paths and pointed out that society does not have to adopt a single design strategy for all of cyberspace (Kang 2000). Instead, we can intentionally diversify our policy risk and zone different cyber spaces in accordance with different racial environments. For instance, I suggest that most market places be zoned abolition: in such zones, Asian Americans cannot be given worse offers in product purchases, leases, and the like because racial mapping is made impossible. Consider, for instance, how using a car-buying agent who charges a flat fee above dealer's invoice can racially anonymize a buyer, which then prevents the possibility of racially discriminatory negotiations.

But the focus of this essay is not the marketplace but civil society and the political realm. In these domains, I have argued in favor of integration as the recommended zoning strategy, with special emphasis on establishing those environmental characteristics that social psychologists have long identified as being crucial to decreasing racial bias. The basic idea is that Internet-mediated interactions can help improve attitudes and decrease stereotypes about Asian Americans.

If this seems far-fetched, consider the following data. The 2001 Pew Special Report pointed out that 72% of (English-speaking) Asian Americans used the Internet to seek out hobby information, and that 32% of them engaged in online chat, which entails going into virtual “rooms” to discuss matters of common interest. This sort of online interaction need not be superficial (Spooner 2001). The Center for Digital Future’s most recent report defined an online community as “a group that shares thoughts or ideas, or works on common projects, through electronic communication only” (CDF 2007, 97). These online communities are of various natures, ranging from “professional, social, relationships, spiritual, hobbies, and politics.” According to its survey, those who participate in online communities seem to take them quite seriously. For example, 67.2% thought the community was very important or extremely important. This attitude is reflected in their time commitments: 56.6% log into their community at least once a day, during which time they post messages (18.8%); talk to any available member (8.7%); browse for information (7.0%); or ask for help (2.7%). (*Id.* at 97-98)

The online community interaction often translates into some real world engagement as well. For instance, 20.3% said that they take offline actions, such as attending a meeting, at least once a year that is related to their online community. (*Id.* at 99) Interestingly, 43.7% also claim that they have participated more in “social activism” since they got involved in online communities. Relatedly, 29.7% claim that their involvement in nonprofit organizations have increased since Internet usage (69.6% stayed the same) (102).

All this suggests that Asian Americans can use the Internet to engage in online communities addressing hobbies, art, culture, politics and the like, and that these engagements can be deep, persistent, and cooperative—which satisfy some of the conditions necessary for social contact to decrease racial prejudice. So, to take a simple example, someone living in Idaho who has never before befriended an Asian American, partly due to the fact that so few live in that vicinity, may come to “meet” one online through some common interest, such as cooking or foreign policy. That actual experience could alter the racial meanings that the Idahoan had previously about Asian Americans, which were produced by what might be called vicarious

interactions — principally, stories or images consumed through mass media.

Even more intriguing is the possibility of a slight delay in racial decloaking. At the beginning of some online engagement, suppose that participants of a community know each other only by username, which prevents racial mapping into the Asian category. After some interactions, suppose that the racial cloak is lifted through some biographical detail that is revealed. An interaction partner, whose race was previously not salient (i.e. presumed to be White), turns out to be Asian (or Black or Latino). An online user interface that merges a short-term abolition approach with a long-term integration approach could facilitate interactions that might have been otherwise biased or short-circuited by pre-existing biases.

Although this is a mere sketch of a more complicated argument, the general points can be easily summarized: the Internet enables intriguing strategies of abolition, integration, and transmutation that Asian Americans can benefit from. How, then, does this connect back to civic engagement? The most important linkage, in my view, is promoting integration. The Internet will allow individuals that are physically separated to interact in a community driven by shared interests and commitments. As already explained, although some of these shared interests will be common ethnicity, most will not. This means that many Americans who live in areas with negligible Asian American populations might interact with them for the first time online. And if these engagements are structured in a particular way, then negative attitudes toward Asian Americans could improve and stereotypes of Asian Americans could be weakened.

## Conclusion

The Internet provides new ways to promote various forms of civic engagement. It can, for example, facilitate the creation of online communities, which can range from the ethnic-specific and transnational to the more pan-Asian and domestic. The Internet and related communications technologies can make possible online voting and online-assisted voting. Finally, the Internet can facilitate interracial interactions that can rework the racial meanings associated with the

Asian American racial category.

For Asian Americans, the obstacles to such Internet-assisted civic engagement is not any digital divide. To the contrary, on matters of connectivity, Asian Americans seem to have an edge (at least on average). What's more important is how this connectivity is leveraged. Much of the increase in civic engagement will happen naturally, as the Internet becomes an ever richer medium through which we explore our interests and commitments. That said, specific user interface interventions – such as those that promote an integration paradigm – can produce superior environments.

In my view, those especially interested in Asian American political engagement should experiment aggressively with the “trusted intermediary” idea. The goal would be to offer a localized recommendation clearance site, which matches Asian American voters with the views of Asian American trusted intermediaries. For instance, for states that elect judges, it would not be difficult to have local Asian American law faculty who enjoy a “trusted” status to make recommendations and provide the reasons why. Those recommendations could be translated into multiple Asian languages and pushed out through various electronic media, including the Internet. If such a system works well in one election, it will be viewed as a useful resource in the next election.

Engaging online presents tremendous opportunity for Asian Americans. With some forethought, that opportunity can be translated to greater civic and political engagement.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> According to the NTIA, as of October 2003, Asian Americans appeared to have at least as much access to the Internet as Whites. For example, on basic *usage of the Internet anywhere* (e.g., school, home, work), approximately 63.1% of Asian Americans and 65.1% of Whites used the Internet somewhere, as compared to 45.6% of Blacks and 37.2% of Hispanics. If we change the measure to the percentage who *live in a broadband household*, Asian Americans were clearly at the top: 34.2%, as compared to Whites (25.7%), Blacks (14.2%), and Hispanic (12.6%). (NTIA, 2004, Appendix Table 1)
- <sup>ii</sup> See, e.g., <Punchscan.org>.
- <sup>iii</sup> Finding that in the 2000 Arizona Democratic primary, those who voted using the Internet were more female, more urban, and less minority than those who voted using paper ballots (R. Michael Alvarez and Jonathan Nagler, "The Likely Consequences of Internet Voting for Political Representation").
- <sup>iv</sup> Ethnic organizations such as the Organization of Chinese Americans., the Japanese American Citizens League, and the National Korean American Service and Education Consortium regularly issue "action alerts" on various policy issues. Civil rights organizations such as the Asian Law Caucus, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, and the Asian American Justice Center do the same. Other organizations, such as the Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum (APIAHF) and the Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations (AAPCHO), focus on specific subject matter areas, such as health.
- <sup>v</sup> See, e.g. Ga. Code Ann. § 21-2-413(e) ("No elector shall use photographic or other electronic monitoring or recording devices or cellular telephones while such elector is within the enclosed space in a polling place.").
- <sup>vi</sup> See, e.g., Jerry Kang, *Why Obama*, Korea Times, Feb. 4, 2008 (in Korean); Jerry Kang, *Obama and Ozawa*, National Law Journal, March 21, 2008.



Part II  
Racial  
& Ethnic  
Identification



# Asian American Panethnicity: Challenges and Possibilities

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## Introduction

In a 1999 article published in *Gidra*, an activist Asian American news magazine, Naomi Iwasaki (1999, under "Asian American or Not") writes, "You know, the hardest thing about pan-Asian solidarity is the 'pan' part. It forces us all to step outside of our comfort zones, whether they be constructed by ethnicity, class, home city, identity, whatever." Iwasaki's statement calls attention to the social constructedness of pan-ethnicity — panethnic identities are self-conscious products of political choice and actions, not of inherited phenotypes, bloodlines, or cultural traditions. Panethnic movements and organizations bring diverse cultural groups together in cooperation around shared political goals. In the United States, examples of panethnic groups include the Native American, the Latino, and the Asian American. Despite their distinct histories and separate identities, these groups have at times united to protect and advance their collective interests. Since numbers count in the American political structure, many racialized groups have determined that their civic engagement — that is, their efforts to promote social change through participation in the larger democratic process and/or through grassroots community organizing — is more effective when they organize panethnically (Cornell 1988; Espiritu 1992; Saito 1998).

In my 1992 publication *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*, I identify the twin roots of Asian American panethnicity — in the racialization of Asian national groups by dominant groups and in Asian Americans' responses to those constructions. I argue that the racist constructions of Asians as

homogeneous and interchangeable spawn important alliances and affiliations among ethnic and immigrant groups of Asian origin. Adopting the dominant group's categorization of them, Asian Americans have institutionalized pan-Asianism as their political instrument, thereby enlarging their own capacities to challenge and transform the existing structure of power. In other words, Asian Americans did not just adopt the pan-Asian concept but also transformed it to conform to their political, economic, and ideological needs.

In the four decades since the emergence of the pan-Asian concept in the late 1960s, Asian American communities have changed in dramatic ways. No longer constrained by race-based exclusion laws, Asian immigrants began arriving in much larger numbers than before. Many of the post-1965 immigrants have little direct experience with the Asian American movement and little reason to think of themselves as Asian American rather than as immigrants, as low-wage workers, or as members of different national and ethnic groups (Espiritu et al. 2000, 131). Moreover, recent immigration has further diversified Asian Americans along cultural, generational, economic, and political lines — all of which have compounded the difficulties of forging pan-Asian identities and institutions. This chapter reviews the role of panethnicity in Asian American civic and political engagement, paying particular attention to the ways in which pan-Asian identities and institutions have been complicated and transformed by the post-1965 immigration.

## **Coming Together: The Emergence of Pan-Asianism**

Asians in the United States have always been active in civic engagement — from striking for higher wages and better working conditions to challenging laws that denied them civil rights to supporting political movements to liberate their homelands (Chan 1991, ch. 5). However, it was not until the late 1960s, with the advent of the Asian American movement, that a pan-Asian consciousness and constituency were first formed. The development of a pan-Asian consciousness and constituency reflected broader societal developments and demographic changes as well as the group's political agenda. Be-

fore World War II, pan-Asian unity was not feasible because the predominantly foreign born Asian population did not share a common language. During the postwar years, owing to immigration restrictions and the growing dominance of the second and even third generations, U.S.-born Asians outnumbered immigrants. By 1960 approximately two-thirds of the Asian populations in California had been born in the United States (Ong 1989, 5-8). With English as the common language, persons from different Asian backgrounds were able to communicate with one another (Ling 1984, 73) and in so doing to create a common identity associated with the United States. Also, the breakdown of economic and residential barriers during the postwar period provided the first opportunity for an unprecedented number of Asian Americans to come into intimate, sustained contact with the larger society — and with one another. Formerly homogeneous, the Asian ethnic enclaves started to house mixed-Asian communities, as well as non-Asian groups. Multigroup suburban centers also emerged. Paul Wong (1972, 34) reported that since the early 1960s Asian Americans of diverse national origins had moved into the suburbs outside the major Asian communities such as Berkeley and San Mateo, California. Although a small proportion of the local population, these Asian Americans tended to congregate in pockets; consequently, in some residential blocks a majority of the residents were Asian Americans.

Although broader social struggles and internal demographic changes provided the impetus for the Asian American movement, it was the Asian Americans' politics — explicitly radical, confrontational, and pan-Asian — that shaped the movement's content. Inspired by anticolonial revolutions in Asia and by black and Chicano revolutionary nationalism, college students of Asian ancestry sought to transcend inter-Asian ethnic divisions and to ally themselves with other "Third World" minorities (Blauner 1972, ch. 2; Omatsu 1994). Through pan-Asian organizations, publications, and Asian American studies programs, Asian American activists forged a pan-Asian consciousness by highlighting their shared resistance to Western imperialism and to U.S. racism. The pan-Asian concept enabled diverse Asian American groups to understand their "unequal circumstances and histories as being related" (Lowe 1991, 30). By the mid-1970s,

“Asian American” had become a familiar term (Lott 1976, 30). Although first coined by college activists, the pan-Asian concept began to be used extensively by professional and community spokespersons to lobby for the welfare, health and business interests of Americans of Asian descent. Pan-Asian media such as *Amerasia Journal*, *Asian Week* newspaper and *AsiAm* magazine have also been established. Moreover, single ethnic organizations such as the Japanese American Citizens League and the Organization of Chinese Americans began to take up issues that affect all Asians. Commenting on the “literally scores of pan-Asian organizations” in the mid-1970s, William Liu (1976, 6) asserted that “the idea of pan-Asian cooperation [was] viable and ripe for development.”

The advent of state-sponsored affirmative action programs provided another material reason for Asian American subgroups to consolidate their efforts. Because the welfare state bureaucracy often treats all Asian Americans as a single administrative unit in distributing economic and political resources, it imposes a pan-Asian structure on persons and communities dependent on government support. As dealings with government bureaucracies increased, political and civic participation along a pan-Asian line became necessary, not only because numbers confer power but also because the pan-Asian category is the institutionally relevant category in the political and legal system. Administratively treated as a homogeneous group, Asian Americans found it necessary — and even advantageous — to respond as a group. The pan-Asian strategy has led to some victories. For example, Asian American legislators, community leaders, and organizations united to fight the Census Bureau’s proposal to collapse all Asian racial codes into one summary category for the 1980 and 1990 censuses. Partly in response to the strength of their political lobbying, the Census Bureau finally conceded to the coalition’s demand for a detailed enumeration of Asian subgroups. At first glance, Asian American demands to be counted separately in the 1980 and 1990 censuses suggest the absence of pan-Asian solidarity. However, this struggle for separate counts was waged by pan-Asian advocacy groups.<sup>1</sup> Without the competitive advantage of these pan-Asian efforts, the struggle with the Census Bureau probably would not have been so successful. Thus, rather than demonstrating the lack of pan-

Asian solidarity, the census struggles illustrate the organizational dialectic of Asian American ethnicity: a demand for separate counts was waged by a pan-Asian coalition. It is noteworthy that Asian Americans who lobbied for individual group data also pushed for an accurate *total* API count. In other words, the census protest was mostly against the *absence* of subgroup categories, not against the *presence* of the pan-Asian category (Espiritu 1992).

While political benefits certainly promote pan-Asian organization, it is anti-Asian violence that has consistently drawn the largest pan-Asian support. For many Asian Americans, anti-Asian violence concerns the entire group, cross-cutting class, cultural, and generational divisions. The 1982 killing of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American who was beaten to death by two white men who allegedly mistook him for Japanese, united Asian Americans across generational, ethnic, class, and political lines. For some Asian Americans, the Chin case marked their first participation in a pan-Asian effort. Their belief that all Asian Americans are potential victims propelled them to join together in self-defense and to monitor, report, and protest anti-Asian violence. In particular, Asian Americans pushed for the collection and reporting of statistics on anti-Asian crimes at the local, state, and federal levels. This pan-Asian activism has forced government officials, the media, and the public to be more attentive and responsive to anti-Asian crimes (Espiritu 1992).

## Changing Demographic and Economic Characteristics

The post-1965 immigration surge has transformed Asian America — and thus the feasibility of pan-Asian civic engagement — in dramatic ways. The share of immigration in the United States from Asia as a proportion of total admission grew from 5 percent in the 1950s to 11 percent in the 1960s and to 33 percent in the 1970s, and it has remained at 35 percent since 1980 (Zhou and Gatewood 2000, 9). In sheer numbers, the Asian American population grew from a total of 1.4 million in 1970 to 7.3 million in 1990, to 10.2 million in 2000. By 2030, it is projected that the API population will be nearly 25 million and will comprise just over seven percent of the total population (Ong and Scott, Chapter 1). According to Zhou and Gatewood (2000, 14),

immigration accounted for more than two-thirds of the spectacular population growth. For the new national origins groups (Indians, Koreans, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and the Hmong), population growth can be attributed almost entirely to immigration (Zhou and Gatewood 2000, 14). The dramatic growth in the absolute numbers of Asian Americans has been accompanied by increasing ethnic, generational, and socioeconomic diversity within Asian America. As Michael Omi (1993, 205) succinctly states, "The irony is that the term ["Asian American"] came into vogue at precisely the historical moment when new Asian groups were entering the U.S. who would render the term problematic."

### **Ethnic Diversification**

Before the post-1965 immigration surge, the Asian American population was composed mainly of three ethnic groups: Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino. In 1970 Japanese Americans constituted the single largest group (41 percent of the Asian American population), followed by Chinese Americans (30 percent) and Filipino American (24 percent). Members of other national origin groups (mostly Koreans) represented less than 5 percent of the Asian American population total (Zhou and Gatewood 2000, 13). Coming of age in the 1960s, U.S.-born Japanese and Chinese Americans formed the core force of the Asian American movement on the West Coast college campuses and in the Northeast (Espiritu 1992). In contrast, in 2000, the U.S. Census recorded twenty-four national origin groups, and no single group accounted for more than one-quarter of the Asian American population. While Japan has sent very few immigrants to the United States, the Philippines, China and Taiwan, Korea, India, and Vietnam have always been on the list of the top sending countries since 1980 (USINS 1997). Reflecting these immigration patterns, in 2000 the Japanese American share of the Asian American population fell to only 8 percent, and the five largest Asian American groups were Chinese and Taiwanese (24 percent), Filipino (18 percent), Asian Indian (17 percent), Korean (11 percent), and Vietnamese (11 percent) (Barnes and Bennett 2002). The new Asian American demographics have complicated the pan-Asian alignment created in the 1960s and 1970s

among the then largest Asian American groups: Japanese, Chinese, and, to a lesser extent, Filipino Americans.

### **Generational Diversification**

Between the 1940s and 1960s, when immigration from Asia was restricted, U.S.-born Asian Americans dominated the Asian American population. By the 1970s the foreign-born reemerged as a large majority. In 2000, 7.2 million Asian Pacific Americans — approximately 70 percent of the total Asian American population — were foreign born (U.S. Department of Commerce 2002). The foreign-born component dominated all Asian American groups except for Japanese Americans; over 60 percent of Filipinos and nearly 80 percent of Vietnamese and other Asians were foreign born (Zhou and Gatewood 2000, 14). Because of legal exclusion in the past, it is only among the two oldest immigrant groups — the Japanese and Chinese Americans — that a sizable third or fourth generation exists. Among Asian American children under eighteen years of age, more than 90 percent are either foreign-born or children of foreign-born parents (Zhou and Gatewood 2000, 23). Ong and Scott, in Chapter 1 have projected that the foreign born segment will still be a majority in the year 2030.

### **Class Diversification**

Post-1965 immigration has also increased the economic diversity of Asian Americans. In contrast to the largely unskilled immigrant population of the pre-World War II period, the new arrivals include not only low-wage service-sector workers but also significant numbers of white-collar professionals. Ong and Patraporn (2006) report that ethnic differences play a significant role in the unequal distribution of wealth among Asian Americans. Using indirect measures of wealth (mean income, interest, and dividends, rental income and home value), they found that in 2000, Japanese, Chinese and Asian Indians consistently held more wealth at the top end while non-Vietnamese Southeast Asians settled at the bottom end. The most significant gap is between Japanese and non-Vietnamese Southeast Asians where the latter's mean household income is about half that

for Japanese at \$47,153 and \$88,122 respectively, and their amount of wealth was less than a quarter of that held by Japanese. While Filipinos and Vietnamese fare better in terms of mean income, their interest, dividends and rental income is substantially lower than the average for all Asian Americans. Koreans are slightly below the average of all Asians for all three measures of wealth.

### **Asian American Identities, Political Attitudes and Policy Concerns**

The results from the 2000 Pilot National Asian American Political Survey (PNAAPS)—the nation’s first multicity, multiethnic, and multilingual survey of the political attitudes and behavior of Asian Americans on a national scale — support a possible future for a growing pan-Asian consciousness.<sup>ii</sup> Although PNAAPS data indicate that most Asian Americans prefer ethnic- rather than panethnic-based identities, they nevertheless show evidence of panethnic solidarity, especially in policy concerns affecting the Asian American community. Among all respondents, 34 percent identify as ethnic American and 30 percent by ethnic origin alone. Only 15 percent identify as “Asian American.” However, among those who do not identify themselves as Asian American, when probed if they have *ever* thought of themselves as Asian American, about half of the respondents report such panethnic identification. Thus, cumulatively, close to six out of ten respondents identify with the panethnic “Asian American” label in some contexts. And about half of the respondents believe that what happened generally to other Asian American groups would impact what happened in their life (Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004, 17).

The potential for Asian American unity is also evident in their similar voting behavior and political attitudes. The PNAAPS data show that 70 percent who report an opinion on affirmative action are in favor of it; 73 percent favor bilingual services and public information; and respondents, by more than a two-to-one margin, approve rather than disapprove of political contributions by legal immigrants (Lien et al. 2004, 18). Not surprisingly, the majority also favor the election of Asian American candidates and public policies addressing

the concerns and needs of the Asian American and immigrant communities (Lien et al. 2004, 18).

Like previous studies, the PNAAPS data show that those who experience discrimination are more likely to develop panethnic consciousness. Approximately half of the study's respondents identify a racial or ethnic issue (i.e., race relations, language barriers, discrimination, stereotyping, lack of ethnic political power, and interethnic relations) as one of the "most important problems" facing the Asian American communities (Lien et al. 2004, 224). However, panethnic identity construction is not necessarily uniform across groups. As an example, the PNAAPS data suggest that the experience of racial discrimination may mobilize panethnic identification among the U.S.-born but not among those born in Asia. Rather than becoming politicized and mobilized, immigrants who experience racial discrimination appear to "feel alienated or petrified in the host society" (Lien et al. 2004, 67-68). These findings underline the importance of recognizing that the processes of racial formation and civic engagement may be very different for the U.S.-born compared to immigrants.

## Organizing as Asian Americans

During the post-1965 period, the Asian American community's growing numbers, high growth rate, and local concentration promise to enhance the political influence of their pan-Asian civic engagement. On the other hand, the expanding diversity of Asian America presents multiple challenges to building a meaningful pan-Asian political coalition. A review of the research on Asian American civic engagement suggests that pan-Asian organizing is a *secondary but politically critical phenomenon* that is constantly shaped and reshaped by social, cultural, legal, and political forces in the environment. It is also important to note that ethnic-specific identities and panethnic identities are not mutually exclusive; both exist simultaneously and both serve as a resource for the development of Asian American political participation and empowerment (Lien et al. 2004, 209-210).

Cumulatively, existing data suggest that pan-Asianism is closely linked to civic engagement: Asian Americans, regardless of how they

define themselves ethnically, organize panethnically when they determine that pan-Asian alliance is important for the protection and advancement of their civic and political agenda. In her analysis of 55 national pan-Asian organizations from 1970 to 1998, Dina Okamoto (2006) found that the number of pan-Asian organizations has increased since 1970 and throughout the 1980s, with the peak occurring in 1980. A smaller number of national pan-Asian organizations formed in the 1990s, which may be due to the increasing diversity of the Asian populations or to the increasing size and influence of the existing organizations. More than one-quarter of the pan-Asian organizations established between 1970 and 1998 were political organizations that shared the common goals of promoting civil, economic and political rights for Asian Americans as well as for Asians in their respective countries of origin. Some examples include The Asian American Voters Coalition that promotes the equal treatment of Asian Americans in the U.S. political system and The Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence that fights racism and violence against Asian Americans. Another one-quarter of the pan-Asian organizations were professional organizations that promote networking, information sharing, and equal employment opportunities for all Asian Americans. Okamoto (2006) reports that these organizations shared more than their professional interests. For example, the mission of the Asian American Journalists Association is not simply to increase employment of API journalists, but also to monitor stereotypes in the media and to advocate for fair and accurate news coverage of API issues. In a recent study of 2004 registered Asian American organizations, Chi-kan Richard Hung (2005) found that pan-Asian organizations are in the minority (14 percent), but that they tend to have more assets and revenue than ethnic-specific ones. Echoing Okamoto's findings, Hung reports that social service and public interest organizations are more likely to be pan-Asian than religious and cultural ones. Moreover, even though pan-Asian organizations are not growing as quickly as ethnic-specific ones, their steady growth, especially in the arena of political advocacy, is noteworthy. Lai (2007-08, 7) reports that Asian American community-based organizations are among the "fastest growing public service sectors in California during the last three decades." In 1998, over 250 pan-Asian

organizations existed in Los Angeles and Orange counties. In 2007, there were over 150 organizations that focused on political advocacy alone. Overall, these findings suggest that Asian Americans form pan-Asian organizations to respond to external political and funding opportunities and to fight unequal opportunities and discriminatory treatment.

Other studies confirm that racial discrimination galvanizes pan-Asian mobilization: as Asian Americans find themselves without opportunities and fair treatment, they establish supportive alliances from which to strategize about collective issues (Okamoto 2006). As an example, Leland Saito (1998) reports that Japanese and Chinese Americans came together in Monterey Park, California to protest xenophobic attempts to remove Asian languages on business signs. Linda Vo's (2004) study of the Asian Business Association in San Diego provides another example: Asian Americans joined the association because of shared professional interests and shared experiences of economic exclusion and employment discrimination. Along the same line, Okamoto (2006) found that underlying structural conditions, such as occupational segregation and spatial concentration, heighten panethnic consciousness, leading Asian Americans to found pan-Asian institutions. These pan-Asian organizations are important because they provide a setting for persons of diverse Asian backgrounds to establish social ties and to discuss their common problems and experiences. As Asian Americans come together to coordinate, plan, and participate in the activities of these organizations, they become tied together in a cohesive interpersonal network (Espiritu 1992).

Asian American activists have also organized to combat anti-Asian violence, defined not as random attacks against Asians but as a product of structural oppression and everyday encounters (Kurashige 2000, 15). The activities of the Asian Americans United, a panethnic community-based organization in Philadelphia, provide an example (Kurashige 2000). When large numbers of Southeast Asian immigrants began experiencing problems in Philadelphia with racist violence, educational inequality, and poor housing, a small group of educated East and South Asian American activists responded. Modeling themselves after the militant Yellow Seeds or-

ganization in the 1970s, group members insisted on anti-imperialist politics, a critique of racism as institutional and structural, and a focus on activist organizing and politics. They organized a successful rent strike and were part of a victorious legal campaign to institute bilingual education in the local schools. Most important, they sought to build relationships with working-class Southeast Asian communities by creating a youth leadership-training program organized around a pan-Asian identity and radical politics. When a violent attack on Southeast Asian youths in that city by a group of white youths led to a fight that left one of the white attackers dead, city police and prosecutors portrayed the attackers as victims and laid the responsibility for the violence at the hands of the Southeast Asians. Although unable to secure full justice in the court cases that ensued, Asian Americans United seized on the incident as a means of educating its constituency about institutionalized racism. The group succeeded in mobilizing parts of the Asian American community around these efforts, and its success enabled it to move from panethnic to interethnic affiliation through an alliance with a Puerto Rican youth group also plagued by hate crimes, police brutality, and prosecutorial racism (Espiritu et al. 2000, 132). This example suggests that class need not be a source of cleavage among Asian Americans, and that the concerns of working-class Asian Americans *can* unite people at the grassroots level with class-conscious members of the intellectual and professional strata (Kurashige 2000).

The pervasiveness of racism also catalyzes pan-Asian organizing among Asian American college students. Colleges constitute an important site for the emergence of pan-Asianism because they are among the public institutions that lump all Asians into a single group and also because young Asian Americans — whose ethnic and racial identities are shaped largely in dialogue with and in opposition to U.S. racist ideologies and practices — are much more receptive to Asian American panethnicity than their immigrant parents. In a study of an Asian American student organization, APASO, at a large research university in the Midwest, Rhoads et al. (2002) reports that ongoing discrimination against Asian Americans reinforces the ongoing need for Asian American students to organize around their pan-Asian identity. This sense of shared experience motivated

APASO to challenge campus structures that may limit the experiences and opportunities of Asian Americans. For example, during the 1999-2000 academic year, APASO pushed for the creation of a multicultural student center and fought to retain seats on a student government association reserved for multicultural student groups. Rhoads et al. (2002) argue that in the process of organizing around their shared experiences with racism, Asian American college students advance collective understandings of their location in the broader society and the political issues that they face collectively as Asian Americans. And it is through organizing and socializing together that their social identity as Asian Americans is reinforced and strengthened (Rhoads et al. 2002, 13). The authors conclude that panethnic organizations play a critical role in reducing campus racism and discrimination because they promote the creation of multicultural academic communities (Rhoads et al. 2002, 14).

Asian Americans have also been active in the policymaking arena. As an immigrant-majority population, Asian Americans have united to contest anti-immigration policies in the late twentieth century. In 1989, a coalition of Asian American legal organizations — the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Asian Law Alliance, the Asian Law Caucus, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California, Na Loio No Na Kanaka — Lawyers for the People of Hawaii, and Nihomachi Legal Outreach — opposed a Senate bill's proposed cap on family-based immigration and the deletion of the second and fifth preference categories<sup>iii</sup> (S 358). The coalition argued that these measures would scale back opportunities for Asian immigrants to reunite with families at a time when the impact of anti-Asian exclusion laws, which were finally lifted in 1965, was still being felt (Wong 2006a, 102-103). During the 1996 presidential election, the issue of immigration was once again at the center of attention for Asian Americans (Leong 2002, 230). In the congressional fight over the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, Asian American (and Latino) groups led the pro-immigrant family coalition, which formed to preserve yearly allocations of family-unification visas. They also lobbied to protect and enhance the rights of foreign workers (Wong 2006a, 163).

Regarding welfare reform, Asian Americans' responses splin-

tered along ethnic and class lines. Many affluent Asian Americans regarded the harsh 1995 Welfare Reform Act, which bars disadvantaged immigrants from many government assistance programs, as a “refugee” or “elderly” immigrant issue that did not concern them (Leong 2002, 231). However, many Asian Americans became interested in the 1995 Act once they realized that it included language that would have made legal immigrants ineligible for student loans and grants. In other words, it was the proposed cut to educational benefits rather than to welfare benefits that galvanized Asian Americans into action because many did not view educational assistance as welfare (Leong 2002, 234-238). The welfare reform case thus encapsulates both the possibilities and limits of pan-Asian advocacy efforts: on the one hand, Asian Americans will organize panethnically to protect their interests; on the other hand, what they perceive to be *their* interests can and do exclude the needs of the most marginalized Asian American groups.

### **Challenges to Pan-Asianism**

The growing population of bi- and multiracial Asian Americans poses an immediate challenge to pan-Asianism. However, some existing evidence suggests that the growth of the population of multiracial Asians need not spell the end of pan-Asianism. According to the 2000 U.S. census, approximately 850,000 people reported that they were Asian and white, and 360,000 reported that they were two or more Asian groups (Barnes and Bennett 2002, table 4). While there exists no comprehensive data on the racial identification of multiracial Asians, the close contact with Asian American advocacy groups maintained by the Hapa Issues Forum (HIF) — a national multiracial Asian American organization — suggests that multiracial Asian and pan-Asian identities need not be mutually exclusive. From its inception, HIF has pursued a double political mission: pushing for recognition of multiracial Asians as well as for the civil rights agendas of existing Asian American groups. These two goals are most evident in the group’s response to the controversy over the classification of multiracials in the 2000 census. Denouncing the government’s past attempts to wedge mixed-race Americans into one rigid racial cate-

gory, most mainstream multiracial groups favored adding a “multiracial” category to the 2000 census. However, most civil rights groups, including many pan-Asian groups, argued that such a category would dilute the numbers of people who identify with a particular race and cause their respective communities to lose hard-won gains in civil rights, education, and electoral arenas. Refusing this “splitting” of their multiple personal and political identities, HIF’s board of directors rejected the “stand-alone multiracial” category and endorsed the “check more than one” format, contending that the latter option would allow them to identify as multiracial *and* “still be counted with their Asian American brothers and sisters” (King 2000, 203). In other words, the “check more than one” format would allow the data to be collected in a way that recognized the existence of multiracial Asians and still make it possible to use the data in “the five racial category format to track discrimination against Asian Americans” (King 2000, 202). Although data are limited on the relationship between the identity of multiracial Asian Americans and their civic engagement, the HIF’s decision to endorse the “check more than one” format keeps open the possibility that multiracials will fashion their politics along multiple lines of affiliation, including panethnically.

As discussed above, another challenge to pan-Asianism is that it can mask salient divisions, subsume nondominant groups, and create marginalities — all of which threaten the legitimacy and effectiveness of pan-Asian organizing. Existing evidence indicates that pan-Asian organizations often reproduce national and ethnic hierarchies as class and organizational hierarchies. For example, some Asian American groups, such as Filipinos and Southeast Asians and South Asians, have accused the more established Chinese and Japanese Americans of monopolizing the funding and jobs meant for all Asian Americans; the dissidents complained that newer and more impoverished groups were simply used as window display (Espiritu 1992). In an ethnographic study of an Asian panethnic community agency in northern California, Eileen Otis (2001) reports that national hierarchies were reproduced in the distribution of staff positions in the agency, with individuals from more economically developed countries — often countries that were more closely tied to the United States — obtaining the coveted staff positions. With the exception of

one staff member who came to the United States from Vietnam as a child, all of the staff members were from Asian “Tigers” or “developed” East Asian countries. Otis (2001, 362) concludes that “it was no accident that those from countries with the strongest neocolonial ties to the U.S. obtained these positions, since individuals from countries like Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand tend to have more opportunities to develop English language skills.” Comparing the experiences of affluent Chinese immigrants and poor Cambodian refugees, Aihwa Ong (1996, 751) concludes that the category “Asian American” “must confront the contradictions and instabilities within the imposed solidarity, brought about by the group’s internal class, ethnic, and racial stratifications.” In Asian American studies, many scholars have critically pointed to the field’s privileging of East Asians over South and Southeast Asians — a clear indictment of the suppression and diverse histories, epistemologies, and voices within the pan-Asian framework. For example, in an edited volume on South Asians in Asian America aptly titled *A Part, Yet Apart*, Rajiv Shankar (1998, x) laments that South Asians “find themselves so unnoticed as an entity that they feel as if they are merely a crypto-group, often included but easily marginalized within the house of Asian America.”

## Discussion

The emergence of the pan-Asian entity in the late 1960s may be one of the most significant political developments in Asian American civic engagement. The existing evidence suggests that Asian American panethnic organizing is closely linked to civic engagement: whenever there is a need to combine their resources, Asian Americans act as a cohesive unit, presenting a united front against the dominant society. This united front does not mean that Asian Americans dismiss internal differences and divisions, but only that they look beyond them.

The post-1965 immigration has fueled population growth and led to greater visibility for Asian Americans, but their changing demographics has also complicated their civic engagement. In particular, Asian immigration to the U.S. is bifurcated along class line:

many Asian immigrants are uneducated, unskilled and poor, while others are highly educated, skilled, and affluent. Moreover, Asian immigrants do not share a common history, sensibility, or political outlook with U.S.-born Asians. As reviewed in this paper, such internal diversities have made it more difficult for Asian Americans to speak with a unified political voice. Thus Asian American panethnicity has been an efficacious but contested category, encompassing not only cultural differences but also social, political, and economic inequalities.

As we end the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Asian American community is at a crossroads: how to build pan-Asian solidarity amid increasing internal diversities and amid an increasingly polarized U.S. society? In 2030, it is projected that the Asian American population will continue to be diverse along generational and ethnic lines. Given past patterns of Asian American organizing, I expect that ethnic-specific organizations will continue to outnumber pan-Asian ones. On the other hand, even though pan-Asian organizations will be in the minority, I anticipate that they will continue to maintain their influence among Asian Americans and within the larger society. This is because pan-Asian organizations tend to have more assets, revenues, and politically experienced leaders than ethnic-specific organizations. Moreover, because pan-Asianism is primarily a political identity, it does not appear to conflict with ethnic-specific identities. In other words, while those with a pan-Asian American identity are more likely to be engaged outside their ethnic group, those with an ethnic-specific identity do not appear to limit their engagement to within-group arenas. Finally, once established, pan-Asian organizations further promote civic engagement because they become the institutional symbol of Asian American unity and the political voice of Asian American interests. As the de facto representatives of Asian American concerns, these organizations influence a much wider Asian American audience than their membership rosters suggest. Pan-Asian institutions are also important because their very existence can spawn similar organizations. Once institutionalized, the pan-Asian structure reinforces the cohesiveness of already existing networks and expands these networks (Espiritu 1992).

Perhaps most importantly, past research indicates that racial discrimination is a key catalyst for pan-Asian mobilization. Today, Asians in the United States continue to face a host of challenges that affect all Asians: hate violence, racial profiling, anti-Asian media treatment, the ‘model minority’ myth, the ‘perpetual foreigner’ stereotype, exclusionary immigration and naturalization policies, citizens-only restrictions, and denials of language rights — all of which require them to organize panethnically (Ancheta, Ma, and Nakanishi 2004, v). In the next two decades, as the United States competes internationally with China and India’s growing economic influence, it is likely that domestic anti-Asianism will correspondingly rise, making pan-Asian efforts — both from pan-Asian advocacy groups and from the combined efforts of single-ethnic advocacy groups — a political necessity. But much work remains to be done. The challenge for Asian American leaders will be to identify and articulate shared interests and ideology within the socially and economically diverse Asian American community that can serve as the basis for pan-Asian identification and mobilization. Some key mobilizing issues include immigration, language access, racial profiling (especially for South Asian Americans in the post 9/11 era), and anti-Asian violence. Perhaps more importantly, pan-Asianism will not materialize unless and until Asian Americans double their effort to solicit new membership and groom fresh leadership, especially from within the ranks of the less affluent underrepresented Southeast Asian communities.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> The groups included: the National Coalition for an Accurate Count of Asian Pacific Americans, the Asian Pacific American Census Advisory Committee, and the Pacific/Asian Coalition, with the combined efforts of single-ethnic advocacy groups such as the Japanese American Citizens League, the Chinese for Affirmative Action, and the Organization of Chinese Americans.
- <sup>ii</sup> The PNAAPS utilizes two linked fate questions that are also found in surveys on African-American political participation: 1) “Do you think what happens generally to other groups of Asians in this country will affect what happens in your life?” and 2) If yes “Will it affect it a lot, some or not very much?”
- <sup>iii</sup> unmarried children of citizens and residents, and adult siblings of citizens and residents

# The Usual Suspects: Asian Americans as Conditional Citizens

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## Introduction

Perpetual foreigners who lean toward treason—this has been the most consequential construction of Asian Americans for the past century and a half. Asian Americans are sometimes model minorities, geishas, martial artists, hardworking merchants and more, but they are always aliens with suspect loyalties. One could argue that Asian Americans are tolerated during ordinary times and, during certain crises, forcefully expelled from the body politic, whether literally or symbolically. The imputation of perpetual foreignness plays a key role in triangulating Asian Americans relative to whites and blacks, or positioning Asian Americans as not only between whites and blacks in terms of intelligence but also apart from both of them in terms of civic belonging (Kim 1999). The rendering of Asian Americans and Asian immigrants as irredeemable aliens is a story whose major historical signposts are all too familiar: the anti-Chinese movement, the racial bar on naturalization, discriminatory legislation such as the Alien Land Law of 1913, exclusionary legislation such as the Immigration Act of 1924, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, the campaign finance scandal of 1996, and the prosecution of Wen Ho Lee. This dramatic and continuing story is a pointed rejoinder to recent scholarship suggesting that Asian Americans are now being accepted as white by the majority.

What does all of this mean for Asian American “civic engagement”? One can define “civic engagement” very broadly to refer to any participation in the public sphere, but I want to focus in this ar-

ticle on the collective advancement of group interests through conventional political channels such as voting, running for office, advocacy, lobbying, and seeking to influence policy through donations. Here a number of questions arise. How much can Asian Americans achieve through these channels given the prevailing construction of them as irredeemable aliens? Does their putative foreignness mean that they cannot be taken seriously as political subjects? Is Leti Volpp (2001) right that the “Asian American citizen” may be an oxymoron? Race-neutral laws and widely-held rights suggest that political membership is universal and constant yet the quality of a group’s membership seems to depend crucially upon that group’s standing in the national imagination, and the standing of Asian Americans is at best unresolved.

This article approaches these questions through an analysis of how Asian American scholars, activists, and officials have responded to a recent milestone in the narrative of Asian American exclusion—namely, the campaign finance scandal that emerged out of the U.S. presidential election of 1996. Most concur that this was an extremely significant event. Ling-chi Wang of UC Berkeley testified in front of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights that he could not think of “one issue in the 150-year annals of Asian American history that has been more of a setback to civil rights for this community.” Thomas Kim, author of *The Racial Logic of Politics*, characterized the campaign finance scandal as “without question the single most important national event influencing the political fortunes of Asian Americans in the post-World War II era” (2007, 52). Now that a decade has passed since the scandal broke, it seems fitting to ask what meaning(s) Asian American scholars, activists, and officials have attached to it. Almost all agree that the event drew upon and powerfully invigorated the enduring notion of Asian Americans as foreigners inclined toward treason, but they differ on whether we should view the scandal as a temporary setback in the teleological narrative of Asian American political incorporation or as a sober reminder of the ideological processes that will always relegate Asian Americans to the margins of the nation’s political life.

This chapter has three sections. In the first, I show that Asian Americans’ analyses of the 1996 campaign finance scandal tend to di-

verge, with some observers treating the event as a superable barrier to Asian American empowerment and others as suggestive of the permanent exclusion of Asian Americans from political membership. In the second, I suggest that these divergent readings of the scandal spring from a deeper division as to whether the story of Asian American politics generally is an "American Dream" narrative or an "Impossible Dream" narrative. In the third, I propose the concept of "conditional citizenship" as a way of thinking about Asian Americans' political status and consider what all of this means for Asian American "civic engagement."

### **Readings of the Campaign Finance Scandal of 1996**

Asian American political efforts bore significant fruit during the 1996 election. Gary Locke of Washington state was elected the first Asian American governor outside of Hawaii; Asian American candidates did well in various state and local elections; and a historic national voter registration drive led by a coalition of Asian American advocacy organizations resulted in 75,000 new Asian American registered voters. Excitement that Asian Americans were coming into their own politically was tempered, however, by the breaking campaign finance scandal. What came to light was that several Asian American fundraisers for Clinton's re-election effort—including John Huang, Charlie Yah-lin Trie, and Maria Hsia—had violated federal campaign finance laws by soliciting and accepting donations from foreign nationals who were transnational Asian capitalists based in Indonesia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and elsewhere. Bob Woodward's "exclusive" in the *Washington Post* in early 1996 broke the story, which was then energetically taken up by conservative journalists, think tanks, and the presidential campaigns of Bob Dole and Ross Perot. Over the next year, partisan political fervor transformed the fundraising improprieties of a handful of Asian Americans into a phantasmagorical vision of collusion among a Clinton campaign hungry for money, Asian American fundraisers inclined toward treason, and a Chinese government bent on subverting American democracy. Headlines trumpeted an "Asian Connection," the role of "*guan xi*" in American politics, and the emergence of "Chinagate," while promi-

ment Republican officials made anti-Asian jokes and mocked Asian accents in public fora.

Leading journalists and politicians racialized the scandal by generalizing from the wrongdoers to all people of Asian descent, and by consistently eliding distinctions between Asians and Asian Americans, and between Asian Americans of different national origin ancestries. Bound by a putatively homogeneous culture, the entire Asian “race” was depicted as implacably alien, prone to doing things in an undemocratic way, and thus presumptively suspect in its political actions. All guns turned on the Asian American community, especially its noncitizen members. The Clinton administration chose to deflect charges of selling state secrets by “getting tough” with its own donors—the Asian American ones, to be specific. After the election, the DNC launched an internal investigation of donors selected according to several criteria, including those who were solicited by Huang and other Asian American fundraisers and those whose contributions were above \$5,000 and were “made in connection with any DNC fund-raising event targeting the Asian Pacific American community.” The investigation ended up broadly targeting donors with Asian surnames. Donors were not only grilled as to their credit history, social security numbers, citizenship status, and sources of income, but were also told that they would be identified to the press as uncooperative if they refused to divulge this information.

The DNC went further, temporarily banning all legal permanent residents from making campaign donations, attending White House events, or having their pictures taken with the Clintons or Gores—even though it was foreign nationals, not legal permanent residents, who had been implicated in the campaign finance scandal. Democratic and Republican House and Senate members introduced a total of nine different bills aimed at limiting campaign contributions from legal permanent residents. Asian American elected officials like Governor Gary Locke and California Treasurer Matt Fong found their fundraising practices scrutinized by the media. The Federal Elections Commission launched an investigation, the Department of Justice started a task force, and two Congressional committees chaired by Senator Fred Thompson (R-TN) and Representative Dan Burton (R-IN), respectively, held formal, well-publicized hearings on the cam-

campaign finance scandal. Both sets of hearings opened with a roar (asserting grand allegations about a Chinese plot to influence U.S. policy or steal nuclear weapons technology and the role of Asian American spies) and closed with a whimper (having failed to produce any hard evidence to support these allegations). Only the emergence of the Monica Lewinsky story in 1997 quieted the frenzy.

Most Asian Americanists analyzed the 1996 campaign finance scandal as an egregious episode of stereotyping and discrimination that hampered Asian American political development. These authors share a sense of moral outrage and a central unspoken assumption: that racial discrimination, however severe its impact and widespread its occurrence, is not necessarily endemic to the American political and legal system. In fact, the system can be mobilized to combat and perhaps even eradicate discrimination.<sup>1</sup> Hence the tone of these works is often hortatory—urging officials to use the tools at their disposal to respond vigorously to the discriminatory aspects of the scandal, urging Asian Americans to persevere in their pursuit of political power, or urging Asian Americans to adopt new political strategies toward this goal. Many of the authors discussed here were actively involved in organizing Asian American community responses to the scandal as it was unfolding.

In September 1997, Asian American advocacy groups and individuals generated a *Petition to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights* in response to the campaign finance scandal. In his introduction to this document, attorney Edward Chen argues that the scandal revealed a “pervasive, institutional and disturbing pattern of discrimination” (377) which violated the First Amendment and equal protection rights of Asian Americans and undermined federal civil rights and voting rights laws. The petition itself criticizes Congress, both parties, the media, and individual elected officials for racial stereotyping, criminalizing the entire Asian “race” as disloyal aliens, applying a double standard by ignoring the campaign finance violations committed by non-Asian Americans, catering to the xenophobic impulses of the public, and unjustifiably stigmatizing legal permanent residents as a suspect class. In this passage, petitioners urge the nation to live up its highest ideals of equality and democratic inclusiveness:

The issues raised in this Petition are significant not only to Asian

Pacific Americans but to ALL Americans...The degradation of any discrete and insular minority group—here the ‘foreignization’ of Asian Pacific Americans in particular—reflects an intolerance of diversity and besmirches the ideals of our Constitution...[W]e must all become engaged in a struggle to define America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—a struggle about whether diversity will be accepted as a core value of this multicolored country or will be rejected as hollow, meaningless rhetoric (359-60).

While supporting a full investigation into the alleged misconduct of various individuals, the petitioners demand that the handling of the affair be “fair, informed, accurate and free of racial and anti-immigrant bias” and that “the standards applied to Asian Pacific Americans—in Congressional hearings, in the media and by all political parties—be fair and equal as befitting their status as loyal citizens and legal permanent residents of this country” (358). The petition captures the civil rights approach to racial injustice: calling the nation to its higher self by marshalling the nation’s laws, constitutional ideals, and antidiscrimination norms against discriminatory actions.

In his two contributions to the *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac of 1998-1999*, Don Nakanishi also reads the campaign finance scandal of 1996 as an episode of racism that threatens the political gains achieved by Asian Americans. Noting that the event “revives the long-standing issue of whether America will ever truly accept Asian Pacific Americans as Americans rather than foreigners”(Nakanishi 1998-1999a, 35), Nakanishi implies that Asian Americans will eventually be accepted and achieve empowerment if they keep their eyes on the prize. The historic aspects of Asian American participation in the 1996 election were “signs of political growth and maturation” (Nakanishi 1998-1999b, 9), Nakanishi avers, and Asian Americans should “continue the political momentum begun before the current controversy erupted”(Nakanishi 1998-1999a, 35) by building a strong political infrastructure and becoming more informed voters. Rather than being deterred by racism, Asian Americans should be spurred to greater political engagement because of it. Senator Daniel Akaka’s (D-Hawaii) piece in the same volume reflects a simi-

lar sense that Asian Americans are poised on the brink of historic political achievement. Worried that the campaign finance scandal “will kill this initial flowering of a historically quiescent and apolitical community” (28) by confirming Asian Americans’ fears that the system is rigged against them, Akaka exhorts Asian Americans to emulate the Asian immigrants and Asian Americans who in the past “overcame steep social, economic, and institutional barriers” (28) to gain membership in American society.

Like Nakanishi and Akaka, Frank Wu and May Nicholson (1997) call upon Asian Americans to persist in their quest for political power despite the shadow cast by the campaign finance scandal. They point out that the media and politicians consistently implied that figures like John Huang represented all Asian Americans, elided distinctions among Asians and Asian Americans, and evoked cultural essentialist arguments to discuss the Asian “race”—yet they remain optimistic that the event can serve as “a rite of passage” for Asian Americans who can “contribute positively to our democratic experiment” (25). This reading of the scandal as a discriminatory episode, a barrier that Asian Americans can overcome on their path toward empowerment, can also be seen in a piece by Frank Wu and Francey Lim Youngberg (2001). Here the authors concede that the campaign finance scandal “raise[s] troubling implications about the acceptance of Asian immigrants as U.S. citizens and their ability to participate as equal stakeholders in shaping public policy” (312), yet also suggest that the event highlights a certain “lack of political maturity among Asian Americans” (337). Asian Americans should view it as “a challenge and an opportunity” (337), they argue, redoubling their efforts to gain political power.

Some authors exhort Asian Americans to continue their quest for political empowerment, but in a manner that is significantly modified by the lessons of the campaign finance scandal. No more politics as usual, they insist, Asian Americans need to change course. According to Ling-chi Wang (1998), Asian Americans must recognize that they are being used by various groups, including fundraisers like John Huang, transnational capitalists, and politicians of all parties. Although Huang described himself as promoting Asian American collective interests, he was, according to Wang, representing a small

elite group of wealthy business entrepreneurs and professionals with ties to transnational Asian capital. Transnational capitalists, for their part, attempt to continue the historical pattern of home countries' "extraterritorial domination"(13) of Asian American communities, using these sites as points of entry for economic and political penetration. Noting the deforming impact of these processes upon the class structure and political development of Asian American communities, Wang concludes that transnational capital's interests are pointedly incompatible with those of most Asian Americans. Indeed politicians of all parties, he suggests, racialized the scandal in order to divert public attention from the real national crisis: the corrupting influence of money on American elections and democracy.

In another piece (2002), Wang also criticizes inside-the-Beltway Asian American advocates and politicians for "trying to hitch a free ride from a foreign gravy train" (112) and for reflexively crying racism in defense of Huang and others. What Asian Americans need to do, he insists, is to break free from those trying to hijack their cause. This involves joining others in calling out the corruption of the campaign finance system and pursuing meaningful campaign finance reform, as well as returning to community organizing at the grassroots level. The "silver lining" of the 1996 campaign finance scandal, Wang suggests, is that it shows the "resilience of Asian Americans and their collective determination to conquer the last frontier in their long quest for racial equality and social justice: full and equal participation in a democracy...regardless of one's race, gender, color, or class" (116).

Paul Watanabe (2001), too, sees the campaign finance scandal as an object lesson in what Asian Americans should and should not be doing politically. Against those who suggest that Asian Americans simply need to persevere, Watanabe insists that the scandal "clarified many of the limitations of mainstream involvement"(371), thus pointing out the need for new strategies. If donating money to national campaigns in the hope of appointments and political influence is a failing strategy, in part because the economic and political interests of big donors are not those of the majority of Asian Americans, he asks: "[W]hat must be done if Asian Americans ever wish to participate as they should in ruling America?"(380). Like Ling-chi Wang, Watanabe

favors a return to the grassroots. Citing groups involved in voter registration and naturalization drives, such as Asian American Legal Defense Fund in New York City, he argues that community activism builds an “enhanced indigenous base [which] contains resources—individual, organizational, financial, experiential—that are crucial in support of expeditions into the larger political milieu...[and which] offers sustenance through the battles that may be waged”(376). Though Wang and Watanabe recognize the need for a political adjustment, they, like the authors discussed above, suggest that Asian Americans can, through struggle and perseverance, call the nation to its higher self and achieve true membership in this society.

A second, smaller set of writings on the 1996 campaign finance scandal is more critical and less hortatory in orientation. These authors read the event not as a discriminatory barrier to be overcome but as evidence that the civic exclusion of Asian Americans reflects a profound and perhaps implacable problem in American society. According to these authors, the 1996 campaign finance scandal was the product of entrenched ideological and political structures, not just the prejudiced behavior of certain journalists and politicians. The emphasis in these works is more on advancing a fundamental critique of the culture and the political system and heightening our understanding of how these function systematically to vitiate Asian American citizenship than it is on advising Asian Americans to redouble or retool their efforts within current configurations.

Neil Gotanda’s (2001) piece is a prominent example. In Gotanda’s view, the campaign finance scandal of 1996 and the Wen Ho Lee espionage case of 1999 (more on this below) are paradigmatic examples of a pattern that he calls “Asiatic racialization.” Asiatic racialization involves “a group of related yet distinct ideas—Asiatic inassimilability, the conflation of Asian Americans with Asian citizens, and the perception of Asians as a threat to the American nation”(80). These ideas can be traced all the way back to Justice Harlan’s dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the California Supreme Court case *People v. George Hall* (1854), and the Chinese exclusion cases. Gotanda sharply criticizes those who characterize the 1996 scandal and the Wen Ho Lee case as episodes of “stereotyping.” “Instead of individual prejudice or error,” he writes, “the images of for-

eignness are deeply embedded, historically established racial understandings...[that have been] remarkably stable, remaining largely unchanged for over a hundred years"(92). In other words, the problem is not discrimination, seen as a set of discrete individual acts, but racialized constructions deeply woven over time into the cultural infrastructure of the nation. The result is "citizenship nullification" or "the act of stopping the exercise of a person's citizenship rights through the use of the implicit link between an Asiatic racial category and foreignness"(80).

Leti Volpp (2001), too, reads the 1996 campaign finance scandal and the Wen Ho Lee case as markers of a cultural and ideological dynamic by which Asian Americans are denied full citizenship. Looking back to the 1870 Congressional debate over naturalization law and the 1877 Joint Special Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration, Volpp argues that Chinese immigrants were seen as aliens "whose deep-seated, ineradicable cultural, political, and religious differences"(79) made incorporation into the polity unthinkable. What is striking is the extent to which this same racialized construction continues to be applied to Asian Americans today. Indeed, Volpp argues, Asian Americans are not just seen as foreigners but as anti-citizens, those against whom Americanness is defined. These racialized perceptions function to vitiate Asian Americans' formal rights of citizenship. Volpp writes: "The perception that the political activity of Asian Americans is somehow at odds with 'American' political interests serves to deny Asian Americans the effective political subjecthood essential to full citizenship"(81-82).

Michael Chang, author of a book-length work on the campaign finance scandal, *Racial Politics in an Era of Transnational Citizenship: The 1996 'Asian Donorgate' Controversy in Perspective* (2004), argues that the campaign finance imbroglio of 1996 was actually the beginning of a discursive-political phenomenon that culminated several years later with the Wen Ho Lee espionage scandal. After the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* ran front page stories in early 1998 alleging that Clinton had allowed the leaking of w-88 nuclear warhead technology to China, Representative Christopher Cox (R-CA) set up and chaired a House committee investigation on the issue. It was the Cox committee final report's claim that a spy had facilitated the alleged

transfer of nuclear warhead technology to Communist China that led directly to the arrest and prosecution of Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee. The evidence suggests that the government's focus on Lee was a result of racial profiling, and that the major factor weighing against him was his Chinese (ironically, Taiwanese) ancestry.<sup>ii</sup>

The government failed to find evidence to substantiate the allegations against Lee and the case became a public embarrassment. Lee, who had been promptly fired from his job, charged with fifty-six criminal counts, and placed in solitary confinement for nine months, was released in September 2000. To secure his release, he pled guilty to one charge of mishandling classified documents. It turns out that these documents were only categorized as "classified" after Lee had downloaded them; that it was common practice for scientists to download sensitive information onto their computers so that they could work at home (former CIA head John Deutch admitted to doing this and was never prosecuted); and that the information Lee downloaded was never connected to the leak of w-88 nuclear warhead technology. Judge James Parker of the Federal District Court in Albuquerque formally apologized to Lee and publicly excoriated the government for its handling of the case.

What bound the campaign finance scandal and the Wen Ho Lee case together, according to Chang, were what he calls "Asian donorgate" discourses, including the "preexisting racialized nationalist discourse best described as perpetual 'foreignness'" (5). These discourses were forged in the crucible of "American Orientalism," or "the dominant mainstream construction of East-West relations in terms of cultural, economic, and military conflict and difference" (78). By generating culturally essentialist views of the Chinese—e.g., the belief that there is a homogeneous and static Chinese "culture" that is antithetical to Western culture and that determines the actions of people of Chinese descent all over the globe—American Orientalism, Chang argues, directly produces events which ostracize Asian Americans, both symbolically and physically. It nurtures the common perception of China as a threat to the well-being of the West, democracy, the environment, and human rights, as well as the common perception of Asian Americans as the enemies within. Unforgettably, the

Cox report stated that every person of Chinese descent residing in the U.S.—whether visiting scholar, student, legal permanent resident, or citizen—was a potential spy or “sleeper agent” waiting to be activated by the Chinese government. In an era of transnational globalization, Chang argues, Asian Americans will continue to be politically marginalized via Orientalist discourses as long as the state’s power to define alienage, or who is culturally a “citizen” and who is an “alien,” goes unchallenged.

In the other book-length treatment of the 1996 campaign finance scandal published to date, *The Racial Logic of Politics: Asian Americans and Party Competition* (2007), Thomas Kim argues that institutional as well as cultural factors overdetermine the ongoing political exclusion of Asian Americans. The conventional wisdom holds that the two-party political system will promote the incorporation of minority groups insofar as each party needs to court the support of these groups to build a winning coalition. According to Kim, reality belies this expectation. In fact, the institutional dynamics of two-party politics have worked to powerfully marginalize Asian Americans, with the 1996 campaign finance scandal being a case in point. Why, Kim asks, did the Democrats in 1996 turn on Asian Americans rather than challenging Republican attacks as racially discriminatory and untrue? The answer lies in the fact that “Asian bodies [are] racialized as immutably beholden to foreign entities” (28). Kim explains: “[P]arty elites, recognizing the political danger posed to their party brand name by the discursive presence of ‘racialized outsiders’ within the party coalition, must explicitly and aggressively expel Asian Americans if their party hopes to build and maintain a majority party coalition”(4). Rather than promoting Asian American incorporation, the dynamics of coalition-building in a two-party system, working in conjunction with cultural constructions of Asian Americans, actually hamper it, as each party distances itself from despised Asian bodies in order to please other supporters. Kim writes: “[T]he problem rests not in the political strategies Asian Americans might choose within the two-party system but in the structure of the system itself”(5). Kim suggests that Asian Americans should continue to seek political empowerment but his own analysis of the events of 1996 implies that there is little reason for optimism on this front. Compared with the

first set of authors, this second set is considerably more skeptical about the possibility of Asian American membership in the polity.

## Two Narratives of Asian American Politics

These divergent readings of the 1996 campaign finance scandal spring from a broad division in how Asian American scholars, activists, and politicians narrativize Asian American politics as a whole. The first reading of the scandal (as an episode of discrimination to be overcome) emerges from what I call an “American Dream” narrative, which is constructed and reproduced by mainstream elected officials, professional civil rights advocates, and many scholars. The second reading of the scandal (as evidence that Asian Americans may be permanently ostracized from the polity) is driven by what I call an “Impossible Dream” narrative, which is constructed and reproduced by certain scholars in critical race theory and ethnic studies. Like all dichotomies, this one obscures various nuances in position and maps imperfectly onto reality. Still, delineating this central fault line in political opinion is helpful in the assessment of the present and future possibilities of Asian American “civic engagement.”

According to the “American Dream” narrative of Asian American politics, Asian Americans have struggled for more than a century against discrimination and are moving inexorably if unevenly toward the promised land of full political incorporation. The journey has been long and painful, marked by oppression and suffering, but the outcome is all but certain. As Martin Luther King, Jr. memorably put it in Selma, “The moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.” This narrative depends upon the metaphor of movement over time, of a physical journey from a point of origin (exclusion) to a destination point (inclusion), suggesting that Asian Americans are coming out of the wilderness into the heart of the polis. It is teleological, developmental, hortatory, and optimistic. Informed by the notion that America is a land of opportunity and freedom where everyone—“regardless of one’s race, gender, color, or class” (Wang 2002, 116)—can succeed, this “American Dream” narrative of Asian American politics embraces the civil rights movement’s philosophy and the antidiscrimination framework it produced.<sup>iii</sup> It expresses

American triumphalism.

Unsurprisingly, scholars and advocates who focus on voting are among the most active craftspeople of the “American Dream” narrative of Asian American politics. In keeping with the teleological thrust of this story, these observers discuss statistical data about Asian American population numbers, immigration rates, naturalization rates, registration rates, and voting as a matter of collective destiny. As its title suggests, the 2006 press release by the Asian American Studies Center, “The New ‘Sleeping Giant’ in California Politics,” exemplifies this narrative (Ong et al. 2006). This document begins by noting that census data from 2005–2006 indicate that Asian Americans have increased their “potential power” at the polls by raising their overall numbers as well as their rate of citizenship. From 2000 to 2005, Asian Americans in California went from 3.8 million to 4.7 million, representing 38% of the state’s net gain of 2.2 million; in addition, 71% of Asian American adults are now citizens by birth or naturalization, a significant increase over 2000. The report continues: “However, there are still barriers to fully translating the population numbers into voting power”—in particular, that Asian Americans are less likely to register and vote than non-Hispanic whites and African Americans. The sense here is that changing demographics among Asian Americans have created an immanent political potential waiting to be realized. When they overcome the barriers in their way, the narrative goes, the sleeping giant will awaken and Asian Americans will fulfill their political destiny. They will elect more Asian American officials and become an effective voting bloc able to both influence public policy and formulate policy agendas.

Similarly, the *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*, published every few years or so, presents an optimistic, hortatory view of Asian American politics. The *Almanac* typically includes articles, statistics, scholarly reports, and a political directory of elected and appointed Asian American officials. Although it includes many articles that criticize electoral politics from the left, the *Almanac* conveys a clear “American Dream” orientation by analyzing the growing Asian American population’s voting potential and jubilantly counting the increasing number of Asian American officials. The 2001–2002 volume is dedicated to Elaine Chao and Norman Mineta, who were

appointed Secretaries of Labor and Transportation, respectively, by George W. Bush. James Lai, one of the volume's co-editors, asserts that these two appointments "make a strong statement to our nation that Asian Pacific Americans are not perpetual foreigners" and "make it clear that Asian Pacific Americans are here to stay, achieving new levels of political incorporation"(12).

The "American Dream" narrative of Asian American politics underlies the rhetoric of many Asian American elected officials as well. In "The Need for Asian American Leadership: A Call to Action" (2000), Governor Gary Locke of Washington weaves a classic teleological story about Asian Americans overcoming barriers, facing remaining challenges, and moving toward the promised land of inclusion and the fulfillment of their political destiny. First Locke discusses historical instances of discrimination such as the Chinese exclusion movement, the bar on naturalization, and Japanese American internment. Then he credits the civil rights movement with creating "tremendous progress," adding, "I am honored to be an emblem of that progress"(2). He then identifies the "great challenges"(3) still facing Asian Americans, naming poverty, inequality, racially motivated violence, and episodes of ostracism such as the 1996 campaign finance scandal and the prosecution of Wen Ho Lee. Exhorting Asian Americans to register, vote, and run for office, Locke writes:

We bring into the new century a legacy of the blood, sweat, and tears of our parents and our grandparents who helped make this country all that it is today. We owe it to our ancestors to take action that will guarantee that the children of the twenty-first century do not have to live through the cycles of discrimination that have marred our own coming of age (4).

Through committed political action, Locke suggests, Asian Americans can move forward in their journey toward a post-discrimination age.

In a 1996 speech entitled, "A One Hundred Year Journey: From Houseboy to the Governor's Mansion," delivered during his run for Governor of Washington, Locke casts his personal and political autobiographies in terms of the "American Dream."<sup>iv</sup> Locke explains

that his grandfather emigrated from China in the late 1800s, worked as a houseboy, cannery worker, and logger, and then fought in the Normandy Bay invasion in World War II as a soldier in the U.S. Army. He continues: “[M]y background, and my family’s experiences have emphasized the meaning of values like hard work, education, the family, the meaning of personal responsibility, and that government can only provide an opportunity, but cannot guarantee us success” (3). Urging Asian Americans to get involved politically in order to protect their hard-won gains and assume their “rightful place at the table” (6), Locke describes his run for Governor as the culmination of a 100-year journey of sacrifice, hard work, and determination on the part of his own family and Asian Americans throughout history.

In a special issue of the *UCLA Asian Pacific American Law Journal* (2002) devoted to Asian American politics, articles by other Asian American elected and appointed officials echo Locke’s themes. The titles of Tony Lam’s “Breaking Down the Walls: My Journey From a Refugee Camp to the Westminster City Council” and Satveer Chaudhary’s “How a Chaudhary Beat a Carlson” are vivid and self-explanatory. Chaudhary writes: “[A]ct on your dreams. If an Asian Indian senator can make his mark in Minnesota, every Asian American can achieve his or her dream. If one barrier falls, ten fall with it. This is not just my story, it is the story of America” (168). Ming Chin, who was appointed to the California Supreme Court in 1996, writes in the same volume: “I am living the American dream. Only in America could the son of a Chinese immigrant farmer rise to sit on the state’s highest court” (150).

The “Impossible Dream” narrative of Asian American politics starts with the observation that the “American Dream” narrative is fundamentally mistaken. The “American Dream” narrative, as we have seen, sees racial discrimination as aberrational rather than integral to the American experience. Discrimination may be frequent and widespread, but it can ultimately be overcome. For the scholars who craft the “Impossible Dream” narrative, this view of racism, embodied in antidiscrimination norms and statutes, is wishful thinking and harmfully misleading. In their view, racism is a permanent and implacable feature of American life, and people of color will be better able to struggle against it if they face this difficult truth. Asian Amer-

icans will never gain full incorporation through politics as usual—electoral politics and traditional civil rights advocacy—because these activities do not challenge racism at its roots. While critical race scholars think racism is ineradicable in an ultimate sense, they do not suggest throwing in the towel but rather generating new and creative strategies for resisting and challenging racism, ranging from deconstructing racialized identities to rethinking the boundaries of the nation-state and definitions of citizenship. Where the “American Dream” narrative is teleological, emphasizing a physical journey through time and space and over barriers toward the promised land, the “Impossible Dream” narrative emphasizes endless cycles of racial “progress” and retrenchment that add up to stasis. Its powerful anti-triumphalist message challenges American national mythology at its core. It is this “Impossible Dream” narrative that underlies the analyses, discussed above, which read the 1996 campaign finance scandal as suggestive of the permanent exclusion of Asian Americans from meaningful U.S. citizenship.

Derrick Bell (1992), one of the founders of critical race theory, articulated many of the core arguments that comprise the “Impossible Dream” narrative. According to Bell’s theory of “racial realism,” racism will never be eradicated in America and the antidiscrimination framework that purports to address racism is a collective fantasy that prevents us from recognizing this truth. Racial realism posits that white people always act out of what they perceive to be their collective racial interest, unconstrained by promises, norms or laws. Whites abstain from racial discrimination if abstinence is cost free or profitable (the “interest convergence thesis”), but they sacrifice black people whenever there is something to be gained from doing so. For example, powerful whites have for centuries instigated “racial bonding” against blacks as a way of distracting poor whites from class inequality. Recognizing the dual truths that racism is permanent and that civil rights will not eliminate it enables one to be realistic, according to Bell, not fatalistic. We must still struggle against racism in a committed way as an assertion of our humanity, but we must do it with our eyes open.

Neil Gotanda is one of a handful of Asian American legal scholars who have brought critical race theory to bear upon the Asian

American experience.<sup>5</sup> Gotanda's (2001, 1985) central argument has been that Asian Americans have a distinctive experience of being racialized as "foreign" as well as non-white, with the implication that critical race theory must differentiate among varied group experiences rather than presuming that the black experience reflects those of other groups of color. Let us return to Gotanda's 2001 article discussed above, entitled, "Citizenship Nullification: The Impossibility of Asian American Politics." As mentioned, Gotanda sees the 1996 campaign finance scandal and the Wen Ho Lee espionage case as evidence that enduring "images of foreignness" continue to "nullify" Asian American citizenship. Like Bell, Gotanda believes that racism is a permanent, implacable feature of American life and that civil rights laws can never uproot it, with the result that groups of color can never achieve true membership in the polity. Gotanda's conclusion at the end of the article is stark: "[G]enuine Asian American citizenship is an impossibility"(80), even for those who possess the legal status of citizens, as long as race continues to play a significant role in American life. In other words, the political exclusion of Asian Americans is a permanent condition.

It is useful to return as well to Leti Volpp's article discussed above, entitled, "'Obnoxious To Their Very Nature': Asian Americans and Constitutional Citizenship" (2001). As mentioned, Volpp, too, reads the 1996 campaign finance scandal and the Wen Ho Lee espionage case as markers of cultural constructions which function to viti-ate Asian Americans' formal citizenship rights. Drawing upon Linda Bosniak's work, Volpp identifies four discourses about citizenship: citizenship as legal status, citizenship as rights, citizenship as political activity, and citizenship as national identity. In the first two, citizens are objects, "passive recipient(s) of rights"(72). In the latter two, citizens are active subjects with their own subjectivity. Volpp's argument is that while whites are comfortable with granting Asian Americans citizenship in the first two senses, they are not comfortable with Asian Americans being active political subjects or being seen as representing or constituting national identity. Indeed, Asian Americans are racialized so unremittingly as alien and different that "'citizen' and 'Asian' could be said to function as antonyms in the United States context"(82). According to Volpp, this story about un-

fulfilled citizenship should not surprise us. She writes:

Race has always fundamentally contradicted the promise of liberal democracy. The racially exclusive origins of liberalism and civic republicanism were starkly at odds with their purported goals. While membership in the citizenry has been widened, simply adding rights with an accompanying logic of color-blindness will not translate into substantive enjoyment of citizenship. Ideas about race will continue to disrupt the ability of Asian Americans to function and be identified as citizens...One's Asianness seems to be the difference one must suppress in order to be a full citizen (83).

It is not just that Asian Americans are disadvantaged by the rules of the game; they are actually prevented from succeeding. Since politics as usual is obviously insufficient for dealing with the implacability of racism, Volpp speaks of "new forms of struggle" that recognize the futility of seeking national membership within current configurations and that seek the transformative "creation of political solidarities across racial and national boundaries"(85). In other words, Asian Americans' aspirations of belonging can only be fulfilled if the game is restructured in a significant way.

It is worth noting that this division between the "American Dream" and "Impossible Dream" narratives emerges as well in debates over one of the central events in post-civil rights Asian American politics—namely, Japanese American reparations. As Natsu Saito (2001) argues, the established internment narrative suggests that Japanese American internment was a terrible tragedy, but that the nation recognized and corrected its error. Saito identifies two flaws with this narrative: it sees racism as an aberration, and it suggests that the wrong of the internment has been righted. Casting the internment instead as "really a logical extension of all that had come before"(8) in Asian American history, she demonstrates that history is in fact repeating itself at the start of the twenty first century as the U.S. government traces Arab and Muslim Americans as "terrorists" who are "foreign, disloyal, and imminently threatening" (12). Saito reviews recent cultural productions, individual stories, FBI programs, court

cases and anti-terrorism policies and concludes: "The government is still subverting our civil rights and undermining the safeguards of judicial review by tapping into race-based fears and playing the 'national security' trump card"(26). Echoing Chris Iijima, she points out that Congress passed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 to reward the "superpatriotism" and acquiescence of Japanese Americans and to promote the idea that minorities can make it in the U.S. if they try hard enough. Saito urges Japanese Americans to speak out against the established internment narrative and fight the treatment of Arab and Muslim Americans, suggesting that it is still in their power to re-interpret the meaning of the internment. How long can the "American Dream" narrative of the internment persist in the face of post-9/11 realities?

## **Asian Americans and Politics in a New Century**

What are the implications of the campaign finance scandal and of putative foreignness more broadly for Asian American "civic engagement"? It depends upon whom you ask. Judging by their public rhetoric, most prominent players in Asian American politics—including elected and appointed officials, professional advocates, and many scholars—espouse the "American Dream" narrative of Asian American politics and believe that the campaign finance scandal and related events are simply setbacks that should spur the community to even greater efforts at political empowerment. The entire premise of their system-oriented work (policymaking, lobbying, mobilizing the vote) is that conventional political action can mitigate discrimination and produce group benefits. Their own reaction to the campaign finance scandal—filing a petition alleging discriminatory treatment, sponsoring public fora on the issue, writing opinion pieces, etc.—exemplifies intensified "civic engagement" as a response to adversity. On the other hand, those scholars and activists who espouse the "Impossible Dream" narrative of Asian American politics believe that "civic engagement" defined as the collective pursuit of group interests through conventional political channels is a dead end.<sup>vi</sup> Convinced that electoral politics and civil rights advocacy are rigged games that inevitably reproduce white privilege, they see

these activities as distracting Asian Americans from exploring alternative political possibilities. What is needed, in their view, is not civic engagement but civic transformation.<sup>vii</sup>

Which is more accurate, the “American Dream” narrative or “Impossible Dream” narrative of Asian American politics? In my view, there is some truth to each. To capture this complexity, I propose that that we think of Asian Americans from 1952 onwards as experiencing “conditional citizenship.”<sup>8</sup> Conditional citizenship is formal citizenship whose meaning is contingent upon variable forces in a given place and time. It is citizenship that is qualified by negative cultural valuations of groups such that demographic changes, geopolitical dynamics, and other kinds of processes can trigger its abrogation, symbolically and perhaps literally. Unlike the unconditional citizenship typically enjoyed by whites, conditional citizenship is always on the verge of being compromised. This notion is not as sanguine as the “American Dream” narrative: there is no teleological, triumphal journey from the outside to the center of the polis; Asian Americans may never fully arrive, politically speaking. But it is not as pessimistic as the “Impossible Dream” narrative either: conditional citizenship is still legal citizenship and provides greater protection and opportunity for Asian Americans than did the earlier state of being “aliens ineligible to citizenship.” This concept recognizes that Asian American citizenship is meaningful and yet that it is vulnerable. Conditional citizenship is a fluid concept that invites historicization, unlike Gotanda’s more fixed concept of “citizenship nullification,” for instance. Thus in any historically specific situation, it is useful to identify which forces might align to qualify and/or shore up the political and national membership of Asian Americans. Will the continued dominance of the foreign-born among Asian Americans for the next several decades weaken the political standing of Asian Americans? Perhaps. But history suggests that even if immigration were to cease completely, third and fourth generation Asian Americans would continue to be seen as immutably foreign and politically suspect.

Looking into the future, what are the implications of conditional citizenship for Asian Americans and politics in the twenty-first century? How will variable demographic, social, and cultural forces

shape the meaning of Asian American citizenship and how might Asian Americans respond? Both domestic and international forces will figure prominently; I will discuss only a few. Consider emergent racial dynamics within the U.S. The growing numbers of Latinos will alter racial configurations, particularly in areas like California that also have large Asian American populations. On the one hand, as Latinos emphasize issues of concern to immigrants, such as bilingual education and immigration policy, there will be new opportunities to extend the alliances that Asian Americans and Latinos have already constructed over redistricting and other issues. On the other hand, as non-Latinos perceive emergent Latino political power as a looming threat, a rise in nativistic expressions is almost certain to occur. Even if these expressions focus explicitly on Latinos and not Asian Americans, they will influence immigration and other policies that profoundly impact both groups. Although the rhetoric surrounding the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 focused on Latino immigrants, the law had an adverse effect on many Asian Americans as well.

One factor that may strengthen Asian American citizenship is the Western "War on Terror" and its impact on the status of Arab and Muslim Americans. As Saito (2001) makes clear, the U.S. government and the media have, through the "War on Terror," racialized these groups as intrinsically threatening and disloyal. One consistent theme in American history has been that spotlighting a particular group as a threat to the nation tends to cast other marginalized groups in a more favorable light, if only temporarily. During World War II, previously vilified Chinese Americans suddenly found themselves held up as a positive alternative to "Japs." In the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, many Black Americans reported that whites treated them more generously. Foreignness is a relative concept: there's nothing like a supposed "Islamofascist" to make a Black person look truly American. If the racializing of Arab and Muslim Americans continues or intensifies, if Americans really come to believe they are engaged in a "clash of civilizations" with Islam, this could have the effect of making Asian Americans appear more American and as less of a threat. Even if Asian Americans led the charge against the vilifi-

cation of Arab and Muslim Americans, as Saito encourages them to do, they would still likely benefit from the comparative valuation, whether they wished to or not.

On the other hand, there are international developments that portend serious trouble for Asian Americans who, as conditional citizens, are struggling to assert their membership. The rise of China as a global economic and military powerhouse and competitor with the U.S. has implications for all Asian Americans. Japan's surge as an economic power in the 1980s led to significant tension between the U.S. and Japan. These tensions, combined with a domestic economic downturn, generated a surge of white racially motivated violence against Asian Americans. Vincent Chin was one casualty of this situation. The attitude that leading politicians and literati manifest toward China today is hauntingly familiar and mildly alarming. We hear that China is immune to moral reasoning (because it supports the Sudanese government committing genocide in Darfur and continues its domination of Tibet); it is ruining the planet (because its rapid industrialization has created serious environmental problems); it is spreading plagues (the SARS epidemic appears to have originated in China); it is undercutting American industry (by taking advantage of the "most favored nation" status and flooding the U.S. market with cheap goods); and it is trying to hurt Americans (by sending poisoned toothpaste, pet food, and toys to the U.S.). Jokes about poisonous goods from China have become a staple in late night comedy routines. In the American imagination, China has become the Dr. No of the globe, a mastermind plotting to destroy its enemies and conquer the world via myriad nefarious means.

It may be that the most powerful moves Asian Americans can make in response to conditional citizenship relate to political subject formation, or the definition of the 'we' in question. Consider the fact that conditional citizenship may well apply to other racialized groups (and arguably to other kinds of groups as well), not just to Asian Americans. For example, although the racialization of Asian Americans has differed in important ways from that of Black Americans, unconditional citizenship has eluded both groups. Black people were enslaved, denied citizenship under *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1854), and then granted political membership by the Reconstruction Amend-

ments, only to see these rights abrogated by the establishment of Jim Crow in the South. Black Americans are not cast as aliens beholden to foreign powers, but they are cast as aliens within their own land. In his story "The Space Traders," Derrick Bell (1992) suggests that whites will one day betray Black people spectacularly, in a manner evocative of slavery. Offered wealth, environmental rejuvenation, and bountiful energy sources by space aliens in exchange for the nation's Black population, white and other Americans would, according to Bell, mull it over briefly and then say yes. Constitutional and civil rights protections would be tossed aside and Black Americans would be rounded up, stripped, and chained before being forced onto the space ship. That the same story could be told about Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Arab and Muslim Americans, and others suggest that despite the specificity of their respective experiences, these groups may share the common plight of conditional citizenship. There may be untapped political potential here. If Americans of Asian, African, and Mexican descent were to approach the recent treatment of Arab and Muslim Americans as an assault upon 'us' rather than as a matter of little concern or an occasion for 'us' to stand up for 'them,' interesting new political configurations might emerge.

As Espiritu (1992) has shown, Asian American panethnicity or racial consciousness was constructed in the 1960s by people of various Asian origins as a response to being racialized as a single group (see also Espiritu in this volume). Forged in the crucible of white racism and nativism, Asian American panethnicity has come to be seen as a normative good, an achievement that literally birthed a community, the key to effective political action. The conventional narrative of panethnicity is exciting and heroic: Asian Americans constructed something from nothing and now struggle to keep panethnicity alive despite the centrifugal pressures of ethnic and diasporic identities, all in the name of group empowerment. However, panethnicity may reinforce foreignizing tendencies by suggesting that Asian Americans constitute a unitary group with distinct political interests from other Americans. Proponents of panethnicity are very clear that Asian Americanness is constructed, but the nuances of reactive identity formation are lost on the general public, who simply

perceive a culturally or racially distinct group asserting its unitary identity and interests. Along these lines, Asian Americans might want to avoid describing themselves in the very culturally and racially essentialist terms used by those seeking to restrict their citizenship. For instance, many Asian American elected officials and community leaders such as Michael Woo, Matthew Fong, and Changlin Tien have claimed that Asian Americans are uniquely poised as Pacific Rim players to serve as "bridge builders" between the U.S. and Asia. Evelyn Hu-Dehart (1999) rightly asks about the political risks of this kind of talk. Similarly, Arif Dirlik (1999) points out that the turn toward diasporic thinking in the academy tends to reify "Chineseness," which both dehistoricizes identity formation and renders Chinese people aliens in their immediate contexts. While the short term gains purchased by racial essentialism are obvious up front, the long term costs are often overlooked and deserve more consideration.

Underlying the processes of subject formation is the question of substance: what does it mean, politically speaking, to be Asian American? What are Asian American political interests? Should Asian Americans continue to struggle to define a unitary set of group interests or instead let their individual interests or values define their group memberships and identities? Should Asian Americanness be the exclusive or even primary way of organizing political responses to the world? Since Asian Americans experience the world not only as Asian Americans but also as women, Los Angelenos, Americans, Vietnamese immigrants, teachers, workers, transnational capitalists, gays and lesbians, members of the Third World, etc., to what extent should they embrace multiple, simultaneous definitions of 'we' and join various political configurations only some of which are defined by panethnicity?<sup>ix</sup> "Civic" comes from the Latin *civis*, which means community. This raises the question: whom is Asian American "civic engagement" supposed to serve? Who is the community in question? Asian America? America? A global citizenry? Are energy issues, global food shortages, deforestation, species extinction, nuclear proliferation and other such issues best addressed through race-based politics? There is no distinctly Asian American position on global warming, but Americans of Asian descent can, along with others, em-

brace a 'we' built upon the profound understanding first, that the domination of nature and animals is linked philosophically, analytically, and practically to the domination of women, people of color, and others, and second, that the planet's survival depends upon transforming all of these relationships.<sup>x</sup> Asian American "civic engagement" may turn out to refer to Asian Americans going beyond current frameworks and working to develop and nurture broader communities that are not racially defined. Denied full membership in the U.S. polity, Americans of Asian descent may yet claim it in a larger arena.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> We can of course distinguish between public position-taking and private ruminations. Some who espouse the "American Dream" narrative in public may have private doubts about whether racism will ever be conquered. My concern here is with the public positions and their implications.
- <sup>ii</sup> Robert Vrooman, former chief of security at Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory, has publicly stated that Lee was singled out because he was of Chinese descent. The short list of suspects contained names of other scientists with very similar profiles, but none other than Lee was of Chinese descent. See Volpp 2001, 81.
- <sup>iii</sup> To be clear, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s itself drew heavily upon the American creed (the ideals of equality, freedom, and justice) and described itself as seeking to make the American Dream a reality for Black Americans.
- <sup>iv</sup> Governor Locke delivered this keynote speech at the national conference of the Organization of Chinese Americans on June 29, 1996. It was later published in the 1998-1999 edition of the *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*.
- <sup>v</sup> Others include Robert Chang, Mari Matsuda, and Keith Aoki.
- <sup>vi</sup> One example of an activist organization with this stance is Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAA AV), based in New York City. See Kim 2004.
- <sup>vii</sup> There is no existing survey data that ascertains to what degree Asian American individuals subscribe to one or the other narrative. We cannot infer from the act of voting that an individual espouses the "American Dream" narrative because one can vote for the same reason that a nonbeliever might go to confession—"just in case". Do immigrants lean toward the "American Dream"

perspective? Perhaps, since this would be consistent with the aspirational attitudes that lead them to migrate. Yet precisely because of their aspirations, immigrants may be the most likely to become disillusioned with politics, as many in the Korean immigrant community did after the Los Angeles uprising of 1992.

<sup>viii</sup> 1952 was the year when the bar on naturalization was lifted for Asian immigrants to the U.S.

<sup>ix</sup> Many Asian Americans already do this. I am posing a normative question, not a descriptive one.

<sup>x</sup> See ecofeminist works such as Plumwood (2002) and Kheel (2008).



# Connecting the Dots: Understanding the Importance of Census Participation to Civic Engagement

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Terry M. Ao

## Introduction

Civic engagement is often seen as the key to empowerment for a community. While there is no one authoritative definition, civic engagement is generally seen as an activity or activities taken to make a difference and promote the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. In essence, civic engagement encompasses a broad ideal of individually contributing to a greater good that benefits both the individual and the community at large. In the Asian American community, what is often overlooked is how critical census participation is to effective civic engagement. This stems, in part, from a lack of knowledge about the census generally — that is, what it is, why it is important, what is at stake with respect to census participation, and, consequently, the inability to connect the importance of census participation to effective civic engagement. Once that connection is understood, we must focus on understanding the barriers to our communities' full participation and what can be done to eradicate these barriers. At the end of day, census participation should be seen as the backbone of civic engagement and, thus, should be included as an integral component of any comprehensive civic engagement campaign.

## What is the Census?

The United States Constitution requires the federal government to count the number of people in the United States every ten years. This count is called the decennial census and the next scheduled

count will be 2010. The Census Bureau, which is a part of the United States Department of Commerce and is responsible for planning and conducting the decennial census, is tasked with counting everyone who resides in the United States as of Census Day, April 1, 2010, including children and immigrants, regardless of their legal status.

In past censuses, the Census Bureau sent out a short-form survey to 100% of the households and a long-form survey to a random sample of households (1 in 6). The short form asked the basic population questions, such as age, gender, race and Hispanic origin. The long form asked socioeconomic questions, such as educational attainment, language ability, income levels and so forth. While data from both the short and long forms are used for funding appropriations, Voting Rights Act requirements and other governmental and non-governmental reasons, the short form data is collected for the purpose of reapportionment and redistricting.

After the 2000 census, the Census Bureau replaced the long form of the decennial census with the American Community Survey (ACS), which asks similar questions to the long form and is intended to provide information on what a community looks like on a more up-to-date basis rather than relying on data collected every ten years. The ACS questionnaire asks questions such as name, sex, age, ethnic origin, race, language ability, educational attainment and household income. The ACS provides communities with critical economic, social, demographic, and housing information for all states, cities, counties, metropolitan areas and population groups of 65,000 people or more. Because it is designed to provide more up-to-date data, the ACS is sent out to a sample of households every month of every year and the Census Bureau provides ACS data on an annual basis. With the switch from long form to ACS, future censuses, starting with the 2010 Census, will only consist of the short form.

The Census Bureau also conducts various other surveys throughout the years, including the Current Population Survey (CPS) and the Economic Census, that help provide the data needed to understand the many communities that make up this country. The CPS is a monthly survey conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics and is the primary source of information on the labor force characteristics of the U.S. population. Estimates ob-

tained from the CPS include employment, unemployment, earnings, hours of work, and are available by a variety of demographic characteristics including age, sex, race, marital status, and educational attainment as well as by occupation, industry, and class of worker. Supplemental questions to produce estimates on a variety of topics including school enrollment, income, previous work experience, health, employee benefits, work schedules, and voting are also often added to the regular CPS questionnaire. The Economic Census provides official measures of output for industries and geographic areas, and serves as the cornerstone of the nation's economic statistics, providing key source data for the Gross Domestic Product and other indicators of economic performance.

### **Why is the Census important?**

The importance of census data cannot be overstated; census data is critical for our society to function as it is used for many purposes by many entities. For example, information about age, Hispanic/Latino ethnicity, and race is used by the Department of Justice to combat discrimination; by the Department of Health and Human Services to support research on service delivery for children, minorities, and the elderly; and by the Department of Education to conduct studies, evaluations, and assessments of children of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. This information is also used to reapportion political representation and in the redistricting process. Information about age, race, Hispanic origin, and language ability is used to determine election language assistance requirements under the Voting Rights Act. Income and housing responses are used by the Department of Housing and Urban Development to assess the need for housing assistance for elderly, handicapped, and low-income homeowners. Citizenship information is used by community-based organizations to assess the needs of their constituents. Employment information is used by communities to develop training programs, and by business and local governments to determine the need for new employment opportunities accordingly. Income information helps determine the needs of families and others and makes it possible to compare the economic levels of different areas, and how eco-

nomic levels for a community change over time. Voting data from the CPS in federal election years have been used to figure out where to canvass for get-out-the vote efforts or to determine which communities need more education and outreach efforts targeting them.

Many federal and state programs use census data to distribute funds for community development. In fact, according to The Brookings Institution, census data is used by federal agencies to determine the allocation of over \$300 billion in federal funding. Education information is used to determine the number of public schools, education programs, and daycare services required in a community. Data on disability provides the means to allocate government funding for healthcare services and new hospitals in many communities. Military service information is used by the Department of Veterans Affairs to measure the needs of veterans and to evaluate veterans' programs dealing with education, employment, and health care.

Finally, it is particularly important that Asian Americans participate in the census because it is the richest source of data on Asian American communities, particularly for sub-ethnic communities (such as Chinese, Asian Indian and Hmong). In many data sets or surveys developed by private, academic and other governmental entities, Asian Americans often find themselves woefully underrepresented. Many data sets or surveys simply lump Asian Americans into the "Other" categories, thereby making it impossible to determine what the landscape looks like for Asian Americans on that particular topic, whether that topic be related to health care, educational dropout rates, or some other important social or political issue. Other times, Asian Americans are able to find aggregated data for the entire Asian American community but that data may not be particularly useful. Because the Asian American community is diverse, comprised of several dozen distinct ethnic groups, a multitude of cultures and languages, and widely varied experiences in the U.S., aggregated data may simply mask problems and concerns for particular sub-ethnic groups. For example, Asian Americans as a whole are often seen as wealthy and well educated, but disaggregated data for subgroups reveals a wide array of incomes, poverty rates, and levels of educational attainment — from those doing very well to those struggling on multiple fronts. The Census Bureau is one of the few entities that col-

lects and reports data at the disaggregated level of Asian American sub-ethnic groups. Therefore, it is even more critical for Asian Americans to participate in census surveys to ensure that the data captured by the Census Bureau is as thorough and accurate as possible.

## **What is at stake when we talk about Census participation?**

If census data is used for so many purposes, from reapportionment and redistricting to allocation of federal, state and local funding, to recognizing trends and problems in communities, then the data must be accurate. An accurate count of Asian Americans will allow communities to track the well-being of children, families, and the elderly; determine where to locate new highways, schools, and hospitals; show a large corporation that a town has the workforce the company needs; evaluate programs such as welfare and workforce diversification; and monitor and publicize the results of programs. Unfortunately, there have been issues with accuracy of census counts, particularly for communities of color. Since 1940, the Census Bureau has attempted to measure its ability to accurately count the people in America whether it was through Demographic Analysis or the use of a separate coverage measurement survey. Duplicate responses lead to overcounts, while omissions, or missed persons, lead to undercount. Subtracting overcounts from undercounts results in a net undercount or overcount for each census.

For each decennial census from 1940 to 1980, the national net undercount went down, as did the net undercount for specific population subgroups. However, since 1940, there has always existed a differential undercount – that is, non-Hispanic whites had lower undercount rates than people of color, or, stated another way, people of color were missed by the census more often than non-Hispanic whites. The differential undercount was also reduced each decennial census since 1940.

The 1990 census was a watershed moment for the Census Bureau. It was the first census that was less accurate than the one previous. The differential undercounts were the highest the Census Bureau had ever recorded. We also learned from 1990 that it was not only African Americans who suffered significant differential under-

counts but also Latino Americans and Asian Americans.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, American Indians on reservations had the highest undercount of any groups in the 1990 census, with an undercount rate of over 12 percent (Hogan and Robinson 1993). The undercount of children was generally disproportionate. Children made up a quarter of the overall population in 1990, but accounted for slightly more than half of all persons missed by the Census Bureau. The undercount of children of color was even more disproportionate (Edmonston 2000).

In 2000, the Census Bureau worked to improve the accuracy of the count. Unfortunately, it was unclear how well the Census Bureau was able to count people because the Census Bureau did not have confidence in the detailed findings from their final coverage measurement, the Accuracy and Coverage Evaluation (Revision II). The National Academy of Sciences' National Research Council did conclude with a fair amount of confidence that the net undercount and differential undercount by race/ethnicity were reduced from 1990. However, the panel also concluded that there continued to exist a differential undercount of racial minorities in the 2000 census (Committee on National Statistics 2004, 241).

In the Asian American community, accuracy in census counts remains a persistent issue. In the 2000 Census, Asian Americans were alleged to be slightly overcounted by the Census Bureau's findings, possibly because there was a relatively high rate of duplication for Asian Americans in college living away from home, which likely offset any undercount of other subgroups.

Still, other Asian American subgroups believe that they were vastly undercounted. This was particularly true for Southeast Asian communities. For example, many community leaders in Long Beach, California believed that the Cambodian population was undercounted in the 2000 census. As evidence, they cite the fact that local school enrollment data were considerably different than the data provided by the 2000 census. During the 1999-2000 school year, school enrollment data showed a population of Cambodian students that was nearly as large as the entire Cambodian population counted by the Census Bureau. Yet, the 2000 census data showed that the Cambodian school-age population accounted for less than half of all Cambodians in California. It is clear that the Census Bureau missed a

significant number of Cambodian children in the 2000 census, and, from this finding, we can extrapolate it is highly likely that the census missed a significant number of Cambodian adults in California, as well.

## **Impact on Civic Engagement**

Because non-participation in census surveys can lead to potential undercounts, severe consequences to civic engagement will inevitably follow. Inaccurate census counts can create future problems for redistricting, addressing language barriers to voting, and enforcing voting rights. Additionally, undercounts would make other aspects of civic engagement work more difficult to undertake.

Undercounting communities will have a devastating impact on redistricting. Redistricting, the process by which census data is used to redraw the lines and boundaries of electoral districts within a state, affects districts at all levels of government – from local school boards, wards and city councils to state legislatures and the United States House of Representatives. The way that district lines are drawn also influences whether or not elected officials are responsive to the needs of their communities, such as securing funding for bilingual education classes or ensuring that Limited English Proficient individuals in the community have access to health care.

Asian American communities have not traditionally been actively involved in the redistricting process, except in certain areas where there is a sizeable population. This lack of participation has, in turn, resulted in underrepresentation in elected leadership positions. For example, despite being 12% of the population in Los Angeles as of the 1990 Census, there were no Asian Americans on the County Board of Supervisors during the 1990s because the Asian American communities were split apart into different districts (Vasquez 2001). Keeping Asian American voters with shared interests together in a district means that they have a significant voice in deciding who is elected to office, and whether their needs are being raised and represented. In 2001, the Coalition of Asian Pacific Americans for Fair Redistricting (CAPAFR) was formed to organize the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities statewide in Cali-

for California for the first time in history to actively engage in the statewide Assembly redistricting process and create a statewide Assembly proposal. CAPAFR's advocacy resulted in the 2001 Assembly lines unifying seven key communities of interest, two of which resulted in the election of Asian American Assembly members (Assemblyman Mike Eng of the 49th Assembly District and Assemblyman Van Tran of the 68th Assembly District), including the first Vietnamese state legislator in the nation (Coalition of Asian Americans for Fair Redistricting 2001). The ability to make this progress begins with having quality census data. If Asian Americans are missed in the decennial count then they will not be represented in the redistricting process. If too many Asian Americans are missed, whole communities run greater risks of being split into different districts during the redistricting process, and thereby losing their political clout.

If Asian Americans are missed from the monthly American Community Survey (ACS), communities run the risk of not receiving the election language assistance they need — and are entitled to under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. During the 2006 reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, in recognition of the move from the long form to the ACS, Section 203 determinations were to be made every five years based on ACS data (Hamer, Parks and King 2006). Section 203 requires covered jurisdictions to provide language assistance during the electoral process, thereby removing the language barrier to voting for their covered language minorities. A jurisdiction is covered under Section 203 where the number of limited English proficient United States citizens of voting age in a single language group within the jurisdiction who are Asian American, Latino, American Indian or Alaska Native is more than 10,000, more than five percent of all voting-age citizens, or exceeds five percent of all reservation residents on an Indian reservation, and has an illiteracy rate higher than the national illiteracy rate.<sup>ii</sup> Once covered, the jurisdiction is obligated to provide “any registration or voting notices, forms, instructions, assistance, or other materials or information relating to the electoral process, including ballots” in the covered language as well as in English.<sup>iii</sup> Section 203 has been successful in increasing the civic engagement of Asian American citizens, with higher voter registration and turnout levels from each previous en-

actment or reauthorization period. Increases in voter registration and turnout can be directly linked to Section 203 compliance. For example, after entering into a Memorandum of Agreement with the Department of Justice, Harris County, Texas (Houston) saw the doubling of Vietnamese voter turnout which resulted in the first Vietnamese candidate in history to be elected to the Texas legislature, defeating the incumbent chair of the Appropriations Committee. The increased civic engagement of these groups has also led to increased political representation by candidates of choice. In recent years, almost 350 Asian Americans have been elected to office.<sup>iv</sup> If Asian American communities miss out on Section 203 coverage because of missed persons, then their ability to be civically engaged suffers.

Finally, without accurate voting data, the ability of civic engagement organizations to do their job effectively will be compromised. Information on reported voting and registration by various demographic and socioeconomic characteristics is collected for the nation in November of congressional and presidential election years through the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS). Combined with data from other census surveys, these data are important in determining what groups are in need of education and outreach efforts and are useful in detecting trends in voting patterns of particular communities. For those organizations that have a demographic analysis capacity, or for those that do not but who contract with those that do, census data can be used to develop a Get-Out-The-Vote strategy, including determining where canvassing and phone banking should occur. These data are critical to civic engagement by helping to shape and guide what any given civic engagement campaign should look like.

### **What barriers exist to Census participation for the Asian American community?**

It is clear that we need to have every Asian American counted and it is equally clear that some are not. There are barriers to census participation that likely explain why some Asian Americans are being missed. The Asian American population in the United States is larger than it has ever been in our nation's history. From 1990 to 2004, the

Asian American population doubled in size, growing from seven million to 14 million. Of this rapidly growing segment of the population, about two-thirds are foreign-born, and more than a third of the Asian American population, nearly four million people, is considered limited English proficient (LEP). This combination of factors indicates that a significant sector of the population is at a substantial disadvantage — both linguistically and culturally — when it comes to participation in the census.

The Census Bureau's Asian American focus groups showed that many Asian Americans lacked awareness about the census and had not heard of the Census Bureau.<sup>v</sup> Indeed, many Asian Americans find the idea of the census not only confusing, but invasive and potentially threatening. Asian Americans — especially those who have recently emigrated from countries with oppressive governments — believe that the census is linked to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). The Census Bureau's Asian American focus groups also noted the lack of understanding about the purpose of the census and how the data is used. They also did not recognize any direct benefit to participating in the census to themselves and/or to the Asian American community. Lastly, respondents noted that English-language proficiency issues and the lack of availability of in-language materials functioned as barriers to census participation by Asian Americans.

While the ideal for a census is to achieve a complete count of all persons in the country, perfection in this context is impossible. The pragmatic reality is that the Census Bureau constantly strives to achieve the most accurate count possible and one that is better than previous counts. The 2010 Census will provide the Census Bureau with even more challenges in achieving an accurate count. The demographics of 2010 have changed drastically from 2000. Some communities, such as the Latino American and Asian American communities have experienced high growth rates. Additionally, recent natural disasters have displaced many people from their homes and have created a more complex — consequently, less traditional — sense of household for many people. The Census Bureau must be able to understand these communities and situations and the unique barriers to an accurate count that may exist for them.

The Census Bureau also has to account for the fact that people are reluctant to voluntarily provide personal information to the government in an age of identity theft and in the wake of immigration raids and other dragnets that post-9/11 policies have created. Combined with growing privacy concerns that have arisen from recent disclosures that the Census Bureau inappropriately shared information with government agencies, an increasing number of people, particularly minorities, are fearful of providing even the most basic information asked on the census. The Census Bureau must somehow overcome the many obstacles created by these factors in order to get an accurate count.

### **What can be done to break down barriers to Census participation?**

It is important that we actively educate people about the importance of census surveys because the Census Bureau's Asian American focus groups indicated that very few had ever participated in any U.S. Census, even though most of the Asian American participants had been living in the United States during the 2000 Census. In fact, the majority of Asian American respondents reported never having received the census in the mail, nor were they visited by a census enumerator. For those who received the form but did not respond, some threw it away because they could not read English, others said they just were not interested, and a few said that at the time they were not yet citizens and thought that only U.S. citizens could participate. A number of participants mistakenly confused the census questionnaire with their annual evaluation form for their welfare assistance programs or with other telephone or mail surveys conducted by private businesses or government agencies. Thus there is a lot of confusion regarding what the census surveys are, what they do, and how one should correctly fill them out.

Based on the Census Bureau's Asian American focus groups, doing good and improving one's community was seen as an important benefit of the census. The Asian American respondents expressed their particular interest in a number of the benefits, including school funding, funding of other programs (such as police, firemen,

and national security), building new roads, determining the number of Congressional seats, planning for businesses, and providing public bilingual services. In fact, once participants were shown the census fact sheets and had an opportunity to discuss how the data is used and benefits the community, the majority expressed interest in participating in the 2010 Census.

There are many opportunities to engage Asian Americans in participating in census surveys. Some of the specific efforts suggested by the Census Bureau's Asian American focus groups to motivate more Asian Americans to participate in the census include: working closely with Asian churches and temples; setting up seminars or workshops at Asian American community centers or organizations; getting the message to parents through students at school and creating and sending a task force with bilingual census takers. They also suggested running in-language ad campaigns that emphasize the following messages: participating in the census does not require legal status and filling out your census form provides benefits to communities, including hiring more police, receiving more funding for schools, and building more roads to reduce traffic. Further, greater census participation can also allow communities to gain more political power. They also noted that the most effective outreach strategies to reach Asian ethnic communities utilize native-language media (e.g., television, newspapers, radio, billboards near or within the community) and flyers posted at Asian churches, temples, community centers, social service organizations and at major Asian grocery stores.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding the importance of census participation to effective civic engagement is critical to optimizing civic engagement work. The primary key to overcoming these obstacles is to raise overall awareness of the census and why it is important for every person to participate in census counts, regardless of their citizenship or legal status. Unfortunately, even for community based organizations who are aware of the benefits of census data, working on census education and advocacy often takes a back seat to other pressing issues, such as citizenship and naturalization, immigration or get-out-the-vote

work. Having community groups understand that accurate census data is the backbone to all of their civic engagement efforts will help to create greater awareness of the importance of census data. If Asian American communities can work collectively to increase the accuracy of their communities' census counts, the effect on civic engagement efforts will be widespread and profound, the impacts of which could range from increased funding for programs, services, schools and infrastructure, to having more voting power, to electing more Asian American elected officials at local, state and national levels.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> The 1990 census provided the first measurements on the undercounts for Latino Americans, Asian Americans, American Indians and Alaska Natives. In the previous decennial censuses, the only coverage measurements made were for "black" and "non-black."
- <sup>ii</sup> 42 U.S.C. § 1973aa-1a(b)(2). The Director of the Census Bureau makes these determinations, which are effective upon publication in the Federal Register. The Director's determinations are not subject to review in any court. 42 U.S.C. § 1973aa-1a(b)(4).
- <sup>iii</sup> 42 U.S.C. § 1973aa-1a(c). Of course, when the covered language is oral or unwritten, then the covered jurisdiction is only required to furnish oral instructions, assistance, or other information relating to registration and voting. *Id.*
- <sup>iv</sup> H.R. Rep. No. 109-478, at 9-10 (2006) at 19.
- <sup>v</sup> The report on these focus groups, *Ethnic and Racial Sub-Population Focus Group Research, Qualitative Research Conducted on Behalf of the U.S. Census Bureau*, can be found at <http://www.census.gov/procur/www/2010communications/final%20report%20-%20asian%20&%20arab-american.pdf>. The report provides detailed findings from focus groups on the following populations: Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Filipino, Laotian, Chinese, Arab, Multi-Racial, and Caucasian.



Part III  
Institutional  
Factors



# Growth and Diversity of Asian American Nonprofit Organizations

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## INTRODUCTION

In societies with free association among individuals, civil society developments constitute the foundation and fabric of its people. Civil society generally refers to actions individuals voluntarily take in various forms, at different levels of collectiveness, and under diverse institutional settings — all with the goal of bringing positive changes to a relevant community. These actions are distinctively different from government or market activities, but they are becoming increasingly inter-related and inter-dependent. Public policies may facilitate civil society developments. One example is providing the regulatory framework with sufficient incentives to encourage the formation of publicly accountable nonprofit organizations to carry out good work. In the U.S., different types of nonprofit organizations are formed everywhere to advance a multiplicity of causes, so much so that the terms civil society and nonprofit organizations are frequently used interchangeably.

In Asian American communities, civil society is very much part of communal life since the early history of immigration. In earlier times of exclusion and isolation, Asian American nonprofit organizations might perform significant *de facto* self governance roles for an ethnic community. In recent decades of a more open society and accommodating public policy, different types of Asian American organizations can be instrumental in promoting greater political and economic integration with society at large. Yet, very little is known about Asian American nonprofit organizations (NPOs) as a group. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of these or-

ganizations in major U.S. metropolitan areas — guided by a simple research question: What is the pattern of development of Asian American nonprofit organizations? The pattern of development includes the size of this segment of nonprofits, their history, the distribution among different functional types as well as among diverse ethnic groups, and some general financial situation of these organizations.

It is a well-established fact that nonprofit organizations play an increasingly important role in contemporary U.S. society (Salamon 1999). Various theories have been advanced to explain the rationale for the existence of the nonprofit sector. One theory argues that the rise of nonprofit organizations is a result of government failure — analogous to the justification for a government to exist due to market failure (Weisbrod 1988). As the private market fails to produce some goods and services because of the incompatibility between market incentives and the nature of public goods and services, so are some other goods and services that a government, even a democratically selected one, may fail to produce equitably. In a society with heterogeneous public interests and public decision by majority rule, only collective goods (including public goods) that meet majority interests may get provided. In the absence of any alignment with majority interests, public goods that are local to either a geographic area or to a community of any particular characteristic may need to find alternative provision mechanisms. Individuals that share the same local public interests may engage in self-organizing to form voluntary and nonprofit agencies to provide local collective goods. Resources for these nonprofits may come from within the same community, outside the community, or even the larger government sector, particularly when these local public interests overlap with the larger context of government policy initiatives.

The community interests of different racial and ethnic groups can be considered an example of such local collective goods. In this case, the collective goods are local to different ethnic groups. As a community, Asian Americans are comprised of significant immigrant population of diverse ethnicity. There are at least two general immigrant concerns for these Asian Americans — economic survival in the adopted country and maintaining a distinctive cultural identity and heritage. Helping immigrants to survive economically includes or-

ganizing nonprofits to teach English as Second Language (or English for Speakers of Other Languages), providing employment services or services to those who need help in taking care of themselves — like low-income households, the youth, and the elderly. Maintaining cultural identity may take the form of setting up ethnic language schools to teach U.S.-born Asian American children, forming nonprofits to promote ethnic art, music, dance, and other aspects of the immigrant home culture. As Asian American communities grow, they may learn to adopt more mainstream organizing strategies. One consequence is the development of Asian American nonprofits that promote Asian American interests in the context of the larger society — including advocacy groups, professional associations, funding intermediaries, and private foundations.

Thus, Asian American nonprofit organizations can generally be categorized into four functional types. These categories are:

1. Religious organizations. These are primarily churches and temples.
2. Cultural organizations. These organizations promote and preserve an ethnic group's cultural identity, including home-country language schools, traditional arts, dance, or music groups, and other general cultural organizations — for instance, associations based on the last name of an ethnic Chinese subgroup.
3. Service organizations. These agencies provide primarily one or more types of social services like English classes, health services, youth programs, or senior housing projects. These services have the overall objective of helping immigrants participate more productively in the economy.
4. Public interest organizations — these are advocacy groups, professional organizations, civic organizations, and private foundations and various public interest funds. The central theme among them is to enhance the voice of their respective Asian American constituency through organizing, financing, holding forums, sponsoring activities, or other appropriate means.

Among these four functional types of Asian American nonprofit organizations, there is also heterogeneity of community interests. Because of the nature of religious and cultural activities — especially in

the use of native languages and the meaning of identity, it is likely that a religious or cultural organization serves a specific Asian ethnic group. A social service or public interest organization operates in the larger societal context in terms of its funding sources or sphere of influence, and thus may not be bounded as much by similar language and cultural particularities. A Vietnamese American may not attend a Chinese church but participate in an English class conducted at an Asian American social service agency. The following empirical sections may shed some light on whether the distribution of Asian American nonprofits reflects this pattern of heterogeneity.

The remainder of this chapter is organized into three parts. The first part describes the data, which come primarily from IRS tax forms. This is a rich source of information with some major limitations. The second part presents a profile of the Asian American nonprofit organizations in the sample. The major findings are that Asian American nonprofit organizations are numerous but few compared to all nonprofits, they are young and diverse — both ethnically and functionally — and they are concentrated in a small number of metropolitan areas. The third part examines the factors associated with the functional types (religious, cultural, service and public interest) and with organizational size as measured by total assets and annual revenue. The results indicate that Asian American religious organizations tend to have a longer history, are more likely to be found in suburban middle class communities, as well as in metropolitan areas with a more diverse ethnic population, and a relatively less active general population in community organizing. The opposite is true for secular Asian American organizations as a group. The pattern is less consistent among the three types of secular Asian American organizations. Regarding organization size, more established Asian American nonprofits, pan-Asian American organizations, and those located in communities with larger Asian American populations tend to have more financial resources.

## DATA

In spite of the emerging importance of ethnic nonprofits, research on these organizations has only begun recently. Michael

Cortes (1998) explored various data sources for research on Hispanic nonprofits in the U.S. He made use of the application for tax-exempt status and nonprofit tax returns (Form 990); both were filed with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service. The data used in Cortes (1998) is available at the IRS upon request. Recent advances in information technology, especially via the internet, have rendered similar information accessible on a few websites. This study makes use of these free and electronically accessible data sources<sup>1</sup> (e.g. website of National Center for Charitable Statistics and [www.guidestar.org](http://www.guidestar.org)) to provide an overview of Asian American nonprofit organizations in the U.S. Since Form 990, the tax return filed by nonprofits receiving annual revenue of \$25,000 or more, is filed on a voluntary basis, compliance and data quality may not be carefully audited. However, Froelich, Knoepfle, and Pollak (2000) and Bielefeld (2000) demonstrated the research utility of these completed tax returns. After comparing the information in Form 990 with audited financial statements of selected nonprofits, Froelich, Knoepfle and Pollak (2000) concluded that the financial information, especially balance sheet and income statement information, contained in Form 990 was generally reliable.

This chapter examines Asian American nonprofit organizations in U.S. major metropolitan areas. Asian American nonprofit organizations here refer to nonprofits with the mission of serving directly and primarily Asian Americans, and that are run by Asian Americans, either as executive directors or as board members of the organization, or both. Thus, neither nonprofit organizations that serve Asian Americans but have no significant Asian American representation as board members or as the executive director, nor non-Asian American serving organizations with Asian American executive directors are included in this study. Metropolitan areas are used because minority and immigrant populations are likely to be concentrated in these areas. More specifically, Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area (CMSA) is used as the definition for metropolitan areas. This is the most inclusive metropolitan area concept used by the Census Bureau. This study collects information from the 10 largest CMSAs as measured by total population.<sup>2</sup>

CMSA demographic data is obtained from the 1990 and 2000 census. The Guidestar database of nonprofits allows interactive

searches for these organizations within the same approximate coverage of CMSAs. This study assumes that a fifty-mile<sup>3</sup> area surrounding the zip codes of a central city is big enough to cover most of the Asian American nonprofit organizations in the corresponding metropolitan area. Another challenge is to identify Asian American nonprofits in the electronic archives. In this study, these organizations are identified by their names bearing such classification or subgroups as Asian, Cambodian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Indian<sup>4</sup>, Filipino, and similar terms.

Asian American nonprofit organization data for this study is collected from the website [www.guidestar.org](http://www.guidestar.org), because it also includes location information of nonprofits that do not file Form 990, especially religious organizations. This website also provides the key information of when a nonprofit organization is granted tax-exempt status or when it was formed. Even though the Asian American nonprofits included in this study are not exhaustive of all such organizations — smaller ones are particularly excluded — the search on this website provides the most comprehensive count of them from one single source. According to a local directory of human services for Asian Americans (Asian American Federation of New York 2003), there are 85 to 90 Asian American human service agencies in the New York metropolitan area. Almost the same number (83) of Asian American service organizations are identified in this study. A comparison of the Boston data with a local directory of Asian American organizations in Massachusetts (Asian American Resource Workshop 2001) shows that the local directory has 219 Asian American community organizations whereas the [www.guidestar.com](http://www.guidestar.com) archive search resulted in 112 Asian American nonprofit organizations. A breakdown of the four functional types of organizations shows that the Boston Asian American organizations in this study amount to 47 to 55 percent of the same type of organizations in the local directory. If local directories are complete, this is an improvement over the general undercount of small nonprofit organizations as reported in O'Neill (2002). As much as two-thirds of 501(c)3 nonprofits had annual revenue less than \$25,000 in 1997 (Arnsberger 2000) and thus were not included in the IRS Form 990 database for that year. Thus, the sample in this study is a reasonable representation of medium to large Asian

American nonprofit organizations in the respective metropolitan areas.

## PROFILE OF ASIAN AMERICAN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

### ASIAN AMERICAN POPULATION AND NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Figure 1 and Tables 1 and 2 summarize the relevant U.S. census data and findings from examining the data on Asian American nonprofit organizations available at the website [www.guidestar.org](http://www.guidestar.org). They provide an overview of the ethnic and functional diversity of Asian American nonprofit organizations in major U.S. metropolitan areas. This section begins with a general discussion of the distribution and history of these organizations in relation to the distribution of the Asian American population.

The Asian American population grew rapidly in the 1990s. Figure 1 shows the size of the Asian American population and the number of Asian American nonprofit organizations in the ten largest metropolitan areas. In 2000, Los Angeles (1.7 million), New York (1.4 million), and San Francisco (1.3 million) have the largest Asian American population, each accounting for 7 to 18 percent of the total population. The other metropolitan areas are far behind with less than 400,000 Asian Americans, or 2 to 6 percent of the total population. It is not surprising that 70 percent of the Asian American nonprofits in the sample are located in these three metropolitan areas. Los Angeles has the most numerous Asian American nonprofits (about 820), in comparison with New York (about 470), San Francisco (about 360), and the other 7 metropolitan areas which has less than 100 to 200 each. This concentration is even more pronounced for older Asian American nonprofits. Both Figure 1 and the high correlation coefficient of 0.93 strongly confirm the finding that metropolitan areas with larger Asian American populations have more Asian American nonprofits.

The top full panel of data in Table 1 shows the youth of most of the existing Asian American nonprofits. In each of the ten metropolitan areas, between 45 to 60 percent of Asian American nonprofits were formed in the 1990s. Another 20 to 30 percent have their ori-

gins in the 1980s, and 10 to 25 percent in the 1970s. The average age of Asian American nonprofits in this study is less than twenty years. The median age is 12 years. Some of the Asian American nonprofits formed in the last fifty years may have ceased to exist, but this information is not available in the data for this study.

Asian American nonprofits amount to less than 1 percent of the total number of nonprofits in 7 of the 10 largest metropolitan areas. Even in the three largest Asian American communities, Asian American nonprofits are only 1 percent (New York), 2 percent (San Francisco), or 3 percent (Los Angeles) of the total number of nonprofits in the respective area (Figure 1). Although the proportion of nonprofits organized and run by Asian Americans is much lower than that of the metropolitan population of Asian descent, there are proportionally more Asian American nonprofits than Hispanic-Latino nonprofits in each of the same metropolitan areas (Hung 2007). The languages used among Asian Americans are more diverse than the primarily Spanish and Portuguese commonly used among the Hispanic-Latino population. Despite the stereotype of Asian American being the model minority, many in the population need social services as well (Cheng and Yang 2000). The services also need to be provided in a culturally competent way (Zhan 2003). These Asian American organizations may be more prepared to deliver culturally competent services. The much larger Hispanic-Latino population may also be served by mainstream nonprofits with bilingual staff, or by Hispanic-Latino run nonprofits that are larger than the typical Asian American organizations. These differences partly explain the more numerous Asian American nonprofits relative to Hispanic-Latino organizations.

Figure 1. Asian American Population and Nonprofit Organizations in the Ten Largest Metropolitan Areas 2000

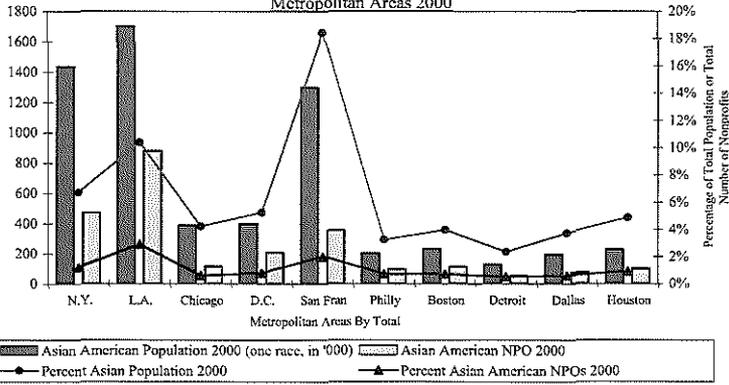


Table 1. Distribution of Asian American Nonprofits by CMSA

	L.A.	N.Y.	S.F.	D.C.	CHI.	BOS.	PHIL.	HOU.	DAL.	DET.	Total %	Total N (c)
<b>Total</b>	824	469	365	213	117	108	91	92	74	51	100.0	2404
<b>% among the 10 CMSAs (a)</b>												
Historical period organization was formed	34.3	19.5	15.2	8.9	4.9	4.5	3.8	3.8	3.1	2.1	100.0	
% formed within a CMSA in 1950 and before	1.2	1.3	1.7	1.4	1.7	0.0	1.1	2.2	0.0	0.0	1.3	30
% formed in a CMSA in 1951-1960	0.9	1.1	1.4	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.0	0.8	19
% formed in a CMSA in 1961-1970	6.5	3.4	7.7	6.6	4.3	2.8	3.3	4.4	1.4	5.9	5.5	130
% formed in a CMSA in 1971-1980	12.7	12.0	18.8	17.5	24.1	14.0	16.7	9.9	11.0	17.6	14.6	349
% formed in a CMSA in 1981-1990	26.3	20.6	24.3	21.8	20.7	22.4	26.7	24.2	31.5	19.6	24.0	572
% formed in a CMSA in 1991-2000	52.4	61.5	46.1	52.1	49.1	60.7	52.2	59.3	56.2	54.9	53.8	1283
<b>Ethnicity (b)</b>												
% Pan Asian American within CMSA	8.1	16.3	20.5	19.5	16.4	17.8	18.7	11.0	12.2	7.8	14.1	338
% Chinese within CMSA	20.3	28.9	35.5	30.7	25.9	45.8	22.0	38.5	27.0	39.2	28.0	673
% Japanese within CMSA	8.8	4.9	11.5	4.2	9.5	2.8	6.6	5.5	5.4	7.8	7.5	180
% Korean within CMSA	47.5	41.3	18.9	26.0	37.9	15.9	37.4	13.2	29.7	27.5	35.5	853
% South Asian within CMSA	2.3	2.8	3.3	9.3	4.3	0.9	3.3	12.1	6.8	9.8	3.9	94
% Southeast Asian within CMSA	13.0	5.8	10.4	10.2	6.0	16.8	12.1	19.8	18.9	7.8	11.1	266
<b>Functional types (b)</b>												
% Religious NPO within a CMSA	52.1	42.4	38.8	42.9	47.3	38.0	29.8	20.6	27.1	26.4	40.5	972
% Cultural NPO within a CMSA	16.1	24.2	20.7	20.9	27.0	26.0	20.5	27.6	33.6	25.3	21.4	515
% Service NPO within a CMSA	12.1	17.8	25.0	18.7	14.9	20.0	16.1	31.0	20.6	25.3	16.6	399
% Public Interest within a CMSA	19.7	15.6	15.5	17.6	10.8	16.0	33.6	30.8	18.7	23.1	21.5	516

(Chi-Square Tests:  $p < 0.01$ )

(a) Chi-Square Tests:  $p < 0.05$

(b) Chi-Square Tests:  $p < 0.01$

(c) The total N for all historical periods is smaller than that for all ethnicity or all functional types because the year of formation for about 20 organizations cannot be determined

## PAN-ASIAN AMERICAN AND ETHNIC NONPROFITS

If heterogeneity of community interests is the basis for organizing nonprofit organizations to substitute for government failure, the extent of ethnic diversity among Asian American nonprofit organizations would further highlight the significance of these agencies in fulfilling unmet needs that escape government or mainstream nonprofit organizations' attention. The second full panel of data in Table 1 shows the distribution of different ethnic Asian American nonprofits in the ten largest metropolitan areas in 2000. The top full panel of data in Table 2 shows the period of formation for these ethnic Asian American nonprofits.

Pan-Asian American nonprofit organizations are organized to promote the interests of all Asian Americans, rather than focusing on a specific ethnic group. Pan-Asian American, Southeast Asian, and South Asian nonprofits are the youngest among Asian American nonprofits; about 60 percent of them were organized in the 1990s. Almost the same percentage of each of the three groups was formed in the 1970s (9-12%) and 1980s (23-24%). Southeast Asians and South Asians are relatively new immigrant groups compared with the East Asian groups of Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans. The recent emergence of pan-Asian American organizations can be attributed to the time it takes for the rise of the U.S.-born and English-speaking generation of Asian Americans, who are likely to be the most active organizers of pan-Asian American nonprofits. While most ethnic nonprofits focus on the needs of the first generation immigrants and their families, some second generation middle-class Asian Americans see the merits in joining ethnic organizations as well. To offset the perception or stereotype of being "foreign" in a primarily white environment in Dallas, second generation Korean Americans and Indian Americans separately organized their own ethnic associations to preserve a balance between their heritage and economic class. They celebrate both ethnic and American holidays, and conduct service projects with first generation ethnic associations as well as with mainstream community organizations (Dhingra 2003).

Researchers continue to debate whether pan-Asian American activism is an outgrowth of the civil rights movement in the 1960s or in-

fluenced by the more radical approach of the contemporary black liberation movement (Omatsu 1994). In any case, establishing nonprofit agencies was an important institutionalization process at the beginning stage of the pan-Asian American movement (Geron 2003). Most of the pan-Asian American nonprofits played primarily advocacy roles from addressing anti-Asian American sentiments to promoting Asian American political representation at multiple levels of government (Lien 2001).

In each of the ten metropolitan areas, pan-Asian American nonprofits constitute about 8 to 20 percent of existing Asian American organizations. That is, on average, 8 to 9 out of every 10 Asian American nonprofits are organized to promote the spiritual, cultural, economic, and political interests of specific ethnic Asian groups rather than to further pan-Asian American interests. There are actually fewer truly pan-Asian American nonprofits than the number reported here, since the Asian American identification in some of the nonprofits' names might be used to reflect the intentionally inclusive nature of the organizations, while the actual clientele is still primarily one ethnic group. The pan-Asian American movement may actually benefit from the diversity of Asian ethnic community activism, especially in the form of nonprofit organizations, by bringing them into an alliance with a unifying goal. It may be more difficult for pan-Asian American activists to directly engage the diverse ethnic Asian communities because of language and cultural differences. The seemingly few pan-Asian American nonprofits may not signal inadequate pan-Asian American activism if significant numbers of individual ethnically based organizations are affiliated with pan-Asian American nonprofits. The effectiveness of pan-Asian American movements at the organizational level or the extent of such inter-organizational linkages needs further research. However, there is some evidence that partnerships with pan-Asian American organizations may not always be on an equal footing, and ethnic organizations may find it necessary to form additional coalitions based on other kinds of shared identity like gender or class (Advani 1997).

Among the current ethnic Asian American nonprofits, proportionally more Japanese American nonprofits were among the oldest organizations in the largest metropolitan areas. The distribution of

their origin over the three decades since 1970 has been steady, at about 20 to 25 percent. But they are not as numerous as the other ethnic groups, primarily because of the absence of substantial Japanese immigration in recent years. Only 27 percent of Japanese American nonprofits were organized in the 1990s, compared with 50 to 60 percent for all the other ethnic Asian nonprofits. The Japanese American nonprofits nevertheless continued to advocate for the community. For instance, the Japanese American Citizens League, beginning in the 1970s, played an active role in seeking redress for the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II (Kitano and Maki 2003). Some of its leaders were also instrumental in founding other Asian American professional organizations like the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association (Yamashita 2000).

Southeast Asian nonprofits outnumbered Japanese American nonprofits in most of the top ten metropolitan areas. Because of the turmoil in their homelands and the circumstances of refugee resettlement, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian immigrants face particular socioeconomic and psychological challenges in adapting to life in the U.S. (Rumbaut 2000). Southeast Asian nonprofits played especially important roles in this lifelong process of adjustment (Pho, Gerson, and Cowan 2007). Because of the historical colonial relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines, Filipino organizations have a longer history than other Southeast Asian nonprofits. However, because of differences in economic class and homeland regions, Filipino organizations in the U.S. are far from being homogeneous (Espiritu 1996).

A surprising pattern is that Korean American nonprofits outnumbered their Chinese American counterparts in the ten metropolitan areas as a whole (35.5 % vs. 28%) as well as in half of them, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Dallas. This is due to the large number of Korean churches set up in the 1990s in these metropolitan areas. In contrast, there are proportionally more Chinese American than Korean American nonprofits in DC-Baltimore, San Francisco, Boston, Detroit, and Houston, the same metropolitan areas where religious organizations do not dominate numerically. The rapid growth of Korean churches, mostly Protestant, was a transnational phenomenon beginning with the similar

growth in South Korea in the last few decades. In a study of Korean churches in New York City, Min (2000) argued that the large number of small to medium sized Korean ethnic churches were also convenient places where Korean immigrants maintained their cultural traditions, sought services through the pastoral ministry, and acquired social status for the selected few church leaders. These utilitarian functions are likely to prevail in other ethnic religious organizations as well, as in the case of some Hindu organizations that are part of the transnational development of Hindu nationalism in reproducing Hindu culture in the U.S. (Rajagopal 2000; Mathew and Prashad 2000).

South Asian nonprofits lag behind other Asian ethnic groups in their distribution across the metropolitan areas. According to Khandelwal (2002), South Asian organizations in New York City were mostly fragmented along a home country's regional, religious, or cast boundaries. Early Indian American nonprofits in the 1960s and 1970s were formed by middle class professionals or well-off businessmen, in order to solidify social connections and to hold cultural events. Beginning only in the late 1980s and 1990s were there pan-South Asian organizations to address the advocacy and social services needs of the more diverse immigrants — especially women and youth. Among Indian American nonprofit organizations, significant diversity or even rivalry may exist. In the Los Angeles area, a Hindu Indian and a Muslim Indian organization were separately engaged in influencing homeland politics and defining Asian Indian identity in southern California (Kurien 2001). Likewise, Chinese American organizations in Chinatowns may also be caught in the middle of the political maneuvering between China and Taiwan, after the U.S. government established diplomatic relationship with the People's Republic of China in 1973.

The fact that Asian American nonprofits can be classified based on ethnic identity reflects the heterogeneity of interests among Asian Americans. Using an ethnic group's identity or country of origin in the title of the organization further shows that preserving ethnic and cultural uniqueness may be intentional among some of the ethnic Asian American groups. Yet, pan-Asian American organizations provide a channel for these diverse ethnic nonprofits to strive for a united

front in matters of common concern. This balance between heterogeneous group identities and unified community interests may also be illustrated in the distribution of the four functional types of Asian American organizations.

Table 2. Distribution of Asian American Nonprofits by Historical Period of Formation

Ethnicity (a)	Percent of Organizations Formed in:						All periods	Column %
	1950 or before	1951-1960	1961-1970	1971-1980	1981-1990	1991-2000		
Pan Asian American	0.0	1.2	1.2	12.2	23.0	62.4	100.0	14.1
Chinese	2.2	1.0	4.3	17.1	23.5	51.7	100.0	28.0
Japanese	2.2	2.2	29.8	18.5	20.2	27.0	100.0	7.5
Korean	0.7	0.2	3.9	14.3	25.7	55.1	100.0	35.5
South Asian	0.0	2.2	2.2	8.7	23.9	63.0	100.0	3.9
Southeast Asian	1.9	0.0	3.4	12.1	23.5	59.1	100.0	11.1
Functional Types (a)								
Religious NPO	2.0	0.9	6.2	17.0	25.6	48.3	100.0	40.6
Cultural NPO	0.4	0.6	3.3	31.6	24.9	56.8	100.0	21.5
Service NPO	0.5	0.3	1.5	15.0	24.6	58.1	100.0	16.5
Public interest NPO	1.4	1.2	9.2	10.6	19.8	57.8	100.0	21.4
Percentage of Existing Organizations Formed in this Period								
Actual Number of Existing Organizations Formed in this Period	1.3	0.8	5.5	14.6	24.0	53.8	100.0	100.0
	30	19	130	349	572	1283	2383	2383

(a) Chi-Square tests,  $p < 0.01$

#### FOUR FUNCTIONAL TYPES OF ASIAN AMERICAN NONPROFITS

Asian American ethnic community organizations existed prior to the 1950s. Various ethnic organizations were instrumental in representing immigrants' social, economic, and political interests in the earlier political climate of exclusion and discrimination of ethnic minorities (Yu 1992; Lien 2001). In the early part of the twentieth century these organizations were probably one-stop places for immigrant activities — from finding a job, dealing with mainstream institutions outside the ethnic community, settling disputes, to seeking social and cultural enrichment. The growth of the federal and state governments in social services and the increasingly inclusive political climate in the second half of the twentieth century might have broken the monopoly of these few traditional ethnic organizations in community affairs. At the same time, the economy from division of labor might have encouraged the rise of different types of Asian American community organizations, with each type focusing primarily on one area of specialization. The development of nonprofit organizations in New York's Chinatown is an example of such changes inside and outside of an ethnic community (Kuo 1977). In addition, the differ-

ential impact of the modern welfare state on ethnic organizations is confirmed by a national study of Indochinese refugee associations (Hein 1997). Direct public assistance to individual refugees tends to reduce the role of ethnic organizations. Privatization of public assistance, however, uses ethnic organizations as the middleman to deliver services to these refugees and thus enhances the prominence of these organizations.

By examining the type of programs outlined in the completed Form 990, we can determine the functional category to which an Asian American nonprofit organization belongs. However, because not all nonprofits report detailed program information, we can also examine the agency's name and its mission statement to ascertain the agency's functional category. The data for this study shows that, in general, existing Asian American religious organizations have a longer history than the other three types of Asian American nonprofits in these metropolitan areas. Twenty-eight (58 %) of the 48 Asian American nonprofits formed prior to 1960 are religious organizations. More than 55 percent of the cultural, service, or public interest nonprofits were formed in the 1990s, whereas 48 percent of the religious organizations were formed in the same period. Likewise, 74 percent of the religious organizations were formed in the last two decades, whereas close to 80 percent or more of the cultural, service, or public interest nonprofits were formed in the same period (Table 2). For each of the four functional types of Asian American nonprofit organizations, successively more of them were formed over the last four decades. However, the proportion of these organizations formed for religious purposes has declined steadily from more than 60 percent to less than 40 percent during the last few decades, as more and more non-religious Asian American organizations are organized. This order of development may be attributed to the differences in the costs to organize and maintain different types of nonprofits. These costs may include not only the higher material and financial resources required to organize service agencies but also the increasingly sophisticated political skills necessary, especially in relation to the external community, to run effective public interest organizations.

The bottom panel in Table 1 shows the distribution of the four functional types of Asian American nonprofits in the 10 metropoli-

tan areas in 2000. In six of them — New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Dallas, the distribution of nonprofits among the four functional categories are very similar. Religious nonprofits constitute the single largest group (38 to 52%). Asian American nonprofits that promote culturally and ethnically distinctive identities are the second largest group (16 to 27%), followed by service-oriented nonprofits (12 to 25%) and public interest organizations (11 to 20%). The implication for participation in the political arena is significant for the Asian American communities in these six metropolitan areas. Sirola, Ong, and Fu (1998) argued that Asian American community-based organizations can play significant roles, although are not always able to do so, in lobbying for favorable local economic development policies — especially when the relative size and the economic hardship facing the Asian American population do not immediately catch the attention of policy makers. If advocacy groups, professional organizations, civic organizations, and private foundations, all part of public interest Asian American nonprofits, are the most prepared to mobilize the respective ethnic community, are there enough of them to effectively represent the voice of Asian American communities? These public interest organizations, or Asians Americans who are part of these organizations, may need to join forces with other Asian American nonprofits, especially service agencies, in order to make their voices heard. The numerous Asian American religious organizations, different from their African American counterparts, are unlikely to be very vocal and active in the political arena. Talking politics at the Sunday pulpit is a rarity in Asian American churches, even though some claim that Hindu organizations may mingle their religious and cultural focus with Hindu nationalism (Mathew and Prashad 2000).

For the remaining four metropolitan areas — DC-Baltimore, San Francisco, Boston, and Houston — the distribution of Asian American nonprofits among the four functional categories is more even. While religious organizations constitute close to or more than 40 percent of all Asian American nonprofits in the other six metropolitan areas, none of the functional types exceed 35 percent in this second group of metropolitan areas. Religious organizations still constitute a significant portion (20 to 30%) of all Asian American nonprofits, al-

though they are not as overwhelming as in the other seven metropolitan areas. There are relatively more cultural organizations (33.6%) than any other type of Asian American nonprofits in the Boston area. In the Houston area, there are roughly the same number of religious, cultural, service, and public interest organizations. Asian American public interest organizations are proportionally more numerous in San Francisco (33.6%) and DC-Baltimore (30.8%) than in the other top ten metropolitan areas. This last observation may be attributed to the influence of the general progressive atmosphere in San Francisco (Deleon 1992) and the agglomeration effect of the concentration of federal government agencies and other public and nonprofit headquarters in the DC area.

### **FACTORS FOR THE PATTERN OF FUNCTIONAL TYPES AND THE FINANCES OF ASIAN AMERICAN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS**

The remaining sections of this chapter report the results of further statistical analysis,<sup>5</sup> beginning with factors differentiating Asian American nonprofit organizations by functional type (religious, cultural, service and public-interest), and then factors associated with the finances of these organizations. Factors for the functional type of an Asian American nonprofit organization include location in larger or smaller metropolitan areas, suburban or central city location, the extent of community organizing at the metropolitan area level, Asian American ethnic diversity in a metropolitan area, social economic characteristics of Asian Americans at the 3-digit zip code level, and an organization's attributes including its ethnic identity and history.

Although 70 percent of Asian American nonprofits are located in Los Angeles, New York, or San Francisco metropolitan areas, different functional types are not equally likely to locate in these top three areas. Religious organizations are so numerous everywhere that the pattern of their distribution between the above three metropolises and the other seven metropolitan areas remains uncertain. Cultural or service organizations are less likely to locate in the top three areas, whereas public interest organizations are just the opposite. One explanation is that both cultural and service organizations serve a local

Asian American community, but a lot of the public interest organizations, such as foundations or professional associations, may serve a wider regional or national clientele. Thus, these public interest organizations are more likely than cultural or service agencies to locate in the three largest metropolitan areas. Religious organizations are more likely to be found in the suburban areas, where land may be more abundant for a congregation of a large number of worshippers. Service or public interest organizations as a group or separately are more likely to locate in city centers, where the majority of their target clientele may reside. Asian American public interest organizations are also more likely to locate in metropolitan areas where community organizing in the general population is more active, as measured by the larger number of nonprofit organizations per 1,000 residents. This same pattern also holds for Asian American cultural organizations, but not necessarily for service organizations. On the other hand, religious organizations tend to stay away from metropolitan areas with active community organizing, and concentrate instead in areas with more diverse Asian American ethnic populations. Secular Asian American nonprofits as a group serve a more homogeneous population than the religious organizations do. But it is unclear whether the extent of ethnic homogeneity of the clientele among Asian American cultural, service, and public interest organizations is the same or not.

Religious organizations also tend to locate in middle class communities. They are less likely than the secular Asian American nonprofits to locate in more well-off areas characterized by Asian American households with higher levels of both education and home ownership. Asian American churches or temples are also less likely to be found in very poor neighborhoods characterized by higher percentages of Asian Americans below the poverty line and unemployed. The socioeconomic context of the local Asian American community does not seem to have any observable relationship with the presence of cultural organizations, but it has mixed effects on service and public interest organizations. As a group, Asian American service or public interest organizations are more likely to locate in poorer Asian American communities with high poverty and high unemployment rates. Moreover, Asian American service organizations are more likely to locate in communities with higher concen-

trations of foreign-born Asian Americans and those who do not speak English well. But public interest organizations are less likely to locate in these areas. This may indicate that most of these service organizations are there to assist Asian American immigrants to integrate economically to the larger community by providing English classes, job training, and similar services in the same community clients reside. But a sufficiently large number of the public interest organizations may be situated in communities where their leaders reside, many of whom may be second generation Asian Americans and fluent in English.

In terms of organizational attributes, Asian American service and public interest organizations as a group or separately are more likely to have a pan-Asian American focus. Asian American religious organizations are distinctively organized along the lines of ethnic identities. This is consistent with the earlier observation that Asian American churches and temples are located in more ethnically heterogeneous communities. Pan-Asian American religious organizations hardly exist, primarily because religious activities are conducted in each ethnic group's native language or dialect. The data is not conclusive regarding whether the cultural organizations in this study are more pan-Asian American than ethnic-based, or vice versa. Asian American religious organizations are more likely than their secular counterparts to be formed in earlier rather than later decades of the twentieth century. Both cultural and service organizations are more likely to be formed in recent decades. The ambiguity of the historical pattern of public interest organizations can be attributed to the large number of civic organizations formed in the 1960s, such as the local offices of the Japanese American Citizens Leagues and the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, as well as the rise of more contemporary advocacy and professional organizations in recent decades.

In contrast to Asian American religious organizations, Asian American secular nonprofits tend to be younger, more pan-Asian American in focus, and are more likely to be found in central city well-off central cities or low-income communities within metropolitan areas with a more homogeneous ethnic population and a relatively more active general population in community organizing. The seemingly contradictory location pattern of secular Asian American

nonprofits in both wealthy and poor communities is actually consistent with not only the different operational modes of different types of nonprofits, but also the well-established bimodal distribution of Asian Americans of diverse socioeconomic background. A significant segment of Asian Americans is highly educated and wealthy, who are more likely to be the leaders of public interest organizations. Some other significant segments of the Asian American population are relatively less educated and poorer, and are more likely to be the clients of service organizations.

The location pattern of secular Asian American nonprofits generally applies to Asian American service and public interest organizations as a group, except for the ethnic homogeneity context and the wealth variable. At the level of individual functional types, the location pattern of cultural, service, and public interest organizations is less consistent. However, metropolitan location, the general population's community activism, socioeconomic context, pan-Asian American identity, and a nonprofit's history still account for some of the differences among these three types of Asian American nonprofits. The homogeneity of community interest is the only non-factor.

## FINANCES OF ASIAN AMERICAN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

The descriptive results in earlier sections are based on the number of organizations, which is one measure of the size and diversity of Asian American nonprofit organizations. The finances of these organizations may also provide some measure of their scale of operation. Although the information in the completed Form 990 is not audited by the Internal Revenue Service, studies cited earlier show that the financial information is generally reliable — especially at the aggregate level. Out of the approximately 2,400 Asian American nonprofits included in this study, less than 750 of them have filed Form 990 or Form 990 EZ. Much fewer of them has sufficient financial data for statistical analysis. The data indicate that, excluding religious organizations, less than half of the Asian American nonprofits in the study have annual revenue in excess of \$25,000. The percent with financial data varies with functional type: 49 percent for cultural organizations, 56 percent for service organizations, and 45 percent for

public-interest organizations. Although religious organizations are not required to file Form 990 or 990EZ, sixty-seven of them have done so anyway. Some of them are para-church organizations or have significant service components. Taking into consideration organizations not included in this study, it is likely that smaller organizations constitute the majority of Asian American nonprofits in these metropolitan areas. Whether smaller organizations together have greater impact than their larger counterparts on the Asian American community requires further research.

The key financial measures reported here include average total asset, average total revenue, average government support, and average net income. Net income is the difference between total revenue and total expense. These financial measures are five-year averages from 1998 to 2002 for each Asian American nonprofit organization with the available data. A very small number of them also include 2003 data. Form 990, but not Form 990EZ, reports broad categories of funding sources, including the amount of government support. Table 3 presents a comparison of the means of these financial variables among different categories of Asian American nonprofits. Not all the results are statistically significant. While the average total asset of the 714 Asian American nonprofits just exceeds \$1 million, half of them have less than \$86,000 in total asset. Similarly, while their average annual revenue is about \$800,000 — half of which comes from government sources — half of these Asian American nonprofits have less than \$90,000 in annual total revenue. Since this study includes only medium and large nonprofits, the average and median financial measures of the size of all Asian American nonprofits are likely to be significantly lower.

For the more than 700 larger Asian American nonprofits with financial data in the sample, there are statistically significant financial differences between two broad functional types, between metropolitan locations, and between pan-Asian American and ethnic organizations. Financially, Asian American service and public interest organizations as a group are larger than their religious and cultural counterparts. This observation is supported by both means comparison and regression analysis that isolate the impact of different factors. These service and public interest organizations' average

revenue, average net income, and average government support are each three to six times that of the religious and cultural organizations as a group. This is consistent with earlier suggestions that it takes more resources to provide services through service agencies or to act as an effective voice through public interest organizations than to promote spiritual enrichment or cultural preservation. In fact, government funding plays a significant role in this development as it contributes 60 percent of the average total revenue of these service and public interest organizations but only 20 percent of the same for cultural and religious organizations. However, the differences in average total asset are not statistically significant, nor are the differences of all financial measures among the four individual functional types of Asian American nonprofits. Although all the financial measures of Asian American nonprofits in the top five metropolitan areas are larger than those in the second-tier of the top 10 metropolitan areas, only the difference in average total revenue is statistically significant. Asian American nonprofits in the Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, DC, or Chicago metropolitan areas receive, on average, three times the revenue of their counterparts in Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, Dallas, or Houston. Pan-Asian American nonprofits, although they are fewer in number, are three to five times larger than the ethnic organizations in terms of the average total asset, average total revenue, and average government support. Regression analysis confirms this larger scale of operation on the part of Pan-Asian American nonprofit organizations. This pattern is similar to the comparison between the fewer but larger Hispanic American organizations and their more numerous but generally smaller Asian American counterparts (Hung 2007).

There are other possible factors for the variations in the financial size, as measured by total asset or annual revenue, of Asian American nonprofit organizations in the top 10 metropolitan areas. These factors may include organizational attributes, management capability, and community context. Organizational attributes are clearly the most dominant factors for the differences in Asian American nonprofit finances. In addition to functional type and ethnic identity discussed above, more established organizations uniformly have more total assets as well as higher annual revenue, which attest to the sus-

tainability and effectiveness of these nonprofits. The ability to solicit government financial support, to generate a surplus in the form of net income, and the expense on fundraising activities can be used as measures of a nonprofit's management capacity to run a successful operation. While larger Asian American nonprofit organizations may get more government support, run larger surpluses, and spend more on fundraising, their management capacity is not necessarily superior to smaller organizations in enhancing Asian American nonprofit organizations' financial position in terms of total asset or total revenue.

The only relevant contextual factor is the size of the Asian American population in a 3-digit zip code area where the Asian American nonprofits are located. Both the average total asset and total revenue of these organizations are larger in communities with more Asian Americans. This may be a demand factor since more resources are needed to serve a larger clientele. Or, it could be a supply factor. In areas with more Asian Americans, Asian American nonprofits may receive more financial support from them. Both the supply and demand factors may exist simultaneously, although testing the relative effect of the two factors is beyond the scope of this chapter. No other contextual factor is relevant. In particular, wealthier Asian American communities do not necessarily contribute more money to their local Asian American organizations. This is a fundraising challenge for these nonprofits.

These results reinforce the importance of pan-Asian American organizations and more established Asian American nonprofits. They are the most robust factors in understanding the nature of different functional types of Asian American organizations as well as their financial positions. Asian American service and public interest nonprofits as a whole are more likely to be younger and have a pan-Asian American focus. Older organizations and pan-Asian American nonprofits, on average, tend to have larger annual revenue and total assets. More established pan-Asian American service organizations have the largest annual revenue among Asian American nonprofits.

Table 3. Comparison of Means Among Different Categories of Asian American Nonprofit Organizations (\*\*\* p < 0.01)

	N	Average Age of NPOs	N	Average Total Asset	N	Average Total Revenue	N	Average Total Government Support	N	Average Net Income
Religious NPOs	966	17.8***	66	\$473,377	67	\$427,519	50	\$88,671	67	\$43,929
Cultural NPOs	511	14.9***	246	\$829,391	251	\$693,694	175	\$506,600	251	\$60,579
Service NPOs	394	14.7***	221	\$1,401,463	222	\$839,869	181	\$353,108	222	\$81,081
Public Interest NPOs	510	16.4***	179	\$1,626,939	180	\$1,022,805	143	\$478,610	180	\$32,025
Religious or Cultural NPOs	1479	16.8**	338	\$957,669	341	414970***	250	90949***	341	27551***
Service or Public Interest NPOs	904	15.7**	376	\$1,363,415	381	1134416***	300	675683***	381	85348***
NPOs in LA, NY, SF, DC, or Chicago	1971	16.7***	595	\$1,312,390	602	894821***	459	\$471,159	602	\$60,309
NPOs in the other top 10 CMSAs	412	15.0***	119	\$466,083	120	293466***	91	\$100,881	120	\$46,721
Asian Ethnic Subgroup NPOs	2048	16.8***	559	776094***	564	538654***	423	212411***	563	\$53,947
Pan Asian American NPOs	335	13.5***	135	2596771***	158	1708334***	127	1067659***	159	\$72,580
All Asian American NPOs	2383	16.3	714	\$1,171,339	722	\$794,622	550	\$409,895	722	\$58,051

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter presents a general profile of Asian American nonprofit organizations in the 10 largest U.S. metropolitan areas. The heterogeneous collective interests that give rise to nonprofit organizations in general apply equally well to account for the presence of Asian American nonprofits in this chapter. Asian American nonprofits in the ten largest U.S. metropolitan areas were primarily formed in the last few decades of the twentieth century — largely in response to the diverse needs of the rapidly growing Asian American population. Significant ethnic and functional diversity exist among Asian American nonprofit organizations. As a group, they remain a numerically insignificant part of the nonprofit sector.

Nevertheless, the functional types reflect the heterogeneity of needs — from spiritual enrichment and cultural preservation within Asian American communities, to fostering economic assimilation and cultivating Asian American voices in relation to the larger society. These nonprofits together play a balancing act between facilitating political and economic integration while maintaining separate Asian American identities. Asian American religious organizations are clearly different from their secular counterparts in terms of their ethnic identities, the ethnic heterogeneity and socioeconomic context of

the client base, the activism of the larger community, as well as geographic location. Although pan-Asian American organizations are few in numbers, their scale of operation is actually larger, at least in financial terms, than the other Asian American ethnic nonprofits. It is not a coincidence that Asian American service or public interest organizations tend to have a pan-Asian American focus.

With continued growth of the Asian American population in the foreseeable future, Asian American nonprofits will likely increase in both number and organization size. Some projections of the growth of foreign-born Asian Americans suggest that adult immigrants will continue to constitute a significant proportion of the Asian American population. The Asian American population, unlike their Hispanic-Latino American counterpart, will not grow to the point of becoming a significant clientele of mainstream organizations, except for communities where Asian Americans are the largest minority group. To the extent that the religious, cultural, service, or public interest needs of foreign-born Asian Americans are not met by existing mainstream organizations (public, private, or nonprofit), the demand for ethnic based organizations will persist. The result may be either the expansion of existing ethnic-based Asian American nonprofit organizations or the creation of new organizations — especially in new settlement areas outside of traditional central city enclaves. As Asian American organizations expand into communities with Asian American populations that are less concentrated than their counterparts in traditional central city enclaves, there are both opportunities and challenges. The physical boundaries of an ethnic enclave are no longer there. Existing mainstream organizations in these communities can be both collaborators and competitors in meeting various needs of the local Asian American population. Race relations in a more mixed community is inevitably a potential issue.

Pan-Asian American nonprofit organizations are, by far, few and new. The maturing of the Asian American population with the growing U.S. born generation will provide an expanding pool of human and financial resources for the development of pan-Asian American organizations. Therefore, pan-Asian American and ethnic-based organizations are both likely to grow. The challenge is whether they will grow separately and independently, or in some coordination

with each other — making use of the strengths of both types of Asian American nonprofit organizations to advance the Asian American community. One determinant for the pattern of growth can be the extent of shared common interests relative to the differences among the ethnic communities they serve. A related factor is the development of ethnic and pan-Asian identities in the Asian American population. Given the continued importance of Asian American nonprofit organizations, more research is necessary to understand how these nonprofits function and impact inside and outside Asian American communities.

## Notes

- i These websites have begun to charge data access fees for funded research. Free access to data for unfunded research is subject to website approval.
- ii The Census Bureau definition of these CMSAs is:  
New York—Northern New Jersey—Long Island, NY—NJ—CT—PA CMSA  
Los Angeles—Riverside—Orange County, CA CMSA  
Chicago—Gary—Kenosha, IL—IN—WI CMSA  
Washington—Baltimore, DC—MD—VA—WV CMSA  
San Francisco—Oakland—San Jose, CA CMSA  
Philadelphia—Wilmington—Atlantic City, PA—NJ—DE—MD CMSA  
Boston—Worcester—Lawrence, MA—NH—ME—CT CMSA  
Detroit—Ann Arbor—Flint, MI CMSA  
Dallas—Fort Worth, TX CMSA  
Houston—Galveston—Brazoria, TX CMSA
- iii Both the NCCS and [guidestar.org](http://guidestar.org) websites allow interactive search up to 50 miles of a zip code.
- iv Searching for Indian nonprofits requires distinguishing between American Indian and Asian Indian organizations, only the latter is included in the results.
- v Please see Hung (2005) for a full discussion of the regression models and detailed analysis.
- vi Based on personal communication with Professor Paul Ong, who has calculated some projections of the Asian American population based on U.S. Census data.

# Civic Engagement as a Pathway to Partisanship Acquisition for Asian Americans

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It is the best of times and the worst of times for Asian Americans in electoral politics in the United States today. Two vignettes illustrate this tale. The first is the story of Harvinder Anand, a businessman who runs a chemical manufacturing company that operates in the United States, India, China, and Thailand. Anand lives in the tony Long Island exurb of Laurel Hollow, New York, where he was elected mayor in 2007. Anand, who with a Sikh turban and beard in a 95 percent white upper crust community, represents what the New York Times reports as a new political phenomenon (Vitello 2007, B1). He is an Indian-American who – like Louisiana State Governor Bobby Jindal, New Jersey Assemblyman Upendra Chivukula, Ohio State Representative Jay Goyal, and Maryland State Delegate and Majority Leader Kumar Barve – find political success among electorates in which they are “the tiniest of minorities.”

Anand’s initiation into politics in the United States, notably, came through civic engagement. Upon moving to a gated community in Laurel Hollow, Anand organized his neighbors to form a heating oil buyers’ co-op and coordinate demands for a more unified garbage collection system. Perhaps as a consequence, Anand’s neighbors in Laurel Hollow neither saw him as a partisan, polarizing figure nor marked him racially or as an immigrant. Here the *New York Times* article quotes John Fitteron, a village trustee: “Harry is just a highly capable individual who, like all of us, wants to give something back to the community” (Vitello 2007, B1). Thus while Anand describes himself as a Reagan Republican, he ran unopposed and remarked, “At the end of the day, I am a businessman. I believe in efficiency and cost-effectiveness” (Vitello 2007, B1).

Further westward along the Jericho Turnpike in multiethnic Queens, we find Morshed Alam. Like Anand, Alam is an immigrant and a chemist by trade. Unlike Anand, Alam is also a laundromat owner, a one-time student leader in Bangladesh's struggle for independence, and a hardened veteran of politics. Alam's rocky inauguration into party politics, American-style, came in 1996 when he decided to challenge Republican State Senator Frank Padavan, a 13-term incumbent who was quite public and vocal about his nativist views on immigration and demographic change in Queens. The Queens County Democratic Party, however, did not greet Alam's political ambition with open arms, or even begrudging recognition. Rather, Alam faced a relentless onslaught of pressure to quit the race. The pressure ranged from a legal challenge to the Board of Elections to physical threat and bodily harm. As Alam puts it, "even when I won the Democratic primary ... I went through every kind of hell in that race ... I was sent to the hospital with two broken bones around my eyes (Lehrer and Sloan 2003, 373-374)."

Alam survived the physical attacks, but was outspent by the Republican incumbent \$500,000 to \$25,000, never received the backing of the county party organization, and ultimately failed to prevail electorally. Nonetheless, he won 42 percent of the vote in the general election, recruited a multi-ethnic rainbow of immigrants into his own organization, the New American Democratic Club, and, ultimately, put the predominantly white Democratic establishment in Queens County on notice that naturalized immigrants like himself could no longer be ignored. Of note, Alam's campaign was expressly partisan and polarizing and his strategy in the face of the Queens County Democratic Party's opposition to his candidacy was to work in earnest to build a successful multi-racial, multi-ethnic coalition. Alam proudly remarks, "[m]y campaign committee was made up of a Colombian-American, a Jewish-American, a Black-American, a union worker, and a conservative Republican. It's not like years ago when you were Irish in an Irish neighborhood, or Italian in an Italian neighborhood (Lehrer and Sloan 2003, 373-374)."

Alam's political fortunes present a bold relief to Anand's. Yet there is also common bedrock to both stories. Namely, Alam shares with Anand a common point of departure through his civic engage-

ment. Prior to his bid for elected office, Alam was active as a former local AFL-CIO chapter president, a leader in the New York-based American Bangladesh Friendship Association, an organizer of neighborhood community groups to combat hate crimes, and a member of the Queens community school board. Moreover, in both cases, the role of political parties in seeking out and shepherding new immigrants into the main-line of American politics ranges from invisible to outright hostile. Neither Anand nor Alam entered into politics as a result of being recruited into party activism or groomed for elected office by the Democratic or Republican parties.

The role of political parties in particular differs starkly from our ballyhooed remembrances of the central role played by parties in incorporating previous waves of immigrants from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As many accounts have it, the late 19th century and early 20th century in America represented a golden age of immigration. These immigrants came from distant lands (predominantly European) and were absorbed into America's economic markets, assimilated into its social customs, and incorporated by its political institutions. This period is, at least in our collective memory, one that represents a model for the inclusion of newcomers into a pluralist political system, with local political parties playing the critical intermediary role in this process of incorporation. As one scholar of immigration describes it,

On a typical day in the 1890s, thousands of immigrants arrived at Ellis Island in New York. For many, learning English and acculturating to America would be the work of years, even decades. But often it would be a matter of only a few weeks or even days before they received a visit from a Tammany Hall ward heeler or before friends or family brought them along to some event at the local precinct hall. Long before many of those newcomers fully understood what it was to be American, they knew quite well what it meant to be a Democrat or a Republican (Schier 2002, 16).

To be sure, scholars who have taken a less nostalgic look at white

immigrant incorporation at the turn of the last century conclude that the willingness of parties to incorporate new citizens was not equal across all immigrant groups (Ignatiev 1995; Jacobson 1998), or all historical contexts (Mayhew 1986), or all electoral circumstances (Erie 1990). Other organizations like neighborhood associations, unions, churches, and ethnic voluntary associations were vital to the incorporation of new immigrant groups (Sterne 2001). Yet the incongruity to today's parties is conspicuous. There has been much careful study of how today's political parties compare with those of yesteryear. For the most part, this body of work has concluded that today's parties lack the organizational capacity, the political incentives, the cultural literacy, and perhaps even the democratic resolve to shepherd new immigrants into the political process and secure their loyalties to a particular political party (e.g., Jones-Correa 1998a; Anderson and Cohen 2005; Kim 2006; Rogers 2006; Wong 2006b).

If the two major parties are reluctant to bring Asian Americans – the largest growth rate segment of the U.S. population since the 1970s – into the political fold, then we are pressed to ask: how does a predominantly immigrant electorate like the Asian American community become politicized? Which factors keep Asian Americans from becoming politically active and which factors act as a stimulus to political activism? In the absence of responsive and responsible parties, one site that many scholars have recently looked to is the institutional influence of organizations in civil society and the individual effects of civic engagement (see, e.g., Ramakrishnan 2006; Rogers 2006; Wong 2006b; Ecklund 2007; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008). We do the same in this chapter.

Civic engagement as an alternative site for the politicization of Asian Americans is salient in our vignettes of Anand and Alam. Both individuals share a common pathway into politics through their involvement in non-electoral participation and organizing. Yet as our stylized description of the experiences of Anand and Alam suggest, "civic engagement" is neither uniform nor rooted in a shared immigrant experience. In Anand's case, civic participation is motivated by the collective and consensual interests of a socioeconomically and (for the most part) racially homogeneous gated community. Alam's participation, by contrast, is defined by the politics of a far more so-

ocioeconomically and racially diverse community and deeply rooted in organizations – like labor unions, civil rights organizations, ethnic associations – that engage in contentious and identitarian politics. One vignette echoes the assimilationist view of Asian immigrants who model the American Dream; the other does not.

In this essay, I examine civic engagement as a potential pathway to the political engagement of Asian Americans. Specifically, I argue that the relationship that we form to a political party is a key marker of our political orientation and activism. A plurality (and in some surveys, majority) of Asian Americans, however, do not identify with a political party. I then present the argument for looking to civic engagement as a pathway to partisanship acquisition. Specifically, I examine the direct effects of civic engagement on party identification as well as an indirect effect, through the formation of panethnic identity. Then, drawing on statistical analysis of the 2000-2001 Pilot National Asian American Politics Study, I examine three different kinds of civic engagement – working to solve a community problem, organizational membership in an ethnic association, and religious participation. The analysis shows that Asian Americans with higher levels of civic engagement are in fact more likely to identify with a political party and, for at least one measure of engagement, also more likely to develop a strong sense of panethnic identity (which then leads to a greater likelihood of identifying as a Democrat). Party identification, in turn, is a key factor in how politically active Asian Americans are. The essay concludes with several important qualifications and rejoinders on these results.

## **Party Identification and Political Incorporation**

For better or worse, the American people have hung their most deeply held political convictions and sentiments, anxieties and aspirations with a political party for about as long as they have existed. Martin Van Buren, founder of the first political machine in New York and principal architect of the first national political party (the Jacksonian Democrats), writes of “an unbroken succession ... Neither the influences of marriage connections, nor of sectarian prejudices, nor any of the strong motives which often determine the ordinary actions

of men, have ... been sufficient to override the bias of party organization and sympathy, devotion to which has, on both sides, as a rule, been a master-passion of their members (1867, 7)." Today, our understanding and analysis of this "master-passion" rests chiefly on the concept of party identification. Virtually every published work in political science on public opinion, voting behavior, and political participation using survey data includes some version of the party identification scale. And given this seeming ubiquity, it is little surprise to find, in study after study, that "the psychological attachment of individuals to one or the other of the major parties ... reveals more about their political attitudes and behaviors than any other single opinion (Keefe and Hetherington 2003, 169)" and that "party identification remains the single most important determinant of individual voting decisions (Kinder and Sears 1985, 686)."

The reasons why party identification is so central to the way that Americans think and act on politics are clear. Partisan habits are something that Americans are born into, starting with the partisanship of their parents and sustained through pre-adult and early adult socialization (Campbell et al. 1960). For adults, it is a psychological attachment that serves as a critical means to navigate a political information environment that is often saturated with complex details and hortatory messages (Fiorina 1981; Popkin 1991). Voters can do without encyclopedic knowledge about each candidate's issue positions and can navigate strategic communications by simply knowing which party and politicians they trust (and which they do not) and then using partisan cues to figure out "who is for what" (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). In effect, in the U.S., "Democrat," "Republican," and "Independent" are the defining identities in the political realm (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002).

What, then, do we know about the party attachments of Asian Americans? The answer, it turns out, is not so easy to decipher. For one thing, there is a dearth of systematic, reliable data on which to base our expectations. A large random sample of U.S. adults – as in a pre-election survey or an exit poll – will contain only a handful of persons of Asian descent, and typically with a bias for those Asians who are more educated, well-off, assimilated into life in the U.S., and proficient in English. The costs of obtaining a larger, unbiased sam-

ple, moreover, can be prohibitive; it is simply difficult to find a sample design for a population that is linguistically heterogeneous and geographically dispersed across ethnic subgroups, yet locally concentrated within ethnic subgroups, as Asian Americans are (e.g., see Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004). As a result, the quality of data on Asian American mass opinion is less than ideal. An example is the striking “house” effects between two exit polls fielded in California following the 1996 general elections. The Voter New Services exit poll found Asian Americans to be more Republican than Democratic (48 percent to 32 percent), while the *Los Angeles Times* found the opposite – Asian American Democrats here appeared to outweigh Asian Republicans (44 percent to 33 percent).<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding the elusive nature of Asian American public opinion, a pattern of Democratic partisanship has begun to emerge. According to one review of twelve national, state-level, and metropolitan-level surveys in the 1990s, the roughly even split in Asian American partisanship begins to take a discernibly Democratic turn by the 1998 off-year elections (Lien 2001). This leaning has become even more sharp in recent years. In the post-election 2000-2001 Pilot National Asian American Politics Study (PNAAPS) – the first multi-city, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual academic survey of Asian Americans – Democratic identifiers outnumbered Republican identifiers by more than two-to-one. Moreover, Democrats outnumbered Republicans for every ethnic subgroup in the PNAAPS except for Vietnamese American respondents (who leaned, but only modestly, toward the Republican Party).

This partiality is also mirrored in how Asians vote. According to the Voter News Service exit polls, a solid majority of Asian Americans voted for Al Gore over George W. Bush in 2000 (55 percent to 41). In the 2004 presidential election, the National Election Pool (NEP) exit polls found a 56-44 split in favor of John Kerry over George W. Bush and, in the most recent 2006 elections, Asian American voters split 62-37 in favor of Democratic congressional candidates. In the 2006 mid-term elections, NEP exit polls found a 70-26 split in favor of Dianne Feinstein in the California race for U.S. Senate in California, the only state in which sufficient numbers of Asian Americans were polled to gauge their vote choices. In local, multi-lingual,

multi-ethnic exit polls in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City the margins are even more decisive for Democratic candidates. Moreover, voter registration studies in 2004 and 2006 by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund in New York and Asian Pacific American Legal Center in Southern California found marked increases in the number of Asian American registered Democrats.

So, two features define what we know about Asian American partisanship: our measures often vary across polls and, between the Republican and Democratic parties, Asian Americans lean Democratic. These features, important as they are, mask another (perhaps more central) defining feature: the plurality, and in many surveys, *majority* of Asian Americans choose not to identify with any political party at all. In the 1993-94 Los Angeles Study of Urban Inequality (Bobo et al. 2000), only 39 percent of respondents chose to identify as a Republican or a Democrat (11 percent identified as Independents, fully 55 percent chose the response option, “something else,” and 6 percent reported being unsure or refused to answer the question). In the 2000-2001 PNAAPS, shown below in Table 1, only half of the respondents chose to identify as a Republican or Democrat (with 13 percent Independents, 20 percent volunteered that they did not think in partisan terms, and 18 percent reported being unsure or refused to answer the question). Thus while many political observers chomp at the bit to divide the electorate into Red and Blue segments, many Asian Americans themselves first wonder what it means to be a partisan.

Table 1. Patterns of Party Identification among Asian Americans							
“Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, an Independent, or of another political affiliation?”							
	Chinese	Filipino	Indian	Japanese	Korean	Vietnamese	ALL
Republican	8%	20%	13%	9%	21%	15%	14%
Democrat	32%	40%	44%	40%	43%	12%	36%
Independent	3%	14%	23%	20%	12%	15%	13%
Not sure / Refused	24%	13%	14%	15%	16%	28%	18%
Don't think in these terms	33%	13%	6%	18%	8%	31%	20%
TOTAL N	308	266	141	198	168	137	1218
Data: PNAAPS (2001)							

Elsewhere, I discuss at length possible explanations for this relative absence of partisanship among many Asian Americans (Hajnal and Lee 2006, Lee and Hajnal 2008). There are two kernels of the argument. First, partisanship acquisition for Asian Americans should be thought of as a sequence: in the first step, Asian Americans need to see the traditional categories of partisanship – “Democrat,” “Republican,” and even “Independent” – as meaningful choices; once they view these categories as meaningful, they then choose between them. The second key to the argument is that – for a population that is predominantly first and second generation – prior political socialization cannot be presumed. In its absence, partisanship is explained as a function of three factors: information, ideology, and identity. Uncertain information about why party competition is important and where parties stand on key issues drives the first step of being partisan or apartisan. Ideological commitments to particular issues and beliefs or a strong racial identity drive the second step of identifying as a Democrat, Republican, or Independent.

This phenomenon of “apartisanship” is related to the general finding that, across multiple measures of immigrant political incorporation, Asian Americans appear far from fully included and well represented in democratic life in the U.S. In a sense, the attachments that immigrant-based ethnic communities like Asian Americans form, *or fail to form*, to a political party are an important and underexamined dimension of immigrant political incorporation. Table 2 summarizes the basic patterns of under-participation in terms of the three widely studied stages of formal political incorporation.

	Whites	African Americans	Latinos	Asian Americans	TOTAL
% citizen	97.9	93.7	59.3	67.5	91.3
% registered	73.5 (75.1)	64.4 (68.7)	34.3 (57.8)	35.0 (51.9)	65.9 (72.2)
% voted	65.8 (89.5)	56.3 (87.4)	28.0 (81.6)	29.8 (85.1)	58.3 (88.5)

Source: 2004 American Community Survey. For “% registered” and “% voted” rows, the top figure in each cell is the proportion of all adults in that group; the figure in parentheses is the proportion of those adults from the previous row (e.g., the proportion of all whites who are registered is 73.5 percent; the proportion of all whites who are registered and citizens is 75.1 percent).

The three key steps here are whether a newcomer to the United States has established citizenship, whether that citizen (if eligible) registers to vote, and whether that registered voter actually casts a vote come Election Day. The table compares levels of incorporation of whites, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. The main point of this table is quite clear. Asian Americans (and Latinos) lag behind both whites and African Americans at each step in this process of political incorporation. The proportion of Asian Americans who are citizens is roughly only two in three; the proportion who are registered is roughly only one in three; the proportion who vote is about three in ten.

	TOTAL	African Americans	Latinos	Asian Americans	Native Americans
House	438 (100%)	41 (9.4%)	25 (5.7%)	4 (0.9%)	1 (0.2%)
State Legislature	7382 (100%)	530 (7.2%)	229 (3.1%)	85 (1.1%)	47 (0.6%)

Source: Licn, Pinderhughes, Hardy-Fanta, and Sierra, 2007.

This underparticipation in politics is also mirrored by data on the levels of political representation across racial and ethnic groups. If representation is measured by matching the proportion of legislators in a group to the population proportion of that group, African Americans come the closest to parity in representation, with Latinos and Asian Americans lagging substantially behind. This underrepresentation is shown quite clearly in Table 3: according to the 2006 American Community Survey, Asian Americans (even allowing for the more inclusive “alone or in combination” categorization) were just under 5 percent of the U.S. population, but only roughly one percent of members of the House and of state legislatures.<sup>ii</sup>

A wide range of explanations have been offered for this incomplete incorporation of Asian Americans into the main lines of American politics. At the individual level, some scholars suggest that Asian Americans are simply less interested in politics (Cain, Kiewiet, and Uhlaner 1991; Tam 1995) or more interested in the politics of their home country (Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Barone 2001); others suggest the proper focus should be on the process of political socializa-

tion (W.T. Cho 1999; Wong 2001) and the development of ethnic/panethnic identity (Lien 1997; Wong 2006b). At the institutional level, scholars have either pointed to a logic of party competition that systematically excludes racialized minorities like Asian Americans (Kim 2006; see also Frymer 1999 and Fraga and Leal 2004) or to historical changes in party politics like weakened local party organizations, candidate centered elections, selective and strategic mobilization efforts, and assumptions about the political interests and aptitude of groups like Asian Americans (Wong 2006b).

### **Civic Engagement and Political Incorporation**

In the absence of a demonstrable role of political parties in the political incorporation of Asian Americans and given the overwhelming numbers of Asian Americans who do not think in partisan terms, the question is: how do Asian Americans come to terms with partisan politics? One place that scholars have increasingly turned to is civic institutions and civil society (Ecklund and Park 2005; Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2006; Wong 2006b; Ecklund 2007; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008). The reasons for doing so are quite clear. Civic institutions like labor unions, social service organizations, ethnic associations, and religious institutions can act as a mediating influence and organizational bridge between newcomers and the political system writ large. From political philosophers like Carole Pateman (1970) to empirical political scientists like Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady (1995), civic engagement is viewed as developing key civic skills like political communication and organizing and in nurturing a sense of psychological engagement and efficacy in the realm of public affairs. Moreover, beyond reasons why civic institutions may nurture a greater sense of political engagement and incorporation, there is a tide of sentiment viewing volunteerism and civic engagement as a tonic for democratic ills in America (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Putnam 2000; Galston 2000; Macedo 2005).

As with any idea on which hopes are heavily pinned, there is much debate over what civic engagement is and whether it helps or harms the flourishing of democratic politics (see, e.g., Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Putnam 2000). When the term is used in this essay, it

refers to individual and collective actions that aim to address an issue of public concern and that are located in civil society. Broken down into its component words, the term “engagement” *prima facie* denotes actions and behaviors, not attitudes and beliefs. Its modifier, “civic,” is more tendentious and up for grabs. For some, civic refers to the obligations of citizenship and the impulse to act in pursuit of the public interest. For others, civic refers to action that is rooted in civil society, where civil society is an arena of voluntary, uncoerced discourse and action that is independent of the state and the market (and in some variants, the family).

The first definition is more commonplace. In *Democracy at Risk*, a publication of the American Political Science Association’s Committee on Civic Education and Engagement, civic engagement is defined as including “any activity, individual or collective, devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity” (Macedo 2005, 6 [emphasis in original]).” Here “civic engagement most obviously includes voting” and also electoral precursors to voting like working for a political candidate or campaign, attending a political rally, contributing money to a candidate or campaign, wearing a button or displaying a bumper sticker for a candidate or campaign, and trying to persuade a friend, neighbor, or stranger to vote for a candidate or issue.

In this essay, I use civic engagement in the narrower second sense that distinguishes between the formal realms of electoral, legislative, bureaucratic, and judicial politics and the informal realm of civic institutions and civil society. The boundaries between formal politics and civic engagement are, no doubt, porous. This choice is made on several grounds. First, the central argument in this essay is explicitly about the potential for engagement in civil society to serve as a pathway into partisanship and, as a result, into formal political engagement writ large. To avoid a tautology where political activity begets political activity, we need to define civic engagement in a way that distinguishes it from the main lines of politics per se. Second, civil society is interesting to examine separately from other spheres of life. It is in its role as a “third sector” (beyond government and the private sector) that we are interested in civil society as a pathway to the political incorporation of Asian Americans into the formal realm of elections and government. It is also in this role that civil society

acts as a potentially important site for the empowerment of marginalized populations and the mobilization of politics outside the main lines. Finally, activity in civil society is important to examine on its own terms as a counter to pervasive and totalizing indictments about the absence or presence of political action and agency among Asian Americans. That is, just because Asian Americans vote at rates that fall significantly below that of other groups does not necessarily imply that Asian Americans are inactive or uninterested in being engaged. Thus civic engagement, as we use the term in this essay, encompasses a range of specific activities such as working in a soup kitchen, serving on a neighborhood association, and so on, but excludes formal modes of political participation in the electoral arena (for a similar distinction, see Zukin et al. 2006).

**Figure 1. Civic Engagement as a Pathway to Politics**

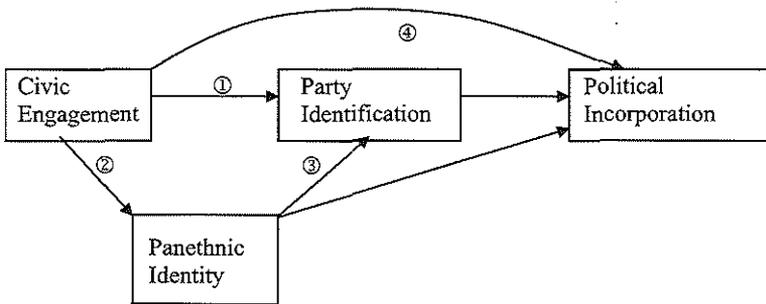


Figure 1 presents this central argument about civic engagement more schematically. There are two ways in which civic engagement can potentially act as a pathway to politics writ large. The first is by propelling Asian Americans to view partisan categories as meaningful (1). In the process of being engaged and feeling efficacious, Asian Americans may be further empowered to stake their ground as a Democrat, Republican, or Independent. This identification with a political party (or as an Independent) then defines one's degree of political inclusion and incorporation. The second route to politics is indirect, through the formation of a sense of ethnic or panethnic identity (2). As Figure 1 shows, in this second route, civic engagement promotes a greater sense of ethnic or panethnic identity that, in turn defines both the partisanship (3) and the political attitudes and action of Asian Americans. Finally, Figure 1 also considers the extent to

which civic engagement may directly increase one's chances of becoming politically active and incorporated, without the mediating effects of partisanship or panethnic identification (4).

A complete empirical test of all pathways in this figure together requires the kind of statistical testing and plain length in text that go beyond the aims of this volume.<sup>iii</sup> An alternate strategy, which we adopt here, is to examine the first key relationship in some detail – whether civic engagement influences one's degree of partisanship (1). Then, as a second order of business, we also look for evidence for the following additional relationships: (2) whether civic engagement influences one's perceptions of panethnic linked fate; (3) whether one's panethnic linked fate influences one's partisanship; (4) whether one's civic engagement influences one's formal political incorporation. In the following sections, we briefly detail the data and measures we use and the approach we take to testing for the independent effects of civic engagement on each of these four relationships. To preview, the results are strongest between civic engagement and whether or not one has views about the partisan system of political competition in the United States (1), with more mixed and selective (depending on which measure of civic engagement we examine) results for the remaining outcomes. The results also vary in several crucial respects between foreign-born and U.S.-born Asian Americans.

## Data and Measurement

This account of the relationship between civic engagement and party identification is examined using data from the 2000-2001 Pilot National Asian American Politics Study (PNAAPS). The PNAAPS is the primary multi-city, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual survey of Asian Americans, fielded over ten weeks after the November election (see Lien et al. 2001 and Lien et al. 2004). Six primary Asian ethnic groups — Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, South Asian, and Vietnamese — and five major metropolitan centers of large Asian American populations — Los Angeles, Honolulu, the San Francisco Bay Area, Chicago, and New York — are represented. Interviews were conducted by telephone. Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese respondents were given the choice of a non-English language interview.

The resulting sample yielded 1,218 adult Asians: 308 Chinese, 168 Korean, 137 Vietnamese, 198 Japanese, 266 Filipino, and 141 South Asian Americans.

Before we can describe what the PNAAPS shows about the relationship between civic engagement and party identification, we must first detail what we mean, in survey terms, when we speak of these concepts. With civic engagement, the PNAAPS includes three different measures. The question wording for these three measures is as follows:

1. "During the past four years, have you participated in any of the following types of political activity in your community? ... Worked with others in your community to solve a problem?"
2. "Do you belong to any organization or take part in any activities that represent the interests and viewpoints of [R's ETHNIC GROUP] or other Asians in America? [IF YES] How active are you as a member? Are you very active, somewhat active, not too active, or not active at all?"
3. "How often do you attend religious services? Would you say ... every week, almost every week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, or never?"

None of these alone are an ideal measure. These questions, for one thing, were not designed to directly test for civic engagement, but rather intended to measure other things – political participation, ethnic solidarity, and religiosity, in the case of the three items above. Activities and organization membership on behalf of ethnic/panethnic interests may strike some as too particularistic to represent the general concept of civic engagement. Religiosity may strike others as denoting a particular, morally-laden and perhaps biographically prefigured form of voluntary association within the rubric of "civil society." Yet, taken together, the three measures here capture important and distinct dimensions of civic engagement.<sup>iv</sup> The value in examining all three simultaneously, rather than making strong claims on behalf of any one measure, is in acknowledging the heterogeneity and multidimensionality of associational forms and, by corollary, their possible influences on partisanship and political incorporation. In the PNAAPS, 21 percent of respondents reported having worked to solve a community problem, 15 percent belonged to an ethnic as-

sociation, and fully 51 percent reported attending religious services at least once or twice a month.

With party identification, we begin with the standard question format. All respondents are first asked, "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?" Those who self-identify with a party are then asked, "Would you call yourself a strong [Republican/Democrat] or not a very strong [Republican/Democrat]?" And those who self-identify as an Independent are asked, "Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?" This sequence of questions is typically used to measure party identification along a continuum from strongly identifying as a Republican to strongly identifying as a Democrat.<sup>v</sup>

For our purposes, we view party identification as a sequence of two choices: (1) whether or not individuals think in partisan terms ("partisans" or "apartisans"); (2) how they think of themselves in partisan terms ("Democrat," "Republican," or "Independent"). Here identifying as an "Independent" is considered a form of partisan thinking because: (1) Asian Americans who self-identify as Independents can be shown to be distinct in their political orientation and immigrant experiences from those who are apartisan; (2) the category of "Independent" exists, in the American political landscape, *only in relation to* the categories of "Democrat" and "Republican" and can therefore be thought of as partisan in this relational sense. The term "apartisan" is reserved for respondents who refuse to answer the question, who indicate that they are unsure of how to answer the question, or who explicitly volunteer that they do not think in partisan terms. In the PNAAPS, roughly 36 percent of respondents identified themselves as Democrats, only 14 percent as Republicans and 13 percent as Independents, and fully 38 percent were apartisans.

## **From Civic Engagement to Partisanship**

As we noted before, our first order of business is to see if civic engagement is positively associated with a greater degree of attachment to partisanship and a specific major political party. Recall that the importance of looking to partisanship is that it has such a well-es-

tablished influence on one’s political attitudes and actions. Before we dive into a full, elaborate statistical test of the effects of civic engagement on the partisanship of Asian Americans (and, in ensuing sections, panethnic identification and political participation), it is first worth a look at whether the basic patterns on these outcome measures vary by civic engagement. Table 4 thus shows the degree to which party identification varies by each measure of civic engagement. There is a clear tendency toward holding a view on party politics – that is, identifying as a Democrat, Republican, or Independent – among Asian Americans who are civically engaged, across all three measures of civic engagement.

Worked with others in community to solve a problem				
	Democrat	Republican	Independent	Apartisan
Yes	42.6%	15.9%	15.9%	25.5%
No	33.8%	13.5%	12.2%	40.6%
Membership in an ethnic / panethnic organization				
Yes	46.4%	18.8%	13.8%	21.0%
No	33.8%	13.0%	12.8%	40.4%
Attend religious services at least 1-2 times each month				
Yes	37.3%	19.7%	12.1%	30.8%
No	33.9%	7.5%	14.2%	44.4%
Cell entries are row percentages.				

- Across the board, between 40 and 44 percent of Asian Americans who were not civically engaged had no view towards political parties or Independents; only a range from 21 percent to 31 percent of those who were civically engaged were similarly apartisan.
- Beyond this effect on thinking in partisan terms, there are varying effects between our three measures of civic engagement of party choice itself. Asian Americans who attended religious services regularly were significantly more likely to identify as Republican (20 percent) than those who do not attend religious services (less than 8 percent). By contrast, respondents who belonged to an ethnic or panethnic organization (and to a lesser extent, respondents who worked to solve a community problem) were likelier to identify as a Democrat than as a Republican.

- The likelihood of identifying as an Independent does not appear to vary with one's civic engagement.

One might raise the important consideration that these measures of civic engagement may vary in critical ways by key markers of difference within the broad and often totalizing category of "Asian American." Specifically, many key features of Asian American social, economic, and political life vary by ethnic group and by generation and the number of years an immigrant has spent in the United States. Perhaps, to follow the argument, civic engagement is reduced to belonging to a particularly engaged or religious Asian ethnicity; or civic engagement belies one's degree of acculturation in the U.S., varying by length of time spent in the U.S. If so, perhaps the seeming effect of civic engagement on Asian American partisanship is spurious, with patterns of party identification being instead a function of these other factors.

<b>Table 5. Measures of Civic Engagement, by Ethnicity/National Origin</b>						
Worked with others in community to solve a problem						
	Chinese	Korean	Vietnam	Japanese	Filipino	So. Asian
Yes	16.3%	11.3%	12.6%	27.2%	23.5%	35.5%
No	83.7%	88.7%	87.4%	72.8%	76.5%	64.5%
Membership in an ethnic / panethnic organization						
Yes	5.2%	8.9%	8.0%	22.7%	22.2%	24.8%
No	94.8%	91.1%	92.0%	77.3%	77.8%	75.2%
Attend religious services at least 1-2 times each month						
Yes	25.4%	77.6%	44.1%	34.7%	74.0%	62.5%
No	74.6%	22.4%	55.9%	65.3%	26.0%	37.5%

Table 5 shows the extent to which patterns of civic engagement vary by ethnic/national origin, at least for the three measures of civic engagement to which we have access in the PNAAPS data. Here, there are no consistent effects across measures of civic engagement. Koreans appear to be the most religious ethnic sub-group, but they are far less likely to collaborate with other community members to solve a problem or to belong to an ethnic or panethnic organization. Similarly, Japanese are the second most likely group to report working on a community problem, but the second least likely group to re-

port frequent attendance in religious services. That said, there is some within-group consistency: Chinese appear across all measures to be relatively less civically engaged (somewhat also true of Vietnamese); Filipinos and South Asians by comparison appear across all measures to be relatively highly engaged in civic life.

Table 6 looks at the variation in civic engagement by generation and number of years in the United States among the Asian American first generation. Tenure in the U.S. is grouped into four ranges: between 1 and 5 years, 6 to 10 years, 11 to 19 years, and 20 years or more. The basic results of Table 6 are summarized below.

Worked with others in community to solve a problem						
	1-5 years	6-10 years	11-19 yrs	20+ years	2nd gen	3rd gen+
Yes	16.1%	15.6%	13.6%	23.4%	29.2%	34.2%
No	83.9%	84.4%	86.4%	76.6%	70.8%	65.8%
Membership in an ethnic / panethnic organization						
Yes	11.8%	11.3%	13.6%	14.8%	25.6%	13.1%
No	88.2%	88.7%	86.4%	85.2%	74.4%	86.9%
Attend religious services at least 1-2 times each month						
Yes	47.2%	52.3%	58.0%	59.1%	41.7%	40.5%
No	52.8%	47.7%	42.0%	40.9%	58.3%	59.5%

- Levels of work on community problems for PNAAPS respondents increase with time in the U.S. and generation.
- Levels of membership in an ethnic/panethnic organization are highest among the second generation.
- Levels of religiosity increase with time in the U.S., but decline across generations.
- There are no consistent effects across measures of civic engagement.

This possible variation across generation/tenure in the U.S. is especially important to examine given Ong’s (see Chapter One) Census projections for the Asian American population. Beyond the projection that the population is likely to continue to grow, foreign-born Asians will continue to be a majority even in 2030. Given this likely continued significance of the foreign-born population within the

Asian American community into the future, we explicitly compare the influence of civic engagement between the foreign-born and U.S.-born Asian American population in our subsequent statistical analysis. For now, it is valuable to keep in mind that these two factors – ethnic/national origin groups and generational/tenure in U.S. effects – have some bearing on civic engagement, but do not explain the total variance of why some Asian Americans are “joiners” and others are not. Other factors come to mind as possibly varying with one’s level of civic engagement and one’s patterns of party identification, such as income, education, age, and sex of respondent. Here we use statistical regression methods that allow us to “control for” the possibility that these other factors influence party identification and isolate the independent effect of civic engagement on one’s party identification. Table 7 presents the streamlined “marginal effects” of a sequence of three such regressions:

1. In the first, Asian Americans who are “apartisan” are compared to those who are able to identify with one of the three conventional “partisan” categories of “Democrat,” “Republican,” or “Independent.”
2. Of those who identify with a conventional partisan category, the second regression compares Asian Americans who identify as Independents from those who identify with one of the two major parties.
3. Finally, the third regression compares – among major party identifiers – those who identify as Democrats to those who identify as Republicans.

That is, in the first regression, we test for the effect of civic engagement – and other “control” factors (ethnic/national origin, generation, years lived in the U.S., age, sex, education, family income) – on whether Asian Americans are apartisans or not; in the second, on whether Asian Americans are Independents or not; in the third, on whether Asian Americans are Democrats or Republicans. To compare the effect of civic engagement among the foreign-born and U.S.-born respondents – in the context of Ong’s 2030 projections – we also re-ran our regressions to include an “interaction term” that measures the joint occurrence of being foreign-born and civically engaged.

In Table 7 below, we simplify the results of our regression analy-

sis into “marginal effects.” Marginal effects, or predicted probabilities, are a way of focusing our attention on the primary variable of interest. In this case, the cell entries represent the independent effect of each kind of civic engagement on each kind of partisanship, holding all other factors in the regression model to their mean value. For each measure of civic engagement, Table 7 shows in the first row the primary effect of civic engagement that does not differentiate between U.S.-born and foreign-born. In the two following rows, Table 7 shows the revised analyses that allow for an explicit comparison by nativity. The summary effects of Table 7 follow:

**Table 7. Marginal Effects of Civic Engagement on Party Identification<sup>^</sup>**

	APARTISAN	INDEPENDENT	DEMOCRAT
Worked with others to solve common problem	-8.5%** (-0.9 to -16.1)	<i>not sig.</i>	<i>not sig.</i>
<i>U.S.-born</i>	<i>not sig.</i>	<i>not sig.</i>	13.4%** (-4.2 to 27.4)
<i>Foreign-born</i>	-11.7%* (+3.8 to -24.0)	<i>not sig.</i>	-25.5%** (-.01 to -49)
Membership in ethnic/panethnic organization	-14.3%** (-6.2 to -22.5)	<i>not sig.</i>	<i>not sig.</i>
<i>U.S.-born</i>	-15.6%* (.02 to -29.2)	<i>not sig.</i>	<i>not sig.</i>
<i>Foreign-born</i>	<i>not sig.</i>	<i>not sig.</i>	<i>not sig.</i>
Attend religious services 1-2 times each month	-8.7%** (-1.3 to -15.9)	-8.2%** (-1.3 to -15.1)	-19.1%** (-10.6 to -27.6)
<i>U.S.-born</i>	<i>not sig.</i>	-17.0%** (-.03 to -31)	-22.7%** (-.08 to -35.8)
<i>Foreign-born</i>	-14.5%** (.00 to -28.0)	<i>not sig.</i>	<i>not sig.</i>

<sup>^</sup> Cell entries are predicted effects of changing from the minimum value to the maximum value of each measure of civic engagement on party identification and its 95 percent confidence interval.

\* Statistically significant at the p<.10 level.

\*\* Statistically significant at the p<.05 level.

## Community problem-solving

- Asian Americans who work with others in their community to solve a common problem are on average, 8.5 percent less likely to be apartisan than those who do not engage in such community problem-solving work.
- Community problem-solving work does not appear to have any other statistically significant effects on one's partisanship as a first-order effect — it neither distinguishes Independents from major party identifiers nor does it distinguish Democrats from Republicans.
- These effects are altered when we differentiate between the effects of civic engagement for foreign-born and U.S.-born respondents. In the first distinction between apartisans and those who identify as a "Democrat," "Republican," or "Independent," the effect of community problem-solving turns out to hold primarily among foreign-born Asian Americans. For respondents not born in the U.S., community problem-solving work decreases one's likelihood of being apartisan by about 11.7 percent; this mode of community engagement has no effect on partisanship for U.S.-born Asian Americans.
- Differentiating between U.S.-born and foreign-born also reveals a strong effect on the choice between identifying as a Democrat and Republican. Foreign-born who work with others in their community are 25.5 percent more likely to identify as a Republican; U.S.-born who work with others in their community are 13.4 percent more likely to identify as a Democrat. These opposite effects between U.S.-born and foreign-born appear to have canceled each other out when nativity is not explicitly taken into account.
- This last finding suggests that not all forms of "community problem-solving" are alike, and that the kind of work with others on one's community (and perhaps even how the word "community" is interpreted and defined) differs markedly between Asian Americans born in the United States and those born abroad. Here it is tempting to speculate further on the difference in community engagement, but the data used for this study do not allow us to get to the root of this divergence between the foreign-born and U.S.-

born Asian American population.

## Working for an ethnic/panethnic organization or issue

- Asian Americans who belong to an ethnic or panethnic organization (or work on ethnic or panethnic issues) are on average 14.3 percent less likely to be apartisan than non-belongers.
- Belonging to organizations or taking part in activities representing ethnic/panethnic interests does not appear to influence the choice to identify as an Independent or the choice between identifying with one of the major parties.
- Unlike working with others in one's community, the effect of engagement on ethnic/panethnic activities appears to be primarily among the U.S.-born. U.S.-born respondents engaged by this measure are 15.6 percent less likely to be apartisan, with no significant effects on foreign-born respondents.
- The absence of any statistically significant effects on the remaining two stages of party identification does not change with the addition of an interactive term.

## Religious engagement

- Religiosity affects each stage of party identification: Asian Americans who attend religious services frequently are 8.7 percent less likely to be apartisans, 8.2 percent less likely to be an Independent, and 19.1 percent *more* likely to identify as a Republican.
- When we compare U.S.-born to foreign-born Asian Americans, the effects are more selective again. In the first stage, foreign-born who attend religious services often are 14.5 percent less likely to be apartisans than their foreign-born counterparts who do not attend religious services.
- In the second stage, U.S.-born who are religious are 17 percent more likely to identify with a major party than as Independents; there is no effect of religiosity for foreign-born Asian Americans.
- In the final stage of identifying as a Republican or Democrat, the effect is again among the U.S.-born. U.S.-born respondents who are active attendees of religious services are 22.7 percent more

likely to identify as a Republican. Again, there is no effect of religiosity on identifying between the Democrats and Republicans for foreign-born respondents.

These effects are pretty strong. To give a sense of where they stand relative to other factors that we control for, in the first regression, one's family income and number of years in the U.S. also significantly influence whether or not Asian Americans are apartisan or identify with a partisan choice. In the case where our measure of civic engagement is working to solve a problem in one's community, the marginal effect of family income — between respondents to the PNAAPS in the lowest income category and those in the highest — on apartisanship is 15 percent (the higher the family income, the likelier one is to identify with a partisan choice). With respect to the variable of years in the U.S., Asian immigrants who have lived in the U.S. just one year are 6 percent likelier to be apartisan than Asian immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for 20 years.

The upshot here is pretty clear. Active engagement in non-political spheres of civic life induces greater understanding of and identification with partisan politics. With some modes, engagement further shapes the particular content of one's partisan politics: highly religious Asian Americans are also less likely to identify as either Independents or Democrats, favoring instead allegiance to the Republican Party.

## **Partisanship Through Panethnic Linked Fate**

A second relationship to examine is whether civic engagement politicizes Asian Americans by engendering a greater sense of panethnic identity. As many other scholars have noted, Asian American "panethnicity" is an especially distinct kind of social group identity that is characterized by the simultaneous coexistence of externally perceived homogeneity and internally lived heterogeneity (Espiritu 1992; Lowe 1996; Lien 2001; Kibria 2002; Okamoto 2003; Vo 2004; Masuoka 2006; Okamoto 2006). For Asian Americans, the extent of the ambiguity and internal diversity group boundaries begins with the ethnic/national origins covered under the broad rubric of "Asian,"

which includes Chinese (mainland, Taiwanese, Hong Kong), Filipinos, Hmong, Indians, Japanese, Koreans, Malays, Pakistanis, Thais, Vietnamese, and, by some accounts, even Pacific Islanders and Arabs. Further weakening the case for panethnic identity is the sheer diversity of languages, religions, cultural orientations, political economies, and immigration histories characterizing persons defined as Asian American. Yet, under the right historical and organizational circumstances, Americans of divergent Asian national origins, languages, cultures, religions affiliations, immigration histories, collective memories, and structural positions in global and local economies are able to mobilize into a panethnic collectivity (Espiritu 1992; Okamoto 2003; Vo 2004; Okamoto 2006).

Here I build on a previous work using the PNAAPS that demonstrates that panethnicity can also influence the everyday attitudes and actions of Asian Americans (Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004; Lee 2005) and that social contextual factors are an important determinant of panethnic identity formation among Asian Americans (Masuoka 2006). The PNAAPS includes three different measures of panethnicity: (1) perceptions that Asians in America share a common culture; (2) self-identification as an "Asian American"; (3) perceptions that Asians in America share a "linked fate." In previous work, I demonstrate that the conception of panethnicity that has the greatest effect in defining the political orientation of Asian Americans is the third, linked fate conception (Lee 2005). Thus we focus on this measure here. In the PNAAPS, this common fate question asks respondents if they "think what happens generally to other groups of Asians in this country will affect what happens in your life." Following Dawson (1994), perceptions of linked fate can be thought of as a heuristic that simplifies political choice along a panethnic group utility calculus — what is best for me, individually, is determined by what I perceive to be in the best interests for my in-group, collectively.

**Table 8. Strength of Panethnic Linked Fate, by Measures of Civic Engagement**

	No linked fate	A little	Somewhat	Strong linked fate
Worked with others to solve a community problem	17.2%	15.9%	23.7%	25.5%
Membership in an ethnic / panethnic organization	13.4%	15.9%	14.6%	24.2%
Attend relig. services 1-2 times per month or more	46.5%	52.8%	54.5%	57.2%
Cell entries are row percentages.				

Table 8 shows the extent to which civic engagement varies with one’s strength of panethnic linked fate. Across all three measures, Asian Americans who strongly agree that what happens to other Asian Americans affects what happens in their lives are likelier to be civically engaged than their counterparts who reject such a linked fate. The greater likelihood of being engaged is most pronounced in the case of membership in an ethnic/panethnic organization, where 24 percent of strong panethnic identifiers hold such organizational ties in comparison to only 13 percent of non-identifiers.

As with the relationship between civic engagement and party identification, we further tested for the robustness of this effect by controlling again for a range of other factors that could plausibly covary with one’s panethnic identification – ethnic/national origin group, generation, tenure in the U.S., age, gender, family income, and educational attainment. The results, shown in Table 9, are mixed across measures of civic engagement. When we do not differentiate between U.S.-born and foreign-born, Asian Americans who work with others in their community to solve a common problem are 10.5 percent more likely than Asian Americans who do not engage in such work to perceive their fates to other Asian Americans as somewhat or strongly linked. Engagement in ethnic/panethnic organizations or in religious activity, however, do not appear to have any direct effect on one’s perceptions of panethnic linked fate.

**Table 9. Marginal Effects of Civic Engagement on Panethnic Linked Fate**

	A little linked	Somewhat linked	Strongly linked fates
Worked with others to solve community problem	-0.4%	4.9%	5.6%
Born in U.S.	-0.4%	4.9%	6.0%
Born outside U.S.	<i>not sig.</i>	<i>not sig.</i>	<i>not sig.</i>
Membership in (pan)ethnic organization	<i>not sig.</i>	<i>not sig.</i>	<i>not sig.</i>
Born in U.S.	-0.9%	6.3%	9.7%
Born outside U.S.	-0.8%	-11.3%	-7.3%
Attend relig. services 1-2 times each month or more	<i>not sig.</i>	<i>not sig.</i>	<i>not sig.</i>
Born in U.S.	0.2%	-5.4%	5.5%
Born outside U.S.	-0.4%	8.4%	9.1%
Cell entries are row percentages.			

When we explicitly contrast these effects for U.S.-born and foreign-born, we again reveal some hidden and pronounced effects. With engagement with others in one's community, we now see that this effect is isolated to the U.S.-born, who are about 11 percent more likely to believe in a moderate and strong sense of linked fate. There is no effect of community problem-solving work on panethnic identification for foreign-born respondents. More strikingly, the other two measures of engagement now shows some statistically significant relationships to a panethnic linked fate identity.

- U.S.-born Asian Americans who belong to ethnic or panethnic activities or organizations are 16 percent more likely to believe in a panethnic linked fate strongly or somewhat.
- The effect cuts in the opposite direction foreign-born, who are about 19 percent less likely to hold somewhat or strongly to a panethnic linked fate identity.
- With religiosity, it is foreign-born Asian Americans who attend religious services regularly who are more likely (by about 11 percent) to believe their fates are somewhat or strongly linked to that of other Asians in America.
- U.S.-born who are highly religious, by contrast, are almost 17 percent less likely to adhere to a sense of linked fate.

As with party identification, the influence of civic engagement on

panethnic linked fate with religiosity and ethnic/panethnic activity appear to be concealed by the opposite effects between the U.S.-born and foreign-born. Again, it is inviting to theorize about the basis for these divergent effects of civic engagement for U.S.-born and non-U.S.-born Asian Americans, but such considerations exceed the grasp of the PNAAPS data used in this chapter. The key point to underscore is that the critical differences are missed by simply examining Asian Americans as a single, monolithic group.

These findings, taken together, demonstrate the importance of civic engagement on Asian American panethnic identity. It further turns out that when Asian Americans believe their fates are linked to that of all other Asians in America, it has a significant and sizeable effect on their partisanship. As before, party identification is examined in three steps: (1) being apartisan or identifying with a partisan category; (2) being Independent or identifying with a major party; (3) identifying as a Democrat or a Republican. The effects of panethnic linked fate are as follows:<sup>vi</sup>

- Asian Americans who strongly believe their fates are linked are 10 percent less likely to be apartisan than those who reject the idea of a common destiny outright;
- A linked fate orientation has no bearing on one's likelihood of identifying as an Independent or with a major party;
- A strong linked fate orientation increases one's likelihood of identifying as a Democrat by 14 percent.

## **From Civic Engagement to Formal Political Incorporation**

We have thus far examined the various ways in which civic engagement spurs the politicization of Asian Americans. Recall from Figure 1 that there are a number of possible relationships between civic engagement, partisanship, panethnic identity, and the political incorporation of Asian Americans. The most consistent effect we find is the association between all three measures of civic engagement and partisanship: Asian Americans who are not active in civic life are less likely to view the partisan categories of "Democrat," "Republican," and "Independent" as a meaningful choice. We also see more selective evidence for an indirect pathway to partisanship through paneth-

nic identity: Asian Americans who actively work with others in their community on common problems are more likely to hold a strong sense of panethnic linked fate, and this common fate orientation then decreases the likelihood of being apartisan and increases the likelihood of identifying as a Democrat rather than a Republican.

The remaining question is whether civic engagement also directly potentiates the formal political incorporation of Asian Americans. By formal political incorporation we mean the three keys to democratic inclusion in American political life: citizenship, voter registration, and voter turnout. There are other measures we might also examine, including other modes of political participation, such as contributing money to a campaign or candidate, contacting a public official or political representative, and attending a public meeting or protest march. Also, the term “political incorporation” itself is much more encompassing than the sometimes ritualistic acts of obtaining legal status and fulfilling one’s civic duties. Broadly speaking, we care about political incorporation because the term denotes the process of successive stages of inclusion into all arenas of democratic decision-making. Importantly, full incorporation and inclusion perforce also involves one’s subjective membership and ownership in our politics, such as a sense of belonging, agency, and voice.

Focusing for the moment on the three most commonly examined formal measures of political incorporation, Table 10 shows the marginal effects of each measure of civic engagement on citizenship, voter registration, and voter turnout. As with Table 7, these marginal effects are calculated holding the other “control” variables in our regression model – age, education, family income, gender, number of years in the U.S. as an immigrant, immigrant generation, and ethnic/national origin group – at their mean values.

**Table 10. Marginal Effects of Civic Engagement on Formal Political Incorporation<sup>^</sup>**

	Citizenship	Voter Registration	Voting <sup>†</sup>
Worked with others to solve common problem	5.2%* (-0.4 to 10.8)	8.4%* (-0.4 to 17.1)	8.1%* (-1.1 to 17.4)
Membership in (pan)ethnic organization	4.5%* (-1.8 to 10.8)	13.3%** (3.9 to 22.7)	18.1%** (7.7 to 28.5)
Attend religious services 1-2 times each month	5.0%* (-0.8 to 10.9)	11.2%** (2.7 to 19.7)	17.3%** (8.8 to 25.8)

<sup>^</sup> Cell entries are predicted effects of changing from the minimum value to the maximum value of each measure of civic engagement on party identification and its 95 percent confidence interval.

<sup>†</sup> Voting is measured as respondent self-reports of voting in the 2000 presidential election.

\* Statistically significant at the p<.10 level.

\*\* Statistically significant at the p<.05 level.

The results support the promise held by many for civic engagement as a pathway to political incorporation.

- All three measures of civic engagement increase the likelihood of citizenship by about 5 percent.
- Asian Americans who are active in their civic life are also likelier to have registered to vote by a range of 8 to 13 percent, compared to Asian Americans who are not civically engaged.
- The largest effects are found for the act of voting itself. Asian Americans who work with others in their community to solve common problems are 8 percent likelier to have voted; participation in ethnic and panethnic organizations and activities increases one's chances of voting by 18 percent; attending religious services frequently increases voting by 17 percent.
- Differentiating between foreign-born and U.S.-born alters these results somewhat. The most prominent among these is that the effect of civic engagement among U.S.-born increases one's likelihood of voting by 22.9 percent; among foreign-born, it decreases one's likelihood of voting by 19.5 percent. Similarly, but to a much lesser degree, civic engagement among U.S.-born increases one's likelihood of being registered to vote; among foreign-born it may decrease one's likelihood of being registered, but the effect is not statistically significant. There is also some moderate evidence that the effect of religiosity and of participation in ethnic/panethnic

activities or organizations on voting is primarily an effect among U.S.-born Asian Americans.

## Summary and Discussion

Asian Americans are widely noted for their relative absence in spheres of political life. This is so, both at the mass level of political participation and at the elite level of political representation. Often, this relative absence is explained by turning a critical, incriminating eye either to the interests and incentives of individuals: either indicting Asian Americans for being politically apathetic or non-Asian American party elites and non-Asian American rank-and-file partisans for being unwilling to support the candidacy of Asian Americans running for elected office. In these pages, we focus instead on the institutional role of political parties and the relationship that rank-and-file Asian Americans have to the party system in America and to either major party. We have discussed the extent to which the attachments, that Asian Americans form (and fail to form) to the system of party competition in America, serves as a critical bridge to their politicization; we also followed the lead of many current scholars in looking to civic engagement as a key prior step to developing partisanship.

The analysis here has focused on three rather distinct measures of civic engagement found in the 2001 Pilot National Asian American Politics Survey: the general experience of working with fellow community members on a problem of common interest; participation in an ethnic or panethnic organization or activity; and attendance in religious services. We find a strong and significant role for civic engagement in determining whether Asian Americans are partisan or apartisan and a selective relationship between religiosity and Republican Party affiliation. We also find that community problem-solving begets a greater sense of panethnic identity, which in turn begets greater partisan ties and, more specifically, greater Democratic Party affiliation. Finally, we find that all three measures of civic engagement triggers the political incorporation of Asian Americans from citizenship acquisition to voter registration to voting itself.

Taken together, these results strongly affirm the promise that

many imbue to the workaday, seemingly non-political, forms of engagement in civil society. These results, however, should be taken with a dose of precaution. Three reasons, in particular, prompt our circumspection. First, each of the relationships that Figure 1 represents as one-way influences might well be two-way relationships. Panethnic identification may foster greater activity in civic life, not just the other way around; partisanship may foster a heightened sense of panethnic identification, not just the other way around; formal political incorporation (especially the acts of registering to vote and voting itself) may foster a greater sense of partisanship, not just the other way around. Perhaps the least likely of these is that partisanship may foster greater civic engagement, as it is difficult to imagine how identifying with a major party itself would foster working with others in one's community or greater attendance at religious services.

To further complicate matters, a second reason to be circumspect is that it is also possible that both civic engagement and party affiliation are the result of some other underlying processes of immigrant acculturation and political incorporation. In the analysis presented here, I have deliberately specified only a minimal set of factors to include in the statistical analysis as "control variables." In reality, civic engagement and partisanship almost certainly interact in more complex ways with panethnic identification, immigrant socialization, and key structural contexts of immigrant political incorporation (e.g., demographic composition, organizational density, social networks, local and global political economy, party competition, and electoral rules). These results, strictly speaking, thus represent more of a "plausibility" test for the role of civic engagement in the politicization of Asian Americans than a definitive, discriminating causal analysis. Having made this requisite caveat, it is still important to note that even if civic engagement and partisanship are not *causally* related, the forces or interventions that motivate one may very well motivate the other.

A final reason to be cautious in how we use these findings is reflected in the varied, sometime starkly opposite, findings we obtain when we explicitly compare the effects of civic engagement between U.S.-born and foreign-born Asian Americans. There are numerous possible realities on the ground that could support this divergence.

Perhaps most obvious among these is that the kind of civic ties that newcomers from Asia hold may differ in fundamental respects from those that the Asian American second generation and beyond hold. As our results suggest, the forms of civic engagement in which Asian-born respondents participate often push further away from partisanship and political incorporation, while the civic engagement of U.S.-born respondents consistently pull respondents to draw brighter lines between parties, between identities, and towards formal political inclusion.

There is, on this point, simply more research to be done. We have no reason to expect that one's country of birth is the only area in which the effects of civic ties on Asian American politics may diverge. Regional differences and the diversity of ethnic/national origin groups are two other potential dimensions of divergence that bear further examination. In addition, while we have examined three distinct kinds of civic ties in this essay, there are many others that might differ in their politicizing effects, such as labor unions, community-based organizations, hometown associations, and so on. Finally, with regard to projections into the future, there is no magic oracle here. Perhaps the clearest implication based on the present research, however, is that if the two major political parties continue to shun Asian American voters and candidates or otherwise hedge their bets in wooing them, the influence of a panoply of civic organizations and forms of associational life will surely continue.

## Notes

- i Two other key considerations, beyond the availability of data are the representativeness of the sample and the quality of the data. On the first, exit polls only survey voters after they have voted, some surveys poll likely voters, some only poll adults living in metropolitan areas with a high proportion of Asian Americans, some only poll Asian Americans with certain surnames, some only poll certain ethnic subgroups within these "panethnic" groups, and so on. On the second, some surveys only conduct interviews only in English while others allow for non-English interviews; some surveys tolerate response rates as low as 25 percent for a telephone interview while others endeavor to reach much higher response rates and conduct face-to-face interviews; some surveys aim to ask questions in as neutral

a manner as possible while others lead respondents with their question wording (see, e.g., Lee 2001).

- ii African Americans were roughly 13 percent of the U.S. population by the “alone or in combination” grouping (and 12.4 percent if counted as “Black or African American alone”). Native Americans were 1.4 percent of the population when counted “alone or in combination” and 0.8 percent “alone.”
- iii There are two remaining pathways shown in Figure 1 that we do not examine here: the relationship between party identification and political incorporation and between panethnic identification and political incorporation. Elsewhere I test for these effects and find strong effects for both (Lee 2003; Lee and Hajnal 2008).
- iv Vietnamese and Asian Indians were oversampled to generate a sufficiently large number of respondents for analysis. Other details of the survey methodology can be found in Lien et al 2001).
- v The inter-item correlations between these three items are not strong enough to consider scaling the items together into an index of civic engagement.
- vi By convention, “weak” Democrats and Republicans are those individuals who identify with these corresponding parties but whose identification is not strong. “Leaner” Democrats and Republicans are those individuals who choose to identify as an Independent to the initial question but are willing to acknowledge a partisan bent, with the term “pure Independents” reserved to those individuals who identify as an Independent to the initial question but reject any partisan inclinations to the follow-up question.
- vii These results are not shown in a table, but are available on request.

# Organizing Asian Americans into Labor Unions

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## Introduction

Historically and currently, unions have been an important vehicle for engaging the public in civic activities. Unions have a long history of political mobilization, including endorsing candidates for state, local, and national elections, and using their members to get out the vote for candidates who can advance workers' interests (Kuttner 1987; Ferguson and Rogers 1986). As with the case of other racial minorities, however, the history of labor unions and organizing Asians has been blemished by a racially exclusionary past.

Fortunately, times have changed and so have labor unions. Beginning in the late twentieth century, efforts by unions to organize Asians have been fruitful for both unions and workers, recruiting thousands of Asians as union members, raising wages and increasing workplace democracy. Moreover, through participating in union activities that impart political knowledge and leadership skills, Asian Americans have become active in a broad range of civic activities, ranging from political mobilization efforts, get out the vote efforts, and greater community involvement.

This chapter surveys the history of labor unions, including their different strategies for civic engagement and the extent to which they organized Asian workers. It examines unions as a cross-ethnic institution that builds the capacity for civic engagement — including developing leadership potential — by providing skills, experience, and opportunities that allow workers to be involved and effective. Particular attention is paid to the Asian and Pacific American Labor Association's (APALA) efforts to organize and politically mobilize Asian Americans. The chapter concludes with assessing the challenges, as

well as the future, of organizing Asians into labor unions.

For the purposes of this chapter, civic engagement is defined as participation in one's community (local, national or global) with the purpose of influencing, improving or participating in society as a politically informed or engaged citizen. This definition includes: participating in community or organizational activities and events with the goal of aiding or improving the community or its members; understanding the needs or problems that community members face; keeping informed about the community and world events; or aiding society in other ways that bring about positive change or increase the understanding of a community or social problem (e.g. writing, lecturing, teaching, organizing activities, fundraising, and/or participating in the political process).

The latter part of this essay draws from the experience, knowledge and insights from the nation's top Asian labor leaders, including: May Chen, International Vice President of UNITE/HERE and Manager of Local 23-25 in New York City, who is a leader in organizing, educating and representing garment workers and other Asian immigrant workers; Maria Somma, Health Care Organizing Coordinator of the United Steelworkers and President of APALA, who has been a leader in organizing nurses and other health care professionals, occupations which employ large numbers of Asians; Gloria T. Caoile, Executive Director of APALA and former assistant to the president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), who has been instrumental in organizing professional workers as well as casino workers, significant segments of the population of unionized Asians; and Kent Wong, Director of the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education and the founding president of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA). Phone interviews of these labor leaders were conducted during the summer and fall of 2007.

In addition, this chapter draws from previous research, "Women of Color and Unions," in *Perspectives on Work* (see Kim 2005), and the phone interview of Katie Quan during August of 2004 which informed this publication. Ms. Quan is the former International Vice President of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) and is currently Associate Chair of the Center for

Labor Research and Education at the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, University of California, Berkeley. She was instrumental in organizing garment workers in New York City as well as Asian workers in San Francisco. I thank all of these truly extraordinary labor leaders for their insights on this topic. They continue to be leaders in the labor movement and a true inspiration for myself and for many others.

## **A Brief History of Labor Unions and Asian Workers**

Historically, labor unions have sought to improve the standard of living for workers through collective action, thus the very activity of organizing and working together to achieve the common goal of workplace improvement has required civic engagement. Because labor unions used different strategies to improve working people's lives, the type of civil engagement they employed varied over time.<sup>1</sup>

One of the earliest strategies was overtly political. In 1828, the first labor party in the United States was founded when the Philadelphia Mechanics Union of Trade Associations transformed itself into the Workingmen's Party. As with labor parties that exist in other countries today, the idea behind this strategy was to become a political party similar to the Democrat and Republican political parties. As a labor party, it would nominate and then try to elect one of its members to local public office who would pass legislation favorable towards improving all workers' (not just its own members) and working class' lives. Such legislative goals included universal and free education, the ten-hour work day (the work day at that time was twelve hours), the right to vote for those without property, eradicating debtors' prison and monopolies, prohibiting child labor, and ending the compulsory militia. Other unions replicated this strategy, and soon labor parties sprouted in other cities, including New York, Boston, Newark, and Pittsburgh. In part, this strategy was successful; its platform was adopted by the then-Democratic Party of Andrew Jackson, but the depressions in 1828-31 and 1837-50 destroyed these new political parties.

In 1869, the Knights of Labor was formed. It followed another strategy to improve the bargaining clout of workers: an inclusive

union. Membership was open to workers and non-workers, the unemployed, farmers, shopkeepers, small employers, and skilled and unskilled workers. Even black workers, who were usually excluded from organized labor during this time, were allowed to join this union. The idea behind the strategy of “one big union” was that if everyone belonged to the same union, its large membership would exert enough power so that employers would meet their demands.

The political platform of the Knights of Labor included an eight-hour work day (the work day by then was ten hours), homesteading on public land, prohibiting child labor, establishing income and inheritance taxes, and adult education. They followed a strategy of “revolutionary unionism”—so named because of their desire to transform the economic system into one of worker cooperatives. To this end they organized communities and educated them about the problems of the capitalist economic system. The height of the Knights of Labor was the movement for the eight-hour work day in 1886, which culminated in a nationwide strike, involving 300,000 workers from Kentucky, Texas, and Virginia to St Louis, Detroit, Grand Rapids, New York, Boston, and New Haven. Workers across European ethnicities — Poles, Germans, Bohemians — united across the U.S. by walking off their jobs and into the street.

In 1886, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was founded. It followed yet a third strategy to improve workers’ lives. Known as “business unionism,” the AFL tried to improve the wages and working conditions of its members through collective bargaining, a process of reaching an agreement between workers and their employers regarding workers’ wages, working conditions, training and other terms of employment. The impetus for employers to reach an agreement with workers and avoid a strike was the loss of sales and revenue during a strike; for workers, the motivation was the loss of earnings. Thus the mutual economic benefit that employers and employees provided each other (jobs and wages for employees, sales and production for employers) and the fact that each would suffer an economic loss if an agreement were not reached provided a mutual incentive to be reasonable during negotiations and to reach a settlement.

Members of craft unions that formed the AFL included highly-

skilled trade workers such as blacksmiths, carpenters, masons, coopers, tailors, and printers. These unions only admitted those working in their craft, thus omitting unskilled and semi-skilled workers entirely. This strategy of exclusion was purposeful: the bargaining power of these skilled workers was achieved by restricting those who could learn and perform their craft, effectively limiting competition for their jobs. Thus the AFL unions bargained to control the apprenticeship program, including who can become apprentices, and in doing so, kept out of the craft any outsiders, which usually included immigrant and black workers.

This strategy of exclusion worked. The high skill level of these craft workers and their limited numbers gave them bargaining power to demand relatively high wages when economic times were good. When times were bad, however, even skilled workers failed to maintain their living standards.

Besides being exclusionary, the AFL unions largely ignored political and electoral activities, including political and reformist policies. Historically they opposed policies like the minimum wage and Social Security that could help a wide swath of workers beyond their members. Instead, AFL unions concentrated only on immediate wage increases and job related issues for their own members. Because they only helped their own members and excluded many, most workers failed to benefit from their actions. Thus, both historically and currently, AFL unions have been relatively more politically conservative and exclusionary in practice than unions that have followed other strategies of improving workers' lives, such as the CIO.

The Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), first established in 1935 as the Committee of Industrial Organization<sup>ii</sup>, followed yet a fourth strategy — one of industrial unionism. The CIO organized all workers along industry lines — skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled — who worked in mass-produced industries. Thus there would be one union for all workers in the auto industry, including semi-skilled, unskilled, and skilled, though they might work for General Motors, Chrysler, or Ford. There would be another union for all workers in steel, and another for those in rubber. The idea behind this strategy is that the union gains power from having everyone organized in one industry. If every worker in one industry, like auto, belonged to one

union, such as the United Auto Workers Union, the union could strike against one auto plant and have all the workers in that plant walk out and shut down the factory. In addition, the union could negotiate the same wages for all workers no matter who their employer. In this way, workers don't compete against each other (competing for the lowest labor costs gives employers a cost advantage, driving higher wage competitors out of business), since labor costs would be the same in all companies in a given industry.

As this review of labor history illustrates, workers have always sought to improve their lives by engaging in civic activities, using numerous strategies to achieve these — by forming political parties and through business, revolutionary and industrial unionism. Their inclusiveness regarding who they allowed to become members as well as the extent to which they engaged in the political and electoral process varied by the strategy they used.

Yet throughout this history, organized labor has had to contend with a hostile political and legal climate in the U.S. Today, neither the Knights of Labor nor the Philadelphia Mechanics Trade Union exist. The demise of the Knights of Labor occurred after eight policemen were killed by a bomb in Chicago during the 1886 strike for the eight-hour day and the state charged the leadership of this union with these murders, executing four of them (but later exonerated all eight because of a lack of evidence). The Workingmen's Party was a victim of hard economic times that eroded the resolve of workers who tried to improve their lives when there were others willing to take their jobs for less pay.

Both unions were also victims of the unforgiving laws in the U.S., which were slow to protect workers who wanted to organize into unions and failed to punish employers who used ruthless tactics to break unions. Unions could flourish only after the Wagner Act was passed in 1935. This law protected the right to organize workers into unions and established penalties for companies that tried to prevent organizing.

But subsequent changes in the law — namely, the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1955 — allowed for decertification of unions and weakened the ability of unions to organize workers. The result is that the number of workers organized into unions peaked at one-third in

1955 but has been declining ever since. This decline has accelerated in the last two decades, so that today only 12 percent of workers belong to unions. The decline of unions has been attributed to weak enforcement of the laws today and flaws in the labor laws that allow employers to prevent union organizing efforts (Freeman and Medoff 1984; Brofenbrenner 1994; Dannin and Wagar 2000). In contrast, in the government sector, union organizing and membership has increased, due to passage of federal and state laws beginning in the 1960s that have allowed for public sector unions to exist and to bargain collectively (Freeman 1986), and because the government sector has not resisted the unionization of workers. The post-war period also resulted in increased numbers of professional workers, and with these, a proliferation of employee associations for these workers.

The legacy of this relatively hostile legal and political history is that today, the only types of unions that exist are business and industrial unions, which merged in 1935 into the federation known as the AFL-CIO.<sup>iii</sup> The mechanism modern unions use to improve working conditions is to organize workers into local unions and to raise wages, and improve working conditions through collective bargaining with employers. Yet, modern unions have not turned their backs on other forms of civic engagement, as this essay will demonstrate. Historically as well as today, many unions have been involved in electoral politics as well as local community coalitions to improve the lives of working people.

## Asian Workers

Historically, Asians have faced the same difficulty of a hostile political and legal climate impeding their efforts to improve their wages and working conditions by organizing into unions. The consequence is that, like those of white workers, the vast majority of their strikes failed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But Asians also faced the additional obstacle of racism. Like other racial minorities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Asians were relegated to the jobs that no one else wanted — those that were the lowest-paying and that had the worst working conditions.<sup>iv</sup>

Moreover, throughout this history of trying to improve the lot of workers, organized labor largely neglected to organize Asian Americans and, at their worst, participated in excluding them from the more lucrative jobs. Shut out of labor unions and placed in the worst jobs in the U.S. — in agriculture, building railroads, and working in mines — Asians organized themselves into independent labor organizations that existed outside of the mainstream labor movement. Though stereotyped as unlikely to join labor unions and take militant action, in fact, Asians participated in and led numerous strikes.

The earliest strikes occurred while building the transcontinental railroads under dangerous and brutal conditions. In 1867, two thousand<sup>v</sup> Chinese railroad workers struck against the Central Pacific Railroad for higher wages, equal pay and hours (compared to white workers), an end to corporal punishment and for the ability to leave their jobs if they chose. Chinese workers also struck against the Houston and Texas Central Railroad in 1870 over their wages and failure of the company to comply with their contract. The Chinese workers lost both of these strikes due to brutal labor tactics by employers.

With low pay and oppressive working conditions, the agricultural sector experienced numerous organizing drives and strikes by Asian workers. In Hawaii, dissatisfaction over the exploitative conditions on the plantations, including segregated housing and jobs, low wages, and abusive overseers, led to many strikes. These included: 1,200 Japanese cane cutters and loaders in Wailua who struck in 1904 for higher wages; 7,000 Japanese workers who struck the major plantations in Oahu in 1909 for receiving lower wages than Portuguese and Puerto Rican workers; and 2,000 Filipino workers who struck in 1924 for higher pay, an eight-hour day, and better housing. Strikes by Japanese workers over abusive actions by overseers also occurred in Maui in 1904 and in Waipahu in 1906.

Perhaps the most notable strike on the islands was the six-month strike in 1919 when Japanese and Filipino workers banded their separate labor organizations together into a combined multiethnic labor organization, the Hawaii Laborers' Association. The union's 8,000 Japanese, Filipino, Puerto Rican and Spanish workers demanded higher pay and an eight-hour day. Although this strike, like all the

others on the islands, was lost by the workers, it is notable for uniting workers of many diverse nationalities.

Strikes in agriculture penetrated the mainland as well. As early as 1880, Chinese fruit pickers in Santa Clara, California, struck for higher wages (Takaki 1993). In 1903, Japanese and Mexican farm workers in Oxnard, California, joined together into the multiracial organization the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association, as 1,200 workers struck for higher wages. Like many strikes before the Wagner Act was passed in 1935, this strike was marred by violence. When strikers demonstrated in front of labor camps that housed strikebreakers, shots were fired, killing one Mexican worker and wounding two Japanese and two Mexican workers. Blame for the violence fell on the labor union, resulting in the jailing of the leaders of the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association (Chan 1991).

Violence was common during other strikes, as well. In 1933, 700 Filipino lettuce pickers struck in Salinas Valley, California. This union grew to 2,000 workers and joined the 1934 strike in Monterey with an AFL affiliate union, the Vegetable Packers Association. During this latter strike, labor leaders were arrested, two workers were shot, and the labor camp where hundreds of Filipino farm workers lived was burned to the ground (Chan 1991).

Notably, strikes by Asian workers were not limited to white owners or employers. In 1875, Chinese garment workers struck a Chinese sweatshop owner in San Francisco for higher wages. In Hawaii, 300 plantation workers struck in 1891 to protest a Chinese labor contractor who allegedly cheated them (Chan 1991). Asian workers, in other words, are similar to other workers: they organize for the same reasons other workers organize — for higher wages, better working conditions, fairness, and respect.

Despite their low pay, abusive working conditions, and demonstrated commitment to union organizing, Asian workers remained outside of organized labor. In part, this was because of the outright refusal of organized labor to include Asian workers. When the Hawaii Laborers' Association applied for membership into the AFL in 1920, the AFL never took up the matter (Chan 1991). When the Filipino lettuce pickers asked the AFL to form a union for them, the AFL refused, leaving the workers no choice but to form their own inde-

pendent union (Chan 1991). During the 1903 strike by the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association, the AFL mediated an agreement between workers and growers, after the murder and wounding of workers. But after the strike when the union applied for membership, the AFL stated that it would admit the union only if Chinese and Japanese workers were excluded from membership (it was willing to accept Mexican workers). The Mexican secretary of the union refused this condition and thus membership into the AFL, aptly stating:

Our Japanese here were the first to recognize the importance of cooperating and uniting in demanding a fair wage scale... We have fought and lived on very short rations with our Japanese brothers, and toiled with them in the fields... We would be false to them and to ourselves and to the cause of unionism if we now accepted privileges for ourselves which are not accorded to them (Chan 1991, 87).

Unions also ventured into the political realm to broaden their exclusion of Asians. The Seaman's International Union, an AFL affiliate, pressured Congress to forbid foreign sailors from working on U.S. ships and asked immigration officials to arrest and deport Chinese sailors (Chan 1991). Even the inclusive Knights of Labor, whose strategy was to organize every person in a community and included African Americans, excluded Chinese workers (the Chinese were the only Asians on the U.S. mainland at that time) along with liquor store owners, professional gamblers, stockbrokers, lawyers, bankers, and other "economic parasites." Moreover, the leadership of the Knights of Labor pushed for the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and its extensions, excluding Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States. After its passage, the union leadership tried to extend this law to exclude Japanese and Koreans as well, but this attempt failed.

It was only in 1936 that the AFL accepted into its fold the Field Workers Union, a Mexican and Filipino union of farm workers (Chan 1991). Later, in 1940, the AFL admitted the Federated Agricultural Laborers Association, a Filipino union, after it successfully represented thousands of farm laborers in a series of strikes in central California (Chan 1991). By the 1960s, when Filipino and Mexican farm

worker organizations joined forces to form the United Farm Workers Union, the AFL admitted them as well.

There were rare exceptions to the exclusionary policies of labor unions. Generally, these exceptions were among CIO unions, which were more inclusive than others, given their strategy of organizing all workers. Both the canning industry and the National Maritime Union (NMU) admitted Asian workers into their CIO unions (Friday 1994; Chan 1991). The NMU in fact, was formed by workers who disagreed with the Seaman's International Union's exclusionary policies. The NMU invited Chinese workers to join a strike it called in 1936. Chinese sailors agreed to join the strike after the union pledged to address Chinese workers' concerns of equal treatment by race. The NMU also admitted black sailors into its union; its constitution was unusual in that it prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, creed, national origin, or political affiliation (Chan 1991).

Why were Asian workers anathema to organized labor? Of course, as historians argue, labor unions often refused to admit other ethnics, even other white ethnic workers (Saxton 1971). Additionally, labor unions reflected the social views of their time, which included racism. The labor unions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had segregated labor unions for African Americans, if they bothered to admit them at all.

Like other racial minorities during this time period, Asians were subject to anti-miscegenation laws, which forbade Asians to marry whites. These laws were removed from the books only in 1967 (Chan 1991). School segregation by race often prohibited Chinese, Japanese and Korean children from attending the white schools, instead relegating them to the "Oriental" or black schools. Residential segregation limited Asians to live within Chinatowns and other undesirable neighborhoods because of racially exclusive covenants or practices by realtors and landlords that restricted where Asians could live.

Being immigrants brought their own woes in addition to those based on race alone. Asians immigrants were subject to particular laws that taxed them, such as the Foreign Miner's Tax in 1850 and 1882 that subjected Chinese miners to pay \$3 per month in California. Other laws restricted Asians from owning or leasing land, beginning in 1913 with the Alien Land Law in California. Subsequent restrictive

land laws passed in California and in other states during the 1920s and 1930s restricted working as tenants on the land.

Moreover, Asians were singled out for exclusionary treatment, especially in U.S. immigration laws. These laws began with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which barred Chinese laborers from entering the U.S., the Gentleman's Agreement in 1907 that prevented the immigration of Japanese laborers, and the Immigration Act of 1924 which excluded "aliens ineligible for citizenship," thus effectively ending Japanese immigration.

Asian immigrants could be so targeted because they lacked political power. Because they were nonwhite and nonwhite immigrants were ineligible for U.S. citizenship, the Chinese were unable to become naturalized citizens and thus vote. This practice was upheld by two U.S. Supreme Court cases in 1922 (*Ozawa v. United States*) and 1923 (*United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*), which ruled that Asian immigrants were ineligible to become naturalized U.S. citizens (Chan 1991).

Thus labor leaders and their members reflected the views of a larger society that condoned these practices and restricted the rights and opportunities of Asian immigrants. It is no wonder that Asian workers were limited to jobs that were low-paying and least desirable. During the late nineteenth century, when the Chinese worked in manufacturing, they were hired in the lowest paying manufacturing jobs in urban areas. When they worked in the same industries as whites, they worked in the lowest paying occupations, and when they worked in the same occupations as white workers, they were paid less (Takaki 1993).

Anti-Chinese sentiments appeared in the late nineteenth century across the West. The Chinese, seen as a competitive threat by white miners, were robbed, attacked, run out of the lucrative gold mines and, in some cases, killed. In the farmlands across the West, Asian workers were run out of fields. Even the worst manufacturing jobs were too good for the Chinese. White workers, able to work in the West after completion of the transcontinental railroads, wanted these jobs for themselves during the trying years of the depression of the 1890s. They drove the Chinese out of these jobs through boycotting products made by Chinese labor in 1886 as well as through vi-

olence (Takaki 1993; Saxton 1971; Chan 1991).

Factories and stores that employed Chinese workers were burned; housing where the Chinese slept went up in flames. This began in the 1870s but found more frequency and organization during the 1880s and 1890s. Known as the “driving out,” residents of towns forcibly expelled the Chinese from towns across the West. They did this by beating, robbing, shooting, killing, lynching, and maiming the Chinese and loading them into trains and shipping them out of town. Arsonists burned buildings in Chinatowns; in some towns, entire Chinatowns were burned to the ground. Across the West, unarmed Chinese were murdered in cold blood.

Driven out of mining, factories, fields, railroads, and construction, the only jobs left for the Chinese were self-employment as store and restaurant owners and laundry workers, or manufacturing ethnic products that only their fellow ethnics bought, jobs that white workers did not want.

Asians who arrived in the early twentieth century were not immune from racial violence and circumscribed employment opportunities. In 1908, a mob robbed Asian Indians and drove them out of Live Oak, California, setting their camp on fire. In San Francisco, Japanese immigrants were physically attacked in 1906; in separate incidents that year, still others were stoned — a famous Japanese seismologist was one of these fatal victims. In 1921, Japanese immigrants were forced to leave Turlock, California, or be lynched if they refused or returned. Korean farm laborers were similarly threatened with violence if they worked the orchards in Hemet, California, in 1913, as were Filipino workers, who were driven out of Washington’s Yakima Valley in 1928. In 1930, Filipino farm workers were attacked by a mob of 400 whites in Palm Beach, who killed two Filipino workers and beat up dozens more (Chan 1991).

With few exceptions (see Friday 1994), Asians were not organized into unions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was in part because of union leadership, but also in part because they did not work in industries that were unionized, due to employers, co-workers and a society that wouldn’t allow them to work in other, more lucrative types of employment. This reflected racially prevalent attitudes and practices that segregated minority

workers in the lowest paid jobs that no one else wanted and enforced job, educational and residential segregation through law and violence.

Fortunately, times have changed. Racially segregated labor unions became illegal after passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Changes in immigration priorities after the 1965 Immigration Act allowed many more Asians to immigrate to the United States as refugees, skilled workers who are in short supply, or as family members uniting with those living here. The result was a rapid increase of Asian workers to the United States, so much so that today, most Asians in the U.S. are immigrants (Ong et al. 1994). These immigrants are diverse culturally and historically, coming from countries like South Korea and the Philippines, in which labor unions were free and strong, and others, in which labor unions were mere puppets of the state or of employers.

One consequence of the 1965 immigration law is that Asian immigrants are bimodal. Those reuniting with family or entering the U.S. as refugees often have relatively low levels of English language abilities and formal educations, such as those from Southeast Asian countries. These immigrants work in lower paid industries, such as in garment, restaurant, hotel and personal service. The immigrants that fill occupations where there exist labor shortages, however, such as nurses from the Philippines and engineers and information technology professionals from India, have relatively high levels of formal educations, English language abilities and technical skills and earn relatively high wages (Ong et al. 1994; Kim and Mar 2007).

The diversity of Asian workers today — by skill level, English language ability, country of origin, and experiences with unions in their ancestral countries — have numerous implications when organizing Asians into unions, as the next section explains.

## **Labor Unions, APALA, Civic Participation and Asians Today**

Today, 11 percent of Asian workers belong to labor unions (for comparison, 12 percent of all workers belong to labor unions; Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008). With the growth of Asian immigrants into the U.S., unions changed their views and tactics during the late twen-

tieth century. Many labor unions began to understand that it was in their best interests to include Asian workers in their unions, since including them was better than competing against their lower wages if they remained unorganized. Lower cost and unorganized workers produce lower priced products and services that put unionized employers at a competitive disadvantage. Perhaps the greatest change was that Asians were being successfully organized into labor unions in garment, hotel, restaurant, and meatpacking industries, often by Asian organizers, and that Asian organizers were needed in order to communicate to workers in their own language and to understand the nuances of the many Asian cultures.

With unions needing Asians to organize workers, and the unions' promises of higher pay, greater benefits and protections in the workplace for Asians, a marriage of mutual benefit was obvious to both Asians and unions.<sup>vi</sup> This was formalized in 1992, when the AFL-CIO formed the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA).

The purpose of this organization is two-fold: 1) To train new organizers to organize Asians into labor unions and assist labor unions during organizing campaigns of Asian workers, and 2) To mobilize Asian voters to increase Asian American participation in the political process.

As a result of APALA's training efforts, there is a new generation of people who have been trained and recruited into unions, more union organizing campaigns involving Asian Americans, and an expanded capacity of unions to reach out to Asian American workers (Wong 2007). Consequently, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Asians who have been organized. Across the nation, 20,000 Asian American workers have been organized into unions within the last five years (Wong 2007).

An example can be seen in APALA's organizing efforts in Los Angeles' health care industry, which employs many Asian workers. The union density increased from six to 65 percent in health care as a result of the work of many APA organizers, some who were recruited through APALA's efforts. In Los Angeles, 74,000 workers joined the Long Term Care Union of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in 1999 (Wong 2007). In another example, APALA helped mo-

bilize the Filipino community to support the San Francisco Airport workers' unionization campaign, 90 percent of who were Filipino (Caoile 2007).

Labor took notice. "There was a sense from labor unions that Asians are invisible and not interested in organizing," May Chen, International Vice President of UNITE/HERE and Manager of Local 23-25 in New York City, explains. "But the many Asian organizers who have participated in the labor movement and the successful campaigns proved them wrong. It showed that Asians were interested in organizing and were good at it" (Chen 2007)

APALA also mobilizes voters to increase Asian American participation in the political process. As Chen describes, "Political activism and political education are the nuts and bolts of a union." Unions register voters in workplaces and in communities, and teach members who their representatives are and how to visit and lobby them. They educate their members about issues pressing to communities, such as immigration reform, help shape talking points about these issues, and send their members to lobby state and local politicians. These union members then take these skills back to their communities, teaching others about the issues and how they can effect political change (Chen 2007).

During elections, APALA is active in voter education and mobilization efforts, including this current national election. Currently, APALA is training its members for the national election, including voter registration, voter education, and get out the vote efforts (Wong 2007). During the 2006 election, APALA worked with community groups on political mobilization campaigns, including one in Nevada, since many Asians in Las Vegas work in the gaming industry. They helped register Asians to vote and helped with voter protection, in terms of having access to ballots in their language and access to the polls. They had a phone bank in many different Asian languages, registered and mobilized numerous Asians to vote, and ran classes on what to do at the polls and citizens' rights at the polls. The result was that the Asian Pacific American vote spiked in Nevada (Somma 2007).

Part of APALA's ongoing political education efforts include a Congressional Voter Guide that describes issues that affect Asian Pa-

cific Americans, such as immigration rights, civil rights, and workers' rights. It also states APALA's position on these issues and how Senate and House Congressional Representatives voted — whether with or against APALA. Although they don't tell voters how to vote, by explaining the bills that have come before Congress and how Congressional Representatives voted, APALA informs the Asian Pacific American community about whether or not their representatives are voting for their interests (Caoile 2007; Somma 2007). Educating voters about how Congressional leaders stand on issues pertinent to Asian workers has made a difference. As Caoile states, "Harry Reid won by only a few thousand votes in the last election. Those are our votes; they made a difference. In California, Asian Pacific Americans play a major role, providing a swing vote."

Politicians have noticed. "Now when we ask for a meeting, Congressional leaders meet with us. It took time to organize the community, to tell the community that you should have a voice. Now that we have mobilized Asian Pacific Americans and have the numbers in our organization, we do have a voice and political clout," says Caoile. An example of the new political clout of Asian Pacific Americans occurred during 2006. Caoile explained that "as the voter guide was going to press, there was one issue that one member of Congress hadn't decided on. We didn't know how he was going to vote. We called his office and said we were going to put him down as voting against us. He changed his vote because of this and voted with us!"

APALA is also advancing legislative issues pertinent to Asian Americans, such as immigration and Asian American workers' rights. It has worked on campaigns to defeat anti-immigrant and anti-civil rights bills in Congress and referendums in California, and to support bills in Congress that strengthen workers' rights. It has mobilized workers for immigration reform and helped elect to the California State Assembly Ted Lieu, who is sympathetic to labor and Asian Pacific Americans' interests (Caoile 2007). In California and Washington, APALA members hold elected office, and many Asian legislators, national and statewide, come to APALA for assistance. APALA works with them on voter mobilization and protection (Somma 2007).

"Overall, the labor movement is an activist force," Kent Wong

states. "Bringing Asians into the labor movement enhances their participation on various fronts." This is because many unions also are involved in larger issues of concern to their members, such as economic and social justice issues, and with Asian and Hispanic workers, immigrant issues as well. In Los Angeles, labor unions and their members have been active on immigrant workers' rights. The culmination of these efforts occurred on May 1, 2006, when Los Angeles held a demonstration for workers' and immigrant rights, attracting the largest turnout for a "May Day" demonstration in U.S. history (Wong 2007).

Maria Somma, Health Care Organizing Coordinator of the United Steel Workers, says that when she organizes, she explicitly involves the union in pertinent community issues, such as education, crime, tax policy and access to health care. Even without a unionization drive, union members often work with community activists around local social and economic justice issues. Often ad hoc alliances are created among community organizations, including faith based organizations, and labor members work on specific local community issues. In Washington Heights, a Dominican neighborhood in New York City, there was medical maltreatment resulting from the lack of translators in the hospitals. Although the city already had a language access law, unions and community organizations successfully pressured the city to enforce it. In other areas of New York, unions and community groups helped launch campaigns to build playgrounds in immigrant communities. In Queens, unions and community organizations campaigned to include Muslim holidays in school schedules. Most recently, unions and community organizations joined together to press the state of New York to allow driver's licenses for illegal immigrants (Chen 2007).

"Community and labor are the same," concludes Caoile. "Labor plays an important role in communities." Once Asians become politically active, they participate in other community activities, such as becoming school board members or getting involved in other community issues (Caoile 2007; Chen 2007; Quan 2004). There appears to be a spill-over effect from union activities to broader community involvement (Chen 2007). "Union members see how being involved in the community is similar to protecting workplace rights," says

Somma. "The biggest problem with immigrants is lack of knowledge regarding their rights and the laws. But if you teach them that they can have an impact on their living and working conditions, if you mobilize and educate them, you may get them involved in voting, supporting a union drive, or protesting English Only bills."

Katie Quan, former International Vice President of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) has witnessed many union members undertaking personal transformations in their lives as a result of organizing. By standing up to their employers and organizing with fellow workers in the community, workers realize that they can change the conditions of their livelihoods through working together. Union experience gives them self-confidence as well as imparts knowledge, skills (such as writing press releases and speaking to the media), and leadership abilities to challenge and improve social and economic injustices. They then bring these skills back to their communities to improve a variety of social problems. "They learn how to do things they never envisioned they'd do before," Quan says. As Quan explains, many garment workers move up the ranks in the labor movement. Others take the skills they learned and become active in their community around other issues, such as police brutality and gentrification. Thus the skills learned while working with unions gives them a sense of personal empowerment that transforms them, so that they become community leaders around other issues as a result (Quan 2004; Kim 2005).

## **Challenges in Organizing Asians**

### **U.S. Labor Law**

Many of the challenges to organizing Asians are the same ones that face many other workers: the laws in the United States are so weak that it is easy for employers to prevent union organizing (Brofenbrenner 1994). Employers often fire workers who are sympathetic to the union; thus when it comes time to vote for the union, many people who would have voted for the union are no longer employed (Freeman and Medoff 1984). If they don't fire these workers, employers can transfer them to the worst jobs or otherwise make their

working conditions less desirable so that these workers will quit (Levitt 1993). Employers can also intimidate workers, stating that they will lose their jobs if a union is elected. Although these activities are illegal, the fines employers face are low and it takes years for unfair labor practice charges to make their way to hearings; by then the union election has long been held, usually with the union losing and the employer paying a small fine.

These activities by employers erode the support unions have from workers. When the most visible union supporters are being fired, laid off or are quitting from their harassment, fewer union supporters remain. Those remaining workers who support the union would be rightfully afraid of losing their job when they see the most visible supporters fired or harassed. The result is that workers are less likely to vocally support the union, become active in the unionization drive, or vote for the union.

Such was the case of organizing workers in the largest Chinese newspaper in Los Angeles, the Chinese Daily News. The workers voted for the union, but management undertook a five-year battle with the workers, firing many of the pro-union workers, harassing some of the pro-union workers that remained, and stalling contract negotiations (Wong 2007). The tactics worked. A second union election was held, in which the union was defeated. Workers were too afraid to vote for the union a second time. Eventually, the illegal practices of management were heard in court, and workers received some compensation, but it was too late. The newspaper remains non-union (Wong 2007). Because unfair labor practices are heard many years later and the fines and back pay workers receive are so meager, corporations lack any strong disincentives to break the law.

## Cultural Sensitivity

In addition to these challenges, any good union organizer tailors a given campaign to fit the needs and background of its members. Among Asian immigrants, English is not their first language and their cultural identity (at least during the first generation) often remains with their home country. These immigrants have assumptions and biases about unions rooted in their experiences in their

home countries, so organizers often need to educate these workers about unions in the U.S., explaining that the union will not be controlled by the company or by the government, that it would truly be independent, and that members would have a say about union activities and their leadership (Somma 2007; Chen 2007).

For Asian immigrant workers, having someone who speaks their language and comes from their culture (or at least understands it) is critical (Somma 2007; Chen 2007). Many of the organizers emphasized this point:

You have to understand the culture, talk to the workers, learn their ethnicity, speak their language, signal that you understand who they are. You have to have Asian organizers, folks who look like the workers, so that if someone looks like the workers and understands them, Asians figure the union is okay if this Asian believes in it. Workers are more trusting if there is an Asian organizer and if the organizer understands their cultural background (Chen 2007; Caoile 2007).

As Chen explains, the general approach to organizing Asians is similar to any group: talk to workers, understand their assumptions about unions, and communicate what the union will do for them. This involves identifying the key issues for workers and including these in the organizing campaign. Organizers culturally attuned to the workers will most likely understand the important issues for these workers and thus how to approach them. For Asian immigrants, addressing their needs for health care benefits and other workplace benefits is often important, as well as communicating to workers that with a union they would have recourse for any problems that arise, including problems of discrimination. Having a place to go where they can bring their problems is critical and often helps win them over to the union side. For U.S.-born Asian workers, often education and health benefits are more important than to other workers (Chen 2007).

Also important to any union campaign is knowing the leaders in the community, understanding the power structure of the community, and obtaining the approval of these people and organizations.

This is also best done by someone who speaks the language and comes from those communities (Somma 2007). Somma recalls, "We were organizing technical employees among which were many (about 15%) Filipinos. There were two to three key Asian leaders. Once you got them, you got the majority [of workers] through the leaders in the worksite. It's like going to the elders; you have to find the leaders, understand the power structure. Once you have [their support], you have the rest of the workers."

Unions that heed this advice will succeed; those that don't, fail.

An organizing drive from the United Auto Workers illustrates this. Caoile said, "When they first started to organize casino workers in Atlantic City, they did fliers, letters. The UAW said that the Asians didn't respond." The lead organizer was Asian but didn't speak the language. So they called Caoile for advice on how to reach these workers (Caoile 2007; Somma 2007).

APALA sent in Chinese speakers and mailed letters to all the workers in their native language, describing APALA, what unions were, what their legal rights were, and how unions could improve their workplaces (Somma 2007). The union took out radio ads on the local Chinese radio station, as well as ads in ethnic papers to describe the organizing drive (Somma 2007; Caoile 2007). Caoile told the union which organizations they should call to get their support, who the leaders were in the community, the restaurants workers frequented, and where the workers lived and shopped, so that organizers could visit these places to talk to workers. The UAW followed this advice, putting ads in ethnic papers and translating the material into different languages. The first time they had a union election, they lost. The second time, after following this advice, they won. They then started organizing in Connecticut. Because they knew what to do this time, Caoile says, they won.

As Quan emphasizes, "In organizing people of color, it's important to understand the social networks and the fabric of the particular ethnic or racial community. Who are the important players in the community? Who can you ally with to build a platform? You can't just pass out leaflets or you'd be viewed as an outsider with no credibility. Instead, you have to find out what the key organizations and networks are. In the Chinese community, the media is impor-

tant. The Chinese read one to two newspapers a day. They take the newspapers' word as the truth; if the newspaper says something is so, they believe it is right. So in organizing these workers, important matters must appear in a newspaper, making media campaigns important in organizing these workers."

Organizational affiliation is also important, Quan states. "You need to gain the support of organizations that are respected in the community. With the Chinese community, these were clubs and associations, of which there are many. Joining community organizations and having them as sponsors was important to lending credibility towards your issues. For Koreans, churches were the important institutions to involve."

In 1989, Quan was the head of organizing garment workers in San Francisco. "All of the targeted shops were comprised of Chinese immigrants. To establish roots and credibility in the Chinese community, we established a worker center in Chinatown. It was a bold move for unions to come to Chinatown. People told me that the unionization drive would never work, that the conservative elements in the Chinese community would oppose the unionization drive and break the windows of the center."

For the opening of the center, Quan sent out invitations on red cardboard. She had visited all of the Chinese associations and invited the leaders to come to the opening ceremony. But a week before the opening, her boss questioned her, telling her that she was doing everything wrong — that she should use white paper for the invitations, for example. "I told him, 'No, it had to be on red paper,'" Quan says, knowing the cultural significance of the color red to the Chinese community.

The opening was a huge success. "The mayor came, the leaders came, there was a lion's dance. The place was packed full of Chinese workers. The center was welcomed, and the members were thrilled. They felt that the union was sinking roots into the community and that it knew how to do things right." (Quan 2004) Knowing the social fabric of the Chinese community and respecting the culture was key to success.

## Internal Union Dynamics

Another challenge of organizing Asian workers is the composition of the labor movement, which lacks diversity. Most of the leaders in labor remain white men who hold the power in the labor movement and make the decisions (Wong 2007). Asians speak of the existence of double standards and a glass ceiling in unions. As Quan explains, "You're ghettoized. There is a glass ceiling. From my own life, I spoke to the head of my union and told him I wanted to become management, which meant heading a local. He asked, "Do you speak Spanish?" I didn't speak Spanish, but that didn't stop the Jewish men from heading local unions and it hadn't stopped him. I was viewed as ripe for only Chinese speaking people." Although Quan believes this is changing a bit, her observations of other Asian organizers is that "you tend to stay in the Asian community." "I applied for regional director position in LA, where most of the workers were Latino," she said. "I had more seniority and was more skilled than the other applicants, but someone else who was not Asian was chosen. I was told that I should stay in Northern California in the Asian population. If I had been white and male I would have had different experiences; I'd have gone farther quicker."

## Perceptions of Asians

Perhaps the greatest challenge, however, is one of perception. Many people view Asians as apolitical. Currently, Asians are less likely to participate in the political process (see Chapter 1 by Ong and Scott). But this is changing. As Caoile states, "Asians may have been complacent. At one time a lot of Asian Pacific Americans didn't get involved in electoral politics. But now they know that you need to be involved in electoral politics, that the political process affects the decisions about your health care, the schools your kids attend. Asians are engaged in political action now."

Because two-thirds of Asians are immigrants, they may be less participatory in the electoral system. This status also may make them more afraid of organizing into a union because they have so much more to lose. As Caoile explains, "They have families back home looking to them for survival — they are supporting an entire family."

In New Jersey, there are a lot of Filipina nurses. For most, it's their first job. They work the worst shifts — the night shift, the holiday shift. During an organization drive, they said they couldn't join the union or they'd get fired and their entire family wouldn't eat back home."

"But if an Asian Pacific American talks to them outside of the workplace and educates workers, and tells them they can't be fired from an organization drive, they get stronger. They talk to each other, find out they're all in the same boat, that they all get the holiday shifts. They begin to see their problems not as individual but collective ones, and realize that the solution is a collective one as well. They think, maybe we do have a voice. They begin to complain, fear is no longer part of them. They ask why they get the worst shifts, and then they see a change — they're treated better because they know their rights and can't be forced to work the worst shifts." (Caoile 2007)

Somma agrees. "Immigrants are hard to organize because of language, culture, and because they have more to lose. It's not just their job but their whole family; a lot is on the line. In my personal experience in organizing nurses, once you show that the union is a valid and legal vehicle, that the union can't harm you, and that there is power in the collective, workers join the union."

The rapid increase of immigrant workers in the United States is a reason unions need to contend with them. As Somma states, immigrants are the fastest-growing sector in union membership. Indeed, the proportion of union members who are immigrants has increased from 9 to 11 percent from 1996 to 2004, and the number of immigrants in the U.S. increased 48% in the United States between 1996 and 2004 (Migration Policy Institute 2004). Thus immigrants are a growing population among union members because of the increased number of immigrant workers in the United States.

As these illustrations show and as Wong emphasizes, "Asians can be political. They are political. Whether activated through community work or labor unions, the younger Asian Americans are having an impact in politics including the electoral arena."

For this reason, politicians are no longer ignoring them.

## The Future of Labor Unions as a Vehicle for Civic Engagement

### The Future for Asians

"Our time has come," says Caoile, "we are a growing population." Indeed, the future for organizing Asians is bright, since Asians are concentrated in many areas that are growing, including health care, hospitals, service industries and education (Caoile 2007; Somma 2007; Wong 2007). These are sectors that unions have targeted for organizing drives. As Caoile states, SEIU and AFSCME are organizing in these areas. Asians also work in many occupations that have been targeted for organizing, including post-secondary teachers, registered nurses, lab technicians, gaming service workers, and airport concession and Hudson News stands in airports (APALA nd; Chen 2007). In addition, Asians disproportionately work in the public and health care sectors, where there are higher unionization rates than in other industries (Wong 2007). The result is that Asians are the fastest growing ethnic group to join unions (Somma 2007).

Asians are also concentrated in geographic locations that are amenable to unions. Asians are concentrated in urban areas where union density is significant, Wong states. "For example, the largest union density is in Hawaii. Hawaii has very progressive social policies. It is the only state with universal health care. There is a history of having progressive social legislation and legislators. Asians hold political office in Hawaii, they are involved in political activities and in labor unions. Labor has a link with communities and has influence in Hawaii." Other areas where Asians are concentrated include New York, California and Massachusetts, which also have high union densities.

According to Somma, the AFL-CIO is examining organizing professional workers, including registered nurses, health care workers, technicians, respiratory therapists, radiologists, laboratory professionals, IT occupations (where the Communications Workers of America are organizing), and educators, since all of these occupations are growing. The AFL-CIO is also forming relationships with pro-

fessional organizations that have a large number of Asian workers, such as accountants and pharmacists, exploring whether or not collective bargaining can advance these professions.

If immigration laws change so that higher educated immigrants are preferred over less skilled immigrants, these professional organizations will be critical to protecting Asian workers. But even without changes in the immigration laws, higher educated Asians in public service, education, and medicine will continue to find themselves courted by unions. Because Asians work in both high- and low-paid jobs that are unionized, Asians will continue to play a role in unionization efforts.

## Replenishing Organizers

Organizing is difficult work. It involves travel and working around the clock during a campaign, including many nights and weekends. With so much at stake — lower profits for employers, possible lost jobs for workers who can be illegally fired when they organize — the work can be highly confrontational and emotionally taxing. The result for many organizers is burnout. After a few years of this lifestyle, many organizers move on to other jobs. This has been no different among Asian organizers. As Chen explains, this pattern is exacerbated by the fact that the Organizing Institute at the AFL-CIO has focused exclusively on training college graduates to be organizers. These college graduates have families that expected their sons and daughters to go into law or medicine, but instead they became organizers. Many of these young college graduates consequently organize for five to ten years and then go to law school (Chen 2007).

Certainly, unions benefited from the talents of these young organizers during their stints as organizers, and many do stay in the labor movement, including many stars such as Norman Yen, a Brown graduate, who is currently running an affiliate union in Texas.

But as May Chen suggests, part of the solution may be in training rank and file workers to become organizers, as well as college graduates. “There are a lot of Chinese, Filipino, and Vietnamese workers working in hotels. These workers won’t go to law school or

medical school. They really appreciate what the union did for their families, that it raised wages, allowed their kids to get good educations and was their entrée into the middle class. We need to get these people involved in organizing, because once you do, they do an amazing job.”

Chen explains that when UNITE HERE organized a TJ MAXX in Pennsylvania, she sent some rank and file activists to help organize it. “They got along instantly with the workers there because they were similar to them. They were enthusiastic about the union, and it showed. It won over workers; they won the trust of workers quickly. They were hard workers and they did a great job.”

## The Future for Unions

While Asians are poised to become union members and become active in civic engagement, the future for labor unions, without changes in the law, is more problematic. Unionization rates have fallen from one-third percent to only 12 percent of workers today. Much of this decline is because of management’s resistance to unions and use of illegal tactics, such as those used by the Chinese Daily News, to prevent unions from organizing workers (Brofenbrenner 1994; Freeman and Medoff 1984).

Only with additional legislation can these problems cede. Such legislation would allow unions to file injunctions against employers, allow financial penalties against employers for threats, intimidation, lies, distortion, and plant closings as a result of union campaigns, and increase penalties for employers who break the law. Currently, fines are so low that it is economically worthwhile to break the laws, since doing so incurs a small cost and saves much more by keeping out a union. In addition, reducing the time between filing unfair labor practices and receiving a judgment from the National Labor Relations Board would benefit workers. Finally, allowing unions to be officially recognized after a majority of workers sign cards stating their desire to have a union, which is the case in Canada, would also prevent abusive employer practices and aid organizing efforts (Brofenbrenner 1994).

Another challenge is urging unions to organize workers. Many

national unions have chosen not to undertake such expensive, difficult campaigns (Wong 2007). Or they organize shop by shop, which is why they lose, Wong says. What unions need is strategic organizing — analyzing industries to see which are growing and where unions can win elections, having a comprehensive organizing campaign, with industry-wide targets, committing the necessary resources, involving the community, conducting corporate research, and having an effective media campaign. These are all elements of successful organizing campaigns.

## Conclusion

Historically, few Asians belonged to unions, reflecting a society that excluded, or at best, ignored, Asian workers. But with changes in attitudes about race, and with APALA and unions reaching out to organize Asian Pacific Americans, race is no longer a barrier. Instead, today, the barriers to unionizing Asian workers — employer resistance and weak national laws — are those that confront all workers. Thus Asians hold a common agenda with other workers, and civic participation across racial lines will further the cause of Asians, as well as all workers.

Today, Asians are organizing Asian workers into labor unions. The very activity of organizing into unions often transforms and empowers workers when they experience that by working together they can change the conditions of their lives. Consequently, unionized workers use their newfound tools of collective action to participate broadly in their local community and in the larger society, and in doing so, improve their schools, neighborhoods, and nation.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> This review of labor history is based upon Lee Balliet (1987).
- <sup>ii</sup> It changed its name in 1936.
- <sup>iii</sup> Recently, however, some unions, including the Service Employees International Union and the Teamsters, have splintered off from the AFL-CIO but continue to follow either the industrial or business unionism model.
- <sup>iv</sup> This review of the history of Asian workers and unions is based on Takaki (1993) and Chan (1991).

- v According to Chan (1991), two thousand struck; according to Takaki (1993), it was five thousand.
- vi Among full-time wage and salary workers, the median usual weekly earnings for union members was \$863; for non-union members it was \$663 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008; see also Freeman and Medoff, 1984, for the union wage premium).

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**Megan Emiko Scott** is a Master of Public Policy candidate at the UCLA School of Public Affairs. In partnership with SCOPE, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that builds grassroots power to eliminate structural barriers to social and economic opportunities for poor and disenfranchised communities, she is currently researching policy strategies to create green manufacturing jobs in Los Angeles. Prior to UCLA, she worked at PolicyLink, a national nonprofit research and action institute advancing economic and social equity, where she provided administrative and research support to the President. She also co-founded and ran the San Francisco Bay Area chapter of Swirl, a national community building and advocacy organization for multiracial individuals and families. Megan is from Oakland, California and holds a B.A. in East Asian Studies from New York University.



# Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc. (LEAP)

[www.leap.org](http://www.leap.org)

Since its founding in 1982, Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc.(LEAP) has been intent on “growing leaders” within the Asian and Pacific Islander (API) communities across the world. A global, nonprofit organization, LEAP is guided by its leadership development philosophy that APIs can retain their unique cultures, identities and values while developing new and vital skills that will make them effective leaders within their own organizations, their communities and the broader society. LEAP works to achieve its mission by: **Developing people**, because leaders are made, not born; **Informing society**, because leaders know the issues; and **Empowering communities**, because leaders are grounded in strong, vibrant communities. Through its mission of "growing leaders", LEAP is uniquely positioned to expand the civic participation, public understanding and leadership development of Asian and Pacific Islanders.

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## University of California Asian American and Pacific Islander Policy Multi-Campus Research Program

The University of California Asian American and Pacific Islander Policy Multi-Campus Research Program (MRP) promotes and coordinates applied and policy research on topics relevant to California's growing Asian American and Pacific Islander population. The MRP serves as a bridge linking UC researchers to community organizations, the media, and elected officials and their staff. These activities help the University of California to integrate research, teaching, and community outreach in ways that inform and enlighten public discourse on important public policy issues. The MRP is supported through funds from the UC Office of the President, UCLA's Asian American Studies Center, and other academic units from throughout the UC system. Professor Paul Ong is the Director, and Professor Bill Hing is the Associate Director.

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