

ASIAN AMERICAN CIVIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENTⁱ

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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.ⁱⁱ 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.”ⁱⁱⁱ

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%.^{iv} 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.^v 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.^{vi} 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.^{vii} 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

- ⁱ 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.
- ⁱⁱ See Appendix A for discussion on concepts and definitions.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Appendix B for summary of LEAP surveys.
- ^{iv} 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.
- ^v See Appendix A for discussion on concepts and definitions.
- ^{vi} *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.
- ^{vii} 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.