Political and Civic Engagement of Immigrants[i]

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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.[ii] 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 21st 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 disproportionally large share of the Asian population than in any other major racial/ethnic groups in the United States (Lien 2006a, Table 8-1).[iii]

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.[iv] 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.[v] 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 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.[vi] 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.[vii] 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)[viii] 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 21st 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.[ix] 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 21st 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 20th 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[x] 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
% Registration Among Citizens				
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
%Voting Among the Registered				
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
Share of Voting-Age Persons				
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
Share of Voting-age Citizenry				
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
Share of the Electorate				
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

[i] 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>.

[ii] 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.

[iii] 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.

[iv] See the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website at <www.uscis.gov> for the latest set of requirements and changes.

[v] Most countries, except the United States and certain Latin American countries, have automatic voter registration (Mackie and Rose 1991).

[vi] 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 Multicultual 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.