

# Asian American College Students and Civic Engagement

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Julie J. Park, Monica H. Lin  
Oiyen A. Poon, Mitchell J. Chang

University of California, Los Angeles

## 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

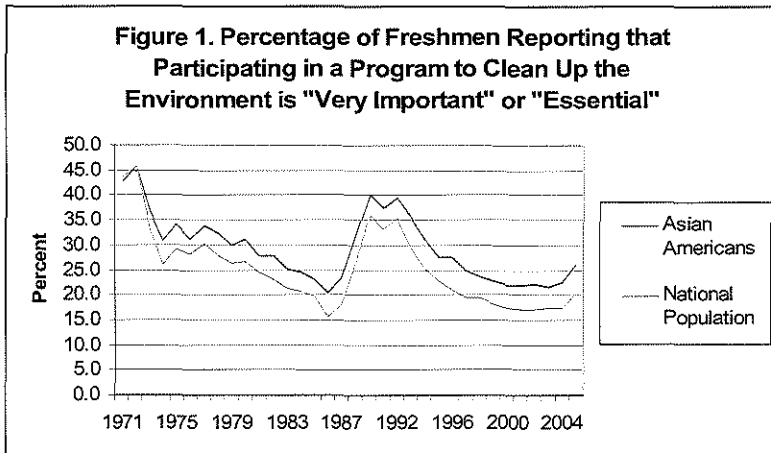
Overall, we found that an increasing proportion of Asian American freshmen over time were engaged in community service activities prior to college. Like students nationwide, Asian Americans are entering college having spent substantially more time volunteering during the high school years. In 1990, 47.5% 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

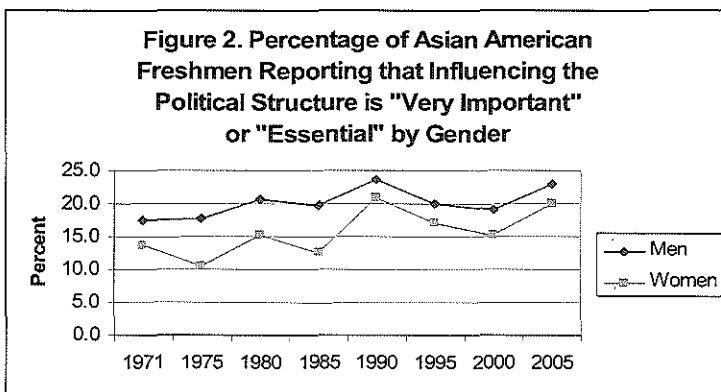


college freshmen to state that participating in programs to clean up the environment was a top priority for them.

## 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.

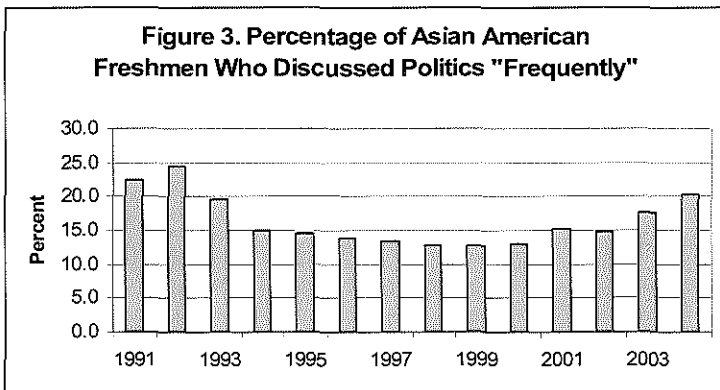


Comparing Asian American women and men in their responses to this political objective, we see a slight split by gender that has per-

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.

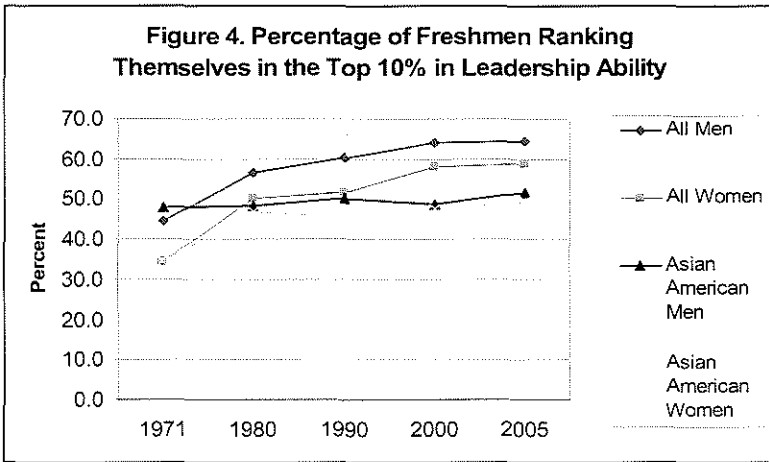
## Capacity for Civic Engagement

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.

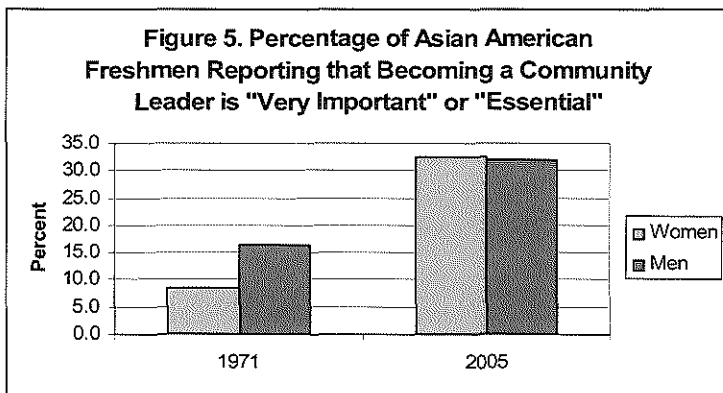
With respect to self-reported leadership ability, we compared Asian American men and women to the overall freshman college population across the decades (see Figure 4).



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.

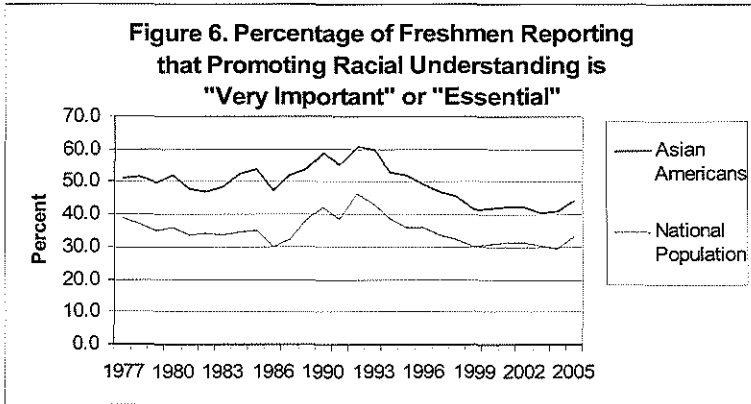
When looking at the survey item measuring the importance of influencing social values, 29.8% of Asian American first-year students in 1971 reported this was an essential or very important priority for them. By 2005, the percentage had risen over 10 percentage points, to 42.3%. Although we cannot be sure 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).