

Increasing Asian-American Political Participation

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ABSTRACT

Asian Americans, one of the fastest-growing demographics in the United States, face barriers to political participation despite their increasing numbers and socioeconomic status. Looking at factors that limit Asian American political engagement, such as feelings of exclusion, language barriers, and experiences of discrimination, it is argued that there are two strategies to increase their participation: raising awareness and increasing representation through Asian American candidates. Drawing on studies that link voter turnout to discrimination awareness and the presence of Asian candidates, it is found that acute discrimination motivates greater political involvement, while chronic discrimination has little effect. Additionally, the presence of Asian American candidates boosts voter turnout, and this is more so in districts with larger Asian populations. Finally, using social media to raise awareness and develop pan-Asian unity is essential to increase Asian American influence in politics. Further research is needed to develop methods to promote solidarity and enhance the visibility of Asian American voices in the political sphere.

Introduction

Asian Americans are one of the fastest-growing demographics in the USA; although Asian adults constitute only 7% of the total adult population (Ruiz, 2021; Noe-Bustamante, & Shah, 2023), the Asian share of the population increased by 81% from 2000 to 2019 and is projected to reach 35 million by 2060 (APIAVote, 2022). Despite these increasing numbers, however, they still have relatively little influence on American politics. Asian Americans have “one of the most dismal voter turnout rates—47 percent—compared to 66 percent for black voters and 64 percent for non-Hispanic white voters” (Kim, 2017). This is an incongruity as conventional measures such as socioeconomic status would predict higher participation (Chan, Nguy & Masoka, 2024), but various barriers exist to Asian American involvement in politics, both for voters and candidates.

One example of an impediment to Asian American participation is the “pervasive feeling of not belonging in American politics, which fuels a cycle of non-participation” (Kim, 2017). Politicians share some of the blame for this since they rarely interact with Asian American voters or target them in their campaigns: “compared to the national average of 53 percent, only 31 percent of Asian Americans reported being contacted by candidates or parties in 2012” (ibid). The tendency for politicians to overlook Asian Americans creates a sense of alienation, decreasing their tendency to vote, and creating a vicious cycle in which politicians also do not garner campaigns or promises for Asian Americans (ibid).

Another obstacle is the language barrier that makes it even more difficult for Asian Americans to holistically understand the political sphere. In 2019, nearly 57% of all Asians in America were foreign-born (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021), and in 2014 35% of Asian American adults were affected by limited English ability (Ramakrishnan & Ahmad, 2014). For these individuals, their incompetence in language poses challenges in navigating or understanding the election process or even the ballots themselves (Kim, 2017).

Meanwhile, since the emergence of Covid-19, greater instances of discrimination, specifically Asian hate, have made it more important for Asians to assert themselves politically. A total of 6,273 Asian-hate incidents were reported in 2021, with 11.5% of the total incidents being civil rights violations such as workplace discrimination or

housing-related discrimination (Yellow Horse, Jeung, & Matriano 2022). This was a 339% nationwide increase compared to 2020 (Yam 2022). Recently, however, 60-62% of eligible Asian American adults voted in the presidential election of 2020, breaking participation records; yet this significant increase in voter turnout was still less than the White participation of 74% (Ghitza & Robinson, 2024).

The main aims of this paper are to argue for greater involvement of Asian Americans in America's politics, and to present methods to increase Asian American political participation and influence. To do so, this paper will review studies that look at the factors that affect Asian American political participation and then advocate specific measures that can effectively increase political participation. Two approaches are presented: raising voter awareness and having more Asian American candidates.

Raising Awareness

Raising awareness in this context refers to spreading consciousness among Asian Americans of the discrimination they face. Several of the studies reviewed here show that raising awareness about the benefits of increased voter turnout induces greater participation in American politics, especially higher voter turnout, by Asian Americans.

A study conducted by Chan, Nguy, and Masuoka (2022) raised two questions: "What were the indicators of turnout and presidential vote choice for Asian Americans in 2020," and "did racial considerations play a role in shaping Asian American turnout and vote choice?" As data, they analyzed the 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (Frasure et al., 2022), which consists of 3,975 interviews of Asian Americans including both registered voters and citizens who were not registered to vote. Their results showed that perception or awareness of acute discrimination such as threats and hate crimes, motivated Asian American voting.

The study estimated that two primary contextual factors likely raised awareness for Asian American voters: the rise of anti-Asian animosity due to Covid-19 and the appearance of an Asian American candidate. During the pandemic, former President Donald Trump's remarks blaming China for the creation of Covid-19 inflamed anti-China and anti-Chinese sentiment, resulting in many Asian Americans experiencing or witnessing violent discrimination (Chan, Kim and Leung, 2021). Additionally, the researchers expected that the first South Asian American vice president, Kamala Harris, would "[activate] a shared group identity among Asian American voters," increasing voter participation.

The study focused on two independent variables given the context in which the study was conducted, which were attitudes about "racial group linked fate" and perceptions of racial discrimination. Linked fate amongst the racial groups was assessed using Dawson's proposed measure (Dawson, 1994), and awareness of racial discrimination was evaluated as "personal experience with racial discrimination and perceived discrimination against Asian Americans as a racial group" (Chan, Nguy, and Masuoka, 2022).

Summarizing the results, they found a higher voter turnout among Asian immigrants who reported experiencing discrimination. Compared to those who reported no discrimination, "Asian American immigrants who had experienced racial discrimination were moderately more likely to turnout by about 6 points." Those who reported perceiving discrimination but having direct personal experience were also 10 percentage points more likely to participate compared to those who perceived no discrimination. This shows the "significant effect of both perceived and experienced discrimination on turnout is driven largely by immigrant respondents in the Asian American sample." The study attributed this notable influence of racial considerations on Asian immigrants to the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes or sentiments originating from the prevalence of Covid-19. During the pandemic, social media platforms widely publicized racial crimes (Borja & Gibson, 2021) spreading more awareness of the reality. According to the study, this re-established the idea that "the 'forever foreigner' stereotype continues to guide their treatment in the United States," especially threatening a sense of belonging for immigrants and thus causing greater political participation.

Additionally, a strong perception of linked fate motivated Chinese-Americans in particular to vote against the Trump administration and in favor of Biden. Indians and Korean Americans were also further impelled to vote for

the Democratic party primarily due to greater awareness regarding the brutality of anti-Asian discrimination. Nonetheless, “variation by national origin suggests that distinct dimensions of racial considerations had different impacts on the vote choice of Asian American national origin groups in 2020,” reflecting a weak sentiment in regards to the linked fate of distinct groups of Asian Americans (CITATION?).

As evident through the results of the study, there is a positive correlation between both perceived and experienced discrimination with voter turnout although the magnitude of influence differs based on the specific national origin of the voter. Greater awareness regarding discrimination faced by Asian Americans increases voter turnout, implying that an increased consciousness regarding such issues should increase voter participation.

Although increasing awareness regarding discrimination is essential, Chan, Nguy, and Masuoka (2022) fail to show how the weak sentiment of linked fate can be improved to induce greater voter turnout. The study does not mention the attempts that can be made to increase pan-Asian identity and how it would actually be beneficial for political participation.

However, prior to their investigation, opposing literature existed: “In contrast, scholars suggest that people who have experienced underserved treatment due to their race, ethnicity, or religious affiliation, may feel inferior and powerless” (Finch, Kolody, and Vega 2000; Maciejewski et al. 2000; Whitbeck et al. 2002) and “tend to question their efficacy in making a change by political involvement” (McCluskey et al. 2004; Michelson 2000). The discrepancy between these findings, which it should be noted are from 2000 to 2004, and those of Chan, Nguy, and Masuoka (2022) may have resulted from Asian Americans increasingly discovering that they are not in fact inferior or powerless in American politics. If so, this again suggests that not only is raising awareness regarding discrimination important, but continuing to raise greater awareness among Asian Americans about their worthiness as American citizens and about their power as participants in political processes is also crucial.

Whereas Chan, Nguy, and Masuoka (2022) did not distinguish among different types of discrimination or the effects they would have on political participation, Xiao and Oklahoma (2021) distinguish between chronic and acute discrimination and examine how these different types of discrimination affect political behavior, suggesting that such results may have resulted because not all types of discrimination incur voting and there is a difference in tendency to vote based on nativity as well. This research “examines the effect of perceived chronic and acute discrimination...on Asian Americans’ likelihood of voting in the 2016 presidential election while considering other possibly related demographic and socioeconomic factors” (CITATION?).

The study uses a slightly different definition to define chronic and acute discrimination. Participants answered “yes, no, don’t know, or refused” various items to assess whether they had “experienced a variety of forms of mistreatment in their day-to-day encounters.” Those items include, “You receive poorer service than other people at restaurants or stores; People act as if you don’t speak English; People act as if they are afraid of you; People act as if they think you are dishonest; You are called names or insulted; and You are threatened or harassed.” In contrast, those who experienced acute discrimination assessed their experience based on the following six items: “unfairly denied a promotion; unfairly fired from a job; not been hired for a job due to unfair reasons; unfairly stopped, searched, questioned, physically threatened or abused by the police; unfairly prevented from moving into a neighborhood by the landlord or a realtor; neighbors made life difficult.” Each participant had three options, “experienced none of these discriminatory events; experienced one of them; experienced two or more discriminatory events.” (CITATION?).

Thus, Xiao and Oklahoma (2021) confirms the findings of Chan, Nguy, and Masuoka (2022) only with regard to acute discrimination. The report shows that “individuals who reported that they had experienced more than one acute discriminatory events are more likely to have reported voting in the 2016 presidential election than those who reported experiencing none of the events that assess acute discrimination.” The study hence confirms that “perceived acute discrimination is positively associated with increased voter turnout.” However, they found that experience of chronic discrimination “does not affect voting behavior among registered Asian Americans.”

These findings have diverse implications for the argument of this paper. First, merely raising awareness of the existence of acute discrimination might be the most effective way to increase Asian American participation in politics, so at least initially that should perhaps be the focus of the awareness-raising efforts. However, these results

raise a question about why chronic discrimination does not have an effect on participation. The study notes several reasons including the fact that “previous research examining the effect of discrimination on political behavior did not treat the measure of perceived discrimination as a scale created from multiple items,” “the inconsistent measure of perceived discrimination in prior research,” and that “the Williams’ (2008) measure was not specifically created for Asian Americans as a pan-ethnic group, so it may be limited [in its ability] to capture everyday forms of discrimination that might be specific to Asian Americans.”

Along with the possible speculations suggested by Xiao and Oklahoma (2021), perhaps Asian Americans have simply accepted chronic discrimination after long periods of being exposed to such treatment. Another reason might be that Asian Americans are less optimistic about the possibilities of changing acute discrimination. This then suggests another potentially effective method of spreading awareness: emphasizing that chronic discrimination is unacceptable in America and showing that through active political participation, they can also make significant changes to reduce acute discrimination.

Asian American Candidates

Asian American candidates are rarely seen in the political field, and even if they are, they are rarely elected. However, various studies affirm that having Asian candidates on the ballot improves Asian American turnout, especially if the candidate shares the voters’ ethnicity or if there is a shared pan-Asian identity.

A study conducted by Sadhwani (2020) asserts that “Asian American voting behavior is highly nuanced and markedly distinct from other minority voters.” To explore those nuances, the study asks two questions: “does the presence of an Asian American candidate on the ballot stimulate pan-ethnic or national origin co-ethnic Asian American turnout,” and “to what extent does district context matter for the mobilization of Asian American voters?” To answer those questions, they collected data “for all California Assembly general election candidates from 2012 through 2018.”

Overall, they found that “Asian American turnout is elevated when an Asian American is on the ballot.” It was demonstrated that “across all three categories of districts with varying size of the Asian American population, the magnitude of turnout is higher with the presence of an Asian American candidate.” To be more specific, “as the size of the Asian American population increases in a district, the size of the percent change also increases from a 1.6 percentage point difference in turnout in districts in which Asian Americans comprise 15 percent of the district population or less to a 3.2 percentage point change in turnout in districts with Asian American populations of 30 percent or more.” Either way, the presence of an Asian American candidate can stimulate greater voter turnout from Asian American voters regardless of national origin, suggesting “that the effect of shared pan-ethnic identity may be salient.”

However, why does the percentage of Asian Americans living in the district make that effect so much larger? In their conclusion, they speculate that their findings might be explained by voters living among a larger population benefit “from additional on the ground resources” such as religious or community organizations and media, stating that this invites further inquiry. If the difference in turnout between districts with low Asian American population and high Asian American population does turn out to be explained even partially by such organization, then one implication is that more organization and outreach needs to be done in districts with smaller numbers of Asian Americans. That could have a huge impact on Asian Americans political participation since so many Asian Americans live in districts where they are less than 15% of the population.

Another study, conducted by Leung (2021), adds nuance to the previous study by presenting evidence of a strong national-origin preference amongst Asian American voters. Asian Americans have disparate histories and diverse languages, customs, and religions. For instance, considering their disparate cultures and origin, some Pakistani immigrants might understandably feel surprised to find themselves lumped into a category that includes fourth-generation Filipino Americans. This struggle poses challenges to “theories of bloc voting, partisan voting, and descriptive representation.” This study thus aims to answer two questions: first is whether “Asian Americans have preferences for candidates of the same national-origin group” and second is whether “Asian American candidates have intra-racial

appeal,” meaning if “Asian American candidates appeal to Asian American voters across national-origin lines.” (CITATION?). To be clear, unlike the previous studies reviewed here, this study is investigating not only what percentage of Asian American citizens turn out to vote, but how likely they are to vote for candidates who share their specific ethnicity or national origin.

Based on the analysis of various cases, Leung (2021) concludes that “Asian Americans have strong national origin preferences.” In the case of an Asian American candidate with a different national origin, the specific party that the candidate is in takes precedence most of the time. For instance, although Asian Americans mostly vote for the Democratic Party, “the presence of Republican Young Kim swayed Korean American voters to split the ticket, voting for both her and Democrat Newsom in the same election.” However, “other Asian voters in the district did not change their support from Democrat to Republican.” Based on several such cases, the study finds that: Asian American voters do not seem to have particularly strong preferences for Asian candidates outside of their national-origin group. … This indicates that in cases where the national-origin of the voter and candidate are not the same, the voter defaults to a partisan cue and Asian candidates do not seem to enjoy a ‘racial’ vote boost (Leung 2021).

Furthermore, in a situation where “party and national-origin conflict, Asian voters may be more responsive to the national-origin cue, given that Asian Americans have generally weaker partisan attachments.” In short, Leung (2021) demonstrates that Asians lack a pan-ethnic, racial perspective. Pan-Asian solidarity in this context means creating a political unity amongst Asian Americans in order to promote and advocate for greater representation in American politics. However, research on better promoting pan-Asian solidarity is limited in that no specific methods have been presented. Moving forward, it is crucial that more investigation be done on how to create the pan-Asian consciousness.

Conclusion

With the recent geopolitical tensions rising along with the 2024 presidential election, and with Kamala Harris as the new democratic candidate, Asian American participation or turnout has become an even more important factor for the representation of Asian Americans.

The first method of increasing voter turnout, raising awareness, can be achieved in multiple ways. One method is through social media where content is spread the fastest in all languages, to all people around the world. Compared to other news sources, social media can be one of the most efficient ways to spread information as every post is shared over vast networks of people. There are, however, limitations to this method. While social media can be an effective channel to spread information among teenagers or young voters, it might not reach those who do not use such media channels. Especially with older voters or those who potentially have more influential power in society, they probably will not rely on social media for information on a daily basis, limiting the scope of reach. Still, further research is required to evaluate or develop methods of how to use social media for effective information transfer.

The second method of more Asian American candidates can mostly be achieved through a greater social acceptance for Asian Americans and support. This may be difficult especially with the consequences of Covid-19 still lingering in many places. Nevertheless, with greater pan-Asian solidarity and a pan-ethnic perspective of all Asian Americans, enough support may be gathered to raise the importance of Asian Americans. To achieve this, more investigation is also needed to find out how to ensure greater pan-Asian solidarity.

Asian Americans can be a powerful force in American politics if greater awareness and more representation through candidates are provided. Diversity is a vital part of any society, especially American society, and it is important that all groups are politically represented. Hence, it is important, especially with the mistreatment many Asian Americans face currently, that more research and investigation be done to support greater political participation of Asian Americans.

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