



Political Participation of Asian Americans

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Asian-Americans are the fastest-growing racial group in the United States. By 2036, the Center for American Progress estimates that they will comprise 10% of all eligible voters (*5 Ways to increase Asian American Voter Turnout*, Uprety), as a group with a greater tendency towards higher education, a future politically-involved Asian-American generation is highly plausible. In California and Virginia, they already hold large influence over elections, and within our own state of Washington their influence is no doubt measurable. However, it's a well known fact that relative to other minority groups Asian-American voter turnout is abysmal.

According to the Asian Counseling and Referral Service, only 56% of those Asian-Americans eligible to vote registered to do so for the 2016 Presidential election (*The Asian American Vote*, Stephens). Out of that 56%, New America Weekly put final turnout at 47%, a stark contrast to African-Americans' 66% and white voters' 64% (*Why Asian Americans Don't Vote*, Kim). As such, Asian-Americans represent untapped voter potential, especially in Washington. Asian-Americans skew liberal on many issues such as climate change, immigration, social equality, and education reform. However, due to their relative political isolation, Asian-Americans are still susceptible to broad conservative pushes, notably on concerns such as tax reform, abortion, and Affirmative Action, as well as through appeals to Asian-Americans as 'model minorities' (*The Untapped Potential of the Asian Voter*, Desai). This article will look to explore the reasons why Asian-Americans so often choose to not vote, and a follow-up article will consider methods of solving this conundrum.



From the New York Times

Political Culture across Asia

This first challenge is that Asian Americans are not one political culture or racial group. Take China, for example. The most populous country in the world, it's home to 1.4+ billion people, as well as 292 different languages and regional dialects -- Standard Mandarin was introduced by the ruling Communist Party to ensure such a broad diaspora would be able to communicate with one another. This is one nation alone; the idea that the same outreach and campaigning can be applied to all Asian-Americans is preposterous. Even just considering the six largest sub-groups, Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese, there is a huge amount of historical, cultural, and linguistic diversity.



From the Pew Research Center

As a Chinese-American, I cannot accurately speak to other Asian-American ethnic groups and the assumption that I am equipped to do so is detrimental to the type of voter outreach campaigns seek to do in Asian-American minority communities.

The cultural shock of broad suffering

Today China is regarded as a dominant global player, perhaps soon to eclipse the United States. Many, however, aren't aware of how recent China's ascent has been. Most Chinese people remember harder times, which continues to remain ingrained as they consider political involvement. For one hundred years, 1839-1949, China suffered civil turmoil, foreign exploitation, and war. It's referred to as the 'Century of Humiliation', and includes events such as the Opium Wars, civil war between the Republicans and ultimately victorious Communists, and invasion by Japan in World War II. Tens of millions of people died, and the entire nation suffered.

As a result, there is a sense that since the American political structure is comparatively stable, Chinese people should keep their heads down and be grateful. This is the source of the 'model minority' trope, the idea of Asian-Americans being extra hard workers that stay quiet. Though it's a dangerous stereotype, first and second generation Asian-Americans often see political and social issues as secondary to financial well-being, an attitude that they often attempt to pass along to their children. It's emblematic of a general belief that the average American, especially Asian-Americans, have very little personal power and should instead focus on themselves and their loved ones, dismissing political participation as not particularly impactful or meaningful.



TIME Magazine, 1987

Chinese Political Culture

Chinese political apathy, however, isn't just rooted in history, it's also easily compared to current day Chinese politics under the Communist Party. There is a general understanding that the Communist Party is oppressive, censoring the internet and other forms of free speech and expression, but most of the West still isn't aware of its extent. In the 1980s, under Communist Party leader Deng Xiaoping, China saw some gradual liberalization, some of which is still seen today in the form of globalization and certain free market policies. At the time, the world watched with the expectation that China's people would push themselves into democracy. Today, even as Chinese prosperity advances further and further, China is still a far cry from democracy. The 1980s nationwide Chinese protests culminated in the Tiananmen Square Massacre in which martial law was declared, and Chinese military troops used live fire against protestors causing up to 50,000 civilian casualties. China's new leader, Xi Jinping, has eliminated his own term limits, which echoes the history of totalitarianism. He's further guided policies that violate basic human rights, including the current forced internment of countless members of North Chinese minority ethnic groups in 're-education camps'. Under his regime, far from their being healthy political culture in the form of choice and opinion, there is instead a "Social Credit System" that assesses citizens' 'social reputability' and dictates countless aspects of their lives, from one's ability to hold certain work positions to one's ability to travel abroad.



Chinese Muslim Uighurs in a 're-education' class

As such, the fear of government reprisal against citizen unrest is very real and prominent in Chinese people's lives. My aunt and uncle have been banned from traveling out of China: my aunt for the mere act of back-talking a police officer and my uncle for unknown reasons. The history of the Chinese people is a history of isolation from important decision-making. On top of that, what little people can do, engage in political agitation, often results in them facing punitive measures, perhaps death or disappearance if they continue to persist.

Even Chinese people abroad still hesitate to speak out. Anastasia Lin is a Canadian-American actress and model, but also an outspoken human rights advocate, one that often criticized Chinese human rights violations. In 2015, Anastasia Lin's China-based father began receiving threats from Chinese security agents. Although Lin continued her advocacy with courage, countless Chinese nationals abroad face similar circumstances and often fear speaking out against the Chinese state or engaging in politics. It is indoctrinated in Chinese culture and carried on for the rest of their lives.

Take my father, for example. In 2016, shortly after the election of President Trump, a friend invited me to take part in the subsequent reactionary protests that were to occur in Seattle. My mother and father took a firm stance against my attendance, it was only a year later that they were able to articulate their reasoning. Reminding me of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, my mother informed me that there had been countless others around the country. My father, she told me, then a student at the city of Hanzhou's Zhejiang University, had engaged in student-protests along with his peers. Following the protests' aftermath, he had been lucky to be allowed to travel to America. Many other students he knew were banned from leaving the country. My father was lucky to escape Chinese punishment, and only as a result was able to meet my mother in America and build a prosperous life. They imparted to me their belief that civil agitation has little benefit, which is what countless Asian-American parents ingrain in their children based on their experiences in war-torn situations such as the Vietnam War, Cambodian Genocide, or human rights violations in the Philippines.

Conclusion

Despite the huge Asian-American growth, Asian-American representation in local, state, and national congresses have not followed this trend. Currently, there are only 14 Asian-Americans in the US House and 3 in the Senate. Locally, despite Washington's own Asian-American growth booming far above the national average, we still see relatively little Asian-American involvement. Out of 88 positions, Asian-Americans only make up 7 positions in the State House. In the State Senate, Asian-Americans hold 3 of 49 positions. Within King County, Asian-Americans still only make up a small portion of its representatives. This is despite King County being the county with the third-largest increase in immigrants in the entire nation, with half of that growth coming from Asian nationals.

Solutions will require convincing more Asian-Americans that engaging in politics is worthwhile, not only for greater Asian-American voter turnout, but also for greater Asian-American interest in running for office rather than always naturally turning towards nonpartisan fields such as business and academia.

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