

Are Asian Americans a Meaningful Political Community?

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INTRODUCTION

This dialogue draws on the roundtable discussion about the question of whether Asian Americans constitute a meaningful political community. By some measures, Asian Americans comprise the most diverse of all US ethno-racial groups, with a majority born outside of the United States and a wide range of native languages represented, in addition to the substantial socioeconomic and religious diversity in the population. The participants consider possible bases of a coherent political identity but find that this inevitably is a work in progress.

Pei-te Lien

The nature of Asian American political community is a perennial question. I think it can be tied to what APSA President Rogers Smith was talking about: identity. Who are we? Who are we counting? Such as when you look at Asians, who do you come up with? When we say Asian American, do you think of Muslim American? Or when we look at who were the Asian American presidential candidates, many people would say, “Oh, Andrew Yang!” but do you happen to know there also were Tulsi Gabbard and Kamala Harris? Just focus on the ethnic origins of these three Democratic presidential candidates—they show that we have people of mixed-race and mixed-ethnic backgrounds, and we have people of different religions and different groups of women in different socioeconomic classes. The breadth of our diversity makes it difficult for us to conclude that this is one community.

However, I think our community is really about construction. It’s a political construct. It’s not a natural thing, and so it depends on a number of factors. I would say we need to look at the people and the organizations that are constantly working to remind us of the possibilities for us to work together, to vote together, and/or to stand on the same issues or on the same side of an issue together, so that we become greater than the collection of parts. This process is certainly a kind of coalition building as well.

Loan Le

I think that the answer is mixed—we have both political community and periods of heterogeneity. I think heterogeneity is an

important feature of Asian America. Consider, for example, the Vietnamese American community in Little Saigon. I don’t know if you remember the debate in or around 1996, but there were some in the community who proposed a bridge that didn’t follow Vietnamese principles of architecture. Segments of the Little Saigon community were upset about that. They fought for a different kind of project construction more suitable to the ethnic community’s heritage. So, in that way, Vietnamese Americans—one Asian American group—celebrated their ethnic heritage and their political empowerment as distinctive. But Vietnamese Americans also are part of Asian America, a larger identity group that facilitates the formation of coalitions that can speak out against discrimination in larger numbers.

While respecting individual ethnic groups that comprise Asian America, we also need to be conscientious about continuing to build the commonalities that serve as the basis for a panethnic, superordinate identity. So, for example, when the government discriminated against Asian American employees, insinuating, “Because you’re Asian, you’re under more scrutiny, you’re suspicious,” Asian American groups, legal groups, and others wrote to Congress members and stated more or less, “There’s a part of the government that is now unfairly targeting Asian Americans for prosecution. This is discrimination.” So, I think in key moments, we have been able to flex and move and be more politically active than we ever have been. Other striking examples of Asian Americans empowered as a panethnic group include the periods following the murders of Vincent Chin and Thiên Minh Lý. Hate crimes such as these made us realize that regardless of our individual ethnicities, there are actors who are willing to commit violence against Asian Americans by virtue of membership in an other-imposed racial group in a racial hierarchy over which we do not have direct control.

Unfortunately, I do not think we have reached any kind of peak in the development of political community. We are not where we should be. We have a long way to go, and we can see this in how people feel so free to express anti-immigrant sentiment. And what are the consequences? Why aren’t people more worried about our vote? Why aren’t people more worried that we will speak up and have the electoral power to remove from office someone who is anti-Asian American? This can be explained in

part by the model-minority stereotype, which continues to affect us, wherein we are perceived as passive receptors unwilling to speak up about wrongdoings. In daily life, others might think

was a South Asian doctor who was working for the embassy. I asked them from the floor, “What do you two have in common besides being lumped together by a census definition?” The

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along the lines of the following: There’s that Asian American kid in the corner; let’s pummel him; he’s not going to do anything; she’s not going to do anything. Some actors think that we will simply roll over, content with the ideology of the model-minority myth. We do have more to do with respect to speaking up, facilitating voice among the marginalized and further developing empowered panethnic coalitions.

Okiyoshi Takeda

I think it depends on whether we are talking about the elite level or the mass level. At the elite level, I think it is a meaningful concept. There are many panethnic organizations such as APIA-Vote (Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote) and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC). We are the Asian Pacific American Caucus, and most of us are college professors. OCA, a grassroots organization that was an acronym for “Organization for Chinese Americans,” now calls itself “OCA–Asian Pacific American Advocate.” The JAACL (Japanese American Citizens League), which is the oldest Asian ethnic organization in the United States (established in 1929), now frequently speaks on behalf of all Asians and even for Muslims—for example, when the Trump administration issued orders restricting their entry into the country. Whether these organizations achieve panethnicity is debatable, but at least they speak the language of panethnicity.

Likewise, most of the college programs established for Asian Americans call themselves Asian American Studies programs. I haven’t heard of something like a Japanese American Studies program, although Japanese American history, culture, and literature are taught within Asian American Studies programs. One exception might be the Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University in St. Paul, Minnesota, where a minor in Hmong Studies is offered. Another exception might be Kamakakuokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies at University of Hawai’i at Manoa, where students can earn a BA and a MA in Hawaiian Studies.

At the mass level, I’m not so sure if we have achieved a meaningful identity. In the 2008 National Asian American

Japanese American diplomat answered, “We have a common fate. Our ancestors were put into camps and South Asians were persecuted after 9/11.” That was a good answer, but it left the question as to where Southeast Asians fit in. In addition to Japanese Americans and South Asians, Korean Americans were persecuted to some extent during the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, and the Chinese Exclusion Act targeted Chinese for persecution in 1882, but Southeast Asians faced persecution in their home country before coming to the United States. So, Asian ethnic groups differ in where they were persecuted. This can help make Southeast Asians’ identities different from those of other Asian Americans, which means that panethnic Asian American identity has not been achieved yet.

Sara Sadhwani

I think of Asian Americans as a political powerhouse not yet realized. The Pew Research Center anticipates that by 2055, Asian Americans will be the largest immigrant group in the United States (Lopez, Ruiz, and Patten 2017). Far beyond traditional receiving states such as California and New York, Asian American communities are growing in electorally important places including Texas, Nevada, Michigan, and Georgia. Where nonpartisanship once defined the community, we see evidence from the 2012 and 2016 elections that a majority of Asian American voters are beginning to solidify a partisan affiliation with the Democratic Party—and I don’t think we’ve even mentioned the potential fundraising capacity of Asian Americans.

Yet, as a junior scholar, the outlook for the study of Asian Americans is far less certain. On the job market, if you’re talking about Asian Americans, the question you’re asked is, “Why is this important?” That we still have to tell people why Asian Americans are important—why it’s an important community to study—should be a signal to us that there’s still some real work to do. When papers are being reviewed at a generalist journal, the response is, “This belongs at PGI [*Politics, Groups, and Identities*].” I love PGI. I think it is an essential venue for the study of racial and ethnic politics, but why can’t a study about Asian Americans be in a generalist journal? So,

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Survey, 47% of respondents said “yes” when asked whether they were ethnic Asians (e.g., Korean Americans), whereas only 21% said “yes” when they were asked if they identified as Asian Americans (Wong et al. 2011, 161–62).

Years ago, I attended an event held during the Asian Pacific American Heritage Month at the American embassy in Tokyo. One panelist was a Japanese American diplomat and the other

there definitely still are barriers that the Asian American community is facing to show itself as the political powerhouse that it potentially could be.

Andrew Aoki

As people have indicated, the answer is a resounding “maybe.” When looking at purely domestic political issues, the answer is

more “yes.” The more you delve into international issues, the less you find common ground. The divisions among Asian ethnic and nationality groups, in a sense, have migrated with the people, making an Asian American identity a continuing

immigrants, trying to convince them of the idea of a pan-Asian American identity.

And so it’s a constant work in progress. As Oki said, at the elite level, we see much more of a pan-Asian American

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question. Adding to this are the continued high levels of immigration. Tomás Jiménez (2010), studying Mexican Americans, developed this useful idea: “ethnic replenishment.” Although there are many Mexican Americans who are highly acculturated, Jiménez found that the continued immigration from Mexico has replenished the Mexican aspect of Mexican American identity, making it at least appear to be more distinctive from other American group identities. Asian American communities have experienced even higher levels of ethnic replenishment. Second- and later-generation Asian Americans have acculturated to the United States and, importantly, to the concept of Asian America. However, the steady influx of immigrants from Asia means that most communities are heavily immigrant—more than 60% foreign born, in most cases—making it more difficult to forge a common Asian American identity. Japanese Americans are an exception, but other groups are dominated by individuals socialized in other countries, where the idea of a pan-Asian identity is not only unknown but also often bizarre.

The Asian American movement of the late 1960s and 1970s was third-generation Asian Americans who looked around and said, “People look at us and make no ethnic distinctions. Sometimes they use ethnically specific slurs but apply them indiscriminately to anyone who appears to be of Asian ancestry. And so we have more in common than we have differences.” Racial discrimination can increase this sense of linked fate (e.g., Masuoka 2006); therefore, the post-2016 surge of racial resentment and racism may increase a sense of linked fate, but immigrants will still have far less of the shared history of discrimination. With this high level of ethnic replenishment, we have to start over again with each wave of

orientation. When we created it, the Asian Pacific American Caucus was trying to create a broad tent, as big a tent as possible. We intentionally included the “P” because we wanted to welcome Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders. We see the same approach in many other professional organizations, government groups, and political activists. Of course, there’s no clear dividing line between “elite” and “mass,” especially because social media makes it easier to do grassroots organizing and coalition building.

However, at the individual level, it is still an open question. I have many Hmong students. They have some sense of an Asian American identity, but they’re really more Hmong. Many of their student groups could be considered Asian American organizations; however, about a third of them have “Hmong” at the beginning of their name, not “Asian American.” The names they choose suggest a resounding “maybe” to the question of Asian Americans as a meaningful political community. ■

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