

The Broader Scholarly Context of Asian American Politics

Loan Le, *Institute for Good Government and Inclusion & San Francisco State University*
Sara Sadhwani, *Pomona College*

CAN STUDYING ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICS HELP US UNDERSTAND WHITE SUPREMACY, ANTI-BLACKNESS, AND RACIALIZATION?

Loan Le:

Research on and teaching of Asian American politics help us to interpret the political frames that contribute to racialization and the democratic exclusion of nonwhite populations in the contemporary United States. By studying Asian American politics, we have the opportunity to better understand who is excluded—and by whom—in open rhetoric and how this affects the political incorporation of immigrants and racial minorities. We also gain insights into broader dynamics in the landscape of race relations, with an emphasis on how nativist and racist political frames are used to marginalize members of both Asian American and Black American communities.

Strong anti-immigrant rhetoric is a recurrent force in American politics affecting minority groups. Last year, President Trump told a “squad” of progressive Congresswomen—apparently including Ilhan Omar (D-MN), Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), and Ayanna Pressley (D-MA)—to “go back and help fix the totally broken and crime-infested places from which they came before criticizing policies in the US” (Quilantan and Cohen 2019). President Trump’s supporters furthermore “chanted a...threat against his critic, US Rep. Ilhan Omar, calling for Trump to ‘send her back’ to Somalia” (Pearce et al. 2019). At first reading, the anti-foreign message might obscure the simultaneous presence of anti-Black sentiment. In *Civic Ideals*, Smith (1997) argued that there has been a continuing struggle between civic republican ideals for citizenship (defined by norms of individual equality) and inegalitarian ascriptive traditions (defined by assertions that membership in this country should be limited to a particular ethnoracial group). Nativism is defined by hostility to those who are not born in this country, whereas racism is defined by antipathy directed against persons based on perceived membership in a racial group. The fact that a number of squad members were US born underscores that racism competes with nativism as the dominant interpretive frame for these events.

In July 2019, Professor Mae Ngai from Columbia University was quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*: “I’m a Chinese American. I grew up hearing this on a playground: ‘Ching chong, go back to where you came from.... Excuse me for being so frustrated, but there’s not a lot to parse here. This is just

racism” (Pearce et al. 2019). Research and teaching about Asian American politics bolster rigorous thinking that can critique historical and contemporary frameworks that shape attitudes and policies related to racism, discrimination, and minority groups. Why is it racist to tell a group of naturalized citizens, for example, that they are not American and should go back to where they came from? It is racist because doing so encourages exclusion of a category of people who have full rights to citizenship and equal protection under the law. Asian Americans are disproportionately foreign born, with more than half of our group consisting of first-generation Americans. A broad assault on naturalized citizens as less American, then, is a way to denigrate Asian Americans as a group. Along these lines, studying Asian American politics helps us to understand that the rejection of Representative Omar based on immigrant identity likely camouflages a simultaneous rebuff rooted in anti-Blackness, as well as sexism and Islamophobia. Although white immigrants comprise a significant proportion of elected representatives (Geiger 2019), prominent media today are much less likely to include news coverage with a rebuff of white immigrant elected officials’ belonging in the United States (in contrast to that of their nonwhite immigrant peers). More generally, nativism often is used to justify racist assaults and outright racial violence against nonwhite, minority groups in America.

Nativism and racism marginalize minorities in everyday experiences, but their use in the mobilization of extremist ideologies, such as violent white supremacy, presents further risks to our democracy. Research on Asian American politics examines divergence on issues based on ethnicity because Asian America is composed of many ethnic groups and heterogeneous languages, as well as varied political, social, economic, and cultural patterns. Other research notes gender differences in political behaviors (Filler and Lien 2016). Despite this heterogeneity, Asian Americans are lumped together, “racially triangulated,” and treated as different because of the “forever foreigner” stereotype (Kim 1999). We see the most recent example of this in 2020, with racism, discrimination, and hate crimes against Asian Americans on the rise after COVID-19 was identified as originating in Wuhan, China (Chow 2020; Mullis and Glenn 2020). The Anti-Defamation League found that white supremacists on social media were using the coronavirus to recruit followers to attack minorities (Perrigo 2020). Hence, Asian Americans must continue to build Asian American panethnicity and stand unified against

ongoing racism, discrimination, violence, and other illegal activity, with special attention to hate crimes.

In addition, Representative Omar's case and violent white supremacist mobilization underscore that we need to build bridges, emphasize commonality with Black Americans, and

basic human rights continue on and off campus to this day. With more people speaking up, perhaps we can do better than letting others control the dialogue such that extremist behavior or failures in equal protection are normalized.

Nativism and racism marginalize minorities in everyday experiences, but their use in the mobilization of extremist ideologies, such as violent white supremacy, presents further risks to our democracy.

continue to develop cross-racial coalitions. Research on Asian American public opinion highlights a positive association between support for Black Lives Matter and a sense of linked fate with Asian Americans and other minority groups (Merseeth 2018). If minorities are rarely good enough, despite the fact that they are loyal Americans who pledge allegiance to our bedrock constitutional principles, then we must acknowledge that too many are being treated as second-class citizens. This has been the long-standing case for both Asian American and Black American communities. Asian Americans often are perceived as foreign despite citizenship and years in the United States. Black Americans may be excluded less frequently due to perceptions of the "foreign," but they face discrimination based on anti-Black sentiment and other biased attitudes over time (Kim 1999). By evaluating political

Sara Sadhwani:

The study of Asian Americans during the past 20 years has led us to consider the socioeconomic and racialized hierarchy of the United States. The existence of this racialized hierarchy is the embodiment of white supremacy, borne out of two centuries of policies and institutions designed to exclude people of color from participation and remain subservient to whites. Today, in an era of relative diversity and equity, the remnants of this system are all around us—in path-dependent institutions, in the structural hierarchy of society, and in the psyche of the American public. Studying Asian Americans helps us better understand the United States for what it is and for the way in which Americans of all stripes and colors must live their lives within a racialized and hierarchical structure that predates themselves. Kim's (1999) work on triangulation and

Studying Asian Americans helps us better understand the United States for what it is and for the way in which Americans of all stripes and colors must live their lives within a racialized and hierarchical structure that predates themselves.

rhetoric for nativism and racism (as well as other elements; e.g., biases against gender and sexual orientation), we can unpack and disarm political frames that manipulate group conflict and undermine democratic inclusion.

There is much work to be done. In an era of some prosperity, some progress, myriad challenges, and also oppression, we know that good work on race and ethnicity could have an important role in public policy discussions. If we do believe in equal protection, then we should strive to teach students and faculty colleagues about historical and contemporary Asian American politics, which encompass myriad issues and historical moments that are largely absent in textbooks on American politics (Aoki and Takeda 2008; Takeda 2015). We also have the ability to serve as role models for students in real life, above and beyond our research and writing. We should have the courage and wisdom to behave consistently in accordance with the inclusive principles that we teach. Beyond scholarship, college professors who inhabit the "ivory tower" primarily may be reticent to get involved in problems facing the institution that employs them. Regardless of administration or partisanship, however, our reluctance to report either violations or poor enforcement of Americans' rights contributes substantially to why violations of

Masuoka and Junn's (2013) conceptualization of racial hierarchy help us better understand the structural context of the United States and the relative positionality of minority communities—one in which whites continue to occupy a position on the top of the hierarchy and communities of color are positioned below—and at times are at odds with one another. The examination of the ostracization and discrimination that Asian Americans face places them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis whites, and these experiences powerfully shape the identity, ideology, incorporation, and political behavior of the community.

Yet, we also know that, on average, Asian Americans have higher incomes and educational attainment levels than any other racial or ethnic group, including whites. Although Asian Americans may be disadvantaged in certain regards compared to whites, there also are certain privileges that segments of Asian Americans have in comparison to African Americans and Latinos. Asian Americans often arrive in the United States as students and highly skilled workers. Many arrive already proficient in English, a resource that allows immigrant families to incorporate into American life more quickly. Of course, not all Asian Americans enjoy these resources. Many, particularly Southeast Asians, arrive as refugees of war and oppressive

regimes; others have found their future in the United States through work in restaurants, the garment industry, and other low-wage work. Although the pathways on which many Asians arrive in the United States are diverse, a majority of Asian Americans nevertheless occupy a place of relative advantage in the racial hierarchy. Maintaining this elevated position is the maintenance of a system of white supremacy.

However, white supremacy is more than an institution or structural hierarchy. It is an idea and a belief. We see it when people self-identifying as white supremacists light torches in Charlottesville, Virginia, and march through the streets. I argue that we see it in the debates that are occurring now that attempt to divide the Asian American community on an issue such as access to higher education. Whereas external forces are actively attempting to splinter the Asian American community, there also is active organizing within communities—particularly conservative segments of Chinese Americans, who believe that their civil rights are being violated by affirmative-action policies. In our research moving forward, we need to examine the types of opportunities and constraints for cross-racial coalition building. One component of that research is to disaggregate Asian Americans to see more fully the diversity that exists among East Asians, South and Southeast Asians, and Pacific Islanders, who are all lumped under the Asian American banner. In addition, there is an opportunity to further unpack the other racial categories—to examine the differences between Black immigrants and Latinos of varying national origins and immigration experiences and variation between rural and suburban whites. By looking beyond the traditional five racial and ethnic “boxes” (i.e., White, Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and Native American), we might unearth the microfoundations of hierarchy and conflict between minority communities. However, we also might identify the circumstances under which racialized communities can and do come together to dismantle the systems of white supremacy that are rearing their head in American life today. ■

REFERENCES

- Aoki, Andrew, and Oki Takeda. 2008. *Asian American Politics*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Chow, Andrew. 2020. “Violence Against Asian Americans Is on the Rise—But It’s Part of a Long History.” *Time Magazine*, May 11. <https://time.com/5834427/violence-against-asian-americans-history>.
- Filler, Nicole, and Pei-te Lien. 2016. “Asian Pacific Americans in U.S. Politics: Gender and Pathways to Elected Office.” In *Distinct Identities: Minority Women in U.S. Politics*, ed. Nadia E. Brown and Sarah Allen Gershon, 218–33. New York: Routledge.
- Geiger, Abigail W. 2019. “In 116th Congress, at Least 13% of Lawmakers Are Immigrants or the Children of Immigrants.” *Pew Research Center Fact Tank: News in Numbers*, January 24. www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/24/in-116th-congress-at-least-13-of-lawmakers-are-immigrants-or-the-children-of-immigrants.
- Kim, Claire Jean. 1999. “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans.” *Politics & Society* 27 (1): 105–38.
- Masuoka, Natalie, and Jane Junn. 2013. *The Politics of Belonging: Race, Public Opinion, and Immigration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Merseth, Julie. 2018. “Race-ing Solidarity: Asian Americans and Support for Black Lives Matter.” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 6 (3): 337–56.
- Mullis, Steve, and Heidi Glenn. 2020. “New Site Collects Reports of Racism Against Asian Americans Amid Coronavirus Pandemic.” *National Public Radio*, March 27. www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/03/27/822187627/new-site-collects-reports-of-anti-asian-american-sentiment-amid-coronavirus-pand.
- Pearce, Matt, Michael Finnegan, Tyrone Beason, and Melissa Gomez. 2019. “Trump Is Challenging What It Means to Be American, and Naturalized Citizens Are Unsettled.” *Los Angeles Times*, July 25. www.latimes.com/politics/story/2019-07-21/with-send-her-back-chant-trump-tears-at-the-meaning-of-citizenship.
- Perrigo, Billy. 2020. “White Supremacist Groups Are Recruiting with Help from Coronavirus—and a Popular Messaging App.” *Time*, April 8. <https://time.com/5817665/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-white-supremacist-groups>.
- Quilantan, Bianca, and David Cohen. 2019. “Trump Tells Dem Congresswomen: Go Back Where You Came From.” *Politico*, July 14. www.politico.com/story/2019/07/14/trump-congress-go-back-where-they-came-from-1415692.
- Smith, Rogers. 1997. *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Takeda, Okiyoshi. 2015. “A Forgotten Minority? A Content Analysis of Asian Pacific Americans in Introductory American Government Textbooks.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 48 (3): 430–39.