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Practitioners' Essay

Awakening the New "Sleeping Giant"?: Asian American Political Engagement

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Abstract

The 2008 election was a milestone in the emergence of Asian Americans as a factor in American politics, with national television news networks openly discussing and analyzing California's Asian American voters. Most mainstream analysis, however, had very little in-depth understanding of this population. This essay provides some insights into the absolute and relative size of the Asian American population, along with key demographic characteristics, their participation in electoral politics, some of the barriers they encounter, and future prospects. The brief is based on analyzing the most recently available data, the 2006 American Community Survey (ACS) and the 2006 November Current Population Survey (CPS). This analysis builds on a previous analytical brief which examined the emergence of Asian Americans as California politics' new "sleeping giant," a term that was applied to Hispanics in the 1980s and 1990s because of their rapid growing numbers.

Introduction

Super Tuesday of the 2008 Primary (February 5, 2008) was a milestone in the emergence of Asian Americans as a factor in American politics. The national television news networks openly discussed and analyzed California's Asian American voters, who comprised an estimated 12 percent of the state's registered voters.¹ A CNN exit poll indicated that Asian Americans in California voted for Senator Hillary Clinton by a 3-1 margin (71 percent), allowing her to win the popular vote by eight points through an Asian American and Latino voting bloc.² To a lesser extent, newscasters

took note of the Asian Americans in other primary elections. The focus has been on the Democratic race because more Asian Americans are registered with that party than any other party. A report by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) on the 2004 Presidential Elections surveyed Asian Americans in twenty-three cities in eight states: New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Michigan, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. AALDEF affirmed that 57 percent of Asian Americans were registered Democrats, over a quarter were not enrolled in any political party, and 15 percent were registered Republicans.³ Similarly, a study by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) found 35 percent of Asian American Voters registered as Democrats in the Los Angeles County 2006 General Election and 28 percent registered as Republicans.⁴

Most mainstream analysis, however, had very little in-depth understanding of this population with some initial commentaries claiming that a large majority of California's Asian American voters went for Senator Clinton because of racial bias.⁵ That proved to be too simplistic and inaccurate because a significant number of Asian Americans went for Senator Barack Obama in Hawaii's primary election, which was held two weeks later. The lack of well-informed opinions on how this population voted, however, does not distract from the historical acknowledgement of Asian American voters by the national media, even if it has proven to be somewhat brief and fleeting.

This essay provides some insights into the absolute and relative size of the Asian American population, along with key demographic characteristics, their participation in electoral politics, some of the barriers they encounter, and future prospects. The brief is based on analyzing the most recently available data, the 2006 American Community Survey (ACS) and the 2006 November Current Population Survey (CPS). This analysis builds on a previous analytical brief which examined the emergence of Asian Americans as California politics' new "sleeping giant," a term that was applied to Hispanics in the 1980s and 1990s because of their rapid growing numbers.⁶

Citizenship Status

As of 2006, Asian Americans comprise nearly 5 percent of the total U.S. population, with 10 states having more than 5 per-

cent of their population being Asian Americans.⁷ What is more important in terms of potential political engagement is the Asian American percent of those eligible to register to vote. What is particularly noticeable is the fall off in the Asian American share when the analysis is limited to either those with citizenship or adult citizens (18 years and older), which is documented in Table 1.⁸ Nationally, the share drops by 1 or more percentage points. In other words, while one in twenty Americans is Asian, between one in twenty-five and one in thirty adult citizens is Asian. These figures, however, vary tremendously among the states. Asians constitute a majority of adult citizens in Hawai'i, and they comprise one-eighth of the population. Four additional states listed in Table 1 have percentages higher than the national average (New York, New Jersey, Washington, and Virginia). The numbers show considerable regional differences in the potential of Asian Americans to be an important political force.

Table 1: Asian American Population Estimates, 2006

Area	Total Population	Asian Population	Percent Asian	Percent Asian, Citizens	Percent Asian, 18+ Citizens
United States	299,398,485	14,656,608	4.9%	3.9%	3.6%
STATES					
California	36,457,549	4,896,851	13.4%	12.2 %	12.3%
New York	19,306,183	1,391,510	7.2%	5.4%	5.2%
Texas	23,507,783	859,588	3.7%	2.8%	2.7%
Hawai'i	1,285,498	725,436	56.4%	55.3%	54.0%
New Jersey	8,724,560	685,013	7.9%	5.9%	5.4%
Illinois	12,831,970	583,538	4.5%	3.5%	3.3%
Washington	6,395,798	497,782	7.8%	6.4%	6.1%
Florida	18,089,889	460,641	2.5%	2.1%	1.8%
Virginia	7,642,884	409,035	5.4%	4.0%	3.7%
Massachusetts	6,437,193	334,954	5.2%	3.8%	3.3%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 ACS PUMS

The primary reason for the difference in the Asian American share of the total population and the Asian American share of adult citizens is the fact that this is predominantly an immigrant popu-

lation. In 2006, 61 percent of Asian Americans were immigrants, and 76 percent among Asian American adults.⁹ The percent that is comprised of immigrants varies greatly among the ten states listed in Table 2. They comprise a small minority majority of those in Hawai'i, and three-quarters of those in California. The highest fraction is in New Jersey, where seven in eight are immigrants. This difference can influence the political issues that Asian Americans are most concerned about because immigrants and U.S.-born have different concerns. Equally important is the naturalization rate among the immigrants. The good news is that nationally a majority has acquired citizenship, and the rate of naturalization appears to have increased.¹⁰ Nonetheless, there is still a substantial minority who are not citizens, and the rates tend to be lower outside the West Coast.

Table 2: Citizenship Status of Asian Americans, 2006

State	Adults (x1,000)	Born Citizen	Naturalized	Not Citizen	Naturalization Rate
United States	10,951	24.1 %	43.4%	32.5%	57.2%
STATES					
California	3,722	25%	47%	28%	63%
New York	1,090	15%	46%	38%	55%
Texas	625	17%	46%	37%	56%
Hawaii	551	70%	19%	11%	63%
New Jersey	515	12%	49%	39%	56%
Illinois	440	19%	46%	35%	57%
Washington	376	29%	44%	27%	62%
Florida	337	19%	48%	33%	59%
Virginia	303	18%	48%	34%	58%
Massachusetts	255	20%	39%	41%	49%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 ACS PUMS

Voter Registration and Voting Patterns

Even after achieving citizenship, there are two additional steps required to become fully politically engaged—registering to vote and turning out to vote. According to estimates from the Voter Supplement to the November 2006 Current Population Survey¹¹, Asian American adult citizens exhibit lower registration rates, which can be seen in the top panel of Table 3. The national registration rate

among Asian Americans is substantially lower than for their non-Asian counterparts, a difference of 19 percentage points. With the exception of Hawai'i, registration rates among Asian Americans by regions are lower than for their non-Asian counterparts. On the other hand, the rate for naturalized Asian Americans is only slightly lower than for naturalized non-Asians, which indicates that the typical immigrant regardless of race tend to have lower odds of registering. Thus, the observed lower registration rate among Asian American adult citizens is due in part to its population being dominated by naturalized immigrants. What is surprising is that the registration rate for native Asian Americans is lower than that for native non-Asians. This indicates that inter-generational acculturation does not necessarily translate into greater political engagement. In fact, there seems to be greater apathy among U.S.-born Asian Americans, although it may be due in part to the fact that this group tends to be younger.

Table 3: Registration and Voting Rates, 2006

STATES	Registered		Voted	
	Asians	Non-Asians	Asians	Non-Asians
Adults (18+) Citizens				
United States	49%	68%	33%	48%
<i>Citizen by Birth</i>	46%	69%	31%	49%
<i>U.S. Naturalized</i>	52%	55%	34%	38%
California	49%	64%	34%	49%
Hawai'i	56%	53%	47%	39%
New York/New Jersey	51%	64%	29%	44%
All Other Regions	48%	69%	30%	49%
Registered Voters				
United States			66%	71%
<i>Citizen by Birth</i>			68%	71%
<i>U.S. Naturalized</i>			65%	68%
California			71%	77%
Hawai'i			83%	72%
New York/New Jersey			57%	68%
All Other Regions			62%	71%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 CPS

Table 3 also reports voting rates. Nationally, relatively fewer Asian American citizens turned out to vote in 2006, a difference of 15 percentage points compared with non-Asians. Asian American

subgroups also lag behind their non-Asian counterparts, with the exception of those in Hawai'i. The gaps are not as great when examining the turnout rate among those registered to vote. Nonetheless, even with this more limited population base, there is room for improvement in terms of enhancing Asian American political engagement. One strategy is to use an alternative to going to the polls, that is, by mail voting. Interestingly, a higher percentage of Asian American voters used this method, 24 percent compared with 13 percent for non-Asian voters. The one exception to the low turn-out rate is, again, the Aloha state. The Asian Pacific American Legal Center reported approximately 37 percent of Asian Americans voting in the LA County 2006 General Election voted by absentee ballot. APALC also noted while 48 percent of all voters in Orange County's 2006 General Election voted by mail, approximately 61 percent of Asian Americans countywide did so.¹² The Hawaiian exception may be due to the fact that Asian Americans are highly influential in state politics, and this greater efficacy may provide incentives for greater participation.

The November 2006 CPS provides some additional explanations for the lower political engagement levels for Asian American citizens. As the above analysis indicates, the more important challenge among those eligible to vote is to increase their registration rate. Moreover, an analysis of the responses to the survey indicates that registered Asian Americans who did not turn out to vote had similar problems as non-Asians, such as the inability to get to the polls because of illness, being away from home, conflicts with other obligations, and transportation problems. There are, however, distinctive differences in the relative frequency of reasons for not registering. One positive finding is that Asian Americans are not more politically apathetic. While 42 percent of non-Asian citizens stated that they did not register because "Not interested in the election or not involved in politics," only 30 percent of Asian American citizens gave the same reason. On the other hand, 11 percent of the non-registered Asian American citizens stated that they "Did not know where or how to register" and another 7 percent stated that they had "Difficulty with English." The respective percentages for non-Asians were 5 percent and 1 percent. According to the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, 41 percent of all respondents in their 2004 Multilingual Exit Poll were limited English proficient (LEP).¹³ The 2004 exit poll covered juris-

dictions that were either legally required to provide or voluntarily provided language assistance to the voter, under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act. In the Manhattan-Brooklyn-Queens areas of New York, 56 percent of Chinese were limited English proficient and 37 percent required an interpreter; 67 percent of Koreans were LEP and 34 percent required an interpreter in Queens, NY; and 59 percent of Bangladeshi was LEP and 26 percent needed an interpreter in Hamtramck, MI.

These barriers to registration are not surprising given that most Asian American citizens are immigrants; consequently, they are more likely to encounter language and informational barriers.

Future Trajectory

Rapid growth has been the driving force behind the emergence of Asian Americans as a potential new “sleeping giant” in politics. And that force will not abate anytime soon. The most recent Bureau of Census populations projects that Asian Americans alone, a more restrictive definition that does not include those who are part Asian, will increase to 5.4 percent of the population by 2020, up from 3.8 percent in 2000.¹⁴ The more inclusive count of Asian Americans would put the 2020 figure at perhaps over 6 percent. If the percentage point increase in the Asian American share of the population is similar at the state level, then three to four states will join Hawai’i and California as having at least one-tenth of the population being Asian American.¹⁵ Demographics, however, is not political destiny. Asian Americans still face a number of hurdles to translating their growing numbers into growing political strength. The above analysis highlights some of the challenges. Although the number of U.S.-born Asian Americans will grow faster than the number Asian American immigrants, our projections indicate that immigrants will continue to constitute a large majority of Asian Americans twenty-years-old or older, over three quarters in 2020.¹⁶ Over 3 million will be recent immigrants, that is, those in the country 10 years or less. As a consequence, there will continue to be the challenge of promoting naturalization in order to increase the number of Asian Americans eligible to register and vote. Even with citizenship, the current patterns indicate that much work is still needed to get naturalized Asians to register and go to the polls. While the growing number of U.S.-born Asian Americans will automatically increase the number of Asian Americans eligible to vote, the analysis show that this

group has low registration and turnout rates. The population trajectories clearly create the potential for an awakened sleeping giant in American politics within less than a generation, but that will only materialize through public policies that promote greater political engagement and the concerted efforts of a myriad of community-based organizations.

Notes

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Co-Sponsoring Organizations:

The UCLA Asian American Studies Center is the nation's leading research center in the field of Asian American Studies and houses a Census Information Center, which has a program to analyze data from the ACS as they become available.

The UC AAPI Policy MRP brings together University of California researchers, elected officials and their staff, and community organizations to conduct research focusing on the policy concerns of the AAPI community.

Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc. (LEAP) has been intent on "growing leaders" within the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities across the country. LEAP's mission is to achieve full participation and equality for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders through leadership, empowerment, and policy.

1. "Election08 Political Dashboard," <<http://news.yahoo.com/election/2008/dashboard/?d=NC>> as of February 5, 2008.
2. "Election Center 2008 Primaries and Caucuses," <<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/primaries/results/epolls/#CADEM>> as of February 5, 2008.
3. Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF). *"The Asian American Vote: A Report on the AALDEF Multilingual Exit Poll in the 2004 Presidential Election."* <http://www.apivote.org/documents/multimedia/04-20-05_exit_poll_report.pdf>
4. Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC). *"Asian Americans at the Ballot Box: The 2006 General Election in Los Angeles County."* <http://apalc.org/demographics/wpcontent/uploads/2007/05/apalc_ballotbox2006_final.pdf>
5. National Election Pool Exit Poll 2008. "Demographic Profile of California Voters." *Los Angeles Times* Website: <<http://www.latimes.com/news/>

- politics/la-020708-me-calif-g,0,1300314.graphic> as of May 5, 2008.
6. Ong, et al., "The New 'Sleeping Giant' in California Politics: The Growth of Asian Americans," UCLA Asian American Studies Center, <http://www.aasc.ucla.edu/archives/sleepgiants.htm>, posted September 6, 2006. In 1990, Hispanics made up 14 percent of adult citizens in California, and in 2006, Asian Americans approached that level, with over 12 percent of California's adult citizens.
 7. When possible, the counts include those who are Asian alone or Asian in combination with another race. The most recent estimates from the U.S. Bureau of the Census places the Asian American population at 5 percent of the U.S. population on July 1, 2007. The ten states with the highest Asian American percentages are Hawai'i, California, New Jersey, Washington, New York, Nevada, Alaska, Maryland, Virginia and Massachusetts.
 8. The estimates in Table 1 on total population, Asian population, percent Asian, and Asians as a percent of citizens are based on information extracted from tabulations reported by the Bureau of Census on its American FactFinder web site. The estimated Asian share of adult population is based on Paul Ong's tabulation of the 2006 ACS Public-Use Micro Sample (PUMS).
 9. Immigrants are defined as those who are not citizens by birth. The statistics on adult Asian Americans and the statistics in Table 2 are tabulated by Paul Ong from the 2006 ACS PUMS.
 10. See for example, Paul Ong and Joanna Lee "Naturalization of S.F. Chinese Immigrants: The Surge In The 1990s," UCLA California Center for Population Research, January 2007.
 11. The tabulations in Table 3 were done by Paul Ong. The Asian category includes those who are Asian alone and one of seven multi-racial categories that include Asians. The weights for Asian Americans were slightly adjusted upward to account for those who are part Asian but not in one of the seven listed multi-racial categories. Subpopulations were created to ensure an adequate sample. The smallest sample is the number of Asians in the New York and New Jersey, which numbered 311. The next smallest sample is the number of Asians in Hawai'i, which numbered 708.
 12. Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC). "Asian Americans at the Ballot Box: The 2006 General Election in Orange County." <<http://demographics.apalc.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/04/oc-ballot-box-final-032708.pdf>> and "Asian Americans at the Ballot Box: The 2006 General Election in Los Angeles County." <http://apalc.org/demographics/wp-content/uploads/2007/05/apalc_ballotbox2006_final.pdf>
 13. Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF). "The Asian American Vote: A Report on the AALDEF Multilingual Exit Poll in the 2004 Presidential Election." <http://www.apiavote.org/documents/multimedia/04-20-05_exit_poll_report.pdf>
 14. U.S. Census Bureau, 2004, "U.S. Interim Projections by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin," <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/usinterimproj/>, Internet Release Date: March 18, 2004. The number of Asian Americans is projected to increase by 67 percent over the two decades, from 10.7 million to 18 million. The more inclusive Asian American count for 2000 is 11.9 million.
 15. The likely states are New Jersey, Washington, New York, and Nevada.
 16. These projections by nativity were made by the author based on the Bureau

of the Census' overall population projections. The modified projections starts with the distribution by nativity in 2000, assumes that the age-specific survival rates are the same for both U.S. born and foreign-born Asians, and uses the Bureau's assumptions about future immigration flows.

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