

UC Berkeley

ISSI Fellows Working Papers

Title

Local Political Context and the Puzzle of Asian American Under-participation in Electoral Politics

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6sx9m6c0>

Author

Hsu, Naomi

Publication Date

2012-06-25

ISSI GRADUATE FELLOWS WORKING PAPER SERIES 2010-2011.58

**Local Political Contexts and the Puzzle of Asian
American Under-participation in Electoral Politics**

by Naomi Hsu

**Department of Sociology
University of California, Berkeley
June 25, 2012**



Institute for the
Study of
Societal Issues

Naomi Hsu
Department of Sociology
University of California, Berkeley

nhsu@uclink.berkeley.edu

In spite of having relatively high levels of educational and occupational attainment and income, and having the highest rates of naturalization among immigrant populations, Asian Americans have the lowest rates of electoral participation of any racialized group in the United States. This paradoxical combination defies both traditional political science theories of political engagement, which emphasize socioeconomic determinants of participation, and conventional sociological theories of assimilation, which view political integration as occurring in step with socioeconomic integration. In this paper, I argue that local-level political-contextual conditions are an important contributor to Asian American under-participation in electoral politics. In particular, I reveal that while there are substantial differences in the net size of the Asian-white voter registration gap across states, even more dramatic differences exist across counties within the same state. I further demonstrate that this variation cannot be explained by differences in the size, density, or ethnic and immigrant composition of the Asian American population across counties, which suggests that the county contexts themselves are driving the differences. The findings in this research indicate a need for comparative studies across local contexts.

The Institute for the Study of Societal Issues (ISSI) is an Organized Research Unit of the University of California at Berkeley. The views expressed in working papers are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the ISSI or the Regents of the University of California.

Introduction

In scholarly literatures that assess how immigrant and racialized minority populations fare in comparison to native-born whites in the United States, Asian Americans occupy a curious position. On the one hand, Asian Americans have been noted for having relatively high levels of educational and occupational attainment and income, surpassing whites in education and roughly equaling them in income¹ (Zeng and Xie 2004; Alba and Nee 2003; Goyette and Xie 1999; Iceland 1999; Kao 1995); and for having the highest rates of naturalization among immigrant populations (Junn and Matto 2008; Ong et al. 2008; Citrin and Highton 2002; Yang 2002; Lien 2001). On the other hand, Asian Americans have the lowest rates of formal political participation of any racialized group in the United States, being underrepresented both among voters and in national and local political offices (Ong et al. 2008; Lien et al. 2004; Citrin and Highton 2002; Lien 2001). Besides complicating the position advanced by some social scientists that Asian Americans are “becoming white” (Alba and Nee 2003; Yancey 2003), low rates of electoral participation from one of the fastest-growing segments of the American population have sobering implications for the practice of democratic self-governance and the representativeness of public policies.

¹ It is important, however, to recognize that there is a great deal of socioeconomic heterogeneity within the Asian American population, particularly across different national origin groups (Lien 2004; Woo 2000; Iceland 1999). Asian Americans tend to cluster at both the high and low ends of socioeconomic measures (a bimodal distribution), resulting in what Zheng and Xie (2004) describe as “a high average and a large dispersion” (p. 1076). Moreover, returns to education and occupational status may be smaller for Asian Americans than for whites (Zeng and Xie 2004; Alba and Nee 2003; Barringer et al. 1990; Nee and Sanders 1985), and Asian Americans may encounter a “glass ceiling” beneath the highest managerial levels in the corporate economy (Alba and Nee 2003; Woo 2000).

Asian Americans' peculiar combination of high levels of socioeconomic attainment, high rates of citizenship acquisition², and low rates of voting defies conventional sociological theories of assimilation, which tend to view political integration as occurring in step with socioeconomic integration (Bloemraad 2007; Lien et al. 2004); and traditional political theories of political engagement, which emphasize socioeconomic determinants of participation. Socioeconomic variables such as education and income do have strong positive effects on Asian Americans' voting behavior (Wong et al. 2008; Ramakrishnan 2005; Xu 2005; Lien 2004), but the baseline participation of Asian Americans is so much lower than that of other groups that, at every level of education and income, they exhibit the lowest rates of participation. Students of immigrant political incorporation have observed that, given the heavily-immigrant nature of the Asian American population, immigrant variables must be considered in understanding Asian Americans' political participation. Yet, even after accounting for factors such as citizenship, foreign-born status, duration of stay in the U.S., English language proficiency, and generational status, a substantial participation deficit remains between Asian Americans and other groups (Wong et al. 2008; Xu 2005; Lien 2004; Citrin and Highton 2002; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001).

In light of the limited utility of individual-level variables in elucidating Asian American under-participation in electoral politics, some researchers have suggested the relevance of political-contextual factors such as minimal outreach by political parties, candidates, and civic organizations (Jang 2009; Anderson 2008a; Anderson 2008b; Wong 2006; Ramakrishnan 2005; Lien 2004; Vo 2004; Citrin & Highton 2002; Lien 2001; Ramakrishnan & Espenshade 2001; Uhlaner et al. 1989), and underrepresentation of Asian Americans in elected offices (Lien 2004;

² High rates of naturalization can be seen as incongruous with low rates of voting because, aside from being a prerequisite for voting among the foreign-born, naturalization is viewed by some to be driven by the same bundle of social and attitudinal forces that drive voting (Bloemraad 2006; Citrin and Highton 2002).

Lai et al. 2001; Lien 2001; Lien et al. 2001; Bobo and Gilliam 1990). However, empirical work examining the effects of political context on voting participation among Asian Americans has been very limited. In this paper, I contribute to the development of this nascent literature by performing a systematic investigation of variation across political jurisdictions in the extent to which Asian Americans under-participate in electoral politics. First, I show that substantial differences exist in the size of the Asian-white voter registration gap, controlling for socioeconomic, demographic and immigrant characteristics, across states in the U.S. I then reveal that, in spite of considerable cross-state variation, differences in the net size of the gap across counties within the same state are even more dramatic. Next, I demonstrate that cross-county variation in the net gap size cannot be explained by differences in the size, density, or ethnic and immigrant composition of the Asian American population across counties, which suggests that the county contexts themselves are driving the differences. I conclude by discussing future avenues of research to further refine our understanding of the contribution of local-level political-contextual factors to the puzzle of Asian American electoral under-participation.

Literature Review

Traditional and immigrant models of voting participation

Traditional models of voting participation emphasize socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of individuals, particularly education, income, and age (Wong et al. 2008; Citrin and Highton 2002; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001; Cho 1999; Lien 1994; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Education, the strongest predictor of voting, elevates electoral participation by fostering cognitive, civic, and political skills, increasing political knowledge, exposing people

to participatory norms, and increasing the likelihood of being mobilized. Income's independent effect on voting is weaker than that of education, but it also enhances the likelihood of voting, in part because it increases exposure to mobilization and in part because some higher-income occupations may motivate interest in government activity. Like education and income, age increases political exposure and experience, and it has a positive effect on voting until very advanced ages. All three variables have demonstrated consistently robust predictive power in studies examining voting behavior.

All racialized minority groups in the United States have lower rates of electoral participation than whites (Xu 2005; Citrin and Highton 2002; Lien 2001). However, when education, income, and age are held constant, the difference between blacks and whites disappears; in fact, in some elections, blacks are more likely to vote than whites with comparable backgrounds (Xu 2005; Lien 2004; Citrin and Highton 2002; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001; Lien 1994). The gap between Latinos and whites also is reduced substantially, although not entirely eliminated, once socioeconomic and demographic factors are taken into account (Xu 2005; Lien 2004; Citrin and Highton 2002; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001; Lien 1994; Uhlener et al. 1989). By contrast, accounting for background variables does not appreciably reduce the gap between Asians and whites (Xu 2005; Lien 2004; Citrin and Highton 2002; Lien 2001; Lien 1994; Uhlener et al. 1989). While socioeconomic variables do have sizable and statistically significant positive effects on Asian Americans' voting behavior (Wong et al. 2008; Ramakrishnan 2005; Xu 2005; Lien 2004), the baseline participation of Asian Americans is so much lower than that of other groups that, even at the highest levels of education and income, they participate at lower levels than others.

Given that the Asian American population consists of a higher percentage of foreign-born individuals than any other racial group³, it is plausible that Asian Americans' low rates of participation in electoral politics stem in part from non-citizenship⁴ or unfamiliarity with the American political system due to recentness of arrival, both of which might be expected to dampen voting rates for any group, not just Asian Americans. A survey of the literature on Asian American voting reveals that while non-citizenship does indeed explain some of the voting gap between Asian Americans and non-Hispanic whites (Wong et al. 2008; Lien et al. 2004; Citrin and Highton 2002), a substantial gap remains *even among citizens* (Citrin and Highton 2002; Lien 2001; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001). Foreign-born status contributes modestly to the gap among citizens, with foreign-born Asian American citizens being somewhat less likely to vote than native-born Asian American citizens (Xu 2005; Ong and Nakanishi 2003; Citrin and Highton 2002).⁵ Strikingly, a substantial gap persists between Asians and whites *even among the native-born* (Ong et al. 2008; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001). Most interesting of all are the findings by Ramakrishnan (2005) and Ramakrishnan and Espenshade (2001) that improvements in voting do not appear to extend much beyond the second generation among Asian Americans. Thus, the gap in voting between Asian Americans and white Americans cannot be said to be an exclusively immigrant phenomenon; *even third and later generations* of Asian Americans do not exhibit electoral parity with native-born, non-Hispanic whites.

³ According to data from the 2000 U.S. Census, 68.5% of Asian Americans are foreign-born.

⁴ Although the foreign-born Asian American population has the highest rate of naturalization of all immigrant populations in the United States, with the vast majority acquiring citizenship within 10 years of arrival (Citrin & Highton 2002), the percentage of citizens in the Asian American population at any given time may be moderate due to the continuing influx of new immigrants.

⁵ In addition to being unfamiliar with the U.S. political system, some first-generation immigrants may be oriented more towards homeland politics than U.S. politics, but as their duration of stay in the U.S. increases, their likelihood of voting rises appreciably (Ramakrishnan 2005; Xu 2005; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001).

Voter registration and turnout

Not registering to vote is the primary cause of the voting gap between Asian American and non-Hispanic white citizens. Once registered, Asian Americans turn out to vote at rates that are only modestly lower than those of white Americans (Jang 2009; Ong et al. 2008; Wong et al. 2008; Xu 2005; Lien et al. 2004; Ong and Nakanishi 2003; Citrin and Highton 2002; Lien 2001; Lien et al. 2001). In this regard, Asian Americans are no different than others who have a low likelihood of voting. Since the 1980s, students of voting have observed that low rates of voting are produced largely by low rates of registration (as opposed to low rates of turnout among the registered), and that, once registered, those whose characteristics suggest a low likelihood of voting behave more like those whose characteristics suggest a high probability of voting (Cho et al. 2006; Highton 1997; Piven and Cloward 1989; Erikson 1981). However, while the traditional low-probability registrant is characterized by lack of socioeconomic resources, Asians American' lower-than-average likelihood of registration appears to be driven by other factors.

Political Context

The persistence of the electoral participation gap between Asian and white American citizens after controlling for individual socioeconomic, demographic, and immigration characteristics has led to speculation about political contextual factors that may contribute to diminished participation among Asian Americans. Such explanations point to undermobilization of Asian Americans by parties, candidates, and civic organizations (Jang 2009; Anderson 2008a; Anderson 2008b; Wong 2006; Ramakrishnan 2005; Lien 2004; Vo 2004; Citrin & Highton 2002; Lien 2001; Ramakrishnan & Espenshade 2001; Uhlaner et al. 1989); and to underrepresentation of Asian Americans in positions of political power, a situation which, in addition to limiting elite

mobilization, is thought to contribute to lower levels of political trust and efficacy among Asian Americans than among groups who enjoy higher levels of political empowerment (Lien 2004; Lai et al. 2001; Lien 2001; Lien et al. 2001; Bobo and Gilliam 1990).

Only a handful of studies have empirically examined the effects of political context on the voting behavior of Asian Americans. In some of these studies, Asian concentration serves as a proxy for contact with or exposure to ethnic media, community organizations, interest groups, political parties and candidate organizations. The logic is that interest groups, political parties, and candidate organizations will find it more cost-effective to target geographically concentrated groups (Cho et al. 2006) and ethnic/immigrant communities that are reachable via ethnic media and community organizations (Ramakrishnan 2005; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001). Results depend on the level of analysis (state, county/metropolitan area, or census tract). Net of other variables, researchers have found a positive effect of Asian concentration on voting (without distinguishing between registration and turnout) at the state level (Ramkrishnan 2005; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001); no effect of Asian concentration on voting (without distinguishing between registration and turnout) at the county/metropolitan area level (Ramakrishnan 2005; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001); and a negative effect of Asian concentration on turnout among the registered at the census tract level (Cho et al. 2006)⁶.

Jang (2009) takes an alternative approach by operationalizing political context as the *absolute size* of the Asian American population and proposing a rational choice-based argument: increases in group size enhance perceptions of the group-level benefits of participation by

⁶ Cho et al. (2006) attribute the negative effect of neighborhood Asian concentration on turnout to reduced interaction with individuals who have participatory political inclinations, such as middle-class whites. They note, however, that the direction and degree of the effect is contingent upon the size of the group in the broader location, with Asians in California being less negatively affected by neighborhood Asian concentration than those outside of California. They suggest that, in the broader context, larger concentrations of the group are more likely to be targeted for mobilization by parties and candidates.

increasing the number of others who would gain an average benefit. He finds that Asian Americans who live in counties with larger Asian American populations are more likely to register to vote, and to turn out once registered, than those who live in counties with smaller numbers of Asian Americans.

The question of the relationship between Asian American population density or size and electoral participation is important and clearly complex. However, studies that investigate the effect of political context on Asian American electoral participation should expand beyond these particular measures. After all, it is important to keep in mind that Asian American population density and size are uncertain proxies for the political context variables they are meant to represent. For example, as discussed previously, political mobilization is often operationalized as Asian American population density, but it is possible that levels of mobilization are unrelated to the population density of Asian Americans, as has been found in some studies of Latinos (Leighley 2001; Browning et al. 1986)⁷.

Two studies of Asian American political participation do, in fact, examine the effect of contextual features beyond Asian American population density and size. Ramakrishnan (2005) probes the impact on Asian Americans' voting likelihood of the closeness of state-level political contests, the state-level number of 501(c)(3) organizations per capita, and the state-level average rate of voting participation in past presidential elections, finding limited explanatory power for the first two variables and strong effects for the third. Wong et al. (2011) report no relationship between Asian Americans' likelihood of voting and party competition at either the state or county level, a very slight increase in voting among Asian Americans who live in a state with ballot initiatives, and a modest increase among Asian Americans living in areas with Asian

⁷ Although it may be more cost-effective for political elites to target geographically concentrated groups for mobilization, they may nevertheless refrain from initiating contact if those groups are seen as unlikely voters.

American elected officials. Wong et al. also find that Asian Americans living in traditional immigrant destinations are more likely to vote than those living in small settlements or new destinations, but note that "most of the bump-up in voting rates between settlement types appears to be a difference between living in [Hawaii, California, and New York] and living elsewhere" (118).

Not many of the specific measures of political context examined in the studies by Ramakrishnan (2005) and Wong et al. (2011) significantly affect Asian Americans' likelihood of voting. However, the results do suggest the importance of geography, given that Asian Americans who live in certain states appear to have greater likelihood of voting. The relevance of geography is also implicated in studies which find that registered Asian Americans living in Hawaii and California are more likely to turn out to vote than those living in all other states combined (Lien 2004; Lien 2001).

In this paper, I expand upon these preliminary geographical findings by systematically investigating whether Asian American under-participation in voter registration varies across two levels of geography: state and county. I focus on registration because, as mentioned previously, registration is the primary barrier to voting participation for Asian Americans, as it is for all low-likelihood voters. I examine cross-state and cross-county variations in the registration *gap* between Asians and whites rather than straight cross-state and cross-county differences among Asian Americans because the gap is a direct estimate of Asian American under-registration relative to whites. Straight cross-place comparisons among Asian Americans do not illuminate the issue of Asian-white difference: first, cross-place differences among Asian Americans alone do not necessarily indicate changes across places in the difference between Asians and whites

because they could parallel cross-place differences among whites; second, a lack of cross-place differences among Asian Americans does not necessarily signal parity between Asians and whites in those places because rates could vary, or be consistently higher, for whites across those same places. Finally, I am interested in state and county boundaries because they are particularly relevant for voter registration: in the United States, voter registration and elections are administered by states and counties. Moreover, mobilization by political campaigns and party organizations tend to occur at the state and county levels (Ramakrishnan 2005). Thus, I regard states and counties as political jurisdictions, not merely as geographic units. In this exploratory research, I do not test the effect of *specific* jurisdiction-level political context variables, such as features of voter registration administration or mobilization efforts by parties, candidates, and civic organizations, but rather determine whether or not each of the two levels of *jurisdictional context as a whole* affects the extent to which Asian Americans under-participate in voter registration. By identifying places where the Asian-white registration gap is relatively high and those where it is relatively low, I lay the groundwork for future studies endeavoring to understand the sources of Asian American under-participation in electoral politics.

Data and Methods

Analysis in this paper is limited to the ten states with the largest Asian American populations, and to the six counties in the state of California which have the largest Asian American populations. The ten states account for 75% of the Asian American population in the United States, and the six counties together comprise 73% of California's Asian American population. In the first stage of analysis, I estimate the gap in voter registration between Asian and white American citizens in each state and county, controlling for a number of individual-

level socioeconomic, demographic, and immigrant variables using logistic regression, a maximum likelihood method appropriate for modeling a binary dependent variable as a function of covariates.⁸ I then identify variation in the magnitude of the net registration gap across same-level jurisdictions and note that variation is more pronounced across the six counties in California than across the ten states. Finally, in order to strengthen my argument that cross-county variation in gap size is driven by differences in jurisdictional contexts, I demonstrate that differences in the attributes of the Asian American population across counties cannot explain differences in the size of the gap.

Analysis of the net size of the Asian-white registration gap in each jurisdiction is performed using pooled data from the Census Bureau's 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2006 Current Population Survey (CPS) Voter Supplements.⁹ Pooling six data years generates enough adult citizen Asian cases to analyze the Asian-white registration gap in the states of California, New York, Hawaii, Texas, New Jersey, Illinois, Washington, Florida, Virginia, and Massachusetts; and in the California counties of Los Angeles, Santa Clara, Orange, Alameda, San Diego, and San Francisco.¹⁰

Characteristics of the Asian American population, in particular, its ethnic distribution, size, density, percentage foreign-born, mean number of years in the U.S., and percentage limited English proficiency, are obtained from the 2000 decennial Census.

⁸ The dependent variable is registering to vote. The key independent variable of interest is race, measured by a set of four dummy variables: Asian, black, Latino, and white, with white being treated as the comparison category. In this study, I focus on the difference between Asians and whites. Age, education (a set of five dummy variables, with the lowest category of less than a high school degree being the comparison category), family income, residential stability (residence at the same address for 3+ years), foreign born status, and dummy variables for the election years 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, and 2004 are included as control variables.

⁹ It is necessary to pool together six data years in order to yield enough cases of adult citizen Asians for analysis in each individual state and county. The survey years 1996-2006 are used because they comprise an appropriate time match for the Census 2000 data that are utilized in other parts of the analysis.

¹⁰ Pooling multiple years of election data also yields the additional benefit of minimizing the effects of idiosyncrasies during any single election.

Results

The persistence of the Asian-white gap in registration at the national level

Since many of the statistical studies addressing racial gaps in participation discussed in the literature review were conducted using data from the 1990s and earlier, I first provide an update of overall trends using the pooled 1996-2006 CPS data. In the aggregate, Asian and Latino American adult citizens severely lag behind white citizens in voter registration, while black citizens are moderately less likely than white citizens to register: the respective registration rates for whites, blacks, Latinos and Asians are 72%, 66%, 55% and 52%. Once age, education, income, residential stability, and foreign born status are accounted for, however, blacks out-register whites and the gap between Latinos and whites is markedly diminished, while the Asian-white gap remains substantial: blacks go from 27% lower odds of registration to 14% *higher* odds, Latinos improve from 52% lower odds to 16% lower odds, and Asians shift very little from 58% lower odds to 56% lower odds. These patterns, which echo those found in studies using earlier data, demonstrate that, unlike the registration gap between whites and other racialized minorities, registration differences between Asians and whites persist even after taking into account socioeconomic, demographic, and immigration characteristics.

I also find, in line with Ramakrishnan and Espendshade's (2001) findings, that even U.S.-born Asian Americans have not reached parity with white Americans in voter registration. Table 1 displays the odds ratios from a logistic regression of registration on generation (broken down by race), controlling for age, education, income, and residential stability. The reference group is third-plus generation non-Hispanic whites. Although the gap between Asians and third-plus generation non-Hispanic whites does decrease noticeably from the immigrant generation to the

second generation to the third-plus generation¹¹, even the third-plus generation of Asian Americans is significantly less likely to register to vote than third-plus generation whites with similar demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. Net of age, education, income and residential stability, the odds of a third-plus generation Asian American registering to vote are 56% lower than the odds of a third-plus generation white American registering to vote. Among third-plus generation racialized minorities, Asian Americans stand alone in their extreme distance from white registration patterns.

Table 1. Difference in odds of registration (with controls) between immigrants/minorities and 3rd-plus generation non-Hispanic whites

	Odds Ratio	% Difference
Foreign born Asian	0.302*	-69.8
2nd generation Asian	0.344*	-65.6
Mixed generation Asian	0.550*	-45.0
3rd plus generation Asian	0.436*	-56.4
Foreign born Latino	0.623*	-37.7
2nd generation Latino	0.720*	-28.0
Mixed generation Latino	0.885*	-11.5
3rd plus generation Latino	0.860*	-14.0
Foreign born Black	0.624*	-37.6
2nd generation Black	0.629*	-37.1
Mixed generation Black	0.966	-3.4
3rd plus generation Black	1.166*	16.6
Foreign born White	0.588*	-41.2
2nd generation White	0.999	-0.1
Mixed generation White	1.146*	14.6

*Statistically significant at the .05 level

¹¹ Whereas Ramakrishnan and Espenshade (2001) do not find much evidence of improvement between the second and third-plus Asian generations, I find that the Asian-white gap is smaller for Asians in the third-plus generation than for Asians in the second generation. This discrepancy between my findings and theirs is perhaps due to the fact that we define “second generation” differently. Whereas they code as second generation any U.S.-born respondent who has *at least one* parent who was born outside of the U.S., I code as second generation only those whose parents *both* were born outside of the U.S. I code those who have one U.S.-born parent and one foreign-born parent as “mixed generation” (in between 2nd & 3rd-plus). My regression results reveal that there is actually less of a gap between third-plus generation whites and mixed generation Asians and Latinos than between third-plus generation whites and third-plus generation Asians and Latinos. Moreover, mixed generation whites are significantly more likely to register than third-plus generation whites. Thus, mixed generation respondents appear to be especially inclined to register.

Jurisdictional differences in the magnitude of the Asian-white registration gap

In assessing whether or not the net size of the Asian-white registration gap varies across political jurisdictions, I begin at the state level. Slightly over half of all Asian Americans live in just three states: California, New York and Hawaii, with California alone accounting for 35% of the Asian American population. Another quarter of Asian Americans reside in Texas, New Jersey, Illinois, Washington, Florida, Virginia, and Massachusetts, listed in descending order of the size of the state's Asian American population. The remaining quarter is spread out across all other states. Table 2 reveals that variation in Asian American under-registration is considerable across the ten states with the largest Asian American populations, ranging from 60% lower odds-of-registration than whites in Illinois to 32% lower odds-of-registration in Hawaii.¹² What is perhaps most interesting in Table 2 is the finding that California and New York are not among the top three states with the smallest gaps (though they are among the top five). These two states, along with Hawaii, are typically singled out a priori as states that are likely to have higher levels of Asian American political participation than other states because they have the largest Asian American populations. Thus, studies that have examined the effect of state of residence on electoral participation among Asian Americans have tended to test whether Asian Americans living in Hawaii, California, or New York are more likely to participate than those living in *all other states combined*. By performing a state-by-state analysis, especially one that focuses on the gap between Asians and whites, I have revealed a greater degree of cross-state variation in

¹² Although the gap is smallest in Hawaii, it is interesting that an Asian-white gap in favor of whites exists at all in Hawaii, given that Asians are a numerical majority in Hawaii, as well as quite dominant in Hawaiian politics in terms of elected officials. The gap in Hawaii should be taken with some degree of skepticism, however, because the CPS did not disaggregate Asians and Native Hawaiians until 2004. That is, up until 2004, Asians and Native Hawaiians were grouped together in the same category in CPS data. Disaggregated data in the 2004 and 2006 surveys reveal that registration rates for Native Hawaiians are much lower than those for Asians. A more accurate analysis of Asian-white registration differences in Hawaii must therefore await data from future iterations of the now-disaggregated surveys.

Asian American electoral participation than previously known, and I have also identified Massachusetts and New Jersey as states with lower Asian-white registration gaps than California and New York.

Table 2. Difference in odds of registration (with controls) between Asians and whites, by state*

State	Odds Ratio	% Difference	% Asian in State	Asian Population
HI	0.678*	-32.2	41.68	503868
MA	0.557*	-44.3	3.68	238124
NJ	0.536*	-46.4	5.80	480276
NY	0.502*	-49.8	5.41	1044976
CA	0.492*	-50.8	10.79	3697513
FL	0.464*	-53.6	1.72	266256
WA	0.46*	-54.0	5.60	322335
TX	0.42*	-58.0	2.68	562319
VA	0.404*	-59.6	3.69	261025
IL	0.396*	-60.4	3.44	423603

*Statistically significant at the .05 level

While differences are impressive across states, they are even greater across the six California counties. Accordingly, the remainder of this paper focuses on analyzing cross-county variation. Table 3 displays differences in odds of registration between Asians and whites in each county after controlling for age, education, income, residential stability, and foreign born status. Although a notable gap between Asians and whites exists in all six counties, the gaps in San Francisco and San Diego Counties are considerably larger than the gaps in the other counties: in San Francisco and San Diego Counties, the odds of Asian Americans registering are 66% and 65% lower, respectively, than those of matched whites, compared to 52%, 45%, 42%, and 33% lower in Alameda, Los Angeles, Santa Clara, and Orange Counties, respectively. The gap in Orange County is the smallest by far, and it is about the same size as the gap in the state of Hawaii. Since the registration rates for whites do not deviate very much across these counties—

ranging from 72-77%, as seen in Table 4—differences in the size of the gap can be attributed to cross-county variation in Asian American registration, which fall within a far greater range of 42-58%.

Table 3. Difference in odds of registration (with controls) between Asians and whites, by county

County	Odds Ratio	% Difference
Orange	.666*	-33%
Santa Clara	.576*	-42%
Los Angeles	.548*	-45%
Alameda	.481*	-52%
San Diego	.352*	-65%
San Francisco	.34*	-66%

*Statistically significant at the .05 level

Table 4. Percentage of adult citizens who are registered to vote, by county and racial group

County	White	Asian	Latino	Black
<i>Orange</i>	77	58	54	38
<i>Santa Clara</i>	72	49	52	67
<i>Los Angeles</i>	74	57	58	73
<i>Alameda</i>	72	50	52	64
<i>San Diego</i>	73	44	54	54
<i>San Francisco</i>	72	42	56	61
<i>Other Counties</i>	69	50	52	56

The finding that the net size of the Asian-white voter registration gap varies more widely across counties within the same state than it does across states, with little cross-county difference among whites but substantial difference among Asians, suggests that Asian American electoral incorporation is especially sensitive to local-level jurisdictional contexts.¹³ A potential alternative explanation, however, is that the variation in gap size is due to differences in the

¹³ By comparing counties within the same state, the overall state institutional context is held constant so that any county-level variation is independent from state-level variation.

attributes of the Asian American population across counties rather than to differences in jurisdictional contexts. For example, participatory norms may vary by Asian ethnic group, since they originate from countries with different political and social settings and also have different histories in the U.S. In the sections that follow, I test this alternative interpretation by evaluating the extent to which differences in the characteristics of the Asian American population account for differences in the net size of the Asian-white registration gap. It should be noted that some of the variables which I designate as characteristics of the Asian American population, most notably Asian American population size and density, have, in other studies, been regarded as features of political context. My purpose here in referring to them as Asian American population characteristics is not to argue that they cannot be viewed as political contextual variables, but rather to distinguish between those features that *derive* from the Asian American population and those that *interact* with it.

The ethnic distribution of the Asian American population

Previous studies of Asian American electoral participation have found differences in levels of participation across Asian American ethnic groups (Wong et al. 2011; Aptekar 2009; Wong et al. 2008; Ramakrishnan 2005; Wong et al. 2005; Lien 2004; Citrin and Highton 2002). Thus, one potential explanation of cross-county differences in the Asian-white registration gap is that some Asian ethnic groups are, for cultural or other reasons stemming from their countries of origin or history of settlement in the U.S., less involved in American electoral politics than are other Asian ethnic groups; and in counties where there are higher concentrations of such groups, registration rates for Asian Americans are especially low.

In order to evaluate the viability of this hypothesis, I first turn to Census 2000 data on the ethnic makeup of the Asian American population in each county, presented in Table 5. The table reveals that the ethnic composition of Asian Americans does vary from county to county. In San Francisco, the county with the widest Asian-white registration gap, Chinese Americans¹⁴ are the most populous Asian ethnic group, accounting for 61% of the Asian American population; Filipino Americans are the next largest group at 19%; and none of the other ethnic groups constitutes more than 5% of the Asian American population. In San Diego, the county with the second widest Asian-white registration gap, Filipino Americans are the largest Asian ethnic group, comprising 46% of the Asian American population; each of the other ethnic groups makes up 13% or less of the Asian American population. In Orange, the county with the narrowest Asian-white registration gap, Vietnamese Americans form 36% of the Asian American population, followed distantly by Korean Americans at 14%, Chinese at 13%, and Filipinos at 12%. On the surface, these patterns of ethnic distribution appear to support the notion that some Asian national-origin groups—in this case, Chinese Americans and Filipino Americans—are especially disinclined towards American politics, while other groups—specifically, Vietnamese Americans—are particularly inclined; and that it is their overrepresentation in San Francisco, San Diego, and Orange, respectively, that is driving the magnitude of the county’s net Asian-white registration gap.

¹⁴ Given the vast political and social differences between China and Taiwan, and the different histories of settlement in the U.S. between Taiwanese and Chinese Americans, Taiwanese Americans are not included among the Chinese.

Table 5. Ethnic distribution of Asian Americans (%), by county, 2000

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Orange</i>	<i>Santa Clara</i>	<i>Los Angeles</i>	<i>Alameda</i>	<i>San Diego</i>	<i>San Francisco</i>	<i>Other Counties</i>
Chinese	13	26	24	35	11	61	17
Taiwanese	2.23	1.4	3.42	1.33	0.76	0.23	0.68
Chinese & Taiwanese	0.32	0.34	0.26	0.03	0.07	0	0.04
Japanese	7	7	10	5	8	3	7
Filipino	12	18	23	23	46	19	30
Indian	6	17	6	13	4	2	10
Korean	14	5	16	5	4	3	5
Vietnamese	36	21	7	8	13	5	6
Other	9.45	4.26	10.32	9.64	13.17	6.77	24.28

In order to test whether ethnicity is responsible for differences across counties, I exclude each of these groups from my estimation of the registration gap for the county in which it is overrepresented.¹⁵ Doing so results in only small-scale changes. When Vietnamese are removed from the analysis of Orange County, the difference between the predicted probabilities of registration for Asians and whites remains smaller than that in other counties, going from 9% to 10%. Similarly, when Chinese are removed from the analysis of San Francisco County, the difference between the predicted probabilities of registration for Asians and whites remains larger than that in other counties, going from 25% to 28%. Finally, when Filipinos are excluded from the analysis of San Diego County, the Asian-white gap in predicted probability of registration goes from 25% to 21%, remaining wider than the gap in every county besides San Francisco.

As a further test of whether ethnicity is responsible for cross-county differences, I determine whether or not there is variation in registration across counties for each of the

¹⁵ Although the CPS Voter Supplement surveys directly ask respondents for their racial identification, they do not have a similar question about ethnic identification. They do, however, include questions about the respondent's and respondent's parents' birth places, thus permitting indirect inference of the ethnicity of immigrants and second generation individuals.

overrepresented groups. I find that, net of age, education, income, and residential stability, first and second-generation Filipino adult citizens who live in San Diego County have odds of registration that are 36% lower than those who live in other counties; and first and second-generation Vietnamese adult citizens who live in Orange County have odds of registration that are 53% higher than those who live in other counties.¹⁶

These findings show that, although the counties have very different ethnic profiles, ethnic differences are not responsible for variation across counties in the net size of the Asian-white registration. They further demonstrate that members of the same national-origin group, far from being fated to adopt particular political outcomes due to culture or pre-migration experiences, can have markedly different outcomes depending on the local contexts in which they find themselves.¹⁷

Other characteristics of the Asian American population

If cross-county differences in the magnitude of the registration gap are not driven by differences in the ethnic composition of the Asian American population across counties, are they produced by cross-county differences in other features of the Asian American population, such as its size, density, foreign-born percentage, mean length of stay in the U.S., and extent of limited-English proficiency? These group-level factors might be important because they could potentially affect the nature and extent of political socialization within the population. As shown in Table 6, no clear pattern exists between these characteristics of the Asian American population

¹⁶ Unfortunately, there are not enough cases of Chinese adult citizens in individual counties to perform a similar analysis for Chinese Americans.

¹⁷ These findings also indicate the need to assess the extent to which observed differences in levels of political participation across Asian American ethnic groups are driven by actual group differences or by differences across groups in geographical distribution.

and the size of the gap across counties: none of the variables increases or decreases alongside increases in the size of the gap.

Table 6. The Asian-white registration gap and characteristics of the Asian American population, by county, 2000

County	% Difference in Odds of Registration between Asians and whites	Size of Asian Population	% Asian	% Foreign Born among Asians	Mean years in U.S. among Foreign Born Asians	% Limited English among Foreign Born Asians
Orange	-33	386,785	14	71	15	27
Santa Clara	-42	430,095	26	71	13	19
Los Angeles	-45	1,137,500	12	70	15	26
Alameda	-52	295,218	21	66	15	21
San Diego	-65	249,802	9	67	17	16
San Francisco	-66	239,565	31	70	18	35

It is important to recognize that these findings do not negate the possibility that, more generally, i.e., in a larger-scale statistical study with more than six counties, some of these variables could in fact be found to have effects on Asian Americans’ registration outcomes.¹⁸ In a larger sample of counties, these counties’ values on some of the variables would likely cluster on one side of the distribution; all six of the counties, for example, have large Asian American population sizes and concentrations relative to other counties in the U.S. However, the crucial point here is that none of these variables can explain the dramatic differences in the net size of the Asian-white voter registration gap across the six counties which together comprise nearly three-quarters of California’s Asian American population. Indeed, the fact that so much variation exists in the size of the gap across counties which, in the grand scheme of things, are relatively similar with regard to the characteristics of their Asian American populations, highlights the need to focus on explanatory factors outside of the populations themselves.

¹⁸ As discussed in the literature review, Jang (2009) finds a statistically significant relationship between county-level size of the Asian American population and voting participation among Asian Americans.

Conclusion and Discussion

The “Asian anomaly” (Citrin and Pearson 2006; Citrin and Highton 2002) in American politics refers to the pattern of much lower levels of electoral participation among Asian American citizens, both foreign-born and native-born, than would be predicted by their relatively high socioeconomic standing, as per conventional sociological theories of assimilation and traditional political science theories of political engagement. While this phenomenon is well-documented in the literatures on minority and immigrant political incorporation, its causes remain unclear. Potential explanations include those that suggest cultural proclivities towards political avoidance among Asian Americans (group-based explanations), and those that point to insufficient political outreach to Asian Americans (contextual explanations). In this paper, I have presented evidence that Asian Americans’ under-participation in electoral politics is highly dependent on conditions that are external to the population itself.¹⁹

In summary, I have revealed considerable variation across states, but even greater variation across counties within the state of California, in the size of the Asian-white voter registration gap after controlling for individual-level socioeconomic, demographic, and immigrant characteristics. I have considered two alternative interpretations of these patterns: (1) local-level jurisdictional conditions are an important contributor to Asian American electoral under-participation; (2) the Asian American population itself differs across counties in ways that affect the nature and extent of political socialization within the population. While the second interpretation might seem especially plausible given that voter registration rates vary little across counties for whites but dramatically so for Asians, I have discounted it, and at the same time provided support for the first interpretation, by demonstrating that cross-county differences in the

¹⁹ This does not necessarily imply that cultural explanations are altogether invalid in accounting for the overall situation of Asian American electoral under-participation in the U.S., but it does demonstrate the crucial importance of contextual factors in determining the *extent* of under-participation.

net size of the registration gap are not associated with cross-county differences in the composition of the Asian American population. Although the ethnic makeup of the Asian American population does vary considerably across counties, with distinct ethnic groups being overrepresented in the counties with the lowest and highest Asian-white voter registration gaps, I have shown that removing each overrepresented group from my estimation of the registration gap for the county in which it is overrepresented results in only small-scale changes. I have also shown that there is a great deal of cross-county variation in voter registration for each of the overrepresented groups, thus further weakening the explanatory power of ethnicity and reinforcing the importance of jurisdictional contexts. Other characteristics of the Asian American population, such as its size, density, foreign-born percentage, mean length of stay in the U.S., and extent of limited-English proficiency, show limited variation across counties, and the variation that does exist does not occur in step with changes in the net size of the Asian-white registration gap.

The findings in this research indicate that Wolfinger and Rosenstone's (1980) mobilization model of political participation, which "asserts that participation is a response to contextual cues and political opportunities structured by the individual's environment" (Leighley 1995, p. 188), may be a particularly appropriate theoretical approach to understanding the puzzle of Asian American under-participation in electoral politics.²⁰ Future research should explicitly compare the political contexts of counties that have relatively high Asian-white registration gaps and those that have relatively low gaps. The focus of such research should be on contextual conditions that produce *differences* in participation between socioeconomically comparable Asian and white American citizens, rather than on conditions that might be expected to affect all

²⁰ This theoretical lens has previously been used to explain why levels of political participation vary across time for the same electorate (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), and why socioeconomically disadvantaged groups can sometimes compensate for having low levels of resources (Lien 2004).

groups equally within a given county. Factors that would be particularly germane for cross-local comparison include voter registration and elections administration by the county registrar, and outreach and mobilization by political parties, electoral candidates and civic organizations. For example, counties with smaller registration gaps might have party or civic organizations that are more dedicated to or capable of registering new voters, greater numbers of candidates whose campaigns target Asian Americans for voter registration, or county registrars that are more rigorous in advertising and distributing Asian-language voter registration materials. Such research may not only be useful in modifying theories of assimilation and political participation in the U.S.; it may also provide insight into ways of improving levels of electoral participation among Asian Americans, who are one of the fastest-growing populations in the United States.

References

- Alba, Richard and Victor Nee. (2003). *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Andersen, Kristi. (2008a). "In Whose Interest? Political Parties, Context, and the Incorporation of Immigrants." Pages 17-38 in *New Race Politics in America: Understanding Minority and Immigrant Politics*, eds. Jane Junn and Kerry L. Haynie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Anderson, Kristi. (2008b). "Parties, Organizations, and Political Incorporation: Immigrants in Six U.S. Cities." Pages 77-106 in *Civic Hopes and Political Realities*, eds. S. Karthick Ramakrishnan and Irene Bloemraad. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Aptekar, Sofya. (2009). "Organizational Life and Political Incorporation of Two Asian Immigrant Groups: A Case Study." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32(9): 1511-1533.
- Barringer, Herbert R., David T. Takeuchi, and Peter Xenos. (1990). "Education, Occupational Prestige, and Income of Asian Americans." *Sociology of Education* 63: 27-43.
- Bloemraad, Irene. (2006). *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Bloemraad, Irene. (2007). "Unity in Diversity? Bridging Models of Multiculturalism and Immigrant Integration." *Du Bois Review* 4(2): 317-336.
- Bobo, Lawrence and Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. (1990). "Race, Sociopolitical Participation, and Black Empowerment." *The American Political Science Review* 84(2): 377-393.
- Browning, R., Marshall, D.R., and Tabb D. (1986). *Protest is not Enough: The Struggle of Blacks and Hispanics for Equality in Urban Politics*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Cho, Wendy K. Tam. (1999). "Naturalization, Socialization, Participation: Immigrants and (Non)Voting." *The Journal of Politics* 61(4): 1140-1155.
- Cho, Wendy K. Tam, James G. Gimpel, and Joshua J. Dyck. (2006). "Residential Concentration, Political Socialization, and Voter Turnout." *The Journal of Politics* 68(1): 156-167.

- Citrin, Jack, and Benjamin Highton. (2002). *How Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration Shape the California Electorate*. San Francisco, CA: Public Policy Institute of California.
- Citrin, Jack and Kathryn Pearson. (2006). "The Political Assimilation of the Fourth Wave." Pages 217-242 in *Transforming Politics, Transforming America*, eds. Taeku Lee and S. Karthick Ramakrishnan. Virginia: University of Virginia Press.
- Erikson, Robert S. (1981). "Why Do People Vote? Because They Are Registered." *American Politics Quarterly* 9(3): 259-276.
- Goyette, Kimberly and Yu Xie. (1999). "Educational Expectations of Asian American Youths: Determinants and Ethnic Differences." *Sociology of Education* 72: 22-36.
- Highton, Benjamin. (1997). "Easy Registration and Voter Turnout." *The Journal of Politics* 59(2): 565-575.
- Iceland, John. (1999). "Earnings Returns to Occupational Status: Are Asian Americans Disadvantaged?" *Social Science Research* 28: 45-65.
- Jang, Seung-Jin. (2009). "Get Out on Behalf of Your Group: Electoral Participation of Latinos and Asian Americans." *Political Behavior* 31(4): 511-535.
- Junn, Jane and Elizabeth Matto. (2008). "New Race Politics: The Changing Face of the American Electoral Landscape." Pages 1-16 in *New Race Politics in America: Understanding Minority and Immigrant Politics*, eds. Jane Junn and Kerry L. Haynie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kao, Grace. (1995). "Asian Americans as Model Minorities? A Look at Their Academic Performance." *American Journal of Education* 103: 121-159.
- Lai, James S., Wendy K. Tam Cho, Thomas P. Kim, and Okiyoshi Takeda. (2001). *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34(3): 611-617.
- Leighley, Jan E. (1995). "Attitudes, Opportunities and Incentives: A Field Essay on Political Participation." *Political Research Quarterly* 48(1): 181-209.
- Leighley, Jan E. (2001). *Strength in Numbers?: The Political Mobilization of Racial and Ethnic Minorities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lien, Pei-te. (1994). "Ethnicity and Political Participation: A Comparison between Asian and Mexican Americans." *Political Behavior* 16(2): 237-264.

- Lien, Pei-te. (2001). *The Making of Asian America through Political Participation*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Lien, Pei-te. (2004). "Asian Americans and Voting Participation: Comparing Racial and Ethnic Differences in Recent U.S. Elections." *International Migration Review* 38(2): 493-517.
- Lien, Pei-te, Christian Collet, Janelle Wong, and S. Karthick Ramakrishnan. (2001). "Asian Pacific-American Public Opinion and Political Participation." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34(3): 625-630.
- Lien, Pei-te, M. Margaret Conway, and Janelle Wong. (2004). *The Politics of Asian Americans: Diversity and Community*. London: Routledge.
- Nee, Victor and Jimmy Sanders. (1985). "The Road to Parity: Determinants of the Socioeconomic Achievements of Asian Americans." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 8(1): 75-91.
- Ong, Paul, Melany Dela Cruz-Viesca, and Don Nakanishi. (2008). "Awakening the New 'Sleeping Giant'? Asian American Political Engagement." *AAPI Nexus: Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders Policy, Practice and Community* 6(1): 1-10.
- Ong, P.M. and D.T. Nakanishi. (2003). "Becoming Citizens, Becoming Voters: The Naturalization and Political Participation of Asian Pacific Immigrants." Pages 113-134 in *Asian American Politics: Law, Participation, and Policy*, eds. Don T. Nakanishi and James S. Lai. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Piven, Frances Fox and Richard A. Cloward. (1989). "Government Statistics and Conflicting Explanations of Nonvoting." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 22(3): 580-588.
- Ramakrishna, S. Karthick. (2005). *Democracy in Immigrant America: Changing Demographics and Political Participation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Ramakrishnan, S. Karthick and Thomas J. Espenshade. (2001). "Immigrant Incorporation and Political Participation in the United States." *International Migration Review* 35(3): 970-909.
- Uhlener, Carole J., Bruce E. Cain, and D.Roderick Kiewiet. (1989). "Political Participation of Ethnic Minorities in the 1980s." *Political Behavior* 11(3): 195-231.

- Vo, Linda Trinh. (2004). *Mobilizing an Asian American Community*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Wolfinger, R.E. and S.J. Rosenstone. (1980). *Who Votes?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Wong, Janelle S. (2006). *Democracy's Promise: Immigrants and American Civic Institutions*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Wong, Janelle S., Pei-te Lien, and M. Margaret Conway. (2005). "Group-Based Resources and Political Participation among Asian Americans." *American Politics Research* 33(4): 545-576.
- Wong, Janelle S., Pei-te Lien, and M. Margaret Conway. (2008). "Activity amid Diversity: Asian American Political Participation." Pages 70-94 in *New Race Politics in America: Understanding Minority and Immigrant Politics*, eds. Jane Junn and Kerry L. Haynie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wong, Janelle, S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, Taeku Lee, and Jane Junn. (2011). *Asian American Political Participation: Emerging Constituents and their Political Identities*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Woo, Deborah. (2000). "The Inventing and Reinventing of 'Model Minorities'." Pages 193-212 in *Asian Americans: Experiences and Perspectives*, eds. T. Fong and L. Shinagawa. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Xu, Jun. (2005). "Why Do Minorities Participate Less? The Effects of Immigration, Education, and Electoral Process on Asian American Voter Registration and Turnout." *Social Science Research* 34: 682-702.
- Yancey, George A. (2003). *Who is White? Latinos, Asians and the New Black/non-Black Divide*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
- Yang, Philip Q. (2002). "Citizenship Acquisition of Post-1965 Asian Immigrants." *Population and Environment* 23(4):377-404.
- Zeng, Zhen and Yu Xie. (2004). "Asian Americans' Earnings Disadvantage Reexamined: The Role of Place of Education." *American Journal of Sociology* 109(5): 1075-1108.



Institute for the
Study of
Societal Issues

2420 Bowditch St. # 5670
Berkeley , CA 94720-5670

tel: 510-642-0813

fax: 510-642-8674

email: issi@berkeley.edu

web: <http://issi.berkeley.edu>