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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6zb2v33r>

Journal

AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community, 9(1-2)

ISSN

1545-0317

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Publication Date

2011

DOI

10.36650/nexus9.1-2_11-20_RamakrishnanEtAl

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Peer reviewed

Bringing Asian American Voices to Policy Debates:

Findings from the 2008
National Asian American Survey

S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, Jane Junn,
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Summary

Where do Asian Americans stand when it comes to public policy? In what ways are they most likely to participate in politics in order to exert their influence in public policy making? More often than not, the answer to these questions is mired in assumptions, anecdotes, and selective evidence because until only very recently, little systematic, nationally representative data on this emerging group has been available to the public. In this brief, we introduce the 2008 National Asian American Survey (NAAS), the first multilingual, multiethnic national survey of Asian American political attitudes and behavior, and suggest that these data shed light on: (1) critical questions about Asian Americans' public policy attitudes and (2) the types of political action Asian Americans are most likely to take to pursue their policy interests.

The 2008 National Asian American Survey

What are the policy needs and priorities of the Asian American community? Most attempts to answer this question focus on objective circumstances ranging from individual-level outcomes, such as English-language proficiency, or the incidence of mental depression and household-level outcomes, such as family size and welfare participation rates, to outcomes that are produced by interactions between these factors and larger socioeconomic and political contexts, such as residential segregation, incidence of hate crimes, and access to affordable health care. As important as these studies are, objective metrics are sometimes at odds with the beliefs and the subjective needs, goals, and aspirations of Asian

Americans. A fuller picture thus needs to take into account the voices of community members and to ascertain how Asian Americans define their priorities and preferences.

A standard way to accomplish this goal is to conduct surveys. Although such surveys are common for the general population (e.g., CBS News/*New York Times*, Gallup, and CNN) and are increasing in frequency for Latinos (e.g., Pew Hispanic and Latino Decisions), it is extremely rare to find a reliable, nationally representative sample of Asian American public opinion. More often than not, surveys of Asian Americans are either restricted to exit polls (which are very limited in content regarding public policy issues), targeted to specific communities (either by ethnic group or geographic place), or poorly implemented (e.g., inadequately trained interviewers or interviewing only in English). Even large federal data-collection efforts like the Current Population Survey (which interviews its Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander [AANHPI] population only in English or Spanish and interviews insufficient numbers of respondents in most states in order to disaggregate results by ethnic/national origin group) suffer from many of these deficits.

One recent exception is the 2008 NAAS, which was conducted over roughly ten weeks prior to the 2008 election. We view the NAAS as a landmark effort to collect data about the policy views of Asian Americans correctly for several reasons. First, it includes sufficiently large numbers of respondents from each of the six largest Asian national-origin groups (Asian Indians, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese) to enable analysis of these constituent groups as well as Asian Americans as a whole.¹ More specifically, the NAAS completed 5,159 interviews with a final breakdown of 1,350 Chinese, 1,150 Asian Indian, 719 Vietnamese, 614 Korean, 603 Filipino, and 541 Japanese origin respondents, with 182 additional respondents who are either from other countries in Asia or who identify as multiracial or multiethnic.² Second, survey interviews were conducted in eight languages (English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Japanese, and Hindi), more fully capturing the linguistic diversity of the Asian American community. Third, the sampling design allows end users to draw valid statistical inferences about Asian Americans that are nationally representative (using sampling weights) and are representative of Asian Americans in high-density geographic ar-

eas (e.g., states like California, New Jersey, and New York or metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, New York, the San Francisco/Bay Area, and Washington, D.C.).

Finally, the content NAAS survey instrument is remarkably rich and explicitly constructed to assess the political behaviors and policy beliefs of Asian Americans. The interview length was roughly half an hour, covering a range of modules: (1) national origin(s) and experiences with migration; (2) media use and political priorities; (3) political participation and candidate evaluations; (4) issue orientations, party identification, and political ideology; (5) racial/ethnic identification and inter-/intragroup relations; and (6) civic engagement. The questionnaire ends with standard demographic measures of individual-level characteristics on education, income, home ownership, length of residence, and other items known to influence political engagement. A more comprehensive description and analysis of the data can be found in our book (Wong et al., 2011), and starting in the fall of 2011, the micro-data will be available through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (Ramakrishnan et al., 2011) and the web site for the NAAS.³

Asian American Views on Public Policy

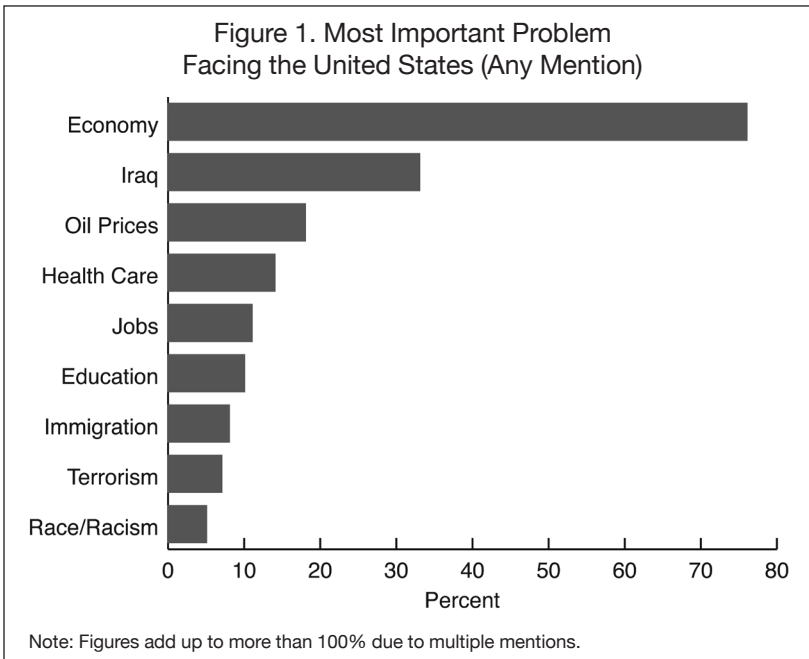
What do the 2008 NAAS results reveal about Asian American policy views? Here we present data on policy priorities and then focus on three issues: high-skill visas, health care reform, and abortion.

Policy Priorities

A common approach to measuring the public's sense of priorities is by asking the question: "What do you think is the most important problem facing the United States today?" The NAAS allowed respondents to mention up to three "most important" problems. During the late summer months of 2008, when the NAAS was in the field, the most salient national issue among Asian Americans was the economy (76% mentioned the economy), followed by the Iraq War (33%), oil prices (18%), health care (14%), employment (11%), education (10%), and immigration (8%).⁴ Although perceptions of the public's priorities are notoriously changeable in response to changes in media coverage, political spin, and other external circumstances, it is important to note that we can only

gauge this public agenda by directly asking a representative sample of Asian Americans.

When we do so, the attitudes of Asian Americans are quite distinctive. It is remarkable, for instance, that the economy is so salient in the minds of Asian Americans even before the failure of Lehman Brothers in September 2008 and the subsequent financial crisis. For instance, although 53 percent of Asian Americans ranked the economy as the top issue among those interviewed in August 2008, only 36 percent of the general population did so according to other polls (Roper Center, 2008).



Issue Preferences

In addition to using surveys like the NAAS to help define the policy priorities for Asian Americans, the NAAS is also useful to monitor the substantive positions Asian Americans hold on key policy issues. Here too the results can be illuminating and even unexpected. To illustrate, we highlight our findings on three issue areas: health care, immigration, and abortion. Regarding health care, Asian Americans exhibited strong levels of support for universal health care: more than 80 percent approved of “the government guaran-

teeing health care for everyone.” These numbers were much higher than the national average of 60 percent to 64 percent in 2007 and 2008 (Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, 2008; Toner and Elder, 2007). Moreover, this strong support held across all national origin groups. Even among Vietnamese-American respondents, who were most likely to identify with the Republican Party, 89 percent supported universal health care (Wong et al., 2011).

In regard to immigration, given the U.S. Senate’s prior consideration of legislation that would give greater weight to professional skills and reduce the number of family reunification visas, NAAS respondents were asked whether they agreed with this potential policy change. Roughly one in two respondents supported such a move, with 22 percent opposing and 29 percent unsure. This moderately high support is striking given that many Asian American advocacy groups actively oppose such a policy shift (Asian American Justice Center 2009; Narasaki 2007). Indian-, Chinese-, and Filipino-Americans (groups with generally more high-skilled professionals) were particular likely to support this policy shift.

Finally, when it came to abortion, Asian Americans tended to be relatively liberal, with 35 percent of NAAS respondents supporting the legalization of abortion “in all cases,” compared to 17 percent of the general American public in other polls (Smith and Pond, 2008). This is perhaps not surprising given the relatively higher proportion of secular Asian Americans. We further find that those who self-identify as Evangelical or born-again Christians are less likely to support legal abortions in all cases than their non-Evangelical or born-again counterparts (28% vs. 40%). Between national origin groups, Vietnamese are the least pro-choice, a finding that is in line with their high numbers of conservatives, Republicans, and religious Catholics.

Moving the Asian American Policy Agenda Forward

These policy items clearly show a distinctive and internally diverse Asian American policy profile that is often missing from debates and decisions regarding issues that affect Asian Americans. Representative and accurate survey data is also critical to a fuller picture of the extent to which Asian Americans are able to voice their political views and act on behalf of their political interests. Given the disproportionate underrepresentation of Asian Americans in elected and appointed offices of government, de-

mands for greater representation and accountability also depend vitally on the political engagement and empowerment of Asian Americans. Here exit polls and data from the Current Population Survey consistently show that Asian Americans “underparticipate” relative to whites, but we have little systematic and reliable data about why some vote while others do not, or about how engaged Asian Americans are in a variety of other modes of participation beyond voting.

Analysis of the NAAS shows that voting is by far the most common form of political participation (outside of talking with one’s friends and family about politics). Importantly, beyond voting, Asian Americans are engaged in a variety of other modes of political action, from other aspects of institutionalized electoral politics like contributing to a candidate, party, or other campaign organization (13%) and contacting a public official (9%) to politics through working with others in their communities to solve a problem (21%), engaging online (12%), and protesting (4%).

Some individuals participate in more than one activity. In the NAAS, we can identify nearly one in ten adults as “superparticipants”: those who engaged in at least five of the following ten political activities surveyed in the NAAS: registering to vote, voting in the last presidential election, voting in the 2008 primaries and caucuses, campaigning, donating money, contacting one’s elected official, working with others in the community, engaging in online politics, protesting, and taking part in the 2006 immigration protests. These superparticipants are more likely to be male, native-born, highly resourced (in terms of education, income, and homeownership), and members of civic organizations. More pointedly, superparticipants are more likely than others to hold liberal views on abortion rights and to oppose changing immigration policy in order to give greater priority to professional visas over family visas.⁶

Conclusion and Future Directions

This significant gap between the policy preferences of those who are political activists versus those who remain on the sidelines of politics is also a telling reminder that the political identity and voice of Asian Americans are invisible except through data-collection projects like the 2008 NAAS. Moreover, the findings from the 2008 NAAS presented in the preceding text represent just the tip of the iceberg. Among the many areas we have not touched on in this

Table 1. Frequency of Participatory Acts, by National Origin Group (in %)

	Asian Indian	Chinese	Filipino	Japanese	Korean	Vietnamese	Total
Registered to vote	43	52	61	63	49	60	54
Voted in 2004	33	39	48	55	37	51	42
Voted in 2008 primaries	42	45	53	53	35	39	45
Vote intention in 2008 ^a	76	67	69	82	84	80	74
Political talk with family/friends	71	71	63	72	73	58	68
Worked for campaign	3	3	5	4	3	3	3
Contributed money	12	11	17	18	11	7	13
Contacted politician	11	9	13	10	5	5	9
Community work	27	19	23	17	18	21	21
Online participation	13	14	11	5	17	7	12
Protest activity	4	4	4	3	3	8	4
2006 immigration marches	0.3	0.7	0.8	0.4	1.5	1.6	0.8
Home country politics	5	5	4	1	1	2	4

Note: ^a Percent of registered voters who reported being “absolutely” certain they would vote in the November elections.

brief include data on the prevalence and contexts of discrimination and hate crimes; in-language election materials; support for Asian American candidates; and common political ground with whites, African Americans, and Latinos. It is clear from our experience with the NAAS that the political opinions of Asian Americans are dynamic, diverse, and understudied. Whether through academic researchers, community advocates, or government agencies, it is

imperative to build on this effort and continue to work toward more complete and systematic data on Asian Americans' attitudes and behaviors. In particular, we believe future efforts, starting with 2012, should continue to refine survey methodology tailored to the AANHPI community, expand and update the range of policy areas examined, drill down and dig deeper into high-priority policy areas, and redouble efforts to survey groups that are often underrepresented within the AANHPI community (e.g., Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders; non-Vietnamese Southeast Asians; Middle Eastern, Muslim and South Asian communities; and multiracial Asians).

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the James Irvine Foundation, the Russell Sage Foundation, the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York for their support of the 2008 NAAS.

Notes

1. The NAAS includes adults in the United States who identify any family background from countries in Asia, exclusive of countries classified as the Middle East. Note that this distinction includes any family background from countries in East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Philippines, and South Asia. This sampling frame does not, however, explicitly target Native Hawaiians or Pacific Islanders.
2. The registered voters in our sample include 784 of Indian origin, 748 Chinese, 521 Vietnamese, 406 Filipinos, 388 Korean, and 340 Japanese. A total of 120 registered voters are categorized as "Other Asian American," which includes multiracial respondents as well as those outside the six largest ethnic origin groups.
3. For more information, please visit <http://www.naasurvey.com>.
4. For the analyses that follow, we weight our sample, using a poststratification raking procedure to reflect the balance of gender, nativity, citizenship status, length of stay in the United States, and educational attainment of the six largest national-origin groups in the United States as well as the proportion of these national-origin groups within each state. Some of the results presented here vary from the results presented in earlier reports we made in October 2008 as a result of final data collection and revised sampling weights.
5. Percentages exceed 100% because up to three answers were accepted.
6. Interestingly, there is no significant relationship between political activism and opinion on universal health care.

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