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## IN CONSIDERING THE POLITICAL BEHAVIOR OF ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN

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### Introduction

Cognizant of the multi-racial and multi-ethnic realities in the United States, research in political science is also highlighting the political experiences of certain segments of the U.S. population, such as those of women of color.<sup>1</sup> The sociopolitical context, which fuels the formation of political opinions, behaviors, and treatment of women of color, is heavily mediated by the intersection of their race, ethnicity, and gender identities (Smooth 2006; Hancock 2007). It is with such contextual and scholarly considerations that I provide an empirical understanding of the political attitudes and behaviors of Asian American women as political participants in the United States.

Currently, there is limited research that focuses on the political experience of Asian American women (please see Filler and Lien, and Sriram, from this volume, on discussion of Asian American women as electoral candidates). This is an unfortunate oversight since Asian Americans, as a whole, are the fastest growing racial group in the United States. According to the 2010 U.S. Census Redistricting Data, Asian Americans experienced a 46 percent growth since 2000, which is more than any other ethno-racial group (U.S. Census Bureau 2010b). Also specific within the Asian American community, Asian American women are distinct in some of their demographic and political characteristics. First, census data show that women make up of over half of those who are 18 years or older in the Asian American community.<sup>2</sup> Second, the Current Population Survey (CPS) from November 2012 indicates that among all Asian American women, who are citizens, close to two-thirds are registered to vote (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). However, given the large number of noncitizens (new immigrants) who are women, only a little over 38 percent of the overall Asian

American women population are registered voters (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). These numbers are significant because there has long been talk of a potential Asian American “voting bloc” during presidential elections (Tam 1995). Therefore, the political behavior and preferences of Asian American women raise normative questions about the significance of their role as voters in American electoral politics. The study of Asian American women, consequently, adds both a theoretical and normative dimension to an overall understanding of the political behavior of ethno-racial minorities in the United States.

This chapter highlights the political attitudes and behaviors of Asian American women voters and provides preliminary empirical evidence towards understanding their electoral preferences. There are two ways to get a sense of where Asian American women stand in the overall political spectrum of American politics. First is to consider the possibility of a gender gap in the political attitudes and behaviors within the Asian American community. The second is to examine how they compare in their political preferences to other women of color (i.e., Latinos and Blacks). A baseline in the political behaviors and preferences of Asian American women can be established through these comparisons. In addition, I also assess how current scholarship has conceptualized the politics of Asian American women, including the socio-political dimensions that set Asian Americans apart from other women of color.

## Deciphering the Demography and Politics of Asian American Women

Due to restrictive immigration policies, there has been a striking imbalance between the numbers of men versus women in the Asian American community for most of U.S. history.<sup>3</sup> Through the elimination of quota-based immigration in 1965, Asians were free to come to the United States through different means regardless of gender or country of origin. By the 1980s, the sex ratio within the Asian American community became balanced for the first time in U.S. history due to the influx of new Asian immigrants (Chow 1987). Today, there are approximately 14.7 million Asian Americans residing in the United States, and of which, over half are women (U.S. Census Bureau 2010a).<sup>4</sup>

In the context of Asian American political participation, some research has discussed whether there are gendered differences in the political behavior of individuals. Particularly in the work of Lien et al. (2004), they found that compared to other variables, “gender” is often *not* the strongest explaining factor for differences in individuals’ political behavior within the Asian American community. Instead, scholars need to look toward “the impact of ethnic culture, citizenship status, education context, and social network” for convincing explanations to these differences (Lien et al. 2004, 206). This echoes a previous study also by Pei-te Lien (1998) where she concludes that while gender is a significant predictor of political behavior by itself, it becomes far less salient when

considered in conjunction with race. Nevertheless, there are still instances when gender does appear to be a significant factor in interpreting political behavior and attitudes. For example, while there is little difference between men and women in terms of partisanship, as seen in the 2008 National Asian American Survey (NAAS), researchers did find a gender gap among partisan “non-identifiers” (Wong et al. 2011, 139). Specifically, 39 percent of women versus 30 percent of men are considered partisan “non-identifiers.” In this sense, more Asian American women seem to “reject the traditional tripartite partisan categorization” compared to men (Wong et al. 2011, 139). This result is significant because it implies that even more so than Asian American men, Asian American women do not think in traditional partisan terms that are familiar to most Americans.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, partisan identification, as a variable, should be reconsidered when used as a proxy for understanding the political behavior of Asian American women. More so than Asian American men, their lack of partisan affiliation may be a result of indifference rather than independence of the major ideologies and policies espoused by the Republican and Democratic Parties.

Another way that researchers have assessed the sociopolitical experiences of Asian American women is within the context of cross-racial political alliances. Loo and Ong (1982) highlight the failure of the second wave feminist movement to motivate working class women from San Francisco’s Chinatown into social and political action. While there were many explanations, including those that are cultural and structural, as to why the movement failed, the authors ultimately determine that Chinatown women perceived themselves as having more in common with Chinatown men than White activists, making an overall coalition of women a challenge (Loo and Ong 1982; Chow 1987).

Ultimately, Asian American women did not play a prominent role during the second wave feminist movement in or out of their ethnic enclaves (Chow 1987, 1989). It was not surprising given that the sociopolitical concerns of Asian American women were arguably different from those of White women. These differences contributed to the lack of consciousness and political activism (Chow 1987, 293). Additionally, there was an absence of dialogue between Asian American women and activists in terms of grievances, needs, and goals (Chow 1987, 1989). Therefore, Asian American women and other women of color were not well represented in the feminist movement, which was led and focused on predominately White, middle-class issues (Yamada 1981; Loo and Ong 1982; Dill 1983; Chow 1987, 1989).

Given the lack of connection between women of color and White women, scholars point out that solidarity between women of color, instead, might be viable since this population shares “the triple oppression of race, class, and gender” (Lien 2001, 218).

Studies that assess the sociopolitical relationship between women of color have generated interesting and complex results. First, scholarship suggests that there are indeed applicable shared experiences between women of color, such as the

working conditions of the sweatshop industry, whose labor force is dominated by Latina and Asian American women (Kwong 1997; Silliman et al. 2004). These commonalities are potential seeds for cooperation. Second, research, however, also argues that Asian American women do not necessarily find solidarity with other women of color (or even White women). This is because, according to Lien (2001), “differences in education, income, socialization, acculturation, group consciousness, and identity, and other factors may also set apart their political choices from those other immigrant and U.S.-born women” (218–219). Other marked variances include that Asian American women are more likely to be foreign-born compared to women in other racial groups (Chow 1987; Lien 2001). Furthermore, recent studies commissioned by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) also show that Asian women, while still lacking income parity compared to White men and Asian American men, have out-earned Black women, Latinas, and even White women (Benson 2013). Third, those who have written on the topic of community organizing, especially from the perspective of a community activist, focus on the ability of the organizer to formulate an effective activist collaboration (Sen 1997). This type of perspective redirects the assessment of coalition formation among women of color from structural barriers (such as intrinsic difference in terms of socioeconomic status) to the talents and perception of community organizers.

A study by Nadia Brown (2014) examines assumptions in political science about individual resources and political activities to further illustrate the similarities and differences in political activism among women of color. For example, Brown finds that women with more education and income (Asian and White women) are actually more likely to engage in nontraditional forms of politics (e.g., sign a petition, march in a protest, participate in a boycott) compared to Black women or Latinas. This runs contrary to expectations given what scholars currently understand about the relationship between resources and different types of political participation.

Overall, there is limited research available on the political experiences of Asian American women; literature in this area also shows a complex and often contradictory picture of political activism. At this point, there is still a gap in our knowledge of the political behavior and attitudinal preferences of Asian American women. Literature has shown that their political activism (or the lack thereof) cannot be explained through a conventional understanding in political science. Furthermore, the possibility of political alliances among women of color seems mixed and largely unexamined for a variety of reasons discussed in this section. While the socioeconomic status (SES) of Asian American women today is vastly different from Asian immigrants who lived in the United States prior to 1965, they still share common sources of social and political oppression as other communities of women of color. In theory, the gendered aspect of their identity is what sets Asian American women apart from men in their ethno-racial community. However, the relatively high level of education and

the high number of foreign-borns among Asian American women are just a few of the many reasons they are distinct in their political preferences and behaviors compared to other communities of women of color.

## **Assessing Asian American Women's Political Behavior and Attitudes**

I assess several aspects of political behavior and attitudes of Asian American women as compared to Asian American men and other women of color with the 2008 Collaborative Multi-racial Post-election Study (CMPS). This dataset is uniquely appropriate because it is a national telephone survey of registered voters that includes representative samples of African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and Whites. The survey was conducted between November 9, 2008 and January 5, 2009, after the 2008 presidential elections. The sample was drawn from a list of registered voters in the 18 states where there are higher concentrations of non-White minorities. The survey had an overall return of 4,563 respondents and 2,713 are women. After breaking down by race and gender, there are 753 Latinas, 451 Asian American women, and 430 Black women. The results and findings here are mainly exploratory to help situate an understanding of Asian American women voters in the context of ethnic and gender politics.

I examine two broad categories of political outcomes for Asian Americans and among women of color. The first category of dependent variables is those associated with various political acts, such as party identification, turnout, vote choice in the 2008 presidential election, political volunteering, campaign donations, and participation in protest activities. The second category of dependent variables focuses on political attitudes of issues that may unite communities of women of color, such as citizenship for unauthorized aliens and in-state college tuition for DREAMers. The independent variables are gender and race.

### ***Key Dependent Variables***

Several political acts are chosen for discussion in this chapter and each are selected as points of research interests in the political experience of Asian American women. First, partisanship is tested and examined as prior studies by Wong et al. (2011) have raised the question of whether Asian American women are in fact more “non-partisan” than Asian American men. Acknowledging how partisanship influences (or does not influence) Asian Americans has theoretical and empirical implications. Furthermore, as competition in American politics continues and presidential candidates from both major parties find it necessary to “court” minority communities with favorable policies (McIlwain and Caliendo 2011; Brownstein 2013), an understanding of turnout (if Asian Americans go to the polls) and who they have supported in past presidential

elections are significant aspects in deciphering the potential “Asian American Voting Bloc.” In addition, I also include three measures of political participation – volunteering, donations, and participation in protest – as these variables measure a variety of political behaviors. The first two are considered “traditional” forms of participation, and as such, they should be more easily attained by those who have higher socioeconomic status and more “resources” (Verba et al. 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen 2003). Past research and census data have shown Asian American women to be the most progressive earners and have the highest education level among women, on average. Compared to other women of color, they should also be the most engaged in these forms of political activities. Finally, one measure of “non-traditional” or “resource poor” political activity is included in the analysis as Nadia Brown’s (2014) article finds that resource rich women (White and Asian American women) are more likely to participate in “resource poor” political activities, such as participating in a protest. Her finding challenges conventional understanding of the linkage between SES and participation in different kinds of political activities. This is a good opportunity to reexamine this contradiction between theory and data results.

The second broad category of dependent variables examines political attitudes of Asian Americans and women of color on various controversies and issues. Both measures are related to citizenship/immigration. An alliance between women (and women of color) is often understood in the context of social movements and social justice issues (Tronto et al. 1997; Silliman et al. 2004). Therefore, both variables were selected based on their potential to gauge individual opinion on these issues and provide a preliminary assessment of the possibility for political alliances.

## **Methods**

A series of crosstabs were generated to examine the relationship between gender and different aspects of political behavior and attitudes. Race is controlled for and a chi-square test was used to determine the goodness of fit between dependent and independent variables. Also, for the purpose of my analysis, survey questions with answers that measure the strength of responses (e.g., strongly agree, somewhat agree) were collapsed into fewer categories that convey positive, neutral, or negative feelings.

## **Dynamics of Political Participation for Asian American Women**

### ***Partisanship***

I first look at party identification across groups of women of color and that of within the Asian American community. As seen in [Table 5.1](#), survey results from the 2008 CMPS show that there are proportionally more Democrats versus Republicans among women of color. Specifically, Black women overwhelmingly

**TABLE 5.1** Partisanship Affiliation Based on Race/Gender (%)

	<i>Latino Women</i> ( <i>n</i> = 753)	<i>Asian Women</i> ( <i>n</i> = 451)	<i>Black Women</i> ( <i>n</i> = 430)	<i>Asian Men</i> ( <i>n</i> = 478)
Republican	14.7	20	2.6	24.3
Democrat	57.8	40.1	72.6	34.9
Independent	11.2	16.2	10.9	23.8
Others	0.4	0.7	0.7	0.4
Don't think in these terms	12.1	16.9	10.9	13

identify with the Democratic Party (72.6 percent) and over half of Latina respondents identify with the Democrats (57.8 percent). Asian American women are also mostly Democrats (40.1 percent) but close to 17 percent also said that they “don’t think in these [partisan] terms.” In this sense, Asian American women have the highest proportion of “non-partisans” of any of the groups that were compared. When looking at the gender differences that exist among all Asian Americans surveyed, there are proportionally more Asian American women who identify with the Democratic Party or as “non-partisans.”

### ***Turnout and Vote Choice***

Respondents of the 2008 CMPS have a very high turnout rate during the 2008 November elections – over 90 percent of those surveyed said they had voted during the midterm/presidential elections. These numbers seem incredibly high but there are several possible explanations for that. First, the survey was sampled through a population of registered voters and during a presidential election year, which usually corresponds to higher turnout rates because of its high profile (Hill and Leighley 1999; The Center for Voting and Democracy 2014). Second, the 2008 presidential elections were historic due to the candidacy of Barack Obama, who became the first African American president of the United States. And third, the social desirability effect of voting generates inflation on self-reported turnout rates (Burden 2000; Holbrook and Krosnick 2009). In contrast, data published by the U.S. Census on the November 2012 elections (also a presidential election year) show a turnout of 48.5 percent for Asian American registered women voters (U.S. Census Bureau 2012).

During the 2008 presidential elections, two-thirds of women of color voted for Barack Obama. Black women, not surprisingly, were overwhelmingly supportive with close to 90 percent of those surveyed indicating that they voted for Obama. Of all three groups of women, Asian American women had the highest proportion of supporters for John McCain. And compared to Asian American women, Asian American men showed more support for McCain (31.9 percent). Even so, over half of Asian American male respondents said they voted for Barack Obama.

### ***Political Volunteering and Donations***

When considering the political participation of minorities, results from the 2008 CMPS show that most respondents have not volunteered at a political campaign. Among Black women, approximately 15 percent responded positively about volunteering, while Latinas, Asian American women, and Asian American men all had fewer than 10 percent of respondents who had volunteered.

As for donating money to a candidate or an electoral campaign, over 20 percent of both Black women and Asian American women respondents said that they have made donations. There were proportionally fewer Asian American men who have donated to campaigns compared to Asian American women. And Latinas had the least proportion of political donors with approximately 13 percent indicating that they made political contributions during the 2008 electoral season.

### ***Protest Activities***

Results from 2008 CMPS show no clear variance between participation in political protests in all groups. Overall, few respondents mentioned to have participated in protests in the 12 month period leading up to the time of the survey (late 2008, early 2009).

### ***Attitude on Awarding Citizenship to Undocumented Immigrants***

Next, I turn to political attitudes on controversial political topics in the United States. Looking at respondents' opinions on whether undocumented immigrants should qualify for U.S. citizenship under certain circumstances, Latina respondents stood out to be overwhelmingly supportive of this policy position at over 91 percent. This is consistent with research that shows that Latinos are often politically galvanized through immigration-related issues and supportive of "liberal" immigration policies (Suro 2005; Leal et al. 2008). Furthermore, while all women of color surveyed are generally supportive (over two-thirds), Black women are more supportive of citizenship for unauthorized immigrants compared to Asian women. Among Asian Americans, men are less supportive than women of citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

### ***Attitude on In-State Tuition for DREAMers***

Another controversial topic in the recent years concerns DREAMers – usually understood as undocumented immigrant youths who were brought to the United States as children. Many entered the United States before the age of 16, have continued residency, and have graduated from U.S. high schools (or earned a GED) (Immigration Policy Center 2012). Analysis based on the 2008 CMPS demonstrates

that much like the question about citizenship for undocumented immigrants, Latinas are overwhelmingly supportive with close to 85 percent of those surveyed agreeing that DREAMers who graduated from U.S. high schools should qualify for in-state college tuition. Black women are also fairly supportive, with over two-thirds agreeing with the questionnaire statement. The Asian American community, both men and women, is generally supportive of this policy position but only at around 55 percent or so. There does not appear to be a marked gender difference of this issue for Asian Americans.

## Discussion

Preliminary results based on the 2008 CMPS offer several interesting perspectives on the political attitudes and behaviors of women of color and the possibility of gender-based differences within the Asian American community.

First, results on the partisanship of Asian American women are consistent with findings from previous studies. The high number of non-partisans among Asian American women further confirms the notion that Asian Americans cannot be motivated by political parties the same way as those who understand the political cues of parties as they are intended in the American context (Lien 2001; Lien et al. 2004; Wong et al. 2011). Additionally, based on statistical tests, observable differences between Asian American men and women on partisanship can be explained by their gender ( $p = 0.05$ ).

Second, results from the 2008 voter turnout and vote choice in the presidential elections give reasons to consider the power of descriptive representation to motivate political participation for racial minorities (Mansbridge 1999). And while Table 5.2 shows Asian American women to be more supportive of Barack Obama over John McCain compared to Asian American men, the chi-squared probability is greater than 0.05, leading to the conclusion that there is no real gender difference in the 2008 presidential election vote choice within the community.

Third, results from three aspects of political participation outside of voting (volunteering, donating money, and protest/demonstration activities) are mixed and without a clear pattern. Proportionally, Black women are the only group to have high numbers of political volunteers. Given the historic significance of the

**TABLE 5.2** 2008 Presidential Vote Choice by Race and Gender (%)

	<i>Latino Women</i> ( <i>n</i> = 753)	<i>Asian Women</i> ( <i>n</i> = 451)	<i>Black Women</i> ( <i>n</i> = 430)	<i>Asian Men</i> ( <i>n</i> = 478)
McCain	20.7	26.4	3.4	31.9
Obama	67.9	62.3	89.8	54.2
Someone else	2.4	1.2	0.7	2.1

2008 presidential elections for the Black community, it could be argued that Blacks, in general, were more motivated to participate. This seems to be confirmed by looking at the proportion of Black men (17.8 percent) who said they had volunteered (in the same survey). Less than 10 percent of Asian women, like Latinas and Asian American men, had volunteered.

In terms of political donations, Asian American women and Black women had the highest proportion of donors. While donations, similar to volunteering, are considered “resource rich” political activities, Black women, who are usually lower in SES compared to Asian women, actually donated at a higher proportion than other groups of women. Black women’s level of participation can likely be explained by the singularity of Obama’s candidacy in 2008. And while Asian American women seemed to donate more than Asian American men in the 2008 election cycle, statistical tests have shown that gender is not a significant source of variance between men and women in the Asian American community.

As for participation in protests and demonstrations, results from the survey show a lack of involvement and very little difference among all groups compared. The lack of variance runs contrary to previous research about who participates in protests and why they do so (Brown 2014).

Fourth, results from political attitudes on citizenship and immigration controversies highlight the prominence of these issues for Latinas. While Asian American women generally take a more “liberal” position towards immigration and citizenship, they trail behind Black women in terms of support. However, compared to Asian American men, statistical tests confirm gender to be a significant explanation ( $p < 0.05$ ) for differences on citizenship and immigration policy preferences within the Asian American community. Overall, women of color hold similar opinions on social justice related issues, especially those pertaining to immigration and citizenship. One possible explanation for common policy preferences may be traced to a mutual bond that many Latinas and Asian American women share as new immigrants and the histories of immigration in their ethnic communities. However, one can also argue that Black women and Latinas have a deeper connection due to struggles associated with low SES within their populations. I argue that these commonalities and differences among women of color need to be further unpacked to properly assess the possibilities of political coalition and alliances.

## Conclusion

The results seen in the 2008 CMPS on various aspects of political participation and political attitudes are preliminary indicators of political differences and similarities among women of color and the Asian American community. I conclude that the politics of Asian American women are unique in the sense that they are a group of women whose preferences are simultaneously affected by their socioeconomic status, their gender, and for many, their distinctive shared

history as an immigrant community. As a result, some of their political behaviors can be explained by existing research (e.g., relationship between partisanship and gender), while others are unique because of their exclusive experience at the intersection of their various identities (e.g., their support for a liberal immigration and citizenship policy for undocumented aliens).

Based on the limited analysis on political attitudes and behaviors, I argue that Asian American women usually see eye to eye with women of color on a variety of political matters. They often share similar predisposition in terms of partisanship, favorability of candidates, as well as key social justice issues. The option for alliance and support is likely possible among these women. At the same time, Asian American women can often find resonance for their political position *within* their racial community. Aside from Asian American women, Asian American men had the largest proportion of “non-partisans” according to the 2008 CMPS, which is likely explained by the high number of new immigrants, in general, within the community. It is unclear whether their history of immigration, gender, race, or some combination of all these variables, will come to define the political preferences and behavior of Asian American women in the long term.

In suggestion of future direction for research, any study on Asian Americans cannot preclude the possibility that political behaviors and preferences are a result of one’s *Asian-specific* ethnic identity. It is well understood in scholarship on Asian American politics that ethnicity is an important contributing factor to variances in political behavior (Lien 2001; Lien et al. 2004; Wong et al. 2011; Harvie and Lien 2016). Therefore, any future study on the political behavior and attitudes of Asian American women should take Asian ethnicities as a factor of analysis. Other contextual aspects for analysis include the process of political socialization in the receiving country (Jones-Correa 1998; Cho et al. 2006; Lien 2008) and the significance of homeland politics for immigrant individuals residing in the United States (Lien 2006).

Finally, it is also possible that survey data are ultimately limited in helping us understand *how* Asian American women form their political preferences. Other research methods, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, may serve to gather findings in addition to what we already know about the political experiences of Asian American women.

Appendix available online at [www.routledge.com/9781138958845](http://www.routledge.com/9781138958845).

## Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the 2015 Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association (New Orleans, LA). I thank Nadia Brown and Sarah Gershon for their insight and comments.
- 2 This is based on the 2013 American Community Survey (one-year estimates) published by the U.S. Census.

- 3 Even prior to the closing of Chinese immigration through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Chinese laborers already lived in what was characterized as a “bachelor society” due to the Page Law (meant to stem the tide of Chinese prostitutes). Particularly, U.S. governmental officials were prejudiced against Chinese female immigrants (Peffer 1999).
- 4 This number only includes those who identified as “Asian alone” in the U.S. Census.
- 5 In other words, the Democrat and Republican labels do not hold the same political implication for Asian Americans.

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