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Looking Ahead Post-Midterms:

Asian American Engagement in Politics

Esther Yoona Cho

A joint publication from Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative & Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society

The recent midterm elections represented a significant turning point for Asian Americans. In New York, Taiwanese American John Liu and Indian American Kevin Thomas became the first Asian Americans to be elected to the State Senate. My-linh Thai and Joe Nguyen of Washington were the first Vietnamese Americans to be elected into the state legislature. Kentucky elected its first Indian American state representative with Nima Kulkarni.

Studies have revealed that Asians are the fastest-growing racial group in the U.S., but Asian Americans have rarely been the focus in academic or public discourse on political participation. However, this group is a critical untapped voter base. The Asian American electorate is estimated to double from 5.9 million in 2015 to 12.2 million voters by 2040, according to Asian and Pacific Islander American (APIA) Vote. In general, given their collective capital and the extant research on the relationship between educational and socioeconomic background and electoral participation, we would expect that Asian Americans as a community would have high rates of voter turnout. However, instead, studies have shown that voter turnout among Asian Americans is lower compared to other minority groups.¹

Research by Christian Dyogi Phillips (Assistant Professor of Political Science at University of Southern California) and Taeku Lee (Professor of Political Science and Law at University of California, Berkeley) shows how the Asian American voting population looks different from the Black, Latino, and White

¹ Lien 2001; Wong et al 2011

For more, see Phillips, Christian Dyogi, and Taeku Lee. 2018. "Superficial Equality: Gender and immigration in Asian American political participation." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 6(3): 373-388.

Asians are the fastest-growing racial group in the U.S., but ... this group is a critical untapped voter base

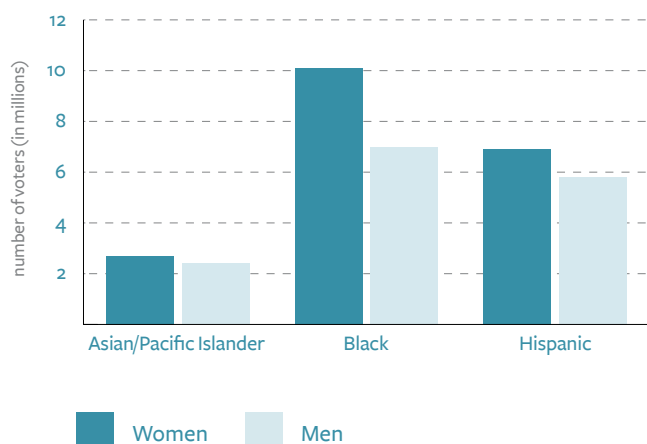
populations, particularly with regards to gender differences in political participation. Black, Latina, and white women have voted at higher rates than their co-racial male counterparts across the last three presidential elections.² We see the opposite trend with the Asian American population; women have voted at lower or roughly equal rates to Asian American men.

Using data from the 2008, 2012, and 2016 National Asian American Survey, Phillips and Lee examine what is behind these gender differences among the six largest Asian national origin groups: Chinese, Filipino, Indians, Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese. They examine how nativity status, educational level, and political mobilization shape multiple modes of political participation, such as presidential election turnout, contact with a government official, and talking with family and friends about politics. Phillips and Lee find that women and foreign-born individuals are less likely to vote, with foreign-born status significantly and negatively affecting the likelihood of Asian American women voter turnout. On the flip side, having some sort of exposure to political groups increases the likelihood to vote, just as much as being foreign-born decreases this likelihood. Having contact with a political campaign or organization is positively related to electoral participation for both men and women, regardless of foreign-born status. Further, as we would expect, higher educational levels increase the likelihood of voting regardless of gender and foreign-born status. However, highly educated foreign-born women are still less likely to vote compared

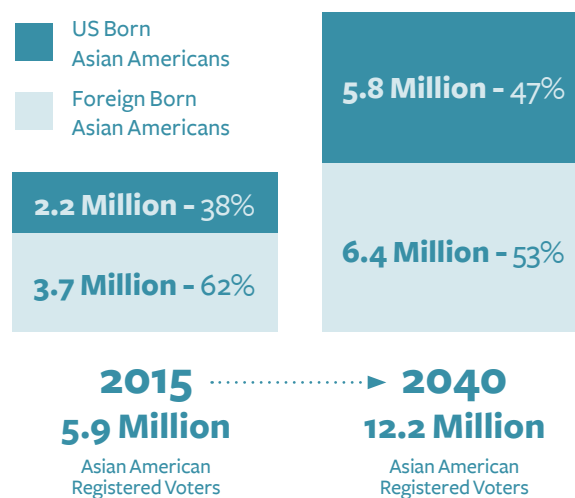
² CAWP 2017



Voter Turnout by Gender and Race in 2016 Presidential Election



Asian American Registered Voters by Nativity



to highly education foreign-born men. Given that roughly three-quarters of the adult Asian American population is foreign born, these gender differences raise significant questions about how resources translate into participation across gender and nativity.

In this work, Phillips and Lee underscore the importance of accounting for multiple demographic factors to understand the nuances of political participation and voter turnout. Being a woman or foreign-born, and how these two factors influence each other, affect voting rates among Asian Americans. We learn, moreover, that mobilization efforts can be effective in galvanizing the Asian American electorate, with the important caveat that baseline rates of contact from campaigns and other organizations involved in elections are lower for Asian American women than men.

These efforts must be tailored given the variation found in this research. Looking to the role of the Asian American voting population in future elections, there are therefore several policy implications. First, we must educate government officials on the potential force of

the Asian American voting bloc. Asian American voters are the fastest growing minority group in the country who have significant potential to shape the outcomes of elections, as well as future national, state, and local trajectories. Second, mindful that Asian Americans are a heterogeneous population representing a myriad of languages and cultures, both civic organizations and government bodies must invest resources in mobilization and outreach efforts to grow Asian American political participation. Despite limited resources, community-based and grassroots groups must engage in similar endeavors, and donors must target their aid for these efforts. Particularly in order to reach foreign-born non-native English speakers, outreach must be localized to specifically tailor information to the constituents in the vicinity. Furthermore, there is scant attention given to accurately carrying out obligations to provide ballots and other election materials that are correctly translated into Asian languages. In order to ensure that voters can participate in the electoral process, all materials must be translated with care. In conversations about minority and women representation, Asian Americans and Asian American women in particular must not be overlooked.

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About the Author

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Esther Yoona Cho is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley and Graduate Fellow at the UC Berkeley Institute for the Study of Societal Issues. Prior to joining the doctoral program, she worked on education research at the Social Science Research Council and the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development. She holds a B.A. in International Comparative Studies from Duke University and a Ed.M. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her intellectual journey has been motivated by her passion for understanding and eradicating stratification structures that disenfranchise immigrant and refugee populations. As a scholar, her broad research agenda centers on invisible stigmas and intersectional identities. Her current project, as such, explores intersections of race and illegality by examining the camouflaged community of Asian undocumented immigrants. Her published work has been featured in the *Russell Sage Foundation Journal of Social Sciences*, the *Asian American Law Journal*, and the *New York Times*.