Partisanship, Issue Importance, and Interest in Politics: Examination of the Political Behavior of Chinese Americans in 2008 and 2016

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Abstract

This study examines the political behavior of Chinese Americans during the 2008 and 2016 election years, focusing on partisanship, issue importance, and political engagement. Utilizing theories such as Social Identity, Cognitive Dissonance, Issue Ownership, immigration assimilation, and racial consciousness, it analyzes how these frameworks influence political participation. Data sourced from the National Asian American Survey (NAAS) revealed limitations due to the scope of election years covered and sample size, impacting the statistical significance of findings. Despite these constraints, the research enriches our understanding of Chinese Americans' political dynamics and suggests directions for future, more detailed investigations.

Opening

In the ever-evolving landscape of American politics, the role of ethnic minorities in shaping electoral outcomes and policy preferences has garnered increasing academic attention. Among these groups, Asian Americans represent a particularly intriguing from their growing political participation and distinctive socio-political orientations. There have been many studies investigating the political behavior of Asian Americans as a whole, but few have examined the specific political behavior of many Asian sub-groups, notably Chinese Americans, the largest Asian American ethnic origin group, accounting for 22% of the total Asian adult population (Ruiz, Noe-Bustamante, and Shah 2023). Masuoka, Ramanathan, and Junn (2019) argue that national origin differences have not been fully accounted for in previous explanations of Asian American political participation. In response, this research study is dedicated to examining the political behavior of Chinese Americans, specifically focusing on the interplay between partisanship, issue importance, and political engagement during the pivotal election years of 2008 and 2016.

A myth that intrigues me, aside from the party identifications of Chinese Americans, is the increasing visibility of Chinese Trump supporters, often referred to as “Chinese MAGAs,” on the internet. Many of these individuals are recently naturalized citizens who hold conservative views on race and ethnic relations, taxation, immigration, and LGBTQ+ issues. Despite belonging to a minority group and having once been immigrants themselves, they express opposition to the policies and ideologies typically associated with the Democratic Party. Interestingly, although these individuals have benefited from Democratic policies, their naturalization appears to coincide with a growing disapproval of the party. While the motivations behind their shift in party identification are not the primary focus of this paper, my analysis aims to investigate if Chinese Americans are "turning Red," transitioning their party identification from the Democratic to the Republican Party, if yes, then to what extent?

Lastly, in the dataset I utilized for my research inquiries, the National Asian American Survey (NAAS), Chinese Americans had a surprisingly low response rate on many of the more sensitive political issues as compared to the rest of the Asian American Group. I have included several variables to investigate if their low response rate is associated with their interest in politics, and their tendency to participate in demonstrations or sign petitions. I will also discuss the possible reasons for their reservedness in the discussion section.

To summarize, the major research inquiries for this study are as follows: First, has there been a change in the party identification of Chinese Americans from 2008 to 2016? Second, during the 2016 Presidential Election, to what extent did Chinese Americans prefer Donald Trump over the Republican Party? Third, which issues are closely associated with the party identifications of Chinese Americans? Lastly, what factors contribute to the low response rate of Chinese Americans in politics?

Review of Literature

Scholars studying the political behavior of specific groups often focus on vote choice rather than party identification, given that partisanship has been relatively stable and consistent among non-Asian/Latino groups for a considerable period. Zheng (2019) claims that vote choices at various administrative levels—presidential and congressional—reflect shifts in political attitudes. However, vote choice does not necessarily reflect partisanship, as partisan loyalties influencing voting behavior can fluctuate over time, making them an insufficient measure for fully understanding the political behavior of Asian Americans. Zheng (2019) also suggests that party identifications serve as both a form of political attachment and a psychological orientation to political participation (Verba and Nie 1972). It is important to note that, however, while partisanship may convey a general political stance among parties, it does not guarantee alignment on specific policy positions under various administrations.

Party identification, or partisanship, is a fundamental aspect of political behavior (Campbell et al., 1960). What factors influence party identification? Verba and Nie (1972) suggest that it is a cumulative choice shaped by an individual’s policy preferences, socioeconomic characteristics, and political expectations. Specifically, I have delineated three categories of theories that explain party identification: Sociological, Psychological, and Rational Choice theories. These will be explored in detail in the subsequent sections of this paper.

*Sociological Theories*

The Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals choose their political party based on the social groups they identify with, such as class, religion, race, or ethnicity. People tend to support the party they perceive represents their group's interests and values (Greene, 2004).

*Psychological Theories*

There are two models from the psychological aspect that approach party identification. The first would be familial transmission, suggesting that party identification develops at an early age, largely through the influence of parents, is remarkably stable throughout life, is relatively unaffected by short-term forces, and acts as a central organizing force for other political perceptions and preference (Franklin, 1984). Bell and Kandler (2015) also find that party identification is substantially heritable; and there is empirical support for a model in which genetic and environmental factors influence political orientations, which in turn affect party identification. The second model would be Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 1957) which refers to one's internal need for consistency in their beliefs and attitudes. When facing conflicting information, people are likely to align with a party that reduces this psychological discomfort by confirming their pre-existing beliefs; Mullainathan and Washington (2009) have found support for the empirical relevance of cognitive dissonance to political attitudes.

*Rational Choice Theories*

There are two theories using the rational choice perspective to interpret voter party identifications. Downs (1957) suggested that theorized that rational voters choose a party to maximize their utility from voting for that party, in other words, party identification is a result of careful consideration of which party will best serve the voter's interests. The other theory, the Issue Ownership Theory, developed by Petrocik (1996), is a theory of voting that emphasizes the role of campaigns in setting the criteria for voters to choose between candidates. It expects candidates to emphasize issues on which they are advantaged, and their opponents are less well regarded. Banda (2019) made one further step, ​​defining issue ownership theory as the idea that candidates should focus on the issues associated with their parties, and avoid issues owned by an opposing party. In real-life politics, the theory suggests that voters associate certain issues with certain parties (for example, Democrats with healthcare, and Republicans with tax reliefs and abortion). Voters then tend to support the party that they believe has the best policies or solutions for the issues they care most about.

*Applicability of Popular Theories for Asian Americans*

Existing literature on the partisanship of Asian Americans primarily engages with general theories that explain party identification across entire electorates. Among the theories outlined previously, Social Identity Theory, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, and Issue Ownership Theory are particularly pertinent for examining party identification among Asian Americans.

For Social Identity Theory, Leung’s (2021) study on Asian American Candidate Preferences in California discovers that Asian Americans have strong national-origin preferences. In cases where there is an Asian candidate of a differing national origin, party preference becomes more important than Asian Identity preference.

In terms of Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Lenz (2012) indicates that voters tend to change their attitudes and policy preferences to conform with their preferred party. For example, the Richauldhuri (2018) study argues that Asian Americans develop Democratic preferences through interactions within peer groups, adhering to the psychological group’s party preference to reduce their psychological discomfort, which is the reason many Asian Americans adopt conservative ideology but vote for Democrats, because they perceive contemporary Republicans as ideologically extreme and aligning themselves with the Democratic Party produces in group psychological discomfort.

Regarding Issue Ownership Theory, Verbal and Nie (1972) conclude that policy preferences are a fundamental component of political involvement and partisan orientation, this is particularly true for Asian American voters. Traditional indicators such as socioeconomic status often fail to accurately predict party identification among Asian Americans, largely because this group is predominantly composed of foreign-born individuals who exhibit diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and interpret socioeconomic factors differently (Tam, 1995; Hajnal and Lee, 2011).

Examining Asian Americans’ attitudes on pivotal societal issues and comparing their preference of party, is thus an appropriate measure of their partisanship.

*Immigrant/Asian American-Specific Theories*

Theories that seek to explain general party identifications overlook how culture and racism play a role in affecting the party identifications of Asian Americans and Chinese Americans. Gordon and Barron (1964), in their study of immigration assimilation research, argued that immigrants’ patterns of political behavior are rooted in the combination of cultural norms and values that they brought over from their countries of origin and cumulative domestic experiences. This is connected to my investigation of the low response rate of Chinese American survey respondents in all 3 NAAS surveys, Asian Americans, as one of the largest and fastest-growing immigrant-based ethnic communities, have lower political participation rates, as well as demonstrated by many public opinion surveys (Wong, Lien, and Conway, 2005).

Racial consciousness, concurrently, significantly influences the political behavior of Asian Americans. Wong, Lien, and Conway (2005) have discovered a positive correlation between racial consciousness and political participation, noting that it directly affects Asian Americans' party identification. Furthermore, Masuoka (2006) observed that experiences of discrimination tend to lead Asian Americans to favor the Democratic Party. Similarly, Kuo, Malhotra, and Mo (2016) found that perceptions of ethnic exclusion from mainstream American society often drive Asian Americans to align with the Democratic Party. These insights underline the profound impact of racial dynamics on political affiliations within this community.

In summary, this literature review has identified the Social Identity Theory, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Issue Ownership Theory, Gordon (1964)’s immigration assimilation model, and Wong, Lien, and Conway (2005)’s concept of racial consciousness as the most pertinent theoretical frameworks for analyzing the political behaviors of Chinese Americans. These theories, each addressing different aspects of political engagement, collectively offer a collective understanding of how Chinese Americans participate in politics. By integrating these diverse perspectives, this study aims to provide a comprehensive explanation of the varying degrees and forms of political participation observed among Chinese Americans. This approach not only challenges but also enriches the existing literature on political participation within the broader Asian American community. The subsequent data section identifies and selects variables that are well-suited for examining these theories. Detailed explanations of how these theories interact with the empirical data will be elaborated in the findings and discussion section.

Data

Dataset

I primarily use data from the 2016 Post-Election National Asian American Survey (NAAS), as well as the 2008 and 2016 Pre-Election NAAS, to assess the political behavior of Chinese Americans in 2008 and 2016. My analyses rely principally on several key variables: Party Identification (2008 and 2016, presented in Figure 1), Presidential Vote Choice (compared to party identification, presented in Figure 2), Respondent’s opinion toward 3 issues: ethnic relations, transgender, and education (Table 1-3) and how are they associated with Chinese Americans’ partisanship. Lastly, three special variables to investigate Chinese Americans’ low response rate toward political questions: interest in politics, political activity in their home country prior to emigration, and participation in demonstrations/rallies (Table 4-6).

Findings

Figure 1. Visual Presentation of Asian American and Chinese American Party Identification in 2008 and 2016

Source: 2008 and 2016 Post-Election National Asian American Survey (NAAS).

Figure 1 directly responds to my first research question: “Are Chinese American voters turning Red?”; based on the data from 2008 and 2016 NAAS, 20.3% of the Chinese American respondents identify with the Republican Party in 2008, and 25.5% of the Chinese American respondents identify with the Republican Party in 2016. There has been a 5% increase in the percentage of Chinese Americans who identify themselves to be affiliated with the Republican Party. This is an evident contrast from Asian Americans, which has a 10% decrease in the percentage of Asian Americans who identify themselves to be affiliated with the Republican Party.

Figure 2. Presidential Vote Choice v.s. Party Identification of Chinese Americans in 2016.

Source: 2016 Post-Election National Asian American Survey.

Figure 2 presents the findings related to my second research question: Did Chinese Americans exhibit a stronger preference for Donald Trump or the Republican Party in the 2016 election? The data reveal that 35.7% of Chinese American respondents indicated that they voted for Donald Trump, whereas only 25.5% reported an identification with the Republican Party. This discrepancy suggests a higher preference for Trump as an individual candidate than for the party itself among this cohort. Given that the National Asian American Survey (NAAS) is designed to be nationally representative, these results imply that in 2016, a larger segment of the Chinese American population preferred Donald Trump over the Republican Party.

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| Table 1. Cross-tabulation of Party Identification and Opinions on School Quality (Chinese American) | | | | | | | | |
|  | Opinion: School Quality | | | | | | | |
|  | | | Doesn’t Matter | Not Very Serious | Quite Serious | Very Serious | Refused | Total |
| Party Identification | Democratic | % within Party ID[[1]](#footnote-1) | 55.4% | 19.6% | 10.7% | 7.1% | 7.2% | 100% |
| Republican | % within Party ID | 63.2% | 10.5% | 5.3% | 10.5% | 10.5% | 100% |
| Total | % within Party ID | 57.3% | 17.3% | 9.3% | 8% | 8.1% | 100% |

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| Chi-Square Test | Asymptotic Significance |
| Pearson Chi-Square | .751 |

Source: 2016 Post-Election National Asian American Survey (NAAS).

Table 1 presents a cross-tabulation of party identification and opinions on school quality among Chinese American respondents. A majority (55.4%) of Democratic respondents indicated that school quality "Doesn’t Matter" to them. This group also shows relatively lower levels of strong opinions on school quality, with 7.1% viewing it as "Very Serious". In contrast, Republican respondents are less likely to disregard school quality, with 63.2% stating it "Doesn’t Matter", but a higher proportion (10.5%) consider it "Very Serious". Overall, both groups have shown a very counter-intuitive disregard toward school quality. The Pearson Chi-Square test resulted in a value of 0.751. This indicates that there is no statistically significant association between party identification and the opinions on school quality among Chinese American respondents.

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| Table 2. Cross-tabulation of Party Identification and Opinions on Equal Rights (Chinese Americans) | | | | | | | | |
|  | Opinion: We have gone too far in pushing Equal Rights in this country | | | | | | | |
|  | | | Strongly Agree | Somewhat Agree | Neither | Somewhat Disagree | Strongly  Disagree | Total |
| Party Identification | Democratic | % within Party ID | 7.2% | 20.6% | 15.5 % | 27.8% | 28.9% | 100% |
| Republican | % within Party ID | 14.7% | 47.1% | 11.8% | 14.7% | 11.8% | 100% |
| Total | % within Party ID | 9.2% | 27.5% | 14.5% | 24.4% | 24.4% | 100% |

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| Chi-Square Test | Asymptotic Significance |
| Pearson Chi-Square | .013 |

Source: 2016 Post-Election National Asian American Survey (NAAS).

Table 2 provides a detailed view of how Chinese American respondents affiliated with different political parties perceive the progression of equal rights in the United States. A smaller portion of Democratic respondents (7.2%) strongly agree that the push for equal rights has gone too far, while many Democrats are either somewhat (27.8%) or strongly (28.9%) in disagreement with the statement, suggesting a prevalent pro-equal rights sentiment within the party. In contrast, a larger percentage of Republican respondents (14.7%) strongly agree with the statement. Nearly half (47.1%) somewhat agree. The Pearson Chi-Square test yields a value of 0.013, indicating that the differences in opinions across party lines are statistically significant.

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|  | | Table 3. Cross-tabulation of Party Identification and Opinions on Transgender (Chinese Americans) | | | | | | | | | | |
|  |  | | | Opinion: Transgender | | | | | | | | |
|  | | | | | Strongly Oppose | Oppose | Neither | Favor | Strongly  Favor | Refused | Total |
| Party ID | Democratic | | % within Party ID | | 28.7% | 17.5% | 9.3% | 12.0% | 26.9% | 5.6% | 100% |
| Republican | | % within Party ID | | 40.5% | 32.5% | 16.2% | 2.7% | 2.7% | 5.4% | 100% |
| Total | | % within Party ID | | 31.7% | 21.4% | 11.0% | 9.7% | 20.7% | 5.5% | 100% |

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| Chi-Square Test | Asymptotic Significance |
| Pearson Chi-Square | < .001 |

Source: 2016 Post-Election National Asian American Survey (NAAS).

Table 3 presents the distribution of opinions on transgender rights categorized by party identification among Chinese American respondents. It explores the degree to which respondents either oppose or favor transgender rights. A large portion of Democratic respondents exhibit more favorable attitudes toward transgender rights, with 26.9% strongly favoring and 12.0% favoring these rights. Support within the Republican cohort is considerably lower, with only 2.7% strongly favoring and an additional 2.7% favoring transgender rights. Combining responses from both groups, the total sample shows 31.7% strongly oppose and 21.4% oppose transgender rights, overall Chinese American respondents do not favor transgender rights. The Pearson Chi-Square test reports a value of < 0.001 indicates a statistically significant association between party identification and opinions on transgender rights among Chinese Americans.

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| Table 4. Chinese American: Interest in Politics | | | | |
|  | Not Interested | Somewhat Interested | Interested | Very Interested |
| Percent | 21.1% | 39.3% | 25.8% | 13.9% |

Source: 2016 Post-Election National Asian American Survey.

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| Table 5. Ever Attended a Protest/Demonstration/Rally? | | |
|  | Yes | No |
| Chinese Americans | 7.9% | 92.1% |
| Asian Americans | 10.5% | 89.5% |

Source: 2016 Pre-Election National Asian American Survey.

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| Table 6. Ever Signed a Petition? | | |
|  | Yes | No |
| Chinese Americans | 18.4% | 81.6% |
| Asian Americans | 28.1% | 71.9% |

Source: 2016 Pre-Election National Asian American Survey.

To examine if Chinese Americans’ low response rate in Politics has something to do with their interest in politics, or history of political participation, I initially selected three variables: Interest in Politics, Participation in Demonstrations, and lastly home country political involvement. Table 4 presents interest levels among Chinese Americans in politics: 21.1% are not interested, 39.3% are somewhat interested, 25.8% are interested, and 13.9% are very interested. This suggests that a substantial proportion of Chinese Americans express at least some interest in politics. Table 5 reveals that only 7.9% of Chinese Americans have ever attended a protest, demonstration, or rally, compared to 10.5% of the broader Asian American population. Finally, Table 6 indicates that 18.4% of Chinese Americans have signed a petition, which is lower than the Asian American average of 28.1%.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from Figure 1 suggest a 5% increase in the percentage of Chinese American survey respondents who identify as Republicans. However, I have limited confidence in reporting that Chinese Americans have become more affiliated with the Republican Party, given the lack of data collection from the NAAS in the years 2004 and 2012. Without information about the party identification of Chinese Americans in these two years, I find it difficult to tell if the 5% change is a fluctuation or a constant increase since 2004. The findings from Table 2, that less than 50% of the Chinese American survey respondents agree with the progression of the equal rights movement in this country; and Table 3 that only a bit over 30% of the Chinese American respondents favor transgender rights, is consistent with the Richauldhuri (2018) study that Chinese Americans, like many Asian Americans, presents a mix of conservative ideology and liberal policy preferences.

The findings from Table 1 are very striking to conventional understandings of Chinese Americans’ attitude toward education, and the intuition that Chinese American parents who care about education are more likely to be Republicans (Dirks 2023, Ruiz, Noe-Bustamante, and Shah 2023). Over 70% of the respondents claimed that school quality does not matter to them, and the opinion on school quality is not associated with party identification. This is a significant finding as it challenges the traditional view of Chinese American parents. However, data from additional sources and years should be considered to verify the accuracy of this new insight.

The findings from Table 4-6 suggest that while Chinese Americans do show varying levels of interest in politics, this does not uniformly translate into active political participation. The lower rates of involvement in demonstrations and petition signing might reflect both cultural and structural factors that influence how this community engages with the political process. Even though the Chinese American respondents are already naturalized citizens, they still contain many of the characteristics and attitudes toward politics found in their Chinese counterparts from their homeland. This is consistent with the Gordon and Barron (1964) immigration assimilation research that immigrants’ patterns of political behavior are rooted in the combination of cultural norms and values that they brought over from their countries of origin and cumulative domestic experiences; as well as the Lien (2010) study which argues that the pre-emigration socialization context for immigrants may affect their participation in politics.

Historically, China has been a center for innovative political thought, dating back to the Warring States period when early political philosophers from various competing states experimented with diverse ideas. In the Song Dynasty, Wang Anshi’s innovative “New Policies” influenced Roosevelt’s New Deal a thousand years later. However, China has also experienced frequent crackdowns on political expression, from the notorious Burning of the Books and Burying of the Scholars in 213 BCE (USC U.S.-China Institute, 2008) to the Cultural Revolution, and more recently, the demonstrations against Covid policies in Ürümqi and Shanghai. While the Chinese people recognize the value of political expression, they also remain cautious of the potential repercussions associated with it.

Lastly, to examine the major party identification of Chinese Americans, and the factors associated with their partisanship, I have excluded the independent or non-party-affiliate respondents from my data analysis. As a matter of fact, in all 3 NAAS datasets, the proportion of Asian Americans identifying as independents has reached nearly or over half; and percentages of Chinese Americans who identify as independents have reached nearly 70% across all three surveys in 2008 and 2016. This conforms with the findings from Hajnal and Lee (2006, 2011) that Asian Americans, as compared to other major ethnic groups, have less tendency to identify with the Democratic Party or Republican Party.

An important limitation of the NAAS is that it only includes data from 2008 and 2016, also, for many of the questions from the survey, the amount of people responding was too little that it could not produce a statistically significant finding. Although the three datasets are all nationally representative, a dataset with a larger sample of Chinese Americans could improve the accuracy of the findings found in this dataset, specifically the issue regarding Chinese Americans’ attitude toward education, and their change in party identifications. The recent federal revisions to Statistical Policy Directive No. 15: Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity (Orvis 2024), allow for further collection of the nation of origin of a survey respondent under the most basic ethnicity column allow for the creation of such dataset in the future.

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1. In this article, "Party ID" is used as shorthand for "Party Identification" and will be consistently referred to as such throughout. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)