

A Reporter on Race and Andrew Yang

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Body

He ran on saving workers from automation, but also leaned into issues of race and representation.

Andrew Yang, the Taiwanese-American businessman whose campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination exceeded expectations for a political newcomer, dropped out of the race this week after an eighth-place finish in the New Hampshire primary.

Mr. Yang pitched himself as an entrepreneurial problem solver on a quest to save America from automation. But as an Asian-American candidate, issues of race and representation became factors in his candidacy, especially as rivals like Julián Castro, Kamala Harris and Cory Booker dropped out and the field winnowed to a handful of white front-runners.

I asked my colleague Matt Stevens, who covered Mr. Yang's campaign, about those dynamics, and he said that Mr. Yang had told him that leading with race and identity was not "necessarily the most helpful way to move any community forward."

I was also interested in what it was like for Matt, as a Korean-American, to report on a candidate who drew support from Asian-Americans but at times leaned into stereotypes on the campaign trail. Here's our conversation:

What did Andrew Yang's entry into the race mean for Asian-Americans? And how they are viewing his exit?

At first, I think, not much. Mr. Yang filed his paperwork to enter the race in the fall of 2017, but he didn't generate any buzz until our colleague Kevin Roose wrote about his campaign months later. And even then, it took an appearance on Joe Rogan's podcast in 2019 for people to really start to learn his name.

Because, in the beginning, he was talking so much about the automation of jobs held by the white working class (truckers, for example), and because the audience for podcasts like Mr. Rogan's is mostly white men, white men formed the base of his support.

But as college students and other young voters started taking notice, Asian-Americans began showing up at his events in significant numbers. They were not shy about telling me that they were drawn to him in part because of his race. And in general, I think his supporters -- Asian-American and otherwise -- are sad he dropped out, but confident that this isn't the last they'll hear from him.

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Do you think race was a reason he lasted longer than other candidates? Was the #YangGang diverse?

The Yang Gang certainly became diverse, both racially and ideologically. He attracted Trump voters and Bernie Sanders supporters and everyone in between.

Research from AAPI Data has shown that as Mr. Yang's campaign grew, so did financial support from Asian-Americans. And money keeps a campaign viable. But I think he hung on so long, mostly because it was impossible to leave a town hall of his and not feel like he was genuinely normal, very likable and extremely concerned about the future. For many voters sick of politics as usual, that was more than enough.

He took some heat for saying "I am Asian, so I know a lot of doctors." What did Mr. Yang tell you about his use of Asian-American stereotypes?

There was probably no topic I talked more about with Mr. Yang than his handling of his Asian-American identity; and although I am sure some in his campaign found it frustrating, to their credit, Mr. Yang was always made available for an interview on the topic.

I'd boil his response down to a few prongs: He said repeatedly that he was proud of his background and was well aware that he was being seen as a representative of the community. He saw the jokes as a way he could differentiate himself in a crowded field.

There was one thing he told me in an interview for a story about his previous jobs that I think does a nice job of summing up his perspective: "I'm not sure if leading with" race and identity, he said, "is necessarily the most helpful way to move any community forward."

You wrote a deep dive into his career before his campaign that included a lot of perspectives from people who used to work with him, some of them critical. What was the response to that story? In general, did you find that people expected you, as an Asian-American, to be more sympathetic toward him in your coverage?

In some cases, yes, people did seem to have certain expectations of my coverage -- or at least folks said as much on Twitter. Some asserted that my editors had made me write the tough story on Mr. Yang because I was Asian-American -- the idea being, I think, that my byline would somehow inoculate The New York Times from criticism.

And speaking of my byline, I'm a Korean-American adoptee. And I also recall some Twitter users highlighting that fact that my name is Matt Stevens, which I took to mean they thought I could not possibly have borne in mind an Asian-American point of view, given my name.

I did not respond to anyone on Twitter. In my experience, it's usually best not to. But I will say the piece found a wide readership, and I don't think everyone who spent time with the article came to the same conclusions.

Was this assignment a surprise for you?

People sometimes ask if I was put on the Andrew Yang beat because I am Asian-American. The answer is no. And I think the story of how I came to cover him offers another lesson about why it is so important to have a diversity of voices and perspectives in the newsroom.

In short, I was assigned in the spring of 2019 to go listen to the Democratic candidates speak at a conference down the street from our office. It was the first time I saw Mr. Yang give his stump speech, and he used his now well-worn tagline: "The opposite of Donald Trump is an Asian man who likes math."

The joke did not land. And as an Asian-American, I found it a little unusual coming from a presidential candidate. So, in one of my better moments, I suggested that we write a story on the ways Mr. Yang was leaning into his Asian-American identity on the trail. I developed a few sources on the campaign, Mr. Yang persisted in the race, and then, when the ways he was talking about being Asian-American became news again, I was well positioned to tackle race-related stories with what I think and hope was complexity and nuance.

I came to believe that this was a necessary contribution.

Read "The Andrew Yang Exit Interview" [here](#).

The Push to Get Asian-Americans to Complete the Census

"Asian-Americans have been relegated as the subminority -- that we're not black, we're not Hispanic. For a large part, we're an afterthought."

-- Gene Wu, a Democratic state representative from Houston who is Chinese-American

Our national race correspondent, John Eligon, wrote this week about how Asian-Americans reported that they were less likely to fill out their census forms than any other demographic group. They are also the least familiar with the census, on average, and the most worried that their information will be used against them, according to a Census Bureau report.

Activists told John that Asian-Americans remained largely misunderstood and that they were determined to use this year's census to showcase the group's multiplicity, secure better resources and funding, and harness untapped political power.

You can read more about the efforts to encourage Asian-American participation in the census in his report.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/15/us/how-andrew-yang-handled-his-asian-american-identity-on-the-campaign-trail.html>

Graphic

PHOTO: Issues about Andrew Yang's background and how he handled them were part of his candidacy. (PHOTOGRAPH BY RUTH FREMSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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