

Candidate Often Left Out of the Conversation About Color

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Body

The Democrats have a historically diverse field, but the Asian-American entrepreneur will be debating with six white candidates.

LOS ANGELES -- It is a fact of political life Representative Judy Chu is accustomed to: when there is a discussion about people of color in Washington, she will inevitably have to elbow her way in so that Asian-Americans are considered.

"We have long had a problem with Asian-Americans being invisible in politics," said Ms. Chu, the first Chinese-American woman elected to Congress, who represents Pasadena, Calif. "When the conversations are about people of color, we are always making sure that we are included and we have to insert ourselves in the process."

After weeks of debate over diversity in the Democratic presidential field, it is an unusual moment for Asian-Americans in politics: Seven Democratic presidential hopefuls will step on to the debate stage here Thursday night, each making a pitch to lead a party that is intently focused on black and Latino voters. And all but one -- Andrew Yang, an entrepreneur who few saw as a viable candidate a year ago -- are white.

The debate in one of America's most ethnically diverse cities will not include any candidate who is black or Latino. Though it will feature two women -- Senators Elizabeth Warren and Amy Klobuchar -- and a gay man, Mayor Pete Buttigieg of South Bend, Ind. the lineup does not satisfy some in the party who believe that Democrats could pay dearly if the demographics of its candidates do not reflect its voters.

Last week, Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey, who is black, penned a letter to party leaders noting that many of the people who helped make the Democratic field "diverse" have been "excluded" from Thursday's debate. The letter was signed by eight other candidates, including Ms. Warren and former Housing secretary Julián Castro, the only Latino in the race. (Neither Mr. Booker nor Mr. Castro met the required threshold of total donors and qualifying poll results.)

The intense focus on racial identity in politics has once again left some in the Asian-American community considering what diversity really means -- and how exactly they fit in.

"A couple of journalists have asked me whether I feel a responsibility to represent all people of color on the debate stage," Mr. Yang said recently in a tweet. "I tell them that is impossible -- our communities are too diverse for that. Most Americans I meet are concerned about very similar things."

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That Mr. Yang -- a candidate who has risen from almost complete obscurity to become one of just a few Asian-Americans to ever mount a serious run at the presidency -- will be the only nonwhite person speaking to millions of voters on Thursday is in itself extraordinary to many political veterans.

"So often, Asians aren't viewed as leaders but they are viewed as competent," said John Chiang, the former California state treasurer who ran for governor last year and started a political action committee to elect more Asian and Pacific Islander Democrats to office. "It plays across the board and whether it's correct or not, it's left an impression. You have an understanding of what Asians are and they are not seen as political leaders in the collective consciousness."

Those impressions may be gradually changing. The 2020 Democratic primary marked the first time three Asian-American and Pacific Islanders all sought a major party's nomination for president: Mr. Yang, who is the son of Taiwanese immigrants, Representative Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii, who was born in Samoa, and Senator Kamala Harris, the daughter of an Indian mother and Jamaican father. Ms. Harris had qualified for the debate but ended her campaign this month.

After decades of immigrant exclusion, second-generation Asian-Americans have come of age and experts say they are showing increasing interest and engagement in American politics.

Still, Asian-Americans are far too often left out of conversations about people of color, said Mark Takano, a Japanese-American Democratic congressman from Riverside, Calif.

"It's a blind spot even among progressives," Mr. Takano said. "In my experience, progressives are dominated by a lot of educated white people. They tend to think about African-Americans and Latinos as people of color, and Asian-American somehow doesn't count."

In the debate over immigration and Dreamers, for example, Mr. Takano and Ms. Chu both said they had worked hard to ensure that Asian-American undocumented immigrants were included in strategy sessions and at news conferences.

Mr. Takano blames much of the problem on the myth of the "model minority," which over-generalizes Asians as diligent and high-achieving, and the idea that Asian-Americans do not have any of the same challenges as blacks or Latinos.

"The reason it's important to think about Asians-Americans right now is they offer this window into race relations, identity and privilege," said Janelle Wong, a professor of American studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, who studies Asian-American politics.

"Asian-Americans are a nonwhite group and experience racial discrimination, but simultaneously, we exhibit, as a group, elements of advantage," she added. "This is a window we haven't had front and center before."

During Mr. Yang's remarkable political ascent, he has largely sought to avoid extended discussions about his background, choosing instead to focus on ideas like his signature policy, universal basic income. His crowds at rallies in big cities are young and diverse, and include Asian-Americans who say they were drawn in by his ideas, but are also happy to see someone who looks like them running for president.

But the ways Mr. Yang has chosen to discuss race during his campaign have nonetheless been the subject of intense scrutiny by other members of the Asian-American community. His campaign tagline, for example -- "The opposite of Donald Trump is an Asian man who likes math" -- and his proclamation at a debate earlier this year that "I am Asian, so I know a lot of doctors" have drawn heavy criticism for perpetuating stereotypes about Asian-Americans.

"He has really treated his Asian identity as a point of humor or deflection, and he may think that's necessary," said Viet Thanh Nguyen, a novelist and professor at the University of Southern California, who has interviewed Mr. Yang

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onstage. "I think it's telling that he hasn't found an approach that takes it seriously, rather than using it as a way to be disarming for many Americans who might not know Asians."

Karthick Ramakrishnan, a professor of political science at the University of California, Riverside, said Mr. Yang "is not seen a typical minority candidate because he has not talked about issues in ways that appeal to a broad swath of the black, Latino and Asian-American electorates."

To that point, several experts and activists in the Asian-American community said they hope he will use his time as the only candidate of color on the debate stage Thursday to address issues of race head-on.

"He needs to more fully spell out how his signature issue -- the freedom dividend -- plays out in minority communities," Professor Ramakrishnan said.

Mr. Yang will be taking his place in the spotlight in a state that is home to one-third of all of the country's Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders. Of course, Asian-Americans are no monolith, and the term encompasses a huge range of ethnicities, nationalities, languages and political views. (One example: Thursday's Democratic debate will be moderated NewsHour's Amna Nawaz, who is Pakistani-American, in what community activists say will be a first for an Asian-American.) And nowhere is that diversity more clear than in California -- a state with significant Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese and Japanese populations among others.

At about 6 percent of the United States population, Asian-Americans are not a large enough voting bloc to propel a national candidate to victory on their own. But Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders represent about one out of every six registered voters in California and Asian-American voters in swing states could prove critical in a close election. (Mr. Booker, for example, has placed a special emphasis on Asian-Americans in Nevada, where Filipino immigrants could provide crucial votes, holding caucus trainings in Tagalog this month.)

Asian-Americans are also the fastest growing racial group in the United States. Many experts believe that anti-immigration rhetoric increasingly espoused by the Republican Party under President Trump has helped ensure that the voting bloc leans heavily Democrat.

"There's no question that the backbone of the Democratic Party is African-Americans; we're not saying 'look at us not them.' We're saying 'look at us also,'" said Manjusha P. Kulkarni, the executive director of the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council -- a coalition of more than 40 community based organizations that serve and represent about 1.5 million Asian-Americans Los Angeles County.

"Candidates and parties," she added, "would be making a mistake to ignore us."

Jennifer Medina reported from Los Angeles and Matt Stevens from New York.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/19/us/politics/Andrew-Yang-2020-Democrats-Debate.html>

Graphic

PHOTOS: Andrew Yang with a supporter after a town hall in Dover, N.H. At left, Representative Judy Chu, the first Chinese-American woman elected to Congress. "We have long had a problem with Asian-Americans being invisible in politics," Ms. Chu said. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARAH RICE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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