The Political Culture of Asian Brazilians

**Introduction**

Brazil is a country of immigrants and Asian immigrants have played an important part in her national history. Asian immigration first began in the colonial period[[1]](#footnote-1) but in 1907, the government of the state of São Paulo authorized Japanese immigration that would create the largest Japanese community outside Japan. Today, the Japanese are the second largest immigrant population in Brazil and the Chinese are ninth. [[2]](#footnote-2) In 2010, more than two million Brazilians declared themselves as Asian-Brazilians, or “amarelo,” mostly descended from immigrants from Japan. Additionally, this group is growing faster than other ethnic groups. In Brazilian society, Japanese-Brazilian politicians have played prominent roles since 1947.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Race is an important part of individual identity and has an obvious and intimate relationship with politics. Nevertheless, there are few studies that have focused specifically on Asians, mainly in Brazilian political science or about Brazil. Studies on racial issues are almost exclusively devoted to relations between blacks, “pardos,” and whites and discuss social issues such as quotas, state violence, and poverty. Since the beginning of racial studies in Brazil, Costa Pinto excluded the category "amarelos" or yellow from the classification "de cor" or of color in his works[[4]](#footnote-8)[[5]](#footnote-9), creating a binary system in which Asians would have an ambiguous position, neither completely white, nor completely "colored." Throughout history, public discussions about the Japanese often included seemingly different groups such as Jews and Arabs, excluded from the black and white system that dominates racial studies. During the period before World War II, Brazilian national identity underwent profound changes and these ambiguous groups challenged notions about Brazilian identity held by the elite. The political, social, and economic success of these groups gave them advantages to negotiate their social position and integrated them into the black and white system in this latter category.[[6]](#footnote-12)[[7]](#footnote-13)

Academic articles on Japanese-Brazilians published in Brazil have been dedicated to immigration between Japan and Brazil and, more recently, to the phenomenon of the Dekasseguês. Questions about identity have also gained prominence, especially in literary studies. In the U.S., the literature has focused on similar issues, though Asian American studies is a more mature field than its Brazilian counterpart. In the field of political values and attitudes, it is already known that Americans of Asian descent identify predominantly with the Democratic Party for reasons such as social exclusion and intergroup similarity.[[8]](#footnote-14)[[9]](#footnote-15)[[10]](#footnote-16)

Despite this, since Almond and Verba's pioneering work, research on race and political culture is scarce. Even rarer are works focusing on Asians. We hope to overcome this gap in the literature and, in this article, we analyze the political culture of Asian Brazilians from two axes: cognitive orientation to politics and institutional trust. We used data collected by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) to propose representative indices of these two axes, used as dependent variables in regression models with sociodemographic predictors, including race. Our intention was examine if being Asian Brazilian affects, in any way, the subjective disposition of citizens regarding relevant political themes and objects.

To achieve this goal, we divided this article into three parts. We begin with the theoretical approach and a literature review. In the second part we present the methodology used for the construction of indexes and the aforementioned regression models. Finally, in the third part we present and discuss the results.

**Theoretical Approach**

Race and politics are closely linked and ethnic group is one of the most prominent and immutable characteristics of a person. In societies where there are no formal impediments associated with race, racism still permeates political life and constitutes a lens through which a person looks and is looked at in the world.[[11]](#footnote-17)

The ethnic group forms an important collective consciousness and its members usually have shared experiences. A significant part of this sharing involves the group's perceptions [[12]](#footnote-18)[[13]](#footnote-19) f society in general and the group’s specific political interests. Organizations fighting for the rights of minorities are important institutions in Western democracies and factors such as socioeconomic class, geographic distribution, group norms, and experiences of discrimination affect the relationship between race and politics.[[14]](#footnote-20)[[15]](#footnote-21)

Experiences of discrimination and perceptions of equal opportunities, or lack there of, in a society are important in building a strong group identity. In addition, they give a sense of alienation from society that can diminish confidence in institutions and mediate participation or abstention in politics. People from an ethnic group who feel discriminated against are more likely to support a party that has a tradition of defending minority rights. However, personal experiences of discrimination motivate individuals to punish the ruling party, even if it has a tradition of defending minorities. Moreover, experiences of discrimination are not equal. Political discrimination typically manifests itself as laws, policies, and other systemic measures can motivate individuals to participate in politics. In contrast, societal discrimination typically manifests itself in interpersonal forms such as verbal attacks from colleagues and can diminish feelings of effectiveness that can, in turn, decrease political participation.[[16]](#footnote-22)[[17]](#footnote-23)[[18]](#footnote-24)[[19]](#footnote-25)

Socioeconomic status is particularly important because resources, such as education, facilitate political participation and can have a moderating effect. This is because as a group occupies a more central social position, it will have lower support for group specific issues. People [[20]](#footnote-26)[[21]](#footnote-27)[[22]](#footnote-28)from affluent social classes are typically better treated by peers and have higher levels of confidence while people in lower classes may have more experiences of being cheated, leading to lower levels of confidence. However, it is important to distinguish the effects of income and education, the most prominent components of socioeconomic status. Income is generally linked to support to established authorities and greater institutional trust, while education, as a cognitive mobilizer, is linked to lower trust and greater political participation. Low-income people typically have fewer resources to create and maintain civic associations and as a result have fewer opportunities for political participation.[[23]](#footnote-29)[[24]](#footnote-30)[[25]](#footnote-31)

Population size is a consistent predictor of the political activity of minority groups. Studies in several countries show that geographical distribution increases the level of political activity of minorities. In the UK, when the proportion of an ethnic group increases in a neighbourhood, the likelihood of its members voting increases. Studies on the effects of participation in voluntary associations can increase political involvement, because it develops civic skills that facilitate engagement and mobilize individuals but conditioned to the type of association.[[26]](#footnote-32)[[27]](#footnote-33)[[28]](#footnote-34)

Factors that hinder the formation of a strong collective identity include geographic distribution, the ability to shame defectors, the level of integration into society, and socioeconomic status. When a small group is distributed over a large area, identity formation in the group is difficult. If the ethnic group has strong norms and the ability to sanction, individuals have to consider the costs of diverging from the group's norms. When the ability to sanction is weak, individuals feel more freedom by pursuing their own interests when they diverge from the group. The level of integration in society and socioeconomic status have an interesting interaction. When the group is not well integrated into society and suffers prejudices, real or perceived, high socioeconomic status does not weaken the unity of the group and the ethnic group remains important for the decision-making process of individuals. When the group does not suffer prejudices, socioeconomic status weakens support for the group's interests.[[29]](#footnote-35)[[30]](#footnote-36)

**Hypotheses**

The previous section presented a summary of the, sometimes contradictory, factors that affect the two axes that we intend to examine in relation to the Japanese-Brazilian community. In Brazil, this group is usually composed of people of higher social class. Overall, individuals who have fewer socioeconomic or educational resources have lower levels of institutional confidence. [[31]](#footnote-37)[[32]](#footnote-38)The population of Japanese-Brazilians is small compared to other ethnic groups, making up just over 1% of the national population, which decreases the benefits of institutional racism against Asians. Japanese-Brazilians suffer less prejudice compared to other minority groups because the cost of maintaining a regime of institutional racism is greater than the benefits of non-discrimination. When a minority obtains high levels of a scarce class resource, in this case education, prejudice in the labor market can be diminished. To derive the benefits of white supremacy in the long run, white employers and employees have to maintain a united front of prejudice. As Japanese-Brazilians are a proportionally small group in Brazil, white individuals [[33]](#footnote-39)[[34]](#footnote-40)give up keeping the front together to obtain the short-term benefits of hiring and transacting with members of this group. These factors suggest that Japanese-Brazilians would have a weaker political consciousness and more confidence in institutions in relation to other groups. [[35]](#footnote-41)

On the other hand, Japanese-Brazilians are concentrated in the south and southeast; the states of São Paulo and Paraná contain over 90% of the Japanese-Brazilian population. This geographical concentration would favor more political participation. Japanese communities have a strong tradition of participating in voluntary cultural and sporting associations. Japanese schools have existed since the first period of Japanese immigration. During World War II Japanese communities were persecuted and there was a ban on teaching or speaking the language of Axis countries. Popular songs at that time contained[[36]](#footnote-42) anti-Japanese lyrics and many of these schools were closed. However, after the war many schools reopened, showing the resilience of this community. In studies on Dekasseguês, they often cite experiences of discrimination and a longing for identities as reasons why they leave Brazil.[[37]](#footnote-43)[[38]](#footnote-44)

The confluence of these factors raises questions about the cognitive orientation to politics and institutional trust that this research seeks to answer. On the one hand we have factors such as geographical concentration and a tradition of participation in voluntary associations that favor strong political participation and less institutional trust while factors such as high socioeconomic class and a small population that theoretically weaken political participation, begging the question which group of factors dominates?

**Methodology**

Using LAPOP data for the years 2017 and 2019, we created two indexes using factor analysis. The first, Cogitative Orientation toward Politics Index (COPI) and is synthesized from three variables: interest in politics, subjective political effectiveness and political knowledge. Before using the variables in the analysis, we standardized them to the same scale of 1-7 and reversed the order of subjective political efficacy so that they all have the same direction. The second, Institutional Trust Index (CI) and brings together [[39]](#footnote-45)[[40]](#footnote-46)[[41]](#footnote-47)11 variables [[42]](#footnote-48) about various Brazilian institutions such as political parties, the Supreme Court, and congress. In the factor analyses, we used a polychoric correlation matrix and defined the extraction of only one factor, without rotation. Table 1 presents the results of factor analysis, including factor loadings.

Table 1. Polychoric Factor Analysis for COPI and CI, Brazil, 2017-19

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Ci | COPI |
|  |  |  |
| Do courts guarantee a fair trial? | 0.56 |  |
| Respect for political institutions | 0.61 |  |
| Basic rights are well protected | 0.73 |  |
| Proud to live in the political system | 0.74 |  |
| People should support the political system | 0.74 |  |
| Trust in the military | 0.46 |  |
| Trust in national congress | 0.75 |  |
| Trust in political parties | 0.78 |  |
| Trust in the President of the Republic | 0.66 |  |
| Trust in local government | 0.59 |  |
| Confidence in elections | 0.66 |  |
| Self-assessment of political understanding |  | 0.59 |
| Self-assessment of political interest |  | 0.71 |
| Interviewer's assessment of political knowledge |  | 0.44 |
| % variation | 0.45 | 0.35 |
| Crombach's Alpha | 0.8676 | 0.5524 |
| KMO | 0.931 | 0.609 |

Source: Lapop, 2017 and 2019.

The two indexes were standardized to a 0 to 1 scale and used as dependent variables in regression models controlling for education, family income, gender, age, and survey year. Given the importance of education throughout different dimensions of political culture, we also propose interactions between ethnic group and education. The equations of the estimated models are:

Where Yi is one of the indices, COPI or CI, University is a dummy variable for an undergraduate degree, Ethnicity is a vector of dummy variables for ethnicity, Income is a vector of dummy variables for income, Female is a dummy for women, Age is the age, and year is a 2019 dummy. Table 2 shows the proportions or, in the case of age, mean, of these variables.

**Results**











Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the independent variables used in the models and indexes.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, Brazil, 2017-19.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Proportion (Average to Age) | Standard Desavio |
| Female | 0,5025053 | 0,5000763 |
| Age | 38,87245 | 15,91045 |
| University Education | 0,1020371 | 0,302747 |
| Family Income 0-1050 | 0,2825094 | 0,4502941 |
| Family Income 1051-1950 | 0,2860213 | 0,4519741 |
| Family Income 1951-2550 | 0,1523037 | 0,3593743 |
| Family Income 4951 | 0,1451925 | 0,352353 |
| White | 0,2971485 | 0,4570789 |
| Black/Brown | 0,6055005 | 0,4888246 |
| Other | 0,0370604 | 0,1889413 |
| Yellow | 0,0602907 | 0,2380643 |
| 2017 | 0,5056106 | 0,500051 |
| 2019 | 0,4943894 | 0,500051 |
| COPI | 0,4281259 | 0,2337673 |
| CI | 0,3555311 | 0,2155426 |
| *N* | 3030 |  |

Source: Lapop, 2017 and 2019.

Table 3 presents the results of regression models. Columns 1 and 2 present the models using COPI and CI indices, respectively, without interaction, and 3 and 4 show the same models with interaction between university education and ethnic group.



Table 3. Linearregression m odelos for COPI and CI, Brazil, 2017-19.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
|  | COPI | CI | COPI | CI |
| White | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
|  | (.) | (.) | (.) | (.) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Negro/Pardo | -0.0162 | -0.00223 | -0.0196+ | -0.00275 |
|  | (-1.52) | (-0.25) | (-1.74) | (-0.29) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Other | -0.0238 | 0.0192 | -0.0263 | 0.0120 |
|  | (-0.95) | (0.90) | (-1.03) | (0.55) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Asian | -0.0204 | -0.0120 | -0.0366+ | -0.0151 |
|  | (-0.98) | (-0.69) | (-1.68) | (-0.82) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| University | 0.147\*\* | -0.0247+ | 0.122\*\* | -0.0318 |
|  | (9.33) | (-1.88) | (4.77) | (-1.45) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Female | -0.0976\*\* | -0.0188\* | -0.0979\*\* | -0.0190\* |
|  | (-10.36) | (-2.37) | (-10.40) | (-2.41) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Age | -0.000779\*\* | 0.000732\*\* | -0.000788\*\* | 0.000738\*\* |
|  | (-2.58) | (2.89) | (-2.61) | (2.92) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| <1050R | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
|  | (.) | (.) | (.) | (.) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| 1051-1950R | 0.0214+ | -0.0262\* | 0.0210+ | -0.0261\* |
|  | (1.74) | (-2.50) | (1.70) | (-2.49) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| 1951-2550R | 0.0589\*\* | -0.0384\*\* | 0.0584\*\* | -0.0378\*\* |
|  | (3.88) | (-3.05) | (3.84) | (-3.01) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| 2551-4950R | 0.102\*\* | -0.0627\*\* | 0.102\*\* | -0.0626\*\* |
|  | (6.49) | (-4.75) | (6.46) | (-4.75) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| 4951R+ | 0.0601\*\* | -0.0347\*\* | 0.0611\*\* | -0.0338\* |
|  | (3.81) | (-2.59) | (3.87) | (-2.52) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| year=2017 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
|  | (.) | (.) | (.) | (.) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| year=2019 | 0.0360\*\* | 0.0992\*\* | 0.0361\*\* | 0.0994\*\* |
|  | (3.57) | (12.53) | (3.59) | (12.55) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| White # University |  |  | 0 | 0 |
|  |  |  | (.) | (.) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Negro/Pardo # University |  |  | 0.0272 | 0.00427 |
|  |  |  | (0.83) | (0.16) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Other # University |  |  | 0.00755 | 0.183+ |
|  |  |  | (0.06) | (1.68) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Asian # University |  |  | 0.171\* | 0.0369 |
|  |  |  | (2.42) | (0.57) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Constant | 0.457\*\* | 0.319\*\* | 0.461\*\* | 0.319\*\* |
|  | (25.74) | (20.89) | (25.60) | (20.61) |
| Observations | 2215 | 2861 | 2215 | 2861 |

*t* statistics in parentheses

+ *p* < 0.1, \* *p* < 0.05, \*\* *p* < 0.01

Source: Lapop, 2017 and 2019.

For models without interactions, only the ethnic group dummies were not significant, an unexpected result given the richness of the literature on the relationship between ethnic group and political culture. Family income and university education showed positive effects, indicating the existence of a relationship between socioeconomic status and the two indices, corroborating much of the literature on political attitudes and behaviors that associate the educational level with greater political activism through the development of cognitive or civic skills, the cultivation of political interest and the provision of political information. The time effect showed that the two indexes increased between 2017 and 2019. Age had a positive effect [[43]](#footnote-49)[[44]](#footnote-50)[[45]](#footnote-51)on CI and a negative effect on COPI, indicating that older people tend to have more institutional confidence and less political orientation. Women have less institutional confidence and a lower orientation to politics than men. This result confirms findings from the international literature that show that women generally participate less politically and have less confidence[[46]](#footnote-52) in institutions due to various constraints, such as family responsibilities that disproportionately fall on their backs and also due to [[47]](#footnote-53)the process of political socialization replicating patterns of inequality between genders.

When we added an interaction between schooling and ethnic group, the effects of the black/brown and yellow categories were negative for COPI, while the impacts of income, age and sex did not change. The effect of education remained positive and significant for COPI, but was no longer relevant in the CI model. The interaction between schooling and yellow was significant and positive for COPI, indicating that higher education has a particularly strong positive relationship for Asian Brazilians. An assumption in the theory about the relationship between schooling and political participation is that it has a similar effect on different ethnic groups, but the evidence in this regard is not yet conclusive in the specialized literature. Lien showed that, in the U.S., education has a strong relationship with political participation for Americans of Mexican descent, but not for Asian Americans. The[[48]](#footnote-54)literature, in general terms, is scarce on this effect nthis last specificethnic group. Making this discussion even more complex, sampling techniques are often poorly adopted for comparison between multiple groups. Interestingly, our results indicated an opposite effect, suggesting a difference between the position of Asians in Brazil and the USA. [[49]](#footnote-55)One explanation may be that most Asian population in the U.S. was born outside the U.S. [[50]](#footnote-56) and this decreases the group's political participation.a do grupo. [[51]](#footnote-57)Regarding IC, the Asian condition and its interaction with schooling were not significant, indicating that Asian Brazilians have levels of institutional confidence similar to those of other ethnic groups.

Together, these models show that ethnic identity, particularly for Asians, does not have a strong effect on cognitive orientation to politics and institutional trust. However, the models show that education has different, albeit reduced, effects among ethnic groups and that the impacts of socioeconomic resources vary between ethnic groups. For Asians, a category that interests us most directly, higher education increased the score of the measure on the cognitive dimension.

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    By Jeffrey Lesser [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
39. The draftingquestion in the questionnaire is: How much are you interested in politics: a lot, something, little or nothing? [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
40. The question posed is: The mr./you feel you understand the most important political issues in the country. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this sentence? [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
41. With the redaction: Using the scale presented below, please qualify your perception of the respondent's level of political knowledge [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
42. Use the following items lapop: B1 (To what extent the mr./Do you believe that the courts of justice of Brazil guarantee a fair trial?), B2 (To what extent do you have respect for Brazil's political institutions? To what extent the mr./do you have respect for Brazil's political institutions?) B3 (To what extent do you believe that the basic rights of the citizen are well protected by the Brazilian political system?), B4 (To what extent are you proud to live in the Brazilian political system?), B6 (To what extent do you think the Brazilian political system should be supported?), B12 (To what extent do you have confidence in the Armed Forces [the Army]?), B13 (To what extent do you have confidence in the National Congress?), B21 (To what extent do you have confidence in the political parties?), B21A (To what extent do you have confidence in the President of the Republic?), B32 (To what extent do you have confidence in the City Hall?), B47A (To what extent do you have confidence in the elections in this country? To what extent the mr./Do you have confidence in the elections in this country?) [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
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