How Asian Americans Became Democrats

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Jul 26, 2016(The American Prospect Blogs: http://prospect.org/blogs Delivered by Newstex) This article appears in the Summer 2016 issue. Subscribe here.[1] As a force at the ballot box, ***Asian*** Americans caught the media's attention in 2012, when exit polls showed that they supported Barack Obama with 73 percent of their votes, a level exceeded only by African Americans. That year, Obama also won a big majority of Latinos, but his strong showing among ***Asian*** Americans was a much bigger surprise. In 1992, the majority of ***Asian*** Americans had voted for George H.W. Bush, creating the impression that as an upwardly mobile and affluent group, they would continue to vote Republican. But 20 years later, in an astounding shift, ***Asian*** Americans moved 40 points toward the Democrats in presidential elections.

Since they're also the fastest growing racial group in the United States, the change has major implications for the future of American politics. While the attention to ***Asian*** Americans in 2012 was long overdue, much of the commentary was short-sighted and misleading. By that year, the high level of ***Asian*** American support for Democrats should not have come as a surprise; a leftward shift had been building from one election cycle to the next. Some pundits also misread the sources of the change. In 1992, writing in The Washington Post, Stanley Karnow had claimed that ***Asian*** immigrants were more likely to identify as Republican because they valued individual responsibility and free enterprise and many of them had fled communist countries. In 2012, New York Times columnist David Brooks claimed that ***Asian*** Americans voted Democratic because they came from cultures that do not put a high value on individualism and instead approve government intervention. If cultural values can be used to explain both voting Republican and voting Democratic, they may not explain either one very well. The actions of parties and political leaders over the past two decades provide a far better explanation for the politics of ***Asian*** Americans today than do the disparate cultural traditions that immigrants have brought with them. To understand the shifting political allegiances of ***Asian*** Americans, we need to look closely at the evidence of their political attitudes and behavior. Recent years have seen a significant increase in survey data on ***Asian*** Americans from such sources as the collaborative National ***Asian*** American Survey (NAAS) and AAPI Data, a project that I direct. These and other surveys help to correct some mistaken explanations for the shift of ***Asian*** Americans to the Democrats, but they also show another pattern that blunts the impact of that shift. Despite their high average levels of education and income, ***Asian*** Americans have among the lowest levels of civic and political participation in the United States. (Photo: AP/John Locher) Cynthia Ameli, who is Chinese American, picks up materials from Sarah Gibson before heading out to canvass for Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in Las Vegas on February 12, 2016.This low level of participation should worry not just Democrats but anyone concerned about the future of race relations in America. The juxtaposition of large-scale ***Asian*** immigration, high levels of economic achievement, and low levels of civic integration runs the risk of reverting ***Asian*** Americans to a place they have occupied through much of U.S. history: a 'middleman minority' in America's racial order, ignored by the powerful and resented by the powerless. Any effort to make sense of ***Asian*** Americans' politics today has to begin with that historical background. ***Exclusion***, Then MobilizationAsians came to the United States in significant numbers starting in the mid-1800s. For a century, they were seen primarily as economic migrants—occupying special occupational niches or fulfilling certain economic needs, but not deserving of the kinds of political rights or public recognition accorded to white, European immigrants. After the Civil War, the United States signed treaties with

China to encourage Chinese immigrants to come to work on the western railroads, but unlike their Irish counterparts who worked on the eastern railroads, the Chinese were not eligible to naturalize as U.S. citizens. The 1880 Angell Treaty declared that Chinese laborers would have 'all the rights, privileges, immunities and exemptions which are accorded to the citizens and subjects of the most favored nation.' But, in practice, they were not protected against attacks by local mobs or discriminatory treatment. Indeed, local resistance to Chinese immigration was so strong that California wrote anti-Chinese provisions into its 1879 Constitution, and the state lobbied the federal government to pass anti-Chinese laws such as the 1875 Page Act and the 1882 Chinese ***Exclusion*** Act. Later waves of immigrants from Japan and British India also learned the hard way that economic gains did little to foster social and political integration. In fact, economic gains without political integration bred resentment and further calls for ***exclusion***. In the early 1900s, for example, California and a few other western states passed 'alien land laws' to limit the economic advancement of Japanese and Indian immigrants in agriculture. Most dramatically, the United States stripped Japanese Americans on the West Coast of their fundamental constitutional rights during World War II, forcing them into internment camps. Given these dramatic, and often draconian, moves toward ***Asian*** immigrant ***exclusion***, ***Asian*** Americans might have become more politically engaged after the end of World War II. There is some evidence for a spike in political interest in the postwar period. For example, Dalip Singh Saund, an Indian immigrant who received a doctorate in mathematics from Berkeley in 1924, helped push for the rights of Indian and Filipino immigrants to naturalize under the Luce-Celler Act of 1946. Soon after being naturalized himself, Saund won elected office, first as a local judge and then as the first ***Asian*** American member of Congress. After World War II, the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) pushed for the repeal of alien land laws and helped to establish the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. In Hawaii, Japanese American farmworkers became highly politicized in the 1950s, helping to overthrow the ruling Republican Party in territorial elections and ushering in a new era of statehood and Democratic Party dominance. Except for these few examples, however, ***Asian*** Americans largely stayed on the margins of political life until the civil-rights era. The 1960s proved critical in mobilizing a new generation of ***Asian*** American youth into politics and social movements. The JACL participated in the 1963 March on Washington and pushed for the repeal of anti-miscegenation laws, while ***Asian*** American organizations in San Francisco fought against community displacement resulting from 'urban renewal' programs. Several other developments during the 1960s—anti-war protests, Third World freedom struggles, civil-rights demonstrations, and the formation of ethnic studies departments—helped to usher in a new wave of ***Asian*** American political empowerment. Surprisingly, however, these civil rights-era developments among ***Asian*** Americans did not fully translate into party politics. In 1992, when national exit polls started counting ***Asian*** Americans separately, they showed a group that was mostly Republican. That year, ***Asian*** Americans supported George H.W. Bush over Bill Clinton by a margin of 55 percent to 31 percent and were twice as likely to describe themselves as conservative than as liberal. They were also less likely than African Americans and Latinos to believe that 'government should do more to solve national problems.' These national exit polls were limited in that they included no ***Asian***-language support, and they were not designed to be geographically representative of the ***Asian*** American population (the same limitations hold true today). Still, the finding of a conservative-leaning ***Asian*** American electorate in 1992 corresponded to the pattern that many observers saw among political donors and other community notables. Although not much was written on the subject at the time, some observers attributed the conservative leanings of ***Asian*** Americans to a combination of anti-communist sentiment among Vietnamese, Chinese, and Korean immigrants and a commitment to 'hard work and family solidarity [over] … welfarism,' as The Washington Post's Stanley Karnow wrote in 1992. Indeed, Karnow went on to note, '***Asian*** Americans whose roots in the United States go back two or three generations are likely to be more liberal than recent arrivals. Familiar with American ways, they feel entitled to assert their rights.' According to Karnow, the post-1965 wave of ***Asian*** immigrants served as a counterweight to the civil-rights era, shifting the ***Asian*** American community in a more conservative direction. (Source: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research/Cornell University) A Strong Leftward ShiftIf post-1965 immigrants did indeed move the ***Asian*** American community to the right, the group's leftward shift since 1992 is all the more remarkable. Although Bill Clinton won only 31 percent of the ***Asian*** American vote in 1992 (or 36 percent of the two-party vote if we exclude Ross Perot), Al Gore won 55 percent in 2000, followed by John Kerry with 56 percent in 2004, and Obama with 62 percent and 73 percent in 2008 and 2012, respectively. In just two decades, the Democratic Party's share of the ***Asian*** American presidential vote more than doubled. Even more remarkably, Obama won every major national origin group of ***Asian*** Americans in 2012, including Vietnamese Americans, who have traditionally leaned Republican. Such group realignments have taken place only rarely in the past century—first, with the shift of Jewish and black voters to the Democrats during the New Deal and, subsequently, with the

shift of Southern whites to the Republicans that began in the civil-rights era. The driving forces behind these changes have usually been the choices of political parties in differentiating themselves from each other on important issues of the day. Even though the New Deal failed to attack racial discrimination, the Democratic Party's focus on economic redistribution helped to shift African Americans away from the party of Lincoln. Historical research on Jewish voters suggests a combination of factors at play in making the group a Democratic voting bloc, including selective outreach by local Democratic Party machines, Republican restrictions on immigration in the 1920s (which blocked more Jews from entering the country), and Roosevelt's support for progressive social and economic policies and his early and steadfast opposition to Nazi Germany. Parties have similarly played an important role in shifting ***Asian*** American attitudes. As my colleague Taeku Lee and I have argued, 'pull factors' have drawn ***Asian*** Americans toward the Democratic Party, while 'push factors' have driven them from the Republicans. The actions of political parties may be particularly consequential for a group like ***Asian*** Americans, many of whom, as first-generation immigrants, have yet to develop strong partisan attachments. During the 1990s, Bill Clinton played a key role by making the Democratic Party more appealing to ***Asian*** Americans. Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council projected a pro-business image that was attractive to many ***Asian*** American entrepreneurs, and millions of ***Asian*** Americans naturalized during a period of strong economic growth. Clinton and Gore also devoted considerable attention to ***Asian*** American donors, although a fundraising scandal in 1996 tempered that enthusiasm. In addition, the Clinton administration brought a new generation of ***Asian*** Americans into campaign work and appointed positions, including Norman Mineta as secretary of transportation, the first ***Asian*** American cabinet secretary in American history. By 2000, ***Asian*** Americans were roughly evenly split in their preference between Gore and George W. Bush. Since then, the leftward shift in the ***Asian*** American vote has also reflected 'push factors' from the Republican side. Congressional Republicans have outdone one another in anti-immigrant rhetoric and proposals and, despite efforts by the Bush administration, consistently scuttled efforts to enact comprehensive immigration reform. To be sure, immigration has never been a top issue for ***Asian*** American voters; the economy, education, and health care usually lead as the top three issues in surveys. Still, immigration holds a symbolic place among ***Asian*** American voters. A 2014 AAPI Data survey of ***Asian*** American registered voters found that 41 percent would consider switching their support away from a candidate who expresses strong anti-immigrant views. Immigration thus matters to ***Asian*** American voters less as a top policy priority than as an indicator of whether candidates and parties respect immigrants and welcome them. (Photo: AP/Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call) Delegates listen to President Barack Obama's speech at the 2012 Democratic National Convention. Exit polls that year showed that ***Asian*** Americans supported Barack Obama with 73 percent of their votes, a level exceeded only by African Americans.Another development pushing ***Asian*** Americans away from the GOP has been the rise of Christian conservatism in the Republican Party. The 2012 Pew survey on ***Asian*** Americans indicated that the strongest level of Democratic Party support comes from Hindus and those who claim no religious affiliation (these groups make up a significant share of Indian Americans and Chinese Americans, respectively). The same Pew survey did not contain a sufficient number of Muslim respondents, estimated to be about 4 percent of the ***Asian*** American population, to produce reliable estimates of their party preference. However, the group's 2011 survey of Muslim Americans also indicated very strong support for the Democratic Party. Finally, a 2016 AAPI Data survey of ***Asian*** American registered voters indicated that 43 percent would consider switching their support away from a candidate who expresses strongly anti-Muslim views. Party stances on policies have also helped to reinforce the shift of ***Asian*** Americans toward the Democrats. National surveys have shown that on issues that matter to them such as education, job creation, and health care, ***Asian*** American voters have consistently favored the Democratic Party and the positions that Democrats endorse. For example, ***Asian*** American majorities have supported steps to expand health-care access, such as the Affordable Care Act (asked in the 2012 NAAS). ***Asian*** Americans are also strong supporters of gun control (asked by AAPI Data in 2014 and 2016), and they tend to support bigger government spending even if it means paying higher taxes (asked in 2012 surveys by Pew and NAAS). High-level Democratic Party efforts at symbolic outreach have built on this foundation of agreement about national policy. Obama re-established the White House Initiative on ***Asian*** Americans and Pacific Islanders in 2009 and nominated a record number of ***Asian*** Americans to cabinet posts and federal judgeships. Hillary Clinton has also maintained strong connections with ***Asian*** Americans. All of these efforts have contributed to the ***Asian*** American political realignment. (Source: AAPI Post-Election Survey)Some analysts have offered other explanations for party change among ***Asian*** Americans. I have already mentioned the cultural theory advocated by David Brooks and others. The political scientist Andrew Gelman points to geographic differences within the United States, arguing that the high concentration of ***Asian*** Americans in deep-blue states such as California and New York accounts for their strong

support for Democrats. Neither the cultural nor the geographic explanations, however, can account for the 40-point shift toward Democratic presidential candidates in a 20-year span. The basic problem with the cultural explanation is that deeply rooted values do not change so quickly. Some might argue that the cultural values of ***Asian*** Americans have shifted as a result of a changing national-origin mix—more Indian Americans and fewer Japanese Americans, for example. But my research indicates that these demographic changes have done little to change the mix of ***Asian*** immigrants who are pro-government versus pro-enterprise. Similarly, there has been no dramatic change in the shares of ***Asian*** Americans living in 'blue states' compared with 'red states.' In the last 20 years, the number of ***Asian*** Americans has actually been growing faster in red states and swing states. Some other commentators suggest that Republicans would have the backing of ***Asian*** Americans if only the party presented them with a more friendly face. For example, writing in Slate in the wake of the 2012 election, Richard Posner claimed that ***Asian*** Americans were not acting instrumentally (that is, on the basis of self-interest or group interest), but rather expressively, recoiling from Republicans whom they perceive to be hostile to minorities. Charles Murray, writing for the American Enterprise Institute, argued that ***Asian*** Americans favor Republicans on economic issues but could not bring themselves to support a 'party of Bible-thumping, anti-gay, anti-abortion creationists.' These explanations are in line with one side of our party-driven argument: The Republican Parry has indeed pushed ***Asian*** Americans away. But neither Posner nor Murray is willing to acknowledge what attracts ***Asian*** Americans to the Democrats. The 2008 and 2012 NAAS data show that ***Asian*** Americans are rewarding parties and candidates who share their views about issues such as health care, government spending, and gun control. The 2012 survey shows that ***Asian*** Americans support increasing taxes to help reduce the federal deficit, and a Pew survey from early 2012 indicates that ***Asian*** Americans prefer a bigger government that provides more services to a smaller government providing fewer services (55 percent to 36 percent, respectively). That's the opposite of what Pew found for the public as a whole (39 percent to 52 percent, respectively). (Photo: AP/Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call) President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, and their families walk on stage at the 2012 Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina. The support of ***Asian*** Americans for government spending today is a significant departure from their views in 1992 and 1996, when they were more likely to favor private solutions. Changes in party preference and policy views among ***Asian*** Americans have reinforced each other over the last two decades. First, symbolic appeals and outreach efforts drew more ***Asian*** American voters into the Democratic Party tent. Then, as a growing number of ***Asian*** Americans began to identify as Democrats, their policy views began to align more closely with the party's mainstream. In a parallel development, harsh rhetoric by prominent Republicans has made the party more unwelcoming to ***Asian*** Americans, reducing the proportion of voters who self-identify with the party and support the conservative policy views that Republicans espouse. The Republican Party has attempted to make amends. After the 2012 presidential defeat, the Republican National Committee issued a comprehensive assessment, the 'Growth and Opportunity Project,' which recommended making greater investments in outreach to ***Asian*** American voters, supporting ***Asian*** American candidates, and creating a new team of ***Asian*** American political operatives. The RNC seems to have made some significant progress in places such as Southern California, where Republican recruitment and outreach efforts helped three ***Asian*** American women win seats in the state legislature in 2014. The RNC also seemed to be making headway in Nevada and northern Virginia, two important battleground states in recent presidential elections. But all of these investments may be in jeopardy this year. During the Republican primaries, Donald Trump, Carly Fiorina, and even Jeb Bush made remarks that, in various ways, denigrated ***Asian*** Americans. Looking ahead to November, it is an open question whether the 26 percent support that Romney won among ***Asian*** Americans will be the low-water mark for a Republican presidential candidate. Early survey results from 2016 indicate that Trump's inflammatory rhetoric is likely to further reduce ***Asian*** American support for Republicans and might even be crystallizing party identification among those who previously leaned Democrat. The data also show, however, that the political effects of exclusionary rhetoric may be somewhat muted for Chinese Americans. A Worrisome Pattern of DisengagementWhile they have shifted their voting, ***Asian*** Americans still aren't making their voices heard effectively. Surveys conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau have consistently shown that ***Asian*** Americans have the lowest rates of civic participation. This is true even among people typically associated with high levels of participation, including seniors and those with high incomes and college degrees. ***Asian*** Americans are less likely than other groups not only to vote, but also to attend public meetings, contact public officials, and volunteer—the activities that make American democracy hum. This disjuncture should worry us all. Community leaders should be concerned that low participation will mean that the concerns of ***Asian*** Americans will fail to get the attention of elected officials. Mainstream civic and political leaders should be concerned that they are failing to harness the talents and resources of this rapidly growing population. In

1999 and 2000, I interviewed party officials and leaders of ***Asian*** American organizations about their efforts to get immigrants more involved. ***Asian*** American leaders repeatedly told me that the members of their community were primarily interested in ensuring their economic advancement and had neither the time nor the motivation to participate in civic life. Today community leaders still talk about the difficulty of generating political interest among people who are working two jobs to make ends meet or working longer days in search of upward mobility and the trappings of upper-middle-class life. (Source: Author's analysis of current population survey voter supplements of 2012 and 2014, and civic engagement supplements of 2008 and 2013)Some might argue that there is nothing wrong with ***Asian*** Americans pursuing this kind of advancement strategy. Why bother engaging in politics, the argument goes, when people are able to satisfy their needs through private enterprise? At first blush, it is difficult to argue with this sentiment. If political involvement is purely instrumental—just another way of getting ahead—we should not be concerned about low participation among people who get ahead in the marketplace. But there is more to involvement in the public arena than economic gain. Political participation signals who belongs and who counts in a society. As the long history of ***Asian*** American political ***exclusion*** shows, economic advancement without political voice is a recipe for trouble. So, what can be done to improve ***Asian*** American civic participation? Research has long shown that people are much more likely to participate if they are asked to do so. Outreach is particularly important for first-generation immigrants, who constitute the vast majority of ***Asian*** American adult citizens. Political parties and candidates can play an important role here. The battleground map of presidential politics, however, does not encourage parties to invest in ***Asian*** American mobilization. Among all racial groups, ***Asian*** Americans have the lowest proportion of residents who live in swing states. It is not surprising, then, to see national surveys showing that ***Asian*** Americans are less likely than other groups to be contacted by a party. In some states, however, political party outreach to ***Asian*** Americans can help minority political parties make gains in state legislatures and lay the groundwork for long-term gains. This seems to be happening among Republicans in Southern California and among Democrats in Houston and other Texas cities. In addition, the number of ***Asian*** Americans running for Congress continues to grow, and ***Asian*** American women have notched some significant successes in local elections from Seattle to Philadelphia and Boston. The last few years have also seen an uptick in voter registration and mobilization by national nonprofits like APIAVote and ***Asian*** Americans Advancing Justice, political committees such as AAPI Victory Fund and CAPA21, and local efforts by various labor unions and community organizations. There is some initial evidence that these efforts are working, but they have yet to reach the scale necessary to fully integrate ***Asian*** Americans into American civic and political life. As the population of ***Asian*** Americans continues to grow at a rapid pace, the stakes in mobilizing them politically will increase. How big a political role ***Asian*** Americans will play is not yet clear, but the days when parties and candidates could simply ignore them are over. [1]: *https://ssl.palmcoastd.com/21402/apps/-180913?iKey=I**GG1#38;*

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