A Political Powerhouse in Search of a Home

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The last several elections have taught us a valuable lesson: a few voters, in battleground areas, have the potential to determine or alter the results of an election. From a historical standpoint, the 2000 presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore will be notable for illuminating this fundamental truth about American politics. An artifact of our system of government is that a strategy that cultivates all voters equally is plainly not as effective as one that is intently focused on key voting blocs. The natural next question then is, what are these key voting blocs? Would this description, for instance, aptly describe the Asian

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American
population? On its face, Asian Americans appear to compose or have the potential to compose a voting bloc given their large and growing population. Yet, even after more than 40 years of escalating immigration, with current numbers now surging to over 13.5 million, Asian Americans generally remain poorly understood and largely neglected by mainstream politicians.[1]

There are more than a handful of reasons why politicians might regard Asian Americans as an unimportant political faction. First, the group's political cohesiveness is at issue. The Asian American community encompasses a diverse mix of individual ancestry groups whose differences are significant. As a category, Asian Americans speak over a hundred different languages, align with many different cultures, and have a sense of belonging to different ethnic groups who have exhibited unquestionable and enduring historical animosity toward one another.[2] Second, even if the group were cohesive, their political importance as a bloc vote is lessened because they are not as geographically segregated as Blacks or Latinos. Accordingly, they are more difficult to target on a geographic basis, and their influence is not concentrated in many districts or locales across the United States. Finally, even if they were cohesive and geographically compact, the proportion of the group that is foreign born and not naturalized is high. Since many of them are unable to vote, their sheer numbers sound more impressive than the reality in most election districts. These reasons may explain why political outreach efforts have been less than spirited, with a few exceptions sprinkled about in California and Hawaii, where the Asian Americans have historically rooted populations along with a scattering of local majorities.

Whether these outreach efforts should be expanded is debatable. Would a more vigorous and passionate outreach effort toward Asian Americans yield valuable political returns? We argue that it would, given the right circumstances and sensitivity, and that the lack of effort thus far is a missed opportunity. While the differences that have defined Asian Americans remain evident, especially among the foreign born, the base of Asians born in America continues to grow, lending signs of an increasingly assimilated population with an increasingly common identity and sense of linked fate. By 2005, an estimated 36 percent of all Asian Americans were born in the United States, and their naturalization rate (52 percent) remains much higher than the corresponding rate for the foreign-born population as a whole (38 percent). While not all Asian Americans are eligible to vote, even among the foreign born, Asians naturalize at much faster rates than Latino immigrants. This has been a longstanding trend and an essential precursor to political incorporation. One might also consider the rise in newly naturalized citizens as an instance of enormous political potential for either party. While the Democratic Party often appears to take support from Blacks and Latinos for granted, few would describe Asian Americans as similarly beholden to one party or the other. That is, a higher percentage of their vote can still be won by either party.

Given their greater geographic dispersion, highly targeted communications efforts will not make sense in every contested election, and we do not intend to argue that the Asian American electorate is the hidden key to victory in all elections. If they are key in some elections, however, campaigns must give some

thought to strategies that incorporate Asian Americans more generally to avoid the appearance of courting the population only when convenient. To be sure, there are pockets of concentration, and official census figures on Asian American settlement suggest that sincere efforts may have important consequences in Arizona, Nevada, Alaska, Utah, and Washington in the West; Missouri and Illinois in the Midwest; New Jersey, Maryland, New York, and Massachusetts in the Northeast; and Texas and Virginia in the South. If the presidential contest is close, Asian American outreach will realize its greatest potential in battleground states such as Oregon, Wisconsin, New Hampshire, Florida, and possibly Virginia, if it proves to be the battleground that some are predicting. In each of these states, the potential votes are there and not predisposed to a particular party.

Another important insight is that while parties understandably aim to win every election, they are exercising a shortsighted strategy if their focus is solely on the immediate payoffs of outreach. Even if Asian Americans are not a consequential voting bloc in a current election, campaigns should not discount the future of this rapidly growing population. Culling the favor of the Asian American group now may have enormous impact upon their longstanding allegiances even while the short-term payoffs are smaller than a campaign might like. In short, a successful strategy must encompass vision. From this particular vantage point, the disregard for the nation's Asian American subgroups is antiquated and ill advised.

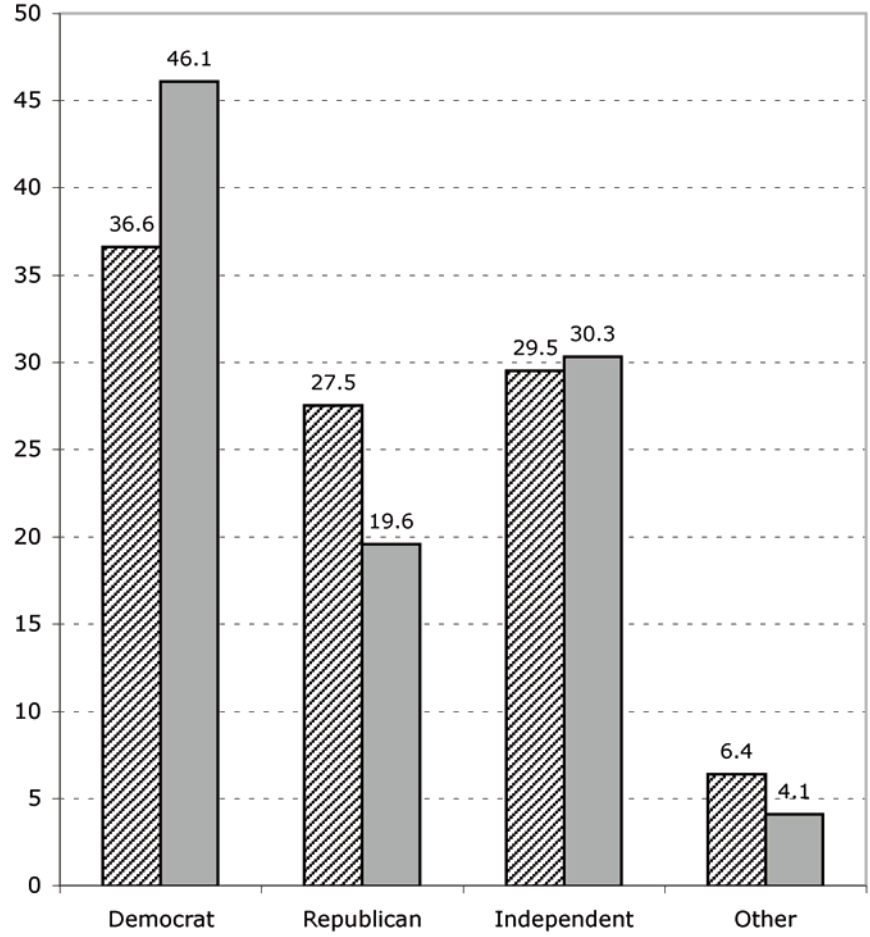
Looking Beyond California

One important theme in our writing on Asian Americans is how dominant the California experience has been in our understanding of Asian American political life (Cho, Gimpel, and Dyck 2007). Although the prevailing image of Asian Americans continues to be California-centric, based on research conducted on the large concentration and extensive history of Asian Americans in the Golden State, about half of the nation's Asian Americans live outside of California and Hawaii, and their histories, life circumstances, and patterns of political incorporation bear unique geographic imprints.

Like any other population that has come to reside in a particular place, that location's history and political traditions are integral to political socialization. That is, we should not be surprised to discover that the many Asian Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area have been steered by the area's history and political environment toward the politics of the Democratic Party. The preponderance of Asian American members of Congress has emerged from California, and the majority of them have been Democrats. The Bay Area is especially lopsided in this regard. Similarly, New York City polls routinely reveal a Democratic bias in its Asian American population, as they do for nearly any significant population in the Big Apple. Asian Americans are no different than other voters whose views are shaped by efforts to work within dominant local political institutions and parties. At the same time, there is nothing inherent in Asian American life or history that fuses them to the Democratic Party. What might appear to be a bias toward the Democrats must be viewed with an understanding of the highly selective lens of convenience sampling that may be employed. In addition, the seeming bias does

not speak to how the various Asian American diaspora would emerge politically if they have streamed away from traditional ports-of-entry and toward Tampa, FL; Houston, TX; Washington, DC; and St. Louis, MO. The Asian American group defies simple political categorization in this way just as it defies simple categorization in so many other ways.

Asian American voters in the touted 2008 battleground states are considerably less attached to the Democratic Party than Asian Americans in the traditional states of Asian concentration—New York, Hawaii, and California. Across 12 potential battleground states (New Hampshire, Oregon, Wisconsin, Florida, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Washington, New Mexico, Nevada, Colorado, and Virginia), Asian American voters were divided 37 percent Democratic to 28 percent Republican in adherence to the political parties in 2004, compared with a much wider 46 to 20 percent gap in California, Hawaii, and New York (see Figure 1). Notably, about one-third of Asian American voters insisted they were independents or "something else" in the 2004 national exit polls, regardless of where they lived.



Similarly, in our prospective battleground states, far more Asian Americans are willing to label themselves as conservatives, than are Asian Americans who reside in California, Hawaii, and New York. Though typical surveys indicate that the overall Asian American group leans Democratic—reflecting the sizable influence of the California component of the survey—they also show that large percentages do not see themselves as party adherents and are not highly ideological (Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004, 16). For those serious about political recruitment, these patterns are worth careful study at a more local scale, within states.

Moreover, we should recognize that the Democratic bias has strong roots in the Japanese American community. While Japanese Americans are generally more Democratic than the other Asian ethnics, this is, in fact, one of many ways in which the Japanese community is unique politically among Asian Americans. Because of the history of exclusion primarily toward other Asian groups and the "privileges" of family reunification the Japanese gained through the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907, the Japanese have the longest-standing roots in America. They also register to vote at higher rates. Among those registered, they turn out to vote at higher rates (Tam 1995). As well, a disproportionate share of Asian American elected officials has been Japanese (Cho 2002).

Importantly, while the Japanese were the largest Asian American ethnic group from 1910 to 1970, this stature has unambiguously declined since 1965. Contrast the Japanese community with the Vietnamese community. The Vietnamese community was almost nonexistent prior to 1975. Since the fall of Saigon, however, the Vietnamese presence in America has exploded and has overtaken the Japanese population in sheer numbers. The Vietnamese community also leans as heavily Republican as the Japanese lean Democrat. In fact, every Asian ethnic group with the exception of the Japanese is growing rapidly. Furthermore, virtually every group leans politically to the right of the Japanese and has a larger base of uncommitted voters. The Democratic bias that we see among Asian Americans, then, is deceiving and not clearly enduring, but likely ephemeral.

Understanding Uncommitted and Swing Voters

Research on voting behavior has provided us with some understanding of why voters fail to commit to regular participation, to a political party, or to call themselves political moderates. Most politically literate natives settle on their partisan affiliation at a young age and retain that identity through adulthood (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Many of those who are not committed to a party, on the other hand, have not been socialized into the politics of either party by their parents or by living around other politically active adults. The lack of parental socialization into American politics is a significant deficit in the personal histories of many Asian American immigrants as well as those who follow as the second generation. Some have not been raised with the norm of political participation, and if their countries of origin had no tradition of mass participation, the notion of regular political involvement may be a difficult concept to grasp and embrace.

For others with weak or wavering commitments to one of the major parties, the root cause has been sometimes identified as a feeling of being torn by conflicting

political impulses. Political scientists have labeled this condition as one of being cross-pressured. "They are attracted to each party by one set of opinions and repelled by another. . . . They are inconsistent," as Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954, 200) famously put it in their landmark study of political behavior. Asian Americans may well have instincts that pull them toward the Democratic Party, such as the sense that they are at a disadvantage as ethnic minorities or experiences of discrimination. At the same time, they may have other traits that pull them toward the other political party, such as their socioeconomic status or an emphasis on individual initiative and personal responsibility. Certainly there is a difficult history of exclusion, discrimination, and internment, but the immigrants who arrived in droves post-1965 have reshaped the Asian American group. The high income and soaring educational attainment that has marked many of the post-1965 immigrants may be an important source of cross-pressures. Japanese Americans and Asian Indians have surged ahead of their Anglo counterparts on key sociodemographic indicators. The annual median income of Asian American households is the highest of any ethnic group. In 2005, half of the Asian American group over the age of 25 possessed a bachelor degree or higher, compared with a significantly lower 27 percent for all adults in this age range. In addition, 19 percent of this Asian American group have an advanced degree (e.g., Ph.D., M.D., J.D, M.B.A.), compared with 9 percent in the overall population. The impressive summary statistics are, by now, familiarly connected to the phrase *model minority*, perhaps not descriptive of all Asian ethnicities, but an aggregated summary statistic nonetheless. Asian American voters are, unsurprisingly, even more upscale than the Asian population in general.

With rising socioeconomic status often comes geographic mobility out of lower income, immigrant-receiving areas, for example, and into more affluent suburbs. Geographic mobility then may also create cross-pressures inasmuch as this mobility is associated with moving from one social and political context to another. We have evidence that migratory citizens are commonly characterized as more politically ambivalent and more independent-minded than those who do not move (Brown 1988). Moreover, upward economic mobility is commonly associated with moving from more Democratic origins to more Republican destinations (Gimpel 1999). Under these circumstances, the cross-pressure pits childhood socialization experiences in which loyalty to one party may have been learned against the new friendship network that may be more politically divided or inclined toward the opposite party. Within the United States, where a dizzying array of choices on issues is forced into a selection of one of two political parties, it is not surprising that a fierce ambivalence may ensue. Voters respond sometimes by refusing to vote at all and at other times by registering as Independents, changing their minds during the campaign, settling on a candidate very late in the election, splitting their ballots, or engaging in related behavior often described as "independent" of partisanship. These are among the very voters toward whom the bulk of campaign advertising is directed.

Given the diversity in ancestral heritage and rising geographic diversity of interests, there winds up being no substitute for detailed local knowledge of particular communities. Moreover, in many areas, a great deal of homogeneity is obvious.

Chinatowns, Koreatowns, and Little Saigons are so named because of ethnic homogeneity, not because the wide array of different ethnicities is concentrated in a single location. The importance of local knowledge is difficult for us to admit given our social science craving to formulate law-like generalizations that neatly package populations and their behavior. We also risk rendering the term *Asian American* meaningless in suggesting that, in addition to the strong ethnic divisions and categorizations, there are such strong currents of local diversity as well. One way to understand the Asian American community, then, is as local blocs and local communities, much as we would characterize any other group as subject to local, contextual forces. In this sense, Asian Americans depart from the simple characterizations that have served Blacks and Latinos, who are much more cohesive nationally as well as locally.[3]

All *effective* political outreach efforts must proceed to a large extent on a community-by-community basis, with a generous sprinkling of local understanding of the arrival, settlement patterns, and roots of particular groups. Arguably the failure of many costly political communications strategies to effectively move their audiences is precisely that these efforts do not show sufficient sensitivity to local conditions and local populations. The locally based political organizations of old were in a much better position to engage nearby populations than the overly centralized political bureaucracies that are today's political parties. Asian Americans are no different from any other Americans in the sense that they adapt to their local environment. Arguably, in areas where they are least likely to be a strong or large presence, the pressures for conformity are even greater, which may explain why Asian American voters are less distinct from non-Asian voters in battleground states than they are in California.

The Outlook

The preference of Blacks and Latinos for the Democratic Party is well entrenched. While they are free to abandon the Democrats at any juncture, the likelihood of a mass exodus is not high. In fact, this type of enduring partisan attachment among the electorate is closer to the rule rather than the exception and characterizes a behavior that transcends race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Few of us ever change our partisan affiliation once the choice has been made. In this sense, Asian Americans, with their large proportions of uncommitted partisans, represent not only a true swing constituency, but an unprecedented opportunity for the political incorporation of individuals who are grouped together racially in the United States. Since we have ample evidence of enduring partisan choices, an investment now will pay off well into the future, given what we know about the intergenerational transmission of political attitudes.

Cross-pressures are resolved and decisions are reached as individuals weigh some aspects of their experience more than others in making up their minds during a campaign. The astute political party will carefully examine inconsistencies and cross-pressures and provide the kind of information that assists individuals in reaching a decision by prioritizing certain issues and concerns over others. For the

legions of voters without strong party attachments, including millions of Asian Americans, the coming campaign stands in a critical position to be the primary socializing event in their personal histories (Sears and Valentino 1997). We are not optimistic that the fall 2008 campaign will fulfill this promise for very many Asian Americans, but we are certain that the opportunity to politically incorporate a racial group is rare and the future political spoils of a successful venture would be hard to overstate.

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Endnotes

[1] For ease of exposition, the term *Asian Americans* will be used interchangeably with *Asian Pacific* Americans and *Asian Pacific Islander*.

[2] The Chinese, with an estimated 2,829,627 million living in the United States, make up 23.4 percent of all Asian Americans. They are followed by Asian Indians at 18.6 percent, Filipino Americans at 17.8 percent, Vietnamese Americans at 10.5 percent, and Korean Americans, rounding out the five largest ethnic groups at 10.3 percent.

[3] To be sure, there are few groups that truly are nationally cohesive or monolithic. National surveys only fool us into believing that such cohesion exists because they do not contain sufficient numbers of respondents to allow us a glimpse into the local diversity that surely exists.