

Reflections on Asian American Politics on the 20th Anniversary of the Asian Pacific American Caucus

Introduction: Reflections on Asian American Politics on the 20th Anniversary of the Asian Pacific American Caucus

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This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the first symposium on Asian American politics published in a political science journal. Contributors to this current symposium note what has changed, where the scholarship is going, and where it should go by addressing issues that have significantly reshaped not only our discipline but also American society more broadly. The study of Asian American politics has roots in engaged social science. Students of ethnoracial politics have long blended scholarly rigor with deep personal concerns—the groundbreaking work of W. E. B. DuBois (1899) is one notable example—and that blend continues to be prominent among scholars of Asian American politics. This article explains the origins of the 2001 symposium and provides a brief overview of the growth of scholarship on Asian American politics.

THE ROOTS OF THE ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN CAUCUS AND THE 2001 SYMPOSIUM

The 2001 symposium was the brainchild of the Asian Pacific American Caucus (APAC).¹ APAC emerged in September 1999, launched by scholars brought together by the American Political Science Association (APSA) organized section on Race, Ethnicity, and Politics (REP).

REP was founded in 1995. For at least a decade prior, there had been growing interest in the study of race, ethnicity, and

politics, but it was not yet widely recognized as a distinct field within APSA (Affigne 2014). As early as 1985, the APSA Annual Meeting's section 12 was titled "Political Participation, Political Power, and the Politics of Disadvantaged Groups." The 1986 program committee's section 5, "The Practice of Political Science," included work on racial politics, as did section 12, "Interests, Groups, and Social Movements."² In 1987, panels on race and ethnicity could be found in the program committee's section 15, "Interest Groups and Social Movements" and in section 21, "State, Local, and Urban Politics." From 1988 to 1995, with the exception of 1989, there was a program committee section titled "Race, Gender, and Ethnicity." In 1989, the program committee's section 25 was titled "Ethnic and Racial Minority Studies."

The creation of an organized section focused exclusively on the study of race, ethnicity, and politics brought more recognition to the field. Participants in REP's early panels included many junior scholars who would become key figures in the study of Asian American politics (Aoki 2019).

In 1999, I was one of the co-chairs responsible for the APSA REP panels. Having seen how the recently formed Latino Caucus had created a valuable institutional space for like-minded scholars, I surveyed attendee interest in a corresponding organization for Asian Americans. Finding an overwhelmingly positive response, I recruited Pei-te Lien as co-organizer, enlisted the support of friends in REP, and worked to obtain recognition as an APSA Related Group. APAC held its first panel and other official events at the 2000 APSA Annual Meeting.

By then, Latino Caucus members had published a *PS* symposium titled "Latino Politics in the United States: An Introduction" (Affigne 2000). The collection was a valuable resource for political scientists interested in expanding their course content but lacking expertise in the area. APAC members supported doing something similar, and one of the founding scholars of Asian American politics, Don T. Nakanishi, graciously agreed to be coeditor.

Nakanishi's participation was of practical and symbolic importance. His career included a historic fight for the recognition of the study of racial and ethnic politics, and he had laid out an expansive vision for what the study of Asian American politics should entail (Nakanishi 1985). Nakanishi argued that Asian American politics scholarship needed to focus on more than electoral politics. Because heavily immigrant populations included many who were ineligible to vote, excessive focus on

electoral politics could miss significant political activity. Nakanishi also understood that the politics crossed national boundaries; therefore, scholarship on Asian American politics had to include what has become known as transnationalism (Collet 2018). At the same time, Nakanishi emphasized the importance of community politics, something his friend Paul Watanabe notes in his contribution to the current issue.

Post-Election Survey—providing enough Asian American cases for scholars to conduct detailed analyses of subgroups (Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004; Wong et al. 2011).

The growing body of data also expanded our knowledge of Asian American political incorporation. Political parties—so important for an earlier wave of European immigrants—do not appear to have a comparable role for Asian immigrants,

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The symposium, titled “Asian Pacific American Politics,” was published in *PS* in Fall 2001 (Aoki and Nakanishi 2001). In that era, one sign of interest was a request for hardcopies, and we were gratified to receive many such requests in the months following publication.

SCHOLARSHIP ON ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICS IN THE PAST TWO DECADES

The 2001 symposium summarized research on Asian American politics. Scholars had been drawing on state and regional surveys to examine political behavior and partisan acquisition (Cain, Kiewiet, and Uhlaner 1991; Lien 1997; Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989), and changing demographics had sparked research on cross-racial coalitions (Horton et al. 1995; Saito 1998; Uhlaner 1991).

In 1999, Kim published an influential article that asked where Asian Americans fit within the racial hierarchy. She argued that Asian Americans had been “racially triangulated” by whites, experiencing “relative valorization” (i.e., judged to be superior) when compared to African Americans on cultural grounds while at the same time subject to “civic ostracism” and seen as “immutably foreign and unassimilable with Whites” (Kim 1999, 107).³

Tam (1995) analyzed the extent to which Asian Americans were a meaningful political bloc, concluding that Asian American ethnic groups had different political perspectives. Lien’s (2001) landmark work argued that politics played a central role in establishing a pan-Asian identity, noting that the high level of intra-Asian diversity rendered that identity a continuing question.

whereas community groups—although they lack the resources of the parties—have moved in to fill the gap (Hajnal and Lee 2011; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008; Wong 2006).

The expanding research provided powerful support for Nakanishi’s argument that an adequate understanding of Asian American politics required an understanding of the transnational context (Collet and Lien 2009; Le and Su 2018; McCarthy and Hasunuma 2018). Country-of-origin socialization and political concerns can have significant influences on the political orientation of immigrants.

These influences continue to prompt the question that Tam (1995) and Lien (1997) addressed more than two decades ago: To what extent do Asian Americans comprise a meaningful political group? Most Asian Americans do not have a strong sense of racial linked fate; however, a panethnic connection may be felt in some circumstances, such as when respondents believe they have experienced racial discrimination (Junn and Masuoka 2008; Masuoka 2006). Assessing Asian American panethnicity presents significant methodological challenges (McClain et al. 2009; Sanchez and Vargas 2016). The trend of greater Asian American support for Democratic candidates is clear, although there are competing explanations (Kuo, Malhotra, and Mo 2017; Raychaudhuri 2020).

Immigration has changed the political context. In the late-twentieth century, the small numbers of Asian Americans meant that Asian American candidates had no choice but to build cross-racial coalitions (except for those running in Hawai‘i). Today, the growing Asian American population has created more opportunities for political influence (Lai 2011). It is

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Much has changed since the 2001 *PS* symposium.⁴ Perhaps most important have been nationwide surveys, starting with the Pilot National Asian American Political Survey (PNAAPS), followed by the National Asian American Survey.⁵ Subsequent surveys also included substantial samples of Asian Americans—for example, the Collaborative Multi-Racial

interesting, however, that white voters also may be more likely to support Asian American candidates than African American or Latino candidates (Visalvanich 2017). Changing demographics also allowed impressive studies of subgroups, including Wong’s (2017) analysis of how intergenerational dynamics fueled Hmong political participation and Mishra’s (2016)

searching examination of political differences among Asian Indian Americans.

LOOKING BACKWARD AND FORWARD

Five articles in this symposium draw from a roundtable and panel at the 2019 APSA Annual Meeting. Two other articles are contributed by senior scholars who attended the APSA events but were not among the panelists.

The first article reflects on changes and current questions. Okiyoshi Takeda, a key figure in APAC's founding, notes

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progress in the past two decades but also observes how Asian Americans still fall short of parity. Pei-te Lien, another pioneer in the study of Asian American politics, discusses the changes since she first started her work, and she sees the issue of panethnic unity as a key question today. Sara Sadhwani highlights the questions about the rising electoral power of Asian Americans and the still substantial number who decline to declare affiliation with either major party.

In the second article, Sadhwani and Loan Le discuss how Asian American politics contributes to a broader understanding of ethno-racial politics. Although Asian American issues are never identical to those of other ethno-racial groups, there are important common themes, as Le and Sadhwani observe.

However, to what extent *are* Asian Americans a meaningful political community? The final discussion in the APSA roundtable addressed this existential question, and the third article is an edited transcript of that discussion.

In the fourth article, James Lai follows with a discussion of factors that can promote unity or division. He notes growing disparities and discusses how social media offers the opportunity for more political differentiation.

Regardless of the degree of pan-Asian commonality, the study of individual communities is valuable. Paul Watanabe, another pioneering scholar in the field, observes in the fifth article how community studies reveal complexities that can be missed in macro perspectives and calls attention to voices that often have been overlooked.

The final two contributions to this symposium showcase a new generation of scholars exploring similarities and differences among Asian Americans. In the sixth article, Vivien Leung and Daeun Song examine affirmative action. Leung finds that experiencing discrimination and microaggressions increases support, and Song studies how supporters and opponents have framed their arguments.

The seventh article explores Asian American political behavior. Chinbo Chong asks to what extent panethnic appeals resonate among diverse Asian American voters. Tanika Raychaudhuri approaches this from the other direction, asking what creates the Asian American preference for Democratic candidates, suggesting that peer influences may drive partisan acquisition. Nathan Chan examines online

political participation, finding evidence of considerable differences across Asian American subgroups.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The 2001 symposium appeared as the events of 9/11 dominated the news and the ensuing weeks saw attacks on South Asian Americans. As the articles in this symposium are being finalized, hostility toward Asian Americans is surging (Park 2020) and some leaders have referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as the "Chinese virus" (Orbey 2020). These events,

two decades apart, remind us that the place of Asians in America is a series of ongoing questions, from the degree of their political incorporation to their relationship with other communities of color. This symposium offers a glimpse into how scholars continue to try to answer those questions. ■

NOTES


1. I intentionally use the term "Asian Americans" and not "Asian Pacific Americans" (or any other term combining Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders). When APAC was created, our goal was to be as inclusive as possible. However, students of Native Hawaiian politics perceive their concerns as closer to those of indigenous peoples and differ about whether Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders should be categorized with Asian Americans (East Coast Asian American Student Union 2017). APAC continues its inclusive philosophy, but most related research conducted by scholars has focused on Asian Americans. Of course, there are questions about only the "Asian American." Do Filipinos view themselves as Asian Americans? Do South Asians (sometimes referred to as "Desis") feel encompassed by that label?
2. This paragraph draws on the "Summary of Official Program" for each year: 1985 (383), 1986 (398, 400–1), 1987 (395, 397), 1988 (410–11), 1989 (379), and 1990 (279).
3. Kim's thinking has evolved, placing considerably more emphasis on the disadvantages facing African Americans (Kim 2018).
4. Growing interest in the topic also is seen by the decision of Polity Press to publish the first textbook on Asian American politics in 2008 (Aoki and Takeda 2008).
5. The PNAAPS was a quasi-national sample that used multilingual interviewers, allowing it to reach far more Asian Americans than possible with monolingual surveys.


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