

# Taeku Lee: Outside In—An Immigrant's View of American Political Science

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When you meet the new American Political Science Association President Taeku Lee and hear him speak, you might be surprised to learn that English is his third rather than his first language. Having arrived in the United States at the age of 11 via Malaysia, and prior to that, his birthplace in South Korea, Lee is likely among the few immigrant presidents elected to lead this association. Lee's beginnings as an immigrant and outsider in the United States have structured and continue to frame his ambitions, his scholarship, and his view for the future of the profession.

Lee is non-traditional in another way, having come to the discipline without a single undergraduate course in political science. Enrolled instead at the University of Michigan in an intensive program incorporating college and medical school within six years, Lee left the relative job security and financial rewards of medicine and shifted to the social sciences, completing a master's degree at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government before a PhD in political science at the University of Chicago. Originally intending to study political theory and public choice, his dissertation research under the guidance of Michael Dawson focused on US public opinion and political behavior. Lee aimed to challenge areas of study that were deeply rooted in the tradition and demographics of a mid-20th Century vintage behavioralism. In so doing, he sought instead to privilege a broader set of voices in US public opinion. Much like the American historian Ronald Takaki's methodology of telling the people's story, Lee has throughout his career elected to listen to Americans who have until recently been marginalized by political science. As Joy Kogawa aptly described, the stories, political aspirations, and opinions of people of color in the United States "burst with telling" (Kogawa 1981). Lee has made it his life's work to capture that telling and translate it for American political science.

This biography is the product of several recent conversations I had with Lee and retells his understanding of himself and his place in political science. I was initially skeptical of whether Lee would be credible as an outsider to political science, given that he has reached the pinnacle of the discipline by being named the president of the association while a faculty member at Harvard University (both undeniable indicators of insider status). What became clear through our conversations was that Lee still sees himself as an outsider looking in. Race, language, and immigrant status all play important roles in the development of



Pictured above: Taeku Lee

one's sense of belonging. That feeling of being 'where you belong' with the proper socialized habits and the time-honored expressions goes unquestioned among many people, particularly white Americans whose birthright citizenship and native English arm them with a fulsome sense of belonging.

Political science itself, like the flawed pluralist heaven Schattschneider described more than six decades ago, also sings like a chorus with 'an upper-class accent.' For some, and not all, the pithy aphorisms are familiar, the rules and practices are long internalized, and the cultural or sports analogies make sense and come naturally. In contrast, immigrants arrive in a new land, usually with a different language and distinct cultural practices, and must therefore act the chameleon, becoming adept at blending in to new and different habitats. One strategy is to be 'like water,' changing shape and form to slide through resistance with less risk of injury. Complicating matters further is the omnipresence of the racial uniform for outsiders who cannot be seen as white. In the case of Asian immigrants and US-born

Asian Americans—a burgeoning literature in political science that Lee contributed to in his career—their racial classification has important implications for both political identity and their conditional sense of belonging in the United States.



From the 2017 Fall Council Meeting in San Francisco, CA  
Left to Right: David Lublin, David Lake, Steven Rathgeb Smith, Taeku Lee, Kathleen Thelen

Aware of the potential incongruity in insider status and outsider identity, Lee's work insists that the phenomenon of identity is dual—both ascribed as well as internally driven. Whether in the form of partisan loyalty or group-based racial and ethnic identity, Lee sees identity as neither obvious nor simplistic. Indeed, it was the complexity of social and political phenomenon and the accompanying challenge of explaining their contours that first attracted him to political science and continues to engage him as a scholar. Alluring as the social science siren call for parsimony and replicable causal mechanisms is for the professionally ambitious, Lee has been explicit throughout his career in pursuing the study of what makes politics non-uniform and surprising, embracing the wisdom of another APSA president, Sidney Verba, who counseled that it is not our job to make the complicated simplistic, but instead to render complex phenomena comprehensible.

#### 'FOUND' IN TRANSLATION

It is often expressed that meaning can never be fully captured in another language, that some bits of authenticity are 'lost' in translation. Perhaps, but equally apparent if not fully appreciated, that much can be 'found' in translation. Lee, in his persona and his work, provides a case study of what can be revealed when an outsider looks in. Translation involves moving words from one language to another, and the act of doing so implicates a broader set of social, political, and cultural contexts that foreground and contextualize the words themselves.

The exercise of translating and contextualizing language for Lee began at an early age, first learning Korean in the family home, then conversational Malay and English, all while moving residences, first from town to town in Peninsular Malaysia, then landing first in the United States in New York City, and on to suburban Detroit for high school, his ninth school in the K-12 sequence. The seeming constancy of relocation and adaptation required Lee to fine tune an ear for idiom and inflection and to manage the seemingly perpetual pressures when speaking

in public to perform in what still feels to him like a non-native tongue. Even today, Lee reports feeling more comfortable when writing than when speaking, and over-preparing for even the most low-stakes presentations. For those with English as a second language this is a process distinct from native speakers who face no burden of translation. The implication here is that a greater degree of thoughtfulness and precision is what can be 'found' in translation. At least for Lee, some of what is 'found' in translation is a more studied and careful approach to what he writes and how he verbalizes comments.

While these traits are not just the province of outsiders, they nevertheless represent an analytical process of translation for some non-insiders who must first decide why particular questions are being asked while others are ignored, as well as why some positions and perspectives are assumed to be the right ones. That said, not all outsiders 'find' in translation, because it is much easier to accept and then follow the path of least resistance to success in the academy, a path that is increasingly driven by asking and answering narrow questions inhabited within clever designs. Instead, Lee advocates for scholarship and research programs that focus on questions relevant to the vital issues animating politics today, among them populist nationalism, misinformation, racial inequality, resurgent anti-Semitism, global capitalism, income inequality, and the perils facing our environment. 'Found' in translation are some characteristic elements of Lee's career and scholarship and approach to political science: to always question and critique the theoretical priors and normative biases of existing analytical approaches, to center the voices of the unheard, to ponder over the overlooked, to embrace complexity and noise as essential elements of the reality we seek to explain.

**"Race, language, and immigration status all play important roles in the development of one's sense of belonging."**

#### BEYOND ANGLO-CONFORMITY: RACE AND ETHNIC POLITICS

When Lee arrived in the United States and enrolled in elementary school at PS 40 in New York City, becoming a political scientist was not in the cards, for him or his family. The move from the racially diverse, international, and urban environment of New York City public schools to the heavily white-dominant and upper middle-class environs of suburban Bloomfield Hills, Michigan for high school, however, came to be an early defining moment. Lee's years in Michigan were a time of perceived competition from Japanese automakers and intense 'Japan-bashing,' which included the racially-motivated murder of Vincent Chin at the hands of two white autoworkers, a crime for

which both men were ordered to pay a nominal fine and served no time in prison. It was within this broader climate, where Asian immigrants would 'buy American' out of fear more than patriotism, that Lee was socialized into the emerging contemporary politics of Asian Americans. While few of Lee's professional colleagues and friends would describe him today as an insurgent or a troublemaker, these formative years would have an indelible impact on the questioning, contrarian mindset that Lee brought to thinking about politics.

It was in college that Lee began to enact his political side, organizing on campus for various progressive causes, from being a student leader in Physicians for Social Responsibility and advocating for medical school education reform at the University of Michigan, to organizing anti-apartheid events and fundraising to fight famine for Oxfam, to serving on Michigan Student Assembly and canvassing voters door-to-door during US Presidential elections in the 1980s. While his heart moved him to politics, Lee ultimately recognized his limits as a political organizer, and he saw the wisdom of the advice of his medical school mentor to use his head, rather than his hands, to advance the social change he cared about. On to political science he went!

Lee came of age in the discipline of political science when the study of race and ethnicity in the United States was, if not an afterthought, then viewed as more of a sideshow from the main event of the twin big acts of political behavior and public opinion. No race or ethnicity modifier was needed at that time for these mostly behaviorally oriented fields of study because the voting population of the US was still heavily white, or presumed to be so. There was no organized section in the discipline for work outside of these traditions, and while scholarship on African American politics was developing on its own, major efforts had to be made for its inclusion in the study of US politics overall. The study of Latinx and Asian American people and their political behavior and attitudes was at that time in a very early stage in the discipline. The trial of police officers who had brutally beaten Rodney King and the LA uprising that followed were focal events during Lee's first year as a graduate student at the University of Chicago. That proved to be a pivotal moment in his turn from political theory and public choice to American politics and race and ethnicity politics (REP). In the intervening decades since Lee's work on race and the dynamics of public opinion, party identification, Asian American political behavior and attitudes, and most recently class and inequality have contributed to the growth of the REP subfield and its importance to the study of both US politics and within political science overall.

Lee's view from the outside of how scholars understood public opinion revealed many blind spots in the existing literature. Chief among them was the formidable dragon representing the longstanding perspective in US politics scholarship that elites were the main driving force behind the contours of political attitudes among Americans. By extension, gatekeepers in the field of US public opinion kept alternative views at bay, protecting the conventional wisdom that mass political attitudes were stable and rooted in what elites in politics transmitted to voters and the mass public. Taking issue with this perspective, Lee's first book *Mobilizing Public Opinion* examined the dynamics of change in public opinion influenced by grassroots organizations, protests by ordinary people, and the words of their fellow citizens. Privileging the anti-racist protest and movement politics

among African Americans and their allies during the Civil Rights Movement, Lee was not content to accept conventional and static explanations of public opinion. Instead, and particularly during periods of rapid social change and unrest, Lee argued that there was more to explaining why attitudes changed than what elites said and how that sentiment was reflected in large-N surveys. Eschewing a conventional design, Lee instead gathered information at the ground level often overlooked by other researchers. The result was both a more nuanced understanding of who and what affects public opinion beyond elite discourse, as well as a conceptual advance in understanding the dynamics of change in attitudes rather than a focus on stability in opinion.

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Consistent with Lee's impulse in his first major work to bring those Americans who have been overlooked in politics, he pursued a similar angle in a post-tenure book while on the faculty at the University of California, Berkeley. This second major work on party identification in the United States was co-authored with Zoltan Hajnal of the University of California, San Diego. The impetus behind this book was that five decades had passed since *The American Voter*, with a changed party system, a demographically transformed electorate, and the yin-yang of rising partisan polarization and rising non-partisanship among Americans. The centerpiece of this book is the party affiliation and identification among Latinos and Asian Americans in the United States, both groups with large proportions of immigrant voters among them who were thus not socialized into enduring partisan attachments. *Why Americans Don't Join the Party* took issue with the previous characterization of these newer voters as politically quiescent and less active in politics as a matter of lack of motivation or absence of discernment. Lee and Hajnal effectively slayed some of the myths of party identification that developed early in the behavioral revolution in the US and argued persuasively that identification with a political party in the US is as much the province and obligation of the institutions of parties to mobilize all voters, racially diverse and otherwise.

Lee also continued his work in REP in US politics as part of a team of researchers who collected data from a nationally representative sample of Asian Americans about their political behavior and attitudes. Following the lead of pioneers in the field such as Pei-te Lien (University of California, Santa Barbara), Lee together with Janelle Wong (University of Maryland), Karthick Ramakrishnan (University of California, Riverside), and myself, undertook an ambitious data collection prior to the 2008 election to survey Asian Americans. This group of Americans was at the time, and still is, heavily immigrant and concentrated in population in a handful of states. The countries from which Asian immigrants originate are widely varied, as is their native language. Thus, conducting a study of such magnitude

was complex and expensive, requiring live interviews with research subjects in-language as well as in English. Lee and his colleagues collected data from nearly 6,000 Asian Americans and utilized this information to analyze voting and other forms of participatory activity in politics, as well as reveal the contours of public opinion across a variety of political issues. *Asian American Political Participation* was published several years after the 2008 election and shone a spotlight on a fast-growing and increasingly influential bloc of voters in the US who had until then been both difficult to capture in research studies, and mostly ignored by politicians, parties, and the media. No longer fully overlooked, Lee and his colleagues along with other political scientists specializing in Asian American politics, have put this newest group of Americans forward as part of the mosaic of voters to whom analysts must contend to understand the contours of US politics. Since then, the design and methods of the 2008 National Asian American Survey (NAAS) have served as a basis for the 2012 and 2016 NAAS as well as a model for subsequent data collections of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders at the national as well as state and local levels.

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#### **FORGING NEW TERRITORY: RISING INCOME INEQUALITY**

Lee's new projects extend his longstanding interest in the politics of race and ethnicity in US politics to forge new ground outside of the United States to issues relevant to political economy and the growing income inequality in diverse and wealthy democracies. Lee's current work (with Pepper Culpepper, at the University of Oxford) is aimed at revising the discipline's interests in corporate regulation as an avenue for addressing durable inequalities. Lee and Culpepper are completing a book manuscript that tells the story of how corporate scandals act as focal events that overcome the collective action problem that consumers and voters everywhere quietly suffer. Under the right conditions and the right media framing, such scandals can coordinate the anger and outrage of private consumers and voters as a countervailing force against multinational corporations that effectively tyrannize the economies of advanced democracies. Much like the work Lee designed to highlight those who are not recognized or heard in elite politics, this work by Lee

and Culpepper focuses attention on what ordinary people can do by 'crowdsourcing' negative judgment and demanding accountability and responsiveness from their governments. Rising income inequality in contrast to the spectacular growth of profits among powerful multinational corporations is not, they argue, an inevitable reality of late capitalism. Instead, harnessing the power of people to stimulate mass action and recognition of the impact of corporate malfeasance provides a potentially potent antidote. Like other earlier unseen explanations Lee has sought to bring to light throughout his career, identifying this source of constraint reinforces substantively what can be found in translation by viewing outsiders—those who lack high positions in government or the economy—as much more powerful than expected.

This forthcoming book, *The Billionaire Backlash*, will be completed as Lee works on his newest project on democratic renewal via a case study of Asian Americans. A recent recipient of a Carnegie Fellowship, this work will reconsider polarization through the experiences of Asian Americans, focusing on voting, education, public health, and policing. Utilizing the internal diversity of Asian Americans in terms of national origin, citizenship status, language, religion, culture, and geography as leverage, Lee will examine how and why race relations, economic opportunity and social mobility, as well as ideology—meritocracy among others—mediate polarization among Asian Americans, sometimes exacerbating and other turns ameliorating inequality and discrimination. Lee aims to dig beneath the political flash-points of issues like voter suppression, affirmative action, global pandemics, and racialized policing to anchor a different rendering of the dynamics of polarization among Asian Americans and within US politics more generally. Far from a simple question that can be answered in a parsimonious way, Lee's plans for this work in progress mirror the designs and approaches he has taken in his past work: a relentless pursuit of a complex question with openness and delight at what is to be found.

#### **OUTSIDE IN: ENHANCING DIVERSITY IN THE DISCIPLINE**

Central to the view of the discipline of the newest APSA president is the ambition to provide a framework for allowing outsiders into the world of scholarship and teaching in political science, and in so doing, enhancing diversity in the discipline. Diversity to Lee encapsulates indicators of outsider status beyond native-born status and race and ethnicity, and instead is broadly conceived to include class, gender, sexuality, religion, among others. He is deeply committed to providing greater opportunities to scholars who might not, as he could not until leaving medical school, imagine a career in the profession. His presidency is crucial to diversifying the representation of the APSA membership and the students we teach in classrooms across the country. The absence of models at all stages of the pipeline limits what people see as their potential and likewise, what others see in the possibilities of those unlike themselves. Lee is himself a symbol of a most unlikely outcome almost a half-century upon landing on these shores, to demonstrate that outsiders can indeed become insiders and do so at the highest level. ■