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Immigration and Political Incorporation: Asian American Representation in State Legislatures

Michael Kistner[1] and Tanika Raychaudhuri[2]

[1]Department of Political Science, University of Houston, Houston, TX, USA and [2]Department of Political Science, Rice University, Houston, TX, USA
Corresponding author: Michael Kistner; Email: mkistner@central.uh.edu

Abstract

Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial group in the US electorate, yet they are significantly under-represented in political office. How do predominantly immigrant groups like Asian Americans close this representation gap? We build on existing theories of minority representation and immigrant assimilation by highlighting the importance of a group's political incorporation into American society. We argue that the representation of minority immigrant groups in political office requires social integration and the acquisition of civic resources, processes that can take considerable time. Using new data on Asian American state legislators spanning half a century, we find that immigration in prior decades is associated with greater political representation, while contemporaneous population size has either no independent impact or a negative one. Other indicators of immigrant social integration, including citizenship status, language ability, education, and income, also predict the likelihood of co-racial representation in political office. Our results suggest political representation gaps of immigrant groups narrow over time, though this may be a non-linear process. Our findings also imply that the least integrated members of immigrant groups are the most likely to be affected by representational deficits.

Keywords: political representation; state legislatures; racial politics; legislative elections; immigration

Introduction

Asian Americans are the fastest-growing ethnoracial group in the contemporary US electorate, due in large part to ongoing immigration (Budiman and Ruiz 2021). Over eight million individuals immigrated to the United States from countries across East, Southeast, and South Asia between 2000 and 2022 according to recent American Community Survey estimates.[1] As a result, Asian Americans' share of the US

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[1]See https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2022.S0502?q=immigrants.

population has risen quickly in a short period of time, nearly doubling from 3.8% in the 2000 decennial Census to 6.2% in 2020.

Despite this rapid population growth, the Asian American community is underrepresented in political office at all levels of American government. Asian Americans accounted for just 0.9% of all elected officials in the United States in 2020 (The Reflective Democracy Campaign 2021). The differential factor between the percentage of the population and elected officials that are Asian Americans is −85%, compared to −82% for Latinos, −73% for Native Americans, −43% for African Americans, and +46% for whites (The Reflective Democracy Campaign 2021). This lack of representation in political office can have negative downstream consequences, keeping Asian Americans from having their perspectives heard and preferences taken into account through the policy-making process (Baker and Cook 2005; Casellas 2010; Ellis and Wilson 2013; Grose 2011; Mansbridge 1999; Preuhs 2006; 2007; Williams 2000).

This article highlights one major reason Asian Americans remain so underrepresented in elected office: barriers to political incorporation faced by predominantly immigrant groups. Existing research on race and representation in the US largely focuses on minority population size, but has not fully grappled with theories of immigrant assimilation and civic incorporation. An emerging body of work on Asian American representation has followed much of the literature on African American and Latino representation (e.g., Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran 1996; Casellas 2010; Clark 2019; Grose 2011) by focusing on the importance of ethnoracial voting blocs, finding evidence that co-racial voting contributes to the success of Asian American candidates (Leung 2022; Sadhwani 2022a, 2022b). Given this, it is unsurprising that Asian American politicians are more likely to run and win in districts with large Asian American and non-white populations (Dyogi Phillips 2021; Lublin and Wright 2023). Separately, a different line of research has drawn from sociological work on the immigrant experience in the United States (e.g., Alba and Nee 2003; Portes and Zhou 1993; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001; Waters and Jiménez 2005) to explore how the political identity and behavior of Asian Americans is shaped by the fact that they are a predominantly immigrant group (Carlos 2018; Hajnal and Lee 2011; Ramakrishnan 2005; Wong 2006; Wong *et al.* 2011).

We connect these two strands of literature – one focused on the political representation of ethno-racial minorities and another focused on the social and political incorporation of immigrants – to explain when and where Asian Americans are most likely to hold office. Put simply, our argument is that the representation of immigrant groups requires political incorporation along several dimensions (citizenship, language skills, context-specific knowledge acquisition), a process that can take years or decades. As immigrant groups acquire these resources, they are both more likely to run for political office (increasing the supply of minority representatives) as well as vote, organize, donate, and otherwise support co-ethnic candidates (increasing the demand for minority representatives). Because this process is uneven and non-linear (Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou and Xiong 2005), research that solely focuses on minority population size and neglects to take into account political incorporation provides an incomplete picture of how such groups are represented.

Our specific focus is on American state legislatures. We think this context is a useful one for studying Asian American representation for several reasons. First, Asian American representation is difficult to study solely in national institutions

such as Congress simply due to the limited number of Asian American representatives.[2] Second, in many states Asian American representation has rapidly expanded in recent years, while in other states it remains nonexistent, providing useful variation that can be studied. Third, the increasing importance of state legislative activity in the American policy-making process makes it an important venue to analyze political representation (Grumbach 2018). Finally, state legislators often go on to hold federal positions, so studying legislative representation at the state level can help us understand future representation in Congress and other national institutions.

We thus take advantage of newly collected data on the racial background of American state legislators extending back over 50 years to evaluate how immigration and incorporation shape descriptive representation. Our main finding is that immigrant political incorporation, measured in multiple different ways, strongly predicts the descriptive representation of Asian Americans. First, in state-level analyses extending back decades, earlier Asian population growth is associated with greater numbers of Asian American state legislators in office, while recent immigration (population growth within the previous 10 years) has either no impact or a negative one. Second, in district-level analyses with a shorter timespan but richer data, we find the likelihood of Asian American representation is associated with not just the number of Asian residents in a state legislative district but also the legal status, language proficiency, education, and income of the Asian American population, all civic resources that prior research has shown shape Asian American citizens' ability to participate in politics (Ramakrishnan 2005; Wong 2000; Wong *et al.* 2011). While our analyses are descriptive in nature, the patterns we observe are consistent with a causal theory in which immigrant groups gradually acquire knowledge and resources that allow them to participate in politics and acquire representation in office. Furthermore, the breadth and timespan of our evidence, which goes beyond what has been possible in prior research, provides reassurance that the dynamics we identify are general ones, not limited to a particular case or context.

In addition to these assimilation-linked barriers to political incorporation, separate analyses highlight another challenge the Asian American population faces when it comes to descriptive representation: intraracial ethnic heterogeneity. When we subdivide the Asian American population into groups of national origin, we find limited evidence of pan-ethnic (as opposed to co-ethnic) representation of Asian American communities. This suggests that a pan-ethnic identity may be forming among Asian American voters, but ties to national ethnic groups remain strongest (Leung 2022; Sadhwani 2022a, 2022b). On the basis of these results we conclude that assimilation is at least partially "racialized," providing Asian Americans with the tools to participate in the US political system while maintaining a distinct ethnic and racial identity as well as a set of group-based interests (Lee and Kye 2016).

A key descriptive implication of our findings is that the Asian Americans who face the most barriers to civic engagement – recent immigrants, those who are non-

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[2]For example, in the 118th Congress, two senators and 19 members of the House of Representatives identified as Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders (Manning 2023). During the same time period, there were 153 AAPI state legislators (Klarner 2022).

English proficient, the less educated, etc. – are also less likely to have a co-ethnic representative than their more socially and politically integrated counterparts. Given extensive research establishing the benefits of descriptive representation, these results have important consequences for identifying *whom representational deficits most affect.*

While we focus specifically on Asian Americans in this article, the arguments we test and barriers we describe are relevant to a wide range of immigrant groups in the US (including those from Central and South America, Africa, and elsewhere). As the American electorate diversifies, the lengthy and oftentimes challenging process of social integration means that acquiring descriptive representation typically takes time. More optimistically, the trajectories of representation for different Asian American communities in different states suggests that representational gaps do eventually narrow.

Race, representation, and the case of Asian Americans

Research in political science has focused extensively on the descriptive representation of marginalized groups, considering why and how it matters. In defining work on the topic, Pitkin (1972) characterized descriptive representatives as political officeholders who "look like their constituents." Since Pitkin, scholars have highlighted the importance of descriptive representation for a variety of outcomes such as overcoming group marginalization in the policy-making process (Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1998; Sapiro 1981). While descriptive representation does not always lead to influence in politics and policy, there is a consensus that, at a minimum, the election of political officials from marginalized groups is necessary for the full consideration of group perspectives (Dovi 2002; Mansbridge 1999; Williams˙2000). In practice, descriptive representation often leads to substantive representation of group interests (Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran 1996; Grose 2011; Hero and Tolbert 1995; Lowande, Ritchie, and Lauterbach 2019).

How do minority politicians get elected? The most prominent explanation argues that voters with *shared racial or ethnic identity with a candidate* are more likely to support the candidate. By this logic, representation of minority groups depends on their share of the population and whether they form a critical mass of voters in particular constituencies, if not the polity at large. Consistent with this expectation, studies of descriptive representation find that constituency racial demographics are a strong predictor of minority representation. For example, the likelihood of electing an African American or Latino legislator increases with the share of an electoral district's population from that minority group (Canon 1999; Casellas 2010; Grofman and Handley 1989; Hardy-Fanta *et al.* 2016; Lublin 1997; Lublin *et al.* 2009; Parker 1990; Preuhs and Juenke 2011). In fact, minority legislators are particularly likely to be elected in districts where most residents (or at least a plurality) are from the same racial group as the candidate (Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran 1996; Hicks *et al.* 2018; Lublin *et al.* 2020; Preuhs and Juenke 2011). A growing literature also considers "supply-side explanations" for the emergence of women and minority candidates, finding that alongside institutional factors, district demographics are strong predictors of whether non-white

candidates appear on the ballot (Branton 2009; Canon 1999; Juenke 2014; Shah 2014; Shah, Scott, and Juenke 2019).[3]

Scholarship focusing specifically on the case of Asian American officeholders has produced mixed findings, suggesting that theories of minority population size may not fully explain their representation in political office. In contrast to work studying African American and Latino representation, Lai *et al.* (2001) find that congressional districts with the largest Asian American populations in the late 1990s and early 2000s were not represented by Asian Americans. In turn, they argue that Asian American candidates are most successful when they have "cross-over appeal" to members of other racial groups. Emergent research (Lublin and Wright 2023) has revisited this question in a more recent time period (2011–2020), using data on Asian American representation in state legislatures as well as Congress. The authors find that Asian American candidates have cross-over appeal, drawing more support from non-Asian racial minorities than white candidates do, but uncover evidence of co-ethnic voting by Asians as well. In a similar vein, Lien and Filler (2022) find that Asian American representation on California city councils grows with their share of the population, albeit neither consistently nor uniformly, using data from several points in time between 1980 and 2020 (p. 99).[4]

Other studies suggest that the link between Asian population and representation might be a conditional one. For example, in an analysis of the factors that shape state legislative representation for Asian Americans and Latinos, Dyogi Phillips (2021) argues that a complex interaction of race and gender "simultaneously constrains and facilitates access to electoral opportunity for distinct groups of men and women" (p. 9). She finds that majority–minority districts benefit Asian American and Latino male candidates, but not their female counterparts. Lien and Filler (2022) also find gendered differences in Asian American representation across levels of political office. In another study focused on the emergence of minority candidates for state legislative positions, Fraga, Juenke, and Shah (2020) find that Asian American candidates are more likely to run as the percentage of Asian Americans in the district increases, but this association weakens in districts represented by an Asian American incumbent in Congress.[5] Others find similar effects at the local level in Orange County, California, particularly when Asian American candidates employ co-ethnic cues (Uhlaner and Le 2017).

Related research has studied Asian American co-ethnic representation from the perspective of *voters* as opposed to office-holders or candidates. For example, studies of California voters during the late 2010s (Sadhwani 2022a, 2022b) find that Asian Americans are more likely to vote for Asian American than non-Asian candidates for Congress and the state assembly, but show that shared national origin is a strong predictor of Asian Americans' vote choices. These studies support theories of

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[3]Party recruitment may also shape the supply of minority candidates, although there are mixed findings about whether women and minority candidates receive less support from political parties than their male and white counterparts (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2019; Fraga and Hassell 2021; Sanbonmatsu 2006).

[4]In addition to this analysis, Lien and Filler (2022) also collect data on Asian American officeholders at multiple levels of government. Their book presents detailed descriptive information about these representatives, but leaves several open questions about the factors associated with them holding office.

[5]This dovetails with findings that women candidates are more likely to be elected to state legislatures when women already hold high-profile political positions in their state (Ladam, Harden, and Windett 2018).

co-ethnic voting as well as the idea that pan-ethnicity is not the primary axis of group identity for most Asian Americans (see also Leung 2022).

Immigrant assimilation and political incorporation

While much of the literature on minority representation focuses on co-ethnicity, a separate body of work (much of it by sociologists) considers what factors shape immigrants' social and political experiences in the US with implications for these groups' representation in political office.[6] One factor that has received more attention from scholars of immigrant socialization in sociology than political science is immigrant assimilation and political incorporation. We outline the key theoretical arguments and findings from this research and then consider how these factors may shape Asian American political representation.

Classic sociological research on immigrant incorporation argues that immigrant groups adapt to American life by adopting the dominant social and cultural practices in their host society (Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964; Warner and Srole 1945). These accounts center the process of "straight-line assimilation," whereby immigrants and their children adopt American social, economic, and cultural practices – and lose those from their country of origin – over time and generations in a linear fashion (Warner and Srole 1945). The degree to which immigrant groups must reject their own social practices differs across theories, ranging from "Anglo-conformity, which demanded the complete renunciation of the immigrant's ancestral culture," to "cultural pluralism," in which some aspects of immigrant cultures become incorporated into mainstream American culture (Gordon 1964, p. 8). These theories generally conceive of assimilation as a process of economic and social mobility from one generation to the next (Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001, p. 876). As such, common measures include, "socioeconomic status, spatial concentration, language assimilation, and intermarriage" (Waters and Jiménez 2005, p. 105). Although these theories were developed to explain the incorporation of European immigrant groups before 1965 legal reforms altered the racial composition of immigrants entering the US, some scholars argue that they also apply to racially diverse groups of new immigrants, including Asian Americans (Alba and Nee 2003; Waters and Jiménez 2005).

Our account aligns with other work which updates these theories by acknowledging that straight-line assimilation is not a foregone conclusion, especially for immigrants from racial minority groups. For example, research on "segmented assimilation" explores the possibility that the second-generation children of Latino and Black immigrants may not uniformly experience upward socioeconomic mobility (Gans 1992; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993). Instead, these authors argue there is variation in second-generation assimilation outcomes along lines of race, class, and residential settlement. While many of these accounts focus on Latino and Black children of immigrants, segmented assimilation is also a possibility for the children of Asian American immigrants who grow up in ethnic enclaves or

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[6]Although such theories find support in research on immigrant representation in Western Europe (Dancygier 2014, 2018; Goodman 2014), few studies conducted in the US context consider the impact of immigrant incorporation on representation in political office (cf. Casellas 2010; Rogers 2006).

low-income households (Fu and Hatfield 2008; Hiller and Chow 2005; Zhou and Xiong 2005).

It is important to note that theories of segmented assimilation argue that there are a range of assimilation outcomes for the children of immigrants, not that downward mobility is the only possible outcome (Zhou and Xiong 2005). In this vein, Alba and Nee (2003) acknowledge that segmented assimilation may occur, arguing that it does not "rule out the possibility that assimilation in the form of entry into the mainstream has a major role to play in the future" (p. 9). In fact, they take positive socioeconomic outcomes and high rates of intermarriage among Asian Americans as evidence that theories of assimilation apply in a modern context. However, these are not the only measures of social and political assimilation. Others argue that Asian American assimilation is an inherently racialized process, as racial identity continues to play an important role in their lives, especially as it relates to politics, "regardless of their socioeconomic status and levels of acculturation" (Lee and Kye 2016, p. 253).

Research in political science considers the implications of these theories for the civic incorporation of immigrant groups including Asian Americans. For example, several indicators of immigrant assimilation, such as generational status, years spent in the US, naturalization, and English language ability increase the likelihood of Asian American political participation and partisan acquisition (Chan, Nguy, and Masuoka 2024; Cho 1999; Phan and Garcia 2009; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001; Wong 2000; Wong *et al.* 2011). However, this work also raises questions about assumptions of linear assimilation or the accumulation of political resources over time. For example, Asian American and Latino political engagement may not consistently increase across years and generations spent in the US (Carlos 2018; Jones-Correa 1998; Lee *et al.* 2006; Lien 2004; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001). Moreover, socioeconomic status, another key measure of assimilation, does not consistently predict higher rates of civic engagement among Asian Americans (Cho 1999; Junn 1999; Lien *et al.* 2001). Finally, factors distinctive to the immigrant experience, such as the political regime type in countries of origin, political engagement before migration, and transnational political ties shape Asian American civic engagement (Collet and Lien 2009; Lee *et al.* 2006; Lien 2010; Ramakrishnan 2005; Wong *et al.* 2011).

Building on this literature, we argue that immigrant assimilation (i.e., the integration of an ethnic group into a broader society) should lead to greater representation in political office, although this outcome is unlikely to be uniform or immediate. While immigrant groups such as Asian Americans may in general become more incorporated in the political realm over time and generations, this need not always be the case (Fu and Hatfield 2008; Zhou and Xiong 2005). Therefore, we argue that Asian American population size does not immediately lead to increased political representation. Rather, we build on theories of segmented assimilation and argue that the gradual acquisition of civic resources among members of the Asian American community produces descriptive representation over a period of time.

According to such theories of immigrant assimilation and political incorporation, as members of immigrant populations become more incorporated within a society, they should have greater opportunity to engage in politics for reasons of legal status (e.g., enfranchisement due to citizenship), acculturation (e.g., growing recognition of salient political cleavages, increased knowledge of the political system, exposure to norms of political participation), and resource acquisition (e.g., acquiring levels of education and wealth that permit greater participation in politics). As immigrant

groups become incorporated in these ways, they will be more likely to produce candidates for public office as well as be able to support these candidates via voting, organizing, donating, and other forms of civic participation. For these reasons, the more incorporated an immigrant community is in a constituency, the more likely they should be represented in office.

Drawing on these arguments, we develop several predictions about the relationship between immigrant incorporation and representation in state legislatures. The first is that Asian American population size alone does not predict legislative representation, as theories of shared racial or ethnic identity and representation predict. Instead, the *historic population hypothesis* predicts that the likelihood of Asian American representation in state legislatures increases as the local Asian American community becomes more established, which we measure in terms of population size in prior decades (while holding constant contemporaneous population size).

However, since theories of segmented assimilation argue that time alone is not sufficient for political incorporation, we also consider whether the acquisition of civic resources increases the likelihood of representation. The *civic resource acquisition hypothesis* predicts that the likelihood of Asian American state legislative representation increases when a higher percent of the Asian American population possesses key resources. In our analyses, we consider the proportion of the Asian American community who are citizens, fluent in English, multiracial, college educated, or high income.

In testing whether these theories explain Asian American representation in state legislatures, we draw on Lee and Kye's (2016) account of "racialized assimilation," which centers the continuing significance of race for Asian Americans despite relative socioeconomic and social assimilation. Contrary to straight-line theories of assimilation, we do not expect that integration leads to full social incorporation into "mainstream [white] society" such that the interests of Asian Americans are no different from those of whites. Rather, even assimilated Asian American immigrants who have access to civic resources maintain a distinct Asian American racial identity that shapes their life experience in the US (Kim 1999; Lee and Kye 2016).[7] In turn, regardless of their level of assimilation, Asian Americans may benefit from descriptive representation and vote for co-ethnic representatives. By this account, assimilation and the acquisition of civic resources leads to political incorporation, providing Asian Americans with the tools for civic engagement.

While European immigrants largely followed a linear assimilation trend (Gordon 1964), this racialized model of assimilation and political incorporation may also apply to diverse immigrants from ethno-racial minority groups beyond the Asian American community. Some examples include Black and Latino immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. However, it is important to note that patterns of immigrant assimilation and political representation in other immigrant communities may differ from those for Asian Americans because these

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[7]The opposing theoretical perspective is that as immigrant groups become more assimilated into a society, their political identities and preferences becoming less distinctive. From this point of view, members of the group might for candidacy driven (supply-side) reasons become more likely to hold office as the group assimilates, but we would expect less co-ethnic voting from the group and thus a weaker dyadic connection between the group's population share in a district and the likelihood of descriptive representation. We return to this discussion in the concluding section.

other groups are often highly concentrated into districts where many voters are from the same racial group and have different social experiences in the US. Furthermore, as Black immigrants assimilate, they may become incorporated into a politically active non-immigrant African American community (Rogers 2006). Future work may explore the extent to which these arguments apply to diverse non-white immigrant communities.

Data on Asian American representation in the states

Does social integration lead to a greater Asian American presence in state legislatures? How? Answering these questions requires data on Asian American representation. Below, we describe a new dataset of Asian American political representation in state legislatures across time, and detail two complementary approaches we adopt to measuring assimilation and social integration.

The primary dataset we use, originally collected by Klarner (2022) and shared with the authors, contains the racial and ethnic identities of all American state legislators elected to office between 1970 and 2020. The dataset was constructed by a team of researchers using rosters maintained by interest groups, archival biographical records published by state legislatures, and (in recent years) state legislative and candidate websites. More details on the procedures for identifying legislator race and ethnicity as well as validation of the codings can be found in Section S1 of the Supplementary Material.

During this time period, there are 476 unique state legislators with an Asian or Pacific Islander background.[8] In Table S2 in the Supplementary Material, we provide additional data on the nationality and ethnicity of these legislators, the states they hold office in, and their political parties. Of particular note from the table is the partisan split: Democratic Asian American state legislators outnumber their Republican counterparts by approximately a 4 to 1 margin.[9]

When and where does Asian American representation in the states occur? In Figure 1, we display two plots showing the growth of Asian American representation over time as well as the location of Asian American state representatives in recent years. The top panel compares Asian population growth in the United States between 1970 and 2020 as a percent of total US population, alongside the percent of all state legislators with an Asian American background. The timing of population growth versus representation is consistent with an assimilation-based story of political incorporation; from 1970 onwards the Asian share of the population grows steadily. However, Asian American representation does not begin to increase meaningfully until approximately 2000, at which point it too starts growing. This suggests that the political incorporation of Asian Americans does not follow

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[8]We follow prior work in grouping Pacific Islanders with Asian Americans of other origins when considering Asian identity as a broad pan-ethnic grouping. Pacific Islanders make up a small share (less than 6%) of all Asian American state legislators in our data, however. Additionally, all analyses in the article exclude Hawaii, as our research focus is minority representation. Since Hawaii is a plurality AAPI state, the dynamics of AAPI representation in Hawaii likely differ qualitatively from other US states.

[9]While our analyses center the importance of political incorporation for immigrant groups, representation is also a factor of how willingly political parties embrace the candidates and interests of minority groups. We view this as a complementary explanation to ours; as immigrant groups become socialized to the new political system, they become aware of which parties promote their interests and support those parties at higher rates.

Growth in Asian Population and Representation
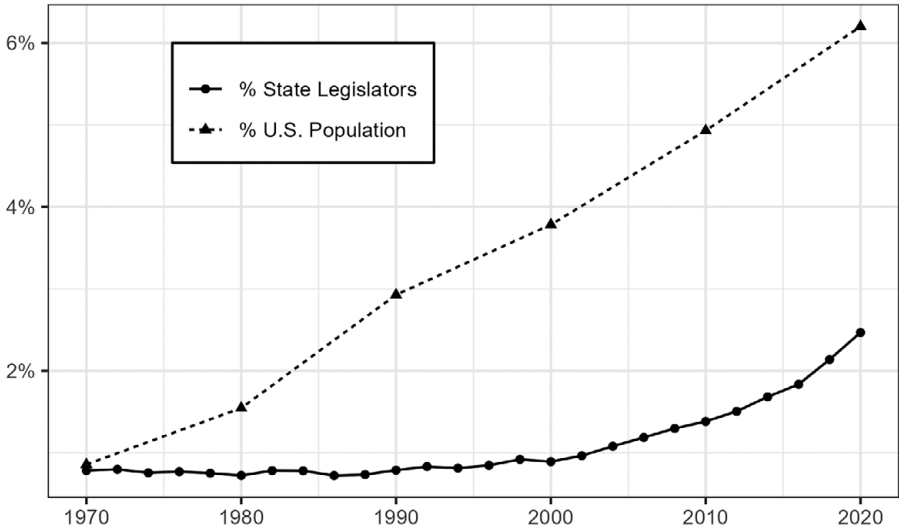
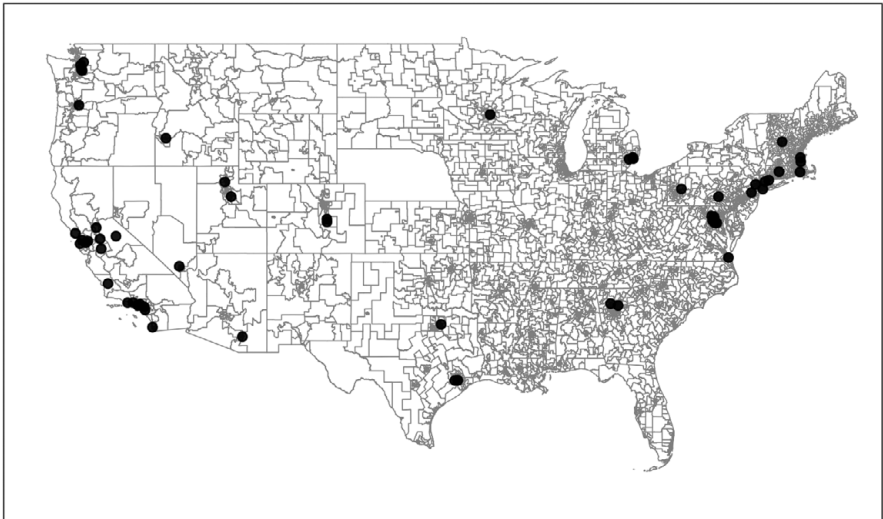## Map of Asian American Representation (2010s)

Figure 1. Temporal and geographic dynamics of Asian American representation in the states.
Note: The top panel displays the growth of Asian American population in the United States (dashed line; data from decennial US Censuses) and Asian American representation in state legislatures (solid line) between 1970 and 2020, each expressed as the percent of total (population/legislators). The bottom panel shows lower chamber state legislative districts in the contiguous US for the 2012–2021 redistricting cycle (data on state legislative district boundaries come from the US Census Bureau). Solid black dots indicate state legislative districts with at least one Asian American representative during this time period.

theories of minority population size, as representation does not increase immediately nor linearly with population size.

The bottom panel shows the location of Asian American state representatives in the most recent full redistricting cycle (2012 to 2021). As the map reveals, there are areas where Asian American representation is particularly concentrated, such as in the Northeast, California, and large urban areas in the Midwest.

Our main analyses take advantage of variation in Asian American representation across both time and districts to test our hypotheses about immigrant political incorporation and representation in political office. The first analysis examines how Asian American political representation is associated with Asian population growth, both contemporaneous and in the near past, using data on Asian American population size by state dating back to the 1960s. We collect decennial US census data on the Asian population in each state by decade, as well as auxiliary variables likely associated with Asian American representation. The hypothesis we test (the *historic population hypothesis*) is whether Asian American population growth in earlier decades is associated with contemporaneous Asian American representation after conditioning on contemporaneous Asian American population size. In other words, when comparing two states with a similar presence of Asian Americans in the electorate, do we observe greater Asian American representation in the state where Asian Americans arrived earlier? This state-level analysis offers an initial test of theories of immigrant assimilation and political incorporation alongside theories of co-racial representation.

The second analysis we conduct uses finer-grained geographic data (at the expense of examining a shorter time period) to test expectations about access to civic resources in immigrant communities and representation in political office. For this analysis, we evaluate the determinants of Asian American representation at the state legislative district level. To do so, we collect data on state legislative districts from the American Community Survey (ACS). From 2006 onwards, the ACS surveys contain information not just about the size of the Asian population in each state legislative district, but also the citizenship, language, education, and income of the district at large as well as the Asian community. We use these variables, which permit a deeper examination of how assimilation along several dimensions (citizenship, language use, education, etc.), to test the *civic resource acquisition hypothesis.* We conclude with a brief comparison of co-ethnic versus pan-ethnic representation at the state legislative district level.

Population growth and Asian American representation

We begin our empirical analyses by looking at how the timing of Asian population growth in individual US states corresponds to representation in state legislatures. Our strategy is to look at states with varying Asian population levels over time, and determine if population growth is associated with immediate and/or future representation of Asian Americans in the state legislature. Explanations of minority representation that highlight co-ethnic voting or critical minority population mass predict we should find the former, while theories of immigrant assimilation and incorporation suggest we should observe the latter.

Because historical data on the Asian population in each state comes from decennial censuses, the unit of observation in these regressions is a state by decade combination.[10] In the simplest model, the specification can be given as

$$\text{Asian Representation}_{s,d} = \beta_1 \text{Asian Population}_{s,d} + \mathbf{X}_{s,d}\gamma + \alpha_s + \delta_d + \epsilon_{s,d},$$

where Asian Representation$_{s,d}$ refers to the percent of state legislative seats in state s and decade d held by Asian Americans, and Asian Population$_{s,d}$ the Asian percent of the population in the state at the beginning of the decade. Put differently, for each state, we regress the percent of Asian American legislators in the 1980s on the Asian population in the year 1980, the percent of Asian American legislators in the 1990s on the population in the year 1990, and so on.

In the equation above, α_s and δ_d represent state and decade fixed effects, respectively. The inclusion of state fixed effects ensures the model uses solely variation in population size within states (not across states) to estimate the relationship to representation. The decade fixed effects control for the secular growth in Asian American state legislators over time, accounting for any nation-wide changes in Asian American representation. In addition to these fixed effects, we control for factors that vary across time within a state ($\mathbf{X}_{s,d}$ above). The control variables used are the state median income, the percent college educated in the state, the percent of other racial minorities in the state, and the Democratic vote in the most recent presidential election.

While the simplest model uses only the Asian population in the state at the beginning of the decade, additional models evaluate whether co-ethnic population in *earlier* decades predicts Asian American representation in *later* decades, independent of the contemporaneous population. To accomplish this, lagged versions of the *Asian Population* variable are included along with the contemporaneous one. For instance, with one lag included the equation becomes

$$\text{Asian Representation}_{s,d} = \beta_1 \text{Asian Population}_{s,d} + \beta_2 \text{Asian Population}_{s,d-1}$$
$$+ \mathbf{X}_{s,d}\gamma + \alpha_s + \delta_d + \epsilon_{s,d}.$$

In this model, β_2 can be interpreted as the predicted difference in Asian American representation associated with the state's Asian population size at the beginning of the previous decade, holding constant the population at the beginning of the current decade. Intuitively, the model allows us to compare two states, each with an equal Asian population size at the beginning of the decade but one with a larger Asian population the decade prior. If the latter type of state has more Asian American legislators in office, this suggests that it is not just the size of the Asian population that matters but also how long they have been members of the community.

Table 1 displays the results for four such models, beginning with no lagged population variables and then gradually adding one-, two-, and three-decade lagged

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[10]In some decades, such as the 1980s and 1990s, the census groups together Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. For comparability across decades, we add the latter category in when data for the two groups are separated. As these analyses exclude Hawaii, the proportion of Pacific Islanders in all other states is quite low.

Table 1. Asian American population growth and representation in state legislatures

	DV: Asian American state legislators (% of state legislative seats in decade d)			
Asian population %	0.848*	−0.788	−0.768*	−0.759*
(Current decade)	(0.412)	(0.394)	(0.310)	(0.304)
Asian population %		1.703**	0.675*	0.679*
(One decade prior)		(0.445)	(0.318)	(0.321)
Asian population %			1.147**	1.115**
(Two decades prior)			(0.153)	(0.148)
Asian population %				0.067*
(Three decades prior)				(0.029)
Control variables	Y	Y	Y	Y
State fes	Y	Y	Y	Y
Decade fes	Y	Y	Y	Y
No. of obs.	147	147	147	147
R^2 Adj.	0.644	0.775	0.832	0.832

Note. Standard errors clustered by state shown in parentheses. *p*-values from two-tailed tests: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

population variables.[11] The first model, in Column 1, confirms that larger Asian American populations are indeed associated with higher levels of Asian American representation, as theories of co-racial representation predict.

Columns 2–4 of Table 1 qualify this finding considerably, however. These columns reveal that representation depends on how established local Asian American populations are, as the *historic population hypothesis* predicts. The models in these columns, which include one or more lagged population variables, do a much better job of predicting patterns in Asian American representation, as evidenced by the increasing adjusted R^2 value across columns. The coefficient estimates reveal that it is not just the size of the contemporaneous Asian population that matters, but when that population growth occurred, in line with theories of immigrant assimilation and incorporation. In fact, when the lagged population variables are included, the estimated effect of contemporaneous population is negative. This suggests that after taking into account the presence of Asian population in prior decades, recent Asian population growth – due to immigration or other reasons – may actually have a negative impact on Asian American representation. Such a pattern is consistent with multiple explanations rooted in existing literature, such as a backlash effect against immigrants among non-immigrant community members (Abrajano and Hajnal 2017), low rates of political engagement among Asian American newcomers (Lien *et al.* 2001), or weak pan-ethnic racial identity among less-incorporated minority populations (Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004).

In contrast, the relationship between earlier Asian population levels and contemporaneous representation is consistent and positive. In Columns 2–4 the coefficients from all of the lagged population variables are all positive, and most are significant. In Column 4, where three lagged variables are simultaneously included, the coefficient

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[11]The full set of estimates, including control variables, can be found in Table S4 in the Supplementary Material. For comparability across columns, in Table 1, we restrict the data to $d = 1990$ onwards, since we have statewide Asian population data going back to the 1960s (i.e., we can include three lags, $d − 3$, for all observations such that $d \geq 1990$). Differences in coefficient estimates across columns are thus due ̄ to differences in included lags, not differences in which decades are included in each regression. Table S5 in the Supplementary Material excludes the third decade lag and uses state legislator racial data beginning in the 1980s instead. Doing so leads to similar conclusions as discussed here.

sizes imply that Asian population levels two decades earlier are the strongest predictors of how many Asian American state legislators currently hold office.

To illustrate these relationships more clearly, Figure 2 compares the contemporaneous and lagged Asian American population to Asian American state legislative representation in the four states with the largest Asian population share in recent years. As can be seen in the figure, in all four states there is a sizeable representation gap between the contemporaneous Asian population and the share of state legislative seats held by Asian Americans. However, there is a much closer relationship between the share of current state legislative seats and the Asian American population from two decades prior. In fact, in two states (California and Washington) Asian Americans hold a slightly greater percent of seats in the state legislature by 2010 than their population share in 1990.
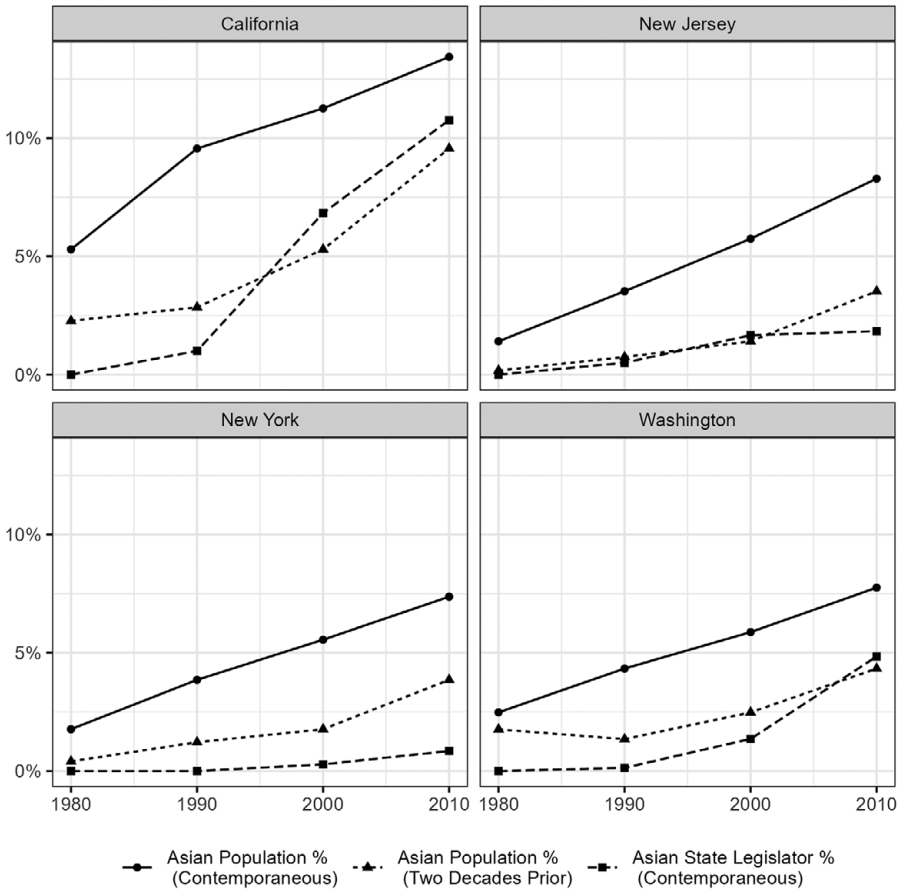

Figure 2. Population and representation dynamics in four example states.
Note: The figure displays Asian American state legislative representation as well as contemporaneous and lagged Asian American population in the four states – California, New Jersey, New York, and Washington – with the largest Asian share of the population between 1980 and 2010.

To summarize, an analysis of Asian American representation and population dynamics shows population growth does lead to political incorporation, but that this is a process takes place over multiple decades.

District demographics and Asian American representation

Our second analysis moves from representation in the aggregate to dyadic representation, evaluating which characteristics of state legislative districts – in particular, civic resources possessed by the Asian population in a district – are associated with having an Asian American state representative or senator. As mentioned above, we collect data on state legislative districts from the American Community Survey beginning in 2006, the first year ACS data are available. In addition to looking at the size of the Asian population in each state, we consider how indicators of immigrant assimilation and social integration along multiple dimensions (e.g., legal, social, and socioeconomic) – citizenship, language, multiracial status, education, and income – are associated with co-racial representation of the Asian population.

We begin by regressing a binary indicator for electing an Asian American representative in a given district in a given election cycle on the Asian percentage of the population in the district, to establish a baseline for the relationship between Asian population and co-racial political representation.

Second, we estimate the same regression but separate the Asian population by citizenship status, including as independent variables the population percentage of US-born Asian citizens, the population percentage of foreign-born naturalized Asian citizens, and the population percentage of foreign-born Asian non-citizens. Our expectation is that the percentage of native-born Asian citizens will be most strongly associated with pan-ethnic representation and the percentage of Asian non-citizens the least strongly associated (Cho 1999; Junn 1999; Wong *et al.* 2011). In the latter case, given that citizenship is a legal requirement for voting, a greater number of Asian non-citizens (holding constant the number of Asians who are US citizens) should not be associated with pan-ethnic voting or candidacies. We expect US-born Asian citizens are more likely to be represented by Asian Americans than naturalized Asian citizens as the former have spent a greater portion of their lives in the United States and are more likely to be more incorporated in the political culture (Wong *et al.* 2011).

Third, we separate the Asian population in the district into the percent that report speaking English as their primary language at home versus those that report speaking another language. English proficiency is an indicator of how socially integrated Asian Americans are, with greater proficiency revealing greater assimilation (Cho 1999; Lee and Kye 2016; Waters and Jiménez 2005). Furthermore, a lack of English proficiency should make it more difficult for individuals to absorb information about politics (advertisements, debates, signs, etc.) and may be associated with less engagement in a political system that does not prioritize language access (Nguyen 2022a).

Fourth, we separate the Asian population into those identifying solely as Asian versus those who identify as another race or ethnicity (e.g., white, Latino, Black).[12]

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[12]Our measure of multi-racial identity separates those who identify as Asian alone from those who identify as Asian in combination with another race or ethnicity. Those who identify with multiple Asian ethnicities (e.g., Chinese and Korean) but not another race or non-Asian ethnicity are not coded as multi-racial. We are also unable to code those who have a multi-racial background but do not identify as such.

Those who identify as Asian American alongside other racial groups are more likely to be incorporated in American society and make an intentional decisions to identify both with the Asian American community as well as one or more non-Asian ethnoracial groups (Davenport 2018; Masuoka 2017).

Fifth, we separate the Asian population into those who report having a four-year college degree or more education versus those with less than a four-year degree. Higher education is an indicator of social incorporation, and those with a college degree should be better prepared to understand and participate in American politics. Although research on Asian American civic engagement does not find that income and education consistently predict turnout (Junn 1999; Lien *et al.* 2001), in studies of African American and women's representation, education (as well as income) has been found to be an important predictor of representation (Karnig 1979; Marschall and Ruhil 2006; Robinson and Dye 1978; Smith, Reingold, and Owens 2012; Thomsen and Swers 2017; Wright and Zhu 2021).

Accordingly, we also separate the Asian population into low income households ($50,000 of household income per year or less), middle income households (between $50,000 and $100,000 of annual household income), and high income households (anything above $100,000 of annual household income). The logic here is straightforward; as individuals have greater economic resources, following and participating in politics becomes easier. Thus we expect a stronger association between the percent Asian population in a district and pan-ethnic representation among middle and high income households.

We evaluate these expectations, which stem from the *civic resource acquisition hypothesis*, using our data on the race of state legislators and the socio-demographic characteristics of the districts they represent, estimating a series of logistic regression models decomposing the Asian population in each district into different categories based on the hypotheses above.[13] In these models, the unit of observation is a state legislative district in a specific election year, and the dependent variable is whether the elected representative is Asian American or not.

In addition to the above-discussed characteristics of the Asian population, all models control for variables that might also influence the likelihood a district is represented by an Asian American. These include the percent of a district's entire population (i.e., non-Asians and Asians collectively) that is college-educated, the median income of the district, and the percent of a district's residents are Black, Hispanic or Latino, or from another non-white category, relative to the omitted baseline category (the percent of a districts' residents who are white).[14] We also include the measure of district conservatism developed by Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2013) to control for differing propensities to elect an Asian American across party and ideology. Finally, and importantly, we include state-election year fixed effects to control

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[13]Due to the high levels of collinearity between the different Asian demographic variables, we cannot estimate a single model with all demographic variables simultaneously included. Instead, we focus on single dimensions (citizenship, language, etc.) in each regression model. Our main goal in analyzing multiple different indicators of social incorporation is to evaluate the general relationship between assimilation and representation as measured by multiple indicators, rather than focus on the independent contribution of any one dimension.

[14]These latter variables help account for the relationship described by Lublin and Wright (2023) in which more racially diverse districts are more likely to elect an Asian American representative to office even independent of the Asian population in the district.

for any differences across years and states in the probability of Asian Americans getting elected to state office. Consequently, these regressions compare demographic differences across districts within a state within a particular election year.

The results of these models are displayed graphically in Figure 3. To establish a baseline, the first model simply includes the Asian share of the population without any further decomposition. Coefficient estimates above this baseline indicate that Asian individuals in that group are more likely to be represented by an Asian American legislator than Asian residents writ large, while a smaller coefficient implies the inverse.

The subsequent results largely align with our expectations and support the civic resource acquisition hypothesis. Beginning with the citizenship variables, we find that the percent of Asian citizens in a district is associated with representation by an Asian American, while the percent of Asian non-citizens has effectively no relationship with the likelihood of co-ethnic representation. There does not appear to be much difference in pan-ethnic representation for US-born versus naturalized citizens, however. One explanation for this is that naturalized citizens have made a conscious and oftentimes costly decision to acquire citizenship (Jones-Correa 1998). Given naturalized citizens often have made the difficult decision to renounce
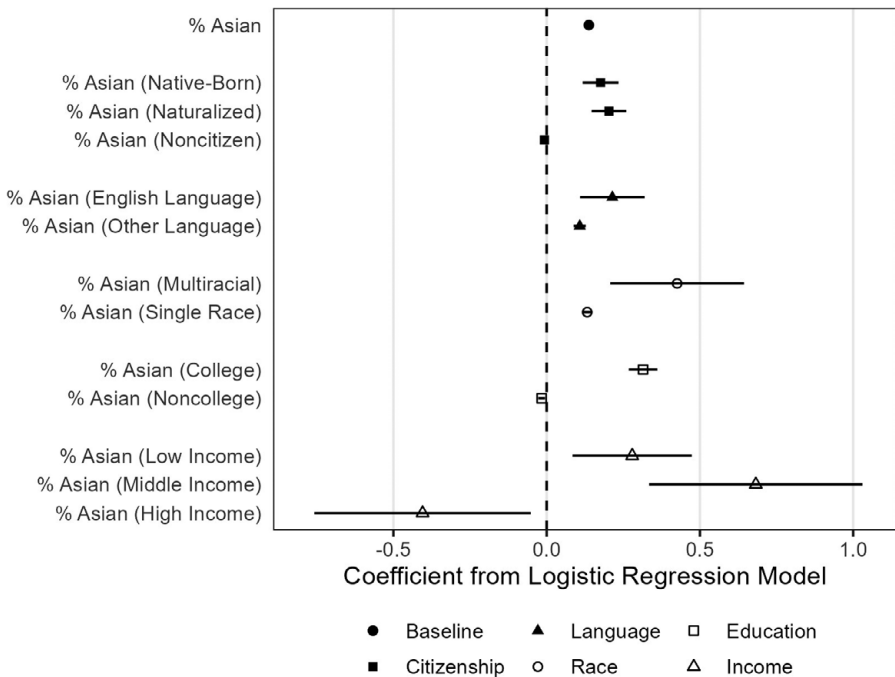

Figure 3. Predictors of district representation by an Asian American state legislator.
Note: Shapes indicate coefficient estimates from logistic regression models with control variables (general district ideology, racial composition, income, education) and state-year fixed effects included. Standard errors clustered at the district level. Solid lines display 95% confidence intervals. Data span 2006 to 2020. The full set of estimates, including coefficients for control variables, are provided in Table S6 in the Supplementary Material.

allegiance to their country of origin, it is unsurprising that they might also make the conscious decision to participate in American politics.

Turning next to the language variables, we find some evidence that English-speaking Asians are more likely to be represented by an Asian American than non-English speaking Asians. The coefficient estimate for the English-speaking Asian percent of a district's population is almost twice as large as the coefficient for the non-English speaking Asian population. The relationship between language use and representation, while not precisely estimated (the p-value from a two-tailed F-test for difference of coefficients is 0.064) is in the direction predicted by our theory.

Moving next to the racial identification variables, we find that Asians who identify with another race are more likely to be represented by an Asian legislator in office than those who identify as Asian alone ($p = 0.097$). This might be surprising from one perspective, as we might expect those who identify with other racial and ethnic groups in addition to their Asian heritage to support those other racial and ethnic groups politically, perhaps to the detriment of Asian candidates. However, taken as an indicator of Asian social assimilation, the relationship between multiracial identification and Asian representation accords with our theoretical expectations (Masuoka 2017).

The results for the education variables are also in line with expectations. The coefficient for pan-ethnic representation of college educated Asians is almost twice as large as the baseline coefficient. In contrast, there is essentially no relationship between the percent of non-college educated Asians in a district and the likelihood of representation by an Asian American.

For income, we find evidence of a non-linear relationship. While the percent of middle-income Asian Americans in a district is more predictive of co-ethnic representation than the number of low-income Asian Americans ($p = 0.088$), the relationship between the number of high-income Asian Americans in the district and Asian American representation is negative. This latter finding, while unexpected, may be connected to the districts where high-income Asian Americans live, if they are quite different than districts where low- and middle-income Asian Americans live. This also aligns with findings that increasing income does not consistently predict higher turnout rates among Asian American voters (Junn 1999; Lien *et al.* 2001).

To summarize, we find that the districts represented by Asian Americans are, as theories of shared racial identity and representation suggest, are those with a high concentration of Asian residents. However, the social incorporation of that Asian population also matters. Places with large numbers of middle-income, English-speaking, multi-cultural, Asian American citizens are most likely to elect an Asian American to represent them in their state legislature.

Co-ethnic versus pan-ethnic representation

Up until this point, we have examined Asian legislators and residents as a single aggregate group. However, Asian as a pan-ethnic racial group covers a wide variety of different nationalities and ethnicities. Previous research on Asian American political behavior argues and finds that co-ethnic preferences are particularly strong, although there is evidence a pan-ethnic Asian American identity also exists (Cho 2001; Le Espiritu 1992; Junn and Masuoka 2008; Masuoka 2006).

To what extent are the above findings driven by co-ethnic versus pan-ethnic representation? We evaluate this question by re-estimating the regression models of the previous section, but including separate population and representation variables for the largest ethnic subgroups in our data: Chinese, Indian, Korean, Filipino and Japanese. The results are shown in Section S7 of the Supplementary Material. As Supplementary Figure S7 shows, while the representational link is generally strongest for legislators and residents of the same Asian ethnic subgroup, there is evidence of cross-ethnic representation for Asian American state legislators as well. In four out of the five ethnic subgroups, there is a strong, positive, and significant relationship between ethnic subgroup population size and the likelihood of being represented by a member of that ethnic subgroup. In all five cases, after controlling for ethnic subgroup population the relationship between the broader Asian population in the district and pan-ethnic representation is weaker than the relationship with co-ethnic representation.[15] This corroborates theories of co-ethnic voting and highlights the strength of bonds between Asian American voters and representatives from the same ethnic subgroup (Leung 2022; Sadhwani 2022a). However, the results also support the idea that the formation of a pan-ethnic Asian political identity and coalitional group may be a consequence of social incorporation (Le Espiritu 1992).

Conclusion

Asian Americans, the fastest growing ethnoracial group in American politics, are also among the most under-represented at all levels of political office (The Reflective Democracy Campaign 2021). But (as Figure 1 shows), representation of Asian Americans is rapidly increasing, albeit unevenly. Our study applies a new theoretical frame to understand the representation of Asian Americans: immigrant assimilation and political incorporation. We argue that the process of immigrant incorporation is both segmented and racialized, such that access to civic resources within the Asian American community (rather than the size of this community alone) increases their representation in political office. Using new data of broad scope on Asian American state legislators, we evaluate the dynamics of minority representation for a rapidly growing and predominantly immigrant group. Across a variety of tests, several findings emerge.

While Asian American legislators are more common in states and districts with larger Asian American populations, the political incorporation of that population matters. Asian Americans hold a higher percent of legislative seats in states where Asian population growth occurred decades earlier than states with an equal-sized but more recent Asian population. Asian American state legislators are also most likely to represent districts where the Asian population is comprised of citizens, English-speakers, multiracial families, college degree holders, and middle-income households. Furthermore, while we find greater levels of co-ethnic representation, for four of the five largest Asian ethnic groups we also find Asian American legislators are more likely to represent districts with greater populations of Asian Americans from other ethnic backgrounds. This suggests that Asian American candidates may emerge

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[15]Although four out of the five pan-ethnic coefficients are positive and significant at at least the $p < 0.10$ level.

in diverse Asian American communities and comports with the idea that racial and ethnic diversity leads to political coalition building.

Besides revealing the importance of political incorporation for the representation of immigrant groups, these findings help discredit a plausible opposing narrative: that assimilation severs the link between race, ethnicity, and political behavior of ethnoracial minority immigrant groups. As the Asian American population becomes more socially integrated, they do not lose their identity or distinct preferences. Rather, these analyses suggest they become better able to translate their identities and preferences into political power, overcoming barriers to descriptive representation.

Our theory highlights the importance of political incorporation for both supply side (candidacy-driven) and demand side (voter-driven) explanations of minority group representation. Unfortunately, our data – which categorizes the race and ethnicity solely of *state legislators*, as opposed to *state legislative candidates* – do not allow us to parcel the relative importance of these two factors. Our data do allow us to study the descriptive representation of Asian Americans in state politics extending back decades, which we take advantage of in our analyses. We leave it to others to find new ways of quantifying the precise contribution political incorporation makes to running for office versus voting and other forms of mass participation.

We also note that while our theory is causal in nature, our empirical results are descriptive and predictive. The patterns of Asian American representation across time and district are consistent with a causal story, and the consistency of these findings across decades of American politics and many states is reassuring, but our understanding would be improved via more causally identified research. Future work may test these claims using empirical methods that address the persistent challenge of untangling causality in research on race and representation in political office.

Despite our limited ability to make strong causal claims, the findings unambiguously offer key descriptive insights about which Asian Americans are more or less likely to have a co-racial representative. Regardless of the precise mechanisms producing under-representation, our results show that Asian Americans who are socially integrated – as measured in terms of nativity, timing of immigration, language proficiency, social integration, and educational attainment – are more likely to be represented by Asian American state legislators than those who are less integrated into American society.

Given the substantive policy benefits of descriptive representation (Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran 1996; Dovi 2002; Grose 2011; Hero and Tolbert 1995; Lowande, Ritchie, and Lauterbach 2019; Mansbridge 1999; Williams 2000), this empirical pattern is a troubling one, indicating that members of immigrant communities with limited access to resources and less of a public voice are among the least likely to receive descriptive representation (Schattschneider 1960; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2013). Furthermore, since processes of immigrant assimilation are non-linear, immigrant communities like Asian Americans may not consistently gain representation over time and generations if they do not gain access to civic resources. Therefore, while our results have some positive long-term implications (suggesting that Asian American representation in legislative positions will increase as more community members become socially integrated), they reaffirm the deep-seated inequalities underlying the representational gaps that exist within immigrant communities.

More broadly, these results emphasize the complexity of political representation for immigrant groups. The finding that legislative representation is most likely in areas where immigrant communities have been established for several decades suggests there is a lag in political representation for members of immigrant groups, who may not achieve legislative representation until well after they become naturalized citizens. Since descriptive representation increases immigrant civic engagement (Barreto 2007; Uhlaner and Scola 2016), this finding conveys that representational deficits reinforce barriers to civic incorporation. It might also explain relatively low rates of Asian American political representation in new immigrant hubs in the American south like Texas, where the Asian American population is rapidly growing but is not as well established as those in major cities in the west and northeast (Nguyen 2022b).

Finally, these findings may apply beyond the Asian American community to other minority groups with large immigrants populations. For example, many Latin Americans, another large pan-ethnic immigrant community in the US, encounter similar barriers to representation such as language proficiency and citizenship status. However, only 45% of Latino adults (compared to 71% of Asian American adults) are foreign born (Budiman and Ruiz 2021; Funk and Lopez 2022), meaning such problems of social incorporation might be less acute. Alternatively, other smaller immigrant groups from different parts of the world, including Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean may face even higher barriers. Although the descriptive representation of many of these groups in legislative office is difficult to study with the data and methods used in this work, a similar non-linear, racialized process of political incorporation and representation may also apply, meriting further investigation to determine when and how such groups achieve representation.

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Author biographies. Michael Kistner (mkistner@uh.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Houston. He received a PhD in Politics and Social Policy from Princeton University.

Tanika Raychaudhuri (tanikar@rice.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Rice University. She received a PhD in Politics from Princeton University.