# Revisiting Panethnicity: Emerging Political Contours in Asian Pacific American Politics

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The contemporary Asian Pacific American (APA) community consists of more than 30 ethnic groups with none representing a majority of the total APA population.[1] With the importance of racial group consciousness in US politics through power in numbers, the salience of panethnicity to APA politics remains unabated. Since Espiritu's (1992) influential work, past scholarship in the past two decades in the field of APA politics has examined the influence of APA candidates and elected officials on panethnic APA voter turnout and campaign contributions (Cho 1999; Lai 2000; 2011; Lai et al. 2001; Min 2014). Other studies focused on the racial positionality of APAs through statewide and national public opinion and voting behavior on issues that shape APA group consciousness (Junn and Masuoka 2008; Wong et al. 2011). The panethnic question often posited in these studies is whether APA ethnic groups will find common interests and ideology that bind a couple or several of them together or will they go it alone.

Future scholarship on APA panethnicity must continue to interrogate these critical perspectives while examining newly emerging political contours that facilitate or inhibit panethnic identity, such as rising class disparities, emerging ideological movements on social-media platforms, and persisting transnational identities. Instead of framing the panethnic question as to whether APA ethnic groups can coalesce on issues and candidates in progressive, unified racial coalitions rather than going it alone, future studies should consider these political contours that embody the diversity of the larger APA community. In doing so, we can consider a future that is not limited to political cohesion as a single unified racial group but one in which there could be competing APA panethnic coalitions representing different political positions along the entire ideological spectrum.

## REFRAMING THE MEANING OF PANETHNICITY

The meaning of panethnicity, like racial categories, is fluid and ever changing. From 1968 to 1975, the formal Asian American Movement on the West and East Coasts was historically perceived as the height of panethnic solidarity in the APA community, which at that time consisted primarily of three major East Asian American ethnic groups (i.e., Chinese, Japanese, and Filipina/o Americans). Under the motto of "unite all who could be united" and the common language of English,

they created panethnic and cross-racial alliances to fight for social-justice issues including affordable public housing, lunch programs for elderly immigrants, bilingual education, and ethnic studies (Louie 2001). Efforts to re-create similar progressive coalitions around social-justice issues and policies continue today, particularly among panethnic APA national and community-based organizations. However, since the Immigration Act of 1965 and the implementation of H1-B visas, the APA community has undergone ethnic, class, and ideological diversity, which has shaped and altered the contemporary APA community and subsequently challenged the original meanings of panethnicity as only a progressive ideology. Future scholarship must continue to refine the meanings and underlying factors for panethnicity to take into account these shifts for a more comprehensive and robust understanding of the trajectory of APA politics.

## GROWING ECONOMIC DISPARITIES WITHIN THE APA COMMUNITY

The importance of panethnicity comes at a time when the APA community is shaped by growing trends of income disparities between the wealthiest and poorest members within this racial group. According to a 2018 Pew Research Center study of government data, from 1970 to 2018, APAs had the largest income disparity among all racial groups between the top and bottom 10% (Kochhar and Cilluffo 2018). For those at the bottom, a 2019 study of California workers found that Hmong (44%) and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (36%) had the highest percentages of working poor, followed by Cambodians (26%), Vietnamese (26%), and Chinese (23%) (Public Religion Research Institute Staff 2019). One contributing reason for this income disparity is immigration preferences and policies since the Immigration Act of 1965, in which family reunification still remains the most salient factor for APA immigrants who represent nearly 70% of the national APA population. Southeast Asian American refugees and Pacific Islander immigrants, in particular, continue to struggle economically due to factors such as institutional inequalities, low education attainment, and limited English proficiency. A recent study found that nearly 1.1 million Southeast Asian Americans are low income, with 460,000 living in poverty (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center 2020). In contrast, Asian immigrant entrepreneurs and skilled workers from India, Mainland China, and the Philippines who are recruited

and sponsored by US corporations through the H1-B visa process have primarily skewed and facilitated the income disparity within the national APA community (Kochhar and Cilluffo 2018).

Given the growing ethnic diversity and income disparities within the APA community, the ability to create a uniformed racial experience is not likely without key unifiers in the form of public policies, such as comprehensive immigration reform and anti-immigrant violence. This is true for African Americans and Latinas/os as well. Recent studies found the erosion

Dream Act. On the opposite side of the ideological spectrum, a conservative APA movement was in 2006, when a coalition of mostly highly educated, wealthy Mainland Chinese with a smaller number of other conservative Asian American immigrants utilized social media including WeChat, Facebook, and email to mobilize against and eventually table California Senate Constitutional Amendment (SCA) 5, which was intended to reintroduce affirmative action into higher-education admissions.[2] This example illustrates how panethnic coalitions are not always exclusively linked to progressive issues, as seen

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of linked fate among African American voters due to increasing class disparities (Gay, Hochschild, and White 2016; Hochschild and Weaver 2015); another study found that class differences and assimilation have become corrosive factors for creating a Latinidad identity among Latina/o voters (Castro, Felix, and Ramirez 2016). Future scholarship on APAs must closely examine how these class disparities can influence their voting behavior, policy attitudes, and partisanship both within and across racial lines. Such diversity may result in competing panethnic clusters in support of public policies and candidates around progressive and conservative issue stances, as seen most recently in public opinion polls on affirmative action and undocumented immigration.

### EMERGING CONSERVATIVE STRANDS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICAL ACTIVISM

As the contemporary and future APA community is made and remade through stricter immigration policies that favor more educated and wealthier immigrants, contemporary ideological movements that counter post–Civil Rights APA progressive political movements have taken shape around polarizing policies including affirmative action, data disaggregation, and homeless camps. The key platform that has enabled this activism is social media apps: APAs are the most digitally connected racial group in the United States; 95% use the internet and 91% own a smartphone (Perrin 2016).

Social-media activism also can influence whether panethnic coalitions can materialize given the presence of political motivation. These digital platforms have the ability to amplify disparate voices—either in unison as a racial group or separately as an ethnic group—across the entire ideological spectrum. A recent example of this was in 2017 when a progressive panethnic coalition of diverse APA organizations and leaders was formed around comprehensive immigration reform that facilitated an online biracial coalition (i.e., #BlackAAPIAction) on Twitter and Facebook with African American organizations and activists. On December 5, 2017, more than 100 members of this panethnic and biracial coalition convened on the steps of the US Capitol for a day of action urging Congress to pass a clean

during the Asian American Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Conservative identities are taking shape among recent Asian immigrants who tend to be more affluent and highly educated.

### THE PERSISTENCE OF TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITIES

Previous scholarship illustrates the importance of transnational identity and movements in understanding APA political behavior both abroad and in the United States (Collet and Lien 2009). Given this salience of transnational identity within the majority foreign-born APA community, it is important to continue examining its relationship to panethnic identity. A recent example in California, where more than 30% of the national APA population resides in the continental United States, illustrates how transnationalism can influence both negatively and positively panethnic coalition building. In 2016, Asian Indian Americans challenged a panethnic South Asian American coalition's proposal that specifically required the content in California's high school textbooks to replace the term "India" with "South Asia" and the depiction of Hinduism (Medina 2016). Asian Indian American activists viewed the proposal by the South Asian American coalition as an attempt to erase their ethnic identity. In contrast, the South Asian American coalition wanted inclusion and recognition of the histories of other South Asian countries in addition to India, which was an extension of South Asian geopolitics in the United States. The underlying factors of this textbook controversy that would divide the South Asian American community into different coalitions were transnational identities and geopolitics. The significance of this example is that among its majority foreign-born population, APA transnationalism will remain critical in determining which Asian ethnic groups will work together in future panethnic coalitions. This will depend on their respective issue stances regarding policy issues that range from comprehensive immigration reform to affirmative action.

### CONCLUSION

Past scholarship has framed diversity within the APA community as either a strength or a weakness to panethnicity with a focus on progressive coalitions. Instead, future scholarship

on APA panethnicity must continue to ask these research questions while also reconceptualizing panethnicity to examine how emerging political contours within the APA community can shape it, thereby resulting in the formation of competing panethnic clusters across the entire ideological spectrum around different issue positions. ∎

## NOTES

1. According to the 2010 US Census, Asian American populations consisted of the following detailed groups: Asian Indian, Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Indonesian, Iwo Jiman, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Malaysian, Maldivian, Mongolian, Nepalese, Okinawan, Pakistani, Singaporean, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, Thai, Vietnamese, and Other Asian. For the Pacific Islander population, the detailed groups are Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Tongan, Tahitian, Tokelauan, Guamanian, Mariana Islander, Saipanese, Palauan, Carolinian, Kosraean, Pohnpeian, Chuukese, Yapese, Marshallese, I-Kiribati, Fijian, Papua New Guinean, and Ni-Vanuatu.

2. Similar social-media activism emerged during the 2020 California elections among conservative Asian Americans—primarily led again by wealthy and educated Mainland Chinese Americans—against Proposition 16, which sought to remove the ban on affirmative action from the California constitution. Proposition 16 was defeated by 57% of the vote (approximately 9.5 million).

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