

Issue Brief #160: Asian American Protest Politics
“The Politics of Identity”

Key Words

Political visibility, Yellow Power Movement, pan-Asian American identity, model minority, perpetual foreigners, reverse discrimination

Description

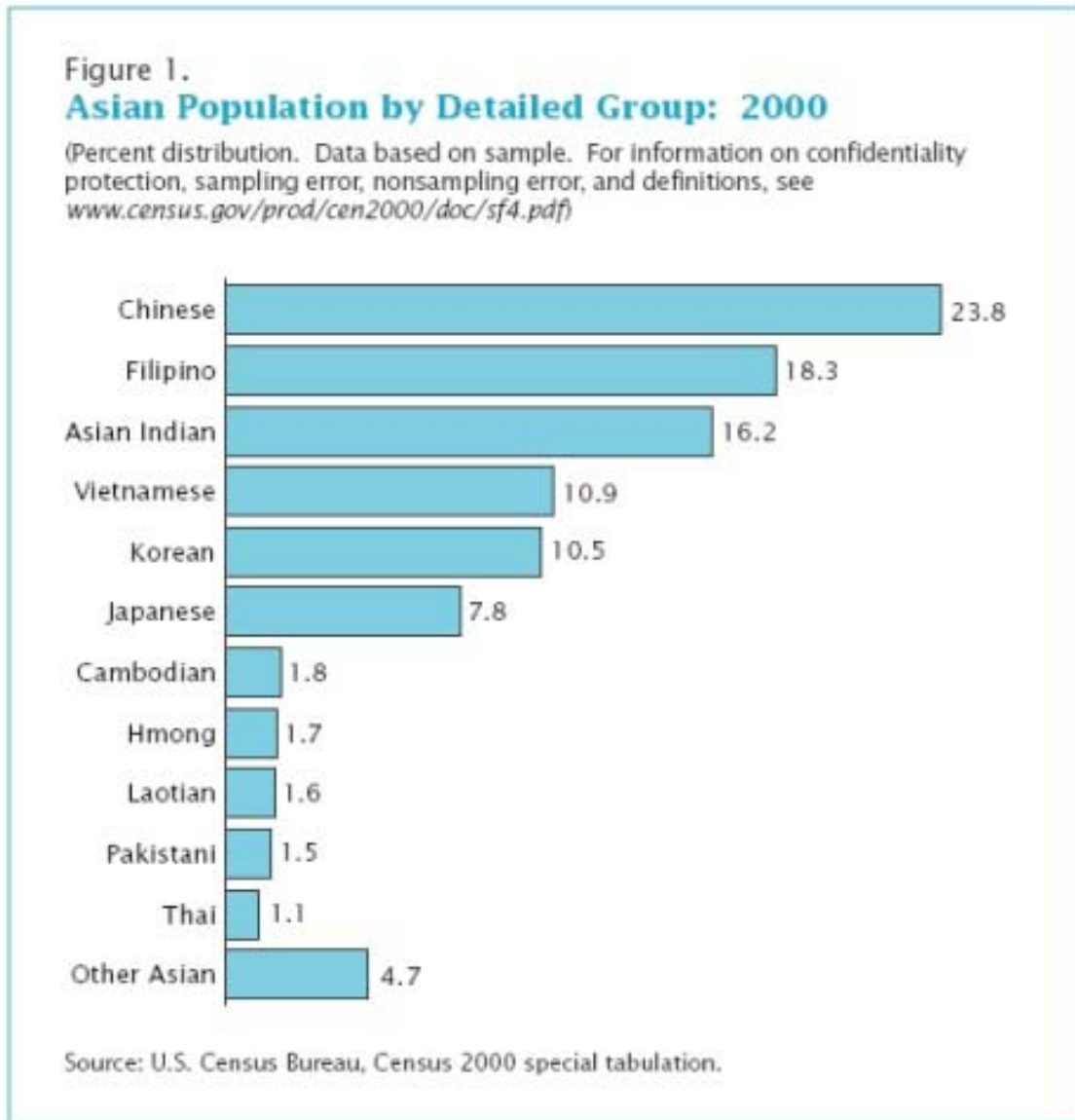
This brief seeks to review the history of Asian American protest movements in the twentieth century and the political ramifications of historic Asian American stereotypes, such as the “model minority” and “perpetual foreigner” prejudices. It also assesses the consequences of these myths that may unfold if Asian Americans continue to feel excluded from political culture and society.

Key Points

- Asians currently constitute five percent of the American population, and this small percentage may contribute to their seemingly low political visibility. Furthermore, immigration to the United States by Asians is a relatively recent phenomenon, with small numbers arriving in the 1830s followed by decades of restricted access and exclusion from citizenship. It wasn't until the 1950s and 60s when legal changes facilitated Asian immigration to the United States. Spikes of high arrival have occurred throughout the past decades. Today, Asians represent the fastest growing immigrant group in the United States, which has enormous political implications. (See U.S. Census reference)
- Like most other immigrant groups, Asian Americans seek racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment. Their mobilization has often been based on an inter-Asian coalition based on a pan-Asian identity. However, in light of this sweeping categorization, the most recent Asian American ethnic consciousness movements have highlighted the diversity of peoples included within this broad pan-ethnic category. (See Lien, Nguyen)
- Asian Americans seek to imbue their pan-ethnic identity with new definition and depth by protesting the stereotypes and caricatures that diminish them as individuals. These stereotypes include the “model minority” and “perpetual foreigner” labeling, which foster anti-Asian sentiments. Although efforts to protest these stereotypes have emerged on a small scale, a grand campaign has not been staged – yet. (See Chang, Nguyen, Wei)
- Asian Americans have not historically engaged in protest movements other than the Yellow Power Movement of the 1970s. Therefore, the term “protest politics” may be misleading, as Asian Americans have not historically staged grand social movements or resorted to political protests. However, for this interest in conventional (vs. unconventional or violent) participation to be maintained, the political system will have to be increasingly responsive to Asian Americans as they quickly increase their political clout in the United States. (See Ramakrishnan, Espiritu)

Images

Image 1



This figure from the 2000 Census reveals the diversity of nationalities lumped into the pan-ethnic “Asian American” category. Available online from: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/censr-17.pdf>

Image 2



THE SILENT MINORITY?

This magazine cover from the 1970s highlights two major elements of the Yellow Power Movement. First, it unites a variety of Asian American groups under the “Asian Family Affair” heading and questions the “silent minority” stereotype.

Available online from:

<http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/images/asianamerican/AFA-SilentMinority320.jpg>

Image 3



A student at the University of Pennsylvania protests the Asian American studies program's reduction in funding. The movement for Asian American studies programs began in the 1970s and continues, as this student demonstrates, through today. Available online from: <http://www.falloutcentral.com/news/2008/04/04/asian-american-studies-university-of-pennsylvania-restored/>.

Image 4

Table 2
Misperceptions in Initial Encounters

Misperception	% reporting misperception			
	Asian American (n = 38)	White American (n = 85)	African American (n = 20)	Hispanic American (n = 24)
From another country and/or non-native english speaker	34.2 _a	7.1 _b	10.0 _{b,c}	20.8 _{a,c}
An athlete	2.6 _a	9.4 _a	15.0 _a	8.3 _a
From another country	18.4 _a	5.9 _{b,c}	10.0 _{a,c}	16.7 _{a,c}
Dumb	7.9 _a	15.3 _a	25.0 _{a,b}	33.3 _b
Older than I am	15.8 _a	37.6 _b	15.0 _{a,b}	29.2 _{a,b}
Gay	5.3 _a	5.9 _a	10.0 _a	4.2 _a
Unfriendly	28.9 _a	31.8 _a	45.0 _a	41.7 _a
A geek	18.4 _a	10.6 _a	5.0 _a	12.5 _a
A criminal	0.0 _a	4.7 _a	20.0 _{b,c}	4.2 _{a,c}
A musician	5.3 _a	2.4 _a	0.0 _a	4.2 _a
Bad at sports	13.2 _a	7.1 _a	0.0 _a	12.5 _a
Feminist	10.5 _a	5.9 _a	5.0 _a	12.5 _a
Reckless	2.6 _a	8.2 _a	5.0 _a	12.5 _a
Good at math and science	28.9 _a	4.7 _b	5.0 _b	8.3 _{a,b}
A non-native English speaker	21.1 _a	2.4 _{b,c}	5.0 _{a,c}	12.5 _a
Racist	5.3 _a	4.7 _a	0.0 _a	0.0 _a
An artist	2.6 _a	4.7 _a	10.0 _a	4.2 _a
In a fraternity or sorority	7.9 _a	12.9 _a	15.0 _a	12.5 _a
I am not aware of any misperceptions	10.5 _a	16.5 _a	15.0 _a	16.7 _a

Note. Open-ended responses (no. of responses, if more than one): Asian Americans: boring, cheerful, different ethnicity (2), elusive, passive, reserved, typical, younger (3); White Americans: celebrity, confident, mean, non-Jewish, shy, snobby, spoiled, younger; African Americans: quiet, shy, stuck up, thug, upset, younger; Hispanic Americans: always happy, different ethnicity (5), shy, wealthy, younger (2). Numbers in the same row that do not share a subscript differ at $p < .05$.

This chart from the American Psychological Association quantifies Asian Americans' associations with the “model minority” stereotype. Available online at: http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/psp/89/5/images/psp_89_5_717_tbl2a.gif

Image 5

SECRET ASIAN MAN By Tak

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This is a recent cartoon referencing the “submissive” and “obedient” labels applied to Asian Americans (and apparently their hair as well).

Available online from: <http://www.secretasianman.com/images/strips/SAM101006.gif>

Brief

The history of Asians in the United States, and, therefore, their participation in the American political system, is a relatively short one. Asian immigration began in the 1830s and grew throughout the 1860s, mainly due to the arrival of Chinese miners during the 1848 California Gold Rush. After an influx of Japanese and Filipino immigrants around that same period, Asian immigration was effectively ended by laws defining race as a barrier to migration. Asian immigration to the United States in large numbers did not begin again until 1965 with the reformation of the Immigration Act, which altered the previously standing – and very stringent – quota (the annual quota for Chinese, for example, was only fifty). The end of the Korean and Vietnam Wars brought another wave of Asian American immigration, particularly from Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Asian immigration, especially by well-educated, English

speaking South Asians, has continued through the present. Today, according to the 2008 Census Bureau population estimate, there are 15.5 million Asian Americans living in the United States. Asian Americans therefore account for five percent of the nation's population.

Like most other historic minority groups, Asian Americans unified forces on the tail of the Civil Rights Movement to create their own Yellow Power Movement. The Yellow Power Movement was an effort by Asian Americans, particularly students, to address and end the discrimination that existed in American society against Asian Americans. The movement also tried to ensure equality of opportunity for Asian Americans. The Yellow Power Movement was active during the 1970s, along with other empowerment movements for Native Americans, women, and homosexuals. A cornerstone of the movement was the promotion of Asian American studies programs, which began to crop up at a variety of universities, including Berkeley and Stanford. Further, this mobilization of a variety of Asian ethnic groups under a pan-ethnicity identity began to congeal the "Asian American" category politically and culturally.

Although multi-racial coalitions between different immigrant groups had long played an important part in campaigns for civil rights, it wasn't until the 1960s and 1970s that diverse communities with different histories began to unite as "Asian Americans." Asian Americans have long been thought to be the most intrinsically diverse category of minorities, linguistically, culturally, and nationally. Tensions caused by the lack of a common language and diverse cultural traditions led to the late development of a pan-ethnic identity. The Asian American movement that promoted this new identity – which initially united Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino Americans, and then expanded to include Koreans, Southeast and South Asians, and Pacific Islanders – provided the foundation for new ethnic solidarity.

Although this sweeping grouping initially served to unify diverse Asian American constituencies, the consequences of such rigid solidarity are beginning to surface. Because Asian Americans total a mere five percent of the entire U.S. population, the diversity of the group is often disregarded in media and news discussions of "Asians" or of "Asian Americans." However, Asian Americans are now the fastest growing immigrant group in the United States, and this increase has very important political implications, especially as Asian Americans continue to face discrimination.

Two stereotypes have defined many Asian Americans' experiences in the United States. First, Asian Americans have long been thought to be a "model minority," which references its

members' high educational attainment, economic success, and family and community stability. The statistics seem to affirm this stereotype. According to 2007 U.S. Census data, roughly 86 percent of both all Asians and all people in the United States 25 and older had at least a high school diploma. Further, 50 percent of Asian Americans in comparison to 28 percent of the total U.S. population had earned at least a bachelor's degree. Among Asian subgroups, Asian Indians had the highest percentage of bachelor's degree attainment at 64 percent. In regards to employment, about 45 percent of Asian Americans were employed in management, professional and related occupations, compared with 34 percent of the total population. There is a common misconception that Asian Americans take pride in this classification, as the myth has largely detrimental effects. Many Asian American students report feeling inadequate under the standard or feeling as if they are perpetual representatives of their race. The social and psychological consequences, however, are merely the tip of the iceberg. Asian Americans' high educational and professional achievement has resulted in what many feel is reverse discrimination, the process by which otherwise qualified candidates are not selected because of Asian Americans' overrepresentation in that field. The myth and racial quota systems, explicit or otherwise, serve only to justify Asian Americans' exclusion from American society.

Similarly, there is a widespread perception that Asian Americans are not "American" but are instead "perpetual foreigners." Many Asian Americans report being asked, "So where are you really from?" even if they were born and raised in the United States. The perpetual foreigner stereotype, like the model minority myth, has enormous effects on the self-concept of Asian Americans. The awareness of being stereotyped as a foreigner predicts feelings of conflict between individuals' ethnic and national identities, ultimately diminishing Asian Americans' sense of belonging, politically and otherwise. Some scholars have contended that this stereotype has limited Asian American domestic and foreign policy activism due in large part to their persistent outsider racialization. This discouragement from entering the political arena, although not yet severely manifested, may have significant political ramifications if these stereotypes continue to persist.

As the number of Asian Americans continues to rise in the United States, the pressure on the political system will be greater for their incorporation into American culture. It is important for Asian Americans to feel that the political system is responsive to them; otherwise, conditions

may align for alternate means of participation, perhaps through another protest movement or, if tensions are too high, political violence.

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