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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics
Professor Smith

Issue Brief: Asian-Americans and Class

Key Words:

Asian-American, Class/Socioeconomic Status, Model Minority, 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act

Description:

This brief looks at the tensions between the culturally different groups that fall under the Asian-American as well as the tensions between Asian-Americans and some other groups of the Ethnoracial Pentagon. It also address what the effects of being a model minority have on Asian-Americans.

Key Points:

- How they became a Model Minority
- Official definition of Asian-Americans vs. Ingroup definition
- Whether the Model Minority status is true for all Asian-American Groups
- What groups tend not to consider themselves Asian-American and tensions that arise there
- Tensions between Asian-Americans and other ethnoracial groups because of their Model Minority status

Issue Brief

Since the 1960s, Asian-Americans have been considered a Model Minority. This stemmed from heavy statistical evidence of Asian-American success and wealth that the group gained after immigrating to the United States. These numbers were significantly higher than other groups and created the belief that America “[has] transcended racism and the social obstacles [it has] historically encountered and thus [Asian-Americans] can serve as exemplars of progress for other minorities” (Rahmat). Essentially, Asian-Americans are looked to as proof that America is in a post-racial environment, however, this is drastically untrue. Through analysis of how Asian-Americans became a model minority, the tensions within the Asian-American racial group and the group’s tensions with other cultures, it will be clear that Asian-Americans are far

from perfect as a “model minority,” a model minority being defined as a minority group whose level of success is above the population average.

Socioeconomic Characteristics by Racial/Ethnic and Asian Ethnic Groups

Numbers are in percentages, except for income
Click on a column heading to sort up or down

	Not Proficient in English	Less Than High School	College Degree	Advanced Degree	High Skill Occupation	Married, Spouse Present	Homeowner	Median Personal Income	Median Family Income	Living in Poverty	Public Assistance
Cambodian, Hmong, or Laotian	44.3	52.7	9.2	0.4	9.8	66.6	53.3	\$16,000	\$43,850	22.5	9.9
Native American Indians	2.6	27.4	10.8	0.9	11.9	50.2	64.2	\$14,500	\$32,240	25.1	6.1
Blacks	0.8	29.1	13.6	1.2	12.3	38.0	54.4	\$16,300	\$33,300	24.9	4.5
Latinos/Hispanics	30.3	48.5	9.9	1.6	9.6	56.3	52.4	\$14,400	\$36,000	21.4	3.5
Pacific Islanders	7.1	21.7	13.6	1.6	13.8	61.4	48.1	\$19,100	\$50,000	16.7	4.4
Vietnamese	40.4	37.8	13.8	2.5	22.6	61.2	60.0	\$16,000	\$51,500	13.8	4.8
Whites	0.7	15.3	25.3	3.0	21.4	64.5	78.2	\$23,640	\$48,500	9.4	1.3
Filipinos	7.0	13.1	42.8	4.3	29.7	62.7	67.6	\$23,000	\$65,400	6.9	1.6
Japanese	10.0	9.5	40.8	4.6	32.0	60.7	70.8	\$26,000	\$61,630	8.6	0.9
Koreans	32.9	13.8	43.6	5.6	27.0	69.0	51.9	\$16,300	\$48,500	15.5	1.6
Chinese	31.3	23.6	46.3	8.5	41.9	67.1	65.7	\$20,000	\$58,300	13.1	1.8
Indians	8.4	12.6	64.4	12.5	51.6	74.9	56.8	\$26,000	\$69,470	8.2	0.9

In 1965, Former President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Immigration and Naturalization Act. At the time, Johnson was quoted as saying “This bill that we will sign today is not a revolutionary bill. It does not affect the lives of millions. It will not reshape the structure of our daily lives, or really add importantly to either our wealth or our power. Yet it is still one of the most important acts of this Congress and of this administration [as it] corrects a cruel and enduring wrong in the conduct of the American nation” (Daniel). The Act was intended to race-based immigration quotas and promote the entry of immigrants for professional work requiring specialized degrees in higher education. Table 1 presents information about different cultural groups in America with the Asian-American group broken up. As Table 1 shows, the top five groups with the greatest holding in advanced degrees are Asian-American, a major point of entry

for Asian immigrants, who had been restricted from the United States since the 1880s due to heavy immigration restrictions. Once the 1965 Immigration bill was signed, it makes sense that there would be a heavy influx of Asians to the West. This does, however, immediately bias Asian-American standing. Asians came to the United States already more educated and in position for upward economic mobility. America did not transcend obstacles with the group, but bypassed them completely. And even in this, not all groups who are named under the Asian-American umbrella are at Model Minority status or even consider themselves to be Asian-American.

The ethnoracial term “Asian-American” usually brings to mind images of northeastern Asians, typically Japanese, Korean, and Chinese. This category, however, includes all members of the Asian Diaspora, from South Asians (Pakistanis and Indians) to Southeast Asians (Filipino, Cambodians, Laotian to name a few). In fact, the latter group composes about 35.8% of Asian-Americans (Rahmat). Ironically, all these groups feel the Model Minority stereotype pressed upon them. In her research on Asian-Americans at an American High School, Stacey Lee came to this conclusion. According to her,

Table 1

“teachers and non-Asian students generally assumed that all Asian Americans were high-achieving model minorities, an assumption that negatively affected students who failed to live up to the standards of the stereotype. As a hegemonic construct, the model minority stereotype served as a wedge between Asian Americans and other groups of people of color, and shaped the way all Asian American students viewed themselves” (Lee 120)

This is despite the fact that some students do not necessarily see themselves as Asian-Americans or want to associate with other Asian-American subgroups. For example, many Southern and Southeast Asians “use strategies of disidentification or assertion of difference from Muslim South Asian Americans in an effort at self protection of

widespread distrust and suspicion of Islam that exists in the United States and has been exacerbated by the 9/11 attacks" (Kibria 216). Asian-Americans in the school contested the model minority stereotypes, probably because it was not representative of all Asian-Americans.

Often, Southeastern Asians do not fit into the model minority stereotype, in terms of socioeconomic status, education levels, and high skill occupations. Table 2 has the

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Table 2

Same data as Table 1 except the data has been organized in order of the group with the least high skill occupations to the most. The group with the second fewest high skill occupations are Southeastern Asians, specifically Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians. While Indians, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Koreans, and Vietnamese have the greatest high skill occupation.

Additionally, Asian-Americans have tensions with other groups. As a model minority, they are often compared to groups that tend not to do as well, for example,

African-Americans. Both groups have historical tensions with each other even in Lee's research at the school. She says

“high achieving Asian-identified students asserted that affirmative action policies unfairly favored African Americans and discriminated against Asians, The attitudes of these students highlight the fact that the position of Asian Americans as a model minority is contingent upon the stereotype of African Americans as the failing minority.” (Lee 126)

The tensions with Asian-Americans do not stop there, though. Lee also remarks upon their achievements in Silicon Valley pushing out young, white families. The families

“have expressed concern that Asian American students are too competitive and that their own children end up being stereotyped as underachievers in contrast to the hyperachievement-oriented Asian-American students. In short, the white parents fear that their children can't compete against the Asian American students.” (Lee 138)

The model minority status of Asian-Americans has both benefits and disadvantages. It has boosted the pride Asian-Americans have in their nationality but it also has strained inter-ethnoracial relations.

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