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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics
April 12, 2016

Asian Americans, European White Americans, and the College Admissions Game Issue Brief

Key Words:

College admissions, racial quotas, model minority, affirmative action

Description:

My issue brief investigates publically denied but clearly implicit racial quotas that Asian Americans are subject to in elite private university admissions, particularly in Ivy League schools. Such discrimination not only favors the admission of white applicants, particularly children of alumni, but also is misrepresentative of Asian academic achievement and the cultural and historical heterogeneity of individual Asian ethnic groups.

Key Points:

1. Asian Americans are by far the highest academically achieving ethnoracial group, outperforming whites alongside Hispanics and African Americans.
2. However, Asian admittance into elite private colleges has stalled even as immigration rates and college-agedness of Asian immigrants has skyrocketed, and indeed in some Ivy League schools has decreased, suggesting hidden racial admissions quotas. Comparison of such data with admissions statistics from California public universities, where affirmative action is banned and where Asian Americans make up almost half of incoming academic classes, renders this reality even starker.
3. Asian Americans are also less likely to be admitted into elite schools through “back-door” means like legacy, which white students are able to take advantage of due to their historical monopoly of educational and professional opportunities in the United States. Since Asian Americans have previously been subject to discriminatory property and citizenship laws, they have been actively hindered from pursuing, much less achieving, the same advantages as whites.
4. Despite the efforts of youth Asian activists, policy makers and academics have put very little pressure on elite private schools to make their admissions process more transparent, leaving the issue at a passive standstill.

Issue Brief:

One of the most controversial issues impacting the relationship between European Americans—who have been largely consolidated into a broad white category following the mid-twentieth century¹—and Asian Americans is the subject of elite college admissions. Despite their vastly heterogeneous cultures and histories, Asian immigrants in the United States have often been deemed homogeneous “model minorities,”² examples of hard work resulting in academic and professional achievement that other minorities should mirror.

Such a stereotype, however, does not quite hold true below the surface. While data show that Asian Americans have the highest rates of achieving college and advanced degrees and

¹ Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

² *Asian Nation*, “Asian American History, Demographics, and Issues,” <http://www.asian-nation.org/>

enjoy the highest median Socioeconomic Index, they are still paid \$522 less than their white counterparts for every additional year of education achieved.³ Determining group wealth by Socioeconomic Index, too, is misleading, as such a measure more accurately reveals a trend of multiple members of Asian American families possessing jobs to support the household, often in conjunction with family-run businesses. More significantly, analysis of an individual's Median Personal Income, or per capita income, by race reveals that white persons enjoy higher rates of individual wealth and financial security than do Asians.⁴ Stereotypes of Asian academic achievement are particularly distorted when examining sub-ethnic Asian groups, such as Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian Americans, who have the highest high school dropout rates in the country alongside extremely high rates of government assistance.⁵

In college admissions, too, Asian Americans face discrimination that is systematically covered-up by universities despite increasing immigration numbers and high achievement statistics. While Asian Americans make up 5.6 percent of the general population, they comprise about a third of American math and physics Olympiad teams, Presidential Scholars, and National Merit Scholarships.⁶ Yet studies reveal that at private schools, Asians must still score 140 points higher than whites for admittance.⁷ Indeed, the United States' college-aged Asian population has doubled over the last twenty years alongside such strides in Asian academic achievements, but there has been no increase in Asian enrollment at elite schools, and has actually been a decrease in enrollment at Ivy League schools like Harvard.⁸

Comparison of this statistic to the racial makeup of California public universities, where admissions are not allowed to consider race as a form of affirmative action in their decisions and instead focus strictly on meritocracy after Proposition 209, is striking: in 2014, over forty percent of UC Berkeley and almost forty-five percent of the California Institute of Technology's enrollments are Asian American.⁹ Such a clear numerical discrepancy, many Asian Americans believe, is likely due to hidden racial admissions quotas within private schools that privilege European American applicants, as with former quotas for Jewish candidates in the Ivy League in the 1920s and 1930s.

³ *Asian Nation*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

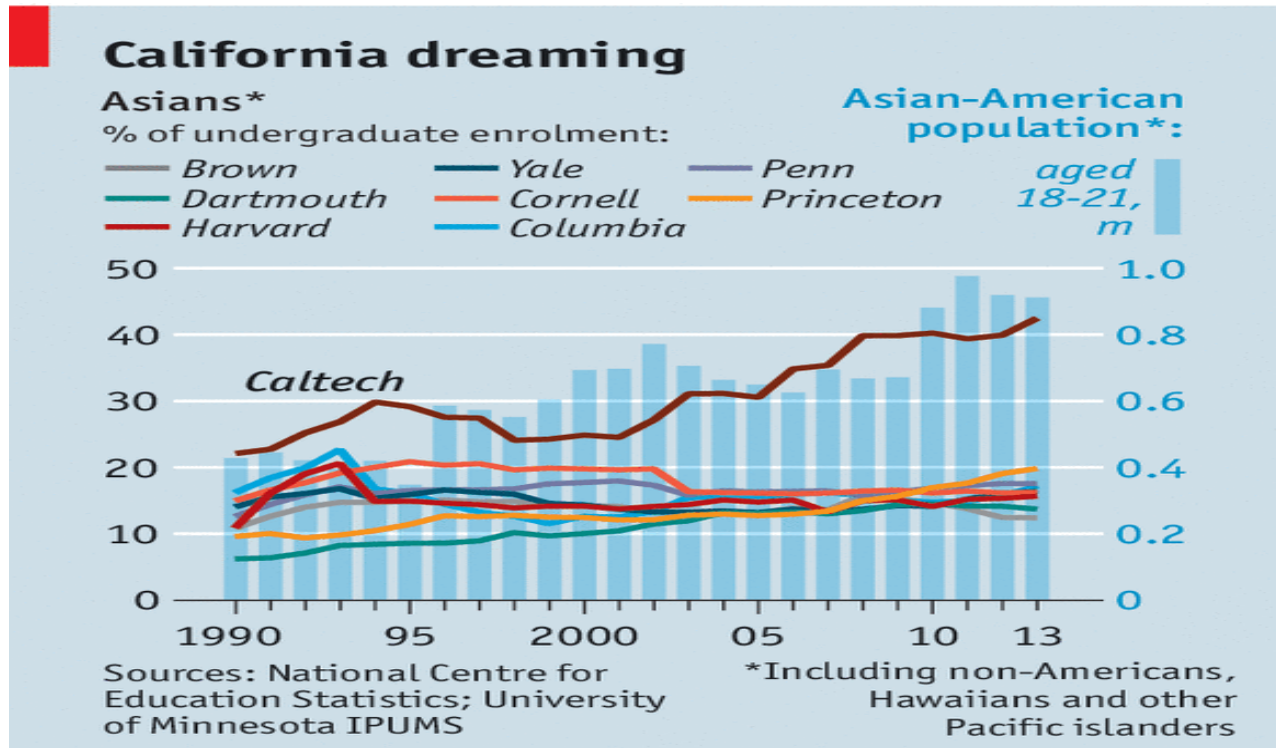
⁵ *The Economist*, "The Model Minority is Losing Patience," 3 Oct. 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21669595-asian-americans-are-united-states-most-successful-minority-they-are-complaining-ever>

⁶ *The Economist*.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Ron Unz, "Asian Quotas in the Ivy League: 'We See Nothing! Nothing!'" *The Unz Review*, 27 May 2014, <http://www.unz.com/runz/asian-quotas-in-the-ivy-league-we-see-nothing/>

⁹ *The Economist*.



Economist.com

Source: *The Economist*, “The Model Minority is Losing Patience.”

Such a disparity in achievement and admission rates amongst Asians likely originates from the United States’ history of discrimination against the group, as Asians have been subject to numerous laws restricting their property ownership, citizenship rights, and naturalization abilities since their initial immigration to the U.S. Such laws—including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Alien Land Laws, and the 1924 Immigration Act, among others—prevented Asians from pursuing the same opportunities as whites, who in turn had less competition for spots in higher education, public assistance programs, and jobs. The internment of Japanese-Americans, but not of white German or Italian Americans, during World War II further reflects the culmination of a history of mainstream views of Asians as foreign “others” not subject to the same legal protections as whites.

Lack of mainstream distinction between diverse sub-ethnic Asian groups also accounts for misunderstandings regarding Asian prosperity and need for affirmative action programs; after all, “involuntary” immigrants such as Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian refugees suffer from systematic impoverishment and possess a college degree attainment rate of less than ten percent.¹⁰ Even voluntary immigrants who came to the United States with high levels of education, such as Korean and Chinese Americans, face professional discrimination because of lack of English fluency, forcing them to work low wage jobs.¹¹

Sara Harberson, former Associate Dean of Admissions at the University of Pennsylvania, attributes many Asian Americans’ rejections from elite schools to their absence of an insider “proverbial golden ticket” comprised of being “children of alumni, children of donors...or

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Asian Nation*.

students who are connected to the well-connected,”¹² which can increase one’s likelihood of admission fifteen-fold at certain colleges.¹³ As Asians have only accessed basic citizenship rights, much less higher education, in the last generation, they rarely benefit from such legacy and related “connections,” which overwhelmingly favor whites. As such, the topic of Asian discrimination in college admissions is largely an issue of preference of white children of alumni and the well-connected, not of competition against other ethnracial minority groups. After all, whites receive over seventy-five percent of merit-based scholarships, thrice as much as all minority groups put together,¹⁴ indicating that other minorities are not benefiting at the expense of Asians.

Thus, while sixty-four Asian American advocacy groups have acted on suspected racial quotas, filing lawsuits against elite universities like Harvard and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, such groups identify “white, African-American, and Hispanic applicants [as being] given racial preferences over better qualified Asian Americans,”¹⁵ as stated by the Students for Fair Admissions. However, the more significant issue is that whites continue to be favored over historically wronged minorities, including Asians. Supreme Court cases like *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger* have limited race-conscious affirmative action in public universities, maintaining that increasing racial diversity in academic settings constitutes a “compelling state interest” only if it is “narrowly tailored.” Such legal decisions reinforce the notion that admitting—or broad scale denying, as is potentially the case for Asian Americans—an applicant based solely on his race is unconstitutional, as race should instead be treated as one of the many factors that positively contribute to campus diversity.

Source: Students for Fair Admissions: <https://studentsforfairadmissions.org>

¹² Peter Jacobs, “Former Ivy League admissions dean reveals why highly qualified Asian-American students often get rejected,” *Business Insider*, 10 June 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/sara-harberson-explains-why-asian-american-students-get-rejected-2015-6>

¹³ Tamar Lewin, “Study Finds Family Connections Give Big Advantage in College Admissions,” *The New York Times*, 8 Jan 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/09/education/09legacies.html>

¹⁴ Doug Lederman, “Grant Recipients and Race,” *Insider Higher Ed*, 6 Sept. 2011,

https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/09/06/merit_based_and_private_scholarships_disproportionately_favor_white_students

¹⁵ Lederman.

Conclusion:

Affirmative action is necessary to achieve just equality of opportunity for Asians and other ethnoracial minorities that have been historically disadvantaged by the United States in favor of European whites. To simply produce admissions breakdowns that mirror societal demographics of Asians would ignore past legalized discrimination against the group. An ideal affirmative action policy would have no effect on admission of other minority groups, but rather would reduce legacy and “insider” white admissions due to their continuing advantage in American society. Increase of college acceptances for struggling Asian sub-ethnic groups in particular, such as Southeast Asians, would further strengthen affirmative action. Elected officials and ethnic studies academics must place pressure on elite institutions to release racial admissions data, or else it is likely that implicit discrimination against Asians in favor of well-connected whites in the college admissions process will continue.¹⁶

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Relevant Websites

- Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund: <http://aaldef.org>
- Justia U.S. Supreme Court Case Law: <https://supreme.justia.com>
- Silicon Valley Chinese Association: <http://svca.me>

¹⁶ Unz.

Students for Fair Admissions: <https://studentsforfairadmissions.org>; Project on Fair Representation: <https://www.projectonfairrepresentation.org>

Other Relevant Links

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