Issue Brief: Asian Americans and Immigration in the United States

Key Words: Asian Americans, Hispanics, immigration, voting

Description: This issue brief explores the importance of the growing Asian American population in the United States, especially in regards to immigration policy and its implications for political engagement. In doing so, it touches upon cross cutting cleavages within the demographic, discussing markers of identity such as socioeconomic background and education.

Key Points:

- The United States Census uses the term “Asian” as a blanket term to encompass several different ethnic groups hailing from all over the Asian continent, e.g. ranging from Southeast Asia to the Indian subcontinent.
  ➢ This is a broad definition that must be kept in mind when discussing the demographic at large.

- In 2012, Asians surpassed Hispanics as the largest group of new immigrants coming to the United States.

- The growing Asian American population holds promise for future political turn out, i.e. voting.

- Asian Americans make up one of the largest groups of immigrants applying through the U.S. legal permanent residence/visa program.
Issue Brief

Accounting for roughly 5.6% of the total U.S. population, the Asian demographic refers to individuals whose origins lie in the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent. In the United States, the six largest Asian-American groups by country of origin include Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Indian Americans, Vietnamese Americans, Korean Americans and Japanese Americans. Despite notable differences between these subgroups, Asian Americans are distinct in that as a whole they comprise the highest earning, best educated, and fastest-growing immigration population in the country.

Compared to the general population, Asian Americans earn a median annual household income of $66,000, which surpasses the $49,800 average among all U.S. adults. Within the 25 years and older age group, approximately 59% of Asians also hold college degrees, compared to only 28% of all people within that range in the United States. In recent years, Asians have passed Hispanics as the largest group of new immigrants to the United States. About 430,000 Asians – or 36% of all new immigrants – moved to the United States in 2010, in contrast to roughly 370,000 Hispanics – or 31% of all new arrivals. Many scholars have attributed this particular ascent of the former and the decline of the latter to increased immigration enforcement standards and a dwindling supply of low-wage work in an already unstable U.S. economy.

It is interesting to note that within the history of Asian-American immigration, it was only several decades ago that Asian immigrants came here not as highly educated workers, but as low-skilled laborers. Establishing their own small communities and ethnic enclaves, they managed to succeed both socially and economically, in spite of the institutionalized racism and discrimination against them.
While the lens of immigration reform has often been focused on the Hispanic demographic, it is just as important to consider the growing role of Asian Americans within this context as well. As the fastest growing racial group in the country, almost half of all immigrants in the United States – 18.2 million – come from Asia. With a growing political influence – especially in Hawaii and California - the Asian American electorate increased 128% between 1996 and 2008. In the 2012 election, Asian Americans participated in large numbers, giving President Barack Obama roughly 1.5 million votes for his re-election. By 2040, these statistics are to increase, as the Asian American electorate is expected to more than double.

Considering the fact that many Asian immigrants come to the United States via chain migration, the importance of family sponsorship cannot be overemphasized within the immigration process. Currently there are as many as 1.8 million Asian family-based visa
applicants hoping to be reunited with their families living in the United States. This does not take into consideration that there are already 1.3 million unauthorized immigrants from Asia living in the country, hoping for more effective pathways to citizenship and legalization.

When it comes general attitudes regarding the current U.S. immigration system, however, Asian Americans remain divided – while 45% say the system is “working pretty well and requires only minor changes,” 47% say the system “needs to be completely rebuilt” or “needs major changes.” Regardless, the AAPI community’s stake in the immigration movement is undeniable, especially as its presence continues to grow on the political arena. In 2011, for instance, after the signing of an important executive order supporting the progress of DREAMers (and the children of illegal immigrants), 73% of Asian-American voters rallied behind Obama in support, swinging major votes in Virginia and Florida. This in itself serves as
a testament to the growing role of Asian advocacy groups within the immigration reform debate, and highlights the ways in which Asian Americans are using their growing political influence to implement change.

All in all, as the AAPI community continues to evolve, it takes on new dimensions, becoming more vocal, educated, and engaged within the political system. As such, it is critical that its voice and opinions be heard both within the political process and society at-large; otherwise, without an open dialogue, there can only be limited prospects for change.
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