

# Group Membership and Context of Participation in Electoral Politics among Korean, Chinese, and Filipino Americans\*

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*Asian Americans have fallen behind other ethnic groups with regard to political participation, despite being one of the fastest growing populations and having achieved socioeconomic advantages over the last few decades. This paper examines this puzzle by looking at a demographic and socioeconomic portrait of major Asian-American groups and their participation patterns in electoral politics. The paper focuses on a host of factors, such as group membership, generation, assimilation, and political and community contexts, that go beyond individual level attributes. The paper explores particularly how group-specific political and community contexts mediate voting behavior differently or similarly across three major Asian groups—Korean, Chinese, and Filipino Americans—based on a review of existing research, secondary data from the Current Population Surveys of 2000, 2004, and 2008, and the 2011 American Community Survey.*

**Keywords:** Electoral Politics; Korean Americans; Chinese Americans; Filipino Americans

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## Introduction

Asian Americans continue to lag behind other ethnic groups with regard to participation in electoral politics, despite being one of the fastest growing populations and having achieved socioeconomic advantages over the last few decades (Lien 2001; Wong et al. 2011; Logan et al. 2012). Why are Asian Americans lagging behind other groups in electoral participation? Why do some ethnic groups have a higher rate of political participation than other groups? There have been many studies comparing white, black, Latino, and Asian voter participation (Uhlener, Cain and Kiewet 1989; Leighley 2001; Leighley and Vedlitz 1999; Antunes and Gaitz 1975; Ramakrishnan 2005; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001). A common starting point is to try to explain the typical finding of lower participation by Latinos and Asians through compositional differences. For example, low Latino voting can be accounted for by Latinos' lower citizenship rate, their relative youth, and their lower socioeconomic status.

However, studies of Asian electoral participation have been particularly hard-pressed to come up with explanations for why, given their more favorable socioeconomic position, Asian-American citizens still show depressed voting rates (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Citrin and Highton 2002). If assimilated Asian Americans are still not voting, then group membership and sociopolitical context may help explain their behavior. "Being Asian," a factor not reducible to individual-level processes, seems to make a deciding difference. Furthermore, it is well-known that Asian Americans are remarkably diverse in terms of ethnicity, language, national origin, religion, cultural and political orientation, socioeconomic status, and immigration histories (Wong et al. 2011).

Scholars have offered several suggestions about this group-specific effect, pointing to Asian Americans' geographic dispersion within the U.S., cultural factors such as a "community norm to avoid political involvement or the learned attitude that electoral politics are a waste of time," lack of political leadership, and experiences with discrimination in the U.S. (Uhlener, Cain and Kiewet 1989, p. 217). One factor that Asians have in common is the large share of immigrants in each group. Assimilation theory expects recent immigrants not to be fully incorporated into mainstream society (Alba and Nee 2003). However, members of the second and subsequent generations progressively lose their individual immigrant identities and participate in key institutions, including civic affairs. In other words, the political dimension of

assimilation implies greater involvement in American political institutions: more engagement, activity, and advocacy.

This paper primarily discusses existing studies to understand the collective dimension of political participation, such as group membership, immigrant generation and assimilation, and political resources, focusing on electoral participation of Asian Americans in general, as well as specific Asian-American groups. Registered voting is only one form of political engagement, but it is perhaps the most important one when it comes to exercising democratic rights through expression of choice in candidates and policies. The paper also pays particular attention to the heterogeneity of Asian groups by comparing three Asian-American groups: Korean, Chinese, and Filipino Americans. These three groups were purposely selected to examine how group differences related to distinctive demographic and generational characteristics, sociopolitical context, and mobilization shape the nature of political participation. Koreans were selected because of their documented ethnic solidarity as a result of their homogeneous cultural and linguistic characteristics and their unique adaptation experience in urban America. Additionally, they were previously the least active Asian group in electoral participation until the past decade, but have since moved up from last place. Chinese and Filipinos are the two largest Asian groups according to the 2010 Census. The Chinese are the largest Asian group with members of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds from a country where demographic participation is rarely practiced. Filipinos were chosen due to their lack of linguistic barriers, which is the biggest hurdle for immigrants to overcome in voting registration and participation. Additionally, prior studies have shown that Filipinos are associated with a segmented downward assimilation pattern. This begs the further question of whether or not their segmented assimilation pattern of socioeconomic attainment corresponds with their political participation pattern.

To offer the latest descriptive statistics of registration and voter turnout, I consulted the nationally-representative Current Population Survey from 2000, 2004, and 2008. In these years, the November survey included a voting and registration supplement. Since the CPS also contains questions about the nativity and citizenship status of respondents, it is well-suited for analyses of the registration and voting of immigrants and correlation to generation. When data from the aforementioned years are pooled together, the CPS includes adequate samples of naturalized immigrants for each of the ethnic categories. Other common sources of political participation data, such as the National Election Survey, contain much smaller samples of foreign-born

members of non-white racial groups.

## Socioeconomic Resources and Participation in American Electoral Politics

An established research tradition demonstrates the strong effect on political participation of individual characteristics such as age, education, and residential stability. Such characteristics, which are indicators of socioeconomic resources, have had consistently strong explanatory power. Based on a theory of utility maximizing behavior, for persons with the resources of time, political experience, information, education, money, and knowledge, political participation is rewarding and comes with few costs (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Verba et al. 1993). There is considerable evidence for this explanation from national-level studies based on the Current Population Survey (CPS) and the National Election Study (NES) using indicators such as age, education, and income (Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Leighley and Nagler 1992). Researchers argue that useful political or civic skills resources confer a greater likelihood of personal investment in voting outcomes and enhance knowledge of and familiarity with the political process (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba et al. 1993).

There is a debate over whether socioeconomic resources have the same political implications for all individuals, regardless of ethnicity, and to what extent these variables account for overall group differences in behavior. For example, Avrizu and Garcia (1996) find that SES variables do not uniformly impact Latino voting: effects of income, but not education, are significant. For Asian Americans, their level of income and education, higher than that of the average American, has less, if any, effect on political participation compared to either blacks or whites (Lien 1994; Cho 1999; Junn 1999). A study on first- and second-generation immigrants in New York City reports that some groups participate in politics at much higher rates than expected based on group average income and education levels, while others participate at much lower rates (Kasinitz et al. 2008). Thus, there remains considerable room to look for additional group-specific factors that may affect turnout for each group.

## Immigrant Assimilation and Political Participation

Most studies dealing specifically with Asian and Latino immigrants build upon socioeconomic resource models, rather than stressing the collective or group-specific dimensions of immigrant incorporation. From the perspective of assimilation theory (Alba and Nee 2003), political participation is an indicator of loss of immigrant identity and incorporation into the majority society. Hence individual-level characteristics should be the prime determinants of participation, just as in the socioeconomic resource models. However, as will be discussed below, contradictory empirical findings in the literature cast doubt upon expectations of a linear increase in political participation with increase in time, number of generations, and duration of experience in the U.S.

From the perspective of assimilation theory and resource-based theories of voting, new immigrants, regardless of race or national origin, can be expected to exhibit low participation rates due to a combination of low resources and unfamiliarity in their new setting. Indeed, the standard socioeconomic resource models go a long way toward explaining the apparently low levels of participation by immigrants (Bass and Casper 2001a; 2001b). Cho (1999) posits that all of the observed racial/ethnic differences in voting and registration among racial minorities can be explained by the interaction between English-speaking ability and foreign-born status. To the extent that immigrants assimilate economically, culturally, residentially, or linguistically, they should vote at rates no different from native-born Americans with otherwise similar attributes.

Another key assimilation hypothesis is a linear increase in integration over time and growing participation from the first to the third generation. Some researchers report that foreign-born persons (regardless of the duration of their residence in the U.S.) have consistently lower levels of voting than the second generation (Cho 1999; DeSipio 1996). However, there is also evidence to the contrary (Lien 2004). In fact, it has been suggested that those who choose to become citizens and therefore are eligible to register and vote are an especially motivated, self-selected subset of immigrants who are more likely than natives to participate in the political process (Segal 2002). After controlling for other characteristics, both Barreto et al. (2005) and Pantoja, Ramirez and Segura (2001) find that foreign-born, naturalized Latino citizens in California indeed show higher levels of voting than native-born Latinos. In a study of NES data, Cassel (2002) also finds that newer immigrants show

higher levels of voting than longer-term residents (see also Garcia and Arce 1988). This suggests that the voting behavior of immigrants, or more broadly, ethnic groups with large shares of immigrants, may be shaped by features peculiar to group membership. One shortcoming, however, is that few studies have examined generational patterns of electoral participation among Asian groups.

Recent scholarship also challenges both individual-level assimilation and resource-based perspectives by focusing instead on generational differences across various ethnic groups. Significantly, Ramakrishnan and Espenshade show that generational differences in propensity to vote vary by racial group (Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001; Ramakrishnan 2005; Lien 2004). Only for Asians is there a linear progression of increasing participation by generation. By contrast, there is a decline across generations among Latinos. This paper builds on these studies, which have examined group differences in political participation and generational patterns at the group level.

## Generational Patterns

To examine generational patterns of political participation among the three Asian groups, I constructed generation categories based on information contained in the CPS files about birthplace and parental birthplace. Those born outside of the U.S. are classified as first generation. Those born in the U.S. with at least one parent born outside of the U.S. (or U.S. territories) are classified as second generation. The remaining 3<sup>+</sup> generation cases are individuals born in the U.S. whose parents were also born in the U.S. (or in U.S. territories). However, due to the small number of cases for the third-generation categories for most Asian groups, I combined the second- and third-generation categories to compare with the first generation. With these generational categories, I examine the intergenerational patterns of socioeconomic attainment, registration, and voting for each group.

First, Table 1 exhibits the composition of nativity, naturalization, and generations for adults among the three Asian groups. This composition demonstrates the demographic basis for political participation. Asian groups have the highest proportion of immigrants among all ethnic groups in America. A majority of Asian Americans consists of foreign-born immigrants (65%). This proportion is higher than that of Latinos (59%). In particular, Korean, Chinese, and Filipinos are most likely to be first-generation-dominant Asian groups. Chinese Americans are the most likely,

**TABLE 1**  
**GENERATIONAL COMPOSITION OF KOREAN, CHINESE, AND FILIPINO AMERICANS**

	Non-Hispanic White	Asian	Korean	Chinese	Filipino
N	218,710	14,573	441	2,172	1,068
First generation (%)	4.6	64.6	76.9	81.9	72.1
Naturalized Citizens (%)	2.3	31.2	38.3	42.8	47.4
Second+ generation (%)	95.4	35.4	23.1	18.1	27.9

SOURCE.—Pooled sample of Current Population Survey in the years 2000, 2004, and 2008.  
Sample is restricted to adults (age 18+).

with approximately 82% being foreign-born, followed by Korean Americans (77%) and Filipino Americans (72%).

Naturalization changes an immigrant's political status in the United States, conferring constitutional rights that significantly affect his/her economic and civic incorporation into U.S. society. Table 1 shows that the rate of naturalization among Korean Americans (38%) is lowest, compared to either Filipinos (47%) or Chinese (43%). However, one might note that the direct association between citizenship status and political participation is difficult to predict (Lien 2004). The decision to become naturalized may derive from a wide range of reasons (e.g. prerequisite for family unification) and may have nothing to do with actively wanting to vote in the U.S. Furthermore, for many immigrants, the ability to become naturalized depends upon material resources.

Second, Table 2 shows generational patterns of education, age, and household income as indicators of major socioeconomic resources for voting. Overall, there is a linear progression from the first to the second generation in terms of educational attainment and median household income, except for Filipino Americans. Chinese Americans demonstrate clear signs of intergenerational upward mobility for every measure. The number of Chinese who completed a college degree level of education or more shows a big jump from 47% to 57% from the first to the second generation. For median household income, second-generation Chinese also show remarkable improvement compared to their first-generation counterparts (from \$69,050 to \$89,300). Korean Americans show an overall generational enhancement in education and income, although the number of less-educated members (measured by percentage of less than high school) slightly increased in the second generation. Except for this category, Korean Americans experience modest intergenerational upward mobility. Consistent with other studies

**TABLE 2**  
**GENERATION AND SOCIOECONOMIC ATTAINMENTS (AGE 18+)**

	Generation	Age (Mean)	Less than High School (%)	BA or more (%)	Household Income (Median)*
Koreans	1st	46.4	9.4	49.6	62,000
	2nd	33.7	9.8	50.0	75,110
	Total	43.4	9.5	49.7	64,900
Chinese	1st	46.5	18.4	47.4	69,050
	2nd	40.6	5.3	57.1	89,300
	Total	45.4	16.0	49.2	73,000
Filipinos	1st	47.5	8.1	46.5	90,000
	2nd	36.9	6.0	33.9	89,000
	Total	44.8	7.5	43.0	90,000
Asian	1st	43.8	12.9	45.8	75,000
	2nd	42.2	7.0	28.2	80,000
	Total	43.2	10.6	39.0	75,800

SOURCE.—Pooled sample of Current Population Survey in the years 2000, 2004, and 2008.

\* Household income data are based on Public Use Micro Sample in the year of 2011.

Sample is restricted to adults (age 18+).

based on the segmented assimilation theoretical framework, Filipino Americans experience downward mobility from the first generation to the second generation (Zhou 1997; Rumbaut 2004; Oh and Min 2011). The proportion of members who achieved a college degree or more decreases from 47% to 34% over generations, and median household income slightly declines, from \$90,000 to \$89,000.

Finally, Table 2 shows age as an indicator of resources for voting. In general, the first-generation members of most Asian groups are relatively older than those of the second generation, due to the constant influx of adult foreign-born immigrants. The finding demonstrates that first-generation Filipinos are slightly older on average than first-generation members of the other two groups. However, second-generation Korean Americans (average 34 years old) and Filipino Americans (average 37 years old) are relatively younger than second-generation Chinese Americans (average 41 years old). The fact that second-generation Koreans are the youngest of the three may imply fewer resources and relative lack of voting experience as a group.

Do these generational patterns of socioeconomic attainment correspond



**TABLE 3**  
**REGISTRATION AND VOTING BY ETHNICITY AND GENERATION IN U.S. (2000-2008)**

	Number of Cases	Registration	Voting
<b>Korean</b>			
1st generation	198	55.1	47.5
2nd generation	102	66.7	55.9
Total	300	59.0	50.3
<b>Chinese</b>			
1st generation	1009	48.7	42.4
2nd generation	394	61.2	53.3
Total	1403	52.2	45.5
<b>Filipino</b>			
1st generation	542	60.0	48.7
2nd generation	297	60.9	52.5
Total	839	60.3	50.1
<b>Asian</b>	10,586	57.5	48.4
<b>Non-Hispanic White</b>	214,514	74.6	66.0

SOURCE.—Pooled sample of Current Population Survey in the years 2000, 2004, and 2008. Sample is restricted to adult citizens.

with the rate of political participation? As Table 3 indicates, the findings support a linear progression of electoral participation persisting from the first to the second generation for the three groups (citizens age 18+). Overall, second-generation members are more likely to register and participate in voting than first-generation members. This finding implies that participation could be enhanced as U.S.-born generations of Asian Americans enter politics and as immigrant generations gain experience with the political system over time (Wong et al. 2011).

Related to these findings, Figure 1 suggests that there may be reason to think that group differences fade away as immigrants move from the first generation to subsequent generations. First-generation Filipinos are more likely to register and vote than their first-generation Chinese and Korean counterparts, perhaps due to their professional backgrounds and lack of English-language barrier. However, group differences in both registration and voting rates seem to fade away for the second and later generations, which leads to a generational convergence across the major Asian groups, although second-generation Koreans are more likely to vote than second-generation members of the other two groups. In particular, the intergenerational increase in registration and voting is minimal for Filipinos compared to

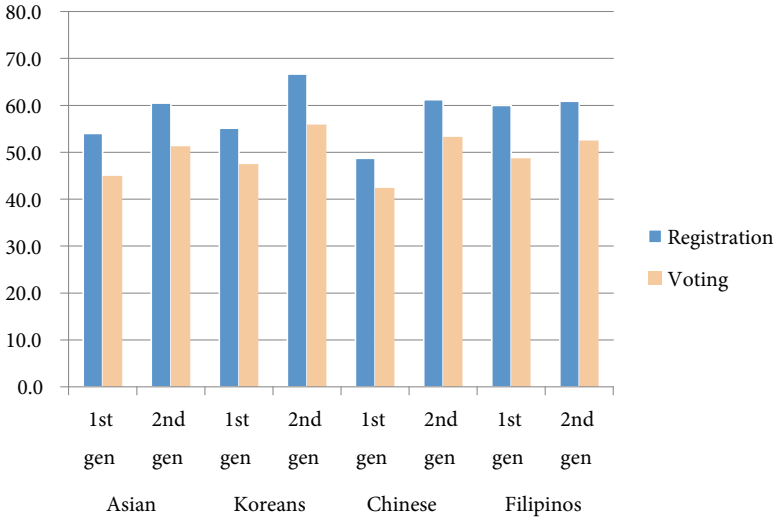


Fig. 1.—Generation and Electoral Participation among Korean, Chinese, and Filipino Americans (Source: Pooled sample of Current Population Survey in the years of 2000, 2004, and 2008. Sample is restricted to adult citizens).

Korean and Chinese Americans. This pattern may contribute to their lack of linear progress in socioeconomic attainment.<sup>1</sup>

Next, to elaborate on the relationship between socioeconomic resources and registration/voting across groups, I simplified the findings above in terms of education and voting rates. As Table 4 indicates, higher group levels of educational attainment as the most important socioeconomic resource among Asian Americans do not correspond with higher levels of registration and voting when compared to that of non-Hispanic whites. A similar mismatch exists when comparing the three Asian-American groups. For example, Chinese Americans are more likely than Filipino Americans to have completed a college degree or more, but less likely to participate in voting. Although education is strongly linked to socioeconomic resource-based voting behavior, this finding addresses a need to better understand why high levels of education do not necessarily translate to high levels of political participation.

In addition, significant differences according to national origin are

<sup>1</sup> The intergenerational variations in registration and voting are statistically significant only for the Chinese American population. In other words, there is no statistically significant relationship between generation and electoral participation for Korean and Filipino American members.

TABLE 4  
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND VOTING BY ETHNIC GROUPS

	Koreans	Chinese	Filipinos	Asians	Latinos	Whites
Bachelor Degree or more	49.7	49.2	43.0	39.0	11.0	28.3
Voting	50.3	45.5	50.1	48.4	47.7	66.0

SOURCE.—Pooled sample of Current Population Survey in the years 2000, 2004, and 2008. Sample is restricted to adult citizens.

found, although the dynamics of any particular election may affect voter turnout for Asian-American groups (the 2008 National Asian American Survey). Generally, Japanese Americans have the highest rates of voting, and Asian Indians have the lowest, despite also having the highest educational attainment and income levels. For the three groups in this study, Filipino and Korean Americans are near the middle, with Filipinos more likely than Koreans to participate in electoral politics. Chinese Americans usually have lower rates of participation than the first two groups. These findings challenge the expectation that group advantages or disadvantages based on socioeconomic resources will not necessarily translate into similar positions in political participation. How then can we explain group differences that cannot be explained by corresponding levels of socioeconomic resources?

## Group Membership and Context of Participation

An alternative approach is to examine how group membership, typically defined by race and ethnicity, structures political participation above and beyond such individual characteristics. A group-focused understanding of political participation first emerged from studies of African-American voting. High voting rates, despite deficits in socioeconomic and other resources, have been attributed to group consciousness, mobilizing institutions, and other features specific to African-American communities (Verba and Nie 1972; Harris 1994). An unanswered question in research on political participation is how insights from studies of African-American voting hold up in a post-1965 era of large-scale immigration and whether or not they extend to Asians, Latinos, and whites.

Racial or ethnic group membership—whether by self-identification or by external demarcations—contributes to the definition of the context in

which potential voters find themselves, and different groups may respond differently to the same conditions. For example, it is reasonable to expect that group membership may work differently for Latinos and Asians (Asian subgroups) than for either blacks or whites, given linguistic and national-origin diversity, varying strength of ethnic institutions, different residential patterns, and varying histories of discrimination and group solidarity. In addition, growing diversity in the United States due to large-scale immigration complicates American racial and ethnic identities and introduces the immigrant/native distinction into the question of racial and ethnic differences.

### *Group consciousness*

Group consciousness is typically understood as a set of beliefs on how a group's interests and agendas should be asserted or advanced through ideas and actions. The "ethnic community hypothesis" (Olsen 1970) posits that minority groups generate a sense of solidarity in reaction to discrimination that then motivates group efforts to overcome disadvantages through political engagement (Antunes and Gaitz 1975). This approach suggests that the political potency of group-membership is linked to "racial identification" (Verba and Nie 1972). Others have argued that a sense of "linked fate" stimulates participation (Tate 1993; Dawson 1994, 2001) or group solidarity (Chong and Rogers 2005). But Junn (2006) points out that group consciousness may or may not promote or involve political participation in mainstream institutions. Studies using measures of "linked fate" or group consciousness (Uhlaner, Cain and Kiewet 1989; Lien 1994) find no positive relationship between group consciousness and voting. Thus, it is an empirical question whether group consciousness has political consequences.

For instance, Korean Americans are associated with strong ethnic solidarity based on their relatively homogeneous backgrounds and middleman minority experiences in urban America. They are highly self-employed and play a prominent role in small liquor, grocery, or green grocery stores in low-income African-American communities (Min 1996). They frequently find themselves caught in the middle of dealings between white distributors, black customers, and Hispanic employees, thus encountering racial conflicts, tensions, and licensing restrictions, which have led to heightened targeting and visibility in American urban and racial politics (Wong et al. 2011; Min 1996, 2011). African Americans have also organized boycotts against Korean-owned stores in New York and Los Angeles. This

conflict peaked in the Los Angeles riots of 1992, which may have resulted in stronger ethnic solidarity and political development (Min 1996; Park 2002).

Despite this unique group experience and consciousness, Korean Americans appear to have steadily enhanced their political representation and participation, at least in electoral politics. In 1993, Jay Kim, former mayor of Diamond Bar, California, was elected as the first Korean-American Congressman. Recently, a second-generation Korean American, John Choi, former Economic Development Director of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFLCIO, is running for a seat in Los Angeles City Council's Thirteenth District in 2013. If he is elected, he will be the first Korean American to serve on the Los Angeles' City Council.

### *Organizational mobilization*

Political involvement may flow from group membership through other causal pathways. Scholars have emphasized the mobilizing role (Tate 1991; 1993). This may include the ethnic church (Harris 1994) and other organizational resources stemming from the civil rights movement, including organizations like the NAACP, Urban League, or the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (Antunes and Gaitz 1975). Others emphasize the targeted political mobilization of specific groups (or the failure to target those groups) by parties, candidates, or other political organizations (Shaw, de la Garza and Lee 2000; DeSipio, de la Garza and Setzler 1999).

Case studies of select ethnic groups in limited settings suggest that this is true. Studies of Cubans provide a classic illustration of the political strength that flows from well-orchestrated ethnic organization (Portes and Mozo 1985; Bueker 2005, 2006). Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee (2000) find that being contacted by a Latino organization is an important predictor (a stronger predictor than income) of Latino voting (Ramakrishnan 2005; Pantoja et al 2001; Barreto et al 2005; Pantoja and Segura 2003). Latino civic organizations and labor unions that targeted immigrants seem to have been particularly important in encouraging Latino voting in California in 2002, where immigrant Latinos voted more than either native-born Latinos or non-Latinos (Barreto et al. 2005).

Asian Americans, in general, lack the relative intensity and longevity of civil rights organizations (Antunes and Gaitz 1975). Yet, organizational efforts that mobilize political participation and promote voting rights have been growing. The first National Asian Pacific American Voter Registration Campaign in 1996 brought together over a hundred Asian Pacific Islander

American organizations with a total 75,000 registered voters. Two years later, Asian-American leaders and activists came together to form the 80-20 Initiative, a political action committee (PAC), hoping to increase Asian-American political representation at the national level (Lien 2001, p. 76).

In 2012, many Asian-American grassroots organizations indicated interest in registering Asian-American voters and educating them on the election process and voting rights, resulting in significant non-partisan mobilization efforts. For example, Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote, APIAVOTE, Asian American Justice Center, AAJC, and other partners worked with over 75 organizations in 15 states to enhance civic participation in the Asian-American community (Asian American Justice Center 2012). Group-specific organizations that are devoted to promoting registration and voting have been active at the local level. For example, the Korean American Civic Empowerment (KACE), which was established in 1996 in Flushing, New York, and branched out to New Jersey, has been one of the most active grassroots organizations in mobilizing the Korean-American community by advocating voting rights and educating eligible-to-vote Korean Americans. KACE's remarkable accomplishments include registering over 24,000 Korean Americans as voters in New York and New Jersey and raising the Korean-American voter turnout from 5% in 1996 to over 68% in 2008 (<http://us.kace.org/>). While there have been few empirical studies on the direct effects of ethnic organization on electoral participation, it is hard to deny its impact.

Another indicator of political mobilization is political party identification, whether it is mobilized internally or externally by mainstream political parties. For example, many Vietnamese Americans, known to have the least access to socioeconomic resources among all major Asian groups, show high levels of political interest and identification with the Republican Party, combined with a position of strong anti-communist ideology, given their background as refugees from communized Vietnam.

Table 5 also shows that a higher proportion of Asian Americans identify as Democrats (31%) than as Republicans (14%). Both Koreans and Filipinos have a smaller but still sizeable proportion of Republicans (17% and 16%, respectively). Chinese are the least likely to be Republicans. Among Asian groups, Korean Americans have the second-highest proportion of Democrats (38%), following Japanese Americans (40%) (not shown in Table 5). Among the three groups, Korean Americans most highly identify themselves as Democrats, followed by Filipino Americans. Filipinos were traditionally a more conservative electorate, supporting Republican candidates. The 2008 election marked the first time that a majority of Filipino Americans voted for

**TABLE 5**  
**POLITICAL PARTY IDENTIFICATION**

Ethnic Group	Democrats (%)	Republicans (%)	Independent (%)	No Party Affiliation (%)
Koreans	38	17	10	35
Chinese	25	8	28	39
Filipinos	34	16	17	32
Asians	31	14	20	35

SOURCE.—Adapted from Wong et al's (2011) analysis of the 2008 National Asian American Survey (p. 132).

a Democratic presidential candidate. In 2008, a majority of Filipino Americans (58%) helped elect Obama.

This lean towards the Democratic Party has since continued to grow, affecting the past two U.S. presidential elections. According to the 2012 Post-Election Survey of 2,238 Asian- American respondents, 71% voted for Obama, 28% for Romney, and 1% for another candidate, contributing a net of 1.4 million votes to the elected president's popular vote margin (Asian American Justice Center 2012).

Table 5 also exhibits that a considerable proportion of Asian Americans are reluctant to commit to either of the two major political parties. The size of the "no party affiliation" category itself does not account for low political mobilization. However, stronger group identification with one or both of the major parties may be a necessary step for mainstream political organizations in mobilizing Asian-American voters. Thirty-nine percent of Chinese Americans, 35% of Koreans, and 32% of Filipinos have no party identification, while levels of party identification with either the Democratic or Republican Parties are low compared to the other racial/ethnic groups. This low level of potential political mobilization may be indeed associated with a low level of voting for most Asian-American groups.

### *Social and Political Context*

Political behavior may also be affected by the social and political context in which one lives, what we call "context of participation." Political and social contexts can be important in channeling group-relevant information, shaping group political consciousness, encouraging the formation of racial or ethnic group identity, or inviting group-specific mobilization by outside political

actors or elites (Timpone 1998; Cho 1999; Jones-Correa 2001, 2005; Ramaskrishnan and Espenshade 2001; Bueker 2005; Leighley 2001; Gay 2001; Cho et al. 2006). Demographic context of ethnic communities as measured by co-ethnic presence, racial/ethnic isolation, immigrant concentration, racial segregation, and metropolitan status may have political consequences as well.

Several scholars have argued that participation is greater in communities where minority or immigrant group members are a larger share of the population. Immigrants may find themselves more readily welcomed in ethnic or immigrant communities and thus benefit from the ethnic social capital embedded in such places. In support of this argument, Bueker (2005) found that the overall percentage of the foreign-born population (regardless of ethnicity) at the MSA level had a small but significant positive relationship to voting.

On the other hand, there is also reason to believe that majority-minority communities tend to isolate residents from the social mainstream and sideline them from the political process. A recent study, using data from official registration lists in cities with large proportions of four major Asian groups (Asian Indian, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean), examined the effects on voting of the proportion of each Asian group in the local population at the census tract level (Cho et al. 2006). Effects varied across groups, but were mostly negative. Thus, whether ethnic concentration or segregation creates conditions that facilitate collective action or leads to political isolation becomes an empirical question.

Additional features of the context of participation involve more distinctively political variables. The empowerment thesis argues that participation increases in areas with co-ethnic political officials (Bobo and Gilliam 1990). Empirical evidence on the empowerment thesis varies across ethnic groups. Political empowerment measured by the number of co-ethnic political officials had no significantly positive effect on Asian-American voting, but for Latinos and blacks, the effect was small but positive (Logan et al. 2012). However, Lien (2004) argues that voter turnout among Asians was greater in high-empowerment states such as Hawaii and California, controlling for individual and immigrant factors such as income, education, and nativity.

Voting rights legislation is also designed to mitigate or remove obstacles to voting by linguistic minorities, but analyses of these provisions have yielded mixed results. Jones-Correa (2005) reported from his analysis of the Current Population Survey from 1996 and 2000 that Asians and Latinos were



**TABLE 6**  
**BILINGUAL BALLOTS AND LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE FOR ASIAN AMERICANS**

	State	County	Language	Korean	Chinese	Filipino
2000	7	16	5	3	12	6
2010	11	21	6	4	14	9

SOURCE.—Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (2000; 2010)

more likely to vote in states that offer voting and registration materials in the respondent's native language; this was especially true for Latinos (both immigrants and native-born), while results varied among Asian groups.

One important political-institutional climate formally designed to promote minority participation is the bilingual ballot. Under the language assistance provisions under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act, bilingual ballots, translated voting materials, and interpreters must be provided in counties where the census reports that more than 5% or 10,000 people are (1) over 18 years old (the legal voting age), (2) citizens of the United States, (3) speak the same Asian language, (4) have limited English proficiency, and (5) have a higher illiteracy rate than the national illiteracy rate (Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund 2010).

Table 6 shows that Asian-language voting services increased from 2000 to 2010. In 2000, there were 16 counties in 7 states who provided voting assistance in 5 different Asian languages (Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Filipino, and Vietnamese). In 2010, 21 counties in 11 states offered assistance in 6 different languages (Indian was added). The number of counties that provide Korean language service for voting increased from 3 in 2000 to 4 in 2010. In 2000, 12 counties offered voting services in Chinese. By 2010, 14 counties offered Chinese-language services. In 2000, 6 counties offered services in Filipino Tagalog. By 2010, 9 counties offered Filipino-language services. However, according to Logan et al.'s research (2012), the effect of bilingual ballot provision for Asians has no effect on voting based on the state-level coverage data. Where there is only partial coverage, bilingual ballot policies are implemented by local jurisdictions which are not identifiable in the CPS data and the results may reflect features of local political contexts that cannot be captured in their study.

## Conclusion

The findings suggest that the puzzle of Asian-American political

participation is more complex than initially anticipated. The traditional socioeconomic resource model is unable to consistently explain the intragroup variations among major Asian-American groups. While the contexts of participation, such as residential concentration and political climate, have not been directly tested in this paper, existing research shows that its effects have been mixed or inconsistent across different ethnic groups. Perhaps the group-specific experience of immigration suggests that when studying Asian-American political participation, one cannot ignore the importance of immigrant political socialization in regard to group consciousness and political socialization. In other words, an understanding of immigration history and group-specific adaptation experiences helps us to better account for group variation.

It has been well documented that Chinese Americans are one of the first Asian groups to have immigrated to the United States. Their long-time presence has helped them build relative success in terms of political representation in federal, state, and local government. However, at the group level, many scholars report that politics in the Chinese community is influenced by divisions along lines of region, class, homeland politics, and immigrant generation (Toyota 2010). In addition, lack of prior experience with direct political participation under communist regimes in the home country, language barriers, and ethnic concentration may all act to dampen the propensity of voter participation. According to Lien (1994), many Chinese are indifferent to politics. They have difficulties with the language, and they are not familiar with the major political parties or the candidates. Despite these challenges, Chinese Americans' tendency to live and work in their own enclaves poses a great demographic basis for potential political representation, particularly at the local level. Fifty-five Chinese Americans serve as elected officials at the various levels of government (Wong et al. 2011, p. 42).

Filipino Americans, another long-time Asian immigrant group, have a somewhat distinctive immigration background. Due to the American annexation of the Philippines in 1898, Filipino Americans were viewed as subjects of a U.S. territory, rather than immigrants from another country (Takaki 1989). Further differentiating them from other Asian groups, they face few language barriers, because the official language in their homeland is English. In 2008, 41 Filipino Americans were elected to office, ranging from city council to the U.S. House of Representatives (Wong et al. 2011, p. 47), although most of those in federal and state offices were concentrated in Hawaii. In California, the state with the highest Filipino-American

population, no Filipino American has been elected to either state legislature or U.S. Congress, as of 2010 (Wong et al. 2011, p. 47).

Compared to either Chinese or Filipino Americans, Korean Americans are a relatively more recent and smaller group. Despite having a culturally and linguistically homogeneous background, their small population size coupled with a low rate of naturalization puts them at a political disadvantage. Nonetheless, their unique middleman minority experiences as victims of boycotts and riots in low-income African-American neighborhoods has likely strengthened ethnic solidarity and increased associated political outcomes. Korean Americans have gained some prominence in political representation in American politics. Thirty-one Korean Americans are now elected officials, including city councilmen and mayors, mostly at the local government level (Kim 2012). Koreans are the most politically empowered in terms of the number of elected officials at various levels of government per 100,000 members, compared to Chinese and Filipinos. These Korean-American officials were elected often through strategic pan-Asian coalition building, to avoid facing otherwise insufficient voter support.

Besides distinct subgroup differences, Asian-American voter turnout has steadily increased, from 1.7 million in 1996 to nearly 3 million in 2004 to 3.2 million in 2012, with a growing Asian-American share of the electorate (close to 3%) (Magpantay 2009). One may pose the question of whether this overall increase in Asian-American political participation will lead to a greater convergence in participation across the various ethnic groups. One notable finding was the consistent generational progress that second-generation Asian Americans are more likely to participate in American politics than their first-generation counterparts. Furthermore, the group differences in registration and voting have diminished in the second generation. This finding suggests a significant convergence across the groups in political participation from the first generation to the second generation. Thus, to the extent that second-generation members account for the future trajectory of the Asian-American electorate, we may expect greater convergence across ethnic groups in terms of political participation, despite somewhat divergent socioeconomic attainment patterns. This implies a potential increase in validity for the pan-Asian-American category.

Finally, the Asian-American population continues to grow in traditional areas of concentration, such as California and New York, while simultaneously showing growth in non-traditional states like Nevada, Arizona, and Georgia. This persistent geographic concentration of the Asian-

American population in the traditional immigrant gateway states may discourage political parties and candidates from mobilizing new Asian-American voters, because Asian Americans are less likely to reside in presidential battleground states than whites or blacks (Wong et al. 2011). In addition, the old challenge of a relatively small group size (less than 5 % of all register voters) along with the inefficiency of mobilizing an immigrant-dominant group with multiple language subgroups who lack English proficiency and political party identification persists. Thus, without greater effort toward internal mobilization and pan-Asian coalition building, Asian-American political participation patterns may be unlikely to change dramatically in the near future.

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