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THE POLITICAL BEHAVIOR OF ASIAN AMERICANS: A THEORETICAL APPROACH¹

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I use political economy, political sociology, and political psychology perspectives to examine the political behavior of Asian Americans. Theoretical discussions focus on the effects of group size, high percent of non-citizen members, and factors associated with social contexts and networks on political participation. Based upon additional theoretical considerations, I also suggest the utility of broadening research to examine relative group size, psychological and political-cultural factors, and institutional effects within a multi-level framework in future empirical studies.

INTRODUCTION

Sociological and political science research on U.S. electoral behavior has contributed to an increasingly sophisticated understanding of voting behavior and partisanship among the American electorate. Though previous research on political behavior has examined the effects of race on political participations, these analyses are generally limited to comparisons between whites and blacks. Comparatively, little theoretical or empirical work has focused on Asian Americans despite their increasing social and political influence on the American politics (Lien 1997).

Since 1990, the Asian and Pacific Islander population has increased by nearly three million,² comprising a record high of 3.7 percent of the total American population in the year 2000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001b). At both federal and local levels, there is indication that Asian Americans are somewhat more integrated into the American political system than in previous historical eras. Gary Locke was elected the state of Washington's

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² The exact number is 3,368, 171. If we use race alone or in combination for Census 2000, the numerical difference between the year 2000 and the year 1990 is 5,499,580.

21st governor in 1996, making him the first Asian American governor on the North American continent. In July 2000, Norman Y. Mineta became the first Asian American to hold a cabinet position as the U.S. Secretary of Commerce. Though Asian American elites may be gaining some ground in American politics, census data show that Asian Americans have not sufficiently translated political resources into broader political mobilization and that they register and vote at lower rates than whites and blacks. Studies have shown that the racial gap between whites and blacks in registration and voter turnout can be explained by social economic status (Lien 1997). However, a glass ceiling of political involvement seems to still exist for Asian Americans even after controlling for group attributes and demographics.

Noting the inconsistency between current theories of political behavior and the unexpected low level of political participation by Asian Americans, this paper attempts to use theories based on political economy, political sociology, political psychology and political culture, and institutional effects to analyze the political behavior of Asian Americans.

IDENTITY OF ASIAN AMERICANS

In line with previous efforts to investigate the political behavior of Asian Americans, I adopt the concept of Asian American panethnicity, including people having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, the India subcontinent, or the Pacific Islands (Fernandez 1996). One major theoretical motivation to study the political behavior of Asian Americans as a whole comes from the fact that racial identification is not a process involving only "self-defining," but also social construction of racial identities by the dominant group members, a point of particular relevance to attributions involving Asian Americans by dominant groups in the American society (Xie and Goyette 1997). Espiritu's (1992) and Omi and Winant's (1994) research on racial/panethnic identity suggests that the Asian American racial identity/panethnicity is both socially constructed and institutionally imposed. If there is a mismatch between the imposed Asian American panethnicity by other racial or ethnic groups and the self-defined identity, members of distinct ethnic groups of Asian and Pacific origins often adjust to the imposed one (Espiritu 1992; Saito 1998).

There is also a non-trivial degree of similarity across different Asian ethnic groups. The largest Asian American groups are mostly from East, South, and Southeast Asian countries. These include Chinese, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Koreans, Japanese, and Indians, all of whom share similar histories, traditions, values, and norms. For instance, their countries of origin experienced similar histories of being colonized, semi-colonized, or subjugated to western countries; after arriving in the United States, these

people have shared similar experiences of social closure and discrimination. In addition, many Asian American groups— especially Asian immigrants—still subscribe to Buddhist-Confucian thoughts, emphasizing obedience, tolerance, family values, attainment of high education, and patriarchal priority (Lien 1997).³

DEMOGRAPHICS OF ASIAN AMERICANS AND THEIR POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

Many studies have shown the significance of demographics for political behavior, for instance the curvilinear association between age and voter turnout (Knoke and Hout 1975), effects of marital status in contagion models (Straits 1990), and the positive effects of family income and educational attainment on voter registration and turnout rates in almost all electoral behavior research. This line of research has led to the well-established demographic and socio-economic status model, which argues that demographic characteristics, socio-economic status included, affect political participation. Group-based differences in political participation are largely attributable to these demographic characteristics. Once these demographic variables are controlled, we should expect that group differences in political participation would eventually disappear.

As of 2000, the census counted 10,641,833 Asian Americans, an increase of 46.3 percent compared with Census 1990 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001b). In the 1990s, approximately 66 percent of Asians lived in just five states – California, New York, Hawaii, Texas, and Illinois; the same percentage of Asians were born in foreign countries (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993), and the trend of population concentration still persists in the year 2000 with a five percent shy of the total percentage in the aforementioned five states in 1990 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001a). Using the average American population as benchmark, Asian Americans are distinguished by the following characteristics: (1) they are younger than the general population; (2) they have higher educational attainment; (3) they are

³ Forthwith, there have been some considerations about the trade-off between accuracy and efficiency in using Asian American as a single categorizing variable. In this analysis, I use Asian American as a racial/panethnic category simply because it has become a primary racial category in the census, the causes and consequences of which are clearly related to the political integration within the Asian American communities, electoral redistricting, and a chain of social, political, and cultural reactions since the 1960s (Wei 1993).

more linguistically isolated; (4) they are more likely to participate in the labor force; (5) they experience poverty rates slightly higher than all Americans despite their higher median family incomes and educational attainment (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993). These demographic attributes contribute either positively or negatively to Asian Americans' political participation. For instance, we can expect high educational attainment and family earnings to positively affect the political participation of Asian Americans, whereas age and poverty rates might drive them in the opposite direction. A function of these effects, including interaction between racial identity and demographics, and some non-linear multiplicative effects induced by the interaction between macro and micro variables, however, results in an overall low level of Asian American political participation.

The preceding discussion raises an important question: what are the registration and voter turnout rates of Asian Americans in recent election years, given their demographic characteristics? In the congressional election years of 1994 and 1998, the reported voting rates of non-Hispanic Asians and Pacific Islanders stayed around 20 percent as opposed to 50.1 and 46.5 for whites, 37.4 and 40.0 percent for blacks, respectively (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000a).⁴ The census data, including the Current Population Survey (CPS) estimates, also show similar patterns in registration rates: Asian Americans are about twice as unlikely to register as whites and blacks do (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1998, 2000a).⁵ Once differences in socioeconomic status are taken into account, black and white turnout rates are roughly equal, whereas the voter registration and turnout rates of Asian

⁴ The voting rates take noncitizens into account. For Asian Americans, the citizen voting rate is 32.3 percent in 1998 and 39.4 percent in 1994, whereas for other racial groups, the citizen voting rates are only one or at most two percent off the general voting rates reported here. Statistics for Asian Americans' voting behavior in previous election years (before 1994) are not available.

⁵ The 2000 Voting and Registration Supplement of the Current Population Survey provided similar evidence that Asian American citizens are much less likely to vote than whites and blacks. The raw registration rates for different racial/ethnic group members with the U. S. citizenship are: whites, 80.51 percent; blacks, 79.12 percent; Hispanics, 64.39 percent; and Asian Americans, 62.61 percent. After controlling for major demographics, length of stay, birth cohort, state characteristics, and interaction between race and education, there are non-trivial race-based residuals (Xu 2001).

Americans are still significantly lower than those of whites and blacks (Lien 1997). Having noticed the enduring racial effects on electoral behavior, it is reasonable to argue that unlike white or black, the determinants of Asian American political behavior transcend purely demographic factors, relating possibly to social, cultural, and political structure embedded both within and outside the Asian American communities. In the following section, I review existing theories of political participation, and relate the distinct group attributes of Asian Americans to these theories to formulate a group-based theory of political behavior. I will focus my discussion on voter registration and turnout with occasional reference to other forms of political behavior.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

Over the past 40 years, political behavior scholars have developed three distinct theoretical approaches: the political economy tradition, the political sociology tradition, and the political psychology tradition (Carmines and Huckfeldt 1996). Taken together, the three approaches yield an intellectual paradigm that relocates the research focus of political behavior from a single to multi-dimensional perspective. In the following sections, I discuss the potential theoretical contributions of these three traditions to a better understanding of Asian Americans' political behavior, identifying institutional process as an additional causal factor of relevance.

POLITICAL ECONOMY

Anthony Downs argues in *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), that there is an analogy between economic behavior and political behavior in that both work on the basis of individually defined self-interest. Based on the concept of utility income calculation, Downs (1957) contends that political actors behave by comparing the gains and losses they have received under the present government and what they expect to receive if the competing political parties were in office. In combination with rational calculation of the cost of political information, political actors either vote for the party of their preference or abstain if the losses outweigh gains in a given election.

Applied to Asian Americans, the political economy approach suggests that an imbalance between expected political inputs and outputs contributes to low levels of political participation by Asian Americans. Because of small population size, language barriers, and a lack of integrative leadership, Asian Americans may experience low levels of efficacy in producing favorable political outcomes. Based on calculation of their gains

and losses through political participation, many Asian Americans may find it rational to abstain from voting in, or developing an interest in, elections.

As Asian Americans comprise only approximately 3.7 percent of the total American population, it is probable that the benefits that they might gain are negligible, compared with their election campaign donation and actual participation (Wei 1993; Lien 1997; Nakanishi 2001). With a few exceptions like Hawaii and California, Asian Americans are relegated to secondary significance in elections in most states. Even if in the provision of universal participation, their votes would have no significant effect given the plurality voting system central to U.S. politics (Wei 1993). Most presidential and congressional candidates tend not to champion issues related to Asian Americans in their political platforms (Nakanishi 2001). This in turn transmits a message to the public that the political participation of Asian Americans has little bearing on politics. As the low returns of participation become transparent, Asian Americans might opt out of American politics.

Associated with the individual self-interest hypothesis, Asian Americans' demographic attributes might affect their political behavior differently than it affects whites or blacks. Several studies have found that immigrant status is a great impediment to political involvement as immigration-related characteristics like country of origin, naturalization processes, length of stay in the United States, and the sojourner's complex are found to have a strong impact on political behavior (Lien 1997; Lin 1998; Bass and Casper 1999; Nakanishi 2001). A factor of particular relevance to political economy approach is that first-generation immigrants usually do not have the necessary skills for full-fledged political participation. For Asian immigrants, especially those with low-level income and education, intellectual consumption, namely, overcoming language barriers and processing complex information on politics, might create disproportionately high costs for their participation. It is also noteworthy that the stark contrast between anti- or quasi-democratic systems in most Asian countries and the well-established American democracy can cause problems for Asian immigrants as they attempt to become familiar with American politics. Therefore, a utility income calculation of participation should easily lead to Asian immigrants' immediate pursuit of economic success and deferment of political participation. The negative effects of immigration and cultural barriers, as a result of utility income calculation, might also have adverse effects on native born Asian Americans due to a variety of group processes in largely Asian areas.

In addition, the economic facet of the "sojourner's homeland complex" diverts Asian Americans' attention from American politics to economic security. Upon arrival, Asian Americans tend to work in low-income positions in ethnic enclaves. Bonacich (1973) elaborates on the

effects of sojourning, suggesting that there are immigrants who do not plan to settle permanently but intend to accomplish economic goals and return to their homeland. Many of these sojourners, as Bonacich describes, are Asian immigrants in the United States. Due to their initial economic hardship and intent of sojourning, Asian immigrants focus on economic activities involving income generation, while dismissing political involvements. Therefore, economic insecurity and the sojourner's complex might limit some Asian immigrants to achieve immediate economic gains as opposed to struggle for permanent citizenship or long-term political empowerment. Such political inefficacy among the first-generation Asian immigrants may have strong residual effects on immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s as well as native-born Asian Americans.

Education, however, might affect Asian Americans' political behavior in another important way involving utility calculation. Based on several national surveys, social scientists have found that Asian American students tend to use the risk-averse strategy in their choice and completion of postsecondary education (Min 1995). A disproportionate number of Asian Americans, immigrants in particular, choose natural sciences and engineering versus social sciences as their undergraduate or graduate majors to increase their odds of finding high-paying jobs. Because of different educational purposes and accordingly distinct socialization processes, people who specialize in social sciences are more likely to be interested in politics than those in natural sciences. Due to a high concentration in the latter fields, Asian Americans with relatively high education might be seriously affected by this depoliticizing effect.

Based upon studies of whites and blacks mostly, one may hypothesize that the political deficit of Asian Americans might be theoretically grounded upon an economic assumption. Disadvantaged by major demographic variables such as immigration status, age distribution, risk-averse behavior in educational attainment, awareness of their own population size, and the residual effects of social closure and discrimination, Asian Americans therefore may opt out of American politics through their rational utility calculation of participation.

POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

Another theoretical thrust originates from the political sociology tradition espousing the relevance of social contextual factors to political behavior. Recent political research has drawn upon "contextual analysis" and "network analysis" to examine the wide-spectrum variations in political behavior. The contextual analysis approach to political behavior contends that "understanding the politics of individual citizens within the political and

social settings where they are located fits well within the political sociological traditions established by Key and Lazarsfeld and others” (Carmines and Huckfeldt 1996:229). Strong evidence has shown that at aggregate level, contexts lie beyond the reach of individual control. But, what is context? Context, according to Eulau (1986), refers to the social composition of an environment, which might be anchored in such bases as geographical region, historical heritage, and political alignments within certain racial or ethnic groups. Thereby, the environment, or social context, includes geographical, historical, racial, demographic, and political entities.

By comparison, the network analysis approach contends that political actors are steered not only by the “anchorage” as contextual analysis approach suggests but also by connections. Wasserman and Faust's (1999:3) influential methodological synthesis argues, “The appealing focus of network analysis is on *relationships* among social entities, and on the patterns and implications of these relationships.” For example, individuals are likely to adopt the political views of people around them. In addition, *relationships* or relational identities, be they weak or strong ties, furnish people with various resources for social mobility, and these resources lend influence to political involvement.

Though contextual analysis and network analysis present different devices for analyses of political behavior, the overlap and interplay between context and network have suggested that a combined approach is more viable. Carmines and Huckfeldt (1996) argue that contexts might affect the “probabilities of social interactions” within and across groups as well as network boundaries. Likewise, contexts can be expressed as patterns or regularities in network among entities (Wasserman and Faust 1999). As illustrated in the following sections, factors contributing to contextual disadvantages might also affect network resources in one way or another.

Contextual Disadvantages of Asian Americans – As the previous literature and empirical studies suggest, Asian Americans tend to experience two contextual disadvantages. First, population composition of local communities contributes to a low level of political participation among Asian Americans. Second, the historical context inherited from their homeland countries might impose different political agendas upon Asian Americans such that a single political front can hardly evolve into formation.

As an important demographic factor, local population composition affects the political behavior of Asian Americans. Regarding the group size of Asian Americans, there are two major kinds of Asian communities, namely, low Asian concentration communities and high Asian concentration communities. In low concentration areas, the small local population and characteristics of the American political processes pressure Asian Americans to make strategic concessions to local white-dominant culture with their

conversion to the “white” culture or flight to largely Asian areas. In high concentration areas where racial conflict effects are presumed to increase, the cultural and ethnic friction within Asian communities might also become salient due to the phenomenon of group-clustering (Massey 2001). First, because of long-term social closure and discrimination, upward mobility is relatively limited for Asian Americans compared with European immigrants. Second, as the size of any ethnic group or the allies of these groups within Asian American communities is too small to challenge the political system for requesting more resources, between-group competitions and geographic divisions become salient, the result of which is a segregation under concentration: a large number of Asian Americans cluster around one locale; however, there are divided geographical and cultural boundaries between different ethnic groups.

The other element of local population composition, between-group composition or relative group size, examines how the group size of a certain group and its rival groups affects the political behavior of both sides. Studies of racial attitudes have shown that both absolute population size and relative group size are key predictors of racial attitudes such as attitudes toward black-targeted policies (Quillian 1996; Taylor 1998). Along this line of research, one can expect that group conflict theory is able to explain different propensity for political participation under race-based circumstances. In states where the population size of Asian Americans exceeds the national average, the voting rates of both Asian Americans and other racial/ethnic groups are expected to be higher than the national average due to their competition for limited resources; however, the linkage between Asian Americans and other racial / ethnic groups in other states is expected to be weak because of Asian Americans' relative invisibility and communal disorganization in the low-Asian-concentration areas. In addition, in communities where the total population size is large and the relative group size difference is small, one would expect to observe the highest level of participation due to the intensified competition for resources in a zero-sum game.

Thus, there might exist a high-strong and low-weak association between the relative Asian population and the correlation of electoral behavior between Asian Americans and other racial groups, though the mechanisms might differ slightly. For whites, their motivation for active participation is two-fold, urged by competition for both resources and dominance. For blacks and Hispanics, their motivation might come from mere interest conflict. Another dimension of group size affecting political participation lies in multi-racial residential segregation (Massey and Denton 1993; Frey and Farley 1996). The effects of segregation on political participation requires further investigation of the following questions: How

do people act across racial lines in highly segregated or highly mixed areas? Is there any unfair delivery of public services along the racial line? Is the community leadership efficient in reinforcing multi-racial community cohesion? And in general, how does the between-group dynamics work regarding political participation in racially segregated and mixed areas, respectively?

A second disadvantage stems from the historical context under which first generation Asian immigrants were socialized. Some qualitative evidence has shown that historical context effects pose challenges to the political unification of Asian American communities. Due to the undercurrents of distrust and even animosity between members of different ethnic groups, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, and other Asian Americans tended to form their own cultural enclaves, thus creating cleavages within the Asian American communities. For example, during World War II, Chinese and Korean Americans expressed anti-Japanese sentiments in response to the Japanese invasion of China and Korea. The subtle split between mainland and Taiwan Chinese reflects another kind of within-group friction. Clearly, different interpretations and attachments to homeland histories and politics lower the likelihood of forming political coalitions among different Asian American groups.

The Role of Networks among Asian Americans – In addition to group resources derived from local mobilization, political actors gain resources through social networks. Though one cannot always select his or her residency, individuals can partake in social or political coalitions across geographical areas. Carmines and Huckfeldt (1996:235) argue that “the individual actor is not, however, seen in isolation, but rather in the context of surrounding constraints and opportunities that operate on patterns of social interaction, the acquisition of political information, and the formulation of political choice.” Census data suggest three network-related factors in the Asian American community: rich flight, lack of social and spatial mobility in the ethnic enclaves, and class cleavages along ethnic groups. All three may create significant difficulties for efficient political networking.

A variety of population indices have indicated that Asian Americans are less segregated than blacks and Latinos (Frey & Farley 1996; Massey 2001). Once Asian Americans are economically better off, they tend to be promptly assimilated into the largely white areas to seek better communal services, especially quality schooling for their children. This in turn results in a high-level drainage of social and human capital out of Asian American communities. Lacking sufficient and dynamic resources, Asian American communities are likely to be more politically disorganized than other racial/ethnic groups like blacks or Hispanics.

As half Asian Americans 18 years old and older are immigrants, their social mobility and spatial mobility become critical to their political participation (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000b). Based on their multi-group analysis of immigrants, Portes and Manning (2001:569) infer that ethnic mobilization is most common among groups “who have already abandoned the bottom of the social ladder and started to compete for positions of advantage with members of the majority.” However, the social mobility of Asian Americans has been characterized by the relatively low return of social capital within ethnic enclaves and a large within-group status variation with the Japanese taking the lead, followed by Chinese, Koreans, Indians, and Hmongs falling far behind (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993). First, Asian immigrants tend to work in low-level “bridging” ethnic enterprises or businesses with fewer opportunities for upward social mobility within the enclaves and limited channels for assimilation into the mainstream society. Sanders and Nee's research (1987) on the limits of ethnic solidarity of Chinese immigrants in the enclave economy suggests that enclave workers have much slower social mobility than those outside the enclave economy. Though the discussion does not apply to all ethnic groups of Asian Americans, it provides significant evidence that some of the largest Asian immigrant groups suffer from disadvantages in social capital within and outside enclaves, Chinese Americans in particular.⁶ These low levels of social capital in turn can be expected to constrain the participation of many Asian Americans.

Another factor keeping Asian Americans from higher levels of political participation is within-group variation and its related consequences. As social scientists contend, individuals choose their “political neighbors” and they make their selection decisions consistent through racial, ethnic, and class characteristics, the latter of which has been considered as the most important criterion (Wilson 1981, 1997; Tate 1993). Asian Americans are experiencing an ethnicized stratification process. Class conflicts and ethnicity conflicts have placed Asian Americans into a political predicament. Both educational attainment and wealth are unevenly distributed, with Japanese and Chinese taking the lead, and Hmongs and Cambodians falling far behind. Noting the social and class cleavages within the Asian American community, one may hypothesize that Asian Americans are sufficiently

⁶Both the Census 1990 and Census 2000 show that Chinese are the largest ethnic group among all Asian American groups, comprising approximately 25 percent of the Asian American population.

heterogeneous as to limit the creation of stronger political bonds that would facilitate political participation.

In addition to the three factors aforementioned, there is also some evidence that the trans-national dimensions of the social context and social networks contribute to the ebb and flow of political participation of Asian Americans. For instance, the Japanese invasion of most East and Southeast Asian countries in WWII, the Vietnam War, the recent escalating tension between mainland China and Taiwan, and various forms of the U. S. military and economic influence on the internal affairs of many Asian countries, all created pitfalls for Asian Americans to be further involved in the American democratic processes. Thus, the political behavior of Asian Americans may not only be locally shaped, but also affected by transnational conflicts.

POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY AND POLITICAL CULTURE

Within the political psychology paradigm, there are three major theoretical thrusts, emphasizing media effects, the politics of race, and the heuristical decision-making process respectively. These three thrusts represent competing yet complementary visions of the psychological factors affecting political behavior. Scholars focusing on media effects have made departures from the traditional media bias assumption by examining the priming processes involved in media coverage. Reflected by the marginalization of Asian Americans in media coverage, media effects can be seen in two factors: coverage salience and media bias. As is demonstrated in daily news coverage, racial frames focus largely on black-and-white politics and this style of reporting may not stimulate high levels of political efficacy and participation among Asian Americans.

Though Carmines and Huckfeldt (1996:239) contend, that “The modern press has created the role of the professional, *politically detached*, critical observer,” biases nevertheless persist. In addition to lower levels of coverage, Asian Americans are often portrayed as disloyal to the United States and inferior in physical attraction by the American media. From the fundraising scandal of the 1996 campaign, the 1998 Cox report on Asian spying, to the most recent Wen Ho Lee case, Asian Americans appear to be experiencing high levels of negative portrayal by the American media (Nakanishi 2001).

As another facet of political psychology, racial politics is closely associated with media coverage. In response to the critique of “race does not matter,” Hamill, Lodge and Blake (1985) argue that a wide spectrum of issue opinions are organized cognitively with respect to race partly due to the salience effect that the media exert on public opinion. However, because

of past media bias and inappropriate portrayal, media coverage simply dismisses the politics of Asian Americans by bracketing and marginalizing them. Hence, the racial effects are greatly manipulated by the salient black-and-white politics, which leads to the political inefficacy of Asian Americans.

The last major aspect of political psychology tradition focuses on how political decisions are made. Most political psychologists argue that citizens are inclined to be “minimally informed—but informed nonetheless — citizenry” (Carmines & Huckfeldt 1996:245). Thereby, citizens utilize some shortcuts to reduce complex problem solving to more simple judgmental operations by unconsciously adhering to Kahneman and Tversky's four principles, namely availability, representativeness, adjustment, and simulation. However, due to the high percentage of non-citizens and language barriers in Asian communities, these cognitive processes may be limited. For instance, language factors result in a large proportion of Asian Americans processing or delivering information coded in their own languages. On average, 65.2 percent of Asians speak Asian languages at home; 56 percent do not speak English very well; and 34.9 percent are linguistically isolated (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993). The diversity of Asian languages means that major Asian American media reach only a small number of Asian Americans. Apart from the low level of political efficacy and other characteristics in political psychology shaped by the American media and political culture, it is of note that the culturally transmitted political psychology also plays a key role in shaping Asian American behavior. The authoritarian political system within many Asian countries discourages political involvement. The patriarchy-oriented Asian cultures may particularly contribute to the high political deficit of Asian American women.

In addition to these values, the imposed as well as self-defined “sojourner” status contributes to Asian Americans' low level of political participation. In their definitive *Immigrant America*, Portes and Rumbaut (1990:109) state that for sojourners, “early political concerns of the foreign born today seldom have to do with matters American. Instead, they tend to center on issues and problems back home.” Due to the facilitation of modern technology for communication and transportation, according to Portes and Rumbaut (1990), immigrants keep alive the identification and loyalties into which they were socialized, and accordingly regard politics in the host society with relative indifference. For instance the split between Taiwan and Mainland Chinese, the contrast between a weak presence of Koreans in local U. S. political affairs and their close contact with events back home, and the negative effects of the Vietnam war on Vietnamese refugees, all suggest how homeland politics may overshadow the political involvement of Asian Americans in the United States.

INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTS AND DISCRIMINATION

In addition to the effects identified by the political economy, political sociology, and political psychology traditions, the political and legal systems may also influence the political behavior of Asian Americans. As Young and Takeuchi (1998) state, at the federal level, the history of the United States' immigration and naturalization laws regarding Asians displayed a clear pattern of racial discrimination. Since the early 19th century until the late 1960s, Asian Americans lived under highly discriminatory laws. Very stringent immigration and naturalization screening procedures were required for Asians, but not for European immigrants. Because of a large share of immigrants, the Asian American community is likely to be seriously affected at both experiential and psychological levels. This in turn might cause Asian Americans to be disillusioned with an active involvement in politics, resulting in their political disorganization, low level of political participation, and accordingly a lack of political capital (Lien 1997; Nakanishi 2001).

Electoral laws might also limit the political power of Asian Americans. The Electoral College voting system minimizes the influence of minority groups like Asian Americans, and accordingly their political efficacy. The monolingual ballot-casting system in most states also excludes a high percent of Asians from registering and voting, given that 35 percent of Asians are linguistically isolated (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993; Nakanishi 2001). The requirements of residence length and the restriction on the time span of registration all pose challenges to new Asian immigrants. The obstacles imposed by the voting system then in turn are likely to negatively affect the political psychology of Asians, resulting in low-level political efficacy and the experience of political exclusion. Together with the within-group conflicts among sub-communities of Asian Americans, political alienation prevents Asian American communities from establishing a single political platform on which higher levels of political participation might emerge.

Discrimination against Asian Americans is not merely restricted to immigration and electoral system, but extended to other areas like housing (Yinger 1988), school (Takaki 1990), and employment (U. S. Commission on Civil Rights 1992). For instance, the aforementioned overemphasis on mathematics and natural sciences might not be due to Asian American students' risk-averse strategy in educational attainment. Instead, one could reasonably argue that discrimination or unequal treatment makes Asian Americans direct their efforts to "hardcore" and yet "easy-to-prove-out" areas. As Zhou and Bankston (1998:8) state, "minority status systematically

limits access to social resources such as opportunities for jobs, education, and housing, with the result that racial/ethnic disparities in levels of income, educational attainment, and occupational achievement persist." Deprived of equal employment rights and excluded from mainstream trades, neighborhoods, and professional associations for decades, Asian Americans retreat into their own cultural enclaves and accordingly are insulated from American political institutions.

CONCLUSION

Using political economy, political sociology, and political psychology approaches, this paper has discussed factors potentially affecting the political behavior of Asian Americans, especially their low rates of voter registration and turnout. Small group size, contextual disadvantages, social network characteristics, ethnic cleavages within the Asian American communities, and such group demographic factors as immigrant status and education are hypothesized to be associated with low levels of political efficacy and participation. Noting the characteristics of Asian Americans, this paper provides a synthetic theoretical perspective applicable to empirical studies of the political behavior of Asian Americans. It is also noteworthy that heterogeneity across different ethnic groups within the Asian American community may be relevant to explaining between-group variances in political behavior. Much of the variance, however, may be explained by the theories presented in the previous sections. Some factors that I discussed might affect the political participation of Asian Americans through economic, political, psychological, and institutional processes simultaneously. A simple example would be "sojourning," which affects how Asian Americans make calculations of gains and losses in political participation, and also reshapes the political psychology of Asian Americans. Another example would be education and immigration, which might play out their effects through rational calculation and institutional discrimination. This simultaneity might add both depth and complexity to a better understanding of the political behavior of Asian Americans.

In summary, my study suggests that racial, cultural, and contextual attributes are critical to research on the political behavior of minority groups in addition to the more common focus on demographic variables. Such findings might imply that more multi-level data are needed to unravel the causes of variances in levels of political participation among Asian Americans. Although my discussion is limited to theoretical exploration and the formation of hypotheses, it provides useful bases for future research on the political behavior of Asian Americans. Further, empirical research could productively compare the magnitudes of factors specified by different

theoretical approaches, while also examining the causes that make one set of factors more salient than others. Another fruitful line of investigation is to study the relative group size effect of whites, blacks, and Asians, and residential segregation on their political behavior in communities in which their respective group sizes differ. Taken together, these suggestions define a research agenda that would substantially further scholarly understanding of the political participation of Asian Americans.

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