

Political Participation and Civic Voluntarism

S. Karthick Ramakrishnan

University of California, Riverside

Political participation and involvement in community organizations are the hallmark features of civic engagement in a democratic society. Public involvement plays an important role in ensuring that political institutions and leaders take the voices of residents into account when making decisions affecting their communities. While scholars have concerned themselves about overall declines in political and civic participation (Putnam 2000), it is also important to pay attention to inequalities in participation across different racial and ethnic groups. This is especially true for political outcomes, where absolute levels of participation are less important than relative differences in participation, with the latter playing a significant role in determining which groups have more say than others in the formulation and implementation of policy decisions. However, group differences are also relevant for civic participation: not only do civic inequalities lead to political inequalities, but the ability of communities to provide public goods and services also depends critically on the civic infrastructures already in place. Thus, it is important to pay attention to group inequalities in civic participation and political participation because they pose significant challenges to the vitality of American democracy.

This chapter examines the extent to which Asian Americans are equal to other racial and ethnic groups when it comes to participating in community organizations and in the political process — with activities ranging from voting to making campaign contributions, writing to elected officials, and attending local government meetings. We make these comparisons using national data where available, and also using state-level data from California, the state that accounts for

about 35% of the Asian American population in the United States and serves as a harbinger of the country's anticipated "majority-minority" status by mid-century. The general finding is that participation rates among Asian Americans are low compared to other racial and ethnic groups. We also show that even when Asian Americans do indeed participate, such as in making campaign contributions or creating vibrant community organizations, they tend to remain more invisible and less influential in the eyes of government officials.

We also examine the extent to which participation may be affected by such factors as age, length of residence in the United States, and residence in ethnically concentrated areas. Given the changes in all of these factors over time — with longer-term immigrant residents in the United States, the growth and aging of the immigrant second generation, and the growth of Asian American populations in various metropolitan areas — we project the likely trajectories of Asian American participation in the coming decades. Finally, we offer suggestions on ways to address the major challenges related to the future of Asian American civic and political participation: increasing participation rates, making community organizations more viable, and getting government officials to pay more attention to Asian American community organizations.

Political Participation

Many scholars who study political behavior define civic engagement as including activities that are explicitly political — such as voting, attending public hearings, and writing to elected officials — as well as activities related to voluntary participation in sectors of society that are outside the realm of politics, the family, and the market (Putnam 2000; Verba et al. 1995). For a small proportion of individuals, engaging in civic voluntarism serves as a substitute for political participation; this is especially so for youth who tend to favor community service over political participation as a more direct means of improving their communities (Longo and Meyer 2006). For most others, however, civic participation is intimately connected to political participation (Verba et al. 1995). Participation in community organizations connects people to politics in several ways: it helps individ-

uals develop *skills* that are relevant to politics (such as writing to public officials and mobilizing groups towards a common cause); it provides them with greater *knowledge* of politics by facilitating interactions among people who share common interests and concerns; and it provides them with *opportunities to be mobilized* by political campaigns that look to organizations as sources of votes, campaign contributions, and campaign volunteers (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Thus, for several reasons, understanding the role of participation in civic engagement requires us to pay attention to involvement in activities that are explicitly political as well as those that are commonly classified under “social capital” or “civic voluntarism.”

Voting: Voting is the most common type of political activity in the United States today and is arguably one of the hallmark features of participation in a democratic society. Voting in U.S. elections has consistently been lower than in other advanced industrialized countries, although in the past two decades, gaps in voter turnout between the United States and other countries have diminished considerably. Still, in 2006, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimated that turnout in the United States was about 20 percent below that of Germany and France, and 55 percent below Italy’s (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2007).

Voter participation in the United States is notable not only for its generally lower levels of turnout, but also for its significant levels of participation inequality across racial and ethnic groups and along socioeconomic lines. For instance, in the 2004 Presidential election, the voting rate among Asian American adults (37%) was comparable to voting among Latino adults (32%), and considerably lower than the rates for African Americans (68%) and Whites (73%). As Table 1 indicates, varying rates of citizenship among adults accounts for a large portion of this gap, as only two-thirds of Asian American adults were citizens while 95% of Black adults and 98% of White adults were citizens in November 2004. Still, even after taking citizenship gaps into account, voting among Asian American adult citizens is about 40 percent (or 20 percentage points) lower than voting among eligible African Americans and Whites.

Table 1. Citizenship and Voting Rates in November 2004

	Voting Rates Among Adult Residents	Citizenship Rates Among Adult Residents	Voting Rates Among Adult Citizens
Asian American and Pacific Islander	37	68	55
White	73	98	74
Black	68	95	72
Latino	32	59	55

Source: Current Population Survey Voter Supplement, 2004

There are several reasons why voting among Asian American citizens lags behind Whites and Blacks. Length of stay in the United States plays an important role, as recent immigrants are less likely to hold strong party identification and be mobilized by political campaigns (Ramakrishnan 2005; Wong 2006; Hajnal and Lee 2006). A similar story holds true for the immigrant generation, and the relatively high proportion of first-generation immigrants among the Asian American electorate helps account for the gaps in participation with Whites and Blacks. Participation among Asian Americans also increases with age and indicators of socioeconomic status such as educational attainment, income, and homeownership (Lien et al. 2004; Ramakrishnan 2005). Still, even after controlling for all of these factors, Asian Americans lag considerably behind African Americans and Whites in terms of voting participation.

Campaign Contributions: Giving money to political causes may affect policy outcomes directly by improving the likelihood of victory or defeat for ballot propositions. Money can also influence policy outcomes indirectly, both by shaping access to elected officials and by affecting the election outcomes of candidates who are friendly to a group’s issues.¹ The question naturally arises as to whether members of certain racial or ethnic groups have greater access or influence than others when it comes to campaign finance. Results from surveys in California indicate that there are indeed significant gaps in

the rate of political contributions across racial and ethnic groups (Ramakrishnan and Baldassare 2004). Just as in the case of voting and signing petitions, Whites are the most likely to give to political causes and candidates (26%), followed by Blacks (20%), Asian Americans (17%), and Latinos (10%). These gaps in giving remain even after controlling for age and socioeconomic status. There is no national survey that compares Asian American campaign contribution activity with those of Whites, Blacks, and Latinos. Evidence from the Pilot National Asian American Political Survey (Lien 2004) indicates that contribution rates among Asian Americans (12%) are similar to those found in the general population in surveys such as the American National Election Studies (Mutz and Sapiro 2000). However, variation in sampling design and questionnaires limit the comparability of the data, and so we cannot say for certain whether or not Asian Americans lag behind Whites in their giving to political causes and candidates.

Signing Petitions: In regions with state and local ballot propositions, participation in petition signatures is another important type of political participation. Gathering petition signatures is important to civic engagement because it helps set the agenda on what questions appear on state and local ballots and, just as importantly, what questions or issues do not appear. As past studies have indicated, there are sizable differences in the rate of petition signing across racial groups (Ramakrishnan and Baldassare 2004). For instance, in California, Whites have the highest rates of participation (44%), followed by Blacks (39%), Asian Americans (38%), and Latinos (29%). National-level data show an even greater gap in petition signing among Asian Americans when compared to Whites. For instance, the Social Capital Benchmark Survey (Putnam 2000) shows that Asian Americans are about one-third less likely to sign petitions as Whites (29% versus 42%, respectively). Also, just as in the case of voting, these differences are not solely the result of differences in age and socioeconomic status. Controlling for these factors still leaves intact the lower rates of participation among Asian American citizens when compared to Whites.

To the extent that Asian Americans share the same policy prior-

ities as other groups, this difference in petition gathering may not lead to any racial differences in policy influence. However, petition gatherers may be less likely to target Asian Americans precisely because they do not share the same policy priorities as Whites. Also, even if Asian Americans are asked to sign petitions, they may be more likely than Whites to feel that such petitions are tangential to their concerns or run contrary to their interests. Thus, to the extent that Asian Americans have policy priorities and preferences that are significantly different from Whites, their lower rates of participation in signing petitions represents less power in setting the legislative agenda of ballot propositions.

Attending Public Meetings: The ability to influence politics and policy does not stop on Election Day. Indeed, much of the task of governance occurs between elections, and involves public officials who have never run for elected office. The types of issues brought up in public hearings and meetings are usually local in nature, relating either to schools, land use, or the provision of government services. Through public hearings and meetings, citizens and non-citizens alike have the opportunity to influence the policy process. However, participation rates in public meetings are generally much lower than for voting because they require greater time commitments to participate and to get informed about particular issues, meeting times, and locations. Participation in public hearings also tends to be more challenging for first-generation immigrants who are more likely to face linguistic and cultural barriers to speak up in front of government officials (Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2006). The only data that allow for comparisons in public meeting participation between Asian Americans and other groups comes from the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC). There, the data indicate that participation gaps with Whites are small relative to the other gaps we have seen so far: 36% of Asian Americans and 38% of Whites have participated in meetings on local issues, and the differences between the two are not statistically significant. Latinos and African Americans have slightly higher rates of participation (42% and 43%, respectively), but these differences lose their statistical significance when controlling for various demographic factors.

Writing to Elected Officials: In addition to responding to those who attend government meetings and public hearings, elected officials also pay considerable attention to letters from constituents. Constituents send emails and letters to express opinions on policy (Lee 2002), but also often request assistance with navigating federal, state, and local bureaucracies. As other studies have shown (Verba et al. 1995), requests for assistance are most common among those writing their local and state representatives, while expressions of policy opinion are more common among those writing elected officials at the national level. Both these types of requests have implications for influence over public policy. If some groups are more likely than others to write their elected officials for assistance, they are also likely to enjoy a greater ability to navigate government bureaucracy in ways that benefit their interests. Group disparities in writing letters on policy issues also have significant implications for the relative ability of each group to influence legislative agendas and agency enforcement.

Data from the PPIC statewide surveys in California indicate that Asian Americans are considerably less likely than White residents to write to elected officials (24% versus 35%, respectively). This gap remains significant even after controlling for age, socioeconomic status, and immigrant generation. Finally, gaps in participation are also evident at the national level when comparing participation rates in the Pilot National Asian American Political Survey (12%) and the American National Election Study (25%).

Attending Political Rallies: Attending rallies and speeches have a less obvious effect on public policy than many of the other activities considered so far because they play only a minor role in influencing the election outcomes and setting the legislative agenda. Still, rallies provide an avenue for participation and political expression for those who lack the monetary resources to contribute to campaigns or the political knowledge necessary to participate in local meetings. Indeed, attendance at local rallies is also open to those who are not citizens of the United States, a fact that could influence the relative level of participation among Asian Americans. However, research from California and elsewhere suggests that Asian Americans lag behind

other groups in this measure of political participation (Ramakrishnan and Baldassare 2004; Putnam 2000). Regardless of whether one is looking at citizens or noncitizens, Asian Americans are considerably less likely to participate in political rallies than Whites or Blacks, a finding that holds true even after controlling for various demographic factors.

Civic Participation

While much is known about the relationship between race, immigration and political participation in the United States, far less is known about the “other half” of civic engagement — those activities relating to volunteerism and civic association. The study of group differences in volunteerism and civic association (hereafter *civic voluntarism*) is important to the study of politics for several reasons. First, civic associations often serve as important conduits to more formal means of political participation, either through the acquisition of relevant political knowledge and skills (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), or through attempts by political actors to mobilize those who are already involved in the civic life of their communities (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Thus, while the group differences in writing elected officials and contributing money to politics may point to inequalities in political access in the contemporary period, group disparities in civic voluntarism may lead to continued inequalities in political participation over the long term. Finally, civic voluntarism also has significant implications for public policy since community organizations are important actors in the provision of public goods. With state and local governments in various regions experiencing severe budget shortfalls, many expect civic associations, religious groups and charities to provide public goods in the absence of government spending (Marimow 2003).

The Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement allows us to compare participation rates of Asian Americans to other racial and ethnic groups. As shown in Table 2, there are significant differences across racial groups in civic volunteerism. The table presents results for the most basic measures of volunteerism — rates of par-

ticipation in the previous 12 months, the number of organizations in which volunteers participate, and the intensity of participation as measured by the number of hours spent volunteering.

Table 2. Volunteerism among adult residents, by race/ethnicity

	<i>Overall</i>	<i>Asian American</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Latino</i>
Volunteered in organization (%)	27	18	31	19	14
<i>Among Volunteers</i>					
Number of organizations	1.5	1.3	1.5	1.4	1.3
Recruited to participate (%)	49	43	50	46	46
Hours volunteered per year	139	107	138	168	127

Source: Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement, September 2006

When we consider the most basic metric of volunteerism — whether or not the respondent has done any volunteer work in the previous 12 months — Whites have the highest levels of participation. Nearly one-third of White respondents report having volunteered, while only about one in six Asian Americans had done so, a level comparable to the participation rate among African Americans and slightly higher than the participation rate among Latinos. The gap in volunteerism between Whites and non-Whites is also apparent in the number of organizations in which volunteers participate. Whites who volunteer participate in an average of 1.5 organizations, while the corresponding figures are 1.4 for Blacks, 1.3 for Asian Americans, and 1.3 for Latinos. Asian Americans are also less likely than Whites to be recruited to volunteer for an organization. Among those who volunteer, 43% of Asian Americans were asked to do so or followed the lead of a friend or family member. By contrast, 46% of Blacks and Latinos and 50% of Whites were recruited into volunteerism. Finally, the intensity of participation as measured by hours volunteered is lower for Asian Americans than for any other racial or ethnic group in the United States. It should be noted that these same group differences in voluntarism are also present in a state such as California, where the Asian American population is much larger and more established (Ramakrishnan and Baldassare 2004). This holds

true, not only for overall participation rates, but also for the intensity of participation among volunteers. Thus, the growth of the Asian American population, in and of itself, is unlikely to lead to any large-scale changes in civic voluntarism.

Much of the differences in civic voluntarism between Asian Americans and Latinos, on the one hand and Whites and Blacks on the other, can be attributed to varying mixes of immigrant generations. Even more so than in the case for voting, we find strong differences in civic voluntarism across immigrant generations. As we see in Table 3, the likelihood of volunteering increases by over 70% from the first immigrant generation to the third generation and beyond. Indeed, by the third generation there are no significant differences in the participation rates of Asian Americans and Whites (32%). Thus, while Asian Americans still lag considerably behind Whites in terms of voting participation, the same is not true for civic voluntarism.

Table 3. Differences in Volunteerism Within the Asian American Population

<i>By Immigrant Generation</i>	
First-generation	17
Second-generation	20
Third generation and higher	29
 <i>By National Origin*</i>	
Japanese	25
Korean	22
South Asian	22
Filipino	21
Chinese	17
Vietnamese	14
Hmong	13

* Note: National origins are calculations based on the nativity of parents, and are therefore unavailable beyond the second generation. The Current Population Survey does not include information on national origin for groups other than Latinos.

Source: Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement, September 2006

There are also important differences in participation rates by national origin, which are in line with expectations regarding the positive relationship between socioeconomic status and civic participation. Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, and South Asians, who are among the most well-to-do Asian Americans, have the highest rates of civic voluntarism among first- and second-generation immigrants. On the other hand, Hmong and Vietnamese Americans, who tend to fare less well in terms of educational attainment and income, have lower levels of civic voluntarism. Controlling for education and income wipes out any national-origin differences in civic participation among Asian Americans. Still, looking across racial and ethnic groups, introducing controls for education and income leaves Asian Americans less likely to participate than Whites, suggesting that other factors related to civic outreach by existing organizations and the attitudes and priorities of Asian American residents may also play a significant role (Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2006).

Finally, in our understanding of civic voluntarism, it is important to examine not only *whether* people engage in voluntary activities, but also the types of organizations in which volunteers are involved. As indicated in Table 4, Asian Americans who volunteer are most likely to do so for religious organizations (39%). This emphasis on religious organizations is even stronger for Asian American volunteers than for Whites and African Americans, suggesting that studies of Asian American civic participation need to pay far greater attention to religious institutions (Wong et al. 2008). Next, Asian American volunteers focus their energies on organizations catering to children and youth, followed by social and community service organizations and health organizations. These differences are in line

with overall patterns of volunteerism in American society.

Table 4. Differences in Volunteerism By Organization Type

	<i>Overall</i>	<i>Asian American</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Latino</i>
Organization types (main group)					
- Religious	35%	39%	34%	35%	43%
- Children / Youth	20	20	19	28	20
- Social / community service	13	10	13	11	12
- Health	8	10	8	6	5
- Adult education	4	4	4	5	4

Source: Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement, September 2006

So, to summarize: The relationships between race, immigrant incorporation and voting participation in the United States are by now well established. Studies based on state- and national-level datasets have shown that Asian Americans are generally less likely to vote in elections than Whites and African Americans. Furthermore, factors related to immigration such as nativity, length of stay in the United States, English language ability, and country of origin characteristics all bear a significant relationship to voting participation (DeSipio 1996; Tam Cho 1999; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001). These gaps in voting also extend to other types of political activities such as writing to elected officials and attending public hearings, as well as to civic activities. Thus, instead of finding compensation for the lack of Asian American political voice at the ballot box with participation in other civic and political activities, we find a worrisome pattern of compounding inequalities in participation, with Asian Americans at a distinct disadvantage.

Projecting Future Patterns

While the present-day snapshot reveals many significant gaps in participation between Asian Americans and other racial/ethnic groups in the United States, many of the anticipated changes in the Asian American population over the next 30 years should help to improve Asian American civic and political participation. These

changes include the continued aging of the Asian American population and the growing proportion of native-born residents and long-term immigrant residents. Given the relevance of these factors to future trends in participation, it is worth considering *why* these factors have an important bearing on political and civic participation.

Previous studies have consistently shown that age bears a significant relationship to political participation, with low levels of involvement among young adults for virtually every type of political activity — from voting and signing petitions to writing elected officials and working on political campaigns (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba et al. 1995). The reasons for low participation among the young are also relatively well established. Apart from the fact that they are less likely to be homeowners or have children and that they are more residentially mobile than older adults, the young are less likely to participate because they have had fewer experiences that produce the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in politics.

In the study of immigrant populations, length of stay in the United States is another important factor in predicting political and civic participation. Duration of stay in the United States can lead to higher participation for several reasons. First, as immigrants live longer in the country, they are more likely to come in contact with mainstream political and civic institutions that are beyond the confines of their ethnic enclaves and institutions (Gordon 1964). They are also more likely to acquire politically relevant information, strengthen their party attachments and gain experience in dealing with government agencies (Cain et al. 1991; Wong 2000; Jones-Correa 1998). Finally, just as longer stay in a given neighborhood gives citizens a greater sense of having a stake in local and state politics, longer stay in the United States can give immigrants a stronger stake in national politics. It is possible that greater experience with the political system can also lead to lower participation as immigrants experience varying levels of distrust or frustration with government agencies. However, most of the empirical evidence for Asian Americans indicates otherwise — greater exposure to the political system from staying longer in the United States has meant a higher likelihood of political participation. Longer stay in the United States has also meant greater participation in community organizations by

Asian Americans (Ramakrishnan 2006).

The relationships between the immigrant generation and political participation are a little more complicated. For Whites, there is no straight-line generational pattern in voting participation as there is for other types of social and economic outcomes such as homeownership and income. Instead, studies have found a pattern of “second-generation advantage,” where participation increases into the second generation but declines thereafter (Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001). Among Latinos, voter turnout is relatively flat across immigrant generations. For Asian Americans, however, voting increases from the first generation to higher immigrant generations — suggesting that assimilation-related factors play a significant role, but that race-related barriers such as ascribed foreigner status continue to serve as a drag on participation among second- and third-generation Asian immigrants (Kim 1999). This linear increase in participation can also be found for other political activities such as signing petitions and attending public hearings, and also for civic voluntarism.

In the coming decades, the Asian American population is projected to get older. The proportion of second-generation immigrants is expected to increase, even though first-generation immigrants would still constitute the majority of the adult population. Finally, given the continuous rise in immigration since 1965, the average length-of-stay among first-generation Asian immigrants is also expected to increase. All of these factors should help increase the level of Asian American participation in the years ahead.

There are, however, some important caveats. First, other racial and ethnic groups in the United States are also expected to get older, with non-Hispanic Whites constituting the vast majority of residents over age 65. Thus, even with increases in their absolute levels of participation, the Asian American population is still likely to lag behind Whites in political participation. Since participation in civic voluntarism tends to drop off among seniors, this may be less of an issue for civic voluntarism. Also, the growing size of the Asian American population may have some unforeseen effects on political and civic participation. If California is a harbinger of Asian American civic engagement in the rest of the United States, significant participation gaps would continue to remain, even with increases in the number of

Asian American elected officials in Congress and in local offices.

So, what can be done to reduce the gaps in participation between Asian Americans and other groups? Given the high proportion of first-generation immigrants in the Asian American population, it is advisable for organizations providing training for the naturalization exam to also provide training in skills that are necessary for effective political participation. For example, in the case of writing a letter to a local official, relevant skills include finding out who to send a letter to, knowing how to compose a formal letter, and following up on the letter by attending local meetings. For many immigrants, limited English proficiency may constrain their ability to engage in such activities. In cities where there are large proportions of Asian immigrants with limited English proficiency, city governments and community organizations can encourage participation by providing translation and other forms of language assistance.

In addition to providing relevant skills, recruitment and mobilization are also necessary prerequisites to increasing the level of civic engagement among Asian Americans. Many studies have shown that parties and campaigns conduct only limited outreach to Asian American communities. Our research indicates that this lack of outreach also applies to mainstream civic organizations. Immigrants are more likely than the native-born to say that they lack sufficient information about volunteering opportunities. Also, among those who do volunteer, immigrants are less likely to say that they were recruited to participate by someone in the organization. These results therefore indicate the need for more active recruitment efforts, not just by political parties and campaigns but also by community organizations seeking to increase the civic participation of residents.

There are other solutions that extend beyond efforts targeted at individuals. For instance, there is a new body of research which shows that, even when Asian Americans create or participate in community organizations, those ethnic associations receive far less attention from public officials than more established organizations serving White residents (Wong 2006; Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2006; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008). Another issue involves redistricting: it is challenging to draw districts with sizable Asian American voters because of their smaller numbers and greater resi-

dential dispersion than African Americans and Latinos (Lien 2001). Still, it is possible to draw districts for state and local government offices with significant Asian American populations in several metropolitan areas such as New York City, Central New Jersey, northern Virginia, Chicago, Houston, and the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Alameda in California (Lai and Geron 2008).

With the necessary skills, recruitment, and institutional support, Asian Americans can finally hope to bridge the gaps in participation with members of other racial and ethnic groups for activities that extend well beyond the ballot box.

Notes

ⁱ Past studies have shown that, although individual political donations rarely have direct effects on legislative votes, institutional actors who give money to legislators do have a greater degree of access to the shaping of legislation (Hansen, 1991).