

Asian Americans and the anti-racist equity agenda

Contradictions and common ground

By [Janelle Wong](#) • June 15, 2022

Summary: While Asian Americans are a growing, predominantly progressive political force in the United States, stereotypes about Asian Americans, as well as a small but vocal contingent of Asian Americans working against anti-racist policies (such as affirmative action) complicate efforts to sustain multiracial coalitions working toward racial justice. Here are five important things that policymakers, researchers, and advocates need to understand about the Asian Americans and the anti-racist agenda:

- **The idea that Asian Americans are more educated than other populations in the United States because they value education more is not only false but harmful when deployed as a weapon against other nonwhite groups.** Asian Americans are disproportionately likely to have a bachelor's degree because U.S. immigration policy has long focused on recruiting high-skilled immigrants from Asia. These “hyperselected” highly educated Asian Americans sponsor for immigration highly educated family members. Those who imply that Black and Latinx families struggle economically because their cultures don't value education are overlooking data that shows they do.
- **Asian Americans are a growing, predominantly progressive political force in the United States.** Although they constitute only about 7% of the total U.S. population, they are the fastest growing group of eligible voters, and over the last two decades have become much more likely to vote for Democrats than for Republicans.
- **What distinguishes Asian Americans from other groups is not a heightened focus on education and immigration but rather universal health care, progressive tax reforms, gun control, and the environment.** Contrary to popular belief, they are not as a group fiscally conservative. Rather, Asian Americans, like Black and Latinx Americans on average, favor a bigger government with more services over a smaller government with

fewer services.

- **Although the majority of Asian Americans support liberal candidates, there has been a slight shift toward the right among Asian Americans since 2016, and there are strains of conservatism that run deep in the population.** The conservatism is particularly evident with regard to affirmative action. While 65% of Asian American voters support affirmative action, those promoting the false “Asian American penalty” narrative are organizing to end racial considerations in college admissions and other programs that seek to increase racial diversity in higher education and in access to public magnet and specialized high school programs.
- **Immigration is fueling more diversity within the Asian American population, both with respect to economic status and political positions.** A small, but highly mobilized contingent of Asian Americans working in opposition to some key issues on the racial equity agenda has seen some success. The Asian American left is less visible than the Asian American right. These dynamics portend a new racial formation in the U.S. whereby Asian Americans occupy contradictory positions that threaten future multiracial coalitions.

Introduction: Asian Americans in the U.S.

The term “Asian American and Pacific Islander” (AAPI) refers to a constructed identity category in the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau (2021) defines Asians as people “having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.” The Bureau defines Pacific Islanders as persons “having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.” This essay focuses primarily on Asian Americans. The term “Asian American” is employed hereafter unless data or research on Pacific Islanders is included explicitly.¹

Using data from the American Community Survey (2017–2019), the Pew Research Center estimated that more than 20 million people in the U.S., or 7% of the national population, identified with this racial category as “Asian” alone or in combination with another racial or ethnic category (Budiman and Ruiz 2021a).

Over the past two decades, research on the Asian American population has grown exponentially, allowing a better understanding of the contemporary racial position of Asian Americans and associated anti-racist efforts.

Policy drivers helped create contemporary Asian America

Asian Americans, on average, demonstrate the highest median family income of any racial group in the country. One driver of this trend is education. Abby Budiman and Neil Ruiz (2021a), researchers at the Pew Research Center, observe that 54% of Asian Americans over the age of 25 hold at least a bachelor's degree. In contrast, the proportion of the general U.S. population over 25 years of age with at least a bachelor's degree is less than 35%. These statistics certainly obscure important variations in both educational attainment and economic security within the Asian American population, but have nevertheless become a source of fascination for many cultural observers.

For example, in 2015, *New York Times* columnist Nick Kristof (2015) attributed the economic success of Asian Americans to “East Asia’s long Confucian emphasis on education.” This viewpoint, a common one, assumes that Asians hold distinct values when it comes to education, such that Asian American parents make extraordinary sacrifices to ensure their children go to the best public schools and relentlessly remind them of the importance of education.

Yet, the idea that Asian American success is the result of a unique cultural inheritance ignores the policy drivers behind the creation of contemporary Asian America. It also ignores that Indians, who come to the U.S. largely without a Confucian background, exhibit even higher levels of education than their East Asian brethren.

In the mid-1800s, Asian immigrants were recruited to work as farm laborers and to help build the first transcontinental railroad, toiling for low wages in the harshest of conditions. Confucian values were not seen as the key to success, but as a marker of racial and religious differences. That is, Confucianism and other non-Christian, non-Western philosophical and religious orientations held by Asian immigrants were used to paint the group as “pagans” with customs and beliefs so strange that they could never be fully assimilated into U.S. life (Fisher and Fisher 2001). Eventually, most Asians were excluded from immigration altogether due to fears of racial contamination. There were always exceptions, however.

The first Asian students to attend my own campus, the University of Maryland, College Park, are examples. Pyon Su graduated from the University of Maryland, College Park, in 1891, and Chunjen Constant Chen, another Asian student, enrolled in 1915. Both attended the university during the long period of “Asian Exclusion,” when U.S. laws specifically barred people from Asia from immigration. During that period, Asian people in the United States were run out of Western towns by white vigilantes and Asian and white students in public schools were segregated. But Su was a diplomat, and Chen was an international student and scholar. Both were exceptions to the rule of exclusion, which prohibited low-wage workers, but welcomed small numbers of merchants, diplomats, and scholars (Hsu 2015). Further, Su and Chen both attended the university decades before the first Black students were allowed to enroll. The exclusion of Black students on campus did not end until 1950 when the NAACP successfully sued the university. In 1951, Hiram Whittle

became the first Black undergraduate student admitted to the university.

The kinds of exceptions to Asian exclusion exemplified by Su and Chen show the roots of the model minority stereotype—a stereotype captured so well by Kristof and others who assume that cultural values, not structural forces, account for Asian American educational and economic attainment.

But those structural forces driving the stereotype are on clear display in the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which dramatically changed the way Asians were seen in this country—from uneducated and unwanted scourge to hardworking students and examples of economic success.

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act ended Asian exclusion and created two immigration priorities: high skills and family reunification. After 1965, the U.S. started to recruit high-skilled immigrants from Asia. The Asian American population increased exponentially. The majority of Asian American adults (71%) are foreign-born, and the vast majority of Asian immigrants (of all legal statuses—naturalized citizen, permanent resident, temporary visa) arrived after 1990 when these efforts were ramped up even further (Batalova 2011; Hanna and Batalova 2021). In terms of temporary migration, which is facilitated through nonimmigrant visas, by 2011, employers were hiring 72% of all workers in the U.S.’s main temporary visa program for high-skilled jobs that require at least a college degree—the H-1B visa—from Asia (U.S. CIS 2013). (H-1B visas can in some cases lead to lawful permanent residence and eventually citizenship, although that pathway is controlled by employers.) In 2020, China and India alone accounted for more than 85% of all H1-B visas grantees (U.S. CIS 2021a). And while student visas are also temporary nonimmigrant visas, the majority of international student visas have also gone to nationals of Asian countries over the past two decades (Ruiz 2014).

This mode of selective recruitment challenges the idea that Asian success in the United States is due to Asian values. If Asian cultural values are the explanation, why don’t we see the same kind of educational achievement in Asia as in the United States? We don’t. As Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (2015) make clear, Asian immigrants in the U.S. are “hyperselected.” More than 50% of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. have a bachelor’s degree. In China, the rate is much lower (as of 2020 about 15%) (BOFIT Weekly 2021). About 80% of Indian immigrants in the U.S. have a bachelor’s degree, while in India, the percent holding a degree is much lower (Bertrand, Hanna, and Mullainathan 2010). U.S. immigration policy creates a highly educated Asian American class and this group sponsors for immigration highly educated family members. And the model minority stereotype continues to flourish.

The pernicious underbelly of the ‘model minority’ stereotype

Research on this seemingly positive stereotype has revealed its pernicious underbelly. One of the most dangerous aspects of the model minority myth is that it has been used as

a rhetorical weapon against other nonwhite groups. If Asian American educational achievement is the result of group values, then lack of achievement must be due to lack of value for education among Black, Latinx, and indigenous groups in the United States, this flawed logic asserts. Empirical data suggest quite the opposite (Luo and Holden 2014). Stepler (2016) reports that beliefs that it is important for their children to earn a college degree are higher among Black and Hispanic parents in the United States than among white parents. According to a survey of Americans ages 18 and older, Black respondents (41%) are more likely than Asian respondents (36%) to “strongly agree” that an education beyond high school offers a good return on investment (Fishman, Nguyen, and Francisco 2020).

Even more disturbing is the way in which the model minority myth, associated with Asian Americans, is linked to negative stereotypes about Black and Latinx people. Jerry Park and his colleagues (2015) found, for example, that white students who endorsed the idea that Asian Americans were especially competent were also more likely to believe that many Black and Latinx people could “do better” if they “just tried harder.” And when Asian Americans themselves internalize the idea that Asian Americans are especially competent, they are also more likely to exhibit anti-Black attitudes (Yi and Todd 2021).

Stereotypes obscure understanding of issues important to Asian Americans

Although they are still only about 7% of the total U.S. population, Asian Americans constitute a growing political force in the United States. Asian Americans are the fastest growing group of eligible voters in the nation (Montanaro 2021).

For about two decades, Asian Americans have moved dramatically toward Democratic partisanship and candidate choice. In 1992, exit polls showed Asian Americans supported Republican George H.W. Bush over Democrat Bill Clinton. By 2012, exit polls showed that more than 70% of Asian Americans in the electorate cast their votes for Democrat Barack Obama over Republican challenger Mitt Romney (Ramakrishnan 2016b).

In 2016 and 2020 this trend continued, with exit polls showing that less than a third of Asian American voters supported the Republican candidate Donald Trump in either of those years (Stevens 2021). Political variation by national origin certainly exists. The Asian American Voter Survey showed that in the summer of 2020, among Indian American registered voters the vote distribution was 65% for Democrat Joe Biden, 28% for Republican Donald Trump, with the remainder mostly undecided. Among Vietnamese American registered voters, the split was 36% Biden, 48% Trump, and 16% undecided (AAPI Data 2020).

Why have Asian Americans as a whole become a reliable source of support for Democratic candidates? The answers can be found in the data (presented below), but they are often obscured by stereotypes. Understanding the policy issues that motivate Asian Americans requires confronting the model minority stereotype—which touts Asian

Americans' purported special value for education and the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype, which assumes that Asian Americans uniformly support certain immigration policies.

With regard to the model minority stereotype, when political candidates reach out to Asian Americans, a typical campaign message is, "I care about education just like you." Of course, all voters care about education, not just Asian Americans. But the model minority stereotype leads to this type of messaging.

The idea that Asian Americans are "forever foreign," another stereotype deeply embedded in the U.S. psyche, leads candidates to communicate with a message that sounds something like, "I care about immigration, just like you." Yes, most Asian Americans are immigrants, but it might surprise some people to learn that on key issues such as favoring a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, Asian Americans exhibit attitudes much like the general U.S. population. That is, they favor such policies, but not more so than other groups. In fact, Black Americans are more in favor of both providing a path to citizenship and on increasing visas for legal immigrants than are Asian Americans (Carter, Wong, and Guerrero 2021).

Beyond the misleading "forever foreign" stereotype, policymakers miss key aspects of the immigrant population that should inform policymaking. About 60% of Asian American adults were born outside the U.S (Budiman and Ruiz 2021a). In fact, for more than a decade, the majority of foreign-born people entering the U.S. each year have been from Asia, and from China and India in particular. In contrast, the majority of those of Latin American origin in the U.S. are native-born. Despite the fact that most immigrants entering the U.S. each year are coming by plane from Asia, the U.S.–Mexico border is the focus of much of the rhetoric and policy concern related to immigration. For example, during his term, Donald Trump ran on an anti-immigrant agenda which included building a wall between the U.S. and Mexico.

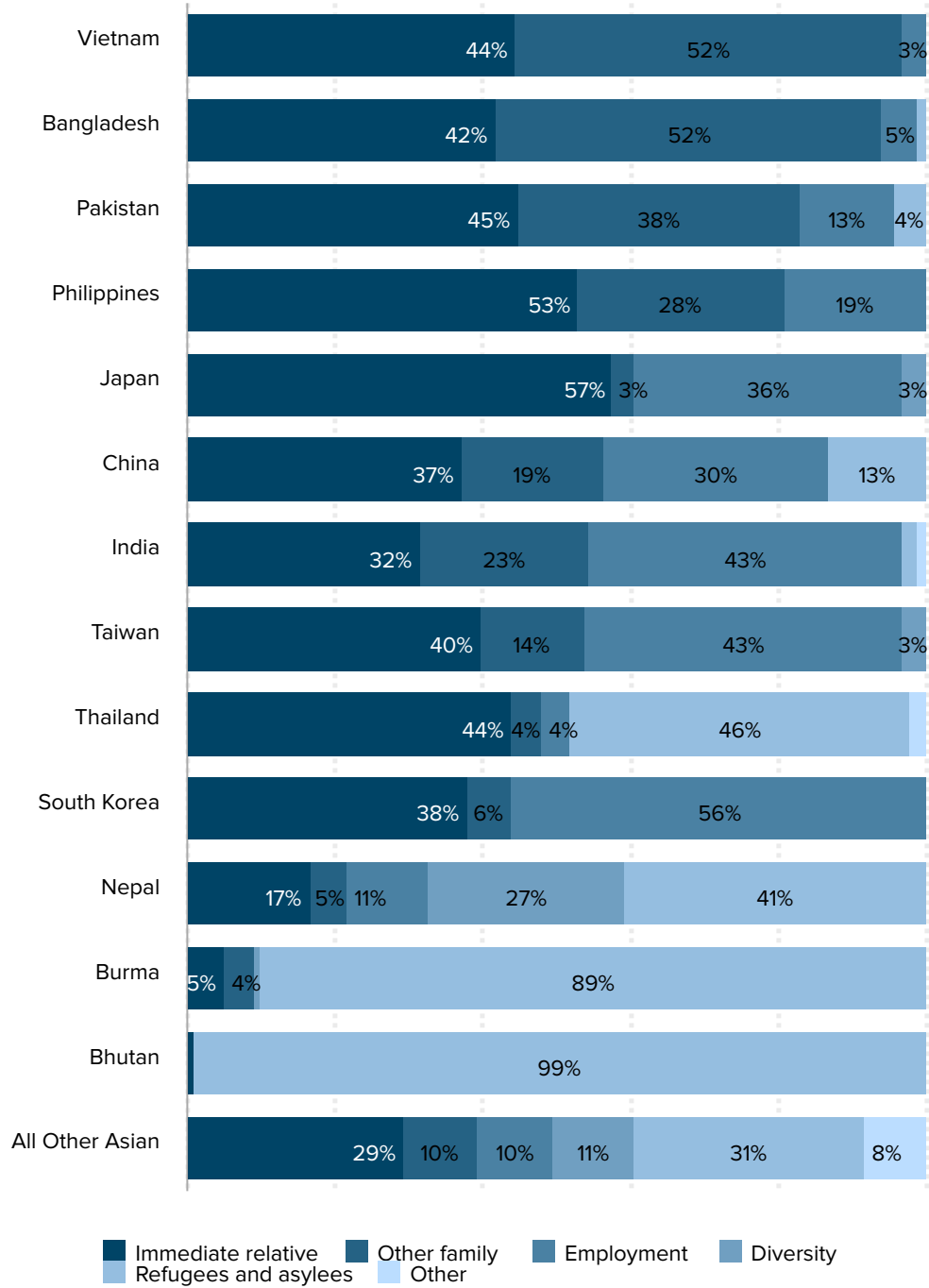
The growth in the Asian immigrant population has implications for how we think about people who are unauthorized in the United States. When Trump was elected, one out of seven Asian immigrants was undocumented (Ramakrishnan and Shah 2017). Because immigration from Mexico, both legal and unauthorized, slowed dramatically even prior to Trump taking office, Asians now make up the fastest growing group of undocumented people in this country.

Further, as shown in **Figure A**, Asians benefit dramatically from what the Trump administration disparagingly called "chain migration," loosely meaning immigration through the U.S.'s family-based green card preferences, which allows U.S. citizens and some lawful permanent residents to sponsor relatives. With a few exceptions (refugees), sponsorship from relatives through these family-based preferences has been a major engine of growth for Asian immigrants. This also contributes to the overall high education profile of the community as those who receive employment-based visas based on education and skills then sponsor family members who are likely to be characterized by similar levels of educational attainment.

Figure A

Asians benefit from immigration sponsorship by relatives (“chain migration”)

People of Asian origin obtaining legal permanent resident (“green card”) status in U.S., by broad class of admission, 2015



Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to disclosure requirements. Legal permanent resident

Figure A
(cont.)

(LPR) status, commonly referred to as a “green card,” is also known as a “permanent immigrant visa.” LPR status allows immigrants who meet certain requirements to become naturalized citizens after five years, or sooner, in some cases. Diversity refers to the Diversity Visa lottery, in which people who are nationals of a country that is underrepresented in terms of who gets green cards may apply for the chance to obtain a green card (U.S. CIS 2018). The employment-based (EB) green card pathway has five “preference” categories (U.S. CIS 2021b).

Source: Adapted from Wong 2018. The data are derived from *2015 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* Table 10 (U.S. DHS OIS 2016).

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Health care, inequality, and the environment are among pressing issues for Asian Americans

Despite their central role in Asian American life, education and immigration are not the issues on which Asian Americans appear to hold the most distinct positions from the general public. The policy issues on which Asian Americans show attitudes different from other Americans are universal health care, progressive tax reforms, gun control, and the environment.

Asian Americans are more likely to identify as “environmentalists” than the U.S. population in general (Ramakrishnan and Shah 2017). And they are more liberal (i.e., in favor) when it comes to a governmental role in health care (Ramakrishnan 2013), taxing the rich (Atilano and Wong 2018), and gun control (Ramakrishnan 2016a), too. For instance, survey data from the 2016 National Asian American Survey shows that 80% of Asian Americans support taxing the rich to provide a middle-class tax cut, and this is fairly consistent across different national origin groups, including among Vietnamese Americans, who tend to be the most Republican-leaning group. When the analysis is restricted to those making over \$250,000 a year in the Asian American community, a strong majority still agree with this policy (Atilano and Wong 2018).

In fact, it is a misconception that Asian Americans are fiscally conservative. This misconception is in part driven by the false assumption that small-business ownership is widespread among Asian Americans. It is true that Asian American immigrants are overrepresented in small-business ownership relative to their proportion of the population. A Fiscal Policy Institute report published in 2012 found, for example, that 31% of immigrant small-business owners were Asian American. But small-business owners account for just a small part of the Asian American community. The report found that among Asian immigrants, less than 5% were small-business owners (Fiscal Policy Institute 2012). In addition, survey after survey shows that Asian Americans are more like Black and Latinx communities than white communities when it comes to favoring a bigger government with more services over a smaller government with fewer services. White Americans are the only racial group in which a majority choose the latter (Wong and Shah 2021).

The ideological complexities of Asian America today

The growth of Asian Americans in the electorate was the subject of much attention in the national election in 2020. All eyes were on Georgia, in particular, and key races in that battleground state (Tavernise 2021). Many people speculated that Asian American electoral growth in that state contributed to Democrat Joe Biden’s narrow victory over Trump in the previously red state. Some also speculated that Trump’s hard line on China and derogatory language placing blame on China for the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic would lead those Asian American voters who had previously supported Republicans to abandon the party. However, while the vast majority of Asian Americans supported Joe Biden and Democrats in congressional races in 2020, support for Trump among Asian Americans (and among other people of color) ticked up slightly from 2016 to 2020 (Cai and Fessenden 2020). This shift was particularly unexpected since many Asian Americans seemed to blame Trump and Republicans for a rise in anti-Asian hate incidents over the course of the pandemic (Dugyala and Jin 2021).

This slight shift toward the right among Asian Americans, in the face of COVID-19-related violence directed at Asian Americans tied to Republican lawmakers’ anti-Asian rhetoric (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020) reflects the ideological complexities of Asian America today. Although Asian Americans might be considered a Democratic bloc, there are strains of conservatism that run deep in the population, particularly with regard to issues of race and inequality. One face of Asian American political engagement is their contribution to a Democratic victory in the swing state of Georgia in 2020. The other face is organized opposition to affirmative action and other educational equity programs that seek to address (lack of) racial diversity in higher education and to increase access to public magnet and specialized high school programs. While a majority of Asian Americans support affirmative action (see **Figure B**), some Asian Americans, with the full support of long-standing anti-affirmative-action activists such as Edward Blum and the mostly white-led and white-staffed Pacific Legal Foundation, have alleged anti-Asian discrimination in admissions at Harvard and at specialized public high schools and magnet programs (Garces and Poon 2018; Fu 2019; Peetz 2020).

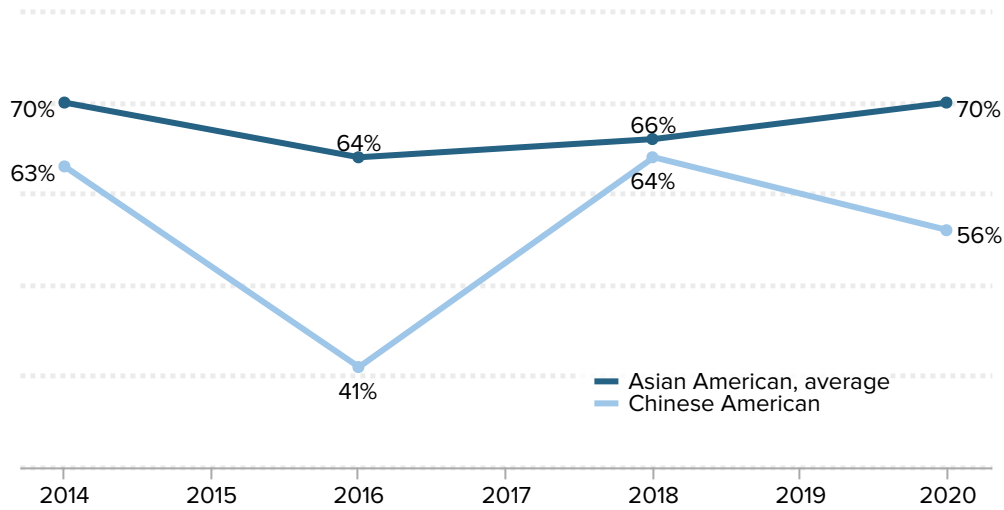
The remedy sought in legal complaints in associated cases has been the elimination of the consideration of race and the end of race-conscious holistic admissions at Harvard, and the maintenance of standardized testing and other admissions criteria that pose an unfair barrier to access in the case of public magnet and specialized high schools. Here we see that Asian American activism poses a direct threat to a broader educational equity and civil rights agenda. Regardless of whether these Asian American activists and their conservative representatives win their cases in court, the cases promote a false “Asian American penalty” public narrative (Chin et al. 2019) that has proven effective and been weaponized by conservative activists (Nakamura 2021).

Beyond challenges to race-conscious holistic admissions and equity reforms to admissions

Figure B

A majority of Asian Americans support affirmative action

Shares of Asian Americans and Chinese Americans surveyed who say they support affirmative action, 2014–2020



Source: Adapted from Lee, Wong, and Ramakrishnan 2021. The data are derived from surveys of registered voters from AAPI Data, APIA Vote, and Asian Americans Advancing Justice.

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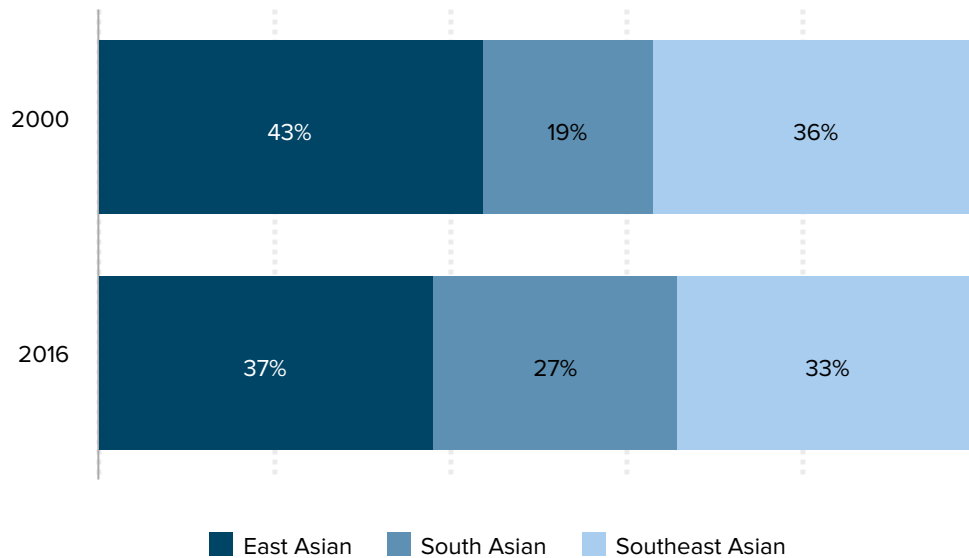
to public magnet and specialized high schools, some segments of the Asian American community have mobilized to successfully challenge “sanctuary state” legislation to protect undocumented immigrants (Turque 2017) and to oppose Critical Race Theory instruction (Raleigh 2021). At the same time, Asian Americans as a whole depart from these conservative positions. The proportion of Asian American registered voters supporting race-conscious programs, for example, has been largely consistent at more than 65% for more than a decade (Lee, Wong, and Ramakrishnan 2021).

It is clear from the observations above that given their varied positions on important issues, Asian Americans are not a uniform source of activism for what are traditional racial equity policies. Asian Americans align with progressive positions on social programs such as government-sponsored health care, gun control, the environment, and redistributive tax policies. But there are large pockets of highly mobilized conservative activism in the Asian American community, and this activism tends to be focused on fighting policies that are viewed as contrary to racial equity, such as race-conscious admissions and protections for undocumented immigrants.

Figure C

South Asians are a growing share of Asian Americans

Share of Asian American population with East Asian, South Asian, and Southeast Asian heritage, 2000 and 2016



Source: Adapted from Wang and Ramakrishnan (2017), who used data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

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Asian American diversity and the future

The conservative activism among Asian Americans described above does not represent the views of the broader Asian American community. The most visible conservative movements in Asian America are led by Chinese Americans (Garces and Poon 2018). Chinese Americans make up less than a quarter of the Asian American population today (Budiman and Ruiz 2021a). Indian Americans, who demonstrate the most progressive views in the larger Asian American population (Wong and Shah 2021) will likely outpace Chinese American population size in the future, as shown in **Figure C**.

Diversity has long been and continues to be the hallmark of the Asian American population. While Asian Americans demonstrate the highest levels of average income and average education of any racial group in the United States, within the Asian American population there is the same kind of economic polarization observed in the U.S. more broadly. This polarization is not only between rich and poor, but also maps onto national origin within the Asian American population. For example, there is a large gap in median household income between Indians (high) and Bangladeshis (low) in the U.S. (Budiman and Ruiz 2021b).

Further, the household income of different Asian national origin groups varies by mode of

immigration. Indians and other groups, such as Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans have been recruited mainly through employment-based green cards and through temporary work visas like H-1B, which are usually tied to specific jobs that require at least a college degree, and are thus associated with higher earnings. At the bottom of the income distribution are groups that have entered the country as a result of U.S. wars in Asia and a range of associated refugee policies. Education varies by national origin group. Bhutanese Americans are one of the fastest growing refugee groups in the U.S. and their overall educational attainment is much lower than Taiwanese Americans, who have been beneficiaries of high-skilled labor recruitment (Budiman and Ruiz 2021b).

Economic diversity, both within and across groups, will no doubt continue to shape the political agenda in Asian America in unexpected ways (Wong and Shah 2021).

Conclusion

Immigration is fueling more diversity in the U.S., including *within* the Asian American population. This diversity extends to commitments to a racial justice agenda. A grassroots movement fostered by a small, but highly mobilized contingent of Asian Americans to challenge educational equity by opposing affirmative action and reforms to admissions in public magnet and specialized high schools cannot be ignored. Efforts among Asian Americans to challenge immigrant rights and “Critical Race Theory” have been successful. Although there is an Asian American left, it is a less visible movement compared with the Asian American activists opposing equity reforms and race-conscious admissions. The latter implicitly, and in many cases, explicitly engage in anti-Black, anti-Latinx, and anti-immigrant rhetoric (Fu 2019). That said, this group that is conservative on racial issues is not necessarily aligned with right-wing Republicans. Many are Democrats. These dynamics portend a new racial formation in the U.S. whereby members of a nonwhite group, Asian Americans, occupy contradictory positions that could threaten future multiracial coalitions in the quest for racial justice.

Additional reading and resources

Readers interested in delving deeper into the issues touched on in this chapter are encouraged to explore the following resources suggested by the author.

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Subject matter experts

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Endnote

1. Lisa Kahaleole Hall (2015) provides an important discussion of the importance of applying these categories carefully, with attention to the distinctions between the two groups.

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