THE FUTURE OF ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICS

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper offers an outline of an assessment of the future of Asian American politics. I synthesize both the rapidly expanding scholarship on Asian American politics as well as a broader body of research on Asian American incorporation and assimilation. This paper builds on a range of works that have explored similar questions, such as Gary Okihiro’s *Margins and Mainstreams* (1991), Claire Jean Kim’s “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans” (1999), David Palumbo-Liu’s *Asian/American* (1999), and Pei-te Lien’s *The Making of Asian American through Political Participation* (2001).

I focus on two broad concerns: Asian American relations with other ethnoracial groups, and the prospects for Asian American panethnicity. Both of these have important implications for race in America more broadly, a topic I will explore in an expanded version of this paper.

I note an irony of Asian American politics: the worse things are, the better the prospects for organizing—and the more successful that community groups are in battling discrimination and creating equal opportunity, the dimmer are the prospects for their organizations enduring.

While some form of Asian American politics seems likely to endure for the foreseeable future, the specific form is hard to forecast at this point. The tension between ethnic-based (e.g., Filipino or Korean) and panethnic-based (Asian American) politics persists. Although we have benefited from a wealth of new data, it continues to be point in different directions regarding the prospects for ethnic or panethnic politics.

**Introduction: A tale of two centuries**

**June 19, 1982**: On a day that will live in infamy in Asian American history, Vincent Chin was viciously beaten by two white auto workers angry over the declining fortunes of their industry. Chin’s attackers epitomized the racism faced by Asian Americans: the forever foreigner image, leading the killers to view the American Chin as a foreigner national; racial lumping, as the Chinese American Chin was perceived as someone of Japanese ancestry; and the irrational hatred that led the bigots to kill Chin for actions to which he had no connection. Chin had been out for his bachelor party, but his friends and family found themselves attending his funeral rather than his wedding.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The shocks continued even after Chin is laid to rest. His attackers were arrested, but, after being found guilty, the judge sentenced them to only three years’ probation and a fine. It is hard to imagine two African Americans getting off so lightly had they taken a baseball bat and beaten a white victim to death.

Asian Americans began to organize in protest. But, as they gathered evidence to support a civil rights case against Chin’s killers, they were stunned to learn that many liberals opposed applying civil rights laws in defense of Asian Americans. The Michigan branch of the American Civil Liberties Union expressed no interest in Vincent Chin’s case. Undeterred, activists built a pan-Asian coalition which drew support across racial lines as well.

In the end, the battle was lost. Chin’s attackers were tried on civil rights charges, with a split decision: one was convicted and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison, while the other was acquitted. Although it seemed as if some justice would be done, an appeal was filed, the case was reheard in conservative Cincinnati, and a white, blue-collar jury found the killer not guilty.

Vincent Chin did not die in vain, however. His story inspired more activism, and the lessons learned help prepare Asian Americans to better fight the next battles for equal rights.

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**June 19, 2012**: The Pew Research Center releases a major report that hails Asian American success and satisfaction with life in the United States. [[2]](#footnote-2) On this, the thirtieth anniversary of the brutal attack in Detroit, activists and scholars are writing about why Vincent Chin still matters, but his legacy is most powerfully demonstrated by the firestorm of responses from Asian American organizations. [[3]](#footnote-3) Within hours of the release of the Pew report, community groups issue statements expressing concern over the framing of the Pew research.

The response leaves many outsiders puzzled, however. As one writer notes, Asian American community groups find themselves being asked “‘Why are you complaining about someone saying something good?’” (Chen 2012).

Why indeed? The press releases hint at part of the answer. The Japanese American Citizens League notes that “While our community reflects diversity, this research does not” (Japanese American Citizens League 2012). The Asian American Center for Advancing Justice sees the report as failing “to fully recognize the challenges many Asian Americans face,” which means that “the educational, economic and social service needs of America’s fastest growing racial group will not be fully understood or addressed by policy makers” (Asian American Center for Advancing Justice 2012). Judy Chu, chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, observes that “many of the groups that were excluded from this report are also the ones with the greatest needs” (Hing 2012).

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However, while the community group criticisms tended to emphasize the omission of APA groups facing the most challenges, the press releases also hint at concerns over the future of Asian American politics and the position of Asian Americans in the larger society. [[4]](#footnote-4) This paper examines those concerns. I draw on the rapidly expanding scholarship on Asian Americans that has emerged in recent years. The rapid growth in knowledge, however, also means that there is more opportunity for synthesis. What Rodney Hero has observed about Latino politics—“there has been little effort to bring together or systematically discuss the implications of the analyses” of Latino politics (Hero 1992, 1)[[5]](#footnote-5)—might also be said of research on Asian Americans. My goal here, then, is to provide tentative thoughts about those implications.

Such a broad subject cannot be adequately addressed in a paper, of course, so here I offer an outline of an assessment of the future of Asian American politics, an introduction to a larger work. The assessment focuses on what I see as two fundamental questions: the relationship of Asian Americans to other ethnoracial groups, and the relationship of Asian American subgroups to each other. I start with the former, beginning with a brief review of the history of Asian Americans and racialization.

**ASIAN AMERICANS IN THE LARGER SOCIETY**

Like other peoples of color, Asian Americans initially encountered intense prejudice which led to their marginalization. The specifics differed for each ethnoracial group, but the general outcome was the same. [[6]](#footnote-6) After the initial genocidal assaults, American Indians were often geographically isolated, which was feasible because their social organization still followed national lines, making it possible to banish entire tribal groups to reservations. African Americans faced an extensive system of legal and extralegal laws and customs intended to put them at an extreme disadvantage. Chattel slavery meant that isolating African Americans would be self-defeating, and, in fact, southern whites needed to have them in close proximity. In that situation, a dense network of rules was needed to maintain psychological separation between black and white, and those rules needed the full backing of government agents and terrorist groups (overlapping categories, to be sure). Latinos and Asian Americans faced somewhat similar circumstances, since neither were widely enslaved, and neither were members of indigenous nations. Latinos—primarily Mexican-ancestry, at first—had the modest advantage of citizenship, guaranteed them through the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, although not always respected. In addition, they were essentially native to what became the American southwest (formerly the Mexican north), so preventing them from immigrating was a moot point for those who sought to discriminate against them.

Perhaps most notably, both Latinos and Asians became a significant element within American society long after the black-and-white racial structure had developed. As a result, one key question was where these groups would fit within a racial hierarchy that did not have an obvious spot for them.

**Racialization**

Among scholars of race, there is a consensus that race is a socially and politically constructed category. Although one can identify geographically-focused groups that share genetic traits, these groups do not correspond to conventional racial categories (Blum 2002). Furthermore, the definition of racial categories have sometimes change rapidly (Lott 1998; Rodriguez 2000), in far too short a span of time to be explained by genetic change, so genetic similarity cannot be the basis for that reclassification. In addition, racial classification varies across societies, further highlighting the social basis of those categories.

In the United States, the history of racial formation can be dated to the earliest European incursions.[[7]](#footnote-7) The foreign arrivals were quickly aware of differences between themselves and the native inhabitants, but racial categorization seems to have begun to solidify with the arrival of involuntary African immigrants. Starting what would be a long but not proud tradition, Europeans proclaimed lofty ideals of freedom while doing their best to deny liberties to African workers. Apparently, though, hypocrisy was not seen as any more virtuous then than it is now, so an ideology began to develop to justify the denial of freedom to some inhabitants.

Fortunately for the European immigrants, history provided a number of models for classifying some humans as different than and inferior to the humans doing the classifying. Haltingly at first, and then with greater conviction, would-be slave owners institutionalized a classification system which held those of African descent to be fundamentally inferior to those of European ancestry. By the mid-18th century, the outlines of this ideology was firmly in place, and, as abolition efforts grew in the next century, ideas of racial difference, superiority, and inferiority grew more elaborate and entrenched.

The success of these schemes can be best seen retroactively, looking back from our present time to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when racial classifiers struggled to craft a convincing rationale for defining Asian immigrants as separate and unequal. Today, the typical American would likely see it as obvious that Asians constitute a separate race. In the middle of the nineteen century, however, the United States racial regime was adapted to only two categories: black and white.[[8]](#footnote-8)

While it is extremely difficult to know the thoughts of those early Asian immigrants, it seems likely that they quickly saw which side of the color line held all the advantages. As Ian Haney López has documented, many of those immigrants fought to be classified as white, eventually losing their battle, but not until after long court battles (Haney López 1996). The struggles of the courts to justify a separate racial classification for Asian immigrants highlights again the way that social and political basis of race. The dominant scientific views failed to provide justification for excluding all immigrants from Asia into an inferior racial category, and science became increasingly less helpful as the scientific racism of the nineteenth century gave way to challenges in the first half of the twentieth (Dain 2002; Barkan 1992). Although the most ardent racial classifiers remained willfully ignorant of scholarly challenges to the dominant notions of race, there seemed to be a deep, implicit understanding that racial classification was built on sand. If racial groups were as fundamentally different as some claimed, differences would presumably be self-sustaining.

Legal codes and informal practices reflected a very different view, however. Especially after the Civil War, when the abolition of slavery removed an extremely powerful legal weapon against African Americans, an extensive web of laws and customs developed to maintain racial separation, and to perpetuate myths of racial superiority and inferiority (Klinker and Smith 1999). When survey research techniques and capacities developed in the mid-twentieth century, scholars found clear evidence of how deeply these myths had been internalized by many Americans (Schuman, et al 1997).

**Forever Foreigner: Asian Americans in the U.S. racial structure**

Large-scale immigration of Asians helped to emphasize the constructed nature of racial categories. Government authorities struggled to classify immigrants from Asia because the U.S. racial structure—like all racial structures—had grown up around the specific circumstances of American history, which was initially concerned primarily with black and white.[[9]](#footnote-9)

When Asian Americans were racialized, then, it is not surprising that the cultural alchemy swirled around their foreign status. Involuntary African immigrants could also be seen as foreign, but it would be difficult to emphasize the point too much, since slave owners clearly intended to keep them and their progeny indefinitely. If Africans were a polluting, alien element, maintaining their captivity would be less defensible than if they were portrayed as subhuman and childlike. With Asians, however, there was no possibility of widespread enslavement, but exclusion seemed a viable option.

And so, the racialization of Asian Americans emphasized their alien character. There is some debate over whether this was driven more by psychological prejudice or economic competition (e.g., Saxton 1971; Gyory 1998; Lyman 2000; Gaines and Cho 2004), but there is no question that Asian immigrants came to be portrayed as fundamentally different than European Americans (Daniels 1970/1962, 1997; Takaki 1998).

This effort was highly successful, and the *forever foreigner* image persists powerfully to this day. While large numbers of Asian Americans today are indeed immigrants, the *forever foreigner* image was very strong before the most recent immigration surge from Asia. In the mid-twentieth century, when Asian immigrants were relatively rare, almost all adult second- and third-generation Asian Americans could recount many times of having been asked “where are you from?” or “how did you learn to speak English so well?” Whether or not the questions were intended to be hostile, they clearly mark Asian Americans as fundamentally alien. Even those who are in every observable way highly acculturated, speaking English indistinguishable from other native-born cohorts, Asian Americans are immediately assumed to be foreign, because to be *Asian* is understand to be not *American*. This perception, in all its hostile fury, was on full display in the late nineteenth century, as government officials and nativist groups sought to make sure that Asian immigrants would be denied equal treatment under the law.

The devastating consequences of the forever foreigner image were driven home most powerfully with the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. As has been often observed, it was only Japanese Americans who were subjected to this treatment, not German or Italian Americans.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the eyes of most Americans, Japanese Americans were fundamentally alien, not to be trusted.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Chinese Americans were more likely to experience this type of alienation, as Japan became an American ally and China an enemy. Because of racial lumping, however, Asian Americans of all ancestries were targets, so Japanese Americans were as likely as Chinese Americans to be called “chinks,” or, in the 1970s, “gooks” (a racial slur originally directed at Vietnamese).

**The Model Minority or “Honorary Whites”**

In recent decades, however, somewhat different images also emerged. Perhaps the most prominent is the *model minority*, a notion which is usually traced back to the 1960s,[[11]](#footnote-11) and two articles that appeared in the popular media. The first was William Petersen’s “Success Story, Japanese American Style” (Petersen 1966), which argued that Japanese Americans had experienced success far beyond what one would expect of immigrant groups, especially ones that had faced the degree of oppression Japanese immigrants and their children experienced. At the end of that year, *U.S. News & World Report* pointed to the successes of Chinese Americans (“Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.” 1966), although both the article title and its analysis were far less analytical and considerably more judgmental than Petersen’s assessment. Over the next few decades, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and other magazines gave further voice to the image of a model minority, focusing then more on the triumphs of some Southeast Asian American students.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Asian American studies scholars have given compelling critiques of this image. Empirically, many of the depictions of the model minority are based on an inadequate assessment of the data. In other cases, they may be driven more by a desire to attack African Americans than a genuine admiration for Asian American accomplishments.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Regardless of the soundness of the evidence of the motivation of the writers, this image does seem to differ significantly from the image of Asian American as fundamentally foreign. Often, this view holds Asian Americans up as the quintessential American success story. While this image may have roots in more negative ones—e.g., Asian Americans as machine-like workers who cannot be outworked because they lack the feelings of normal human beings—there is no doubt that the model minority image has much more positive implications than the forever foreigner stereotype that developed in the late 19th century.

In a seminal work, Claire Jean Kim suggested that the *forever foreigner* image coexists alongside the *model minority* (Kim 1999). Kim argues that American racial groups are evaluated on at least two dimensions: superior/inferior and insider/foreigner. Asian Americans are held to be superior to African Americans but also fundamentally foreign and unassimilable.

Kim’s article helps highlight the central question of this paper: where do Asian Americans fit in the American racial structure? There is no question that Asian Americans long had a place alongside other marginalized groups, and that they continue to face discrimination and bigotry. At the same time, however, there are many cases where Asian Americans are implied to be standing on the same plane as European Americans. Some have even suggested that Asian Americans may be in the process of becoming “white” (e.g., Yancey 2004). And, with that notion, we return to the Pew study controversy.

**Asian Americans and the Evolving Color Line**

The place of Asian Americans in the racial structure has long been disputed. Had people from Asia been in the original classification scheme, there would never have been the many years of court battles noted above, as early Asian immigrants sought to be placed on the white side of the color line. By the mid-twentieth century, Asian Americans seemed to be planted firmly on the “non-white” side, but the color line itself is a societal creation, and so everything connected to it is subject to change.

The furor over the Pew Research Center study is fueled in part by this controversy. The model minority may not be white, but it could be used to attack the interests of blacks, in areas such as affirmative action—a topic I address later in this paper. Asian American community groups who criticized the Pew study were aware of this view, and some of their criticism seemed a preemptive effort to deter those who would try to array Asian Americans against African Americans or Latinos.

But the larger societal definitions are driven by large and widely scattered forces, making them difficult to influence. Perceptions of racial difference are the product of many factors, and the color line may evolve in ways that community groups dislike.

The only certainty is that racial definitions are fluid, over the long run. Changing circumstances change the color line and change the racial schemas that people use to guide their thinking about race (Roth 2012). Asian immigrants forced a reshaping of the black-white schema dominant in the late 19th century, with Asian Americans eventually located on the non-white side of the color line (Haney López 1996). Today, Latinos present challenges to dominant racial schema, leading to further reshaping (Rodriguez 2000; Roth 2012).

Over a decade ago, Herbert Gans speculated that the color line could be transforming from “white/non-white” to “black/non-black” (Gans 1999; see also Hochschild and Rogers 2000). George Yancey, drawing on the Lilly Survey of Social Attitudes and Relationships, argues that Asian Americans and Latinos are drawing closer to whites, in the process reshaping the color line so that it is becoming a gulf separating African Americans from all others. “African Americans,” says Yancey, experience a degree of alienation unlike other racial groups” (Yancey 2004, 4).

This prospect has not been welcomed by those who anticipate it. Although it might hold out some benefit for Asian Americans or Latinos, it implies grim prospects for African Americans, who would again find themselves on the bottom of the racial hierarchy.

The Pew study offers more support for Yancey’s argument. Critics of the report have rightly noted that it overstates Asian American success, but even after accounting for those shortcomings, the economic gap between Asian Americans and African Americans remains. By implicitly emphasizing these gaps, the Pew report raises questions about Asian Americans and their relations with other peoples of color.

**Rainbow’s End?**

Both necessity and preference have led Asian American activists to build coalitions with other civil rights groups. The vision for such a coalition was perhaps most famously stated by Jesse Jackson in his 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns (Collins 1986; Morris and Williams 1989). Civil rights groups tend to share the same views on some broad policy questions—e.g., a stronger government safety net; more support for education, especially in impoverished areas; and vigorous enforcement of civil rights protections. In a brilliant exposition, Gary Okihiro has described the many ways that Asian Americans experienced oppression similar to that inflicted on African Americans (Okihiro 1994, ch. 2). Asian Americans have many reasons to identify with the plight of African Americans, Okihiro argues, although he concludes that while “yellow is not white,” “yellow is not black either” (Okihiro 1994, 62). However, while Asian Americans have their own distinct concerns and history, the much smaller size of the population has made it almost essential for Asian Americans to form political alliances.

The Pew Report suggests that large numbers of Asian Americans are experiencing circumstances which may lead their interests to diverge from that of other peoples of color. If, as the Pew Report asserts, Asian Americans are happier with the direction of their lives, than they may perceive less of a need for civil rights protections. There’s little question that African Americans still perceive discrimination to be a major factor in their lives (Sigelman and Welch 1994/1991; New American Media 2007). And, if Asian Americans are prospering, social programs become less important. Worse yet, it raises the possibility that many Asian Americans could turn against those programs if they see them as a cost (through higher taxes) imposed to benefit others.

On the surface, there is no disputing the Pew economic numbers. Asian American have a higher household median income than even whites, and the percentage of highly educated Asian Americans is considerably larger than comparable numbers for any other major ethnoracial group.[[14]](#footnote-14) As awareness of this has grown, a profound change has been occurring in cultural categorization of peoples of color. As David Palumbo-Liu has observed, “Just a few years ago, in the inventorying of racial groups in the United States, "Asian American" was normally part of the cluster ''AfroAmerican,""Native American,""Hispanic American," . . . Now, however, one increasingly finds that "Asian American" is omitted” (Palumbo-Liu 1999, 4). Today, it is increasingly common to see “Asians and whites” placed in a single category which is distinguished from “Latinos and blacks.” This classification has also been reflected in important policy choices, e.g., affirmative action programs which seek to provide additional assistance to blacks or Latinos, but not to Asian Americans or whites.

Of course, the superficial figures are misleading, although not incorrect. Two problems are particularly important: first, Asian Americans are geographically distributed very differently than whites, making nationwide comparisons inappropriate; second, Asian American family patterns are different than whites, skewing comparisons that use household or family median income. Because Asian Americans have more workers per family, their household and family median incomes will tend to look larger. However, when comparing per capita income, the relative picture changes,with whites substantially ahead of Asian Americans. In addition, because Asian Americans are geographically concentrated in high-cost areas, their incomes will appear to be higher. However, if one compares income levels *within* the metro areas where Asian Americans are most numerous, a different pattern also emerges, with whites and Asian Americans roughly the same. As mentioned earlier, though, Asian Americans have more earners per household, which helps to drive their median household income higher. While household income is still a valid measure—the total income per household is an important factor for opportunity in family households—it does not show that Asian Americans have reached parity with whites. The Appendix demonstrates some of these relationships for metro areas with high percentages of Asian Americans.

However, even after controlling for those distorting factors, Asian American income continues to rank higher than African Americans or Latinos. While Asian American success is exaggerated by those who look only at national figures, it still is true that Asian Americans find themselves between black (and brown) and white. That reality creates more uncertainty as to whether Asian Americans will find their economic interests to be closer to whites, or closer to African Americans and Latinos.

In addition to creating different interests, different economic positions can lead to different perspectives. Asian Americans are certainly not free of prejudices infecting the larger population, and more prosperous ones may see themselves as superior to those who are less successful. Pawan Dhingra’s interviews with Korean and Indian Americans found many of them “stressing Asian Americans’ superiority over other minorities, invoking part of the model minority image” (Dhingra 2003, 130).

Of course, the socioeconomic levels of some Asian American subgroups is much lower than it is for others. There can be little doubt that some Asian American subgroups can benefit from programs that seek to aid disadvantaged groups. However, this raises profound questions about the coherence of the category “Asian American,” a question I address later in this paper.

**Asian American Politics: Behavior, Attitudes, Policy Preferences**

Thanks to a rich body of recent research, we can examine past Asian American political behavior and attitudes for guides to future developments. Political activity is driven by different dynamics than social or economic interaction—in particular, partisan divides create strong lines of division and unity that are not found elsewhere.

Most notably, Asian Americans appear to be moving strongly toward the Democratic Party. We have very limited reliable data as we look back more than a decade or two, so we cannot have a great deal of confidence about trends, but good survey data in more recent years points to a clear Democratic bias (Lien, et al 2004; Wong, et al 2011).

The reasons for this are not clear. Given their relatively high socioeconomic position, Asian Americans might be expected to lean more toward Republicans. On the other hand, given their very different religiosity (Pew Research Center 2012a), it may be that they are less attracted toward the party which has increasingly become identified with conservative Christianity. Janelle Wong and her colleagues speculate that it might be due to socialization during the Clinton years of high prosperity (Wong, et al 2011).

What is clear, however, is that Democratic identification places Asian Americans in a coalition where African Americans and Latinos are also prominent. In many meaningful ways, members of those different groups are more likely to interact politically when they inhabit the same party coalition. Especially given the apparent increasing polarization in American politics, at least among the “political class” (Sinclair 2006; Theriault 2008; Fiorina and Abrams 2009; Levendusky 2009), this harbors more hope for continued cooperation. Party leaders and other political entrepreneurs have an incentive to maintain and expand their coalition, although the opposing party sometimes will seek to lure away some parts of the coalition.

One possible source of the growing support for Democrats may be that peoples of color share policy preferences more likely to be supported by Democratic officeholders. This seems to be the case with certain civil rights policies, most notably voting rights. While Asian American civil rights groups have different specific concerns than do African American groups, both tend to support the Voting Rights Act (VRA), although their focus may be on different provisions of the VRA. African Americans, of course, have reasons to continue to be concerned about various forms of voter suppression (some subtle, some not-so-subtle), while Asian Americans tend to be more concerned about language issues.

Leland Saito has shown how Asian Americans in the Monterey Park area built coalitions that included not just multiple Asian American groups, but Latinos and whites as well (Saito 1998). In other cases of political and labor organizing in southern California, key individuals have helped to build bridges between Latinos and Asian Americans (Saito and Park 2000). James Lai and Kim Geron have examined Asian American coalition-building in Bay Area California suburbs, where they also found panethnic coalition-building and cross-racial alliances (Lai and Geron 2006; Lai 2011). Finding ways to transcend narrow group interests is often critical, but those group interests may sometimes loom large and threaten to bring groups into direct conflict.

Education is a good example. On one hand, many Asian American, African American, and Latino groups support greater funding for urban education, and many Asian Americans share the preference of many African Americans for more schooling options.[[15]](#footnote-15) On the other hand, the changing terrain of affirmative action has created growing potential for Asian Americans to find their interests opposed to those of African Americans and Latinos. Among activists, affirmative action does not appear to have created a division, and part of the unhappiness over the Pew report was probably driven by an awareness that the report’s findings could make it harder to maintain a common front over affirmative action.

However, as Asian Americans are categorized as a successful group, they may increasingly find themselves grouped with whites in the category not eligible to benefit from affirmative action programs. Already, we have the troubling case of Lowell High School in San Francisco, where a group of Chinese American parents sued to overturn an affirmative action program which sought to maintain percentages of African American and Latino students in the prestigious public school (Chang 1999; Hing 2001). More recently, S.B. Woo’s group, 80-20, and an Indian American umbrella organization has joined anti-affirmative action forces in the battle over efforts to consider race in admissions at the University of Texas (Baynes 2012; Jaschik 2012; Kahlenberg 2012; Schmidt 2012).

Most Asian American organized groups appear to be maintaining strong support for affirmative action, and the available data show support in the larger Asian American population (Lien et al 2004; Teranishi n.d.), although survey evidence is scarce, in part because Asian Americans are often not included.[[16]](#footnote-16) However, it is not clear the extent to which this is support for the principle of compensatory policy or for self-interest, driven by the belief that they are potential beneficiaries. Some Asian Americans, perhaps seeing the current trends, oppose affirmative action and believe as contrary to the interests of Asian Americans (Dhingra 2003). Already, some conservatives have used the “Asian card” to attack affirmative action, emphasizing the unfairness to Asian Americans, although it is not clear that the sympathy of conservatives actually lies with Asian Americans.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In addition, the affirmative action issue has potential implications for Asian America. At this point, programs that seek to give additional consideration to Asian Americans usually do so on a panethnic basis: i.e., the eligibility category is “Asian Americans,” rather than “Hmong Americans,” “Vietnamese Americans,” or some other ethnic group. As with other, similar institutional categorization, this is likely to at least increase awareness of membership in the panethnic group. With the growing socioeconomic success of some Asian Americans, eligibility for these programs has been diminishing, but programs have sometimes been fashioned to maintain eligibility for some Asian Americans by focusing more on specific socioeconomic circumstances.

For example, prosperous Asian American families are unlikely to benefit from the McNair Program. The McNair Program focuses first on socioeconomic disadvantage.[[18]](#footnote-18) The program’s eligibility requirements state that “In all projects, at least two-thirds of the participants must be low-income, potential first-generation college students,” but “The remaining participants may be from groups that are underrepresented in graduate education” (U.S. Department of Education). Asian Americans are not defined as one of the groups underrepresented in graduate education, so most Asian Americans would not qualify, although low-income ones might. While all Asian American subgroups have low-income members, it is clear that some will have higher percentages of eligible youth than others. Southeast Asian American youth in particular are more likely to come from families that are low-income and where they are the first to attend college.

Perhaps not surprisingly, it appears that support for affirmative action varies considerably by ethnic group, with Indian Americans—the most prosperous Asian American group, and presumably the group least likely to benefit—offering the weakest support (Teranishi n.d.). If affirmative action and related programs are increasingly revamped to focus on individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, it seems certain that only some Asian Americans will qualify.

A single policy difference is not likely to alliances to crumble, but the case of affirmative action reveals potential fault lines underlying Asian America. Lacking the long personal histories of oppression that still helps forge ties between African Americans (Dawson 1994), Asian Americans are more dependent on current self-interest to maintain panethnic unity.

The Asian American Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s benefited from this. U.S.-born Asian American youth recognized that they differed little in the eyes of bigots, and activists came to realize that the oppression which had fallen on Asian American subgroups was an important *shared* experience: the experience of racism. In those circumstances, and further motivated by the Vietnam War, Japanese American, Chinese American, Filipino American, and other Asian American youth found common cause (Wei 1993; Liu, Geron, and Lai 2008; Maeda 2012).

Whether an equally compelling common cause exists today is uncertain. Immigration has changed Asian America, from a largely U.S.-born to a majority foreign-born population (Yang 2011). The surge of newcomers has increased the potential political influence of Asian Americans by swelling their numbers, but it has also made it more difficult to organize around shared concerns, as community groups sometimes focus equal or greater attention on problems in the immigrants’ countries of birth. These homeland concerns do not necessarily reduce political engagement, but they create greater hurdles to coalition-building. In addition, if the Pew study is correct that large numbers of Asian Americans are satisfied with their lives and hopeful for their future, it means that there is less chance that Asian Americans will join together around common life struggles.

**ASIAN AMERICAN PANETHNICITY**

Asian America is made in America. The term “Asian America” was developed by activists who helped to spearhead the Asian American movement in the 1960s and 1970s, but the awareness of the category “Asian American” has also been greatly enhanced by government policies which defined four (later five) distinct racial categories (Wei 1993; Aoki and Nakanishi 2001; Omi and Espiritu 2000).

“Asian American” is a panethnic identity, one that seeks to draw together Americans of different ethnicities—e.g., Filipino Americans, Korean Americans, Vietnamese Americans.[[19]](#footnote-19) When considering the future of Asian American politics, one must therefore consider the future of Asian America. Will the panethnic identity be a meaningful one for Americans of Asian ancestry? If not, Asian American politics would seem to have a limited future. Interestingly, assessing the future of Asian American panethnicity involves looking also at the future of the factors which contribute to the racialization of Americans of Asian ancestry.

**The Roots of Ethnoracial Politics**

Because my concern is with politics, I turn to a discussion of the roots of ethnoracial politics. By *ethnoracial politics* I mean a politics where people organize along ethnoracial lines, where their ethnoracial identity is sufficiently strong to create lines for political action.

Scholars have identified two basic roots of such politics: oppression and opportunity. Individuals who have been racialized—lumped into a broad category that many Americans perceive as a separate race—have faced considerable discrimination tied to that racial identity. [[20]](#footnote-20) The epitome of this is the case of African Americans, but American Indians, Asian Americans, and Latinos are also examples (Dawson 1994; Almaguer 1994), with the caveat that some observers consider “Latino/Hispanic” to be an “ethnic” category rather than a racial one. Individuals tied together by a common experience of discrimination may find it in their self-interest to band together to fight that discrimination. Asian Americans are an excellent example. Anti-Asian violence has been one of the most effective factors contributing to pan-Asian American coalition-building, since, as I have noted elsewhere, no one likes to get their head bashed in.

In other cases, opportunity may fuel ethnoracial politics. A common ethnoracial identity may provide an effective basis for an interest group. Glazer and Moynihan found this to be the case in New York City. Glazer and Moynihan argued that the ethnic groups of New York had evolved into interest groups whose members enjoyed what Herbert Gans later labeled *symbolic ethnicity* (Gans 1979; Glazer and Moynihan 1970).[[21]](#footnote-21)

To what extent do Americans of Asian ancestry embrace a common term to identify themselves? The short answer is “not very much.” Both the PNAAPS and the NAAS find that only a small minority describe themselves as “Asian American”: 21 percent of respondents in the NAAS, and 15 percent in the PNAAPS (Lien, et al. 2004; Wong, et al. 2011). Employing a common term of identity is only part of a shared identity, however.

Equally important is the extent to which individuals see common interests, or strong ties between their lives and those of others. A majority of NAAS respondents believed that Asian Americans shared a common race, culture, and economic interests. On the other hand, almost half (48 percent) felt that what happens to other Asian Americans did not affect their own lives, and another 7 percent felt that it did not affect their lives very much (Wong, et al. 2011). The PNAAPS had similar responses, although a plurality (49 percent) felt that what happens to other Asian American groups *would* affect their lives; half felt that Asian Americans shared a common culture. The PNAAPS also probed those who reported that they did not identify themselves as “Asian American,” and it found that almost half reported that they *had* identified as Asian American at some point in their lives (Lien, et al. 2004).

At this point, then, the prospects for panethnic unity appear modest. Substantial percentages of Asian Americans recognize some common ties, but majorities appear to identify more closely with their ethnic rather than their panethnic group. However, Asian America is likely to undergo significant change in the coming decades, as the percentage born in the U.S. grows. Could panethnic identity grow as well?

One Asian American subgroup is already largely U.S.-born—Japanese Americans. Data from the PNAAPS and NAAS do not show Japanese Americans more likely to identify panethnically.[[22]](#footnote-22) While the experience of Japanese Americans differs substantially from other Asian Americans, and so they cannot necessarily be seen as a predictor of the future behavior of other Asian American subgroups, their responses do not support the hypothesis that panethnic identity will grow as a group becomes more acculturated. It is possible that highly acculturated groups may perceive considerable differences between themselves and predominantly immigrant groups, even when government classification would lump them all into the same ethnoracial category.

In addition, Asian American groups facing more economic challenges may not always want to be lumped with the more prosperous groups with whom they share an ethnoracial category. Some of the criticism of the Pew study clearly reflects this concern, and earlier versions can be observed with Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, who worried that their specific circumstances might be missed if they were left in the much larger “Asian American” category (Omi and Espiritu 2000). Some Filipino American groups have also sought to be tabulated separately from the larger Asian American population, in part to better position themselves to benefit from affirmative action. There was apparently some resentment that older, more established Asian American groups continued to claim the lion’s share of leadership positions, despite the fact the rapidly growing Filipino population was now a much larger portion of the Asian American population (Omi and Espiritu 2000).

And, as noted above, more prosperous Asian Americans may be less likely to support affirmative action, because they may perceive themselves as likely losers under the policy. If less prosperous Asian Americans see their interests as harmed by being lumped with the more prosperous, prospects for panethnic unity dim even more.

**Politics and Panethnic Identity**

On the other hand, although some policies may divide Asian Americans, politics more broadly may serve to unite them. In a deeply insightful analysis, Pei-te Lien has shown how politics has united Asian American subgroups, whose joint efforts have at times overcome seemingly huge differences (Lien 2001). As Glazer and Moynihan observed, claiming a common ethnoracial identity may serve one’s self interest, as it can be the basis for unifying an interest group (Glazer and Moynihan 1970/1963). For Asian Americans, an obvious challenge to that is the ethnic groups (e.g., Korean American rather than Asian American), but the small size of the Asian American population—and even smaller size of the subpopulations—means that building larger coalitions will often be necessary. Felix Padilla’s groundbreaking work on Hispanic politics in Chicago showed that Latino groups realized that they could benefit from political unity, bridging the substantial divide that had separated Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans there (Padilla 1985).

One important sign of support crossing ethnic lines has been campaign contributions. Wendy Tam Cho, drawing on FEC data and an extensive name dictionary, has concluded that Asian Americans do not contribute across ethnic lines, but Lai’s research reaches the opposite conclusions (Cho 2002; Lai 2011). The difference may in part be a “glass half-full or glass half-empty” debate, although in the case of campaign contributions it might be more accurate to call it a “glass one-tenth full or glass nine-tenths empty” debate. Both sets of research find that Asian American candidates continue to draw much more heavily on contributions from co-ethnics: e.g., Chinese Americans will be the largest source of funds for Chinese American candidates. However, Lai and Geron place more emphasis on the significance of the minority of money that is crossing ethnic lines, an interpretation that is persuasive if one considers the historical context. Not only have Asian American subgroups seen little in common with each other in the past, there was often deep enmity between their ancestral nations. The fact that significant numbers of Asian Americans have moved far enough beyond that to send money to candidates of other Asian ancestries does seem to constitute movement toward greater panethnic identity, even though it is not yet the rule.

As many specialists have observed, Asian American politics has characteristics distinct from the dynamics of other ethnoracial minority politics (e.g., Aoki and Takeda 2008 ). The processes of social and economic incorporation seem to have distinctive characteristics as well. This raises questions of acceptance and exclusion.

**ACCEPTANCE, EXCLUSION, AND THE IRONY OF ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICS**

When considering panethnic identity and the future of Asian American politics, a potential irony quickly becomes apparent. For generations, Asian American politics has been centered around a fight for acceptance and equal treatment, but success could mean the gradual decline of Asian America. If the prejudice and exclusionary policies eventually disappear, it is not clear if there will be sufficient defining factors to maintain a distinctive Asian American identity. Some type of ethnic identity may remain, but the ties may be too weak to sustain any meaningful politics. One never hears talk of German American concerns today, for instance. While Americans of German descent may celebrate their heritage in some ways, the ties that bind them to others of the same ancestry are very weak.

This is not to suggest that Asian Americans will quickly lose meaningful connections to the identity of their immigrant ancestors. However, the ties that endure may be more ethnic than panethnic. The traditions that immigrants have brought with them have never been *Asian*—they have been much more specific—e.g., Cambodian, Hmong, Korean, Malaysian, Pakistani. Also, the enormous cultural differences across Asia makes it unlikely that shared cultural rites would develop.

While Africa also encompasses vast cultural differences, and African Americans have a few potentially unifying rituals, those have grown out of their unique experiences, part of which includes intense repression which made it almost impossible to preserve the specific cultural practices which early (involuntary) African immigrants brought with them. By the twentieth century, most African Americans had little or no idea of their specific ethnic roots. In part, this reflects how long most black families had been in the United States, but in part this also reflected the concerted efforts of slave owners to prevent slaves from maintaining their culture. In this context, efforts such as Kwanzaa a great deal of sense. For Maulana Karenga to refer to the seven principles as “the seven basic values of *African* culture” (Kwanzaa website, emphasis added) seem reasonable, since most African Americans are not likely to be focused on family traditions from a specific part of Africa. As noted, most are probably still uncertain about the specific origins of their African ancestors. That said, Kwanzaa appears to continue to struggle to find widespread acceptance among African Americans, most of whom seem more likely to follow traditions similar to those followed by large numbers of other Americans—such as Christmas celebrations.

Asian Americans are much more likely to be aware of their specific ancestral customs, however. The Asian American population never suffered massive involuntary migration followed by fierce efforts at cultural genocide.[[23]](#footnote-23) In addition, most are recent immigrants, or the children of recent immigrants. While pan-Asian cultural rites may still supplant the more ethnically-specific ones, it seems more likely that the more specific ones—the ethnic traditions—will have deeper roots than any panethnic ones that may emerge.

**The Case of Japanese Americans**

As the only majority-U.S.-born group, and, in a sense, the most acculturated group, Japanese Americans represent an interesting case. Intermarriage rates are very high, and for recent Japanese American newlyweds, comprise a majority of all marriages (Pew Research Center 2012b).[[24]](#footnote-24) As noted earlier, data from the PNAAPS and NAAS show that Japanese Americans do not appear to be getting more likely to identify as “Asian American,” with the majority choosing “Japanese American” or “Japanese,” or else (according to the PNAAPS data) simply choosing to identify as “American.”

While continued high levels of immigration may create different patterns for other Asian American groups, the pattern of structural assimilation appears to be continuing for them. In 2010, over a quarter of all Asian American newlyweds involved a partner of a different ethnoracial background, and, reaching almost 40 percent among U.S.-born Asian American newlyweds (Wang 2012, 7-9). Other types of structural assimilation will probably reinforce. More prosperous Asian Americans are more likely to live in suburbs and less likely to be segregated. Who you marry is in shaped in significant ways by whom you see, and suburbanized Asian Americans will be increasingly likely to see non-Asian Americans make up most of their neighbors.

Census population data also suggests a relatively high degree of structural assimilation for Japanese Americans. If one uses the “race alone” numbers (totals for those who chose only one race), Japanese Americans even appear to be disappearing. In practice, most analyses use a slightly more restrictive tabulation when comparing Asian groups: those who checked only one race and one category (e.g., Korean). Using this approach, numbers for each Asian group will be mutually exclusive—i.e., there will be no overlap between groups. Table 1 shows the change in the Japanese American population from 1970 to 2010, according to the decennial censuses.

Table 1: Japanese American Population

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **1970** | **1980** | **1990** | **2000** | **2010** |
| 588,324 | 716,331 | 866,160 | 796,700 | 763,325 |

Source: Decennial censuses. 2000 and 2010 include only those who checked one race alone.

Even for those not familiar with the United States census, the steep plunge from 1990 to 2000 would raise red flags. What happened, as is well known, is that Census 2000 significantly changed the enumeration procedure for racial groups, allowing people to check more than one race. However, most numbers changed very little, and only about 2 percent of all Americans chose more than one race. For American Indians and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders, the differences were very large (78 and 127 percent, respectively), but for Asian Americans, the difference was more modest. Adding those who checked more than one race increased the Asian American population by 18 percent above the number for those who checked one race only.[[25]](#footnote-25)

However, the difference for Japanese Americans is substantially larger. Table 2 shows the Japanese American population for “race alone and in combination”—i.e., those who checked only one and those who checked more than one race.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Table 2: Japanese American Population

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **1970** | **1980** | **1990** | **2000** | **2010** |
| 588,324 | 716,331 | 866,160 | 1,148,932 | 1,304,286 |

Source: Decennial censuses. 2000 and 2010 includes those who checked one race alone and those who checked more than one race.

The difference is dramatic. By 2010, the inclusion of those who checked more than one race increases the Japanese American population by a little over 70 percent over the number for those who checked one race alone. While the full implications of this are not yet clear, what *is* certain is that there is very large percentage of Americans with Japanese ancestry who do not fall into the clear-cut “race alone” category. If other Asian American groups follow this pattern in the next few generations, an Asian American panethnic identity will clearly be in increasing competition with other ethnoracial identities.

**Assessing the Future of Asian American Politics**

Every organization concerned with the welfare of marginalized groups seeks to put itself out of business. Asian American community groups face the danger that they could succeed.

While prejudice against Asian Americans is not likely to disappear overnight, a diminishing trend could further weaken panethnic unity. The diverse Asian American population has few issues which can serve as political rallying points, but anti-Asian violence works pretty well. If, then, Asian American community groups and others were to succeed in creating a more tolerant society, one of the strongest sources of pan-Asian unity could be lost. The more Asian Americans find acceptance and incorporation, the less reason they may have to band together politically as Asian Americans.

This is not to say that Asian American politics as a coherent entity would disappear completely. As long as immigration continues to be substantial, homeland concerns (e.g., Hmong concerns over the treatment of their relatives in Southeast Asia) will probably provide some rallying point for individual Asian ethnic groups. However, while this is not incompatible with involvement in American politics, it is not likely to encourage panethnic organizing. In fact, a sense of linked fate may be strongest within these individual ethnic groups (Haynes and Skulley 2012). As noted above, cultural traditions that may continue to bind individuals are also more likely to be ethnic ones.

In addition, Asian American community groups are likely to persist for some time, and many have a strong panethnic focus. “Asian American” will continue to be one of the standard racial categories on government forms and most others gathering information on racial group membership, reinforcing some sense of panethnic identification. However, other factors are likely necessary for a stronger sense of panethnic identity to take hold among Americans of Asian ancestry.

None of this rules out the Glazer and Moynihan scenario of ethnic groups evolving into interest groups. If the “honorary whites” view is correct, Asian American groups may increasingly take on the characteristics of other American ethnic groups, with a common identity fueled by common interests. Given the diversity of Asian America, this raises the possibility that a panethnic politics will be challenging to sustain. For example, prosperous Chinese, Indian, or Korean Americans, for instance, may find common interests with co-ethnics, but struggle to find common interests with struggling Southeast Asian Americans or Native Hawaiians. Of course, individual ethnic groups have their own internal differences (e.g., Park 2001).

In addition, if racial lumping declined for Asian Americans, panethnic bonds would presumably weaken even more. While a third-generation or later Japanese or Chinese American may not identify with an immigrant Vietnamese American, the former realizes that many other Americans currently fail to see the huge differences between the two, and lump them together as “Asians.” If, however, Americans come to understand these differences more (presumably one of the goals of things such as Asian American Heritage Month), and racial lumping diminishes, that source of linked fate would fade as well.

This would not necessarily be a bad development. While there are important benefits from strong panethnic coalitions, an overly strong emphasis on panethnicity might obscure important differences and developments, as Cristina Beltrán has argued in her study of a pan-Latino identity (Beltrán 2010). Panethnic alliances can still grow around specific concerns, allowing it to continually reflect changing circumstances.

However, this can be challenging for community groups that seek to maintain panethnic coalitions. A focus on a specific problem or set of problems makes organizing easier. With apologies to Charles Dickens, the worst of times may also be the best of times for Asian American community groups. As Yen Le Espiritu has observed, the common heritage that has helped to shape Asian American panethnicity has been “a history of exploitation, oppression, and discrimination” (Espiritu 1992, 17). High levels of anti-Asian discrimination can strengthen panethnic identification, at least when accompanied by racial lumping. One of the implications of the Pew report is that many Asian Americans may no longer perceive these significant levels of discrimination—perhaps the best of times so far for Americans of Asian ancestry, but not necessarily for community groups seeking to build panethnic support.

**CONCLUSION**

The Pew report, “The Rise of Asian Americans” can be seen as a battleground of the war over the legacy of Vincent Chin. On one side are forces who see the Asian American story as a largely positive one, a narrative that starts with deep and extensive oppression but concludes triumphantly. Overcoming both *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination, Asian Americans have become remarkably successful, reflected both in objective measures such as education and income and in subjective measures such as life satisfaction or relations with neighbors.[[27]](#footnote-27) From this perspective, Vincent Chin represents a terrible chapter in Asian American history, but one that has largely been transcended.

On the other side are those who argue that Asian Americans continue to face substantial discrimination and economic hardship. While this view acknowledges the success of a significant portion of the Asian American population, it focuses more attention on the segment that continues to struggle (significantly, the segment not carefully examined in the Pew study). While the Vincent Chin legacy is very positive—the vocal and quick response to the Pew study is itself part of that legacy—the struggle for equality continues. Indeed, in an ongoing case involving military harrassment that led to a suicide of a Chinese American soldier, Vincent Chen’s memory was recalled when the first soldier prosecuted received a light sentence which included minimal prison time and a modest fine (Zucchino 2012; Asian American Justice Center 2012b).

We still know too little to be certain about the direction of Asian American politics. The Pew study provided valuable data on Asian Americans, but many unanswered questions remain.[[28]](#footnote-28) We need more data on the changes that occur across generations, on the differences between the immigrant generation and their children and grandchildren. The second generation becomes acculturated in a very different context than their immigrant parents. One would not expect many immigrants to identify with American-made panethnic categories, but the next generations would presumably be more inclined to do so. Surveys such as the NAAS are just beginning to give us data to explore this question.

In addition, we need more case studies such as those undertaken by Leland Saito, Edward J.W. Park, Kim Geron, and James Lai. This detailed research into the campaign and public policy efforts of Asian Americans have much to teach us about the nature of coalition-building and Asian American incorporation. The results can tell us not only about the future of Asian American politics, but also holds implications for the next chapter of the sad story of race in America.

**APPENDIX: INCOME CLAIMS BEHIND THE MODEL MINORITY IMAGE**

One of the central pieces of evidence for the argument that Asian Americans are a “model minority” is their high household income. The Pew report, “The Rise of Asian Americans” opens exultantly: “Asian Americans are the highest-income, best-educated and fastest-growing racial group in the United States” (Pew 2012, 1). Critics have shown, however, that these figures are misleading (e.g., Suzuki 1977; Takaki 1998). In this appendix, I show some of the evidence for this criticism, but note that the argument of George Yancey (Yancey 2004) might be valid as well.

Census data allows an easy demonstration of two key criticisms of the income claims. First, the “high income” assertion is based on *household* (or family) income.[[29]](#footnote-29) Household income is the total income of all members of the household. Households with more earners are likely to have higher incomes than households with fewer earners, and Asian Americans households tend to have more earners. Therefore, high household income is not necessarily a sign that Asian Americans have achieved parity with or exceeded the income levels of Whites. A better measure of that is *per capita* income—income per person.

Second, Asian Americans are not evenly distributed throughout the country. Unlike whites, large numbers of Asian Americans are not found everywhere. Rather, Asian Americans are concentrated in a few sections of the country, and their greatest numbers are found in some of the most expensive metro areas in the United States. Therefore, high average incomes can be very misleading, since most people in those areas tend to have higher-than-average incomes. Here, I present comparisons within the same metro areas, which eliminates the distortions caused by differences in cost-of-living in different parts of the country.

In Figure A1 and Table A1, I present data from the metro areas with the largest number of Asian Americans, based on data from the 2010 Census (Hoeffel, et al., 2012, Table 3).[[30]](#footnote-30) For each metro area, I provide median *household* income for Whites, Blacks, and Asian Americans. Asian American household income is indeed high, but, as the table shows, it no longer looks so high compared to white household income, once one compares groups within the same metro area. In two of the areas, Asian American household income is slightly higher than that of Whites, but in the other three it is slightly below white median household income. Interestingly, a similar relationship can be found when comparing Blacks and Latinos. In two of the areas, black median household income is higher than that of Latinos, but in the other three, Latino median household income is slightly above that of Blacks. Table A1 presents the same data as Figure A1, but with specific median income levels for each group, and adds median household income for all households and Latino households.

Figure A1: Median Household Income

Table A1: Median Household Income

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | All | White | Asian | Black | Hispanic |
| New York | 64,126 | 79,070 | 74,008 | 43,855 | 42,037 |
| Los Angeles | 58,766 | 71,648 | 67,390 | 44,953 | 47,168 |
| San Jose-San Francisco | 75,168 | 84,082 | 89,497 | 44,463 | 55,242 |
| San Diego | 61,469 | 69,814 | 75,196 | 48,134 | 45,261 |
| Honolulu | 70,356 | 76,379 | 70,341 | 61,719 | 56,439 |

In Figure A2 and Table A2, I present data from the same five metro areas, but *per capita* income, rather than household income. The position of Asian Americans relative to Whites falls considerably, which is one of the central points made by critics of the model minority thesis. However, Asian Americans continue to occupy a position above African Americans, consistent with Yancey’s argument. Note the consistent relationship: Whites are substantially above all other groups, Asian Americans substantially above the others (except in Honolulu), and Latinos at the bottom. In Honolulu, the number of Blacks in the sample is quite small, leading to a fairly high error margin for the per capita income estimate. Table A2 presents the same data as in Figure A2, but provide specific figures, and adds per capita income figures for all individuals and for Latinos.

Figure A2: Per Capita Income

Table A2: Per Capita Income

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | All | White | Asian | Black | Hispanic |
| New York | 34,612 | 45,648 | 32,525 | 22,111 | 18,375 |
| Los Angeles | 27,148 | 43,083 | 29,480 | 23,581 | 15,181 |
| San Jose-San Francisco | 37,640 | 51,602 | 36,056 | 25,720 | 18,945 |
| San Diego | 29,792 | 39,849 | 29,350 | 23,568 | 16,309 |
| Honolulu | 29,303 | 41,707 | 31,010 | 30,960 | 19,600 |

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1. This section draws heavily on Helen Zia’s account (2000, ch. 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pew Research Center (2012b). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, Asian and Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund (2012), Japanese Americans Citizens League (2012), OCA (2012b), National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Although I discuss Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders at some points, my focus is on Asian Americans. One of my concerns here is the viability of Asian American panethnic identity, and automatically lumping Asian Americans with Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders would raise even more questions which go well beyond the scope of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hero wrote this two decades ago; he would not necessarily make this observation today, given more recent scholarship (e.g., Beltrán 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I use the term “ethnoracial” to include both what is sometimes referred to as “ethnic politics”—e.g. Irish American or Greek American political activity—as well as what is sometimes labeled “racial politics”—e.g. African American or Asian American politics. The term has the advantage of clearly include the politics of Latinos, a group that is sometimes defined as “ethnic” and sometimes as “racial” (and sometimes as neither). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It is possible to find similar processes dating back at least to the Middle Ages (e.g., Baum2006), but my concern here is with the process in the United States, so my discussion goes back no farther than the racial classification developed by early European settlers. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. One could argue that racial classification was evolving to include American Indians, but legal definitions were still dominated by the binary view: black and white. The complex status of American Indians meant that they were still treated more as foreign nationals than constituting a separate racial category within the United States (\*\*\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. American Indians clearly played a central role in the development of the United States. However, because of their more powerful position and extensive social and political systems, American Indian tribes were initially considered foreign nations. Hence, there was no need to incorporate them into the domestic racial structure. Given the hostility toward native peoples, however, there was ample cultural prejudice to draw upon when their tribes were enveloped by the territory of the United States, and it was easy to classify them as non-white. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Some have disputed the uniqueness of the Japanese American experience during World War II, but this challenge appears to be rooted in ignorance. Some apologists for the internment argue that German and Italian Americans were indeed arrested, but the comparison is not well-founded. Authorities did indeed round up a small number of German and Italian Americans, individuals who were considered to pose a particular threat. In fact, a small number of Japanese Americans were also arrested, similar to what happened to German and Italian Americans. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the FBI moved to apprehend a few thousand *Issei* (first-generation Japanese Americans) who were seen as posing a security threat (whether they posed any actual threat is another matter). What did not happen, however, was a mass incarceration of German and Italian Americans who posed no conceivable threat. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Gary Okihiro (1994, 33) writes that the “intellectual foundations” for the stereotype date to a 1956 *American Anthropologist* article. See Caudill and De Vos (1956). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See “Success Story” (1971); Kasindorf (1982); Bell (1985); Brand, et al. (1987). The 1987 *Time* article was not just a simplistic declaration of the model minority image. The writers noted that the math success of many Asian Americans could be traced to education abroad, and it also discussed the pressures that some Asian American students faced in their effort to excel. Also, in 1984, *Newsweek* published a special *Newsweek on Campus* titled “Asian Americans: The Drive to Excel,” which featured several articles exploring reasons for Asian American success, and also challenges facing Asian Americans. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The *U.S. News & World Report* article that gave one of the early depictions of Asian Americans as a model minority opens with an implicit criticism of “African Americans”: “At a time when Americans are awash in worry over the plight of racial minorities—One such minority . . . Chinese Americans, is winning wealth . . . by dint of its own hard work.” To make the point even clearer, the story then states that Chinese Americans are “still being taught . . that people should depend on their own efforts—not a welfare check . . .” (“Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.”). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. By “major ethnoracial groups” I mean African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, European Americans, and Latino Americans. The last grouping in this list presents challenges, because it is often not counted as a “racial” group, following the Office of Management and Budget’s Statistical Directive 15. However, it is customary to think of Latinos are one of the major “minority groups” in the United States. “Minority groups” is increasingly an inadequate term as well, however, because all the major ethnoracial groups are minorities in some setting, and when there *is* a majority group, it can be different from place to place. “Ethnoracial group” is an imperfect term, but perhaps slightly less imperfect than the current alternatives. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The politics of school choice is itself complicated. Lower-income Asian American families served by struggling schools seem to welcome a greater range of school choices through options such as charter schools. African American also seem to welcome more choices, whether through charter schools or school vouchers. However, among liberal activist groups, there is strong opposition to school vouchers (and more muted opposition to charter schools), particularly from teachers’ unions. That opposition may contribute to less vocal support for school choice from Asian American community groups. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. As of early August 2012, major Asian American groups supporting affirmative action appear to have maintained their stance. For example, the Asian American Justice Center website continues to declare its support (Asian American Justice Center 2012a), the OCA issued a press release in support (OCA 2012a), the and Japanese American Citizens League Program for Action Committee has recommended “vigorous support for affirmative action” (JACL Program for Action Committee). Most Asian American organizations filing briefs in the current University of Texas affirmative action case (*Fisher v. Texas*) support the University of Texas’s practice of considering race in admissions decisions (Baynes 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See, for instance, a *National Review* column that implies concern for Asian Americans (Clegg 2012). However, as many Asian Americans will recall, the *National Review* was a leader in emphasizing racially inflammatory images in the so-called campaign finance scandal in 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The program is named for Ronald McNair, an African American astronaut who died in the Challenger space shuttle explosion. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. There are different ways to define “ethnic group.” A single nation-state—e.g., China or India—can be said to consist of many different ethnic groups. Therefore, a category such as “Chinese American” can itself be considered to be a panethnic one. However, the most common practice when discussing Asian Americans is to refer to national-origin categories (e.g. Indian American, Japanese American) as ethnic ones. I follow this practice for convenience, keeping in mind that there are different ways of defining ethnic groups. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The watershed work on this is Michael Dawson’s *Behind the Mule* (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Glazer and Moynihan noted, however, that African Americans remained an exception to this pattern. In the first edition of the book, they predicted that this would change, but, in the revised edition, they acknowledged that this had not come to pass. They suggested that this reflected decisions made by black Americans, although it seems equally plausible that it reflects the behavior of whites that continued centuries of racialization. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The PNAAPS and NAAS both find low percentages of Japanese Americans identifying as “Asian American” (15 and 13 percent, respectively), but they differ significantly on other lines. The NAAS finds that 80 percent of Japanese Americans identify as either “Japanese American” or “Japanese,” but the PNAAPS finds only 38 percent identifying that way, and 41 percent identifying as simply “American.” The questions differed substantially, with the NAAS allowing respondents to choose as many responses as wished, while the PNAAPS asked for a single response. This undoubtedly accounts for some but not all of the difference. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. One other ethnoracial minority group *was* the target of cultural genocide: American Indians. Not surprisingly, they too have needed to engage in some cultural reconstruction, similar to what Karenga has attempted with Kwanzaa. See Nagel (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The term *intermarriage* is sometimes misunderstood. While many may define it as marriage between members of different racial groups, it is often defined to include marriage between members of different Asian groups. For Japanese Americans recent newlyweds, the rate of marriage to a *non-Asian* partner is 55 percent. Another 9 percent of recently married Japanese Americans married an Asian American of a different ethnic group. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. All figures in this paragraph are from my tabulations of 2010 Census data. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Again, this applies only to 2000 and 2010, since there was no option to check more than one prior to 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. I use the term “Asian Americans” here advisedly. Because the Pew report focused only on Asian Americans (and not on Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders), I do not discuss them in the first two paragraphs of this section. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Even those critical of the Pew report recognized the value of the data. Some of the groups have reportedly cited some of the report’s data in their *amicus curiae* briefs to the U.S. Supreme Court, in support of the University of Texas’s affirmative action admissions policy (Baynes 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Household income is a different measure than family. Most simply, almost everyone is in a household, but not everyone is in a family, as the Census Bureau defines “family.” *Household* is the more comprehensive term; *households* are divided into family and non-family households. Family households contain two or more persons related to each other (e.g., parent and child). “Family income,” (technically, family household income) therefore, is a less comprehensive measure than household income—which includes both family and non-family households. Household measures only exclude the institutionalized population (persons living in places such as prisons, dorms, or other group quarters) and the homeless not living in any formally recognized structure. For more explanation of these Census Bureau definitions, see Lofquist, et al. (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For the biggest three, I use data from the Consolidated Statistical Area (CSA), to get the greatest possible of each group. San Diego and Honolulu, however, are not in CSAs, so for those two I have used data from the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). For more information, see “Geographic Terms and Concepts—Core Based Statistical Areas and Related Statistical Areas.” Strictly, speaking, what I present is data which includes data for the *six* municipalities with the largest Asian American populations. The Census Bureau ranking is by municipality (what the Census Bureau terms “places”), not metropolitan area (MSA or CSA). San Jose and San Francisco are the third and fourth largest places, respectively, but are combined into one CSA. Presenting data on the municipality alone would be misleading, however, because the Asian American population within those central cities tends to be much poorer than the Asian American population in the surrounding suburban and exurban areas. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)