Asians in the Americas

3

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Asian Americans occupy a defined and by now accepted corner of America's "ethnoracial pentagon." Yet ponder "inequality" and "Asian American" is unlikely to come to mind. In fact, kindle what we think we know about Asian Americans and the light shines on their storied heights of educational and socioeconomic achievement, or perhaps the remarkable within-group diversity that calls to question the very coherence of the pan-ethnic category itself. This chapter explores the ways in which Asian Americans are a meaningful, even critical group to consider in thinking about race and inequality in the United States. It discusses in detail the way in which the social meanings attached to the category "Asian" have shifted in the United States from a designation that foreclosed opportunities for full citizenship to a valorized position of a "model minority" within the racial order. Despite this valorization, the chapter points out that Asian Americans continue to face discrimination and underrepresentation in a number of fields in American life. These empirical realities debunk arguments that portray racial gaps between whites and people of color in the United States as epiphenomena of socioeconomic status. Finally, it demonstrates how the "model-minority" narrative obscures the rampant inequalities that exist among different ethnic subgroups.

In contemporary social and political discourse on class inequalities in the United States, discussion of Asian Americans is relatively scarce compared with examinations of the unequal fortunes of other groups of racialized Americans. Nevertheless, Asian Americans have been consistently and throughout the history of the United States separated into distinct categories of race, beginning with the earliest classification of Chinese in 1870 and continuing with the multiplicity of Asian race categories in the 2010 US Census. Although remaining classified as racial minorities, the construction of Asian Americans in the last several decades as a model minority highlights their relatively high levels of educational attainment and economic status while simultaneously ignoring the diversity of the population. This obscures the wide variation in resources among ethnic groups within the broader set of Asian Americans and persistently discounts unequal opportunities and outcomes in the United States.

Indeed, the contemporary characterization of Asian Americans as a model minority coexists with the "forever-foreigner" trope, which emphasizes their purported inability to assimilate while underscoring a long-standing fear of a "yellow peril" (Kim 2000; Takaki 1989; Tuan 1998). Although they have been present in the Americas for centuries, Americans of Asian descent until recently accounted for only a small proportion of the US population. So effective were federal policies of Asian exclusion that there were fewer than a million Asian Americans in the United States when immigration law was reformed by the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. Since then, record numbers of immigrants from a wide range of Asian countries have arrived in the United States. Comprising a population distinct from pre-1965 cohorts in terms of education and income, Asian Americans in the United States today are characterized by diversity, remain the target of racial discrimination, and continue to struggle to achieve political recognition and representation.

Focusing on Asian Americans in the United States, this chapter elaborates on three key observations from the study of racial and class inequalities when viewed through the perspective of Asian Americans. First, it discusses the perils of aggregation, arguing that the process of combining the diverse groups of immigrants (and their US-born offspring) into the broader category of Asian American obscures important internal diversity and can result in inaccurate conclusions about inequality and race in the United States. Second, the chapter highlights how the political meaning of Asian American is structured by time, context, and institutions, thereby contending that these constructions continue to nurture inegalitarian practices and political outcomes. Third, it provides empirical illustrations of how inequality for Asian Americans is both cumulative and relational, the result of overlapping spheres of exclusion. Taken together, this trio of observations yields a set of recommendations for devising more robust analyses of inequality within the context of a more racially and ethnically diverse environment.

THE CONTEMPORARY DIVERSITY OF ASIAN AMERICANS AND THE PERILS OF AGGREGATION

Immigration from a diverse set of Asian nations has occurred at the same time during which the official government racial taxonomy has undergone substantial

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change regarding the classification of who is Asian (Wong et al. 2011). In its enumeration questionnaire beginning in 2000, the US Census Bureau considers Asian to refer to individuals with origins in the Far East, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Subcontinent, in addition to Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders in separate categories. A person can be identified racially by country of origin and the categories of Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, and "Other Asian," including Asians of Burmese, Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Pakistani, and Thai origins.

These data illustrate the phenomenon that aggregation can obscure internal diversity within the broader category of Asian Americans, resulting in inaccurate conclusions about the model-minority status of this racialized group.

This broad array of countries includes tremendous diversity inside of the larger category of Asian in terms of language, religion, socioeconomic resources, history in the United States, migration trajectory, and geographic location of settlement. Neither do Asian Americans in the United States today share a common language or religion. Languages spoken by Asian Americans include Mandarin and Cantonese, Arabic, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Korean, Samoan, Tongan, Japanese, Thai, Hindi, Cambodian, and Bengali, among other languages and dialects. Unlike other immigrant groups from Latin America, new arrivals from Asian nations do not share a common language (i.e., Spanish) or a dominant religion (e.g., Catholicism). In contrast, Asian Americans today are as likely to adhere to the religious beliefs and practices of Christianity as Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism.

In addition to the wide swath of languages spoken and religions practiced, Asian Americans have distinctive trajectories of migration to the United States. A heavily immigrant group overall, only about one quarter of adult Asian Americans today are native-born. These citizens by birth in the second generation and beyond are more likely to have origins in the East Asian nations of China and Japan or in the Philippines, given the relatively early settlement by immigrants from these countries to the United States. At the same time, Asian Americans with Chinese and Filipino roots nevertheless as a group are more heavily immigrant as a function of more recent waves of migration from these countries, whereas Japanese Americans comprise the only ethnic-origin group of Asian Americans who are majority native-born.

Another important trait differentiating Asian Americans is their immigration status and the way they came to the United States. Although the largest grouping of immigrants to the United States overall is through reunification with family already in the country, Asian immigrants are more likely than other immigrant groups to have come to the United States on employment visas and with refugee status. Asian Indians are among the more recent Asian immigrant groups, and a relatively large proportion gain entry and lawful permanent residence through employment preferences as skilled workers. In contrast, a greater number of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong Americans arrived in the United States as refugees from their home countries. As a result of these unique circumstances, settlement patterns in the United States also are distinctive: Hmong Americans settled in locations as diverse as Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Fresno, California, whereas larger groups of Vietnamese Americans reside in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Houston, Texas, and Cambodian Americans live in locations as diverse as Long Beach, California; Lowell, Massachusetts; and Jacksonville, Florida. Refugee resettlement often has occurred in conjunction with the assistance of civic and religious groups located in cities and states atypical of traditional immigrant destinations. In contrast, immigrants who come on employment visas or under family reunification, such as Asian Indians and Koreans, are more likely to settle in urban metropolitan areas with already-existing large populations of Asian Americans, including Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay area, and the New York metropolitan area.

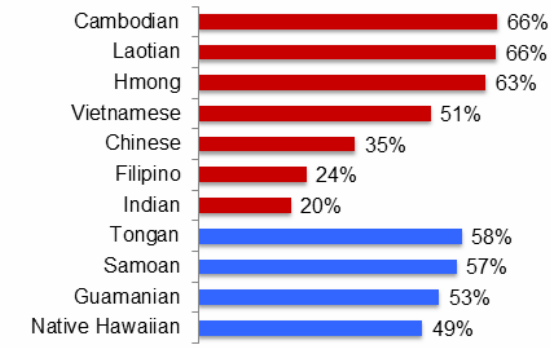
Despite stereotypes of Asian Americans as a model minority with uniformly high educational and income levels, there is a wide range of socioeconomic resources (Aoki and Takeda 2008). The distribution of income and economic resources for Asian Americans is heavily bi-modal: highly skilled workers and those with commercial connections and business interests are on the right tail of the distribution, whereas other Asian Americans with a relatively lower level of education and occupational skills are on the low end of the resource distribution. In this regard, it is incorrect to characterize the Asian American population as only wealthy or underprivileged. For example,

although median household income for Asian Americans is higher at $66,000, compared with the overall population of $49,800, these averages obscure a much different pattern when disaggregated by national origin among Asian Americans (see www.pewsocialtrends.org/asianamericans-graphics/st_12-06-17_aa_income). Similarly, and as the data in figure 1 attest, although aggregate levels of educational attainment for Asian Americans is higher than the general population, the proportion of those with a college degree within the broader category of Asian Americans varies substantially.

Aggregation thus obscures internal diversity within the category of Asian Americans and can yield inaccurate conclusions about political, economic, and social outcomes. Figure 2 provides data on poverty rates in California, demonstrating that a higher proportion of Asian Pacific Islanders and Asian Americans with national origins in Southeast Asia live in poverty than the average rate among all Californians. Similarly, there is substantial variation in the rate at which groups of Asian Americans are uninsured. Figure 3 documents these patterns.

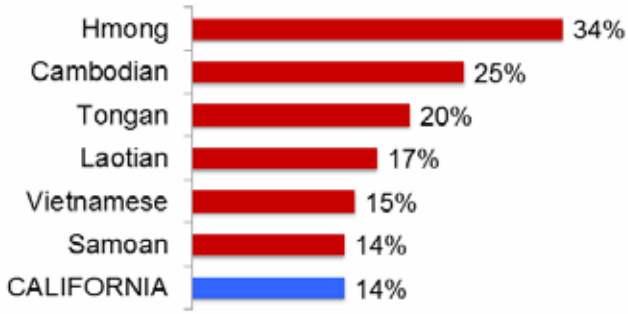
These data illustrate the phenomenon that aggregation can obscure internal diversity within the broader category of Asian Americans, resulting in inaccurate conclusions about the model-minority status of this racialized group. In this respect, aggregation also can be exploited to valorize one group relative to others, such as African Americans and Latinos, thereby promoting principles of "color-blindness." Assuming the pan-ethnic grouping of Asian Americans and aggregating various groups therefore can have both empirical and ideological consequences.

Figure 1: Percentage without a 2- or 4-Year College Degree



Source: http://www.naasurvey.com/resources/Presentations/KR-aapidata-UCCS-jan26.pdf

Figure 2: Poverty Rates in California

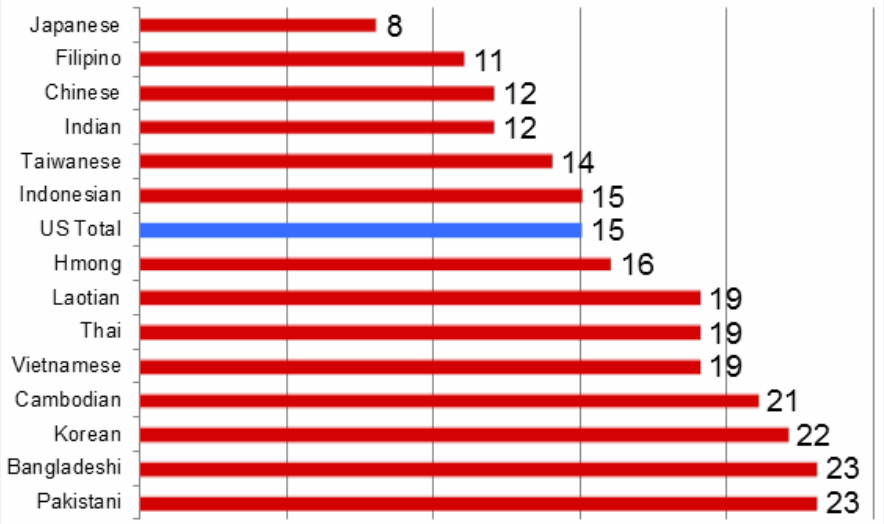


Source: www.advancingjustice.org/publication/community-contrasts-native-hawaiians-and-pacific-islanders-california-2013.

PLACING ASIAN AMERICAN EXCLUSION IN TIME AND CONTEXT

Visitors to an elite university campus in the United States today may find it difficult to imagine that Asian Americans were subjected to persistent and blatant racial discrimination throughout a substantial portion of US history. Highly ranked American universities (e.g., Stanford University in Palo Alto, California) today boast ethnically and racially diverse student populations that include Asian Americans. However, scratch just beneath the surface and look back into the past;

Figure 3: Percentage without Health Insurance



Source: www.advancingjustice.org/publication/community-contrasts-asian-americans-us-2011.

it is apparent that explicitly racial political exclusion is at the root of the small size and geographic concentration of the Asian American population when the Civil Rights Act was signed into law in 1964 (Ngai 2004). Fewer than a million Americans with Asian origins resided in the United States during the official 1960 census—even after the recent addition of the territories of Alaska and Hawai'i (both states have large Asian American populations)—precisely because immigration from Asia had been restricted since the 1860s. Similarly, only with passage of the McCarran–Walter Act in 1952 could Americans of all Asian ancestries apply to become naturalized citizens (Daniels 2004).

The roots of anti-Asian US immigration policy can be traced to the post–Civil War politics of California and the new states of the American West. Indeed, it was Leland Stanford—railroad magnate and benefactor of the elite university that bears his name—who addressed voters in 1862 in his inaugural address as the eighth governor of California, outlining the logic of Asian exclusion as follows:

> To my mind it is clear, that the settlement among us of an inferior race is to be discouraged, by every legitimate means. Asia, with her numberless millions, sends to our shores the dregs of her population. Large numbers of this class are already here; and, unless we do something early to check their immigration, the question, which of the two tides of immigration, meeting upon the shores of the Pacific, shall be turned back, will be forced upon our consideration, when far more difficult than now of disposal. There can be no doubt but that the presence of numbers among us of a degraded and distinct people must exercise a deleterious influence upon the superior race, and, to a certain extent, repel desirable immigration. It will afford me great pleasure to concur with the Legislature in any constitutional action, having for its object the repression of the immigration of the Asiatic races. (See http://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/08-Stanford.html)

With the completion of the transcontinental railroad and new European immigrant workers from the East Coast arriving in San Francisco, politicians across the nation climbed aboard the Asian exclusion bandwagon so clearly articulated by Governor Stanford. Two decades later, with the thinnest margin of a US presidential election within recent memory, the US Congress passed and President Chester Arthur signed into federal law the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Despite objections to the racially discriminatory intent of the law, neither political party could risk losing California and other swing states in future presidential elections (Tichenor 2002). Once established in federal law, Chinese exclusion was expanded to restrict entry and naturalized citizenship for immigrants from other Asian nations. This culminated in the Immigration Act of 1917, also known as the Asiatic Barred Zone Act.

This context of white European dominance of language and the characterization of "who got here first" exerts a powerful framing of political belonging in the Americas.

Asians as undesirable political subjects became common knowledge, and states and courts followed suit in creating alien-land laws and antimiscegenation rulings and statutes across the nation (Ancheta 2006; Gross 2008). The racial prerequisites to entry and naturalization specified in the federal laws that targeted Asian immigration would not be effectively eliminated until passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. This Act shifted dramatically from racial restrictions and toward occupational preferences and family reunification that were more race-neutral. Thus, the 1965 Act cleared the way for immigrants from Asian nations to legally immigrate to the United States and seek naturalized-citizen status.

The century of explicit racial exclusion from entry to the United States in federal law finally came to a close. However, because it was so effective in keeping Asians out of the United States, post-1965 immigrants from Asia entered a national polity that had become unaccustomed to interacting with Asian Americans and unable to consider them as equal members of the political community. Indeed, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and subsequent US Supreme Court decisions upholding their imprisonment reinforced the suspect character of Asian Americans (Aoki and Takeda 2008).

Considering Asian American exclusion in time and context provides a historically grounded perspective from which contemporary inequalities in political, social, and economic outcomes can be regarded as both reflections in categorizations associated with group stereotypes and as a source of inegalitarian practices and political outcomes. Thus, the meaning and consequences of being Asian in the Americas is structured by time, context, and institutions. The political construction and dynamism of group categorization as Asian outside of Asia is more distinctive in the United States than it is in Canada, Latin America, and South America. This is a result of historically situated patterns of colonization and migration along with variation

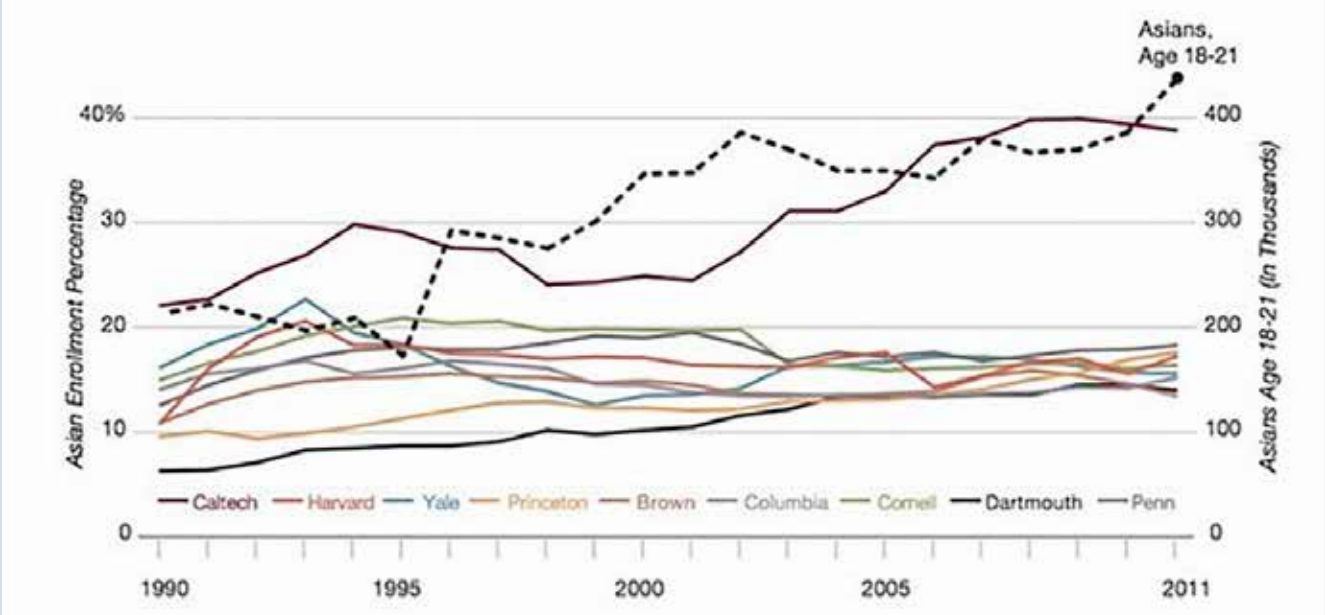
in political institutions and practices of racial classification in different contexts. The category of Asian-*something* signifies different things not only in different places but also at specific points in time.

OVERLAPPING SPHERES OF EXCLUSION FOR ASIAN AMERICANS

The two previous sections contend that the aggregation of Asian Americans across all national-origin groups obscures inequality and supports the myth of the model minority and that the exclusion of Asian Americans has been a persistent feature of the US economy, society, and politics. It is only within the last five decades that this exclusion has been relaxed; as such, the chapter argues that inequality for Asian Americans can be characterized today as cumulative and relational, the result of overlapping spheres of exclusion. The practice of aggregation and the persistence of racial-group stereotypes support the maintenance of a racial hierarchy and power structure in the Americas, where the "default category" of white requires no modifier (Masuoka and Junn 2013). It is telling that the phrases "British diaspora" and "Europeans in the Americas" appear much less frequently (if at all) in comparison to characterizations of the "Chinese diaspora" in the scholarly and popular lexicon. This context of white European dominance of language and the characterization of "who got here first" exerts a powerful framing of political belonging in the Americas.

The widespread characterization of Asian Americans as a model minority presents a narrative of overcoming exclusion on the basis of race and excelling economically and socially. The relatively large number of Asian American students attending elite American universities was the prototype for the model-minority trope. Although it is the case that the student population at elite educational institutions is disproportionately Asian American, this demonstration alone masks a different pattern of relatively low success of admissions when considering the size of the group. Figure 4 documents the proportion of Asian American students enrolling in elite US colleges between 1990 and 2011, tracked together with the number of 18–21 year old Asian Americans in the United States over the same years. Whereas the size of the population of college-aged Asian Americans has near doubled over this time period, admissions to all but one school (i.e., California Institute of Technology) has remained roughly constant, if not declined. While it might continue to be true that Asian Americans are overrepresented at elite colleges in comparison to their proportions in the general population, this proportionality is bumping up against a clear "ceiling

Figure 4: Asians Age 18–21 and Elite College Enrollment Trends, 1990–2011



Source: http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/12/19/fears-of-an-asian-quota-in-the-ivy-league/statistics-indicate-an-ivy-league-asian-quota
Note: Trends of Asian enrollment at Caltech and the Ivy League universities, compared with growth of Asian college-age population; Asian age cohort population figures are based on Census CPS, and given the small sample size, are subject to considerable yearly statistical fluctuations. Source: www.advancingjustice.org/publication/community-contrasts-native-hawaiians-and-pacific-islanders-california-2013.

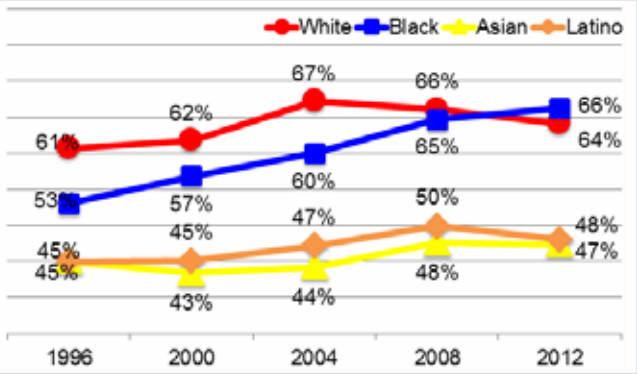
effect." Notably, universities that publicly disavow the use of "legacy" considerations in vetting applicants for college admissions (e.g., California Institute of Technology or the University of California system) do not show such a visible ceiling and have a proportion of Asian American students that roughly parallels their population growth. Importantly, these data on college admissions show that inequality is fundamentally relational; a group that may appear to be doing well (perhaps even outperforming all other groups) nonetheless still faces barriers to the full realization of its capacity.

In the political sphere, Asian Americans also are underrepresented in terms of voter registration and turnout. Asian Americans reside and vote in all of the United States, with the largest concentration in Hawai'i, Alaska, and the West Coast. At the same time, there are substantial and growing populations of Asian American voters in Texas, Illinois, Virginia, New Jersey, and New York; The South has experienced the highest growth in Asian American populations during the last decade. However, Asian Americans are still less likely to vote in US elections than Americans of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Figure 5 provides data on voting turnout over time among Asian Americans compared with non-Hispanic whites, African Americans, and Latinos.

Despite relatively high levels of formal-educational attainment, Asian Americans vote at lower rates than all other groups of voters (Wong et al. 2011). Importantly, the gap between the proportion of Asian Americans who are eligible to vote and the proportion that turnout on Election Day has, if anything, grown and not shrunk in the last two decades. The low rates of turnout contribute to a widespread misconception of Asian Americans as "apolitical" and "perpetual foreigners" (Kim 2000, Tuan 1998) and typically relegate Asian Americans to the category of "low propensity voters" that do not merit a candidate, campaign, or political party's attention. Lost in such misconceptions are the systemic, institutional sources of exclusion from greater civic and political engagement. Figure 6, for instance, provides Current Population Survey data from the 2004, 2008, and 2012 US presidential elections on the proportion of people reporting difficulty in registering due to language barriers by race. The figure makes clear that, while Hispanics may be the most prominent "language minority" in the United States, it is Asian Americans who are most likely to have problems with language access in their efforts to participate in politics.

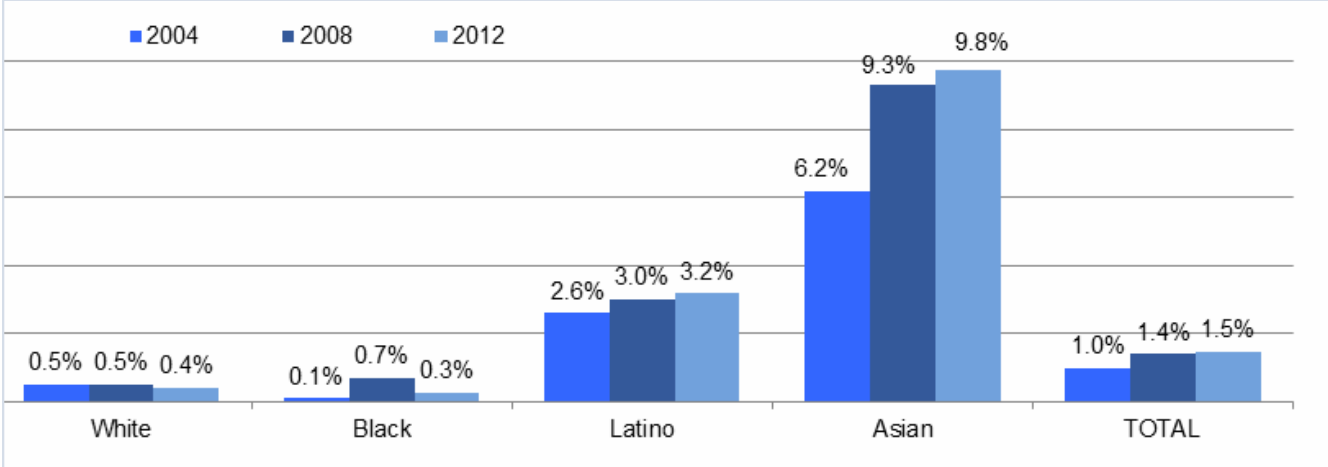
Another systemic, institutional barrier to Asian American political engagement is the role of political

Figure 5: Turnout as Percentage of Voter Eligible Population



Source: www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting.

Figure 6: Percentage Not Registered Due to "Difficulty with English"



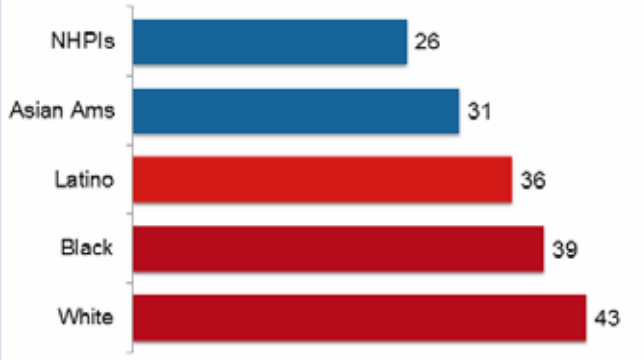
Sources: www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting; 2004, 2008, 2012 Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplements.

parties. The absence of visible and effective political mobilization by the two major political parties in the United States is another key contributor to the modest voter-turnout rates among Asian Americans (Hajnal and Lee 2011). Figure 7 compares political contact rates before the 2008 US presidential election and shows that Asian Americans and Asian Pacific Islanders had the lowest mobilization rates compared with other Americans grouped by race and ethnicity.

Taken together, more modest levels of registration, mobilization, and voting among Asian Americans overlap with and factor into systematically lower rates of political representation across all levels of government. Despite accounting for more than 5% of the US population, there is only one Asian American US Senator and 10 members of the US House of Representatives in 2016. Other than in Hawai'i and California, Asian American political representation at state and local levels of government remains modest and lower in proportion compared with the composition of the population of voters (see https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/AAPI-Participation.pdf).

The observation to draw from this discussion is that analysts should resist compartmentalizing the spheres of exclusion as the domain of one group and not others. Instead, analysts can better understand the dynamics of inequality with research designs and analytical strategies that systematically observe inequality in relational terms, across categories, time, and locations. Taken together, this third observation combines with previous arguments suggesting that the perils of aggregation demonstrate that socioeconomic inequality for Asian Americans is paradoxical only if considered in static, aggregate, and absolute terms. The Asian American case demonstrates that the "color-blind" ideology of opportunity is false. In analyzing inequality in the Americas from the vantage point of Asian Americans, it therefore is important to take care with aggregation, thereby both matching the method of categorization to the phenomenon under study and selecting appropriate frames of reference. Viewing the dynamics of inequality from the perspective of Asian American political exclusion encourages analysts to theorize about the role of variation in time, place, and institutional context with an objective of identifying power structures to reveal the dynamics of inequalities and how they are perpetuated. ▪

Figure 7: "Over the past 12 months, were you contacted by anyone ... to register or to vote in this year's election?"



Note: NHPIs = Non-Hispanic Pacific Islanders.
Source: www.naasurvey.com.

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