

# **Asian Americans and Politics: Voting Behavior and Political Involvement**

Elizabeth Hoene  
Bemidji State University

Political Science Senior Thesis  
Bemidji State University  
Dr. Patrick Donnay, Advisor  
March 2011

## ***Abstract***

*Voting behavior and political involvement are two commonly studied topics among political scientists today, most commonly involving Caucasian, African, and Hispanic Americans. However, there have been relatively few studies done on Asian American and Asian immigrant voting behavior and their political involvement. What causes Asian Americans and Asian immigrants to vote the way they do? How involved are they in American politics and why? These are questions that I am aiming to answer through the studying of the Pilot National Asian American Political Survey 2000-2001 from the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Socioeconomic factors such as income, level of education, marital status, and age are traditionally the factors that are studied when looking at the cause of voting behavior and political involvement. In addition to these, I will be looking at variables such as length of residence, country of origin, and knowledge of the English language as causal factors for voting behavior and political involvement. I anticipate the results to be varied among the countries of origin.*

## Introduction

Politics is an important part of many cultures around the world today.

This is especially true in the United States. There are so many ways that politics as a whole could be studied such as voting behavior, political involvement, and political ideology just to name a few. However, what is voting behavior and political involvement? Voting behavior is whether someone who is eligible votes and why they vote the way they do. Political involvement is how involved in politics someone is, how much they care or is interested in politics. There have been many studies done on American voting behavior and political involvement, primarily involving Caucasian Americans, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans. There have been relatively few studies done involving Asian Americans and their voting behavior, political ideology, and political involvement.

When studying Asian Americans, their voting behavior and political involvement, why they vote the way they do and how they become involved in politics is being looked at. There are several variables that are also looked at to answer these questions. Party identification (whether the respondent identifies themselves as being a Democrat, Republican, or Independent), socioeconomic status (age, income, main language, level of education, nationality, how long they have lived in the United States), political participation (voting in elections, taking part in political rallies), and partisanship (how partisan the respondent is, meaning are they strictly Democrat or strictly Republican) are the variables that were considered important when determining the reasoning behind

Asian American voting behavior and political involvement. SPSS data from the Pilot National Asian American Political Survey 2000-2001 was put into cross-tabulation tables to look at the causation effects of country of origin, level of education, income, gender, and citizenship on voting behavior and political involvement and how significant the results were.

## **Literature Review**

Partisanship and political party identification are commonly studied among political scientists. There is reasoning for this. It is very important to understand how or even if citizens align themselves with a particular party, which way they vote, and why. For years, the main races that were studied were Caucasians and African Americans. There have been relatively few studies done on how Latin Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans develop a party identification. There are many reasons why Caucasian Americans and African Americans affiliate themselves to a political party, but I am interested in how and why Asian Americans become a supporter or non-supporter of a party. Asian Americans are one of the fastest growing minority populations in the United States. By the year 2020, there will be an estimated twenty million Asian Americans in this country. They will make up around eight percent of the total population (Phan and Garcia, 2005).

There are many reasons as to why Asian Americans support a certain party or have a political identification. Socioeconomic status variables like age, income, level of

education, and how long one has been living in the United States are some. Others, like one's level of political participation and partisanship or nonpartisanship also have an effect on an Asian American's political party identification. My research question is this: In a comparison of Asian Americans, Asian Americans with higher levels of education are more likely to vote and be involved in politics than Asian Americans with a lower level or no education. The reasoning behind my theory is that there are so many factors that play a role in how involved in the political realm immigrants become particularly use and knowledge of the English language, to the length of their residency to education. I believe that these factors, among others, directly effect party affiliation and political involvement. If an Asian immigrant has not lived in the United States long enough to understand the political system and cannot understand or has a hard time understanding the English language, it would be difficult for them to become informed enough to become involved in the political arena.

## **Party Identification**

Political identification is the term used for when citizens align themselves with a certain political party. There can be many reasons behind why someone chooses to be a "Republican" versus being a "Democrat." There is quite a bit of evidentiary support for people who choose to be a member of a particular party because of their parents or other family member's political beliefs (Phan and Garcia, 2005). There is also support for the theory that political activism comes from one's level of education and that the family

member's beliefs have nothing to do with it (Phan and Garcia, 2005). Those who have higher levels of education, meaning those who have gone to school beyond the required high school years, are shown to have more interest in politics and therefore having a political identification. Then there are those that choose to not even develop a belief or support for a political party because of how they have been treated because of racial factors (i.e. stereotyping and discrimination that they have faced) that affect how they view their new country (Lien, 1994).

## **Socioeconomic Status**

Some of the most used socioeconomic variables in determining reasons behind the development of partisanship among any race are as follows: level of education, age, income, and how long one has been living in the United States. While it has been concluded as a general consensus that level of education plays a large role among all races, this is not necessarily the case among Asian Americans (Lien, 1994). Age affects political exposure and connection with political parties (Phan and Garcia, 2005).

According to the 2008 National Asian American Survey (Rucker, 2009), sixty-three percent of Asian Americans are adults and of that sixty-three percent, eighty-one percent are registered voters. There is also a significant relationship between the number of years an immigrant has lived in the United States and partisanship acquisition (Wong, 2000).

Wong states that analysis shows that the greater understanding and use of the English language coupled with more media exposure that comes with a longer residency

contribute to the acquisition of their partisanship. Roughly sixty percent of the Asian Americans living in the United States are foreign born. This is an important fact considering that the longer an immigrant has been a resident of the United States, the more likely they are to have developed identification with a certain political party because they will have had more exposure to the English language and the media, which in turn could educate the immigrant on the American political system. These things would then help them develop a party identification.

## **Political Participation**

What constitutes “political participation?” Political participation is voting in primaries, state and national elections, and taking part in the political arena in a variety of ways. While it is obvious that someone who is born in the United States is a citizen of the country and therefore is naturally allowed to vote, it is a much longer process for an immigrant. Immigrants who wish to become voting U.S. citizens have to go through a process that includes the following steps: naturalization, registration, and the last and easiest of the three, turn out on election days. However, to do these things, it takes quite a bit of effort and most importantly, time.

Becoming a U.S. citizen requires a minimum of five years, while registering to vote and going to the polls may require an extraordinary amount of time, information and resources (Lien, Collet, Wong, Ramakrishnan, 2001). The aforementioned requirements for voting and other issues like lack of knowledge of the U.S. political system and

language barriers, make it difficult to form a political identification, much less get to the polls, which in turn could turn some Asian Americans off on voting. Asian Americans are known to have lowest numbers when it comes to turn-out at the polls in comparison to white and African Americans (Lien, et al. 2001). However, even with these issues, Asian Americans possess the fastest growth rate of citizenship of all racial groups, including Hispanics (Lien, 2001).

### **Non-partisan versus Partisan Asian Americans**

Unlike the widely studied political behaviors and political involvement of African Americans and Latinos, traditionally, Asian Americans have been known to vote more Republican in primaries and state and national elections. A study of Asian American partisanship acquisition found immigrants from China, Korea, and Southeast Asia became more Republican with increased exposure to living in America (Phan and Garcia, 2005). However, there is new data that has been unveiled that suggests that there are more Asian Americans that classify themselves as Independent than either of the other major political parties. There are three main types of Independents. The first type is the person who is an Independent but also supports one of the two major parties based on the party's stance on important issues. The second type is the person who identifies him or herself with just being an Independent and not a supporter of either one of the two major parties regardless of issues but supports smaller, less popular parties. Lastly, the third type is the person who is not attached to any political party. Nguyen and Garand (2007)



state in their conference paper, “Partisan Strength and Nonpartisanship Among Asian Americans,” that Independents are generally individuals who feel the need to hold on to some of their independent thinking, yet who are at the same time, affiliated with either the Republican Party or the Democratic Party. According to the Pilot National Asian American Political Survey, there have been an equal number of Asian Americans that are partisan and that are not partisan.

There are around fifteen different ethnicities that fall under the category of Asian American. The Pacific Islands, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Japan, North and South Korea, and China are among the countries with the largest number of immigrants to the United States. Cultural factors that are linked to these different ethnicities, like traditions, values and religions, and geographical locations of their native land all play a role in whether or not an Asian American is partisan or non partisan. Because of these differences, the Asian ethnicities have their own political perspectives and ways of identifying with a political party.

Asian Americans are one of the most interesting and dynamic ethnic groups to study for the reason that they are all not the same. Unlike African Americans and Latin Americans, two minority groups that overwhelmingly align themselves with the Democratic Party, Asian Americans do not typically all vote for or support the same political party. There are many reasons why this is. The different religions and values, how long an immigrant has been living in the United States, their age and level of education all play a large role in the extent to which Asian Americans become partisan

and in the way they become politically involved. These same reasons also play a role in if an Asian American even wants to take part in the political arena.

## **Methods and Analysis**

Finding a data set to use that was large enough and asked appropriate questions was rather difficult. Most data sets that were looked at had few Asian American respondents. However, the Pilot National Asian American Survey, the SPSS data set that was used for this study, asked primarily politically motivated questions to Asian Americans only. Four independent variables (Country of Origin, Income, Gender, and Level of Education) and three dependent variables (Party Identification, Voted in 2000, and Reasons for Not Voting) were used in six cross-tabulation tables. Levels of Chi-Square significance and measurement of association in the form of Lambda were identified and analyzed for each of the six tables.

### **Table 1: Effect of Country of Origin on Party Identification**

**would go here**

The first cross-tabulation table has Country of Origin, a nominal variable, as the independent variable with Party Identification, a recoded nominal variable, as the dependent variable. The Country of Origin variable consists of eight Asian countries; China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, the Philippines, and India/Pakistan. China, Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and India/Pakistan had the highest number of

respondents. The Party Identification variable was recoded into the three major parties; Democrat, Independent, and Republican. Of the seven hundred and eighty-seven respondents, over sixty percent of them identified themselves as Democrat. Republican would be next, with twenty-nine percent of the Asian respondents identifying themselves as a believer in the party. Independent had the lowest number of respondents at almost nine and a half percent. Reasoning for these numbers could be that traditionally, a majority of minorities favor the Democratic Party. The only country that does not follow this is Vietnam with about forty percent of the respondents supporting the Republican Party being the majority. The effect their homeland's government could also be why they support the party they do. The relationship between Country of Origin and Party Identification was shown to be significant, with the Chi-Square being .000. The relationship also showed to be positive and strong with Lambda being .343

## **Table 2: Effect of Level of Education on Party Identification**

**would go here**

For the second cross-tabulation table, Level of Education, a recoded and nominal variable, was the independent variable. Party Identification was again used as the dependent variable, only a fourth category, do not know, was added to really look at the effect of education on the variable. This was an important table to the research for this study. Level of Education was recoded into four categories; Grade school or less, some high school, high school graduate or some training or college, and then college degree or

beyond. There was an overwhelming amount of respondents, ninety percent, that said they were a high school grad and higher. In the HS Grad/Some training or some college category, those who identified themselves Democrat was nearly forty percent of the respondents where as those who Do Not Know was roughly thirty-nine percent of the respondents.

In the College Degree and beyond category, seventy-one percent of the respondents identified themselves with one of the three parties, where as only twenty-nine percent of the respondent's replied that they did not know or did not have a party. The relationship between Level of Education and Party Identification showed to be significant with a Chi-Square of .000. The measure of association or Lambda showed to be positive, however the there was a weak measure at .051.

### **Table 3: Effect of Level of Education on Voting would go here**

The third cross-tabulation table looks at the effect of Level of Education on Voting. Again, Level of Education is the independent variable. Voting in 2000, a nominal variable is the dependent variable. This variable was one of the only variables in the data set that could be used to measure if a respondent participates in politics. Overall, two things were observed: more people have a high school degree and beyond then respondents that do not and more respondents did not vote in the 2000 election then those that did. Another interesting thing that was found was the in the College Degree and Beyond category, there was less then a percent difference in those that voted and those

that did not vote. While the numbers in the table were different than expected, the relationship between Level of Education and Voted in 2000 showed to be statistically significant at .000. The measure of association was positive and very strong at .902.

**Table 4: Effect of Country of Origin on Reasons for Not Voting  
would go here**

The fourth relationship that was analyzed was the one between the independent variable, Country of Origin and the dependent variable, Reasons For Not Voting which is a recoded nominal variable. There were several reasons given as to why one did not vote in the original Reasons variable. However, the only reasons given that actually had solid numbers of respondents were Not a Citizen and Citizen but Not Registered to Vote. Overall, seventy percent of the respondents replied that they were not citizens and thirty percent replied that they were citizens but they were not registered. China, Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines and India/Pakistan had the greatest numbers of respondents. Of the respondents from these countries, a majority of them replied that they are not citizens when asked why they do not vote. The only country that had more respondents that replied that they were citizens but not registered was Hong Kong, by ten percent. The relationship between these variables was shown to be statistically significant with the Chi-Square at .000. There was positive measure of association and it was strong at .763.

### **Table 5: Effect of Income on Party Identification would go here**

The effect of Income on Party Identification was also looked at during this study. Income, a recoded and nominal variable, is the independent variable. It is the measure of the respondent's family yearly income. Party Identification was again used for the dependent variable, this time omitting the Do Not Know category. Income was originally an interval variable. The cross-tabulation table became too large with it as it was; so it was recoded into Lower Income (<\$10,000-19,999), Lower to Middle Income (\$20,000-39,999), Middle Income (\$40,000-59,999) and Upper Income (\$60,000- <). There were more Upper Income respondents overall. There were also more Democrat respondents overall. For each Income category, over sixty percent of the respondents replied that they felt they were Democrats. The Independent category had the smallest number of respondents. The numbers on the table did not show that level of income mattered. The relationship was not statistically significant with a Chi-Square of .361. The measure of association was very weak, if not nonexistent at .000.

### **Table 6: Effect of Gender on Party Identification would go here**

The last relationship looked at in this study was the effect of gender on party identification. For this cross-tabulation table, Gender, a nominal variable, is the independent variable. Party Identification is the dependent variable. There were more male respondents and just over sixty percent of all of the respondents replied that they were Democrat. Looking at the table, gender showed to not be much of a factor with the

percentages pretty close. The Republican row shows the only large difference with about thirty-three percent of the male respondents and twenty-five percent of the females replying that they were Republican. The relationship between these two variables was not very statistically significant with a Chi-Square of .054. The measure of association was again very weak at .000.

## **Conclusion**

Asian Americans are one of the most interesting and diversified ethnicities in America today. There are several factors that can play into whether or not someone votes or if they participate in politics. Gender, income, country of origin, and one's length of stay in the United States are all factors that play a role. These factors can be different for every ethnicity. However, one of the biggest factors is level of education. The impact of one's level of education was the basis for the research for this paper. This variable was shown to have quite an effect on respondent's political party identification. The relationship between level of education and party identification was statistically significant, with a positive and strong measure of association. This data statistically supports the first part of the research question that states that Asian American respondents with higher levels of education are more likely to have a party identification and participate in politics than Asian Americans with a lower level or no education.

Because there was a lack of a variable that plainly showed political participation, Voted in 2000 was used as the dependent variable to indicate political participation.

Again, the relationship was shown to be statistically significant and had a strong, positive measure of association. This data supports the second part of the research question.

Country of Origin as an independent variable was also shown to have a statistically significant relationship with party identification. There was also a statistically significant relationship between Country of Origin and Reason for Not Voting. A theory for this might be that for the respondents that are citizens but not registered to vote, their reasoning may be that they do not know enough about the political system or they may feel like they will not make a difference. The only variables that did not have an impact on party identification were Gender and Income. Further research would be necessary to determine why Country of Origin had such a large impact.



## Appendix

Table 1: Political Party Identification by Country of Origin

		COUNTRY OF ORIGIN							Total	
		CHINA	TAIWAN	HONG KONG	KOREA	VIETNAM	JAPAN	PHILIPPINE S		INDIA/PAKISTA N
Political Party Identification	Democrat	71 77.2%	20 62.5%	15 88.2%	79 59.4%	17 29.8%	96 69.1%	111 59.4%	76 58.5%	485 61.6%
	Independent	2 2.2%	1 3.1%	0 .0%	14 10.5%	17 29.8%	14 10.1%	11 5.9%	15 11.5%	74 9.4%
	Republican	19 20.7%	11 34.4%	2 11.8%	40 30.1%	23 40.4%	29 20.9%	65 34.8%	39 30.0%	228 29.0%
Total		92 100.0%	32 100.0%	17 100.0%	133 100.0%	57 100.0%	139 100.0%	187 100.0%	130 100.0%	787 100.0%

Chi-Square= .000

Lambda= .023

Table 2: Effect of Level of Education on Party Identification

		Highest Level of Education				Total
		Grade school or less	Some high school	HS Grad/Some training or college	College degree and beyond	
Political Party Identification	Democrat	19 35.8%	16 26.2%	174 39.7%	255 42.8%	464 40.4%
	Independent	1 1.9%	3 4.9%	25 5.7%	41 6.9%	70 6.1%
	Republican	3 5.7%	9 14.8%	69 15.8%	130 21.8%	211 18.4%
	DK/NA	30 56.6%	33 54.1%	170 38.8%	170 28.5%	403 35.1%
Total		53 100.0%	61 100.0%	438 100.0%	596 100.0%	1148 100.0%

Chi-Square: .000

Lambda: .051

**Table 3: Effect of Level of Education on Voting**

		Highest Level of Education				Total
		Grade school or less	Some high school	HS Grad/Some training or college	College degree and beyond	
VOTED IN 2000	YES	13 24.5%	16 26.2%	176 40.2%	298 50.3%	503 43.9%
	NO	40 75.5%	45 73.8%	262 59.8%	295 49.7%	642 56.1%
Total		53 100.0%	61 100.0%	438 100.0%	593 100.0%	1145 100.0%

Chi-Square: .000

Lambda: .902

**Table 4: Reason for not Voting by Country of Origin**

		COUNTRY OF ORIGIN								Total
		CHINA	TAIWAN	HONG KONG	KOREA	VIETNAM	JAPAN	PHILIPPINES	INDIA/PAKISTAN	
Reason for not voting	Not a Citizen	93 78.2%	19 65.5%	5 45.5%	77 85.8%	45 58.4%	27 57.4%	47 53.4%	75 83.3%	388 70.0%
	Citizen but not registered to vote	29 23.8%	10 34.5%	6 54.5%	13 14.4%	32 41.8%	20 42.8%	41 48.8%	15 18.7%	168 30.0%
Total		122 100.0%	29 100.0%	11 100.0%	90 100.0%	77 100.0%	47 100.0%	88 100.0%	90 100.0%	554 100.0%

Chi-Square= .000

Lambda= .763

Table 5: Effect of Income on Party Identification

		Income				Total
		Lower Class	Lower to Middle Class	Middle Class	Upper Class	
Party Identification	Democrat	61 67.8%	106 61.6%	88 62.4%	143 64.1%	398 63.6%
	Independent	11 12.2%	16 9.3%	11 7.8%	13 5.8%	51 8.1%
	Republican	18 20.0%	50 29.1%	42 29.8%	67 30.0%	177 28.3%
Total		90 100.0%	172 100.0%	141 100.0%	223 100.0%	626 100.0%

Chi-Square: .361

Lambda: .000

Table 6: Effect of Gender on Party Identification

		GENDER		Total
		MALE	FEMALE	
Party Identification	Democrat	244 58.9%	241 64.6%	485 61.6%
	Independent	35 8.5%	39 10.5%	74 9.4%
	Republican	135 32.6%	93 24.9%	228 29.0%
Total		414 100.0%	373 100.0%	787 100.0%

Chi-Square: .054

Lambda: .000

## Bibliography

- Cain, B., Kiewiet, D., & Uhlener, C. (1991). The Acquisition of partisanship by latinos and asian americans. *American Journal of Political Science*, 35(2), 390-422.
- Chong, D., & Kim, D. (2006). The Experiences and effects of economic status among racial and ethnic minorities. *American Political Science Review*, 100(3), 335-351.
- Doyle, W. (2005). Public opinion, partisan identification, and higher education policy. *Vanderbilt*. Retrieved (2010, February 25) from <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lpo/doyle/pubopin.pdf>
- Kim, C. (1999). The racial triangulation of asian Americans. *Politics and Society*, 27(1), 105-138
- Korey, J., & Lascher, E. (2006). Macropartisanship in california. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 70(1), 48-65.
- Leighley, J., & Vedlitz, A. (1999). Race, ethnicity, and political participation: competing models and contrasting explanations. *The Journal of Politics*, 61(4), 1092-1114.

Lien, P., Collet, C., Wong, J., & Ramakrishnan, S. (2001). Asian pacific-american public

opinion and political participation. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 34(3),

Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1353550?seq=1>

Lien, P. (1994). Ethnicity and political participation: a comparison between asian and mexican americans. *Political Behavior*, 16(2), 237-264.

Lien, P. (2004). Asian Americans and voting participation: comparing racial and ethnic differences in recent u.s. elections. *International Migration Review*, 38(2), 493-517

Nguyen, N., & Garand, J. (2007). Partisan Strength and Nonpartisanship Among Asian Americans. *Political research online*. Retrieved (2010, February 24) from [www.politicalscience.org](http://www.politicalscience.org)

Nguyen, N., & Garand, J. (2007). Explaining the Partisan Socialization of Asian Americans. *Political research online*. Retrieved (2010, February 25) from [www.politicalscience.org](http://www.politicalscience.org)

Phan, N., & Garcia, J. (2005). Asian American Partisanship: Dynamics of Partisan and Non-partisan Identities . *Political research online*. Retrieved (2010, February 24) from [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p41297\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p41297_index.html)

Rucker, K. (2009, April 22). Why Do asian Americans get involved in politics: 2008 naas survery highlights. Retrieved from <http://www.asianweek.com/2009/04/22/why-do-asian-americans-get-involved-in-politics-2008-naas-survey-highlights/>

Uhlener, C, Cain, B, & Kiewiet, D. (1989). Political participation of the ethnic minorities in the 1980s. *Political Behavior*, 11(3)

Wong, J.S. (2000). The Effects of age and political exposure on the development of party identification among asian american and latino immigrants in the united states. *Political Behavior*, 22(4), 341-371.

