

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

## Anti-Asian Americanism and the 2020 Elections

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There is an alarming increase in negative treatment against Americans of Asian descent, coinciding with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the fever pitch of the 2020 election in the United States. This policy brief identifies four elements that are critical to understanding the trend towards anti-Asian Americanism. Incidents of harassment and hate against Asian Americans are:

1. not isolated or rare, but pervasive.
2. not a new phenomenon, but present throughout the history of Asians in America.
3. not limited to disaffected, uneducated masses, but often instigated by political elites.
4. not limited to everyday social interactions, but also includes efforts to curb the citizenship rights and political power of Asian Americans as a group.

Before discussing these four elements, it is important to first describe the broader backdrop against which the trend of anti-Asian Americanism is set.

The United States is a democracy in crisis. Democracy is not just backsliding (Bermeo 2016) but sits on the verge of a precipitous descent into chronic violence and civil strife. In their book *How Democracies Die*, Harvard professors Steve Levitsky and Dan Ziblatt (2018) identify two diagnostic criteria for democracies at mortal risk.

First, democracies are at risk when competing political parties lose the norm of mutual toleration. Levitsky and Ziblatt define this as the recognition that electoral competition is the only game in town, where losers of an election must simply try again in the next election rather than resorting to actions outside of democratic institutions. Today, one in three Americans still believe that Joe Biden is not the legitimate winner of the 2020 election. States like Arizona are currently conducting sham audits of the 2020 vote count despite zero evidence of election irregularities.

Second, democracies are at mortal risk when competing political parties lose the norm of forbearance, defined as a commitment to playing the long game, with opposing parties willing to respect both the letter and the spirit of the law. Consider the lack of forbearance in the Republican-led Senate's unwillingness to consider the Supreme Court nominee Merrick Garland to the US Supreme Court in the last year of Barack Obama's presidency, in contrast to the Senate's rush to approve Brett Kavanaugh in the last months of Donald Trump's presidency. Or consider the current debate to suspend Senate filibuster rules on the Democratic side of the aisle.

This loss of mutual toleration and forbearance is undeniably rooted in the political, social, cultural, and racial polarization of the United States. Levitsky and Ziblatt write that "if one thing is clear from studying breakdowns throughout history, it is that extreme polarization can kill democracies" (2018, p. 7).

In the United States today, even prior to Donald Trump's ascendancy to the White House, Democrats see Republicans as a threat to the country's well-being, and an even greater share of

Republicans see Democrats as the same. This mutual hostility has only deepened since Trump's presidency. Among Trump's signature achievements has been to yoke this polarization onto other sources of division in America—race, gender, nationality, geography, culture, epistemology. Today, Americans cannot even agree on what is real and what is fake about our world and its daily events.

Add the unprecedented public health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and the simmering tensions between the United States and China to this incendiary mix of polarization, division, and hostility and all the ingredients are present for the epidemic of aggression, discrimination, and violence that we have seen. And with the pandemic as a catalyst, all that malevolence has been disproportionately targeted towards a group of Americans that has been scapegoated for the public health threat and its economic consequences.

Historically, one might expect that scapegoated group to be African Americans, the poor, sexual minorities, or undocumented immigrants from Mexico; but this time, the fire has been raging against Asian Americans. To casual observers, that may be shocking, since Asian Americans are often portrayed as a "model minority," a minoritized, largely immigrant group that is prospering by following the rules (Wu, 2014). However, this fire of misdirected aggression has had terrifying, even lethal consequences like the mass shooting in Atlanta this March at three Asian American-owned spas, leaving eight people dead, four of whom were Korean American women.

This policy brief highlights four critical points to understand the rise of hate against Asian Americans in the United States today. First, these are not isolated, rare incidents. Anti-Asian American harassment and hate is pervasive and proliferating. Second, this negative treatment of Asian Americans is not new and should not be surprising. Anti-Asian American harassment and hate have been present for as long as Asians have been in the United States. Third, anti-Asian Americanism is not found just among the disaffected and uneducated masses, but also among political elites who sow the seeds of scapegoating and resentment. Fourth, adverse treatment is not limited to verbal harassment, discrimination, and violence against Asian Americans in everyday social interactions. There are political ramifications in ongoing efforts to curb their citizenship rights and political power as a group.

## **A Pervasive Phenomenon**

On the widespread extent of anti-Asian American harassment and hate, these are just some data points:

- The non-profit Stop AAPI Hate (2021) reported 6,603 incidents of violence, discrimination, harassment, and civil rights violations between March 2020 and the end of February 2021.
- 68% of these incidents are reports of verbal harassment and name-calling, but 11% are cases of physical assault; 7% are reports of being coughed at or spat on (a reference to China-virus sentiment), and; 5% are reports of workplace discrimination.

These figures are self-reported and crowdsourced data and not be representative and free from measurement error. A more systematic reporting from the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at Cal State University tracks police reports of hate crimes in America's 16 largest cities (Levin, 2021). They find that:

- Between 2019 and 2020 alone, anti-Asian American hate crimes increased 149%. During this same time period, hate crimes overall declined 7%.
- In New York City, during the first quarter of 2020 (prior to the COVID-19 outbreak), there were 13 such incidents; for the first quarter of 2021, there were 47. This database also finds

significant increases in police reports of hate crimes against Asian Americans in LA, Boston, San Jose, San Francisco, and other cities with large Asian American populations.

The third source of data is from surveys of a representative sample of Asian Americans. Here are some findings from the Pew Research Center (2021). In surveys conducted last summer and this spring, they found that:

- 81% of Asian Americans say that violence against Asian Americans in the US is increasing.
- 45% say they have experienced at least one of the following five hateful incidents since the pandemic began: fearing that someone would threaten or physically harm them because they are Asian American; having people act uncomfortable around them because they are Asian American; being subject to racial slurs and jokes because they are Asian American; being told by someone to go back to their home country; being told by someone that they are responsible for COVID-19.<sup>1</sup>
- The Asian American subgroup most likely to report having experienced one of these incidents is Chinese Americans. The second likeliest group is Korean Americans.

## **A History of Anti-Asian Americanism**

Anti-Asian harassment, hate, and violence have a history that dates back to the first waves of immigrants arriving on American shores in the 19th century. Read about America's immigration history and you will find forgotten incidents like the 18 Chinese immigrants who were lynched and mutilated in Los Angeles in 1871; several dozen Chinese immigrants who were shot to death and burned in Rock Springs, Wyoming in 1885; a massacre of some 34 Chinese gold miners in Hells Canyon, Oregon in 1887 (see, e.g., Lew-Williams 2018, Lee 2019).

There are also familiar and more recent incidents, like the incarceration of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor during World War II. Or the murder of Vincent Chin in Detroit by two unemployed white autoworkers who mistook Chin for a Japanese American in 1980. Or the mass killing of mostly Southeast Asian refugee children at an elementary school in Stockton, California in 1989. Or the violence and property crimes against Korean American businesses in the aftermath of Sa-I-Gu in Los Angeles in 1992.

A common theme that connects the many moments of anti-Asian Americanism throughout United States history is the fear of an unknown, "alien" other and the perception of threat arising from that fear. This fear is often stoked by factors such as perceived or real economic competition, demographic change, and foreign policy threats. The current manifestation of harassment, hate, and violence, for example, often targets Chinese Americans specifically because of the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan and because that origin is fuel to the fire of several years of escalating vitriolic exchanges between the US and China during the Trump Administration.

## **The Role of Political Elites**

The backdrop of heated rhetoric between Donald Trump and Xi Jinping and an on-again-off-again trade war between the US and China brings out a third crucial point. The scapegoating and negative treatment of Asian Americans, both historically and today, is not a spontaneous outbreak from the hoi polloi of society. Rather, as with ethnocentrism and ethnonationalism movements more generally, opportunistic business and political leaders are often at the vanguard, enabled by elite

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<sup>1</sup> The 45% figure for Asian Americans is almost as high as the 52% of African Americans who say that one of these incidents happened to them.

institutions and the force of law. For instance, the first restrictive immigration law to be enacted in the United States marking the end of open borders was the Page Act in 1875, which explicitly targeted the exclusion of "immoral Chinese women." This was followed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and many dozen other "racial prerequisite" laws and court rulings thereafter (Haney Lopez, 1996).

The most eminent elites of the day were not silent about this rising tide of nativism and racism in the 19th century. Leland Stanford, founder of Stanford University, is infamous for stating in 1862 on Chinese migration 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 ... 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." Similarly, John Boalt, erstwhile namesake of UC-Berkeley's venerated law school, wrote in 1877 that "The Caucasian and Mongolian races are non-assimilating races ... The Chinaman [sic] ... excites in us ... an unconscious repulsion ... In all respects, the Chinese differ from us more than any known race."

In much the same way, today's harassment, hate, and violence against Asian Americans is not a phenomenon isolated to the uneducated, to the person on the street looking to scapegoat someone for COVID or for losing their home or their job. Anti-Asian Americanism today, as it has been historically, is ignited by the words and deeds of those in the highest positions of power in America. We need only recall Donald Trump's disparagements like the "Chinese virus," the "kung flu" (not to mention his reference to Mexican immigrants as "rapists" and African nations as "shithole countries") to connect the words of political leaders to deeds like white nationalist marches and anti-Asian violence.

### **From Hate in the Streets to Suppression in Elections**

Finally, the harassment and hate against Asian Americans is not merely stoked by verbal disparagements from the now disgraced former president. A new kind of threat faces Asian Americans today in state legislatures throughout America. Between January and June of 2021, at least 17 states have enacted at least 28 new laws that restrict access to voting. And the number of states and laws keeps growing.

These are laws that are ostensibly passed under the guise of ensuring election integrity, but that predicate lacks any verifiable evidence of a threat to secure elections. Rather, these new laws appear to take dead aim at one target: racial minorities' access to vote in America.

These laws make it harder for all Americans to register to vote, maintain their voter registration status, and to vote by mail or absentee. In particular, the specific terms of this new legal strategy by Republican state legislatures take a broad swipe to undercut the ways that African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans vote. For Asian Americans, voter registration often requires new and tightened proof of identification that includes being able to match the exact spelling of a person's names across different proofs of identification, and Asian names are much likelier to be misspelled or incorrectly transcribed. In addition, new and tightened identification requirements also require an exact match of home addresses across different forms of identification, and Asian Americans (like other immigrant groups) are more likely to change addresses more frequently. Additionally, some states plan to reduce the number of mail-in ballot drop boxes, targeting urban areas with higher concentrations of Black, Latino, and Asian American voters. Texas, for example, is proposing to set up just one drop box for the entire city of Houston.

Asian Americans are also especially likely to vote through the modes that are explicitly targeted in these state laws: voting by mail and absentee voting. The US Census Bureau's Current Population Survey data show that in 2020, 69% of all American voters cast their ballots by mail or by early voting. This high figure is perhaps unsurprising given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but among Asian Americans, it is an even higher 82% who voted by mail or voted early.

## Looking to the Future: Power and Representation

The main points of this policy brief are grim. American democracy is in crisis. Harassment, hate, and violence against Asian Americans are on the rise and linked to both Donald Trump's presidency and the pandemic. This is just the latest episode of a long history of anti-Asian violence. It is also fueled by racial scapegoating at the highest levels of our political system, written into our laws. Yet, there is still potential for hope and empowerment.

First, against the backdrop of threats to our democracy, American citizens answered the call of duty in the 2020 election. More than 158 million Americans voted, 17 million more than in 2016. This represented a 12 percent increase—the largest increase in turnout between presidential elections on record. This upsurge in turnout was especially high among Asian Americans. Historically, Asian Americans have been viewed as a "low propensity" segment of the electorate and thus a poor investment in campaign efforts and resources. In spite of this, Asian Americans have been the most rapidly and consistently growing segment of the electorate. Between 2012 and 2016, Asian American voter turnout grew 16% according to estimates by Catalist, in a year when many other voters stayed home. Between 2016 and 2020, turnout among Asian Americans increased by 20%, much greater than the 12% overall increase nationally. This increase in Asian American turnout was especially high in Southern states like Kentucky (where it increased 97% between 2016 and 2020), Tennessee (85%), and Georgia (83%).

There are signs that the growing political participation of Asian Americans is translating into greater political voice. One obvious indicator of voice and influence is seats in political offices. Consider political representation for Korean Americans. Between 1999 -- when Jay Kim (CA-41) lost his bid for re-election -- and 2018, there were zero Korean Americans in Congress. Over those two decades, Korean Americans grew in numbers from 1.2 million to roughly 2 million. Then, in 2018, Andy Kim won his bid to represent New Jersey's 3rd district. And in 2020, three more Korean Americans were elected: Young Kim (CA-39), Michelle Steel (CA-48), and Marilyn Strickland (WA-10). Many other qualified, competitive Korean American candidates have run for Congress in the last few years like Robert Ahn, David Min, Pearl Kim, Dan Koh, and David Kim. In addition to rising electoral participation and political representation, Asian Americans are also increasingly civically engaged. Both nationally and in local communities, Asian Americans are organizing around common interests. Notably, many prominent Asian American civil society organizations are being run by Korean Americans, like EunSook Lee at the AAPI Civic Engagement Fund, Connie Chung Joe at Asian Americans Advancing Justice, and Stephanie Cho at Advancing Justice Atlanta. Korean Americans are also building infrastructure by forming relatively newer organizations like the Korean American Grassroots Conference, Council of Korean Americans, Korean Americans for Political Action, and Korean American Community Foundation.

Out of crisis, it is said, opportunity is born. The outbreak of anti-Asian American harassment and hate has been horrific and heartbreaking. At the same time, it has awakened Asian Americans to the importance of collective action and community empowerment. Perhaps the apotheosis of this dialectic of crisis and opportunity is the recent passage of the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Bill, co-sponsored by Representative Grace Meng (NY-06) and Senator Mazie Hirono (Hawaii), and intended to respond to and restrain the rise of anti-Asian American hate crimes. Despite a democracy under mortal threat, riven by partisan polarization, this landmark legislation nonetheless passed this May with a vote of 364-62 in the House of Representatives and received a nearly unanimous vote in the Senate. This remarkable degree of bipartisanship demonstrates that, while the current outbreak may be just the latest episode of a long history of anti-Asian violence, progress is possible. ■

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