

ASIAN-AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION:
THE CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL INVISIBILITY AND POLITICAL ALIENATION

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Political Science

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts

By

Baongan Nguyenvinh Chuor

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary political scientists have found that Asians do not follow the traditional socioeconomic model that is often used to predict an individual's likelihood to participate in the United States political process. As such, they have begun to explore the barriers to political participation but only focus on the internal roadblocks. Therefore, this paper contributes to the nascent literature on this subject by studying external barriers, such as *social invisibility* and *political alienation*, by implementing an original survey at the University of Houston.

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To my family
for their unparalleled hard work and support
without which I would not be where I am today
nor where I will be in the future.

Uống nước phải nhớ nguồn.

Introduction

An individual's likelihood to participate in politics is typically correlated to their socioeconomic status. But while Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) are among the most educated and highest income earning people in the United States, they have shown extremely low levels of political participation. In fact, they are among the least likely racial group to take part in the American political system. Therefore, the goal of this thesis is to address the following research question: despite the high income and education levels among Asian-Americans, why do they participate in American politics at such low rates?

A major obstacle in writing this thesis is the limited existing scholarship on this topic. While political scientists have proposed theories such as contemporary migration and internal diversity of the Asian population to explain their low political participation rates, they do not study the effects of social invisibility and political alienation on political participation. To address the lack of attention given to this area of study, I implement a project that advances the existing research on Asian-American political participation. I hypothesize that Asians will report higher levels of income but higher levels of social invisibility and political alienation. To test my hypothesis, I designed and fielded an original survey. Based on the collected data, I provide supporting evidence for a negative relationship between social invisibility and political participation. Moreover, my findings support the same relationship between political alienation and political participation. This thesis provides a clearer picture on the external barriers that inhibit Asian individuals from integrating into American politics. As such, political campaigns can use the findings from this study to understand the impact of *social invisibility* and *political alienation* on their Asian constituents.

Literature Review

Historically, Asians were the least likely racial group to vote, but the 2016 general election marked a turning point in AAPI voting patterns. Compared to 2012, AAPI turnout increased by 2.4 percent (Masuoka, Han, Leung, and Zheng, 2018), and for the first time since 1996, Asian-American voter turnout surpassed that of Latino-Americans (Carlos, 2018; Krogstad & López, 2017). Still, AAPI participation lagged behind that of other racial groups: only 49.3 percent of Asians voted compared to 65.3 percent of non-Hispanic Whites and 59.6 of Blacks (US Census Bureau, 2017d). Given Asians are the fastest growing racial group in America (López, Ruiz, & Patten, 2017; Masuoka, Han, Leung, & Zheng, 2018; Ramakrishnan, Wong, Lee, & Lee, 2017) and hold a unique political position as a decisive swing vote in several states (Junn & Masuoka, 2008; Phillips, 2018; Ramakrishnan & Yeung, 2014; Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011), they represent a crucial but largely untapped voter base (Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). Therefore, it is important to examine the barriers Asian-American and Pacific Islanders face when participating in American politics.

Past academic scholarship argues that the strongest indicator of a person's likelihood to participate in American politics is their socioeconomic status (SES). Many credit Verba, Scholzman, Brady, & Nie (1993) as some of the first scholars to study what is now the *traditional socioeconomic model* (Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999; McClain & Carew, 2018). Since the 1970s, "Study after study has confirmed their finding that citizens with higher levels of education, income, and occupational status tend to vote more, contact more, organize more, and campaign more than do those with lower status" (Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999, 1094). However, contemporary political scholarship negates the theory that SES is applicable to all racial groups when predicting their rate of political participation, especially for Asian-Americans (Jang, 2009;

Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999). According to the US Census Bureau (Ryan & Bauman, 2016), Asian-Americans were more likely than any other racial group (i.e. White, Black, or Hispanic/Latino) to have a bachelor's degree (53.6 percent, 32 percent, 22.5 percent, and 15.5 percent respectively). Nevertheless, Asians were the least likely racial group to vote until the 2016 general election (Carlos 2018, Krogstad & López, 2017). To study this phenomenon, scholars have suggested additional theories for the causes of low AAPI political participation among Asian-Americans, such as immigrant status, low linguistic assimilation, intergenerational differences, and lack of group cohesion.

Although Asian migration to the United States dates back to the 1700s, Asians did not gain mainstream attention until the growth of Chinese and Japanese immigration in the 1800s (McClain & Carew, 2018; Motomura, 2007). The integration of Asians into American society was contentious, unwelcome at various levels of government, and led to discriminatory policies to segregate Asians from the rest of American society (Motomura, 2007). For example, Asian immigrants were not allowed to become American citizens until the McCarran-Walter Act, was enacted (McClain and Carew, 2018, Motomura, 2007). Nevertheless, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act marked the beginning of the liberalization of immigration policy in the United States by abolishing the national origins system that previously favored migrants from Western Europe (Daniels, 2002; McClain & Carew, 2018; Motomura, 2007; Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). Moreover, it opened migration to victims of humanitarian crises, highly skilled and educated individuals, and people seeking family reunification (Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). This policy dramatically grew and reshaped the Asian-American population. Now, in a population of more than 18 million people, 67 percent of Asian-Americans and 80 percent of AAPI adults are foreign born, while the corresponding values for non-Hispanic whites are 38

percent and 53 percent (US Census Bureau, 2017a; Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). As such, only 35 percent of Asian-American adults are voters (Masuoka, Han, Leung, & Zheng, 2018, 190).

As the most heavily immigrant racial group in the United States (Masuoka, Han, Leung, & Zheng, 2018), Asians face various obstacles to political participation, such as citizenship status (Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). While citizenship is not a factor in some political activities such as protesting, others like federal voting rights are only extended to citizens (Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). Since only two-thirds of the Asian-American population are United States citizens and eligible voters, political campaigns conducting Get Out the Vote (GOTV) initiatives are reluctant to invest in this group given insufficient guarantee of benefit. (Bedolla & Michelson, 2009; Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). In addition, experts in AAPI political participation contend naturalized citizens are more motivated to be politically active. For example, they are more likely than noncitizens to contribute money to politics and contact a government official (Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011).

Scholars have also studied the political behaviors of Asians through the lens of intergenerational diversity. To begin, even the AAPI foreign-born population can be divided into adult migrants (i.e. first generation) and child migrants (i.e. 1.5 generation). This distinction entails varying levels of engagement with American institutions (e.g. school) (Rumbaut, 2008) where language assimilation and political socialization occur. These two immigrant generation cohorts nevertheless come together to comprise a large proportion of Asian-Americans who are limited English proficiency speakers. According to the most recent US Census data (2017a), 43.8 percent of the foreign-born population and 30.4 percent of the general AAPI population speak

English less than very well. This means that 5.2 million Asians do not have a strong command of English and are therefore linguistically constrained from assimilating into American society and politics (Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011).

As the US-born (i.e. second-generation immigrant) cohort grows, it is important to study the way extent to which they engage with American institutions. Although the literature on US-born Asian-American political socialization is nascent, Wong et al. (2011) and Carlos (2018) present interesting theories for political activity (or lack thereof) among second-generation individuals. Native-born Asian-Americans are unique because they face obstacles to political socialization as the children of immigrants but also have greater access to American institutions that help them shape their political beliefs and knowledge than their foreign-born counterparts. As such, Carlos (2018) argues that second-generation Americans experience a prolonged partisan socialization process, in which they are less likely to attain political information in the home, so they must rely on their experiences in American institutions to help them form their political identities. Although scholars have suggested that politicization for the average American typically begins during early childhood, others argue that this traditional partisan attainment story does not apply to second-generation Latinos or Asian-Americans, two racial groups that most benefitted from the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (Carlos, 2018; Dahlgard, 2018; Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). Where most White Americans are likely to follow this trend, political socialization occurs much later in life for most Asians and Latinos (Carlos, 2018).

Academic scholarship acknowledges that perception of a shared common history and destiny are conducive to higher rates of voter registration and voting (McClain & Carew, 2018), but most of the research in this area of study is focused on African-Americans. Dawson (1995),

for example, asserts that a history of economic oppression is the root of the *black utility heuristic*, a theory that says an African-American individual's "[political] preferences are partly shaped by one's ties to the black community [and] one's perception of group interests..." (47). Given this theoretical foundation, Junn and Masuoka (2008) study the extent to which Asian-Americans perceive a sense of *linked fate* (i.e. the belief that one's personal lot in life is intimately intertwined with that of others in one's in-group) with others in the broad AAPI racial category. Lower levels of participation among Asians are partially connected to this lack of group cohesion (McClain & Carew, 2018).

While Asians have historically experienced structural racism and economic oppression, such as anti-miscegenation laws, housing discrimination, and other laws aimed at dismantling Asian-owned businesses (McClain & Carew, 2018), it is important to remember the impact that contemporary migration has had on reshaping the Asian-American population. The massive flow of immigrants created an abrupt but clear cleavage between native and foreign-born Asians. Unique cultural identities and migration patterns also explain the tendency for Asian-Americans to identify with their national origin group rather than the "Asian-American" label (Phillips, 2018; Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). According to McClain and Carew (2018), 62 percent identify with their national origin group, 19 percent of Asians identify as Asian-American or Asian, and only 14 percent identify as American. This perception of low linked fate can be attributed to this group's vast internal heterogeneity (McClain & Carew, 2018).

Even after considering all these factors, scholars still cannot fully explain the lack of political participation among Asians. In particular, scholars have mostly focused on Asians' internal roadblocks to political participation, largely ignoring external roadblocks. As such, this

thesis will advance theories about the relationships social invisibility and political alienation have with political participation of Asian-Americans.

Theory

Past political science literature supports the traditional socioeconomic model: as SES (socioeconomic status) rises, so does one's likelihood to participate in politics (Weaver & Lerman, 2010). If this were the case, Asians would be among the most politically active racial groups in the United States. But as noted above, this is not the case. While high educational attainment and median household income levels are socioeconomic characteristics of both Asians and Whites, Asians turn out to vote at disproportionately lower rates when compared to other racial groups in the United States (Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). The purpose of this thesis is thus to study other sociopolitical factors, specifically external barriers, that inhibit Asian-American political participation. Given the close ties between social characteristics and politics, I argue that social invisibility and political alienation are key factors in low political participation rates among the Asian racial group.

In building my theory of Asian *political participation*—“activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take” (Wong Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011, 17)—I begin by defining who I consider Asian. For this thesis, I refer to people of Asian descent in several ways—Asian, Asian-American, Asian-American/Pacific Islander, and AAPI. While the US Census (2018) officially separates the Asian and Pacific Islander groups as per the 1997 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) standards on race and ethnicity, (Bith-Melander, Chowdhury, Jindal, & Efird, 2017) academic research typically consolidates these two groups into one collective category. For this reason, I consider an individual *Asian* if he/she is “[a] person having origins in any of

the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam” or “[a] person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands” (US Census Bureau, 2017b). Similar to the US Census Bureau, survey respondents in my research will self-report their racial identification.

Other important terms to define include social invisibility and political alienation. First, a social group experiences *social invisibility* when the group is overlooked by mainstream media, politics, and academic research. This definition is drawn from sociological research on bisexual individuals, but should also apply to Asian Americans, as I expect they too may feel as though they are “rendered inferior, unworthy of discussion, or non-existent” (Monro, Hines, & Osborne, 2017, 664-665). Additionally, past scholars have described *political alienation* as “a social condition in which citizens have or feel minimal connection with the exercise of political power” that can lead people to tune out politics or engage in aggressive political activities (Pantoja & Segura, 2003, 441). Therefore, political alienation is tied to low political efficacy.

I hypothesize that social invisibility and political alienation lower Asian political participation for several major reasons. First, Asians are often ignored by the mainstream media. While only limited academic scholarship categorizes Asians as invisible (McClain & Carew, 2018), I argue that Asians are consistently overlooked in various aspects of American politics and society. Like other invisible minorities (e.g. Native Americans, bisexual individuals in the LGBTQ+ community, refugees) Asians are rarely discussed in mainstream media, suffer from deficient resources to make informed political decisions, and feel unaffected by American politics.

Second and somewhat related, Asians lack *descriptive representation* in American politics. Research evidences that being represented by someone of one's own racial or ethnic group in government increases *political efficacy*, a measure of trust and sense of influence that has been linked to important political outcomes such as voter participation and engagement (West, 2016). As this theory has been supported among African-Americans and Latinos, it is worthwhile to consider the impact of descriptive representation on Asian-Americans as well (West, 2016; Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). Although Asians comprise six percent of the general American population (US Census Bureau, 2017b), they only make up 2.8 percent of the 115th federal legislature. This means only 15 out of the 535 legislators in the 115th U.S. Congress are Asian (Bialik & Krogstad, 2017). Asians represent the fastest growing racial group in America but are continuously underrepresented. Additionally, they must follow laws set forth by elected officials who do not understand the needs of their communities (López, Ruiz, & Patten, 2017). Moreover, they experience *one-way transactions* with the government. In other words, they are “passive subjects acted on by authorities, nor responded to by representatives; where decisions are made about them, not in response to their claims; where their input in decision making is minimal; and where they are ‘objectified and dependent rather than equal participant’” (Weaver & Lerman, 2010, 3).

Third, even when politicians attempt to reach out to Asian voters, there is a misunderstanding of the group. Misperception of the AAPI racial group is a significant contributor to their political and social invisibility. The perception of social homogeneity among Asian-Americans can in part be attributed to the imposition of the “Asian-American” racial group, “a distinctly US-based concept” (Junn & Masuoka, 2008, 733). While there are advantages to consolidating the Asian subgroups, this strategy perpetuates the idea that all

Asians are the same and ignores the multiplicity of cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds within the AAPI label.

Academic scholarship has provided strong evidence that Asians prefer to identify with their national origin group rather than the AAPI label, but American scholarship continues to group all Asians together, implicitly ignoring the deep internal cleavages. This practice has been referred to as *racial lumping* (Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). Despite the extensive cleavages that exist within this group, scholars argue that perceptions of discrimination and social exclusion are one of the few common experiences that Asian subgroups share (Jacobson, 2003; Phillips, 2018; Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). Although bleak, this could be the experience that encourages Asians to build multi-ethnic coalitions and increase their voting propensity.

In this regard, issues that affect specific Asian subgroups are overshadowed by the “model minority” and “perpetual foreigner” stereotypes. (Bith-Melander, Chowdhury, Jindal, & Efirid, 2017). The model minority myth perpetuates the belief that the high average economic success of Asians is attributed to the cultural differences. In other words, scholars have argued that Asians are inherently smart and hardworking and thus do not have many social or economic problems in comparison to other American racial minorities. Nevertheless, it is this perception of Asians that place them in a uniquely triangulated position in the American social structure. The dominant theory in sociological research is that Asians are *racially triangulated*: socially inferior to Whites, superior to Blacks (Jacobson, 2003; McClain, Carter, Soto, Lyle, Grynawiski, Nunnally, Scotto, Kendrick, Lackey, & Cotton, 2006) but deemed perpetual outsiders (Kim, 1999; McClain & Carew, 2018). This generally perceived “outsider” relationship to American

society is a clear form of social exclusion and significant contributor to the social invisibility of Asians.

As a perceived homogenous group, scholars typically study Asians as one racial group, rather than separate ethnic or national origin groups. Therefore, issues such as low socioeconomic status, mental illness, and immigration among Southeast Asians are ignored by the general U.S. population (Bith-Melander, Chowdhury, Jindal, & Efird, 2017). However, a 2017 study conducted by the Pew Research Center (López, Ruiz, & Patten) found that 42.11 percent of the Asian groups studied reported poverty rates higher than the national average. This study clearly demonstrates the economic heterogeneity within the AAPI population, but this diversity is continuously ignored by mainstream media and elected officials. Therefore, acknowledging this heterogeneity is the first step to better understanding this group.

Last, and somewhat related, the linguistic diversity among Asian-Americans presents another major obstacle for political campaigns strategizing their Get Out the Vote (GOTV) efforts. Although Hispanic Americans are also comprised of unique national origin groups, they share one language. In contrast, it is more difficult and expensive to connect with Asians because there are more than 40 ethnic groups speaking over 100 languages and dialects (Bith-Melander, Chowdhury, Jindal, & Efird, 2017) within this racial category. While the Asian-American population has grown by 900 percent since 1965 and are important swing voters in several states (Phillips, 2018; Junn & Masuoka, 2008; Ramakrishnan & Yeung, 2014), campaigns are hesitant to allocate limited funds to mobilizing a population with a history of low voter turnout and partisan affiliation (Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). They thus isolate an entire racial group from the American political process and ignore the sociopolitical issues that affect them (Wong, 2005). Bedolla and Michelson (2009) support this argument by finding that Asian people

contacted in the form of a live phone call by a political campaign were more likely to vote. In other words, the personal invitation to participate is more effective in mobilizing Asians than their own socioeconomic resources (Bedolla & Michelson, 2009). By ignoring this voting bloc, politicians perpetuate the systematic exclusion of Asian Americans in American politics and contribute to their low political participation levels (Phillips, 2018; Wong, 2005).

Based on the literature and reasoning presented above, I expect:

- H1: The reported income levels for Asians to be greater than or equal to that of other racial groups studied.
- H2: Compared to other racial groups studied, Asians will report higher levels of social invisibility.
- H3: Compared to other racial groups studied, Asians will report higher levels of political alienation.
- H4: Compared to other racial groups studied, Asians will report lower levels of political participation.

In the following section, I explain the process of studying the relationship between sociopolitical invisibility and political participation. If these hypotheses are correct, Asian-Americans will report higher levels of political alienation and social invisibility and thus lower levels of political participation. In contrast, White participants will report the lowest levels of social invisibility and political alienation and the highest level of political participation in comparison to the other racial groups surveyed.

Research Design

To study the relationship political participation has with both social invisibility and political alienation, I implemented an online survey among the student population at the

University of Houston-Main Campus (UH). Utilizing Qualtrics, an online platform that facilitates the acquisition of primary data, I collected 221 responses from May 1, 2018 to October 3, 2018. The survey was distributed by posting the survey on various social media pages and groups at UH, sharing the anonymous link with classmates, and having professors share it with their students.

To begin, my sample is not nationally representative. Difficulty in gathering representative samples were ultimately due to the financial limitations of this thesis being an undergraduate project. Although a sample of the UH population will not completely represent the American population, I am confident in the level of racial representation of my sample because UH has the second-most diverse student population in the United States. Out of 45,364 students, 20.75 percent are Asian, 30.58 percent are Hispanic/Latino, 25.63 percent are non-Hispanic White, and 9.70 percent are African-American (University of Houston, 2017). Therefore, one advantage of using UH students to comprise the sample population is the overrepresentation of Asian-Americans.

UH students from all racial backgrounds were invited to participate in my survey. While 221 responses were originally collected, African-Americans only made up six percent of the survey respondents. Therefore, these responses were discarded because a large enough sample was not collected to make meaningful comparisons. In this regard, Table 1 shows the distribution of races studied (non-Hispanic White, Latino, and Asian) in my total sample.

Additionally, while the importance of studying Asian-Americans by national origin subgroup was earlier emphasized, this thesis is unable to do this because participants were not asked to identify a national origin group. Nevertheless, the small sample sizes also prevent the disaggregation of data and ability to run separate analyses.

	White (N=78)	Latino (N=56)	Asian (N=73)	Total Sample (N=207)
Race (%)	37.68	27.05	35.27	100.0

Table 2 shows the racial groups broken up by sex. Most people in the total sample are female. Women also constitute most of the respondents for each racial group studied. Sex distribution, however, is more equal within the Asian group. This finding could in part explain the high proportion of Democrats in my sample, shown in Table 6.

	White (N=78)	Latino (N=56)	Asian (N=73)	Total Sample (N=207)
Male (%)	37.18	35.71	43.84	39.13
Female (%)	62.82	64.29	56.16	60.87

Table 3 shows the distribution of academic standing within the racial groups. Respondents could choose from six categories: freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, super-senior, and graduate student. The table demonstrates that most respondents are undergraduate seniors, followed by juniors. Combined, these groups comprise more than 75 percent of my total sample. As such, most participants were likely of voting age during the 2016 election.

	White (N=78)	Latino (N=56)	Asian (N=73)	Total Sample (N=207)
Freshman (%)	2.56	3.57	2.74	2.90
Sophomore (%)	8.97	12.5	6.85	9.18
Junior (%)	29.49	28.57	45.21	34.78
Senior (%)	44.87	44.64	38.36	42.51
Super-senior (%)	3.85	7.14	4.11	4.83
Graduate Student (%)	10.25	3.57	2.74	5.80

I also asked a question related to immigration given more than one in four people in Houston are foreign-born (US Census, Bureau, 2017c. Participants chose between four options:

first-generation immigrant (I am an immigrant), second generation (My parents are immigrants, but I am not), third-generation (My grandparents are immigrants, but my parents and I are not).

Table 4 shows White participants are least likely to be immigrants whereas their Latino counterparts are most likely, followed by Asians. In addition, Whites were more likely to report no immigration within the last two generations of their families. In addition, more Asians are second-generation immigrants, followed by Latinos, then Whites. Half of the total sample consists of second-generation immigrants.

	White (N=78)	Latino (N=56)	Asian (N=73)	Total Sample (N=207)
First Generation (%)	5.13	16.07	13.70	11.11
Second Generation (%)	19.23	53.57	80.82	50.24
Third Generation (%)	11.54	16.07	1.37	26.03
None of the Above (%)	64.10	14.28	2.74	28.99

Participants were also asked to describe their family history with higher education. They could choose from four options: first-generation college student (I am the first in my family to attend college), second generation (One or both of my parents went to college, but my grandparents did not), third-generation (My parents and grandparents went to college), or none of the above. Table 5 shows that White respondents are the least likely to be first-generation college students and Latinos are the most likely. In addition, two in five total respondents in the total sample are second-generation college students.

	White (N=78)	Latino (N=56)	Asian (N=73)	Total Sample (N=207)
First Generation (%)	20.51	48.21	24.66	29.47
Second Generation (%)	34.62	33.93	53.42	41.06
Third Generation (%)	34.62	10.71	21.92	23.67
None of the Above (%)	10.26	7.14	0.0	5.80

The survey then asked participants to identify the political party with which they most identify. They could choose between Republican, Democrat, Independent, or Other. As shown in Table 6, Democrats make up nearly half of the total sample and the largest proportion of respondents in each racial category. Asians are also the most likely racial group to identify with the Democratic Party, Whites were most likely to identify with the Republican Party, and Latinos are most likely to identify as an Independent. This finding with regard to Latinos and Asians is consistent with national surveys that find people in these groups are mostly Democrats (López, Ruiz, & Patten, 2017, Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011).

	White (N=78)	Latino (N=56)	Asian (N=73)	Total Sample (N=207)
Republican (%)	23.08	12.5	12.33	16.43
Democrat (%)	41.03	55.36	64.38	48.31
Independent (%)	25.64	26.79	15.07	22.22
Other (%)	10.26	5.36	8.22	8.21

Given the background information shared above, Whites in the sample population are least likely to be foreign-born and are more likely to have family members of older generations attend college, most Latino respondents were first-generation college students, and Asians tend to be US-born Americans and second-generation college students. This finding supports the trend resulting from the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act that favored highly educated and skilled immigrants (Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011).

Dependent Variables

Political participation is measured as voting behavior in this thesis. While participants were asked to report voter registration and voting behavior in the 2016 election, these measures may not capture participation rates accurately. For example, the sample population used in this research is comprised of college students, some students may not have been eligible to vote in

2016. Therefore, I look at these past participation measures but utilize the reported likelihood (i.e. intention) of voting in the 2018 midterm elections as the main dependent variable in my analyses. Participants could choose from one of five responses for this measure: “extremely unlikely” to “extremely likely”.

Furthermore, shown above is that Latino and Asian respondents were more likely to be first-generation immigrants. This means that some of them may not be eligible to vote. As this could influence the results of this research, my analyses are limited to second-plus (i.e. second, third, fourth, etc.) generation respondents.

Independent Variables

The independent variables in this research are socioeconomic status, social invisibility, and political alienation. To measure SES, I asked survey respondents, “What do you perceive your *annual household income* to be?” Respondents could choose from eight categories ranging from under \$25,000 to over \$150,000. However, college students vary in financial situations. While some may be financially independent, many may be dependent on their families. In this regard, the latter cohort may inaccurately report their income. Nevertheless, one’s perceived income can indicate one’s likelihood to participate in politics

Next, *social invisibility* (H2) is measured by perceptions of group awareness and media coverage. The following questions address these variables respectively: “To what extent do you feel people outside of your ethnic group are aware of the social, economic, and political issues affecting your ethnic group,” and “To what extent do you feel your ethnic group’s interests and issues are covered by mainstream media outlets.” With regard to both questions, respondents could choose from five options: “none at all” to “a great deal.”

Last, I test H3 by asking survey participants three questions: “To what extent do you feel your ethnic group’s interests are represented in government,” “To what extent do you feel you have the ability to influence political policies or affect the actions of government,” and “Has a political campaign in the 2018 midterm election contacted you in anyway?” These questions respectively address representation in government, political efficacy, and campaign contact. For the first two questions, participants could choose from five options: from “none at all” to “a great deal.” For the last question, survey respondents could choose between “yes” and “no.” As such, *lack of outreach or contact* by a 2018 political campaign indicates political alienation.

Data Analyses

Income and Participation

I begin my analysis by looking at political participation among respondents in the sample. Table 7 shows the reported rates of voter registration and 2016 voting for my total sample and for three groups: Whites, Latinos, and Asians. Note that first-generation immigrants have been removed from the total sample populations for reasons discussed above. Overall, Table 7 shows that nearly 90 percent of total respondents are registered to vote but they were generally less inclined to vote in the 2016 election. Whites and Latinos reported nearly equal rates of voter registration while Asians lagged by a margin larger than five percent. With regard to actual voting behavior, more Latinos report voting in the 2016 general elections, followed by Whites then Asians. As such, Asians report the lowest rate of political participation for both of these measures.

	White (N=74)	Latino (N=47)	Asian (N=63)	Total Sample (N=184)
Voter Registration (%)	91.89	91.49	84.13	89.13
Voted in 2016 (%)	71.62	74.47	57.17	67.39

Table 8 shows the results for the 2018 voting intention measure. Reporting likelihood to vote, participants could choose from one of five responses ranging from “extremely unlikely” to “extremely likely.” As shown below, Latinos report the highest level of voting intention whereas Asians report the lowest likelihood to vote in 2018, followed by Whites then Latinos. In this regard, Asians are the least likely to actually vote, as shown by the 2016 voting and 2018 voting intention measures. This finding corresponds with past literature that finds Asians are less inclined to vote compared to Whites and Latinos.

	White (N=74)	Latino (N=47)	Asian (N=63)	Total Sample (N=184)
Extremely unlikely (%) (y=1)	6.76	0.0	4.76	4.35
Somewhat unlikely (%) (y=2)	5.41	6.38	14.29	8.70
Neither (%) (y=3)	6.76	4.26	11.11	7.61
Somewhat likely (%) (y=4)	21.62	29.79	30.16	28.26
Extremely likely (%) (y=5)	59.46	53.19	39.68	51.09
Mean	4.22	4.36	3.86	4.11

The next step is to test whether these patterns of participation can be connected to socioeconomic status. Shown in Table 9 is the distribution of reported average household income. Consistent with prior academic literature, Asians reported the highest mean income, followed by Whites then Latinos. Moreover, Asians are the least likely to select the lowest income category (under \$25,000) and the most likely to choose the highest category (over \$150,000).

	White (N=74)	Latino (N=47)	Asian (N=63)	Total Sample (N=207)
under \$25,000 (%) (x=1)	33.78	29.79	19.05	27.72
\$25,000 - \$39,999 (%) (x=2)	8.11	12.77	11.11	10.33
\$40,000 - \$49,999 (%) (x=3)	6.76	14.89	4.76	8.15
\$50,000 - \$74,999 (%) (x=4)	10.81	23.40	9.52	13.59
\$75,000 - \$99,999 (%) (x=5)	10.81	8.51	9.52	9.78
\$100,000 - \$124,999 (%) (x=6)	9.46	0.0	12.70	8.15
\$125,000 - \$149,999 (%) (x=7)	5.41	8.41	7.94	7.07
over \$150,000 (%) (x=8)	14.86	2.12	25.40	15.22
Mean Income	3.81	3.13	4.76	3.96

To test whether income relates to voting, I divide respondents at the mean of income and compare the means of the 2018 participation variable for both high ($x \geq 4$; $\geq \$50,000$) and low ($x < 4$; $< \$50,000$) income respondents in each racial group. Table 10 shows the results of the two-sample tests. Counter to expectations, low-income Whites and Latinos are more likely to vote than their high-income counterparts. Additionally, this difference is statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level for Whites but not Latinos. This finding thus contradicts expectation of political science literature and may be influenced by college students reporting the *perception of* (not actual) annual household income. However, I still find strong support in favor of H1, as there are not statistically significant differences in voting patterns among low-income and high-income Asians. In total, the results in this section show that Asians do not follow the *traditional socioeconomic model* of political participation. Thus, determinants of Asian political participation go beyond SES.

Table 10: Likelihood of 2018 Vote by Race and Income

	White (N=74)	Latino (N=47)	Asian (N=63)
Low Income X < 4	4.5	4.41	3.73
High Income x>=4	3.95	4.3	3.93
Difference of Means	.55*	.11	-.20

*= $p < .05$

Social Invisibility

If higher income is not conducive to high political participation rates among Asians, I assert through my second hypothesis (H2) that *social invisibility* is one factor of low participation. Table 11 shows the complete breakdown of responses for both social invisibility measures, *group awareness* and *media coverage* by race. It illustrates that Asians reported higher mean levels of social invisibility, as Asians were most likely to report “none at all” and least likely to report “a great deal” to both questions. Additionally, Whites were report the lowest mean levels of social invisibility for both measures.

Table 11: Social Invisibility Breakdown

	Group awareness				Media coverage			
	White (N=73)	Latino (N=47)	Asian (N=63)	Total (N=183)	White (N=73)	Latino (N=47)	Asian (N=63)	Total (N=183)
None at all (x=1)	12.33	10.64	26.98	16.94	16.44	4.26	33.33	19.13
A little (x=2)	21.92	29.79	36.51	28.96	16.44	31.91	50.79	32.24
A moderate Amount (x=3)	26.03	36.17	30.16	29.51	21.92	40.43	6.35	21.31
A lot (x=4)	21.92	17.02	4.76	14.75	20.55	12.77	6.35	13.66
A great deal (x=5)	19.17	6.38	1.59	9.84	24.66	10.64	3.17	13.66
Mean	3.14	2.79	2.17	2.72	3.21	2.94	1.95	2.70

Table 12 offers an analysis of the relationship between these two variables of social invisibility (i.e. group awareness and media coverage) and political participation. I split each racial group into two categories: those who reported perceptions of high (HSI; $x < 3$) and low (LSI; $x \geq 3$) social invisibility. Using a two-sample t-test, I compare the means of the 2018 voting intention measure of the LSI and HSI groups for each of my racial categories. In regard to the group awareness measure, I find that LSI respondents are overall more likely to say they will vote in the 2018 election for Asians. However, there are no significant differences in voting among those who reported low and high social invisibility.

In terms of media coverage, I also find that among Whites and Latinos, the means for reported 2018 intention are lower among HSI participants. Among Asian, however, those who reported HSI through media coverage were likely to indicate 2018 voting intention. The finding for the media coverage measure therefore does not support my second hypothesis (H2): social invisibility is a factor in the low political participation rates among Asians. Nevertheless, the group awareness measure provides strong support for H2.

Table 12: Likelihood of 2018 Vote by Race and Social Invisibility

	Group Awareness			Media Coverage		
	White (N=73)	Latino (N=47)	Asian (N=63)	White (N=73)	Latino (N=47)	Asian (N=63)
High Social Invisibility ($x < 3$)	1.76	1.58	2.08	1.75	1.41	2.21
Low Social Invisibility ($x \geq 3$)	1.80	1.68	2.26	1.8	1.77	1.8
Difference of Means	-.03	-.10	-.19	-.05	-.35	.41

*= $p < .05$

Political Alienation

Next, I assert that *political alienation* (H3) is a barrier to political participation. Table 13 shows the response distribution for the first two measures, *representation in government* and *political efficacy*, and the corresponding values for the third measure, *2018 campaign contact*, can be found in Table 15.

First, Whites are the most likely to feel like their interests are represented in government and were the least likely to report high political alienation for this measure. Overall, Asians reported perceptions of political alienation at higher rates, followed by Latinos, then Whites. Moreover, more than 75 percent of Asians reported high political alienation while the corresponding values for Whites and Latinos are 18 percent and 57 percent. In addition, Whites were most likely to report perception of high representation in government, followed by Latinos then Asians.

While all racial groups studied reported similar levels of political efficacy, Asians ultimately report the lowest rates, and thus higher levels of political alienation. Interestingly, though, is that Whites were most likely respond “none at all” and “a great deal” to this question. On the other hand, Asians were the least likely to report both “a great deal” and no influence over government. Moreover, Latinos reported the highest mean level of political efficacy, followed by Whites, then Asians.

Table 13: Political Alienation Breakdown by Race

	Representation in Government				Political Efficacy			
	White (N=73)	Latino (N=47)	Asian (N=63)	Total (N=183)	White (N=73)	Latino (N=47)	Asian (N=63)	Total (N=183)
None at all (x=1)	5.48	12.77	19.05	12.02	24.66	21.28	12.70	19.67
A little (x=2)	12.33	44.68	57.14	36.07	31.51	21.28	44.44	33.33
A moderate Amount (x=3)	20.55	29.79	15.87	21.31	17.81	31.91	30.16	25.68
A lot (x=4)	19.18	8.51	6.35	12.02	17.81	19.15	9.52	15.30
A great deal (x=5)	42.47	4.26	1.59	18.58	8.22	6.38	3.17	6.01
Mean	3.81	2.47	2.14	2.89	2.53	2.68	2.46	2.56

Similar to social invisibility, I split my respondents into two categories: those who reported high (HPA; $x < 3$) and low (LPA; $x \geq 3$) political alienation. Utilizing a two-sample t-test, I compare the mean values of my descriptive representation and political efficacy measures for my racial groups. Table 14 shows that, contrary to my expectations, mean 2018 voting intentions for all groups are higher among those who perceive less representation in government (i.e. HPA). In contrast, Table 14 also suggests that for all groups, intent to vote is lower among Whites and Asians with low political efficacy (i.e. HPA). Thus, my findings for these two measures of political alienation are mixed.

Table 14: Likelihood of 2018 Vote by Race and Political Alienation

	Representation in Government			Political Efficacy		
	White (N=74)	Latino (N=47)	Asian (N=63)	White (N=74)	Latino (N=47)	Asian (N=63)
High Political Alienation (x < 3)	4.46	4.44	3.92	4.17	4.1	3.78
Low Political Alienation (x >=3)	4.16	4.25	3.67	4.27	4.56	3.96
Difference of Means	.30	.19	.25	-.10	-.46	-.19

*= $p < .05$

Turning to my third measure, Table 15 shows that most respondents reported no campaign contact (i.e. HPA). However, Whites were more likely to report campaign contact, followed by Latinos then Asians. This finding supports past literature that argues college students are often more ignored by political campaigns, as well as literature that asserts Asians and Latinos are contacted less than their White counterparts (Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011).

Table 15: Political Alienation Breakdown by Race Continued (Campaign Contact)

	White (N=74)	Latino (N=47)	Asian (N=63)	Total (N=184)
No (%) (x = 0)	54.05	61.70	65.08	59.78
Yes (%) (x = 1)	45.95	38.30	34.92	40.22
Mean	.46	.38	.35	.39

I measure the association between this political alienation variable and 2018 voting intention by splitting the racial groups into two categories: those who reported low political alienation (i.e. they were contacted; x = 0) and those reporting high political alienation (i.e. they were not contacted; x = 1). Utilizing a two-sample t-test, I compare the mean values of the two political alienation categories for my racial groups. Table 16 shows that political alienation as

measured by campaign contact has a negative and significant relationship with political participation across all racial groups. The differences between the two groups are greatest among Whites, then Asians, and then Latinos.

**Table 16: Likelihood of 2018 Vote by Race and Political Alienation Continued
(Campaign Contact)**

	White (N=74)	Latino (N=47)	Asian (N=63)
High Political Alienation (x = 0)	2.23	1.90	2.44
Low Political Alienation (x = 1)	1.26	1.22	1.59
Difference of Means	.96*	.67*	.85*

*=p<.05

Overall, the data presented in this section offer some support for my hypotheses. First, I demonstrate that income cannot be used to determine likelihood to vote among Asian-Americans. In terms of social invisibility, lack of group awareness has a negative but not significant association with intention to vote in the 2018 midterm elections. In addition, political alienation as measured by low political efficacy and a lack of campaign contact also appear to be associated with a lower likelihood of voting in 2018.

However, not all measures support my hypotheses. In particular, intent to vote appears to be higher among Asians who perceive a lack of media coverage and a lack of political representation. This relationship may be influenced by the composition of the sample used in this research, as this finding is reflected among Whites and Latinos as well. Given most participants are second-generation immigrant and college students who have greater engagement with American institutions than their foreign-born counterparts, perhaps perception of representation in government and American media becomes less relevant as an individual’s engagement with American institutions increases. As mentioned above, these individuals have greater

opportunities for political socialization and are likely to have a greater understanding of American politics. But even these exceptions highlight the value of going beyond SES in the study of Asian-American political participation.

Conclusion

Political science literature on Asian-American political participation is still nascent even though Asian migration to the United States began in the 1700s. Scholars have found that Asians do not follow the *traditional socioeconomic model* for political participation. Researchers have studied internal barriers such as unique immigration patterns, citizenship status, immigrant generation, slow political socialization, and ultimately lack of group cohesion within the Asian-American/Pacific Islander racial group. Therefore, I contribute to the nascent literature on this area of study by analyzing the external barriers to political participation.

To test my hypothesis, I implement a survey among the student population at the University of Houston. In support of past literature, I find that income has a negative and insignificant relationship with Asian-American political participation, but a positive and significant relationship among Whites and Latinos. Thus, I test for the relationship between social invisibility and political alienation.

First, I find Asians who perceive higher group awareness are more likely to report intent to vote in 2018. In contrast, Asians who reported low media coverage (HSI) were more likely to indicate voting intention. With regard to political alienation, I find that Asians who report low representation in government and campaign contact (HPA) were more likely to indicate voting intention. Additionally, Asians who reported high political efficacy (LPA) are more likely to vote in 2018. Given these findings, the relationship Asian-American political participation has with various social invisibility and political alienation measured are blended. Nevertheless, they

offer insight into the extent to which external variables may influence the political behaviors and attitudes of Asian-Americans.

Although past scholars have argued that race is at the center of American politics (McClain & Carew, 2018), they have only studied Asian-American political behavior to a small extent. In their defense, Asians make up such a small percentage of the American population that studies rarely have enough Asian respondents to make meaningful statistical comparisons (Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). In this regard, I take advantage of the oversample offered by the racial diversity at UH and am confident my findings will give political campaigns and academic scholars deeper insight into both Asian-Americans and this generation of voters. Overall, I find that social invisibility and political alienation have negative associations with political participation among AAPI individuals. This is important because political science scholarship has traditionally ignored the external barriers Asians face to participating in American politics. My findings can thus help political scientists and campaigns project the political behaviors of people who will comprise the majority of voters for the next fifty to sixty years. Regardless of the barriers to political socialization that second-generation Asians face, scholars expect that the growth of this native-born population will increase the overall political participation rates among the AAPI population (Wong, Ramakrishnan, Lee, & Junn, 2011). This subgroup thus has the potential to shape the political behavior trends of the AAPI label as a whole.

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