

# From Narrative Scarcity to Research Plenitude for Asian Americans



JENNIFER LEE AND KARTHICK RAMAKRISHNAN

In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Viet Thanh Nguyen (2016) asserts that all wars are fought twice—first on the battlefield and then in our collective memory. Our collective memory of the Vietnam War is constructed from manifold narratives, but most are told from the point of view of the majority—in this case, White Americans who fought in the war or protested it. Nguyen points out that the majority group enjoys narrative plenitude; most of the stories focus on them and are told from their perspective. Minoritized groups, by contrast, experience narrative scarcity. Relatively few stories are told about them and even fewer are told from a minority perspective. Thus, for example, the blockbuster movie *Crazy Rich Asians* featured an all-Asian cast and was a meaningful step toward greater representation of Asian Americans in leading Hollywood roles. Yet because of nar-

rative scarcity, millions of Americans saw only a thin slice of Asian American life and had no comparable opportunities to gain insight into the varied experiences, attitudes, and behavior of the majority of Asian Americans who are neither wealthy nor East Asian.

Nguyen has stated that individual writers and artists cannot achieve narrative plenitude on their own but need influence over all levels of narrative production. To this, we provide an addendum: as social scientists, we can work toward narrative plenitude by contributing to both research production and plenitude. This requires systematically designing and collecting research, accurately relaying narratives based on it, and in the process, correcting biased assumptions of Asian Americans and other minoritized populations. The compilation of original research articles in this issue is a critical step toward research plenitude in

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pushing back against the one-dimensional narratives in which stereotypes, tropes, and dated assumptions about Asian Americans prevail. By raising fundamental questions about the diversity of the U.S. Asian population and identifying points of convergence in their experiences, attitudes, and behaviors, the authors in this issue significantly advance our knowledge about Asian Americans in the contemporary period. The issue is thus a foundational endeavor from narrative scarcity to research plenitude of Asian Americans.

The rapid growth of the Asian American population underscores the urgency of this project. The fastest growing U.S. racial group, Asian Americans increased from less than 1 percent of the country's population in 1970 to 6.4 percent today. By 2060, demographers project that the figure will be 10 percent. And, unlike other groups, such as Hispanics who are growing mainly through natural births, the U.S. Asian population is growing primarily through immigration. China and India have long surpassed Mexico as the leading sources of new immigrants to the United States. By 2055, Asians will surpass Hispanics as the largest immigrant group in the country (Colby and Ortman 2015; U.S. Census Bureau 2015).

The surge in immigration, accompanied by the low birth rate of U.S. Asians, has resulted in a population that is majority foreign born: two in three Asian Americans are immigrants, a figure that increases to nearly four in five among Asian adults. Asian Americans are the only racial group in the United States who are majority foreign born, a fact that belies stereotypes of Hispanics as the quintessential immigrant group. (In reality, the majority of Hispanic Americans are native born.) Indeed, 90 percent of U.S. Asians are either immigrants or the children of immigrants. Moreover, one in seven Asian immigrants is undocumented, and the Asian undocumented population is increasing at a faster rate than the counterpart Mexican and Central American populations (Ramakrishnan and Shah 2017). Hence, not

only is Asian the new face of immigration, it is also the new face of undocumented immigration.

Finally, when it comes to immigrant voters, Asians are about as numerous nationally as Hispanics, each constituting nearly one-third of the adult naturalized population and roughly equal proportions of naturalized citizens who are registered to vote.<sup>1</sup> Hispanics may have been synecdoche for U.S. immigrants in the latter part of the twentieth century; Asian Americans occupy that role in the beginning of the twenty-first. Indeed, it is impossible today to accurately understand immigrant incorporation without including the Asian American population.

### THE DIVERSITY- CONVERGENCE PARADOX

The new face of immigration may be Asian, but Asian is a catch-all category that includes tremendous heterogeneity. According to the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which guides the U.S. Census Bureau and other federal agencies, Asian is a racial category alongside White, Black, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. In 1997, the *Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity* defined Asian as 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" (OMB 1997).

The national-origin groups subsumed under the Asian rubric do not have a common language, ethnicity, culture, or religion; nor do these groups fully correspond to the geographic scope of Asia. Although seemingly arbitrary, the definition is born of centuries of racial exclusion in the United States that denied state protections and U.S. citizenship to immigrants from Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea, and India (Colbern and Ramakrishnan

1. Data from the Current Population Survey reveal that during the 2016 election, Asian Americans and Hispanics constituted 33 percent and 30 percent, respectively, of naturalized citizens who were registered to vote. Similarly, data from the 2017 American Community Survey reveal that Asian Americans and Hispanics constitute 32 percent and 33 percent, respectively, of naturalized adult citizens.

2020). Defined as non-White, these groups were deemed “unassimilable,” full of filth and disease, and unfit for U.S. citizenship (Lee 2015; Lew-Williams 2018; Ngai 2004; Wu 2015). Two landmark Supreme Court cases in the 1920s (*Ozawa v. United States* and *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*) held that Asians could not be considered racially White even if they had fair complexions (*Ozawa*), or even though some prevailing theories held some Asian groups to be Caucasian (*Thind*).<sup>2</sup> Hence exclusion from U.S. citizenship was the basis of Asian group formation and panethnic political mobilization.

Mobilization initially took the form of fighting for the right to naturalize. Indians and Filipinos spearheaded this fight and pushed for that right under the 1946 Luce-Celler Act, but all Asian American groups continued to advocate for the removal of national-origin barriers to naturalization, which was finally granted with the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act. Soon thereafter, Dalip Singh Saund, who had mobilized for passage of the Luce-Celler Act in 1946, became the first Asian American to be elected to Congress—a mere seven years after securing naturalization in 1949 (U.S. House of Representatives 2020). Subsequent pivotal moments of Asian group formation included large-scale protests against racial discrimination and the Vietnam War in the 1960s, successful efforts to create Asian American studies and ethnic studies programs starting in the late 1960s, and then bids for official census recognition in the 1970s. The federal government’s recognition of Asian as a racial category in 1977 was a critical turning point in subsuming diverse national-origin groups under a single rubric (Espiritu 1992; Okamoto 2014; Omi and Winant 1994).

Accompanying diverse national origins are diverse migration histories—including contexts of exit from countries of origin and contexts of reception in the United States (Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Chinese are the oldest Asian immigrant group that initially arrived primarily as low-wage migrant laborers; Japanese, Filipino, and Korean immigrants followed (Lew-Williams 2018). The U.S. Census first counted Chinese residents in 1870 and began

counting the Japanese population in 1890. By 1920, Filipinos, Koreans, and Hindus were included as census categories, reflecting the demographic realities of workers in California and other Western states.

Despite the presence of Asian immigrants in the United States since the nineteenth century, the Asian population remained at less than 1 percent of the country’s total even as late as 1970. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, combined with a series of other highly restrictive Asian exclusion laws that lasted for six decades, prevented the growth of the U.S. Asian population until the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Ngai 2004). Abolishing national-origin quotas, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act created new preferences for foreign-born applicants based on family reunification, preferences for particular skills, and refugee status. As a result of changes in immigration law, the earliest post-1965 Asian immigrants were highly educated, highly skilled professionals—including doctors, nurses, and engineers—who fulfilled labor shortages in particular occupational niches. So highly selected are contemporary U.S. Asian immigrants from China, India, the Philippines, and Korea that Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (2015) characterize them as *hyper-selected* to reflect their dual positive immigrant selectivity: they are more likely to have graduated from college than their nonmigrant counterparts in their countries of origin, and also more likely to hold a college degree than the U.S. mean. Their hyper-selectivity has put them and their second-generation children at more favorable starting points relative not only to hypo-selected immigrant groups such as Mexicans (Diaz and Lee 2020), but also to native-born Whites and Blacks.

Groups such as Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotians began arriving en masse in the late 1970s as refugees (Hein 2006; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Fleeing turbulent political regimes, these groups displayed a range of socioeconomic profiles, with the first wave typically highly educated and hyper-selected, and later waves significantly less so. Not only did their contexts of exit differ from that of volun-

2. *Ozawa v. United States*, 260 U.S. 178 (1922); *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 261 U.S. 204 (1923).

tary immigrants like Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans but so did their context of reception; the U.S. government provided various forms of resettlement assistance to help ease the incorporation of war-torn refugees.

Today's newest Asian immigrants are increasingly from South Asia—including such countries as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—and exhibit an array of skills and education levels. Indians are among the most highly educated, hyper-selected Asian immigrants, with three-quarters holding a college degree. Bangladeshis, by contrast, fall at the lower end of the socioeconomic distribution, in regard to both educational attainment and income. The shift in national origins among Asian immigrants has resulted in unprecedented diversity within the U.S. Asian population. South and Southeast Asians now make up 27 and 33 percent of the Asian American population, respectively; East Asians make up only 36 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2016).

Folding such diverse national-origin groups into a single U.S. racial category has had the unanticipated consequence of masking intra-group inequality. The inequality was unveiled in a recent report by the Pew Research Center (2018), which pointed to Asians as the U.S. racial group with the highest level of income inequality, with the top tenth of the income distribution earning nearly eleven times those in the bottom tenth. Much of this income inequality is related to national origin, with Asian Indians having median household incomes of \$100,000 and Burmese and Bangladeshis of \$36,000 and \$49,800, respectively.

Income is only one of many indicators in which Asians exhibit tremendous inequality. Other measures include educational attainment, English-language proficiency, poverty levels, welfare receipt, access to health care, and health outcomes (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Wong et al. 2011). Indeed, like Black Americans, Asian Americans exhibit more intragroup variation on these socioeconomic indicators than intergroup variation between them and other U.S. racial groups.

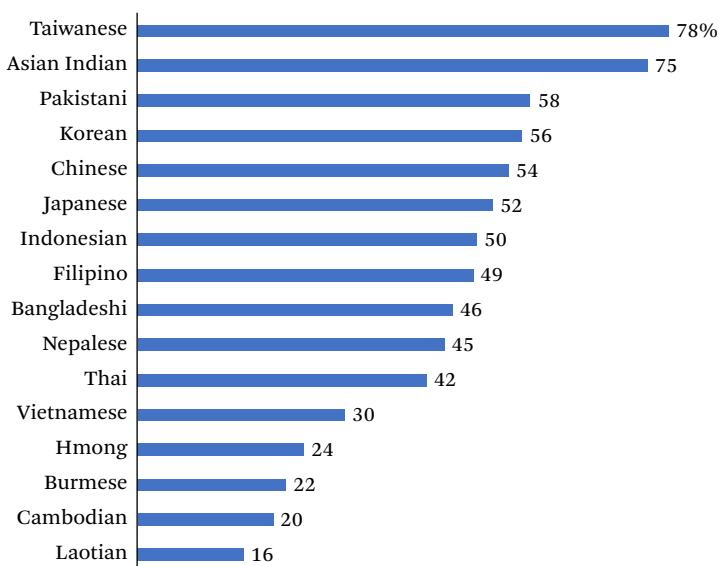
Despite this tremendous heterogeneity, Asian Americans converge in several notable ways, including experiences with certain types of discrimination, voting behavior, and atti-

tudes on policies from environmental protection to gun control to higher taxation and social service provision, and, more recently, affirmative action. This seeming paradox—of convergence despite divergence in national origins and socioeconomic status—provides one of the central puzzles animating research on Asian Americans today. Explaining the *diversity-convergence paradox* can be addressed only by collecting and analyzing disaggregated data broken down by ethnicity, detailed origin, and immigrant generation so that researchers can identify points of convergence as well as the contexts and conditions that bolster it.

### DATA DISAGGREGATION AS A CIVIL RIGHTS ISSUE

The inequality among Asians has led to the argument that data disaggregation is a civil rights issue for Asian Americans (Lee, Ramakrishnan, and Wong 2018). Not only does data disaggregation provide a more accurate count of the U.S. Asian population, it also provides a more detailed portrait of Asian Americans' socioeconomic, political, and health outcomes. These detailed portraits challenge some of the most pernicious narratives of Asian Americans, including the reigning misperception that Asians are America's model minority. We provide several illustrative examples of how data disaggregation helps correct this biased narrative.

First, Asians are touted as academic high achievers who outperform other groups in high school, gain admission to the most selective universities, and graduate from college at the highest rates. Yet data disaggregation shows immense variation in educational attainment among Asian Americans: Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong fall well below the U.S. mean, and Indians, Chinese, Koreans rise far above it (Lee and Zhou 2015). As figure 1 shows, 75 percent of Indians, 54 percent of Chinese, and 56 percent of Koreans hold a bachelor's degree or higher, yet fewer than 25 percent of Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong claim the same. In fact, the latter groups are less likely than African Americans or Hispanics to have graduated from college. When we disaggregate even further, we find that the majority of Asian Americans do not attend elite universities—a misperception that has been buttressed by

**Figure 1.** Bachelor's Degree or Higher Among Asian Americans

Source: Authors' tabulation based on analysis of 2017 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.

prominent coverage of the latest battles over race-conscious affirmative action policies at Ivy League institutions, including *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* and the Department of Justice's investigation into Yale's admission practices.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the majority of Asian American students attend community college (Fong 2017).

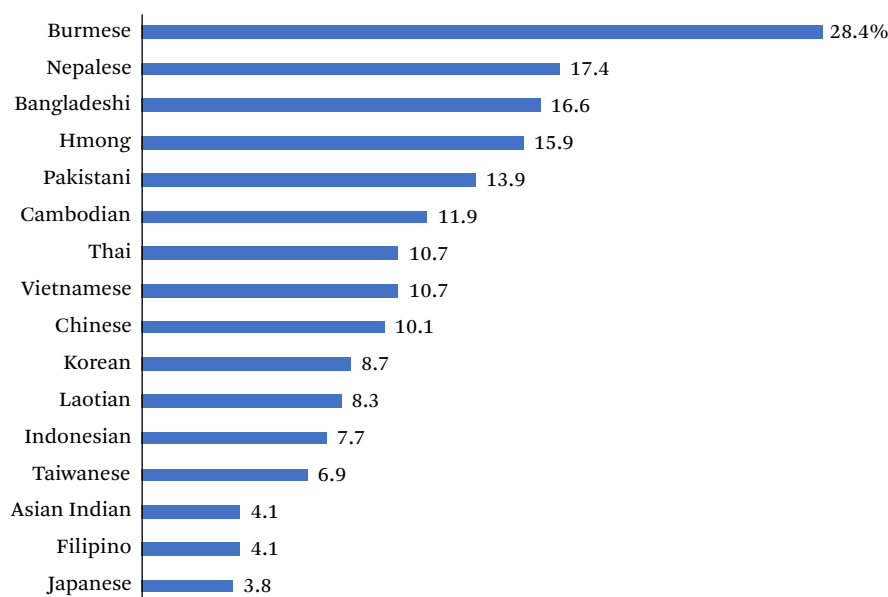
Because educational attainment is directly correlated with median household income, poverty levels, and welfare receipt, the differences in educational attainment directly translate into glaring socioeconomic disparities among Asians (Shah and Ramakrishnan 2017). Although the most highly educated Asian groups boast median household incomes higher than those of native-born Whites, Asians at the other tail of the distribution have some of the highest levels of poverty and welfare receipt of all U.S. groups (figure 2). Relying solely on means and medians thus reifies the dated trope that Asian Americans are a uniformly highly educated, high-earning group, which in turn has damaging consequences, including

Asian American exclusion from policies and programs that address poverty, including welfare receipt and housing insecurity.

Second, Asians exhibit an extreme range in limited English-language proficiency (LEP), defined as speaking a language other than English at home and speaking English "less than very well." More than one-third (35 percent) of the U.S. Asian population has limited proficiency in English—a rate that surpasses that of Hispanics and leaves Asians as having the highest LEP. Again, the mean masks tremendous heterogeneity, as figure 3 shows. The rate of limited English proficiency ranges from a high of 64 percent among Burmese to a low of 19 percent among Asian Indians.

Like differences in educational attainment, differences in English-language proficiency also translate into differences in outcomes, including earnings, occupational status, the quality of health care, and health outcomes. Limited English-language proficiency also hampers the ability of Asian Americans to gain access to federal government programs and participate

3. *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, 261 F.Supp.3d 99 (2017).

**Figure 2.** Poverty Rates Among Asian Americans

Source: Authors' tabulation based on analysis of 2017 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.

in civic and political life. Again, disaggregated data are critical to providing services to the U.S. Asian population. For example, data disaggregation provides public hospitals in smaller-population counties with the necessary tools to calculate the costs and benefits of translation services in Vietnamese, Korean, and other Asian ethnic languages. In a similar vein, data disaggregation allows policymakers to assess which Asian groups need translation services to get language access under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act.

Third, data disaggregation has implications for access to health care, preventative health, and health-care interventions. Some Asian ethnic groups are more susceptible to certain health risks than others: Vietnamese men and women have the highest rates of lung cancer of all Asian American groups, and Korean men and women have some of the highest rates of colorectal cancer (American Cancer Society 2016). Understanding interethnic differences is critical to targeting federal policies so that resources are allocated in ways that improve the unique health challenges of Asian ethnic groups, which is only possible with disaggregated data.

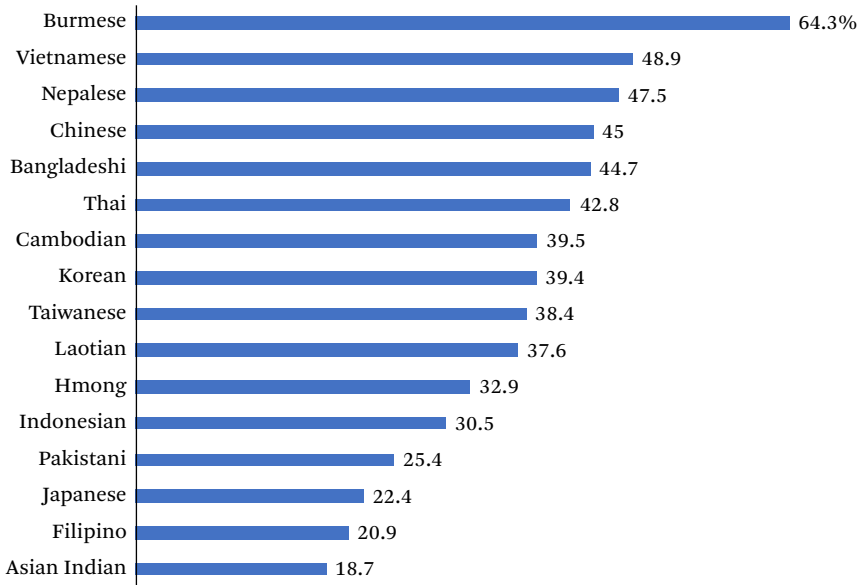
Fourth, data disaggregation also reveals the

diversity in experiences with different types of discrimination. The 2016 National Asian American Survey (NAAS) shows significantly higher self-reports of employment discrimination among South Asians than among East Asians, and other survey data reveal that Indians are eight times more likely than Chinese to report that they have been unfairly stopped or unfairly treated by police (NPR 2017). In the wake of COVID-19, however, East Asians—and especially Chinese Americans—are far more likely than South Asians to report experiences with racially charged verbal assaults (Stop AAPI Hate 2020).

Finally, on patterns of intermarriage, data disaggregation points to a pattern of Indian exceptionalism. Although U.S.-born Asians, on average, have high rates of intermarriage, the patterns differ starkly across ethnic groups: it is far lower for Indians (32 percent) than for Koreans (54 percent), Chinese (56 percent), Filipinos (63 percent) and Japanese (69 percent) (Min and Kim 2009).

Data disaggregation is also critical to understanding the diversity in attitudes, but here we find far greater convergence in Asian American public opinion than we might expect based on



**Figure 3.** Limited English Proficiency Among Asian Americans

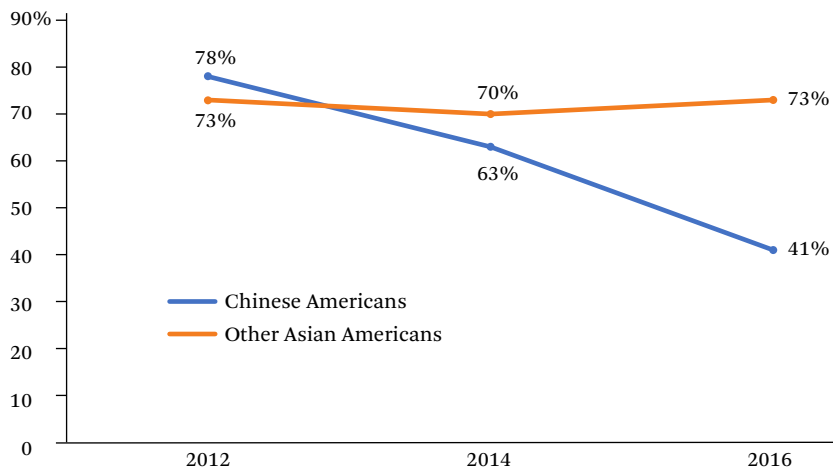
Source: Authors' tabulation based on analysis of 2017 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.

differences in socioeconomic status alone. Thus, for example, even though Indian Americans have among the highest levels of income in the United States, they also strongly support paying higher taxes and protecting key elements of the social safety net, including the provision of affordable health care (Pew Research Center 2012; Ramakrishnan and Lee 2012). Much of this pattern can be explained by the relatively high levels of Democratic Party identification among Indian Americans. However, support for universal health care is also very high among Vietnamese Americans, even though they tend to be the most Republican-leaning Asian American group, which suggests the potential importance of other aspects of immigrant socialization in the United States (Ramakrishnan et al. 2018; Wong et al. 2011). Convergence is also greater than expected among Asian Americans on issues such as environmental protection and gun control, as well as for political behavior such as presidential vote choice (Ramakrishnan and Ahmad 2014). To underscore, only by collecting disaggregated data by ethnicity are we able to point to areas of convergence among Asian Americans.

Disaggregated opinion data also reveal the

contexts and conditions under which Asian Americans are likely to diverge in their public opinion. On issues such as abortion, gay rights, and transgender rights, Asian Americans who are Christian hold far more conservative views than those who are not (Ramakrishnan et al. 2018). Moreover, opposition to affirmative action has been much stronger among Chinese Americans than among other Asian American groups in 2016—pointing to a pattern of Chinese exceptionalism. So exceptional were Chinese relative to other Asian groups in their opposition that they alone accounted for the drop in support for affirmative action among Asian American registered voters from 2012 to 2016 (Ramakrishnan and Wong 2018).

Galvanizing through ethnic social media platforms like WeChat, conservative Chinese immigrants effectively mobilized to protest against affirmative action (Rong 2019; Wong 2018). Their successful mobilization within and outside Chinese ethnic communities led to a nearly 50 percent drop in support for affirmative action among Chinese American registered voters between 2012 and 2016 (Ramakrishnan and Wong 2018). Apart from Chinese Americans, however, nearly three-quarters of Asian registered voters

**Figure 4.** Changes in Support for Affirmative Action Among Asian Americans

Source: Authors' tabulation based on analysis of the 2012 National Asian American Survey and the 2014 and 2016 Asian American Voter Surveys.

supported affirmative action in higher education and the workplace in 2016 (see figure 4). Yet because Chinese are the largest Asian group, accounting for one-fifth of the U.S. Asian population, their views are often taken (and sometimes mistaken) to represent the views of all Asians (Lee and Ramakrishnan 2020a).

Other types of disaggregation also reveal important differences in Asian American public opinion. Support for affirmative action is stronger among younger, native-born Asian Americans, who are also more likely to hold more progressive attitudes on issues such as environmental protection, immigrant rights, and gun control (Lee and Tran 2019; Ramakrishnan and Wong 2018). Disaggregating opinion data not only by ethnicity but also by nativity and age is vital to examine points of Asian American divergence as well as convergence across a range of issues. Thus, disaggregation is critical to address two leading questions that guide the study of Asian Americans in the social sciences, which many authors in this issue tackle. First, is there a common policy agenda among Asian Americans? Second, what conditions promote greater convergence in Asian American public opinion?

### GROUP FORMATION

Although diversity is a hallmark of the U.S. Asian population, robust research that focuses

on how that diversity affects group formation is slim (Alba, Jiménez, and Marrow 2014; Wimmer 2013). This question is particularly germane for the U.S. Asian population given that only 57 percent of Asian Americans believe they have a common race, and 49 percent believe they have common political interests. They are more likely to believe they have a common culture and economic interests, at 65 and 66 percent, respectively (Ramakrishnan et al. 2018). Whether Asian American constitutes a meaningful social, political, or cultural category will become an increasingly salient question as the U.S. Asian population continues to grow and diversify. Which social, political, economic, and cultural issues and experiences will galvanize and mobilize an Asian American political agenda and racial identity, and which will fracture them? Moreover, in spite of their diversity, will Asian Americans respond to a sense of linked fate that has historically bound African Americans?

African Americans evince a strong sense of linked fate—the belief that one's life chances are inextricably tied to the success and advancement of one's racial group (Dawson 1994). Because race has historically been the most salient status characteristic in determining the life chances of Black Americans, they prioritize the well-being of their racial group, even if doing so operates against their self-interest. Their



strength of linked fate is most evident in their voting behavior, their support for the Democratic Party, and unified policy views, even in spite of their growing socioeconomic diversity. And though this socioeconomic diversity has also increased their political diversity, Black Americans have not lost strength in their racial identity or their commitment to racial justice (Hochschild and Weaver 2015).

Recent research has also shown evidence of linked fate among Asians, with 67 percent agreeing that what happens to Asian Americans as a group will affect what happens to them (Gay, Hochschild, and White 2016). Whether linked fate manifests into similar patterns of political behavior and policy attitudes as it does for African Americans is an evolving question, but as noted, public opinion data already show greater than expected convergence on a number of policy issues. As the Asian American population grows, diversifies, and evolves through immigration, intermarriage, and multiracial identification, a key question is whether the points of convergence will be durable enough to keep the Asian group boundary intact, or whether cleavages along the lines of national origin, nativity, generational status, class, and phenotype will fracture it.

We also add a word of caution here: simply adopting concepts such as linked fate—which was born out of the African American experience—and applying it to Asian Americans may not be the most judicious way to understand Asian group formation. Asians have never fit neatly into the Black-White divide that has long dominated theories and research on racial classification, group formation, and race relations in the United States. Yet because the Black-White color line has been the most enduring, questions about the experiences of new immigrant groups like Asians and Hispanics have been posed and addressed using a Black-White framework, theories, and concepts.

Studies of intermarriage and multiracial identification show that Asians and Hispanics are more likely than Blacks to intermarry with Whites as well as more likely to adopt a multiracial identification (Alba 2020; Lee and Bean 2010). And because younger, native-born Asians and Hispanics are significantly more likely to intermarry and claim a multiracial identifica-

tion than their older, foreign-born counterparts, some social scientists have concluded that Asians and Hispanics are following the footsteps of their European predecessors and are the next in line to become White. This is a viable hypothesis, but it rests on the assumption that the boundaries around the Asian category are as permeable and fluid as they were for European ethnics, but history has shown that this has never been the case (Lee 2015; Lew-Williams 2018; Ngai 2004).

The hypothesis that Asians are becoming White or honorary White also privileges the experiences and narratives of only some Asians—namely highly educated, hyper-selected East Asians (Lee and Ramakrishnan 2020a). When we count only East Asians as Asian, the possibility that Asians will become White or honorary White is not entirely implausible. But the experiences and outcomes of South and Southeast Asian groups—including the deportation of Cambodian immigrants, hate crimes against Sikh Americans, and lower rates of intermarriage among South Asians—make this forecast seem much more unlikely. Of course, the boundaries of Whiteness and Blackness, as well as the question of who is Asian, are subject to change. Racial classification depends not only on how government agencies classify individuals, what Lee and Ramakrishnan (2020a) call official group assignment, but also how Asians and non-Asians accept or refute those racial classifications. That even multiracial Asians and East Asians who have been in the United States for generations continue to experience racial insults, acts of microaggression and discrimination, and perceived foreignness make the prospect of becoming White or honorary White seem highly implausible (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020; Zou and Cheryan 2017). At no recent time has this become more apparent than as the country and world struggle with the social, economic, and public health devastations wrought by COVID-19.

### **A MOMENT OF RECKONING IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19**

As fears and insecurities about the novel coronavirus mount among Americans, so have attacks on Asian Americans. They have been stabbed, beaten, bullied, spit on, pushed, ha-

arrassed, and vilified based on the false assumption that they are to blame for the spread of COVID-19. Faulting China for the origin and spread of the coronavirus, President Trump variously dubbed it the China virus, the Wuhan virus, and “kung flu,” and largely turned a blind eye to the rise in anti-Asian bias. The spike in the term *China virus* in the media increased beliefs among politically conservative Americans that Asian Americans are “perpetual foreigners.” Although this perception had been declining among Americans for thirteen years, the mere reference to COVID-19 as the China virus reinvigorated xenophobia enough to offset more than three years of declines (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020). In one fell swoop, the coronavirus—and President Trump’s blithe description of it—reanimated a century-old racist and xenophobic trope that Asians are foreign vectors of filth and disease, and exposed the precariousness of their status (Lee and Yadav 2020).

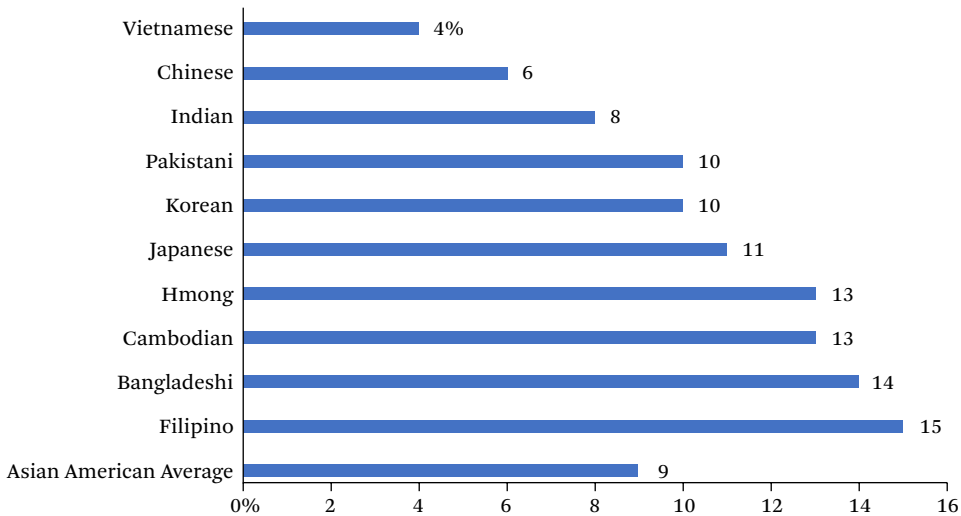
More overt forms of anti-Asian hate have also surfaced. In Texas, for example, a man stabbed a Burmese American family—a father and two young children (ages two and six)—because he thought they were Chinese and were infecting people with the coronavirus (Kennedy 2020). In Brooklyn, New York, a man poured acid on an Asian woman while she was taking out the trash from her home, severely burning her head, neck, and back (Moore and Cassady 2020). In midtown Manhattan, a Korean woman was grabbed by the hair and punched in the face. Even Asian American nurses, doctors, and pharmacists serving on the front lines of the pandemic find themselves fighting racial discrimination as the virus spreads.

The racist and xenophobic reactions directed at Asian Americans are reminiscent of those directed at South Asian and Muslim Americans after September 11 when they were falsely accused of condoning terrorism against the United States—indicating just how rapidly Asian Americans can fall on the “wrong side” of the nativist divide. However, some differences between the post-2001 and post-2019 periods are especially significant. Murders of Asian Americans were higher in the immediate post-9/11 period than today (Ahmad 2004), but President George W. Bush was also quick to

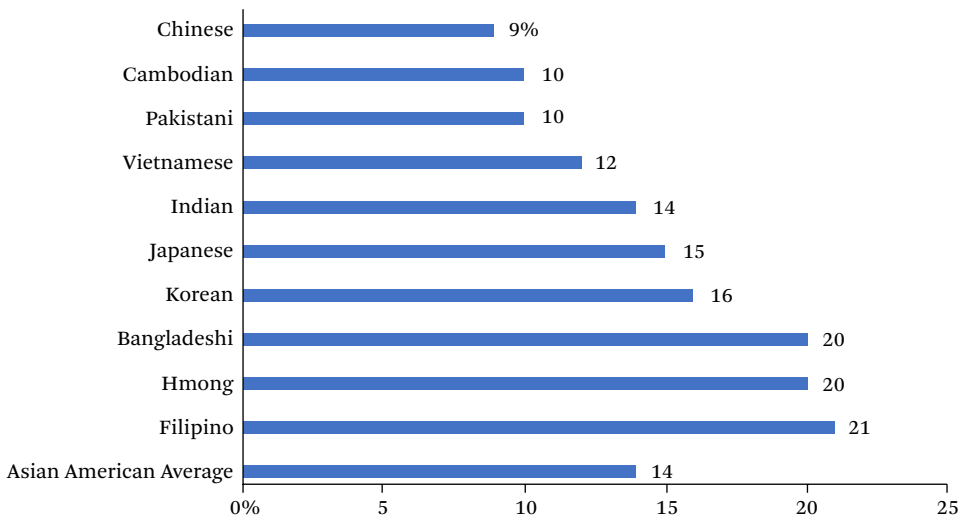
condemn anti-Muslim and anti-Asian hate. As a result, after 9/11, the spike in hate crimes began to subside within two months (Byers and Jones 2007). President Trump, by contrast, sustained his attacks on China and continued to say “China virus” in his references to COVID-19, consequently fueling xenophobic and racist tropes against Asian Americans.

Much like his anti-immigrant rhetoric leading to negative sentiments against immigrants and Hispanics, Trump’s coronavirus rhetoric amplified the vilification of Asian Americans. Hate incidents against Asian Americans remain high: nearly one-third (32 percent) of Americans have witnessed someone blaming Asians for the coronavirus, and about twice as many Asian Americans (60 percent) have reported the same (Ipsos 2020). For reference, threats, harassment, and insults toward Asian Americans have skyrocketed between 2016 and 2020. When compared with data from Ipsos in 2020, data from 2016 NAAS show that only 9 percent of Asian Americans reported having been threatened or harassed, and 14 percent reported having been insulted or called names, as figures 5 and 6 show. In addition, in 2016, Chinese Americans were among the least likely Asian groups to experience these forms of assault. But things changed quickly in the wake of COVID-19: Chinese Americans are now the most likely group to report being threatened, harassed, insulted, or called names, comprising more than 40 percent of all self-reported cases among Asian Americans (Stop AAPI Hate 2020).

Faced with the precariousness of their racial status, many Asian Americans are confronting the brutal realization that economic privilege and proximity to Whiteness are no shields against racist and nativist hate. Actor John Cho (2020) articulated this harsh reality as he described in a *Los Angeles Times* column what it means when one’s belonging and membership in the United States is conditional: one can be embraced as American in one moment and then derided as a foreigner who “brought” the virus to the United States in the next. As Cho notes, “When I became an actor . . . doors were open, strangers were kinder. In some ways, I began to lead a life devoid of race. But I’ve learned that a moment always comes along to

**Figure 5.** Experienced Threats or Harassment Among Asian Americans

Source: Authors' tabulation based on analysis of the 2016 National Asian American Survey.

**Figure 6.** Experienced Insults or Called Names Among Asian Americans

Source: Authors' tabulation based on analysis of the 2016 National Asian American Survey.

remind you that your race defines you above all else.”

Times of crisis also present unanticipated opportunities, or, as Arundhati Roy (2020) describes it, a portal: “We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky

skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world.” In his column, Cho reflects on how the pandemic has reminded him of the numerous times that his Indian American colleague, Kal Penn, got pulled over for airport screenings after 9/11, as well as the internment of Japanese Americans after World War II. Reflections like

Cho's point to the possibility that Asian Americans may emerge from the Trump era with a stronger racial identity, a more purposive sense of linked fate, a more profound solidarity with other Asian Americans, and perhaps a stronger pan-minority identity with other minoritized groups in the United States. The increase in support for affirmative action in higher education in 2020 among Asian American registered voters, and, in particular, among Chinese Americans, suggests that this may, indeed, be a possibility (Lee and Ramakrishnan 2020b).

### 2016 NATIONAL ASIAN AMERICAN SURVEY

Until recently, social scientists lacked nationally representative survey data to study the diversity, heterogeneity, and group formation among Asian Americans. The 2016 National Asian American Survey (NAAS) was designed to rectify this shortcoming. The 2016 NAAS builds on the work of the 2008 survey of the same name that included many measures of civic engagement and political participation but was relatively limited in its exploration of important social dynamics such as racial attitudes, immigrant adaptation, and experiences with micro-aggressions and discrimination. In addition to these measures, the 2016 survey also included demographic information such as age, race, language, gender, country of birth, educational attainment, employment status, marital status, legal status, income, and household size. The average length of the survey was thirty-five minutes.

The 2016 NAAS is the only nationally representative survey of the U.S. Asian population that includes ten Asian ethnic groups, and focuses on the social, political, and economic attitudes and experiences of Asians (Ramakrishnan et al. 2018). The survey also includes sizable samples of Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics, making interracial comparisons possible. A telephone survey conducted between November 10, 2016, and March 2, 2017, the 2016 NAAS includes 4,393 adult respondents who report their ancestry or at least one parent's ancestry from countries in Asia. About two-thirds (63 percent) of the interviews were conducted by landline, and the remainder (37 percent) by cell phone.

Whereas many prior surveys of the U.S.

Asian population focus on a few large Asian ethnic groups and are conducted only in English, the 2016 NAAS includes sizable subsamples of ten Asian groups: Chinese (475), Indian (504), Filipino (505), Korean (499), Vietnamese (501), Japanese (517), Pakistani (320), Bangladeshi (320), Hmong (351), and Cambodian (401). Together, these groups account for more than 85 percent of the national Asian American population. The survey also includes four non-Asian groups: Hispanics (1,126); non-Hispanic Whites (408); non-Hispanic Blacks (401); and Native Hawaiian–Pacific Islanders (120), allowing us to assess the levels and drivers of support of affirmative action for both Asian and non-Asian groups.

Moreover, the 2016 NAAS was offered in English, Spanish, and ten Asian languages: Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, Vietnamese, Hindi, Tagalog, Japanese, Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian. This is critical for data validity, given that 74 percent of U.S. Asian adults speak a language other than English at home, and 35 percent are limited in English-language proficiency (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). Providing the option to complete the survey in a native language generates a more reliable sample of the Asian population because it avoids biasing the sample toward English-proficient, U.S.-born, highly educated, and younger Asians (APIA Vote, National Asian American Survey, and Asian American Justice Center 2013).

The 2016 NAAS is weighted to reflect the 2016 American Community Survey (ACS) population distribution in the following demographic characteristics: gender, age, state of residence, nativity, educational attainment, and citizenship status (see table 1). For example, the proportion of foreign-born Asian respondents in the NAAS sample (78 percent) is nearly identical to the proportion in the ACS sample (79 percent). The proportions of Asians with more than a high school degree (71 percent) and of female Asians respondents (54 percent) are identical in both the 2016 NAAS and ACS samples.

Although the 2016 NAAS is a landmark survey for its coverage of Asian American groups and language support, some limitations are notable. First, the survey does not include many smaller detailed origin groups such as Thai, Indonesian, and Mongolian, who together ac-

**Table 1.** Sample Characteristics of Asian American Respondents

	NAAS Asian Adults	ACS Asian Adults
Bangladeshi	7	1
Cambodian	9	2
Chinese	11	24
Filipino	12	17
Hmong	8	1
Indian	11	20
Japanese	12	6
Korean	11	10
Pakistani	7	2
Vietnamese	11	10
Other Asian	—	8
Foreign born	76	79
Native born	24	21
Less than high school	18	13
High school or GED	17	16
More than high school	65	71
Male	53	46
Female	47	54
California	34	33
New York	11	10
Texas	4	7
New Jersey	3	5
Other states	48	45

*Source:* Authors' tabulation based on 2016 NAAS (Ramakrishnan et al. 2018).

*Note:* Numbers in percentages. The 2016 NAAS sample is weighted, using a raking procedure, to reflect the distribution of race and Asian detailed origin by each of the following dimensions: state of residence, gender, nativity, citizenship status, and educational attainment.

count for upward of 15 percent of the Asian American population. In addition, the NAAS is based on listed samples of Asian American voter registration and consumer data, and ethnic and racial classification are based on propensity scores derived from analyses of an individual's name and the racial composition of the census tract of residence. This means that Asian Americans who have fully Anglicized names (including both first and last name) would be less likely to be included for consideration in the survey.<sup>4</sup> The principal investigators of the 2016 NAAS chose the route of listed

samples because fully randomized methods (such as random-digit telephone dialing) would have been cost prohibitive.

Although Asian Americans are a rapidly growing population, they still only account for less than 6 percent of the U.S. adult population. Asian Americans are also less likely to be residentially segregated than Blacks and Hispanics, so methods of random sampling stratified by geographic areas such as census tracts would have to cover far more places. The logistical difficulty of random dialing of all residents to identify representative samples of Asian

4. It is not impossible for such individuals to be interviewed for the 2016 NAAS because the survey also included samples of residents classified as White, Black, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander according to the same name analysis, and respondents would be reclassified as Asian based on their survey responses.

Americans is made even more extreme when considering that about one-third of Asian American adults are limited in their English proficiency. A random telephone survey would thus need to ensure that interviewers are able to detect language need efficiently, and that contacted individuals would be just as likely as English-proficient individuals to take the survey with Asian-language support when contacted again by a bilingual interviewer. For all of these reasons, the 2016 NAAS relied on a listed sample approach to identifying potential Asian American survey respondents.

### THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE

This volume offers innovative approaches to the study of Asian Americans from social scientists from various disciplines, including sociology, political science, Asian American studies, demography, and urban planning. Each exploits the unique features of the 2016 National Asian American Survey, and addresses timely, relevant, and vexing social and political issues. Although the authors address a broad range of issues that vary in scope and method, each adopts a comparative perspective that involves intergroup comparisons between Asians and other ethnoracial groups, interethnic comparisons among Asians, or alternate axes of intergroup differentiation among Asians.

The first articles adopt the latter approach, offering latent class modeling that breaks with our dominant understanding of Asian American differences as defined primarily by national origin. Although such categorization of Asian Americans is deeply rooted in particular migration histories, exclusionary laws, and contexts of settlement and reception in the United States, authors who use latent class modeling argue instead to go where the observable data take us. Depending on the kinds of indicators being included, we may indeed find new ways of understanding and differentiating Asian Americans rather than through the standard lenses of national origin and ethnicity, which themselves can mask considerable heterogeneity by income, educational attainment, and the like.

Lucas Drouhot and Filiz Garip (2021) argue for such a data-driven approach to group dif-

ferentiation, noting that the standard practice of disaggregating Asians by national origin results in the reification of new categories that can limit our understanding of variations in Asian immigrant incorporation. The authors pool both the pre- and post-election waves of the 2016 NAAS and identify five latent categories of differentiation based on the selectivity of migrant flows (as measured by gender, education, and income) as well as the context of reception in the United States (as measured by immigrant generation and region of settlement). The authors find five differentiated subgroups among Asian Americans, which they label as vulnerable, ordinary, hyper-selected, rooted, and assimilating. These five categories are a parsimonious way of capturing the complexity of the Asian American population and are highly predictive of experiences with discrimination as well as the relationships between discrimination and health, political behavior, and panethnic identity.

Sunmin Kim (2021) also uses latent class analysis to suggest new ways of categorizing the Asian American population. However, rather than relying on attributes related to immigrant incorporation, he relies on attributes related to public opinion on government interventions in areas that range from health care and education, to climate change, immigrant rights, and racial justice. He then examines whether certain groups of Asian Americans (by national origin, education, nativity, and party identification) are more or less likely to align with different latent opinion categories. He finds that, despite significant convergence in opinion across types of government intervention, important differences are revealed in immigration and refugee policy that point to potential future divisions in Asian American opinion.

The second set of articles focuses on political commonality and heterogeneity among Asian Americans. Similar to Kim, Janelle Wong and Sono Shah (2021) raise the question of whether an Asian American political agenda ties together such diverse national origin groups and analyzes data using both the pre-election and post-election 2016 National Asian American Survey. Wong and Shah note that significant variation across national-origin groups on educational attainment, income, and experiences



with immigrant incorporation would suggest dramatically different patterns in public opinion. They find that this is indeed the case when it comes to opinion on immigration policy and affirmative action in higher education. However, on many other issues, such as health care, taxes, and efforts to ensure racial equality outside of the affirmative action context, Wong and Shah unveil a degree of opinion convergence that beats expectations based on standard theories of socioeconomic differences in opinion. At the same time, however, they acknowledge that these generally held views might not adequately capture dynamics involving issue activists, and that selective mobilization on issues such as affirmative action in higher education could still generate bigger fissures in Asian American public opinion in the future.

Maneesh Arora, Sara Sadhwani, and Sono Shah (2021) also analyze group similarities and differences in public opinion, but they focus as much on intergroup differences across racial groups as on intragroup differences within the Asian category. They posit that policy convergence in key issue arenas and perceived interest alignment are key building blocks, or potential constraints, to coalition building across communities. They find that some Asian American groups, such as Bangladeshi, Hmong, and Pakistani Americans, display far greater commonality with Latino/as and Blacks on many issues of public opinion than with other groups such as Cambodian, Chinese, and Japanese Americans. Although these patterns are unlikely to change the ways some Asian groups might categorize themselves racially, they nevertheless point to greater possibilities of cross-racial coalitions with Blacks and Latino/as among some Asian groups than among others.

Ali Chaudhary and Quan Mai (2021) shift the lens from policy attitudes to civic participation and examine variation within a racial group that is often perceived as only weakly engaged in U.S. politics. Much research on Asian American political participation has focused on the civic paradox of socioeconomic status (SES): even though Asian Americans have, on average, high levels of education and income, they have among the lowest levels of voting participation. Studies have indicated that this gap between expectations and reality can largely be attrib-

uted to the large proportion of first-generation immigrants among the Asian adult citizen population, the lack of parental socialization into U.S. political parties, lack of exposure to American politics in Asian colleges and universities, and lack of party contact and mobilization all playing important roles (Hajnal and Lee 2013; Ramakrishnan 2005; Wong 2006; Wong et al. 2011). These studies have paid little attention, however, to processes of transnationalism and foreign socialization into politics prior to arrival in the United States. Chaudhary and Mai lay out a theoretical case for paying greater attention to pre-migration characteristics related to political socialization and offer some empirical support for these expectations by examining differences in civic participation based on where respondents received their college degrees.

The third set of articles shifts our attention from political to social attitudes. Rujun Yang and Maria Charles (2021) focus on gender and sexual politics in the United States and address the question of how Asians compare with other ethnoracial groups in regard to the extension of rights and protections to women and sexual and gender minorities. Given the high proportion of first-generation immigrants among the Asian adult population, one might expect opinion on these issues to be largely conservative, echoing traditional views in many Asian countries. Yang and Charles also posit that expectations of a culture war between men and women might lead us to expect significant gender differences in opinion among Asian Americans. Yet the authors find no support for either set of hypotheses. Instead, they find a significant variation in opinion across groups according to the type of issue being considered. Thus, for example, religion (Catholic identification, Christian fundamentalism, and frequency of religious attendance) explains variation in Asian opinion on abortion rights and LGBTQ rights, but not on support for affirmative action for women. Similarly, the relationship between gender and opinion on rights and protections accorded to women and sexual minorities is neither clear nor consistent. The authors point to the need for further transnational studies of gender attitudes that take into account distinctive gender regimes in countries of origin,

as well as contexts of reception in the United States.

Van Tran and Natasha Warikoo (2021) turn our attention to immigration policies and shed light on the differences in public opinion among a group that is both diverse and majority foreign born. While one might assume that Asian Americans' immigrant experiences may make them the most liberal or progressive group on immigration policy, Tran and Warikoo show that they hold the least progressive opinions when it comes to policies that favor undocumented immigrants. Although lower support than Latino/as on these issues may be understandable given the lower share of unauthorized among the Asian foreign born, the authors do not find greater support among Asians on other immigration policies, such as increasing work visas and family visas. Further, less support for a pathway to citizenship relative to Blacks and Whites is surprising, given the larger share of undocumented immigrants among Asian Americans than among the latter two groups. The authors find that age, political identity, immigrant generation, and contact with Latino/as are significant predictors of Asian American public opinion on immigration policy; they surmise that a lack of awareness about the realities of immigration policy and unauthorized immigration may account for some of these surprising findings on Asian American public opinion.

The final set of articles focuses on responses to discrimination. Tiffany Huang (2021) examines how experiences with different types of discrimination affect perceptions of linked fate among Asians as well as feelings of commonality with other ethnoracial groups. Capitalizing on the inclusion of multiple types and contexts of discrimination in the 2016 NAAS, Huang finds that the type of discrimination experienced is relevant for feelings of political commonality with non-Asian groups. For example, interpersonal discrimination is a key predictor of feelings of commonality with Hispanic Americans, and labor-market discrimination is a key predictor of feelings of commonality with Black Americans. No type of discrimination is associated with feelings of commonality with White Americans, however. Moreover, the type of reported discrimination is also associated

with racial linked fate with other Asians and ethnic linked fate with coethnics. Huang interprets these findings through the lens of the common in-group identity model: Asian Americans will feel more warmth toward their racial and ethnic group if they view experiences with discrimination as a common feature of members of the in-group.

The volume closes with Vincent Reina and Claudia Aiken's (2021) study of housing access among Asian Americans and Latino/as, combining analyses of these groups in the 2016 NAAS with ethnographic and administrative data in Philadelphia. The authors note that greater ethnic diversification and immigration add significant challenges to Asian American housing access, and they show that experiences in housing discrimination vary by national origin for Asian Americans. Next, looking at the case of Philadelphia where the resident population was 80 percent non-Hispanic White and Black as late as 2010, Asians and Latino/as have become a growing share of the city's population. Despite their rapid growth, both remain underrepresented in almost every housing program offered by both the city and the housing authority relative to their share of the income-eligible households.

One reason for their underrepresentation is that many of these government resources have already been allocated to highly impoverished populations that have lived longer in Philadelphia. Yet a host of other factors impede the allocation of resources to Philadelphia's Asian and Latino/a communities, including language barriers, financial and digital illiteracy, and cultural barriers, including distrust. Among Asians, their sheer diversity in ethnic origin and native languages coupled with the model minority stereotype present unique barriers to access to affordable housing resources. Reina and Aiken's (2021) research powerfully debunks the dated perception that Asian immigrants do not need government services to ease their integration and underscores the moral urgency of addressing the complex fair housing challenges both Asians and Latino/as face.

In sum, the authors in this issue address a broad range of timely and pressing research questions that underscore the diversity of Asian Americans, yet also unveil the social and po-

litical issues and experiences that usher convergence among them. As the only majority foreign-born U.S. racial group, Asian Americans converge in ways that exceed expectations—highlighting a unique feature of Asian American experience. Joining diverse social science disciplines to tackle the diversity-convergence paradox, we contribute to theory and research on immigrant integration, and push social science research from narrative scarcity toward research plenitude for Asian Americans.

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