

Testing the Use of “Identity Politics” among Asian American State Legislature Candidates of the  
2018 General Election

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## TESTING THE USE OF “IDENTITY POLITICS” AMONG ASIAN AMERICAN STATE LEGISLATURE CANDIDATES OF THE 2018 GENERAL ELECTION

Traditionally, the Asian American electorate has often been overlooked. It is somewhat young, includes many who are foreign-born, and is relatively small compared to other racial and ethnic groups. However, from 2000 to 2015, the Asian population in the United States grew 72 percent – the fastest growth rate of any major racial and ethnic group during that time period.<sup>1</sup> The population doubled between 1980 and 1990 and kept growing since then.<sup>2</sup> Even in 2001, Democracy Project Director Glenn D. Magpantay wrote that “Asian Americans are one of the fastest-growing minority groups in the nation, estimated to number more than eleven million people. ... [Yet they] routinely have been overlooked by elected officials at nearly all levels of government.”<sup>3</sup> The rapid growth experienced by the Asian American population has yet to cease, and there appears to be little to no indication as to when this trend might start to slow down.

Asian Americans make up the fastest-growing racial group, and the population continues to solidify as a small but noticeable voting bloc and political force, adding about 850,000 registered voters to the national electorate every year.<sup>45</sup> Although most Asian Americans – especially Vietnamese Americans – have historically tended to vote for Republican candidates up and down the ballot, the Asian American vote was split almost perfectly in half in the 2014 general election: 50 percent of Asian Americans who responded to the National Election Pool

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<sup>1</sup> Gustavo Lopez, Neil G. Ruiz and Eileen Patten, “Key Facts about Asian Americans, a Diverse and Growing Population,” Pew Research Center, September 9 2017.

<sup>2</sup> “Asian Americans: Diverse and Growing,” U.S. Population Reference Bureau (1998)

<sup>3</sup> Glenn D. Magpantay, “Asian American Voting Rights and Representation: A Perspective from the Northeast,” *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 28 no. 3 (2001): 739-782.

<sup>4</sup> “2018 Asian American Voter Survey,” APIA Vote and AAPI Data, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> “Asian Americans: A Diverse and Growing Population,” Pew Research Center.  
<http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/asian-americans/>

exit poll voted for a Republican House of Representatives candidate.<sup>6</sup> In 2018, Asian American voters were more likely to be registered as Democrats and favor Democrats in most races, but were also much more enthusiastic about voting regardless of whether they had been contacted by a party than they were in 2014.<sup>7</sup> In California alone, the turnout rate for eligible Asian-American voters was 33 percent in 2018, compared to 17 percent in 2014.<sup>8</sup> Although only 38 percent of the current Asian American population is Democratic, Asian American registered voters hold a net unfavorable view of the Republican Party – with 52 percent viewing the party unfavorably and 34 percent viewing it favorably – and a large net favorable rating of the Democratic Party of 58 percent.<sup>9</sup> Still, given that 52 percent of Asian American Democrats and only 14 percent of Asian American Republicans are under 34 years old, the future of Asian America will likely continue to trend Democratic.<sup>10</sup>

Popular perceptions of Asian Americans as an economically, educationally, and vocationally successful racial group have helped to foster the general expectation that Asian Americans will develop as a political power, an expectation which, to some degree, has been validated.<sup>11</sup> With a thriving and transforming population has come a growing number of Asian American candidates pursuing public office – and a continuous growth in the number of Asian Americans elected to public office. Every few years, the University of California, Los Angeles Asian American Studies Center catalogues hundreds of Asian American federal, state, and local

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<sup>6</sup> “Exit Polls: U.S. House,” *Decision 2014*, NBC News.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/2014/US/house/exitpoll>

<sup>7</sup> “2018 Asian American Voter Survey,” APIA Vote and AAPI Data, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> “California’s Latino and Asian-American Vote: November 2018 General Election,” California Civic Engagement Project, Feb 2019.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b8c7ce15d5dbf599fb46ab/t/5c651fc3e4966b8c909ea052/1550132778391/CEP+Fact+Sheet+2+-+2018+General+Election+Final.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> “2018 Asian American Voter Survey,” APIA Vote and AAPI Data, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> “2018 Asian American Voter Survey,” APIA Vote and AAPI Data, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Su Sun Bai, “Affirmative Pursuit of Political Equality for Asian Pacific Americans: Reclaiming the Voting Rights Act,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 139 (1991): 731.

officeholders in the *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*, and every subsequent edition only gains dozens of pages.<sup>12</sup> As with any group, increased representation at higher levels of government is nearly inevitable as benches and pipelines are continuously constructed at lower levels.<sup>13</sup> Asian American candidates have only increased in number every election year since 1990.<sup>14</sup>

If the Asian American population continues to trend sharply upward as it has been for the past three decades, future election cycles will likely see the continued introduction of more and more Asian American candidates. According to James S. Lai and Kim Geron, increases in Asian American candidacies and descriptive representation for Asian Americans may appear much more quickly than expected, given that many Asian Americans have started to migrate to suburbs where there is less competition for a limited amount of seats and there is ample opportunity to build new – yet still strong – community and political networks.<sup>15</sup>

Despite Asian Americans' rapid growth and community and political organization, studies of the political impact of the fast-growing population remains slim at best. Much of the preexisting scholarship about Asian Americans and politics examines Asian American political behavior and public opinion – often neglecting Asian American candidates and officeholders. Although these studies have illuminated different facets of Asian American political behavior, little is still known about the challenges that Asian American candidates face, the conditions under which they emerge, and the conditions under which they succeed.<sup>16</sup> What little scholarship

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<sup>12</sup> Don T. Nakanishi and James Lai, *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles Asian American Studies Center: 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Kira Sanbonmatsu, *Where Women Run: Gender and Party in the American States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Leslie Casimir, "Foreign-Born Politicians Aim to Make Voices Heard," *Daily News*, Aug. 24 2000.

<sup>15</sup> James S. Lai and Kim Geron, "When Asian Americans Run: The Suburban and Urban Dimensions of Asian American Candidates in California Local Politics," *California Politics & Policy* (2006), 62-88.

<sup>16</sup> "AAPIData: Demographic Data & Policy Research on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders," University of California, Riverside.

and news coverage there is on Asian American candidates often focuses on federal-level candidates rather than Asian Americans pursuing state and local offices.<sup>17</sup> Most scholarship on Asian American politics is focused primarily on Asian Americans' political behavior and on Asian Americans' public opinion. The purpose of this thesis is to contribute to the preexisting literature on racial and ethnic politics – specifically, Asian American politics – by examining whether Asian American candidates are more likely to campaign on their identities as Asian Americans, including their identities as people of Asian descent, as people whose family heritages include immigrant and refugee backgrounds, or both.

Even in 2018, Asian Americans continued to face xenophobia and racism from neighbors and prominent government officials alike, from political campaign videos implying that “China-people” have corrupted American politicians to broad allegations from Federal Bureau of Investigations Director Christopher Wray that all academics of Chinese descent are a threat to American national security.<sup>18</sup> In a political environment in which not only descriptive representation but substantive representation – whether candidates not only look like the American public, but also represent their policy priorities – are increasingly at the forefront of debates about diversity in American government, taking a closer look at how candidates from one of the fastest-growing racial groups in the United States provides another perspective from which to discuss candidates' identities. With a president reportedly claiming that “almost all [Chinese] exchange students that comes over to this country is a spy,” tracking emerging political capacity, whether through examining candidacies or growth in public opinion, is critical to gaining a more holistic understanding of racial politics in America.<sup>19</sup> Through candidate

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<sup>17</sup> “Asian Americans on the Ballot in 2018,” Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies.

<sup>18</sup> “Press Releases,” Asian Americans Advancing Justice.

<sup>19</sup> Annie Karni, “Trump rants behind closed doors with CEOs,” POLITICO, Aug 8, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/08/08/trump-executive-dinner-bedminster-china-766609>

interviews, qualitative analysis of campaign platforms and marketing material, and a content analysis of a manually-aggregated list of the 137 Asian American candidates for state legislature seats across the United States on the November 6, 2018 general election ballot, I analyze the campaign messaging and platforms of the 137 candidates to develop a deeper understanding of the distinct characteristics of Asian American candidates' campaigns for state legislature seats.

### Literature Review

Historically, Asian American candidates and elected officials have been few in number, and they also have not been as ethnically diverse. Until the 1965 reforms to the Immigration and Naturalization Act, Japanese and Chinese Americans comprised the majority of Asian American candidates and elected officials.<sup>20</sup> As immigration from counties in Southeast Asia and South Asia increased during the 1970s into the 1990s, more candidates from different ethnic groups, such as Hmong and Indian communities, started to emerge. So far, six Asian Americans – one Japanese American, an Okinawan American, a Chinese American, two Indian Americans and one Filipino American – have served as state governors, with the most recent being Indian American Republican Nikki Haley. Still, East Asian Americans, especially Japanese and Chinese Americans, continue to make up the majority of Asian American candidates and elected officials, particularly at the federal level. There has not been a Korean American in Congress since 1999.<sup>21</sup> Only one Vietnamese American legislator, Representative Stephanie Murphy, currently serves in the House.<sup>22</sup> During the 115th session, there were only three Asian American senators serving in the United States Senate, two of which are East Asian American.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Yen Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*, Temple University Press (1993).

<sup>21</sup> "There Hasn't Been a Korean American in Congress Since 1999. Come November, There Could Be 4," NBC Asian America, NBC News. Aug 28 2018.

<sup>22</sup> "Stephanie Murphy Went from Vietnam War Refugee to Member of Congress," NBC Asian America, NBC News. Dec 26 2016.

<sup>23</sup> "Senators of the 115th Congress," United States Senate.

Despite the progress made in addressing gender and racial disparities in the United States, the experience of candidates from marginalized communities and underrepresented backgrounds remains one of a vast array of obstacles. For female candidates, navigating the gendered institutions of politics is a constant act of negotiating their own femininity with the masculine expectations of candidacy and officeholding.<sup>24</sup> Although the Democratic Party often recruits more minority candidates than the Republican Party, non-white candidates for state legislature seats still see less contact from party officials than their white counterparts, with 16 percent of African American candidates reporting encouragement to run by local party officials compared to 48 percent of white candidates.<sup>25</sup> Over 80 percent of elected officials of color who were surveyed in the Gender and Multicultural Leadership National Survey did not report being asked or encouraged to run, and most recruiters were not party organizations, but rather community organizations.<sup>26</sup>

The challenge of occupying American racial politics is often equally as difficult to navigate for Asian American candidates as it is for other minority groups. Although it has seen tremendous growth and progress, the Asian American community continues to be viewed as a rather monolithic entity, with individuals whose families came from Southeast Asia and South Asia often having their authenticity as Asian Americans interrogated, a phenomenon typically attributed to both unaddressed colorism and the lengthier, more established history of East Asians in America. Asian American men and women with lighter skin tones – often those of East Asian descent – are more likely to be college educated compared to Asian Americans with darker skin – usually Southeast Asian Americans and South Asian Americans – and the odds of

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<sup>24</sup> Kelly Dittmar, *Navigating Gendered Terrain: Stereotypes and Strategy in Political Campaigns*, (Temple University, 2015): 124

<sup>25</sup> Gary F. Moncrief et al. *Who Runs for the Legislature?* Prentice Hall, 2001, 108

<sup>26</sup> Carol Hardy-Fanta et al. *Contested Transformation: Race, Gender, and Political Leadership in 21st Century America* (Cambridge University Press: 2016), 166-167.

completing higher education increase significantly for Asian Americans with lighter skin tones than for Asian Americans with darker skin.<sup>27</sup>

The model minority myth – the misconception that Asian Americans are inherently better educated and financially successful than the average American, white or not – and other stereotypes about Asian Americans have provided very limited perceptual advantages to East Asian American candidates, but have not necessarily provided the same advantages to South Asian American or Southeast Asian American candidates.<sup>28</sup> The misconception itself is founded on the fact that Asian Americans tend to earn higher median household incomes, with the average annual income of households headed by Asian Americans being reported at \$73,060 compared to the national average of \$53,600.<sup>29</sup> However, despite earning higher median household incomes, Asian American household sizes are often larger, and the reported higher median household incomes are generally a result of multiple income streams present within each household.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, Bangladeshi, Hmong, Nepalese, and Burmese American households earn incomes thousands of dollars below the national median annual household income.<sup>31</sup>

Under the impression that East Asian Americans are more business-savvy, more wealthy, and more proficient in academics, voters often subconsciously characterize these candidates as fiscally responsible or intelligent. Some scholarship describes Asian American candidates as a more neutral minority that can appeal to both mainstream and minority groups based on their

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<sup>27</sup> Igor Ryabov, “Colorism and educational outcomes of Asian Americans: evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health,” *Social Psychology of Education* 19 no. 2, 303-324.

<sup>28</sup> Neil Visalvanich, “Asian Candidates in America: The Surprising Effects of Positive Racial Stereotyping,” *Political Research Quarterly* 70 no. 1 (2017) 68-81.

<sup>29</sup> Gustavo Lopez, Neil G. Ruiz and Eileen Patten, “Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population,” Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/08/key-facts-about-asian-americans/>

<sup>30</sup> “Racial Wealth Snapshot: Asian Americans,” ProsperityNOW, May 10 2018 <https://prosperitynow.org/blog/racial-wealth-snapshot-asian-americans>

<sup>31</sup> Gustavo Lopez, Neil G. Ruiz and Eileen Patten, “Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population,” Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/08/key-facts-about-asian-americans/>



socioeconomic statuses and historical experiences with discrimination.<sup>32</sup> Asian Americans are perceived to face very little discrimination by the general American public, with only Evangelical Christians, white Americans, atheists, and white men being seen as groups that face less discrimination than Asian Americans.<sup>33</sup>

Despite some of the positive effects that might come with the model minority stereotypes, Asian Americans still face discrimination on the campaign trail. South Asian American candidates who used non-ethnic nicknames to combat biases about their ethnic and cultural heritage were at least 25 percent more likely to win their election, with the effect increasing from local to federal contests.<sup>34</sup> In 2017, an unknown group sent mailers to homes in Edison, New Jersey that called for the deportation of two Asian American school board candidates, with the statement “The Chinese and Indians are taking over our town” printed across the postcard.<sup>35</sup>

Coming from a racial group relatively new to the United States, Asian American candidates are typically faced with the challenge of addressing misconceptions perpetuated by the model minority myth and common perceptions of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners regardless of citizenship status. Asian Americans are less likely to have American-born parents, and even Asian American elected officials were more likely to report not having American-born parents, not having parents who had completed a high school education, and not having been raised in a political family than black and Latino elected officials.<sup>36</sup> The first Asian American elected to the House of Representatives in 1956, Dalip Singh Saund, noted in his autobiography

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<sup>32</sup> Gregory Rodriguez, “Minority Leader,” *The New Republic*, Oct 19 1998.

<sup>33</sup> “White Young Men Less Likely to Perceive Discrimination” Public Religion Research Institute [https://www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/PRRI-MTV-Figure\\_8.png](https://www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/PRRI-MTV-Figure_8.png)

<sup>34</sup> Jason A. Kirk and Jason Husser, “What makes a successful Indian American political candidate?” *South Asian Diaspora* 9 no. 2 (2017): 207-223.

<sup>35</sup> Jeff Goldman and Craig McCarthy, “Racist ‘Make Edison Great Again’ mailer targets Asian school board candidates,” NJ.com, Nov 4 2017

[https://www.nj.com/middlesex/index.ssf/2017/11/racist\\_campaign\\_posctards\\_being\\_mailed\\_in\\_edison.html](https://www.nj.com/middlesex/index.ssf/2017/11/racist_campaign_posctards_being_mailed_in_edison.html)

<sup>36</sup> Carol Hardy-Fanta et al. *Contested Transformation: Race, Gender, and Political Leadership in 21st Century America* (Cambridge University Press: 2016), 147

that his Democratic primary opponent attempted to disqualify his candidacy on the basis that he had spent insufficient time in the United States since being naturalized.<sup>37</sup> In 2006, although they reported facing fewer disadvantages overall due to their racial and ethnic backgrounds, Asian American women and men running pursuing office also reported facing greater scrutiny on their qualifications than their black and Latino counterparts.<sup>38</sup> Years later, discrimination persists. Former South Carolina governor Nikki Haley faced harsh criticism and skepticism on the campaign trail for her Sikh background despite having converted to Christianity and regularly attending church.<sup>39</sup> In an interview with TIME Magazine, after discussing why Haley converted to Christianity, she was asked if she would “give [Sikh taxi drivers] a slightly bigger tip.”<sup>40</sup> During the 2018 midterms, Asian American candidates up and down the ballot still faced discrimination in all forms, including social media harassment and explicitly racist campaign attack ads such as the ads that former Republican representative Tom MacArthur’s campaign ran telling voters that his Korean American challenger, Democrat Andy Kim, is “not one of us.”<sup>41</sup>

Institutional structures within government and the American electoral machine have also influenced the diversity of legislatures. Some studies suggest that increased professionalization of state legislatures is both beneficial to racial minority representation but detrimental to non-male representation.<sup>42</sup> There is also evidence to suggest that minority candidates win more seats in different voting scenarios, such as when districts are multimember instead of single-member –

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<sup>37</sup> Dalip Singh Saund, *Congressman from India* (Stockton: Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society, 1930).

<sup>38</sup> Carol Hardy-Fanta et al. *Contested Transformation: Race, Gender, and Political Leadership in 21st Century America* (Cambridge University Press: 2016), 240

<sup>39</sup> Alfredo Garcia, “Must Sikhs, Hindus convert to get elected?” *National Catholic Reporter* Jul 2 2010, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/politics/must-sikhs-hindus-convert-get-elected>

<sup>40</sup> MJ Lee, “Haley laughs off Time’s Sikh joke,” *POLITICO*, Apr 6 2012, <https://www.politico.com/story/2012/04/haley-laugh-off-times-sikh-joke-074904>

<sup>41</sup> Rebekah Entralgo, “Racist mailer targets Asian-American candidate in New Jersey,” *ThinkProgress*, Sept 18, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Peverill Squire, “Legislative Professionalism and Membership Diversity in State Legislatures,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 17 no. 1 (1992): 69-79.

although the scholarship is mixed.<sup>43</sup> The cooption of minority candidates into white candidate slates or local parties to guarantee an election across a particular region is also an area of concern regarding the organic generation of minority candidacies.<sup>44</sup> For Asian Americans in particular, some seats such as statewide offices have been difficult to repopulate with Asian American elected officials due to intense competition for the limited array of seats, historically low voter turnout among Asian Americans, few districts with concentrated Asian American populations, and a lack of a bench and a more formalized pipeline for Asian American candidates.<sup>45</sup>

Minority candidates in areas with larger minority populations often are more likely to emerge and fare better than minority candidates in areas with a majority-white population. Research strongly suggests that the more a district's minority population increases, the more likely minority candidates will emerge in both Democratic and Republican primaries and the more likely that a minority candidate with prior officeholding experience will run.<sup>46</sup> This also holds implications for representation up and down the ballot; if districts with larger minority populations see more minority prior officeholders pursue higher seats, local seats open up to the flourishing minority community, building greater representation for the minority population at all levels of governance. In addition, the positive relationship between the propensity of minority voters in an area and minority voter turnout for legislative elections also improves the prospects of minority candidates in regions and districts with larger minority populations.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Elisabeth R. Gerber, Rebecca B. Morton and Thomas A. Rietz, "Minority Representation in Multimember Districts," *American Political Science Review* 92 no. 1 (1998): 127-135.

<sup>44</sup> Chandler Davidson and George Korbel, "At-Large Elections and Minority-Group Representation: A Re-Examination of Historical and Contemporary Evidence," *The Journal of Politics* 43 no. 4 (1981): 982-1005.

<sup>45</sup> Lai, J. S., Tam-Cho, W., Kim, T. P., & Takeda, O. "Asian Pacific American Campaigns, Elections, and Elected Officials," *Political Science and Politics* 36 no. 3 (2001): 611-619.

<sup>46</sup> Regina P. Branton, "The Importance of Race and Ethnicity in Congressional Primary Elections," *Political Research Quarterly* 62 no. 3 (2009): 459-473.

<sup>47</sup> Matt A. Barreto, Gary M. Segura and Nathan D. Woods, "The Mobilizing Effect of Majority-Minority Districts on Latino Turnout," *American Political Science Review* 98 no. 1 (2004): 65-75.

Although gender and racial parity still have yet to be reached, advancements continue to be made with each election cycle. The 2018 midterm elections saw the unprecedented election of 127 women to Congress and 2,112 women to state legislature seats. For the first time in American history, white men were the minority of Democratic nominees in congressional races, and the 201 self-identifying people of color who ran for Congress in the general election won at a rate of 55 percent.<sup>48</sup> Many of these victories were propelled by campaigns that explicitly pushed their identities as women, immigrants, LGBTQ, and working-class as key components of the candidates' anticipated governing approaches. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who went on to defeat Democratic incumbent Joe Crowley in the primary election and become the youngest representative in the U.S. House of Representatives, introduced herself to voters in a viral video that outlined her background as a daughter of a Puerto Rican mother and as someone who has worked in the service industry.<sup>49</sup> Representative Ayanna Pressley, the first African American elected to Congress from Massachusetts, did not shy away from emphasizing her identity as an African American woman, stating in campaign videos and on the campaign trail that she believed "the people closest to the pain should be the closest to the power driving and informing the policy."<sup>50</sup> Candidates like Ocasio-Cortez and Pressley not only overtly mentioned their identities as people from marginalized communities, but also won in doing so.

For some candidates of minority racial and gender groups, such as women or Latino candidates, popular opinion places them at the center of "identity politics," with claims – particularly from Republican pundits and politicians – that they weaponize their identities to

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<sup>48</sup> Diana Ofosu, "An In-Depth Look At Demographics In The 2018 Midterm Election," ThinkProgress, Nov. 21 2018, <https://thinkprogress.org/2018-midterm-election-winner-demographics-analysis-house-senate-governors-774787ffa84c/>

<sup>49</sup> Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, "The Courage to Change," Youtube video, 2:08. Posted May 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rq3QXIVR0bs>

<sup>50</sup> Ayanna Pressley, "The 1 Bus," Youtube video, 1:51. Posted Aug 2018. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgF79Shc\\_YI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgF79Shc_YI)

appeal to voters.<sup>51</sup> However, these stereotypes about minority and female candidates are limited in truth or exaggerated. For instance, female candidates often campaign on topics similar to those of their male opponents.<sup>52</sup> Appeals to ethnic enclaves and racial groups that a candidate belongs to often do not saturate the campaign or become primary campaign messaging, but rather allow them to build different coalitions within the electorate to gain victory – a phenomenon referred to as “togglng” between racialization and deracialization of the self.<sup>53</sup> Media coverage of Asian American candidates’ campaigns and policy positions is typically fair and balanced despite that the ethnic backgrounds of Asian American candidates are more likely than their non-Asian American opponents to appear in news coverage.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, the use of identity politics in campaign settings is not limited to minority candidates alone. Several social scientists have noted that elites in the current iteration of the Republican Party have been vocal in comforting whiteness and white identity, addressing issues such as immigration that cater most to white identifiers.<sup>55</sup> During the 2018 election in particular, pundits and political operatives alike debated the merits and legitimacy of including candidates’ identities as key parts of their campaigns, and multitudes of opinion pieces from both conservative and liberal media outlets discussed the issue of “identity politics” and whether

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<sup>51</sup> Asma Khalid, “GOP Insists It Doesn’t Engage In Identity Politics. Researchers Disagree,” *National Public Radio*, Dec. 20 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/20/678578358/gop-insists-it-doesn-t-engage-in-identity-politics-researchers-disagree>

<sup>52</sup> Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless, “There’s much less gender bias in politics than you think. Here’s why,” *The Washington Post*, May 24 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/24/how-much-does-gender-bias-affect-u-s-elections/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.ee8cd3bc1a8a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/24/how-much-does-gender-bias-affect-u-s-elections/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.ee8cd3bc1a8a)

<sup>53</sup> Christian Collet, “Minority Candidates, Alternative Media, and Multiethnic America: Deracialization or Togglng?” *Perspectives on Politics* 6 no. 4 (2008): 707;728.

<sup>54</sup> H. Denis Wu and Tien-Tsung Lee, “The Submissive, the Calculated, and the American Dream: Coverage of Asian American Political Candidates in the 1990s,” *The Howard Journal of Communications* 16 (2005): 225-227.

<sup>55</sup> Isaac Chotiner, “The Disturbing, Surprisingly Complex Relationship Between White Identity Politics and Racism,” *The New Yorker*, Jan. 19 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-new-yorker-interview/the-disturbing-surprisingly-complex-relationship-between-white-identity-politics-and-racism>

appealing to voters based on identity is worthwhile.<sup>56</sup> In a country sensitive about racial and ethnic issues and still struggling to contend with a long history of institutionalized racism, candidates of racial minorities have traditionally skirted race-based appeals.<sup>57</sup> Whether this is true for Asian American candidates, however, is still yet to be investigated more thoroughly.

For Democrats, particularly in the 2018 midterm elections, the conversation around identity and representation saw increased popularity, with campaigns from those such as Pressley strategizing to not only appeal to minority voters, but include them. In an interview with the *Boston Globe*, Pressley's senior advisor Alex Goldstein discussed the newly-elected representative's victory as a result of a "multicultural strategy" in which "everything is on the table and every community is worthy of organizing in and on behalf of."<sup>58</sup> Outsider candidates like Pressley – who are not just political outsiders, but live on the margins in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and other identifiers – turned their marginalized status into a political asset. Sri Lankan American economist Krish Vignarajah, who ran for governor of Maryland during the primary election, astutely pointed out in one of her campaign ads that having more women in office is not just a matter of descriptive representation, but that healthcare, education funding, and incarceration rates are all better in states where more women are at the helm.<sup>59</sup> Instead of shying away from discussing their identities, many of the candidates that ran during the 2018 midterms proudly touted their identities as campaign assets, using them as tools to communicate issue priorities with voters in more nuanced ways.

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<sup>56</sup> Mike Gonzalez, "It Is Time to Debate—and End—Identity Politics," The Heritage Foundation, Oct 9 2018 <https://www.heritage.org/civil-society/commentary/it-time-debate-and-end-identity-politics>

<sup>57</sup> Charlton McIlwain and Stephen M. Caliendo, *Race Appeal: How Candidates Invoke Race in U.S. Political Campaigns* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

<sup>58</sup> Nik DeCosta-Klipa, "How did Ayanna Pressley pull off a double-digit drubbing of Michael Capuano in the 7th District?" *Boston Globe*, Sept 5 2018. <https://www.boston.com/news/politics/2018/09/05/ayanna-pressley-massachusetts-win>

<sup>59</sup> Jill Filipovic, "A Woman's Place," *The New Republic*, May 29 2018, <https://newrepublic.com/article/148297/gender-motherhood-political-assets-midterms>

For non-white, non-male candidates that ran during the 2018 midterms, communicating with their multicultural constituencies was key, and Asian American candidates – especially ones that ran in districts where there are sizable Asian American populations – faced the same challenge. When polled, Asian Americans have typically identified education and economic issues as very serious issues for themselves and for their families.<sup>60</sup> Even in 2006, surveyed Asian Americans responded that education was their first priority as constituents.<sup>61</sup> Once the survey data is disaggregated by ethnic group, however, slight differences in public opinion emerge. Over 40 percent of Southeast Asian Americans report problems in school – such as bullying and educational proficiency – as very serious issues, while less than 30 percent of East Asian Americans identify problems in schools as very serious issues.<sup>62</sup> In 2018, 50 percent of Chinese Americans reported that taxation was an extremely important election issue compared to 36 percent of Vietnamese Americans and 32 percent of Filipino Americans.<sup>63</sup>

Nationwide, Hmong, Cambodian Laotian, and Vietnamese American adults have the lowest educational attainment of Asian American ethnic groups, while Asian Indian, Sri Lankan, Chinese, and Malaysian Americans are among those with the highest educational attainment.<sup>64</sup> In addition, over fifty percent of Asian Indian, Chinese, and Japanese Americans hold occupational positions in management and professional fields, while Southeast Asian Americans hold the least amount of management and professional positions, with a majority working in manufacturing and service occupations.<sup>65</sup> Chinese Americans also own nearly a third of Asian American-owned

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<sup>60</sup> “2018 Asian American Voter Survey,” APIA Vote and AAPI Data, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Carol Hardy-Fanta et al. *Contested Transformation: Race, Gender, and Political Leadership in 21st Century America* (Cambridge University Press: 2016), 327

<sup>62</sup> “State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Series,” Center for American Progress, 57

<sup>63</sup> “2018 Asian American Voter Survey (AAVS),” APIA Vote and AAPI Data

<sup>64</sup> “State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Series,” Center for American Progress, 47

<sup>65</sup> “State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Series,” Center for American Progress, 81

firms.<sup>66</sup> Although their educational attainment and professional achievements are similar, there is one primary difference between East Asian Americans and South Asian Americans: South Asian Americans have the highest proportions of community members who are recent immigrants to the United States compared to East Asian Americans.<sup>67</sup>

The history of Asian Americans in politics has been a relatively short one, but demographic changes and shifts in overall policy priorities for the community such as immigration have helped generate more political and civic engagement among Asian Americans and propel more Asian Americans to candidacies – and to successes. Still, even as Asian American candidates see more runs and more victories, disparities within the community reveal differences and disparities between candidates, as well as different policy priorities for different ethnic groups within the Asian American community. Although Asian Americans remain a much smaller voting bloc than other racial minorities, their projected growth and the steady increase in candidacies makes examining Asian American candidates pursuing seats at the state level crucial to understanding not just how Asian American representation has evolved, but how it will continue to evolve as more Asian American candidates emerge, win, and continue to develop the state-level bench.

### Methodology

To compile the necessary data and evidence to address whether Asian American candidates are more likely to campaign on their identities as Asian Americans and whether they are more likely to campaign on certain policy priorities than others, I employ both qualitative and quantitative methods. I interviewed several candidates who ran in 2018 for their insight into addressing identity in their campaigns and examined several campaign sites and campaign

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<sup>66</sup> “State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Series,” Center for American Progress, 98

<sup>67</sup> “State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Series,” Center for American Progress, 30



marketing materials. I also conducted a content analysis of the campaign websites of the 137 Asian American candidates for state legislature seats that qualified for inclusion on the 2018 general election ballot.

Since there is not one definitive, succinct list of Asian American candidates, the list of Asian American candidates used in this analysis had to be manually derived from various sources such as the *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*, the University of California, Riverside APIAData projects, and Ballotpedia data. In some cases, other sources such as news articles and social media posts were used to identify the candidates as Asian American. Although there are some Asian American state legislature incumbents – and challengers – anticipated to be on 2019 general election ballots, in keeping with the boundaries of selecting only 2018 general election candidates, the list of candidates aggregated for this particular analysis does not include candidates for 2019 elections in states with off-year elections or states with staggered elections for certain legislative seats.

After sifting through Ballotpedia data and the *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*, I've identified 136 Asian American state legislature candidates on the 2018 general election ballot and organized them into separate entries per candidate. Data for each candidate was derived only from the candidates' campaign websites. Each entry includes the candidate's name, the state in which they are campaigning for office, their party affiliation, whether they are an incumbent, whether they have previously held a different public office before their 2018 campaign, their ethnicity, and whether they won election. In terms of campaign priorities, each entry also indicates whether the candidate mentioned being an immigrant, a refugee, or a descendant of either; mentioned being of Asian descent or immigrating from Asia specifically; explicitly used the word "legal" to describe their immigration status; mentioned education

policy; mentioned healthcare policy; mentioned immigration policy; or mentioned economic policy.

*Qualitative Findings: How Asian American Candidates Touch on Identity*

Although not all the Asian American state legislature candidates on the 2018 ballot discussed their Asian backgrounds, those that did wove it into their narratives as Americans seeking public office. Former California state senator Janet Nguyen, a Vietnamese American and a Republican, ran unsuccessfully for re-election in the 2018 midterms, unseated by just over 3,000 votes to Democratic, white male challenger Thomas Umberg.<sup>68</sup> During the campaign, her campaign produced and disseminated an ad titled “Life,” in which Nguyen highlighted her journey as a refugee and how her background shaped her conservative views. With a voiceover recording laid over shots of her completing tasks around her house, she said: “I’m an immigrant. I lived in a refugee camp. My family had to escape on a boat, but we finally made it to America. We had nothing left except our dreams. ... I decided to get involved in government because I wanted to help families like mine.” The ad also includes a recording from the California State Senate on February 23, 2017, when Nguyen made headlines for being removed from the floor after sharply criticizing the memorialization of former Democratic state senator Tom Hayden, who had traveled to North Vietnam with then-wife Jane Fonda in 1974.<sup>69</sup> Over footage in which Nguyen speaks to an audience of constituents in front of the South Vietnamese, Californian, and American flags, Nguyen continued: “They tried to drag me off the Senate floor because they did not want our voice to be heard – but we won’t be silenced.”

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<sup>68</sup> Spencer Custodio, “Democrat Tom Umberg Declares Victory Over GOP State Sen. Janet Nguyen,” *Voice of OC*, Nov 28 2018, <https://voiceofoc.org/2018/11/democrat-tom-umberg-declares-victory-over-gop-state-sen-janet-nguyen/>

<sup>69</sup> Alexei Koseff, “California senator removed from floor after criticizing late lawmaker Tom Hayden,” *The Sacramento Bee*, Feb 23 2017, <https://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/capitol-alert/article134515314.html>

Kansas Democrat Rui Xu, a son of Chinese immigrants who successfully ran for the Kansas State House of Representatives, found that although he never extensively discussed his immigrant background, even white, Midwestern voters were receptive to his family's story of immigration and adaptation to American life. One of his most-viewed Facebook advertisements detailed his mother's experience in communist China and described how she would go to work and then come home to study for hours by candlelight – a story which Xu said both illustrated his passion for education to voters and described his immigrant background without explicitly and separately referencing it.

“In a progressive district, I just tried to find a common thread with the Sharice Davids campaign of ‘young, new, different face,’ which kind of implied the immigrant thing for me without outright saying it,” Xu told me over the phone.<sup>70</sup> “I joked about my name at the doors a lot, which helped endear me to voters, I think. My stump speeches mentioned that I decided to do this because after 2016, I realized how many people out there were fighting against the things that I love most about this country and why my parents moved here, and I realized that I have to fight just as hard *for* those things.”

Tina Maharath, a Laotian American Democrat who won election to the Ohio State Senate during the 2018 midterms, had less party support during the primary election but earned the necessary voter support to push her through the general election. Even as the Democratic nominee, the Ohio Democratic Party and Franklin County Democrats refused to endorse Maharath and didn't provide her campaign with any monetary support.<sup>71</sup> Both her campaign platform and her campaign itself reflected her experience as a daughter of refugees displaced by the Secret War in Laos. On her campaign site, Maharath explained that she would fight for

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<sup>70</sup> Rui Xu, phone call to author, Feb 13, 2019.

<sup>71</sup> Jeremy Pelzer, “Democratic underdog Tina Maharath wins Ohio Senate seat,” Cleveland.com, Nov. 27, 2018. <https://www.cleveland.com/politics/2018/11/democratic-underdog-tina-maharath-wins-ohio-senate-seat.html>

veterans because her “generation is currently the third generation in [her] family who has served the United States Armed Services,” referring to the Laotian and Hmong soldiers who fought on behalf of the United States during the Vietnam War.<sup>72</sup> Having been one of many Southeast Asian Americans who experienced maladaptation as a teenager, Maharath also had an arrest record that made it onto several attack mailers against her, but ultimately, she found that voters were sympathetic to her past. “I just kept thinking, ‘I’m a woman, I’m a minority, I live in Columbus, they don’t want me,’” Maharath told *The Columbus Dispatch* after her victory. “Well, I just won!”<sup>73</sup>

### *Quantitative Analysis: 2018 State Legislative Campaigns of Asian American Candidates*

#### Hypotheses

Analyzing my original data set of Asian American state legislative candidates from 2018, I will test the following hypotheses that relate to their campaigns concerning which Asian Americans – East Asian American, Southeast Asian American, or South Asian American – are more likely to be incumbents (H1), which Asian Americans are more likely to campaign on education issues (H2), and, probing popular conceptions of how candidates employ identity politics, which are more likely to mention their identities in their campaigns (H3). Since partisanship often dominates how campaign platforms and messaging is shaped, I also test several hypotheses about Asian American candidates with respect to how party may shape their willingness to (H4) campaign on health care issues and (H5) mention their own identity as immigrants or as Asian Americans more generally in their campaigns. Lastly, in a test of the alleged effectiveness of campaigning using identity politics, I test a hypothesis regarding the win

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<sup>72</sup> “Platform,” Tina Maharath for Ohio State Senate. <https://www.tinamaharath.com/platform>

<sup>73</sup> Jim Siegel, “Democrat Tina Maharath completes unlikely victory in Ohio Senate race,” *The Columbus Dispatch*, Nov. 28, 2018.

rates of Asian American state legislature candidates that discussed their racial and ethnic backgrounds during their 2018 campaigns.

### **Hypothesis One: Ethnicity and Incumbency**

Because Southeast Asian Americans have the least educational attainment and hold the least amount of management positions and that South Asian Americans are often some of the most recent immigrants to the United States out of the total Asian American population, I hypothesize that *incumbent Asian American state legislators will be more likely to be East Asian American than Southeast Asian American and South Asian American.*

### **Hypothesis Two: Ethnicity and What Issues They Run On**

Since Southeast Asian Americans report experiencing more issues with bullying and educational achievement in compulsory education, I *hypothesize that Southeast Asian American candidates are more likely to campaign on education reforms than East Asian American candidates.* I also hypothesize that *South Asian Americans and Southeast Asian Americans are more likely to discuss immigration than East Asian Americans* given that those two populations include more recent immigrants and refugees to the United States.

### **Hypotheses Three: Ethnicity and Identity**

Although the Asian American population is relatively new compared to other racial groups in the United States, there are still disparities among Asian Americans when it comes to established histories and economic security. Given that Southeast Asian Americans are more likely to be refugees and that South Asian American communities include some of the most recent immigrants to the United States out of the entire Asian American population, I hypothesize that *East Asian Americans are less likely to campaign on their Asian backgrounds than Southeast Asian Americans and South Asian Americans.*

### **Hypothesis Four: Dominance of Partisanship**

Substantive scholarship supports the notion that partisanship remains the ultimate determinant of both voter and legislators' behaviors. Although socioeconomic differences persist among Asian American communities, these differences may not factor in as heavily as party identification when it comes to Asian American candidates' campaign messaging and platforms. The national Democratic Party focused on healthcare messaging during the 2018 midterm election season, a focus which trickled down the ballot to state legislative races.<sup>74</sup> I hypothesize that *Democratic Asian American state legislature candidates were more likely to discuss healthcare policy as key components of their campaigns than Republican Asian American state legislature candidates were.*

### **Hypothesis Five: Party and Identity**

President Donald Trump's hardline stances on immigration, such as his proposal to build a wall along the United States' southern border, have generated nationwide debates about immigration policy. The president's rhetoric was one of the factors that led to a historic surge in candidacies from people of color.<sup>75</sup> In addition, the president's anti-immigrant, has also pushed more Asian Americans – who are often either immigrants or from immigrant families – to the left.<sup>76</sup> Given that Asian Americans were one of many groups that responded negatively to the president's anti-immigration rhetoric and that the 2018 midterms saw an unprecedented amount of candidates explicitly incorporating their identities as people of color into their campaigns, I hypothesize that *Democratic Asian American state legislature candidates were more likely to*

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<sup>74</sup> Griffin Connolly, "Democrats' Final Midterm Pitch: Two Words – Health Care," Roll Call, Nov 6, 2018 <https://www.rollcall.com/news/politics/democrats-final-midterm-pitch-two-words-health-care>

<sup>75</sup> "The Faces of Change in the Midterm Elections," New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/31/us/politics/midterm-election-candidates-diversity.html>

<sup>76</sup> Asma Khalid, "How Asian-American Voters Went From Republican To Democratic," NPR, <https://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/09/16/439574726/how-asian-american-voters-went-from-republican-to-democratic>

*discuss their identities as Asian American or their identities as immigrants or refugees than their Republican counterparts.*

### **Hypothesis Six: Identity, Party, and Win Rates**

Conservative pundits have continued to claim that Democratic, non-white candidates often engage in “identity politics” to appeal to voters and gain their support. Fox News pundit Tucker Carlson infamously asked, “How precisely is diversity our strength?” in September of 2018 in response to some Democrats’ assertion that demographic diversity is a benefit to American society.<sup>77</sup> In an opinion piece published by Fox News, conservative columnist Tammy Bruce criticized Democrats for engaging in identity politics, stating that “they will recycle the age-old leftist approach of lying to voters about who they are while vowing to punish those who dare to expose them.”<sup>78</sup> To test this emphasis on identity politics’ role in the 2018 midterms, I hypothesize that *Democratic Asian American state legislature candidates that discussed their Asian backgrounds were more likely to win than those their Republican counterparts.*

## **Findings**

### **Descriptive Findings**

The 137 Asian American candidates that ran for state legislative seats during the 2018 midterm election were largely Democratic, East Asian American, and male. As shown in Figure 1 below, out of the 137 candidates, 104 were Democrats, 28 were Republicans, two were Green Party members, two were registered as members of the Independent Republican Party, and one identified as a Libertarian candidate. 94 of the candidates were men and 43 were women.

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<sup>77</sup> “Tucker Carlson: ‘How Precisely is Diversity Our Strength?’” Youtube video [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l\\_xkgRwXvcE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_xkgRwXvcE)

<sup>78</sup> Tammy Bruce “The left’s ‘identity politics’ hypocrisy,” Fox News, Aug 9 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/tammy-bruce-the-lefts-identity-politics-hypocrisy>

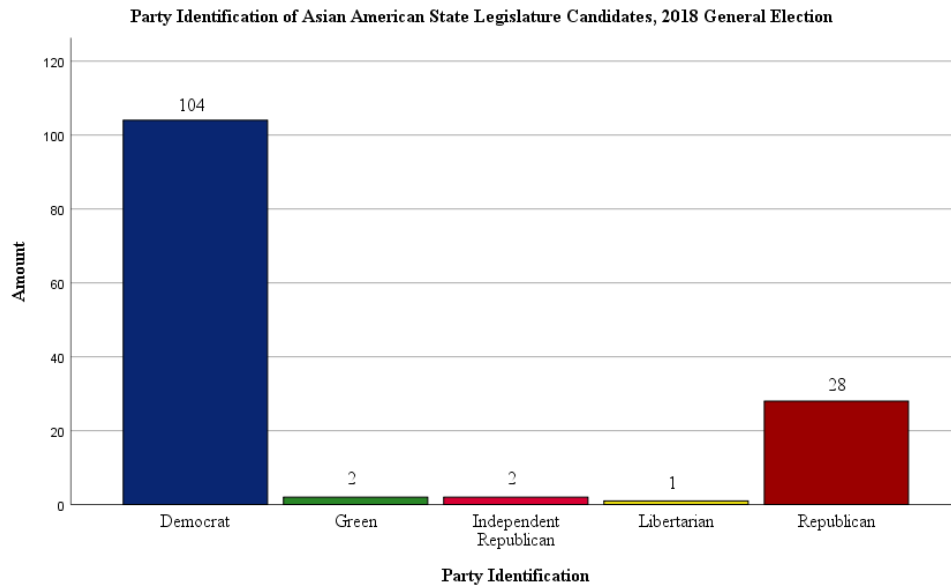


Figure 1. Asian American State Legislature Candidates by Party Identification

East Asian Americans made up the majority of Asian American state legislature candidates running in 2018, outnumbering Southeast Asian American and South Asian American candidates combined.

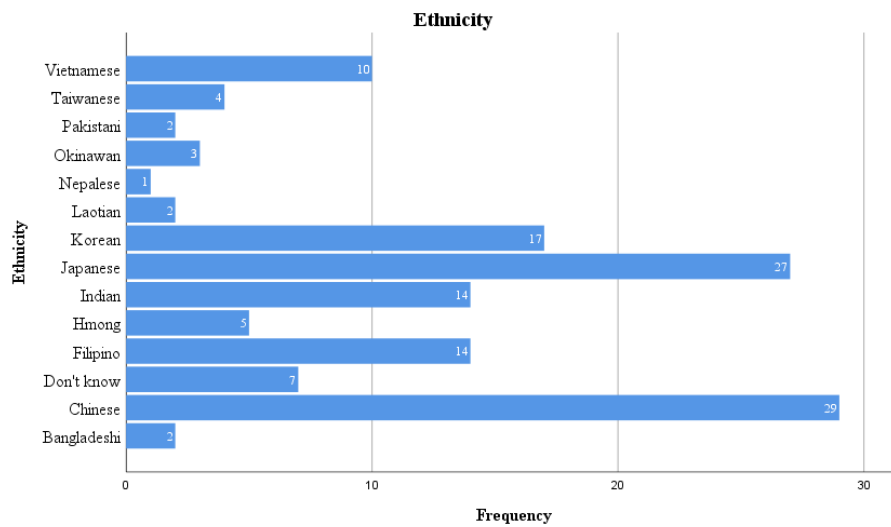


Figure 2. Asian American State Legislature Candidates by Ethnicity



As shown in Figure 3, for ease of analysis, I initially recoded the ethnicity variable into three main categories: East Asian American, Southeast Asian American, and South Asian American. The East Asian American category includes candidates who identify as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Okinawan, and Taiwanese American; the Southeast Asian American category includes Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, Laotian, Hmong, and Filipino American candidates; and the South Asian American category includes Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Nepalese American candidates. However, since South Asian American and Southeast Asian American candidates were still far outnumbered by East Asian American candidates and since South and Southeast Asian Americans face similar issues in areas such as immigration, I again recoded the three variables into two: East Asian American and non-East Asian American.

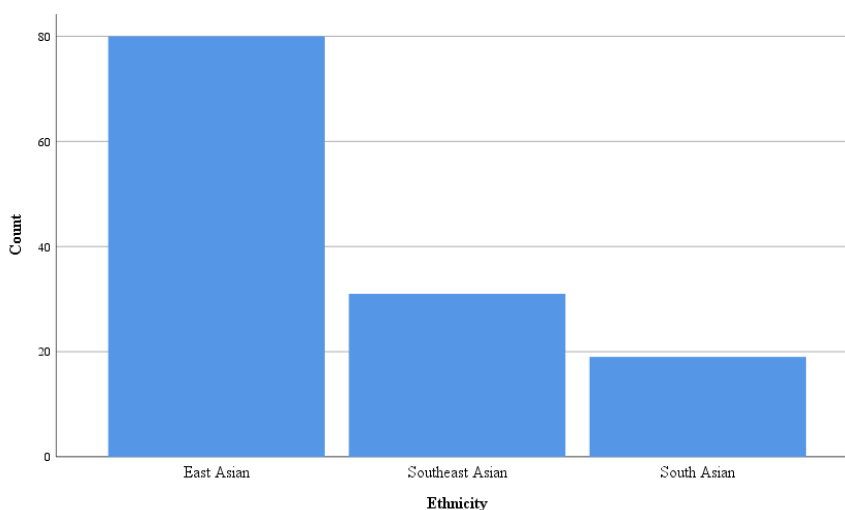


Figure 3. Asian American State Legislature Candidates by Ethnicity, Three Categories

In addition, most of the Asian American state legislature candidates sought seats in lower chambers, had not held a different office before, and were incumbents. Ninety-eight of the candidates were pursuing seats in the lower chambers of their state legislatures, 103 of them had never held a different office before, and 74 of them were incumbents. A majority of the

incumbents – 60 of them – were pursuing reelection in lower chambers, and a majority of the newcomers – 38 candidates – were also seeking election to seats in lower chambers.

Unsurprisingly, as shown in Figure 4, an overwhelming majority of the Asian American state legislature candidates were from California and Hawaii – the states with the largest shares of the national Asian American population.<sup>79</sup>

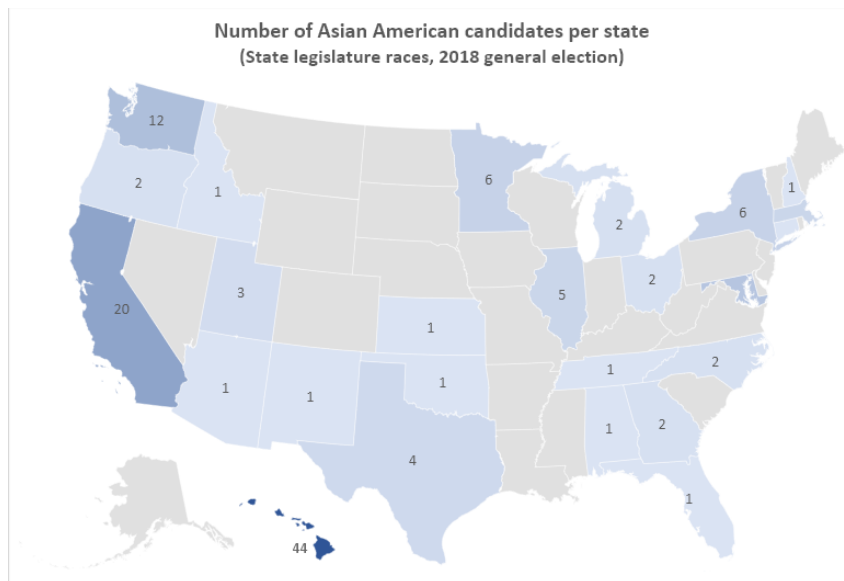


Figure 4. Geographic Distribution of Asian American State Legislature Candidates

Overall, relatively few candidates discussed their backgrounds as Asian American or as people from refugee and immigrant families. Even fewer – specifically, two Republican candidates – explicitly mentioned utilizing “legal” immigration channels in indirect reference to undocumented immigrants, as shown in Figure 5.

<sup>79</sup> Gustavo Lopez, Neil G. Ruiz and Eileen Patten, “Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population,” Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/08/key-facts-about-asian-americans/>

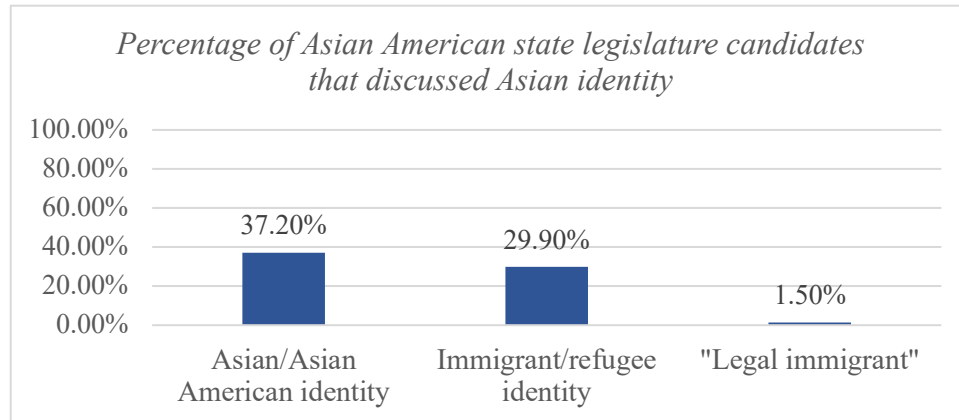


Figure 5. Bar graph, percentage of Asian American state legislature candidates that discussed Asian identity

Additionally, as shown in Figure 6, education and the economy dominated policy discussions with 58.40 percent and 56.90 percent of the 137 candidates including it as a core component of their campaigns. 36.50 percent of them also discussed healthcare and 13.10 percent included immigration as a key policy priority. About a fourth of the candidates discussed their racial or ethnic identity.

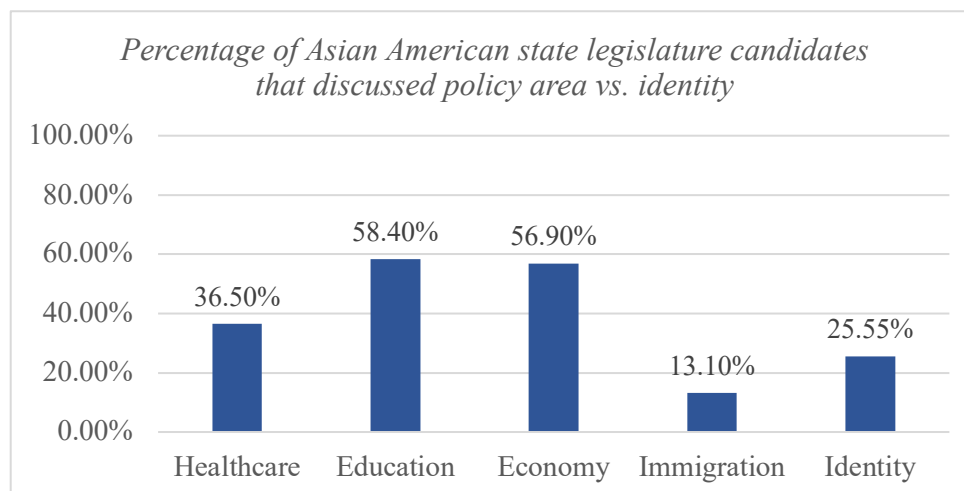


Figure 6. Bar graph, percentage of Asian American state legislature candidates that discussed policy areas and identity

### Data Analysis

Despite claims that non-white candidates – especially Democratic non-white candidates – pander to voters by using their racial and ethnic backgrounds, analysis of Asian American state legislature candidates' 2018 general election campaigns reveals that other factors, such as partisanship and incumbency status, remain the dominant influences on the content of Asian American state legislature candidates' campaign platforms and messaging.

I find support for my first hypothesis, which is that *East Asian American state legislator candidates are more likely to be incumbents than Southeast Asian American and South Asian American candidates*. For example, 65 percent of East Asian American candidates are incumbents compared with a difference that is statistically significant (Chi-Square=4.078;  $p < .05$ ). I found that East Asian American state legislature candidates were far more likely to be incumbents than Southeast Asian Americans and South Asian Americans, providing support for H1. The probability value for the relationship between incumbency and ethnicity is 0.001, and the Chi-Square value is 10.412. Even when controlling for whether the candidates had previously held an office, the relationship between ethnicity and incumbency remains significant (Chi-Square=8.837;  $p = 0.003$ ).

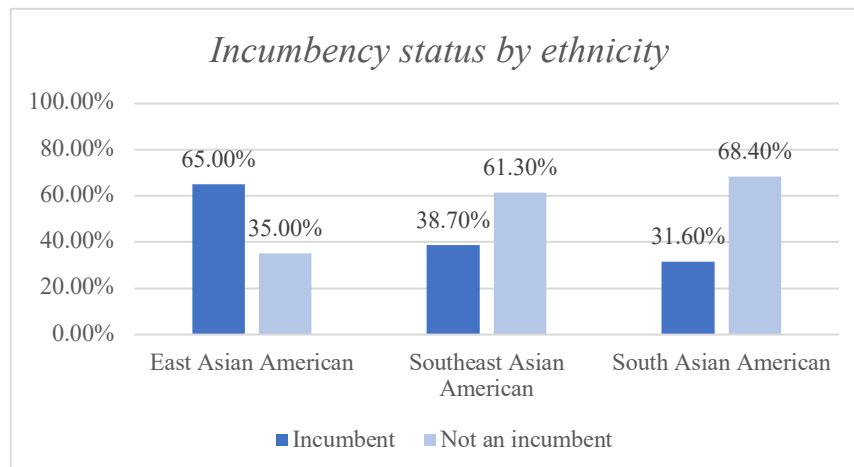


Figure 7. Bar graph, incumbency status by ethnicity

Turning to campaign issues, I also found no support for H2; there is no relationship between ethnicity and whether the candidate discussed education or economic policy. However, there is a relationship between ethnicity and whether the candidate discussed healthcare or immigration policy, but the relationship between ethnicity and whether the candidate discussed healthcare was much weaker than was the case with immigration policy. South Asian American state legislature candidates were more likely to include both healthcare policy and immigration policy as core components of their campaign platforms than other Asian American candidates.

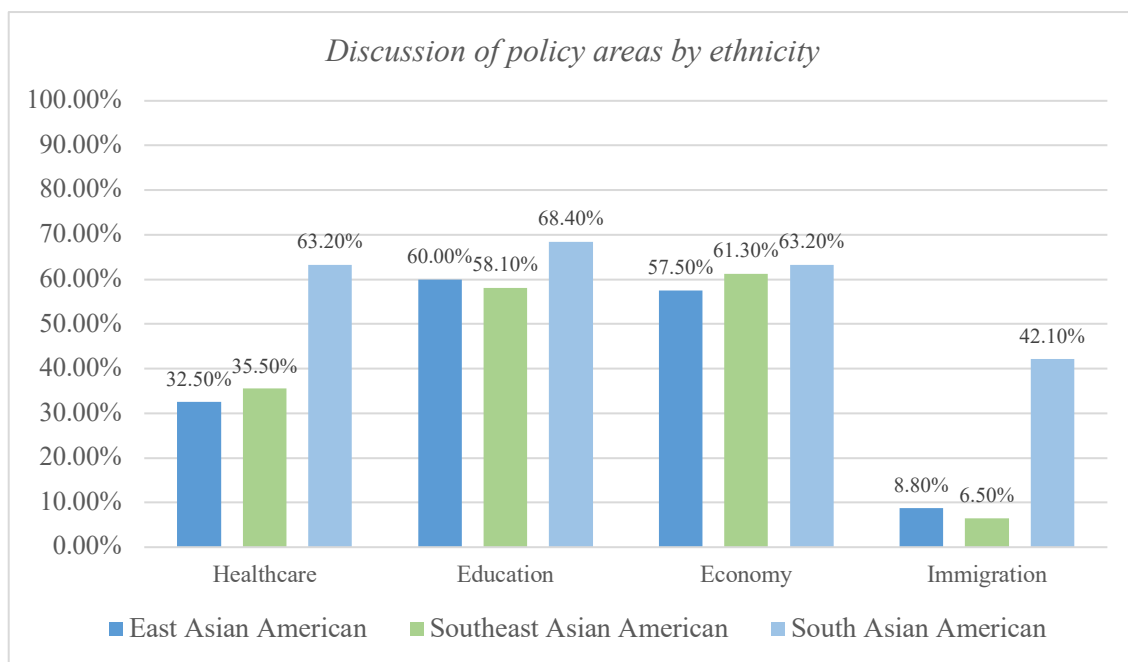


Figure 8. Bar graph, policy area discussion by ethnicity

I also found no support for H3. Although Southeast Asian Americans are often from refugee families and South Asian Americans are typically the most recent Asian immigrants to

the United States, there is no relationship between ethnicity and whether the candidate mentioned their Asian, immigrant, or refugee background.

Grouping the candidates by party, I found that Democratic Asian American state legislature candidates were much more likely than Republican Asian American candidates to discuss healthcare as a key component of their campaign platforms. With a probability value of 0.017, the relationship between these candidates' party identification and whether they chose to discuss healthcare in their platforms is significant – a finding which supports H4: Democratic Asian American state legislature candidates were more likely to discuss healthcare policy than their Republican counterparts. Democratic Asian American state legislature candidates were also more likely to include education in their campaign platforms than Republican Asian American state legislature candidates were.

However, as displayed in Figure 9, partisanship was less of an influence on whether the candidates discussed other issues. Both Democratic and Republican Asian American state legislature candidates discussed economic policy at similar rates, with a majority of both incorporating economic policy into their campaign platforms. Very few of these candidates discussed immigration at all, and partisanship had no influence on whether they discussed it or not. Since immigration is primarily a federal issue, this finding is less surprising.

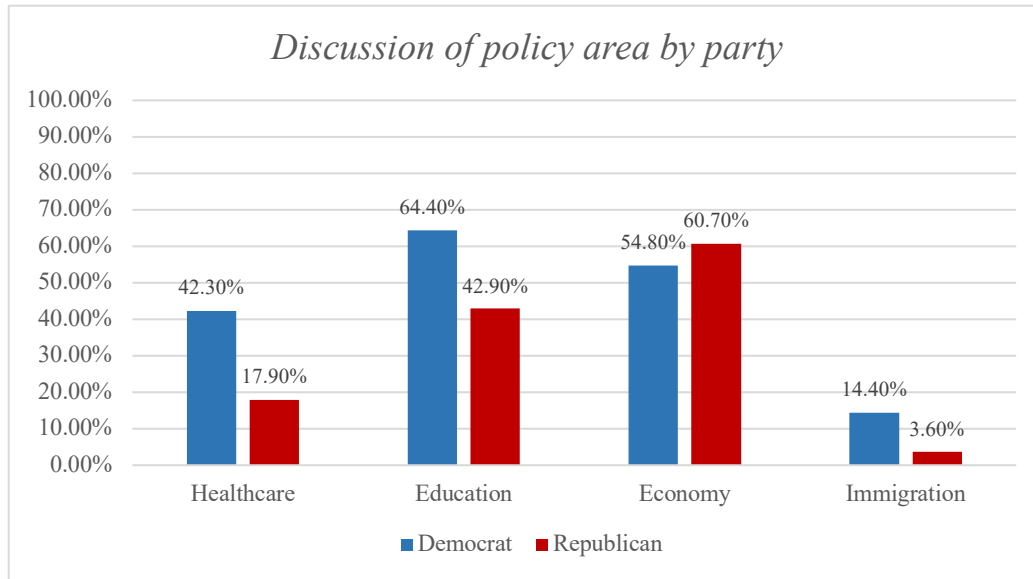


Figure 9. Bar graph, policy area discussion by party

In addition to influencing which topics these candidates discussed, breaking down the Asian American state legislature candidates by party reveals that partisanship was a factor in their success. Democratic Asian American state legislature candidates fared much better than Asian American state legislature candidates of any other party, with 87.5% of them winning election compared to 32.1% of Republican and 0% of other candidates winning election. Even after controlling for candidates' incumbency status, the relationship between the two variables remains strong, with a probability value of 0.000 both controlling for incumbency and without controlling for incumbency.

Contrary to popular belief that Democratic candidates from marginalized communities employ identity politics to gain votes, I found no evidence supporting either my fifth or sixth hypotheses. I found no evidence that Democratic Asian American state legislature candidates were more likely to discuss their racial, ethnic, immigrant, or refugee backgrounds than their Republican counterparts. Additionally, Asian American state legislature candidates that

discussed their identities as Asian Americans or their immigrant or refugee backgrounds were not more likely to win election. Even when controlling for party, I found no evidence supporting the assertion that there is a relationship between these variables even when controlling for ethnic subgroups and for party, providing no support for my sixth hypothesis.

Additionally, as shown in Figure 10 below, I found that there is no relationship between the party identification of the 2018 midterm Asian American state legislature candidates and whether they mentioned their Asian heritage or Asian American identity and whether they discussed their immigrant or refugee backgrounds.

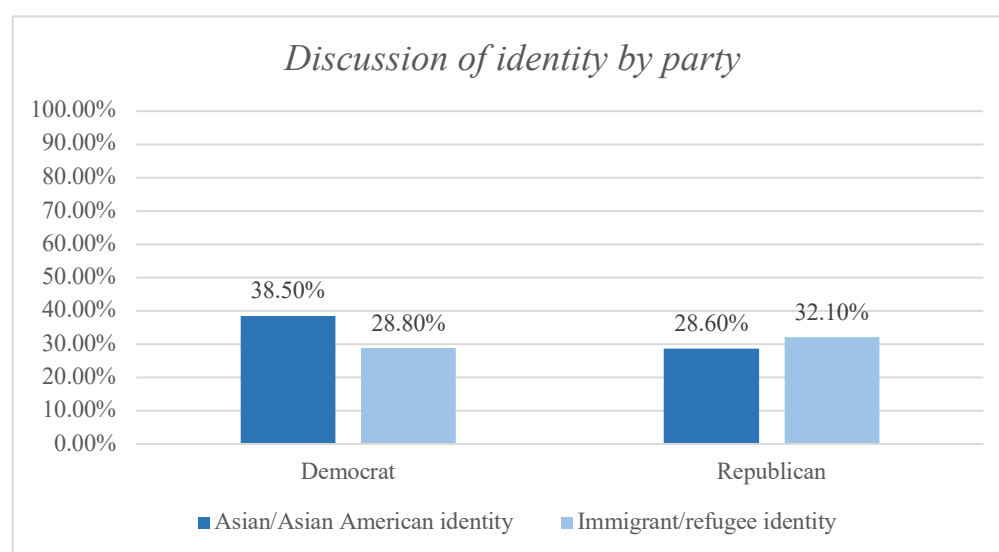


Figure 10. Bar graph, discussion of identity by party

Despite the prevailing narrative of Democratic minority candidates employing racial appeals to gain votes, both Democratic and Republican Asian American state legislature candidates mentioned their heritage at similarly low rates.

### Conclusion

Despite the overarching narrative of identity politics that drove media coverage and popular discussion surrounding the 2018 midterm elections, for Asian Americans who pursued



state legislature seats, partisanship – not racial or ethnic identity – remained a dominant factor in how these candidates campaigned. I found support for my first hypothesis regarding ethnicity and incumbency and my fourth hypothesis about party identification's role in shaping campaign policy priorities. East Asian Americans were more likely to be incumbent state legislators than Asian American candidates of other ethnic backgrounds, and Democratic Asian American state legislature candidates were more likely to discuss healthcare policy as key components of their campaigns than their Republican counterparts. However, I found no support for my other four hypotheses. I found no statistically significant relationship between ethnicity and what issues the candidates campaigned on, ethnicity and whether the candidate discussed their identity, party identification and whether the candidate discussed their identity, or identity, party, and whether the candidate won election – a set of findings contrary to the claim that Democratic candidates, candidates of racial minority backgrounds, or Democratic minority candidates weaponize their identities to gain votes and win elections.

Although this analysis is brief, the data collected and the findings suggest several avenues for further research. For example, a major component missing from this analysis is the inclusion of district demographics as a variable. In many cases, the candidates' decisions to campaign on their identities as Asian Americans, refugees, or immigrants could be influenced by the presence of a large Asian American population, a large immigrant population, or a large refugee population in-district, where such appeals would not only perhaps be more impactful and carry more weight, but also imply to constituents that they would gain both descriptive and substantive representation from the candidates' victories. This analysis also only examines a single general election and therefore is limited to a very small sample size of 137. Further research that includes tracking Asian American candidacies for state legislature seats over time, including primary and

general elections, could reveal trends in identity politics and policy priorities not found in an analysis of one election alone. Also, analyses that involve comparisons between Asian American candidates and candidates of other racial groups have yet to be conducted since no datasets that include all state legislature candidates from every state for any given election are available or have been compiled.

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