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Executive Summary

Asian Americans have been part of the U.S. history almost as long as the country itself has existed. However, their representation in key decision-making roles, particularly in Congress, remains limited, accounting for only about 3 percent of the total members. This underrepresentation can be attributed to challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, and the political systems of their countries of origin. Despite these obstacles, there are encouraging trends among Asian Americans, especially within the younger generation, who are increasingly passionate about participating in public affairs.

This rising enthusiasm is reflected in higher voter turnout rates among Asian Americans, signaling their growing influence both politically and demographically. This paper will clarify and compare key concepts like "civic engagement" and "political participation" to highlight their importance. Ultimately, the report aims to encourage more Asian Americans to recognize the significance of civic engagement and urge U.S. authorities to listen to the voices of the Asian American community.

Part 1 Clarifying the Concepts

Before exploring these concepts, the Yuan Foundation conducted a small-scale survey to assess people's understanding of basic civic education terms. One term that many found challenging to define was "civic engagement." People often oversimplify this concept, reducing it to single actions like "voting" or "volunteering." However, there is a need for a more universal and nuanced understanding of what constitutes civic engagement. Even U.S.-born citizens sometimes require clarification on these terms. The differences among these definitions often lie in the scale of participation and the underlying intentions. Most explanations agree that civic engagement cannot be limited to just a few activities like voting, volunteering, or protesting. Both civic engagement and political participation are crucial to the foundation of the American democratic system, ensuring that government functions smoothly at both the local and national levels.

Additionally, there is a tendency to confuse terms like "civic engagement," "community participation," and "political participation." While these concepts share similarities and may overlap, they involve distinct motivations and activities.

Misunderstanding or oversimplifying these concepts can lead to an underestimation of certain groups' civic efforts. Therefore, the first step in promoting civic engagement is to clearly define and differentiate these key concepts.

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement refers to both the behavioral and psychological efforts aimed at improving the community. Behavioral efforts include activities like voting, protesting, volunteering, and even posting comments on news or public affairs. Psychological efforts involve the willingness to pay attention to social issues and the recognition that participating in public events is part of one's civic duty. Civic engagement doesn't necessarily have a political motivation; rather, it is often driven by a desire to contribute positively to the community.

A community can be defined as a group united by shared interests, identity, or geographical location. The goals of civic engagement are to improve society and achieve personal fulfillment. This fulfillment arises from a sense of social responsibility and an awareness of civic duties. Today, academics conceptualize civic engagement as encompassing a wide range of activities, from voting to helping neighbors. However, this broad understanding risks diluting the concept, making it so expansive that it could apply to nearly any social interaction.

To properly understand civic engagement, it is essential to avoid oversimplifying it to a few specific activities or overextending its definition to encompass all social interactions. After researching various explanations, we find Thomas Ehrlich's definition particularly compelling.

In his book *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, Ehrlich defines civic engagement as "working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting a community's quality of life through political and non-political processes." According to Ehrlich, it is a moral and civic duty for citizens to view themselves as integral members of their communities, which leads them to consider social problems as partially their own. This sense of shared responsibility motivates individuals to take actions that contribute to social improvement.

Political Participation

Compared to civic engagement, political participation has a clear political intent. It includes actions that directly influence election outcomes or the decision-making process, such as voting and lobbying. Political participation also encompasses a broad range of activities where individuals develop and express their opinions about how the world is governed.

Additionally, it involves efforts to shape decisions that affect people's lives. For example, posting a complaint about a specific policy online or organizing a protest can indirectly influence policy outcomes. Those engaged in political participation may aim to impact the political system at various levels, including regional, national, or global governance.

The most significant difference between civic engagement and political participation is that civic engagement often involves more psychological effort, with individuals recognizing their partial responsibility for public issues and contributing to the community in non-political ways.

Community Participation

Community participation refers to the voluntary efforts made by individuals to contribute to projects aimed at improving their community. These efforts should be strategic and intentional. One of the key goals of community participation is to help individuals find a sense of belonging within their community. In the long term, community participation fosters greater involvement and trust within the community.

A community can be defined as a social group brought together by shared hobbies, interests, or goals. For example, an Animal Rescue Organization is a community for individuals committed to saving animals' lives. Community participation goes beyond collective action; it involves community-sensitive strategies that are both well-planned and empathetic. These strategies combine logical social science principles with the art of understanding and communication.

The most significant difference between community participation and civic engagement is that community participation emphasizes community-building and long-term collaboration, while civic engagement focuses more on individual fulfillment and contributing to the community through various forms of involvement.

Factors of Civic Engagement

The United States is often referred to as the "melting pot" of world cultures, as immigrants bring diverse cultural backgrounds with them. This cultural diversity makes it more challenging for a country like the U.S. to motivate citizens to participate in public affairs. According to research by Joakim Ekman, factors influencing civic engagement among citizens include demographic, macroeconomic, and psychological motivations. Demographic factors encompass population size, as well as characteristics like religion, history, and culture. Studies show that civic engagement tends to be more prevalent in countries with smaller populations. The origins of democracy trace back to ancient Greece, where city-states, known for their small populations, laid the foundation for democratic principles.

Macroeconomic factors also play a role in motivating civic participation. Research indicates that higher-income individuals are more likely to engage in public affairs because they have a vested interest in their community's development, which directly impacts their children's education, safety, and quality of life.

Education is another key factor in civic participation. Studies suggest that citizens with higher levels of education are more inclined to engage in civic activities. In a country like the United States, where the cultural backgrounds of first-generation immigrants are diverse, the U.S. democratic system may differ significantly from the political systems of their home countries. Immigrants from countries with more centralized power structures, such as single-party or autocratic regimes, may be less likely to engage in civic activities. Additionally, individuals are often influenced by their environment, including their workplace, family, and schools, all of which can have spillover effects. For instance, if someone is surrounded by people who are actively engaged in civic activities, they are more likely to be motivated to participate as well.

Mass media also plays a crucial role in shaping civic engagement. The level of media freedom in a state affects people's ability and motivation to participate in public affairs. People living in areas with less media censorship are more likely to engage in civic activities. The complexity of these factors can make it challenging for social scientists to develop a comprehensive quantitative research method to study civic engagement. As a result, voter turnout remains one of the most important statistics for

measuring civic engagement. However, it is important to recognize that voter turnout alone cannot fully capture the extent of civic engagement within a specific group.

Part 2 Current Situation of Asian American Civic Engagement

In this chapter, we will present key statistics that highlight the current state of civic engagement within the Asian American community. These data will illustrate how Asian Americans have become an increasingly influential force in both demographic and political spheres in the United States. According to research by the Pew Research Center, Asian Americans have been the fastest-growing group of eligible voters for over two decades, though this growth rate slowed after 2018. In 2022, the number of eligible Asian American voters reached 13 million. A Pew Research Center survey found that 56 percent of these voters are concentrated in five states: California, Hawaii, Texas, New York, and New Jersey.

Additionally, a report from USCIS states that more than 57 percent of Asian American voters are "naturalized citizens" rather than American-born citizens. Naturalization refers to the process by which individuals born outside the United States become U.S. citizens. By 2030, the growth rate of U.S.-born Asian Americans is expected to surpass that of naturalized citizens, indicating that the younger generation within the Asian American community will play an increasingly important role in the future.

However, despite this growing influence, economic disparities within the Asian American community persist. Ten percent of Asian Americans still live in poverty, with the poverty rate among Asian American children slightly exceeding 16 percent. These statistics underscore the importance of addressing the socioeconomic challenges faced by the community while recognizing its rising political and demographic significance.

Research highlights several key characteristics of Asian American voters. While voter turnout alone cannot fully measure a group's civic participation, it remains a primary indicator. Notably, half of Asian American eligible voters hold a bachelor's degree or higher, a rate higher than that of other minority groups. Additionally, the Asian American voting population tends to be younger, with a median age of 44 compared to 48 among the broader eligible voter population. Furthermore, 36% of Asian American eligible voters are between the ages of 30 and 49, compared to 32% of the

overall eligible voter population. These demographics suggest that Asian Americans are becoming an increasingly vital force. However, the community still faces significant barriers to deeper civic engagement.

Language is one of the most significant barriers. The AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) community consists of approximately 50 ethnic groups who speak more than 100 languages, making it far less homogenous than other racial groups. About 20% of Asian Americans speak English less than proficiently, with many of these individuals being older or living in more insular communities. This language barrier limits access to civic education for some members of the community. With 70% of Asian Americans still being foreign-born, cultural differences also present a major challenge. The cultural diversity within the Asian American community is among the most complex, contributing to difficulties in forming a cohesive political alliance.

The lack of cohesion is further compounded by the community's tendency to view race and ethnicity as distinct identities, making collaboration across different Asian ethnic groups more difficult. Cultural and linguistic differences add another layer of complexity to organizing efforts. Additionally, stereotypes in U.S. society often depict Asian Americans as being secluded from broader cultural engagement. Despite these challenges, there are positive trends emerging within the community. More Asian Americans are becoming motivated to engage in public affairs and are finding effective ways to make their voices heard.

Part 3 Observation in the Asian Community

Despite the barriers to civic engagement faced by Asian Americans, there are positive trends in the community's increasing passion and influence. First, Asian Americans are emerging as a significant civic and political force in many state elections. In states with higher proportions of Asian Americans, such as California, they have already become key swing voters. As one Asian American Congresswoman noted, "We have gone from the margins to the margin of winning." This shift has garnered more attention from the media and politicians, who are now paying closer attention to the community's needs and preferences.

According to a survey by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the policy priorities of the AAPI community include technology, key ballot initiatives, and

higher education. Many politicians have begun reaching out to the Asian American community, recognizing their growing influence.

Additionally, the younger generation of Asian Americans has become increasingly motivated, particularly in response to the rise in racial discrimination against the community following the COVID-19 pandemic. This generation understands the importance of making their voices heard and has taken to the internet as a platform for expressing their opinions on public affairs. Research also indicates that Asian Americans are more likely to adopt new voting methods, such as mail-in voting, over traditional in-person voting.

Beyond voting, there is also a noticeable increase in volunteerism among Asian Americans. Although white Americans still make up the majority of volunteers, Asian American participation in volunteer activities is on the rise. This trend is influenced by cultural values from many Asian countries that emphasize "service" and "giving." For example, Chinese philosophy has a longstanding tradition of sharing wealth, resources, and time, which is reflected in the growing volunteerism within the community.

Conclusion

The myth of the "model minority" of Asian Americans left the whole nation with the wrong impression that Asian community is more than satisfied with their political, economic and social status. There are many voices from the community still waiting to be heard. Asian representation in Congress is still lacking, and we need our rising young generation to shine the future of our community. As a freshly starting non-profit organization, we recognized the barriers hindering Asian community from protecting their civil rights and interests. However, we also witnessed the awakening of our community, especially the younger generation. They used modern technology as their weapon to protect their rights and were more actively engaged in civic activities, including voting, advocacy and volunteerism. Asian Americans are becoming a rising demographic and political force.

The mass media, institutions and politicians started actively taking actions to reach the community. Moreover, we noticed the vast potential and passion for a more significant role in the government's decision-making process. The Yuan Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the participation of Asian citizens, will

continue to provide education and outreach on civic and political participation for the Asian community. However, at the same time, we suggest that the U.S. government and key institutions pay attention to the enormous potential and power of the Asian community. We believe that the young generation of Asian youth will be the future of our community, so we will continue to educate Asian American youth with civic engagement and empowerment training.

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