

“Machine Town”: Panethnic Asian American Identity in Philadelphia Politics

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Introduction & Research Question:

In this paper, the focus will be placed on panethnic Asian American politics in the city of Philadelphia, an understudied subject in a city where racial politics have long been observed along the black-white divide (Kerkstra, 2015). The objective of this study can be distilled down to its research question: How successful have efforts to forge a panethnic Asian American political coalition been in Philadelphia politics? “Efforts” to forge such a coalition are defined broadly, to take into account multiple, intentional attempts to forge such a coalition while success will be determined by the nature of Asian American political activity in Philadelphia politics, with those efforts being deemed a success if there is an Asian American panethnic political coalition with aforementioned origin that acts across ethnic divides in a coordinated and consistent manner both in the voting booth and outside of it in other arenas of political participation.

Literature Review:

To effectively engage the topic under study, the roots of various strands that underlie this particular research question must be examined, with a focus on existing

academic literature on this topic. Towards that end, the literature review will examine the variety of topics that undergird this research question, such as the definition of Asian American panethnicity, the origins of panethnic Asian American identity, the history of Asian American political activity, the ethnic divisions that continue to complicate the panethnic identity, the nature of ethnic urban politics in American cities--especially Philadelphia, and the experiences of Asian American involvement in American urban politics. By examining this cross-section of multiple topics, an understanding can be established on this relatively understudied subject.

In exploring the topic of Asian American panethnicity, the definition of what panethnicity entails must first be established. The most succinct, but distinct, definitions for panethnicity can be found in two works. In the dissertation titled “Panethnicity among Asian Americans and Latinos: panethnicity as both a dependent variable and independent variable”, Tae Eun Min defined panethnicity as a “sense of solidarity beyond different ethnic or national origins”, originating from particular social contexts and individual reactions to them (Min, 2010, p. 1). As for what a panethnic group is, this paper utilizes the definition employed by Yen Le Espiritu in his groundbreaking work--*Asian American panethnicity: Bridging institutions and identities*--which defines a “panethnic group” as a “politico-cultural collectivity made up of peoples of several, hitherto distinct, tribal or national origins” (Le

Espiritu, 1993, p. 2). As for the communities that make up Asian Americans, U.S. Census defines "Asians" as a "person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent" (U.S. Census Bureau). In combining the aforementioned definitions, a panethnic Asian American group or coalition can therefore be described as a "collective made of Americans with distinct origins in Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, with a sense of solidarity going beyond their differing origins". With the definition of Asian American panethnicity established, an examination of its origins can now take place.

In *Asian American panethnicity: Bridging institutions and identities*, Yen Le Espiritu examined in depth the origins of Asian American panethnicity. In examining panethnicity in the American context, the author took issue with the existing framework of seeing ethnic identification as the culmination of a process of either primordialism or instrumentalism, with primordialists arguing that it arose from perceived commonalities over culture and heritage while instrumentalists argued that it emerged as means toward political and material ends (Le Espiritu, 1993, pp. 4-5). For the author, however, both claims miss a key element of ethnic formation and identification in the United States by assuming that it is a voluntary process. According to Le Espiritu, nonwhite groups in the United States has been subject to the process of "categorization" -- wherein "one

group ascriptively classifies another" -- by white Americans in which diverse communities of Africans, Native Americans, Latinos/Hispanics, and Asians have been labeled under homogeneous labels that ignore the heterogeneous reality of ethnicity in those panethnic groups (Le Espiritu, 1993, pp. 5-6).

Having stated the non-voluntary nature of American panethnicity, Le Espiritu delved further into the emergence of American panethnicity. According to the author, panethnic political action in the United States among various nonwhite communities emerged in the 1960s, with various activists in those determining that coalitions across ethnic lines are necessary to combat discrimination and marginalization (Le Espiritu, 1993, p. 12). In the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement, minority rights were expanded and written into law, with affirmative action programs implemented to expand minority representation in employment and resource allocation. Consequently, however, the government chose to categorize the diverse nonwhite communities of United States into the panethnic groups of African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos/Hispanics, and Asians, out of efficiency concerns or of inability or refusal to be attentive to the myriad interests of heterogeneous nonwhite ethnic groups, leading to persons from these communities to act collectively to protect and advance their interests (Le Espiritu, 1993, pp. 12-13).

It is in this historical context that--according to Le Espiritu--the panethnic

Asian American identity emerged. Developed on college campuses by Asian American students and activists, the panethnic Asian American identity emerged as a way for disparate student activists from diverse communities to work together under one common cause, as explained by one of the founders of one of the early panethnic Asian American organizations in the United States--the Asian American Political Alliance, founded in 1968 at University of California, Berkeley:

There were so many Asians out there in the political demonstrations but we had no effectiveness. Everyone was lost in the larger rally. We figured that if we rallied behind our own banner, behind an Asian American banner, we would have an effect on the larger public. We could extend the influence beyond ourselves, to other Asian Americans (Le Espiritu, 1993, p. 34).

Shortly after the development of Asian American panethnicity through a mixture of external forces and pressure from Asian American student activists, it was categorized and institutionalized by the government, putting various Asian American communities under one label for the purposes of efficiency in census calculation, electoral districting, and resource allocation. This led to a further solidification of the Asian American panethnic identity as groups beyond student activists incorporated it for their own purposes, from professionals to politicians (Le Espiritu, 1993, p. 18). Despite this appearance of unity, however, Asian

Americans as a group remain divided, reflecting the ethnic diversity of Asian Americans both before and after the civil rights movements of 1960s.

As a consequence of the homogenizing quality of Asian American panethnicity and due to the emphasis on electoral participation and political representation in the studies of nonwhite Americans' political activity, the long history of political participation by different Asian American communities in pursuit of economic and social opportunities and justice has been understudied, as Pei-te Lien argued in *Making of Asian America: Through Political Participation*. In this work, the author explored the history of Asian American political action prior to the civil rights movements and immigration liberalization of 1960s, contradicting common misconceptions of Asian American politics as being of "passivity and monotony" (Lien, 2010, pp. 1-2).

The image of Asian American political participation that emerges from Lien's research in the era prior to 1960s is complex and varied, reflecting the diversity of Asian American communities in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status. In the case of Japanese and Chinese Americans, most of whom were driven by segregation and discrimination to live in ethnic enclaves in urban centers, community organizations and associations emerged to reflect and advance the interests of the community in question (Lien, 2010, p. 9). In line with Le Espiritu's assertion of the importance of involuntary factors in the formation of

ethnic identification (Le Espiritu, 1993, pp. 5-6), these organizations were established in the peak era of anti-Asian sentiment among white Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) and Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA) representing Chinese Americans and the Japanese Association of America (JAA) representing Japanese Americans--headquartered in the urban centers of the Pacific Coast where the majority of Chinese and Japanese Americans lived (Lien, 2010, p. 9). These organizations, and other community organizations in both the Pacific Coast and other parts of the country, engaged in a variety of political actions ranging from protesting exclusionary immigration laws to lobbying on legislation affecting their communities, while also working to provide financial and other services to members of their own communities (Lien, 2010, pp. 9-16).

In contrast to the activities of aforementioned associations which involved the provision of services and engagement (both accommodating--especially with Japanese American organizations--and confrontational) with the government over legislation and law, there is a vibrant history of strikes and work stoppages by Asian American immigrant laborers before the 1960s--and internal divisions over those actions. While excluded from existing labor unions and organizations dominated by white workers who actively supported legislation and efforts to curb Asian

immigration, Asian immigrant laborers nonetheless found ways to strike against low wages and poor workplace conditions through labor strikes, protests, and litigation (Lien, 2010, p. 19). For example, the Filipino Labor Union (FLU) was formed in 1933 by Filipino agricultural workers from Northern California after the American Federation of Labor (AFL) refused to organize a union for them and despite initial disapproval from other Filipino organizations, especially the Filipino Federation of America (FFA). Outside of the Filipino community in California, there were additional actions by other Asian American communities involving the filing of lawsuits, seizure of company property, and work stoppages, from Chinese plantation laborers in Southern states to Japanese railroad workers in the Pacific Northwest. While many such labor strikes and actions failed, such failures cannot entirely be attributed to white supremacy over the government alone. In the case of Japanese plantation workers who went on strike in the Hawaiian island of Oahu in 1909 over poor pay and benefits, the loss of that strike had a lot to do with the internal divisions among Japanese Americans in Hawaii itself as it was opposed by figures in the local Japanese establishment despite the strikes being conducted and supported by their coethnics (Lien, 2010, pp. 19-20).

The underlying ethnic and socioeconomic divisions as shown in the aforementioned history continue to be a feature of Asian Americans as a group today, and navigating it is a crucial task in

any attempt to form a panethnic Asian American coalition. Furthermore, for panethnic Asian American activism and political engagement to be effective, a sense of solidarity that everyone shares a shared fate is necessary (Le Espiritu, 1993, p. 17). This sense of solidarity today, however, is complicated by the vast diversity within Asian American communities, however. In *Ethnic origins: The adaptation of Cambodian and Hmong refugees in four American cities*, Jeremy Hein explored the how the differing experiences of Cambodian/Khmer and Hmong refugees from Southeast Asia--arriving in the post-1960s world--impacted their experiences in the United States, including the propensity to embrace a panethnic Asian American identity. Furthermore, by analyzing the experiences of two communities with low rates of educational attainment and relative lack of capital, the author sheds light on internal divisions within a panethnic community that is often seen as a monolithic "model minority" that has attained financial security and well-being (Lee, Pheng, Vang & Xiong, 2017, p. 2).

In examining the experiences of Hmong and Cambodian refugees, Hein noted that the sense of panethnic Asian American identification is lower for Hmong than it is for Cambodians, thereby showing how divisions within the Asian American community complicate attempts at coalition building. Unlike the Cambodian refugees the author studied, Hmong possessed a stronger sense of the divides that separated Hmong

from non-Hmong, especially regarding culture and socioeconomic status--two factors that form the basis of panethnic identification between different ethnic groups when they view themselves as being similar on those factors (Hein, 2006, pp. 131-133). Cambodian refugees that Hein studied, by contrast, emphasized similarities between themselves and other Asian ethnic groups, even ranking different Asian American groups on how similar they are to themselves, with Laotians, Thais, and Filipinos--other ethnic groups with origins in Southeast Asia--being deemed more similar to Cambodians than Japanese. Furthermore, Cambodian refugees the author studied also emphasized the relevance of outside context in shaping their panethnic identification with other Asian Americans as they are all minorities who have been categorized as "Asian" in a majority white country. Additionally, unlike the Hmong, the Cambodian refugees the author studied also expressed a weaker ethnic solidarity with other Cambodians and a greater focus on individuals, both of which helped to increase panethnic Asian American identification among Cambodian refugees under study (Hein, 2006, pp. 136-139).

Similar to Hmong Americans, Indian Americans also face a choice when it comes to embracing a panethnic identity. Unlike Hmong, however, Indian Americans face a strong division between a panethnic "South Asian" identity--inclusive of South Asian Americans of non-Indian origin--and a pan "Hindu/Indic" identity--revolving around a

religio-cultural heritage unique to India--let alone a choice between ethnic solidarity with other Indian Americans versus a panethnic Asian American solidarity (Kurien, 2003). In the article "To be or not to be South Asian: contemporary Indian American politics", Prema Kurien explored the dilemma between embracing a "South Asian" identity vs the choice of a "Hindu/Indic identity", the former embraced by more progressive persons with inclinations toward advancing social justice and bringing together diverse communities with common experiences in the United States and the latter embraced by more conservative persons who seek to instill traditional Hindu/Indic values into the next generation while also distinguishing themselves from other communities with South Asian origins (Kurien, 2003). The consequence of the presence of these two distinct identities, however, is the reduced emphasis among Indian Americans on the development of a panethnic Asian American identity and solidarity with other ethnic groups from regions outside South Asia. Despite this reduced emphasis, however, the emergence both the "South Asian" and "Hindu/Indic" identities among Indian Americans could not have occurred if not for the fact that Indian Americans are a minority in the United States, with both group identities being focal points around which Indian Americans can act together for political and material ends (Kurien, 2003).

To understand the viability of forming a panethnic Asian American political coalition, it is necessary to

understand the reality of Asian American political participation as it is in contemporary times. In "Panethnicity among Asian Americans and Latinos: panethnicity as both a dependent variable and independent variable," Tae Eun Min examined how identification with a panethnic identity impacted political activity among Asian Americans and Latinos. The author discovered that for Asian Americans, panethnic identification lowered voting participation while significantly increasing nonvoting participation in politics (Min, 2010, pp. 164-165), the latter broken down into five activities: contacting government officials, making financial contributions to campaigns, attending public meetings and rallies, signing petitions, and participation in protests (Min, 2010, p. 146). Min theorized that the explanation for the negative impact of panethnicity on voting might lie in the fact that Asian Americans often make up a small minority of the electorate and the total population in most electoral districts, which may convince those who have a panethnic Asian American identity that they are not part of the wider society, thereby possibly dampening belief in their capability to influence elections and in the capacity for elected officials from non-Asian ethnic groups to advocate for their interests (Min, 2010, p. 164). By contrast, the author theorized that panethnic Asian American identification might motivate increased nonvoting participation among Asian Americans because of a desire to engage in direct action to translate policy demands into concrete policy changes to the benefit of

Asian American communities (Min, 2010, p. 165).

Another work that delves into Asian American political participation is *Asian American political participation: Emerging constituents and their political identities* by Janelle Wong, S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, Taeku Lee, and Jane Junn. Utilizing survey data taken in 2008 from over 5,000 Asian Americans from across the country, the authors depict a complex mosaic of a community with varying patterns of panethnic identification and political participation while possessing much potential to play a more active role in American politics. One finding that the authors encountered was that Korean Americans are most likely to identify as “Asian American” (43%) or “Asian” (48%) whereas the other groups surveyed--Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, and Vietnamese Americans--identified with those identities at similar levels, or about half the proportion it was among Korean Americans (Junn, Lee, Ramakrishnan & Wong, 2011, p. 162). Additional distinctions were also found, with Korean Americans strongly endorsing the idea of a “common race” of Asians whereas Indian Americans supported the idea of Asians sharing a common culture and economic interests (Junn, Lee, Ramakrishnan & Wong, 2011, p. 167). As for political participation, there were also major differences based on ethnicity, with Indian and Filipino Americans voting at much higher rates than Chinese Americans (Junn, Lee, Ramakrishnan & Wong, 2011, p. 6) while a majority of Japanese and Korean

Americans identified with the Democratic Party in contrast to Vietnamese Americans, among whom a plurality favored the Republican Party over the Democratic Party (Junn, Lee, Ramakrishnan & Wong, 2011, p. 129).

Despite the differences in certain results and in the focus of research, both “Panethnicity among Asian Americans and Latinos: panethnicity as both a dependent variable and independent variable” and *Asian American political participation: Emerging constituents and their political identities* agree on one major factor that motivates Asian American political participation: experience with discrimination and hate crimes. In the former study, the author concluded that experience with discrimination encourages Asian Americans to vote, seeing political participation as a status-enhancing activity (Min, 2010, p. 166). In the latter, the authors of the study stated that experience with discrimination and hate crimes strongly influence Asian American political participation, albeit with more positive influence on nonvoting participation than voting. The authors theorized that the stronger relationship between such experience and nonvoting participation--such as protests, contacting public officials, and making campaign contributions--might be attributable to the more direct quality of such participation whereas voting is much more indirectly consequential (Junn, Lee, Ramakrishnan & Wong, 2011, p. 169).

In terms of hate crimes and discrimination influencing political

participation, the most famous example that is often cited is the case of Vincent Chin's murder. Vincent Chin, son of Chinese immigrants, was murdered by two white men with a baseball bat in Detroit in 1982, who shouted racial epithets while blaming Vincent Chin for the loss of American automobile manufacturing jobs to Japanese automakers. The two white men who murdered him then received a lenient sentence of three years of probation after pleading to manslaughter, which enraged many Asian Americans and caused protests in major cities under the cause of "Remember Vincent Chin", thereby leading many to become more politically active. For many Asian Americans, the murder and the aftermath of the Vincent Chin case exemplified the racism and discrimination experienced by them, creating a sense of solidarity (Wu, 2012).

On a more local level, Philadelphia also experienced an incident of racial discrimination and hate crime that galvanized a segment of its Asian American population in 2009. In 2009, several Asian American students at a south Philadelphia high school were physically assaulted by their fellow students, leading to the hospitalization of many injured students. In the aftermath of this incident, anger erupted as it was reported that the school administration took no steps to curb the bullying and increasing tensions between the school's Asian and African American students (Chow, 2015). Similarly to the impact of Vincent Chin's murder, this incident also had a politically charged

impact on south Philadelphia's Asian American community as Asian American students in the school protested the administration's indifference, soon joined by Asian American organizations such as "Asian Americans United, the Cambodian Association, Victims and Witnesses Services, Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, and Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation" (Gym, 2009). One of the leading activists involved in this case, Helen Gym, became an at-large city councilwoman in Philadelphia's City Council in 2016, after a long career spent on activism for justice for the city's immigrant and working class communities (Philadelphia City Council).

Since this paper's focus is on panethnic Asian American urban politics in Philadelphia, it would be instructive to focus on a book that covered the topic of Asian American urban politics. In *Governing American cities: Inter-ethnic coalitions, competition, and conflict*, Michael Jones-Correa compiled the works of multiple authors on the topic of ethnicity and urban politics, especially regarding the impact of immigrants on the local political scene with regards to competition and coalitions. With regards to Asian Americans, one group in particular received attention: Korean Americans in Los Angeles. While the sections of the book focusing on this community does delve into the role played by Korean Americans in the local politics of Los Angeles and their interactions with other ethnic groups of the city--especially African Americans--a

picture of panethnic cooperation across ethnic lines with other Asian American communities does not emerge, however (Jones-Correa, 2001). A potential explanation for this lack of panethnic Asian American political activity might be attributable to the ease of creating urban ethnic enclaves in large urban areas, where an ethnic group can create its own community somewhat insulated from other communities of the city (Hein, 2006, p. 124).

While literature on panethnic Asian American politics in Philadelphia could not be found, there is a major work on the importance of race--between white and African Americans--in Philadelphia, which could shed light on the research topic under study. In *Philadelphia Divided: Race and Politics in the City of Brotherly Love*, James Wolfinger explored how a lasting interracial coalition politics of the working class became impossible in Philadelphia, focusing specifically on the interplay between the personal lives and political choices of white and African American voters. While an interracial coalition supportive of the New Deal emerged initially, it started to fall apart almost immediately in Philadelphia (Wolfinger, 2007).

According to Wolfinger, the main factor that undermined this short-lived coalition was the response of the Republican Party and working-class white Americans to African American efforts to dismantle discrimination and the latter's drift toward the Democratic Party. While the New Deal coalition in Pennsylvania was always fragile

(and practically absent as a potent political force in a Philadelphia controlled by Republicans), it broke down as white Americans came to associate the federal government and its actions with support for African Americans. Working from this association, the Republican Party then explicitly linked African Americans with the Democratic Party, driving more white Americans in Philadelphia from the Democratic Party and toward the Republican Party (Wolfinger, 2007). From the conclusions of *Philadelphia Divided*, it seems that it might be possible for a panethnic Asian American political coalition to form, only to be embroiled quickly in competition with other ethnic communities over resources.

Analysis:

As stated at the beginning, the purpose of this paper is to answer this research question: How successful have efforts to forge a panethnic Asian American political coalition been in Philadelphia politics? Towards that end, this section will describe the characteristics of the Asian American population in Philadelphia first, followed by a description of Asian American organizing and associational life in Philadelphia, and culminating in an analysis of whether or not efforts to forge a panethnic Asian American political coalition met success in Philadelphia politics.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau data on Philadelphia, persons of sole Asian descent comprise 7.4% of the total population in Philadelphia as of 2016,

translating to a population of around 116,000 Asian Americans in the city (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016) concentrated predominantly in South and Northeast Philadelphia. This is not a monolithic population, however. It is a growing community--growing by 43% between 2000 and 2010--with great ethnic diversity. As of 2010, the largest Asian American ethnic group in Philadelphia were Chinese, followed by Indians, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Koreans, and Filipinos, respectively. Furthermore, Asian Americans are also a growing segment of the electorate, with 49% of Philadelphia's Asian American population being eligible to vote or to register to vote (Asian Americans Advancing Justice, 2013, pp. 34-38). Additionally, in terms of political representation, there are two Asian Americans on the Philadelphia City Council, both of Korean descent (Philadelphia City Council).

According to the report produced by Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAAJ) in 2013 on Philadelphia's Asian American community, four issues are of main concern for the city's Asian American population: unemployment, poverty, limited educational attainment, and limited English proficiency. These issues do not impact all Asian American ethnic communities equally, however. On the unemployment front, the rate of unemployment among Philadelphia's Asian Americans was 17% in 2011. On poverty, over one in four Asian Americans in Philadelphia live in poverty, with a wide range from 41% for Cambodian Americans

and 15% for Indian Americans. Regarding educational attainment, 57% of Indian Americans and 52% of Korean Americans had a Bachelor's degree or a more advanced degree whereas the same was only true of 13% of Vietnamese Americans and 9% of Cambodian Americans; the Asian American average was 35%. On English proficiency, about 47% of Asian Americans in the city have limited English proficiency, with a high proportion of 61% within Chinese American community and a low proportion of 20% among Filipino Americans. These statistics show that the Asian American community of Philadelphia is very diverse with a complex set of interests, which may complicate efforts to form a panethnic political coalition around an Asian American identity (Asian Americans Advancing Justice, 2013, pp. 40-43).

In terms of organizational and associational life, there are many organizations serving Asian Americans in Philadelphia cutting across various sectors and goals, with some having a panethnic focus while others seek to serve a single ethnic community. Some examples of panethnic Asian American organizations and associations (and their focus) in Philadelphia include Asian Americans United (community and leadership development), Asian Arts Initiative (arts), Asian American Women's Coalition (women's issues), Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (civil rights and advocacy), and AIDS Services in Asian Communities (health) (Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation). While these panethnic

organizations and associations serve many Asian Americans across the city, there are many more non-panethnic Asian American groups that are more often encountered by Asian Americans in their daily life. Some examples of these groups include the Southeast Asian Freedom Network, Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, Bangladesh Welfare Association of America, Filipino Executive Council of Greater Philadelphia, Council of Indian Organizations, Bhutanese American Organization-Philadelphia, VietLEAD, Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Associations Coalition (SEAMAAC), and Chinese American Women Sisterhood Society--and these are just the Asian American organizations that current members of Philadelphia's Mayor's Commission on Asian American Affairs have worked with in the past or work with at the moment (City of Philadelphia). The number and prominence of these non-panethnic Asian American organizations are significant since as shown in the case of Hmong in the Midwest, a strong identification with an ethnic identity can prevent identification with a panethnic identity (Hein, 2006, pp. 131-133). Consequently, the prominence of these non-panethnic organizations combined with the paucity of politically-oriented Asian American organizations--both panethnic and ethnic--serves as an indication that efforts to forge a panethnic Asian American political coalition in Philadelphia has not succeeded.

With regards to the research question, the evidence seems to indicate that

the efforts to forge a panethnic Asian American political coalition have failed in Philadelphia politics, with a myriad of issues continuing to prevent the successful creation of such a coalition.

One such issue involves the barriers to voting faced by Asian Americans, ranging from English proficiency to culture. With such barriers depressing Asian American voter turnout, it is difficult to argue that a cohesive and sustained panethnic Asian American political coalition exists in Philadelphia politics.

With regards to English proficiency, significant proportions of Asian American communities lack sufficient English knowledge to navigate the directions and options at the voting booth on their own. While there are provisions in the Voting Rights Act that provide for the protection and assistance for minority language voters across the United States, the reality is that often many Asian American voters with limited English proficiency--especially in Philadelphia--struggle to fully participate in the voting process as there are often not enough translators for many languages at the voting locations to assist such voters. Furthermore, while there are "phone-in translation services" at voting places that are available to minority language voters with instruction cards on how to access them, they are often not accessed either because such cards are not available all locations or due to the lack of knowledge of such services among both poll workers and voters (Bunny, Davis & Edge, 2016).

On the issue of culture, the differing cultural experiences of various Asian American groups make both voting and the creation of a panethnic Asian American political coalition difficult. For certain immigrants from authoritarian countries such as China who have become citizens, voting can be a new and unfamiliar process as public officials in China are not popularly elected through competitive elections featuring multiple parties. Even if certain voters are immigrants from a democratic country, voting can still be difficult since they do not know about American politics--such as the distinctions between the political parties and the levels of government--and organizations assisting them with voting are often legally prohibited from providing such information lest they come across as propagandists for a certain view (Bunny, Davis & Edge, 2016).

An additional indication of the absence of a panethnic Asian American political coalition can be found in the endorsement lists of political candidates in Philadelphia. For example, in the lists of endorsements of candidates for Philadelphia District Attorney and City Controller in 2017, no ethnic Asian American organization based in Philadelphia was listed, let alone a panethnic group (Orso, 2017). Furthermore, in the endorsement lists of Helen Gym's and David Oh's--the only Asian American elected officials in the Philadelphia City Council--candidacies, no panethnic Asian American organizations with roots in Philadelphia were found, further emphasizing the failure of the efforts

to forge a panethnic political coalition of Asian Americans (David Oh: City Council at-Large) (City Council at-Large: Helen Gym). With endorsements often serving as a significant barometer for a candidate's ability to win elections and of a group's ability to select winning candidates, this absence of local Asian American presence in endorsements of Philadelphia politicians--especially Asian American ones--serves as an indicator of lack of political power of Asian American groups in Philadelphia (Bycoffe, 2016).

While there is ample evidence to indicate that the efforts to forge a panethnic Asian American political coalition in Philadelphia politics have failed, there is nonetheless a piece of evidence that might support the opposing argument: the voting patterns of Asian American voters in elections. While there is a vast difference in the socioeconomic status of various Asian American communities, there is a strong coherence in voting patterns in Pennsylvania, where 27% of its Asian Americans live in Philadelphia (Asian Americans Advancing Justice, 2013, pp. 40-43)¹. In the 2016 general election, a strong majority of Asian American voters in Pennsylvania voted for the Democratic Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton (87%) while also strongly backing the Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Katie McGinty (79%) and Democratic Congressional candidates in

¹ Due to the lack of available information on Asian American voting patterns in Philadelphia, exit poll data from Pennsylvania will be used as an imperfect method to understand Asian American voting patterns in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia--Robert Brady (78%) and Dwight Evans (70%)--as shown in a report of data from an exit poll conducted by Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF, 2017, pp. 10-15). This performance was not the exception, however. It was in many ways a repetition of the voting patterns from the general election of 2012 (also exit polled by AALDEF), when 89% of Asian Americans voters voted for the Democratic Presidential candidate Barack Obama while also overwhelmingly favoring the Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Robert Casey (76%) and the Democratic Congressional candidates in Philadelphia--Robert Brady (92%) and Chaka Fattah (80%) . Additionally, the 2013 report of the AALDEF also contained disaggregated data on the voting patterns separated by ethnicity, which showed 96% of Chinese Americans in Pennsylvania voting for Obama while Vietnamese Americans in Pennsylvania--one of the most Republican-leaning Asian American groups in 2012--still voted heavily for Obama, with him winning 77% of their vote (AALDEF, 2013). From these voting patterns, an argument could be made that the efforts to build a panethnic Asian American political coalition have succeeded, as reflected in the voting patterns (despite the focus of this paper being on Philadelphia politics at the city level).

This argument, however, fails to take into account the nature of Asian American support for Democratic candidates. Instead

of being mobilized to vote for Democrats as part of a political coalition created directly by outside efforts, Asian American voters are voting on their own for Democrats as a reaction to the vision and proposed policies of the Republican Party at the federal level. Exclusionary rhetoric from national Republican politicians--especially around immigration--is what is helping to drive Asian Americans to vote overwhelmingly for Democrats (Mo, 2015). As for evidence, on issues where there is strong agreement across Asian American ethnicities on a position, such as guns (pro-gun control), comprehensive immigration reform (pro), and antidiscrimination protection for LGBTQ persons (pro-LGBTQ protection) (AALDEF, 2017, pp. 18-21), the Republican Party holds diametrically different positions (Republican Party, 2016). Additionally, when it comes to Asian American votes for candidates of one party up-and-down the ballot, it is explainable as part of a larger pattern of straight ticket voting affecting American politics as a whole and not limited to Asian Americans in Pennsylvania, with more and more voters across the United States voting for the political party and not the candidate (Brownstein, 2016).

With regards to Asian American politics in Philadelphia, especially that of a panethnic nature, perhaps the best description of it came from Andy Toy--a leader in the Philadelphia chapter of the Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance

Associations Coalition, a former city council at-large candidate (Gamboa, 2015), and someone I personally know as well:

It's a 'machine town,' where the white machine and black machine are well-established political players, he said. There is no Asian machine (Bunny, Davis & Edge, 2016).

Conclusion:

Based on available evidence of voting patterns, nonvoting political participation, and the state of Asian American community in Philadelphia, this paper concludes that the efforts to forge a panethnic Asian American political coalition in Philadelphia politics have not succeeded, with continued predominance of ethnic Asian American organizations over panethnic associations, depressed Asian American voting caused by barriers to voting, and lack of Asian American organizational presence in political endorsements indicating the absence of such panethnic political coalition. While an argument can be made for the successful formation of such a coalition based on the voting patterns of Asian Americans in Philadelphia and the rest of Pennsylvania on federal elections, there is ample evidence that indicates that those voting patterns are influenced more by Asian American voters' own political preferences and national trends toward straight ticket voting and partisan polarization than by coordinated efforts to form a panethnic political coalition in Philadelphia politics.

Furthermore, it must also be noted that the research topic explored by this paper--panethnic Asian American politics in Philadelphia--is a relatively understudied topic with limited to non-existent discussion in political science literature. With more accurate and precise data on Asian American political participation in Philadelphia and more time and resources to examine them, a more definitive conclusion could be reached on the nature of Asian American panethnicity in Philadelphia politics. Nevertheless, the available evidence paints a portrait of the difficulties that persist still in organizing the various Asian American communities under a panethnic umbrella.

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