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It depends on who you run against: Inter-racial context and Asian American candidates in US elections



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ABSTRACT

Do White voters evaluate minority candidates differently by the racial context of an election? This paper addresses this question by measuring the effects of racial contexts on candidate evaluation. Drawing upon two prominent theories of interracial relations – racial priming and racial triangulation theories –, I argue that White voters change their assessments on candidates depending on the racial context of an election, and the contextual effects occur only in select areas of candidate evaluation. I support this argument by setting up a unique survey experiment that places an Asian American candidate in racially varying electoral contexts and conclude two major findings: First, racial context takes effect in assessing candidates' issue competence but not their personal traits. Second, Whites evaluate Asian candidates' issue competence based on the racialized nature of a give issue.

Introduction

As the fastest-growing immigrant group, the Asian American voting population is increasingly contributing to the diversity of the American electorate (Vazquez, 2014). Likewise, the rise of Asian American officials has been a notable phenomenon in the political arena, as more Asian American members are seeking political office than ever before.¹ As of 2016, Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies (APAICS) reported more than 400 Asian Americans running for federal, state and local offices, and the number has been increasing rapidly since they started collecting data in 2012.² In particular, state and local elections in the United States play a vital role for Asian American candidates to advance to national politics, as the majority of the candidates run in various subnational contests, such as school board and city council elections. The ascendance of minority candidates at the state and local level is contributing to the shift toward a new look in electoral competitions and eventually a racially diverse government, in which candidates of various races, not just White and Black, compete against each other and govern together (e.g., Lai & Geron, 2006; Shah, 2014).

The increase of Asian American candidates, or minority candidates in general, raises important new questions about the racial context in evaluating candidates. Since Asian American candidates are mostly likely to compete against contestants of different races, traditional electoral settings, which are typically either mono-racial (all White) or biracial (e.g., White vs. Black), provide little insight on how this multiracial context would affect voters' evaluation of Asian candidates vis-à-vis their competitors. Thus far, studies have found that White voters do not employ explicitly negative stereotypes against minority candidates (mostly Black and Latino). Instead, they apply implicit stereotypes by either viewing them as ideologically more liberal or as supportive of policies

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¹ "More Asian-Americans Seeking Higher Office." National Public Radio. Website: <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/14/162881272/more-asian-americans-seeking-higher-political-office> (Last accessed 2/2/2017).

² APAIC Election Database. Website: <http://apaics.org/2016-elections/> (Last accessed 2/2/2017).

benefitting their co-ethnic³ groups, such as immigration or affirmative action (Citrin, Green, & Sears, 1990; Terkildsen, 1993; Sigelman, Sigelman, Walkosz, and Nitz, 1995; Weaver, 2012; Stephens-Dougan, 2016; Adida, Davenport, & McClendon, 2016; Karl & Ryan, 2016). It is less clear, however, whether such implicit racial priming also shapes voters' view on Asian candidates. Among the few studies on Asian American candidates, one study found that Asian candidates do better than White competitors across various biographic and ideological scenarios, and neither minority nor immigrant status hurts Asian candidates' chance for elected office. Asian candidates, the study concludes, suffer less from negative racial stereotypes than their minority counterparts and sometimes even benefit from positive biases (Visalvanich, 2017b; Visalvanich, 2017a).

At least, these findings seem to suggest that Asian American candidates are relatively free from the constraints posed by their racial status and the stereotypes attached to it. In reality, however, this does not mean that Asian American candidates always enjoy advantages over White or other minority candidates. White voters do not maintain a completely neutral stance but hold a racialized view in evaluating candidates under certain circumstances. In 1993, Michael Woo ran unsuccessfully for an open seat mayoral election in Los Angeles against Richard Riordan, a white Republican candidate. Compared to the broad support from minority voters, the white opposition to Asian American leadership was strong, which led to Riordan's victory against Woo (Hajnal, 2006; Kaufmann, 2004). Among minority voters, 69 percent of the Asian Americans, 89 percent from Black voters, and 57 percent of the Latino voters chose Wong; However, only 33 percent of the white vote supported him. Furthermore, many Asian American candidates have had difficulties with being elected in big urban areas (Lai & Geron, 2006), and most Asian politicians are elected in areas with a significant portion of Asian voters such as Hawaii, California and New Jersey. As more minority politicians are making strides into majority White districts, it is imperative to understand how racial cues take effect in racially diverse electoral settings.

In this paper, I explore the role of racial cues in candidate evaluation by pairing Asian candidates against contestants of various races. In particular, this study pays attention to the ways in which Asian Americans' racial stereotypes manifest themselves under two conditions: competitor's racial identity and issue content. Departing from previous research that mainly examines vote choice, I investigate how Whites evaluate candidates on a variety of issues, and how the evaluation varies across the racial context of an election. I show that the evaluation of Asian candidates is not strictly based on explicit racial prejudice but on their expected performance across various political issues. This issue-based evaluation, I further argue, depends on what I call racialized issue ownership, a process in which voters perceive and sort out candidates' relative strengths and weaknesses based on the relationship between issues at hand and the racial context of an election. Respondents draw different perceptions on a candidate *vis-à-vis* his/her competitor, and the pattern largely reflects stereotypes embedded in the intergroup relationship between candidate's and competitor's racial identities.

In the following section, I elaborate on why it has been difficult to detect racial bias against Asian candidates. In order to investigate when and how racial stereotypes are activated for Asian American politicians, I engage two theories - racial priming theory and racial triangulation theory - to specify the conditions under which racial considerations may come into play in candidate evaluation. I test the hypotheses by setting up a survey experiment on a hypothetical city council election, in which Whites are asked to evaluate candidates' general traits as well as their competence in five issue areas - crime, economy, education, assistance to the disadvantaged, and immigration.⁴

Background: the curious case of Asian American candidates

In candidate evaluation research, Asian American candidates have made a curious case because racial cues have a minimal, if any, influence on evaluating them. Asian Americans' "foreigner" stereotype, for example, seldom affects Asian candidates' electability. Instead, research found that Asian candidates are viewed more favorably than their White competitors, even when their foreigner stereotypes are implicitly primed (Visalvanich, 2017b; Visalvanich, 2017a). Given that Black or Latino candidates tend to be associated with negative racial bias (McConaughy, White, Leal, & Casellas, 2010; Weaver, 2012), Asian candidates seem to differ from other minority candidates.

Why do racial cues have little bearing on evaluating Asian candidates? Are White voters color-blind when assessing Asian American candidates, treating them equally with White candidates? I suspect that race is still an important variable but did not manifest itself in existing surveys for two reasons. First, the absence of racial bias may stem from the tendency toward social desirability in experimental constructs. As found in several studies, White respondents are likely to engage in a self-monitoring behavior when they are asked to evaluate a non-White candidate by giving him/her a higher score than what they actually would think (e.g., Terkildsen, 1993; Weaver, 2012). Most experimental studies on candidate evaluation are done in a fictitious setting whereby there is a low cost of selecting minority candidates over a white candidate. In this case, social desirability pressures are likely to lead to overestimating the voters' preference for minority candidates (e.g., Weaver, 2012; McConaughy et al., 2010; Krupnikov, Piston, & Bauer, 2016). In addition to social desirability, the multiplicity of Asian stereotypes, both negative and positive, may cancel each other out, making it look like stereotypes are not present. Under such conditions, a question about vote choice (Who are you going to vote for?) is less informative than more narrowly targeted questions (e.g., how competent do you think is this candidate capable of handling crime?) in predicting how voters employ racial attitudes in candidate evaluation.

³ Throughout the article, I use the term "coethnic" to refer to the four demographics that share a common racial and/or ethnic identity: Anglo-White, Black, Asian, and Latino.

⁴ Selecting issue areas require a judgment on which issues matter to voters, and these areas were chosen for two reasons. First, they cover most salient urban issues that can actually be handled by local politicians. National security or climate change, for example, are of national importance that are beyond the capacity of city council members. Second, each issue area is implicitly associated with racial categorization.

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