Asian Americans and their various votes

By William Yoo
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These days I'm often asked, "Who will Asian Americans vote for in the presidential election?" There's a relative dearth of media coverage on Asian American political engagement, due in part to the challenges of polling Asian Americans. The ambiguity surrounding Asian Americans is not a new phenomenon: it's directly related to the past experiences of Asians in the United States. This long and tangled history is a narrative of marginalization and migration layered with oppression and opportunity.

One interpretation of Asian American history delineates an upwardly mobile progression from 19th-century "yellow peril" to 21st-century "model minority." Like a traveler who maps an entire forest based on a clear view of a few trees, this line of thinking gets some facts correct but ultimately oversimplifies and misrepresents historical realities.

Early Asian American immigrants to the United States were regarded as cheap labor and culturally inferior. Today, one study shows that Asian Americans are the "best-educated, highest-income, fastest-growing" racial-ethnic group in the country. But data also reveals that Asian Americans are a diverse people representing a multiplicity of cultures, languages, regions, and religious traditions. There is no one archetypal tale that attends to the many stories of immigrants from East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia who came to the United States at different times and for different reasons.

Asian Americans have responded to the regnant racial hierarchies and dominant religious cultures in the United States in a variety of ways. Some share the views expressed by the Japanese Buddhist Hirai Kinzo, whose address at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago lambasted the racist attitudes and actions of some American Protestants toward Asians. He found it strange that white Americans would send so many missionaries to Japan to convert his people to "be moral and believe Christianity" while at the same time depriving Japanese people in the United States of their dignity and human rights. He charged, "If such be the Christian

ethics—well, we are perfectly satisfied to be heathen."

Others offer a more ambivalent assessment, like that of the Korean Methodist Yun Ch'iho, who studied at Vanderbilt and Emory from 1888 to 1893 before rising to prominence as a political and religious leader in Korea. He embraced Christianity as a religion of hope and liberation, joining with white American Protestants to mobilize for world missions. But he also felt confusion and pain from the racism he encountered in the American South. As white students exclaimed hateful sentiments, including one who remarked that he "would sooner mill down his church than to admit a colored member," and white people in the streets yelled epithets like "Chinaman" at him, he struggled to reconcile his religious and racialized experiences in the United States. He was welcomed into elite Protestant institutions because of his Christian conversion but also ostracized as a racial "other" who did not fit into either the majority (white) or minority (black) cultures.

Hirai Kinzo and Yun Ch'iho represent two of many Asian American perspectives on race and religion in the United States. Yet there is a common thread within this tapestry: grappling with how to participate in this country's civic life.

In 1885, Josiah Strong observed that "to be a Christian and an Anglo-Saxon and an American in this generation is to stand on the very mountain-top of privilege." Strong urged those at the peak of "Christian civilization" to use their God-given means and influence to uplift downtrodden Africans and Asians at home and abroad. Although Christians today no longer talk like Josiah Strong, some of his ideas about race and religion persist in the public sphere.

American historian Joyce Appleby once observed that "history is powerful because we live with its residues, its remnants, its remainders and reminders." All Asian Americans—even groups with overwhelming majorities of Christians, such as Filipino Americans and Korean Americans—continue to wrestle with how to make sense of their presence in the larger body politic. Some seek to partner alongside other racial-ethnic minority groups in coalitions to reform unjust systems of oppression. Others regard other racial-ethnic minority groups as their competition to access the few spots reserved for persons of color in some predominantly white institutions.

So how will Asian Americans vote? The most recent data suggests that the majority of Asian Americans will vote for the Democratic presidential nominee because they are increasingly in favor of liberal policies on health care, immigration, and the

environment. Likewise, my conversations with Asian Americans, including my Korean American parents, are replete with rebuke of the Republican Party’s acquiescence to its nominee’s intolerant rhetoric and vision for the nation. But there is too much cultural heterogeneity and religious diversity within the Asian American population for me to offer one simple and straightforward answer.

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