Beyond Coethnic Boundaries: Coethnic Residential Context, Communication, and Asian Americans’ Political Participation

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Abstract

This study examines when and where residential context and communicative factors help and hurt Asian Americans’ political participation both within and beyond coethnic boundaries. Using multilevel analyses, this paper found that living in ethnically homogeneous residential areas and using ethnic media increase Asian-related political awareness. However, these coethnic features in their communicative structure did not directly bridge Asian communities to the political participation. Instead, coethnic features indirectly galvanize Asian Americans’ political participation, which may spill over to more general domains of political participation.

Ethnic minorities’ participation in political processes is essential for a functioning democracy whose constituents consist of a variety of racial and ethnic origins. Recent conceptualization of multicultural democracy suggests ethnic minorities should be engaged in politics both as members of “large” general publics and “small” ethnically bounded publics. The large general publics address issues and concerns that face the whole population in a nation-state. The small publics articulate and advance group interests that could be neglected by the dominant ethnic groups (Jacobs & Tillie, 2004; Marri, 2003). Despite these normative expectations about minority-group participation, ethnic minorities have been reported to be less likely to engage in politics relative to dominant ethnic groups. In addition, studies found that existing theoretical models of political participation have not adequately explained this participation gap between the dominant and minority groups.

Existing theories of ethnic minority participation lack consideration of an integrative communication aspect that might either facilitate or hinder ethnic...
minorities’ participation in general and ethnic specific arenas. Political communication research has noted that communicative configuration and processes, both interpersonal and mediated, affect people’s political participation (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). An ethnic civic community perspective also highlights key roles of communication in ethnic minority groups’ political participation. This perspective suggests that “communication fabrics” (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006, p. 173) of ethnic community—communicative ties among and across ethnic group members and ethnic media use—affect the level of ethnic groups’ political participation and trust (Fennema, 2004; Fennema & Tillie, 1999; Jacobs & Tille, 2004).

Concurring with the importance of the communicative approach to explain ethnic minorities’ political participation, this study is particularly interested in the Asian American population. Asian Americans are one of the fastest growing ethnic minorities in the United States, yet their level of political participation is not proportionate to their population growth (Lai, Cho, Kim, & Takeda, 2001; Tam, 1995). Their political participation level, as well as the number of political elites who represent them, is lower than that of other ethnic groups. Studies show that among situations where ethnic minority groups are not highly participatory, in spite of high social economic status (SES), Asian Americans are a typical example of this anomaly (e.g., Cain, Kiewiet, & Uhlaner, 1991; Tam, 1995). Therefore, using a sample of Asian Americans, this study examines the political implications of ethnically homogeneous residential areas and ethnic media reliance: Whether or not the coethnic features of communicative factors encourage or inhibit ethnic minorities’ political participation.

Ethnic Minority and Political Participation

The task of including ethnic minorities and their voices into the mainstream public sphere is a priority in most democratic societies. Theoretical models developed to explain general political participation have been tested in order to explicate ethnic minorities’ political participation. For instance, the most prominent and widely supported model of political participation is based on SES, which argues that higher status individuals, relative to lower status individuals, are more likely to have better tools enabling them to be politically engaged (Conway, 1991; Gimpel, Lay, & Schuknecht, 2003; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). In addition, those with higher SES are believed to obtain greater benefits from political involvement than those of lower status (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Key, 1964). While the general importance of SES for explaining participation is clear, SES is a less robust predictor for minority group political participation. In fact, the
Asian-American population is an indicative example that high SES does not correspond to the high political participation of ethnic minorities (Cain et al., 1991; Tam, 1995).

Recognizing this limitation, scholars steered their attention to the aspect that individuals' political behaviors are at least partly constrained by factors beyond the individual's social economic characteristics. Ethnic group identity emerged as a key concept to understand ethnic group political participation. The group identity approach was first used in African-American political participation research, and has been extended to other ethnic minority research (Chong & Rogers, 2005). Members of minority groups become more participatory when they build a solid group identity or group consciousness (Guterbock & London, 1983; London, 1975; London & Giles, 1987; Verba & Nie, 1972). However, recent group identity studies of African Americans as well as other ethnic minority groups have yielded weak or inconsistent results in explaining ethnic minorities' political participation (Chong & Rogers, 2005; Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999; Lien, 1994; Uhlaner, Cain, & Kiewet, 1989; Wang, Lien, & Conway, 2005). Although it is not yet possible to draw definite conclusions, these inconsistent findings suggest the need for alternative or supplementary models to explain ethnic minorities' political behavior.

One contribution that could be made to existing models of ethnic minority political behaviors is a closer examination of the contextualized features of their communication: Whom they live surrounded by and what kinds of media they consume. These contextualized features of communication inherently constrain how people understand the political world and how to interact with it. In this respect, the recent political communication research examining the role of integrative communicative factors in political participation seems to deserve scholarly attention in explaining minority political participation (e.g., Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001; Kim, Jung, & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; McLeod et al., 1999).

**Integrative Communication Approach**

Recognition of the importance of communicative context is one of the most valuable contributions of an integrative communication approach. It has long been understood that context influences the ways people interact with others and political information is communicated through a variety of informal social interactions (e.g., Huckfeldt, 1979, 1987; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004; Mutz, 2004). Recent research on “storytelling neighborhood” or “metamorphosis research” (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001; Kim, Jung, & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006) accentuates the importance of “communication infrastructure” in building strong communities where members of community are enabled to engage in collective action for common purposes. Communicative structure, including features of neighborhood and
local/ethnic media and people’s connectedness to this communicative structure, influences community members’ civic life. This tightly interwoven “communication fabric” (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006, p. 173) is highly pertinent to understanding ethnic minorities’ political civic participation.

Ethnic minority groups tend to live in ethnic enclaves and maintain ethnically homogeneous interpersonal networks (Cutler & Glaeser, 1997; Massey & Denton, 1992). Living in ethnic enclaves and being closely connected to coethnic network is sometimes inevitable, especially for less skilled immigrants who search a job for living and strive to adjust to new environments (Edin, Fredriksson, & Åslund, 2003). In addition, assimilation research in sociology has found that even ethnic minorities who have geographically relocated outside of ethnic enclaves (i.e., assimilated) often remain socially isolated in their new neighborhoods (Fischer, 1982). Although neighbors from different ethnic backgrounds may be friendly with each other, they tend to socialize with friends or family of the same ethnic group, especially when it comes to long-term ties (Gonzales, 1993).

Besides coethnic residential context and interpersonal networks, more and more ethnic minorities turn to rely on ethnic media rather than mainstream media of the host society. Recent reports have identified ethnic media as one of the few sectors among all news media with general audience growth in United States; conversely, mainstream U.S. media have suffered from a steady audience decline for decades (Lieberman, 2006; Matsaganis, Katz, & Ball-Rokeach, 2011; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004). Although fluency in English language may be one of the most prominent reasons for ethnic media dependency, it seems that there are other factors behind the rapid growth of ethnic media. For instance, Abrams and Giles (2007) found that African Americans’ media use could be explained by their seeking for social identity gratifications. That is, even ethnic minority groups without a language barrier use ethnic media to seek their ethnic identity gratifications.

Asian-Related Political Awareness

The contextual features of coethnic residential neighborhoods and the communicative activities matter because it structures relevant information flow and content that in turn facilitates minority group political participation. Political communication research has shown that the role of community as well as mass and interpersonal communication provides relevant information necessary for being participatory (McLeod et al., 1996, 1999). For instance, McLeod and his colleagues argue that the effects of communication (both interpersonal and mass-mediated) and community on participation may work indirectly, increasing levels of relevant information, which in turn influence levels of political participation. Regarding ethnic minorities’ political participation, Cho, Gimpel, and Dyck (2006) and Cho, and Rudolph (2008) showed how
residential context sometimes encourages or discourages ethnic minorities’ voting turnout. In their research, Cho et al. and Cho and Rudolph (2006, 2008) propose that coethnic residential context shapes the flow of political information and political mobilization. Although Cho and colleagues did not directly test the link among residential context, political information and exogenous political mobilization, their arguments provide a valuable framework for ascertaining why coethnic context matters to explain and understand ethnic minorities’ political behaviors.

Some social contexts provide much more conducive environments for acquiring political information through interpersonal contacts (Huckfeldt, 1979). Downs’ (1957) classic research suggests how relative information cost (i.e., resources people need to spend to get information) could govern political judgments and behaviors. Based on Downs’ information cost thesis, Ahn, Huckfeldt, and Ryan (2007, 2008) argue that individuals are “cost conscious consumers of political information”; they seldom look for information beyond their own group boundaries paying additional information costs.

Coethnic communication context could create familiar environments to exchange information in mother-tongue languages, which significantly reduces the information cost for ethnic minorities. Coethnic context not only influences the information cost but also structures the content of political information (Cho et al., 2006; Cho & Rudolph, 2008; McClurg, 2003). For instance, by talking to neighbors with the same ethnic background, people can encounter and share some worrisome issues that could influence their life as a member of that minority group. Therefore, when individuals are part of a coethnic information network, their levels of political awareness, especially regarding their own ethnic community, should increase, which in turn should motivate political participation.

**H1:** People who live in a mostly Asian residential area show higher Asian-related political awareness.

Through communication, citizens acquire political information about issues and problems in the ethnic community and are exposed to opportunities and ways to participate. Interpersonal and mediated communications are individuals’ main sources of political information. For instance, Chaffee, Nass, and Yang (1990) showed that mass media, especially television, could bring immigrant populations into the political process by providing political knowledge. TV delivers political information with visual cues, which could lower the information cost, especially for immigrants whose native languages are not English. It is reasonable to assume that ethnic media can do a better job of lowering the information cost than mainstream American media (Kim et al., 2006; Lin & Song, 2006). Positioning ethnic media as a crucial component of ethnic culture, Fennema (2004) argues that ethnic media contribute to
strengthen the relations among members of the ethnic community “by spreading information and synchronizing the topics of daily conversations” (p. 439).

Recent research on ethnic media also shows that ethnic media tend to cover the political stories about ethnic minorities’ country of origin or other ethnic related stories (Lin & Song, 2006; Lin, Song, & Ball-Rokeach, 2010). In addition, recent surveys held in eleven ethnic communities in Los Angeles showed that ethnic minorities, in particular first generation immigrants, rank home country news as more important than local neighborhood news (Matsaganis et al., 2011). Asian Americans have a rather short history of immigration and could have a stronger drive for keeping up with the development of countries they left. In addition, many ethnic media organizations are transnational. In the United States, they possess steady connections or sometimes are a part of media organizations in the country of origin (Matsaganis et al., 2011). This kind of ethnic media share the same news stories with their home country connections or parent companies along with contents covering their own ethnic group-related stories in the United States. Thus, the following hypothesis was drawn.

H2: People who rely more on ethnic media than mainstream media show higher Asian-related political awareness.

By virtue of living in a neighborhood surrounded by people of the same ethnic background, individuals are surrounded by messages and media that could raise their political awareness related to their own ethnic group. For example, by seeing a bumper sticker on neighbor’s car or watching news from an ethnic news channel, people can encounter and share some worrying issues that could influence their life as a member of a minority group. Therefore, when individuals are part of a coethnic community, their levels of political awareness, especially regarding their own ethnic community, should increase, which in turn could motivate own-ethnic group related political participation.

H3: People with higher Asian-related political awareness tend to participate more in Asian-related political activities.

Exposure to Political Mobilization

Although political activities could be self-generated by recognizing one’s own civil rights, exogenous mobilization forces have long been recognized as an important determinant of political participation. Political parties and organizations often attempt to mobilize citizens by carefully targeting certain groups of people. They do so because individuals who have been contacted by a party or other individuals are far more likely to participate in political activities than those who have not been contacted (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).
The relationship between coethnic residential context and exogenous mobilization is a complex one. For instance, the size of ethnic concentration moderates exogenous mobilization efforts (Cho et al., 2006; Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2008). Political parties are more likely to approach ethnic minorities when they live in nearby areas as a big group (Cho et al., 2006). Therefore, larger assemblies of ethnic minority groups are usually the beneficiaries of mobilization efforts. However, when the ethnic clustering is not sufficiently large, it could result in the opposite: Smaller ethnic clusters may not produce enough benefits to political parties or groups considering the costs they need to pay to reach them. For instance, Pelissero, Krebs, and Jenkins (2000) found that party mobilization effects are likely to be subdued if parties and candidates need to deal with the barriers posed by foreign languages or low income. It therefore appears that coethnic social context either facilitates or offsets the exogenous mobilization efforts depending on the size of ethnic clusters.

Taken together, coethnic residential context could be a double-edged sword. Living in an ethnically homogeneous environment might enhance the chance to be exposed to exogenous mobilization efforts. On the other hand, the coethnic environment might operate as a buffer from political socialization pressures that could stimulate political actions. If social networks or community ties fail to provide sufficient incentives or opportunities for participation, ethnic enclaves can simply insulate ethnic minority groups from the larger social environment, and this kind of retreat seemingly inhibits political participation (Huckfeldt, 1986). Based on the discussion above, the following research question and hypothesis are proposed.

*RQ1:* What is the relationship between coethnic features of residential context and exposure to political mobilization?

*H4:* People who are exposed to political mobilization tend to be more politically participatory.

**Beyond Coethnic Boundaries**

From the perspective of multicultural democracy, individuals are expected to participate in the political process both as members of broader national civic community and as members of specific cultural and ethnic communities. Multicultural democracy recognizes and promotes cultural, ethnic diversity and difference as a bulwark against tyranny of majority and challenge to existing, unequal power structures. Thus, a democracy functions when national civic community as well as group-specific civic communities thrive (Gould, 1996; Jacobs & Tillie, 2004; Okihiro, 1994; Parker, 2001). Despite this normative ideal, it remains an empirical and testable question as to whether ethnic-group based political participation relates to political participation in general politics.
An ethnic civic community perspective (Fennema & Tillie, 1999, 2004; Jacobs & Tillie, 2004) suggests that the engagement in an ethnic civic community relates positively to political participation in “nonethnic” mainstream politics. Flourishing civic organizations among ethnic groups foster those groups’ understanding of common interests and motivates them to engage in the political process. This perspective implies that there should be some positive relationship between ethnic group related political participation and general political participation.

Conversely, others argue that existing political systems in Western societies tend to require ethnic minorities to negate their own ethnic identities and interests when they enter into mainstream politics. Since the dominant form of most democracies is predicated on the neutralization and neglect of cultural, ethnic diversity and differences, participation in ethnic-oriented politics is discouraged and ignored in mainstream politics. Ethnic minorities are compelled to abandon their ethnic identities and attain the languages and cultures of the dominant ethnic group and to conform to a single, national civic culture (Marri, 2003; Okihiro, 1994). When ethnic group-based participation is systematically devalued and marginalized, there should be no intrinsic relationship between ethnic-group-related participation and general participation. In addition, research on political participation notes the multi-dimensionality of political participation, implying that political participation in one realm does not necessarily transfer to the participation in the other realm. The modes of political participation vary in terms of the level of individual motivation necessary, the level of conflicts connected with the act, the span of the political goal sought, and the scope of individuals potentially influenced by outcomes of political act (Verba & Nie, 1972). This approach to political participation indicates that ethnic-group related participation may not connect to general political participation. Due to these competing theses about the relationship between the two forms of political participation, the following research question was asked.

*RQ₂*: Does Asian-related political participation increase general political participation beyond ethnic matters?

**Methods**

**Data Sets and Analysis**

To test the influences of coethnic features of residential context, this study ran the multi-level analyses using HLM 6.08 software. Two sets of data were required to run the multilevel models: Individual level and context level data. The Pilot National Asian American Political Survey (PNAAPS) was used as the individual level data source. Data collection of PNAAPS was
conducted between November 16, 2000 and January 28, 2001. This data set includes a total of 1,218 adults of the top six Asian American ethnic population groups living in the five Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs): Los Angeles, New York, Honolulu, San Francisco, and Chicago. The sample consists of 308 Chinese, 168 Korean, 137 Vietnamese, 198 Japanese, 266 Filipino, and 141 South Asians. This data set only solicits the sample from five MSAs addressed above, which clearly limits the generalization of the findings outside of urban/suburban areas. Despite the clear limitation of the data set, the PNAAPS is almost the only publically accessible data set of Asian American population in terms of political behavior. Moreover, there has been no major survey data collection since the PNAAPS data was gathered. In addition, the Asian population in these metropolitan areas represents 40% of the Asian population in the United States, which make PNAAPS a reasonable data set to test and answer the proposed research hypotheses and questions. The average incidence rate for interviews drawn from the listed surname sample was 41%. The incidence rate for RDD interviews is 15%. The average refusal rate is 25%, with 34% in the listed sample and 3.5% in the RDD sample.

Census 2000 data were used for the context level data of multilevel models. The unit of analysis for the context level data is MSA, which is the only geographical marker the PNAAPS data set includes. Percentages of Asian population of five MSAs were integrated in the model as a contextual level variable representing the coethnic feature of geographic bound residential context.

Exogenous Variables

Exogenous variables that measure coethnic features of communication include coethnic residential context and reliance on ethnic media. Two indicators measured coethnic residential context: One from context level data and the other from individual level data. The percentage of Asian American population of each MSA is the first indicator of coethnic residential context that comes from context level data. Census 2000 data provide specific percentages of Asian population for 5 MSAs: Chicago (4.3%), New York (9.8%), Los Angeles (10%), San Francisco (30.8%), and Honolulu (55.9%). This indicator covers some basis of the coethnic feature of geographic residential context. In other words, in terms of coethnic residential context, living in the Honolulu MSA, where 56% of residents are Asian, would be different from living in New York, where the percentage of Asian is close to 10%.

While context level data discussed above could provide information about ethnic homogeneity in respondents’ broad geographic residential area, a MSA covers huge geographical areas including many different communities with different shades of ethnic homogeneity. The Asian percentage of MSA
alone may miss the nuance of narrow-scoped residential coethnic features. For instance, if only Asian percentages in each MSA were used as a marker for the residential coethnic feature, it makes it difficult to tell whether an Asian lives in a predominantly White community or a mostly Asian community within a MSA. Taken a step further, using the Los Angeles MSA, an Asian person could live in a mainly White residential area, an ethnically diverse neighborhood, or a predominantly Asian residential area such as Koreatown or Greater Monterey Park. To address this potential limitation of the Asian percentages in MSAs (i.e., the first indicator of coethnic residential context), a second indicator from the individual level data was also included to tap a smaller scoped residential ethnic homogeneity. PNAAPS has a single question asking the respondents about ethnic diversity in residential context. Respondents were asked whether or not their residential areas are predominantly Asians. About 20% of respondents indicated that their neighbors are predominantly Asians ($M = 0.20, SD = 0.40$).

Of course, this individual level self-report of coethnic residential context does not accurately represent coethnic feature of geographic residential context. For instance, this self-reported data cannot distinguish Asian Americans who live in Greater Monterey Park in Los Angeles MSA from Asian American living in Flushing in New York MSA. The correlation between these two indicators of coethnic residential context was $0.18$ ($p < .001$), which indicates that Asians who live in a geographical region with a dense Asian population such as the Honolulu MSA are more likely to report that they reside in a heavily Asian neighborhood. A weak correlation, however, also indicates that there is some variation among people who live in the same MSA.

Reliance on ethnic media ($M = 2.83, SD = 1.28$) was measured by asking a single question on a scale from 1 to 5 how often respondents use ethnic media, relative to U.S. media, as a source of entertainment, news and information comparing ($1 = do not use ethnic media; 3 = use ethnic media about the same time with mainstream U.S. media; 5 = use ethnic media all the time$).

**Endogenous Variables**

*Asian-related political awareness* was measured as an additive index of two measures asking if respondents were aware of recent Asian–related news, with correct answers scored as 1 and all other answers scored as 0. This created a 3-point scale that ranged from 0 to 2 ($M = 0.77, SD = 0.68, r = .17, p < .01$). More specifically, respondents were asked whether they were aware of the scandal involving U.S. nuclear scientist, Wen Ho Lee, as well as the 80–20 Initiative. *Exposure to exogenous mobilization* ($M = 0.60, SD = 0.73$) was measured with two questions. The first question asked if respondents had been contacted by a political party, candidate or other political group. Fifty-eight percent of respondents answered that they had been
exposed to mobilization efforts by a political institution \((SD=0.49)\). The second question asked if they had been contacted by an individual regarding political campaigns. About 20% of respondents answered that they had been exposed to mobilization efforts by individuals \((SD=0.40)\). Later these two questions were averaged to build a measure of exposure to exogenous mobilization \((r = .33, p < .01)\).

General political participation measure was developed by adding six dummy variables based on respondents’ participation in six types of political activities \((M = 0.92, SD = 1.39, \alpha = .67)\). Those activities include writing or phoning a government official, donating money to a campaign, signing a petition for a political cause, taking part in a protest or demonstration, serving on a board, and working on a political campaign. A composite measure of Asian-related political participation was also developed by adding six dummy variables that asked whether respondents participated in each political activity involved an Asian-American candidate or issue affecting Asian Americans \((M = 0.36, SD = 0.93, \alpha = .93)\). Exactly the same types of activities asked to tap general political participation (listed above) were used for coethnic participation. For instance, participants were asked whether or not they contacted government officials about an Asian American issue and whether or not they donated to a political campaign about Asian Americans. About 80% of respondents never participated in any form of general political participation. On the other hand, about half of the respondents participated in at least one form of political activity directly relevant to the Asian community.

Control Variables

Four sets of control variables were included in the models. First, four socio-structural variables (age, gender, education, and family income) were incorporated. Age was measured as a continuous variable with the average age being 48 years old \((SD=17.4)\). Gender was dummy coded with men coded high (50.2%). Education was tapped by an 8-point scale with grade school or less the lowest value and post-graduate degree as the highest value \((M = 5.05, SD = 1.90)\). About one-third of respondents were college graduates and 15.8% of them had some college education. Family income was measured by a 7-point scale of income ranges and median income range was between 40,000 and 59,999 dollars. For the family income variables, serial mean replacement was applied because of the large number of missing cases.

Political interest, strength of political party identification, and experience of active political participation while respondents were in their home country were also included in the model. Political interest was coded using a 4-point scale \((M = 2.73, SD = 0.98)\). Strength of political party identification variable was built based on the original measure of political party identification. Regardless of supporting party, strong partisans were recoded as three and
moderate partisans were coded as 2, and weak partisans (leaning toward both parties) were coded as 1. Independents (7.2% of respondents) and people without any supporting political party were coded as 0 ($M = 1.59$, $SD = 1.06$). Experience of active political participation while they were in home country was coded using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 to 5 ($M = 1.18$, $SD = 0.76$).

Three group consciousness variables were included in the model: Sense of linked fate with other Asian Americans, perceiving commonality among Asian culture, and finally experience of racial discrimination. Respondents were asked whether they sensed a linked fate with other Asian Americans. Once they said yes, a follow-up question about how strongly they feel was asked. Based on these two variables, sense of linked fate with other Asian American was constructed, with the scale ranging from 1 to 4 ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.06$). How much similarity participants perceive among Asian culture was measured by a single item ranging from 1 to 4 ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 0.88$). Lastly, respondents were asked whether they have been victims of hate crime and whether they have experienced any racial discrimination. Combining these two variables, a discrimination experience variable was constructed ranging from 0 to 2 ($M = 0.52$, $SD = 0.70$, $r = .39$, $p < .001$).

Two variables concerning international migration were incorporated into the analysis. First, using two relevant questions from PNAAPS (which language they use at home and business), an English usage variable was constructed (ranging from 1 to 3, $M = 2.31$, $SD = 0.53$, $r = .10$, $p < .001$). Finally, a variable measuring overall years living in the United States was constructed based on two relevant questions in the PNAAPS data. For the first generation immigrant, how long they have lived in United States on a permanent basis was used. For U.S.-born Americans, age was used for variable construction ($M = 21.75$, $SD = 20.54$) (see Supplementary Appendix A for more specific measurement information).

**Results**

**Asian-Related Political Awareness (H1 and H2)**

$H1$ expected that coethnic residential contexts would help Asian Americans be politically more aware of Asian-related matters. As shown in the left column of Table 1, this hypothesis was partially supported in terms of a self-reported measure of residential ethnic homogeneity. Asian Americans who reported that their residential areas are composed of mostly Asians (i.e., self-reported coethnic residential context) were more aware of Asian-related political issues ($b = .13$, $p < .05$) than those who report that they do not live in Asian dominant neighborhoods. However, the same pattern did not persist in terms of percentage of Asians in residential contexts (i.e., MSAs). In other words,
Asian Americans living in Honolulu, for instance where more than half of residents are Asians, are not necessarily keeping up with more of the salient news about Asian community, compared to Asian Americans who live in Chicago, where only 4.3% of population is Asian.

H2 predicted that people who rely on ethnic media more than mainstream U.S. media would be more aware of Asian-related political issues. Table 1 shows that this hypothesis was supported ($b = .08$, $p < .001$). That is, the more that Asian Americans rely on ethnic media than mainstream media, the more they are informed about Asian-related issues.

### Exposure to Political Mobilization (RQ1)

Do coethnic residential contexts facilitate or reduce the exposure to exogenous mobilization efforts (RQ1)? As indicated in the right column of Table 1, with other conditions being equal, living mostly around other Asians (i.e., self-report measure) neither increased nor decreased the chance of exposure
to exogenous mobilization efforts ($b = -0.06$, *n.s.)*. In contrast, although it was not significant at the conventional level of significance, people who live in the geographical area (i.e., MSA in this case), where the Asian population is higher than others, tend to report a higher level of exposure to political mobilization than those in MSA with relatively lower Asian populations ($b = 0.01$, $p < .07$).

**Political Participation ($H3$, $H4$, and $RQ2$)**

$H3$ expected a positive relationship between Asian-related political awareness and Asian-related political participation. The results presented in Table 2 indicate that those who were more aware of Asian-related issues tend to show higher participation in coethnic political activities ($b = 0.10$, $p < .05$). In other words, those who were more aware of Asian-related political issues were

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<td>Asian-related political participation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control variables</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income</td>
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<td>Gender (female = 0)</td>
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<td>Political interest</td>
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<td>Partisan strength</td>
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<td>Years living in the U.S.</td>
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<td>Experience of discrimination</td>
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<td>Linked fate with Asian Americans</td>
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<td>Coethnic features of communicative factors</td>
<td>Percentage of Asian American (MSA)</td>
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<td>Coethnic residential context (self-report)</td>
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<td>Information &amp; mobilization variables</td>
<td>Coethnic political awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exposure to political mobilization</td>
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*Note: n of individual level units = 784; n of context level units = 5; cell entries are unstandardized coefficients and standard errors from multilevel models; $\#p \leq .07; \; \*p \leq .05; \; **p \leq .01; \; ***p \leq .001$
more likely to actively participate in Asian-related political activities. Therefore, $H_3$ was supported.

$H_4$ expected a positive association between political mobilization and political participation. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, results suggest that people who were exposed to political mobilization were more politically participatory in both forms (i.e., Asian-related and general political participation) than those who were less exposed to political mobilization ($b = .28$, $p < .001$ for Asian-related political participation; $b = .59$, $p < .001$ for general political participation). Therefore, $H_4$ was supported.

Additionally, as shown in Model 1 in Table 2, coethnic residential contexts did not have any direct relationships with any forms of political participation. In other words, living in ethnically homogeneous residential contexts (both geographic information driven and self-reported) do not necessarily

### Table III.
Multilevel Models Predicting General Political Participation

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<th>General political participation</th>
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<td><strong>Model 1</strong></td>
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<td>Age</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.12***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (female = 0)</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>.28***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan strength</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language use</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years living in the U.S.</td>
<td>−.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political experience in country of origin</td>
<td>.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of common culture</td>
<td>−.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience of discrimination</td>
<td>.28***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked fate with Asian Americans</td>
<td>−.14**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coethnic features of communicative factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Asian American (MSA)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coethnic residential context (self-report)</td>
<td>−.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliance on ethnic media</td>
<td>−.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information &amp; mobilization variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coethnic political awareness</td>
<td>.14#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to political mobilization</td>
<td>.59***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian-related political Participation</td>
<td>.97***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $n$ of individual level units = 784; $n$ of context level units = 5; cell entries are unstandardized coefficients and standard errors from multilevel models; $# p \leq .07$; $* p \leq .05$; $** p \leq .01$; $*** p \leq .001$. 

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make Asian Americans more or less participatory in political activities. However coethnic residential contexts could galvanize political participation indirectly through political awareness and exposure to political mobilization.

Finally, what is the relationship between two forms of political participation (RQ2)? Table 3 indicates that there was a significant positive association between coethnic political participation and general political participation ($b = .97, p < .00$). That is, people who actively work for Asian-related political activities tend to participate in political actions oriented toward the general population. This finding shows some support for the “spill-over” thesis; ethnic-focused political participation could be connected to political participation in more general domains.

Additionally, coethnic residential contexts did not show any direct relationships with general political participation, like it did not for Asian specific political participation. On the other hand, there was a significant negative relationship between ethnic media reliance and general political participation ($b = -0.09, p < .01$).

**Discussion**

Political participation is often emphasized as a necessity for a working democracy. Although a great body of research has been devoted to political participation, scholarly attention to ethnic minority groups’ political participation has not kept up with the growing ethnic minority populations in Western democracies. Asian Americans are considered as one of “new immigrants” who mostly immigrated into America after President Lyndon Johnson signed the Immigration and Naturalization Act (INA) of 1965 (Kitano & Daniel, 2001). Since then, Asian immigration has exceeded European immigration and became one of the fastest growing ethnic minorities in the United States. However, research on Asian Americans’ political participation is scarce, even when compared with the amount of academic works devoted to other ethnic minorities’ political participation. By introducing coethnic residential context and ethnic media as focal factors, this study added a needed piece of empirical findings to the literature on Asian American political participation.

According to the present study, coethnic features of residential context and ethnic media reliance did not directly explain Asian Americans’ political participation in most cases. Living in areas surrounded by others of Asian origins did not automatically facilitate or hinder Asian American’s political participation. Instead, coethnic residential area (self-reported residential ethnic homogeneity only) and ethnic media galvanized Asian Americans’ political awareness about their own ethnic matters, which in turn leads them to be
more engaged in Asian-related politics. At the same time, coethnic feature of geographic residential context (in terms of percentage of Asians in MSAs) was positively associated with the exposure to political mobilization although it was a borderline effect. More specifically, people who live in the geographical area (i.e., MSA in this case), where the Asian population is higher than others, tend to report a higher level of exposure to political mobilization than those in MSA with relatively lower Asian populations.

As addressed in the literature review, the relationship between coethnic social context and political mobilization can fluctuate depending on the size of ethnic enclaves. Some prior studies indicate that political mobilization efforts are more likely to be attempted with ethnic minorities when they live in a nearby geographical area as a big group. Therefore, this positive borderline finding in regard to geographic residential ethnic homogeneity makes sense. For instance, when discussing Asian American politics, scholars sometimes make a distinction between places like Hawaii where Asians are the mainstream ethnicity number-wise. In areas like Hawaii, Asian political leadership representing Asian American is more salient than other places still with large Asian population. This distinction, couched in size and location of ethnic community, could be reflected into exposure to exogenous political mobilization. Therefore, in terms of exposure to political mobilization, living in MSAs where higher percentage of Asian population such as Honolulu and San Francisco means higher chance to be approached by external political mobilization efforts. Exposure to political mobilization was consistently proven as a strong predictor of political participation in both domains (i.e., Asian-related and general domain). In other words, coethnic residential context and ethnic media reliance mostly indirectly influence Asian Americans’ political participation.

Of course, this borderline finding should not be overstated especially when considering the null effect of self-reported residential ethnic homogeneity on exposure to political mobilization. One of the potential explanations could be found in the “size matters” thesis. In other words, if Asian Americans live in a heavily Asian neighborhood but in a certain MSA where Asian population is relatively lower than other MSAs, they are less likely to be an attractive target for political mobilization. From the perspective of political parties or organizations, any extra efforts they need to spend may not be paid off unless the overall size of ethnic community is not sufficiently large. Self-reported residential context used in this study does not tap the size of ethnic residential contexts. Therefore, the null effect of coethnic residential context measured by self-reports could have been a result of offsetting effects of different size of ethnically homogeneous residential contexts.

On the other hand, ethnic media seems to play a double-edged role in Asian Americans’ political participation. A person who relies more on ethnic
media than the mainstream U.S. media may have an unbalanced diet of political information favoring Asian-related political issues, which encourage them to be participatory for Asian-related actions. Content analyses of ethnic media indeed showed that ethnic media tend to concentrate on political news of ethnic minority groups’ home country or own ethnic related matter rather than U.S. relevant news (Lin et al., 2006, 2010). Ethnic minority groups, especially new immigrant populations, need ethnic information, which contributes to bonding within ethnic minority communities. However, what this study found is that ethnic media do not necessarily do a good job in directly bridging ethnic minority communities to political processes of their adopting society. Instead, there was a negative direct relationship between ethnic media reliance and general political participation. This finding raises a question about the role of ethnic media in the realm of politics. It could sometimes insulate, steer away, or replace Asian American’s political actions from the general domains.

Although highly speculative, there are a couple of explanations for the finding in regard with ethnic media and political participation. First, as discussed in the literature review section, prior research on ethnic media points out that ethnic media tend to focus on one’s own ethnic matters or information about their countries of origin. This biased news diet could steer ethnic minorities political interest from host society politics. Second, conjecture about this negative relationship might be found in the way the ethnic media reliance question was asked. Respondents were asked to answer how much they rely on ethnic media compared to mainstream media. This does not tap the actual amount of media (both ethnic and mainstream media) people consume. A person could mostly rely on ethnic media but this same person may not consume the media much in general. These explanations, of course, must be subjected to empirical analysis to determine their veracities.

Another contribution of this study can be found on its empirical examination on the relationship between Asian-group-related political participation and general political participation. Although recent discussion about multicultural democracy emphasizes ethnic minorities’ dual participation in a national civic community as well as ethnic civic communities, the relationship between these two realms of political participation has rarely been tested empirically. Scholars forwarding multicultural democracy as an ideal argue that ethnic minorities involvements in their own ethnic community is not only beneficial but also essential to be good citizens of mainstream societies. Fennema and Tillie (1999, 2001) contend, for instance, that building a strong ethnic community could provide a springboard for ethnic minority groups, which could eventually spill over their active participation in broader community beyond coethnic boundaries. However, others argue that strong ethnic communities do
not necessarily breed active ethnic minority citizens in mainstream society (e.g., Breton, 2003; Jacobs, Phalet, & Swyngedouw, 2004). People often only concern themselves with, and act on, matters directly relevant to their own community and group, but they do not become integrated into outer political worlds beyond their own socio-demographic and cultural boundaries. This tendency of homogeneity exacerbates current concerns about political balkanization and fragmentation of public arenas along the existing political, social, and cultural differences. This is not a new concern, of course. Scholars from diverse disciplines have warned about the danger of social and communicative insularity to democracy. However, this concern does not necessarily refute or challenge the necessity of strong ethnic community for ethnic minorities’ political participation. In a society consisting of culturally and ethnically heterogeneous origins, democracy functions when both national civic community and group-identity based civic communities flourish. The finding of this study suggests the two venues of political participation could be better connected.

The limitations of the study are largely due to the nature of data. First of all, the population of Asian Americans has grown and possibly changed compared to the point in time when the PNAAPS data collection was conducted. Besides the age of the data, there are other limitations in the data used in this study. As indicated in the data set section, the surveys were only conducted in five metropolitan areas. Therefore, the generalization of the findings outside of urban/suburban areas might be restricted. The secondary data set used in this study also does not include general political knowledge measures. Therefore, it is hard to make a more conclusive argument that coethnic residential context and ethnic media disconnect ethnic minority from general political matters. In addition, although this study attempts to consider coethnic features of geographic residential context, MSA as a unit of analysis is somewhat problematic because of its broad scope. In order to examine the effects of residential context, multilevel analysis with geo-coded data with a smaller geographic marker such as census tracts should prove beneficial. Unfortunately, MSA was the only geographic identifier available for this study. Therefore a more cautious interpretation of the findings is warranted.

Supplementary Data
Supplementary Data are available at IJPOR online.

References


**Biographical Note**

Mihye Seo (PhD, The Ohio State University) is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication, University at Albany, SUNY. Her areas of research include media effects and political communication.