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A Demographic and Political Portrait  
of Pattern and Paradox

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**KEYWORDS:** POLITICAL PARTICIPATION; DEMOGRAPHICS; U.S. ELECTIONS

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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This essay analyzes basic demographic trends and patterns of political participation (electoral and non-electoral) for Koreans in the U.S. and considers the prospects for an engaged and organized Korean-American political voice.

**MAIN ARGUMENT**

- The Korean population in the U.S. has grown more than twenty times in size since 1970 and is heavily concentrated in key states. This total population will continue to grow, but the flow of migration has slowed in recent decades and become more geographically dispersed.
- Korean Americans, on average, are highly educated. Their economic fortunes, however, are not commensurate with their education level.
- Koreans do not participate fully in the electoral process as voters. They are also less likely than other Asian groups in the U.S. to be active across other venues of civic and political participation. The only area in which they are especially active is religious participation, but this does not engender other forms of engagement.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- Koreans will be an increasingly established segment of the U.S. population (including naturalized citizens as well as second- and third-generation Americans) due to the declining influx of Korean immigrants.
- Koreans in the U.S. have yet to develop an active and shared “Korean-American” political voice on domestic or foreign policy matters.
- Individual and institutional resources are the keys to building a more politically cohesive and energized Korean-American community.

According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Americans of Asian heritage have been one of the fastest growing populations over the last several decades. In 1960, there were fewer than one million Asian Americans in the United States, accounting for less than 0.5% of the total population. By 2000, the figure grew to 17.3 million, or 5.6% of the total population. This trend is expected to continue, with the census projecting 44.4 million Asian Americans by 2060, slightly more than 10% of the expected total population of 432 million. Not surprisingly, these changes to the composition of American society have triggered animated, and sometimes fiery, debates about immigrant integration, national identity, and democratic citizenship.

Does the trend of explosive population growth also apply to Koreans in the United States? If so, what are its consequences? More specifically, what are its consequences for the prospects of a coherent and politically active Korean-American voice, one that potentially redounds to U.S.-Korean relations and policymaking? This essay presents a socio-demographic and political portrait of Korean Americans. It begins with a very condensed history of Korean immigrant stocks and flows over time and the geographic distribution of the Korean-American population. It then summarizes the socioeconomic achievements of Korean Americans. The remainder of the essay turns to the subject of politics. Here the essay starts with some basic facts about the presence of Korean Americans in elected offices and the levels of citizenship acquisition, voter registration, and voter turnout for Asian Americans as a whole. The bulk of this analysis draws from a 2008 survey, which offers unprecedented data on the political engagement of Korean Americans in electoral and non-electoral realms.

The portrait that emerges is one of pattern and paradox. At first glance, this is a population that is rising in numbers and socioeconomic status. Yet upon closer scrutiny, the migration of Koreans into the United States has slowed considerably, and there are striking gaps in the material success of Korean Americans relative to their educational achievements. Similarly, in the arena of politics, there is a significant degree of “under-participation” among Korean Americans relative to their socioeconomic status. At the same time, evidence also suggests that this may be an especially pivotal moment in the mobilization of a Korean-American political voice, as Korean Americans appear to be far more active in the spheres of civic engagement and politics through new social media.

KOREAN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES:  
PAST AND PRESENT

Koreans have been in the United States for well over a century. The first Koreans to traverse the Pacific were a handful of reform-minded political exiles that largely represented Korea's intellectual and political elite. Small but increasing numbers of Koreans continued to trickle into early 1900s America as political exiles, students, and later as laborers. The first mass migration of Koreans did not occur until 1903, when labor immigrants began working on sugar plantations in what was then the U.S. Territory of Hawaii. Many of these laborers were spurred to leave Korea because of the 1901 famine and the generally harsh economic conditions. This first wave of migration from Korea—including some 7,226 Koreans who left their homeland for Hawaii between 1903 and 1905—came to a halt just as quickly as it began.<sup>1</sup>

For more than a half-century following this initial wave, Korean in-migration came in one of two forms. From 1910 until 1924 (when the National Origins Act, or Reed-Johnson Act, was enacted), more than one thousand “picture brides” immigrated, mostly to Hawaii, to partner with Korean bachelor immigrants. Roughly at the same time, a somewhat smaller contingent of Korean students, intellectuals, and political exiles from the Japanese occupation also came to the United States. Between 1924 and the period of the Korean War, however, emigration from Korea to the United States was effectively halted. The influx of Koreans gained new momentum with the Korean War, as “war brides,” “war orphans,” and later students began to come to the United States in significant numbers.<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, in contrast to immigration from China, the Philippines, and Japan, mass emigration from Korea to the United States is a relatively recent phenomenon. The inflection point in immigration patterns, however, came in 1965 with the passage of the landmark Hart-Cellar Act, which effectively rescinded the restrictive quotas of the Reed-Johnson Act of 1924 and the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952. The Hart-Cellar reforms are an archetypal lesson in unintended consequences. What was viewed by many as a largely symbolic and incremental piece of legislation, at least in the broader context

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<sup>1</sup> Yong-Ho Ch'oe, ed., *From the Land of Hibiscus: Koreans in Hawai'i, 1903–1950* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007); and Eui-Young Yu, “Koreans in America: An Emerging Ethnic Minority,” *Amerasia Journal* 4, no. 1 (1977): 117–31.

<sup>2</sup> Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Communities in New York and Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and Yu, “Koreans in America.”

of the Cold War, precipitated a dramatic transformation of the American demographic landscape.

**Table 1** shows that in 1960, the last decennial census before Hart-Cellar, the Korean-origin population in the United States was 25,000. By 2000, this figure had increased to more than one million people. In the 2006–8 American Community Surveys (ACS), the U.S. Korean population is estimated to be somewhere between 1.3 million and 1.5 million people, depending on whether multiracial Americans with some Korean heritage are included or excluded from the tally.<sup>3</sup>

As the first column on “percent change” shows, the dramatic growth in the U.S. Korean population has slowed considerably in the last decade or two. This point is sharpened by looking just at in-migration to the United States over time. The two right columns in Table 1 show that the decades of the 1970s and 1980s were the peak period of migration. From 1971 to 1980, there was an astonishing 775% increase in the number of immigrants from Korea compared to the previous decade. Then in the 1980s, the high influx continued to grow, before shrinking in half by the 1990s.

This general historical pattern of migration from Korea to the United States is paralleled, with important caveats and differences, by demographic trends for other Asian countries. In the decades from 1981–90 and 1991–2000, Asian Americans were the fastest-growing of the five ethno-racial groups for which the U.S. federal government collects data. During 1991–2000, the Asian-American population grew by 63%, well ahead of a 39% population growth for Hispanics/Latinos, 14% for Native Americans/American Indians, 15% for African Americans, and 5% for White Americans.

While most Asian groups in the U.S. share a common overall trend in population growth (with the exception of the more stable population of Japanese Americans), it is important to note the diversity of Asian groups and their variation in size. Korean Americans constitute a sizeable population but are only 10% of the Asian-origin population of the United States. Chinese (including those from Taiwan) are 23% of the total Asian-American population, while Asian Indians (19%), Filipinos (18%), and Vietnamese (11%) also have larger populations than Korean Americans.

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<sup>3</sup> Population counts in the United States by ethno-racial classification since 2000 are presented in one of two formats as a result of the “mark one or more” format of the “race question” introduced in the 2000 census. For a given group, for example “Korean,” categorized in the racial self-identification question (where “Korean” is listed as a separate “race”), the group’s population can either be counted by limiting group boundaries only to those who identify that group and no other group (“alone”) or by adding those who identify with that group and one or more other groups (“alone or in combination”). Table 1 records the “alone or in combination” counts for the 2000 census and the pooled 2006–8 ACS surveys.

TABLE 1

*Stocks and Flows of the U.S. Korean Population, 1940–2008*

	<b>Population count</b>	<b>% change</b>	<b>New immigrants</b>	<b>% change</b>
<b>1940</b>	8,568	--	--	--
<b>1950</b>	10,000 (est.)	117%	--	--
<b>1960</b>	25,000 (est.)	250%	--	--
<b>1970</b>	69,130	277%	34,526	554%
<b>1980</b>	354,593	513%	267,637	775%
<b>1990</b>	798,849	225%	337,746	126%
<b>2000</b>	1,228,427	154%	164,166	49%
<b>2006–8</b>	1,548,960 (est.)	126%	--	--

*Source:* U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 1940, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000; American Community Survey (ACS), 2006–8; and 2000 Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

*Note:* Population counts for the 1950 and 1960 censuses are estimated from Eui-Young Yu, “Koreans in the United States: 2000,” in *The New Face of Asian Pacific America: Numbers, Diversity, and Change in the 21st Century*, ed. Eric Lai and Dennis Arguelles (San Francisco and Los Angeles: Asia Week and UCLA’s Asian American Studies Center, 2003). Since 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau has conducted an annual ACS as a substitute for the “long-form” questionnaire on the decennial census. Since these are sample surveys, the population counts in Table 1 are estimates of the actual number of Koreans in the United States. Table 1 pools data from the 2006 ACS, 2007 ACS, and 2008 ACS to draw more valid estimates.

At the same time, Koreans share a common characteristic with other Asians in the United States in that a very high proportion of the Korean population is foreign-born. According to the American Community Survey in 2006–8, 74% of Koreans in the United States are foreign-born, compared to 73% of Asian Indians, 70% of Chinese, 67% of Vietnamese, 66% of Filipinos, and 41% of Japanese Americans. In stark contrast, only 12.5% of the total U.S. population is foreign-born. Of the five major racial and ethnic groups enumerated by the U.S. Census Bureau, Asian Americans in general are the largest immigrant group, with 67% of Asian Americans being foreign-born, compared to 39% of Latinos and only 4% of whites and 8% of African Americans.

These demographic trends show some of the dynamism and flux in the Korean (and Asian) population of the United States. Koreans, like other Asian groups, have grown impressively in number. Unlike many other groups, however, this population growth is abating—most likely in response to diminishing “push” factors in migration, due to the surging growth and development of South Korea’s economy. One implication is that Koreans in America will, over time, likely mature as an increasingly multi-generational population. To the extent that the success of U.S.-Korean trust-building projects depend on the attentiveness and affinities of Koreans in the United States, such activated

sympathies need to be developed among second- and third-generation Koreans in the future. This will likely be a challenge, as the second and third generations of all immigrant groups regularly face the cross-pressures of assimilating into “American-ness” while retaining the cultural (and political) interests of their parents’ and grandparents’ country of origin.

#### THE GEOGRAPHY OF KOREAN-AMERICAN IMMIGRATION

If the declining in-migration of Koreans to the United States has the potential to weaken the direct experiential basis of U.S.-Korean trust-building, the dense geographic concentration of the U.S.-Korean population has the potential to strengthen ethnic cohesion in ways that contribute to greater trust-building. **Table 2** depicts 2000 Census data on the geography of the Korean-American population. California is by far home to the largest number of Korean Americans. Roughly one out of every three Korean Americans lives in California. The next most popular destination is New York, with 10% of the national Korean population, followed by New Jersey and four states that are very closely bundled together in the size of their Korean population according to the 2006–8 ACS data: Illinois, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.

To an extent, this geographic concentration reflects the continued prominence of traditional immigrant gateways on both coasts (historically, Ellis Island in New York and Angel Island in California) and the influence of social networks as “pull” factors for migration. This focus on traditional gateways, however, can conceal one of the most dramatic recent patterns in U.S. immigration. Immigration has become such a large-scale phenomenon that there are a significant number of states, counties, and metropolitan areas with historically negligible immigrant or Asian populations that are now witnessing unprecedented (and to a large extent, unanticipated) growth. This emergence of “new immigrant destinations” applies to Korean Americans as well.<sup>4</sup> Of the fifteen states with the greatest growth in Korean population between 1990 and 2000, most are not traditional immigrant gateways and are not names typically associated with large Korean populations—Georgia, North Carolina, Arizona, Florida, Arkansas, Colorado, Oregon, and South Carolina.

The pattern of spatial concentration also holds for finer-grained units at the state level. The 2000 Census counted 257,975 Koreans in the three-county Los

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<sup>4</sup> Audrey Singer, “The Rise of New Immigrant Gateways,” Brookings Institution, February 2004, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2004/02demographics\\_singer/20040301\\_gateways.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2004/02demographics_singer/20040301_gateways.pdf).



TABLE 2

*Korean-American Population by State, 2000 and 2006–8*

	<b>2000 Census</b>	<b>2006-8 ACS</b>	<b>% increase</b>
<b>California</b>	345,882	427,105	23%
<b>New York</b>	119,846	129,070	8%
<b>New Jersey</b>	65,349	84,871	30%
<b>Texas</b>	45,571	61,924	36%
<b>Virginia</b>	45,279	60,859	34%
<b>Illinois</b>	51,453	60,709	18%
<b>Washington</b>	46,880	60,075	28%
<b>Georgia</b>	28,745	47,916	67%
<b>Maryland</b>	39,155	44,206	13%
<b>Pennsylvania</b>	31,612	34,758	10%
<b>Hawaii</b>	23,537	27,690	18%
<b>Florida</b>	19,139	24,472	28%
<b>Michigan</b>	20,886	23,799	14%
<b>Colorado</b>	16,395	22,006	34%
<b>Massachusetts</b>	17,369	21,023	21%

*Source:* U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 2000; and ACS, 2006–8. Only data for the top fifteen states is shown, as ranked by 2006–8 ACS population estimates.

Angeles metropolitan area alone, one out of every four Koreans in the United States. In the New York City metropolitan area (including parts of New Jersey), the 2000 Census counted another 170,509. Taken together, then, roughly 40% of the Korean-American population resided in these two metro areas alone. If the next two most populous metro areas are included—Baltimore-Washington and San Francisco-Oakland-San Jose—more than half of all Koreans in the United States reside in one of these four metro areas.

Thus, the story of the geographic settlement of Koreans in the United States is one of pattern and paradox. The pattern of high concentration at the state and local levels suggest the kind of spatial proximity that often engenders dense social ties, urban (and suburban) enclaves, and stronger ethnic and cultural ties. Yet the more recent trend of Koreans settling in new destinations may have the effect of increasing their geographic dispersion in the long term and lessening these potential effects of spatial proximity. As with the more recent trend of slowed growth in the U.S. Korean population, this geographic dispersion also poses a challenge to the prospects for a sustained and engaged Korean-American voice that influences U.S.-Korea relations in the future.

## KOREA'S OTHER ECONOMIC MIRACLE?

Beyond bodies and space, another key to building a Korean-American political community is material resources. In this regard, the success of Korean Americans is so often recounted that it reaches a near fabled status. Specifically, the triumphs and tribulations of Koreans in the United States, like other Asian groups, are often rendered down to the “model minority myth,” in which Asians are held up as a paragon of hard-working, law-abiding, thrifty, family-oriented, and education-revering immigrants who affirm the “American Dream.”<sup>5</sup> As research has documented for more than a generation, this view of Asian Americans serves the ideological and instrumental purpose of homogenizing the experiences, exaggerating the prosperity, and downplaying the needs of that demographic, while at the same time arousing African-American resentment toward Asian Americans, delegitimizing African-American demands for social programs, and legitimating racially discriminatory arrangements.<sup>6</sup>

As we shall see, the success of Korean Americans is neither unambiguous nor uniform. Ballyhooed accounts of the achievements of Korean Americans often begin by noting their high educational attainment, which is explained by stereotypes about Korean cultural and family values. Such views typically begin with anecdotal accounts of the large numbers of Koreans on the campuses of Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Juilliard, and other training grounds for America's future elite. These stories do match data that compares educational attainment levels across ethno-racial groups. As **Table 3** shows, more than half of all Korean Americans have at least a college degree, with more than one in six holding a graduate or professional degree. By comparison, one in four Americans hold at least a college degree and only one in ten hold an advanced post-baccalaureate degree.

When we consider whether these impressive figures translate into equally striking economic successes, the story is decidedly mixed. To the extent that the socioeconomic status of Korean Americans is a story of triumph and prosperity, it is in no small measure a result of the post-1965 wave of Korean immigrants being “professional immigrants,” who tended to be college-educated and middle

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Sharon Lee, “Poverty and the U.S. Asian Population,” *Social Science Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (1994): 541–59; and Keith Osajima, “Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and 1980s,” in *Reflections on Shattered Windows*, ed. Gary Y. Okihiro, Shirley Hune, Arthur A. Hansen, and John M. Liu (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Sumi Cho, “Korean Americans vs. African Americans,” in *Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding Williams (New York and London: Routledge, 1993); and Claire Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Politics and Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105–38.

TABLE 3  
*Educational Attainment by Group*

	Less than a BA	College degree	Graduate degree
<b>White (non-Hispanic)</b>	59.6%	19.1%	11.3%
<b>Black</b>	82.7%	11.4%	5.9%
<b>Hispanic / Latino</b>	87.3%	8.7%	4.0%
<b>Native American</b>	87.2%	8.5%	4.3%
<b>Asian (all)</b>	50.6%	29.7%	19.7%
<b>Korean</b>	48.1%	34.3%	17.6%
<b>U.S. Population</b>	72.6%	17.3%	10.1%

Source: ACS, 2006–8. The figures are estimated based on the surveys.

class and brought specialized labor skills to the United States. Like many other Asian nations, Korea experienced rapid economic growth in the 1970s, achieved in part through careful price-control policies that included outlawing labor strikes and restrictions on agricultural goods. These policies created a “push” factor toward immigration to the United States. In the field of medicine alone, one study finds that more than 13,000 Korean medical professionals arrived in the United States between 1965 and 1977.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 4** compares median household income levels for Korean Americans and other groups in the United States. Income levels for Koreans are higher than the national median, but the gap is only about \$2,000; the unemployment rate for Koreans is more than a percentage point below the national average. Perhaps most strikingly, however, the median income level for Koreans falls almost \$15,000 below that of the median for Asian Americans as a group. Furthermore, the poverty rate of Korean Americans is higher than the national average and significantly higher than that of whites and Asian Americans as a whole. Thus while Koreans are without question more prosperous than some racial minority groups like African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, their status is nonetheless conspicuously more complicated than the prevailing stereotype of an overachieving, model minority suggests.

To an extent, the gap between high educational achievement and more mixed economic success stems from a labor-skills mismatch between the educational training of Korean immigrants and the availability of work

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Takaki, *From the Land of the Morning Calm: The Koreans in America* (New York: Chelsea House, 1995).

TABLE 4  
*Economic Outcomes by Group*

	Household income	Unemployment	Poverty rate
<b>White (non-Hispanic)</b>	\$55,229	5.2%	9.2%
<b>Black</b>	\$35,086	12.0%	24.7%
<b>Hispanic / Latino</b>	\$41,630	7.4%	21.2%
<b>Native American</b>	\$37,068	12.0%	25.3%
<b>Asian (all)</b>	\$69,047	5.0%	10.6%
<b>Korean</b>	\$54,210	5.2%	13.6%
<b>U.S. Population</b>	\$52,175	6.4%	13.2%

*Source:* ACS, 2006–8. The figures are estimated based on the surveys.

in the United States. It also stems from negative treatment and structural barriers to equal opportunity. Like Asian Indians, another group with a high proportion of “professional immigrants,” many Korean professionals encounter discrimination and licensing restrictions in the United States, leading many of these professionals to resort to self-employment in small businesses. In 1990, 25% of Southern California liquor and grocery stores and 60% of New York City green grocery stores were Korean-owned.<sup>8</sup> The 2006–8 ACS data finds that 12.0% of the Korean working population was self-employed. By comparison, only 6.6% of the total civilian working population and only 6.0% of Asian Americans were self-employed.

The prominence of Korean mom-and-pop shops in U.S. cities has at times incited racial resentment and targeting. There have been numerous high-profile boycotts against Korean-owned stores, often organized in the predominantly black neighborhoods where these stores are located and triggered by the perceived hostility and violence of Korean store owners toward African-American customers.<sup>9</sup> In the most prominent and profound instance of such conflicts, the city of Los Angeles erupted into flames, looting, violence, and protest in 1992 in the aftermath of the jury verdict in the Rodney King trial. Despite the fact that there were no Koreans on the jury or among the police officers who brutalized King, some 2,300 Korean-owned stores were targeted

<sup>8</sup> Min, *Caught in the Middle*.

<sup>9</sup> Min, *Caught in the Middle*; and Claire Kim, *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

during the civil unrest, with an explicit decision by the Los Angeles Police Department not to respond to pleas for help from Korean Americans.

Another basis for the gap between educational training and wages is language acquisition and assimilation. Two measures available in federal data are self-reports on the language spoken at home and self-reported English language skills. English remains a significant barrier to many Korean Americans, educational overachievement notwithstanding. While 80% of all Americans report speaking only English at home, just 20% of Koreans report using only English at home. The 2006–8 ACS data shows a similar pattern in self-reports of Koreans speaking English less than “very well”: more than 90% of all Americans report speaking English very well, compared to slightly more than 50% of Koreans.<sup>10</sup> The extent of language barriers facing Korean Americans is even more pronounced than those for Latino Americans and for Asian Americans as a whole.

A full consideration of the material conditions and opportunity structures facing Koreans in the United States is well beyond the scope of this report. Elsewhere this author and others have described the paradoxes of being Asian in America.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, Korean Americans are valorized as a model minority and “honorary whites”; on the other hand, they are ostracized as “perpetual foreigners” and stereotyped as “homogeneous,” “insular,” and “inscrutable.” On the one hand, Korean Americans are scaling extraordinary heights of socioeconomic achievement; on the other hand, their ascent often bumps hard against “glass ceilings,” and they are shunted into segmented labor markets that undervalue their skills and training. Scholars and non-scholars alike will continue to debate whether this is a glass that is half full or half empty.

What implications will these patterns and paradoxes in the economic conditions of Koreans in America have on trust-building between the United States and Korea? To the extent that many Korean Americans have a relatively high socioeconomic standing, there is potentially a common foundation from which to build a sense of shared interest in better U.S.-Korean relations. At the same time, there is also a clear bifurcation of outcomes between the ballyhooed successes of Korean Americans with Ivy League educations and their often overlooked counterparts who struggle with language barriers, poverty, and

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<sup>10</sup> The census and ACS questionnaires ask about four categories of English skills: “not at all,” “not well,” “well,” and “very well.”

<sup>11</sup> Kim, *Bitter Fruit*; Taeku Lee, “Racial Attitudes and the Color Line(s) at the Close of the Twentieth Century,” in *The State of Asian Pacific America, vol. IV: Transforming Race Relations*, ed. Paul Ong (Los Angeles: LEAP/UCLA, 2000); and Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

their “middleman minority” status.<sup>12</sup> One potential implication here is that on some issues, such as immigration reform (e.g., whether to give priority to family reunification or highly skilled labor), the voice of Koreans in the United States may be divided according to competing interests, while on other issues, such as the long-delayed KORUS FTA (Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement), self-employed Korean Americans may have particularly keen interests to the extent that free trade is expected to increase imports (and lower costs) of Korean goods purveyed in mom-and-pop shops, including textiles, apparel, footwear, electronics, and comestibles.

### A CROUCHING TIGER OR A SLEEPING BEAR?

The theme of patterns and paradoxes is also mirrored in the realm of politics. While Koreans in social and economic spheres of life may confront structural barriers not of their own choosing and beyond their ability to overcome through sheer industry and willpower, the prevailing belief is that in the realm of politics—in the United States, the world’s leading exporter of liberal democracy as a form of government—no such barriers exist. How politically engaged and empowered, then, are Korean Americans?

A common approach to this question is to look for the presence of Korean Americans in positions of political power and elite decisionmaking. This approach results in a clear picture of vast underrepresentation for Asian Americans as a group. In one of the world’s most renowned representative democracies, someone else is doing politics for Asian Americans. While Asian Americans make up 5.6% of the U.S. population, they hold only about 1.1% of seats in the House of Representatives and 1.5% in state legislatures, both elected offices that in a sense are constitutionally designed to be proportional to the public. By contrast, African Americans (who make up 12.3% of the general public) hold 9.4% of seats in Congress and 7.2% in state legislatures.<sup>13</sup>

If we look at Korean Americans more specifically, the numbers are too few for statistical analysis. In its place is a very modest history of specific individuals who rise to power under particular contexts. To this day, former Diamond Bar, California, Republican Jay Kim remains the only American of Korean descent to have served in the United States Congress (1993–9). At state and

<sup>12</sup> Edna Bonacich, “A Theory of Middleman Minorities,” *American Sociological Review* 38, no. 5 (1973): 583–94.

<sup>13</sup> Pei-te Lien, Dianne M. Pinderhughes, Carol Hardy-Fanta, and Christine M. Sierra, “The Voting Rights Act and the Election of Nonwhite Officials,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 40, no. 3 (2007): 489–94.

local levels of political office, there are current elected officials like Hoon-Yung Hopgood (in Michigan's state legislature), Jun Choi (mayor of Edison, New Jersey), Judge Herbert Choy (U.S. Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit), Sam Yoon (Boston City Council), and several notable federal appointees like John Yoo (former Deputy Attorney General in the Bush administration), Harold Hongju Koh (current Legal Advisor in the Obama administration's State Department), and his brother, Howard Kyongju Koh (current Assistant Secretary of Health in the Obama administration).

This focus on elite politics is necessarily incomplete. It leaves open the question of whether ordinary Korean Americans choose to exercise their political rights and influence. This question, while well worth asking, has eluded the kind of careful and comprehensive analysis it deserves in large measure because data on Korean Americans has until recently been unavailable. The general pattern for Asian Americans as a group, however, is unambiguous. Data from the 2004 American Community Survey Voting and Registration Supplement across three widely studied stages of formal political incorporation—the acquisition of citizenship, voter registration (if a citizen), and voting (if registered)—shows that Latinos and Asian Americans lag behind both whites and African Americans at each step. Roughly two out of every three Asians in the United States are naturalized citizens; roughly one out of every three are registered to vote; and roughly three out of every ten actually vote during a presidential election year. The citizenship numbers are not unexpected, as there is a substantially higher proportion of Asian Americans who are foreign-born than there are for whites and African Americans. Nativity alone does not explain this pattern, however, because the citizenship rate for Asian Americans (67.5%) exceeds that of Latinos (59.3%), despite the significantly greater proportion of foreign-born Asians than Latinos in the United States.<sup>14</sup>

This “under-participation” raises a pointed question for scholars of political participation. One of the most durable and canonical results in the study of American political science is that there is a nearly linear relationship between a person's socioeconomic status and likelihood of voting and becoming politically active.<sup>15</sup> As noted in the previous sections, Asian Americans as a group enjoy a relatively high socioeconomic status. Yet they are relatively invisible on

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Janelle Wong, S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, Taeku Lee, and Jane Junn, *Asian American Political Participation: Emerging Constituents and Their Political Identities* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

voting rolls, on the campaign stump, in a crowd of political protesters, among constituents who contact their elected officials, and so on.<sup>16</sup>

This seeming paradox is not without possible explanation. Some scholars infer agency and argue that Asian Americans do not engage in politics in the United States because they are politically apathetic and unmotivated or relatively more interested in the politics of their countries of origin.<sup>17</sup> Others infer structure and argue that Asian Americans do not participate because large numbers are ineligible as non-citizens or de facto ineligible because of language barriers.<sup>18</sup> And yet others infer institutional bias and argue that political parties and civil society organizations neglect to register Asian Americans to vote, mobilize them on election day, and help them develop the civic skills requisite for political engagement.<sup>19</sup>

To adjudicate between these and other potential explanations, this author and his collaborators designed the 2008 National Asian American Survey (NAAS), the first national survey of the politics of Asians in America. The 2008 NAAS conducted 5,159 telephone interviews of self-identified Asian Americans between August 18 and October 29, 2009.<sup>20</sup> Of this sample, 1,350 respondents were self-identified Chinese, 1,150 Asian Indian, 719 Vietnamese, 614 Korean, 603 Filipino, 541 Japanese, and 182 another ethnic ancestry or national origin group. Interviews were conducted in English and seven non-English languages (Cantonese, Mandarin, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Tagalog, and Vietnamese); 40% of the sample opted to interview in a non-English language.

The following sections present basic descriptive information on the politics of ordinary Korean Americans. (Note that politics is being conceptualized here broadly.) The tables below begin with politics in the narrowly conceived electoral realm. They then show the degree of political engagement beyond elections and campaigns. The tables conclude with findings on transnational politics and civic participation. The basic analytic strategy is to compare Korean

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<sup>16</sup> Wong et al., *Asian American Political Participation*.

<sup>17</sup> Carole Uhlaner, Bruce Cain, and Roderick Kiewiet, "Political Participation of Ethnic Minorities in the 1980s," *Political Behavior* 11, no. 3 (1989): 195–232.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Ong and Don T. Nakanishi, "Becoming Citizens, Becoming Voters: The Naturalization and Political Participation of Asian Pacific Immigrants," in *Reframing the Immigration Debate*, ed. Bill Ong Hing and Ronald Lee (Los Angeles: LEAP/UCLA, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Janelle S. Wong, *Democracy's Promise: Immigrants and American Civic Institutions* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); and Zoltan Hajnal and Taeku Lee, *Why Americans Don't Join the Party: Race, Immigration, and the Failure (of Political Parties) to Engage the Electorate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Wong et al., *Asian American Political Participation*.



Americans as a group against the five other ethnic/national origin groups in the NAAS: Asian Indians, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, and Vietnamese.<sup>21</sup>

#### KOREAN AMERICANS IN THE ELECTORAL ARENA

**Table 5** shows the incidence of political engagement along the pathway from residence to voting. In the NAAS, 61% of all Korean respondents reported being a citizen. This proportion roughly mirrors the average for all Asian Americans in the survey, with Vietnamese, Filipinos, and Japanese having the highest rates of naturalization and Asian Indians having the lowest. Of those eligible to vote, 80% of Koreans in the NAAS reported being registered to vote, a proportion also akin to the total sample. The drop-off for Korean Americans appears to happen between registration and voting.<sup>22</sup> Only 69% of Korean registered voters reported voting in 2004, and only 35% reported voting in the 2008 primaries and caucuses. Based on the NAAS data, Koreans had the lowest turnout rates among all Asian-American groups in both the 2004 elections and the 2008 primaries and caucuses.<sup>23</sup>

One bright spot for Korean Americans is in predicting likely voters.<sup>24</sup> Here Koreans are predicted to have a much higher turnout rate (85% of those registered to vote) than all other Asian groups in the NAAS except for Japanese Americans (91% of those registered). Given the importance of voter mobilization and turnout to President Obama's victory, 2008 was quite possibly a pivotal year in the political activation and maturation of Korean Americans. This possibility is explored in **Table 6**, which shows the reported vote choice of NAAS respondents in 2004 and their expected vote choice for 2008.

According to NAAS data, Indians, Chinese, and Japanese voters were most supportive of Democratic candidates in their voting preferences in 2004, while Korean Americans were almost equally split in their self-reported votes between Senator John Kerry and former president George W. Bush. By 2008, the Korean-American vote appears much more partisan, with Korean NAAS

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<sup>21</sup> An alternative strategy would be to conduct within-group analysis by disaggregating the basic findings for Korean Americans according to prevailing socioeconomic and other demographic divisions such as gender, class, age, immigrant status, and geographic location.

<sup>22</sup> The proportion of respondents who self-report on voting in sample surveys is consistently higher than validated voting and voter registration studies indicate. This is also the case in the NAAS study.

<sup>23</sup> Note that the NAAS was conducted before the 2008 presidential election.

<sup>24</sup> "Likely voter models," commonly used in pre-election polling, attempt to predict whether someone will actually vote, since self-reported intention to vote is often a poor predictor of actual behavior. In the NAAS, the likely voter model is a weighted function of level of political interest, self-reported intention to vote, voter registration status, and voting behavior in previous elections.

TABLE 5  
*From Citizens to Voters*

	Asian Ind.	Chin.	Filip.	Japan.	Kor.	Viet.	Total
<b>Citizen</b>	49%	67%	72%	70%	61%	76%	65%
<b>Registered voter</b>	87%	78%	84%	90%	80%	79%	82%
<b>Voted in 2004</b>	71%	70%	77%	87%	69%	81%	75%
<b>Primary voter</b>	42%	45%	53%	54%	35%	39%	46%
<b>2008 likely voter</b>	79%	72%	74%	91%	85%	82%	78%

Source: 2008 National Asian American Survey (NAAS).

Note: Figures for registered voters are conditional on being a citizen. In the 2008 Current Population Survey, 70% of Asian Americans reported being registered to vote. Voting figures are likewise conditional on being registered to vote.

TABLE 6  
*Presidential Vote Choice, 2004 and 2008*

	Asian Ind.	Chin.	Filip.	Japan.	Kor.	Viet.	Total
<b>George W. Bush</b>	34%	40%	53%	34%	48%	80%	48%
<b>John Kerry</b>	65%	57%	41%	55%	47%	19%	48%
<b>Nader / Other</b>	2%	3%	6%	11%	5%	1%	3%
<b>John McCain</b>	19%	16%	29%	16%	24%	57%	26%
<b>Barack Obama</b>	53%	45%	32%	66%	43%	16%	42%
<b>Undecided / Other</b>	28%	40%	39%	18%	33%	27%	33%
<b>Obama (two-way)</b>	74%	74%	52%	80%	64%	22%	62%

Source: 2008 NAAS.

Note: The final row projects vote choice for Obama based on the two-way vote share between Obama and McCain (i.e., excluding undecideds and "other" preferences).

respondents favoring Obama over McCain by nearly a two-to-one margin. It is also worth noting that—with the exception of Vietnamese Americans, who remain quite staunchly Republican—the voting habits of all other Asian groups in the NAAS were more partisan and Democratic by 2008.

Voting, of course, is not the only form of political involvement during an election. The 2008 NAAS also asked respondents whether they worked for a candidate or campaign, or contributed money to a candidate or campaign (see Table 7). Koreans are no different from other Asian groups in the low rates of political campaigning (3%). The level of activity was substantially higher with

campaign contributions. Roughly one out of every nine Koreans reported donating to a candidate or campaign, a proportion slightly lower than that for the full sample. Interestingly, while a higher percentage of U.S.-born Koreans (14%) report making contributions, the incidence of foreign-born Koreans making contributions is still quite high (11%). The sharper divide is citizenship: 15% of Koreans who are U.S. citizens report making political contributions, compared to only 6% of noncitizens.

TABLE 7  
*Politics beyond Voting*

	Asian Ind.	Chin.	Filip.	Japan.	Kor.	Viet.	Total
<b>Campaigned</b>	3%	3%	5%	4%	3%	3%	3%
<b>Contributed money</b>	12%	11%	17%	18%	11%	7%	13%
<b>Contacted officials</b>	11%	9%	11%	9%	5%	3%	9%
<b>Engaged in protest</b>	5%	4%	4%	3%	3%	7%	4%
<b>Visited online site</b>	13%	14%	11%	5%	17%	5%	12%

Source: 2008 NAAS.

#### KOREAN-AMERICAN POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT BEYOND ELECTIONS

Turning to political engagement beyond the context of elections, Table 7 also shows the distribution of participation for three other key political acts: contacting one's elected or appointed official (through letters, telephone, e-mail, personal visits, and the like), engaging in political protest, and visiting websites with political content. For Koreans and for all Asian Americans as a group, the results show a modest degree of political engagement in these non-electoral venues. Only 5% of Koreans report contacting their politicians, and only 3% report attending a protest rally. The rates of contact are especially low compared to most other Asian groups except Vietnamese, whose rates are also low. The one mode of engagement in which Koreans are especially active is visiting a political website: 17% of Korean Americans do this, compared to a lower rate of 12% for the full sample. The salience of online participation is even more pronounced among younger Koreans: 38% of Korean Americans under 30 are politically active online, compared to 24% of other Asians. This behavior is also more pronounced among second- and third-generation Korean

Americans (28% of whom are active online), compared to their foreign-born counterparts (15%).

The NAAS also attempts to explore two other pathways into politics: civic participation and transnational activism. Civic institutions such as labor unions, social service organizations, ethnic associations, and religious institutions can act as mediating influences and organizational bridges between newcomers and the political system writ large. Political philosophers and empirical political scientists both view civic engagement as important for developing skills such as political communication and for nurturing a sense of psychological engagement and efficacy in the public realm. Moreover, there is a rising tide of sentiment that views volunteerism and civic engagement as a tonic for political distrust, disaffection, low participation, and various other democratic ills in the United States.<sup>25</sup>

The 2008 NAAS allows us to examine several distinct dimensions of civic participation. **Table 8** shows the distribution of responses in five areas: (1) working with others on a community problem, (2) belonging to a community organization, (3) attending a church or other place of worship at least once a week, (4) participating in activities other than service or prayer at one's church or place of worship, and (5) belonging to a labor union. The general pattern depicted in Table 8 is that Korean Americans (and all Asian Americans) are quite active according to a range of measures of civic participation. Like the Americans of Alexis de Tocqueville's age, a significant percentage of Asian Americans do the work of community problem-solving and belong to a community organization. Participation rates for Korean Americans are slightly lower than the average for all Asian Americans (18% work on a community problem; 13% belong to a community organization). Among second- and third-generation Korean Americans in the NAAS sample, however, 43% report working with others on a community problem.

Similarly, a sizeable percentage of Asian Americans are highly religious. The striking finding in Table 8, however, is how much more religious Koreans are than other Asian groups. In the 2008 NAAS, 59% of Koreans report attending a place of worship at least once a week, compared to 30% of all Asians and only 37% of Filipino Americans (the next most religious group). Furthermore, among the respondents who regularly attend a place of religious worship, Korean Americans are the group that is most likely to report engaging in some activity other than service or prayer. Presumably, the link between civic activity

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<sup>25</sup> Stephen Macedo, *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation, and What We Can Do About It* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

TABLE 8  
Civic Participation

	Asian Ind.	Chin.	Filip.	Japan.	Kor.	Viet.	Total
<b>Worked on community problem</b>	27%	18%	23%	16%	18%	20%	21%
<b>Belong to community organization</b>	20%	12%	26%	21%	13%	9%	17%
<b>Attend worship weekly or more</b>	21%	33%	37%	17%	59%	25%	30%
<b>Take part in activity other than service or prayer</b>	37%	44%	48%	37%	53%	26%	41%
<b>Union member</b>	7%	7%	18%	10%	5%	7%	9%

Source: 2008 NAAS.

and more explicit political activity is the strongest when houses of worship act as public spaces for collective work beyond service and prayer. More than half the Korean respondents in the NAAS reported engaging in such extracurricular activities through their place of worship.

The other nonconventional site of politics to which scholars are turning is transnational participation. Researchers are increasingly shifting from viewing immigration as a one-way flow—from sending to receiving countries—to examining the liminality of diasporic communities and two-way flows between sending and receiving contexts. Contemporary migration patterns and globalized political economies are reconfiguring connections from and between geographic areas in ways that create transnational communities and purportedly influence the sphere of political activity.<sup>26</sup>

**Table 9** shows three dimensions of transnational activity measured in the NAAS: (1) contact with friends or family from one's home country (or country of ancestry for U.S.-born respondents), (2) remittance of money to that country, and (3) participation in political activity in that country. On the most direct measure of politics—self-reported political activity—the results in

<sup>26</sup> Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, eds., *Toward a Transnational Perspective on Migration* (New York: Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1992).

*TABLE 9*  
*Transnational Participation*

	<b>Asian Ind.</b>	<b>Chin.</b>	<b>Filip.</b>	<b>Japan.</b>	<b>Kor.</b>	<b>Viet.</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>In contact with friends and family</b>	87%	74%	67%	59%	82%	74%	75%
<b>Send money</b>	38%	27%	57%	12%	17%	58%	32%
<b>Participate in politics</b>	5%	5%	4%	1%	1%	2%	4%

*Source:* 2008 NAAS.

Table 9 strongly countervail optimistic expectations of transnationalism. Only 4% of the total NAAS sample report engaging in direct transnational acts and an even paltrier 1% of Koreans report doing so.

When the scope of transnationalism is extended beyond direct political participation, Table 9 shows a greater bustle of activity. One in three respondents in the NAAS sends remittances back to his or her country of origin. Koreans, however, are far less likely to send remittances, with only 17% doing so. Table 9 also shows that three out of four respondents report being in contact with friends and family from his or her country of origin. An even larger percentage of Koreans (82%) report maintaining such contact. These transnational ties, moreover, are not simply a first-generation immigrant phenomenon: 15% of U.S.-born Korean Americans report sending remittances and 54% report maintaining contact with friends and family in Korea.

#### ORIENTING KOREAN-AMERICAN POLITICS

This essay has presented a demographic and political portrait of the pattern and paradox of an evolving ethnic community in the United States. The more than one million Koreans in America stand at a crossroads that many immigrant groups before them have faced. One path leads to a highly crystallized racial group consciousness resulting from shared grievances, a corresponding linked fate, and a history of collective mobilization, as characterizes the status of African Americans. A second related path leads to a similarly high degree of group consciousness, but one activated around specific issues, as might

characterize Jews, Cubans, or Vietnamese in America. Down a third path is a mode of ethnic expression that has receded into the twilight, celebrated in Oktoberfest and Saint Patrick's Day parades, but signifying little of substantive political consequence.

With the highest percentage of foreign-born among the large Asian ethnic groups in the United States, perhaps the one great certainty about the future of Korean Americans is that many of the patterns and paradoxes reported here will change. How this liminal status will affect the prospects for Korean Americans to act as a group and influence U.S.-Korea relations remains to be seen. On the one hand, Korean Americans enjoy a good measure of human capital in their high educational attainment and spatial capital in their high geographic concentration in areas such as the Los Angeles metro area and Greater New York. On the other hand, Korean Americans still face negative stereotyping, language barriers, and other constraints to political action. Moreover, other than online political activity and civic volunteerism through churches, Koreans are still relatively quiescent in the political realm, even compared to other Asian ethnic groups in America.

Bridging these resources and constraints is the perhaps unique political opportunity structure facing Korean Americans today. Several key features of our current moment seem rife with possibilities for effervescence: a 2008 election that saw an unprecedented surge in the numbers of new Asian-American voters (including Koreans), a current U.S. administration that has appointed several Korean Americans to high offices, and current U.S. and South Korean presidents who seem genuinely congenial toward one another. At the same time, this is a fragile opportunity structure. The ouster of either administration, a renewed intransigence or belligerence from North Korea, or some other unanticipated turn of events could close this window of opportunity just as easily as it has opened. What remains to be seen is whether and how Korean Americans avail themselves of this moment, while it presents itself. ♦