

Relative Salience of Ethnicity and Party as Drivers of Asian American Vote Choice

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Abstract

In comparison to Black and Latino communities, the role of race and ethnicity in the political behavior of Asian Americans, particularly vote choice, has remained less examined. As a racial group with a wide range of ethnic diversity and weaker history of partisan alignment, the dependency of Asian Americans on ethnic and partisan cues may vary compared to other groups and in different electoral contexts. In particular, it is not clear whether Asian Americans do align with the theory of partisanship as the primary determinant of vote choice, as ethnic cues could be more salient for them. This paper examines the candidate choices of Asian American voters in California in the 2024 election. I look only at cases of voters who share the same specific ethnicity, also defined as their national-origin, with one candidate in the House of Representatives race. I find little evidence that Asian Americans defect from their party to vote for a candidate with a shared ethnicity, suggesting that partisan cues remain more important to Asian Americans than ethnic cues. However, in electoral contexts where partisan cues are absent, such as both candidates being from the same party, there is some preliminary evidence to suggest that the ethnic cue becomes a more primary predictor of vote choice. These findings help support the theory of partisanship as the primary determinant of vote choice for previously understudied minority demographic and can help inform candidate vote predictions.

Keywords: Asian Americans, ethnic identity, partisan identity, vote choice

1. Introduction

Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial group in America, their population more than doubling since 2000 (Krogstad & Im 2025). Yet, studies of the role race and ethnicity play in voter decision making tend to focus on African Americans and Latino voters, and Asian Americans as a voting bloc remain underexplored in research. While the impact of having a candidate on the ballot of the same race on Asian American turnout has been studied more extensively (Sadhvani 2020; Kim 2020; Fraga 2015), the impact of not just a co-racial, but a co-ethnic candidate on individual vote choice is less documented. Many theories of in-group voting, descriptive representation, and partisanship in relation to minority groups arise out of the political experiences of Black and Latino communities—groups with longer-standing histories of mobilization, racial solidarity, and targeted party engagement—leaving open questions about how such frameworks apply to Asian American voters, whose political incorporation has followed different trajectories.

Furthermore, as a racial group, Asian Americans have very disparate experiences based on differing ethnic origins [Note 1], and the Asian American moniker is often externally imposed, making the nature of their racial group identity different from the strongly shared African American or Latino group identifications and creating further gaps between theories relating to race. Still, their voting behavior is often studied at a pan-ethnic group level, assuming a connection between all ethnicities within the Asian American group and that all Asian Americans choose to identify themselves primarily as part of this racial group. Making a distinction by national origin is less common in academic literature, and such a pan-Asian American grouping downplays the greater significance of specific ethnic backgrounds on Asian Americans (Tam 1995). Evaluating the impact of ethnicity on Asian American vote choice and not simply race is an important differentiation to pursue. Additionally, Asian Americans are less attached to either major party and have weaker partisan identities (Wong et al. 2011). The lesser presence of partisanship in their social identities compared to other racial groups may result in differing political behavior. The ways ethnicity and party shape the political identities of Asian Americans are distinct in each aspect's saliency than among more commonly studied voter blocs.

Thus, my study aims to assess which identity—partisan identity or ethnic identity—is more important to Asian American voters' vote choice and under which conditions one identity becomes more salient than the other. In doing so, this paper also conducts a direct comparison between ethnicity and partisanship, as it considers whether ethnic identity is sufficiently strong to motivate Asian American voters to defect from their party and vote for a co-ethnic candidate from the opposing party. Analysis of reported vote choice data from the 2024 Cooperative Election Study preliminarily suggests that while ethnic identity may be a primary determinant for vote choice in contexts where party differentiations do not exist, a shared ethnic identity does not overcome partisan identity to prompt Asian American voters to cross party lines for a candidate.

2. Literature

Theories of in-group voting generally posit that voters prefer voting for in-group candidates and do so because they seek descriptive representation, voting for candidates who share descriptive traits such as race or socioeconomic background (McDermott 2009). In low-information elections, race and gender offer important, informative cues for voters. Voters also believe that same-race candidates will offer better substantive representation for the racial group, as their policy preferences or stances reflect those of the racial group (McDermott 1998). African American and Latino voters demonstrate a clear preference for co-ethnic candidates (Barreto 2007, 2010; Stokes-Brown 2006) in local governmental contests and state-wide elections. They consistently use a candidate's racial and ethnic cues to help inform their vote choices. Though studies of Asian American candidate preference are often limited by a lack of large-scale data, a lack of candidates, or are only focused on one national origin group, existing research indicates that Asian Americans demonstrate a noticeable preference for candidates from their own ethnic group and prefer other Asian candidates to non-Asian candidates (Leung 2021; Lublin & Wright 2024).

In general, voters rate candidates who share their race or ethnicity 7.9 percentage points higher than majority (white) candidates (Oosten et al. 2023). While voters have a strong preference for representatives who are of the same racial or ethnic background as themselves, this correlation is also connected to partisanship and the historical alignment between certain parties and racial groups in America, especially for Black and Latino voters. Voters seek candidates who not only offer descriptive representation but also substantive representation, meaning they value a candidate's stances on issues and policy, which in modern contexts can translate into a preference for a specific party (Ansolabehere & Fraga 2016).

Partisanship is widely considered as one of the main determinants of vote choice, taking precedence over other established predictors, including candidate characteristics, retrospective voting, and issue voting (Sides et al. 2018). A voter's party identification is often the strongest social identity that shapes behavior within political contexts like voting. Party identification is not simply the party a voter is registered with, though that is a main manifestation, but rather a psychological attachment to a political party, which is often learned early in life from parents and the people they are closest with over an extended amount of time, in addition to the environment in which they grow up in (Sides et al. 2018).

Some racial groups have historically longstanding associations with certain party identifications, making partisan identity a deeply entrenched social identity for these groups that is a primary factor in their vote decision. However, for Asian Americans, these connections are less prevalent. While Black voters have consistently supported the Democratic Party since the Civil Rights Movement and nearly unanimously support Democratic presidential candidates (White & Laird 2020), Asian Americans exhibit weaker ties to either major party. Furthermore, they have historically preferred to identify themselves as 'independent' or 'moderate' (Wong et al. 2011). Around 65% of Asian Americans are foreign-born, making them the only racial group that is a majority foreign-born in the United States (Karthick et al. 2025). They do not arrive in the United States with strongly ingrained partisan preferences, and second-generation Asian Americans, who then do not receive the same passing-on of party identification from their parents that African American and white children experience, develop less partisan attachments as well (Hughes et al. 2006; Raychaudhuri 2018).

The major parties in the United States also fail to provide clear partisan cues for immigrant populations, especially Asians and Latinos, who do not receive as many targeted mobilization or engagement efforts (Hajnal & Lee 2011; Wong 2006). Ethnic community organizations and informal social networks become primary sources of political information, but they often lack partisan cues and do not form predictable partisan voters. Thus, party identification is likely a less salient social identity among Asian Americans compared to other races, and will exert less influence over their vote choice at the ballot box. Their preference for identifying as independents or moderates could indicate that they are less dependent on party as a determinant of their vote choice, and lean on racial or ethnic identity more as a factor in their decision-making. Given the absence of partisan socialization and party

attachments among a majority of Asian Americans, the dominant theory of partisanship as the main determinant of vote choice may not apply to this group. While there is a growing range of literature examining Asian American voter behavior, few studies directly assess the implications of a less salient partisan identity—especially in comparison with the importance of ethnic identity—on Asian American vote choice, distinguishing a gap that this paper seeks to address.

Finally, the idea of an Asian American racial group or pan-ethnic identity is often used in America to collect demographic insights, politically related and beyond. Many instances exist where Asian Americans are considered as one homogenous group, including research exploring income and unemployment rates, racial hate crimes, voter turnout, and partisanship identities (Tam 1995). However, making generalizations across Asian Americans overlooks the diversity in culture, language, religion, and more across different Asian countries and their resulting national origin ethnic identities in America. A majority of Asian Americans prefer using their national origin label to describe themselves, with less than a third identifying with the panethnic label of ‘Asian American’ (Wong et al. 2011). While younger generations of Asian-Americans that are composed of larger fractions of non-immigrants more closely identify as part of the Asian American pan-ethnic group, it is still important to acknowledge this heterogeneity. Not only are Asian Americans a substantially culturally diverse group, but considerable differences across ethnic groups in naturalization rates, voter registration rates, and voter turnout, among other political behaviors (Lien et al. 2001), make the separation between individual ethnic groups and the often-studied monolithic Asian American group important when considering vote choice.

While this paper does use the language of ‘Asian American’ to denote the whole racial group being studied, it differs from many other pieces of literature as it makes a significant distinction of ethnic origin when examining influence on individual vote choice. I consider voters and candidates who are not simply both Asian American but also share a specific ethnicity. For example, Chinese Americans and Indian Americans are two very different ethnic groups, despite both being part of the Asian American racial group. A Chinese American voter is unlikely to feel a salient-enough affinity with an Indian American candidate as to change their typical behavior or influence their vote more than other factors, such as partisanship, than they might with a Chinese American candidate.

A case study of California’s 2018 congressional district races has shown that candidates receive a strong boost in votes from co-ethnic voters, experiencing more turnout from voters of their ethnicity than only party lines would predict, but receive little to no boost from Asian Americans of other national origins (Leung 2021). In the District 39 race between Democrat Gil Cisneros and Republican Young Kim, around a third of Korean American voters were estimated to have crossed party lines in the same election to vote for Kim (Leung 2021). They voted for their co-ethnic candidate from the Republican party while simultaneously supporting a Democratic candidate for governor. Splitting the ballot within the same election is rare, as voters tend to stick with the same party (Beck et al. 2013), and the Korean American voters’ ballot splitting in District 39 signifies that ethnicity had a stronger influence than party on their vote. This case suggests that Asian Americans could be willing to defect from their party to vote for a co-ethnic candidate. To build off of this possibility and address the gaps in the understanding of how Asian Americans’ differing associations with partisanship impact main theories of vote choice, I test the following two hypotheses:

H1: In situations where partisan cues and ethnic cues conflict, ethnicity will serve as a more primary determinant for Asian Americans’ votes. Party identity will be less dominant, leading to scenarios in which Asian Americans vote for the candidate that shares an ethnicity with them rather than the candidate from the same party.

H2: When partisan identity cannot serve as a factor in an Asian American’s vote choice because all candidates share the same party, their ethnic identity will become even more salient in the absence of a party cue. The ethnic cue is the leading predictor of their vote choice, and they will exhibit a preference for voting for the co-ethnic candidate.

3. Empirical Strategy

The method of analysis in this project evaluates individual vote choices from a representative sample of American voters to determine whether voters exhibit the hypothesized behavior. The goal is to compare the importance of ethnic identity and partisan identity to Asian American vote choice and identify which environments can make either identity more salient. To identify relevant voters for analysis, I consider Asian American voters in the relevant election cases of a general congressional district race between only two candidates, with at least one being Asian American. If both candidates are Asian American, then they must be of different national origins. Furthermore, the Asian American voters in these districts must share a specific national origin with only one of the candidates. A majority of cases naturally occur between one candidate representing the Democratic Party and one representing the Republican Party. Races where both candidates are from the same party, leaving no choice

for party, are considered for the second hypothesis. They do not offer the voter the option to defect from their party, but can still demonstrate whether a co-ethnic candidate is more appealing to a voter. The absence of party cues also distinguishes a different context in which ethnicity's salience to voters may rise to the top. The specific election case selection criteria ensure that the resulting sample of voters and their choices can identify whether partisan or ethnic identity is more politically potent, and under what conditions.

The data on individual-level vote choices comes from the 2024 Cooperative Election Study, which surveyed a representative nationwide sample of over 60,000 American voters during the 2024 election year in America. Respondents were surveyed both before and after the election, and were asked about their votes in the races for U.S. President, U.S. Senate, U.S. House of Representatives, and state governor, among other election-centric questions. For this study, only data from respondents in desired election cases in California were considered to ensure an adequate sample size that can represent the behavior of a defined area. California has a large Asian demographic, 16.5% of the state's population, and a high rate of Asian candidates, as evident from the 20 congressional district races with Asian American candidates on the ballot. States such as New York and New Jersey, where more than 10% of their populations also consist of Asian Americans, each had only one congressional district race with an Asian American candidate in 2024. California's election structure for House of Representatives seats also consists of a primary and then a general election, ensuring only two candidates are facing off in the general election.

Due to the scale limitations of the survey and the criteria for congressional district races, only California leaves a large enough sample size of respondents to draw meaningful conclusions about its Asian American population. Though the scale of this data sample is small, with 201 relevant Asian American voters initially identified, the sample of voters surveyed is representative and should reflect the general patterns of voter behavior in California. Another important limitation of this approach and its use of survey data is the likelihood of people who report a vote for social desirability, but didn't actually cast a ballot at all. However, this study aims to understand the decision-making behavior of voters, not voter turnout or participation, meaning that their intent to vote and theoretical choice in a survey response can still serve as a valid data point for both hypotheses.

While 201 respondents were Asian American voters with an Asian American candidate in their district, the final sample only considers voters who share the same ethnicity as one of the candidates, resulting in a final sample size of 78 respondents. Voters represented 15 districts in this sample. Survey respondents who identified as Asian American but did not report a specific national origin were not included. Respondents also reported their own party registration, and for the few cases of absent registration information, the party with which they report feeling most affiliated is used instead. The descriptive statistics of this sample's composition by partisan identity and ethnic identity are given in the two tables below [Note 2]:

Table 1. Partisan composition of sample

	Percentage of respondents	Number of respondents
Democrats	47.40%	37
Republicans	17.90%	14
Independents	34.60%	27

Table 2. Ethnic composition of sample

	Percentage of respondents	Number of respondents
Chinese/Taiwanese	71.80%	56
Indian	11.50%	9
Korean	7.70%	6
Vietnamese	3.80%	3
Japanese	2.60%	2
Filipino	2.60%	2

4. Analysis/Findings

I divide my analysis into two levels. The first addresses my initial hypothesis by looking for cases where voters cross party lines to vote for a co-ethnic candidate, signifying that shared ethnicity matters more than shared party to the Asian-American voter. I consider only the two major parties in America, the Democrats and the Republicans.

All cases feature a candidate and a voter who share the same national origin. I establish three different categorizations based on a voter's response to party cues and ethnic cues, which are displayed in the table below: party loyalists, party defectors, and ambivalent cases. Party loyalists are defined as voters who share a national origin with the opposing candidate but choose to vote for their same-party candidate, with whom they do not share an ethnic background. Party loyalists demonstrate that their party identification, and not ethnicity, is the more important determinant of their vote choice, which is in line with current theories of vote choice and the role of partisanship in voter decision making. A party defector is defined as a voter who shares a national origin with a candidate of the opposing party and crosses party lines to vote for that co-ethnic candidate. [Note 3] Cases of party defection indicate that for the voter, a shared ethnicity with the candidate was more important than a shared party, and a high proportion of party defectors would support my first hypothesis. Party defection contradicts the current paradigm of partisanship as the primary predictor of vote choice, and would indicate that the unique political position of Asian Americans, shaped by weaker partisanship and existing preferences for in-group, co-ethnic voting, makes them a group where this theory does not apply, and new models on vote-choice will have to be formed. Ambivalent cases are defined within the context of my first hypothesis, and, accordingly, are cases where it cannot be determined whether ethnicity serves as a more primary determinant than partisanship for Asian Americans' votes or not. Ambivalent cases are scenarios where a voter shares both an ethnicity and a party with their candidate of choice, and thus, it cannot be definitely concluded whether the party cue or the ethnicity cue determined their vote, a voter identified as an independent, or both candidates were from the same party.

Out of 78 respondents in California's congressional districts, there were zero cases of party defection compared to 23 cases of party loyalty. Although the sample size is quite small for definitive conclusions, the total absence of party defectors and the overwhelming number of party loyalists suggest that partisan identity remains a stronger determinant of vote choice than ethnic identity. Party identification is a powerful identity among Asian American voters that, though it may not be as salient compared to other racial groups, given the backgrounds of many Asian Americans, especially immigrants, they still do not use ethnic cues instead to decide their vote. For younger, non-immigrant generations, partisan socialization, while not as common within family dynamics, remains strong in school environments and leaves a notable impact on voters' social identities (Raychaudhuri 2018). As I did not make any differentiations by immigrant status or age group, this likely led to variations from my initial theories of weaker partisanship among Asian Americans and partly contributed to the party loyalty of Asian Americans found in this study.

Table 3. Voter preferences for party cues compared to ethnic cues

	All voters	Democrat voters	Republican voters
Party Loyalists	29.1% [23]	51.4% [19]	28.6% [4]
Party Defectors	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Ambivalent Cases	70.9% [55]	48.6% [18]	71.4% [10]

A sub-case of these ambivalent scenarios calls for further analysis of voters who identify as independents. In place of defection, I look for cases where they split the ballot, a similar strategy to Leung's study. Their vote in California's Senate race between Democrat Adam Schiff and Republican Steve Garvey is used as a baseline measure of their political stances in the 2024 election year. Although these voters identify as independent, they are likely to still have slight preferences for one party or choose a candidate based on their policy stances, many of which are shared within parties. In addition, splitting the ballot within the same election is simply a rare phenomenon (Beck et al. 2013), and Schiff and Garvey are both white, male candidates, making them characteristically similar and equalizing other factors that could have influenced vote choice. Out of 26 independent voters, a total of four cases of ballot splitting were found, with two distinct scenarios.

Two cases of ethnic-based ballot splitting were defined as instances where an independent voter shared a national origin with the candidate of the opposite party in the Senate race and voted for that co-ethnic candidate. This scenario most closely mimics scenarios of party defection, demonstrating that ethnicity matters more to a voter than other factors, including any party preference they may have. Two cases involved unavoidable ballot splitting, where voters had no choice but to split their ballots because they voted for Republican Steve Garvey but only had Democratic candidates to choose from in their congressional district races. However, in both of these cases, the independents voted for the co-ethnic candidate, still showcasing a preference for shared ethnicity with a candidate. This preference is worth noting, as it supports my second hypothesis and aligns with my next level of analysis, given that the electoral environment of a same-party general election differs. Considering my first hypothesis, only

7.7% of the independent voters were cases of ethnic-based ballot splitting. The cases of unavoidable ballot splitting are not considered significant within the context of my first hypothesis, as the voters had no other option but to split their ballot, and it is unknown what choice they would have made in a race between candidates from different parties.

Similar to cases of party defection, high proportions of ethnic-based ballot splitting would serve as an indication that, for the voter, their ethnic identity was the most salient and primary social identity in determining their vote choice. Thus, the lack of ethnic-based ballot splitting could indicate that for independent voters, ethnic identity remains a secondary determinant of their vote choice after partisan identity. For independent voters, it cannot be definitively determined whether they are true independents and have no partisan preferences at all. However, regardless of whether party identification remains a part of their social identity or not, there are other factors of vote choice akin to partisanship that likely outweigh the ethnic cue, the main one being a candidate's policy. These voters still seek substantive representation, and voters' stances on issues and policy often emerge as a party preference, especially within the same election year (Ansolabehere & Fraga 2016). This desire outweighs the appeal of a co-ethnic candidate and reflects the way that party identity remains more important than ethnic identity to voters who are explicitly affiliated with a party. The first level of analysis examining party defection and ballot splitting reveals that in cases where party cues retain influence as a heuristic, even among self-identified independents, ethnic identity is not salient enough to become the main determinant of their vote choice. Partisan identity matters more, and although my first hypothesis is not supported, it is valuable to acknowledge that Asian Americans' voting behavior can also be suitably understood within the prevailing theory that partisan identity is the primary determinant of vote choice.

Given this outcome, the next level of analysis considers whether sharing an ethnic identity matters in situations where partisan labels aren't available as a differentiating indicator for voters, addressing my second hypothesis. Using the same source of data, this translates to congressional races in California, where both candidates were from the same party: the Democratic Party. From the previous pool of 79 cases, eight featured races between two Democratic candidates. The two districts represented in these cases were District 16 and District 34. In District 16, the race was between Chinese American Evan Low and Sam Liccardo, and one co-ethnic voter voted for Low out of the four cases in this district. In District 34, the race was between Korean American David Kim and Jimmy Gomez, and in all four of the cases, a co-ethnic vote favored Kim.

While this data sampling is too small to produce a meaningful conclusion, the findings serve as a preliminary indicator in support of my hypothesis that ethnicity becomes notably more salient in environments without party cues. Additionally, it suggests distinctions by ethnicity; while 100% of Korean American voters voted for their co-ethnic candidate in District 34, only 25% of Chinese American voters did the same in District 16, supporting my hypothesis for Korean Americans but not Chinese Americans. This difference highlights the importance of making distinctions by ethnic origin group rather than treating Asian Americans as a monolithic bloc. The differing levels of vote choice in favor of the co-ethnic between each ethnicity would be overlooked if these ethnic groups, with their varying cultures, religions, and histories of political behavior were amalgamated under the Asian American label and the statistics on vote choice generalized. Future work with larger datasets may reveal further evidence that ethnic identity is an important determinant of vote choice in elections where the party cannot serve as a differentiator between candidates.

5. Conclusion

My paper finds that a shared ethnic identity is not strong enough to prompt Asian American voters to cross party lines for a candidate, proving hypothesis one incorrect. However, it strengthens the existing theory of partisanship as the main determinant of vote choice by directly testing it among Asian Americans, a less-commonly studied racial group that also experiences historically weaker party attachments compared to other populations. The first level of analysis reveals that when party cues are able to serve as informative labels, ethnic identity does not emerge as a sufficiently salient factor to become the primary determinant of vote choice.

Candidates can be more confident that partisanship will serve as a reliable predictor in two-party elections for the Asian American population, even when there is an Asian American candidate in the race. As Asian Americans make up a growing fraction of the constituency, their demonstrated party loyalty also has meaningful implications for party engagement and Asian American voter mobilization. Neither the Democratic Party nor the Republican Party has historically engaged with Asian Americans, and over half of Asian Americans surveyed by APIA Vote have never received contact from either party (Martinez 2022). Breaking this cycle of neglect towards a population that is not only interested in being politically active, but also leans on partisanship in determining their vote choice, could expand their voter base and aid Asian American voters who feel underinformed.

Given the limited size of its data sample, the second level of analysis is best viewed as a preliminary step towards future work, and its findings are suggestive. However, ethnic identity does seem to become a more primary determinant in races where party cannot serve as a heuristic for voters, supporting hypothesis two, though the sample offers the best preliminary support for Korean Americans. An electoral context without party labels increases the salience of ethnic identity among voters. If these findings are generalizable, they could indicate that in primary elections, Asian American candidates can expect more meaningful support from their co-ethnic voters and rely on in-group voting behavior to serve as a predictor during primary campaigns more than they could in general elections. Future work should examine larger data samples of vote choices from primary races to continue investigating whether the salience of ethnicity in nonpartisan environments holds on a more significant scale. Another pathway for future work could study the differing strengths of partisan identity and their resulting ramifications on voter behavior by generation and immigrant or non-immigrant status among Asian Americans.

Notes

Note 1. Throughout this paper, I use the terms “ethnic origin,” “ethnicity,” and “national origin” interchangeably to describe group identities based on shared ancestry, cultural heritage, or country of familial origin, distinct from racial classifications. While these terms can carry distinct meanings in other contexts, they are treated as analytically equivalent for the purpose of this study.

Note 2. Percentages are rounded to the nearest tenth, and may not add up to exactly 100%.

Note 3. In this study, a case where one of either the voter or a candidate is Chinese American and the other is Taiwanese American are regarded as a co-ethnic case. This definition is made because many Taiwanese and Chinese surnames are the same, and surnames are one of the main indicators used to identify a candidate’s ethnicity. Voters who are already using party and ethnicity as a heuristic are likely not doing much research into the candidates, meaning they are unlikely to uncover additional information about a candidate’s specific ethnicity beyond the assumption they make based on surname. Thus, they will likely instinctively assume the candidate is the same ethnicity, either Chinese American or Taiwanese American, as they are.

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