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Chinese Immigrant Political Attitudes Ethnic-Centered Political Engagement

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CHINESE IMMIGRANT POLITICAL ATTITUDES ETHNIC-CENTERED POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

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Introduction:

This paper examines the political views and ideology of the 1996 cohort. We constructed a survey from an early 2005 voter registration roll, and details of the survey are available from the author upon request. In the survey we asked Chinese Americans for information about their political ideology and partisan affiliation, and also asked for opinions on a range of public policy issues, many of them specifically related to the Chinese-American community or to public policies dealing with ethnicity and immigration (for example, ethnic preferences in education). We also asked about the nature and sources of political engagement: why the respondents chose to vote and where and from whom they got their political information. We found that Chinese Americans in the Bay Area, like Chinese Americans nationwide, are not ideologically monolithic. They are neither liberal nor conservative, and while many are members of political parties, few report strong feelings of partisan allegiance. The respondents are united, however, in their views on a range of ethnic issues—although, interestingly, they are divided over affirmative action. Overall, we find that the respondents share many of the same concerns as American at large, but that they are more aware of policy issues that deal specifically with Chinese Americans.

Political Profile:

About three-quarters of those surveyed voted in the November 2004 election. Respondents were asked about their political views and their recent presidential vote. Although their ideological views varied, a majority of the respondents voted along one particular party affiliation, in part due to regional voting and party affiliation patterns. (See Figure 1.) Respondents were fairly divided among different political ideologies.¹ One-third said they were “middle-of-the-road,” while those who reported they were conservatives, liberals and non-responses each comprised about 20 percent of the respondents.

There was a larger divide between major political party affiliations that did not reflect the previous responses regarding ideology. While 37 percent reported they were Democrats, less than half (49 percent) reported their affiliation as other, about 8 percent said they were Republican and 6 percent did not respond. The high percentage of Democrats may be due, in part, to the large presence of registered democrats in San Francisco. Over 54 percent of San Francisco residents are registered Democrats, compared with 11 percent Republican.² Chinese Americans were also asked which

¹ Question 23

² County registration report, California Secretary of State web site, Oct 24, 2005

presidential candidate they selected in the 2004 election. John Kerry was the choice for 60 percent of the respondents, while only 14 percent chose George Bush. This reflects the party affiliation as well as the political ideology held by a majority of the city. This set of political questions measures how ideology relates to party affiliation and candidate choice. While ideology varied among those surveyed, party affiliation and presidential candidate choice reflected the regional preference.

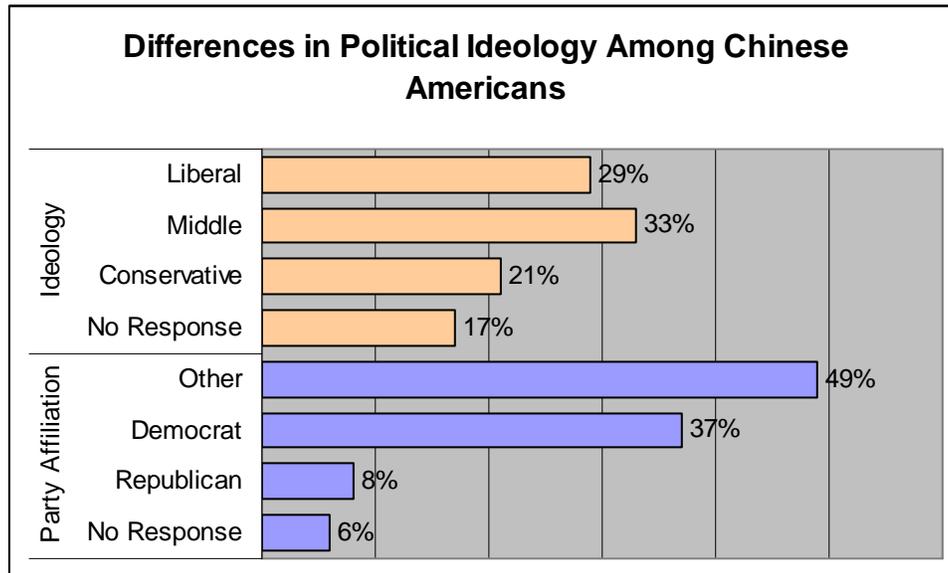


Figure 1

Major Concerns:

Respondents are more likely to identify bread-and-butter economic issues as being among the two most important current problems facing Chinese Americans in the United States and San Francisco. Over half of the possible responses to the question of the problems at the national level are categorized as concerns about a weak economy, inflation, or jobs. Half of the possible responses related to local problems are also in these categories.

Interestingly, only a minority gave responses that can be categorized as being related to domestic or international ethnicity and race relations. On the national question, just over one-quarter identified concerns related to discrimination, inter-group conflict, immigration and immigrants, and relations with China. Only a sixth of the responses to the local question are related to race/ethnic issues (discrimination, conflict, etc.), or immigration and immigrants. In fact, two other local issues are more frequently cited, those related to education and housing. (See Figure 2.)

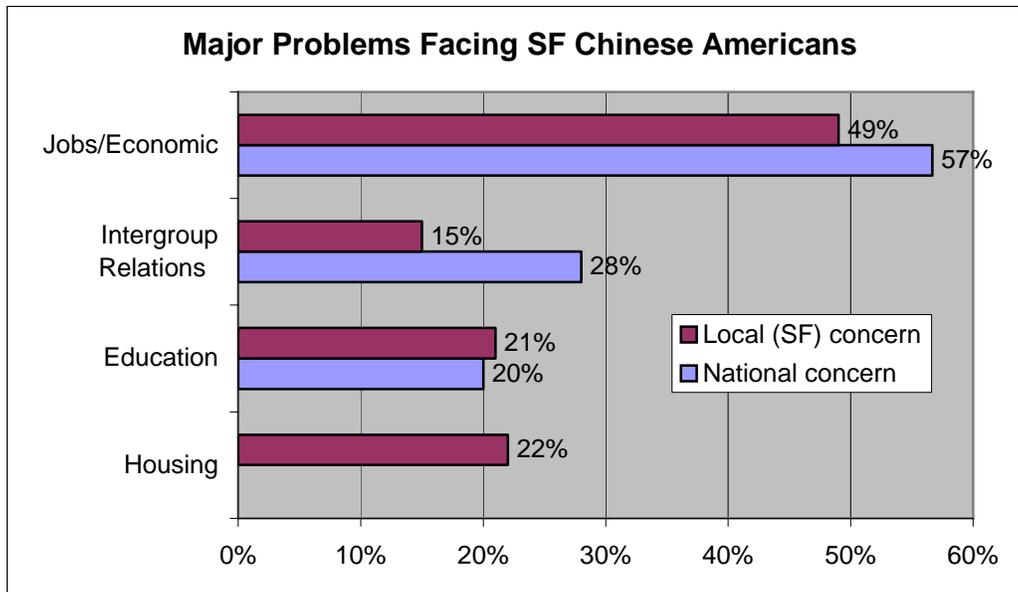


Figure 2

What is apparent from the results is that the naturalized Chinese Americans share common concerns with the general population. That is, their top priorities center around daily problems that directly and indirectly affect everyone, such as the performance of the economy, housing (which is the consumer item that takes up the largest percent of one's budget) and public goods and services, particularly those related to education. In this sense, they are well within the mainstream rather than being on the fringe when it comes to opinions on public policy. The overlap can be seen by examining other surveys. A 2004 poll of the Bay Area conducted by Field for the Bay Area Council ranked the top three concerns as transportation, the economy and housing. In the previous year, the economy was the top concern, followed by transportation and housing. At the national level, a 2003 CBS poll ranked the three top concerns as the economy and jobs, the war in Iraq and terrorism, and education.³

As shown above, naturalized Chinese Americans have unique concerns related to race and ethnicity, but these are secondary in terms of the overall ranking. Additionally, respondents were asked to compare the level of discrimination against their ethnicity compared to Blacks and Latinos. Chinese Americans were split about the degree to which they suffer discrimination in comparison to other races⁴. About the same number of Chinese Americans felt they suffer more or the same degree of discrimination as Blacks, about 28 percent. Just over one-fifth said they suffer less. Just under 30 percent of the respondents felt that Chinese Americans experience the same degree of discrimination as Latinos. Additionally, about the same number of respondents felt they suffer less or more discrimination than Latinos. There was no collective opinion that Chinese Americans were connected to or experiencing discrimination similar to other races.

³ <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/11/13/opinion/polls/main583540.shtml>

⁴ Questions 30 & 31.

In summary, inter-group issues were part of the top concerns; however, these concerns were not the only major problems identified by respondents.

Ethnic-Oriented Concerns:

Concerns related to inter-group relations are focused on Chinese-American specific issues rather than race-based or race-oriented issues. This implies a strong special group interest based on a shared ethnicity. This can be seen in the responses to four questions covering Proposition 209, Proposition 187, the law suit against the use of Affirmative Action at San Francisco's Lowell High School, and the government's handling of the Wen Ho Lee case:

- Proposition 209 is a 1996 California initiative that prohibited state and local jurisdictions from using affirmative action. The initiative, which prohibits race and gender considerations in college admissions and the awarding of government contracts and hiring, was passed by 54 percent of California voters (Ong, 1999).
- Proposition 187 is a 1994 California initiative that denied undocumented immigrants from receiving public services, non-emergency health care and education. A majority of 59 percent voted in favor of this initiative. A judge ruled the proposition unconstitutional and then-Governor Gray Davis dropped the appeal against this ruling, eliminating the proposition (York, 1999).
- In 1994 Chinese-American parents sued Lowell High School to stop the school from using their desegregation plan to limit the number of Chinese-American students. The parents claimed the race-based system of student distribution among the district unfairly burdened Chinese-American students. In February 1999, the San Francisco Unified School District avoided a trial by agreeing to eliminate the consideration of race in student school assignments (Ming, 2002).
- Nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee was investigated for spying for China while employed at the Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory in New Mexico. In 1999, he was charged with mishandling classified information and violating the atomic energy act. Lee was jailed for nine months before he went to trial. The FBI later acknowledged flaws in its investigation and as a result, all but one charge was dropped. Lee pled guilty to one felony charge of downloading classified information and was released in September 2000 (Turnbull, 2003).

While all four items are related to race, they vary in their degree of specificity for Chinese Americans. Proposition 209 is at the heart of the debate around race-based policy and the least specific to Chinese Americans. Proposition 187 is related to illegal immigrants, but has implications for racializing both illegal and legal immigrants. The greatest impact is on Mexican immigrants because the overwhelming majority of undocumented immigrants are from Mexico, but the anti-immigrant undercurrent has the potential of affecting Chinese Americans. The other two issues are clearly Chinese-American specific. The Lowell lawsuit pits a vocal segment of the Chinese-American community against civil rights advocates, including those within the Chinese-American community. While the Lowell case is local and Chinese-American specific, the Wen Ho Lee case is national and Chinese-American specific.

Taken together, the responses to the four items provide insight into what and how the respondents see race and ethnic policies. The respondents were asked if there were

familiar with each of these items, and the questions were worded to minimize any leading statements.

In 1996, California voters passed Proposition 209, which ended the use of affirmative action by state and local governmental agencies. Are you familiar with this proposition?

In 1994, California voters passed Proposition 187, which made illegal aliens ineligible for many public services and public education. Are you familiar with this proposition?

Several years ago, some Chinese-American parents filed a lawsuit to stop the San Francisco Unified School District from limiting the number of Chinese-American students enrolled in Lowell High School. Have you heard of the lawsuit?

Have you heard of Dr. Wen Ho Lee, the nuclear scientist charged with downloading classified data who spent 9 months in jail?

These four questions allow us to examine how awareness varies with the degree of specificity to Chinese Americans. For those who are, whether they agreed or disagreed, or approved or disapproved with the initiative or actions.

Generally speaking, do you strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree with Proposition 209?

Generally speaking, do you strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree with the Proposition 187?

Generally speaking, do you strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree with that lawsuit?

What is your opinion on the government's action on this case? Do you strongly disapprove, somewhat disapprove, somewhat approve, or strongly approve of the government's handling of the case?

These four questions allow us to examine how support for race-oriented policies varies with the degree of specificity to Chinese Americans.

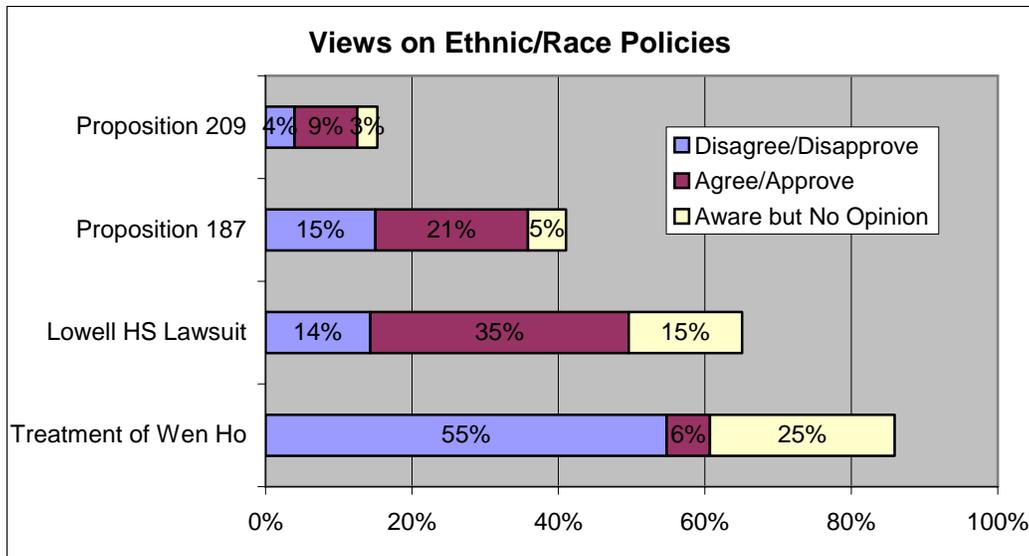


Figure 3

The results show two distinctive patterns. The first is that awareness (the percent of the respondents who know about the item) of policies focused on race or ethnicity increases with Chinese-American specificity. Although Proposition 209 was a pivotal state and national event in the debate regarding race-based policies and affirmative action, only about a sixth of the respondents are familiar with the initiative. On the other hand, about two out of five are familiar with Proposition 187, which predates Proposition 209 by two years. In other words, the respondents are more aware of initiatives that are immigrant-oriented debates than race-oriented debates. Awareness is even higher when the issues explicitly involve Chinese Americans. Nearly two-thirds have heard about the Lowell High School lawsuit. While some of this high level of awareness may be due to the nearness of the event, which took place in San Francisco, the dominant factor is ethnicity. Although the Wen Ho case took place in another state hundreds of miles away, more than four out of five heard about the case.

The second pattern is a systematic variation in the level of support for those aware of these issues. More respondents supported race and immigrant-related policies that were backed by many conservatives, while more supported policies that protect or promote Chinese-American specific interests. Among those familiar with Proposition 209, a majority agreed with the proposition, and less than a third disagreed. In general, Chinese Americans have been divided or ambivalent about affirmative action, despite the fact that they feel that they experience discrimination. This implies that either most respondents do not feel that affirmative action benefits Chinese Americans or that they are not supportive of a broader policy to redress past racial discrimination. The opposition to affirmative action is also apparent in the opinions on the Lowell case. A majority of those familiar with the case agreed with the lawsuit, which sought to end the use of affirmative action that was viewed as disadvantaging Chinese Americans. In other words, the majority takes a position that would directly benefit Chinese Americans.

The importance of ethnic interest is also apparent in the opinions on Proposition 187 and the Wen Ho case. Among those familiar with Proposition 187, slightly more than half agreed with the initiative. This implies that despite the broader anti-immigrant

movement of the period, the majority of these naturalized citizens separated the concerns with undocumented aliens from the potential ramifications for legal immigrants. However, when the issue focuses on Chinese Americans, as symbolically embodied in the Wen Ho case, the majority takes a position in support of the rights of the group. Most of those aware of the treatment of this immigrant also disapproved of the government's handling of the case. Additionally these respondents also constituted a majority of all respondents.

Ethnicity and Political Engagement:

Ethnicity indirectly influences many Chinese Americans' individual political awareness. Almost everyone (98 percent) stated that for the November 2005 election, someone encouraged them to vote, or solicited a contribution for a political candidate or asked them to participate in a political activity⁵. This type of interaction came from a wide range of types of individuals, with friends and relatives being the most frequently cited, yet accounting for only a third of those responding positively. What is interesting is that the overwhelming majority of the interactions came from other Chinese Americans.

A little less than half (43 percent) stated that they read news articles, watch television shows or listen to radio programs on political events in this country.⁶ Among the respondents who responded to the question about what is their main source of information on political issues, less than one-fifth received the information from Chinese-language sources only, 7 percent from English-language sources, and the rest from a combination of both types of sources.

To a certain extent, ethnicity directly influences opinion on candidates. Respondents were also asked about their views on Chinese-American politicians. If given the choice between two equally qualified political candidates, 72 percent said they would be more likely to vote for a Chinese American⁷. However, many felt that ethnicity would not overshadow job qualifications. About 37 percent said they would not vote for a less qualified candidate who was Chinese American.⁸ Over half (52 percent) felt that there are not enough Chinese-American members of Congress, while one-third felt that Chinese Americans were not adequately represented among San Francisco elected officials.⁹ (See Figure 4.) Currently there is only one Chinese-American member of Congress, while San Francisco has one Chinese American on the Board of Supervisors and another serving as the elected Assessor-Recorder.

In San Francisco, the race for city assessor included two Chinese-American candidates. Of those who voted in the November 2005 election, 74 percent voted for Phil Ting, a Chinese-American candidate who won the position with 47 percent of the total votes. Another Chinese-American candidate, Ronald Chun, received 22 percent of the respondent votes while the final candidate, a Latino, received the least amount of votes among those surveyed.¹⁰

⁵ Question 11.

⁶ Question 17. Number of Respondents = 134

⁷ Question 26. 225 said yes, 38 said no. 44 no response

⁸ Question 27. 78 yes, 122 no, 107 NR

⁹ Questions 28 & 29.

¹⁰ Question 16

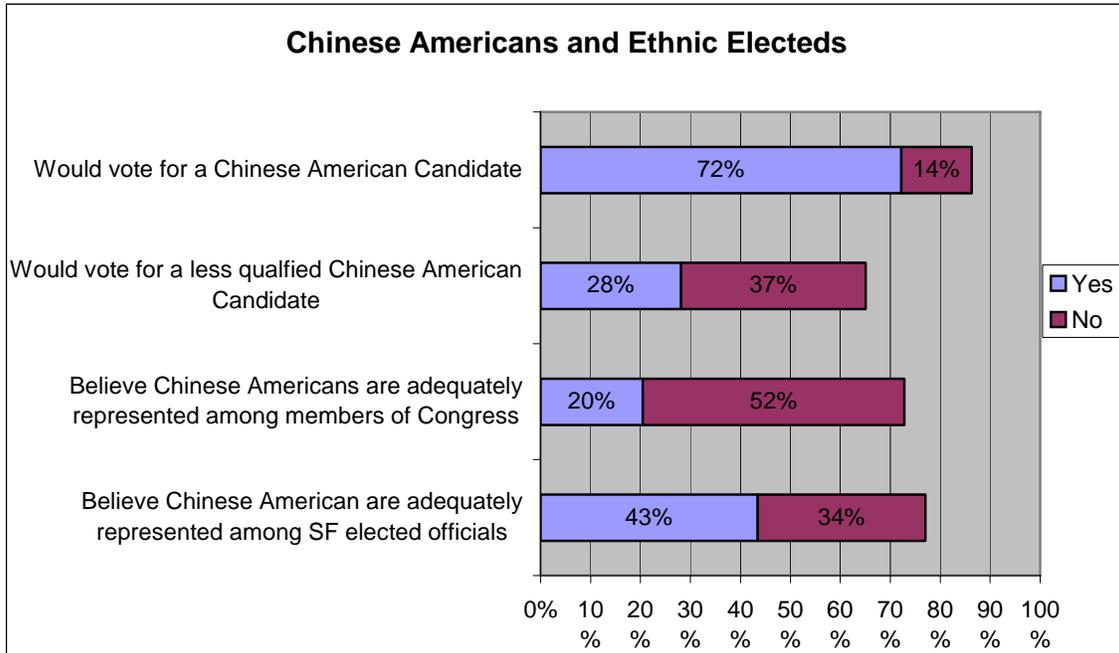


Figure 4

Chinese-American Voters as an Ethnic Interest Group:

This survey gathered the opinions of a specific cohort of recently naturalized Chinese Americans in San Francisco. Although this study is limited in scope, the results show this cohort shares some similarities with Chinese Americans nationally (Lien, 2004). This similarity indicates that Chinese Americans may have similar priorities that extend beyond their political party. These similarities include a lack of a cohesive political ideology, an increasing awareness of race/ethnic-focused policies as it relates to Chinese Americans and supporting broader, conservative anti-immigrant policies while remaining supportive of ethnic-specific issues.

Similar to a national survey of Chinese Americans in 2000-2001, this cohort of new Chinese Americans are ideologically-mixed, but tend to be more aligned on ethnic-specific issues. The national survey found that this group was also divided among different political ideologies and in fact, 76 percent of those registered as Republican or Democrat did not associate strongly with their political party (Lien, 2004).

Additionally, this voter group is also concerned with many of the same issues as the general voting population. When asked to choose the most important problem affecting their community, many respondents of both groups viewed jobs and the economy, as well as inter-group relations as top problems. However, in the national survey on Asian-American political behaviors, 32 percent of Chinese Americans said that the category of immigrants and immigration was the most important problem, followed by race relations and discrimination (19 percent). The economy and jobs was the third most important problem, chosen by 12 percent of respondents (Lien, 2004). In San Francisco, the highest percentage of respondents placed jobs and the economy as the most important problem. Housing was the second most frequent response of San Francisco residents, which may be related to the focus on the local housing market. Many respondents also felt education and inter-group relations were major problems

affecting Chinese Americans. The difference between San Francisco and national responses may be related to the timing of the survey. The national survey was given shortly after the high-profile Wen Ho Lee, a nuclear scientist accused of spying for China, case. This issue cast negative stereotypes of Chinese Americans as foreigners and “denaturalized” Asian Americans, who were portrayed as having divided loyalties (Wang, 2003).

While many ranked racial issues as a major problem, Chinese Americans nationally and locally were more aware and concerned with ethnic-specific issues. Both groups were more concerned with issues that directly pertain to this ethnicity and received much of their political information and motivation for participation from ethnic media and other co-ethnics. These new San Francisco voters had high awareness and strong opinions on particular issues impacting Chinese Americans, but was not unified and informed on larger race-based issues. The national survey found that over half (55 percent) of Chinese Americans nationwide felt that what happens generally to Chinese Americans will affect their individual lives. A majority of these respondents (57 percent) felt that there would be some effect on their individual lives (Lien, 2004). Additionally, this group indicated that the Chinese-American ethnicity of a candidate was a positive factor in their voting behavior. However, most felt that ethnicity would not compensate for a lack of qualifications. Both of these responses reflected Chinese-American opinions surveyed nationally (Lien, 2004).

Similar to Chinese Americans nationwide, new San Francisco Chinese Americans hold mainstream views on policy issues. While this potential voter group is concerned with regional issues such as housing, this group reflects Chinese-American opinions nationwide. San Francisco Chinese Americans’ concern with and awareness of ethnic-specific issues supports national patterns indicating that Chinese Americans have emerged as an ethnic special interest group, aligned along ethnic lines, rather than political ideology or party affiliation. Advocacy groups can apply these patterns when looking to leverage a strong collective voting base for Chinese American-specific issues.

Because this study measured only the ideology of this potential voter base, it is still unclear as to whether this group is comprised of consistent voters who are able to influence election outcomes. The degree of political engagement needs to be studied further to determine if this cohort can play a role in affecting election outcomes.

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