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First Booth:

What Does it Mean to Be a Chinese-American Trump Supporter?

“Through the power of American science and medicine, we will eradicate the China Virus once and for all.” With these words addressed to supporters on the White House’s South Lawn, President Donald Trump celebrated his release from a three-day stay at the hospital after testing positive for COVID-19.

Since March, Trump has persisted in using the term “China virus” or “Chinese virus” to refer to the current pandemic, even with mounting criticism against his choice of words. Studies have shown that his rhetoric has coincided with an increase in discrimination against Asian Americans (<https://thehill.com/homenews/news/518806-use-of-china-virus-led-to-spike-in-anti-asian-bias-study>). And Chinese American voters have taken note.

The 2020 Asian American Voter Survey indicates that issues of racism and racial discrimination have been pushed to the forefront of the Chinese American voter conscious, which has relegated it as one of its top five concerns (https://aapidata.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/aavs2020_crosstab_national.pdf). (Compare this to the general sentiment four years earlier: data in the 2016 AAVS (<https://www.apiavote.org/sites/default/files/Inclusion-2016-AAVS-final.pdf>) reported “Racial Profiling” as the second-to-last important issue in a long list of issues. The 2016 National Asian American Survey (<http://naasurvey.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/NAAS2016-Oct5-report.pdf>) shows that though Asian Americans considered racism an important issue for the country, it was not a personal concern.)

What might be startling are statistics that show how Democratic affiliation has, depending on which 2016 survey you analyze, either decreased by a slight margin or increased equally as much as affiliation to the Republican Party. Statistics that break down voters into other demographic backgrounds indicate that the majority of these Republican voters are 1. foreign-born Asian Americans, and 2. ages 35 and above: The most likely Trump supporter amongst the Chinese American community are first-generation immigrants. So the question is – what does it mean for these Chinese Americans to support Trump in this coming election in relation to their ethnic identity?

Putting behind lived experiences of tragedy in China

May Yuan, a 26-year-old PhD candidate at Rutgers University, was a Trump supporter earlier in the year. She liked his pro-life stance. A month later, she was having different thoughts. “If he keeps on targeting China....” She paused. “I don’t know. I might have to reconsider.”

Millennial voters like May, ages 18 to 34, are the demographic group that has driven the issue of racism and racial discrimination to the heightened status it attained in the 2020 AAVS. On the other hand, foreign-born Asian Americans ages 35 and above have set its importance below those of the economy, health care, education, and national security.

One explanation for this phenomenon is that Chinese-American immigrants might find it easier to disassociate themselves from a country they left behind, especially if they were fleeing brutal conditions, such as the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Communist Regime in 1949 or the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. This past June, Andrew Fong, a member of the Facebook group "Chinese Americans for Trump," posted a long list of reasons why he has no qualms voting for Trump. One of them mentions in detail the brutalities his family faced under the Marxist regime.

Perhaps it is easier for millennials who have only heard of China through the news, family stories, and summer vacations to straddle both their Chinese and American identities if they have never experienced everyday life in the country than their Chinese-born counterparts who lived the experience.

Religious element

Though half of the Chinese-American population has no religious affiliations, three in ten are Christian (https://web.archive.org/web/20170803085803/http://projects.pewforum.org/2012/07/18/religious-affiliation-of-asian-americans-2/asianamericans_affiliation-4-2/). Christianity has been one of the religions more widely accepted by Chinese-Americans because many of its tenets match traditional socially conservative values (importance of the nuclear family, filial piety, etc.). Religion has a significant role in immigrant communities because it offers both a cultural enclave and a space that meets psychological and spiritual needs (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3711910>). It can also be a way for immigrants to fit into the wider American-Christian fabric -- which extends to the political arena. Across all the groups created by Chinese-American Trump supporters, the Christian faith is unfailingly brought up as a reason for their candidate preference.

Model minority

Foreign-born Chinese-Americans might feel the need to work harder to be considered "American" than U.S.-born Chinese Americans. Videos of Asian-American Trump supporters show people decked out in patriotic gear (<https://youtu.be/RBtTR0mdHoU>). Does this outward appearance of American patriotism reflect a desire of the wearer to feel and be accepted as an American citizen? Does support for Trump, one of the most jingoistic presidents ever to grace the presidential seat, provide proof of one's loyalty to America?

Attempt to more fully assimilate into American culture

In the end, supporting Trump seems to entail letting go a little of the "Chinese" in a Chinese-American identity.