


CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

A Comparative Approach to Explaining Gender Disparities in Asian American and Asian Canadian Politics

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In 2020, Asian Americans were the least descriptively represented at all levels of elected office compared to whites, Blacks, and Latinos (Sedique, Bhojwani, and Lee 2020). In this context, Asian women lagged behind Asian men in holding local-level positions, yet they surpassed Asian men in holding federal and statewide offices, and they led 81% of state- and local-level Asian civil rights organizations (AAPI Power Fund 2020; Reflective Democracy Campaign 2021). Do gender disparities in Asian American political representation arise because Asian women are less likely to run for office than Asian men, or because they are less likely to win elections? Do these disparities vary across levels of office? And are they unique to Asian Americans?

This paper presents a path to answering these questions by comparing Asian Americans with Asian Canadians. On one hand, Asian women in both countries confront similar socioeconomic opportunities and challenges (Hamlin, Bloemraad, and de Graauw 2015). On the other hand, they navigate different political institutions and electoral rules (Cheng and Tavits 2011). A cross-national approach can uncover challenges specific to Asian women in ways that intra-national comparisons with Black and Latina American women do not.

Asian American Women in Politics

Asian American women navigate different barriers to political participation than Black women and Latinas (Brown 2014). More so than socioeconomic barriers, pressures to adhere to traditional gender roles in marriage and family deter Asian American women from running for office (Phillips 2021). And whereas local party chairs view Black and Latino candidates as less likely to win state

legislative primaries (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2019), Asian women (also) confront sexism within their ethnic communities. In Los Angeles, a majority-minority city where Asian Americans have long histories as voters and elected representatives, Asian men dominate the most prestigious state legislative seats because there is no formal “Asian American infrastructure” that can support Asian women, which leaves them to navigate the sexism that plagues informal political networks within the Asian community (Phillips 2021).

Nevertheless, sexism within Asian American communities does not have a stronghold on limiting the supply of Asian female candidates because ultimately, primary voters have the final say in who gets to become candidates in the general election. Once they throw their names into the candidate pool, Asian American women may actually have advantages relative to their male counterparts. They have access to more support from outside the Asian community (Grumbach, Sahn, and Staszak 2020), which is useful in statewide and federal elections that require broad multiracial coalitions (Shah, Scott, and Juenke 2018). If Asian American women do indeed have an easier time winning elections than Asian American men, perhaps the reason why they are less likely than men to hold office is because they are less likely to become primary election candidates in the first place.

Asian Canadian Women in Politics

There is less empirical evidence on barriers to political representation for Asian Canadian women because non-whites are grouped in the official Canadian census as “visible minorities” (Tolley 2023). Nevertheless, women from the three largest Asian ethnicities in Canada — South Asians, Chinese and Filipinos — also navigate sexism within their communities. For example, South Asians have the highest levels of political representation of the three ethnic groups (Lim 2018) in part because of financial and political support from Sikh temples (gurdwaras), which are mostly run by men (Besco and Tolley 2020; Kaur and Desai 2020; Todd 2018).

The sexism Asian Canadian women confront within their communities may be exacerbated by electoral structures they have to navigate. Candidates chosen at local nominating contests head straight to the general elections; they do not go through another round of vetting by the general public because there are no primary elections in Canada. In this sense, local party elites have more power in their roles as party gatekeepers than their American counterparts. Using data from the 2004 and 2006 Canadian federal elections, Cheng and Tavits (2011) find female party presidents are more likely to nominate female candidates. However, there has been no additional evidence on the influence of visible minority (or Asian) female party presidents, nor whether Asian Canadian women win at the same rates as male Asian Canadians when they run.

Comparing Asian Candidates in the United States and Canada

I build on existing databases to construct two datasets of Asian candidates that identify election winners and losers, as well as disaggregate ethnicities.¹ First,

the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies (APAICS) provides a publicly available database of Asian American candidates in local-, state-, and federal-level elections from 2020 to 2021. Second, Johnson, Tolley, Thomas, and Bodet (2021) has compiled a database of Canadian candidates in the 2008–2019 federal elections.² To maximize comparability between the US and Canadian datasets, I focus on three ethnic classifications: South Asian (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh), East Asian (China/Taiwan/Hong Kong, Japan, Korea), and Southeast Asian (Laos, Hmong, Cambodia, Philippines, Vietnam).

The datasets contain 415 Asian American and 338 Asian Canadian candidates. I calculate female parity ratios by dividing the proportion of “all candidates” and “winners” in each ethnic group who are women by the proportion in the general population who are women. For Asian Americans, I operationalize “all candidates” as individuals who took part in primary elections, regardless of how they performed in the primary and general elections. For Asian Canadians, I operationalize “all candidates” as individuals who took part in the federal elections. In both countries, I operationalize “winners” as individuals who won the general elections.

Lien and Filler (2022) calculate parity ratios for Asian American elected officials who served in 2020. Presuming most “winners” of the general elections in November 2020 ended up taking office, I present an updated snapshot of female parity ratios for Asian American elected officials. Furthermore, the inclusion of dropouts and losers, as well as winners, in “all candidates” allows me to assess barriers to elected office prior to the voting stage. For the US general population, I rely on the American Community Survey’s 2021 population estimates; for Canada, I rely on the 2016 census. A parity ratio of 1 means women in the ethnic group are on par with their population in political representation.

Table 1 presents female parity ratios in the US and Canada for “all candidates” and “winners.” For the pan-Asian group in the US, female parity ratios for “all candidates” are comparable to that for “winners” in local (0.91 vs. 0.90) and state (0.71 vs. 0.77) elections, but they are substantively lower in federal elections (0.76 vs. 1.03). These findings indicate Asian American women face comparable levels of barriers at the entry and voting stages of state- and local-level elections, whereas they face higher barriers at the entry than voting stage of federal elections. Female parity ratios for East Asians reflect findings for the pan-Asian group, likely because East Asians dominate the number of Asian American candidates. However, even in the context of federal elections, these patterns do not hold true for South Asians. Among South Asian Americans, female parity ratios for “all candidates” are higher than that for “winners” in federal elections (0.66 vs. 0.52).

In Canada, female parity ratios in federal elections are generally lower than in US federal elections. Strikingly, these ratios are the lowest among South Asians, even though there are more South Asian political candidates and winners compared to East and Southeast Asians. This finding comports with narratives of male-dominated religious organizations as the driving force behind South Asian political activism in Canada, such that gains in political representation may conceal gender disparities within ethnic groups. Overall, female parity ratios for “all candidates” are lower than female parity ratios for “winners,” and Southeast and East Asian women are overrepresented among winners.

Table 1. Female parity ratios among Asian candidates in US and Canada

	US local	US state	US federal	Canadian federal
Pan-Asian				
All candidates	0.91	0.71	0.76	0.65
Winners	0.90	0.77	1.03	0.82
South Asian				
All candidates	0.96	0.69	0.66	0.62
Winners	1.04	0.69	0.52	0.71
Southeast Asian				
All candidates	1.07	1.01	0.92	0.63
Winners	0.82	1.26	1.84	1.37
East Asian				
All candidates	0.81	0.61	0.83	0.81
Winners	0.85	0.65	1.16	1.10

Note: Female parity ratios computed by dividing the proportion of female candidates/winners in the ethnic group by the proportion in the general population who are women. The American Community Survey (ACS)'s 2021 population estimates are used for the US general population; the 2016 Canadian census provides estimates for the Canadian general population.

Conclusion

The fact that Asian American women are one of the least represented groups in political office makes it difficult to collect data specific to them, and it makes this task an even more pressing one. Diversifying the country of analysis by including Asian Canadians provides one way of boosting sample sizes and examining how different political institutions affect women in similar socioeconomic circumstances. To extend and explain these findings, scholars need more direct measures of attributes associated with political candidacy and a wider range of research methods such as interviews and survey experiments. Such methods have already been deployed to understand (white) women in politics, but for Asian American and Canadian women, much-needed data collection on their motivations and impediments to political office has only just begun.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X2400028X>.

Notes

1. I thank Isabella Aung and Rosanna Wisden for excellent research assistance. Based on candidate names, we searched online for at least two pieces of evidence that indicate each candidate's race/ethnicity. Please refer to Supplementary Materials for details on this process.
2. Johnson, Tolley, Thomas, and Bodet's (2021) publicly available database does not include candidate names. To identify which visible minorities are Asian, I received permission to access a version of their database that includes candidate names. I thank the authors, especially Erin Tolley, for their generosity.

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