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## Political and civic engagement attitudes among Asian American college students

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POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ATTITUDES AMONG  
ASIAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
Butler University  
1997

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

**Master of Arts in Ethics and Policy Studies**  
**Department of Political Science**  
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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

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**December 2010**

## ABSTRACT

### **Political and Civic Engagement Attitudes among Asian American College Students**

by

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This study explored the attitudes of political and civic engagement among Asian American college students. Previous research suggests that young people are increasingly more inclined to participate in civic activities over traditional forms of political participation. The researcher considered this trend by examining the views of Asian American students, a group whose political behavior has not been largely investigated.

This study employed a qualitative research design. Students from public institutions of higher education in Las Vegas were interviewed using an in-depth and semi-structured format. Findings suggest that there is a general willingness to become involved in civic activity such as volunteering, but there are several obstacles to political participation. It is not clear whether increased involvement in civic engagement will evolve to include politics.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Discussions of public life are frequent and can be traced back to Aristotle's famous proclamation that, "man is by nature a political animal" (Aristotle, trans. 1984, p. 37). Scholars have written at length about the ebbs and flows of participation in the community, observing that in recent years it has gradually declined to alarmingly low levels particularly with regard to young people's interest in electoral politics (Putnam, 2000; Macedo et al., 2005; Zukin et al., 2006). Such information highlights the basic need to continue to learn more about why some people choose to participate and why others do not in order to understand how we might involve more of the community in public discourse and decision making. This study will address this issue being mindful to not only examine trends in the political realm, but also in other less obvious areas that may be of equal importance, especially to younger generations.

When examining activity concerned with community involvement, two forms of participation are commonly used to frame the discussion: political and civic engagement. For the purposes of this study, we will use the following definitions to help distinguish the two terms. Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) broadly define political engagement as "activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies" (38). Zukin et al. (2006), on the other hand, define civic engagement as, "participation aimed at achieving a public good, but usually through direct hands-on work in cooperation with others," while adding that it

“normally occurs within nongovernmental organizations and rarely touches upon electoral politics” (51).

Both forms of participation are associated with a variety of activities whose intentions or goals can at times intersect. Understanding their relationship, however, is not an easy task, as Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) point out, “the boundary between political and non-political activity is by no means clear” (40). Scholars and practitioners alike have acknowledged that there is a connection between the two, although the extent is often debated. Oftentimes this discussion occurs when considering the merits of voluntary associations, groups once observed by Tocqueville as a core component of American democracy (Tocqueville, [1840] 1990). At a minimum, it is generally recognized that participation in these associations can help cultivate certain civic skills and knowledge that are transferrable to the political realm, most notably through social interaction, group decision making and exposure to political processes (Almond & Verba, 1965; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Macedo et al., 2005).

A review of the recent literature related to political and civic engagement reveals two themes that seem to emerge with regard to participatory trends and young people. The first is that younger generations are neither interested nor active in either form of participation. This was most famously presented by Robert Putnam (2000) who documented the demise of both in the book, Bowling Alone. More recently, studies from Zukin et al. (2006) and Kiesa et al. (2007) have updated this view by showing that younger generations, such as the Millennials (those born after 1985), have begun to participate in civic activities such as volunteering at much higher rates, while their involvement in politics remains low. One possible explanation for this shift is that

volunteering offers a more direct way of working with others in the community to address shared problems, one that is specifically removed from the polarized debates that have become commonly associated with the political climate in the U.S. (Longo & Meyer, 2006; Kiesa et al., 2007).

### **Asian Americans: An Emerging Presence**

In addition to examining how people participate, it is not uncommon for researchers to look at a host of peripheral factors to gain further insight into what motivates them to become involved. Ethnicity is one such factor that is commonly considered to determine what impact, if any, it has on participation. With regard to minority groups, existing literature has primarily examined this topic by studying the political behavior of the African American and Latino populations in the United States. Despite being one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007), Asian Americans have largely been excluded from this discussion. As Wong, Lien and Conway (2008) state, “Asian Americans have been overlooked until recently because of the relatively small size of the population compared with minority groups such as African Americans and Latinos, the residential concentration of Asian Americans in a handful of states, and the perception that Asian Americans are quiescent rather than active in politics” (70).

Asian Americans have generally displayed lower rates of political participation, especially when compared to whites and blacks (Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2004; Aoki & Takeda, 2008; Ramakrishnan, 2008). This was most recently reflected in the voter turnout for the 2008 presidential election: non-Hispanic whites (66%), blacks (65%),

Asians (49%), Hispanics (49%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). In a 2007 study on minority youth (ages 15-25), the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) reported that Asian American youth viewed voting as a responsibility of a citizen – one that could actually affect an outcome – yet their rates of voter registration and turnout remained low nevertheless (Marcelo, Lopez, & Kirby, 2007). With regard to civic engagement, however, the results improved considerably. The study reported Asian American youth to be particularly involved in volunteering and community problem solving activities where they were the most active among the ethnic groups surveyed.

Park et al. (2008) have similarly reported positive findings among younger, college-age Asian Americans. In a 2008 study they analyzed the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) Freshman Survey and found that an increased number of Asian American freshmen rated themselves as having substantial leadership and public speaking skills, both of which are valuable for political and civic engagement. Likewise, the study reported an increase in the percentage of Asian American students who believed that becoming a community leader was very "important" or "essential" (87). The authors note that these findings are promising and, in time, could lead to more Asian Americans taking on leadership positions within the school and community settings.

As younger generations of Asian Americans begin to come of age, an increased number researchers have addressed their participation both in the political and non-political realms in an attempt to gauge the trajectory of their community involvement (Lien, 2001; Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2004; Aoki & Takeda, 2008). This research has

provided a good foundation for understanding some trends in participation yet could be improved with more extensive studies that explore the reasons behind this engagement. Such information would be especially relevant should it also take into consideration the specific opinions of college students or young people who are preparing for greater roles in the community. This study will therefore focus on Asian American students in higher education to provide a more detailed look at their specific attitudes towards political and civic engagement. The study will be conducted at institutions of higher education in Las Vegas, a city where the Asian population is one of the fastest growing ethnic groups (Demirjian & Goldberg, 2010), thereby providing a unique context for the examination of developing patterns of community involvement.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to develop a better understanding of Asian American college students' views of civic and political engagement. The study will examine the extent that Asian American college students are drawn to both forms of activities and their reasons for choosing to participate. By exploring these areas, this study will attempt to provide a better understanding of some of the motivations behind both civic and political engagement and if they are influenced by ethnicity.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How do Asian American college students view civic and political engagement and to what extent do they participate in related activities?

2. Why do they participate? What factors contribute to their decision to become involved in such activities or not to participate at all?
3. How do ethnicity and ethnic ties affect the students' participation?

To answer these questions, this study uses a qualitative approach that specifically employs the use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This approach draws from past research related to this area of study and attempts to expand on it by giving its participants an opportunity speak about their own experiences and offer their own perspectives, using their own points of reference. In choosing this method, the researcher will have greater ability to move beyond basic inquiry into standard political topics and be more flexible to discussing matters that are unique to the participant.

### **Significance of Study**

This study will explore how Asian American college students view civic engagement and political participation as well as their involvement and motivations for each. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to existing research by addressing two areas that have recently emerged within the general discussion of political behavior: 1) the relationship between civic and political engagement; 2) the political attitudes of Asian Americans.

To begin, this study will simply examine how young people participate in the community. It will question if their actions are consistent with recent studies that show them to be more active in civic engagement while at the same time gradually withdrawing from traditional forms of politics (Longo & Meyer, 2006; Zukin et al., 2006; Kiesa et al., 2007). And if indeed this is the case, the researcher will question the

implications. What opportunities or problems might arise from such a trend? Based on related studies, is there reason to believe that this engagement might facilitate increased political participation? Zukin et al. (2006) state that a core question for researchers to consider is whether this shift represents “a rejection (conscious or not) of the goals of political action (that is, collective, codified efforts to determine and implement the public good) or instead is an at least partial substitution of alternative means for achieving the same political ends.” (87).

In addition to the practical considerations, the study will also examine these questions as part of a larger theoretical discussion that addresses the importance and influence of concepts related to civic and political engagement. This inquiry will question the reasons as to why students become involved and the relationship this has to their participation in the community. For example, how can we interpret an increase in participation within non-political voluntary associations that focus on volunteering or community service? Might this trend represent a renewed cooperation conducted mainly for the good of the community, yet also with some benefit to the individual?

Tocqueville once described such behavior as adhering to the principle of “self-interest rightly understood,” emphasizing that it did not involve any “great acts of self-sacrifice, but...daily small acts of self-denial” (Tocqueville, [1840] 1990, p. 122). In examining the benefits of this action, he questioned “whether the personal advantage of each member of the community does not consist in working for the good of all” (121). Of course, for Tocqueville, the practice of self-interest rightly understood had broader implications beyond simple acts of charity which we will explore at later points in the study.

Moreover, the researcher will investigate the reasons behind political inactivity. Several studies have reported that young people are not interested in politics and therefore do not participate in related activities at high levels (Putnam, 2000; Zukin et al., 2006; Kiesa et al., 2007). How can this be explained? It is anticipated that in some cases, we will find that a lack of participation can be attributed to the “usual suspects,” e.g. a lack of time, a cynical outlook of politics, and a lack of political knowledge. Yet, what other reasons may negatively affect political engagement? What reasons might be unique to Asian Americans?

Finally, this study will address the role that ethnicity plays in participation. In a broad sense, does it help to bring people together or divide them into particularized groups? The researcher will question if ethnic ties help facilitate involvement and in what specific ways. For example, to what extent might participation be linked to activities coordinated within specific ethnic identity groups or to one that embraces an Asian American identity? Acknowledging the great diversity of the Asian American community, the researcher is particularly interested in the level of group consciousness among Asian Americans. Studies have shown that a sense of group consciousness and linked fate can positively influence political participation (Espiritu, 1992; Wong, Lien, & Conway, 2008).

The process of constructing an Asian American panethnic identity, one that encompasses multiple ethnic groups, has many obstacles, however. Not surprisingly, the diversity of Asian Americans, in regards to culture, language, socioeconomics, and ideology, does not easily support such a concept (Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2004; Aoki & Takeda, 2008). Lien (2001) states that, “the development of panethnic consciousness and



organizations is, to a large extent, not a voluntary process but determined by the specific political context and social relations within the state” (49). Thus, under the right circumstances, such as in opposition to racial discrimination, various Asian ethnic groups would be more likely to mobilize, which could ultimately lead to the development of a panethnic group (Espiritu, 1992). Without the assistance of external factors though, the reality of a panethnic identity may be more imagined than real.

The information from this study may be used to help clarify what role ethnicity plays in facilitating participation among Asian American groups and the ways in which they might work together. It can also be used both by post secondary educational administrators to expand the scope of political and civic offerings at their institutions, and local leaders as they attempt to further engage a growing population in their community. Additionally, because of the exploratory nature of the study, it may raise new questions or provide information that could be used in further research in related areas of study.

### **Outline**

This study has been organized into five chapters. Chapter One introduced the purpose of this study, research questions and significance. Chapter Two provides a review of relevant literature. Chapter Three describes the research design and method used to conduct this study. Chapter Four discusses the findings and analysis of the data. Finally, the researcher presents the conclusions and recommendations for future studies in Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter identifies and organizes the literature that is related to the areas of Asian Americans and civic and political engagement in order to provide background information while also establishing a proper framework for the discussion. As part of this process, the researcher focused on four general areas related to civic and political participation: Asian Americans and their involvement; factors for participating; recent and general trends; and, because this study focused on college students in particular, considerations in higher education. A wide array of resource material is presented by scholars and practitioners alike that help to support the study. Although each of these areas is distinct in its focus, they are also intertwined by the inclusion of various topics, such as the significance of civic skills and voluntary group involvement which appear intermittently throughout the sections.

A survey of the literature reveals that there are information gaps in two primary areas, the first being the amount of survey data related to Asian Americans and political participation. The topic itself has only recently been addressed by a limited number of researchers, most notably Pei-Te Lien, whose 2000-2001 Pilot National Asian American Political Survey (PNAAPS) is one of the few surveys available that provides data on the political behavior of Asian Americans. The second area is in research that examines the relationship between civic and political engagement. An increasing amount of attention has been given to this area as studies continue to display trends where younger generations are more active in civic or community service activities opposed to

traditional forms of political participation. The broader implications for such a trend, however, have not yet been discussed in great detail.

### **Asian Americans and Participation**

When discussing a group as diverse as Asian Americans, it is helpful to first clarify who exactly they are. According to Lien, Conway and Wong (2004), “In a general sense, an Asian American is any Asian who resides in the United States on a permanent or long-term basis, regardless of citizenship or other legal status” (2). The U.S. Census Bureau attempts to narrow the field in their own definition, “the term ‘Asian’ refers to people having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent (for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam)” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). The six largest Asian groups reported in the 2000 Census include the following: Chinese, Filipino, Asian Indian, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese. Consequently, these groups are often targeted in Asian American studies (see Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2004).

Asian Americans are one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). According to the U.S. Census, they comprise 4.6% of the U.S. population; 6.6% in Nevada; and 7.7% in Clark County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In Nevada, between 1990 and 2000, the Asian population increased by 207.4% with Filipinos and Chinese constituting the largest ethnic subgroups (Simich & Wright, 2005). Using census data, the Asian American Justice Center and Asian Pacific Legal Center (2006) reported that in Clark County alone the Asian American population increased by

41% between the years of 2000 and 2004; Filipinos comprised nearly half of this population (46%), while Chinese (15%), Japanese (9%) and Korean (9%) were the three next largest groups.

Wong, Lien and Conway (2008) state, “despite the fact that Asian Americans have been in the United States for centuries, attention to their political behavior is a strikingly new phenomenon” (70). This lack of attention may be partially attributed to popular stereotypes of Asian Americans that have negatively affected their involvement in the political realm. Aoki and Takeda (2008) state that this is especially true of the “forever foreigner” and “model minority” images of Asian Americans, which depict them as perpetual outsiders to the U.S. who are hard-working and successful with little interest or perhaps need for politics. Lien (2001) sums up the multiple perceptions of Asian Americans as “superachievers in the socioeconomic sphere, underachievers in political participation, and perpetual outsiders to the mainstream culture” (178-179). Although these generalizations may not be overtly negative, they reduce the chances for Asian Americans to be recruited to politics by diminishing their lack of influence in the community.

Pei-Te Lien’s 2000-2001 expansive study, the Pilot National Asian American Political Survey (PNAAPS), has provided one of the most thorough examinations of the political attitudes of Asian Americans in cities across the U.S. The survey, which was both multiethnic and multilingual in its approach, offered a glimpse into the complex political behavior of Asian Americans groups. It revealed that a majority of Asian Americans were in fact not apathetic towards politics with 61% of those interviewed indicating that they were somewhat or very interested in “what goes on in government”

(Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2004, p. 11). Moreover, of those interviewed who were eligible to vote, 82% of them voted in the 2000 election (Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2004, p. 13).

In regards to the prospect of building a multi-ethnic Asian coalition, the PNAAPS data revealed several challenges that stemmed from the diversity of Asian Americans. One example is that the survey's respondents preferred to use ethnic identities (e.g. Chinese American, Korean American, etc.) over a panethnic identity that encompassed multiple Asian groups (e.g. Asian American). The large majority of respondents identified themselves either as ethnic American or by their ethnicity alone, while only 15% used the broader term Asian American (Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2004, p. 17). When those who responded negatively to identifying themselves as Asian American were asked if they had ever used the term though, nearly half of the respondents reported that they had within certain contexts (Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2004, p. 17). Perhaps more promising was the unification displayed toward policy considerations such as affirmative action and bilingual services (Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2004, p. 18). Lien, Conway and Wong (2004) state, "although indicators of panethnicity provide some evidence of a sense of common identity and consciousness among the mass Asian Americans, advocates of solidarity will find greater hope in their policy orientations" (18).

Defining the interests of a group as diverse as Asian Americans is no easy task, however. This becomes clear when trying to identify common issues that Asian Americans face today. Outside of shared concerns for racial discrimination, the PNAAPS showed that problems and priorities can greatly vary across ethnic groups (Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2004, p. 15). Additionally, nearly half of the respondents in

some ethnic groups (Japanese, South Asians, and Filipinos) reported that they did not see *any* problems in their respective ethnic communities, while others reported that they were “unsure” if any problems existed at all (Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2004, p. 15). This would imply that, unlike the Hispanic population in the U.S. which has rallied for immigration reform, Asian Americans do not have a common issue that has united them.

In recent years, scholars have questioned the bonds between the many Asian American ethnic groups in order to determine if there is a sense of group consciousness or identity among them. It is generally acknowledged that the concept of panethnicity as it relates to Asian Americans stems less from natural tendencies than from social and political institutions (Espiritu, 1992). Under the right circumstances though, such as in opposition to racial discrimination, a panethnic group could develop and be quite effective. According to Espiritu (1992):

Depending on its political strength and resources, a panethnic group can pressure political institutions to advance the material interests of its members. In a political system in which numbers count, this political strength is derived from a unified front rather than from separate efforts of individual subgroups. Thus, panethnicity is not only imposed from above but also constructed from below as a means of claiming resources inside and outside of the community (13, 14).

Asian ethnic and panethnic organizations have had positive effects in the community by providing assistance and exposing their members to the political process. Recent studies have shown that they sometimes serve as an intermediary between mainstream political institutions and underrepresented and under-recruited Asian

immigrant groups (Lien et al., 2001). In this way, their role is similar to that of labor or religious groups that provide services and organize activities to increase groups' political participation and voter turnout. Wong, Lien and Conway (2005) have found that group-based resources, such as belonging to an ethnic or panethnic organization, are a positive predictor of participation in activities beyond voting which do not require registration or citizenship (568). They state that these resources are often more relevant with "community-based politics (which tend to be organized around activities beyond voting) than for national-level politics (registration and voting)" (568).

It is also possible, however, for these groups to have an adverse effect on social relations. In a study of Chinese in Southern California, Uslaner and Conley (2003) observed that people who associate *only* with others of the same ethnic background are more likely to withdraw from the larger community and participate only with people of the same nationality or ethnicity. This is an example what the authors refer to as "particularized trusters," those who prefer to stick to their own social circles, versus "generalized trusters" who are more open to interact with outsiders. The Chinese with looser ties to their ethnic community demonstrated a greater level of integration into the American society and would "shun civic ties based on nationality in favor of more encompassing ones," while those who only associated with ethnic associations limited their opportunities and, in the event that they were not able to socialize with others from their particular group, might "simply opt out of civic life altogether" (355).

Local community leaders play an integral role in the formation of an ethnic or panethnic group as they call attention to the benefits of mobilization as well as services that may be needed in the community. In many cases, community leaders take the form

of elected officials. As Lien (2001) argues, however, this is one area where Asian Americans are not highly visible. “Despite great electoral gains over recent decades, the Asian American community outside of Hawaii continues to suffer from a lack of representation in political bodies at federal, state, and local levels of government” (105). This may be chiefly attributed to the fact that large percentages of Asian Americans do not live in concentrated areas outside of states such as Hawaii and California.

More community leaders may yet emerge as the percentage of U.S. born Asian Americans continues to increase and younger generations who have been in the U.S. for several years begin to come of age. Length of stay is significant when predicting political and civic engagement among Asian Americans. As immigrant populations spend more time in the U.S., they are also more likely to be exposed to political and civic institutions, have a deeper understanding of political information, and have an increased stake in both local and national politics (Ramakrishnan, 2008). This was displayed in a California survey where the rate of volunteerism by race/ethnicity showed whites at 31% and Asian Americans at 18%. When the latter rate was broken down by generation, however, it substantially increases over the generations. In fact, by the third generation and higher, the rate of volunteerism was raised to 29%.

Park et al. (2008) reported that incoming Asian American college students are better equipped today for civic engagement because they show greater confidence in their leadership and public speaking skills, while also recognizing the importance of community leaders. According to Park et al. (2008), “increasingly, Asian Americans entering four year colleges and universities have a desire to influence political structures,



serve as community leaders, improve race relations, and to be volunteers in their communities” (90).

Moreover, Aoki and Takeda (2008) state that college campuses also serve as ideal locations for Asian American students to meet others from different Asian backgrounds they may not have encountered before. This is especially likely in student clubs or organizations that promote a panethnic way of thinking. Furthermore, colleges or universities with Asian studies programs can also help to facilitate this interaction by exposing students to multiple Asian American perspectives. “Interacting with professors and fellow students, they [Asian American students] are likely to learn of the experiences and challenges that Asian Americans share” (46). In short, Asian American students in higher education today are more willing and have more opportunities to become involved in civic and political activities – a trend that in future years could ultimately benefit the Asian American community as a whole.

### **Factors for Involvement**

In addition to collecting data on how often or in what ways people engage in civic activities, it is also important to consider their reasons for doing so by examining practical as well as theoretical perspectives. Unfortunately, there is much less research available in this area to help illuminate what motivates people to become involved in their communities or in politics, especially for emerging racial and ethnic minorities whose voice in the community has only recently begun to expand. Further investigation into the broader reasons for participation would help to provide a more complete picture of political activity.

According to Almond and Verba (1965), “the society in which individuals do in fact participate in decisions – that is, the democratic society – is likely to be the society in which individuals believe they ought to participate” (135). The authors continue by stating, “It is also likely to be the society in which they think they can participate and know how to go about it” (135). In their study, the authors outline what they describe as the “civic culture” of a nation, one which has a significant role in shaping the political attitudes of its citizens. The civic culture influences citizen participation and ultimately helps to support a democratic political system.

Conceptions of citizenship within a democracy have long been debated in Western political thought with a history that dates back to ancient Greece. Aristotle defined the citizen by placing an emphasis less on location or birthright, and more on his ability to participate in political life within the polis, “the citizen in an unqualified sense is defined by no other thing so much as by sharing in decision and office” (Aristotle, trans. 1984, p. 87). He continues by stating, “whoever is entitled to participate in an office involving deliberation or decision is, we can now say, a citizen in this city” (Aristotle, trans. 1984, p. 87). Because of the uniqueness of political or public life, Aristotle’s citizen needed the proper skills and knowledge for meaningful participation to occur. This was not without good cause, as the citizen’s chief obligation was to support his or her community. Aristotle states, “although citizens are dissimilar, preservation of the partnership is their task, and the regime is [this] partnership; hence the virtue of the citizen must necessarily be with a view to the regime” (Aristotle, trans. 1984, p. 90).

Direct involvement within the community or politics, in general, also gives people more control over their immediate surroundings in contrast to the occasional act of voting

for elected officials with whom there is likely little, if any, personal interaction. In essence, it gives individuals a greater sense of control over their own destiny and helps them to achieve “self-government,” or self-rule, a fundamental component of republican freedom (Sandel, 1996). Self-government is not necessarily an individual endeavor, however. As Sandel (1996) states, it involves “deliberating with fellow citizens about the common good and helping to shape the destiny of the political community” (5). The act of sharing in self-government also requires certain civic virtues such as “a knowledge of public affairs and also a sense of belonging, a concern for the whole, a moral bond with the community whose fate is at stake” (5).

One fundamental reason that people become involved in civic or political activities is to improve their own lives as well as those around them. This is often achieved through participation with others in voluntary associations that provide individuals a chance to share experiences and opinions with others of varying backgrounds while addressing common goals (Tocqueville, [1840] 1990; Almond & Verba, 1965; Putnam, 2000). Tocqueville ([1840] 1990) championed the importance of such groups recognizing that “in democratic countries the science of association is the mother of science” (110). Moreover, Tocqueville saw the relationship between non-political and political voluntary associations as mutually beneficial. He stated, “civil associations...facilitate political association” while at the same time “political association singularly strengthens and improves associations for civil purposes” (115).

Voluntary associations also contribute to an understanding of what Tocqueville described as “self-interest rightly understood,” a principle that embraces small acts of self sacrifice which, in turn, benefit both the individual as well as the greater community. As

he observed during his travels, Americans “show with complacency how an enlightened regard for themselves constantly prompts them to assist one another and inclines them willingly to sacrifice a portion of their time and property to the welfare of the state” (122). In contrast to this principle is the concept of “individualism.” In essence, it cultivates priorities that are solely concerned with supporting oneself and his or her private interests, the result of an unhealthy emphasis that is often placed on democratic conditions of equality. As Tocqueville states, individualism is a “mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends” (98).

McFarland and Thomas (2006) report that when people get involved in voluntary associations at a young age (for example, those offered through high school) they are more likely to remain involved later in life. By starting at a young age, participation in civic groups has a greater chance of becoming a habituated behavior. The authors state that members of “politically salient” youth associations have the opportunity to develop certain skills and relationships that support future participation. They also “develop self-esteem and expectations that make entry to new fields of adult political activity less daunting; and they develop motives for participation by instilling in them a sense of communal identity and obligations of service” (405). Putnam (2000) echoes this thought when speaking about less political activities such as volunteering. “Volunteering fosters more volunteering, in both formal and informal settings. Organizational involvement seems to inculcate civic skills and a life-long disposition toward altruism” (121).

Macedo et al. (2005) state that, overall, associational life helps to encourage various forms of both civic and political participation. Associational life today could

include groups that are connected with one's neighborhood, workplace, religion or a particular leisure activity. Of course, some groups may address or support a certain cause and/or choose to directly incorporate political messages, while others may disregard them altogether. As the authors point out, though, it is the very nature of the participation that is important in determining future involvement.

Even apparently "apolitical" associations bring individuals together in cooperative relations and social networks and thereby enhance the opportunities and willingness of members to engage in civic and political activity. Groups and associations are "mediating structures" in large, complex societies, and by linking individuals to others in cooperative relations, thereby creating and deepening social networks, they can encourage wider forms of civic and political involvement. In a variety of ways, therefore, voluntary associations are training grounds and laboratories of citizenship (120-121).

Some scholars point out, however, that there can also be a negative side to associational life. With this in mind, it is important to note the characteristics of the group, paying particular attention to its goals, activities and membership. As Theiss-Morse and Hibbing (2005) warn, the effects of some forms of associational activity or even a "decidedly homogenous" group could ultimately cause more harm than good. The authors state that, "if these groups teach something other than democratic values or if they serve to weaken ties among diverse people by strengthening ties among those who are similar, then the effects of voluntary associations are not just irrelevant to democracy, they are deleterious" (244).

Similarly, Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) point out that “simply being involved with an institution does not foster participation. What matters for participation is what happens in the institution – the acquisition of civic skills” (340). This point deserves some emphasis as it recognizes a qualitative dimension to group involvement with some forms being more productive than others. Neither membership alone nor the type of association can be fully credited to forming habits of participation. This helps to further clarify the role that voluntary associations play in facilitating civic engagement.

In their study, the authors target three core factors to help explain an individual’s involvement: resources, engagement and recruitment. They refer to these factors as the “civic voluntarism model.” Simply put, “people may become inactive because they lack *resources*, because they lack psychological *engagement* with politics, or because they are outside of the *recruitment* networks that bring people into politics” (269). The authors also discuss the role of the gratifications of voluntary activity in influencing participation, such as material or social benefits. Civic gratification essentially refers to a person’s “desire to do their duty as a member of the community, to make the community or nation a better place to live, or to do their share” (117). They noted that in several interviews civic gratifications were reported higher than others. The authors also acknowledged that certain responses may be deemed “socially appropriate” and therefore respondents feel like they ought to give them.

## **Trends in Engagement**

Not unlike past election years, the 2008 presidential election provided a substantial boost for political participation in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, voter turnout increased by 5 million for the election with significant increases among young voters, ages 18 to 24 (2009). Political engagement, specifically in the form of political discussions, was reported to have dramatically increased on college campuses during this time. According to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey, a national survey that is conducted annually, college freshmen were more politically engaged in 2008 than they had been in 40 years (Pryor et al., 2009).

Such activity, however, is not the norm. Recently, scholars have written at length about the decline of political participation and community involvement across the United States. According to the National Conference on Citizenship, rates of civic engagement have substantially declined since the 1970's in particular with regard to "levels of conventional community participation and connectedness" (29). Their 2008 Civic Health Index report did show that when compared to the 1990's, people are more involved in formal politics (voting, discussing the election, etc.), but that this activity is "volatile" and largely influenced by the major news headlines of the day (29).

Perhaps most famously, Robert Putnam's (2000) work, Bowling Alone, documented a decline of civic engagement activities in local communities, particularly with regard to voluntary associations that ranged from bowling leagues to labor unions. Similar to Tocqueville, Putnam linked these associations to our political institutions, suggesting that this decline, on a broader level, could also negatively affect our

democratic process by decreasing social interaction and trust. Part of Putnam's (1996) reasoning for the decline in engagement is explained by the "usual suspects" such as the pressures of time and money, but also by the more individualized way that people choose to spend their free time, in particular by watching television. Not only can television absorb much of one's free time, but, as Putnam reports, due to the nature of the programming "heavy television watching may well increase pessimism about human nature" (48).

Over the years, the gradual increase in television watching has had a negative effect on the attitudes that are held by youth today, contributing to their low levels of participation. According to Putnam (2000), "much of the decline of civic engagement in America during the last third of the twentieth century is attributable to the replacement of an unusually civic generation by several generations (their children and grandchildren) that are less embedded in community life" (275). Some scholars have noted that this trend has gradually led to a low point in the area of youth involvement. As Patterson in observed in 2002, "today's young adults are less politically interested and informed than any cohort of young people on record" (21).

Several recent studies have shown that much of young adults' inactivity in traditional forms of politics can be traced to a distrust of political institutions which has helped to form a cynical outlook on government in general (Longo & Meyer, 2006; Zukin et al., 2006; Kiesa et al., 2007; Andolina et al., 2009). Moreover, the attitude towards politics has become increasingly apathetic, as young people struggle to see its importance or necessity in addressing day to day issues. As Andolina et al. (2009)



discovered in a series of focus groups, “politics is not something that young people are angry or frustrated about; it is irrelevant” (192).

These attitudes may be partially attributed to a lack of exposure or, more specifically, direct contact with political groups. Studies have shown that young people do not understand politics and therefore feel intimidated and unwilling to get involved (Zukin et al., 2006; Kiesa et al., 2007). Even in the instance when young people do want to participate, the opportunities are not always clear or easily accessible. Perhaps because of these reasons, young people are not often recruited by political organizations. As Zukin et al (2006) point out, “especially in the political world, youth today receive fewer invitations to participate than their elders” (146). This is a major deterrent to their participation as they often need a facilitator for involvement. Reaching out to them with a more targeted approach is an obvious way to increase engagement. As is the case with adults, people are more likely to become involved if they are asked.

While it is clear that a large portion of young adults might have negative views of politics, this does not mean that they are completely disengaged from the community. There are some positive signs, most notably related to volunteering, which show younger generations to be quite active in their communities, albeit in areas outside of political participation. In a CIRCLE study of Millennials, which took place on 12 college and university campuses across the U.S., Kiesa et al. (2007) noted that students were more comfortable with local community service in comparison to formal political action. The authors state that, “most students think it is their responsibility to get involved to make things better for society” or more specifically to “change something” (12). Furthermore,

students seemed to prefer volunteer opportunities because of their directness and non-political agendas:

Students are seeking civic opportunities that are authentic, rather than competitive or partisan. For many, volunteering is an outlet to help others and “make change” on an individual level. They also see it as a neutral activity that is unlikely to provoke conflict. Students do not enter into volunteer activities with the intention of becoming politically involved. In hindsight, they report volunteering has helped them to become aware of issues and learn how issues affect people, yet often do not know what they can do with this new awareness (20, 21).

This leads us to question the meaning of such a trend where young people are gradually withdrawing from traditional forms of politics in favor of more civic forms of participation such as volunteering. In order to better understand this phenomenon, we must examine the relationship between the two forms of participation. For example, if more young people prefer civic activities over political ones, what effect would this have on the community? And just how political are civic activities, if at all? Unfortunately, there are no easy answers to these questions, as scholars and practitioners alike have struggled to agree on the implications of this trend. The literature reveals that there are generally two schools of thought, neither of which presents a particularly strong case for a resurgence in political activity among younger generations in the near future.

First, as was highlighted in the previous section, scholars have acknowledged that there is a relationship between civic and political engagement. According to Almond and Verba (1965), participation in non-political voluntary associations does affect one’s

political attitudes by cultivating certain skills which could then be transferred to the political realm. Most notably, civic engagement with others has the potential to enhance social skills, provide exposure to group processes and decision making as well as perspectives from different group members. The authors state that because of these experiences, members of voluntary associations would “be expected to increase an individual’s potential for political involvement and activity” (250).

This notion has been called into question, however, as it is also recognized that this connection is at times murky and in no way guarantees subsequent involvement in politics. While acknowledging that voluntary associations may help to develop some skills that are valued in the civic realm, others report that there is simply not enough evidence to support the belief that this will lead to increased political participation and call for additional studies to more thoroughly examine the relationship. In a study of religious and non-religious group involvement, Cassel (1999) found that participation in various voluntary associations was not a factor in mobilizing voter turnout, despite the presence of political discussions and, in some cases, the endorsement of political parties and candidates. Ultimately, Cassel reported that he failed to find evidence that participation in the groups had helped to produce a “more active and competent” voter (514).

Kiesa et al. (2007) report that a majority of the college students they interviewed view volunteering as a “complement” to politics recognizing that their volunteer work does in some way relate to public policy, though the extent was sometimes difficult to articulate (20). Similarly, Zukin et al. (2006) also acknowledge that there are some political ties to community service, but point out that oftentimes young people are unable

to make the connections and therefore do not make the transition to more political activity. In closing, the authors offer a troubling assessment, “while civic engagement may also be political in a sense...there remain numerous reasons to be concerned about the relative lack of direct involvement in the political realm of Americans in general, and younger generations in particular” (200).

If young people are increasingly more involved in civic activities, can we expect their groups to help facilitate political discussions related to their work or otherwise? The answer appears to be no, as researchers report that these groups are simply not set up for such a role. According to Longo and Meyer (2006), “the dominant concepts and practices within the community service movement present limitations for increasing political engagement” (9). This can be attributed to the movement’s own “apolitical notions of volunteerism.” Moreover, Eliasoph (1998) reported that members of volunteer and recreational groups sometimes go out of their way to avoid “public-spirited political conversation” in public settings. This is representative of a broader tendency of young Americans who make a conscious attempt to steer clear of potentially controversial issues and discussion altogether in order to avoid conflict.

The second school of thought is that for many young people today, civic engagement, such as volunteering, serves as a true alternative to politics. This stems from the skepticism that politics is unfit or inept when it comes to solving problems in the local community, whereas civic engagement is a more effective way to implement change in a direct manner. Using data collected from CIRP Freshman Surveys, Linda Sax (2000) found that incoming students were particularly active in community service (82.6% reporting participation in their final year of high school), but generally

uninterested in politics due to disconnect with politicians as well as political issues. Sax states that this trend might simply be due to practical reasons.

At first glance this contradiction seems odd, since one might suspect that greater involvement in volunteer work would parallel a growth in political awareness. However, it is quite possible that students are simply placing their energies where they feel they can make a difference – by getting involved in issues such as education, crime, the environment, and the homeless in their local communities (15).

Youth who choose to engage in civic activities while consciously avoiding political participation may be more akin to what UK researchers have labeled “civic-individualists,” or those who promote active citizenship through actions related to “voluntary work, the exercise of consumer rights and social entrepreneurship” (11). As Andrews and Cowell (2005) observe, at the core of this movement is a focus on “promoting self-reliance, by decreasing dependence on state welfare and inculcating the skills citizens need to become informed consumers of public services” (11). The generalization that youth today are uninterested and uninformed citizens may not be entirely accurate; they might simply be choosing to get involved in particular areas that are meaningful to them and which do not necessarily coincide with mainstream political agendas.

## Considerations in Higher Education

It is generally recognized that education plays a significant role in developing both the ability and willingness to participate in civic and political activities (Longo & Meyer, 2006; Zukin et al., 2006; Kiesa et al., 2007). To emphasize the importance assigned to education in shaping civic engagement, Verba, Scholozman and Brady (1995) state that “education enhances nearly every single one of the participatory factors: those who are well educated have higher incomes and exercise civic skills; they are more politically interested and informed; they are more likely to be in institutional settings from which they can be recruited to politics” (420).

Based on these assumptions, one can assume that higher levels of educational attainment would equal greater levels of engagement. As Putnam (1996) states, “well-educated people are much more likely to be joiners and trusters...mostly because of the skills, resources, and inclinations that were imparted to them at home and in school” (37). As he discovered, however, this is no guarantee that they will participate in civic engagement activities. Putnam argues that, “the rise in educational levels should have increased social capital during the last 20 years by 15-20 percent,” quite to the contrary, however, research shows that there has been “a net decline since the early 1970s of roughly the same magnitude (trust by about 20-25 percent, memberships by about 15-20 percent)” (37). These findings are disconcerting and certainly warrant further investigation at a later time.

Nevertheless, let us acknowledge that schools can positively impact students in a variety of ways and have very likely contributed to the recent resurgence in community involvement. According to Sandel (1996), public institutions such as schools, “inculcate

the habit of attending to public things” (321). Keeter et al. (2002) point out that, “schools can provide training grounds for civic involvement, offer opportunities for open discussions and create avenues for service work” (31). This is exemplified in growing number of service learning courses that are designed to give students a broader understanding of the local and national community and the responsibilities or commitment that they have to it (Colby et al., 2003). It is also apparent in student organizations and clubs that are easily accessible and provide opportunities for students to interact with others. Additionally, the institutional culture of a college or university can also positively influence its student body with regard to civic responsibility. A campus ideology that reinforces this are through visual images, ceremonies, or student self governance (i.e. “cultural tools”), can help develop students’ civic awareness and activity within the school setting (Thornton & Jaeger, 2006, p. 53).

Kiesa et al. (2007) point out that institutional culture and opportunities for engagement can vary widely from school to school, however. Not surprisingly, they state that schools that have “explicit civic missions” tend to produce students with higher levels of political knowledge and offer students more opportunities for recruitment to civic and political action, while there is a marked difference in schools with less of a focus that could produce negative consequences. “The result of these differences is likely to be an increasing polarization of Americans into civic participants and bystanders, those who have had opportunities to learn ‘how the system works’ and those who have not” (29).

Another environmental factor that can have a positive effect on the overall rates of civic and political engagement is the student body of an institution. According to

recent literature, one's peers can help develop habits of participation that could continue later in life. Sax (2000) states, "attending a college where other students are highly committed to social activism tends to encourage students' own involvement in their community in the years after college" (14). She mentions that regardless of a student's commitment to social or community issues prior to attending college, their peers play a significant part in influencing their behavior during their experience at school.

Schools also have the ability to offer various incentives for civic engagement, perhaps most notably through the student admission process which looks at the student in a holistic manner, taking into consideration their non-academic activities such as community service. In this scenario, however, community service might simply be used as a tool in building or "padding" one's resume. As Friedland and Morimoto (2005) noted in a study of high school students, students' high levels of volunteerism were "shaped by the perception that that voluntary and civic activity is necessary to get into college, and the better the college...the more volunteerism was necessary" (10).



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of Asian American college students' attitudes of political and civic engagement. While examining trends within these two areas, it is not uncommon for researchers to take a quantitative approach that employs survey data based on questions that focus on voting behavior or membership in political organizations. Such an approach is valuable for providing statistics that are representative of a large population, but it lacks the ability to expand on particular areas that could add more description and depth to the topic (Schutt, 2009). Qualitative research methods (specifically ones that use interviewing techniques) are most effective in this area since they allow for greater flexibility in questioning while focusing on the participants' own viewpoints to build understanding (Patton, 1980; Creswell, 1998).

In order to sufficiently address the research questions presented in this study, a qualitative research method was used. Creswell (1998) states that in a qualitative study, "the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting" (15). This approach was valuable in searching for meaning behind the civic and political engagement of a relatively small and localized group. This study did not aim to provide statistics that were generalizable, but to investigate particular areas and, in doing so, identify new ideas or unexplored questions that could be addressed in further study.

## Design

In order to gather information on attitudes toward civic and political engagement, a qualitative research approach that utilized in-depth interviewing was used as the primary method. Seidman (2006) states, “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (9). The researcher determined that college students would serve as good participants for study as their experiences in higher education put them in a more likely position to a) be familiar with various opportunities for involvement that were either advertised or offered through their school, or; b) be actively involved due to the relevant civic knowledge and skills that they had likely acquired through years of high school and/or college education (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

Las Vegas was selected as a site out of convenience; nevertheless it provides a good context for the study as the city’s Asian population has steadily grown over the past decade and subsequently made Nevada a new destination for Asian immigrants outside of traditional gateway states such as California, New York and Illinois (Asian American Justice Center and Asian Pacific Legal Center, 2006). The University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) and the College of Southern Nevada (CSN) were selected because they represent the two largest public institutions of higher education in southern Nevada. The schools differ in their focus and type with each providing a unique perspective: UNLV is the most established four-year institution in Las Vegas, while CSN is a two-year college that concentrates on associate degrees and certificate programs. It is worth mentioning that due to the schools’ relationship and the relative ease with which students can transfer between them, it is not uncommon for students to have attended courses at both

institutions, or to at least have some basic level of familiarity with each of them. For the Fall 2009 semester, the UNLV Office of Institutional Analysis and Planning reported that the Asian student population at the university was 16% of the undergraduate population and 8% of the graduate population. During the same period, 10% of CSN students were reported as “Asian only” by the school’s Office of Institutional Research.

### **Participants**

Student participants for this study included a sample from the University of Nevada Las Vegas and the College of Southern Nevada. Based on similar qualitative studies that have utilized in-depth interviews to closely evaluate people’s opinions (see Gaubatz, 1995; Rim, 2009), the researcher planned to conduct 10 to 20 interviews. For this study, saturation was reached at 15 interviews; the majority of which were conducted with students from UNLV (10), while fewer were conducted with students from CSN (5).

The general criteria used to select participants for the interviews were as follows:

- Participants were identified as “Asian American”
- Participants were either a U.S. citizen or a permanent resident
- Participants had resided in Las Vegas for a minimum of one year
- Participants had attended UNLV or CSN for a minimum of one year

These criteria were established to ensure that the students had a substantial amount of time to become acquainted with some of the local opportunities for civic and political engagement, offered through a school or local community-based organization. Consideration was given as to whether to limit the study to only students who were citizens and full-time students, but after some deliberation, it was decided that this

requirement would eliminate several good interview candidates and make the process of recruitment more unwieldy. In general, the criteria were easily met, although on some occasions, the researcher did have to specify that international students (more specifically, those studying in the U.S. on an F-1 visa) were not being recruited for the study. The challenge of having to differentiate between Asian American citizen, permanent resident and international student is not unusual on the college campus and in many ways represents the complexity of the diversity of the Asian American population. Finally, it should also be noted that the researcher made an attempt to interview representatives from the larger East and Southeast Asian groups reported to reside in Las Vegas in the 2000 Census, i.e. Filipino, Chinese, Japanese and Korean.

Students were initially selected through referrals from higher education administrators and community leaders who were asked to make recommendations for this project, thus beginning a snowball sample. Patton (2002) states that this method can be particularly useful since it allows the researcher a better opportunity to identify interview candidates that are “information rich” or simply “good examples for study” (243). This is especially relevant when utilizing a one-on-one interview format where it is preferred that the candidates be ones “who are not hesitant to speak and share ideas” (Creswell 1998, p. 124).

For the first round of student referrals, the researcher approached a representative from the Las Vegas Asian Chamber of Commerce who frequently works with members of Asian student groups at UNLV and a representative from CSN’s Office of Diversity and Inclusion who coordinates ethnic advisory board meetings at the college. Each of the

representatives was quick to make a referral and from this point the majority of interviews followed a snowball sample.

The snowball interviewing method presented some challenges. Although useful overall, it posed some practical difficulties that limited the selection of participants. As a result, during the final round of interviews the selection shifted to more purposive sampling. This was primarily to ensure a wider range of interviewees, specifically more inclusion of female participants. During this time, the researcher approached staff at CSN as well as the student participants for additional referrals.

### **Data Collection**

Two of the most common methods of data collection employed in qualitative research are individual and focus group interviews (Patton, 1980; Creswell, 1998; Creswell, 2009). Although focus groups can be a convenient and effective way of obtaining information, the researcher suspected that some participants may not feel comfortable sharing their personal opinions in a group setting. As a result, the researcher chose to utilize a one-on-one interview format that could be conducted in a more private setting where there was greater potential for participants to speak openly about their experiences.

Patton (1980) states that the general purpose of interviewing is to “find out what is in and on someone else’s mind” (196). In-depth, qualitative interviewing is an appropriate method for achieving this goal, in large part because it produces direct quotations that help to shed light on participants’ “level of emotion, the way in which

they have organized their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions (Patton, 1980, p. 28).

The interviews in this study were semi-structured and largely participant driven, utilizing open-ended questioning when appropriate (see interview guide in the appendix a). This approach was chosen to allow the participants to articulate their experiences with guidance, but limited restrictions, from the researcher. For this study, the researcher used a standardized open-ended interview format. This approach utilizes a set of questions that are “carefully worded and arranged with the intention of taking each respondent through the same sequence and asking each respondent the same questions with essentially the same words” (Patton, 1980, p. 198). According to Patton (1980), this format helps to ensure consistency while also reducing “the possibility of bias that comes from having different interviews for different people.” (198).

The interview guide contained questions that were broadly grouped into four categories that were related to ethnicity, the Asian American community, civic and political engagement, and opportunities for engagement at school and in the community. Questions were written to address the study’s research questions and were shaped by the pertinent information that the researcher identified while reviewing materials for the literature review of this study. At the beginning of each interview, student ethnicity was defined through self-identification, a process that helped to clarify the term “Asian American” as it relates to this study. Several themes emerged during the course of the interviews that often overlapped into the different categories of questions. As a result, questioning became repetitious at times during some of the interviews. When this

occurred and the researcher had determined that no new information would be given, the interview was completed.

The interviews were conducted from June to September 2010. Interviews were scheduled at times and locations that were convenient for the participants. The interview times were varied while the interview locations consisted mostly of study rooms in a school or public library as well as some participants' places of employment. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes to an hour, not including some informal discussion time at the end during which additional information might be shared. In a few instances, participants seemed to open up more at this point, perhaps in part because the conversation was less structured and formal having completed the interview questions.

The researcher began each session by giving a brief introduction of the study and his background in an attempt to establish a rapport with the student, so they felt comfortable in sharing their knowledge and honest opinions (Patton, 1980). This was beneficial as some students indicated that they were unsure if they were qualified to speak about civic engagement and political participation. In these cases, the researcher clarified the intent of the study and assured them that no particular level of knowledge was required for the interview. Prior to the interviews beginning, a brief questionnaire was completed to provide some background information on the student and written informed consent was obtained (see appendix for these forms). With the participants' permission, each of the interviews was tape recorded. Additionally, the researcher also took field notes to document observations of the participants and the tone of the interview in general. Following the interview, the researcher asked the participant if he or she could make a referral for another interview candidate.

## **Data Analysis**

Creswell (1998) states that “analyzing text and multiple forms of data presents a formidable task for qualitative researchers” (139). For this reason, the process of reviewing and then attempting to make sense of the oftentimes vast amount of information amassed during a qualitative study, is occasionally referred to as “peeling back the layers of an onion” (Creswell, 2009, p. 183).

For this study, the data analysis process was guided by the following six-step approach outlined by Creswell (2009):

- Organize and prepare data for analysis
- Read through the data
- Code the data
- Generate description of participants and identify themes
- Prepare plan to present findings
- Interpret the data

After the interviews had been transcribed, the researcher then carefully reviewed the text with accompanying field notes to consider the general tone of the interviews, as well as to identify different keywords, phrases and patterns. Following this step, the researcher created tables in MS Word that listed the participants, basic characteristics of their participation and brief notes and/or quotations for future reference. Later, the qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO, was used to help organize the data through a categorization and coding process. Based on the initial review of the interview transcriptions, categories were created representing the broader areas of discussion (e.g. participation in civic and political activities, reasons for participation, attitudes toward



citizenship and ethnicity, etc.). Following this step, the researcher identified various themes that had emerged during analysis (for example, under the category “reasons for participation” we would find the theme, “participation in high school”). Textual data from the interviews was then coded and stored in files that accompanied each theme. In most cases the interview themes reflected the general structure of the interview guide (see interview guide in the appendix a). Overall, the coding process was helpful as it allowed the researcher to better sort, or subdivide, the data while at the same time making it easier to retrieve and reexamine.

### **Verification of Information**

Stake (1995) points out that it is not uncommon for researchers to question if they, in fact, “have it right” and are presenting a “comprehensive and accurate description” in their work (107). Although he was referring specifically to a case study methodology in this instance, his comments can easily be applied to other forms of qualitative research that deal with equal amounts of data. In this situation, researchers must consider the validity of the information that they have collected and the steps they would take to verify it. For this study, the process of verifying the interview information took place at various times throughout Creswell’s (2009) previously mentioned six-step approach to data analysis. This included a thorough examination of the interview transcripts, discussion of major themes during the coding process, as well as member checking that involved follow up meetings with some of the participants to review drafts of their own responses as well as to discuss the overall findings, general themes and patterns.

Additionally, the researcher used various methods of triangulation to further verify the information. Triangulation can generally be defined as the process of corroborating information from various types of data sources used in a qualitative study in order to verify a particular occurrence or phenomenon. The researcher's main objective in data triangulation is "to see if the phenomenon or case remains the same at other times, in other spaces, or as persons interact differently" (Stake, 1995, p. 112).

For this study, multiple secondary data sources were used to help corroborate the various themes that emerged during data analysis. This included a review of related research as well as information that was directly associated with the interviews. A peer debriefing process was also utilized in which the researcher asked a colleague to review the results section of this study and provide feedback. In general, triangulation was an effective tool for the verification process; moreover, it also worked to introduce different ways to interpret the information, which, in turn, contributed to the data analysis.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was not without some limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was small and therefore only allowed for limited generalizability of the results. The researcher previously acknowledged, however, that this was not the intent of the study since its main goal was to seek depth rather than breadth. Nevertheless, this study did produce results which provided a broad view of attitudes and levels of involvement of its subjects. These findings were not unique. Based on previous research (see Zukin et al., 2006; Kiesa et al., 2007), one could expect to find similar patterns or commonalities in other student groups.

The process of self-identification also posed some limitations due to the potential for inaccuracies or misrepresentations from the participants. Recognizing this possibility, the researcher was careful to elicit honest responses which were often substantiated at subsequent points in the interview.

The final limitation involved the potential for bias based on the researcher's own assumptions that were identified at the beginning of the study. The researcher believed that voluntary associations based on ethnicity (sometimes referred to as ethnic identity groups) had the potential to foster a form of particularized trust that could affect their members' interactions with people from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds (Uslaner & Conley, 2003). This belief largely stemmed from the researcher's previous work experiences with various community organizations in Las Vegas where, on a limited number of occasions, the researcher observed that ethnic organizations had created an insular atmosphere within the group. Clearly, this was not the intention of the organization, but an unintended consequence that was partially influenced by its structure.

This view was identified at the outset of the study per Creswell's (2009) recommendation for "reflexivity," or self awareness, while conducting qualitative research. The researcher was mindful to continuously monitor this opinion throughout the study, while making an effort to set it aside or "bracket" it during the interview and data analysis process so to eliminate its influence. The researcher also used the process of member checking and peer debriefing to help reduce the potential for bias when reporting the findings.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### **Participant Background**

Fifteen participants were interviewed for this study. Nine participants were male, six were female. The age range was from 19 to 32. All but two of the participants, one of which being the only graduate student included in this study, could be labeled a “Millennial” or an individual born after 1985. Ten of the participants attended UNLV, five attended CSN. The majority were full-time students pursuing an undergraduate degree. All of the participants had attended their respective school for a minimum of one year.

Through the process of self-identification, which took place at the start of the interview, eight of the participants identified themselves as ethnic American (e.g. Chinese American, Korean American, etc.), four by ethnicity alone, one as Asian, one as Pacific Islander and one as American. Nine of the participants were U.S. citizens; the remaining six were permanent residents.

The majority of students stated that they were active in civic activities (e.g. volunteering); while only three students stated that they were currently involved in political activities. This information was gleaned from question responses that asked students how active they had been in civic and political activities over the past two years.

Participation with civic and political activities was often coordinated within school clubs. In general, students reported that there was a wider variety of clubs at UNLV as opposed to CSN, particularly with regard to those that catered to the interests of Asian American students.

*Table 1. Participant Information*

Participant	Self-Identification	Gender	Age	Club Involvement	Civically Active	Politically Active
1	Chinese American	Male	20	x	x	
2	Asian	Male	21	x		
3	American	Female	20	x	x	
4	Chinese American	Female	19	x	x	
5	Filipino	Male	22	x	x	
6	Korean American	Male	21			
7	American Born Chinese	Male	21	x	x	
8	Filipino American	Male	21	x	x	x
9	Vietnamese American	Male	22	x	x	x
10	Filipino	Male	19			
11	Asian American	Female	28	x	x	
12	Thai American	Female	32			
13	Chinese	Male	20	x	x	x
14	Japanese	Female	25			
15	Pacific Islander	Female	21		x	

### **Summary of the Interviews**

The findings from this study are presented within three categories. These categories were created as a way to organize the interview information in a manner that would be appropriate to answer the research questions.

As discussed, the following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How do Asian American college students view civic and political engagement and to what extent do they participate in related activities?
2. Why do they participate? What factors contribute to their decision to become involved in such activities or not to participate at all?
3. How do ethnicity and ethnic ties affect the students' participation?

Based on the research questions as well as the interview guide, three main categories were created: civic and political engagement, attitudes toward citizenship and the role of ethnicity. Each category also includes separate sub-categories that are related to the main topic. Several quotes have been included in these sections to highlight certain points or themes while providing the reader with the direct participant perspectives.

Various themes were identified within the interview data as participants made frequent mention of particular words, phrases or ideas. Themes were often interrelated and discussed at different points throughout the interviews and ensuing categories. Not surprisingly, the topic of school clubs frequently came up during the interviews. The researcher discovered that the bulk of students' civic and political engagement was often concentrated within these clubs beginning in college or high school. All of the students had attended club meetings with varying degrees of consistency to pursue a specific activity or to simply interact with others on a social basis. Some of the students had served as club leaders while three mentioned that they had even gone so far as to help form their own clubs.

Overall, the students responded positively to their schools' attempts to provide opportunities for civic and political engagement. This was mostly expressed in the context of school clubs and extracurricular activities since little mention was made of efforts inside the classroom. On some occasions students pointed out that this was not actually the responsibility of the institution, but more so the students themselves by forming and promoting their own clubs. Some students did also express, however, that the overall student population at their schools was not particularly interested in civic or political activities.

Stereotypes of Asians were also mentioned numerous times as an issue that affects the Asian American community. Several students viewed the issue with concern believing that it could negatively impact workplace practices as well as their careers. Moreover, some also indicated that it could serve as an obstacle for Asian Americans as they attempt to become more involved in the political realm.

### **Civic and Political Engagement**

The participants generally demonstrated a greater comfort level speaking about community service over political participation. This can mostly be attributed to the fact that many of them had previous experience volunteering in the community while fewer of them had directly participated with politics outside of voting. The majority of students was active in at least one form of the activities and displayed a genuine enthusiasm for helping others.

In regard to civic engagement, the participants had a favorable view of activities such as volunteering and recognized these pursuits as direct and easy ways to help address various community issues. For several of the participants, volunteering was primarily facilitated through school clubs that focused on community service. Oftentimes, students were introduced to these clubs through friends or social events that were hosted by the school such as the UNLV Involvement Fair. Some clubs that were frequently mentioned in the interviews included the Circle K Kiwanis Club, the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA), and the Raising Our Asian Rights club (ROAR). These clubs serve as a link between the students and local community organizations that coordinate volunteering activities to support different causes (e.g.

Three Square, Boys and Girls Club, Habitat for Humanity, Big Brothers Big Sisters and the Starlight Children's Foundation). Students' volunteering experience often reflects typical activities of such organizations:

Participant 4: ...making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and donating them to the Salvation Army to help out the homeless and stuff or, like, going to a local senior shelter and just spending time with them.

Participant 5: I work with the Boys and Girls Club...I really enjoy going there to help supervise them [the kids] and play some games with them cause sometimes they really need a positive role model or just someone that will pay attention to them...

Participant 11: We [do] community service projects around the valley and I helped organize a project where we donated belts and chap sticks to the school I worked for because they [the students] really needed it.

Participant 15: ...I really wanted to help make the houses or help paint the houses and put all the wood up [with Habitat for Humanity]. Help those families with low income...we actually gave food and helped kids go to school with lunches because, you know, some families don't have enough for their kids to eat lunch [with Three Square].

When discussing the reasons for participating, most of the students stated that they truly enjoyed volunteering and expressed a passion for it. At the most basic level, students admitted that it was essentially something they felt good about doing. Outside of a few occasions, the participants did not trace their involvement to a specific cause or



cite one as the reason they became involved, but spoke about their motivations for involvement in largely general and non-political terms.

Participant 1: It's mainly because it's a good cause and, like, I believe in helping, I mean I believe that there's, like, certain people who actually need help. It's just the wrong time hit them and maybe they need help from people like us. I feel it's a good thing to do.

Participant 3: The reason why I love volunteering and love doing what I do is just because it makes me feel good about myself and it makes me seem to appreciate my life a little bit more.

Participant 4: I don't know, I think honestly I just, like, helping people in general. People say it gives you a warm fuzzy feeling inside, but I don't think it's a warm fuzzy feeling. It's probably...just a satisfying feeling. There is no fuzz to it.

A number of the students who had attended high school in Las Vegas also mentioned that their involvement in high school clubs that promoted community service, specifically the Kiwanis Key Club, was a big factor in influencing their participation in college (coincidentally, some also added that most Key Club members were Asian American). For example, in each of the cases where students stated they had been involved in the Kiwanis Key Club, they had later moved on to join the Kiwanis Circle K Club after entering UNLV or CSN. Some of the students implied that this was simply a natural process and an easy way to continue volunteering.

Participant 11: ...in high school I was in Key Club and that really got me interested in community service and when we got the chance to found the

[Kiwanis] Young Professionals Club, I got the opportunity to continue that community service club. I really enjoy doing it.

When asked about their plans to participate in community service activities after finishing school, the majority of students stated that they wanted to remain involved but could not easily identify where that would actually take place. Those who were involved in the Kiwanis Circle K Club mentioned that there were local Kiwanis clubs but that they were not familiar with them outside of the Kiwanis Young Professionals Club which was started in part by UNLV students. Other students stated that they might simply choose to participate with some of the local organizations to which they had been exposed and directly worked with while at school. Some also mentioned that they would inquire with the Las Vegas Asian Chamber of Commerce about possible volunteer/community service opportunities in the community.

The students who were not active in community service still viewed it favorably (some even had limited experience volunteering), but frequently stated that school and/or work greatly limited their free time. None of these students were connected to any formal group that focused on community service activities. When asked if anyone had invited them to become involved, all of the students responded negatively but stated they would consider participating if asked. One student suggested that his lack of involvement was based on limited interaction with people outside of his own circle of family and friends. At times, this non-interfering outlook was also mentioned while discussing the role of the citizen.

Participant 2: Mostly because I don't follow the news so I don't really know what is going on and my friends and family, they just kind of keep

to themselves. We just kind of live our own lives and we don't really know what's going on.

Despite sometimes very high levels of civic engagement, the majority of participants in this study stated that they were not politically active and reported varying levels of interest in politics. In some cases, the researcher observed that when transitioning to questions regarding political participation, some students even responded negatively to the first mention of the word "politics." Later in the interview, students generally revealed that their disdain for politics stemmed from perceptions of politicians as largely uncooperative, often "fighting" or inciting "drama" which was counterproductive to addressing social issues. As one participant commented, "I guess I was never educated really on the nitty-gritty on what they [politicians] really do for this community."

Overall, students did not display any overt preferences to specific political parties or politicians. The researcher anticipated that President Obama might serve as a positive figure, one whose recent popularity might encourage community service, but he was only briefly mentioned on a handful of occasions which included both semi-positive and negative comments.

Some participants stated that they only had an interest in certain types of political subjects or policies and would follow them intermittently. On such occasions, these areas had some direct impact their day-to-day lives. A few that were mentioned included issues related to higher education, e.g. how recent budget cuts were affecting schools or discussions of student loan forgiveness, as well as some topics related to local businesses and the economy, in general.

Others simply stated that they just did not care for politics, without offering any specific explanations as to why.

Participant 4: I think to be honest, I don't have much interest in politics.

It's more about, I know what's happening in a way. And that's about it.

Participant 11: Well, I vote and I read about it sometimes, but it's just not something that interests me. It never has been and I suppose...it just doesn't interest me.

Several students described politics in vague terms, as something that was complex sometimes to the point of frustration and as a result, they felt they could not get involved, or they were not ready for involvement at this particular time. In the latter case students would often clarify this statement by expressing that they did not have enough knowledge or information to participate and seemed unsure about doing so in the future.

Interestingly, these same students might also mention that they tried to stay up to date on major issues in the news, but did so with a neutral perspective that was removed from divisive or partisan arguments.

Participant 3: You know I try to follow it [politics] because it does get interesting after a while, but your head spins so much that it just makes me not really want to get involved or hear it. As much as I want to get involved and see how I can fix things, I can't, or I just don't think I have the voice for it. I just don't think it really matters too much.

Participant 5: I shy away from politics cause I feel, like, I just don't show that much interest in the first place and then I feel like there's just a lot of drama or I don't feel like I'm educated enough and I don't want to go out

there and read a bunch of stuff because I want to make a decision on something. I want to be able to make an educated decision.

Participant 7: I follow sometimes just in the, like, national level. I'll check out the newspapers just to read up on it. I'm not really involved in politics, like, I'm not going to run for anything. I'm not the person like, "hey, you should vote for whoever" like that, but I think it's still important for me to stay involved, like, knowledge wise, but I'm not going to promote anything or, like, I'm not going to be physically involved in running or helping.

Participant 10: I definitely try and keep track of what's happening politically. Most of the time I can't understand what's going on because I don't really have the knowledge. Like, sometimes I would try and read the newspapers and they would mention chambers and legal jargon and I can't wrap my head around it because I've never encountered it before.

Although only a small percentage of the participants stated they were politically active, those that did participated at a very high rate. Each was involved with clubs and/or student government at their schools; additionally, they all had previous work experience on campaigns for Nevada politicians to include Sue Lowden, Governor Gibbons, Senator Reid and Senator Ensign. At the time of the interviews, one participant was interning for Senator Ensign while another was campaigning for Senator Reid. Two of the participants also mentioned that they had visited Carson City during the Spring 2010 semester to present to the Nevada State Legislature and advocate for their respective schools and the importance of higher education in Nevada. The researcher

noted that these students were eager to discuss their political experiences as well as point out the work that they felt needed to be accomplished in their communities.

Participant 9: I think if you want to have a good community then you need to be involved. If everybody was involved then...we'd be able to work through problems. You know, cause in most situations you have a handful of people representing hundreds if not thousands of other individuals then they'll come to agreements...but oftentimes they'll come up with something that not a lot of people agree with. Well, you weren't there. You didn't get to say what you thought because you didn't bother coming to the scheduled meeting...you need to go, you need to be active, you need to be involved.

Participant 13: I was just fascinated by American politics and I wasn't really big in politics [in China]. After I came here I was just fascinated...it was the President Bush and Al Gore election that fascinated me. And then the second year it was John Kerry. I thought it was pretty cool and I started to want to learn more about it. Eventually, I thought that politics would change the world, change something. It was the ultimate way of changing something. You can dedicate yourself to politics, government positions. That is the best way to make a change.

Most recently, some of the politically active students had also worked on projects that encouraged Asian American community members to actively participate in the 2010 census. Projects such as these helped to demonstrate the students' understanding of the ways in which community issues are connected to, or impacted by the political process.

One student described how politicians naturally pay more attention to those populations with greater numbers and commented, “so we’re working very hard at...getting all of our folks to report themselves...because we really want to have political clout. We want to have data, figures so we can start having more clout as far as advocacy...”

In several instances, students’ opinions on civic and political engagement were refined when asked to discuss their thoughts on the relationship between the two forms of participation. Many students viewed politics as primarily dealing with “laws” and spoke about it as a national versus local phenomenon. Conversely, when discussing civic engagement or community service, the students were quick to point out how it could directly affect their lives and the people around them. This is not to imply that participants were unaware of the connection between the two forms of participation. Some students recognized that they did overlap but could not easily describe in what specific ways.

Participant 1: I would say the community [activities] is more of just, like, helping your neighbor so to speak, like, the people that you see every day. Political is maybe the next step up and just, like, not really helping, although if you’re helping with politics and hiring then eventually they will try and help the citizens also. So I guess it could correlate, but yeah, I just feel as if it’s more important as me, for just, like, one citizen to just try and help out the neighbor and probably move on to politics once I learn more about it.

Participant 3: ...it’s just that politics is voicing your opinion. Civics is more just how it is or how you want it to be...with politics, there are all

these people voicing their opinions and that's how it becomes politics when you have something clashing or head butting each other.

Participant 4: I always thought it [politics] was just, like, more national level kind of thing. More about the government, the laws, like, our senators that type of thing...politics. And community, well it kind of intertwines in a way, but then it's more about, like, us citizens, things that affect *us* more than political stuff.

Participant 10: ...politics is running the government making sure everyone is abiding by the law and creating more laws to make a better country and maybe community and civic efforts are more intrinsic community based...they don't deal with the law. They just try to help out in the ways they can without, you know, having political agendas. They're just different avenues. At least that's what I think. One deals with the law and the bureaucracy of it all and one deals with...regular community members trying to make a difference.

Participant 11: I think community service is you're directly serving a purpose, a group of people who need this service. Well, for political activities I think that you're rallying for the support of the politician, not necessarily helping other people, but with community service you see you're directly helping them and you see the effect that you're having, but again I don't have any experience with political activities, so that's as far as I know.



## **Attitudes toward Citizenship**

The participants' perceptions of citizenship and a good citizen were useful to further clarify some of their reasons for civic and political engagement. At a basic level, most of the students expressed that citizens had a responsibility to get involved in the community in some way or another.

The students' characterizations of a good citizen often included brief descriptions and familiar themes such as someone who "pays taxes" and "votes," "provides for his family," "helps the neighbors" or simply does not "litter" or "damage anything." Some students also suggested that being a good citizen essentially meant minding your own business and not interfering with the affairs of others. As one student described it, a citizen's main role is "just being good, respecting others...just keeping to yourself."

Other times students expressed the belief that people had a certain obligation to take a more hands-on approach and to "give something back" to the community. As one student stated, "I think people have to give back what they take." In these instances, students were usually mindful not to be unrealistic with their expectations, further explaining that giving back could essentially include donating just a small portion of one's time.

Participant 5: A good citizen is a genuine good person, who, they go to school or they have a degree. They support their community through different ways maybe financially or they're out there volunteering in some way. And I guess something else is that they have pride in who they are and also in their community and where they're from.

Participant 8: Good citizens need to be involved with the community. They need to vote. They need to understand the issues that affect them. They need to be in touch with their elected officials. If there's an issue that arises, they need to write them, call them and let them know. Advocate. It doesn't mean that you sacrifice your life to be part of the political process, [but] to be part of this country does involve getting outside your box. I'm here living the American dream...making money, but beyond that you need to be involved in the community and also the political process.

Participant 9: Give back, be involved. If you're working full time, you know, take some time, one or two days a week to do something for your community...I think if you want anything in return you'll have to give back.

Participant 15: Well, when I think of a good citizen, I think of helping out in the community. Not religiously, but, you know, giving some part...if you want to stay at home and just not talk to anybody, then just stay at home and that's okay. It's not going to harm anybody, but it would be nice if everyone gave a little bit, cause it *would* make a difference.

Additionally, some students talked about an individual's responsibility to the community in more practical terms. They stated that participating ultimately helps save resources and that taking care of oneself by having some sense of self sufficiency was a key step to being able to help others.

Participant 6: If there aren't volunteers, then someone's going to be paid to do it [community work]...and to be paid to do it means it's going to be coming off of our taxes...Help out, clean the community, make the world a better place. Everybody wants that. Nobody wants a dirty place, so whatever we have to do, volunteer service is basically what has to be done for free. If nobody does it willingly then we're going to alternately pay for it.

Participant 13: ...I feel that the top priority is to take care of yourself. If everybody in America, if you take care of yourself first before taking care of others, if everybody is good on themselves already, then society would be better...I agree more with taking care of myself first and your family first because if you take care of yourself and your family, then that means you take little burdens from the government...and then respond when the government needs you, when people need you.

### **The Role of Ethnicity**

Participants reported a wide range of opinions when responding to questions of ethnicity and the Asian American community. This section will present some of the findings related to ethnicity and how it factors into decisions to become involved either in the community or in politics. With a few students this topic seemed to come up numerous times throughout the interview since it was continuously linked to various points that they were trying to make. With others, it was only mentioned in response to specific inquiries about matters related to ethnicity.

As was previously reported in this chapter, students' ethnicity was determined through the process of self-identification which took place at the beginning of each interview. Eight of the participants identified themselves as ethnic American, four by ethnicity alone, one as Asian, one as Pacific Islander and one as American. When asked if students had ever used the term Asian American, several reported yes, but only in certain contexts such as "applications," "surveys" and "questionnaires."

Multiple students commented that they did feel a general sense of unity with other Asian American groups. This feeling was largely based on shared "culture." Students mentioned that because of common cultural practices as well as upbringing, they felt more comfortable interacting with other Asian Americans. Often they would also cite shared interests, hobbies or club involvement with other Asian Americans as additional factors.

Participant 1: I feel, like, that's kind of how America, maybe people around our age are generally kind of just, like, conformed into...being only affiliated with the Asian groups or only doing special activities, like, school groups mainly just separated by race or ethnicity.

Participant 10: I definitely feel there is some kind of connection since we're from the same continent and the similarities in terms of culture, there's the stereotype that we are more submissive [and] quiet, but I definitely do see some truth in that, but it's inevitable that there would be some connection between us.

Not all students expressed that they felt a sense of unity with other Asian American groups, stating that they only shared this sentiment with others from their own

ethnic background. In some cases, they would also add that they had not had much interaction with other Asian groups.

Participant 13: If you're talking about daily hanging out and stuff like that, we pretty much stick to our own ethnicity...the Filipinos pretty much stick together even the Chinese and Taiwanese, they stick together too. There's a disconnect between, you know, all Asians. I guess it's kind of hard to find anything in common.

The question of group consciousness was sometimes confusing to the students and consequently yielded mixed responses. This question was inserted because researchers have found that a sense of linked fate has the potential to lead to greater political involvement (see Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2004). Nevertheless, some of the students immediately grasped the intent of the question ("our struggles are so common") and cited common stereotypes and challenges faced by Asian Americans as reasons for sharing a sense of linked fate. It is also worth mentioning that when some of the participants were asked if they thought what happened to other Asian Americans would also affect their own lives, a few shared experiences that occurred after the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting. Students stated that following this incident (involving a Korean student) some racially charged comments or jokes had been directed toward them. They explained that this was most likely a result of people not distinguishing between Asian groups and associating them as one. Some students likened the situation to occurrences following the 2001 September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks where some people of middle-eastern descent living in the U.S. experienced hostility based on their ethnicity.

Participant 10: Yes, I do feel that way because, you know, generally other people have this perception of you. If you're Asian you're part of that *whole* group. You're an Asian American, you're an Asian and it's how they would perceive you from the outside. It would affect me because I can't control how they feel about their opinions or whatnot, their thoughts on Asians...they have these preconceived notions about who you are and...their opinions, these issues definitely affect me. You know, cause I can't really control them.

Students reported a variety of answers when asked what they thought were two issues facing the Asian American community today. Several students gave rather brief responses that ranged from topics such as "immigration" to "discrimination" to increased "community involvement." Some students could not immediately identify an issue, while others commented that they were unsure of any if existed. As one student stated, "for me I don't think there's [*sic*] very many issues. I could live here, become a citizen, I could get a nice paid job. I don't think there is an issue for me."

The two issues that students discussed at some length were stereotypes and a general lack of opportunities. These issues seemed interconnected as students recognized that both had a negative effect in the community and more specifically in the workplace. Students who mentioned stereotypes generally did so by describing some variation of the "model minority" stereotype.

Participant 1: I heard actually, quote unquote, that Asians are the invisible race and I kind of agree with it. It pretty much just states that Asians, we don't really take part, like I said in any politics, like, we're just here to

start businesses or make money and I rarely ever see them actually, like, taking part in any politics or any civil works or anything.

Participant 4: I guess in a way a lot of people, like, maybe stereotype Asians as, like, they work hard and stuff. It's a good stereotype, but then not all Asians are like that. So it kind of puts them under more pressure to do better in a way. And, like, if you're interviewing for a certain job, even though it's more geared towards, like, ethnic diversity in the workforce, they still might not want to interview an Asian...because of, like, their accent or something.

Participant 11: Well, just the different stereotypes that people think about, Asians are on top of the class or expected to be hard workers. Stuff like that.

As mentioned, some students also spoke about a lack of opportunities and equality for Asian Americans.

Participant 7: We still kind of, like, back down on opportunities just cause probably society hasn't given us a full equality in terms of being out there and getting our voices heard...it's starting to change though, cause I know we have more Congresspeople who are Asian now...but it's still not to the point of where our voices are totally heard and lots of Chinese people or Asians in general are not speaking out for themselves right now in this moment. So hopefully in the future we can get more out there politically.

Participant 8: ...there's kind of this saying how Asian Americans have this really high rate for getting into college, right, or college graduation rate.

It's actually a pretty good rate, but some of the statistics...some of the data is showing that once these folks get into the professional world, they have a much harder time getting promoted or kind of breaking the ceiling of getting into higher positions. Leadership roles. There are some statistics which show that Asian American males, for example, are making something like 10% less than their white counterparts...we can be college educated but we still don't have the treatment that we would prefer.

After inquiring about issues in the Asian American community, the researcher asked students if they were aware of any national or local leaders who were currently advocating for Asian Americans. On the national level, the majority of students were unable to name any. In some cases, they might have vaguely remembered a politician's name or possibly the state where an Asian American politician was serving, but they could otherwise provide very little information. Of the students who were politically active, Congressman Mike Honda (CA) and Congresswoman Judy Chu (CA) were briefly brought up as well as U.S. Secretary of Commerce, Gary Locke, a Chinese-American who one participant heard speak earlier in the year at a minority business forum in Las Vegas.

Alternatively, several students were able to name local leaders that were not politicians, but community advocates such as Wayne Tanaka, Vida Lin and Rozita Lee. Often these individuals were mentioned in conjunction with the Las Vegas Asian Chamber of Commerce, some of them as staff members (Vida Lin is the current president) while others were introduced to the students through club sponsored events that involved individuals from the chamber, such as the "Hear Me Roar" event, a



community panel discussion held at UNLV in the Spring 2010 semester. Additionally, some participants named fellow students as leaders. Coincidentally, the two students who were mentioned had some visibility among Asian American students at UNLV since they had highly visible roles in clubs that largely catered to Asians, i.e. the Raising Our Asian Rights (ROAR) and the Kiwanis Young Professionals clubs.

Not surprisingly, the politically active students seemed to have a greater understanding of the importance of community leaders since they were more familiar with the connection between social issues and the political process. In one instance, a participant told the story of a community leader whom he referred to as having “power,” which enabled her to more effectively get things accomplished. The researcher observed that these students were very confident in their abilities and seemed to welcome the opportunity to take on greater leadership roles in the community.

Participant 8: I realized as a second generation sometimes making money and living the American dream is not enough, like, you don't take the money with you when you die and so I'm really interested in kind of making as much change, positive change in the community as I can. First of all because, one, the leadership in the community is kind of aging and they need new leaders, young blood, people like me to step up and take the reins and, two, because if there aren't people like me then the old people will keep running the country and they won't address people like me or who look like me, *our* concerns.

Participant 9: ...just by getting involved a little bit [with student activism], my own personal reasons really exploded that into helping other people

because for me I'm not concerned for myself and my future. I know I've been blessed to have certain trades, certain abilities and talents and I can succeed at pretty much whatever I decide to do...so now I'm more politically active and socially active for the people that need it.

When students were asked their opinions of groups that represent the interests of Asian Americans and if they would be effective in resolving issues related to the Asian community, the answers were varied according to the mission of the specific group. It should be noted that this question was answered almost exclusively within the context of school clubs; community groups were not frequently mentioned in this discussion. The researcher presumed that this was most likely because students were not aware of any or could not speak about them in great detail. In regards to the groups' role in the community, most students stated that they helped to expose Asian culture (to Asian and non-Asian groups), thereby facilitating a greater understanding of common attributes and challenges. In this context, students viewed the groups positively. Overall, students did not mention an advocacy role when discussing these groups.

Some participants viewed ethnic student clubs at their schools as purely having a social function with limited interaction with other student groups. In these cases, they were sometimes described as being comprised of mostly international students as well as people who were interested in the students' culture. This view was generally more critical with one student even commenting that these types of clubs were "useless."

Participant 6: Well, these Koreans they get together and have fun. It's not really helping society. Literally the majority of the Koreans [in the

student club] are from Korea...and they're really there just to make friends.

On a few occasions, mention of these clubs led to peripheral discussions of the relationship between Asian Americans who grew up in the U.S. or have lived here for several years, and students from Asia who were attending college in the U.S. on a short-term basis. These discussions revealed some of the cultural differences between the groups and how their interactions are sometimes limited or frayed because of these dissimilarities.

One student believed that Asian student groups could help to resolve issues facing Asian Americans, but then later in the interview seemed to question their purpose.

Participant 15: I think that we can solve issues with, you know, with these clubs. I think if we come together as, you know, Filipinos do or Asian groups we have a better understanding. We see the same sides almost and we can agree on a lot of things and see what we can fix and what we can work on.

Participant 15: ...their [club members] purpose is to mainly stick with Filipinos. I'm pretty sure you don't really have to be Filipino, but, you know, that's mainly what it's for, just us, or just for Filipinos or, you know, just for if you want to be in a group where you guys think alike or are alike...I never really understood the reasons why they make these clubs.

Some students seemed to prefer greater diversity in their groups over ones that were focused mainly on ethnicity or related issues. As one student stated, "I like to

explore other things other than just my culture...I'd like to know about other people's culture." On some occasions this led to the greater issue of inclusiveness. One student pointed out that this was discussed by an Asian community leader during the "Hear Me Roar" panel:

Participant 13: He [the panel speaker] said we need to stop thinking. This is what I took from him. Stop thinking, we need to be involved, mixed with society, integrated with society. I was thinking we're a minority, we need to stick together. No, we need to treat ourselves like everybody else. That's the ultimate way of diversity.

In addition to ethnic student groups, some students also mentioned the Raising Our Asian Rights (ROAR) group at UNLV. Students viewed this group positively and acknowledged that it could be effective in resolving issues related to the Asian community. ROAR was recognized as a panethnic Asian student group that focused on political awareness while also introducing its members to local political groups as well as community leaders (e.g. the "Hear Me Roar" community panel discussion).

Participant 7: I know ROAR right now is really promoting Asian rights in general cause they're setting up connections with, you know, the Asian Chamber of Commerce, getting us students to have some sort of connection with people who could speak out for us. They're also keeping us more involved in politics or anything like that so we can get our voices out there.

One participant who had played a substantial role in forming the club briefly summarized its larger mission:

Participant 8: ROAR is kind of like the coalition for the Asian [student] groups. And so we put together the big things like Asian Heritage Month Festival...we hosted our own Asian graduation reception and so we honor all of the Asian graduates. Before ours there wasn't one. We also do a lot of leadership development. We do workshops and host many conferences and we're hosting a bigger one this fall. And we really kind of focus on the personal and professional development for these folks: college-aged Asians who want to be leaders. A lot of them are board members from the organizations or people who want to develop their skills so they can go back to their [student] groups and kind of just improve them.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### **Overview**

The intention of this qualitative study was to develop a better understanding of Asian American youth's attitudes of civic and political engagement with particular attention given to the role of ethnicity. Fifteen college students were recruited to discuss their opinions and experiences with these two forms of participation. The study drew on existing literature related to the participatory trends of college students as well as Asian Americans to develop its research questions as well as the research design. The overarching question that the study explored was why some people choose to participate in civic or political activities and why some do not. This section will briefly summarize and discuss the results, make comparisons to past research as well as recommendations for further studies related to this area.

Overall, the findings of this study reflect students' general desire to be involved in the community by helping others in some way. Students' work in the community was conducted almost exclusively on a voluntary basis. Their activity is based on a general sense of responsibility to give something back to the community, but also at times to affect some form of change in a particular area with which they were concerned. It is also important to point out that volunteering is simply something that students seem to enjoy doing. In other words, the act of contributing, even if it is only a fraction of their time, gave students a good feeling about themselves.

Volunteering is often performed with others in a group setting such as a school club or local community organization. The researcher learned that school clubs

commonly helped to facilitate the process for participation serving as accessible and non-intimidating entry points for students. More importantly, this club participation also seemed to help foster a habit of involvement through scheduled volunteering or community service activities. This may be partially attributed to the social component of civic activity that should be emphasized. Several of the students acknowledged that they were first exposed to volunteering through friends or peers. One student even stated that volunteering was simply something that he and his friends did routinely (“that’s just how we hang out”).

Additionally, within the clubs, students were sometimes able to take advantage of opportunities for leadership roles. Some students were appreciative for these opportunities and recognized the skills that they were developing. As one student described her club president role, “it made me stronger in a lot of ways. I can actually talk in front of people and I don’t get shy so much. I learned a lot and I enjoy it.” Another student mentioned that through participation in community service he was not only able to gain “experience,” but also “connections.” He acknowledged that community service allows one to contribute positively to the people, but also added that “you can benefit from it, too.”

This study indicates that there are several obstacles that students face to becoming politically engaged, beginning with some of their views towards politics and government in general. Most notably, students expressed negative and distrustful views of politicians and saw politics as something remote that did not directly affect their lives. They also viewed politics as something marred by partisan fighting which they deemed unproductive. Furthermore, several students indicated that they were not qualified for

political participation, as though it were something that required formal training, and therefore they did not seek to become involved. These opinions suggest that for several of the students interviewed in this study, the transition to political activity seems unlikely.

One interesting point that the researcher identified was how students viewed and discussed politics primarily as a national phenomenon. One possibility for this occurrence is that national politics often receives greater attention and generates more discussion than do local politics in the media. As a result, local politics seemed largely overlooked or unknown altogether. This appeared to contribute to the dilemma of students not identifying a clear entry-point into political activity because they lacked exposure to local political figures and organizations. Conversely, no political affiliations or knowledge is required for civic activities such as volunteering and therefore local community service groups were seen as something more approachable and easier to access.

The Raising Our Asian Rights (ROAR) student club at UNLV was one exception to students' negative views of politics. This club seemed to appeal to students for a number of reasons including: 1) its accessibility to students and familiar club structure that is less formal than a traditional political organization; 2) an all-encompassing Asian panethnic approach; 3) a non-partisan and generalized mission with which Asian students could easily identify. Moreover, ROAR seemed to maintain a balance between organizing activities that were not overtly political and those that touched on more traditional forms of political participation such as student activism and lobbying. With this approach, students seemed less likely to be intimidated or turned off by a more conventional political message. Ironically, two of the students interviewed for this study



stated they were neither interested in politics nor politically active but were actually involved with ROAR and enthusiastically spoke about its activities and mission.

Although ethnicity did not appear to play a large role in encouraging community or political activity, it was apparent that student clubs (such as ROAR and the Chinese Students and Scholars Association [CSSA]) were better able to attract some students who were more likely to get involved in clubs that catered to Asians Americans due to the level of familiarity and comfort. To a certain degree, this was also the case for the Kiwanis Circle K clubs whose memberships were predominantly Asian American strictly by happenstance. Additionally, through Asian clubs, students were also likely to be introduced to community leaders who could share their experiences in the community or in politics. For example, several students stated that they had attended a panel coordinated by ROAR and were grateful for the chance to interact with local Asian American community leaders.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the researcher did not discover any trends in civic and political engagement based on citizenship status. While a few students who were permanent residents implied that their status influenced certain aspects of their political participation (most notably their ability to vote), other permanent residents actively participated in both civic *and* political activities. Paradoxically, most of the students who were citizens in this study chose *not* to participate in politics. As was previously mentioned, the researcher's first inclination was to solely target students who were citizens as interview candidates, but later discovered that it was beneficial to include permanent residents in this discussion in order to obtain a more complete perspective of Asian American student involvement.

## **Theoretical Considerations**

From a broad theoretical standpoint, there appears to be an ever-increasing distance between the individual community member, the government and traditional forms of political participation. As was revealed in this study, some students have developed feelings of alienation toward politics; consequently some were unwilling to even broach the subject. The implications for such a trend can be serious. Not only does it eliminate the potential for meaningful discussions of community issues, but it also reduces overall participation in public matters. Moreover, it can also reinforce negative behaviors that Tocqueville associated with the concept of individualism which leads people to withdraw to their own inner circle thereby decreasing their ability to connect to issues outside of their family, friends, studies or work.

We must also recognize, though, that the benefits to political participation are not always clear and therefore people may question the reasons to actively become engaged. This may be especially relevant today considering the political climate in which the tone has grown increasingly negative and government in general is often proclaimed to be inept or corrupt in many cases by politicians themselves. What can be achieved from increased participation then? Why should students be encouraged to have some link to the political realm? Perhaps the most basic reason is to simply gain an awareness of the ways in which politics connects to social issues, but more importantly, how it can affect their everyday lives. Such information might make clear the importance of political decisions while better enabling students to engage in more informed discourse by giving them a greater comfort level when discussing issues related to politics and current events.

Increased political knowledge could also enhance students existing civic work by pointing out new ways in which they might address community problems. Additionally, it might lead to collaborations that extend beyond their involvement in their current school or community clubs. In this manner, political participation has the potential to draw people *farther* out of their inner circles and comfort zones and into a more diverse cross-section of the local community. In this atmosphere a fuller sense of understanding and tolerance can be achieved among participants, and, as a result, a greater level of generalized trust is established (Stolle, 1998). Political participation can also lead to groups and relationships where the stakes are higher because of the nature of their goals, i.e. improving public safety, health and education, etc.

Furthermore, a greater awareness of political issues or public matters and might also help to illuminate the shared interests of individuals and community members and the ways in which their lives and well being are interconnected. This perspective in particular could cultivate a better understanding of Tocqueville's principle of self-interest rightly understood while guarding against the behavior that he associated with individualism. Such an approach may ultimately appeal more to our natural inclinations as individuals. In essence, the more we understand how helping others benefits *ourselves*, the more likely we may be to actually help *others*.

Generally speaking, the aforementioned benefits to political engagement could apply to all students. When discussing Asian Americans in particular, they could help students identify shared concerns among the various Asian ethnic groups that might otherwise be overlooked. These concerns could eventually form the basis of a stronger sense of group consciousness and may ultimately lead to more panethnic group activity.

The participants interviewed in this study reported that they did feel a general sense of unity with other Asian students which was largely based on shared culture. With a greater awareness of political knowledge, however, they might also realize that they share common struggles that could perhaps be addressed more effectively were they to organize and work together as a unified group. Panethnic (or ethnic-specific) group activity might be spurred by such commonalities and the desire to affect specific change in the political, civic or economic realms. In this instance, a panethnic identity based on higher levels of group consciousness can be viewed not only as a means for the development of political participation, but also increased empowerment within the Asian American community (Espiritu, 1992).

Civic engagement, conducted in voluntary associations, may be an initial step to bridging the gap between individuals and the political realm by bringing people into cooperative relationships with others to address local community issues. It provides some students with opportunities to affect change in particular areas, while for others it may simply serve as an entry point for general participation. Civic engagement might also help to create an awareness of how an individual can positively impact his or her surroundings thereby contributing to one's sense of political efficacy (Macedo et al., 2005). As was mentioned earlier in this study, however, it is important to recognize the characteristics of the group in which participation occurs as there is a qualitative dimension to group involvement with some forms being more productive than others (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Putnam, 2000). It is partially for this reason that civic engagement should not simply be accepted as an adequate alternative to politics,

even though it may serve as an entry point for some to meaningful community involvement.

Nonetheless, this study has revealed that civic engagement can play a substantial role in the community and has the potential to encourage political engagement. These views are not new, of course, and have been discussed at several points throughout the study (Almond & Verba, 1965; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Macedo et al., 2005). The researcher will also add, though, that the potential for political engagement does at times seem tenuous and contingent upon circumstances which should be examined on a case-by-case basis that considers both the individual and the group with which they are involved. This study suggests that while some students may be likely to make the transition to increased political activity, others will not. Overall, increased civic engagement, in particular volunteering, can be viewed as a positive trend, one that helps to alleviate common community problems. To enhance its benefits, however, a rudimentary connection to the political realm should also be established in order to ensure a more productive balance between the two forms of participation.

### **Past Research**

Studies by Zukin et al. (2006) and Kiesa et al. (2007) have found that despite low levels of political involvement, younger generations such as the “Millenials” have not completely given up on politics, but struggle to find the appropriate means to connect. These studies support the current findings and are reflected in some student comments.

Participant 10: I try and look at news every day. As far as discussing it, I haven't had a forum or an outlet where I can really try and discuss my

ideologies. I would like to, but it seems right now I haven't had someone else, a group maybe to talk about it. Plus, I am kind of afraid that I might offend someone with my thoughts and my opinions.

Although students demonstrated a strong willingness to participate in community activities, there was little discussion of how the social issues they were addressing were impacted by politics. This finding is consistent with Eliasoph (1998) who stated that civic groups often made an attempt to avoid talk of politics in order to circumvent potentially controversial discussions. The author commented that by doing so, they missed an opportunity to discuss the larger picture to include the root causes of some social issues.

The people I met with wanted to create a sense of community, but did not want to talk politics. Though they did gather together, they missed a chance to ignite that magical kind of power that can sparkle between people when they self-reflectively organize themselves. Such reflection does not necessarily entail ignoring local, individual suffering or abandoning local hand-on projects. In the process of alleviating real people's suffering, citizens could wonder aloud about the political forces that may have helped create the suffering (230).

Several of this study's findings were consistent with data presented in the 2000-2001 Pilot National Asian American Political Survey (PNAAPS). Most notably, students largely identified themselves as ethnic American or by ethnicity alone rather than the broader term "Asian American." Also, students reported a variety of answers when asked what they thought were issues facing the Asian American community today. At

the same time, however, several did express concerns over stereotypes and racial discrimination which came up at various points during the interviews.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The main limitation to this study was its sample size. Because the intent of the study was to focus on the attitudes of a more specific group, the sample included a limited number of participants. The results can therefore not be considered widely generalizable to all Asian American college students at UNLV or CSN. In spite of this limitation, it should also be noted that the sample did include a wide range of students from multiple ethnic backgrounds, each with different experiences at institutions of higher education in southern Nevada. This diversity helped contribute a broader range of perspectives that can add to our understanding of how and why Asian American college students choose to participate in the community.

This researcher recommends that future studies more closely examine students' perceptions of politics and question why students feel they are unqualified to participate and what knowledge or specific skills they feel that they lack in order to do so. This was one point that came up frequently in the interviews and should be explored in more depth.

Investigating the new and different ways in which students might participate is another recommendation. This study primarily examined participation in the context of groups or voluntary associations as well as more traditional forms of political participation in order to gauge students' involvement. A more investigative study of the methods in which students get involved would be helpful to determine if they might

participate in other non-traditional ways (such as online discussions or consumer-based activism) that could also fulfill some political purpose.

It would also be productive to follow up with the students who participated in civic or political activities to see if they remain involved after leaving their schools. This study reported that some students did want to continue their involvement after finishing school but were at times unsure of exactly how they would do so. Also, when conducting follow up, extra attention should be given to those students who demonstrated leadership qualities in either form of engagement. It would be helpful to see how they continue to expand their leadership roles outside of their schools, if in fact, they do. Additionally, it would also be interesting to see whether or not these students maintain their southern Nevada residency and remain involved in their community.

Future research could also explore in more depth the relationship between Asian Americans who grew up in the U.S. versus more recent, foreign-born Asian immigrants who possess lower levels of acculturation. The researcher noted that this relationship should be examined to provide a more complete picture of the various Asian groups in the college and community setting. While examining this relationship, it is suggested that the political attitudes of each group be distinguished and compared. This study revealed varying opinions among members of the groups that could influence the ways in which they participate and work together.



## **Conclusion**

Despite the belief that young people have become increasingly disconnected from their communities, this study suggests that there is a sense of public spiritedness and willingness to get involved. Students' desire to participate stems from a sense of responsibility to give back to the community while performing an activity that is at times both fulfilling and enjoyable. Not surprisingly, students prefer forms of participation that are easily accessible and convenient, most often in areas where they feel they can directly make a difference and with which they are familiar.

The results of this study reflect the importance of student clubs that promote civic engagement, and how they can facilitate participation by presenting accessible entry points to students for meaningful experiences in the community. Students arrive at these clubs through a variety of ways: social connections (a friend's recommendation for, example) or an interest to help out with a particular issue in the community. Nevertheless, a sense of civic responsibility does appear to be fostered or encouraged through these clubs as they increase social interaction, develop habits of volunteerism and provide members with community service opportunities as a means to address local issues with which they are concerned. It is not clear whether students' involvement in civic activities and groups will lead them to politics, however, and therefore a sticking point remains: does participation in civic life evolve to include politics?

Consistent with past research, this study found students to be far less interested or active in politics or traditional forms of political participation. This study also implies, however, that some student clubs may have success recruiting and introducing students to political issues through an approach that is less formal and politicized. How such clubs

might attempt to link politics to social issues that affect students' lives remains to be seen. Furthermore, it is unclear how their members will respond to political discussions if they have already developed negative preconceptions of politics. It would seem, then, that the ultimate question for future research is whether students who are actively involved in civic activities will at some point become politically engaged if they have a greater awareness of the ways in which social issues can be impacted by national and local politics.

Finally, the actions of higher education institutions may be another aspect to consider when discussing factors that enable students become engaged in the community or in politics. Through curriculum development, service learning programs or various student incentives, schools have the ability to take on a greater role in cultivating civic responsibility outside of student clubs. This would, of course, benefit all college students, but may be of particular importance for minority groups whose current participation may be limited. With the appropriate assistance and guidance, though, these groups may eventually discover a clear pathway to greater involvement. As Park et al. (2008) have noted, "if higher education institutions can create avenues for Asian Americans and other college students to link their service experiences with continued commitments to community involvement and social change, we might see a growth in concerned Asian American citizens who are more apt to engage in political activism, including electoral politics" (96).

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APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Question categories: 1) Asian ethnicity; 2) Civic and political engagement;  
3) Opportunities for engagement at school or in the community

1. People identify themselves in a variety of ways. Some examples are American, Asian American, Asian, or Chinese-American. How do you identify yourself?
  - a. Have you ever referred to yourself as Asian American? In what situation?
2. Do you feel a sense of unity with members of your ethnic group? With other Asian American groups in general?
3. Do you feel that what generally happens to other Asian Americans in the U.S. will also affect what happens in your life?
4. Are you currently a member of any organizations that represent the interests of (specific ethnic group) or Asian Americans in general?
  - a. (No) Are you aware of any of these groups at your school or in Las Vegas?
  - b. (No) Would you participate in a group like this if you were asked?
  - c. Do you think these groups are/would be effective in resolving issues that affect Asian Americans?
5. What do you feel are the two most important issues facing Asian Americans or (specific ethnic group) today?
6. Can you name an Asian American community leader that is currently addressing these issues? Someone on the national level?
7. What is your idea of a good citizen?
  - a. Do you feel a (good) citizen has any particular obligations to his or her community?

8. Can you describe your interest in local community affairs? How regularly do you follow or discuss these issues with others?
9. Over the past two years, how active have you been in civic or community activities? (e.g. volunteering, membership in a community group or association, working with others to solve a problem in your community)
10. Can you explain your reasons for participating (or not participating) in these activities?
  - a. How did you get involved in these activities?
  - b. (No) Has anyone ever asked you to participate?
11. Can you describe your interest in politics (at the local and/or national level)? How regularly do you follow or discuss politics with others?
12. Over the past two years, how active have you been in political activities? (e.g. voting, actively supporting a political party or candidate, contacting an elected official, attending a political rally)
13. Can you explain your reasons for participating (or not participating) in these activities?
  - a. How did you get involved in these activities?
  - b. (No) Has anyone ever asked you to participate?
14. How do you distinguish these two types of activities?
15. Can you describe the opportunities that your school offers for civic or political participation? (e.g. student groups, service learning courses)
  - a. How active or interested are you in these activities? Why or why not?
  - b. Are you currently involved in any school groups or clubs?
16. Do you feel your school does a good job in introducing / connecting you to civic and political activities or groups in the community?
17. On a broader level, what opportunities are you aware of in the community for civic or political participation? How did you find out about them?

APPENDIX B  
STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Voluntary Student Questionnaire

Date:

Name:

Age:

Citizenship status:

Number of years in Las Vegas:

School attending:

Number of years at school:

Undergraduate or graduate (student):

Full-time or part-time (student):

## APPENDIX C

### INFORMED CONSENT



### INFORMED CONSENT

Department of Political Science

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**TITLE OF STUDY: Political and Civic Engagement Attitudes among Asian American College Students**

**INVESTIGATOR(S): Dr. Mark Lutz, Matthew Vanada**

**CONTACT PHONE NUMBER: Mark Lutz (702) 895-2899; Matthew Vanada (702) 682-5791**

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#### Purpose of the Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to develop a better understanding of Asian American college students' views of civic and political engagement and how they might distinguish the two. The study will examine the extent that Asian American college students are drawn to both and what they hope to achieve by choosing to participate in related activities. One question that will be addressed is if Asian American college students' participation is driven by a desire to further the interests of the individual as well as those of a larger group, one which may be linked by ethnic ties, for example.

#### Participants

You are being asked to participate in the study because of a) your experience with college students and civic engagement; or b) because you have identified yourself as an Asian-American college student that is currently attending UNLV or CSN.

#### Procedures

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following: answer questions related to the study. The interview time will be approximately 30 minutes to one hour.

Benefits of Participation

There may not be direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. However, we hope to learn more about Asian-Americans and their reasons for participating in civic and political activities.

Risks of Participation

There are risks involved in all research studies. This study may include only minimal risks, i.e. you may become uncomfortable when answering some questions.

Cost/Compensation

There will not be financial cost to you to participate in this study. The study will take 30 minutes to one hour of your time. You will not be compensated for your time.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Mark Lutz at **(702) 895-2899**. For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted you may contact **the UNLV Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at 702-895-2794**.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with the university. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

Confidentiality

All information gathered in this study will be kept completely confidential. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. All records will be stored in a locked facility at UNLV for 3 years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information gathered will be destroyed.

Participant Consent:

I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Name (Please Print)

Audio/Video Taping

I agree to be audio taped for the purpose of this research study.

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Signature of Participant

---

Date

---

Participant Name (Please Print)

***Participant Note: Please do not sign this document if the Approval Stamp is missing or is expired.***

VITA

Graduate College  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Matthew Vanada

Degrees:

Bachelor of Arts, International Studies, 1997  
Butler University, Indianapolis, IN

Thesis Title: Political and Civic Engagement Attitudes among Asian American College Students

Thesis Examination Committee:

Chairperson, Dr. Mark Lutz, Ph. D.  
Committee Member, Dr. Kenneth Fernandez, Ph. D.  
Committee Member, Dr. Michele Kuenzi, Ph. D.  
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. David Forman, Ph. D.