

THE ATTITUDES OF ASIAN AMERICANS TOWARD AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Robert T. Teranishi
Associate Professor of Higher Education
New York University

Asian Americans are increasingly a factor in the political life of the United States, which makes it important to gain an accurate rendering of their position on key social issues that impact the nation. One area where there is a lack of understanding about the position of Asian Americans is with the issue of affirmative action. The 80-20 National Education Foundation (“80-20”) submitted an amicus brief in the Fisher Supreme Court case on affirmative action,¹ reporting that “47,000 Asian Americans revealed overwhelming support (by a more than 52:1 ratio) within the community for race-neutral, merit-based college admission policies” (p. 2). However, this is a significant difference from any other poll on Asian Americans’ attitudes toward affirmative action. This brief examines existing research on the attitudes of Asian Americans regarding affirmative action and compares these results to the poll conducted by 80-20.

NATIONAL OPINION AND EXIT POLLS

Support for or against affirmative action is as difficult to discern for Asian Americans as it is for all Americans.² For Asian Americans, specifically, there is the issue of omission from most national opinion polls on affirmative action. One source for gauging the level of support for or against affirmative action is a multicity, multiethnic, and multilingual survey of political attitudes and behavior of Asian Americans administered by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.³ The results show that 63.1% of Asian Americans indicated that affirmative action “is a good thing” as opposed to 5.7% who reported that it is a “bad thing” and 18.6% who reported that it “doesn’t affect Asian Americans.” These findings are consistent with a 2004 survey of 701 Asian American college students attending 169 colleges and universities. This study found that 62.6% of Asian American college students disagreed with the notion that affirmative action should be eliminated.⁴ Both of these survey results are consistent with exit polls during votes on state referendums to end affirmative action. In 1996, 61% of Asian American voters rejected Proposition 209 in California,⁵ and in 2006, 75% of Asian American voters rejected Proposal 2 in Michigan.⁶

The Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research survey of Asian Americans also found differences between Asian American sub-groups with regard to their level of support for affirmative action. The group most likely to agree that affirmative action “is a good thing” was Vietnamese (86.1%), while the group least likely to agree with this statement was Indians (52.5%). The differences between Asian American sub-groups is consistent with other studies that have found that the community is often split along ethnic, generational, linguistic, and income lines when it comes to their levels of assimilation, perceptions of opportunity, and attitudes toward social policy.⁷

ANALYSIS OF 80-20's POLL

There are at least three reasons why 80-20's poll differs so significantly from any other poll on the attitude of Asian Americans when it comes to affirmative action.

Coverage error: 80-20 claims they “speak for the Asian American community with authority by virtue of its open and neutral national surveys of the community.”⁸ However, flaws in the sampling procedure make this claim problematic. The most significant problem is their non-representative sample because recruitment was administered through an email invitation from 80-20 to its own membership. Because the organization is only reaching a particular sub-group of Asian Americans, and more specifically the composition of their membership, this recruitment technique resulted in a biased sample not representative of the Asian American community.⁹ While it is not possible to estimate the composition of their membership, the national survey of Asian Americans administered by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research indicates that 80% of respondents had never heard of 80-20. Additionally, the respondents for 80-20's survey were limited to individuals with the capability of responding in English, as well as those individuals with access to the internet.¹⁰

Coercion: 80-20 makes their stance on affirmative action very clear on the survey and its members are likely to support the organization's opinion on the issue. In fact, the survey provides 80-20's position and asks respondents if they are “For” or “Against” their position, as opposed to asking questions regarding a respondent's opinion of the policy itself. This approach not only results in a self-selection bias, where people who share views with the organization are more likely to respond, it also results in what political scientists call a “spiral of silence,” in which respondents feel pressure to support a particular position or to stay silent about their true support. The organization also coerced respondents by asking them to provide their full name and race with their response, which were made public on 80-20's web site. This is not only an unethical practice in polling, it encourages responses among individuals that support 80-20's stance on affirmative action and discourages responses from individuals who disagree with them.

Content validity: Support for 80-20's statement in their survey – being “for race-neutral, merit-based college admission policies” – has been found to be a poor measure of a person's attitude toward affirmative action. Previous national polls have demonstrated that a major factor that impacts polling on affirmative action has to do with the wording of the question. For example, while 80% of the American public has indicated that “affirmative action programs for minorities and women should be continued at some level,” a majority also oppose quotas and set-asides.¹¹

CONCLUSION

80-20's claim that they “represent the Asian American community” when it comes to affirmative action cannot be determined by their purported survey results. Their survey instrument, sampling procedure, and reporting all have serious flaws, all of which indicate that this poll does not meet any standard for collecting a reliable opinion.

¹ Brief of Amici Curiae for the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law, the 80-20 National Asian-American Educational Foundation, et al., In Support of Fisher, Abigail Noel Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin, et al. (No. 11-345, May 2012).

² The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes: 1987-2009 Independents Take Center Stage in Obama Era* (Washington, DC: The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2009).

³ Pei-te Lien, *Pilot National Asian American Political Survey (PNAAPS), 2000-2001* (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2004).

⁴ Julie J. Park, "Taking Race into Account: Charting Student Attitudes Towards Affirmative Action," *Research in Higher Education* (May 2009).

⁵ Los Angeles Times. "Los Angeles Times Exit Poll: General Election, November 5, 1996." Los Angeles Times (November 1996). Available online at <http://www.latimes.com/media/acrobat/2008-10/43120439.pdf>.

⁶ The Nation. "Asian Americans for Affirmative Action." *The Nation* (January 2007). Available online at <http://www.thenation.com/blog/asian-americans-affirmative-action>.

⁷ Min Zhou and Yang Sao Xiong. "The Multifaceted American Experiences of the Children of Asian immigrants: Lessons for Segmented Assimilation," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2005); Jane Junn et al., "Asian American Public Opinion," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media*, eds. Robert Shapiro and Lawrence Jacobs (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸ Respondents' Brief of *Abigail Noel Fisher* (No. 11-345).

⁹ Ivan V. Natividad, "The 80-20 Initiative: Critiques and Controversies." *Hyphen: Asian America Unabridged*. May 2012.

¹⁰ Jane Junn et al.

¹¹ Roper Center for Public Opinion. *POLL Database (Question IDs: USYANKP.95007.Q21 and USYANKP.95007.Q18A)*. (Storrs, CT: Roper Center for Public Opinion 1995).

Robert Teranishi is associate professor of higher education at New York University. He is also principal investigator for the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE), co-director for the Institute for Globalization and Education in Metropolitan Settings (IGEMS), and a faculty affiliate with the Steinhardt Institute for Higher Education Policy (SIHEP).