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Minority Conservatives: Asian Americans and the Ronald Reagan Administration in the 1980s

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This article examines the roles played by ethno-racial minorities in modern American conservatism, by investigating the relationship between Asian Americans and the Reagan administration in the 1980s. Asian immigrants began to settle in suburbs during the 1970s, and then organized for racial equality and upward social mobility. Simultaneously, the Republican Party and conservatives attempted to construct close ties with Asian Americans partly because they shared anticommunist sentiments and family values, among other beliefs. However, as the "English Only" movement tried to make English the official language of the United States, the relationship between the Asian American community and the GOP changed from the late 1980s on. As a case study on *minority conservatives*, this paper contributes to the existing scholarship on the American right by analyzing how primarily white political movements like conservatism attracted ethno-racial minorities. Scrutinizing the presence of Asian Americans in the conservative movement is critical because it challenges both the perception of conservatism as a racially exclusive movement and the liberal narrative of ever-increasing integration of racial minorities into the historically white-dominated American mainstream. This research demonstrating Reagan's efforts to create a more multicultural political base, along with other studies of minority conservatives, recasts our understanding of the conservative movement.

1. Introduction

In 1984, the United States Senate Judiciary Committee held hearings on Joint Resolution 167. The resolution stemmed from the "English Only" movement, which proposed a constitutional amendment to make English

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the official language in the United States. The author of the resolution Senator Walter Huddleston (D-KY) remarked that America as a "nation of immigrants" had kept its strength by assimilating people from numerous countries. However, Huddleston claimed, "for the last fifteen years, we have experienced a growing resistance to the acceptance of our historic language, an antagonistic questioning of the melting pot philosophy."[1] The English Only movement appeared to be reactionary nativism by white Americans amid rapid globalization, when the United States faced a surge of immigration—Spanish-speaking immigrants in particular—after passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, also known as the Hart-Celler Act. Yet the movement was in fact more complex. Indeed, among the iconic figures of the movement was Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa, a Republican senator and conservative American of Japanese descent.

This article examines the broader subject of the relationship between ethnic minorities and conservatism, by investigating Asian American civic organizations' political connections with President Ronald Reagan and Republicans in the 1980s.[2] During the 1970s, Asian immigrants began to settle in suburbs, which were overwhelmingly white at the time, and then organized for racial equality and upward social mobility. At the same time, conservative Republicans attempted to construct close ties with Asian immigrants partly because they shared anticommunist sentiments and family values, among other beliefs. As a case study on minority conservatives, this paper contributes to the existing scholarship on the American right by examining how primarily white political movements like conservatism attracted ethno-racial minorities. Scrutinizing the presence of Asian Americans in the conservative movement is critical because it challenges both the perception of conservatism as a racially exclusive movement and the liberal narrative of ever-increasing integration of racial minorities into the historically white-dominated American mainstream.

Modern American conservatism has been a subject of scholarly interest for decades. In his 1976 book, George H. Nash examined post–World War II conservative intellectuals and broke down conservatism into three categories. First, libertarians regarded the expanding federal government as a threat to private enterprise, personal liberty, and individualism, offering alternatives to New Deal liberalism by the mid-1950s. Second, traditionalists opposed secularization and mass society, which was characterized by mass production, mass consumption, and mass media. They instead stressed the importance of traditional values, Christian ethics, and communal life in American society. Lastly, anticommunists as members

of the third school of thought demanded that the United States should defeat communism worldwide, claiming that it was invading America at home and undermining American interests abroad.[3]

Based largely on Nash's definition of conservatism, scholarship on right-wing politics has developed, revealing how such deeply conservative ideologies were rooted in America. Particularly, much ink has been spilled over the rise of the grassroots political right in suburbs. For example, Lisa McGirr, writing about conservative women and men in suburban Orange County, California during the post–World War II period, describes how those antiliberals were not necessarily fanatical extremists. Instead, she succinctly highlights how right-wing activists in southern California suburbs were ordinary citizens, detailing the ways in which highly skilled workers and housewives in suburbia were involved with conservative politics during the 1950s and 1960s.[4]

However, while analyzing diverse aspects of conservatism, most researchers of the American political right focus on white Americans. Like McGirr, some historians have examined middle-class whites in suburbs, while others studied conservatism among working-class whites. Many scholars were riveted by Southern whites protesting desegregation in the 1960s and afterwards; many (along with the mass media) spotlighted religious whites such as Catholics and evangelical Protestants when those groups emerged as right-wing forces.[5] Despite emerging research delineating the racial diversity of people who support conservative ideologies and movements, academia as well as the general public still largely consider American conservatism to be a political movement of white people, relegating Asian Americans in right-wing politics to the periphery.[6]

This study of Asian American conservatives sheds new light on the history of the political right. As Jennifer Burns critically argued, Nash's classic research failed to apply the perspectives of race and globalization.[7] It is true that anti-immigrant conservatives who resisted and continue to resist globalization and demographic transformation, assume the core of American identity to be built on white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) heritage. However, the presence of minorities in the conservative movement reveals that the American right has not always been exclusively white; rather, it is a movement that has been inclusive in some ways and absorbed new blood from a variety of ethno-racial, religious, and sexual minorities. Why do some nonwhite people engage in conservatism, which has often been hostile to immigrants and racial minorities? What can America-born conservatives and newly arrived immigrants have in common? How

is Asian American conservatism distinguished from the conventional right? Grappling with these questions will enable us to better understand American conservatism and its resilience in politics. Although scholarly literature on Asian American conservatism has recently emerged, many of these works dismiss the historical twists and turns of antiliberal Asian Americans by focusing narrowly on what took place in the twenty-first century.[8]

This article examines the political activism of Asian American organizations and analyzes their interactions with the Reagan administration in the 1980s. Against the backdrop of suburban diversification beginning in the 1970s, middle and upper-class Asians relocated to overwhelmingly white suburbs. As they quickly organized themselves to advance their social integration, the Reagan administration reached out to this new voting block by highlighting common ground of conservatives and Asian communities. However, the English Only movement simultaneously clashed with the values of Asian communities and undermined the relationship between Asian Americans and Republicans. In the following sections, this paper shows how the conservative movement's use of the so-called "politics of heritage" attempted to integrate ethnic Asians into American society, while at the same time striving for linguistic homogeneity to emphasize WASP heritage.

2. Suburban Diversification during the Cold War

The mid-1960s was a pivotal moment for Asian American suburbanization as federal legislation paved the way for the transformation of suburbia. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act replaced the national origins quota system with one based on skilled labor needs and family reunification, resulting in the speeding up inflows of Asian immigrants. The immigration act opened doors for Asians from various countries and regions, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, and India among others, to enter the United States. Post-1965 Asian immigration reflected socio-economic stratification as global economic restructuring affected the movement of people. Consequentially, well-educated and highly skilled Asian professionals migrated to the US in pursuit of high quality jobs, whereas other Asian immigrants arrived and worked as lower-skilled laborers.[9]

At the same time, the 1968 Fair Housing Act outlawed racially restrictive

covenants that prohibited the sale of property to nonwhites and opened opportunities for Asians to own homes in suburbs.[10] In some places, the pattern of Asian American settlement in suburbia was characterized by dispersal. But in others, Asian immigrants started to establish so-called "ethnoburbs," where ethnic minorities clustered and created ethnic architectural landscapes reinforcing a sense of identity. By the 1980s, well-known Asian American communities took shape in Los Angeles's San Fernando and San Gabriel Valleys, with Monterey Park becoming known as "the first suburban Chinatown." Vietnamese refugees built "Little Saigons" in California and northern Virginia. Silicon Valley turned itself into a multiracial region as it welcomed engineers and professionals coming to work in the burgeoning IT industry. Furthermore, growth of Asian populations continued in Texas, northern Virginia, and New York, followed by majority-minority communities mushrooming across the nation.[11]

The Cold War wielded influence on suburban diversification and Asian American political views, with suburban homeownership propagated as an American way of life. During the 1950s and 1960s, the image of suburban homeowners as the paradigm of American democracy, freedom, and opportunity was widely disseminated by experts, commercial advertisers, and others who shaped societal norms and values. Cold War propaganda targeting South and Southeast Asia planted the suburban dream in the minds of Asian immigrants even before they landed on American soil.[12] Moreover, many Asians escaped communist governments to leave for the United States. After the Communist Party seized control of China in 1949, former government officials, businesspeople, and intellectuals moved from mainland China to Hong Kong or Taiwan, and then to the United States. Koreans left their homeland, when their country became the front of the Cold War with eruption of the Korean War in 1950. Later, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian refugees came to America after the war in Southeast Asia. Other Asians who did not live in communist countries also chose to emigrate because of otherwise oppressive governments in their home countries. These experiences shaped the political views of Asian immigrants and refugees before they arrived in the US. They were likely to conceive of America as the country of freedom and individualism, while perceiving communism and so-called "big government" negatively.[13]

The immigration and housing reforms of the 1960s set the stage for suburban racial diversification, making suburbs accessible to middle and upper-class Asian Americans. Simultaneously, migration in Cold War years laid the groundwork for the connection between Asian

immigrants and American conservatives. Some Asian immigrants embraced anticommunism due to their experience of escaping communist regimes. They also resonated with libertarians because they had moved to America because it represented freedom and individual choice, believing in their ability to attain the American Dream through education, diligence, and acculturation. Additionally, many Asian immigrants brought cultural values and ethics from their home countries, which in some ways paralleled those of American traditionalism. By the early 1980s, affluent Asian suburbanites constructed relationships with Republicans and other conservatives.

3. Asian Americans, Republicans, and the Reagan Administration

In the 1960s, the Republican Party and Richard Nixon discovered that white Americans with strong ethnic identities, such as Irish, Italian, and Polish Americans, constituted a significant percentage of their political base. As the GOP coined the term "heritage group" to refer to particular identities based on "ethnicity" or "national origin," the Republican National Committee founded the National Republican Heritage Groups Council (HGC) for the purpose of reaching out to ethnic groups. Soon after its founding, the HGC sought the favor of not only white ethnics but also Latinos and Asians, and by 1983 represented 33 different nationalities.[14]

Likewise, Ronald Reagan attempted to gain support from nonwhite ethno-racial groups. With the rise in Asian immigration that began in the 1970s, the Reagan administration stressed the significance of courting Asian Americans as a new electoral constituency for the Republican Party. The White House Office of Public Liaison worked with the HGC to arrange briefings, conferences, and other events for ethnic group leaders at the White House. Faith Fei-Mei Lee Breen, the chair of the HGC's Youth Committee, wrote to Linda Chavez, a Republican Latina who served in the Reagan administration: "Because of the enthusiastic support and responsiveness of the Office of Public Liaison, my goal of increasing Republican representation within the Asian American Community is easier."[15]

Several other Asian Americans eagerly responded to outreach efforts of the Republican Party and Reagan. Julie Rao, who had immigrated with her parents from communist China to the United States, first met Republican leaders in 1983 and subsequently developed a relationship with the GOP. During the 1984 presidential race, Rao founded the Federation of Republican Asian Americans as a grassroots group to assist Reagan's

reelection campaign at the state level. In a letter to Chavez, Rao wrote, "We are proud to have worked for the President in his 1984 campaign and hosted the first Sanctioned Asian Inaugural Ball for him and the Vice President." As the Republican National Committee recognized the efforts of the Federation of Republican Asian Americans, Rao was recognized as one of the top ten outstanding volunteers for the 1984 Reagan campaign.[16]

Rao was one of the so-called "clubwomen" who worked intimately on a grassroots level with the Republican Party through their involvement with clubs and other community organizations. Other Asian American women played roles within the GOP itself as "party women." Nancy Chinn-Lee was a staff member of the HGC at the same time Faith Lee Breen was chair of the council's youth committee. Chinn-Lee and Breen were also co-chairs of the Organization of Chinese American Women (OCAW), an ethnic organization for Chinese women. Although the OCAW was a nonpartisan group, it worked closely with the Reagan administration.[17]

Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, middle-class Asian women and men founded these and other civic organizations of their own. The leaders of these Asian groups were highly educated with master's and doctoral degrees; for example, Rao earned her master's degree in human nutrition from Rutgers University. Members of these civic groups often lived in wealthy suburbs. Some were residents of Washington, DC suburbs such as Potomac, Silver Spring, and College Heights Estates, Maryland. Others lived in New York City's suburban areas or in Huntington on Long Island, which was a predominantly white neighborhood. Still others settled in southern California, including Redondo Beach in Los Angeles County. In tandem with whites whom historian Lisa McGirr terms "suburban warriors," these Asian suburbanites organized themselves for social, educational, and political purposes, building up relations with the GOP.[18]

Why did these Asian Americans endorse Republicans and conservatives like Reagan during the 1980s? For instance, Rao's Federation of Republican Asian Americans highlighted principles that the GOP and Asian Americans could share, such as loyalty to the country, dedication to the principles of the US Constitution, and commitment to the republican form of government. The organization declared: "We regard the Republican Party as the political organization of vision which best epitomizes the ideals in which we believe."[19]

But first and foremost, anticommunism tightly knitted several Asian American ethnicities with conservative Republicans. The fight against communism was crucial to Reagan, his followers, and other conservatives;

immigrants and refugees, whose home countries were confronted with communism, espoused Reagan's hawkish anticommunist stance. The GOP employed anticommunism to draw enthusiasm from ethnic Asian groups both at home and abroad. In July 1986, as part of anticommunist activism in Asia itself, the HGC adopted a resolution recommending the creation of Radio Free Asia, intending it to provide propaganda for people under communist regimes and to strengthen "the anti-communist struggle everywhere in Asia."[20]

The Vietnamese community banded together with conservative Americans to promote anticommunism. Historian Phuong Tran Nguyen has argued that the resistance to communism was a significant factor in Vietnamese assimilation into American society. According to Nguyen, Vietnamese refugees who fought against communism considered it their duty as both Vietnamese and Americans, and were not anticommunist zealots who refused to integrate into American society, as they were sometimes stereotyped. By stressing anticommunist policies, they attempted to be political allies with Republicans and be regarded as "responsible citizens" in the US.[21]

Frank N. Vinh, the chair of the Vietnamese American Republican Association, was a refugee willing to help anticommunist propaganda projects. He explained that after the fall of South Vietnam, the communist government had taken over the National Motion Picture Center in Saigon and destroyed anticommunist films, including Vinh's feature film "We Want to Live." Vinh proposed that he could contribute to anticommunism by making an English version of his film for the young generation of Vietnamese Americans who did not know about "the Communist dangers." Believing that combatting communism required cooperation with Republicans, Vinh affirmed his support for the GOP in the aftermath of its defeat in the 1986 midterm elections, which resulted in Democrats controlling both the Senate and House of Representatives. "After the experience of last November 4 election," Vinh asserted, "we have to start working much harder to get back the control of the Senate and win the future Presidential election of 1988."[22]

Anticommunism provided a bridge between Vietnamese refugees and Reagan. Community activist Hau Nguyen wrote to the White House, saying, "The Vietnamese community and our Association of Former Political Prisoners of Communist Vietnam are deeply thankfull [*sic*] for your concern in the emigration from Vietnam and resettlement in the United States of Former Political Prisoners."[23] Moreover, Vietnamese and other

Asian Americans provided support for Reagan's diplomatic policies beyond Southeast Asia. The National Congress of Vietnamese in America stated that the Vietnamese community supported Reagan's "strong and determined effort against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua."[24] Similarly, Thach Cam Bui, chair of the Asian American Voters Coalition, expressed the group's support for Reagan's decision to combat Iran's financing of terrorism. Applying the Cold War framework to the Middle East, Bui stated that "our duty is to help all freedom fighters openly or secretly to stop the communist expansion."[25]

The connection between anticommunism and the Republican Party also existed in the Korean community. Julian J. Lee, a Korean American from Orange County who founded the California Korean American Republican Association, proclaimed in a letter to the White House Public Liaison Office that "I firmly believe that the Korean-Americans are *natural* Republicans." In his letter, Lee noted that many Korean Americans were Republicans because of their "staunch anti-Communist" stance and "their actual experience of life under Communism." After establishing the California Korean American Republican Association in 1985, Lee organized eleven different county chapters, and the association became the first Korean American grassroots organization chartered by the Republican Party in California.[26]

Anticommunism explains why a number of Asian American leaders and organizations stood behind Reagan's diplomatic policies, and it also provided a means for Asian communities to attempt to influence the administration. As the Soviet military started to intervene in Afghanistan in December 1979, the Reagan administration forged ties with Pakistan and offered it military aid, which upset Indian Americans. Achamma Chandersekaran, a member of the Indian American Forum for Political Education, warned Reagan of potentially disastrous consequences of supplying aid to Pakistan. Worried about Pakistan's nuclear program, she wrote the President, "[I]n trying to restrain the Soviet Union, we may be helping to create a monster who can destroy whole of South Asia…You must be aware that closer US ties with Pakistan will force India deeper into clutches of the Soviet Union."[27] By employing Cold War rhetoric, Chandersekaran asserted that Pakistan military and nuclear power would be a threat to India, a democratic country with the largest population in the world, and urged Reagan to terminate the aid.

Asian American collaboration with conservatives also went beyond foreign affairs and anticommunism. Reagan's nomination of the controversial federal appellate court judge Robert Bork to be an Associate

Justice of the US Supreme Court in 1987 led to heated debates between liberals and conservatives. Many racial organizations and leaders joined the Democratic Party's opposition to the nomination of the very conservative Bork. For instance, Oscar Moran, the president of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)—the nation's largest Latino organization—opposed the nominee.[28] By contrast, many Asian American groups endorsed Bork's nomination. According to Rebecca Range in the White House Office of Public Liaison, the Asian American Voters Coalition, representing fifteen national Asian-Pacific organizations across the nation, was "very supportive of many of the President's policies, including Central America, trade, and most recently, they strongly supported the nomination of Judge Bork."[29] A member of the Federation of Republican Asian Americans sent a letter to the White House, noting that she was loyal to Reagan's decision: "I am not a lawyer, nor a judge, nor an elected official. I am a concerned citizen disenchanted by the Senate confirmation hearing of Judge Robert H. Bork."[30]

Along with anticommunism, shared views on social issues also provided common ground for conservatives and Asian Americans in the 1980s. Founded in 1977, the OCAW, of which Chinn-Lee and Breen were co-chairs, was the largest national group of Chinese American women. While the OCAW highlighted its role in opening up educational and occupational opportunities for Chinese American women, it also endorsed similar beliefs as other conservative women who stressed women's roles in family and society. For example, the OCAW proclaimed that its members and Nancy Reagan shared "good-will that can be earned when women get together and focus upon issues which affect our family." These issues included not only gender issues like upgrading the status of women in education and business, but also family-oriented issues such as "eliminating drug abuse in our children" and "ensuring our children's future."[31] American conservatives found an ally in Asian American communities who put emphasis on family and social order, augmenting ties between Asians and the Republican Party.

Through their activism, many of these Asian American organizations attempted to facilitate their integration into American society. The OCAW asserted that Chinese American women were confronted with "race and sex role stereotyping that has hindered their pursuit of personal and professional fulfillment." To overcome those obstacles, the OCAW organized educational and social projects "to integrate Chinese American women into the mainstream of America's activities and programs."[32] Likewise, Joy Cherian, who became the first Indian American Commissioner at the Equal

Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) when Reagan appointed him in 1987, made a speech about the potential for Asian American assimilation. He contended that "the secret of our success will depend on our ability to join that mainstream to become part of Main Street, USA," adding, "Are we asking for these rights and privileges because we are an Asian American minority? No, we are asking because we are Americans and are an integral part of the United States of America."[33]

However, Asian Americans' integration into the mainstream did not mean that the ethnic minority claimed whiteness. Rather, Asian Americans settled in the US while maintaining their heritage and diversifying American society. After the lobbying efforts by the Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA) and the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), Asian Pacific American Heritage Week was created by a Congressional resolution in 1979. Like the National Hispanic Heritage Week that had been established in 1968, the new heritage week annually celebrated Asian/Pacific Americans' contributions to America and their cultural inclusion across the nation.[34]

The heritage week was also important for the Reagan administration's efforts to strengthen ties with Asian Americans. When signing the Asian and Pacific American Heritage Week Proclamation in 1987, Reagan announced his nomination of Cherian as an EEOC commissioner. He praised Asian Americans as the "model minority," saying:

> Today our citizens of Asian and Pacific descent are admired for their hard work, their commitment to education, and their commercial and scientific genius. In the last century, people spoke of a Protestant work ethic. Well, today no one can miss the fact that there are other cultural-based work ethics, not the least of which is an Asian-Pacific work ethic.[35]

By the late 1980s, Asian Americans were leaving a mark on American society and the economy. They had dispersed to suburbs or established "ethnoburbs," transforming suburbia from a white residential area toward an increasingly multicultural space. In addition, Reagan's neoliberal economic policies lowered trade barriers, bringing about an influx of Pacific Rim capital to the West Coast. As a result of Reagan's pro-business and anticommunist stances, Asian Americans—particularly affluent Asian business owners and professionals—leaned toward the Republican Party.

4. The English Only Movement

S.I. Hayakawa was one of the few racial minority conservatives in Congress from the late 1970s to the early 1980s. A Canada-born Japanese American, he was initially a prominent scholar of communication and race relations. Then Hayakawa rose to national prominence at the end of the 1960s when, as the president of San Francisco State College, he suppressed the Third World Liberation Front strike on campus. With his fame among conservatives, Hayakawa started his political career as a neoliberal Republican and won election as a US Senator from California in 1976.[36]

Hayakawa was a leading proponent of the English Only movement, and in 1981, he introduced Senate Joint Resolution 72 that proposed the English Language Amendment (ELA) to the US Constitution to make English the official national language of the United States. Unlike the majority of Asian Americans, Hayakawa was critical of bilingual education that he believed obstructed learning English at school. He sometimes analogized bilingual education in the US to French-speaking Quebec, Canada, claiming that bilingual policies in education, health service, and government would perpetuate "language ghettos" in the US. As a conservative and semanticist, Hayakawa emphasized the role of English in unifying the nation, saying, "English is the key to participation in the opportunities and self-realization that American life has to offer."[37] In 1983, Hayakawa also established a civic organization, named US English, to promote the English Only movement. With an advisory board including preeminent figures such as Walter Cronkite, Gore Vidal, Norman Podhoretz, Arnold Schwarzenegger, US English became a national grassroots organization dedicated to ensuring the ELA's passage out of Congress and subsequently ratification in the states.[38]

However, the English Only movement shortly landed in controversies. John Tanton, a cofounder of US English with Hayakawa, was well known for his anti-immigrant stance. Claiming that overpopulation was a serious problem in the US and the world, Tanton had created the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), which advocated for reducing immigration to the US. Hayakawa served as the spokesperson of US English and repeatedly denied any anti-immigrant intent to the ELA. But Hayakawa, despite being a racial minority immigrant himself, was in fact hostile to Latinos. In 1985, he charged that "the ethnic chauvinism of the present Hispanic leadership is an unhealthy trend in present-day America," adding, "The only people who have any quarrel with the English language

are the Hispanics."[39]

Ethnic minorities in general were on guard against the English Only movement, because the monolingualism it espoused oppressed non-English languages and nonwhite cultures. Asian Americans became particularly alarmed in 1986 when Proposition 63 (Prop 63), a California statewide initiative to amend the state's constitution to make English the official language of California, was placed on the November election ballot. The Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA), which had played a central role in establishing the Asian Pacific American Heritage Week, was among multiple civic organizations that undertook strenuous efforts to defeat Prop 63. In September 1986, the OCA issued a statement opposing the initiative, arguing that Prop 63 would wipe out "the rich language-culture heritage of the ethnic communities" including street signs, news media, and art forms. The OCA was concerned that the proposition would affect commercial activity in ethnic communities because business signage was not immune to the law. Furthermore, the OCA was afraid that Prop 63 with "a racist and white supremacist view" would invite new anti-Asian and anti-immigrant sentiment in California. "We dread its disastrous impact on all ethnic communities and our society at large," the OCA stated.[40]

As the OCA asked its local chapters to take immediate action, it also demanded support from politicians and other ethnic organizations. In October, the OCA urged Reagan to oppose Proposition 63, saying, "As a leader of our nation, we believe your public endorsement is critical to the cause of human rights and the preservation of heritages of Chinese and all ethnic groups in the United States."[41] In fact, Republican California Governor George Deukmejian did not back Prop 63. Born into a family of Armenian immigrants, Deukmejian anticipated the proposition would "cause fear, confusion and resentment among many minority Californians, who see the measure as an effort to legislate the cultural superiority of native English-speaking people."[42] Other national lawmakers were anxious about the proposition, too. Senator Paul Simon (D-IL) noted, "I am not a supporter of this proposal. While I understand the desire to continue English as our primary language, I do not believe that the Constitution is the proper vehicle for this issue."[43] Similarly, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY) wrote to the OCA, "New waves of immigrants to our country have periodically prompted concern that America could become a multi-lingual nation. Such fears, however, have never been realized."[44]

The OCA shortly received support from other racial and ethnic organizations. Like the OCA, the JACL National Board unanimously voted

to oppose Proposition 63 in May 1986. The national council affirmed that position at the JACL national convention two months later with Ron Wakabayashi conveying JACL's opposition to Prop 63 to the OCA.[45] Black American groups, too, agreed with the OCA that Prop 63 was threatening. John E. Jacob, president of the National Urban League, replied to the OCA's call: "I believe Proposition 63 to be an unnecessary measure that can impact negatively on minority groups who receive important public services in their own language."[46] The Jewish community joined the campaign to counter the English Only movement. The American Jewish Committee (AJC) added to its organizational policies that the "AJC should oppose a Constitutional Amendment, state initiatives and other 'English as the official language' resolutions because they are divisive and negative." The leadership recommended that the AJC play "a leadership role" in these efforts in coalition with racial and ethnic groups including the National Council of La Raza, the OCA, and others.[47]

Solidarity went beyond ethno-racial minority groups. After the California Labor Federation came out in opposition to Prop 63, the nationwide American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) announced its opposition, too. AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland asserted, "America's greatness stems from the ability of individuals from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds to live, work and prosper as one people."[48] The National Council of the Churches of Christ (NCC) was another organization that collaborated with the OCA in opposition to the English Only movement. Proposition 63 passed in November 1986, and the NCC adopted a resolution expressing serious concerns about the implications of Prop 63 and similar measures elsewhere. Maintaining that English was already the primary language in America, the organization warned of "[t]he danger…that these propositions would change English from primary to the only language."[49]

As fears and anxieties among minority communities rose, the proposed amendments to make English the official language at the national and state levels motivated advocates of multiculturalism to put pressure on the Reagan administration to oppose such amendments. Surveying the English Only movement and analyzing reactions of minority organizations, the National SER Policy and Research Institute issued a report that urged the administration to make a firm statement "reject[ing] the move to amend the Constitution of the United States to make English the official language." The report went on to assert that "tolerance for cultural, religious, social, political and even linguistic differences assures that our nation—a nation of

immigrants and refugees—will remain bound together."[50]

Despite the minority groups' opposition, however, Reagan remained sympathetic to the English Only movement. In March 1987, four months after the passage of Proposition 63, Reagan sent a message to the first national meeting of US English held in Philadelphia.

> The language the Founding Fathers used to write our charter of government is the shared, unifying language of our nation, and a key to full and fair opportunity for all Americans. It is important to promote proficiency in English while also upholding our national tradition of cultural diversity. By emphasizing the importance of a common language, we safeguard a proud legacy and help to ensure that America's future will be as great as her past.[51]

The gap between Reagan and Asian American communities over the English Only issue negatively impacted their relationship from 1986 on. When the Ethnic Group Study analyzed changes of the electorate after the 1986 mid-term elections, it found that the biggest losses for the Republican Party were among Latinos and Asian Americans, whereas there were almost no changes among whites and Blacks.[52]

5. Conclusion

The past four decades have witnessed dramatic transformations in both the Republican Party itself and Asian Americans' relationship to it. Republican President Ronald Reagan embraced neoliberalism, believing in free trade and free movement of people. He thought that democracy and freedom attracted immigrants to the US, and that cultural diversity was a proof of American exceptionalism. However, beginning in the 1990s, anti-immigrant sentiments emerged from the Republican Party. Pat Buchanan, for example, discussed building walls on the border with Mexico in his campaign for the 1992 Republican presidential nomination. Buchanan's advocacy was denounced by Republican leaders, including Reagan, as an unrealistic policy and racial bigotry. But anti-immigration rhetoric and policies gradually gathered steam within the GOP, resulting in Donald Trump's presidency in the late 2010s.[53]

As a result, the relationship between the GOP and Asian Americans changed over these years. Back in the 1980s and 1990s, a majority of Asian Americans voted for Republicans. As this paper set forth, the Cold

War framework made communism a common enemy of Asian immigrants and American conservatives. Neoliberal policies provided economic opportunities for Asian Americans, who strived to achieve individual success through education, business, and politics. By emphasizing family and social order, traditionalism struck a chord with many Asian Americans. Asian entrepreneurs and wealthy suburbanites particularly leaned toward the right, and their civic organizations worked intimately with Republicans over the course of the 1980s. Because of these factors, Asian voters tended to support Republican presidential candidates from 1980 to 1996. However, the transformation of the Republican Party at the turn toward the twenty-first century shifted Asian Americans' political party preferences toward the Democratic Party.[54]

Although the GOP had seemingly become a political party dominated by white Americans by the 2010s, it is important to underscore that racial minorities' support for liberalism and their loyalty to the Democratic Party were not always self-evident in the past. As this paper has demonstrated, Asian Americans and conservatives became closely allied from the 1980s to the mid-1990s. And even today, despite Trump's racist rhetoric and discriminatory attitudes, he receives support from such groups as Blacks for Trump, Latinos for Trump, and Asian Americans for Trump.[55]

The existence of minority conservatives requires scholars to refine their understanding of the US political right in terms of matters of race and globalization. In examining the issue of race in right-wing politics, researchers have generally taken it for granted that conservative actors were white, because many systems that conservatives established or advocated for furthered racism. However, as this study of Asian Americans indicates, conservatism can also find support among racial minorities, and the conservative political ideology can be sustainable in a multicultural society. With respect to globalization, exclusionary ideologies such as nativism and opposition to immigration sometimes gained strength on the right during the latter part of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first. Nevertheless, conservatives are not immune from the influence of globalization, as Reagan made efforts to attract Asian American voters and tried to create a more multicultural Republican political base.

Moreover, the reasons that Asian American conservatives joined the broader conservative movement in the 1980s and 1990s were not necessarily colorblindness or a hope that they would be perceived as members of the white majority. While they agreed with conservative principles to a certain extent, they protested the oppression of non-

European and nonwhite cultures and embraced their own particular traditions and heritages. Instead of pushing toward integration into the white-majority mainstream, Asian Americans chose to be part of America without "whitening" their identities. Indeed, many Vietnamese exiles had been anticommunist before they arrived in the US, exemplifying how Asian American conservatism to a significant degree derived from Asian immigrants' own experiences and political cultures in their countries of origin. Their conservatism was not a result of political education in America; through globalization, the immigrants brought with them cultures characterized by strong conservative traits. Thus, Asian Americans and other ethnic minority conservatives are not only potential political allies of conventional white conservatives; they also have the power to transform conservatism from within.

Notes

[1] Quoted in Raymond Tatalovich, *Nativism Reborn? The Official English Language Movement and the American States* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 12.

[2] In this paper, I use the terms "ethnic Asians," "Asians," and "Asian Americans" interchangeably to refer to both Asian American citizens (whether born in the US or abroad) and Asian immigrants who are not American citizens.

[3] George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006 [1976]), xx–xxi. Nash also maintained that it was hard to define modern American conservatism, saying, "I doubt that there is any phenomenon called conservatism, the content of which varies enormously with time and place. It may even be true that conservatism is inherently resistant to precise definition." Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement*, xviii.

[4] Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), esp. 7–8.

[5] A large literature has demonstrated that suburban grassroots conservatism, racism, and religion intertwine with each other. For works on conservative suburban politics, see Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Michelle M. Nickerson and Darren Dochuk, eds., *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Place, Space, and Region* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Michelle M. Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Emily E. Straus, *Death of a Suburban Dream: Race and Schools in Compton, California* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Walter David Greason, *Suburban Erasure: How the Suburbs Ended the Civil Rights Movement in New Jersey* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2013); Allison Hepler, *McCarthyism in the Suburbs: Quakers, Communists, and the Children's Librarians* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2018); and Eileen Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia: Conservatives and Christian Youth Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). For works on white ethnics and working-class conservatives, see Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston against Busing: Race,*

Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Colleen Doody, *Detroit's Cold War: The Origins of Postwar Conservatism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013). Key works on the religious right are Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); David A. Hollinger, *Christianity's American Fate: How Religion Became More Conservative and Society More Secular* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022); Neil J. Young, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983); Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011); Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); J. Brooks Flippen, *Jimmy Carter, the Politics of Family, and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); and Andrew R. Lewis, *The Rights Turn in Conservative Christian Politics: How Abortion Transformed the Culture Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[6] See for example Allan J. Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008).

[7] Jennifer Burns, "What Was Conservatism?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 9, 2016, https://www.chronicle.com/article/what-was-conservatism/.

[8] The *Amerasia Journal* published a special issue on this topic in 2022. See Adrian De Leon and Jane Hong, "Introduction: Conservatisms and Fascisms in Asian America," *Amerasia Journal* 48, no. 1 (January 2022): 2–6, https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2023.2167934. See also Yuanyuan Feng and Mark Tseng-Putterman, "'Scattered Like Sand': WeChat Warriors in the Trial of Peter Liang," *Amerasia Journal* 45, no. 2 (May 2019): 238–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2019.1676610.

[9] Becky M. Nicolaides, "Introduction: Asian American Suburban History," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 34, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 7, https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerethnhist.34.2.0005.

[10] Minorities' struggles to obtain freedom in education and housing predated the mid-1960s. In the *Mendes v. Westminster* case of 1947, Mexican, Japanese, and Jewish Americans challenged racial segregation in California's public schools, leading to the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. The *Shelley v. Kraemer* decision in 1948 held that racial-restrictive covenants in real estate deeds were unconstitutional, and the 1965 Fair Housing Act closed many loopholes left by the *Shelley* decision. See Nicolaides, "Introduction: Asian American Suburban History," 7, 15n8; and Shana Bernstein, "From the Southwest to the Nation: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Los Angeles," in *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Place, Space, and Region*, edited by Michelle M. Nickerson and Darren Dochuk (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 141–63.

[11] Wei Li, *Ethnoburb: The New Ethnic Community in Urban America* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009). Key works on Los Angeles's suburbs are Tanachai Mark Padoongpatt, "'A Landmark for Sun Valley': Wat Thai of Los Angeles and Thai American Suburban Culture in 1980s San Fernando Valley," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 34, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 83–114, https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerethnhist.34.2.0083; Wendy Cheng, *The Changs Next Door to the Díazes: Remapping Race in Suburban California* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); James Zarsadiaz, *Resisting Change in Suburbia: Asian Immigrants and Frontier Nostalgia in L.A.* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022); and Becky M. Nicolaides, *The New Suburbia:*

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[12] Nancy H. Kwak, *A World of Homeowners: American Power and the Politics of Housing Aid* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

[13] Nicolaides, *The New Suburbia*, 81–82, 230.

[14] On the use of the term "heritage group" of the Republican Party, see Ieva Zake, "Nixon vs. the G.O.P: Republican Ethnic Politics, 1968–1972," *Polish American Studies* 67, no. 2 (2010): 53n1, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41162460. For the number of ethnic groups that the National Republican Heritage Groups Council represented, see Letter, Frank J. Fahrenkopf Jr. to Dan Yen, July 12, 1983, folder "Asian: Asian American Voters Coalition (2)," box OA 17127, Rudy Beserra Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

[15] Memo, Faith F. Lee Breen to Linda Chavez, December 9, 1985, folder "Organization of Chinese American Women (1)," box OA 15027, Linda L. Arey Files, Reagan Library.

[16] Letter, Julie Rao to Linda Chavez, January 28, 1986, folder "Asian: Federation of Republican Asian Americans," box OA 17127, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library. For a short biography of Julie Rao, see "Julie Ho Rao Obituary—Falls Church, VA," Dignity Memorial, August 30, 2014, https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/falls-church-va/julie-rao-6104575.

[17] Invitation, Lily K. Lai, folder "Organization of Chinese American Women (3)," box OA 15027, Linda L. Arey Files, Reagan Library. For "clubwomen" and "party women" in conservative politics, see Catherine E. Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through the Rise of the New Right* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

[18] Women-To-Women Program, List of Delegates, folder "Organization of Chinese American Women 08/06/1987 (2)," box OA 15029, Linda L. Arey Files, Reagan Library.

[19] Preamble, the Federation of Republican Asian Americans, Inc., folder "Asian: Federation of Republican Asian Americans," box OA 17127, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.

[20] Radio Free Asia, June 1986, folder "Asian: Miscellaneous," box OA 17127, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.

[21] Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee American*, 77–79. See also San-Juan, *Little Saigons*, 11, 83, 121.

[22] Letter, Frank N. Vinh to Rudy Beserra, November 24, 1986, folder "Asian: Asian American Voters Coalition (1)," box OA 17127, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.

[23] Letter, Nguyen Hau to George P. Shultz, July 7, 1988, folder "Asian: Miscellaneous," box OA 17127, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.

[24] National Congress of Vietnamese in America, folder "Indo-Chinese American Voters Coalition," box OA 17132, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.

[25] Letter, Thach Cam Bui to Ronald Reagan, December 25, 1986, folder "Asian: Asian

American Voters Coalition (1)," box OA 17127, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[26] Letter, Julian J. Lee to Rudy Beserra, October 15, 1986, folder "Asian: California Korean American Republican Association," box OA 17127, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library (italics in original).
[27] Letter, Achamma Chandersekaran to Ronald Reagan, March 11, 1987, folder "Indian: Indian American Forum for Political Education (2)," box OA 17132, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[28] Memo, Rebecca Range to Howard Baker, October 19, 1987, folder "Bork – WHO Post Mortem (2 of 2)," box 12, David M. McIntosh Files, Reagan Library.
[29] Rebecca Range, "Meeting with the Asian American Voters Coalition," November 5, 1987, folder "Asian: Asian American Voters Coalition," box OA 17127, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[30] Letter, Federation of Republican Asian Americans, n.d., folder "Indian: Indian American Forum for Political Education (2)," box OA 17132, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[31] Booklet, Organization of Chinese American Women, "Building Bridges Because Women Care," Spring 1986, folder "Organization of Chinese American Women (3)," box OA 15027, Linda L. Arey Files, Reagan Library.
[32] Pauline W. Tsui, ed., *History of the Organization of Chinese American Women, 1977–2009* (Washington, D.C: Ruth H. Kuo and Rhoda How Memorial Fund of the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region, 2013), 13.
[33] Speech, Joy Cherian, "A Coalition in Motion: A Call for More Action," October 4, 1986, folder "Asian: Asian American Voters Coalition (2)," box OA 17127, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[34] Mary and Mark Au, "Genesis," n.d., folder "Asian Pacific American Heritage Week 1988 / Lists Etc. (3)," box OA 17127, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library; Letter, Frank Horton to Rebecca Range, April 29, 1988, folder "Asian Pacific American Heritage Week 1988/Lists Etc. (1)," box OA 17127, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[35] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on Signing the Asian/Pacific American Heritage Week Proclamation Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley," The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/252869.
[36] For biographical information about S.I. Hayakawa, see Gerald W. Haslam and Janice E. Haslam, *In Thought and Action: The Enigmatic Life of S.I. Hayakawa* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011); and Vivian Yan-Gonzalez, "Model Minority or Myth? Reexamining the Politics of S.I. Hayakawa," *Amerasia Journal* 48, no. 1 (January 2022): 24–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2022.2144664.
[37] Quoted in Haslam and Haslam, *In Thought and Action*, 359.
[38] Tatalovich, *Nativism Reborn*, 10–11; Haslam and Haslam, *In Thought and Action*, 348–49, 360–61. For the Enlish Only movement unfolding in suburbs, see Nicolaides, *The New Suburbia*, 112–15, 243–44; and Zarsadiaz, *Resisting Change in Suburbia*, 107–10, 115.
[39] Quoted in Tatalovich, *Nativism Reborn*, 10, 15. See also Haslam and Haslam, *In Thought and Action*, 360.
[40] Statement, S. Andrew Chen and Henry Mui, "Statements on Proposition 63, CA," September 18, 1986, folder "Chinese. Organization of Chinese Americans I (3)," box OA 17129, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[41] Letter, S. Andrew Chen to Ronald Reagan, October 15, 1986, folder "Chinese. Organization of Chinese Americans I (3)," box OA 17129, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[42] George Skelton, "Deukmejian Opposes 3 Controversial Propositions," *Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 1986, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-09-03-mn-13171-story.html.

[43] Letter, Paul Simon to S. Andrew Chen, December 1, 1986, folder "Chinese. Organization of Chinese Americans I (3)," box OA 17129, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[44] Letter, Daniel Patrick Moynihan to Organization of Chinese Americans, folder "Chinese. Organization of Chinese Americans I (3)," box OA 17129, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[45] Letter, Ron Wakabayashi to S. Andrew Chen, October 15, 1986, folder "Chinese. Organization of Chinese Americans I (3)," box OA 17129, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[46] Letter, John E. Jacob to S. Andrew Chen, October 28, 1986, folder "Chinese. Organization of Chinese Americans I (3)," box OA 17129, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[47] Paper, Marilyn Braveman, American Jewish Committee and Language Policy, "The 'English as the Official Language' Movement—A Briefing Paper," March 6, 1987, folder "Chinese. Organization of Chinese Americans I (3)," box OA 17129, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[48] Letter, Lane Kirkland to S. Andrew Chen, October 17, 1986, folder "Chinese. Organization of Chinese Americans I (3)," box OA 17129, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[49] Resolution, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., "Opposing 'English-as-the-Official-U.S.-Language' Movement," May 15, 1987, folder "Chinese. Organization of Chinese Americans I (3)," box OA 17129, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[50] Report, National SER Policy and Research Institute, "Issues and Options: The English Only Movement," May 1987, folder "English Only Movement," box OA 17130, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[51] Speech, Ronald Reagan, March 24, 1987, folder "English Only Movement," box OA 17130, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[52] Memo, Mary Ellen Jensen and Neil Newhouse to Mark Valente, "Key Coalitional Group Study," April 23, 1987, folder "Republican Indo-American Heritage Federation," box OA 17134, Rudy Beserra Files, Reagan Library.
[53] Nicole Hemmer, *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s* (New York: Basic Books, 2022); Ari Berman, "The Conservative Who Turned White Anxiety into a Movement," *The Atlantic*, April 22, 2024, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/04/pat-buchanan-trump-white-majority-minority/678130/.
[54] Karthick Ramakrishnan, "How Asian Americans Became Democrats," *The American Prospect*, July 26, 2016.
[55] See Takahito Moriyama, "Black Trumpists: Minority Conservatives and Multiracial Whiteness," *Nanzan Review of American Studies* 44 (December 2022): 105–21.