Coronavirus backlash triggers wave of progressive activism from Asian Americans in Orange County

Activists hope surge will help break stronghold Republicans have long uniquely held on county’s AAPI community, which is getting more attention from candidates on both sides of the aisle.

After generations of benefiting from a conservative trope that painted Asian Americans as shining examples of how to assimilate and overcome racism, Tammy Kim said a wave of discrimination tied to the coronavirus pandemic has reshaped reality for many Asian Americans in Orange County.

“We went from ‘model minority’ status to suddenly, at the drop of a hat, being ‘foreigners’ who are told to go back where we came from,” said Kim, managing director of the Korean American Center in Irvine.
Now, say Kim and others, there's a sense that acceptance of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders is as fragile as it is for Latinx, Black and other minority communities.

That realization, they say, is fueling a surge of political activism.

In recent months, Asian Americans in Orange County have marched with Black Lives Matter protesters, phone banked for Democratic candidates and launched their own first-time campaigns to run for office.

And politicians of all stripes are taking notice of local Asian American and Pacific Islander voters like never before. They're creating multi-language campaign materials and hiring staff specifically to reach out to AAPI communities, which are some of the fastest growing voting blocs in the country.

Candidates also are talking — sometimes heatedly — about issues of importance to Asian American voters, from President Donald Trump's use of the term “kung flu” to a California ballot measure aimed at reviving affirmative action in college acceptance.

The AAPI communities aren't monolithic; there are big differences on many issues between different cultures and generations. But progressive leaders say they're seeing more unity this cycle, with AAPI groups and other communities of color working together to push for broader access to healthcare, police reform and other causes that disproportionately affect minorities.

“What Covid brought to light for many people is that a lot of our problems are systemic,” said Susan Lew, president of Asian Americans in Action, a one-year-old group that advocates for progressive policies and candidates in Orange County.

“If we all work together … then we help everyone, including ourselves.”

Progressive political leaders hear opportunity in that message. The new wave of activism, they say, could break a stronghold that the GOP has long held over Asian American voters and candidates in Orange County.

Only in O.C.

In Orange County, neither major party holds a voter registration advantage within AAPI communities; Democrats and Republicans each now claim about 30%, while some 40% of local Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are registered as independents.

But at the state and national levels, Asian Americans have long leaned left, with a majority supporting traditionally liberal issues such as government assistance programs, a pathway to citizenship for immigrants and gun control. And, nationally, Asians are twice as likely to register as Democrats than as Republicans, according to a 2018 survey by the firm AAPI Data.

Still, for decades, Orange County has been an exception.

That's partly because studies show all immigrant groups are likely to take on the dominant politics of their community, at least initially. By that reckoning, Asian voters who came to Orange County in recent decades were, until recently, likely to be Republican, while people who came to, say, San Francisco, tended to be Democrats.

Another factor is that the largest AAPI community in Orange County is Vietnamese Americans, who remain more likely than any other Asian immigrant group to register as Republicans.

That's why, Kim said, as recently as four years ago the local Democratic party invested very little time or money reaching out to Asian American voters in Orange County.

“I think they thought it was a lost cause,” Kim said.

Republicans haven't traditionally done a great job at reaching out to AAPI voters either, though the survey from AAPI Data shows they've done a better job than Democrats.

And the GOP has clearly done a better job for many years at recruiting and supporting Asian American candidates — particularly female candidates — in Orange County.

In 2014, Republicans sent three Asian American women to Sacramento, when Janet Nguyen won a seat in the State Senate while Ling Ling Chang and Young Kim picked up seats in the Assembly. Today, there are four Asian Americans in the county's state delegation; all Republicans.

There are no Asian Americans in the county's current House delegation of Democrats running for reelection this November. And only two of the people running for state offices in Orange County as Democrats are Asian Americans: Diedre Nguyen in the 72nd Assembly District and Dave Min in the 37th Senate District.
that's compared with four state candidates from the AAPI community who are Republicans: Chang, who's now an incumbent state senator in SD-29; Janet Nguyen, who's running in AD-72; Assemblyman Steven Choi of AD-68; and Assemblyman Phillip Chen of AD-55.

There are two Korean American contenders for House seats on the GOP side. Young Kim is challenging Rep. Gil Cisneros in the tri-county 39th District, which is nearly 24% Asian and has sizeable Chinese, Korean and Filipino American communities, according to figures from PoliticalData.com. And Michelle Steel is challenging Rep. Harley Rouda in the coastal 48th District, with is nearly 16% AAPI, including nearly 10% Vietnamese American.

Annie Wright, a vice chair with the Democratic Party of Orange County, said the reason more Democrats aren't on the ballot for those seats this cycle is because there isn't yet a pipeline of local AAPI candidates on the left who've held local office and are poised to move up to House races.

But Wright noted an increase in Asian American Democrats running for local and state races this November, including Tammy Kim for Irvine City Council, Farrah Khan for Irvine mayor and Thai Viet Phan for Santa Ana City Council. She hopes that by 2022 or 2024 at the latest, her party will have established a bench of Democratic Asian American candidates ready to run for higher office.

A push to the left

The shift among Orange County's AAPI community really started to take off in 2016, as President Donald Trump ran for office.

"There has been such an anti-immigrant set of policies, and I think that has alarmed the Asian American communities," Wright said. "I think the message that the Republican party is sending is that Asians are not welcome."

Along with broad moves to reduce immigration, there was the Trump administration's now-abandoned effort in late 2018 to renegotiate an agreement with Vietnam. For a decade, that deal had protected Vietnamese immigrants from deportation, but the administration's bid would have made it possible for some immigrants to be sent back to that country.

Then there is the administration's effort to remove protections for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or DACA residents, who were brought to the United States as children and remain undocumented. While many people primarily associate DACA with Latino youth, Lew noted that in some parts of California, the average DACA recipient is actually Asian American.

Then the coronavirus hit.

Trump and other Republicans' affinity for calling it the "Chinese virus" and "kung flu" virus has been blamed for setting a tone that's led to a sharp spike hate incidents directed at Asian Americans, locally and across the country.

Many Asian Americans also are unhappy with how GOP leaders have handled the pandemic. Wright said they're seeing how wide acceptance of masks, for example, which has been panned by Trump and many Republicans, even as masks have helped places like South Korea avoid major health or economic hits.

One issue that could galvanize Republican AAPI voters in Orange County heading into November is Proposition 16, which would reinstate affirmative action in California.

There isn't the same slate of AAPI organizations advocating for GOP interests in Orange County. Instead, the record shows Republican Asian Americans in the county tend to join forces around particular issues, such as when AAPI residents came out in droves to protest the idea of a homeless shelter in Irvine. Prop. 16 could well be a similar issue this cycle.

Affirmative action has long been particularly unpopular with Korean and Chinese Americans, who fear their kids will lose out on college opportunities that will go to underrepresented minorities. Already, Steel has written an op-ed in the Register opposing the measure. And the political action committee The Orange Club, founded by Chinese Americans to oppose a similar effort in 2014, is reportedly active on the issue.

Lew, whose organization supports Prop. 16, said they hope to educate local AAPI voters about how their communities can benefit from provisions in the bill that can help women and help Asian American business owners land more state contracts. And they hope to send the message that it's not right for Asian Americans to benefit from the oppression and unfair treatment of others.

Either way, Lew predicts that having Prop. 16 on the ballot will help drive up AAPI voter turnout in November. And no matter how they vote, she said she's excited by the prospect of an increase to the community's traditionally low participation.
Rouda and Cisneros have both been highlighting concerns with GOP rhetoric and policies of interest to Asian Americans as they face competitive races with Republican challengers Steel and Young Kim.

Cisneros issued a public call in June, for example, for Young Kim to condemn Trump's “kung flu” comments. Young Kim did so that same night, calling the comments hurtful and divisive.

Rouda has routinely criticized Steel in her role as chair of the county Board of Supervisors for not supporting a mask mandate. And his campaign has highlighted her husband's involvement with an effort by Chinese foreign nationals to influence the Trump administration — a link Steel called racist.

Steel’s campaign, on the other hand, is highlighting how the Delta Tau Delta fraternity Rouda was in at the University of Kentucky some 40 years ago hosted “Mekong Delta” parties. The events were reported to sometimes include fake machine guns and men dressed as American soldiers while women dressed as Vietnamese prostitutes. They’re now banned by the fraternity.

Rouda’s campaign said he remembers attending at least one such party in the early 1980s, though he doesn’t recall details or controversy surrounding them at the time. His campaign noted that hundreds of Delta Tau Delta fraternities hosted these parties in conjunction with U.S. military recruiters across the country in the ’80s. Today, his campaign said he “strongly condemns” the parties. And the campaign accused Steel of “attempting to drum up faux-controversy” over an event that happened four decades ago.

Such battles illustrate the fine line between discussing issues of importance to AAPI voters and pandering to them, or even weaponizing their causes. But Lew said she’s just pleased that such conversations are happening.

“One of the challenges for Asian Americans is just not being talked about enough, period,” Lew said. “Being talked about is the first step to being valued as a part of society, so I'm happy about that.”
Journalism has led Brooke Staggs to a manhunt in Las Vegas, a zero gravity flight over Queens and a fishing village in Ghana. The Big Bear native is addicted to education. She earned her bachelor’s degree in English from California Baptist University, then got her master’s in education as she taught high school English in the Inland Empire. After four years in the classroom, she left in 2006 to be a student again herself, earning a masters degree in journalism from New York University while interning and freelancing for a variety of publications. She sees journalism as another form of teaching, helping readers make informed decisions and better understand the world around them. Brooke spent five years as a staff writer then city editor at the Daily Press in Victorville. She joined the Orange County Register in January 2013, covering several Orange County communities before taking on the cannabis beat in February 2016 and the politics beat in April 2019. On occasion, she also teaches community college and ghostwrites nonfiction books. If she doesn’t get right back to you, there’s a good chance she’s sitting with her husband on a plane or train or boat destined for somewhere – anywhere – they’ve never been.

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