



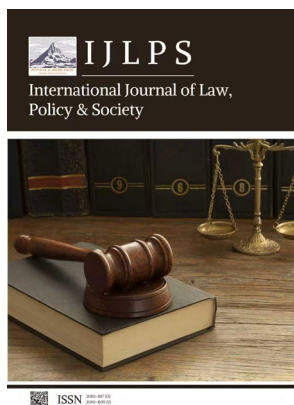
*Article*

# From Silence to Action: Trigger Theory and the Civic Awakening of Asian American Youth

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**Abstract:** This study examines the motivations, challenges, and patterns of civic engagement among Asian American youth in the United States. Despite representing one of the fastest-growing racial groups, Asian Americans exhibit relatively low levels of civic and political participation. Employing a mixed-methods approach, including interviews, focus groups, and surveys, the research explores how identity formation, family expectations, and community representation influence young Asian Americans' involvement in public life. The findings reveal that participants frequently navigate tensions between cultural norms emphasizing conformity and an increasing awareness of social inequities. Nevertheless, many have discovered alternative avenues for engagement—such as mentorship, cultural organizations, and educational initiatives—that prioritize service and advocacy over traditional electoral participation. The study concludes that fostering meaningful civic engagement among Asian American youth requires addressing systemic obstacles and creating environments where cultural identity and civic responsibility can mutually thrive.

**Keywords:** Asian American youth; civic engagement; political participation; ethnic identity; representation; community activism

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## 1. Introduction:

In recent years, Asian Americans have become an increasingly prominent force in U.S. political and civic life, moving beyond the stereotype of the "silent minority" to actively engage in activism, voting, and political representation. Asian American voter participation has risen significantly. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that Asian Americans reached a historic voting turnout of 60% during the 2020 presidential election, surpassing Latino voter participation but remaining below African American turnout. The Pew Research Center projects that by 2024, Asian Americans will number 15 million eligible voters, representing 6.1% of all potential voters in the United States. As their demographic presence grows, their political influence is increasing accordingly [1].

This paper examines the factors driving this transformation using a mixed-methods approach that integrates three main sources of information. First, quantitative analysis of large-scale datasets, including political participation surveys and U.S. Census voting and registration statistics, provides an overview of voting trends. Second, qualitative synthesis of scholarly literature and historical records traces the evolution of Asian American identity and activism. Third, semi-structured interviews with youth from diverse Asian ethnic backgrounds capture lived experiences, motivations, and perceptions often absent from aggregate data.

The study hypothesizes that a combination of demographic growth, cultural empowerment, generational shifts, and catalytic events-such as the COVID-19 pandemic and rising anti-Asian hate incidents-has driven these changes. No single factor alone explains the trend; rather, overlapping social and political currents have mobilized a generation of Asian Americans to raise their voices. A significant social catalyst has been the surge in anti-Asian hate incidents during and after the pandemic, transforming feelings of isolation into collective action and solidarity across ethnic and generational lines. Politically, the increased visibility of Asian American elected officials and political leaders has provided role models and reinforced the legitimacy of Asian American leadership in U.S. politics [2].

These conclusions are supported through triangulation of statistical evidence, scholarly analysis, and first-person narratives, offering a comprehensive understanding of this generational transformation.

## 2. Overview

Asian Americans have long been perceived as politically disengaged and as a "silent minority," expected to focus on academic achievement and upward mobility while avoiding public debates and activism [3]. This narrative is increasingly challenged by a visible rise in political engagement, youth organizing, and civic participation. Asian American youth are stepping into roles as advocates, organizers, and digital creators, using their voices to address issues of racial justice, representation, and policy reform.

Despite being the fastest-growing racial group in the United States, Asian Americans' experiences are often overlooked in national political discourse. Understanding how and why Asian American youth are becoming more engaged is critical not only for representation but also for fostering a truly inclusive democracy. The surge in youth activism following the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise in anti-Asian hate incidents indicate a generational shift that demands attention.

Asian Americans have often been portrayed through a monolithic lens as a uniformly "silent minority," whose civic identity is defined more by academic and economic success than by public engagement. This perception obscures the complexity of the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) experience, implying shared political detachment and overlooking the diversity of motivations, histories, and identities within the community. In reality, the youth driving today's surge in civic participation come from varied ethnic, regional, and socioeconomic backgrounds, which shape the ways in which they engage [4].

This study focuses not only on the civic actions of Asian American youth but also on the personal histories, cultural backgrounds, and emotional experiences that underpin their growing involvement in political and social life. By centering youth voices through first-hand interviews and focus groups, it highlights pivotal moments that moved individuals from passive observation to active participation, revealing a nuanced and multifaceted portrait of a generation resisting outdated stereotypes.

While much research has examined Asian American voting patterns or elite political figures, there is limited qualitative work exploring the inner lives and formative experiences of Asian American youth. This project investigates how intergenerational values, school environments, digital culture, and personal encounters with racism and microaggressions influence a new generation of activists. It seeks to explain the motivations behind their engagement, offering insight into emerging trends grounded in lived experience.

## 3. Research Questions

Understanding Asian American consumer behavior and political activism depends on three fundamental factors: economic conditions, cultural influences, and social dynamics. Economic constraints, such as limited access to capital and intergenerational income

disparities, often lead Asian American businesses with scarce resources to rely on e-commerce platforms as primary market entry points. Cultural background and heritage shape consumer perceptions of products and willingness to support specific brands. Social networks, along with digital platforms, allow consumers to observe each other's purchases, creating a sense of solidarity similar to how activism spreads through organized groups. Together, these factors illustrate how Asian American small businesses succeed in digital markets while digital influence reshapes consumer behavior [5].

#### **Social Factors**

- 1) Race-related incidents, including anti-Asian hate during COVID-19, racial profiling, and bullying in schools, have sparked activism.
- 2) Representation and the visibility of Asian American politicians, artists, and athletes serve as role models for civic identity.
- 3) Online platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube facilitate civic education, protest organization, and digital petitions.
- 4) Schools and peers, through diversity clubs, ethnic studies programs, and encouragement from peers, support youth in speaking out.
- 5) Regional and school-type differences influence exposure to activism, with youth in urban, diverse, or progressive schools more likely to engage compared with those in suburban or private schools.

#### **Cultural Factors**

- 1) Immigrant parents' "keep your head down" approach contrasts with Gen Z's emphasis on advocacy, social justice, and visibility.
- 2) Ethnic background differences influence mobilization priorities; for example, Southeast Asian refugees may focus on issues such as war, poverty, and resettlement, while East Asian youth may prioritize education equity and anti-racism.
- 3) Community identity fosters solidarity not only within Asian groups but also across Black, Latino, and Indigenous struggles.

#### **Economic Factors**

- 1) Economic stress, including family experiences of job loss, pandemic-related precarity, or wage inequality, drives youth awareness of structural barriers.
- 2) Class differences shape engagement, with wealthier Asian Americans emphasizing representation and visibility, while working-class youth mobilize around labor rights, minimum wage, and healthcare.

The study hypothesizes that Asian American youth civic participation has increased due to multiple social, cultural, and political factors. Anti-Asian hate incidents during the COVID-19 era acted as critical triggers, transforming passive awareness into active mobilization. Youth who explore their cultural heritage through ethnic studies, community groups, or artistic activities tend to engage more when they observe Asian American leaders active in politics and media. Family histories, migration narratives, and intergenerational values influence levels of engagement, while social media facilitates rapid mobilization across ethnic and geographic boundaries [6].

Early research on civic engagement focused primarily on traditional forms of participation: voting, volunteering, and joining organizations [7]. Traditional models assumed that continuous involvement was required and did not account for sudden mobilization among marginalized groups. Emerging theories emphasize emotional responses, identity formation, and specific triggers as drivers of participation.

The "model minority" stereotype historically portrayed Asian Americans as financially successful yet politically disengaged. This narrative obscured the ongoing experiences of frustration related to generational differences, racial discrimination, economic disparities, and political underrepresentation. Political socialization through family, educational institutions, and peer networks explains how civic attitudes develop over time. Environments that discourage political involvement during formative years contributed to a silent and marginalized community that required time to become active.

The Trigger Theory of Civic Engagement offers a new perspective by focusing on disruptive events rather than continuous development. It illustrates how external disruptions activate latent social tensions, which then manifest through activist movements. Anti-Asian hate incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic exemplify this process, generating collective suffering, political awareness, and a shared sense of purpose among previously silent youth. Online platforms provided initial low-threshold opportunities for engagement, evolving into physical protests, coalition work, and policy reform initiatives. The framework conceptualizes social change as a three-stage process: disruption, acknowledgment, and collective action.

Evaluation of major civic engagement frameworks reveals both commonalities and differences. Resource-based models explain sustained activism through skills, resources, and recruitment networks but do not account for sudden participation during crises. Political socialization theory demonstrates gradual development of civic values but does not predict rapid behavioral changes. Collective identity theory explains solidarity formation yet cannot determine when solidarity translates into activism. Digital activism research shows how online platforms lower participation barriers and amplify marginalized voices, particularly during rupture events. Cultural citizenship theory extends civic engagement beyond formal politics, highlighting artistic expression, storytelling, and cultural representation as tools for activism [8-11]. Crises often transform cultural expression into direct political action, as seen in Asian American responses to hate incidents.

The trajectory of civic engagement research reflects this evolution: from resource-based models, through socialization theories, to identity-, cultural-, and digital-based frameworks. Trigger Theory situates disruption and crisis at the center of civic engagement, offering insights particularly relevant to Asian Americans, whose political visibility has historically been constrained. Critical events, such as Vincent Chin's murder in 1982 and the rise in COVID-19-related hate crimes, have transformed Asian American social status from hidden to exposed, converting collective fear into collective action. Civic life, while generally developing gradually, undergoes transformative change when social identity intersects with external disruptions, fostering innovative political engagement [12-15].

#### 4. Research Methods

##### Primary Method: Focus Groups and Semi-Structured Interviews

To understand the motivations and experiences behind rising civic engagement among Asian American youth, this research primarily relied on qualitative methods, specifically focus groups and one-on-one interviews. This approach provides deeper, more personal insights into the cultural, emotional, and social factors that cannot be captured through surveys alone. However, qualitative data are limited by smaller sample sizes and potential researcher bias, which may affect generalizability [16].

##### Participant Selection

- 1) Sample size: 30 participants
- 2) Age range: 16-17 years old
- 3) Background diversity:
  - a) Ethnic diversity: Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Filipino, Indian, Japanese, mixed-race, and others
  - b) Geographic diversity: urban, suburban, international students, and different U.S. states
- 4) Gender, socioeconomic status, and immigration generation (first-generation, second-generation, etc.) were also considered

##### Focus Group Design

- 1) Small group discussions with 15 participants per group, lasting approximately 70 minutes
- 2) Discussion topics included:

- a) Experiences with civic engagement, including protests, voting, and online activism
- b) Perceptions of Asian American representation in media and politics
- c) Impact of COVID-19 and anti-Asian hate on political awareness
- d) Interactions with parents or older generations regarding race and identity
- e) The role of schools, teachers, and peer groups in supporting activism

## 5. Data Analysis

Emergent themes such as digital empowerment, generational tension, visibility, fear, and inspiration were tracked and coded across all focus group transcripts. These qualitative findings were then cross-checked against aggregate data from the 2020 U.S. Census and other public datasets to contextualize participant perspectives within broader demographic patterns. Particular attention was given to how identity affiliations with ethnic subgroups, gender, and region influenced responses. For example, Census data indicate that Asian Americans comprise approximately 7.2% of the U.S. population, with the largest subgroups being Chinese (24%), Indian (21%), Filipino (19%), Vietnamese (10%), Korean (9%), and Japanese (7%). These proportions guided comparative analyses to determine whether certain narratives or concerns—such as economic pressures, generational divides, or COVID-19-related discrimination—were more prevalent among specific subgroups relative to their population size [17].

The research design utilized focus group data to examine how Asian American youth activism developed through lived experiences and structural challenges, organized into four thematic categories: social discrimination, economic inequality, cultural identity, and political participation. Table 1 summarizes each theme, indicating its frequency, supporting evidence from official statistics and news reports, participant statements, and researcher interpretation. This design highlights how youth leveraged external conditions, such as hate crimes, small business struggles, and parental expectations, to create civic responses through digital activism and grassroots organizing [18]. By combining quantitative data with qualitative statements and thematic patterns, the table demonstrates both the factors motivating political involvement and the multiple ways Asian Americans experience and express political identity (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Drivers of Civic Engagement Among Asian American Youth.

Theme:	Frequency 1	Evidence (Official Data/ News)	Participant Voices (Focus Groups)	Interpretation
Social: COVID 19 Hate Crimes, School Discrimination	10-15	FBI: 77% rise in anti-Asian hate crimes (2019-2020); <i>Stop AAPI Hate</i> : 11,000 + incidents (2020-2022)	"When the Atlanta spa shootings happened, I felt like silence was no longer an option, so I started an event in my club for remembrance" "At my school, teachers just assumed I was good at math."	High-profile hate crimes and everyday discrimination acted as catalysts, turning awareness into activism.



Economic: Job Loss, Small Business Struggles, Poverty	0-5 (East Coast); 10-13 (west coast)	NYC: 1 in 4 Asian Americans live in poverty (Mayor's Office, 2021); widespread small business closures during COVID.	"When my dad's restaurant shut down, I saw how little protection small immigrant businesses had." "I joined campaigns for higher minimum wage because my mom works two jobs."	Economic inequality motivates working-class youth activism, challenging the model minority stereotype.
Cultural: Parent-Child Tensions, Identity Building, Representation	5-10	Kamala Harris (first AAPI VP), Michelle Wu (Boston Mayor), Jeremy Lin (NBA) cited as role models	"My parents said, 'Don't cause trouble,' but I feel like if we stay quiet, nothing changes." "Seeing Michelle Wu win made me believe Asian voices matter in politics."	Gen Z youth push past parental caution, drawing inspiration from visible AAPI leaders and developing a stronger civic identity.
Political: Social Media Activism, Regional/Ethnic Differences	10-15 (digital) 5-10 (regional)	Pew (2022): 46% of AAPI under 30 get political news mainly from social media. West Coast: housing & immigration. East Coast: admissions & representation	"I learned more about racism from TikTok than from school." "In California, housing costs hit our families first."	Social media lowers barriers to activism, while regional and ethnic variation reveals fractured but adaptive political engagement.

## 6. Ethical Considerations

- 1) Anonymity and confidentiality: All focus group participants were randomly assigned and instructed not to disclose information outside the sessions.
- 2) Right to withdraw: Participants were reminded before, during, and after each session that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.
- 3) Researcher reflexivity: The researcher acknowledged their positionality as an Asian American student, reflecting on how shared identity could build rapport but also introduce bias. To mitigate this, focus group questions were open-ended, and care was taken to avoid leading prompts.

## 7. Findings

### 7.1. Social Triggers

The interviews demonstrated that COVID-19 and its aftermath triggered a sharp increase in anti-Asian hate incidents, motivating young people to engage in activism. High-profile events, including the Atlanta spa shootings, immigration raids, and routine school discrimination, served as pivotal moments that transformed passive awareness into active involvement. One East Coast student explained that witnessing the Atlanta spa shootings made him realize he needed to take action. He subsequently established an Asian American Club at his school to address discrimination through newsletters and events. These personal accounts illustrate how both violent incidents and everyday discrimination created an immediate need for action. According to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, major U.S. cities experienced a 339% increase in anti-Asian hate crimes in 2021 compared with 2020.

### 7.2. Economic Pressures

Economic instability among working-class youth emerged as a key factor influencing their decision to become activists. Challenges such as housing difficulties, small business closures, and minimum-wage employment exposed structural inequalities. A West Coast participant described how his friend's restaurant failed during the pandemic, which highlighted economic vulnerability. In contrast, middle- and upper-class participants were more concerned with educational disparities rather than immediate financial pressures. Pew Research data indicate that Asian American workers in entry-level positions experienced a 57% reduction in work hours and job losses during COVID-19, compared with a 46% reduction in the general workforce. These findings suggest that economic instability in immigrant families directly contributes to political engagement.

### 7.3. Cultural and Generational Shifts

Differences between age groups shaped civic participation during this period. Parents often discouraged activism to emphasize academic security, whereas their children viewed political involvement as essential for justice and belonging. Younger Asian American activists cited examples of cultural heritage and leadership as motivators for engagement. Leadership figures in politics, sports, and media were frequently discussed as validating the importance of youth voices. Survey data from AAPI Data show that 76% of Asian Americans under 30 support multiracial social justice coalitions, compared with 52% of those aged 50 and above. These patterns indicate that generational shifts and cultural identity play a significant role in motivating activism.

### 7.4. Political and Digital Mobilization

Participants identified digital platforms as crucial tools for contemporary civic engagement. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube allowed youth to share experiences, connect with others, and access civic knowledge. One West Coast participant reported that their first awareness of microaggressions came from scrolling through TikTok. Regional differences influenced focus areas: West Coast youth prioritized immigration reform, housing, and climate issues, while East Coast youth emphasized education equity and representation. According to APIAVote (2022), 70% of Asian American youth rely on social media as their primary source of political news, highlighting the central role of digital mobilization in facilitating engagement.

## 8. Conclusion

This study explored the motivations and experiences driving civic engagement among Asian American youth, emphasizing the influence of social, cultural, and political factors on emerging forms of activism. Asian American youth activism develops at the

intersection of socioeconomic, cultural, and political forces, which together create conditions conducive to civic participation. The COVID-19 pandemic and surge in anti-Asian hate crimes acted as pivotal moments that transformed fear into solidarity and quiet resilience into organized action. Economic hardship, generational differences, and digital platforms fostered an environment in which activism evolved from temporary responses to enduring movements.

The findings support the Trigger Theory of Civic Engagement, demonstrating that external disruptions can awaken latent social tensions and motivate collective action. Despite diversity within the Asian American population, a shared belief has emerged among younger generations that silence during crises is no longer acceptable.

Ultimately, this generation's activism reflects both an immediate response to external pressures and a long-term commitment to redefining civic participation in the United States. Their voices represent resistance and renewal, collectively reshaping the meanings of engagement, identity, and solidarity in contemporary American society.

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