A Potential President in a Divided Era: Kamala Harris's Identity in Play

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Honors Thesis

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May 20th, 2025

Introduction

On August 22, 2024, Vice President Kamala Harris took the ballot and accepted the Democratic Party's nomination after former President Joe Biden withdrew from the presidential race. On that day, her candidacy represented a historic moment–the possibility for an African and South Asian woman to lead a major party's presidential ticket. However, on November 6, 2024, at 5:37 AM, seemingly just as quickly as she took the mantle, Donald Trump was able to win the presidency.

As the daughter of a Jamaican father and Indian mother, Harris occupies a heavily interconnected and diverse racial identity. Harris offers a particularly compelling lens through which to examine the influence of multiracial identity on public perceptions amongst African American and Asian American voters due to her unique identity. Societal events like the rise of Sinophobia during COVID-19, the George Floyd murder, and contentious immigration rhetoric have led a majority of Asian Americans and African Americans to believe that race relations have worsened throughout Trump's presidency. (Horowitz, Brown, and Cox, 2019). Despite this fact, he was still able to win over their votes, begging the question of how race might have impacted the ballot. Therefore, studying Kamala Harris's racial intersectionalities requires a deep dive into the complex dynamics between African American and Asian American relations. This study asks: *Did Kamala Harris's multiracial identity shape Asian and African American perceptions of her as a person and presidential candidate? If so, which aspect of her identity–African American, South Asian, or Asian American–was the most consequential to her perception?*

Literature Review

Asian American and African American Division

By the 1850s, thousands of Chinese, Japanese, and Indian immigrants had arrived in the U.S. Howeverm immigration restrictions soon followed: the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred Chinese laborers; the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907-1908 limited Japanese immigration; and the Asiatic Barred Zone, established by the Immigration Act of 1917, excluded immigration from regions range from the Middle East to Southeast Asia (Lee, 2015; Ngai, 2004). These policies ultimately limited Asian migration and institutionalized racial discrimination through immigration policy. This is different from African Americans. Whereas the historical struggle of African Americans within the United States was centered on the enduring legacy of slavery, for Asian Americans, it quickly became about immigration and naturalization. (Singh & Nitesh, 2021, p. 106). This division, although caused by external factors to these two groups, has become especially pronounced from the mid-20th century to today. Many upper-class Asian Americans, particularly those who immigrated post-Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, still very much struggle to grasp the African American experience–their difficulties and dynamics. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was designed to abolish discriminatory quotas and place a greater emphasis on higher education, advanced skills or immgirants with existing family ties to U.S. citizens, resulting in a majority of post-1965 Asian immigrants to be, indeed, professionals, graduate students, or highly skilled workers (Thomsen, 2015). This selective migration acceptance only served to further exacerbate the existing class distinction between the new Asian immigrants and the existing African American communities who had been structurally excluded from socioeconomic advancement due to slavery, Jim Crow, and redlining.

This is not a one-way street and also occurs vice versa. This helps explain the specific examples, including hostilities between Korean Americans and African Americans that stretch as

far back as the 1960s, fueled by entrenched societal and historical factors (Demsas, 2021). American media played a significant role in this, fostering anti-Black racism in Koreans while propaganda from the Korean War labeled Koreans as untrustworthy to African Americans. This can be expanded to other society-wide events like the Vietnam War or Japanese internment during World War II. Asian Americans, on the other hand, were subject to the institutionalized racism that fostered a level of distrust amongst the African American citizens. These mutual suspicions, each group historically viewing the other as an adversary in a shared country, undermined the racial discrimination they both ultimately faced. Tensions were only exacerbated by socioeconomic dynamics. For example, many Korean immigrants were unable to replicate their social standing from their country of origin, therefore finding themselves settling in predominantly working-class Black areas. This spurred competiion and displaced existing Black businesses and residents, sowing mistrust and conflict.

Chinese immigrants faced similar clashes with the African American community as they established grocery stores in Black neighborhoods, setting them into a thriving merchant class and displacing the existing Black vendors. Using the wealth they generated, Chinese immigrants quickly ascended, attending White schools and accessing privileges that African Americans had been fighting for–opportunities they were still unable to win since their emancipation (Kwok, 2024, p.2). Interestingly, the Chinese community does not commonly identify their or society's biases against African Americans as "anti-Blackness." There is not a particularly prevalent attitude that guides their racial biases, but rather, their prejudices are often rooted more in stereotypes, the most prevalent being the widespread belief in the community that "Black people are lazy" (Kwok, 2024, p.3). These examples highlight the complexity of interethnic relationships.

Regardless of the intent of Asian American groups, the model minority stereotype blanket applied to Asian Americans has perpetuated anti-Black racism by contrasting positive perceptions of Asians with the negative stereotypes associated with African Americans. This external force has driven a wedge between the two communities. This dichotomy is exemplified in interracial relationship tensions, which are often stigmatized on both sides. Asian American and African American couples must hide their affection or risk harm. This is exactly what happened to an Asian grocer named J.K. Joe who was murdered by three Black men after they found out he had a secret relationship with a Black woman, shedding light on the concept of racial purity, a White supremacist concept, on these vulnerable, minority lives (Kwok, 2024, p.5). The incident was not just a case of tragic violence–it underscored the deep-seated and pervasive influence of White supremacist ideals of racial purity, even within and between minority groups. Notions of White dominance trickle down. In this case, the idea that racial boundaries must not be crossed even amongst marginalized groups reflects the fragility of racial solidarity.

American history is often compartmentalized as if all minority group experiences were "neat rows of isolated, discernible categories" (Kwok, 2024, p. 1). Unfortunately, this is not the case. Groups constantly clash–and support–and each group's struggles impact those around them. Underlying these racial rifts lies a zero-sum mentality. This mine frame reinforces racial hierarchy as a zero-sum game, a society structured around a central White power with other groups scrambling for what remains. This notion of racial zero-sum theory explains why Asian and Black participants in studies often see each other as a threat to resources that should be utilized within their communities (Tawa, 2022). Studies like this explain why African American communities clashed with incoming Korean Americans and why Chinese American grocery

store owners faced so much backlash from the existing Black communities. When faced with such limited support, and White power seemingly untouchable, minority groups become fearful of losing out and, thus, are forced to perceive one another as competitors. Professor Claire J. Kim asks, in her paper, "Must Asian Americans still attempt to be White in order to get ahead [of African Americans]" (Kim, 1999, p. 129). Many Asian immigrants arrived from caste or status-based societies. Whereas Black Americans have been systematically locked into hierarchies, Asian immigrants were still guided by notions of meritocracy and upward mobility. That is why this competitive framework and minority groups being pitted against each other compounded structural divisions between Black and Asian Americans. The idea of racial triangulation proposes that the racial dynamics in the United States are not binary, but a complex relativity of Asian Americans and African Americans to White Americans. Asian Americans are valorized as this "model minority" who have achieved conditional acceptance, yet African Americans remain subordinate as "outsiders." This has promptly created entrenched conflict between African Americans and Asian Americans as both groups seek validation.

<div align="center">African American and Asian American Solidarity</div>

At the same time, the histories of African American and Asian American communities reveal hopeful moments of unity built out of their shared struggle. After the Civil War, as African Americans were stripped of hard-won rights, Chinese Americans simultaneously lost immigration privileges, intensifying their isolation. (Singh & Nitesh, 2021, p. 104). In response, Chinese shop owners created informal credit systems, allowing Black customers to buy on credit and cash checks when banks refused them. While largely transactional, this relationship was built on trust and mutual survival (Kwok, 2024, p. 4). Another example is found during WWII. As Japanese Americans were uprooted from their West Coast homes, African Americans were

making their exodus from the South. Instances of Black neighbors visiting internment camps with food and activists like Dr. Clifford Iwao Uyeda openly supporting Black peers show solidarity in the face of separate but deeply linked struggles (Varner, 2016). In 1993, the Organization for African American Korean American Solidarity took this spirit further, hosting events to bridge divides (Min, 2008, p. 163). More recently, AAPI organizations like the Asian Pacific Environmental Network joined the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, offering multilingual resources and public support (Jones, 2021). Both groups' sense of linked fate and group consciousness fosters potential political unity, but racial triangulation has historically blocked sustained alliances (Nicholson, Carter & Restar, 2020, p. 117). Now, for second-gen immigrants who know these divides mostly through their parents, it's uncertain which legacies of solidarity or separation will carry into their own political beliefs as they come of voting age.

The East, South, and Southeast Asian Identity Conflict

Besides the clash between her African American and Asian American identity, her Indian American heritage adds another nuanced layer. The term "Asian" actually encompasses three major but distinct subregions (with a few examples): East Asia (China, Japan, Korea), South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan), and Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Philippines, Singapore). The broad label "Asian" is often misused, merges distinct socio-economic experiences, and often obscures critical distinctions. A very common social byproduct of this is the controversial question, "What kind of Asian are you?" This mindset also discredits important, yet often ignored, regional tensions that exist between these groups, independent of U.S. politics. For instance, in China, only 30% of individuals have favorable views of India, which is reciprocated by India's views of China (Pew Research Center, 2014, p. 37). These international dynamics influence the perspectives of Asian American communities in the U.S., potentially mirroring

similar divisions within American politics. It is also slightly more difficult for Asian American sub-ethnicities to build a solid coalition simply because very few Asians are knowledgeable about U.S. history and the many instances of prejudice against Asian immigrants (Ruiz et. al., 2023).

While "Asian American" is not a commonly used term in political and media discourse, it did not emerge as a unified political identity until the civil rights and anti-war movements. The term was coined in 1968 by two University of California, Berkeley students, Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee, as a way to unify the diverse Asian ethnicities (Kaur, 2022). The term is panethnic, which sociologist Yen Le Espiritu explains, refers to creating solidarity amongst diverse ethnic subgroups, often in response to discrimination (Espiritu, 1993, p. 6). Other examples are things like the American Indian or Spanish Coailion terms, each with their purposes (occupation of Alcatraz and jobs, respectively). For Asian Americans, it was against the perceived discrimination in college admissions, which eventually led to federal investigations (Espiritu, 1993, p. 1). However, at its core, the term Asian American was more so an instrument to achieve political and economic advantages, and therefore, unlike ethnic identities like Chinese or Filipino, this panethnic identity is not shaped solely by cultural bonds (Espiritu, 1993, p. 7). This has consequently led to a challenging acceptance, where Asian American identity feels the term fails to address that there is no common culture among Asian Americans and that it is more of a political tool. Without this historical coalition, Asian Americans more or less must build new ones like AAPI, or are more strongly influenced by their origin country.

Research also shows fundamental differences in experiences in the U.S. between Asian groups. In a study done after the 2016 election, it was found that East Asians experience lower rates of behavioral microaggression, verbal microaggression, workplace discrimination, and

institutional racism compared to Southeast and South Asians (Oh, 2022). This is likely tied to the "model minority" stereotype as East Asians are perceived as the "default" Asian, with more than 78% of Americans believing that Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans are Asian whereas just 46%, 37%, and 31% for Indian, Pakistani, and Arab relatively (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2020, p. 1742). Therefore, Asian is inextricably linked to being specifically East Asian, non-inclusive of Southeast and South Asians, despite all three groups falling under the Asian umbrella. Although East Asians still face citizenship issues, the resurgence of anti-Asian hate during COVID, and have still not achieved equality with Whites, they have relatively higher acceptance than other Asian groups. Despite Indian Americans surpassing Chinese Americans to become the largest Asian group in the United States, East Asian identity also seems to be more accepted, with pop culture becoming more and more popular (Hahn et. al., 2023).

Currently, a majority of anti-Asian hate in online communities is directed at South Asians, with 60% of online hostility being directed toward them (Stop AAPI Hate). East Asians have fit into the mold of the Asian model minority, closer to Whites and acceptance, whereas South Asians have not. East Asians have been historically perceived as socioeconomically successful and culturally closer to White norms, whereas South Asians, despite similar high education and economic achievements, are more frequently subjected to suspicion and exclusion whether that is due to perceived foreignness, religious identity (especially Islam), and post-9/11 terrorism associations (Stop AAPI Hate, 2024). These inter-Asian race conflicts raise some issues. Harris's South Asian identity, therefore, may not hold the same sway with certain voters as an East Asian background might, given the generally more favorable public opinion toward East Asians (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2020, pp. 1744-1745). Finally, while generational shifts and acculturation may reduce the impact of parent-origin biases, Harris's Indian American and South

Asian heritage presents a uniquely complex identity that may still affect how she is perceived across Asian American and broader communities.

Multiraciality in Politics

According to Ren, a multiracial identity is not merely a combination of two separate monoracial identities (Renn, 2008, pp. 16-17). Instead, it is on par with and just as valid as any other single-race identity. Multiraciality, as a concept, is quite complicated, but to understand it, it is first important to know that an individual who holds a multiracial identity is not switching between two separate identities. They embody one, integrated identity. Someone who is Black and Asian is not sometimes Black or sometimes Asian, they are Black and Asian.

In contrast, a monoracial identity occurs when a person only has or chooses to identify solely with one background. Unfortunately, this nuance is not widely understood in society and works against individuals with multiracial backgrounds. As Ren explores, the appearance of a multiracial individual plays a role in shaping someone's identity. For example, whether a woman looks Black enough to be in a student org or if someone looks too Asian to participate in a Latino cultural festival, are prevalent judgments (Renn, 2008, p. 18). These judgments affect both how peers view someone and how multiracial individuals themselves view themselves, limiting their identity choices. Whereas in the ideal world, people can embrace their identity as a whole, they are instead forced to compartmentalize their heritage to navigate a culture of race conflicts and hierarchies. Instead, people almost negotiate their identities in a way that balances the benefits and drawbacks of each identity.

When it comes to politics, these multiracial negotiations become more complex and almost essential to the outcome of an election. Barack Obama evidenced the politics of race and its involvement in elections in the 2008 and 2012 elections. "Many White Americans continued

to withhold support from Black candidates…a majority of non-Hispanic Whites did not vote for President Obama" (Goldman, 2017, p. 721). Traditionally, the explanation for why this disparity exists is racial prejudice or the idea that a certain group has negative attitudes towards another. In this case, Whites' negative attitudes towards Blacks as a group translate into their resentment for the Black candidate, therefore, they withhold support. However, there is an emerging suggestion that racial favoritism, or the fear that an elected candidate will prioritize their racial allies at the expense of others, may be a motivator as well. This belief is rooted in the fear motivated by the zero-sum theory. That a Black candidate will pass policies more favorable to Black Americans and therefore leave White Americans behind could apply to any group conflict, but it rests on the fear of limited resources and the notion that someone has to lose in the system. Groups compete over finite resources, leading to fears that political power will disproportionately benefit one group. Going back to the analysis of Obama, looking at White political behavior through the lens of racial favoritism makes sense. For one, a majority of White Americans believe that a Black candidate would favor Black Americans over Whites and fear "racial favoritism predicts support for Barack Obama in both cross-sectional models and fixed-effects models of within-person change, controlling for negative racial stereotypes" (Goldman, 2017).

Additionally, a complex voting environment pushes voters to rely on racial stereotypes and heuristics, especially when those environments are accompanied by a lack of detailed information to make informed decisions. Research has shown that for candidates of color, especially Black candidates, when voters rely on stereotypes, their performance suffers, even among liberal voters (Crowder-Meyer, 2020). This environment was strikingly similar to Harris's case: unlike Trump, who dominated media coverage since 2016, Harris only emerged as a central figure for the Democratic Party after Biden dropped out months into his campaign. This gave her

limited time to introduce her platform and policy agenda. And in the heated, divisive politics that made up 2024, spurred by inflammatory rhetoric, voters were more susceptible to visual cues and simple associations, like race or gender, potentially impacting her further.

Going back and applying these understandings to Harris, a few insights begin to emerge into the intersection of multiracial identity and electoral dynamics. As the first Black and South Asian president, she is perfectly situated to be questioned about her racial authenticity. Is she Black enough or Asian enough to fulfill the needs of her constituents? If she is, she may favor one racial group over another, charging both support and opposition. Her multiracial identity is strategic so that she can position herself in a way that allows her to represent diverse communities and bridge differences, but also create immense division and distrust.

Thus, both these elements–of multiracialism and race politics–are essential when it comes to understanding what exactly happened in the 2024 election that led to Harris's ultimate defeat. Societal perceptions often force multiracial individuals to choose between racial classifications. Multiracial individuals must weigh the pros and cons of their decisions, affected by both racial prejudice and racial favoritism. For the American people, it was a matter of historical biases and racial favoritism. On the one hand, it is a matter of a group having biases against another group, like the White and Black conflict that is rooted in issues like inferiority, slavery, and culture, but on the other hand, it is racial division that can occur even without a history of these. Even two groups who migrated to America can develop political resentments, given that they begin to see or have seen (from the origin country disputes) the other group as a sufficient threat to their resources.

Methodology

This study employs a retrospective mixed-methods analysis, drawing on electoral data, media narratives, and studies of voter behavior to examine how Harris's multiracial identity shaped perceptions of Asian and African American voters during the 2024 election. It seeks to determine *whether* there was any impact and *which* aspect of her racial identity–African American, South Asian, or Asian American–had the biggest impact on voter behavior. This analysis will focus on voter attraction and opposition, considering both who was mobilized and those who chose not to support her.

First, post-election voter turnout, racial voting patterns, and trend data will be assessed to find how different racial groups reacted to a potential Harris candidacy. A descriptive statistical analysis will be used, comparing pre-election polling with actual election outcomes, highlighting any unexpected shifts or patterns that can be attributed to racial identity. Additionally, exit poll data/survey responses from reputable sources will supplement the descriptive statistical analysis above to analyze racialized voting behavior directly. Finally, qualitative data will be incorporated to supplement these numerical trends to provide additional voter insight.

To further contextualize Harris's experience, specific case studies comparing her candidacy to other multiracial and monoracial politicians will be conducted. Case study selection will include Barack Obama, who navigated multiracialism as both a White and Black man; South Asian woman Nikki Haley; and finally, Taiwanese American Man Andrew Yang. These past candidates of Asian, African, and South Asian descent will be key to identifying any recurring patterns regarding racial identity in politics. They are not limited to one party, and some are multiracial and others are monoracial. But they each share important character traits with Harris in their own ways. This analysis will also account for policy and economic ideologies. These

comparative analyses will help address causation by isolating whether shifts in voting behavior are aligned with racial identity or simply with the political and economic state of the country.

It remains unclear whether Kamala Harris's multiracial identity has significant implications for her political campaign. If it does, to what extent does each of her identities shape public perception? These uncertainties call for a deeper examination. Through this thesis, I aim to uncover key examples of racial solidarity, racial division, and how Harris's political identities influence her policy decisions. These factors may either heighten or alleviate the tensions voters experience during election season. This research is also conducted at a particularly unique time because Harris was positioned as the first Asian American and African American biracial candidate. The Presidential stage being one of the brightest, she brings these identities into the spotlight. Additionally, the growing body of literature on racial identity in politics will become ever more important considering the U..S. electorate becomes more diverse (Budiuman & Igielnik, 2020). Understanding these dynamics is essential for analyzing voting behaviors, especially among minority groups.

Analysis of the 2024 Election

Electoral Data and Voter Demographics

Historically, working-class Black, White, and Latino or Hispanic voters have formed a solid base for the Democratic Party. However, in 2024, the presidential election revealed the culmination of Republican efforts to diversify their electorate, shifting the trend. Whereas traditionally, people of color have a long-term standing political alignment with the Democratic party, President Donald Trump made substantial inroads with voters, particularly among men of color (Donoghoe et. al., 2024). In sum, the research shows that Harris's ethnic background was at

play; the numbers, however, show a somewhat modest to weak impact, especially when compared to other concerns like the economy, age, and gender.

African American Voter Attitudes

Polling Data

The polling data points to a dropoff of Black voters. In the 2020 cycle, 92-98% of Black voters said that they were loyal to the Democratic Party, compared to 81% in 2024 (Igielnik, 2021; PRRI Staff, 2024). Multiple sources corroborate this decline, including the AP VoteCast implemented in 2018. The AP VoteCast, unlike traditional exit polls, which only capture election results on the day of voting, begins interviewing registered voters several days before Election Day (The Associated Press, 2024). This has a few benefits, but in particular, it allows the poll to include mail-in or early voters who would otherwise be unrepresented in exit polls. In comparing the 2024 to 2020 numbers found in Figures 1 and 2 below, 91% of Black respondents supported the Democratic candidate in 2020, dropping to 83% in 2024.

SURVEY QUESTION
Did you vote in the presidential election for Joe Biden, Donald Trump, or another candidate?

JOE BIDEN   DONALD TRUMP   HOWIE HAWKINS   JO JORGENSEN

See how voters within each group responded

White

| 43% | 55 | 1 |

Black

| 91 | 8 |

Latino

| 63 | 35 | 1 |

Another race

| 58 | 39 | 1 | 2 |

Figure 1 (Source: AP Votecast, 2020)

SURVEY QUESTION
Did you vote in the presidential election for Kamala Harris, Donald Trump, or another candidate?

■ KAMALA HARRIS   ■ DONALD TRUMP   ■ ANOTHER CANDIDATE

See how voters within each group responded

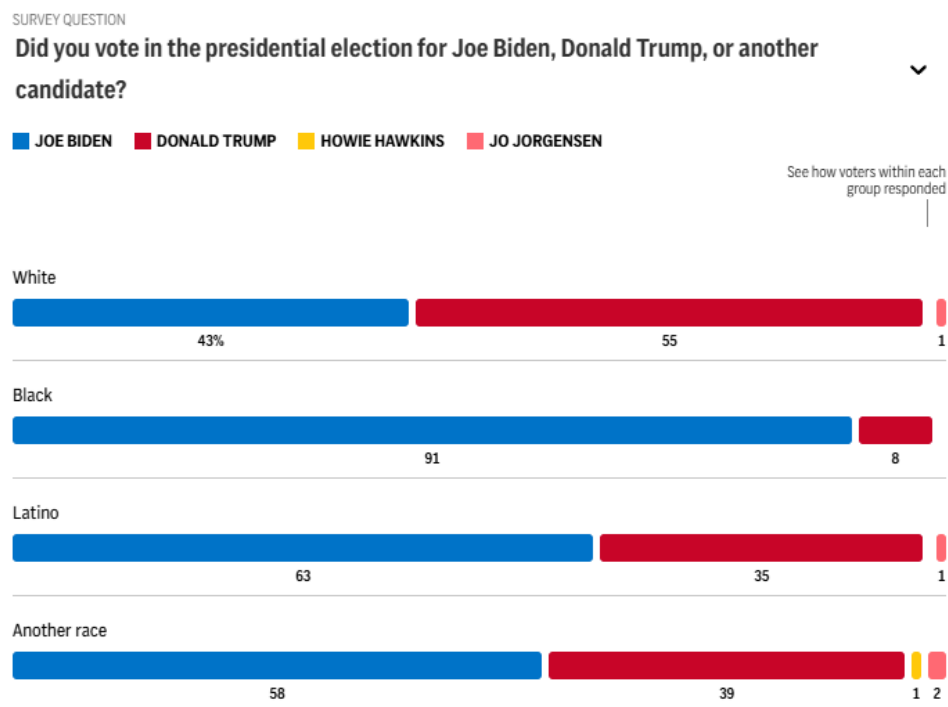White
42%   56   2

Black
83   16   1

Latino
55   43   2
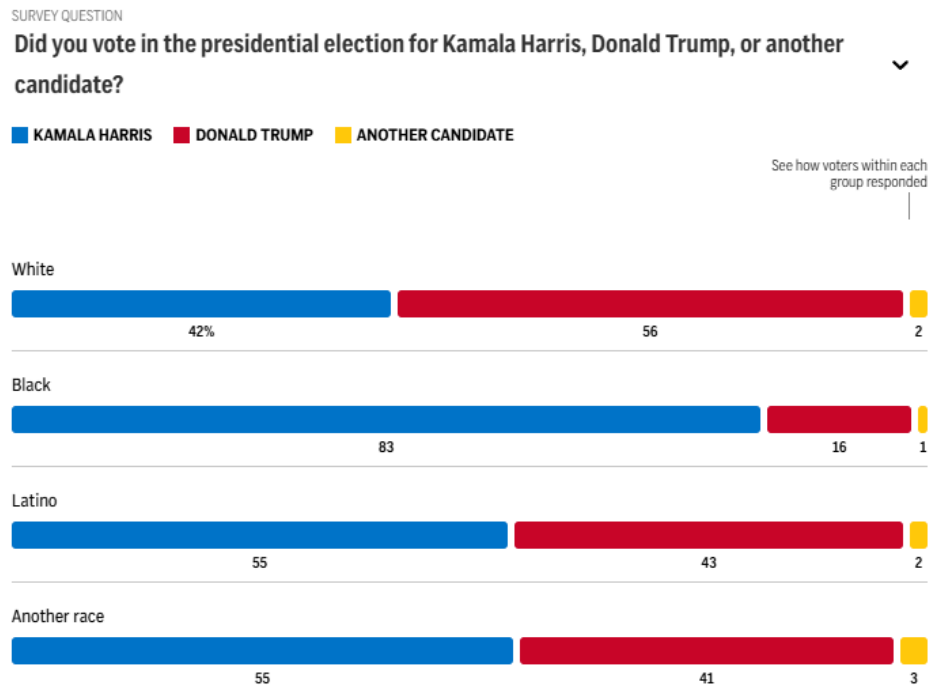
Another race
55   41   3

Figure 2 (Source: AP Votecast, 2024)

According to the Roper Center, 2016 closely aligns with 2020, in which 89% of Black voters supported the Democratic candidate, verifying a substantial dropoff in Black support in 2024 (Roper, 2016). The key takeaway is that the 95% levels that Barack Obama had in 2008 and 2012, where Black voters were almost entirely united behind the Democratic Party, have since fallen apart (Shell, 2025). As seen from the figures above, support remained incredibly consistent well into the 2016 and 2020 elections. Despite strong support in the 2024 election as well, Black support for the Democratic candidate dropped by double digits in the 2024 election cycle.

This dropoff can in part be explained by the candidate herself. In an open-ended survey done by Good Authority, 2,492 responded to the question "how would you describe Harris's ethnic or racial background (Chan & Tokeshi, 2024). The study revealed that people's own racial identities shape how they will then perceive Harris. Black respondents are more likely to

perceive Harris as Black, compared to either South Asian or multiracial, and are more likely to

do so than compared to the White and South Asian respondents. This also applies to South Asian

respondents, who were more likely to respond that she is only South Asian rather than

multiracial or Black. Understanding this context, Figure 3 reveals that yes, a majority of Black

respondents will indeed associate her as Black. However, it is the comparative dropoff to another

Black multiracial person, like Obama, that is telling. Fewer Black voters found Harris shared the

same race as themselves, by about 13%.

Figure 1. Most Black Americans Identify Harris as Black, but Less So Than Obama

In your view, which racial/ethnic identity do you associate most with Kamala Harris's own identity?

Black or African American	47%
Two or more races	29%
South Asian or Indian American	8%
Not sure/other	15%

In your view, which racial/ethnic identity do you associate most with Barack Obama's own identity?

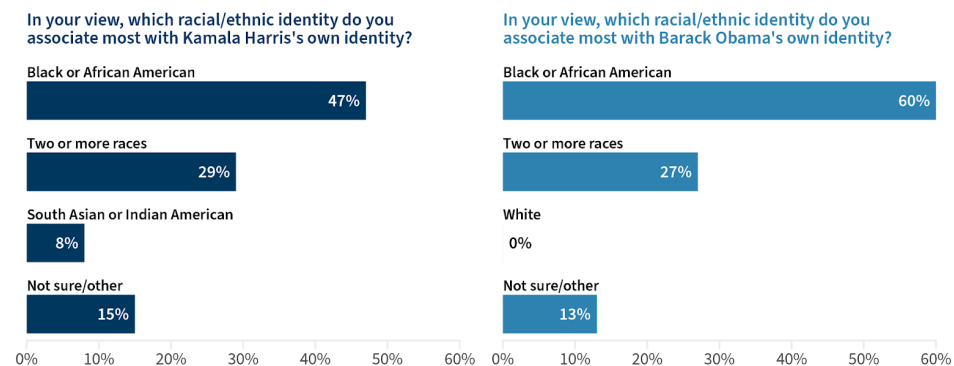|	
Black or African American	60%
Two or more races	27%
White	0%
Not sure/other	13%

Figure 3 (Source: Carnegie, 2025)

Her multiracial ethnic background was spotlighted in the media, with Trump regularly

accusing Harris of "wanting to be known as Black," which Trump felt empowered to claim

because it preyed on an unfortunate vulnerability in Harris's identity in today's political climate

(El-Bawab, 2024). To be clear, this was not just Trump and political opponents–Black American

singer and songwriter Janet Jackson, Black conservative commentator Candace Owens, and

approximately 23% of Black voters were unsure or were skeptical of Harris's identity as seen in

Figure 3 below (Owens, 2024; Romero, 2024; Shell, 2025).

This then helps partially explain the dropoff. The Black Voter Project's 2024 National Black Voter Longitudinal Study found that when asking Black voters what they found the most important feature of a Democratic presidential candidate to be, a majority answered that it was race (Black Voter Project, 2024). The top candidate attribute to Black voters was being a Black candidate. This feeling is corroborated by numbers showing Black voter excitement about Harris's initial nomination when Biden stepped down. This is not just a party-wide excitement either. In a study done by the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, which surveyed a range of Black perspectives around the 2024 elections, they found that ⅘ respondents were more excited about the 2024 election after Harris received the Democratic Nomination compared to when Biden was still the nominee (Young, 2024). In an AP-NORC poll, they found that on just 6/10, Democrats believe that Harris would perform well, which means that Black voters are more supportive of Harris's nomination than other democrats (Kim & Sanders, 2024).

Analysis

So what accounts for the discrepancy between the excitement and the actual results? First, Black voters do care about their leaders and that they represent them. The fact that Black voters may be less likely to even associate Harris as Black in the primary is an issue because there are now fewer people who vote for her who would otherwise be likely to vote for a monoracial Black candidate. That begs the question: Is this because Black voters dislike her South Asian identity? There is little evidence to support this claim. But did her South Asian identity and the incredibly convoluted conversations surrounding her race cause Black voters to disassociate her as Black and as the proper representation that they seek? This is more likely the case. Besides Black monoracial individuals, throughout history, Black and White multiracial individuals, like Obama, are a group that Black individuals are familiar with (Shell, 2025). They

have formed the ethnogenesis that is well accepted by the community. Harris's identity as a Black-Asian and South Asian individual who does not benefit from the familiarity in that specific heritage. Harris, being the latter, does not fit the ethnogenesis of a Black American, and in this way, her South Asian heritage detracted from her connection with Black voters.

Harris carries a darker complexion and "looks" more like the average Black voter than Trump does, comparatively. Just by this alone, it would seem more likely that she would garner Black support if all voters cared about was race, since she is more so than her opponent. But one thing that the Black Voter Project survey did not account for was other non-character attributes a Black voter wants to see in a candidate. Race is more important than other attributes like experience or age to Black voters, but things like policy or the previous administration's economic state play massive roles as well. Many Black voters felt that Harris and, more broadly, the Democratic Party did not represent them in their other needs, like the economy. Black polls conducted by UnidosUS and the Black Economic Alliance found that the economy and inflation were more important to them than other progressive policy priorities, including diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and abortion (Mukherjee, 2024). The latter tend to be strong Democratic policy points, which, at least this cycle, were not the most significant factors for Black voters. Trump had many policies that went against the traditional interests of minorities, including protecting immigration, DEI, and gender rights, but what he also had was a whole Democratic administration in front of him that, to the average voter, seemed to have disheveled the economy. The incumbency bias theory supports this, as inflation increased by 21.2% under Biden while under Trump, voters saw just a 7.9% increase (Newman, 2025). Seeing this, many average voters will be dissuaded from casting a vote for another four years under the Democratic Party.

There are other concerns, too, which have little to do with her ethnicity. The Black voter, in recent election cycles, feels that Democrats are not doing enough to reach them (King, 2019). Ever since Obama took the mantle from 2008 to 2016, Black voters have been a bastion for the Democratic party, as seen with the figures consistently hitting 90% in support. But because of this, over time, Black voters have felt that their unwavering support has led to Democratic leaders forgetting that they need to campaign to meet the Black voters' needs as well. In 2024, what they saw was simple. They are very concerned about the price of food and consumer goods (76%), the cost of housing (72%), and people wanting to work but not being able to find jobs (56%), they still struggle to achieve racial equality and the Biden administration has stood steadfastly with Israel (Cox, 2024; Diaz, 2024). Yet, Harris did little to reach out to specifically Black communities to address these concerns. Worsening this is Harris's past, which presents a unique challenge for Black voters. "A lot of Black voters call her a cop and say that she was one of the drivers of mass incarceration in California. Some of that is misinformation," but at the end of the day, that is what the voter sees (Barron-Lopez et. al., 2024). Her time as a prosecutor meant fighting the War on Drugs in California, which inevitably led to her putting Black people in jail.

A majority of Black voters still supported Harris, but in 2024, a good chunk of previously democratically aligned voters shifted away from the feeling that the Democratic party had given up its support for them. The beginning of the disillusionment of Black voters from the Democratic party's mission is something that needs to be more carefully addressed by candidates if they want to maintain this voter base.

Asian American Voter Attitudes

Polling

Asian Americans, as an ethnic group, supported Harris by the lowest margin of victory of any Democratic candidate within the last seven cycles, by just 15 points (Mukherjee, 2024). But these broad statements about Asian Americans tend to be unfounded and difficult to quantify because Asian Americans are not a big, monolithic voting bloc. This can be studied and further divided into the six largest Asian-origin groups in the U.S.: Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese Americans.

In a comparison of the 2020 and 2024 Asian American surveys (Figures 1 and 2 below), which were both published around the second to third week of September of their respective election years, Trump made inroads with many of these Asian ethnic groups. In a question asking voters which candidate they would be more "inclined to vote for," the following groups viewed Trump more favorably:

Japanese, by 3 points, Korean, by 9 points, and Chinese voters, by 4 points. Vietnamese, Indian, and Filipino respondents viewed the Democratic candidate, Harris, as more favorable.
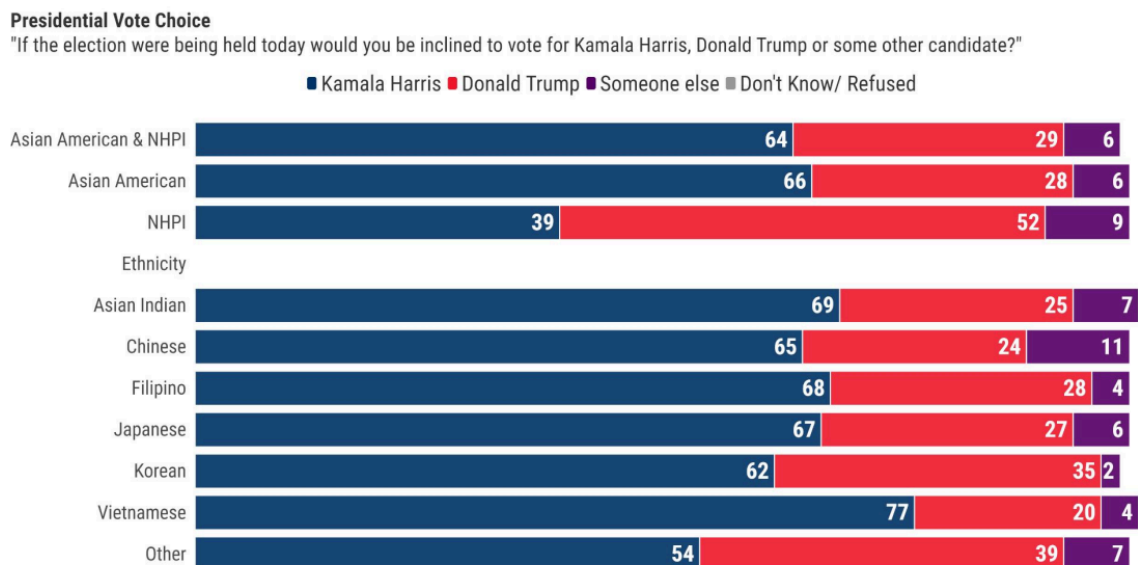
Presidential Vote Choice
"If the election were being held today would you be inclined to vote for Kamala Harris, Donald Trump or some other candidate?"

■ Kamala Harris ■ Donald Trump ■ Someone else ■ Don't Know/ Refused

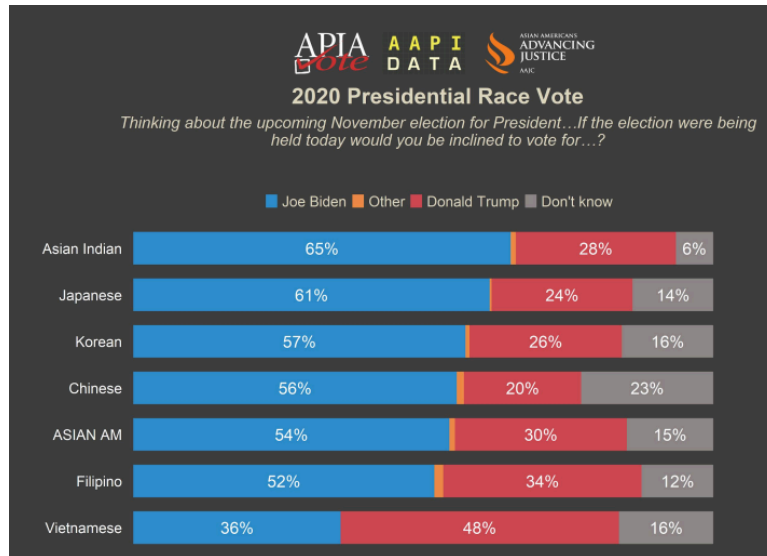|	Kamala Harris	Donald Trump	Someone else
Asian American & NHPI	64	29	6
Asian American	66	28	6
NHPI	39	52	9
Ethnicity			
Asian Indian	69	25	7
Chinese	65	24	11
Filipino	68	28	4
Japanese	67	27	6
Korean	62	35	2
Vietnamese	77	20	4
Other	54	39	7

Figure 1 (Source: AAPI Voter Survey, 2024)

Figure 2 (Source: AAPI Voter Survey, 2020)

On the other hand, Figure 3 below is a second compilation of polling information from

MyAsianVoice dedicated to Asian American polling and data, reviewing the 2024 American

Electorate Voter Poll and the 2020 American Election Eve Poll. They revealed that there is a

negative net change for Harris in Indian, Filipino, and Korean American voters, with the greatest

negative change in Chinese Americans. Vietnamese and Japanese voters swung positively toward

Harris in this poll.

How AAPI Voters voted in 2024 and 2020 by Subgroup

(Percentages may not add to 100%) Subgroup	% who identify as Independent	Democrat (D)			Republican (R)		
		2024 Harris	2020 Biden	Change	2024 Trump	2020 Trump	Change
AAPI	*	61%	68%	-7%	35%	30%	5%
Chinese	**38%**	**53%**	**72%**	**-19%**	**39%**	**27%**	**12%**
Asian Indian	25%	66%	70%	-4%	33%	28%	5%
Filipino	30%	54%	60%	-6%	**44%**	38%	6%
Korean	35%	64%	71%	-7%	34%	23%	11%
Vietnamese	33%	65%	61%	4%	34%	36%	-2%
Japanese	27%	**75%**	70%	5%	23%	29%	-6%
NHPI	*	65%	*	*	31%	*	*

Figure 3 (Source: MyAsianVoice, 2024)

Other sources report slightly different findings, too. Chinese American support for the

Democratic presidential candidate fell to 53% from 70% in 2020, according to the American

Electorate Voter Poll, a large-scale national survey of voters (Qin, 2024). The Indian American

Attitude Survey of 714 Indian Americans found that 60 percent of the group intended to vote for

Harris, compared with 31 percent who planned to vote for Trump. The 2020 IAAS similarly

found that 68 percent of voters intended to vote for Biden, while 22 percent intended to vote for
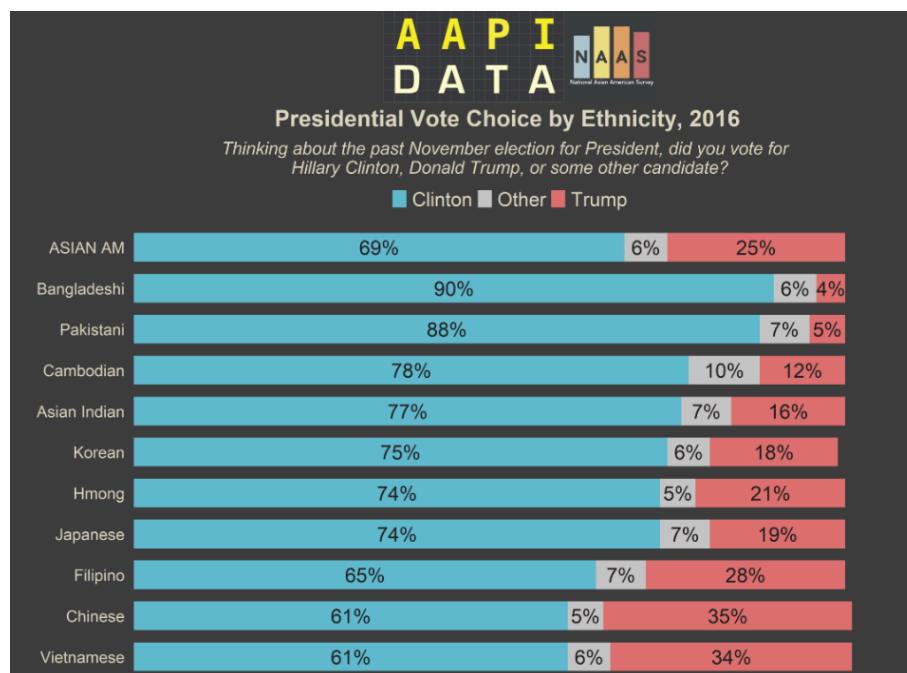
Trump. (Badrinathan et. al., 2024).

Figure 4 (Source: AAPI Voter Survey, 2016)

A comparison of the 2016 and 2024 elections also reveals different voting patterns

amongst Asian American ethnicities. Every group leaned more favorably in 2024, except

Chinese Americans, who dropped by 11 points, and Filipinos, who remained unchanged when

compared to 2020. Asian American ethnicities are varied in their political behavior in that Asian

Americans are not a monolithic bloc, but a coalition of different groups, each with unique

interests and differing political identities. This range makes it difficult to predict uniform voting trends against Harris just due to her multiraciality, at least from the data.

Likewise, it is different to concretely argue Asian American ethnic groups support Harris based on her race from the numbers alone. In the same Good Authority study with African American voters, they also revealed that South Asian respondents are more likely to perceive Harris as South Asian, as opposed to either multiracial or Black (Chan & Tokeshi, 2024). For the other Asian ethnic groups, it is likely a similar story. While there are not many direct studies analyzing how Asian ethnic voters see Harris, it is clear that "Asian American" is still a term primarily associated with lighter-skinned East Asians, in part because Japanese and Chinese Americans were the first to come to America in large numbers (Qin, 2024). There is some evidence that there is a greater distance from her Black identity than her Asian identity, like Indian Americans who perceived Harris better as just Indian than both Indian and Black (Lemi & Sadhwani, 2022).

Moreover, Asian American is such a broad term that it is extremely difficult to say that Asian Americans will unite or reduce support behind an Asian American candidate based purely on their label. According to the Pew Research Center, despite the widespread adoption of the term "Asian American," only 16% of Asian adults use the term "Asian American" to describe themselves, with a majority using their ethnic label or ethnic label with "American" such as Japanese, Indian and Vietnamese or Japanese American, Indian American and Vietnamese American (Ruiz et. al., 2023). This is in line with the history. As mentioned earlier, sociologist Yen Le Espiritu explains that the Asian American term is strategic, one as a means to organize against racial oppression. But for many Asian Americans, this term represents a bureaucratic descriptor or a census category, but not their cultural and political identity with their specific

Asian ethnicity. With this understanding, it can also be concluded that her branding as Asian American is unlikely to build a significant affinity or distaste with Asian ethnic groups, excluding specifically Indian American voters, as mentioned earlier. However, some studies have shown that Asian Americans are less likely to think of Indians as Asians, so her marketing as an Asian American *may* be more advantageous than specifically Indian American (Lee & Ramakrishnan).

From the data, there is a very weak correlation between ethnic groups and their support for Harris. Whereas the hypothesis was that due to origin country biases between South, Southeast, and East Asians would have created marked lines for voter behavior, and this does seem to be the case. There are shifts, but it does not follow ethnic lines. For example, compared to 2016, Chinese Americans dropped 11 points, and Filipinos stayed the same. But in others, other times, Japanese and Vietnamese support for Harris dropped. It is also important to note that while there is a shift, the shifts themselves are just not as significant as Hispanic and Black voters this cycle either. Most shifts between 2016 and 2020 are in the single digits. Race could be a factor, but it is by far not the biggest one for most Asian American voters.

However, this is good evidence that, regardless, Asian American voters' shifting around was due to factors other than race. 68% of Asian registered voters say it's extremely or very important to have a national leader who can advance the concerns of the U.S., reflecting a nationalist pride, and 97% of Asian American registered voters say a candidate's policy is more important than a candidate's ethnicity when deciding who to vote for. It seems unlikely that, at least to a meaningful extent, the AAPI voter base shifted solely because of Harris's Black or Indian American identity.

Analysis

Initially, it may seem counterintuitive that Asian Americans, and specifically Chinese Americans, would have a significant voting base for Trump. His first term marked comments about the coronavirus as the "Chinese virus," confrontational stances against China, and overall xenophobia toward Asian Americans during the pandemic (Qin, 2024). He even worked up a program specifically made to investigate Chinese American researchers, prosecuting them as spies (Qin, 2024). The data on Chinese American voters confirms this: Support for Biden shot up in 2020 out of disapproval of Trump's rhetoric. It is not the majority Asian American support for Harris–the area for study is why, on average, about a ⅓ of Asian ethnic groups still support Trump. Why do Asian Americans find sympathy for a candidate who openly voices and leads to so much anti-Asian hate (Stop AAPI Hate, 2025)?

For Asian Americans, many reasons could be pointed to to help explain shifts and wavering support for Harris. One is that newer immigrants are not invested in many Democratic core principles–issues like gender identity, racial equality, civil rights, and more are not considered priorities (Yam, 2024). This helps account for the sliver of Asian American voters who are new immigrants. There is also a group of more socially conservative immigrants who are especially disinterested in the Democratic Party because of their distrust in gender studies and transgender rights (Qin, 2024). Many understand that the Democratic Party protects minority groups, but certain Asian American groups feel that it is not protecting them. Lastly, like with African American voters, Asian Americans viewed Trump more favorably in 2024 than in 2020 than in 2016 because they were concerned about the economy (Mukherjee, 2024).

It seems to be more about losing faith and trust in the Democratic Party, and that the bastions like New York City and San Francisco can protect Asian American interests. Soft-on-crime policies in these Democratic bastions, affirmative action, which most Asian

American parents are concerned about regarding their children's education, as well as the overall downward trend in the economy, seem to be much bigger motivators for the Trump ballot (Mukherjee, 2024). Chinese American parents viewed education as the golden ticket to a better life, and watching the Biden administration's staunch defenses of university admission racial preferences infringes on this belief. (Lee & Zhou, 2015, pp. 10, 14; Mukherjee, 2024). Despite the Supreme Court striking down affirmative action policies as a violation of the Constitution's Equal Protection Clause, Harris herself described the ruling as a "step backward" and a "denial of opportunity" (Wells, 2023). Further charging this was Yale's lawsuit in which it was publicly released that "the admittance rate for Black applicants in the top academic decile was 60%, for Asian applicants, it was 14.32%" yet, the Biden-Harris administration chose to drop the lawsuit that Trump had originally filed against the school for Title VI violations (Mukherjee, 2024). These, to many Asian American parents, are signs that the American dream that they think they are striving towards or have already achieved–about 72% of Asian adults believe this–is under attack by the Democratic party, and therefore, many are withholding their votes (Ruiz et. al., 2023).

Cross-Demographic/Separate Insights

Economy/Pessimism

As seen in the sections above, there are some cross-demographic overlaps. A large player in this election can be attributed to economic concerns. Especially with inflation and the rising cost of living, these became pivotal factors and influenced voter behavior across demographics and political lines, likely more significantly than Harris's racial identity. This effect aligns with the incumbency bias theory, where the sitting party takes the most heat for economic downturns and bears the brunt of the public dissatisfaction. Roughly 46% of White voters, 42% of Hispanic

and Asian American and Pacific Islander voters, and 31% of Black voters considered inflation and cost of living as critical factors. Despite the media coverage on other topics like immigration or abortion, these economic issues had a much larger influence on people's voting patterns (Cousens, 2024). This seemed to be a factor across the board. Figure 1 shows that across all ethnic groups, the economy was a big negative metric for Harris.

Voters Across the Board Were Pessimistic About the State of the Economy and the Country, Particularly White and Hispanic

Nearly two in three voters (63%) said the country was off on the wrong track, with white voters (66%) and Hispanic voters (59%) the most negative – and the same held true on their views of the economy (72% of white voters rated it negatively, 70% of Hispanic voters).
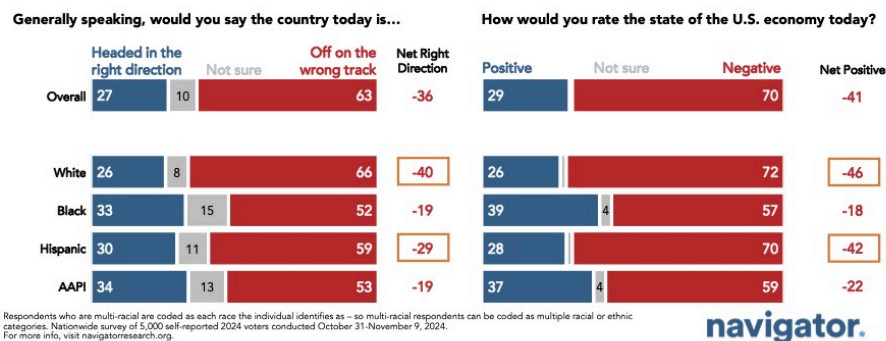
Generally speaking, would you say the country today is...

	Headed in the right direction	Not sure	Off on the wrong track	Net Right Direction
Overall	27	10	63	-36
White	26	8	66	-40
Black	33	15	52	-19
Hispanic	30	11	59	-29
AAPI	34	13	53	-19

How would you rate the state of the U.S. economy today?

	Positive	Not sure	Negative	Net Positive
Overall	29		70	-41
White	26		72	-46
Black	39	4	57	-18
Hispanic	28		70	-42
AAPI	37	4	59	-22

Respondents who are multi-racial are coded as each race the individual identifies as – so multi-racial respondents can be coded as multiple racial or ethnic categories. Nationwide survey of 5,000 self-reported 2024 voters conducted October 31-November 9, 2024. For more info, visit navigatorresearch.org.

navigator.

Figure 1 (Source: Navigator, 2024)

These concerns are valid, at least in the data. Inflation was a "surprise villain" of both Biden's presidency and Harris's candidacy, where inflation increased by 21.2% while under Trump, voters saw just a 7.9% increase (Newman, 2025). While Biden's inflationary issues were largely caused by other factors, such as post-COVID supply issues, the change in spending patterns during COVID, government stimuli, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, voters feel Biden is the easiest to blame simply because he was in charge while these factors were all in play. And more than just Biden, it was the Democratic Party when it came to Harris's election. Therefore, it was crucial when Harris presented her economic and fiscal plan to convince the voting body that she was different, that she could provide a solution to their economic woes, and

that she was worth voting for. Unfortunately, her economic message just did not break through despite a majority of voters saying that the economy was their #1 issue. Trump led on economic issues by six points, according to her donors, her "economic message hasn't broken through," and policy-wise, prominent figures like Sen. Bernie Sanders have warned her that her policy does not address the bread-and-butter issues of the average, middle-class American–a critical demographic if she wanted to make leeway in economics (Bolton, 2024).

Young Men

Figure 1 *(Source: Navigator, 2024)*

The percentage of Asian American Voters, by age group, who voted for each Democratic presidential candidate in 2024 and 2020
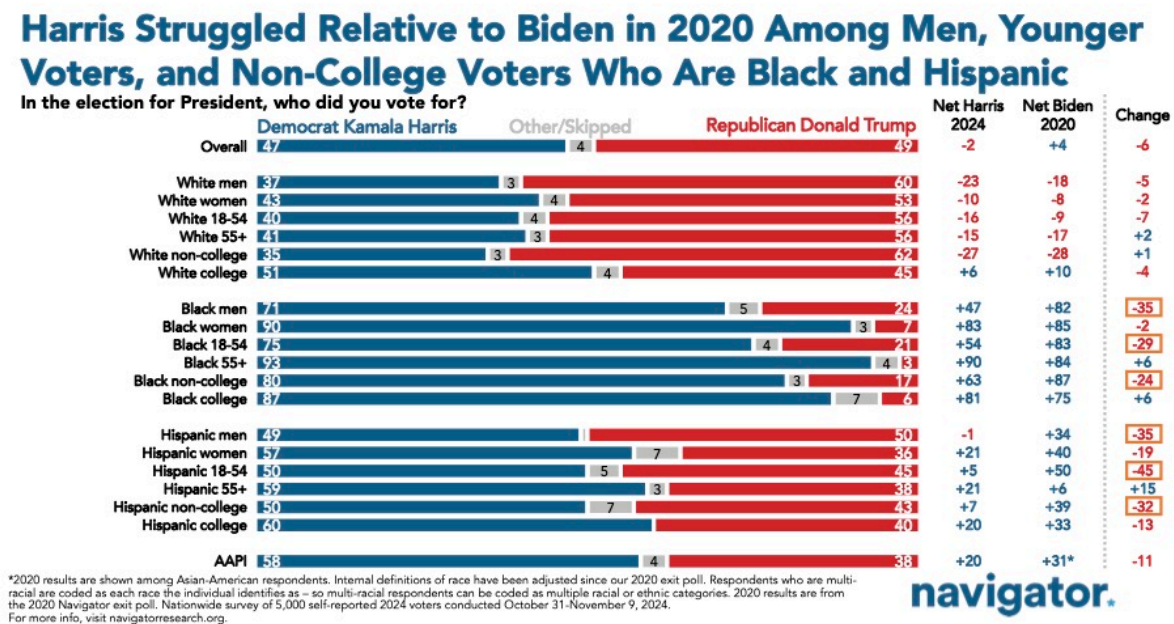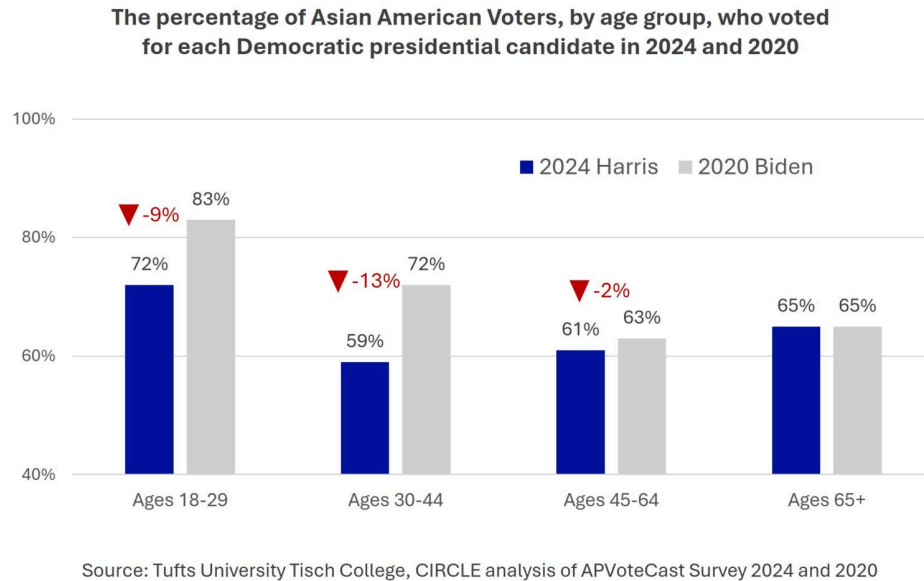
Figure 2 (Source: Tufts University, 2024)

However, as seen in previous sections, it is not just the economy; the young voter is especially concerned. Looking at Figure 2 above, Black men ages 18-54 saw a shift towards Trump, yet Black men 55+ actually favored Harris. Similarly, Asian American voters who were 45 or older barely saw any change in their voting pattern; in fact, almost all of the rightward shift came from voters 18-44 years old. 2024 marked a notable shift among young and, specifically, male voters. More than half of men under thirty supported Trump, including approximately six in ten White men, half of Latino men, and roughly one-third of Black men (Brown 2024). This realignment can be attributed largely to Trump's rhetorical policy style, which actively engaged young voters. Especially for those who felt marginalized by economic and cultural shifts, Trump's aggressive and masculine tone resonated with those who felt overlooked and scorned by society. His presence at UFC fights, football games, and social media influencers charged the conservative population and bolstered his appeal amongst young male voters (Brown 2024). Harris did try as well and reached out to the young voters. She focused on heavy political and

economic messaging, which ultimately failed to gain traction, especially amongst the less politically engaged. Enlisting Black and Hispanic leaders and referencing pop culture sensations like Charli XCX, while a solid attempt to connect with the youth, failed to generate the same level of enthusiasm that Trump was able to (Brown 2024). In part, this could be attributed to Trump's attention-grabbing moments and messaging that reached those who were less politically engaged.

When looking at the existing studies, "young" seems to be a consistent modifier of politics, an adjective that has more play than traditional party lines or racial issues. It tends to be young Asian Americans who want to stay away from race identity discourse (Zhitong, 2020). Andrew Yang, another Democratic candidate in 2020, who will be studied later on, found success among young White men (Stevens, 2019). A majority of Indian Americans back Democrats, but young Indian Americans shifted toward Trump, according to an Indian American Attitudes Survey, one of the first national representative surveys focused on the Indian American community (Badrinathan et al., 2024). Young Black and Latino men followed this same pattern (AP, 2024). In part, there is some interplay with the economy and jobs because it is the younger generation that is looking for jobs, trying to purchase homes, and being first exposed to economic policies that affect them as they hit voting age (AP, 2024).

But ultimately, the shifting political orientation of young men is not just economic dissatisfaction or a lack of political understanding but broader psychological and gender dynamics. *iGen* by Jean Twenge explains how "more than previous generations, they are obsessed with safety, focused on tolerance, and have no patience for inequality" (Twenge, 2024, p. 3). Reading this, psychologists would expect the younger generation to align more closely with Democratic values, which often embody progress and fairness as part of their core

messaging. However, despite this, young voters gravitated towards more conservative messaging and ideologies.

Social psychologist Adam Stanaland jumps in here and connects this trend of young, specifically male voters, to how masculinity is socially defined and reinforced. Stanaland identifies three core psychological mechanisms to explain this: conformity, motivation, and perceived threat (Stanaland). Conformity. Gen Z, in general, but men in particular, are navigating a period of identity formation that is heavily dictated by their environment and their understanding of what traditional masculinity means, making them especially susceptible and fragile, therefore, dictating their conformity. Motivation emerges from this desire to conform and builds a sense of economic and social need. Things like homeownership, a nuclear family, and stable employment are key motivations for Gen Z men because that is how "men" are defined in their eyes. Finally, comes the threat. The threat to their conformity, motivations, and ultimately their masculinity can be found in how men are expected, in their roles, to be providers, breadwinners, and homeowners, yet these are all increasingly difficult to access. These instabilities challenge Gen Z men and how they can access masculinity; therefore, political choices like leaning conservative are a means to reassert control and power.

This was true in the 2024 election as young Gen Z men voters had similar rates to their older male counterparts (both around 67%), despite age generally suggesting a greater general difference and a more left-leaning youth (Stanaland, 2024). This is as opposed to young women's voting behavior, which indeed diverged significantly compared to their older female counterparts. Therefore, the gender gap, more so than the age gap, played a key role in young men's political allegiance. It is not just "toxic masculinity;" the data indicated that it is a more interrelated issue, one that includes economic and social structures, many of which are shifting

for Gen Z men that Trump was able to tap into. Reframing them within a populist, hyper-masculine narrative proved that the Republican Party could capture the votes of the youth, a bloc previously securely held by the Democratic Party (Stanaland, 2024).

Gender

This leads to the conversation about Harris's gender at play, as one of the few females to lead a presidential ticket. From the moment she took the stand as Vice President, she has been berated for being a woman in power. Besides remarks from her political opponent, one 2021 study found that 79% of sexist and racist comments on X were directed at Harris (Ho, 2024). For both Asian American and African American voters, gender was an arguably stronger factor in their voting decisions than race. Despite race getting longer airtime in the media, according to the AAPI and Asian and Pacific Island American Vote (APIAVote), Asian Americans felt that her gender played a stronger role than racial representation when it came to support for her candidacy (Ramakrishnan & Sadhwani, 2024). She received a boost from her gender amongst Asian American women, twice as much so than when compared to men (Ramakrishnan & Sadhwani, 2024). A similar story spells out when looking at Black voters. YouGov's SAY24 Project surveyed 100,000 Black voters, ones likely to vote in 2024, and found interesting connections between hostile sexism and voting behavior. Harris performed better amongst individuals with lower hostile sexism, and the study found that hostile sexism impacted votes of Black men and less so among Black women (Robertson & Tesler, 2024).

The most direct comparison to contextualize the impact of gender is the 2016 election between Hillary Clinton, a White female, and Trump, a White male. In that election, researchers discovered that when men were reminded of traditional gender roles, their support for Trump would increase by a 50-42 margin compared to a 49-33 margin for those who were not (Crockett,

2016). A similar effect occurred in 2024, where the rise of the "Black Manosphere" coincided with support of Trump as an "alpha-male" capable of combating feminism (Robertson & Tesler, 2024). The "Manosphere" was traditionally filled with young, White men and was online places where men had conversations for, with, and about men, usually in a twisted way to justify misogyny and male superiority (Dashiell, 2024). Figures like Andrew Tate, Jordan Peterson, and the "Fresh & Fit" podcast starring Myron Gaines and Walter Weekes have exploded in popularity and become internet personalities. Black men beginning subscribing to this when the manosphere began catering to the African American audience–African American Vernacular English, the use of phrases analogous to Black struggles like women "keeping" men down, repeated statistics about Black men like lower employment and higher incarceration and just the overall disenfranchisement and discrimination against men (Dashiell, 2024). These conversations invite Black listeners to the traditionally non-Black manosphere, leading to the rise of the Black Manosphere. Unfortunately, in 2024, gender still very much played a role in how people viewed a candidate and impacted how both Asian Americans and African Americans voted in the elections.

Hispanic Voters

It is also important to mention Hispanic voters because, by far, the largest swing in voters when organized by racial identity is amongst Hispanic voters, who swung thirteen points in favor of Trump in the recent election, more than either Asian or Black voters this cycle. It had a drastic impact on Pennsylvania, which has a growing Latino population and accounts for about 5% of the state's votes (Dsbusmann et. al., 2024). Pennsylvania was widely considered the most important state in the election, with many channels calling its electoral votes the most significant. This is because of a few things. One, the popular vote in Pennsylvania has always been very

close–2020 marked four days before the state could be projected as a presidential election winner (Behanna, 2024). It is also the fifth-largest state, meaning it carries 19 electoral votes, the 5th most impactful state by electoral count (Davis, 2024). There are some states above it, like California, Texas, or New York, but those states tend to be bastions of their respective party, whereas Pennsylvania, especially this year, was a toss-up that eventually ended in Trump's favor.

What accounts for this drastic disapproval of the Harris candidacy among Hispanics and support for Trump despite his history of antagonistic remarks about Latino immigrants? "Latino" itself is just a blanket term that encompasses 21 Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, so first and foremost, there is no such thing as a homogeneous, single, generic "Latino voter," much like the previous analysis on Asian Americans (Kloppe-Santamaría & Young, 2025). However, some trends predict why the 2024 election resulted in the way it did.

First is religion–the majority of people of Latino heritage are Catholic, and alongside that, a rise of Evangelicals and other Christian denominations points to a more conservative population that supports Republican ideals (Kloppe-Santamaría & Young, 2025). Latino communities that are evangelical strongly supported Trump in 2024 (McCammon, 2024). Additionally, the political history of the home country plays a large role. For example, the U.S.-Mexico Cristero War forced Catholics to flee, and then later, the Cuban revolution of 1959 also forced many conservative and anticommunist migrants to flee. Over time, these groups support Republicans based on policies that are punitive to Cuba and support religious ideals (Kloppe-Santamaría & Young, 2025). This is furthered by suspicion of new waves of immigration from certain Latin American countries and previous economic dynamics and racial hierarchies, which all make Trump's rhetoric that much more impactful to the Latino Trump supporters. Immigration was an extremely important point for many Latino voters. Polls ahead of

the election showed that Latinos specifically were drawn to Trump's proposals that made

immigration stricter and blocked migrants at the Southern border (Dsbusmann et. al., 2024).

Comparative Case Studies

Now, some much-needed context and media analysis must take place to help fully grasp

how race influenced her political trajectory. Throughout recent American history, candidates of

diverse racial backgrounds have navigated their political identity–some Republican, some

Democrat, some distancing themselves from their racial heritage, and others embracing it. Race

makes up a candidate's political identity and, therefore, can be a unifying force or an obstacle

that shapes electoral viability. By comparing her to three distinct figures, Barack Obama, the

coalition-builder, Nikki Haley, the conservative who downplayed race, and Andrew Yang, the

outsider technocrat who balanced racial identity with anti-identity politics, this section will move

beyond polling data to explore the nuances of when and how race shaped Harris's 2024

presidential campaign.

Barack Obama

Throughout Obama's campaign, people attacked his identity. Many insisted that Obama

was not Black, "Mutt," half-and-half, and other derogatory nicknames in mockery of his

multiracial heritage. This even included accusations of him being Muslim and of not being a U.S.

citizen and therefore ineligible to run for President (Zurcher, 2016). All of these derogatory

theories and names were nothing more than rumors of people confused and threatened by his

identity. Obama is multiracial–son of a White Kansan and a Black Kenyan. To be transparent,

however, he indeed outlined his race throughout the campaign as none other than African

American: "I identify as African-American–that's how I'm treated and that's how I'm viewed"

(The Associated Press, 2008). Even though he decided to forgo part of his identity, at least on the

political stage, it is a valid identification. As mentioned earlier under <u>Multiraciality in Politics,</u> Obama experienced the struggles of multiracialism as a struggle to compartmentalize aspects of himself as a legacy of racist social constructs like the one-drop rule. Despite it being advantageous to more clearly outline his White heritage, he slotted and presented himself as a Black man because he felt that was the side of him that represented the struggles he faced and the ways he was treated.

This decision explains why the media is much more likely to identify Harris as multiracial and Obama as just Black, and also why Black voters have a harder time seeing Harris as Black, reflecting the different ways each candidate approached their racial identity (Pena-Vasquez, 2020). Harris has chosen to consistently identify as a multiracial candidate, rather than choosing just one aspect. Harris has publicly identified as Black and South Asian starting from back in 2012, when the California Attorney General interviewed her. Harris clearly stated that she "was the first woman elected, first African American woman elected, and Asian American elected in the state as a district attorney…" (Reuters Fact Check, 2024). In reality, like with Obama, this decision had little bearing on how people would view and call her. Even though, unlike Obama, she avoided slotting herself into one aspect of her identity, like Obama, she still faced the legacy of racist social constructs. Her main opposition, Donald Trump, stated that she only claimed her Black part of her identity as a strategic ploy in her campaign. In the summer of 2024, Trump commented at a gathering of Black journalists in Chicago that "She was always of Indian heritage, and she was only promoting Indian heritage. I didn't know she was Black until several years ago, when she happened to turn Black, and now she wants to be known as Black. So I don't know, is she Indian or is she Black?" the former president said (Pellish, 2024). People are confused and outright deny their own identity as if it is a political tool. The

takeaway is that regardless of how these two multiracial candidates chose to self-identify, their race was ultimately forced into the spotlight.

Harris's public image faced a lot of the same racial categorization that Obama and many other multiracial individuals face. Research shows that political orientation correlates with racial categorizations of multiracial faces. Liberals are more likely to accept and categorize her as multiracial, her true identity, whereas conservatives simply categorize her as White, which is incorrect (Ma et al., 2021). This is a bit complex and, at first glance, seems counterintuitive. According to hypodescent literature, it would be expected that the categorization of multiracial individuals as Black would occur among individuals evaluating Black people more negatively than White people (Ho et al., 2015). What gives people who oppose her the right to label her as White? This thinking can be explained by analyzing the nuances. For one, Harris is a highly successful, affluent, and powerful woman–all traits traditionally associated with being White (Ma et al., 2021). Naturally, conservatives who are unlikely to have conducted extensive research on their opposition may just "guess" her race. More so, it seems this social categorization is an evolution of what anti-Blackness has become. Conservatives are more likely to classify her as White because of the emphasis on a strictly binary racial classification. Notions like the one-drop rule extend to this day, and early studies point to a fear of her multiracial identity in the Republican party (Ma et al., 2021). Arguing she is not Black is a political strategy; this is reinforced by the fact that conservatives who held more anti-Black biases were more inclined to perceive Harris as White (Ma et al., 2021). For the same reasons, this explains why people labeled Obama as not Black, especially people who opposed him. Therefore, conservatives ignore her multiracial side and even assign her as White as a political act, knowing that it would reduce her advantage during the election. Even though Harris attempted to stay true to herself as

a source of pride in her multiraciality, her heritage identification and heritage meant nothing when it came to the political stage and how voters and politicians want to frame her. In the same way, Obama attempted to identify as African American, but in return, still faced derogatory slurs and questions about his birthright. The theme is that race definition is not in the hands of the individual themselves to dictate who they are; at times, especially in the opposition, their race is whichever one provides the least advantages.

Moving beyond race identification, the two also share in common their overall messaging and public presentation. Obama espoused a generally deracialized electoral strategy–he still addressed racial concerns, but in a universalistic and color-blind way. Despite personally understanding the difficulties of racial inequalities–evidenced by his famous "It could have been me" statement–his approach tried to navigate discussions on race without alienating large populations that may be less susceptible to such (Christie & O'Brien, 2020). Similarly, Harris has also strategically engaged minority interests, embracing her multiracial identity and frequently reminding Americans of her diverse ancestry. Like Obama, she has chosen not to directly confront racial issues by herself, allowing other Democrats and prominent figures to challenge Trump's anti-immigration and birther conspiracy theories. Instead, she focused on rhetoric like subtly invoking the Civil Rights Movement, a movement that has gained more widespread acceptance, and framing it in a way to resonate with American values (Contreras & Masset, 2024). Some could argue that this strategy is more racially active than Obama's rhetoric, and while this could be true, this paper argues that it would also match the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, anti-AAPI hate, and the overall increased discussions surrounding race. It is *proportionally* race-neutral. Obama can largely avoid any conversation about race because he was the first person of color to become President, but Harris is in a different electorate–one

that is more diverse, intertwined with race, and will continue to be more so than ever before (Budiuman & Igielnik, 2020). This new electorate expects their candidates to be somewhat attentive or racial inequality without, of course, alienating important topics like the economy or immigration. Still, the broad undertones show that both Obama and Harris have had to balance their concern for racism with a broader political appeal. Harris's rise to prominence was driven by more than just a wave of liberal optimism in response to Trump's presidency: his rhetoric on race, legal controversies, and threats to democracy. She was also shaped by her political strengths and her messaging, being frequently compared to Barack Obama, earning the nickname 'the female Barack Obama' (Bailey & Ramaswamy, 2024; Bierman, 2024). So given all these similarities between Obama and Harris, and if race had a play at all, what gives one of these two winning the presidency twice, and one being voted out of office after just one term as vice president?

One reason was that she was simply second. Obama already set down that a Black president ushering in racial harmony was nothing more than a pipe dream. Throughout the presidency, White Americans began perceiving themselves as victims of the "anti-White" state (Donnella, 2024). This victimhood emerged in response to a shift in the racial dynamics. With a Black president, racial discourse became more visible, and many White Americans saw these conversations leading to their interests being sidelined. At the same time, people on the left learned that a Black president does not equal anti-racist legislation (Donnella, 2024). These are all important values and concerns that Black voters carry, and ones they thought a Black candidate would represent; unfortunately, the Democratic party has not proven that they can follow through. This perception that a Black president finally symbolized change in American racial dynamics led up to Harris. "These include perceptions that the Democratic Party has not

fully delivered on police reform, affordable housing, or closing the racial wealth gap, as well as dissatisfaction with the U.S.'s involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Gaza conflict" (Shell, 2025). To UC Berkeley scholars, coming to this election, it was clear that across a range of disciplines, millions of White, working-class men felt that their industries were dying and their wages stagnant (Lempinen, 2022). Harris came in at a time when a large section of the White voter base has, for years now, felt their political power and cultural status diminishing. They need policies and, ultimately, a face that reassures their climb back into their nostalgic levels of power–one Harris simply does not match. Harris was not ignorant of this. She attempted to reassure constituents that she will uphold a meritocracy, arguing that she "will be a president who unites us around our highest aspirations and a president who leads and listens, who is realistic, practical and has common sense" (Bierman, 2024). Likewise, Black voters needed a candidate who spoke to them directly and worked on their needs, something that the Democratic Party has ignored since Obama. Despite her attempts at Obama-style rhetoric, many critics see them as simply falling flat. "You exist in the context of all in which you live and what came before you" (Bierman, 2024).

A second big difference is that Obama is multiracially White and Black, while Harris is Indian and Black. Unlike Obama, Harris's visible multiracial identity leaves her with less room to navigate racial complexities, which can alienate some groups. Obama's racial flexibility was evident and useful as seen in his 2008 race speech, where he balanced his Black and White heritage with a heart-warming story of both: "I am the son of a Black man from Kenya and a White woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a White grandfather who survived the Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a White grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas" (NPR, 2008). This gave

a neutral undertone to his race as his candidacy could be as much about his White heritage as his Black, even if he aligned with his African American identity. Other attempts, like the "beer summit," demonstrated his attempts at racial mediation where he brought together a Black Harvard academic, Louis Gates, and a White police officer who had arrested Mr. Gates in his own home (Bryant, 2017). Even though it was a pretty clumsy photo op, it showed Obama's willingness to restrain himself from his initial comments about the Cambridge police "acting stupidly," and instead chose to be more cautious so as not to seem like a Black man in the White House (Bryant, 2017). Obama could find success with his race, mediating differences, allowing him to resonate with a larger voting base. As mentioned earlier, "Whiteness" is associated with things like affluence and power, and his multiracial identity was, therefore, beneficial to some degree.

Harris, in contrast, cannot employ this. For one, she does not have a White racial identity that can support her. She must address her racial identity, and she does; Her multiracial identity is clear–something she is proud and explicit about. While this can attract a large voter base, it also opens her up to the existing racial conflicts. Whereas Obama could rely on his identity to unify otherwise dissenting voters, Harris struggles to do so. This is made more evident when looking at the polling numbers. Harris's favorability among Black voters is 9% lower and among Asian Americans is 7% lower when compared to Obama (Roper, 2008; NBC, 2024). Black voters supported Biden because of his deep relationship with Obama, but as time has moved on, Black voters argue that Black candidates, like Harris, cannot rely on their race as a sole way to garner votes–they are looking for authentic, hard-work to secure Black votes (King, 2019). Some went so far as to argue that at the time she committed to seeking Black votes, Harris seemed shallow and inauthentic, verified by the fact that she was behind Biden, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth

Warren in the 2020 Democratic primaries with Black voters (King, 2019). Her multiraciality and her increased visibility as a multiracial figure have, therefore, made it difficult for her to navigate race as a feature, not a flaw, successfully.

While both Barack Obama and Kamala Harris are multiracial figures navigating complex racial dynamics in American politics, it is important to study the ways their strategies and experiences diverged. Obama, son of White and Black parents, largely adhered to a race-neutral, deracialized personal persona which allowed him to resonate with large voter bases without alienating any one group. This includes White, East Asian, and South Asian Americans. Harris, on the other hand, a daughter of Black and Indian parents, faces this challenge inherently differently. Her notably visible identity makes it difficult to adopt race neutrality, and therefore, the perception of her is also more polarized, especially amongst minority voting groups. Moreover, not having that White racial identity provided her no support. Her favorability has ultimately lagged behind Obama's key demographic groups, notably Asian and Black Americans. While she has embraced her multiracial background and attempted to adopt race-neutral rhetoric, times have changed; race is now a forefront issue, exacerbated by Obama's tenure.

Nikki Haley

Nikki Haley draws a very different story from that of both Obama and Harris. Haley is the daughter of two Indian immigrants, served as governor of South Carolina from 2011 to 2017, and was appointed U.S. Ambassador to the UN under Donald Trump's administration. In 2024, she took to the stage and sought the Republican nomination for president (Tikkanen, 2025). While Haley and Harris are both women, tied to India and have personal connections to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), their political agendas have played out

drastically differently, especially through their acceptance of racial identity. Harris, of mixed

Indian and Black descent, has proudly embraced her multiraciality as a core part of her identity,

but Haley has done the opposite. She was more hesitant about her racial background,

downplaying any conversation of it unless it aligned with Republican core ideas. This, of course,

raises the most striking difference, which is that Haley is a Republican, projecting her different

voter bases and placing her on the opposite side of political ideology from Harris. Understanding

this, it will be interesting to see how different people react to Indian American women in power

positions.

      A first point to help contextualize Haley's racial ideology is her decision to separate from

HBCUs. Both Haley and Harris have close ties to HBCUs. HBCUs are institutions that have

historically led Black political thought and activism. Since their inception, HBCUs primarily

served Black Americans, with just about 15% of enrolled students being non-Black in 1976–a

figure that rose slightly in 2022 to around 24% (IES). At first, this may seem a bit

counterintuitive. Why would an HBCU look at Haley's parents or anyone else further than a fully

Black student body? However, in understanding America's fluid racial classifications, it helps

explain the makeup of non-Black students. Historically, "colored" did indeed primarily refer to

freed slaves, but it just as much referred to darker-skinned groups, like South Asians, who

experienced similar types of coloristic prejudice. Therefore, as Attorney Walter White explains

it, people like Haley's father, despite not being Black, have a stronger connection with HBCUs

because of their darker complexion, not coincidentally (White, 2024). Therefore, Haley's

political ideology, distancing herself from the traditional racial and social justice associated with

HBCUs despite her father's attendance, is not simply because she is not Black–it is an active

choice to distance herself from the race discussion as a whole. This is compared to Harris, who,

even on the night of the election, was proudly repping her Alma Mater by hosting a watch party at her HBCU, Howard University. It is the connections to Black colleges and HBCUs as well as being a member of the first collegiate Black sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, that give Harris her identity–a stable one that, as will later be seen, Haley does not have (Ray & Sanchez). This also means Harris has a much harder time "quieting" her identity. She has no intention of doing this, but it also means that Harris would fall flat in the hard right enthusiasts, and that if there are prejudices faced by Harris, she would face them much harder in theory. At least, that is the thought which will be challenged later on.

Beyond this example, it is the political and ideological distinctions between Haley and Harris that mark the most prominent differences between the two. Harris, on the one hand, was openly embracing her multiracial heritage as a strength to advocate for important, Democratic policies like racial equity with her voter base. By contrast, Haley has largely avoided discussions of race, unless it aligns with broader Republican values to appease Republicans in the primary. As sociologist Hajar Yazdiha puts it, she strategically invokes her Indian-American identity only when it reinforces conservative ideas of meritocracy and self-reliance, but otherwise minimizes its role in her lived experiences (Brown & Kinnard, 2024). This sort of "anyone can make it" belief would be traditionally accepted and even applauded by a majority of Republican voters, but despite her meritocratic and race-avoidant conversations, she still faces racial backlash from Trump and fellow Republicans. Racial backlash includes relentless remarks about her birth name, intentionally mispronouncing her name, and posting conspiracy theories that she is ineligible for the presidency because she was born to two immigrants (Brown & Kinnard, 2024). On the other hand, Harris is allowed to embrace her multiracial heritage without being forced to speak on race, evidenced by her ability to represent her Indian and Black sides without much

backlash from *Democrats*. This difference is not unusual either. People of color in the Republican party tend to be forced to, either directly or indirectly, speak on race disproportionally to their White counterparts within the party (Brown & Kinnard, 2024). Examples include Black Republican Tim Scott, who argued that "We don't have Black poverty or White poverty. We have Poverty," or Indian-American candidate and entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, who faced skepticism from Christian conservatives over his Hindu religious values (Brown & Kinnard, 2024). The same story goes for Haley, who, despite facing these racist attacks, maintained her race-avoidant tones. She dismisses Trump and other rhetoric as nothing more than political maneuvering.

But Haley's dismissive stance on race is challenged constantly. One of the most notable was her defense of the Confederate flag in South Carolina, where she argued that it represented nothing more than "service, sacrifice, and heritage," just a few days after a White supremacist murdered eight Black churchgoers in Charleston. Yet, she then backtracked after immense backlash and said it was obvious that she had implied slavery since "everyone knows the flag has always been a symbol of slavery (Brown & Kinnard, 2024). This sort of response reflects her wavering support of racial politics. Sure, she will call out individual acts of prejudice, but tries not to frame them as a broader issue of racial injustice. Her reluctance to even acknowledge systemic racism went infamously viral in December 2023 when she refused to mention slavery as a root cause of the Civil War during a New Hampshire town hall (Barclay, 2024). While her position on many topics, like abortion and race, does appear to be more moderate when compared to other Republican candidates, it is clear that she still frames experiences like childhood discrimination and exclusion from beauty pageants as nothing more than challenges she overcame in her race to the top, not systemic inequality. People on social media also

amplified a theory that "Nikki Haley" was a name created to circumvent racist comments because "Nimrata Randhawa," her birth name, does not appeal to Republican voters (Fichera, 2023). Haley, like Harris, knows that her heritage impacts her political standing, however, she chooses to avoid that topic as a whole.

Haley's identity as an Indian-American woman in the Republican Party challenges traditional assumptions about race alignment in politics as well. The Republican Party has historically struggled with attracting minority voters and candidates, and her story represents a push toward diversifying the Republican leadership while still maintaining core conservative values like the American Dream. However, in the process, she now struggles to appease either side. As mentioned earlier, many Republican allies point out and mock her heritage. But at the same time, Black voters and more liberal constituents are left feeling frustrated with her approach to race. Especially as a woman of color, they see her tendency to minimize racial disparities and make tone-deaf statements about racial inequality as particularly troubling (Tensley, 2024). Yes, Haley's personal story could appeal to a diverse range of voters, in her conservative ideology and her racial makeup could theoretically boost her in the polls. But unfortunately, on paper, the Republican primary is overwhelmingly White, limiting any effectiveness of minority community outreach (Tensley, 2024). Therefore, Haley needs to be consistent in leveraging her identity to promote conservative ideas. She intentionally omits discussion on privilege or immigration and aligns herself with the model minority to assure White Republican voters. This, in turn, allows her to be a "proud daughter of Indian immigrants" while still rejecting any systemic critiques that mirror broader Tea Party-era conservatism structured away from systemic inequalities (Varanasi, 2023, pp. 73-74).

Harris, in turn, is much more traditionally in line with the Democratic Party and its ideas–racial equity, inclusion, and representation. Harris can woefully represent these traits more openly than Haley can. However, while polling is not as useful considering the party differences, through this comparison, one striking similarity does emerge–regardless of whether they center their racial identity in their campaigns, both women's races are inevitably spotlighted by Democrats and Republicans alike. Trump, for example, attempted to challenge Harris's Blackness just as he weaponized Haley's immigrant background (Walter, 2024). It also poses an incredibly interesting question: if a person actively diminishes race in favor of policy and supporting traditional ideals, can people disassociate race in their discussions of the candidate? The answer seems to be no. Despite all the differences in their political ideologies, their conversations about sensitive racial topics, and their presentation of their own identity, there is a striking similarity. The parallel here underscores that women of color, really no matter their party affiliation, personal rhetoric, and even personal beliefs, are ultimately viewed through a racialized lens. Whether they choose to accept or reject racial discourse has no impact on this and is therefore something they cannot escape.

An interesting point can be made here about Haley and Harris's indirect relationship after Haley stepped down from the Republican primaries. Harris strategically toured three battleground states in the final stretch of the 2024 election, especially those who backed Haley in the Republican primary earlier this year. This is evidenced by Harris's policy pitches, which tend to align with a lot of Haley's policy pitches, specifically regarding foreign policy (Cavazos & Huey-Burns, 2024). For example, Harris warned that if Trump were to take the presidency, Vladimir Putin would be sitting in Kyiv, mirroring a similar warning by Haley earlier in the year in Michigan. Moreover, both Harris and Haley announced support for American allies,

denouncing Trump's isolationist views. Both also criticized Trump's relationship with dictators. In the end, a group of ex-Haley voters, as a result of her dropping out of the race, ended up supporting Harris. The most prominent group was the Haley Voters for Harris Pac ("HVHP"). Craig Snyder, the campaign director for the HVHP Pac mentioned that their votes in the Republican primary were more to show an end to Trump's spirit-bearing of the party and that with Haley dropping out, many in the group felt the best way to handle it was by switching over and voting Democrat (Walker, 2024). While the two candidates did indeed sit on opposite sides of American politics, rigid racial and partisan loyalty may have given way to ideological considerations for the voter base.

Andrew Yang

Andrew Yang is a monoracial Taiwanese American and a former Democratic candidate. Yang's public narrative is strongly rooted in his distinct Asian American identity. Yang shares a lot in common with Harris. Both were practicing attorneys, which speaks to their critical thinking and ability to navigate the law. Both were Democratic presidential candidates, meaning at a broad level, they share Democratic ideals. Both are also keenly aware of race identity politics, both because they are people of color, but also through their messaging. For example, in 2019, Yang described his experience in the Democratic primary as "an honor and disappointment to be the lone candidate of color," a remark made after both Harris and Senator Cory Booker had dropped out (Sullivan, 2019). Harris, as analyzed under her comparison with Obama, shares a similar understanding of her identity and the ways her communities interact with the U.S.

Also, similar to the two was their campaign strategy. Yang's approach to his presidential run was one where he maintained a stance against what he termed as divisive identity politics; he famously stated, "Identity politics are a great way to lose elections" (Tensley, 2021). While this

stance seems strange for a Democrat, especially one who understands the impacts of race, it is much less strange in the context of today, and also considering his heritage. Yang was born and raised in New York, the son of two Taiwanese immigrants, and many second-generation Asian Americans share his stance on identity politics. Yang embodies more than just a lesson from Obama-era politics, but also of the second-generation Asian. For example, it has been studied that "rejecting identity politics" is a dilemma for the second-generation Chinese American. These individuals are torn between two cultures, and while they are proud of their Chinese background, they also want to fit that typical "American" even if that means leaning into the "model minority" stereotype (Zhitong, 2020). They, in turn, harbor ideals like a strong work ethic, a meritocracy, and the American Dream. This can be explained, at least in part, by the isolation of Asian American communities in the U.S., with Asian Americans being the least likely minority group to feel that they belong in the U.S. compared to Black and Hispanic Americans (TAAF, 2024). Combining these two pieces of information helps to explain why Yang and Harris devalue race as a central talking point.

In distancing himself from identity politics, Yang hit the news by pushing his famous Universal Basic Income ("UBI") proposal. He argued that many more people of color would be on the debate stage if UBI had already been implemented (Sullivan, 2019). UBI is a social welfare system where every adult citizen receives a set amount of money at a set interval. But again, race was never the central part of his proposal. Branded as "The Freedom Dividend," Yang's UBI was used to address issues such as job displacement due to automation–he maintained a practical defense of it, despite understanding the racial equalization implications. He, for example, argued that providing $1,000/month to every American citizen would be enough to keep people healthy and educated while growing the economy by 13% (Yang, 2020).

This policy of decentering race in the conversation is something the Democratic Party and Harris adopted in this 2024 election cycle as well. Harris believes that she is "running because [she is] the best person to do this job at this moment for all Americans, regardless of race and gender" (Filipovic, 2024).

Yang also provided another unique path of inquiry when he left the Democratic Party and started his independent party, the Forward Party, on October 5th, 2021. This marked a period of great change for Yang because just previously, he had run for New York mayor and doublebacked on his statement of racial identity. Yang ran for mayor in 2021, and during this process, he became more aligned and explicit with racial identity, exemplified by his lengthy public statement he released in response to a racist Asian American cartoon the New York Daily News published (Yam, 2021). During this election, Yang took a more proactive stance on representing the community, participating in AAPI events, and reverting and acknowledging that race had a role in both 2020 and his run for New York Mayor. His strategy now was to amplify his Asian American identity as a source of strength to win over opinionated and diverse voters (Yam, 2021). Unfortunately, despite his new strategy, he was the first serious contender to drop out of the mayoral run.

For many, this came as little surprise because Asian Americans, despite being the fastest-growing ethnic group (~7% of the U.S. Population), make up just two percent of elected officials (Lau, 2021). This is substantially lower than other minority groups, including Black Americans, who make up about 13% of the population and hold 21% of municipal seats (Lau, 2021). In terms of mayors specifically, almost all Asian American mayors are located in California, and even then, there were just 3 out of the 482 incorporated cities in 2019 (Lau, 2021). Sam Yoon, an Asian councilor and the first Asian American to run for Boston mayor,

provides a possible explanation why it is disadvantageous to embrace Asian heritage as a politician. This is because while the "newcomer" image may provide some benefit, ultimately, Asian candidates will struggle to convince voters that they have the right experience to run a large city (Lau, 2021). Whereas other candidates, including minority groups like African Americans, can at least point to a hereditary and familial lineage that sets them in America, Asian Americans are associated with newness and, unfairly, therefore, lower experience. Yoon provides further nuance, differentiating between the role of a lawmaker, like a congressional candidate, versus an executive, like in a mayoral and presidential race. For the former, Yoon cites that it is a matter of good ideas, with metrics, strategy, whereas for the latter, which Yang ran for, it is a matter of trust in his ability to govern as an executive (Lau, 2021). Unfortunately, since he is Asian, people associate that with inexperience.

This is more than just anecdotal. In his presidential run, his polling never exceeded mid-single digits, and he failed to win any pledged delegates in the Iowa caucus despite significant investment there (Stevens, 2020). Despite becoming the torchbearer for Asian Americans by addressing his own identity and along side the fact that "Universal basic income [being] an amazingly hard policy to demonize," according to Matt Clark, a college adviser from Massachusetts, people just simply struggle to get behind Yang (Stevens, 2019; Stevens, 2020). In general, people did not necessarily doubt his ideas, passions, and vision, it came down to trust in his race, something the Asian American community has yet to garner. Yang's story provides an interesting point of context that for Asian American Democratic candidates, regardless of choosing to embrace or diminish race, voters will likely be swayed by their personal biases.

Harris was likely able to avoid this inexperience bias typically associated with being Asian. According to a 2024 STAATUS Index conducted by The Asian American Foundation

("TAAF"), just 2% of participants cited the incumbent Vice President Kamala Harris when asked to name a famous Asian American (TAAF, 2024). More people named Jackie Chan, who is not American, and Bruce Lee, who passed away more than 50 years ago, as Asian American, and a majority (52%) could not think of a single famous Asian American (TAAF, 2024). Harris can do this because the average American electorate hardly understands Asian Americans and is even more unlikely to identify Harris as one. Amplifying this is the fact that, especially in the context of this research, Yang fits the most traditional Asian look. He harbors features of the Asian American that the average American is more familiar with–the look of the East Asian with lighter skin and black hair. Harris, on the other hand, is not so much because she is biracial and has a darker complexion. Despite having a much larger platform as Vice President and a much longer time, Harris never really gained that traction as an Asian American, in the same way a non-American actor or long-deceased martial artist who "looked" Asian did.

There are some important nuances to add as well that help distinguish just how much of an impact race had. For example, aside from their race, both Harris and Yang struggled against complaints about their past, especially since they were both Democratic candidates who were expected to uphold certain values of the party. For Yang, it was the mistreatment of his past employees or the mishandling of topics like race and gender (Stevens, 2020). For a party that serves so many underrepresented minority groups, many of whom face the very allegations against Yang himself, this makes him unappetizing for voters. A similar story was unveiled for Harris in which a concern, especially amongst progressives, was quickly raised about her time as a prosecutor. For example, she embraced anti-truancy laws, which punish parents for students missing school, or represented Gov. Jerry Brown in releasing fewer prisoners than were mandated after the U.S. Supreme Court found California prison overcrowding to be cruel and

unusual punishment (Bazelon, 2016; Lartey, 2024). Despite her 2020 presidential campaign showing her understanding of the all too many Black and Brown Americans locked up, she also had a record of making people serve longer sentences than necessary, and her strict marijuana prosecution record, which largely impacted Black men (Fayyad, 2024). Needless to say, Harris walks a tightrope with Republicans and Democrats alike, with the former criticizing her lax prosecution and the latter criticizing her excessively tough-on-crime elements. Lastly are the constituents. Yang, as reported in his events at New Hampshire, catered to a White, male, and young audience, the very group of people that Harris struggled with in the 2024 election (Stevens, 2019). While race may have played a role, as with him being that model minority, it is more likely, as discussed later on under the Economy/Pessimism section, a result of him targeting what the average, middle-class voter needs and addressing concerns about the economy. For example, his UBI proposal, which traditionally is heavily resisted by White conservatives, was justified in a good-faith effort to create jobs, which ended up drawing the White American crowd (Gilberstadt, 2020). He recognized that millions of manufacturing jobs had been wiped out because of automation, and by positioning his UBI policy to directly address this concern of many Americans, he reduced economic pessimism connected to him and garnered the support of a group who would otherwise be unlikely to vote for Yang (Stevens, 2019).

Andrew Yang reflects the complexity of the Asian American identity in U.S. politics and offers a partial answer to the thesis. Despite both embracing and shoving away identity politics, his eventual withdrawal from the Presidential and New York Mayor ticket suggests that the Asian American identity cannot be sidelined, regardless of his choices. Despite his arguably innovative policy, Yang simply failed to gain the traction to make meaningful gains. His story

exemplifies a powerful lesson for Harris, which is that Asian American candidates are seen as the "new" and the "different." Voter unfamiliarity, racial bias, and doubts about executive leadership come into play for this ethnic group. Harris potentially avoided much of this because of her biracial identity and darker complexion. Harris's darker complexion made her relatively less readily categorizable as "Asian" by the general public and, in a way, paradoxically shielded her from the biases that Yang encountered, despite both candidates being Asian Americans. This also has implications for the future. It seems it is not just the fact that someone is Asian that creates the newcomer bias. They have to look that way, too, for it to influence their electability.

Conclusion

To this end, this research confirms that a candidate's racial identity–or perceived identity–plays a significant role in shaping Black and Asian American voting behavior. When looking at her compared to other candidates–Obama, Haley, and Yang–it is clear that, regardless of rhetoric, identity, and party affiliation, voters will inevitably fixate on race, for better or worse. For example, while both Harris and Yang attempted to center their campaigns around policy over race, their identities were still inevitably intertwined and racialized by voters. This disconnect between their personal messaging and public perception highlights the ways candidates of color, regardless of strategy, are framed through a racialized lens in an era of heightened identity awareness. People may not have necessarily voted for Trump out of dismay for her multiracial identity; her multiraciality and convoluted conversations around her race made it extremely difficult for her and the Democratic Party to build a solid coalition of voters based on her identity alone. With that being said, the Republican Party, if they continue to push rhetoric that appeals to the masses in terms of affordable housing and meritocracy, will find success in the deviation and isolation away from race and focus on policy. For the Democratic Party, it seems that if the goal

is to replicate Black, Asian, and really, overall voter support at the levels of Obama's 2008 campaign, they ought to consider placing as much emphasis on policies that resonate with most Black voters. These include domestic policies like affordable housing, lower healthcare costs, workforce development, and a judicious foreign policy, if not restrained, when engaging in overseas military conflicts. The same goes with Asian Americans, who want to see a greater focus on economic prosperity, growing the American dream, and revitalizing education as a path to success. Due to the limitations of the timeliness of this paper, analyzing so close to the actual election, as more data comes out on the 2024 election cycle, additional research will be incredibly valuable to specifically see the impacts of her identity on each Asian ethnic and Black voters. Harris is just one of many multiracial and incredibly diverse candidates that will emerge in future elections. As the American electorate continues to expand and diversify, race will continue to be at the forefront of voters' minds.

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