

History Demonstrates AAPI Resilience, Solidarity, and Activism

For the fastest-growing sector of the U.S. electorate, the importance of continuing to mobilize, vote, and engage to shape civil rights is clear.

For over a century, Asian Americans have faced waves of anti-Asian sentiment in the United States, spurred by political rhetoric and economic scapegoating. At each stage, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities have risen and organized to protect themselves, and to claim their place in society. The story of this activism is one of resilience and mobilization. By creating a stronger, more powerful voice in the fight for equality, AAPI communities continue to shape the landscape of civil rights in America.

Anti-Asian sentiment has deep historical roots, from the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act banning immigrant laborers from China, to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II (see the Johnston & Kim memo elsewhere in this report). Such events set the stage for early coalition-building and advocacy. The landmark case of *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898) laid crucial legal groundwork. The plaintiff Wong Kim Ark, a Chinese American born in San Francisco, challenged the U.S. government when he was denied

reentry after a trip abroad. The Supreme Court ultimately ruled in Wong's favor, affirming that children born in the United States are entitled to citizenship under the 14th Amendment. This victory set the **precedent of birthright citizenship**, protecting the rights of many immigrant families.

In the 1970s and 80s, Japanese American community leaders, joined by broader **Asian American coalitions and civil rights advocates**, mobilized for redress and reparations for the injustice of the WWII internments. Organizations such as the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) and the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations (NCRR) coordinated community education, lobbying efforts, and grassroots organizing.

In 1980, Congress established the **Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians** (CWRIC). Hearings were held across the country. Former internees testified to the emotional, financial, and social toll of what they had endured. Organizers meticulously gathered and publicized evidence. They engaged the media to increase public awareness—of Japanese Americans' incarceration, and of similar suffering incurred by other groups, such as indigenous peoples ordered to leave their lands.

The movement found support from Japanese American politicians, including Senators Daniel Inouye and Spark Matsunaga, and Representatives Norman Mineta and Robert Matsui. The tenacity of these leaders and organizers culminated in the passage of the **Civil Liberties Act of 1987**, which granted an apology and \$20,000 in reparations to each surviving Japanese American who had been interned.

The Act was a transformative moment: It established that Asian Americans could mobilize to secure justice through legislative change.

A UNIFIED IDENTITY

In 1982, Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was murdered in Detroit. Chin was beaten to death by two white men who blamed him for the economic downturn impacting Detroit's auto industry, as Japan's automotive sector grew. His killers received minimal sentences—three years' probation and a \$3,000 fine, with no jail time—due to a plea bargain. For many Asian Americans, this leniency underscored their vulnerability and the inadequacy of the justice system in protecting them.

The injustice marked another turning point: It motivated individuals from diverse backgrounds to come together under an Asian American identity to combat systemic discrimination, hate crimes, and violence. Until this point, many groups had organized around specific ethnicities, such as Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, or Korean. Chin's death highlighted the need for solidarity in the face of institutional racism.

This newfound unity led to the formation of new advocacy groups and alliances. One of the first was **American Citizens for Justice** (ACJ). ACJ lobbied for federal civil rights charges against Chin's killers and raised awareness of anti-Asian violence. The campaign was spearheaded by journalist Helen Zia, lawyer Liza Chan, and Lily Chin—Vincent's mother. Rallies in Detroit, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and elsewhere **roused Asian**

American communities and attracted national media attention. These efforts garnered support from **other civil rights groups**, from Black organizations to women's groups, and drew attention from the U.S. Department of Justice.

This period also saw the growth of coalitions of legal expertise. The Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) and Asian Law Caucus, both established in the 1970s, and the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) used legal advocacy to address cases of anti-Asian discrimination and racism in employment, education, and housing. The creation of the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association (NAPABA) in 1988 reflected an increased need to build a **network of Asian American lawyers** to advocate for the community.

Chin's case created a country-wide movement that paved the way for modern organizations like Stop AAPI Hate and The Asian American Foundation.

SOUTH ASIAN ACTIVISM

The aftermath of the September 11 attacks brought heightened scrutiny and discrimination against Muslim, Arab, and South Asian communities. The USA PATRIOT Act expanded government surveillance powers, leading to widespread profiling and targeting of Muslim Americans and those perceived to be from the Middle East, which included many South Asians. This environment of fear and prejudice triggered waves of hate crimes, unlawful detentions, and discriminatory acts.

In response, established Asian American civil rights organizations joined forces with Muslim and South Asian leaders to rally in their defense, while highlighting the necessity of centering the people affected. This prompted the growth of South Asian advocacy. Organizations such as South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) and the Sikh Coalition were founded. The Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF), established in the 1990s, was strengthened to prioritize the protection of the civil rights of all South Asians.

The shared experience of xenophobia spurred ever greater collaboration between civil rights groups. This solidarity drew attention from federal agencies such as the FBI and the Department of Justice, which began working with Muslim and Arab American communities to address and combat hate crimes and discrimination.

COVID-19

The pandemic brought a new wave of activism and organizing. Politicians calling COVID-19 the "China virus" and "Kung Flu" (see also the Johnston & Kim memo in this report) fueled a new **surge in harassment and violence** against Asian Americans, who were also hard-hit by **health** and **economic** disparities.

AAPI organizations rallied to support their communities. They documented incidents, advocated for policy change, and attended to health needs. They addressed language barriers, dispelled misinformation, and countered stereotypes. National organizations such as the Association of Asian Pacific American Community Health Organization (AAPCHO) and the Asian and

Pacific Islander American Health Forum (APIAHF) amplified local efforts; they invested in health education, outreach, and social services to address inequities and strengthen community resilience. Voter networks, such as the regional training program infrastructure built by APIAVote, helped mobilize community organizations to distribute personal protective equipment (PPE), information, tests, and ultimately vaccines.

One interesting case study of national-local collaboration concerns the Asian Community Development Council (ACDC) in Las Vegas. Founded in 2015 with a modest budget of \$30,000, ACDC has grown into the city's leading Asian American nonprofit, with a budget in the millions, serving tens of thousands of people. Led by Vida Chan Lin, ACDC began with a vision to address health care access, housing insecurity, workforce development, college readiness, and naturalization assistance. During the pandemic, ACDC expanded its services to include food banks and vaccination sites. From its inception, in partnership with APIAVote, ACDC integrated voter registration and civic engagement into the mission of the organization, registering 20,000 voters. This elevated ACDC's profile and opened doors to expanding its core services.

Also during this period, groups like Stop AAPI Hate meticulously gathered data, gaining national attention, which ultimately led lawmakers like Representative Grace Meng and Senator Mazie Hirono to champion the passage of the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act. The creation of the Alliance for Asian American Justice provided a national network of pro bono legal support to victims of hate crimes. California, under the leadership of Assemblymember Phil Ting, allocated \$14 million to bolster efforts against such incidents, distributing resources to over 80 organizations.

Advocacy groups decided that part of the problem was gaps in school education. Learning from those who raised awareness of the internment camps, groups—including APIAVote—pushed for legislation to incorporate multicultural and Asian American history into K-12 curriculums. This effort resulted in significant achievements: Today, 12 states have statutes that require an AAPI studies curriculum.

The pandemic was another clarifying moment in the history of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans: It highlighted the interconnectedness of health equity, economic justice, and civil rights. With a larger and more engaged AAPI population, more AAPI elected officials, and greater representation in the media, the strategies employed mirrored those of the 1980s and 2000s, but with significantly more resources, allies, and visibility.

All this resulted in a record 60% turnout of AAPI voters in the 2020 election.

POLITICAL POWER

For a century and a half, AAPI activism has risen to the challenges of building a more equitable society.

Solidarity makes it harder for harmful stereotypes and discriminatory policies to gain traction. Now, as the fastest-growing sector of the electorate in the United States, AAPI voters are a formidable political force. With early data showing increased AAPI engagement in the 2024 election, the potential of this

The community continues to confront new policies that echo past discriminatory practices.

community to shape the nation’s future is clear. And when individuals engage beyond voting—by running for office and joining civic organizations, say—that further builds influence and fosters understanding and collaboration.

Despite these advances, the community continues to confront new policies that echo past discriminatory practices. Calls for the return of the China Initiative, and restrictions on property ownership that target Chinese nationals, cast suspicion on Asian Americans and immigrants (see the Gorski & Toomey memo in this report). Once again, AAPI groups have mobilized to lobby against racial profiling.

As the new administration settles in, AAPI organizations stand bigger and stronger, ready to ensure that their voices and needs are heard and prioritized, and to champion justice, inclusion, and the protection of civil liberties.

FURTHER READING

Zinn Education Project. “Asian Americans in the People’s History of the United States.” Accessed January 4, 2025. <https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/asian-americans-and-moments-in-peoples-history/>.

Hamblin, Lawrence. “The Social and Political Activism of the Asian American Movement.” *Emory Libraries Blog*. Emory University, April 26, 2022. <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/woodruff/news/the-social-and-political-activism-of-the-asian-american-movement-2022>.

Wallace, Nina. “Yellow Power: The Origins of Asian America.” *Densho Catalyst* (blog). *Densho*, May 8, 2017. <https://densho.org/catalyst/asian-american-movement/>.



Christine Chen is the executive director and co-founder of APIAVote. She was a resident fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Institute of Politics and serves on the Kennedy Center Community Advisory Board and the Center for Asian American Media. She is a member of the Election Assistance and Policy (EAP) Standing Committee at the American Political Science Association.