



NATIONAL JOURNAL

Andrew Yang has become a lightning rod. Has his identity become one, too?

Asian Americans' political power is growing. But that doesn't translate into monolithic support for Yang's New York mayoral bid.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Democratic mayoral candidate Andrew Yang at a rally against hate at Columbus Park in New York City on March 21 (AP Photo/Eduardo Munoz Alvarez)

Mini Racker

🕒 May 31, 2021, 8 p.m.

The same week he became the last of New York City's most prominent Asian American politicians to [endorse](https://www.cityandstateny.com/articles/politics/campaign-confidential/john-liu-unlikely-endorser.html) [Andrew Yang](https://www.cityandstateny.com/articles/politics/campaign-confidential/john-liu-unlikely-endorser.html) in the mayoral race, state Sen. John Liu recalled the racism he experienced growing up.

He heard “Ching Chong” on a daily basis, Liu said. Sometimes, when the school cafeteria served rice, other students would pass their portions over to him.

“There were many occasions on which I wished I was just white, so that I wouldn't have to deal with all the anti-Asian nonsense,” he said.

Liu went on to become the first Asian American elected to legislative office in New York City. Nearly two decades later, he has found that his experiences in school were similar to Yang's. Liu said Yang's identity wasn't necessarily the primary factor in his endorsement, but that it was a factor.

“I think we need to see Asian American faces and voices in positions of power, especially at a moment in history when we're feeling particularly vulnerable,” he said.

If Yang wins the Democratic mayoral primary on June 22, he will likely become the city's first Asian American mayor, further elevating himself on the national stage.

“The New York City mayor has national impact and influence,” Liu said. “This is practically a national race.”

In Yang, Asian American and Pacific Islander supporters see a famous politician who can give them a seat at the head of the table. But the rise of such an unconventional politician, which has coincided with a changing national understanding of what it means to be Asian American, embodies something beyond the politics of representation. AAPI voters still want to see people who look like them win office, but Yang's candidacy has highlighted the way the group's growing power makes space for a more nuanced story, one that allows for a broader range of political imperatives and a more complex understanding of identity politics.

During his 2020 presidential bid, few took Yang seriously. Even as the entrepreneur advanced farther in the race than almost any other Asian American in history, the most prominent figures in the AAPI community did not line up behind him.

“Even within the Asian American community, people looked at him like he had three eyes,” Liu said. “There were plenty of polite smiles and applause. But the reaction mainly was, ‘You're running for president of the United States. Hmmm, that's nice.’”

This year, Yang can list the Chang Le America Association and the Fujian Foundation in USA among the groups supporting him. But his candidacy disproves the myth that minority groups vote as a monolith. Plenty of Asian Americans have chosen to back other contenders. The Alliance of South Asian American Labor, for instance, joined other labor groups in backing one of Yang's rivals, Scott Stringer, in February. The American Pakistani Advocacy Group also endorsed Stringer before rescinding that endorsement after he was accused of sexual assault. Rise Up New York, a Bangladeshi American group, [endorsed](https://www.politico.com/newsletters/new-york-playbook/2021/04/26/vaccination-drive-shifts-to-walk-ins-city-to-pay-back-furloughed-workers-state-capitol-stays-closed-492590) (<https://www.politico.com/newsletters/new-york-playbook/2021/04/26/vaccination-drive-shifts-to-walk-ins-city-to-pay-back-furloughed-workers-state-capitol-stays-closed-492590>). Eric Adams, who was

Yang's closest competitor in the polls [until recently](#).

(<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-new-york-mayoral-election-is-no-longer-andrew-yangs-to-lose/>).

Meanwhile, a group of more than 700 largely progressive AAPI New Yorkers have signed onto [a letter opposing Yang's bid](#) (<https://www.asiansagainstyang.com/>). In the letter, signers enumerate their concerns about Yang, including several that directly impact the AAPI community. One is his support for the police, especially as a remedy to anti-Asian violence.

Zara Nasir, one of the letter's organizers, stressed how especially marginalized AAPIs—the poor, migrants, sex workers—can face a disproportionate degree of police harassment, alongside the Black and Latino New Yorkers many AAPIs work to ally themselves with. Nasir associates that perspective with a younger generation of Asian Americans; she noted that a bulk of the letter's signers are under 40.

Last year, a [Pew Research survey](#) (https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/05/a-month-before-george-floyds-death-black-and-white-americans-differed-sharply-in-confidence-in-the-police/ft_2020-06-05_viewsopolice_02/) found that younger people generally had less confidence in the police than older ones. That was true within populations of white, Black, and Hispanic Americans. There was no category in the survey for Asian Americans.

While pollsters and political operatives sometimes gloss over the identity-based and ideological divides among Asian Americans, the incidents of racist violence that have accompanied the pandemic have gotten more attention in politics and the press. In February, weeks before six Asian women were killed in a shooting in Atlanta, Yang [spoke on CNN](#)

(<https://twitter.com/andrewyang/status/1365788679218868227>). [about anti-Asian hate and attended a rally](https://www.ny1.com/nyc/manhattan/news/2021/02/28/hundreds-rally-against-anti-asian-attacks) (<https://www.ny1.com/nyc/manhattan/news/2021/02/28/hundreds-rally-against-anti-asian-attacks>) addressing that issue.

It was late that month when Nasir got involved with the anti-Yang letter.

“Me and some other folks were like, ‘We really need to organize an identity-based opposition to Yang, because he is using his identity as an Asian American to hide his bad policy and politics,’” she said.

Nasir, who is Pakistani and Muslim, said that the signers care about representation and want to uplift AAPI leaders, especially given what Asian Americans have been through this year. Yang’s AAPI critics say that their opposition is based on his policy and vision—like his plans to crack down on street vendors, many of whom are immigrants, and his support for educational programs that can exclude students of color.

“It’s not helpful for us to elect one Asian Pacific Islander person that doesn’t actually serve our communities,” Nasir said. “We’ve actually gotten a lot of pushback on Twitter and such from white Yang Gang people—like, ‘Oh, you don’t speak for the Asian community.’ And it’s like, ‘OK, but you don’t, either.’”

“We’re not saying that we speak for all Asian Pacific Islander folks. But we are saying that there’s a sizable number of us who are very concerned about his campaign hiding behind representative politics—*empty* representative politics, because there are people who have substance.”

Nasir brought up a cartoon published in the *New York Daily News* last week that once again brought Yang’s identity to the forefront of the political discourse. The day after Yang named Times Square as his favorite subway stop, the drawing depicted Yang emerging from the station in a baggy T-Shirt, his eyes little more than lines. Nearby was a vendor saying, “The tourists are back.”

Yang [called](https://twitter.com/AndrewYang/status/1397282591745744900) the cartoon racist, arguing that it relied on tropes of Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners”—a label he has often been stuck with.

Rep. Grace Meng, whose Queens-based district [is 40 percent Asian](https://www.census.gov/mycd/?st=36&cd=06) (<https://www.census.gov/mycd/?st=36&cd=06>), mentioned those kinds of attacks as part of what drew her constituents to Yang. She endorsed him after consulting with them.

“I think what motivated some people is how he has been, at times, treated as an other, as someone who is not New York enough,” Meng said. “And I think that that kind of resonated in a negative way with a lot of voters who felt similar types of concerns and this type of pain coming through this last year and a half.”



📷 Rep. Grace Meng (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan) ASSOCIATED PRESS

In response to the criticism, the *Daily News* cartoonist [changed the depiction](https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/27/politics/andrew-yang-new-york-daily-news-cartoon-cnntv/index.html) (<https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/27/politics/andrew-yang-new-york-daily-news-cartoon-cnntv/index.html>) of Yang's eyes, but the paper defended the jabs at Yang as someone who doesn't belong, despite the fact that he's lived in New York since 1996. Throughout the race, Yang's critics have hit him for [skipping town during the pandemic](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/11/nyregion/andrew-yang-mayor-nyc.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/11/nyregion/andrew-yang-mayor-nyc.html>) and [skipping out on voting](https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/536549-yang-defends-not-voting-in-past-nyc-elections) (<https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/536549-yang-defends-not-voting-in-past-nyc-elections>) in every New York City mayoral race this millennium. He's caught flack for [mislabeling a relatively large store as a bodega](https://twitter.com/AndrewYang/status/1350079442488590337) (<https://twitter.com/AndrewYang/status/1350079442488590337>), an alleged affront to the New York institution.

“It does make sense to talk about how he kind of says silly things,” Nasir said. “If there was some very clear ‘He's not from here because of his identity,’ that's obviously messed up. ... There is such a clear line. I think what obscures it is when the candidate themselves hides behind the racial identity politics and says, ‘Oh, this is racist.’ Well, no. I mean, it's obviously clearly talking about your remarks that you made.”

The debate over what defines racism is muddled by Yang's history of invoking race-based stereotypes and making comments that critics say undermine the AAPI community. Perhaps the ones that got the most attention appeared in an [op-ed](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/01/andrew-yang-coronavirus-discrimination/) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/01/andrew-yang-coronavirus-discrimination/>) last spring.

“Asian Americans need to embrace and show our American-ness in ways we never have before,” Yang wrote. “We need to step up, help our neighbors, donate gear, vote, wear red white and blue, volunteer, fund aid organizations, and do

everything in our power to accelerate the end of this crisis. We should show without a shadow of a doubt that we are Americans who will do our part for our country.”

Yang expressed regret for the way the piece came off. But the op-ed gave state Assembly member Ron Kim pause. Kim, who had endorsed Sen. Bernie Sanders in the presidential race and already had concerns about the limited scope of Yang’s universal-basic-income proposal, raised his worries in a conversation with Yang, whom he had known for some years. Kim was satisfied enough to endorse Yang two days into his bid.

“After experiencing directly some of the racism from this race, I think he completely understands [AAPIs] shouldn't be competing to feel like we fit in here,” Kim said.

Yang’s political rise has coincided with an increase in AAPI influence, especially among Democrats. Helping the country through that transition has been the AAPI Victory Fund, which held a presidential forum during the Democratic primary that [only three candidates attended](/s/681445/2020-dems-gamble-with-asian-american-voter-outreach/?unlock=HXX9Oo6V137PGF5W) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-vice-president-harris-headline-democratic-asian-american-summit-2021-05-17/>). Now, its leaders [work](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/aapi-progressive-action-lobbying-political-muscle/) (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/aapi-progressive-action-lobbying-political-muscle/>) with the White House.

In May, the group backed Yang. In an interview with *National Journal* last week, Varun Nikore, its president, said that Yang’s stumbles around identity fit into a changing America.

“Identities are deeply personal, and how we view Asian Americans and Asianness is also deeply personal,” Nikore said. “We haven't had a national dialogue. But right now, we're forced to have a national dialogue about it because of everything that's happening in our world. Four years of Trump, and the last year-plus of COVID, and the murders in Atlanta and Indianapolis, and for the most part we're not really taught to even talk about it.”



📷 Yang at a March 11 news conference in the Dumbo neighborhood of New York (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File) ASSOCIATED PRESS

Asian Americans are learning how to talk about it, too.

“When you're a candidate, you're talking about it when thousands, if not millions, of people are watching,” Nikore said. “We're still learning, frankly—I'm learning what it's like to be an AAPI, an Asian American. I'm even learning what it's like to be Indian American. And that that sort of grows and evolves over

time. ... So for us to say, ‘Oh, this one candidate is not great on Asian American issues, is not as woke as the next person’—I think all we can ask is, ‘Is this person having a growth mindset?’ ... It's come so far so fast, in such a short period of time, that it's really hard to wrap your mind around identity during this time.”

In that context, some of Yang's more controversial comments may be forgivable. His supporters may not agree with everything he says, but they appreciate what they see as his willingness to entertain new perspectives and learn from his mistakes.

“There's no perfect candidate out there,” Nikore said.

Nikore mentioned that Yang's [statements](#)

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/12/nyregion/andrew-yang-israel-palestine-attack.html>).

supporting Israel in its conflict with Palestinians this month did concern his group. The comments earned [support](#) (<https://www.businessinsider.com/andrew-yang-pro-israel-treat-republicans-ted-cruz-stephen-miller-cheer-on-2021-5>), from former Trump White House adviser Stephen Miller, which [worried the campaign](#)

(<https://www.politico.com/newsletters/playbook/2021/05/18/the-curious-case-of-stephen-miller-and-andrew-yang-492889>), but did not put off Yang's Asian American allies, who say he shouldn't be held responsible for GOP supporters.

Kim knows what it's like to draw unwanted support; he says he had a similar experience when he [took on](#) (<https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/17/politics/cuomo-ron-kim-nursing-home/index.html>), New York's Democratic governor earlier this year.

“When I was in the thick of fighting Andrew Cuomo, my social-media validators were socialists or QAnon types,” Kim said. “I don't think he's purposely trying to work with the extreme right-wing side of politics.”

But the phenomenon highlights how, in Yang, supporters and opponents alike see what they want to see. His outsider approach, as well as his openness to admitting his shortcomings—he [walked back](#)

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/12/nyregion/andrew-yang-israel-palestine-attack.html>), his controversial appraisal of the Middle East conflict—make him seem moldable.

“We can move him on these very critical issues that are important to the progressive movement, if the progressive establishment can understand that this is not another corporate ... Democrat,” Kim said.

Yang’s Asian Americanness has been an anchor for him in shifting political waters. Since he [described](#) (<https://www.abc12.com/content/news/Yang-reiterates-the-opposite-of-Donald-Trump-is-an-Asian-man-who-likes-math-while-visiting-Flint-513512051.html>), himself as “an Asian man who likes math,” his identity has been a key part of his political branding. His involvement with AAPI organizations and knowledge of Asian American community leaders were key factors in getting the endorsement from the AAPI Victory Fund; Nikore said the group won’t just back AAPI candidates who look good on paper. Yang has now been in conversation with the group for years.

Being a good representative of Asian Americans, AAPI leaders suggest, is about much more than simply being Asian American. Identity politics can mask deeper issues, a truth that’s becoming more apparent as Americans talk more about race.

“I met [Yang] at a point where I no longer used my ethnic identity to advance my political career,” Kim said. “When I first got elected in 2012, I was celebrated: ‘The first Korean American!’ Wherever I’d go, that was kind of my identity and brand. And it made a lot of liberals in Democratic circles feel proud: ‘See how diverse we are! ... Here’s Ron Kim!’ I realized after a couple years this is a

formula where people of different backgrounds and their identities are often leveraged to protect the status quo. ... So I no longer participated in that kind of celebration.”

Still, in a country that [rarely elevates](https://wholeads.us/research/aapi-political-leadership/) Asian Americans, representation does matter. That’s something Kim said Yang’s bid has made him rethink.

“I think it's undeniable the impact that he would have on young Asian Americans,” Kim said. “I mean, you can see it in my district. Whenever he comes by, young Asian students who never even thought twice about politics and public service—they’re stopping for selfies in restaurants, yelling ‘UBI!’”

He says it reminds him of the sense of belonging he felt during his first visit to San Francisco as a young man.

“I’m like, ‘What is this place? Why is there an old Asian grandma that speaks fluent English?’ I saw an Asian fireman for the first time in my life,” Kim said. “I think that's what a lot of young people are experiencing when they see Andrew.”