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# 2020 Dems Gamble With Asian-American Voter Outreach

AAPI communities are getting more attention, but some leaders feel the candidates aren't prioritizing them.



AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty

Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang greets supporters before the New Hampshire state Democratic party convention in Manchester on Sept. 7.

## Mini Racker

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**C**OSTA MESA, Calif.—In an era of rapidly shifting demographics and intense competition for the Democratic nomination, presidential candidates are taking a gamble with Asian-American and Pacific-Islander communities.

While several are targeting the broad voting bloc with hopes of a boost in the polls, some AAPI leaders said they are feeling ignored.

That tension was apparent at Sunday's first-of-its-kind AAPI Democratic Presidential Forum in Orange County, which only three candidates attended. Rep. Judy Chu of California, who chairs the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, was disappointed at the low turnout.

“I know that this group of organizers worked really hard, worked overtime, reached out to [all the candidates] to get them to come,” she said. “They didn't take this community seriously. I think that's very clear.”

Candidates who declined to attend cited scheduling conflicts, especially with the New Hampshire Democratic Party convention the day before. The candidates who did attend—Andrew Yang, Tom Steyer, and Tulsi Gabbard—flew overnight to be there.

Shekar Narasimhan, founder and chair of the AAPI Victory Fund and one of the forum's organizers, said he didn't see the mass skipping of the event as necessarily a signal of apathy, at least not in each individual case. Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Cory Booker named specific conflicts that

prevented them from attending, which he understood. But others, he said, made him feel as if they didn't respect the community by responding with vague statements about logistics.

“For a few of them, I don't believe them at all,” Narasimhan said. “We never heard a good explanation. We have to assume that it's because they didn't take us for real.”

He singled out Kamala Harris and Pete Buttigieg. Of the former, he said, “Why Kamala Harris, who is AAPI, who's from California, for whom the winning of California is so critical ... would not make that kind of extra effort to come, I don't understand.”

Harris's campaign did not respond to a request for comment on this criticism. On Saturday, however, she launched a South Asians For The People coalition. Buttigieg, meanwhile, has held events with AAPI leaders in Seattle, Las Vegas, and Austin.

Prakash Kopparapu, chairman of Iowa's Asian and Latino Coalition, also said some candidates underestimate AAPI's political power, although he's had good experiences with many of them. In mid-August, the coalition endorsed Harris, following a vote in which Booker, Julián Castro, and Amy Klobuchar also earned significant support. Previously, Kopparapu hosted Buttigieg in his home, while Joe Biden's campaign touted a town hall with the coalition in early August.

Kopparapu said that the candidates were taken aback by the crowds who attended.

“They were quite honest about it. They said, ‘I expected to see 15-20 Asian-Americans and Latinos,’” he said. Instead, they were met by diverse groups of 150.

Kopparapu suggested that some candidates didn't meet with the coalition because minority voters make up too small a fraction of the state's electorate. Ninety percent of Iowans are white.

He called out Warren's campaign in particular. Over nine months of reaching out, the group couldn't arrange a meeting.

"Everyone is very surprised and kind of disappointed, so now I think [her] team is trying to do some repairs," he said.

The Warren campaign did not respond to a request for comment on the coalition, but it has done several outreach events in AAPI communities, including an interview with the Filipino channel and a three-hour meeting with One APIA Nevada.

Many see this election as a turning point for the AAPI community, especially in Nevada. The Silver State, which is third in line on the Democratic primary calendar, has the fifth-highest percentage of Asian-American residents among all states at 8.7 percent, according to Census data.

"Every single candidate reaches out pretty much on a daily basis," said Evan Louie, chair of One APIA Nevada, which has hosted 16 candidates this cycle. "Back in 2012, we'd pay for all the events ... and then the candidates would send surrogates." Now, the candidates generally pay.

But Louie said one thing the candidates could do is acknowledge the specific interests of AAPI subgroups. He provided a suggestion: Speak about Filipino-American World War II veterans' immigration concerns in Nevada, where roughly half of the AAPI community is Filipino-American.

Candidates appear to be taking his advice by courting subgroups and demonstrating a more sophisticated understanding of the community's diversity than in previous cycles.

For lower-polling candidates, for whom even a marginal boost is notable, thoughtful cultural outreach could provide some help.

Tom Steyer's campaign includes a director of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and he plans to hire staff focused on AAPI outreach. Joe Sestak has national cochairs for AAPI issues and an Iowa chair for AAPI outreach. In the last week, Beto O'Rourke visited the Islamic Society of New Hampshire and the Somersworth Indonesian Festival.

Louie said Booker and Gabbard have hosted traditional Filipino meals called Kamayans. Narasimhan suggested that those two are among the best on AAPI outreach.

"We have been making a direct effort to reach out to different API in different parts of the country," Gabbard said in an interview at the forum.

Such outreach could satisfy Chu, who wants to see candidates come to the AAPI community for things besides fundraising.

"The tradition has been they only come when they need the dollars," Chu said. "And even when they get the dollars, they don't necessarily think they have to do anything on our issues."

What are those issues? Several AAPI leaders named immigration as particularly important, as did campaign spokespeople for Warren, O'Rourke, and Sestak. Warren's campaign highlighted her plan to help minority entrepreneurs, O'Rourke's touted his work against hate crimes, and Sestak's noted his trade and climate-change policies. Steyer also emphasized climate change, noting its disproportionate impact on people of color.

Kopparapu said that when Steve Bullock asked him to name "Asian-American issues," Kopparapu asked Bullock to "name one issue that is specific to Caucasians and doesn't affect others."

“A lot of issues the AAPI community faces—it’s just the same issues as any other Americans,” said Madalene Mielke, president and CEO of the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies.

Mielke, like several organizers, said values and outreach matter more to AAPI voters than identity politics. Still, many praised an unprecedented level of representation among the campaigns’ top aides, especially on the Harris campaign. While some AAPI leaders said they wanted to see staffers dedicated specifically to AAPI outreach, the Harris campaign emphasized that it naturally brings diverse voices to the table.

Yang has also successfully connected with fellow Asian-Americans. A Change Research poll taken early this month among 457 AAPI likely Democratic primary voters found Biden taking 17 percent, followed by Warren and Sanders with 16 percent each, and Yang running fourth with 8 percent—a far higher share than in broader primary polls.

Yang, who was among the first to RSVP to Sunday’s forum, and whose crowd-surfing stage exit led to a noticeably thinned crowd, is among the best at AAPI outreach, Narasimhan said.

“He walked into a meeting two weeks ago that had mostly AAPIs in it, and he did this gesture: ‘You, my people!’” he said. “I thought he’d do that today.”