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Current and aspiring House members push back on anti-Asian campaign themes

While GOP candidates campaign on being tough on China,
Republican AAPI challengers confront racism.



Young Kim, who is running for the House seat in California's 39th District, in 2018. Kim is trying to become the first Korean-American woman elected to Congress.

Mini Racker

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Facing an increase in anti-Asian sentiment since the coronavirus shut down the country, even members of Congress aren't immune to racist attacks.

“There’s a book or a pamphlet somebody made that has my face merged onto Mao Zedong’s hat,” said Rep. Stephanie Murphy of Florida at a virtual event hosted by the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies on Tuesday. “And so it’s hard to see those things and not see them as rooted in a bit of racism.”

“For me, it’s just the usual Facebook comments,” Rep. Grace Meng of New York said at the same event. “The other day ... someone responded that I was a Chinese spy. And I actually didn’t blink twice at that, because I’ve been called that before, even prior to the coronavirus pandemic.”

These incidents have followed attacks from both parties on China’s handling of the pandemic. In recent weeks, Trump has run an ad depicting Joe Biden as a Chinese puppet. Meanwhile, Biden [received criticism](#)

(<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/23/biden-ad-exposes-left-rift-china-202241>) for an April ad hitting Trump on China, then dialed it back in a later spot.

For Democrats, there’s a fine line between fair criticisms of China and the kind of rhetoric that can promote bias against Asian-Americans.

“I think it’s possible for us as Americans to have conversations about the Chinese Communist Party and what they did or didn’t do right in responding to the pandemic ... but that is a very different conversation than the spewing of racist rhetoric,” Murphy said.

Although every current member of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus—[including](#) (<https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/APA/Historical-Data/Historical-Data/>) 17 House members and three senators—is a Democrat, Republican AAPI challengers are also weighing in on the heated political environment. While many downballot Republicans have made being tough on China a central theme of their campaigns, Asian-American candidates are changing the conversation.

California Assemblywoman Young Kim, who is challenging Rep. Gil Cisneros in California’s 39th District, said she looks forward to joining the Caucus if elected, and stressed the importance of doing bipartisan work and representing the

diverse political viewpoints of the AAPI community. She also agreed with Democrats on the importance of combating the uptick in anti-Asian sentiment.

“Asian-American businesses have been hard-hit; they have to live with this notion that they have to work harder than other communities,” Kim told *National Journal*. “I believe they experienced the economic consequences of the pandemic earlier because of that stigma.”

“Let’s call it by the scientific name,” she added, when asked about the use of terms like “China virus” or “Wuhan virus.”

Orange County Supervisor Michelle Steel, a Korean-American Republican who is taking on Rep. Harley Rouda in California’s 48th District, has also highlighted the impact of the pandemic on Asian-American businesses. She recently [criticized](https://d2.ocgov.com/pr-ca-salon) (https://d2.ocgov.com/pr-ca-salon) California Gov. Gavin Newsom for claiming that the community spread of coronavirus in the state began in a nail salon, arguing that his statement could hurt business for salons. About 80 percent of California nail salons are owned by Vietnamese-Americans.

Steel has also pushed back on racism in her community during the pandemic.

“Attacks on people of any race are abhorrent and I've used my platform as Orange County Board of Supervisors chair to condemn them whenever possible—including the recent introduction and passage of a resolution promoting tolerance and compassion,” Steel said, citing a statement which condemned discrimination after reports of harassment against local AAPIs.

Kim and Steel are part of a growing group of AAPI office-seekers. In the 2018 midterms, [data](http://aapidata.com/blog/aapis-running-2018/) (http://aapidata.com/blog/aapis-running-2018/) indicated that a record number of Asian-Americans ran for Congress. This cycle, the numbers are almost as high, with at least 30 AAPI candidates running for the House and Senate.

Some of these candidates are long shots. But this time around, many are the incumbents who brought the number of AAPI legislators in Congress to a record [high of 20](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/second-congress-row-elected-asian-americans-pacific-islanders-hit-new-n950371) (https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/second-congress-row-elected-asian-americans-pacific-islanders-hit-new-n950371) last cycle. And some challengers have a good chance of boosting that number even further. In addition to Kim and Steel in California, state House Speaker Sara Gideon, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee-backed candidate in the Maine Senate race, is the daughter of an Indian immigrant. And in Texas 22nd District, Sri Preston Kulkarni exemplifies the kind of candidate that the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee wants to see tackling the issues affecting the AAPI community.

“He’s a model of how our party is trying to do AAPI outreach,” said DCCC Deputy National Press Secretary Darwin Pham. “He’s been reaching out to voters in 21 different languages. With the help of Asian American and Pacific Islander voters, we flipped once deep-red districts in Orange County last cycle and thanks to them we’re on offense in Texas and Georgia in 2020.”

AAPI candidates may even find they can use their unique backgrounds to their advantage.

“When I first decided to run for Congress, folks were like, ‘Are you kidding me?’” said California Rep. Ami Bera at the APAICS event. “I ran on my story as the son of immigrants, on that story of diversity, because that’s an American story”

Several current Asian-American members of Congress noted that they feel they have a unique responsibility to speak out about attacks against Asian-Americans. Unlike in other historically difficult eras for Asian-Americans, the AAPI community now has representation in Congress to push back on narratives that stoke racism.

That representation has grown slowly but steadily. Ten years ago, there were only 13 AAPI members of Congress; 10 years before that, there were only eight. There was never more than one AAPI legislator in the body until [1959](https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/97-398.pdf).

(<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/97-398.pdf>), which meant the unique concerns of Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders were not always heard in the centers of power. During Japanese internment for example, the only AAPI representative in Congress was the delegate from Hawaii, which was not yet a state.

“Seventy-five years ago today, we ended World War II and my own family were put in internment camps, primarily because of a failure of political leadership,” Rep. Mark Takano said. “There were no Asian-American leaders in Congress ... much less any legislature or city council. So make sure you support Asian-American representation at all levels of government. That speaking up and pushing back was something we didn’t have 75 years ago.”