Closing the Civic Engagement Gap through Connective Action

On March 23, 2018, amid the green, manicured lawns in Irvine, California, approximately 250 Chinese American immigrants gathered, carrying signs in front of Irvine’s city hall that read “NO TENT CITY, OUR CHILDREN NEED SAFETY”; “NO HOMELESS IN IRVINE”; and “SCHOOLS ARE IN DANGER.” Liqing Lee Sung, a former Irvine city council candidate and one of the public speakers at the protest, declared, “Can you imagine your child running on the lawn and step [sic] on a needle which could be contaminated by HIV? We cannot let that happen” (Shimura 2018, par. 3). The suburb of Irvine, located in Orange County, has become a popular destination over the past decade for many affluent first-generation Chinese Americans and their families. The Asian American population in Irvine is estimated at between 35 and 40 percent of the city’s total population (Wheeler 2016).

The Chinese American immigrant demonstrators had gathered to protest the Orange County Board of Supervisors’ proposal for the establish-
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ment of a homeless camp in the city (Shimura 2018). The online and offline civic engagement was led primarily by WeIrvine, an online start-up business with its own website of nearly forty thousand members run by four Chinese Americans that helps recent immigrants from Mainland China settle in Irvine because of the city’s reputation for safety and outstanding public schools (Shimura 2016). The homeless camp was proposed on one hundred acres of county-owned land.

WeIrvine’s role in the city’s homeless camp protests is a conservative example of primarily organization-led connective action facilitated by its website portal, social media apps such as WeChat, and local Chinese American community-based organization networks. According to WeIrvine founder Xiaoxiang Lu, “It is going to destroy their belief in Irvine” (Shimura 2018, par. 6). The founders of WeIrvine would charter twenty-four buses from throughout Southern California to bring concerned Chinese American families to attend an Irvine Board of Supervisors meeting on March 27, 2018. According to one organizer who created a Facebook page called “Irvine Tent City Protest,” which had more than five thousand members, “People who I never knew were calling me night and day and asking to do whatever they could to help. It’s really proof that we are a community dedicated to a mission like never before” (Do 2018, par. 18). Like many of the Chinese American immigrants in this book’s other case studies, this was one of the first political protests they had ever attended in the United States (Do 2018).

While there were other local protests of the Orange County Board of Supervisors’ plan to create emergency homeless shelters in the affluent suburbs of Laguna Niguel and Huntington Beach, none of the protests in these cities compared to the swift mobilization and loud protests of the Chinese American immigrants in Irvine. The protests led the Board of Supervisors to overturn the homeless shelter proposal without providing an alternative solution, and the Orange County homeless population continues to grow.

The Irvine example of immigrant Chinese American connective action illustrates some of the potentials and challenges of the power of social media and civic engagement. On the one hand, social media provides ethno-racial immigrant groups, especially those who cannot participate through traditional means such as voting due to factors including citizenship and limited English proficiency, the ability to mobilize around collective concerns. On the other hand, some argue that these mobilization efforts are misguided by racial fears and based solely on group self-interests. These are two competing tensions that are at the crux of Asian American connective action. Asian-influenced suburbs, such as Irvine, will likely become the main battleground sites of future connective action efforts in local, state, and national contexts (Lai 2011).
The term social media became part of the United States’ national lexicon in 2004 and is defined as “forms of electronic communications through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content” (Merriam-Webster 2017). Social media represents an emerging part of most Americans’ lives regardless of their race, class, gender, age, and religious backgrounds. Perhaps no other platform has been more influential in the rise of social media networks than the smartphone, which has made a profound impact on our daily habits and consumption of information since Apple Computers released the iPhone in 2007. Since that time, the smartphone and social media networks have become synonymous and ubiquitous. In 2015, an estimated two-thirds of Americans owned a smartphone, with nearly one-fifth relying on them to access the internet (Smith 2015). For example, Twitter was predominantly accessed through the internet via a computer but now is overwhelmingly utilized on smartphones or other mobile devices (Murthy et al. 2015). As a result, more Americans are getting their news from mobile devices through social media.

With the prominence of smartphones and social media in our lives, scholars have begun to examine social media and its linkages with civic engagement in the form of international and domestic movements in what has been termed “connective action” (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Other recent studies have examined how social media can provide new affordances with regard to the civic engagement of the youth in U.S. politics (Cohen and Kahne 2012; Jenkins et al. 2016; Luttig and Cohen 2016; Kahne and Bowyer 2016; Elliott and Earl 2018).

The impact of social media on civic engagement is apparent today with the sharing of political news and information on various platforms. According to the findings from a 2016 Pew Research Center national poll of 1,520 adults, more than half of Americans stated that they get their political news from social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan 2016). Another Pew Research Center national poll of 3,760 adult respondents during the 2016 presidential election found that 14 percent (tied for second highest) got their news from a social media site and 13 percent (third highest) from a news website app compared to 24 percent from cable TV news (highest) (Gottfried et al. 2016). On Twitter, opinions, information, and news are shared among the global network of those who are “Following” or “Followers” through “tweets” or “retweets” that include hashtags, which are a string of words following a hash (#), the main method for organizing information on Twitter. In 2018, Twitter averaged nearly five hundred million tweets a day (80 percent from smartphones) for an average of six thousand tweets per second (“Twitter Usage Statistics” 2017).
The rise of social media has concomitantly resulted in a decline of the digital divide as the racial gap regarding social media usage and Internet access has completely disappeared. Vice President Al Gore’s speech at the Digital Divide Conference on April 28, 1998, identified the Information Age as the “key to ensuring a lifetime of success” and asserted that it is necessary to ensure that all young people from every background have equal access to the internet (The White House, Office of the Vice President 1998, par. 1). The digital divide argument was bolstered by reputable sources such as a 1998 Pew Research Center poll that found White people were twice as likely as African Americans to use the internet. Today, nearly twenty years later, the Pew Research Center estimates that 40 percent of African Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine, compared to White people at 28 percent, were using Twitter in 2013. Twitter usage was nearly identical between White people and African Americans for those between the ages of thirty and forty-nine and fifty and sixty-four. On the internet usage and broadband access issue that Vice President Gore lamented about, African Americans across these age groups were either at the same percentages or better than White people (Guo 2015).

Empirical evidence of the emergence of a “Black Twitter” among the young adult African American online community can be seen clearly today with the rise of hashtag movements such as Black Lives Matter (Murthy, Gross, and Pensavalle 2016). The ability of African Americans to close the digital divide within nearly two decades, combined with their effective use of social media platforms like Twitter to communicate with each other, to share information, and to mobilize racial projects like Black Lives Matter to address social injustices, provides insights into the potential of social media as a mechanism for mobilization. Moreover, the affordances provided by connective action can also be uplifting to other racial minorities such as Asian Americans and Latinx, two groups containing large numbers of foreign-born and limited English proficient (LEP) members.

Text messaging apps have become critical in connecting people anywhere in the world in a myriad of ways, from discussing social issues to sharing photos. WeChat, which was created by the Chinese company Tencent in 2011, embodies a powerful mobilization tool used exclusively in Mainland China and its diasporic communities (Chen, Mao, and Qui 2018). By 2018, WeChat purportedly reached one billion monthly active users worldwide, which was a 12 percent growth compared to 889 million users at the end of 2016 (Hollander 2018). WeChat groups, which can consist of 500 members, are created around common interests, political issues, hobbies, alumni connections, and social events (Chen, Mao, and Qui 2018). In comparison, WhatsApp, a messaging rival of WeChat that is the most used instant messaging
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app in India, allows for 256 members per group. Owners manage each group on WeChat and determine the tone of the group. WeChat allows owners to spread the word of an upcoming event to their group’s members, which encourages other people to sign up to a group (Chen 2018).

Former president Donald Trump attempted to ban WeChat and TikTok, a popular Chinese-owned video sharing app, through an executive order on August 6, 2020. According to the executive order, WeChat “automatically captures vast swaths of information from its users. This data collection threatens to allow the Chinese Communist Party access to Americans’ personal and proprietary information” (Choudhury 2020, par. 6). On June 9, 2021, President Joe Biden signed a new executive order that would replace Trump’s ban by calling for the Commerce Department to launch national security reviews of all social media apps that have links to foreign adversaries including Mainland China (Allyn 2021).

The focus of this book is not on these online mobile technological platforms per se but on how connective action can facilitate offline political mobilization among Asian Americans by providing them access to and communication of vital political information through online spaces and discussion forums, helping them to participate in public policy debates and social justice issues. Communication in one’s native language is particularly vital for the Asian American community, which contains the largest foreign-born population at nearly 70 percent and one of the largest LEP populations at nearly 35 percent (Ramakrishnan and Ahmad 2014). In addition to these demographic challenges, one prominent scholar declared in 2016 that Asian Americans “still do not have the institutional means to communicate, to moderate, to resolve, and to anticipate future areas of tension” (Kwong 2016, p. 88). Connective action may allow large foreign-born racial groups such as Asian Americans the ability to communicate and moderate their voices and concerns at the local, state, and national levels. Indeed, if connective action has the ability to provide an online means of communication and moderation, historically disenfranchised groups should be able to participate in ways never seen before in the civic arena. This belief is arguably most visible among Asian Americans, a group historically stereotyped as quiet, docile, and apolitical in U.S. politics.

Social Media Effects on Participatory Democracy

While connective action through social media platforms may be seen as a potential panacea for politically disenfranchised minority groups, some argue that the rise of social media has also coincided with the decline of U.S. political parties and thus at the expense of participatory democracy (Edsall
2017). In a provocative *New York Times* editorial, Thomas Edsall (2017, pars. 1 and 31) wrote:

It’s clear that the Internet and social media have succeeded in doing what many feared and some hoped they would. They have disrupted and destroyed institutional constraints on what can be said, when and where it can be said and who can say it... There is good reason to think that the disruptive forces at work in the United States—as they expand the universe of the politically engaged and open the debate to millions who previously paid little or no attention—may do more to damage the left than strengthen it. In other words, just as the use of negative campaign ads and campaign finance loopholes to channel suspect contributions eventually became routine, so too will be the use of social media to confuse and mislead the electorate.

The 2016 presidential election offers a salient example and a cautionary tale of how social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter can be used on smartphones to spread misinformation or “fake news” on the internet to persuade voters toward or against a particular candidate. For example, one 2017 study on the impact of fake news on the 2016 U.S. presidential election found that during the election, thirty million fabricated stories that favored Donald Trump were shared through social media, nearly quadruple the total number of fabricated stories that favored Hillary Clinton (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017).

At the root of the political argument is the belief that individuals are not able to tell the difference between real news and fake news on social media. A 2016 Stanford University study found that among 7,804 middle school students to college students, many could not discern fake news from real news. Among the middle school students in this study’s sample, many were unable to distinguish an advertisement story from a news story. Among the college student sample, many accepted, without any critical thinking, findings from a bogus study from a fabricated organization (Wineburg and McGrew 2016). These findings from the study indicate that while the millennial generation may be more familiar with social media technologies than older generations, they are just as likely to have trouble judging the credibility of online information.

Because of this political misinformation from all ends of the political spectrum and the electorate being unable to distinguish between fake and real news, the question then becomes what the facts being debated are. According to an October 2016 Pew Research Center study finding, 81 percent of American registered voters of both parties stated that “basic facts,” not just public policies, are in dispute (Pew Research Center 2016). The tradition
of finding out the truth by seeking alternative sources and points of view has currently taken a back seat to ideological predispositions that shape where and with whom Americans communicate through social media platforms, whether it be on their computers or smartphones.

Finally, another democratic concern of social media is that it has made electoral politics more vitriolic and polarizing and less trustworthy in the minds of its users. With regard to news trustworthiness, one Pew Research Center survey found that nearly 62 percent of American adults get their news from social media but only 32 percent find that news somewhat trustworthy (Gottfried and Shearer 2016).

Despite the compelling arguments about the negative effects of social media, numerous positive influences exist in the relationship between social media and democracy. Social media has filled a necessary vacuum that has allowed millions of Americans to participate and voice their concerns in ways that they could not have done only a decade ago, before the invention of the smartphone and popular social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. As Edsall opined, this vacuum is the result of the gradual decline of local political party organizations in addition to other social and civic organizations, all necessary aspects of collective action in American politics. However, connective action might provide the bridge that allows online collective action to happen despite the decline in these local political party organizations. One connective action study found that not only were social media technologies during connective action a manner to spread the message but they also became a prominent part of the organizational structure itself (Bennett and Segerberg 2013).

Social media technologies may also provide a larger and more accessible infrastructure via the internet that social and civic organizations no longer have the capacity to provide. Social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube have also made political information more accessible to their users rather than requiring users to join a formal organization to gain access to such information. For example, SNS users grew from 33 percent of the total online community in 2008 to 69 percent in 2012 (Smith 2013). In addition, SNS can have a democratizing effect in that they provide a lower entry point into American politics for historically disfranchised Americans from every demographic group, particularly youth and racial minorities (Kahne and Middaugh 2012; Zimmerman 2012; Mizuko et al. 2015). While social media networks can provide for increased leverage, social groups must be careful not to grow too fast without formal organization structures and social ties that bind them. In fact, one study found that online social networks possess both power and fragility in that they can be undermined by government institutions to maintain power through delaying, distracting, and spreading disinformation (Tufekci 2018).
The Significance of Connective Action
Literature for Asian Americans

With the prominence of social media in our lives, scholars have begun to examine it and its linkages with civic engagement in the form of international and domestic movements in what has been termed “connective action” where groups can voice and organize their concerns in different ways (e.g., posting, creating a chat group) via social media platforms (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Connective action may allow activist groups, as seen with the Black Lives Matter, Arab Spring, and Occupy Wall Street movements, the ability to articulate, amplify, and coordinate their group interests around a particular policy or political outcome through either self-organizing (requiring no organizational coordination) or organizationally led (loose organization coordination) networks (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Castells 2015; Papacharissi 2015).

Social media networks can also allow activist groups to band together online in a process known as “peer production” to shape political discourse around social justice movements (Benkler 2007). A vivid example of digital organized action among activists and organizations was seen on January 18, 2012, against the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Protect IP Act (PIPA), in which an estimated three million people emailed congressional representatives expressing their opposition to both bills (Wortham 2012). Both SOPA and PIPA would eventually be shelved in Congress as a result of the online protests (Weisman 2012). Coordinated physical protests would soon follow in New York, Seattle, and San Francisco, where protesters held signs reading “Don’t Tread on the Internet” (Wortham 2012).

Political motivation is essential for connective action to allow minorities to close the participation gap in both traditional and nontraditional ways. Studies have found that increased social media and internet usage alone does not result in increased political knowledge and voter participation but may actually widen political gaps due to the presence of news and entertainment online sources (Chan 2020; Prior 2005). For example, an Asian American who spends hours engaging on social media platforms for gaming internet communities is not likely to engage in connective action around a particular policy, candidate, or social justice issue. Thus, the presence of political motivation among individuals or groups is critical for connective action to provide individuals with new opportunities to shape political discourse around public policies and political candidates (Chan 2020; Dalton 2017). This is particularly salient for outsiders in U.S. politics, as recent studies have examined how social media networks can provide youth and minorities with new affordances with regard to civic engagement (Jenkins et al. 2016; Luttig and Cohen 2016; Kahne and Bowyer 2016). In a 2016 Wash-
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In the *Washington Post* opinion editorial by Matthew Luttig and Cathy Cohen entitled “How Social Media Helps Young People, Especially Minorities and the Poor, Get Politically Engaged,” the authors argue, “Social media has transformed the relationship among citizens, news and politics. . . . Our findings suggest that new media can encourage Millennials—the most enthusiastic users—to get actively involved in politics, albeit in different ways from previous generations. . . . That’s because the Internet has opened up virtual spaces that bypass traditional gatekeepers” (Luttig and Cohen 2016, pars. 2, 3, 5).

Despite the above recent connective action studies in international and U.S. contexts, there has been very little specific focus on the processes and how connective action shapes Asian American political engagement, particularly given that it contains the largest foreign-born population among all racial groups. This is especially salient for Asian Americans for two reasons. The first reason is that Asian Americans currently have one of the lowest voter turnout rates among its adult voting-age population in comparison with other racial groups. In the 2010 elections, Asian American voter turnout was 31 percent nationally compared to White people at 49 percent, African Americans at 44 percent, and Latinx at 31 percent. Four years later, during the 2014 elections, Asian Americans accounted for an estimated nine million eligible voters but made up only 4 percent of all eligible voters (Krogstad 2014). The second reason is that Asian Americans are one of the most digitally connected racial groups in the United States. According to a series of 2015 national survey findings on digital media usage conducted by the Pew Research Center, 91 percent of English-speaking Asian Americans used the internet compared to White people at 87 percent, Latinx at 82 percent, and African Americans at 81 percent. In addition, 84 percent of English-speaking Asian Americans, 72 percent of White people, 54 percent of African Americans, and 50 percent of Latinx have broadband at home. With regard to owning a smartphone, English-speaking Asian Americans once again led the way with 91 percent compared to White people at 66 percent, Latinx at 65 percent, and African Americans at 62 percent (Perrin 2016).

**Asian American Connective Action Rising:**

*Evidence from Large-Scale Surveys*

As social media becomes an integral part of most Americans’ lives, one would be remiss to assume that the practice and extent of usage of social media as a mechanism for civic engagement is homogenous among all racial groups. This point is certainly true with regard to Asian Americans, the nation’s fastest growing racial group from 2000 to 2010 with a 46 percent growth rate gain.
On the surface level, the statistics at the end of the previous section comparatively demonstrate that Asian Americans are one of the most digitally connected racial groups in the nation. Given their transnational characteristics, various platforms of digital media serve as a way of connecting individuals and communities across a larger transnational community that transcends traditional nation state borders (Laguerre 2010). Below the surface level, other salient questions also arise, such as what the social media usage for Asian Americans who are primarily LEP is, what the interethnic group differences among them are, and whether being digitally connected can lead to higher levels of civic engagement. These questions are necessary because they embody the three most crucial aspects of the national Asian American population: foreign-born, LEP, and diverse.

In addition to social media, ethnic media has become ubiquitous and critical for Asian Americans during political action efforts at the city level by providing political information and connecting ethnic candidates to both old and new Asian American voters (Lai 2011). According to the 2016 National Asian American Survey (NAAS) findings on sources for political information, as illustrated in Figure 1.1, in addition to being the most digitally connected racial group in the United States, Asian Americans are also more likely to get their political information from various ethnic media in the forms of newspapers, television, radio, and the internet than mainstream media (Ramakrishnan et al. 2016). Approximately 47 percent of Asian American registered voters identified getting “a lot and a great deal” of their political information from the internet and social media, which is the largest segment among all political information sources, followed by Same Generation (31 percent), Television (26 percent), and Family/Friends (24 percent).

While interethnic group differences exist among Asian Americans with regard to ethnic media and social media consumption of political information in general, the 2016 National Asian American Survey also found that 66 percent of Asian American registered voters receive “a moderate amount” of their political information through the internet and social media. Nearly 61 percent of foreign-born Asian Americans stated that they relied on the internet and social media for their political information. This percentage is even greater for U.S.-born Asian Americans between eighteen and thirty-four years of age, 77 percent of whom said they relied on the internet for political information and 89 percent of whom said they relied on social media for political information (Ramakrishnan et al. 2016, p. 41).

One common criticism of social media users on Twitter who tweet political hashtags is that such “hashtag activism” results in all talk, no action (Anschuetz 2015; Berlatsky 2015). Despite this criticism, recent national public opinion survey findings indicate that indeed, Asian Americans are
utilizing social media to address social injustice issues through public demonstrations and other political activities. One question in the 2016 National Asian American Survey asked, “In the last 12 months, have you posted or commented about politics on social media, like Facebook, Twitter, WeChat (for Chinese American respondents) or KakaoTalk (for Korean American respondents)?” and 26 percent or a quarter of registered Asian American voters responded that they had engaged with a political issue on social media (Ramakrishnan et al., p. 38). Native-born Asian Americans and young Asian Americans (eighteen to thirty-four) responded to the same question at 44 percent and 50 percent, respectively.

According to Table 1.1, differences exist along ethnicity, nativity, gender, and age groups for Asian American registered voters with regard to civic engagement and social media. Filipino Americans (34 percent) and Asian Indians (33 percent) were the two Asian American ethnic groups most likely to use social media for civic engagement over the last twelve months during the time of the survey, compared to Chinese Americans (23 percent), Vietnamese Americans (22 percent), and Korean Americans (18 percent). Asian American male registered voters were slightly more likely to use social media for civic engagement at 23 percent, compared to 18 percent for Asian American female registered voters. Foreign-born Asian Americans
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(29 percent) were more likely than native-born Asian Americans (5 percent) to use social media for civic engagement. Older-generation (thirty-five and above) Asian American voters were likely to do so at 26 percent, compared to 7 percent for younger-generation (eighteen to thirty-four) Asian American voters. In summary, Asian American connective action is rising among all demographic segments and will likely continue in the future.

Given these findings of the 2016 National Asian American Survey, Asian American connective action can also challenge traditional models of political participation that argue that high socioeconomic levels and formal organizations are necessary to facilitate traditional forms of political participation such as voting, issue awareness, attending political rallies, and contacting elected officials. Past studies have shown that Asian Americans have one of the lowest voter turnouts among adult citizens, with only 47 percent voting compared to African Americans at 66 percent, White people at 64 percent, Latinx at 48 percent, American Indians at 51 percent, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders at 49 percent (Chen et al. 2016). Social media provides Asian Americans and other outsider groups the online infrastructure to interact with their specific and larger ethno-racial communities around pertinent issues taking place within the public and political spheres that transcend geographic boundaries without having to rely on

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<th>TABLE 1.1 CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG ASIAN AMERICAN VOTERS, 2016</th>
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formal organizations to mobilize them. In lieu of such organizations, online affinity groups have the potential, with caveats, to consolidate individual, diffused voices and information into organized and self-sustaining power. These online affinity groups differ sharply from traditional brick-and-mortar organizations in that they do not need office fronts and large staffs but can be created in a centralized, online location that can be visited and updated remotely from anywhere in the world.

The affordances connective action provides to Asian Americans may vary, as found in other studies. For example, among working-class Asian immigrants, social media gives them the ability to connect instantaneously in their respective native languages with others in the diaspora at relatively little cost. For wealthier Asian immigrants, the affordances of social media may provide them with communication channels to express their motivations in effective, rapid, and powerful ways to elected representatives in a state legislature. Thus, Asian American connective action may provide a lower entry to the traditional pathways of American political incorporation that require U.S. naturalization, registering to vote, and voting as cornerstones of political participation. While these traditional pathways are still critical, scholars would be remiss not to examine other pathways that are coming to fruition in an increasingly digital and transnational world.

The 2016 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS), which over sixty social scientists collaborated on, also surveyed a multiracial sample on forms of social media and civic engagement from November 2016 to February 2017.1 The CMPS included 3,066 Asian American respondents from national origin groups who were surveyed with civic engagement and social media questions.2

When asked, “During the past twelve months, have you discussed a candidate or political issue on social media like Facebook or Twitter?,” 74 percent (2,219 respondents) stated “no,” compared to 26 percent (787 respondents) who stated “yes.” A majority of all Asian national origin groups, with the exception of Bangladeshi, responded “no.” Similar to the news source finding, this suggests that while Asian Americans still predominantly get their news from traditional sources such as mainstream television, the minority who get their news from social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are likely to continue to grow.

For the question “During the past twelve months, have you discussed a candidate on (smartphone) social media?,” the Asian ethnic breakdown was the following: Chinese, 11.3 percent “yes” and 88.7 percent “no”; Taiwanese, 19.5 percent “yes” and 80.5 percent “no”; Indian, 30.9 percent “yes” and 69 percent “no”; Korean, 20 percent “yes” and 80 percent “no”; Filipino, 5.4 percent “yes” and 94.6 percent “no”; Vietnamese, 4.4 percent “yes” and 95.6 percent “no”; and Japanese, 6.9 percent “yes” and 93.1 percent “no.”
When asked, “Have you signed a petition regarding an issue or problem that concerns you in the past twelve months?” a majority of Asian American respondents (2,147, or 71.42 percent) stated “no,” compared to 859 (28.58 percent), who stated “yes.” The latter were asked a follow-up question: “Was that an online petition or a hard-copy signed petition?” A majority (687, or 79.98 percent) stated it was an online petition compared to 172, or 20.02 percent, who signed a hard-copy petition. This finding suggests that interest groups are using the internet (e.g., email and social media sites) as the primary method of disseminating their petitions versus the traditional hard-copy method. This finding also is supported by each of the case studies that are discussed later in this book. As Asian Americans continue to be one of the racial groups most connected to the Internet, this connective action finding is likely to continue among all age ranges of Asian Americans, as it will for other racial minorities as well.

Both the 2016 NAAS and the 2016 CMPS demonstrate the growing link between social media and civic engagement or connective action among Asian Americans. At the same time, the findings of both surveys illustrate intergroup differences among the diverse Asian American populations in regard to social media usage for political information and activities. Nevertheless, one thing is certain: Asian Americans are likely to continue utilizing social media platforms, as previous studies have shown that this racial group is one of the most digitally connected despite relatively low voter turnout rates.

Research Questions

Given the two opposing trends of low voter participation and high digital connectivity within the Asian American community, three primary research questions must be addressed. First, how can online connective action facilitate offline civic engagement besides voting, such as political protest, contacting their local and state elected leaders, and attending public forums? This is particularly important given the large and diverse foreign-born, LEP population that currently makes up the majority of the Chinese American and the larger Asian American community. Second, to what extent was the panethnic identity between Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans emerging during online connective action campaigns on social media platforms such as Twitter? For example, in Chapter 4’s Peter Liang case study, did non-Chinese Asian American groups support Liang to the same extent as Chinese Americans based on their race, or did they diverge based on ideological differences? And third, given the ideological, ethnic, and class diversity within the national Asian American community, how can they fit in with future progressive, multiracial political coalitions.
around contentious public policy issues such as racial profiling and affirmative action? This topic is one of increasing political importance given the multiracial characteristics of the public policies and U.S. cities that Asian Americans are an essential part of, as well as their racial group position within the traditional U.S. racial hierarchy that has historically pitted them against other racial minorities (Kim 1999; Masuoka and Junn 2013).

Connective action has provided the largely foreign-born population of Asian Americans who are politically motivated with affordances to influence policy and political outcomes that defy traditional political science models of political participation in several important ways. First, social media such as instant messaging apps, Twitter town halls, and web-based discussion boards can have the profound effect of leveling the playing field by removing the traditional gatekeepers, such as political parties, to gain access to political information and to mobilize voters. Asian American communities are increasingly mobile and digital due to global social formation and emigration patterns. Social media, smartphones, and satellite television connect and provide continuity for Asian immigrants across their respective diasporic communities (Laguerre 2010).

Second, social media has provided new virtual spaces that allow individuals, regardless of race, class, and citizenship, to share and gain access to important information on policies, issues, and candidates that are relevant to their respective communities. For Asian Americans, this is particularly salient given their large foreign-born, LEP populations and low voting rates in U.S. politics. Language barriers that were once associated with formal organizations can now be overcome through social media. Third, as a result of the previous two factors, connective action may allow Asian Americans to challenge the traditional U.S. racial hierarchies that have limited them in two contradictory ways as both political outsiders in the form of the “forever foreigner” and as racially superior in relation to other minorities in the form of the “model minority”—two sociopolitical planes that have historically limited the public perception of Asian Americans from the 1960s to the present. Thus, connective action may provide Asian Americans, both U.S.-born and immigrants, the ability to challenge these two stereotypes by altering and shaping policy and political outcomes related to social justice and transnational identities in their favor in ways never before seen in American politics.

Overview of the Remaining Chapters

The primary focus of this book is to provide a detailed and nuanced glimpse into the multiple ways that connective action, the nexus of social media and civic engagement, takes shape within the Asian American community. As
is argued, social media can provide greater access to and communication among all Americans so they may participate in American politics in ways they never have, but with caveats, including the danger of echo chambers that prevent a balanced discourse on various contentious issues that often drive nonvoters to mobilize. For Asian Americans, this is particularly important, given their long-standing outsider status in American politics as voters and elected representatives, in addition to their large foreign-born and LEP populations.

Chapter 2, “The Racial Paradox and Emerging Political Contours of Asian Americans: How Connective Action Challenges and Amplifies Them,” examines the unique positionalities of Asian Americans within the traditional U.S. racial hierarchy and discusses the emerging political contours developing within Asian America as well as how connective action might alter what I define as the racial paradox that faces Asian Americans today and amplify ideological and intersectional identities. The coexisting stereotypes of Asian Americans as political outsiders/forever foreigners and a model minority are discussed in light of how connective action can challenge both. Previous social science models have illuminated both stereotypes but have failed to understand and incorporate how social media can shift and alter race relations and power differentials when it comes to political incorporation and the traditional racial hierarchies that often place racial minorities, including Asian Americans, beneath White people.

The book’s focus then turns to establishing its theoretical model in Chapter 3, “Conceptualizing a Model for Asian American Connective Action,” which examines how Asian American connective action occurs within three dimensions: the Medium Dimension (Mainstream and Ethnic Social Media), the Goals Dimension (Asian American Civic Engagement), and the Site Dimension (Asian American Immigrant Influenced Cities). Each of these dimensions is discussed with examples to give greater insights into both crowd- and organization-led typologies of Asian American connective action.

Chapters 4 through 9 continue to build on the book’s theoretical model through six diverse empirical case studies to develop Asian American connective action through crowd- and organization-led networks. In these instances, crowds and organizations create personal action frames around an issue that they share information and thoughts on through social media platforms, which facilitate political action beyond the screen. These six case studies also highlight the emergence of political identities around contentious contemporary issues such as affirmative action, racial profiling, and transnational politics. In multiple ways, these case studies illustrate the complexities, limitations, and challenges of Asian American connective action that are relevant to all racial groups. At the same time, they also demonstrate
how connective action can empower Asian immigrant groups by giving them a political voice that they would never have had prior to social media, and how social media platforms served as a vehicle for Asian American connective action (local, state, national, and international) in the context of challenging predetermined decisions and influencing political outcomes. In effect, connective action challenges traditional models of political participation such as collective action.

Chapter 4, “Case Study 1: The 2016 Trial of New York Police Department Officer Peter Liang and the Connective Action Mobilization by First-Generation Chinese Americans,” examines the November 20, 2014, shooting tragedy that involved New York City Police Department (NYPD) officer Peter Liang and Akai Gurley, an unarmed African American man, during a vertical patrol in the Louis Heaton Pink Houses in Brooklyn, New York. Liang was the first NYPD police officer to be prosecuted by the city’s attorney in over a decade, which created perceptions among first-generation Chinese American protesters that Liang was a racial scapegoat. Many of them began to discuss the topic on forums run by the Chinese-created social media app WeChat and subsequently mobilized through public protests both locally and nationally in forty-one cities (thirty-eight U.S. and three Canadian). Ideological divisions arose within the Asian American community between first-generation Chinese American protesters, who focused on predominantly Liang’s civil rights, and progressive Asian American activists, who were part of the Black Lives Matter movement, on the issue of White supremacy and Asian American privilege.

Chapter 5, “Case Study 2: The Asian American Community’s Online and Offline Affirmative Action Battle over the 2012 California Senate Constitutional Amendment 5 Bill,” focuses on Asian American connective action around California’s affirmative action policy in higher education admissions. WeChat was again instrumental in disseminating information to first-generation Chinese Americans statewide. As the case study reveals, social media was also critical in mobilizing this disenfranchised community and forcing the California State Legislature to table the Senate Constitutional Amendment (SCA) 5 bill that sought to reintroduce affirmative action into the University of California admissions process after a majority of voters supported Proposition 209 in a 1996 statewide election. For those outside of this conservative minority segment of the larger Asian American community, this movement appeared to be motivated by group self-interest. Contrary to this belief, public opinion polls indicate that a majority of the Asian American community actually favors affirmative action policies. As seen with the Liang case study, the ability of progressive Asian Americans to form multiracial coalitions with other pro-affirmative action groups was potentially endangered by such swift, conservative mobilization efforts of
an anti-affirmative-action minority segment that did not reflect the larger community’s perspectives. This chapter reveals that echo chambers that were formed in WeChat prevented balanced discussions about the effect of SCA 5 on Asian American admissions in the University of California system.

Chapter 6, “Case Study 3: Data Disaggregation and the 2016 California Assembly Bill 1726—How Connective Action Helped Determine the Narrative and Outcome,” examines the online battle around Assembly Bill (AB) 1726, which sought to require state agencies to disaggregate data on Asian Americans given their ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. Many of the same Mainland Chinese activists who mobilized against SCA 5 were empowered and viewed AB 1726 as another attempt by the California State Legislature to target their children for unfair treatment with regard to admissions to the University of California campuses. Similar to the SCA 5 case study, echo chambers largely dictated the direction and parameters of the discussion on WeChat, which prevented a balanced discussion within the Chinese American community as well as the larger Asian American community with regard to the benefits and costs of data disaggregation. However, unlike SCA 5, the panethnic coalition of progressive Asian American activists was effective in getting AB 1726 passed in both houses of the California State Legislature and signed by Governor Brown, by getting and remaining in front of AB 1726’s main narrative on social media platforms such as Twitter.

Chapter 7, “Case Study 4: The 18 Million Rising Website and Its Role as an Online Conduit for Progressive Asian America Activism,” provides this book’s sole example of Asian American connective action through an organization-led network. The 18 Million Rising (18MR) website illustrates how exclusively online progressive Asian American organizations and activists are using social media vis-à-vis the process of organization-led connective action in unique ways to influence and achieve political outcomes around various social issues. Two 18MR online campaigns (#ReleaseMN8 and #BlackAAPIAction) are discussed and analyzed to provide examples of how organization-led connective action takes shape around two critical public policy issues: the deportation of Cambodian Americans who are former felons and the creation of a biracial coalition between African Americans and Asian Americans for the passage of a clean Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act in the U.S. Congress.

Chapter 8, “Case Study 5: The 2016 California Textbook Controversy—South Asian Americans and the #DontEraseIndia Campaign,” examines how political identities tied to regional culture and politics of South Asian countries can shape political action on the issue of how they are portrayed in required California middle-school textbooks. In 2005 and 2016, this issue became front and center among Asian Indians and other South Asian Amer-
icans. The two rival camps that would eventually emerge in the South Asian American communities during the 2005 and 2016 controversies were symbolized by #DontEraseIndia, which sought to prevent India from being replaced by South Asia in California textbooks.

Chapter 9, “Case Study 6: Establishing World War II Korean Comfort Women Memorials in U.S. Cities and the Online Mobilization against Them,” demonstrates how social injustices during World War II among Japan, China, and Korea can shape Asian American connective action on the issue of comfort women and their symbolism many years after. In the United States, a panethnic coalition composed primarily of Korean Americans, Chinese Americans, and Japanese Americans took on the Japanese government and its ally nationalist organizations to commemorate the atrocity of Korean, Chinese, and Filipino comfort women forced to serve as sex slaves for the Japanese military during World War II in the form of remembrance statues. A common interest—achieving social justice for the remainder of the living comfort women—allowed this panethnic coalition to form in cities throughout the continental United States. The Japanese nationalist detractors from the remembrance statues the groups proposed raised concerns about national sovereignty and whether it was appropriate for another nation that was far removed from the historical events to erect such monuments.

Chapter 10, “On the Virtues and Perils of Asian American Connective Action,” earnestly takes on key opportunities and challenges using this book’s case studies’ findings to address topics such as the echo chamber effect and how to mitigate it, emerging online pan-Asian identities building online multiracial coalitions, and the importance of controlling the online narrative for shaping political outcomes.

Ethno-Racial Group Terminologies

Due to the process of racial formation, the meanings of ethno-racial categories in the United States have been prescribed and challenged by both government institutions and the ethno-racial groups themselves. This book uses the term Asian Americans to describe the larger Asian American community, both foreign-born and U.S.-born, that specifically encompasses East Asian (i.e., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipina/o Americans), Southeast Asian (i.e., Cambodian and Vietnamese Americans), and South Asian (i.e., Asian Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi Americans) national origin groups in the United States—the groups whose connective actions are primarily examined and discussed in this book’s case studies. Asian American Pacific Islander will be used when discussing both Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders such as Hawaiians, Guamanians, Tongans, and...
Micronesians. In specific instances when ethnic groups are discussed, terms such as Asian Indians, Korean Americans, and Cambodian Americans are utilized.

The term African Americans is used to discuss those with African descent in the United States. Latinx (singular) and Latinxs (plural) are used for those in national origin groups from Central America, Cuba, and South America.

Immigrant and first generation are used interchangeably to denote generational differences from the U.S.-born generations among ethno-racial groups. For example, Chinese American immigrants is used to describe those who are the first generation from Mainland China and does not include Taiwanese Americans.

Methodologies

This book primarily utilizes three methodological approaches to examine Asian American connective action: survey data findings, case studies, and social media content analysis. In part, each approach gets at the various aspects of Asian American connective action. As a whole, by utilizing these methods, a broader, clearer holistic picture of Asian American connective action is provided that captures the diversity among Asian Americans and their emerging political identities.

1. Case Studies and Interviews

To further develop the social media and civic engagement findings from the 2016 NAAS and the November 2016 CMPS, six case studies were examined to provide comparative insights on Asian American connective action and the many dimensions of participation through social media networks and online affinity groups. Qualitative interviews were also conducted primarily among individuals who participated in the four case studies, including community-based organization leaders and elected officials.

2. Twitter Hashtag Analyses

Each case study focuses exclusively on Twitter hashtag analyses. It is important to note that this book is not arguing that Twitter was the only form of social media utilized in all case studies, as that would be a fallacy. Instead, Twitter is exclusively focused on in this book for three primary reasons. First, it represents one of the most used forms of social media in the world. According to one source, on average, nearly 6,000 tweets are tweeted each second, which totals approximately 350,000 tweets per minute, 500 million
tweets per day, and nearly 200 billion tweets per year ("Twitter Usage Statistics" 2017). Asian Americans of all backgrounds are utilizing this powerful social media platform to share information and ideas during connective action. Second, Twitter represents a critical way of gauging mass online public attitudes on various contested issues and policies at the heart of the case studies at the moment they are occurring. Such mass public attitudes are critical steps, along with political motivation, that facilitate an online consensus for offline civic engagement, which completes the process of connective action. Third, tweets around an issue will often use hashtags with the subject matter embedded, allowing them to be cataloged and connected to other tweets using the same hashtags, which can provide longitudinal context to a particular issue. This was very important since all of the book’s case studies were examined retrospectively.

Locating and coding each of the Twitter hashtags examined in this book’s case studies required a three-step process. One, each hashtag was located through the advanced search option available on the Twitter website. Two, the user option of the advanced search allowed for searching of any tweets a person or organization tweeted with a particular hashtag. This second step allowed me to find threads of hidden tweets that organizations and individuals may have sent out including the hashtag. Third, a general search of the term without the hashtag was conducted to get more tweet results.

The most common Twitter hashtags used by the Asian American community, not necessarily by other racial groups, during the six case studies are the following:

- #PeterLiang and #FreePeterLiang (Chapter 4, 2016 trial of New York Police Officer Peter Liang case study)
- #SCA5 (Chapter 5, California Senate Constitutional Amendment 5 case study)
- #AB1726 (Chapter 6, California Assembly Bill 1726 case study)
- #BlackAAPiAction and #ReleaseMN8 (Chapter 7, 18 Million Rising website—the 2017 Asian American Pacific Islander [AAPI] Immigrant Rights Table and the Release the Minnesota 8 case studies)
- #DontEraseIndia (Chapter 8, 2016 California Textbook Controversy case study)
- #ComfortWomen (Chapter 9, Korean Americans and the World War II comfort women memorials case study)

Tweets containing these respective hashtags were coded for race, ethnicity, gender, issue position (pro, neutral, or con), and location. Multiple steps were taken to determine and verify the race and ethnicity of each tweet’s
Chapter 1

The user’s profile photo and description, if available, could be effective aids to determine their race. Users of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook tend to share personal information, such as photos, that can help determine their race, ethnicity, and gender. Those who use their first and last name in their Twitter handle help to verify this information as well. For those who use a non-name Twitter handle, a user’s Twitter address, which is visible next to their Twitter handle, may contain their surname—another clue to their race and ethnicity. The list on the “Following” tab may also help shed light on these three factors.

Tweets for the respective hashtags were also coded for their stances on the case studies. Concerning the former NYPD officer Peter Liang trial, tweets were coded as “For Liang,” “Against Liang,” or “Neutral.” The same was done for California Senate Constitutional Amendment 5 and California Assembly Bill 1726. The “Neutral” category was for tweets that either shared or retweeted news on the case study without any comment or did not advocate one side over another. Tweets that retweeted news with commentary were coded as either for or against the issue.

Finally, tweets were all geocoded for their location. Geocoding is the biggest challenge with tweets. For those tweeting from a desktop computer, the geocode can be located by the user’s IP address, a numeric code assigned to every stationary computer. A majority of tweets are from smartphone devices, whose locations are provided by longitude and latitude coordinates. The main problem with this involves getting Twitter to authorize access to this information, which it rarely does even for research purposes. Countries were coded for tweets outside of the United States to illuminate the transnational characteristics of the Asian American community.