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Politics and Media (JRNL 3305)

9 October 2022

**A New Generation of Voters in Pennsylvania: Young Asian Americans and Their
Politics**

“I remember in 2017 when my middle school principal, the day after the election, had to make a statement of: ‘We cannot support hateful ideas in the school, no matter what happened last night, this will always be like a safe place. It’s inconceivable to have to tell a bunch of fifth graders, after the election of the United States president, that this is a safe place for you,’” high school senior Anish Garimidi said, reflecting on Donald Trump’s inauguration speech in 2017.

At the time it may have seemed inconceivable that a public school would take such a stand against an elected official; however, it was a small fraction of what was to come for many students in this particularly politically polarized school district in suburban Pennsylvania. For Asian American students such as Garimidi and others, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the ways in which conversations around race and gender became central to political discourse, especially at the high school level as the Trump presidency continued.

While many parents and teachers strived to keep politics out of the classroom, as the intensity of political discourse ramped up across the nation it became increasingly difficult to avoid the personal nature of many of the hot-button issues that began to come to the forefront of the workplace, school and public culture as a whole.

“2017 started like a fever dream. When the Muslim ban actually happened, and then seeing the videos of what happened at the airports and then kids in cages. Every single day there was something different,” Garimidi said.

Meanwhile, Pennsylvania’s demographics rapidly shifted as many students matured into young adults and began to consider their voting choices. According to a poll conducted by APIA Vote (Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote), a “nonprofit dedicated to engaging, educating, and empowering Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities to strengthen their voices and create impact”, the number of Asians in PA has skyrocketed by 99% since 2000, leading many young voters to question why that increase in diversity is not reflected in the ballot.

“The US just gets more diverse and you need something that's going to accurately represent that,” high school senior Ahana Sinha said. “I can't think of any Asian American representatives. So there's a lot of issues, especially with immigration, and again, basic human rights. If you had more Asian Americans in those positions, you would get a better perspective on how it actually affects everyday people.”

However, the need to reflect the growing diversity in Pennsylvania and across the nation within legislative bodies is just one facet of politics in the state which makes the upcoming midterm election so crucial. Pennsylvania has historically been a swing state and frequently garners much attention, especially in tight electoral races due to its unpredictable political outcome.

As the 2022 midterm elections approach, there is growing anxiety amongst political candidates to capture the vote of a range of different groups in Pennsylvania. Some of these include voters of color as well as female and white voters.

A key race currently playing out in Pennsylvania will serve as a critical factor in who takes control of the Senate this upcoming midterm election. Senate candidates John Fetterman and Mehmet Oz have been at the center of much debate as their polling gap tightens closer to election day. Both candidates have employed a variety of strategies in order to unify as many voters as possible, however, the republican candidate Oz faces difficulty in balancing his party's divisive platform with the views of the electorate who may find issues such as abortion important enough to abandon their party.

Additionally, Asian Americans make up the fastest-growing group of eligible voters in the United States according to data collected by Pew Research center in 2020 putting candidates such as Oz at direct odds with the beliefs of the voting bloc that has historically favored left-leaning candidates. According to polling conducted by Tufts University, young people of color were especially influential in the 2020 election. In counties with large proportions of this voting bloc, president Biden received twice as many votes than in counties with lower proportions of young voters of color. According to the Tufts study, this demonstrates the importance of young Asian Americans and other persons of color as demographics that both candidates must appeal to in order to take the state.

When asked about issues that concern them, responses indicated a pull to the left's beliefs, many young Asian Americans list controversial topics such as abortion, marriage equality, climate change and gun control favoring the Democrats' platform in Pennsylvania amongst this specific demographic. Many young voters indicate there is no choice for them between the two parties.

“On the American political spectrum, I have always leaned heavily to the left. Being right-leaning isn't even (and never has been) an option for me on most issues because the

positions that the American right take are often positions that directly contradict facts of my life or identity, said Sophia Pan, a first-year student at Wellesley University who is registered to vote in Pennsylvania. “I have always found myself fundamentally disagreeing with candidates on the right over core values and priorities, so I've never been able to be not left-leaning.”

This perspective is an issue that could significantly hinder Republicans in Pennsylvania, who in their efforts to hold their base, potentially risk alienating younger Asian American voters on a host of issues.

“Growing up in a battleground state in a wealthy and primarily-white area was also a huge factor. I interacted with so many people who fit into majority demographics like, white or heterosexual, who held opinions that directly put my marginalized identities in jeopardy. It just happens that my identity makes it contradictory to hold certain political beliefs,” Pan said. “As a queer woman of color, it's hard to sympathize with policies that try to take my human rights away.”

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