

Support Strategies for Asian American Women Leaders in Massachusetts

by Lisa Wong, Research Fellow

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ABOUT LISA WONG

As the first Asian American female Mayor in the Commonwealth, Fitchburg Mayor Lisa Wong was re-elected to her third term in 2011. Lisa grew up with a cultural awareness that shaped her appreciation for community development and civic engagement. With a vision for a thriving community, Lisa stands up to the challenges of improving the economic and political position of Fitchburg and surrounding communities. Prior to being elected, Lisa served as Executive Director of the Women's Institute for Housing & Economic Development and the Fitchburg Redevelopment Authority. She holds a BA and an MA in Economics from Boston University.



PROJECT BACKGROUND

The election and appointment of Asian American women to positions in Massachusetts and on the federal level suggest that the face of public leadership is changing. Recent successes for Asian American women in electoral politics provide a unique opportunity to build the pipeline of Asian American women in Massachusetts politics. This research project aimed to identify strategies to increase the number of Asian American women elected to political office in Massachusetts.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In addition to drawing from personal experiences as an Asian American elected official, three Asian American female political leaders and three Asian American young women newly interested in politics were interviewed for this study.

The current political leaders included:

- a woman who has held office for fifteen years
- a woman who recently ran for office
- a woman engaged in training Asian American women in politics

The three young women interviewed were recent graduates of the Asian American Women's Political Initiative, a pioneering program that provides comprehensive training, mentorship and internships for college women in political participation, campaigning, and policymaking.

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

Lisa's initial hypothesis was that underrepresentation by Asian American women was related to a lack of resources to support Asian American women. Through this study, Lisa found that resources had in fact become available in the last five years but that cultural beliefs, socialization, and family expectations still represented barriers.

The findings from the interviews reveal that culture and family currently play a strong role in the decision making process of Asian American women considering active involvement in politics. On the other hand, exposure and training seem to be increasing Asian American women's involvement in politics.

Involvement of Asian Americans in Politics

Even though they comprise the fastest growing minority group in the United States, Asian Americans have relatively fewer role models and support networks in the political arena. The limited history and involvement of Asian Americans in politics - from voting participation rates to serving in elective office - have contributed to an overall cultural context that discourages Asian Americans from being active in politics. These factors have affected both how Asian American candidates are treated and how well they are able to navigate and move up the political pipeline.

Asian Americans may also face cultural expectations from the broader community that may deter them from pursuing and taking on leadership roles in politics. Such racialized and ethnic expectations may be compounded by gendered assumptions and stereotypes, making it particularly difficult for Asian American women in this field.

Given this historical context and cultural factors, it may be more likely that Asian Americans decide to enter politics to address a community need that requires their leadership rather than to fulfill a lifelong ambition.

Role of Culture

Cultural influence plays a key role by defining success for Asian Americans. As noted by study participants, success is tied to educational attainment as well as stability in careers that often require a terminal degree (such as law, medicine, engineering, and business). Success also includes providing support for family (including both children and parents). Careers in politics and public service are not seen as the best options to ensure economic stability needed to take care of elders or children.

Interestingly, fame and careers that draw public attention (as in the case of political achievement) do not appear to be culturally valued among the families of those interviewed.

As indicated earlier, gendered expectations in Asian American families can serve to discourage public leadership for Asian American women. Asian American women are expected to be quiet, respectful, and responsive to elders. Particular aspects of politics, such as being in the public eye, taking charge, being controversial, and perhaps being criticized in a public manner may not be seen as appropriate for Asian American women.

Significance of Family

Interviews also revealed a strong consideration of family in the determination of the women's interest in politics. Some were influenced to get involved with political activities because of parental involvement. Others struggled with the idea of pursuing politics because of real or perceived objections from family members. Such family expectations are linked to cultural expectations including definitions of success and the importance of women in caretaking roles.

It is also important to consider that there are obstacles related to family and cultural expectations for those who are already involved in politics — a topic that deserves additional research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this study suggest the need to:

- support programs such as the Asian American Women's Political Initiative to expose and train young Asian American women to become political leaders
- develop strong financial and support systems for women of color who decide to run for office
- expand discussions about the role of family and cultural expectations in how women of color decide to enter politics and throughout the process of moving up the pipeline of public leadership

FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

The analysis resulting from this research may be used:

- as the basis for further research on how self-identity influences leadership style, trends in diversity, leadership identity, and social policy
- in the development of strategic programs to support more women of color on the path to political leadership

IMPACT OF RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

By choosing politics as a professional field, Asian Americans can still be able to care for their families - an important part of their cultural upbringing. The initial resistance from family usually transforms into support and understanding, especially from parents who believed traditional careers such as medicine and law were the only ways to achieve success. As Lisa Wong reflected, "My own parents have come to understand that my success is measured by my fulfillment in the work that I do as Mayor."

Using one's voice and position to be able to advocate for change and for assistance to one's community is needed, and will only be strengthened by increasing Asian American participation in politics.

Despite both personal and cultural hesitations about being in politics, the Asian American community has responded very positively. The significance of more Asian American women running for and being elected in Massachusetts cannot be underestimated.

The research process itself has been a truly valuable one. By connecting with so many new people, Lisa now has a greater support network both personally and professionally, especially with the four other Research Fellows. The Fellows continue to share their experiences in and out of politics and to seek ways to build the pipeline both together and separately.

About the Pathways to Political Leadership for Women of Color Project

This project is the result of an innovative research partnership between UMass Boston's Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy and the Women's Pipeline for Change. Five women of color active in Massachusetts politics became community researchers to identify barriers, opportunities, and resources of interest to women of color who navigate the pipeline toward elective and appointive office or other public leadership positions. In addition to this project brief, other resources produced by Research Fellow Lisa Wong may be found on the project website.

Visit www.umb.edu/pipeline

for Resources That Inspire, Inform, and Support Public Leadership for Women of Color



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