Spillover Racism: Explain Discrimination against Asian Americans

Abstract

How do we understand the increasing anti-Asian racism in recent years? I argue that the discrimination against Asian American results from the perception of threats from Asian countries. Americans regard these Asian citizens as a symbol of foreign threats and a possible approach through which foreign threats reach them. Therefore, they transfer their negative attitude toward Asian countries to Asian Americans. I call this type of racism spillover racism. Using data from ANES 2020, the study provides evidence for the existence of spillover racism. Results indicate that Americans who perceive more threats from Asian countries are more likely to have negative attitudes towards Asian Americans, preferring fewer Asian American politicians and believing that they have too much influence in American politics, despite their underrepresentation in U.S. politics. This research note provides insight into the mechanism underlying the rise in discrimination against Asian Americans during the Covid-19 outbreak and suggests that the increasing tension between China and the U.S. will lead to further discrimination against Asian Americans. The findings highlight the importance of understanding the impact of foreign policy and international relations on domestic racial attitudes and discrimination.

Spillover Racism: Explain Discrimination against Asian Americans

Introduction

Current studies on racism primarily focus on discrimination against Black Americans and Latinos, but Pew Research Center reports that almost 90% of Asian Americans believe that "there is a lot/some discrimination against Asian Americans in our society" (Center, 2021). In this research note, I present a theory to explain the discrimination against Asian Americans, which I refer to as "spillover racism."

Race plays a critical role in American politics and receives significant attention from social scientists who develop increasingly nuanced theories and models to understand the causes and consequences of racism (Enos, 2016; Kinder & Sears, 1981; Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999; Tesler, 2013). However, most of these theories and models are based on racism against Black Americans and Latinos, largely overlooking the discrimination against Asian Americans (Gay, 2004; Kam & Burge, 2018; Kinder & Sears, 1981; Maltby, 2017). Since different ethnic groups may experience racism for different reasons, focusing only on Black Americans and Latinos limits our understanding of racism in the U.S. This research note aims to fill this gap in the literature by examining the discrimination against Asian Americans, a fast-growing minority group in the U.S., and developing a theory to explain why they face racism.

I argue that discrimination against Asian Americans stems from the public's perception of threats from Asian countries. In modern U.S. history, there have been many instances of discrimination, blame, and even lynching of Asian Americans due to hatred towards Asian countries (Brockell, 2021). My theory is derived from these historical examples and posits that Americans feel threatened by Asian countries, leading to discrimination against Asian Americans. My empirical analysis reveals that when Americans perceive more significant threats from Asian countries, they become less favorable toward Asian Americans and more likely to deny the under-representation of Asian Americans in U.S. politics.

This research note makes a significant contribution to the study of racism, which has historically lacked research on Asian Americans despite their rapid population growth. While studies on racism have traditionally focused on Black Americans and Latinos, who are the two largest minority groups in the U.S., this research note sheds light on the unique experiences of

Asian Americans and provides a new way to understand why they face racism and how this form of racism differs from racism against other minorities. Moreover, this research note provides a timely review of anti-Asian racism following the Covid-19 outbreak and the U.S.-China trade war. The findings underscore the importance of comprehending the impact of foreign policy and international relations on domestic racial attitudes and discrimination. My theory suggests that as tensions between the U.S. and China continue to escalate, anti-Asian racism is also likely to increase.

The origins of racism and Spillover racism

Current research identifies two causes of racism. The first cause is the perception of racial threat (the racial threat theory). Whites discriminate against minorities because they feel threatened by competition for political and economic benefits(Carsey, 1995; Enos, 2016; Hopkins, 2010; Key & Heard, 1949; Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999; Oliver, 2010; Spence & McClerking, 2010). This competition provokes whites' hostility toward minorities and reflects conflicts of private interests(Bobo, 1983; Giles & Buckner, 1993; Spence & McClerking, 2010; Voss, 1996). The second cause is racist socialization (Sociocultural learning theory), which is prejudice learned from an early age that becomes a part of one's belief system (). Whites learn prejudiced ideas from schools, communities, and families, which make them racists(Kinder & Sears, 1981).

In this paper, I propose the concept of "spillover racism" to describe a type of discrimination against minorities in the United States that results from the perception of threat from the countries of origin of these minorities. When Americans perceive a threat from a foreign country, this feeling spills over to immigrants from that country and their descendants. Consequently, Americans see these immigrants as a threat and exhibit racism against them. For instance, when Americans perceive China as a threat to the United States, this perception leads them to discriminate against Chinese Americans. Spillover racism is established with two steps: 1) Americans perceive threats from a country, and 2) they connect these threats with people immigrants from the country.

Americans perceive a threat from a foreign country when it undermines or threatens the

security, economic benefits, or power of the United State. A case in point is the 1970s and 1980s when Americans saw Japan as their biggest threat due to the domination of Japanese goods, especially automobiles, in the American market that endangered millions of jobs in the US. Similarly, as China grows more influential and entangled in political and economic conflicts with the United States, many Americans view China as a threat.

Then, Americans connect the feeling of threat to minorities from these countries and their descendants. There are two ways to establish this connection. First, Americans see minorities as symbols of their countries of origin. Although these minorities might not directly threaten the lives of Americans, they represent the perceived threat, leading to discrimination against them. Historically, people and goods from a country have been seen as symbols of the country. When the U.S. has conflicts with a country, people and goods from the country will become the target of discrimination. For example, in the 1980s, trade conflicts between Japan and the U.S. threatened millions of jobs in the state (Brock, 1989; Iino, 1994). Asian Americans became the target for people to release anger. In Detroit, where the success of Japanese car manufacturers destroyed the local economy, an Asian American, Vincent Chin, was beaten to death by two automobile workers who believed Chin was Japanese. According to testimony, one worker had lost his job at Chrysler and shouted at Chin: "It is because of you little motherf***ers that we are out of work" (Yoo, 2021). Of course, Vincent Chin, a young data engineer, can not make the worker lose his job, but he was a symbol of Japan, a country that caused economic hardship for the worker. The two workers transferred their feeling of threat from Japan to Chin, a perceived symbol of Japan, and released their anger towards the symbol, which finally caused the tragedy of Vincent Chin.

Second, Americans also regard minorities as a possible way through which foreign countries can influence the U.S. They worry that the threat from foreign countries might influence them through immigrants from these countries. Racism towards Asian Americans spurred by COVID-19 shows how this approach works. In 2019, a global pandemic broke out in Wuhan, China. The pandemic quickly spread to the U.S. and caused nearly 1 million deaths within two years. From the very beginning of the outbreak, Asian Americans were blamed for spreading the disease, despite evidence suggesting that most American cases were tracked

back to Europe (Cho, Li, Cannon, Lopez, & Song, 2021; Gover, Harper, & Langton, 2020).

On April 28th, 2020, NBC News reported that 30% of Americans have personally witnessed

people blaming Asian Americans for the pandemic (Tessler, Choi, & Kao, 2020). Researchers

confirmed that the prejudice against Asian Americans is associated with the belief that Asian

Americans should take responsibility for the spread of the pandemic (Cho et al., 2021).

In a nutshell, the whole process of spillover racism is described as follows. First,

Americans detect a threat from a foreign country. This threat can be political, military,

economic, or so on. Then Americans connect the foreign country to some minorities in the

U.S. In most cases, they are immigrants from the country and their descendants. The

connection leads Americans to feel that these minorities threaten their life because they think

the minorities represent the foreign country or transmit the threat from the foreign country.

Accordingly, Americans discriminate against these threatening minorities.

Although my argument and racial threat theory both suggest that discrimination arises

from the perception of threat from minorities, the two theories have a significant difference.

According to racial threat theory, minorities themselves pose a threat by competing with

dominant groups for resources and opportunities. Therefore, the presence of minorities alone

can trigger discrimination. In contrast, spillover racism suggests that the threat is caused by

foreign countries, and Americans believe that minorities represent the threat posed by those

foreign countries. Consequently, whether or not minorities are present in the daily life of

Americans and pose a threat is not as relevant. For example, the perception of China as a

threat to the U.S. can negatively impact attitudes toward Chinese Americans, regardless of

whether Americans interact with them in their daily lives or not.

Spillover racism is particularly helpful in understanding discrimination against Asian

Americans because many Asian countries were and are competitors or threats to the U.S.

Historically, many Asian countries, such as Japan and Vietnam, were American enemies.

Today, China has been viewed as the major American competitor and the biggest threat to the

free world. Compared with Latinos and Blacks, the motherlands of Asian Americans have

more conflicts with America and pose more threats to America. This unique motherland

background, as spillover racism argues, influences the discrimination against Asian

Americans.

Furthermore, Asian Americans suffer "perpetual foreigners" prejudice, strengthening their connection with their countries of origin. "Perpetual foreigner" prejudice is the belief that Asian Americans are inherently foreign and their connection with their countries of origin is unbreakable (). Following this belief, Asian Americans will represent the interest of their countries of origin and should take responsibility for what these countries do. The prejudice explains why we can not find spillover racism among other minorities, even if their countries of origin pose threats to the U.S. For example, Russia is a primary U.S. security threat, but Americans barely blame Russian Americans for Russian threats because Americans do not connect Russian Americans with threats from Russia.

It is worth mentioning that Americans cannot precisely identify the country of origin of Asian Americans. They can distinguish Asian Americans from whites, blacks, and Latinos, but they cannot identify Japanese Americans from Chinese Americans. Therefore, when one Asian country threatens the U.S., all Asian Americans will experience spillover racism. For example, Asian Americans, not only Chinese Americans, become the target of discrimination during the COVID-19 outbreak, despite China being the origin of the virus.

Moreover, spillover racism might also influence other minorities. Whenever a country becomes a threat to the U.S., minorities from the country might suffer from spillover racism. The extent of spillover racism depends on the strength of the connection between minorities and their countries of origin. I believe spillover racism can also partially explain the increasing anti-Muslim discrimination after the September 11th attacks. In this research note, I focus on spillover racism against Asian Americans, but I encourage other scholars to evaluate whether other minorities suffer spillover racism.

Following the argument presented above, I propose two testable hypotheses. First, individuals who perceive a threat from Asian countries are more likely to view Asian Americans as a threat to their way of life. This hypothesis tests whether the perception of a threat from Asian countries spills over to impact attitudes towards Asian Americans. If so, those who perceive Asian countries as a threat should also perceive Asian Americans as a threat. Second, I hypothesize that the level of discrimination against Asian Americans will

increase with the perceived level of threat from Asian countries. This hypothesis aims to examine whether the perception of a threat from Asian countries leads to an increase in discrimination against Asian Americans. In the upcoming sections, I will use a nationally representative survey to test my theoretical framework.

Data and Method

To evaluate the spillover racism theory, the American National Election Survey 2020 (ANES 2020) was used. This survey, a collaboration between Stanford University and the University of Michigan, provides high-quality national representative data on voting, public opinion, and political participation. ANES 2020 is the first survey that includes both the perception of foreign country threats to the U.S. and the perception of Asian Americans.

The first hypothesis is that the perception of threats from Asian countries makes people feel that Asian Americans threaten their way of life. The independent variable is the perception of threats from Asian countries (Asian threat). This variable is constructed from two questions: 'how much is China a threat to the United States?' and 'how much is Japan a threat to the United States?' The answers to both questions scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is 'Not at all' and 5 is 'A great deal'. The answer to both questions is added to create a scale ranging from 2 to 10. Other Asian countries were not included because ANES did not ask relative questions.

The dependent variable of the first hypothesis is the feeling of threat from Asian Americans. ANES did not ask about the feeling of threat directly, so I used two proxies for it. The first proxy is the question: "In American life and politics, do Asian Americans have too much, about the right amount of, or too little influence?" Respondents select one of the three choices, and the variable is coded as a categorical variable with "Just about the right amount of influence" as the baseline. When people perceive threats from minorities, they want the minorities to have less influence on their life. Consequently, people will feel that threatening minorities have too much influence on their life. The second proxy is the question: "how important is it that more Asians be elected to political office?" The answer to this question is a 1 to 5 scale where 1 is "not at all important" and 5 is "extremely important". This proxy can

measure the perception of threats from Asian Americans because people want fewer politicians from threatening minorities (Enos, 2016; Key & Heard, 1949).

The two proxies were used separately to measure the feeling of threat from Asian Americans. In the first model, "In American life and politics, do Asian Americans have too much, about the right amount of, or too little influence?" was used as the dependent variable, and a multi-nomial regression was run. In the second model, whether respondents want more Asian politicians was used as the dependent variable, and an ordered logistics regression was run. Together, the two models test hypothesis one.

The third model examines the second hypothesis that discrimination against Asian Americans increases with the perception of more threats from Asian countries. The independent variable is the perception of threats from Asian countries. The dependent variable is discrimination against Asian Americans. However, the discrimination against Asian Americans has been overlooked for a very long time, and ANES has not had a measurement of discrimination against them. Therefore, I use the feeling thermometer for Asian Americans as an approximated measurement of discrimination against Asian Americans. The validation of this measurement relies on the assumption that people who discriminate against Asian Americans are more likely to feel unfavorable toward Asian Americans. The feeling thermometer for Asian Americans is a 0 to 100 scale measurement, with a higher value indicating more favorable toward Asian Americans. The variable was normalized and multiplied by 100 so that the regression coefficients imply the percentage of change in the dependent variable with a unit change of independent variables.

The models used in this study control for various demographic and political factors, including age, gender, income, education level, race, party identity, political interest, political knowledge, and ideology preference. Additionally, xenophobia is considered a confounding variable for all three models. Xenophobia is defined as "an extreme dislike or fear of foreigners, their customs, their religions, etc" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Individuals with strong xenophobia may perceive foreign countries as threats to their own and engage in discriminatory behaviors towards people of foreign origin, including Asian Americans(Rzepnikowska, 2019; Wimmer, 1997). Therefore, xenophobia might cause the

perception of threats from Asian countries and discrimination against Asian Americans. To account for this, I introduce several variables to control xenophobia. The first is the perception of threats from non-Asian countries, including Germany, Russia, and Mexico. Strongly xenophobic people may feel threatened by all foreign countries, so controlling threats from non-Asian countries can help control for xenophobia. The second variable is the level of anti-immigrant sentiment, which is measured using a five-item question in the ANES 2020 survey that asks respondents to what extent they agree that immigrants harm American culture, ranging from "Agree strongly" to "Disagree strongly."

Results

Table one displays the result of all three models. The table only reports the coefficients of two independent variables and constant; the full result can be found in Appendix A1. Model 1 and Model 2 examine the first hypothesis that perceiving threats from Asian countries leads to perceiving threats from Asian Americans, and the results support this hypothesis. Model 1 shows that when Americans perceive Asian countries as a threat to the US, they are more likely to feel that Asian Americans have too much political influence in American politics. The coefficient of Asian Threats is 0.2156, indicating that a one-unit increase in Asian threats makes people 1.24 times more likely to feel that Asian Americans have too much influence than to feel Asian Americans have about the right amount of influence when other factors are held constant. Model 2 demonstrates that a stronger feeling of threats from Asian countries reduces the likelihood of accepting more Asian politicians, with the coefficient for Asian threats being -0.136. This means that an increase in Asian threats decreases the odds of wanting more Asian politicians by 13.6 percent. Model 3 evaluates the second hypothesis that discrimination against Asian Americans increases with the perception of more threats from Asian countries. The result indicates that as the score for Asian threats increases from the minimum to the maximum, the feeling thermometer for Asian Americans decreases by 14.5 percent. This suggests that when Americans perceive greater threats from countries such as China and Japan, they are more likely to alienate Asian Americans.

Conclusion

This study aims to explain anti-Asian racism, positing that Americans discriminate against Asian Americans because they perceive threats from Asian countries. The feeling of threat from Asian countries causes Americans to view Asian Americans as a potential threat, leading to what I term "spillover racism". In this type of racism, Americans transfer their negative feelings about Asian countries onto Asian Americans, seeing them as symbols of foreign influence in their life or r a possible way foreign countries influence their life.

Empirical analysis supports my argument. ANES 2020 data shows that when Americans perceive more threats from Asian countries, they are more likely to believe that Asian Americans have too much influence in American life and politics, and less likely to support Asian American politicians. Furthermore, perceiving threats from Asian countries is associated with feeling less positive toward Asian Americans, indicating that this type of racism can create a divide between Asian Americans and the rest of society.

The research highlights the link between racism and the history of a minority group. Asian Americans are often subjected to the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype, which assumes that they are not true Americans and that their connection to their countries of origin is unbreakable. This stereotype builds a connection between threats from Asian countries and Asian Americans, contributing to the phenomenon of spillover racism. The results also underscore the significance of understanding how foreign policy and international relations can affect domestic racial attitudes and discrimination. According to my theory, if the tensions between the U.S. and China continue to rise, it is probable that anti-Asian racism will also increase.

Based on these findings, this study calls for further research on racism against non-black, non-Latino minorities. While existing studies overwhelmingly focus on racism against Latinos and African Americans, these may not fully capture the reasons behind discrimination against other minorities, such as Asian Americans. It is, therefore, essential to investigate the unique factors that contribute to racism against each minority group to better understand and address this issue.

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Table 1

Regression Models Testing Spillover Racism

	Dependent variable:			
	Asian Influence		Asian	Asia
	Too much	Not enough	Politicians	thermometer
	Model 1		Model 2	Model 3
Asia threat	0.216***	−0.026	−0.136***	−1.815***
	(0.053)	(0.021)	(0.017)	(0.274)
Anti-imigrants	0.277***	−0.380***	−0.371***	−3.716***
	(0.072)	(0.029)	(0.024)	(0.372)
Constant	−3.342***	1.581***		83.095***
	(0.624)	(0.215)		(2.677)
Observations	7,184	7,184	7,184	3,389
R^2				0.136
Adjusted R^2				0.131

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix

Table A1

Regression Models Testing Spillover Racism

	Dependent variable:			
	Asian Influence		Asian Politicians	Asia thermometer
	Too much	Not enough		
	Model 1		Model 2	Model 3
Asia threats	0.216***	−0.026	−0.136***	−1.815***
	(0.053)	(0.021)	(0.017)	(0.274)
Germany threats	0.157*	−0.090**	0.115***	−0.377
	(0.086)	(0.037)	(0.030)	(0.458)
Mexico threats	0.145*	−0.043	−0.097***	−0.151
	(0.077)	(0.033)	(0.027)	(0.417)
Russia threats	−0.354***	0.171***	0.219***	1.022***
	(0.081)	(0.028)	(0.023)	(0.357)
Anti-imigrants	0.277***	−0.380***	−0.371***	−3.716***
	(0.072)	(0.029)	(0.024)	(0.372)
Age	0.004	−0.006***	−0.008***	−0.007
	(0.005)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.022)
Female	−0.00003	0.213***	0.359***	0.963
	(0.153)	(0.055)	(0.045)	(0.705)
Income	0.002	0.012**	−0.008**	−0.180***
	(0.012)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.061)
Education	−0.279***	0.047*	0.106***	1.668***
	(0.080)	(0.027)	(0.022)	(0.344)

Race

   with white as the reference group

Black, non-Hispanic	0.650***	0.687***	0.679***	−3.184***
	(0.233)	(0.093)	(0.076)	(1.153)
Hispanic	0.464**	0.726***	1.130***	0.669
	(0.232)	(0.085)	(0.070)	(1.092)
Asian or Pacific Islander	−0.020	0.675***	0.376***	8.286***
	(0.595)	(0.141)	(0.118)	(1.852)
Native American/other race	0.055	0.198	0.235	−0.855
	(0.518)	(0.191)	(0.159)	(2.375)
Multiple races	0.666*	0.137	0.010	4.047**
	(0.353)	(0.140)	(0.112)	(1.876)

Party

  with Democratic as the reference group

Republican	0.195	0.143**	0.443***	3.019***
	(0.213)	(0.071)	(0.058)	(0.906)
Other Parties	−0.306	−0.587***	−0.205***	1.695*
	(0.198)	(0.074)	(0.061)	(0.980)
Political knowledge	−0.125*	−0.008	−0.010	0.659**
	(0.075)	(0.026)	(0.021)	(0.336)
Ideology	−0.068	−0.248***	−0.277***	0.005
	(0.071)	(0.024)	(0.020)	(0.307)
Political Interest	−0.019	−0.038	−0.184***	−1.738***
	(0.090)	(0.034)	(0.028)	(0.442)
Constant	−3.342***	1.581***		83.095***
	(0.624)	(0.215)		(2.677)
Observations	7,184	7,184	7,184	3,389
R^2				0.136
Adjusted R^2				0.131

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01