



How Do California's Asian Americans View U.S. Foreign Policy?

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, U.S. foreign policy has engineered a reorientation toward Asia. Whether it is referred to as a “[pivot](#),” “[tilt](#),” or “[rebalance](#),” successive U.S. administrations have made it clear, through public statements and policy documents, that they intend to place Asia at the heart of U.S. foreign policy strategy in the twenty-first century.

Recent initiatives from Joe Biden’s current administration have continued, and indeed accelerated, this trend. In February 2022, the White House released its [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#)—a document that outlines its attempts to strengthen America’s position in “every corner of the region, from Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, to South Asia and Oceania, including the Pacific Islands.” Through initiatives such as [AUKUS](#) (a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and the [Quad](#), a strategic partnership between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, it has attempted to reinforce its words through tangible deeds.

While there are multiple objectives behind this reorientation, arguably the most important is the desire of the United States to contain the economic, political, and security challenges posed by a rising China. Indeed, Democrats and Republicans in Washington, who rarely agree on anything, appear to share a [more hawkish](#) position on China than in years past.

America’s dedication to the Asian theater and the rising political temperature in Washington over U.S.-China relations raise intriguing questions about how Asian Americans perceive these changes. How important is foreign policy in the minds of Asian Americans when they select their leaders? To what extent is the United States successfully managing its relations with Asia? Is there popular support for the new “get tough” consensus on China? And how, if at all, is foreign policy dividing—rather than uniting—the Asian diaspora community in America?

This article attempts to answer these and other pertinent questions about Asian Americans’ foreign policy views in three ways. First, it investigates the salience of foreign



policy as an electoral priority for Asian Americans. Second, it examines respondents' views on the management of U.S. foreign policy toward Asia, with a special focus on how the United States should approach China's rise. Third, it explores the impacts that foreign policy is having on the diaspora and the extent to which it is emerging as a divisive force.

Like the other articles in the [series](#), this article draws on a 2022 online survey of 1,000 California-based Asian Americans conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in partnership with the data and analytics firm YouGov. The sample includes respondents from twenty-one Asian-origin groups but excludes Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders.

This article is the fifth and final piece in the Carnegie series that explores the political and social preferences of Asian Americans in California. The [first](#) article explored the political preferences of the community in the run-up to the 2022 midterm elections, the [second](#) looked at their policy preferences, the [third](#) unpacked the nature of Asian American identity, and the [fourth](#) examined their patterns of civic and political engagement.

SURVEY DESIGN

The data analyzed here are based on an original online survey of 1,000 California-based Asian American residents. The survey was designed by scholars at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and conducted by polling firm YouGov between September 9 and September 26, 2022.

YouGov recruited respondents from its [proprietary panel](#) of nearly 2 million U.S. residents. Only adult respondents (ages eighteen and above) who are full-time residents of California and who belong to one of twenty-one Asian-origin groups were eligible to participate in the survey.¹

These twenty-one ethnic subgroups account for 97.4 percent of the Asian American and Pacific Islander population in California, according to [2020 U.S. Census](#)

[data](#).² The YouGov survey did not include respondents who principally identify as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. The survey was fielded in English (see the next section for additional discussion).

YouGov employs a sophisticated sample-matching procedure to ensure to the greatest extent possible that the respondent pool is representative of the Asian American community in California; the procedure uses data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 [American Community Survey](#) as a target sample frame. All the analyses in this study employ sampling weights to ensure representativeness. The overall margin of error for the sample is +/- 3 percent. This margin of error is calculated at the 95 percent confidence interval.

The survey instrument contains an extensive range of questions organized across six modules: basic demographics, identity and discrimination, politics, policy preferences, foreign policy, and civic and political life. Respondents were allowed to skip questions except for important demographic questions that determined the nature of other survey items.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

As [related research](#) has shown, surveys of Asian Americans have to contend with several thorny methodological challenges. While their numbers have increased, Asian Americans are still a distinct minority—even in California where they make up almost 16 percent of the population—making it difficult to recruit sufficiently large samples for surveys.

One major benefit of working with an extensive survey panel, such as the one maintained by YouGov, is that it provides access to large sample sizes that allow researchers to make reliable estimates about even relatively small populations of interest. However, online panels have a significant drawback: most online survey panels are conducted in English, and [around seven in ten eligible Asian-origin voters](#) report that they only speak English at home or speak the language “very well.”

Therefore, the survey results presented in this article cannot mechanically be extrapolated to the Asian American community in California at large. For instance, this survey’s sample includes a larger share of U.S. citizens than California’s Asian American population [as a whole](#). It is best to treat the survey findings as representative of the views of English-proficient Californians of Asian origin.

Despite this caveat, this survey serves as an important barometer given that, in the years to come, the characteristics of the Asian American population will increasingly resemble those of the sample studied here.

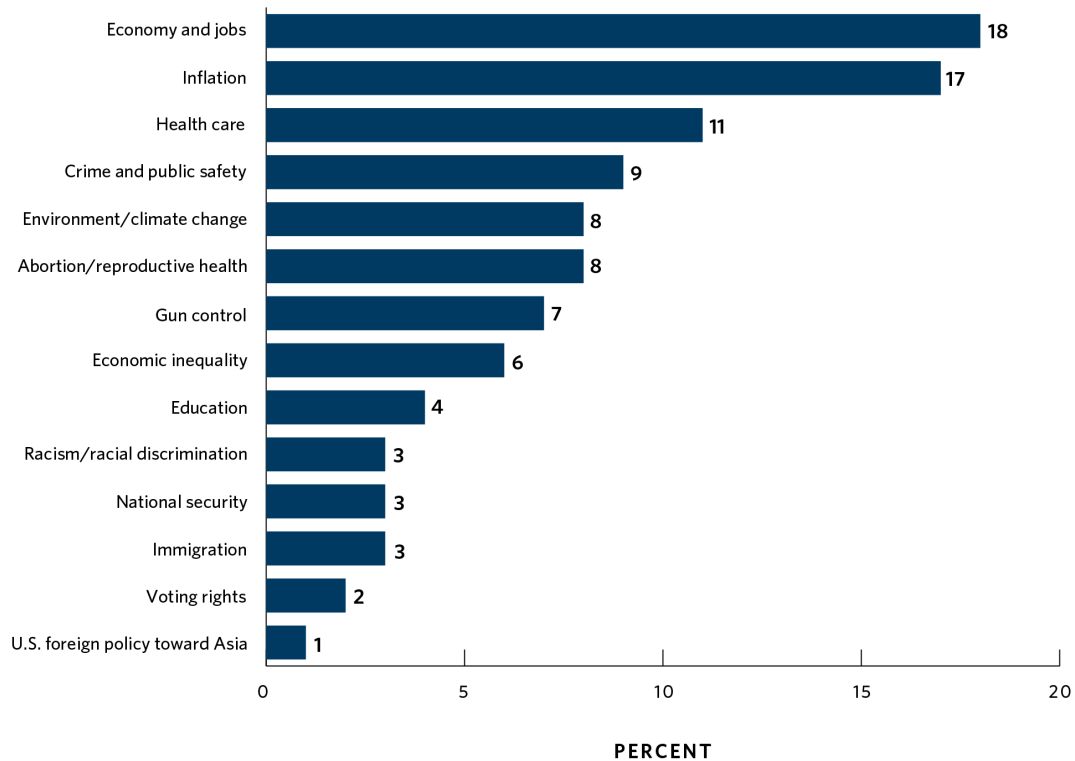
SALIENCE OF FOREIGN POLICY

The survey revealed that Asian American respondents in California had opinionated views on foreign policy but, by and large, issues of international affairs did not rate as priorities when it came to their voting decisions. The survey provided respondents with a list of fourteen policy issues and asked them to rate which of these were the most important issue for them personally in the 2022 midterm elections. The survey was fielded in the weeks before election day in November 2022.

The data suggest that respondents were clearly motivated, above all, by “kitchen table” issues (see figure 1). Respondents’ top two priorities related to their

FIGURE 1
Top Issues in the 2022 Election

Which of the following is the most important issue for you personally?



N= 1,000 California adult residents
 Source: 2022 Survey of Asian Americans in California

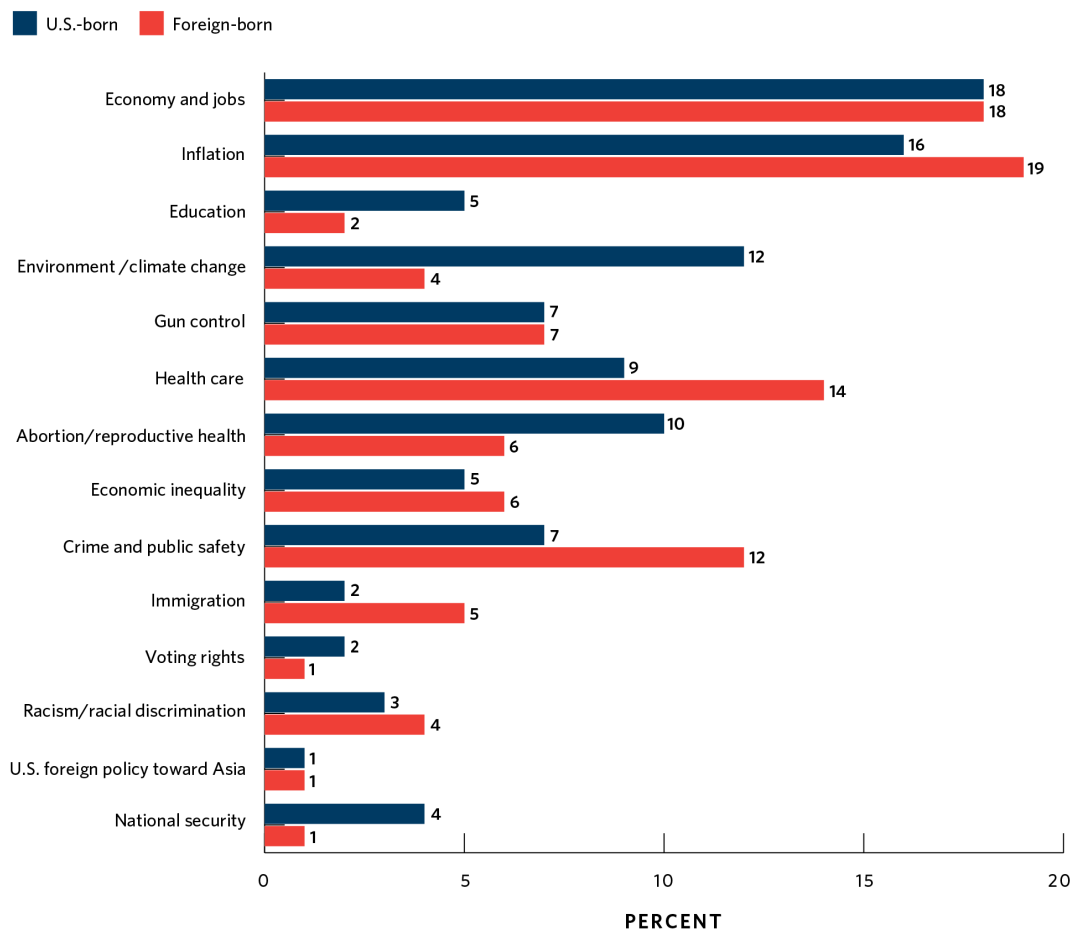
economic standing: 18 percent reported the economy and jobs were their topmost issue, while 17 percent chose inflation. Healthcare ranked third at 11 percent. The survey provided two responses related to foreign policy—national security and U.S. foreign policy to Asia—and both rated near the bottom of the priority list, at 3 and 1 percent respectively. Immigration, which arguably spans the divide between domestic and foreign policy, was also judged to be less of an election priority, with just 3 percent rating it as their top issue.

There is good reason to suspect that issue salience might vary based on respondents' place of birth. For instance, foreign-born respondents might have different priorities than their U.S.-born counterparts, which in turn could be a function of immigration, culture, or age, among other factors.

There were some similarities regardless of birthplace (see figure 2). Economic factors loomed large for both groups. Eighteen percent of respondents of both types listed the economy and jobs as their most important issue. Foreign-born respondents placed slightly more

FIGURE 2
Top Issues in the 2022 Election, by Place of Birth

Which of the following is the most important issue for you personally?



N= 1,000 California adult residents
Note: Numbers do not always equal 100 due to rounding.
Source: 2022 Survey of Asian Americans in California

emphasis on inflation (19 percent) than U.S.-born respondents (16 percent). But these two economic issues were topmost for both sets of respondents.

Nevertheless, there were also intriguing differences between U.S.-born and foreign-born respondents, the starkest being on climate change. Whereas 12 percent of U.S.-born respondents rated the environment and climate change as their top election issue, only 4 percent of their foreign-born counterparts did the same. Somewhat less striking, but still noteworthy, is the difference in emphasis placed on healthcare. This issue was more important to foreign-born respondents (14 percent) than those born in the United States (9 percent). Finally, the two groups differed on the issue of crime and public safety, a concern that [has spiked](#) in the Asian American community given the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes following the pandemic. Foreign-born respondents appeared to be more motivated

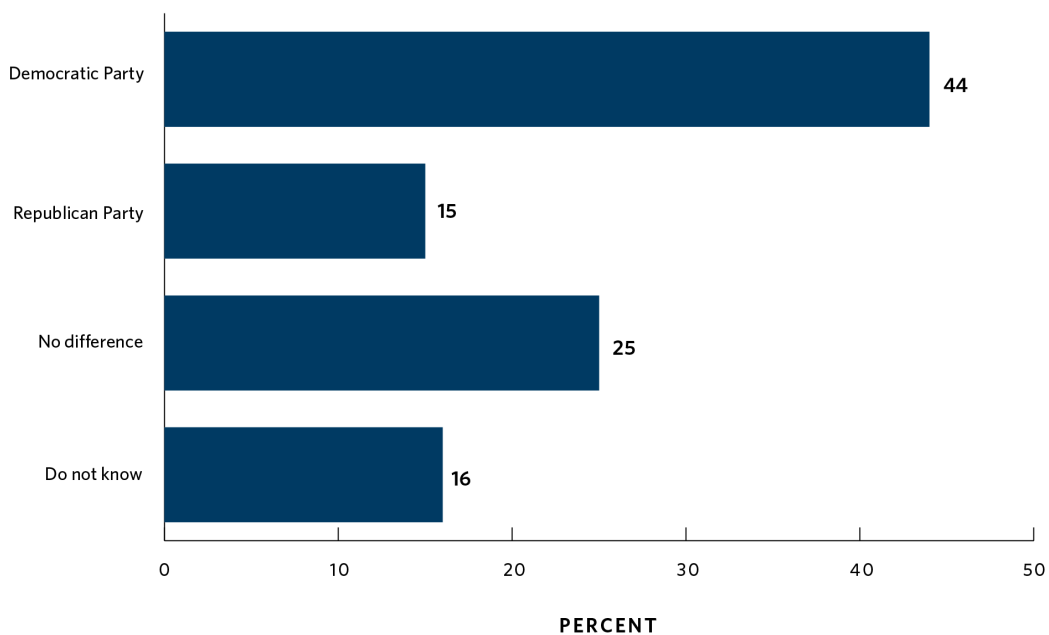
by this issue, with 12 percent of them stating it was their top election issue compared to 7 percent of U.S.-born respondents.

MANAGEMENT OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

The survey proceeded to ask respondents a range of questions about U.S. foreign policy toward Asia, including the issue of U.S.-China ties. To begin, the survey asked respondents about overall management of U.S. foreign relations toward Asia, specifically whether they believed one of the two major political parties did a better job steering U.S. relations. Forty-four percent of respondents affirmed that the Democratic Party did a better job of managing U.S. relations with Asian nations (see figure 3). This is nearly three times the share of respondents who reported that the Republican Party

FIGURE 3
Partisan Handling of U.S. Foreign Policy With Asia

When it comes to managing U.S. relations with countries towards Asia, which party do you think does a better job?



N= 1,000 California adult residents
Source: 2022 Survey of Asian Americans in California

(15 percent) was a better steward of relations with this part of the world. Twenty-five percent of respondents perceived no difference between the parties while 16 percent did not have an opinion.

These figures are roughly in line with the overall breakdown of partisan identity in the sample. An [earlier essay](#) in this series pointed out that 48 percent of respondents identified as Democrats, 17 percent as Republicans, and 27 percent as independents.

Views on China

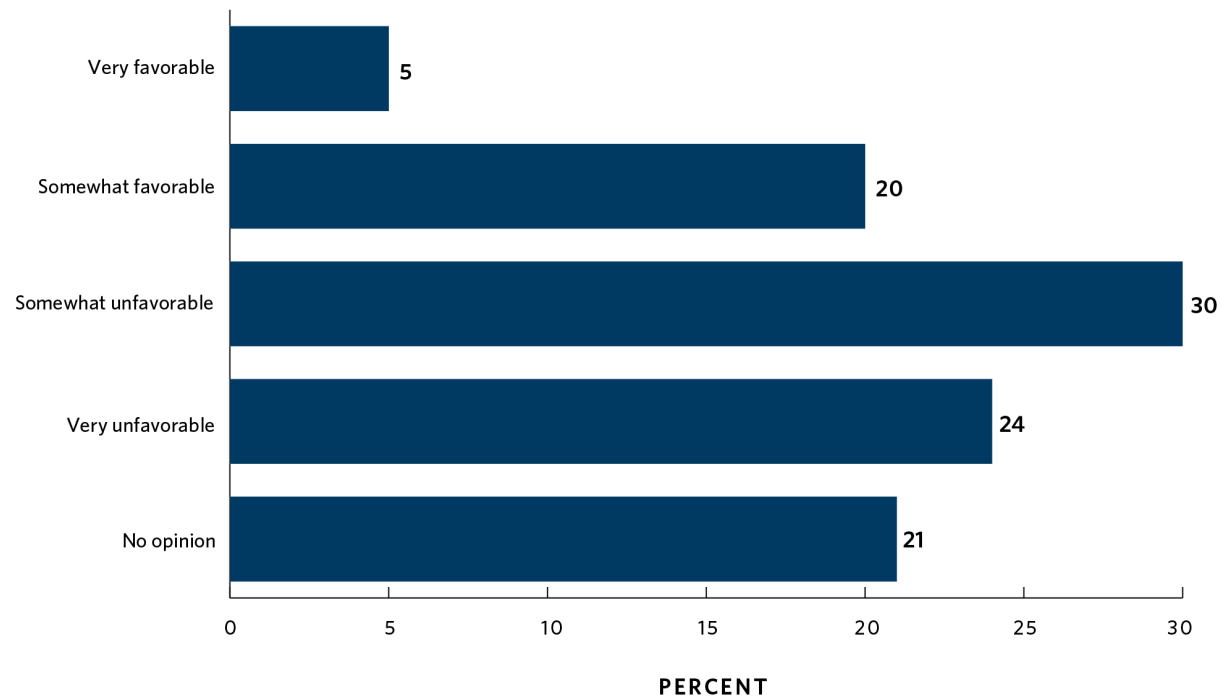
Given how much U.S. foreign policy is increasingly oriented around China's emergence, the survey probed

respondents' views on China and how the United States should engage with the rising power. The survey first asked respondents about their general views toward China by discerning whether they were favorably or unfavorably disposed toward the country (see figure 4).

Only 25 percent of Asian American respondents indicated that they held a favorable view of China, with 5 percent reporting they were very favorable and 20 percent reporting they were somewhat favorable. On the flip side, 30 percent of respondents stated they held somewhat unfavorable views on China and 24 percent reported they were very unfavorable. Taken together, 54 percent of survey respondents held unfavorable views of China. However, a significant share—21 percent—held no clear opinion on China, positive or negative.

FIGURE 4
China's Favorability

Which of the following best describes your opinion of China?



N= 1,000 California adult residents
Source: 2022 Survey of Asian Americans in California

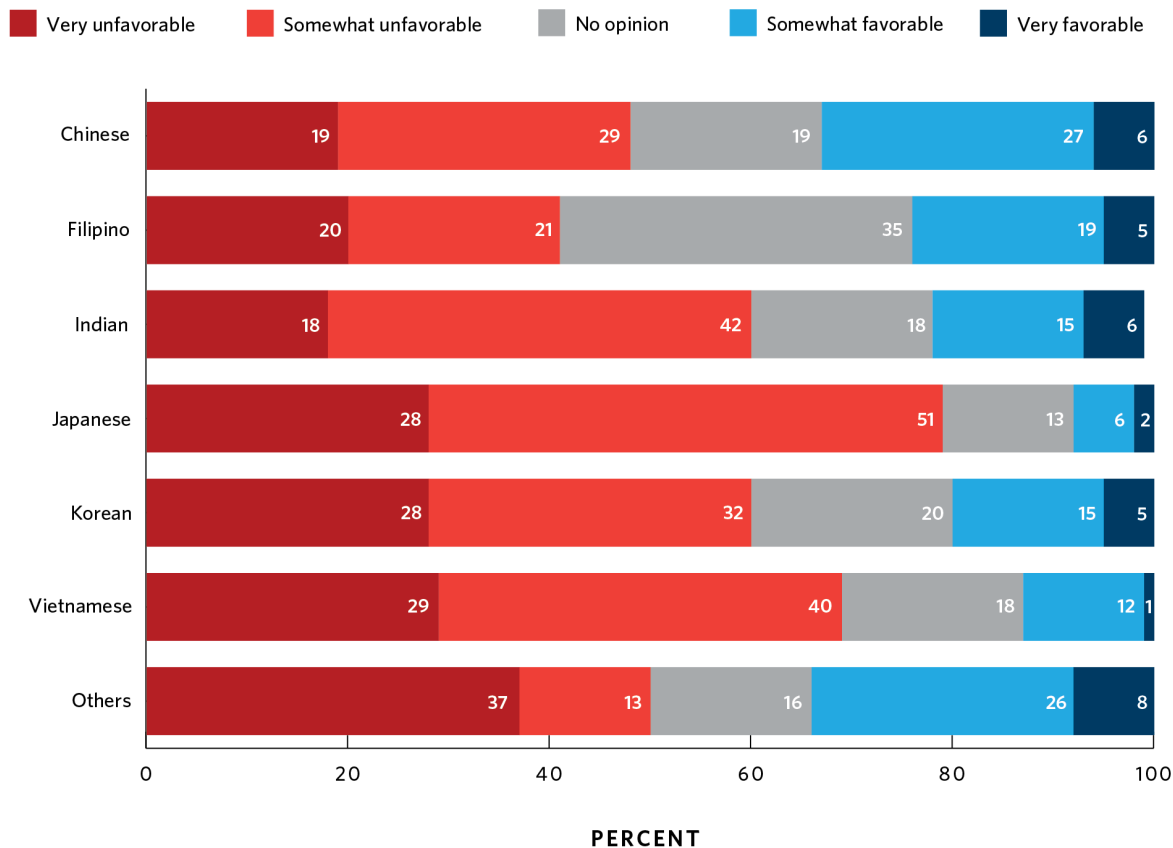
To probe one source of possible variation in respondents' views on China, views on China were broken down by respondents' ethnic group (see figure 5). Respondents from smaller ethnic/national origin groups—listed here under the “Other” label—were the most positively inclined, with 34 percent of them holding a favorable opinion of China. This is just a hair above Chinese respondents' own views, 33 percent of whom reported a favorable opinion. These data are intriguing as they suggest a clear majority of Chinese Americans view their ancestral country poorly. As expected, there is

sizeable variation across ethnic categories. For instance, Japanese respondents held the least favorable views of China, with just 8 percent reporting a favorable opinion. This was followed by Vietnamese (13 percent), Korean (20 percent), Indian (21 percent), and Filipino (24 percent) respondents.

Going beyond general views on China, the survey then explored respondents' views on U.S. foreign policy toward China. For starters, the survey asked about the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China's growing

FIGURE 5
China's Favorability, by Ethnic Group

Which of the following best describes your opinion of China?



N= 1,000 California adult residents

Note: Numbers do not always equal 100 due to rounding. “Others” refers to small ethnic/national origin groups in the sample.

Source: 2022 Survey of Asian Americans in California

influence. While American strategists and politicians are often reluctant to frame this strategy as an explicit attempt to contain and counter China's rise, this is very much the [subtext](#).

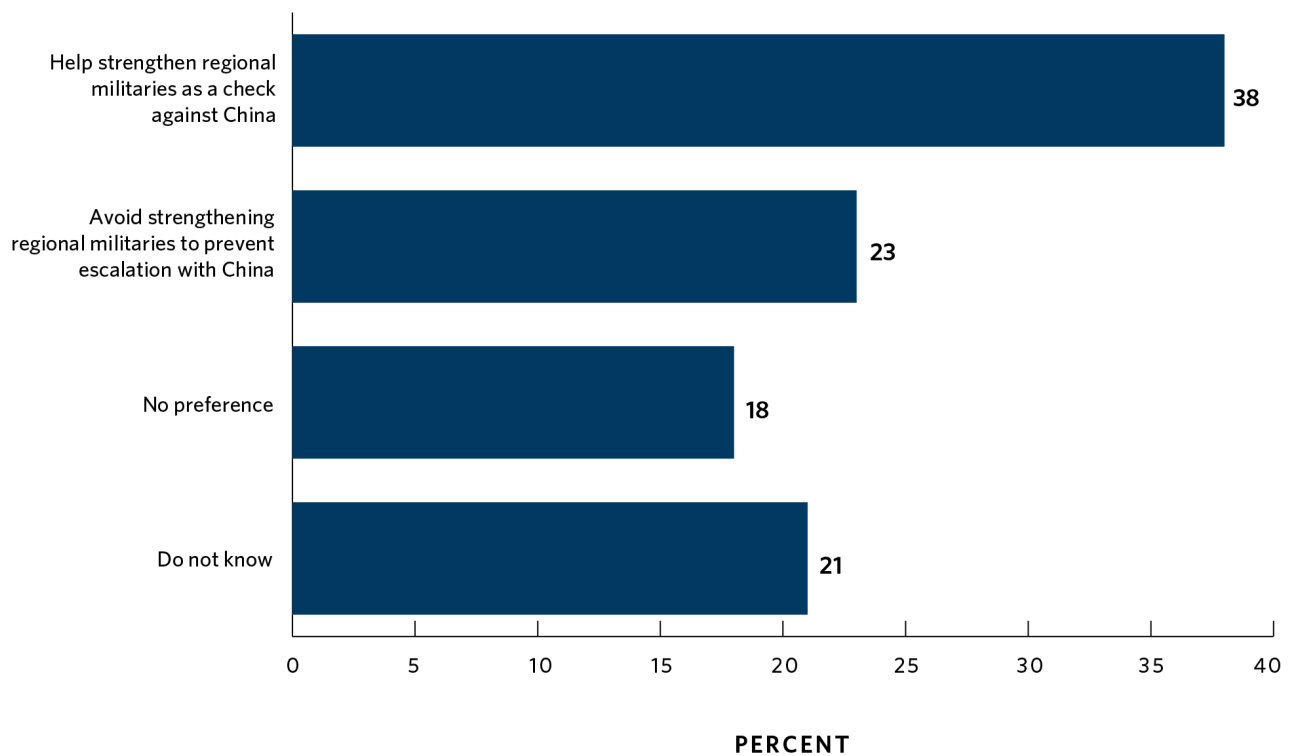
The survey asked respondents about their preferred U.S. posture toward Indo-Pacific nations. Specifically, it asked them whether the United States should help strengthen regional militaries as a check against China or whether it should refrain from strengthening regional military forces in order to prevent escalation with China (see figure 6). A plurality of respondents—38 percent—reported endorsing the more hawkish option, namely that the United States should strengthen regional

militaries to contain China. Twenty-three percent, nearly one in four respondents, reported they would prefer America avoid bolstering regional militaries to prevent escalation with China. A large share of respondents did not have strong views on this question. Eighteen percent reported having no preference between these two opposing positions while 21 percent answered “do not know.”

There is a widely held [perception](#), perhaps changing, that Republicans hold more hawkish views on China when compared to Democrats or independent-minded Americans. Figure 7 explores this conjecture by disaggregating the sample by respondents' self-reported

FIGURE 6
Managing China's Rise

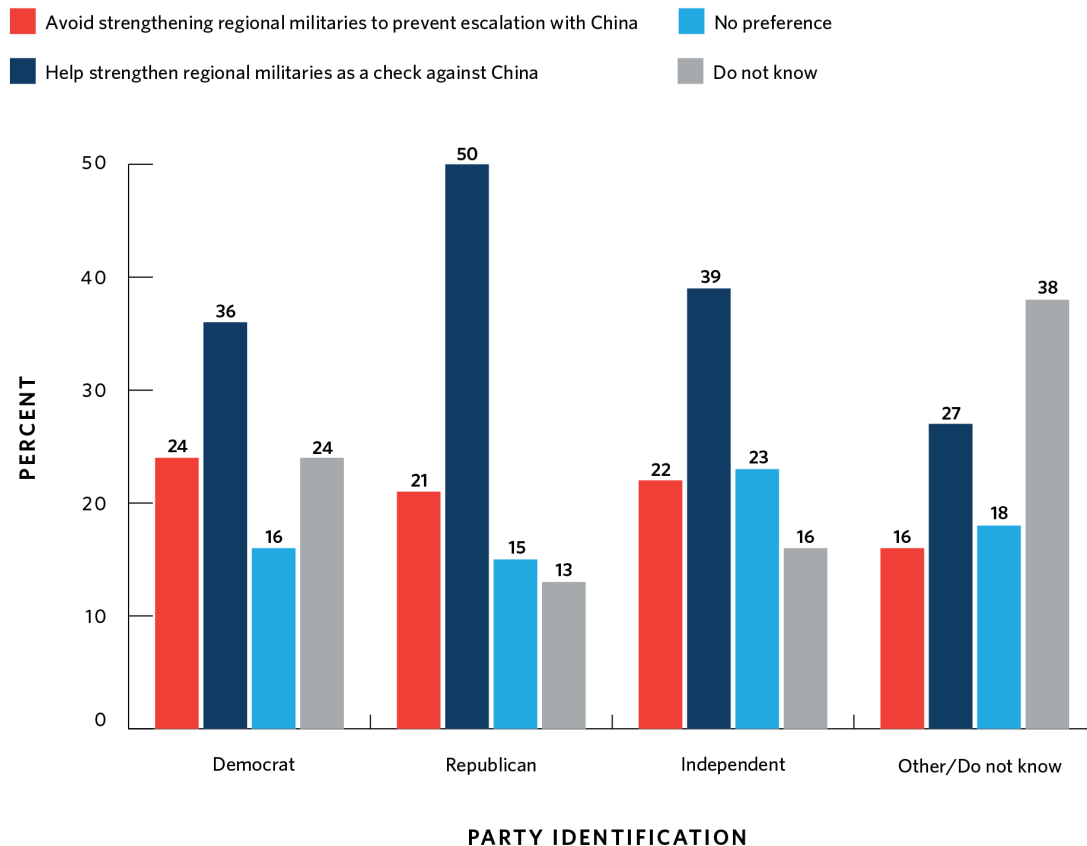
In recent years, the United States has formulated an Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China's growing influence. Do you think the United States should:



N= 1,000 California adult residents
Source: 2022 Survey of Asian Americans in California

FIGURE 7
Managing China's Rise, by Party Identity

In recent years, the United States has formulated an Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China's growing influence. Do you think the United States should:



N= 1,000 California adult residents
 Source: 2022 Survey of Asian Americans in California

partisan identity. The data support the stylized view about partisan differences on China—to a point. Thirty-six percent of Democrats supported strengthening regional militaries as a check on China compared to 50 percent of Republican respondents. Thirty-nine percent of independents shared this view.

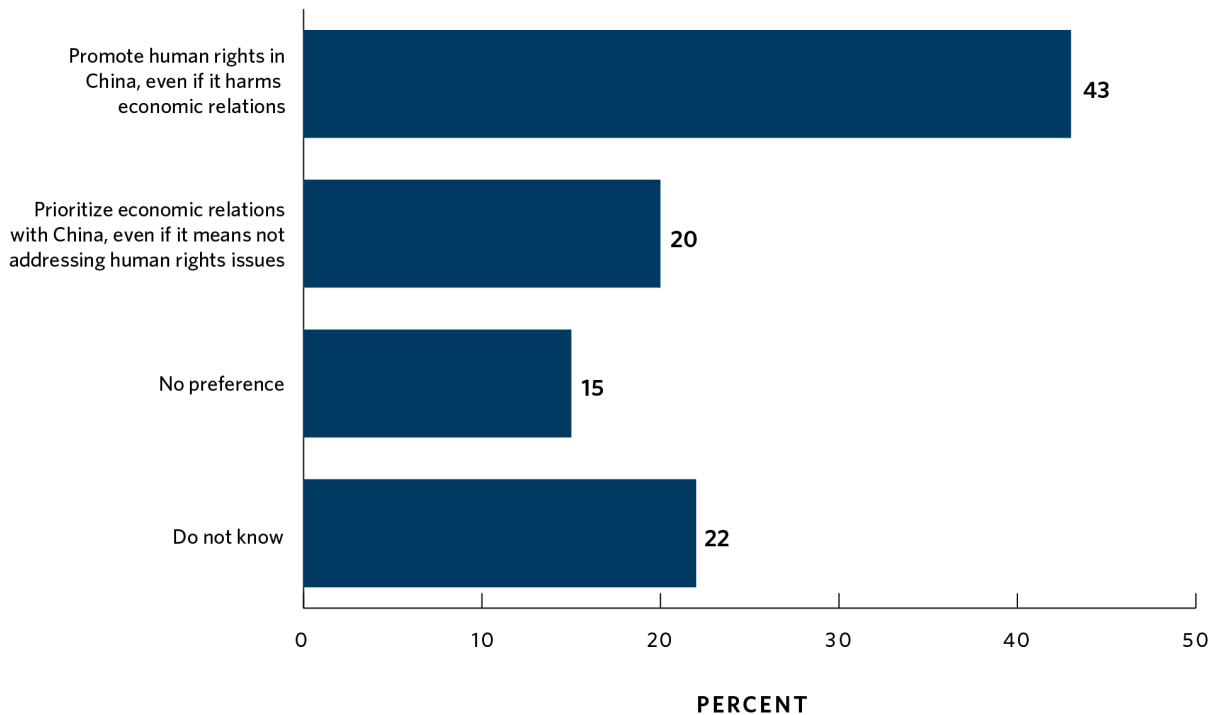
However, the data suggest that Democrats are not necessarily doves. Twenty-four percent of Democrats reported that the United States should avoid strengthening regional militaries to prevent escalation with China, which is just slightly higher than the share of Republicans (21 percent) and independents (22

percent) who reported the same. The big difference between Democrats and Republicans was the share of the former who expressed no opinion (24 percent versus 13 percent).

Finally, the survey asked respondents about the trade-off between economic engagement with China and the need for the United States to address human rights concerns in the country. Specifically, it asked whether the United States should promote human rights in China even if it hurts U.S.-China economic relations or whether it should prioritize economic ties with China even if it means foregoing human rights concerns (see

FIGURE 8
U.S.-China Priorities

When it comes to managing U.S. foreign policy toward China, the United States should:



N=999 California adult residents
Note: Calculation excludes respondents who skipped the question.
Source: 2022 Survey of Asian Americans in California

figure 8). Forty-three percent of respondents, a plurality, reported that the United States should promote human rights in China even if doing so comes at the expense of enhancing economic ties. In contrast, one in five respondents supported the converse—prioritizing economic relations over human rights. Fifteen percent of respondents expressed no preference between the two propositions and 22 percent have no opinion.

Unlike the prior question on strengthening regional militaries, there is little evidence of a partisan divide on the issue of human rights (figure 9). Nearly half of Democrats (47 percent) and Republicans (48 percent) reported prioritizing human rights in China over economic relations. However, this share dropped to

39 percent for independents and dipped even lower for those who did not express a partisan affiliation (19 percent). Roughly one in five respondents across partisan categories supported the notion that the United States should prioritize economic relations over human rights.

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY AND THE DIASPORA

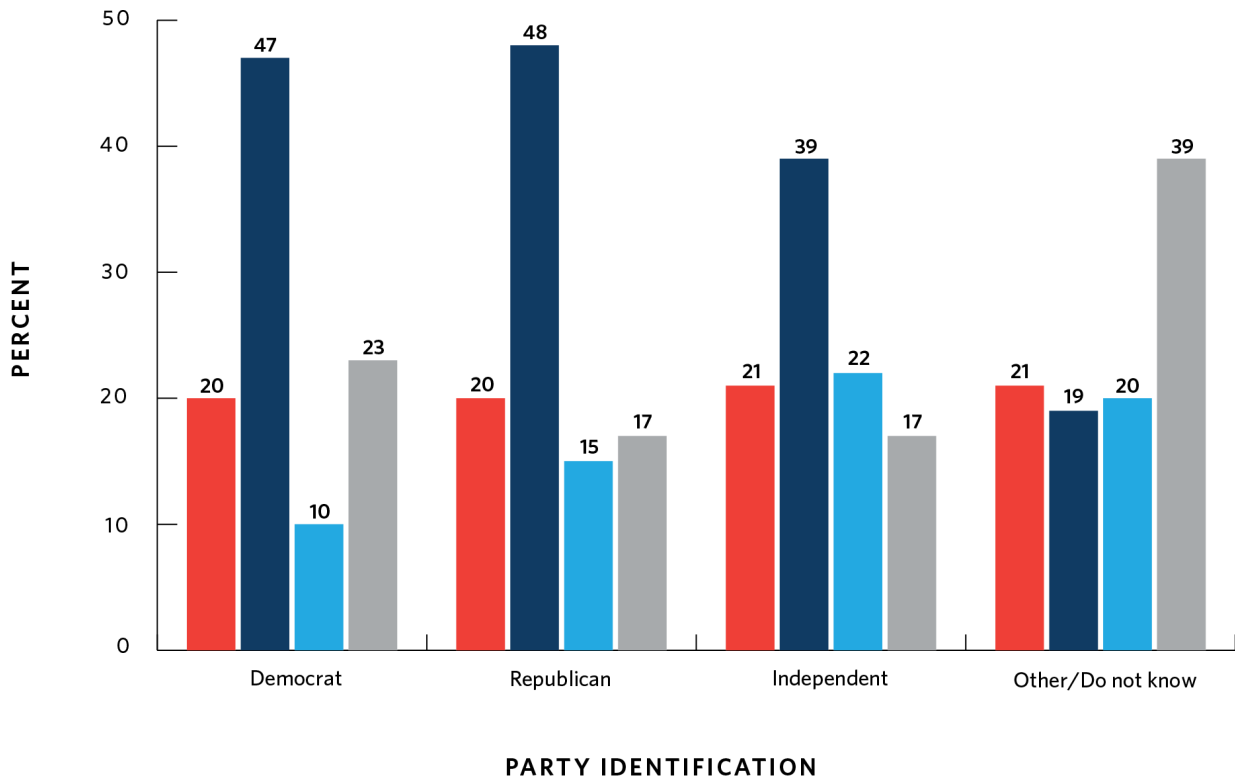
The survey also explored the impact that U.S. foreign policy has on the diaspora. This section focuses on two issues: the role of foreign policy as a dividing force in the diaspora and its role as a potential driver of anti-Asian discrimination.

FIGURE 9
U.S.-China Priorities, by Party Identity

In recent years, the United States has formulated an Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China’s growing influence.

Do you think the United States should:

- Prioritize economic relations with China, even if it means not addressing human rights issues
- No preference
- Promote human rights in China, even if it harms economic relations
- Do not know



N=1,000 California adult residents
 Source: 2022 Survey of Asian Americans in California

Impacts on Diaspora Solidarity

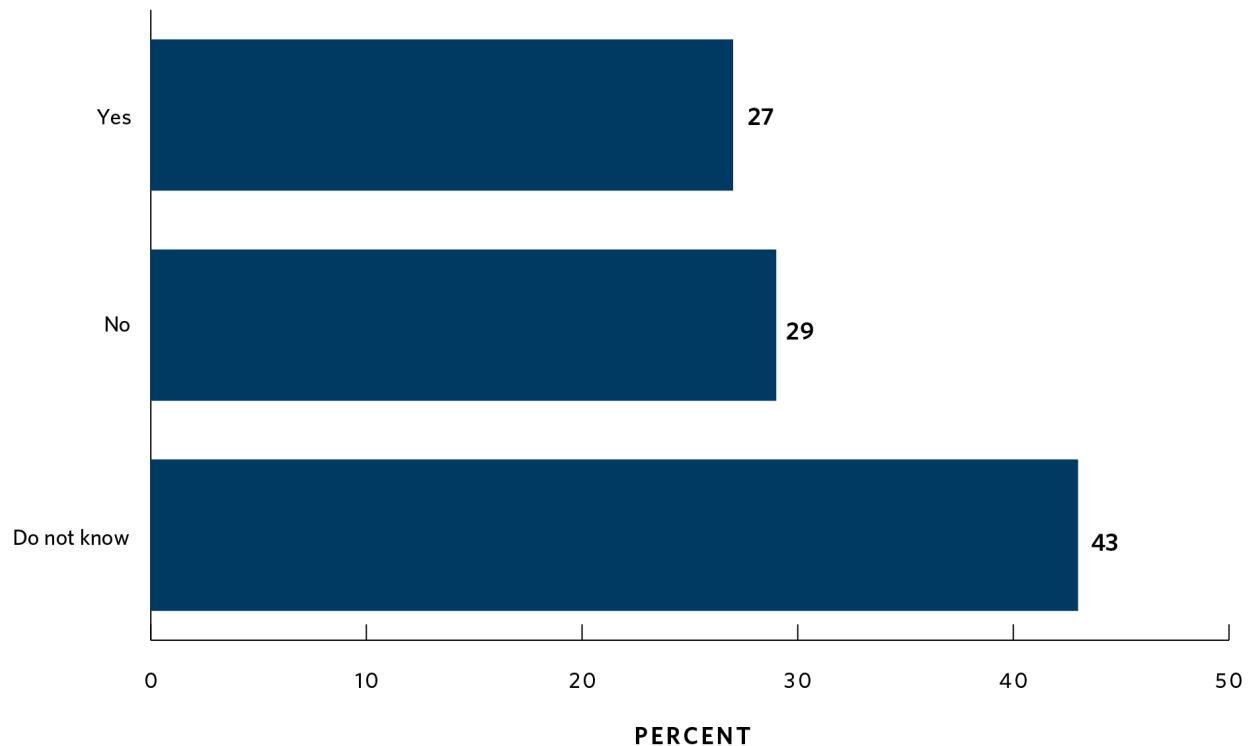
To assess the degree to which U.S. foreign policy is a polarizing force in the Asian American diaspora in California, the survey asked respondents whether they believed U.S. foreign policy was dividing the Asian American community (see figure 10). Interestingly, the modal response—offered by 43 percent of respondents—was that they did not know. Twenty-

seven percent of respondents reported that U.S. foreign policy was dividing the diaspora while another 29 percent believed it is not divisive.

The responses on this question exhibited little variation based on place of birth. Nearly identical shares of foreign- and U.S.-born respondents did not have a clear view of the impacts of U.S. foreign policy. Twenty-nine percent of those born in the United States believed

FIGURE 10
Impacts of U.S. Foreign Policy on the Asian American Community

Do you think that U.S. foreign policy is dividing the Asian Americans community in the United States?



N=999 California adult residents
Note: Calculation excludes respondents who skipped the question.
Source: 2022 Survey of Asian Americans in California

foreign policy was dividing the diaspora compared to 25 percent of foreign-born respondents. Twenty-eight percent and 31 percent of U.S.- and foreign-born respondents, respectively, answered in the negative.

When it came to responses by ethnic category, Filipinos (33 percent) and respondents from other, smaller Asian ethnic groups (34 percent) were the most pessimistic about the impacts of U.S. foreign policy on the diaspora (see figure 11). On the opposite extreme, Japanese respondents (15 percent) were the least pessimistic. Again, it is striking that large shares of respondents—between 38 and 52 percent—across categories expressed no clear view on this question.

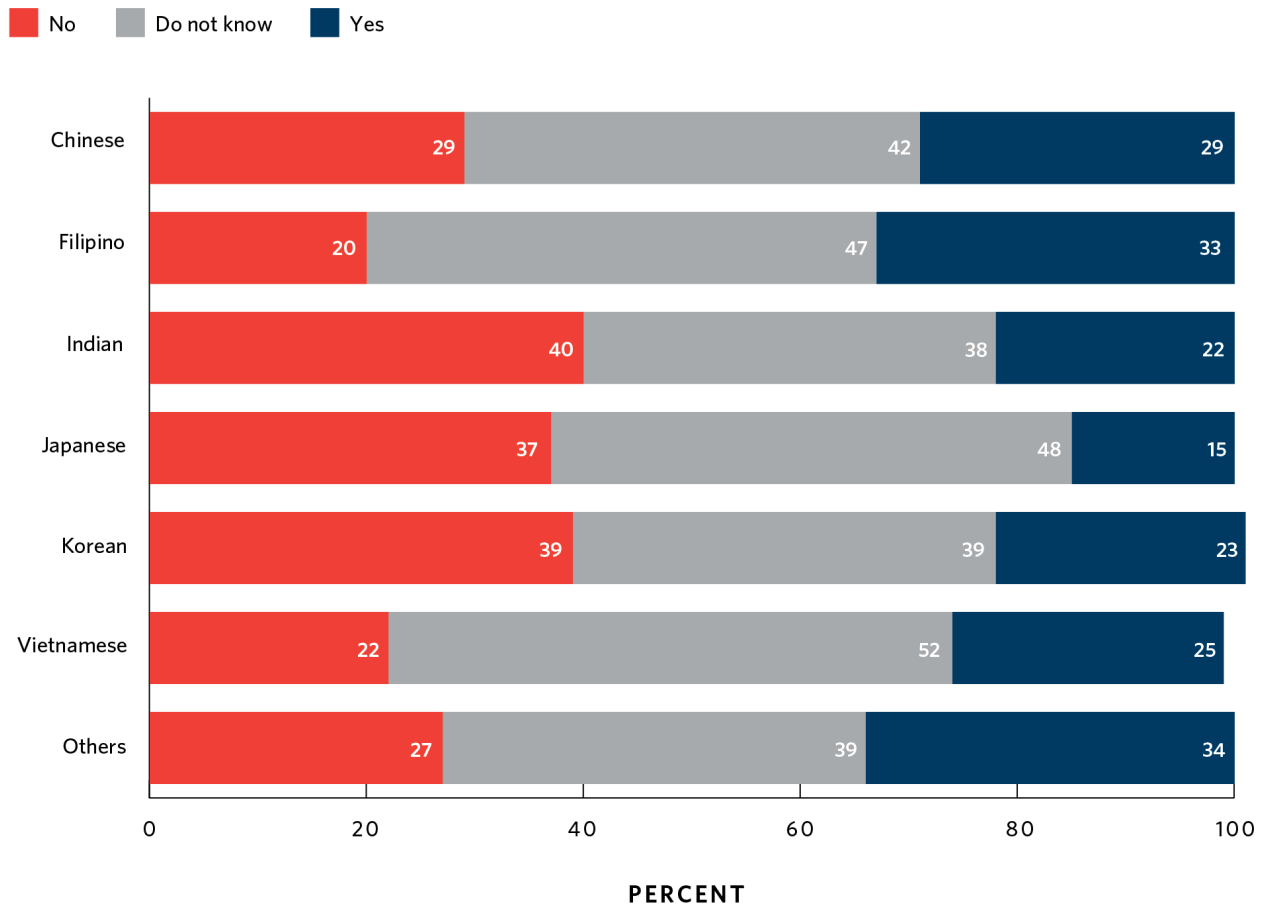
Drivers of Discrimination

As discussed in a [previous article](#) in this series, a clear majority—66 percent—of respondents believed that discrimination against Asian Americans had increased over the previous year. In contrast, only 8 percent believed it had decreased and 26 percent believed it had stayed about the same.

There has been a debate over the drivers of this increase, which is backed up by both [governmental](#) and [independent](#) data sources. Some have blamed the coronavirus [pandemic](#) for the spike while others have highlighted the divisive role of [politics](#). Other observers

FIGURE 11
Impacts of U.S. Foreign Policy on the Asian American Community, by Ethnic Group

Do you think that U.S. foreign policy is dividing the Asian Americans community in the United States?



N=999 California adult residents

Note: Calculation excludes respondents who skipped the question. Numbers do not always equal 100 due to rounding.

Source: 2022 Survey of Asian Americans in California

place the blame on U.S. foreign policy, arguing that the [hawkish rhetoric](#) against China has demonized Chinese Americans and other diaspora members who appear to have East Asian ancestry.

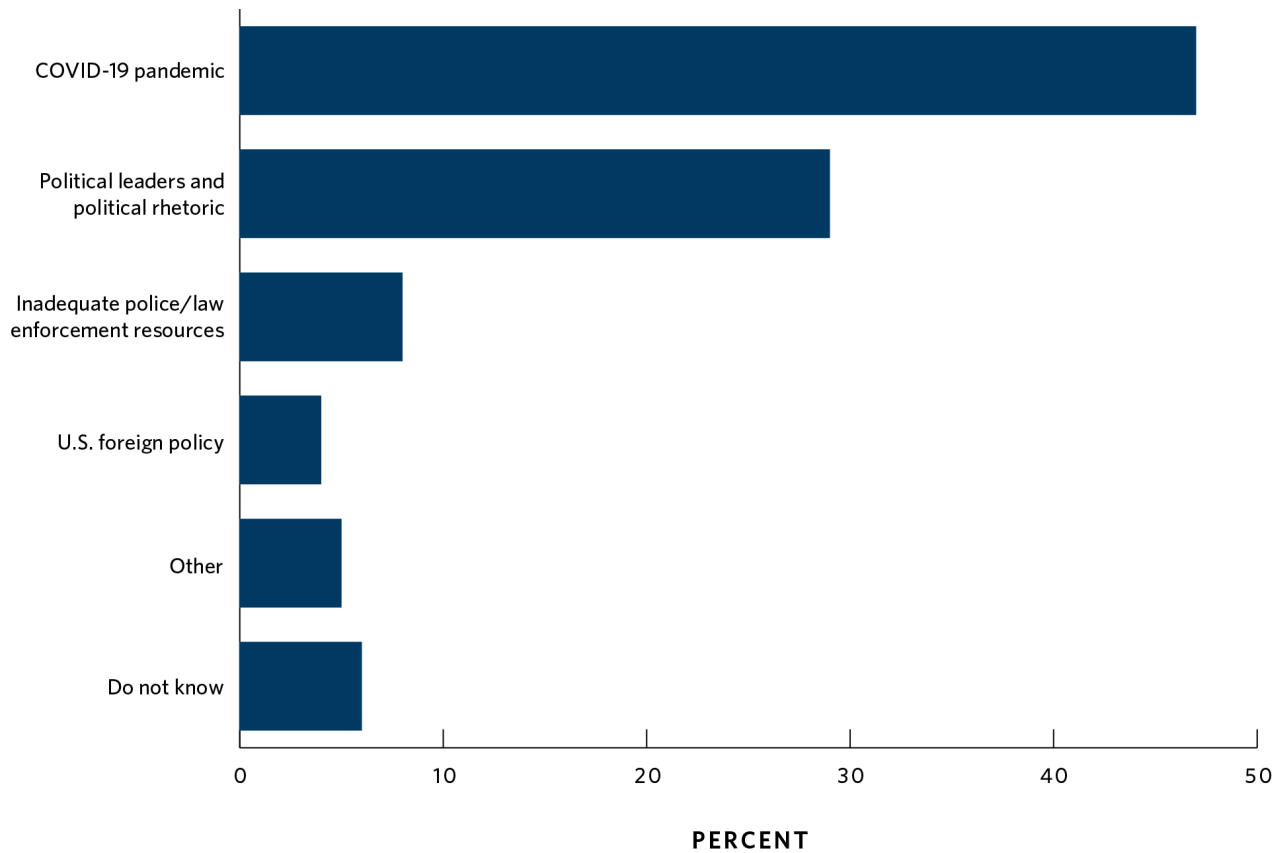
For those who reported that discrimination had increased, the survey asked respondents to identify the factor they believed was *most* responsible for increasing discrimination against Asian Americans (see figure 12). Only 4 percent of respondents fingered

U.S. foreign policy as the principal culprit. In fact, a near majority—47 percent—blamed the pandemic for the surge in discrimination. Another three in ten respondents (29 percent) believed that political leaders and political rhetoric were to blame, and 8 percent reported inadequate police resources as the main driver. Five percent highlighted another factor while 6 percent did not know.



FIGURE 12 Factors Increasing Discrimination Against Asian Americans

While there may be many factors at work, what factor do you think is most responsible for increasing discrimination against Asian Americans?



N=676 California adult residents

Note: This question is restricted to respondents who report that discrimination has increased in the last twelve months.

Source: 2022 Survey of Asian Americans in California

CONCLUSION

As U.S. foreign policy continues its reorientation toward Asia, its relationship with America's burgeoning Asian diaspora will remain a topic worth scrutinizing. This article provides a first cut, using California's large Asian American population as a case study. Several takeaways from this initial analysis are evident.

First, foreign policy has not cracked top-tier status as an election issue for Asian Americans. On this, the Asian diaspora looks no different than Americans of other ethnic/racial backgrounds. By and large, Americans are driven by "kitchen table" issues when they cast their ballots and select their leaders. As the data suggest here, Asian Americans—irrespective of place of birth—share a focus on issues like the economy and healthcare.

However, there are points of divergence within the community. For instance, it is notable that U.S.-born respondents were three times more likely to identify the environment/climate change as a pressing election-time concern compared to their foreign-born counterparts.

Second, when it comes to the management of U.S. foreign policy toward Asia, respondents believed that Democrats were better stewards. This is perhaps not surprising given the overall partisan tilt toward Democrats in the sample.

Third, a majority of respondents held unfavorable views on China, mirroring the views of the American populace at large. Even among Chinese members of the diaspora, only a minority held favorable opinions of China today. When it comes to the U.S. approach to China, there was a consensus among respondents that the United States should strengthen regional militaries and promote human rights concerns in China even if doing so harms bilateral ties.

Finally, on the question of foreign policy impacts, the diaspora did not perceive foreign policy to be a divisive issue. However, more than four in ten respondents did not have a clear opinion on the subject, perhaps suggesting that they had not thought much about foreign policy's relationship to diaspora dynamics. Furthermore, while a clear majority perceived that discrimination against diaspora members had surged in the past year, they did not place the blame on foreign policy, identifying instead the harmful impacts of the pandemic and rhetoric employed by politicians in the United States. One should treat this finding with caution, however, given the interrelationships between political rhetoric, the pandemic, and U.S. foreign policy.

Looking ahead, there are several areas worthy of further inquiry. For instance, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has sparked a [new conversation](#) about the prospects of China forcibly occupying Taiwan. Do Asian Americans

believe that the United States should get involved in such a conflict, and should it take steps to help Taiwan now even if they might increase the chances of conflict down the road?

Another line of inquiry worth pursuing relates to the tension between maintaining strong bilateral ties between the United States and countries in Asia and the reality of democratic backsliding in the region. To what extent is the diaspora in favor of prioritizing democracy and human rights issues if doing so might cast a pall on the United States' bilateral relationships with key partners? For instance, a previous [Carnegie survey](#) found that younger Indian Americans, especially those born in the United States, were wary of domestic changes underway in India, painting a stark contrast with an older generation consisting of immigrants born in India. To what extent is the Asian American diaspora willing to condition bilateral ties on domestic concerns in their countries of origin?

Finally, domestic politics in immigrants' countries of origin does not stop at the water's edge. In many diaspora communities, sources of polarization, division, and societal conflict that might have their origins at home eventually [make their way](#) to the diaspora community abroad. To what extent are these differences being replicated in the United States, spurring new sources of tension in immigrant communities?

The survey results reported here provide a high-level snapshot of the Asian American community in California, but many of the issues identified here will require a more sustained investigation over the long haul as Asia moves toward center stage in U.S. foreign policy.

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NOTES

- 1 The included ethnic subgroups are as follows: Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Malaysian, Mongolian, Nepali, Pakistani, Singaporean, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, Thai, and Vietnamese.
- 2 This percentage was calculated from population numbers from the 2020 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau.

