

The Political Culture of Asian Brazilians

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Abstract

Few studies have examined the relationship between race and politics for Asian Brazilians. Using data from the Latin American Public Opinion Survey, we examine this relationship along two axes: cognitive orientation towards politics and institutional confidence. We use factor analysis to create representative indices of these axes and estimate regression models using race as a predictive variable. We find no evidence that Asian Brazilians differ from white Brazilians along either of these two axes. However, we find that a university education has an especially strong relationship with cognitive orientation towards politics for Asian Brazilians. On average, Asian Brazilians with a university education had a cognitive orientation towards politics score 17% higher than Asian Brazilians without a university education, though we do not find a similar effect for institutional confidence. Overall, we find that ethnic identity, particularly for Asians, does not have a strong effect on either of the axes but education has different effects on them between different ethnic groups.

Keywords: Race and political behavior. Minority political behavior. Asians in Latin America. Factor analysis.

1. Introduction

Brazil is a country of immigrants and Asian immigrants have played an important role in her national history. Asian immigration began during the colonial period (PEREIRA, 2014), but in 1907, the state of Sao Paulo

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authorized the first wave of Japanese immigration that would eventually form the largest Japanese diaspora community. Today, the Japanese are the second largest immigrant population in Brazil and the Chinese are the ninth (WEJSA; LESSER, 2019). In 2010, over two million Brazilians self-identified as Asian, an overwhelming majority of whom are of Japanese descent. The Asian population in Brazil is also growing more rapidly than other groups. Since 1947, Japanese-Brazilian politicians have been a constant in Brazilian society (SAKURAI, 2005).

Race is an integral part of individual identity and its relationship with politics is quite intimate. Despite this, relatively few studies have examined this relationship for Asians, particularly in the Brazilian political science literature or in the Brazilian context. Studies about racial questions are almost exclusively dedicated to questions about Black, white, and Pardo Brazilians, discussing social themes such as affirmative action, state violence, and poverty. From the beginning of Brazilian race studies, Costa Pinto excluded the “amarelos” or the yellow/Asian category from his classification of “de cor” or of color (FRY, 2009, p. 261-282; HASENBALG, 1988, p. 164-182). In doing so, he created a binary system in which Asians would have an ambiguous position; neither completely white nor completely “of color” Throughout history, public discussions about the Japanese frequently included seemingly disparate groups such as Jews and Arabs, who were similarly excluded from the Black and white system that dominates ethnic studies (LESSER, 2000). During the period before World War II, Brazilian national identity underwent significant changes and these ambiguous groups defied notions about identity held by the Brazilian elite. The political, social, and economic successes of these groups gave them advantages to negotiate their social position within the Black and white system in the latter category (LESSER, 2000).

Academic articles about Japanese Brazilians have generally focused on immigration between Japan and Brazil and, more recently, Dekasseguês (MCKENZIE; SALCEDO, 2014; TSUDA, 2009). Questions about identity have also become more prominent, principally in literary studies. In the U.S., the literature has focused on similar questions, though Asian American studies is a far more mature field than its Brazilian counterpart.

In the field of political values and attitudes, it is known that Asian Americans predominantly identify with and vote for the Democratic party (KUU; MALHOTRA; MO, 2014) for reasons such as social exclusion and intergroup similarity.

Despite this, since Almond and Verba's pioneering work, research on race and political culture is scarce. Works focusing on Asians are particularly rare and we hope to fill this gap in the literature. In this article, we analyze the political culture of Asian Brazilians along two axes: cognitive orientation towards politics and institutional confidence. We use data collected by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) to propose representative indices of these axes and use them as dependent variables in regression models with sociodemographic predictive variables, including race. Our intention was to examine if being Asian Brazilian affects, in any way, the subjective disposition of citizens regarding political themes and institutions.

We divide this article into three parts, beginning with a theoretical approach and a literature review. In the second part, we present the methodology used to construct the indices and the aforementioned regression models and, in the third part, present and discuss the results.

2. Literature Review

Race and politics are intimately connected, and ethnicity is one of the most prominent and immutable characteristics of a person. In societies where there are no formal impediments associated with race, racism still permeates political life and constitutes a lens through which a person looks and is looked at in the world (MONAGREDA, 2017, p. 366-393).

Ethnicity forms an important collective consciousness and members of an ethnic groups normally have shared experiences (BIRNIR, 2006; CHANDRA, 2006). A significant part of this shared experience involves group perceptions of society in general and group political interests specifically. Organizations that fight for minority rights are important institutions in western democracies and factors such as socioeconomic class, geographical distribution (CLEARY, 2000, p. 1123-1153), group

norms, and experiences of discrimination affect the relationship between race and politics (CHONG; KIM, 2006).

Experiences of discrimination and perceptions of unequal opportunities, in a society are important in constructing a strong group identity. In addition, they provide a sense of alienation from society that can diminish confidence in institutions and mediate the participation of abstention in politics. Minorities who feel discriminated against are more likely to support political parties with a tradition of defending minority rights (SANDERS *et al.*, 2014). However, personal experiences of discrimination motivate individuals to punish the party in power, even if it has a tradition of defending minorities (SANDERS *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, experiences of discrimination are not created equal. Political discrimination, which typically manifests in the form of laws, policies, and other systemic measures, can motivate individuals to participate in politics (OSKOOII, 2018, p. 1-26). In contrast societal discrimination, which manifests through interpersonal forms such as verbal attacks from colleagues, can diminish feelings of efficacy that can, in turn, decrease political participation (OSKOOII, 2018, p. 1-26).

Socioeconomic status is particularly important because resources, such as education, facilitate political participation and can have a moderating effect (BUENO; FIALHO, 2009; VERBA *et al.*, 1993, p. 453-497). As a group occupies a more central social position, members of the group will tend to have less support for group specific issues (CHONG; KIM, 2006, p. 335-351). People from more affluent social classes are typically better treated by colleagues and have higher levels of confidence while people in lower classes may have more experiences of being cheated, leading to lower levels of confidence (BRANDT; WETHERELL; HENRY, 2015, p. 761-768). However, it is important to differentiate the effects of income and education, two of the most prominent components of socioeconomic status. Income is generally linked to support of established authorities and greater institutional trust, while education, as a cognitive mobilizer, is linked to lower trust and greater political participation (CATTERBERG; MORENO, 2006, p. 31-48). Lower income individuals normally have

less resources to create and maintain civic associations and, as a result, have less opportunities for political participation (STOLL, 2001, p. 529-557).

Population size is also a consistent predictor of minority, political activity (JUST, 2017, p. 1-24). Research across diverse countries has shown that geographic concentration increases political activity among minorities (CLEARY, 2000, p. 1123-1153). In the U.K. when the proportion of an ethnic group increases in a neighborhood, the probability of its members voting increases. Studies about the effects of participation in voluntary associations can increase political involvement because such participation develops civic skills that facilitate engagement and mobilize individuals, though this is conditional on the type of association (STRÖMBLAD; ADMAN, 2010, p. 721-730).

Factors that hinder the formation of a strong collective identity include geographic distribution, the ability to shame defectors, the level of integration into society, and socioeconomic status. When a small group is distributed over a large area, the formation of a group identity is hindered (CLEARY, 2000, p. 1123-1153). If the ethnic group has strong norms and the ability to sanction individuals, members must consider the costs of diverging from group norms. When this ability is weak, individuals feel freer to pursue their self-interest when they diverge from the group (WHITE; LAIRD; ALLEN, 2014, p. 783-800). The level of integration in society and socioeconomic status also have interacting effects. When an ethnic minority group is not well integrated into a society and suffers discrimination, both real and perceived, high socioeconomic status does not weaken group unity; ethnicity continues to be important in the decision-making process of individuals. When the group is not discriminated against, high socioeconomic status weakens support for group interests.

3. Research Question and Hypothesis

The previous section presented a summary of factors, sometimes contradictory, that affect the two axes we seek to investigate in relation to the Japanese-Brazilian population. In Brazil, Japanese-Brazilians are generally of higher socioeconomic class (GRADÍN, 2014, p. 73-92) which would predict higher levels of institutional confidence (SCHOON; CHENG,

2011, p. 619-631). Japanese-Brazilians are a small group, making up just one percent of the national population, which would diminish the benefits of institutional racism toward Asians. Japanese-Brazilians are less discriminated against relative to other minority groups because the cost of maintaining a strong institutional racism regime are higher than the benefits of nondiscrimination (MAIA; SAKAMOTO; WANG, 2015, p. 547-563). When a minority group obtains high levels of scarce social resources, in this case education (MAIA; SAKAMOTO; WANG, 2015, p. 547-563), discrimination in the labor market can be reduced.

To derive the benefits of white supremacy over the long run, employers and employees must maintain a united front of discrimination. As Japanese-Brazilians are a relatively small group in Brazil, white individuals fail to maintain this united front in order to obtain the short term benefits of hiring and transacting with members of the minority group (MAIA; SAKAMOTO; WANG, 2015, p. 547-563). These factors suggest our first hypothesis: Japanese-Brazilians would have a weaker political consciousness and more confidence in institutions in relation to other groups.

On the other hand, Japanese-Brazilians are concentrated in the south and southeast regions; the states of São Paulo and Paraná contain over 90% of the Japanese Brazilian population. This geographic concentration favors greater political participation. Japanese-Brazilian communities have a strong tradition of participation in voluntary associations and Japanese schools have existed since the first period of Japanese immigration (GOTO, 2007, p. 7-8). During the Second World War, these communities were persecuted and prohibited to teach or speak in Japanese. Many of these schools were forcibly closed, and popular songs in the era contained anti-Japanese lyrics. After the war, many of these schools reopened, representing a strong community (CARVALHO, 2003). In studies about Dekasseguês, experiences of discrimination and an uneasiness of their ethnic identity are often cited as reasons for why they left Brazil (LESSER, 2000).

The confluence of these factors raises questions about the cognitive orientation towards politics and institutional trust among Japanese-Brazilians that we hope to answer. On one hand, we have factors such as geographic concentration and a tradition of participation in voluntary

associations that favor increased political participation and disfavor institutional confidence. On the other, we have factors such as higher socioeconomic class and a small population that theoretically weaken political participation, begging the question: which group of factors dominates? We test the following hypothesis:

Due to strong community ties and their minority status, Japanese-Brazilians have less institutional confidence and greater levels of political consciousness.

The next section presents our methodology, followed by the results and discussion.

4. Methodology

To test our hypothesis, we use data from LAPOP for the years 2017 and 2019 to create two indices using factor analysis: a cognitive orientation toward politics index (COPI) and an institutional confidence index (CI). COPI is composed of two variables: interest in politics⁴ and subjective political efficacy⁵. CI is composed of 11 variables⁶ about diverse Brazilian institutions such as political parties, the supreme court, and congress. In

4 A redação da pergunta no questionário é: O quanto o(a) sr./sra. se interessa por política: muito, algo, pouco ou nada? (How much are you interested in politics: alot, somewhat, a little, or not at all?).

5 A pergunta formulada é: O(A) sr./sra. sente que entende bem os assuntos políticos mais importantes do país. Até que ponto concorda ou discorda desta frase? (You understand the political issues most important to the country. Up until what point do you agree or disagree with this sentence?).

6 Usamos os seguintes itens do LAPOP: B1 (Até que ponto o(a) sr./sra. acredita que os tribunais de justiça do Brasil garantem um julgamento justo?), B2 (Até que ponto o(a) sr./sra. tem respeito pelas instituições políticas do Brasil?), B3 (Até que ponto o(a) sr./sra. acredita que os direitos básicos do cidadão estão bem protegidos pelo sistema político brasileiro?), B4 (Até que ponto o(a) sr./sra. se sente orgulhoso(a) de viver no sistema político brasileiro?), B6 (Até que ponto o(a) sr./sra. acha que se deve apoiar o sistema político brasileiro?), B12 (Até que ponto o(a) sr./sra. tem confiança nas Forças Armadas [o Exército?]), B13 (Até que ponto o(a) sr./sra. tem confiança no Congresso Nacional?), B21 (Até que ponto o(a) sr./sra. tem confiança nos partidos políticos?), B21A (Até que ponto o(a) sr./sra. tem confiança no Presidente da República?), B32 (Até que ponto o(a) sr./sra. tem confiança na Prefeitura Municipal?), B47A (Até que ponto o(a) sr./sra. tem confiança nas eleições neste país?, Até que ponto o(a) sr./sra. tem confiança nas eleições neste país?). We use the following survey items from LAPOP: Faith in courts, respect toward political institutions, belief that basic rights are protected, pride in political system, should support the political system, faith in armed forces, faith in national congress, faith in political parties, faith in the president, faith in local government, faith in elections.

the factor analysis, we use a polychoric correlation matrix and defined the extraction of two factors, applying an oblique rotation (oblimin). Table 1 presents the results of the factor analysis, including factor loadings.

Table I – Polychoric Factor Analysis for COPI and CI, Brazil, 2017-2019

Variables	CI	COPI
Do courts guarantee a fair trial?	0,54	0,11
Respect for political institutions	0,61	0,05
Basic rights are well protected	0,74	0,02
Proud to live in the political system	0,74	0,07
People should support the political system	0,73	0,12
Trust in the military	0,45	0,08
Trust in the national congress	0,77	-0,01
Trust in political parties	0,77	0,11
Trust in the President of the Republic	0,64	0,19
Trust in local government	0,58	0,12
Confidence in elections	0,62	0,34
Self-assessment of political understanding	0,07	0,62
Self-assessment of political interest	0,08	0,67
Cronbach's Alpha	0,87	0,55
% variation		0,45
KMO		0,92

Source: LAPOP (2017, 2019). Data from Brazil.

The two indices were standardized to a 0 to 10 scale and used as dependent variables in regression models controlling for education, family income, gender, age, and survey year. Given the importance of education throughout different dimensions of political culture, we also propose interactions between ethnic group and education. The equations of the estimated models are:

Where Y_i is one of the indices, COPI or CI, University is a dummy variable for an undergraduate degree, Ethnicity is a vector of dummy

variables for ethnicity, Income is a vector of dummy variables for income, Female is a dummy for women, Age is the age in years, and year is a 2019 dummy. Table 2 shows the proportions or, in the case of age, mean, of these variables.

Table 2 – Descriptive Statistics. Brazil. 2017-2019

Variable	Proportion
Female	0.5
Age ^a	38.87 (15.9)
University Education	0.12
Family Income < R\$1.100	0.43
Family Income R\$1.101 - R\$2.000	0.28
Family Income R\$2.001 - R\$2.900	0.13
Family Income R\$2.901 - R\$5.600	0.10
Family Income > R\$5.601	0.04
White	0.29
Black/Pardo	0.61
Other	0.04
Asian	0.06
2017	0.505
2019	0.495
COPI*	4.24 (2.7)
CI*	3.9 (2.1)
N	3030

Note: ^aMean and (Standard Deviation)

Source: LAPOP (2017, 2019).

5. Results

Table 3 presents the regression models. Columns 1 and 2 represent the models using COPI and CI, respectively, without interaction while columns 3 and 4 show the same models but with the interaction between university education and ethnic group.

Table 3 – Linear regression models for COPI and CI, Brazil, 2017-2019

Predictors	CI (1)	COPI (2)	CI (3)	COPI (4)
	Estimates (Std. Error)	Estimates (Std. Error)	Estimates (Std. Error)	Estimates (Std. Error)
(Constant)	3.83*** (0.11)	4.12*** (0.13)	3.83*** (0.11)	4.15*** (0.14)
White	-	-	-	-
Black/Pardo	-0.01 (0.09)	-0.00 (0.11)	-0.01 (0.10)	-0.03 (0.12)
Other	0.04 (0.22)	0.01 (0.27)	-0.05 (0.23)	0.02 (0.27)
Asian	-0.23 (0.18)	-0.17 (0.22)	-0.23 (0.19)	-0.38 (0.23)
University	-0.31* (0.13)	1.53*** (0.16)	-0.33 (0.21)	1.32*** (0.26)
Female	-0.31*** (0.08)	-0.96*** (0.10)	-0.31*** (0.08)	-0.97*** (0.10)
Family Income < R\$1.100	-	-	-	-
Family Income R\$1.101 - R\$2.000	-0.22* (0.10)	0.30* (0.12)	-0.22* (0.10)	0.30* (0.12)
Family Income R\$2.001 - R\$2.900	-0.56*** (0.13)	0.72*** (0.15)	-0.56*** (0.13)	0.71*** (0.15)
Family Income R\$2.901 - R\$5.600	-0.45** (0.14)	0.74*** (0.18)	-0.44** (0.14)	0.74*** (0.18)
Family Income > R\$5.601	-0.13 (0.20)	1.02*** (0.25)	-0.11 (0.20)	1.03*** (0.25)
Year 2017	-	-	-	-
Year 2019	0.97*** (0.08)	0.40*** (0.10)	0.98*** (0.08)	0.40*** (0.10)
Black/Pardo* University	-	-	-0.01 (0.27)	0.19 (0.33)
Others* University	-	-	2.01 (1.06)	-0.55 (1.18)
Asian* University	-	-	0.02 (0.62)	2.44** (0.77)
Observations	2615	2701	2615	2701
R ² / R ² adjusted	0.07 / 0.06	0.11 / 0.11	0.07 / 0.07	0.11 / 0.11

Notes: * p<0.05** p<0.01*** p<0.001

Source: LAPOP (2017, 2019).

For the models without interactions, only the ethnic group dummies were not significant, an unexpected result given the literature on race and political culture. Income and education present positive effects on COPI. This corroborates much of the literature on political attitudes and behaviors which associates education with greater political activity through the development of cognitive and civic skills (CAMPBELL, A. *et al.*, 1980), political interest (ROSENSTONE; HANSEN, 1993), and the provision of political information (CARPINI; KEETER, 1996). Contrary to the theoretical expectations, income and education present a negative effect on CI,

The time coefficient showed that the mean of the two indices increased between 2017 and 2019. Age had a positive effect on CI and a negative effect on COPI, indicating that older individuals tended to have more institutional confidence and less cognitive orientation towards politics. Women had less levels of institutional confidence and were less oriented toward politics, relative to men. This result confirms findings from the international literature that show that women generally participate less, politically, and have less confidence in institutions due to various constraints such as bearing a disproportionate amount of family responsibilities and the process of political socialization replicating patterns of gender inequality (WELCH, 1977, p. 711-730).

When we add the interaction between education and ethnicity, we find a positive effect on COPI for Asian-Brazilians while the effects of income, age, and sex did not change. The effect of education remained positive and significant for COPI but was no longer significant for CI. The interaction between education and Asian was significant and positive for COPI, indicating that higher education has a particularly strong and positive relationship for Asian Brazilians. One theoretical assumption is that education has a similar effect on political participation among different ethnic groups, but the empirical evidence is less conclusive. Lien showed that, in the U.S., education has a strong relationship with political participation for Mexican-Americans but not Asian-Americans (LIEN, 1994, p. 237-264).

The literature is generally scarce on the effect of education regarding Asian-Americans. Survey sampling methods are often poorly adopted for comparison between multiple groups, further complicating this discussion (LEIGHLEY; VEDLITZ, 1999, p. 1092-1114). Curiously, our results indicated the opposite effect as Lien, suggesting a difference between Asian-Americans and Asian-Brazilians. One explication can be that a majority of Asian-Americans are foreign born (LÓPEZ; RUIZ; PATTEN, 2017) and this can diminish political participation (LIEN, 1994, p. 237-264). With respect to institutional confidence, being Asian and its interaction with education were not significant, suggesting that Asian Brazilians have similar levels of institutional confidence with other ethnic groups.

Together, these models show that ethnic identity, particularly for Asians, does not have a strong effect on the cognitive orientation towards politics or institutional confidence. However, the models show that education has different effects, albeit reduced, between different ethnic groups and the impact of socioeconomic resources vary among them. The results showed in Table 3 invalidated our main hypothesis. For Asians, the focus of our work, higher education increased the score of this measure of cognitive orientation towards politics.

6. Conclusions

The literature on race and political culture in Brazil has focused on the dichotomous relationship between white and Black/Pardo people. Despite that being a central issue on Brazilian racial politics, the other ethnicities that make up the multicultural population of this country have been notably neglected in these studies. This paper sought to fill this gap by analyzing the political culture of Japanese-Brazilian citizens. We seek to explain how belonging to this group affects institutional trust and cognitive orientation towards politics.

Contrary to initial expectations, there are no significant differences in the political culture of Brazilian Asians. Instead, when race interacts with university education, this population group presents a higher cognitive orientation towards politics score than the white majority group with the same educational level.

These results highlight the inadequacies in the literature on Asian Brazilians. There are significant differences among ethnic groups not considered. However additional studies are still needed, particularly about the political participation and civic engagement of Japanese-Brazilians.

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Recebido em 16/07/2020
Aceito em 22/09/2021
Versão final em 04/04/2022

A Cultura Política dos Brasileiros Asiáticos

Resumo

Poucos estudos têm examinado a relação entre raça e política para Brasileiros Asiáticos. Usando dados do Projeto de Opinião Pública da América Latina, examinamos essa relação através de dois eixos: orientação cognitiva à política e confiança institucional. Nós usamos análise fatorial para propor índices representativos e estimamos modelos de regressão usando raça como uma variável preditiva. Não encontramos evidência de que Brasileiros Asiáticos diferem de Brasileiros Brancos em ambos os eixos. Porém, achamos que a educação superior tem uma relação particularmente forte com a orientação cognitiva à política para Brasileiros Asiáticos. Em média, Brasileiros Asiáticos com educação superior têm uma pontuação de orientação cognitiva à política 17% mais alta do que Brasileiros Asiáticos sem educação superior, apesar de não encontramos um efeito semelhante para a confiança institucional. No geral, descobrimos que a identidade étnica, particularmente para os asiáticos, não tem um forte efeito em nenhum dos eixos, mas a educação tem efeitos diferentes entre os diferentes grupos étnicos.

Palavras-chave: Raça e comportamento político. Comportamento político das minorias. Asiáticos na América Latina. Análise fatorial.