ASIAN AMERICANS ADVANCING JUSTICE
AAJC

Belonging, Loyalty, and Legitimacy

Identifying Anti-Asian Political Narratives

INTRODUCTION

Anti-Asian political narratives have appeared throughout American history and continue to surface during election cycles, geopolitical tension, and social change. These narratives do not simply target individual candidates. They may appear in intersectional ways tied to gender, disability, religion, sexual orientation, class, immigration history, or other aspects of identity and lived experience. A growing body of research suggests a relationship between divisive political rhetoric and subsequent increases in hate crimes and incidents.[1] For that reason, this guide helps community organizations, researchers, journalists, and advocates identify and respond to anti-Asian political narratives organized around three recurring themes: *belonging*, *loyalty*, and *legitimacy*. It also offers *response considerations* for assessing harmful messages and *avoiding amplification*, and additional informative *resources*.

QUESTIONING BELONGING

Whether Asian Americans are treated as fully American and accepted members of the national community.

1 See generally *The Trump Effect: How 2016 Campaign Rallies Explain Spikes in Hate* (*PS: Political Science & Politics*); *How Hateful Rhetoric Connects to Real-World Violence* (Brookings Institution); *Reported Hate Crimes Increase During Elections* (Leadership Conference Education Fund, Apr. 17, 2023); *Hate Speech and Hate Crimes: A Data-Driven Study of Evolving Discourse Around Marginalized Groups* (arXiv:2311.11163); and *Political Rhetoric and Hate Crimes: The Unintended Consequences of Divisive Debates* (University of Bath IPR Blog, June 27, 2024).

Perpetual Foreigner

Core Harmful Message

"They are not truly American."

The perpetual foreigner narrative portrays Asian Americans as outsiders regardless of citizenship, family history in the United States, military service, professional achievement, or civic participation.

Common Tactics

- Mocking accents, names, language ability, or cultural expression to portray a candidate or community as foreign or unfit for public life.
- Scrutinizing citizenship, immigration status, or family origins.
- Using cultural events, symbols, languages, imagery, sounds, flags, or fonts to imply foreignness.
- Highlighting ancestry while disregarding a person's lived experience in the United States.

Examples

- Suggesting a candidate should "go back to their country" or asking, "where are they *really* from?"
- Questioning the legitimacy of citizenship or associated birth documents.
- Political advertising that uses Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Indian, or other Asian imagery or events unrelated to a candidate's actual views or actions.
- Mocking a candidate's name as foreign.

Cultural and Religious Incompatibility

Core Harmful Message

"Their values are incompatible with America."

These narratives portray a candidate's culture, faith, heritage, or community relationships as inconsistent with American identity or democratic participation.

Common Tactics

- Framing religious, cultural practices, and viewpoints as "un-American" or "incompatible with American values."
- Associating Asian identity or religious practices with extremist ideologies.
- Portraying ordinary Asian cultural or religious practices as evidence of non-belonging.

Examples

- Suggesting candidates cannot uphold democratic values mainly based on their religious, cultural, or ethnic identity.
- Claiming a candidate's Asian or religious identity makes them sympathetic to extremist movements.
- Characterizing cultural traditions, food practices, or religious observance as "un-American."

Racial and Religious Purity (Ethnonationalism)

Core Harmful Message

"Americans look and pray a certain way."

These narratives define American identity through race, ancestry, ethnicity, or religion rather than citizenship and democratic participation.

Common Tactics

- Criticizing interracial or multiracial families.
- Suggesting certain racial or religious identities are more "American" than others.
- Promoting White Christian nationalist conceptions of America.
- Depicting demographic change as a threat.
- Manipulating physical appearance to emphasize racial, cultural, or religious differences.

Examples

- Attacks on mixed-race candidates and/or their families.
- Messaging implying certain racial or religious backgrounds are incompatible with leadership.
- Manipulation of skin tone to highlight perceived racial differences.
- Blaming immigrant communities of color for broader economic, Christian cultural, public health, safety, housing, education, or neighborhood concerns.

QUESTIONING LOYALTY

Whether Asian Americans are presumed to have allegiance to the United States rather than foreign governments, communities, or interests.

Foreign Allegiance and Dual Loyalty Claims

Core Harmful Message

"Their loyalty belongs somewhere else."

These narratives suggest Asian Americans cannot be trusted because of ancestry, national origin, cultural ties, immigration background, or family relationships. They also use countries, foreign governments, or events abroad as stand-ins for Asian American people and communities, treating geopolitical conflict or overseas events as evidence of local disloyalty.

Common Tactics

- Unsupported allegations of espionage or foreign influence.
- Claims that heritage, national origin, or perceived connection to a country determines loyalty.
- Assertions that family and business ties abroad create conflicts of interest.
- Treating international travel, language skills, cultural knowledge, or awareness of foreign affairs as suspicious.

Examples

- Suggesting an Asian American candidate serves another country's interests or is a foreign agent without credible evidence.
- Implying dual loyalty solely because of ancestry, family connections, citizenship, or perceived association with a foreign country.

Conspiracy and Hidden Agenda

Core Harmful Message

"They are secretly advancing an agenda."

These narratives portray Asian American participation in public life as evidence of a concealed effort to undermine institutions or advance special interests.

Common Tactics

- Conspiracy theories about demographic change such as Great Replacement Theory.
- Claims of hidden political agendas.
- Alleging that a candidate is deliberately masking their cultural, religious, or political identity to gain power or influence.
- Using isolated incidents involving one person, business, organization, or controversy to cast suspicion on an entire community.

Examples

- Claims that the candidate is part of a coordinated effort to transform American society.
- Assertions that an Asian American candidate is secretly acting on behalf of an ethnic community rather than broader constituency.
- Publicizing images of a candidate in cultural gatherings or wearing cultural attire as purported evidence of hidden allegiances or identity.
- Suggesting that a candidate presents differently across communities to conceal their "true" identity or agenda.

QUESTIONING LEGITIMACY

Whether Asian Americans are viewed as having legitimately earned positions of leadership, influence, and public trust.

Merit and Legitimacy Attacks ("Diversity Candidate")

Core Harmful Message

"They did not earn the position."

These narratives frame race, ethnicity, or gender as the primary reason for a candidate's success while dismissing qualifications, accomplishments, or experience.

Common Tactics

- Suggesting political appointments or promotions were based solely on demographic identity.
- Conflating individual qualifications with broader debates about diversity initiatives.
- Assertions that identity, rather than experience or expertise, explains success.
- Presenting identity and merit as mutually exclusive.

Examples

- "She was only selected because she's an Asian woman."
- "He's a diversity hire."
- Dismissing achievements as products of affirmative action or diversity, equity, and inclusion programs.

Identity Reduction and Stereotyping

Core Harmful Message

"Their identity determines their beliefs."

These narratives reduce individuals to racial or ethnic assumptions and ignore the diversity of experiences, views, and backgrounds within Asian American communities.

Common Tactics

- Treating all Asian Americans as politically or ideologically identical.
- Collapsing diverse communities into a single political stereotype.
- Ignoring differences in nationality, religion, language, ideology, and lived experience.
- Demanding that candidates answer for unrelated people who may share their race, ethnicity, religion, ancestry, or national origin.

Examples

- Assuming all Asian Americans share the same views, skills, socio-economic status, and support the same policies.
- Describing an individual as speaking for all Asians.
- Expecting individuals to answer for unrelated conduct because of perceived shared identity.

Model Minority Weaponization

Core Harmful Message

"They are acceptable only when they conform to a stereotype."

These narratives selectively invoke positive stereotypes about Asian Americans to limit political participation, discourage advocacy, or create division among communities.

Common Tactics

- Using Asian American success stories to dismiss discrimination or societal inequities.
- Praising Asian Americans only when they reinforce preferred narratives.
- Criticizing candidates who challenge stereotypes.
- Characterizing advocacy against discrimination as evidence of ingratitude or political extremism.
- Pointing to Asian American success to argue that other communities should not raise concerns about racism or inequality.

Examples

- "Asians succeeded without help, so others should too."
- "Why are they complaining when they're already successful?"

AMPLIFYING HARM

Hate-based political narratives can appear across the political ecosystem, not only in direct campaign statements. They may surface in candidate speeches, debates, interviews, mailers, billboards, television ads, digital ads, fundraising messages, text messages, and social media posts. They may also be amplified by outside groups, PACs, influencers, campaign surrogates, or informal networks using hate-based narratives to electioneer, mobilize voters, depress turnout, or associate candidates and communities with fear, suspicion, or resentment.

Community organizations should also watch for less direct forms of amplification, including representatives of advocacy organizations using personal social media accounts to spread hate-based attacks, or election officials and political leaders publicly naming hate groups, extremist figures, or affiliated individuals as advisors, allies, validators, event participants, or people close to a campaign. In these cases, the harm often comes not only from the original message, but from repetition, normalization, and the appearance of legitimacy.

AI and Synthetic Media

Artificial intelligence can make these harms faster to produce, easier to personalize, and harder to detect. AI tools can generate or alter images, videos, audio, translations, memes, scripts, comments, or ads that falsely portray candidates or communities as foreign, disloyal, threatening, or unworthy of public trust.

AI can amplify hate-based political narratives by scaling large volumes of content, tailoring messages to specific communities or languages, creating fake or manipulated media, altering identity cues such as skin tone, clothing, accents, names, or cultural symbols, and flooding the information space with repeated or difficult-to-trace claims. Because AI-assisted content can move quickly and appear credible, community organizations should assess both the message and how it is being distributed.

RESPONSE CONSIDERATIONS

When hate-based political narratives appear, community organizations should respond deliberately: assess the message, avoid amplifying the harm, choose an effective response, and remain grounded in both community safety and 501(c)(3) compliance. The information contained in this resource is intended to provide general guidance and should not be construed as legal advice. Because the application of 501(c)(3) rules and other legal requirements depends on the

specific facts and circumstances of each organization, readers should consult qualified legal counsel regarding their organization's compliance obligations.

1. Assess Before Responding

Before responding publicly, consider:

- What core narratives[2] are being evoked: belonging, loyalty, legitimacy, or another form of harm?
- How far has the message spread, and among which audiences?
- Who is spreading it, and who benefits from it?
- Is the message isolated, recurring, or part of a coordinated pattern?
- Has the campaign, outside group, public official, platform, or relevant institution responded?

2. Avoid Amplifying the Harm

Responses should avoid spreading the hate-based message further. Do not quote, screenshot, or link to harmful content during an active election. If referencing the content is necessary, clearly identify it as false, harmful, or misleading; and lead with the facts rather than the attack.

3. Choose the Right Messenger and Response

The best public response may not always come from a nonprofit organization. Depending on the audience and situation, a more effective messenger may be a local community or faith leader, ethnic media outlet, former elected official, youth organizer, educator, small business owner, or other trusted validator.

4. Consider Prevention Messages to Reduce Future Harm

Research from our partners at PERIL shows that prevention messages can help people recognize hateful manipulation before it spreads. These messages briefly explain the tactic being used, why it is harmful, and how similar messages may appear in the future. When needed, use only a small, carefully framed example of the harmful message. Keep the focus on the tactic and community safety, rather than partisan content.

5. Stay Nonpartisan and 501(c)(3) Compliant

Community organizations should ensure that any public response is consistent with applicable 501(c)(3) rules. Responses should focus on the erroneous or hateful content and harmful impact on communities, not who said the message. Responses should not name specific candidates, campaigns, or political parties. Never endorse or oppose political candidates, campaigns, or parties.

2 The categories in this guide are intended to support analysis, but hate narratives may overlap with other categories. When in doubt, focus on identifying the narrative rather than selecting the perfect category.

6. Document and Report

Document the content, source, timing, platform, audience, and any evidence of coordination before the material disappears or changes. Where appropriate, report the incident to relevant platforms, civil rights partners, or community monitoring efforts.

- *Email us: antihate@advancingjustice-aajc.org to catalog, monitor, and analyze trends in hate and bias impacting communities across the country.*

INFORMATIONAL RESOURCES

Community partners seeking guidance on how nonprofit organizations can respond to candidate statements, campaign activity, or election-related issues while remaining compliant with federal law may find the resources below helpful. Please note that not all of these resources are designed for 501(c)(3) compliance.

Guidance for 501(c)(3) Organizations During Election Cycles

- Alliance for Justice: *Commenting on Candidates and Campaigns: How 501(c)(3)s Can Respond During an Election Year*
- Democracy Communications Collaborative: *Elections Communications Guide* with messaging frameworks, rapid-response guidance, and communications best practices for addressing election-related misinformation, hate, and emerging political issues
- Advancing Justice | AAJC: *messaging resource* for crafting effective, values-based responses to hate, discrimination, and harmful political rhetoric affecting Asian American communities.

Other Resources

- PERIL: *responding to and preventing hate and violence*, with specific resources for parents & caregivers, faith leaders & small businesses, educators & mental health counselors, community members, and victims & survivors.

This document was produced by Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC. All information within is, to the best of its authors' knowledge, correct as of 2026-09-09. The document and affiliated website were designed by H James Lucas. Text is set in Lang Gothic, designed by Stephen Nixon and published by ArrowType.