



Why Asian Pacific American Heritage Month Matters

May recognizes Asian American diversity but will political representation and corporate spending follow?

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Rep. Patsy Mink (D-HI) announces the formation of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus at a press conference in May 1994. (Laura Patterson via Library of Congress)

In honor of Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, The Juggernaut will be celebrating the South Asians who impacted us most in the last year. We're accepting nominations of public figures, everyday heroes, and rising stars. [Tell us who you would like to recognize](#). Finalists will be chosen by The Juggernaut's editorial board and a panel of guest judges.

Coronavirus stay-at-home measures have our routines in chaos, blending weekdays with weekends, and making weeks feeling like months. But as we enter May, it's a conscious chance to celebrate diversity within the fastest-growing racial group in the United States: Asian Americans.

May is [Asian Pacific American Heritage Month](#) in the United States — a month dedicated to highlighting the cultural, political, and economic contributions of [more than 22 million Americans](#) who trace all or part of their roots to Asian countries and the Pacific Islands. We know the community's influence matters. Asian Americans wield about [\\$1 trillion](#) in annual purchasing power. Asian representation is at an all-time high in the U.S. Congress with [20 leaders](#). Korean-language *Parasite* became the first non-English-language movie to win the Oscar for Best Picture in February. And the community continues to [lead Fortune 500 companies](#).

But this year, like years before, seems to portend that many Americans — outside some politicians, a handful of companies, and special interest groups — will not pay attention to Asian Pacific American Heritage Month.

Asian Americans are growing fast but still only make up about 7% of the U.S. population. The community is fragmented, too: East Asians and South Asians don't always [see](#) each other as part of the same group. It could also be the commemoration's relatively young stature. The [early roots](#) of Black History Month began in 1926 with Negro History Week. National Hispanic Heritage Month [began](#) with a shorter, week-long observation in 1968; it was expanded to a month in 1988. Gay pride celebrations began as early as 1970. The United States only began officially celebrating Asian American heritage in 1979.

On Wednesday, President Donald Trump's 2020 [annual proclamation](#) briefly shared the story of An Wang, a Chinese American pioneer in electronics engineering who held 40 patents and founded technology company Wang Laboratories. The same week Trump issued

that proclamation, he also issued presidential statements for [National Physical Fitness and Sports Month](#), [National Foster Care Month](#), and [Jewish American Heritage Month](#) — all also designated for May.

It's hard to keep track of all the commemorative days and months, shared Sree Sreenivasan, Loeb Visiting Professor of Digital Innovation at the Stony Brook School of Journalism and co-founder of the South Asian Journalists Association. Sreenivasan believes there isn't widespread awareness of Asian Pacific American Heritage Month — and when there is, it's usually among second- and third-generation Asian Americans.

"This month is important to help Americans — like we do with Black History and Hispanic Heritage Months — learn what is not taught in the history books used in our schools," said John C. Yang, president and executive director of [Asian Americans Advancing Justice](#).

"I see value in getting some of the word out there and to pay more attention at that time," Sreenivasan told *The Juggernaut*. But while anything that brings increased community awareness and more stories is positive, he explained, "There's just so many things going on every day. It's hard (for people) to know what's important."

Compare that to June's well-known Pride Month, which pays tribute to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community. LGBT Americans have [about \\$917 billion in spending power](#), and those who openly identify [as LGBT](#) are about 4% of the country.

Pride Month honors the June 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City, known as a catalyst for the gay rights movement. Gay Pride Day initially began as the last Sunday in June in 1970, but the celebrations have gradually extended over the years to various events throughout June — with major American cities such as New York, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. hosting parades, concerts, and other events throughout the month. The [corporate world](#) has also embraced Pride Month with seasonal campaigns, though it's sometimes led to [shallow efforts](#): research found that [two out of five companies](#) with pride campaigns were not donating any of their proceeds to LGBTQ+ causes. These superficial tactics have earned the moniker "[rainbow-washing](#)."

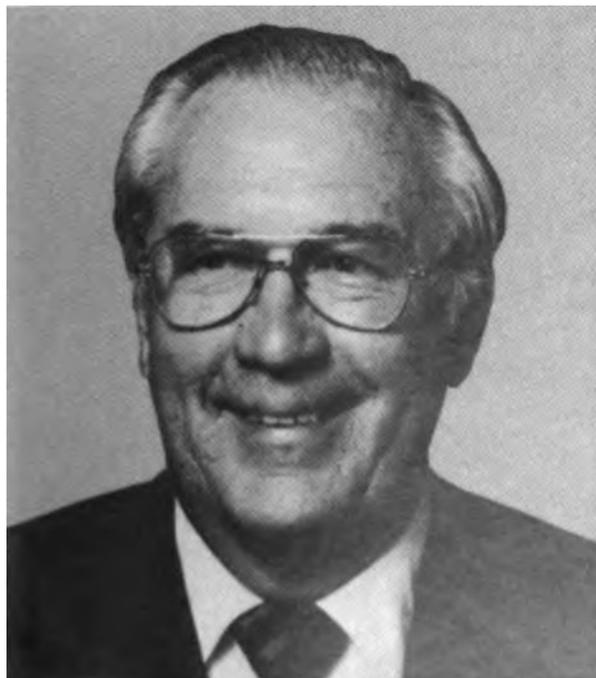
[Some of America's largest corporations](#) celebrate February's [African American History Month](#) (also known as Black History Month), and Americans who identify as black or African American are about 13% of the country and have [\\$1.2 trillion](#) in spending power. The efforts can work — such as when [Target](#) highlighted products from black-owned businesses — but also flop, such as when [Barnes & Noble](#) wanted to relaunch classic books with redesigned covers featuring black characters.

"Like a lot of the other celebrations...those are all opportunities to examine what we call American," said Cyndy Yu-Robinson, executive director of [National Association of Asian American Professionals](#). Since Asian American numbers are smaller, Yu-Robinson says we need to better show how Asians Americans are inherently part of American culture in things like cuisines, languages, and entertainment, such as Japanese Anime and China-founded TikTok.

Companies such as Walmart, McDonald's, and AT&T participate in Asian Pacific American Heritage Month by [reportedly](#) hosting programs and events at their home offices. [Microsoft](#) sometimes recognizes its Asian American employees more widely during the month. Music streaming service Spotify is featuring a curated [Asian Heritage section](#) of Asian American artists and songs from Asia. YouTube is [highlighting](#) up-and-coming Asian American artists. Twitter is promoting the hashtag [#RepresentAsian](#).

There's always increased media attention and Asian American programming on public broadcast stations and some cable outlets this time of year, added Randall Yip, founder and executive editor of news site [AsAmNews](#). "It's a sign that we belong and we are recognized."

In May, PBS is going to broadcast its highly anticipated [Asian Americans](#) series that covers 150 years of history. [Disney Junior](#) is going to air special episodes of [Mira, Royal Detective](#) that feature actors Kunal Nayyar (*The Big Bang Theory*) and Rizwan Manji (*Schitt's Creek*), as well as a short-form series featuring Mira with her mongoose friends. Comcast's Xfinity TV has an "Asian American Film & TV collection" [in honor of the month](#), but when asked by *The Juggernaut*, the company would not disclose how much it spends on overall efforts: "It's fair to say that it's a significant investment," a spokesperson said.



Rep. Frank Horton, former Republican congressman from New York State. (U.S. Government Printing Office)

Asian Pacific American Heritage Month's roots go back to the late 1970s, when Capitol Hill staffer Jeanie F. Jew [wanted to see](#) the government acknowledge Asian Pacific Americans' contributions to the country. May was chosen for a couple milestones: Japanese immigrants first arrived in the U.S. in May 1843 and Chinese immigrants ([including](#) Jew's Chinese great-grandfather) mostly built America's first transcontinental railroad, which was completed in May 1869. Jew approached Rep. Frank Horton (R-NY) to take action and soon he, Rep. Charles Whalen, Jr. (R-OH), Rep. David Satterfield III (D-VA), and Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-HI) introduced [a series of resolutions](#) to create a week recognizing the Asian and Pacific American communities. Horton's resolution passed and [became law in 1978](#), creating the first Asian/Pacific American Heritage Week in May 1979 under President Jimmy Carter.

Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush continued the annual week-long observance until the early 1990s, when [a new law](#) gave Bush permission to use his executive power to make it a month — he did so in 1990, 1991, and 1992. But the initiative wasn't made into law until 1992, after Horton introduced new legislation and Congress [permanently designated](#) May as Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. Since then, Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and now Trump have continued to issue annual presidential proclamations for the month.

Proclamations can do the talking but political representation can spur action. Beyond May, Yu-Robinson recommends the community should continue to register to vote and participate in [the 2020 Census](#). That's especially key since Asian Americans could be undercounted because of poor participation. A [study](#) found that only 55% of Asian Americans said they were "extremely" or "very" likely to participate in the Census — compared to 64% of blacks, 65% of Latinos, and 69% of whites.

Asian Americans should also encourage each other to run for public office, said Madalene Xuan-Trang Mielke, president and CEO of the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies ([APAICS](#)). "How do we motivate the community to take the next step and see that representation is important to us, because that's also how we can share our perspectives and be able to have our community leaders?"

That leadership is growing: The current U.S. Congress has 14 representatives, three senators and three delegates of Asian- or Pacific Island-descent — the highest total number in history. Most prominently, Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) [became the first Indian American to be a serious contender for the Democratic candidacy](#), (she dropped out in December) and tech entrepreneur Andrew Yang was the first Asian American man to run for the White House (he dropped out in February). But at least 171 other Asians are [running for both local and prominent spots](#), too, according to APAICS.

This year's Asian Pacific American Heritage Month also comes on the heels of [an uptick in racism against Asian Americans](#), due to the coronavirus. Some politicians (including the president) and cable news pundits perpetuated derogatory terms such as the "Chinese virus" and "Kung Flu," possibly influencing hate crimes — such as the [stabbing](#) of an Asian American family at a Texas Sam's Club or when a New York subway rider [sprayed Febreze](#) on an Asian passenger. A recent [survey](#), conducted for the Center for Public Integrity found 32 percent of Americans have witnessed blame against Asians for the ongoing pandemic.

For some, this month is an important time to move beyond a popular understanding of Asian Americans — namely the [model minority myth](#) — to help debunk how our community is not a monolith.

“Asian Americans have suffered greatly because the stereotypes of being the perpetual foreigner still looms in the background,” said Asian Americans Advancing Justice’s Yang. “Recognition and celebration of this month helps to break down those barriers and stereotypes.”

Vignesh Ramachandran is a senior editor at The Juggernaut.

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