

## THE CASE FOR ADDRESSING RACE IN THE IMMIGRATION DEBATE

This issue of *Perspectives* presents the second in a series of essays on Race and Immigration. In her essay, Karen Narasaki, president and executive director of the Asian American Justice Center, posits that race is fundamental to the immigration debate. She makes the case that only by addressing race directly—and involving both the newcomer and the native-born in identifying problems and developing solutions—can we ensure America's ability to live up to the promise of fairness and opportunity for all. Her recommendations identify ten strategies foundations can support to nurture the building of a broad and powerful social movement that benefits all members of society.

The first essay in the "Race and Immigration" series, by Emmett D. Carson, now president and CEO of Silicon Valley Community Foundation, examined the relationship between Mexican-Americans and African-Americans. It also offered insightful analysis on the barriers to finding common ground and provided recommendations for foundation action.

We invite you to read Narasaki's essay—as well as the earlier essay by Carson—and share with us your thoughts on how we can continue to keep these important issues on the radar screen of philanthropy. You also may be interested in reading the fall 2006 issue of *New Americans*, which features a wide range of perspectives on immigration reform strategies and priorities.

GCIR is committed to promoting an ongoing dialogue on race and immigration. Your comments and suggestions will guide our follow-up work to illuminate the strategies that funders can support to address racial tensions and improve racial equity.

Sincerely,



Daranee Petsod  
Executive Director, GCIR



Grantmakers Concerned with  
Immigrants and Refugees



Karen K. Narasaki, president  
and executive director of the  
Asian American Justice Center

**P**assage of the 1965 Immigration Act changed the racial and ethnic composition of the United States. By eliminating race-based admissions criteria, which favored immigration from northern European nations, this historic legislation paved the way for expanded immigration from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In 1960, seven of the top-ten immigrant-sending countries were European, but today, all of the top-ten sending countries are either Latin American or Asian.

This diversity—and the fear and anxiety that accompany it—make the debate about immigration fundamentally a debate about race. Race has mattered since our nation's founding, beginning with Irish and Italian immigrants who were not considered to be "white." In today's immigration debate, race and the country's changing demographics constitute a key underlying subtext. It is why immigration is being used in this election year to fan the flames of fear and hostility and to divide communities. Unchecked, it will undermine America's ability to live up to the promise of opportunity for all.

### Immigration Typecast as a Latino-Only Issue

**P**olicy makers, the media, and immigrant communities themselves all have a tendency to view immigration as solely a Latino issue, just as civil rights have traditionally been viewed as solely an African-American issue. Newspaper photos and television news footages reinforce this message to the general public. Despite, for example, the active Asian-American participation in the spring 2006 immigrant

rights rallies, most of the media coverage focused on Latino participation and perspective.

Although Latinos constitute the largest foreign-born population in terms of absolute numbers, the Asian-American community has a higher percentage of foreign-born, and immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean are a growing part of the black community. Arab-Americans—along with white immigrants from Canada, Russia, and other parts of Europe—are also missing from the story.

Typcasting of immigration as a Latino-only issue promotes a framing that pits communities against each other. It undermines our ability to achieve the unity necessary to overcome the forces of fear and bigotry. It weakens our efforts to win fair and sensible policies that reflect our shared concerns and interests as Americans. It fractures a common cause.

### **Race as a Divider: Immigrants vs. African-Americans**

**P**articularly challenging is the framing that pits African-Americans against immigrant communities.

Earl Ofari Hutchison, an African-American author and political analyst, touched a nerve at the height of the mass marches and rallies by largely Latino immigrants with his op-ed entitled “Silent Civil Rights Groups.”<sup>1</sup> He charged that African-American elected officials and traditional African-American civil rights leaders were resistant to comparing the immigrant rights movement to the historic civil rights movement.

Thankfully, that has not been my experience—nor the experience of other immigrant rights advocates—who have worked closely with African-American civil rights organizations. Indeed, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the nation’s largest and oldest coalition fighting for civil rights, embraced immigrant rights as part of the civil rights movement well over a decade ago.

African-American elected officials and other leaders have become increasingly involved in immigration issues, particularly with the growing numbers of immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean and the recognition that issues confronting immigrants are frequently the same issues facing their communities. These leaders opposed a provision in an

anti-immigrant bill that would have paid private bounty hunters to track undocumented immigrants, comparing it to the anti-fugitive act used to track and return escaped slaves. They supported the labor-led Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides. And they protested an immigration bill that would have made everyone who is an undocumented immigrant, and everyone who provides services or humanitarian aid in any way, a felon.

While many national African-American leaders are indeed supportive of immigrant rights, Ofari Hutchison is right to point out that not all are comfortable with the issue.

The impact that growing numbers of immigrants have had, and will have, on the economic opportunities for African-Americans create legitimate concerns. Chief among them is whether immigration has indirectly decreased the incentive of corporate America and elected officials to make necessary investments in our public schools and in job training programs. In the absence of such programs, and given ongoing discriminatory practices, too many in the African-American community will remain trapped in a cycle of poverty and disinvestment.

African-American leaders are well aware that black men have faced higher unemployment rates than white Americans long before immigration. It is a problem exacerbated by the increasing globalization of our economy: Many of the well-paying, middle-class jobs in manufacturing have moved overseas or been mechanized and no longer exist. In addition, the vestiges of discrimination from our not-too-distant segregated past, the struggle for resources our public schools face in high-minority communities, and the increasing withdrawal of public investment in our nation’s most important resource—people—have all taken their toll.

African-Americans are concerned about the persistent poverty and high unemployment rates of African-Americans in cities like New York that are otherwise thriving. They feel displaced from jobs in industries, such as construction and hospitality, which have traditionally provided employment opportunities for many in their community. Some of these sectors, due to a myriad of factors, are now dominated by immigrants.

To counteract that problem, for example, the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees international union, which has a high and growing number of immigrant members, has begun to build in a requirement for affirmative action in their contracts to address issues of discrimination against African-Americans in their industries. Immigrant advocates also have begun to call for language training for existing government workers rather than a wholesale replacement of those workers, who often have a significant representation from the African-American community.

Many African-American leaders have concluded that despite any economic impact immigration may have on the African-American community, the answer lies in creating opportunities in higher-skilled and higher-paying jobs, not in opposing continued immigration or earned legalization for immigrants already here. As a result, the question that most pose is what investments need to be made—and what actions taken to counteract any impact—to finally fulfill the promise of equal opportunity.

Another concern is that local communities are changing as growing immigrant populations join as well as displace African-Americans from their traditional neighborhoods. These changes are occurring not only in urban areas, but also in the rural South. While in some cases changes reflect new opportunities for African-Americans to move into more attractive suburbs, the shift still creates understandable apprehension and can frequently contribute to racial tensions.

Compounding matters, elections are no longer simply black versus white, and race relations are much more complicated. With Asian-Americans and Latinos now joining the electoral fray, there is new competition for political influence. Some African-Americans fear that the new immigrants do not understand and appreciate that the opportunities available to them now were won through a hard-fought civil rights movement led largely by African-Americans. There is also a fear that, rather than being part of the solution to America's age-old struggle to overcome racism, these immigrants will become like the European immigrants before them, moving up and out, again leaving the African-American community behind. The recent comments by civil rights icon Andrew Young attacking Jewish, Arab, and Korean storeowners in African-American neighborhoods show how deeply these fears are held.

Taking advantage of these fears, the fiercest opponents of immigration have sought to recruit African-Americans to their cause. This effort has been largely unsuccessful because there is an instinctive African-American reaction of sympathy for the underdogs—for those being exploited and treated unfairly. Moreover, the underlying racial tenor of the debate and the connection of some of these opponents to hate groups and white supremacists give African-Americans pause, as does their obvious lack of interest in supporting civil rights laws or funding for programs that would help the African-American community.

Finally, some of the heavy-handed enforcement tactics being introduced by anti-immigrant groups, from racial profiling to excessive unchecked power in the hands of law enforcement, echo those used against the civil rights movement and the African-American community.

Nevertheless, much of the media automatically frames the debate around low-skilled immigration as pitting Latinos against African-Americans, even though the most vociferous opponents are white. This is very similar to the media's framing of the affirmative action debates as pitting Asian-Americans against other minorities, despite the fact that whites are the most strident opponents and that a majority of Asian-Americans have consistently polled in favor of affirmative action when it is not done through quotas.

Much of this framing is reinforced by what the media omits from its coverage. For example, Bruce Gordon, the NAACP's president, consciously sought out Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa so that he could join the mayor at one of the spring rallies in Los Angeles. Gordon asked and was given an opportunity to address the marchers. He felt it was not just an issue of solidarity, but also in the African-American community's best interest, as immigrants who are black are also treated unfairly. Not only was Gordon's presence not covered by the press, but the *Los Angeles Times* ran a story about how Mayor Villaraigosa had to be careful that his support of the marchers did not alienate the African-American voters who had supported his candidacy.

This kind of coverage sets up simplistic choices. There is a tautology of belief that if a group does not see something in their narrowly defined self-interest, they will oppose it even if it is in our nation's more broadly defined interests. That is not the case. There is another choice. Americans have a fundamental belief in fairness.

### Pitting Immigrants against One Another and the Native-Born

The current framing of the immigration debates also creates an opportunity to pit Asian-Americans against Latinos, resulting in policies that drive a deeper wedge between the two communities. For example, despite the fact that an estimated 10 percent of the Asian-American community is undocumented, a recent federal immigration reform proposal addresses only undocumented and low-skilled workers from Mexico and the Caribbean. This sends us back to the days of bias against immigrants from Asia and formalizes a class-race divide that pits so-called brown and black workers coming into the country under low-skilled visa programs against Asian tech workers who qualify for high-skilled programs.

Opponents of comprehensive immigration reform frequently raise the specter of unfairness by charging that those eligible for earned legalization, primarily Latinos, will be jumping ahead in line of those in the family backlogs, mostly Asians, e.g., Filipino immigrants who must wait up to 24 years for visas for their brothers and sisters. Yet in reality, pending reform proposals seek to ensure that these backlogs would be cleared before the legalization process would be completed.

Arab-Americans, South Asians, and Muslims have also become fodder in the debates. With national security being held up as the reason for hostility against healthy levels of immigration, these communities have an important stake in the policies being set. Immigration opponents employ tactics of fear and division, seeking to persuade other minority communities that Americans should accept policies that violate fundamental notions of due process, checks and balances, and good old-fashioned fairness.

Lately, Native Americans are being dragged into the debate. Tighter border enforcement has driven undocumented immigrants into more dangerous crossings, some in tribal lands. Tribal concerns about this issue have been used as justification to build a wall that, in fact, the tribal leaders do not want.

### Uniting Communities

Within this divisive context, Asian-Americans have increasingly played an important role in bringing communities together. Our experiences embrace both that of race and that of the immigrant ethnic experience. We understand what it is to be seen as racially inferior as well as to be treated as inherently unassimilable foreigners. The size of our growing population and the incredible ethnic and religious diversity within our community have required Asian-Americans to become adept at working in partnerships and coalition.

The power of bringing all stakeholders together can be seen in the overwhelming support for reauthorizing the Voting Rights Act within a Congress otherwise hostile to civil rights. Latinos, Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Native Americans, and socially conscious whites stood together and did what many thought might not be possible. Not only were the provisions reauthorized in the face of much conservative outcry, but they were strengthened. Efforts to pass weakening amendments failed. Was it easy? No. Were there disagreements? Yes. But it worked. Wise investments by funders helped to build the capacity of groups that share a broad vision of social justice and know how to work together

### The Human Rights Framework

One of the challenges in achieving a progressive vision on immigration and the rights of immigrants is that issues have become so broad that work on immigration and immigrant rights can no longer be done in silos. Anti-immigrant measures are being pushed in every aspect of community life—from English-only measures on health and emergency relief to additional punishment for immigrants caught up in the criminal justice system to local housing ordinances that target large immigrant households. Immigration policy work alone is clearly not enough—nor is the civil rights frame sufficient.

The broader framework of human rights may be needed to realize a progressive vision of equal rights, justice, and opportunities for immigrants. This framework asks, “What rights should anyone have regardless of how they got to this country?” Covering education, health, housing, economic opportunities, a human rights framework can help bring African-Americans, Asian-Americans and Latinos together regardless of whether they are native- or foreign-born.

## The Role of Funders

Some funders express hesitation about funding race-, ethnic-, or faith-based organizations, fearing they might be inadvertently fueling conflict. However, some conflict is inevitable because there are different needs and circumstances and, therefore, potentially different priorities and approaches. When handled well by groups that know how to manage differences and are committed to a set of shared values and vision, conflict can lead to stronger and more creative and effective alliances and solutions.

### *So what can funders do to nurture and support the building of a broad and powerful movement?*

1. **Look at funding strategies with an understanding that race is still relevant.** Certainly, class is also an issue, but it is intertwined with issues of race, ethnicity, and religion. Support groups that have a demonstrated commitment to working across these lines.
2. **Seek opportunities to build capacity of African-American organizations to work on immigration and immigrant rights issues.** Fledgling African and Caribbean immigrant organizations need to be nurtured, and civil rights groups like the NAACP need resources to build expertise in an area that is outside of their traditional work. Together, these groups can help work against any racial bias in our immigration policy.
3. **Support relevant research.** For example, socio-economic research that looks at African-Americans, globalization, and the economic impact of immigration holistically—that takes into account the long history and current realities of discrimination and the complexities of our global economy—can help dispel misperceptions and point communities to effective solutions. Public opinion research is needed to help leaders understand how each minority community is looking at these issues—what do they know and don't know? Such research would help leaders fill in the gaps and target their education efforts. User-friendly demographic reports would serve to educate local policymakers, government agencies, media, and other institutions and to inform local policy work.
4. **Make sure that the concerns of immigrant communities are incorporated in efforts that address social issues,** such as education, health, LGBT, gender, housing, and economic development. In order to be at the table in a meaningful way, national and local immigrant community-based organizations need significant capacity to be able to both work within their own communities and provide leadership outside of their communities.
5. **Support networks and efforts that consistently bring all stakeholders together.** Bilateral conversations between communities are important, but African-American, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian-Americans need to engage with one another—not just because they all have a stake, but also because, otherwise, it will be easier for others to pit groups against each other.
6. **Make resources and a safe space for internal discussions available to groups.** No community is a monolith. There is growing ethnic and other diversity within all of our communities, and it is normal and appropriate for local and national groups to have different perspectives and strengths since they play different roles. Capacity for consistent and regular internal discussions is critical.
7. **Build capacity of anchoring institutions, both on a local and a national level.** These groups need to have the necessary staffing to participate on a level playing field and to consistently plan and work together so that strong relationships are built and maintained. While dialog projects are helpful, investments in supporting joint problem research and problem solving are vital. Although everyone might agree on certain general challenges, such as improving access to quality education, the barriers and the solutions may vary within and among the communities.
8. **Support projects that seek to educate and hold accountable both new and popular media** for improving coverage and breaking free of the stereotypical portrayals of both issues and communities. Improve the communications capacity of immigrant organizations so they can meet regularly with media outlets and hold them accountable. Fund journalist fellowships and trainings focused on covering these issues and

communities. Support efforts to publish analyses of good and bad journalism.

9. **Fund cross-racial and silo-breaking projects.** Working across racial lines can be even more difficult on a local level than on a national level because the competition for resources and for power is much more direct. Understand that long-term funding commitments are essential because effective collaborations will take much more resources and time.
10. **Invest in efforts to build a domestic human rights movement.** Much broader than civil rights or immigrant rights, the human rights framework offers a blueprint for bringing diverse communities together regardless of whether they are native-born or immigrant. Yes, it will require significant effort to overcome U.S. views of exceptionalism and the fear of advocates that their particular issue or community will be subsumed and marginalized. But imagine what could be achieved.

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### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Earl Ofari Hutchinson, "Silent Civil Rights Groups," *Pacific News Service*, posted on March 28, 2006, printed on March 29, 2006, <http://www.alternet.org/story/34156/>

### About the Author

**Karen K. Narasaki** is the president and executive director of the Asian American Justice Center, whose mission is to advance the human and civil rights of Asian-Americans through advocacy, public policy, public education, and litigation. One of the nation's experts on voting rights, immigration and immigrant rights, and race relations, Ms. Narasaki serves in a number of leadership positions in the civil rights and immigrant rights communities.

Before joining AAJC, Ms. Narasaki was the Washington, D.C. Representative for the Japanese American Citizens League; a corporate attorney at Perkins Coie in Seattle, Washington; and a law clerk to Judge Harry Pregerson on the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in Los Angeles. She is a graduate, *magna cum laude*, of Yale University and Order of the Coif, of the UCLA School of Law.

### About GCIR

**GCIR** is a national affinity group that seeks to move the philanthropic field to advance the contributions and address the needs of the world's growing and increasingly diverse immigrant and refugee populations. In 2005, more than 1,500 grantmakers took advantage of our information resources and another 1,000 participated in our programs. For more information, visit [www.gcir.org](http://www.gcir.org) or contact the GCIR office at [info@gcir.org](mailto:info@gcir.org) or 707.824.4374.