



# THE RETURN OF “YELLOW PERIL”

## *Anti-AAPI Rhetoric and Policies Leading up to the 2020 Election*

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### Introduction

Asian Americans are the fastest growing electorate of all racial groups. Eleven million Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) are eligible to vote in this upcoming election and are expected to make up nearly 5% of the nation’s eligible voters.<sup>1</sup> Racial discrimination is among the top concerns for Asian American voters,<sup>2</sup> and racial and ethnic inequality is among the major concerns of all voters.<sup>3</sup>

This report reviews anti-Asian American rhetoric by politicians, including rhetoric related to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the months preceding the 2020 presidential election. Looking specifically on Twitter, the researchers analyzed 1,227 tweets about Asian Americans over an eight month period, and found that over 1 in 10 including racist or stigmatizing language. All of these racist tweets, which were retweeted 1,310,828 times, came from Republican politicians. Furthermore, the research indicates that nearly half of stigmatizing tweets are unrelated to COVID-19, suggesting that politicians are employing anti-Asian American rhetoric not only in response to the pandemic.

The research suggests that President Donald Trump, whose racist or stigmatizing tweets have by far the greatest reach and were retweeted 1,213,700 times and liked 4,276,200 times, is the greatest spreader among politicians of anti-Asian American rhetoric related to the pandemic.

The report also provides a corresponding timeline of federal policies introduced or enacted during a similar period that disproportionately impact – and in some cases appear to even target – Asian American community members, finding a total of 24 policies from Republican politicians.

Together, the research and policies offer a view into a political strategy to employ racist rhetoric in order to enact xenophobic policies and justify their need.

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<sup>1</sup> Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial or ethnic group in the American electorate, Pew Research Center, available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/07/asian-americans-are-the-fastest-growing-racial-or-ethnic-group-in-the-u-s-electorate>

<sup>2</sup> Asian American Voter Survey 2020, AAPI Data, available at <https://aapidata.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Slides-AAVS-2020-sep15.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Election 2020: Voters Are Highly Engaged, But Nearly Half Expect to Have Difficulties Voting, Pew Research Center, available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/08/13/important-issues-in-the-2020-election/>



## I. Study on 2020 Candidates and Rhetoric on China and AAPIs on Twitter

### OVERVIEW

This study investigates how political candidates discussed China and AAPIs in their Twitter feeds during the first eight months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers specifically examined the tweets issued by both Democratic and Republican general election candidates for the offices of president, vice president and U.S. senator.<sup>4</sup>

### METHODOLOGY

Focusing on the period of January 1, 2020, through August 31, 2020, the researchers searched for tweets that contained any of the following terms: “China,” “Chinese,” “Asian American,” “Asian Americans,” “AAPI,” “Wuhan,” “virus,” “flu,” “kung,” “bat” or “laboratory.” The search returned 1,227 tweets in total.

### FINDINGS

Of these tweets, 136 used, endorsed or defended the use of racist, stigmatizing rhetoric such as “Chinese Virus” and “plague from China” (Figure 1). Tweets deploying stigmatizing rhetoric were retweeted a total of 1,310,828 times and liked a total of 4,488,173 times. All of the stigmatizing tweets came from Republican politicians.

**Overall, the 1,227 tweets fell into five main categories (Figure 2):**

1. Tweets that blamed China for the pandemic or were critical of its handling of the pandemic (37%)
2. Tweets that were critical of China for other reasons – e.g., human rights abuses – and critical of the United States’ dependence on China (47.1%)
3. Tweets that showed support for AAPIs facing racism, whether COVID-related or not (3.8%)
4. Tweets that said other positive things about AAPIs or addressed AAPI issues (0.9%)
5. Miscellaneous (11.2%)

The 1,031 tweets that criticized China (i.e., the tweets that were in categories 1 and 2) were found to mention nine main subjects (Figure 3). These subjects included China’s response to the pandemic, corruption, the Chinese Communist Party, trade and supply chain issues, human rights, national security, technology, wet markets and wildlife, and the theory that the virus emerged from a laboratory in Wuhan. Sometimes tweets mentioned several subjects.

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<sup>4</sup> Authors of the Twitter study are Melissa Borja, Ph.D., University of Michigan, Jacob Gibson, University of Michigan, Sarah Gowing, San Francisco State University, Tiffany Lee, University of Michigan, Joseph Lui, University of Maryland, and Wendi Zhou, University of Washington. The Policy Timeline was produced by Sarah Gowing and Russell Jeung, Ph.D., San Francisco State University.



**Two patterns emerged from an analysis of these tweets:**

1. The vast majority (84%) of the tweets that mentioned China and Asian Americans focused on criticizing China.
2. There is a clear partisan divide in how candidates talk about China and Asian Americans. Republicans account for all of the tweets that use stigmatizing rhetoric and for almost all of the tweets that criticized China. In contrast, Democrats did not use stigmatizing rhetoric in their tweets and account for almost all of the tweets that showed support for AAPIs, especially as they contend with COVID-19-related racism.

**STIGMATIZING RHETORIC IN CANDIDATE TWEETS**

Figure 1: Candidates and Stigmatizing Rhetoric

Candidate	Party & State	Number of tweets using stigmatizing rhetoric	Total number of retweets	Total number of likes
Donald Trump	Incumbent Republican President	24	1,213,700	4,276,200
Tom Cotton	Incumbent Republican senator from Arkansas	61	93,187	204,763
Bill Hagerty	Republican Senate candidate from Tennessee	41	1,407	3,389
Cory Gardner	Incumbent Republican senator from Colorado	3	2,230	2,982
Jason Lewis	Republican Senate candidate from Minnesota	5	293	811
Lauren Witzke	Republican Senate candidate from Delaware	1	10	23
Roger Marshall	Republican Senate candidate from Kansas	1	1	5

A total of 136 candidate tweets used stigmatizing rhetoric such as “Chinese virus” and “Wuhan coronavirus.” Tweets with stigmatizing rhetoric were retweeted a total of 1,310,828 times and liked a total of 4,488,173 times.

Seven candidates issued tweets that used stigmatizing rhetoric, and all were Republican. Three candidates – Tom Cotton, Bill Hagerty, and Donald Trump – accounted for the great majority (93%) of tweets with stigmatizing rhetoric.

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Below are some examples of tweets that used stigmatizing rhetoric:



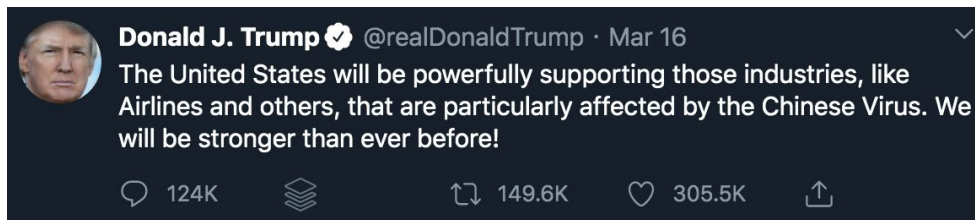
*This tweet was retweeted 9,200 times and liked 17,000 times.*



*This tweet was retweeted 3,100 times and liked 6,800 times.*



*This tweet was retweeted 437 times and liked 1,000 times.*



*This tweet was retweeted 149,900 times and liked 306,600 times.*



*This tweet was retweeted 107,200 times and liked 314,700 times.*

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## CATEGORIES OF CANDIDATE TWEETS

Figure 2: Categories of Tweets

Category of Tweet	Number of tweets	% of tweets	% of tweets made by Democrats	% of tweets made by Republicans
Criticized China for other reasons	578	47.1%	11.8%	88.2%
Blamed China for Covid-19	453	37.0%	2.0%	98.0%
Miscellaneous	138	11.2%	13.0%	87.0%
Showed support for AAPIs	47	3.8%	97.9%	2.1%
Said other positive things about AAPIs	11	0.9%	81.8%	18.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,227</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>12.2%</b>	<b>87.8%</b>

Of the 1,227 tweets, 453 blamed China for the pandemic or were critical of its handling of the pandemic. There were 444 tweets in this category that came from Republicans; 9 came from Democrats. Below is an example:



*This tweet was retweeted 1,000 times and liked 1,800 times.*

There were 578 tweets that criticized China for other reasons – e.g., for human rights abuses – and also criticized American dependence on China. In this category, 510 tweets came from Republicans; 68 came from Democrats. Below are some examples:



*This tweet was retweeted 589 times and liked 1,200 times.*



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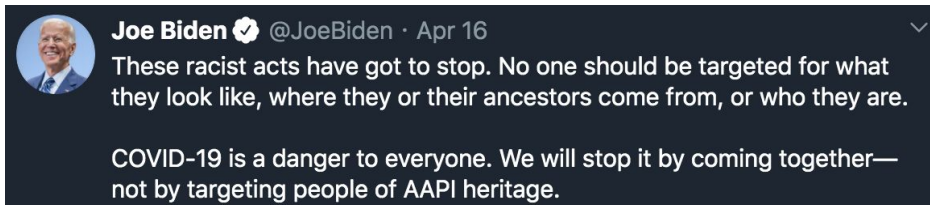


*This tweet was retweeted 3,600 times and liked 6,900 times.*

There were 47 tweets showing support for AAPIs facing racism, whether COVID-related or not. 46 tweets in this category came from Democrats; one tweet came from a Republican. Below are some examples:

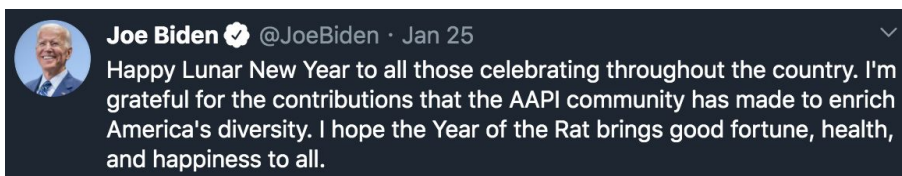


*This tweet was retweeted 3,600 times and liked 17,800 times.*



*This tweet was retweeted 6,100 times and liked 22,400 times.*

There were 11 tweets that said other positive things about AAPIs or addressed AAPI issues. Nine tweets in this category came from Democrats; two tweets came from Republicans. Below are some examples:



*This tweet was retweeted 311 times and liked 1,500 times.*



*This tweet was retweeted 607 times and liked 3,100 times.*

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## Subjects Mentioned in Candidate Tweets Critical of China

Figure 3: Subjects Mentioned in Tweets Critical of China

Subject	Number of tweets	% of mentions	% of Democratic tweets mentioning this subject	% of Republican tweets mentioning this subject
Corruption	317	21.6%	1.3%	98.7%
Chinese Communist Party (CCP)	284	19.3%	1.4%	98.6%
Supply Chain/Trade	250	16.9%	5.6%	94.4%
National Security	173	11.7%	9.8%	90.2%
Technology	130	8.8%	6.2%	93.8%
Human Rights	106	7.2%	24.5%	75.5%
Pandemic Response	95	6.4%	3.2%	96.8%
Wet Markets & Wildlife	29	2.0%	10%	90.0%
Lab Theory	26	1.9%	0%	100.0%

The 1,031 tweets that criticized China mentioned nine subjects. These subjects included China’s response to the pandemic, corruption, the Chinese Communist Party, trade and supply chain issues, human rights, national security, technology, wet markets and wildlife, and the theory that the virus emerged from a laboratory in Wuhan. Sometimes tweets mentioned several subjects.

There were 95 tweets **criticizing China’s responses to the pandemic** – 92 of the tweets came from Republicans; three came from Democrats. Below is an example:



*This tweet was retweeted 1,300 times and liked 2,700 times.*

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There were 317 tweets mentioning **corruption in China**. Of those, 313 came from Republicans and three came from Democrats. Below is an example:



*This tweet was retweeted 14,400 times and liked 25,600 times.*

There were 284 tweets mentioning the **Chinese Communist Party**. Of those, 280 came from Republicans and four came from Democrats. Below are some examples:



*This tweet was retweeted 986 times and liked 2,000 times.*



*This tweet was retweeted 501 times and liked 570 times.*

There were 250 tweets mentioning **trade**. Of those, 236 of the tweets came from Republicans and 14 came from Democrats. Below is an example:



*This tweet was retweeted 1,400 times and liked 5,900 times.*



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There were 106 tweets mentioning **human rights**. Of those, 80 came from Republicans and 26 came from Democrats. Below are some examples:



*This tweet was retweeted 823 times and liked 953 times.*



*This tweet was retweeted 385 times and liked 455 times.*

There were 173 tweets mentioning **national security**. Of those, 156 came from Republicans and 17 came from Democrats. Below is an example:



*This tweet was retweeted 9 times and liked 27 times.*

There were 130 tweets mentioning **technology**. Of those, 122 came from Republicans and eight came from Democrats. Below are some examples:



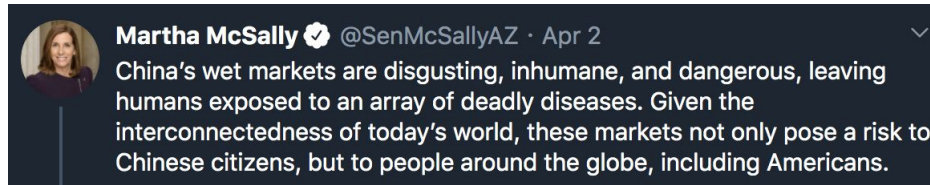
*This tweet was retweeted 470 times and liked 533 times*



*This tweet was retweeted 3,800 times and liked 6,300 times*

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There were 29 tweets mentioning **wet markets and wildlife**. Of those, 26 came from Republicans and three came from Democrats. Below are some examples:



*This tweet was retweeted 548 times and liked 1,900 times*



*This tweet was retweeted 33 times and liked 54 times*

There were 26 tweets mentioning **the theory that the coronavirus emerged from Chinese laboratories**. Of those, 26 came from Republicans and none came from Democrats. Below is an example:



*This tweet was retweeted 3,100 times and liked 6,800 times.*



## II. Timeline of Anti-Asian Policies, January – October 2020

In addition to employing racist rhetoric about the spread of COVID-19, the Trump administration, alongside many Republican senators and representatives, have sought to enact policies which explicitly target China or disproportionately impact Asian Americans.

### Policy categories:

- Scapegoat and blame China for the COVID-19 pandemic (4)
- Curtail immigration and refugee resettlement from Asian nations (6)
- Bar Chinese international students and researchers (3)
- Limit communications, business and trade with China (3)
- Authorize claims of financial and legal liability to be brought against China in American courts (7)
- Ban racial sensitivity trainings (1)

**January 31** – President Trump signed the “Proclamation on Suspension of Entry as Immigrants and Nonimmigrants of Persons who Pose a Risk of Transmitting 2019 Novel Coronavirus.” This banned almost all foreign nationals from entering the U.S. if they had been in China during any of the 14 days prior to their arrival to the U.S.<sup>5</sup>

**March 2** – The Trump administration limited to 100 (collectively) the number of Chinese citizens who may work in the United States for five state-controlled Chinese news organizations, effective March 13.<sup>6</sup>

**March 19** – Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) introduced the “Protecting Our Pharmaceutical Supply Chain from China Act of 2020.” This bill prohibits pharmaceutical purchases from China or products with active pharmaceutical ingredients created in China.<sup>7</sup> (Rep. Mike Gallagher (R-WI) introduced this to the House on April 10.<sup>8</sup>)

**March 24** – Rep. Jim Banks (R-IN) introduced the resolution, “Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the government of the People’s Republic of China made multiple, serious mistakes in the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak that heightened the severity and spread of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which include the Chinese government’s intentional spread of misinformation to downplay the risks of the virus, a refusal to cooperate with international health authorities, internal censorship of doctors and journalists and malicious disregard for the health of ethnic minorities.” This resolution condemns China for its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-suspension-entry-immigrants-nonimmigrants-persons-pose-risk-transmitting-2019-novel-coronavirus>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.state.gov/institution-of-a-personnel-cap-on-designated-prc-state-media-entities>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3537>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6482>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/907>

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**March 26** – Rep. Gregory Steube (R-FL) introduced the “Chinese Government COVID-19 Accountability Act.” This bill directs the president to develop and carry out a strategy to get China’s government to reimburse the U.S. government for funds made available to address COVID-19.<sup>10</sup>

**April 14** – Rep. Steve Chabot (R-OH) introduced the resolution, “Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that all nations should permanently close live wildlife markets and that the People’s Republic of China should cease spreading disinformation regarding the origins of coronavirus.”<sup>11</sup>

**April 17** – Rep. Dan Crenshaw (R-TX) introduced “Holding the Chinese Communist Party Accountable for Infecting Americans Act of 2020.” This bill allows Americans to sue China in federal court to “recover damages for death, injury and economic harm” caused by COVID-19.<sup>12</sup> (Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) introduced this to the Senate on May 7.<sup>13</sup>)

**April 22** – President Trump signed the “Proclamation Suspension of Entry of Immigrants Who Present a Risk to the United States Labor Market During the Economic Recovery Following the 2019 Novel Coronavirus Outbreak.” This suspended immigration into the U.S. for 60 days if foreign nationals are outside the U.S., do not have a valid visa, and do not have another official travel document.<sup>14</sup>

**April 28** – Rep. Brian Mast (R-FL) introduced the resolution, “Expressing the Sense of the House of Representatives that the People’s Republic of China should be held accountable for its handling of COVID-19.”<sup>15</sup>

**May 1** – Rep. Chip Roy (R-TX) introduced the “Bring Entrepreneurial Advancements To Consumers Here In North America Act (BEAT CHINA).” This bill blames China for the COVID-19 pandemic and incentivizes pharmaceutical and medical device and supply manufacturers to relocate to the United States.<sup>16</sup> (Sen. Kelly Loeffler (R-GA) introduced this to the Senate on June 11.<sup>17</sup>)

**May 4** – Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) introduced the “Stop China-Originated Viral Infectious Diseases (COVID) Act.” This bill makes China legally and financially liable for the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6405>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/922>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6519>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3662>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-suspending-entry-immigrants-present-risk-u-s-labor-market-economic-recovery-following-covid-19-outbreak>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/944>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6690>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3945>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3592>

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**May 4** – Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO) introduced the “Justice for Victims of Coronavirus Act.” This bill allows Americans to sue China in federal court.<sup>19</sup>

**May 11** – Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO) introduced the “Justice for Victims of Coronavirus Around the World Act.” This bill stipulates that the president would establish a Justice for Victims of Coronavirus Task Force to investigate and secure damages from China.<sup>20</sup>

**May 11** – Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) introduced the “COVID-19 Accountability Act.” This bill authorizes sanctions in relation to the Chinese government’s response to COVID-19. It requires the president to certify that the Chinese government (1) is cooperating with efforts related to the COVID-19 outbreak, (2) has prohibited wet markets and (3) has released and dropped all charges for anyone involved in protests in Hong Kong related to COVID-19. If the president cannot make such a certification, the president may (1) impose sanctions on Chinese government officials, entities owned or controlled by the Chinese government, and individuals affiliated with such entities; or (2) prohibit Chinese nationals from obtaining student visas (i.e., F and M visas) or exchange visitor visas (i.e., J visas).<sup>21</sup> (Rep. Doug Collins (R-GA) introduced this to the House on May 14.<sup>22</sup>)

**May 22** – Rep. Ann Wagner (R-MO) introduced the “Compensation for Americans Act of 2020.” This bill requires the U.S. Department of State to negotiate with China to secure compensation for damages due to COVID-19, and allows the president to impose sanctions on Chinese nationals and corporations, freeze Chinese assets, and prohibit using federal funds to procure goods manufactured or sourced from a Chinese company. It also requires U.S. World Bank representatives to end China’s eligibility for World Bank assistance.<sup>23</sup>

**May 27** – Rep. David Kustoff (R-TN) introduced the “SECURE CAMPUS Act of 2020.” This bill prohibits Chinese nationals from receiving visas to the United States for graduate or postgraduate studies in STEM fields.<sup>24</sup> (Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) introduced this to the Senate on June 9.<sup>25</sup>)

**May 29** – President Trump signed the “Proclamation on the Suspension of Entry as Nonimmigrants of Certain Students and Researchers from the People’s Republic of China.” This suspended the entry of certain Chinese nationals seeking to enter the United States on an F or J visa (i.e., student visas) to study or conduct research in the United States.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3588>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3673>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3683>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6863>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/7007>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/7033>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3920>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-suspension-entry-nonimmigrants-certain-students-researchers-peoples-republic-china>



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**June 11** – Rep. Devin Nunes (R-CA) introduced the “Holding China Accountable Act.” This bill prohibits travel to the United States by Chinese nationals whose visit involves science, technology, engineering, mathematics or a related field.<sup>27</sup>

**June 22** – President Trump signed the “Proclamation Suspending Entry of Aliens Who Present a Risk to the U.S. Labor Market Following the Coronavirus Outbreak.” This expanded and extended his April 22 proclamation by extending the initial green card ban until December 31, 2020, and includes additional significant restrictions on several categories of temporary guest worker visas, including H1B visas.<sup>28</sup>

**July 20** – Sen. Martha McSally (R-AZ) introduced the “Civil Justice for Victims of COVID Act.” This bill allows Americans to sue China in federal court in relation to COVID-19.<sup>29</sup>

**August 6** – President Trump signed the “Executive Order on Addressing the Threat Posed by WeChat.” This banned transactions between U.S. nationals and the parent company of WeChat, Tencent Holdings, LTD.<sup>30</sup>

**September 22** – President Trump signed the “Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping.” This bans the federal government and its contractors from hosting racial sensitivity training.<sup>31</sup>

**September 26** – President Trump signed the “Executive Order on Enhancing State and Local Involvement in Refugee Resettlement.” This requires the consent of states and cities to resettle refugees in their jurisdictions and reduces the number of refugees to be resettled to the United States from 110,000 in the last year of the Obama administration to only 18,000.<sup>32</sup>

**October 6** – The Departments of Labor and Homeland Security overhauled H1B wage structures, projected to reduce the number of applications filed by corporations for these visas by one-third.

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/7181>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-suspending-entry-aliens-present-risk-u-s-labor-market-following-coronavirus-outbreak>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/4212>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-addressing-threat-posed-wechat>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-combating-race-sex-stereotyping>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-enhancing-state-local-involvement-refugee-resettlement>

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HATE

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[Stop AAPI Hate](#), a national coalition aimed at addressing anti-Asian discrimination amid the pandemic, was founded by the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council (A3PCON), Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) and San Francisco State University's Asian American Studies Department.



The [Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council](#) (A3PCON) is a coalition of more than forty community-based organizations that serve and represent the 1.5 million Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the greater Los Angeles area, with a particular focus on low-income, immigrant, refugee and other vulnerable populations.



[Chinese for Affirmative Action](#) (CAA) was founded in 1969 to protect the civil and political rights of Chinese Americans and to advance multiracial democracy in the United States. Today, CAA is a progressive voice in and on behalf of the broader Asian American and Pacific Islander community. We advocate for systemic change that protects immigrant rights, promotes language diversity, and remedies racial and social injustice.



[SF State Asian American Studies](#) (AAS) is the oldest and largest such academic program in the nation. Founded after the 1968-69 Black Student Union and Third World Liberation Front student strike, it maintains the strike's values of student activism, social justice, and community self-determination.