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Why Demographics Matter in the Political Representation of Racial Minority Groups: A Standpoint Epistemology and Visibility Account

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Abstract

Do demographics matter in the political representation of racial minority groups, and if so, how should we understand and enhance our understanding of effective representation? This thesis aims to explore concepts surrounding how to best advocate for historically marginalized communities within the public policymaking process through the lens of standpoint epistemology and visibility. I begin by sharing my personal experiences as a young Asian American woman interested in politics, as well as a case study of two congressional representatives that serve similar constituencies, Representative Katie Porter and Young Kim.

I will then introduce a theoretical approach termed standpoint epistemology, as first conceptualized by feminist scholars. Drawing on Karl Marx and W.E.B Du Bois' work in class and race consciousness, I will highlight how standpoint theory emphasizes one's social role in gaining knowledge, and how that connection can supplement the representation of constituencies with various standpoints and experiences. Next, I discuss the importance of diverse visibility in spaces such as public office, and the positive effects it has on fostering trust and inspiring a future generation of leaders. This understanding will be complemented by an analysis of recent Supreme Court cases that have affirmed the value of diversity. Lastly, I will reflect on the lessons learned from both accounts to an analysis on how demographics matter in representation, as seen through Representative Porter and Kim's legislative records.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a Jewish Asian American woman, I have always been acutely conscious of how my background influences my views and how I believe other people perceive me. It has simultaneously allowed me to celebrate my Chinese culture with pride whilst being painfully aware of the violence Asians experience across the world. My lived experiences have fueled my interest in social justice and informed my viewpoints on issues beyond identity. As I have learned more about my identity and historic injustices that have affected my community, I am more conscious of the power relations at play. Because I have experienced instances of overt and implicit racism, I am better equipped than those who have not to discuss its harm and what is needed for redress. The dynamic between one's social and political experiences create a unique standpoint that has unparalleled epistemic value.

It is incredibly important to elect representatives that actually reflect the will of their constituents and intimately understand what is needed for the community. This begs the question as to whether racial minority groups are best equipped to represent their own community, since they might be expected to have more knowledge in what is needed in policy making. This question came to me as I thought about the state of my own representation, where my representative is a white woman, and my Senators are white and Latino. Katie Porter, the House member for California's 45th district, represents the diverse constituency of Orange County. As the first Democrat to hold this position, the district has always leaned Republican but has gotten more purple in recent years. It houses 23.5% of Asian Americans in the general district population, making it one of the districts with the highest concentration of Asian voters (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census Results). She has made an active effort to represent the needs of the community, both in terms of outreach and making her resources culturally and linguistically

accessible. In 2019, Porter helped introduce the *Medical Education for a Diverse America Act*, which would recognize the "time spent by medical residents in certain cultural training to count towards a determination of a hospital's number of full-time equivalent residents" (H.R. 5432). This bill encourages future doctors to be cognizant of the current healthcare disparities for people of color and provide more comprehensive care to historically underserved communities. This has also led to her involvement with various API oriented community groups and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC). Founded in 1994, CAPAC aims "To work with other Members and Caucuses to protect and advance the civil and constitutional rights of all Americans" (CAPAC). This caucus, along with the Black and Hispanic caucus, work to ensure that Congressional legislation includes the needs of minority groups at the federal level. It is encouraged that minority members and members with a large minority constituency join, as they often have the opportunity to review bills and meet with prominent political actors. In her role, Porter has cosponsored H.R. 1843, the *COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act*, which directed resources towards the investigation and prosecution of COVID-19 hate crimes. These crimes are defined by "the actual or perceived characteristic (e.g., race or ethnicity) of any person, and the actual or perceived relationship to the spread of COVID-19 of any person because of that characteristic" (H.R. 1843). Additionally, Porter has hosted numerous townhalls with community leaders and stakeholders to deliberate how to best support the AAPI community during this unprecedented time, many of which I have attended.

Although it seems natural to infer that an Asian American would be best positioned to understand the experiences of the local community, Representative Katie Porter has made exceptional efforts to learn and listen. It is clear she recognizes that in order to effectively represent a minority group she does not belong to, she must take an active role in listening and

learning. In this way, her policymaking recognizes the importance of perspective diversity in representing a racially diverse constituency and many would consider her an effective leader. However, it is still important to consider whether there is a need or benefit to having an Asian American representative.

In a district not far away, Representative Young Kim serves California's 39th congressional district. As a Korean born American, Kim has spent considerable time in politics and was the first Korean-American woman to be elected to Congress. Her district parallels Representative Porter's in that it is also racially diverse, with 30.1% of the general population being Asian voters (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census Results). Though democratic President Joe Biden won her district by 10 points, Kim maintained her seat as a Republican largely due to the Asian American vote. Yet, Kim is rarely engaged in her district and is not a member of CAPAC. Given the recent 2022 redistricting and midterm elections, Kim has hardened her ideologically conservative stances on issues that largely affect minority groups, such as immigration and healthcare. Notably, Kim did not support the *COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act*, though it specifically recognized the disproportionate danger experienced by the AAPI community (H.R. 1843).

During my time working on the hill, Kim did not support efforts that would undoubtedly support the minority communities. In fact, Kim has repeatedly claimed that Asian Americans are discriminated against in the admission process in higher education institutions. In response to the upcoming Supreme Court cases regarding affirmative action, Kim states that "race-based education politics go against the American values we hold dear and only divide us further as a nation" (Kim, 2022). As found in a report from the Center for American Progress and AAPI Data, "half of Asian Americans hold a bachelor's degree or higher. However, only 27% of

Vietnamese Americans and 17% of Hmong and Cambodian Americans hold at least a bachelor's degree" (CFAP, 2014). In this way, Kim fails to recognize affirmative action as a policy that is still necessary for students of color in order to rectify historical inequities in higher education. She also does not discern how broad the Asian American community is, which is incredibly harmful when addressing policies that affect various ethnic subgroups differently. Though Kim might not represent a substantial Cambodian population within her district, failing to understand that communities must be elevated as a whole does a disservice to Asian Americans alike. This sentiment similarly applies to the Asian American community learning from and supporting other minority groups, as it is only when everyone is free anyone is free.

Though it is incredibly exciting to see an Asian American woman serve in Congress, Representative Young Kim's legislative record does not indicate that she has faithfully understood the comprehensive needs of the Asian American community and acted as such. Specifically, she has not recognized the needs of the AAPI community housed within her own district. In 2021, Orange County saw 398 hate crimes and incidents, marking a 165% increase over five years and 424% increase over the past ten years (OCDA, 2022). Of those recorded hate crimes, 51% were motivated against Asian Americans. This notable increase is not a coincidence and it falls on the district's elected federal representative to support legislation that would help curb this trend. There is space to both celebrate her achievements in increasing Asian visibility in the federal government, while also critically examining whether she is the most effective liaison for her predominantly Asian constituency.

1.1 Political Representation

In order to better address my concerns about representation, it is imperative to understand the term more broadly. Political representation is at the core of modern society and it is vital to better understand what the best form of representation is. This is especially pertinent to communities that have been historically marginalized and oppressed, as they often remain underrepresented in the current day. The idea of representation hinges on ensuring that the interests of citizens are apparent throughout the policy-making process, which rely on active participation from both individuals and their respective representatives. In districts with largely minority populations, it is critical to question whether traditional forms of political representation effectively achieve the purpose it intends to.

Representation encompasses a wide criterion that may differ for reasons such as the type of political system it is operating under and the group that seeks a voice. Consequently, there are many models of representation. Descriptive representation is when the representative reflects their constituency through specific characteristics, such as race and gender (Pitkin, 1967, p. 63). This could look like a Native American elder advocating on behalf of his indigenous community, not accounting for the mechanisms by which she was chosen. Descriptive representation can often bridge mistrust within the community, as marginalized communities often do not have faith that political representation can be effective. As found in a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, only 20% of Americans have trust that politicians in Washington will "do the right thing" (Pew, 2022). This lack of trust exists between both parties, with "only 29% of Democrats and just 9% of Republicans say they trust the government just about always or most of the time". In

particular, the survey indicates that only 37% of Asian Americans, 26% of Hispanic Americans, and 24% of Black Americans expressed trust in the government.

Furthermore, representation can be found through the delegate and trustee model. The delegate model portrays a system in which representatives should directly convey the desires of their community without interjecting their personal opinion (Tussman, 1947, p. 117). Effectively, they function as a figurative mouthpiece. The trustee model depicts a representative who conveys what they believe is best, hopefully under the guidance of what they have garnered from their constituents (Burke, 1774). In this model, trustee representatives have more autonomy than pure delegates. In a perfect conception, trustees use their personal expertise to better inform how citizen opinion can be translated into public policy.

The current American system operates on a combination of these two forms of representative democracy to carry out its essential duties, therefore it is critical to evaluate what efficient representation looks like. Political representation allows all citizens to participate within the policymaking process, whereas their diverse views are shared where decisions are made. As reflected through the delegate and trustee model, this could look like directly relaying the wishes of constituents or taking the spirit of their message and transforming it into more tangible steps. For example, Sarah has seen horrific instances of school shootings on the news and wants more common-sense gun control but does not have the capacity to envision what steps are needed to implement such programs. In this case, it would be ideal if her Congresswoman and her legislative team could do much research into what exact steps could be conducive to that goal and vote accordingly when bills arise. Though Sarah did not qualify exact policy, she trusts that

her representative either has the expertise or will seek the knowledge to efficiently meet her needs.

As conceived by Hanna Pitkin, the accountability view underlies both the delegate and trustee model of representation as it ensures that representatives are held responsible to citizens by the citizens (Pitkin, p. 38-39, 55). In America, this would come in the form of elections and recall efforts if constituents believe their representatives are not acting with their best interests in mind. This can be seen through the term limit mechanism, in which each member in the House and Senate are up for reelection every 2 and 6 years respectively. When citizens are unhappy with the current state of their community and the broader nation, they have an opportunity to oust their current representative in a relatively short amount of time. This brief tenure also incentivizes political actors to act in the best interest of their constituency, rather than their own political ambition, as they surely want to remain in power.

1.2 Current American Political System

As of 2019, the racial demographic of the United States is broken down as such: white Americans account for 60.1% of the population, whereas Black, Latino, and Asian Americans represent 12.2%, 18.5%, and 5.6% respectively. American Indians, Pacific Islanders, and those of two or more races comprise the remaining 3.7% (U.S. Census Bureau). It is important to note that Latino and Asian Americans are the fastest growing minority groups, growing by 23% and 35.6% of the past decade. Currently, the 117th Congress is the most racially and ethnically diverse to date (Pew, 2021). There are currently 59 Black members, 46 Latino members, 17

Asian members, and 6 Native American members. Relative to the 107th congress which housed 63 minority members, this is a large improvement. However, there is still much work to be done to effectively represent the needs of minority groups, especially when their voices are stifled in predominantly white congressional districts.

Though the American representative system supposedly grants one man one vote, there have been countless systemic barriers in place that have denied citizens a voice in the public policymaking process. At its origin, women, men without property, and Black people were not allowed to vote, effectively silencing their ability to enact change through the system. Though these legal barriers have been struck down, de facto voter suppression is still widely prevalent. Many states still introduce and implement voting restrictions that disproportionately dilute minority votes. Under former President Donald Trump's continual claim that the 2020 election was "stolen" through widespread voter fraud, select states have made voting increasingly difficult and burdensome.

According to a study conducted by the Texas Civil Rights Projects, more than half of those who dropped their ballots in drop boxes via drive-thru voting in Harris County were Black, Hispanic or Asian (Bao, 2021). This method of voting is conceived to increase convenience, which intuitively would make voting more accessible to people with rigid work schedules or childcare responsibilities. It poses no more threat to voting integrity than a traditional drop box, contrary to Texas Governor Greg Abbott's claims. The study also concluded that the process of signature matching, which requires matching the signature on the ballot to those on an official file, disproportionately impacted those who have limited English proficiency (LEP). This affects the Asian Pacific Islander community as 33% of the Asian Americans in Texas are LEP

(APIAVote, 2020). Those with disabilities, trans and gender non-conforming people, women, and military personnel are similarly adversely affected. Asian Americans currently comprise over 5% of the Texas' voting population and is houses the third-largest Asian American population in the country at a staggering 1.6 million people (U.S. Census Bureau). The number of eligible Asian American voters increased by close to 50% between 2012 to 2018, and it is unconstitutional and unjust to prevent a meaningful electorate bloc their right to suffrage (APIAVote).

Given the current American political system has structural issues that still demand remedy to effectively represent its entire population, it is more urgent than ever to examine how to ensure that representation practiced today does not further the problem. In order to do so, it is pertinent to understand why there are unique needs to the representation of racial minority groups, specifically as it relates to the demographic characteristics of their representatives.

1.3 Central Question

I can unequivocally say that Representative Porter has made an honest effort to represent my community and for that, she has earned my vote in the upcoming election. Conversely, if I resided in the 39th district, I am confident in saying that Representative Kim would not receive my vote. Though Representative Porter is a white woman who will never intimately understand the experiences of being Asian American, she has made more of an effort to learn about the needs of the community and advocate accordingly. Yet, I would still love to vote for someone who looks like me, whilst also accurately representing my values in policymaking. It is intuitive to assume that someone who mirrors my identity traits will likely have had similar experiences I

have had, allowing us to more easily find the same issues personal. Furthermore, I would also be enthused and inspired by seeing someone like myself elevated to power in ways I have not grown up seeing. Inherently, I want someone who cares about my community and values rather than someone who just shares my characteristics. In this case, it raises the question as to what reasons there are to desire a representative who is reflective of my identity.

In order to answer this question, I will look at two different reasons as to why demographics matter in the political representation of minority groups. In the first chapter, I will begin by exploring a theoretical approach called standpoint epistemology, as originally developed by feminist scholars. I will consequently describe traditional epistemology and draw the distinction between the two schools of thought. Next, I will explain the features of standpoint epistemology and hopefully highlight how it is a more useful lens in understanding effective political representation.

In my second chapter, I will discuss a different reason demographics might matter in political representation: visibility. In doing so, I will examine my personal experiences and recent Supreme Court cases that indicate visibility has immense value in a functioning democracy. I will first discuss what diversity is and why it has immense value in terms of visibility. I hope to specifically focus on the importance of racial diversity, as reflected in the American political system. Next, I will present the positive outcomes related to increased diversity, such as its effect on reducing discrimination and building stronger relationships within the community. I will then turn to an analysis of recent affirmative action cases that have recognized the value of racial diversity in higher education institutions, highlighting the acknowledgement that there is a compelling interest in a visibly diverse population.

Chapter 2: Standpoint Epistemology Understood

2.1 Traditional Epistemology

Epistemology stems from the Greek terms "episteme" and "logos", which respectively mean knowledge and reason. Collectively, epistemology is a study that aims to answer how knowledge is acquired and why they are justified beliefs. The field has a long history and philosophers alike have attempted to understand human rationale and knowledge.

The theory of knowledge can be qualified by the awareness of true beliefs. Knowledge can be defined by cognitive success and is a form of *true belief* (Ichikawa; Steup, 2017). Cognitive success is determined by knowing what, how, and the facts surrounding the subject. To know the what, one should have an acquaintance with the individual subject. Though direct perception is helpful, it is not necessary in the acquisition of knowledge. For example, I know many facts and stories about President Obama and know that he exists within the world I live in; however, I do not know President Obama on a personal level. This example highlights that though I can recite facts about the former President, I still do not actually know him. Likewise, I may think that I know my lab partner based off of our personal interactions, but not actually know that she is a fugitive. In this case, our interactions are not sufficient to claim that I know her entirely, though I have some true beliefs about her. If I were to be asked my experiences in the lab with her, I would have the knowledge and authority to answer. Conversely, if I were asked about her criminal background, I do not have the distinct type of knowledge to be useful. Though this theory can help distinguish between different kinds of knowledge, it is also pertinent to draw the division between knowledge and the lack of knowledge. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on how understanding representation through the latter distinction.

To place the traditional and commonly held conception of knowledge in a logical argument, knowledge is dependent on three conditions: truth, belief, and justification (Parikh; Renero 2017, p. 93-102). The knower (*K*) can only know if something (*t*) is true if and only if *t* is true and *K* is justified in believing *t*. As demonstrated above, true belief without justification does not constitute knowledge. For example, if I see a golden kiwi at the supermarket, I am not justified in claiming the knowledge that all kiwis are golden. Though I hold a true belief about the kiwi in front of me is in fact golden, I have not considered how my belief relates to the actual world. One can become justified in their belief if there is sufficient reason to find that the belief is likely true. It is only when all three of these conditions are met is there a sufficient claim to have knowledge.

In this line of thinking, traditional epistemology is staunchly committed to a form of intellectualism where knowledge is objective. This is not to say that traditionally epistemology properly understood leads to intellectualism, rather it uses an intellectualist theory of justification as a condition to having knowledge. In this form of justification, beliefs are solely justified through concrete reasons and logical truths. Standpoint theorists offer an alternative way of conceiving justification, giving power to personal experiences as a form of reason. Namely, if two people of different backgrounds had access to the exact same information, they would certainly be in the same position to reach the exact same conclusion. Another way to understand this is in recognizing that both these people could have the same justification to support their true belief. In this way, the acquisition of knowledge is equally accessible to everyone and that knowledge itself is completely interchangeable between agents.

However, this theory fails to take into account the inherent experiences and interests of the agents that undoubtedly influences how they perceive and process information. Standpoint

epistemology highlights that because these experiences are created by people who experience a specific social position, they are similarly responsible for creating justified knowledge (Toole, 2021). Though this knowledge can be acquired, it is valuable to recognize that some people are in a better position to acquire the knowledge they had a hand in creating. This in turn provides people with more authority to weigh in on specific topics.

2.2 Marx's Class Consciousness

Though the term Standpoint theory originated later in feminist theory, the concept that those in specific social-economic positions have special perspectives is prevalent in earlier schools of thought. Namely, the theory of class consciousness within Marxism highlights the unique perspective held in each social class (Ollman, 1972, p.6). German theorist Karl Marx created a strong distinction between "class in itself" and "class for itself", whereas the latter is an organized effort in pursuance of their collective interests. Specifically, Marx understands class as one's relationship to the means of production and whether they own capital. For the understanding of the heart of class consciousness, I will include factors such as profession and income within understanding social class.

The class system, though oftentimes not explicitly labeled, enforced social hierarchies that dominated which spaces one could be in. From the very first moment of life, the family you are born into influences the education you receive and the opportunities you have access to. For example, a private school experience is likely filled with more robust curriculum, increased funding, and expansive possibilities. Furthermore, those who are in the upper class tend to maintain control of the political power system, which means one interest group dominates public

process and policy. This is evident today in the United States as the majority of lawmakers in the 117th Congress are millionaires (Open Secrets, 2020).

Though the specific context of Marx's conception of class consciousness is not relevant in this paper, his claim being aware of one's own socio-economic class is incredibly valuable. An understanding of how one relates to the grander system is an important step to understanding the common interests of that class. This consciousness is a form of knowledge created from a unique standpoint, and it is justified through those personal experiences. As opposed to individual awareness, class consciousness allows everyone to see the totality of their plight. As seen through Marx's work, the only way to disrupt a system is a collective awakening and effort to overhaul the current regime.

This directly juxtaposes Marx's conception of a false consciousness, which is the space people occupy before achieving class consciousness (Engels, 1893). This is defined as a misinterpretation of current political and social hierarchies by those in the lower class. As the underclass will always be the majority, these cognitive distortions allow for oppressive systems to continue without dissent. Given those in a subordinate class cannot understand their position within the system, they do not have the framework to pursue upward mobility. An example of false consciousness can be found in the illusive American Dream, which is the narrative that everyone has equal access to prosperity through hard work and perseverance. Though that is a nice set of ideals to encourage effort, it is a completely flawed concept that breeds false hope within the American people. Systemic and social barriers are in place to continually disenfranchise and subjugate minority groups, regardless of how hard they work.

Though this term was never explicitly coined, Marx found false consciousness to be dangerous because this form of individualism was counterproductive to not only community

growth, but their own. In order for an unequal system to persist, those who are marginalized must not see how they can enact change in their own scope. This is also dangerous because these oppressive hierarchies are preserved, even when the law is seemingly moving forward. Paralleling class hierarchies, Marx's school of thought is applicable to any community that has experienced systemic oppression. For example, women were considered literal property of men during the 19th century and were not given the right to sue on their own behalf. Though coverture is no longer recognized in the United States, sexist ideology as such still permeates the laws that dictate our lives today. There are still innumerable obstacles that make it difficult for women to sue for physical and emotional harm, such as short statutes of limitation, and render them as an inferior class in the legal system.

Through Marx's theory of class consciousness, it is evident that he would recognize the merits of standpoint theory. Because people have firsthand perspective on the unique experiences of their community, they are more equipped to address the actual needs of their community members. For example, California is the first state to offer free and reduced lunches for all students yet there is a major gap between students who are eligible and students who actually utilize the program (California Department of Education). This can be attributed to many reasons, from the social stigma to the quality of the actual food. Regardless, students who have experienced and are in need of assistance have firsthand knowledge on what improvements could be made to better their life. With a clearer understanding of their material circumstances, their input has more epistemic relevance and value than those who have not needed the help. In the same vein, Marx would find that the poor have a more intimate understanding relative to the rich on how welfare programs should be enacted as they have experienced what the lack of support is

like. Furthermore, class consciousness recognizes the power in numbers and how common interests are better served when more members of a society are included.

2.3 Du Bois' Double Consciousness

In William Du Bois' work *The Souls of Black Folk*, he introduced the concept of double consciousness with the social and political realm (Du Bois, 1903). This term denotes the tangible self-consciousness of the "two-ness" Black Americans experience, predominantly through the cultural and political experiences. He further stated describes this feeling as "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois, p.3). Due to the nature of our country, it is important to note that this feeling is not inherent but rather created through institutional racism.

Du Bois understood double consciousness as a psychological obstacle that Black Americans have to work against every day. This is because one has to explore their own self-identity against the pressures of how the dominant group perceives them, creating a more difficult and complex experience for those in marginalized communities. For example, as found in Frantz Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks,* he shares experiences of how white men have changed their vocabulary when speaking to Black people for no apparent reason other than race (Fanon, 2018, p.63). In this way, Black people are subjugated to a singular narrative that they cannot escape, regardless of their individual attributes and relationships. This example highlights how double consciousness is powerful knowledge because it demonstrates a higher understanding of how people interact. In instances such as microaggressions, people of color have a heightened understanding of their subjugated role in an oppressive system, which in turn allows them to see the social order more clearly. When learning about racism and constructing

ways to move towards a more equitable society, people of color can draw on their epistemic experiences that have provided them with true beliefs.

This theory has been further expanded to triple consciousness, which takes into account the importance of intersectionality in discussing marginalization. Philosopher Nahum Welang emphasizes the importance of gender within the analysis of consciousness as it adds another layer of perspective to work through (Welang, 2018). Not only do women and nonbinary people have to situate themselves within the context of their gender, they must strive to discover their identity in relation to their race and other factors. Again, the knowledge held by people who have achieved triple consciousness is epistemically more valuable because of their ability to see social structures more holistically. This superiority lies in being able to understand oneself not only as an individual, but in relation to power dynamics acting on one's access to opportunity and mobility. This has set the framework for many discussions regarding civil rights and how to better support and represent historically oppressed groups.

Double consciousness exists within every marginalized person and provides invaluable insight to the traditional power structures. For example, growing up as an Asian girl, I have always been acutely aware of how western beauty standards are naturally unachievable for me. Though this is an obvious and collective understanding of Asian people, yet the glorification of blonde hair and blue eyes remains the ultimate goal. This places immense amounts of pressure on Asian girls to get cosmetic procedures, though no number of alterations will elevate us to an arbitrary measure of beauty. This double consciousness exists in learning what one's own beauty is, while reconciling what outside pressures are placed onto you. Conversely, white girls have never struggled with this sort of body image issue that is intertwined with the color of their skin and other biological features. Because of this understanding, women of color are better equipped

to dismantle these certain types of western beauty standards as they have personal knowledge of the harm it creates. Likewise, disabled individuals may be in a better position to challenge other aspects of these standards. In this way, the knowledge they possess has more epistemic value than those who are speaking from a completely outside perspective on this issue area.

2.4 Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theory stipulates that people of specific social positions have an epistemically privileged viewpoint as they are informed by their personal experiences. Born out of similar sentiments shared in both Marx and Du Bois' work, contemporary standpoint theory harnesses the renewed perspective of consciousness to the understanding of knowledge. To begin, a standpoint is defined as how individuals view the world and how they perceive and analyze relationships and people (Toole, 2021). Originating as a feminist theory, American philosopher Sandra Harding recognized how the political efforts of women on behalf on women's rights issues were distinctly special due to their intimate knowledge of their cause (Harding, 1991). This created a clear contrast with traditional respect for the "generalized and objective knower" and challenged features that were historically thought to be *non-epistemic.*

As highlighted above, a core tenet to traditional epistemology lies in this independent and detached conception of justification. Conversely, standpoint epistemologists contest this qualification, and instead argue that one's social role and identity can influence this knowledge. Mainstream epistemology holds that knowledge is objective and value-free, and thus everyone has equal access to the same understandings in life. This is clearly untrue and the thesis can be simply dismantled in endless examples. For instance, a seeing individual will never wholly understand the culture and challenges of belonging to the blind community, and consequently be

less qualified to comment on what could be done for the community. Especially as the features that are often overlooked in epistemic value are those that attempt to marginalize individuals, it is important to examine how relevant these features are to determining whether a belief is true.

Standpoint epistemology encompasses three predominant theses, which are as follows: the Situated Knowledge thesis, the Achievement thesis, and the Epistemic Privilege thesis (Toole, 2021). In cooperation, these theses work together to prove that social identity is a central epistemic feature that has value in determining whether a belief is justified, and therefore whether it is established knowledge. In the following paragraphs, I will provide an overview of each of these theses and how they support standpoint theory in relation to a traditional understanding of epistemology. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus more so on the situated knowledge thesis as it best supports why identity is important in cases of political representation.

2.5 The Situated Knowledge Thesis

A strong thesis within standpoint epistemology lies within the situated knowledge thesis, whereas the central idea is that knowledge is inherently *situated*. This line of thought rests on the theory that knowledge is heavily dependent and hence valuable because of the knower. This highlights the importance of understanding the relationship between one's social identity and the knowledge they have, which then could explain the importance their individual perspective has.

It is key here to define what epistemic resources are and how that alters perception. Philosopher Lauren Woomer classifies epistemic resources as *access* or *interpretive* tools, whereas one determines what we see and the latter qualifies how we see it (Woomer, 2017, p.73-91). For example, sexual harassment in the workplace has only been recognized as a separate

issue from general harassment until recent years, though there is still much work to be done. Prior to acknowledging the undue and unequal burden women experience in the workplace, sexual harassment was often reduced to mere harassment felt equally amongst everyone. However, in discerning that the victims of sexual harassment are predominantly women, the consequent course of action becomes more pointed and nuanced. The difference between access and interpretive tools is therefore incredibly important, as those with the latter are more salient in identifying what exactly she is seeing, her role within, and what resources she needs.

Furthermore, these epistemic resources are developed and updated over time based on further experiences and interests. Intuitively, your perspective grows as your sense of self evolves. As I left my predominantly Asian hometown and entered a predominantly white institution for college, I became more aware of how being Asian has impacted my lived experiences and how important it was to me to continue learning and advocating for the API community. As identities and interests vary, positions to acquire knowledge can be different as well. Therefore, it is clear that some people are in more privileged positions to gather knowledge, which is not to say those places are easier to live in. This proves that knowledge acquisition is a *social practice*, reinforcing the importance of recognizing the role social injustices play in the process.

2.6 The Achievement Thesis

The Achievement thesis parallels the previous works of Marx and Du Bois in that it stipulates that standpoint is a process of *consciousness-raising*. This is defined as the process in which one recognizes that they have been perceiving themselves through the dominant lens, which does not allow for an accurate understanding of their own personal experiences (Wylie.

2004, p.339-352). This collective conscious raising is what constitutes standpoint, emphasizing that a key component to standpoint epistemology is that it is jointly created by people who share a similar social role. Essentially, the achievement thesis explains how standpoint is created, which in turn justifies further knowledge. This can be conceived through political struggle or unity within the marginalized community, in which one realizes that themselves and those similarly situated are relying solely on epistemic tools they do not have access to.

In relating it to the women's liberation movement, philosopher Sheila Ruth describes this awakening as a "profound sensitivity and comprehension of the conditions of women's lives – social, political, economic, psychological, and more" (Ruth, 1973. P.291-292). For example, the intense rise of anti-Asian hate inflamed by former President Donald Trump mobilized. Asian Americans across the country to demand further support, representation, and education. It is also during this time did I begin to recognize the importance of amplifying Asian American voices in policymaking, particularly on issues that did not seem explicitly intertwined with race. This newfound thoughtfulness and reactivity to the Asian lens has heightened my understanding as to where policy has been inequitable and what changes could be made to better support my community. It became abundantly clear to me after doing more outreach work that language access remains a large barrier for members of the Asian community to get involved. The API community is not a monolith and there is an abundance of linguistic and cultural differences within the group. In learning more about the Asian American experience, I have seen the lack of in language access in voter information and polling booths that make it incredibly difficult for someone with limited English proficiency to practice their basic right. Consequently, I have worked with local organizations to produce voter guides that reflect the diversity of our community to reduce logistical obstacles in participating within our democracy.

It is important to note here that current understanding of standpoint theory does not demand that those who have this newfound standpoint must belong within the particular group. The achievement thesis stipulates that standpoint is not something people automatically have, but rather it is earned. Therefore, this thesis sets the foundation for the situated knowledge thesis by describing the process in which standpoint can be achieved. Though the standpoint originates from the perspectives of those who share those lived experiences, there is also merit in including those who have made conscious efforts to reassess their own position with this consciousness. This could include members of the dominant group who have committed to be and act in a more educated and well-rounded perspective, and are able to successfully, and partially, better situate themselves for knowledge acquisition.

Conversely, people within the in group in which the standpoint originates from may not achieve standpoint. Given a standpoint is gained through an effort to understand the world through a new critical perspective, it does not include people who have not made that effort. For example, though women create the feminist standpoint, it does not follow that all women inherently have the feminist standpoint. In this situation, these women who have not engaged with consciousness raising are excluded, though they may have started in a better position to achieve that very standpoint.

2.7 The Epistemic Privilege Thesis

Finally, the Epistemic Privilege thesis considers the previous two accounts and concludes that because people from marginalized groups have experienced powerlessness, their standpoint has more epistemic value in subject matters that relate to the specific community. This epistemic privilege is rooted in the fact that people with special standpoints have evidential and cognitive

superiority that allows them to better understand the entirety of a problem and solution. Because those in marginalized groups have been forced to understand both the dominant condition and their own, they are more equipped with epistemic resources to understand the social and political world.

2.8 Standpoint Epistemology within Political Representation

Now that we have discussed what standpoint epistemology is and how it relates to understanding the world from specific social positions, it is pertinent to evaluate how that understanding can supplement political representation. The implication of failing to take into account how social identity provides certain people with epistemic privilege inevitably prolongs oppression. Standpoint theory is especially pertinent in relation to social work for underrepresented groups as it is the best way to ensure that their needs are being met. As representatives are given the responsibility of transforming the needs of a community into deliverable action steps, solely viewing solutions through the dominant lens denies the experiences of those situated in already underrepresented groups. Especially as political problems do not affect everyone equally, it is clear that a strict adherence to a warped perception of objectivity will generally do more harm than good. In this status quo, we have primarily drawn from dominant experiences and so it remains wholly inadequate in making sense of the socially marginalized experiences. Undertaking this form of epistemology is an effective tool to structure a more effective representative system because it prioritizes the opinions of those who actually need welfare to survive, rather than rigid research and the opinions of those merely studying the subject as a form of academia.

As highlighted by James Madison in Federalist 10, the nature of man renders factions inevitable and it is the role of the state to reconcile these differences while safeguarding the community as a whole (Madison, 1787). The solution to this dynamic is in controlling its effects, instead of silencing disagreement as a whole. Because of this, Madison advocated for a strong republic as opposed to a direct democracy. Within a republic, a smaller group of elected representatives act in the interests of their constituents and effectively refine local conflicts into cohesive demands. Federalist 10 shows that the Constitution does not intend to shy away from conflict, but alternatively creates a system that harnesses dissent and discourse for good.

This form of diversity has immense value because it embraces different perspectives borne from different standpoints; however, it poses difficulties in ensuring that varying perspectives are adequately represented. Often in homogenous groups, members are less likely to dissent from the dominant opinion in fear of ostracization. Even with the intention of being open minded and equitable in discussion, a group of solely like-minded individuals share the same breadth of experiences that inform their perspective. For example, if a beauty salon is seeking to improve their customer experience, it would be unproductive to only debrief between the employees. Instead, it is intuitive to believe that reaching out to customers and asking what would make their experience better is a better way to devise a plan moving forward. In such a way, groupthink is dangerous as it severely reduces the rationalization and accountability mechanism that should be present in a decision-making body. Standpoint epistemology acknowledges that within this dialogue, some members are better situated to understand a certain experience and thus, their knowledge has more value.

In recognizing that standpoint theory denotes that people who have discovered how their social identity relates to the world are justified in their beliefs, their knowledge about how to

support their community and be best represented are similarly valuable. This diversity has incredible value in the representative democracy found within the United States. Historically, minority groups have not only been barred from obtaining political power, but further disenfranchised through restrictive voting laws. Due to a combination of discriminatory practices, the voices within these communities have not been represented at any level of government and consequently, policy often does not reflect the actual needs of marginalized people.

Though this is the most diverse, on multiple metrics, composition of government today, power is still overwhelmingly wielded by straight, white men. For instance, 110 of the 116 supreme court justices in the history of the United States have been men, with Justice Sandra Day O'Connor serving as the first woman on the court in 1981 (Meyer; Raji, 2022). Though the current composition of the Supreme Court includes three women, it is important to also examine the clerks that support the functioning of this branch. Out of 38 current clerks, there are 25 men as opposed to 13 women. As the Supreme Court's mission is to evaluate the constitutionality of American law to ensure that it is representative of what is beneficial to the country, viewing diversity on a superficial level is not enough. Without acknowledging and rectifying the imbalance of standpoints included in positions of power poses a severe threat to democracy as the very representative mechanism it rests on is not equally accessible to everyone.

2.9 Identity Politics

Standpoint theory is commonly referred to as identity politics in mainstream media, though the latter is moreso a form of application for this philosophical concept. Identity politics refers to the political technique of developing political stances based on one's personal

characteristic. Coined by Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist social organization in the 1970s, the group emphasized the importance of amplifying identity when conceptualizing policy agendas. Within *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism,* Barbara Smith articulates "that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work. This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression" (Smith, 1983, p.275).

Relating to Marx and Du Bois' conception of consciousness, identity politics similarly recognizes that those who are aware of their identity in relation to the socioeconomic structure in place have a heightened understanding of certain standpoints. This directly lends to more valuable knowledge, relative to those who have not achieved this standpoint, in how to best support those in the same position and create sustainable forms of representation. Because people who belong to marginalized groups are most vulnerable to continued subjugation, it is important to elevate them, and therefore their knowledge, into positions of power. Identity politics does not assert that politics needs to be predominantly on identity, but rather it be an important factor to consider.

Many have criticized identity politics as divisive, insofar that it reinforces social divides that are inherent within a heterogeneous society. As historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. posits in his novel *The Disuniting of America*, "movements for civil rights should aim toward full acceptance and integration of marginalized groups into the mainstream culture, rather than … perpetuating that marginalization through affirmations of difference" (Schlesinger, 1991, p.112). Essentially,

Schlesinger finds that allowing for political understanding to be contingent on the status of one's marginalization further deepens those divides. He argues that this is counterproductive because it encourages those with the same social identity to remain within their communities, rather than engage with different perspectives. For reasons similar to why diversity is important to prevent groupthink, critics find that this insular form of politicking can be exclusive in membership and agenda setting.

What these objections fail to recognize is that identity politics is powerful in that it harnesses the lessons learned from standpoint theory and aims to elevate social roles within justified knowledge. Given representation hinges on what is believed to be an issue and formulations of how to solve that issue, undertaking standpoint epistemology would be hugely beneficial in ensuring that historically ignored perspectives are brought to the forefront. Furthermore, identity politics serves as the basis of organization, and done correctly, allows space for intersectional focuses. Traditionally understood, identity politics focuses on issues such as same-sex marriage, affinity groups on campus, and rape culture. As these issues predominantly affect minority communities, those afflicted tend to be more moved to mobilize. This is no different than any other type of political participation that is informed by any lived experiences. In order to understand why identity politics is powerful, it is important to recognize that the issues focused on are preexisting.

If recognizing one's identity can be a motivating factor towards political participation, it is reason enough to view it as a critical tool towards a successful representative democracy. As identity politics predominantly hinges on members of marginalized communities collectively organizing against the status quo that is construed by dominant groups, it is often a direct challenge to whiteness as power. Historically, whiteness has been the standard in the United

States and progress is often measured relative to the rights and privileges freely enjoyed by white people. This phenomenon remains pervasive, as seen through preferences in federal policy to the lack of skin tone inclusivity in the makeup aisle.

In such ways, it is difficult to discuss power without recognizing how whiteness has been a predominant factor in maintaining that very power. As Marx recognizes in his theory of class consciousness, this form of awakening gains traction when people jointly realize their voice. Identity politics seemingly poses a threat because it threatens the current power structure, one that disproportionately benefits those who are white. It does not seek to further social divides, but rather allows members of various marginalized groups who have similarly been oppressed to come together towards the common goal of equal treatment. In our current state with blatant systemic injustice and extreme polarization, understanding identity politics as a powerful tool to incentivize civic engagement can further enfranchise those who have traditionally felt voiceless. Engaging in identity politics does not mean a sudden interest in an issue area, but rather an overdue reaction to current oppressive systems. Conflating identity politics with distorted conceptions of political correctness or exclusivity fails to recognize that identity is at the core of democratic politics.

2.10 Takeaway from Standpoint Theory

This directly aligns with what standpoint epistemologists would argue is the best form of representation, which would demand representatives make a meaningful effort to understand a certain standpoint. Identity politics serves as a political tool to emphasize the importance of recognizing one's characteristics and how that measures up to the dominant lens, both for constituents and representatives. However, the important takeaway from standpoint theory is that

an important facet of knowledge is social position, thus the knowledge used in political representation cannot be divorced from recognizing the identity diverse present in the group that is represented. In such ways, representatives must make a strong effort to gain this critical perspective in order to effectively understand the state of their constituents, convey and transform their needs into sustainable progress plans, and continue to grow in their own standpoint. This lesson is particularly important in the representation of racial minority groups in the United States as their needs have been historically overlooked by representatives in political power. It is only in our representatives incorporating a genuine understanding of the standpoints within the people they are representing can democracy functionally serve all of us.

Chapter 3: The Importance of Visibility

"Hope will be found by understanding that diversity is the essence of the American Dream and why we need each other to fulfill it" (Omar, 2017). Commonly described as the melting pot of the world, the United States is home to a diverse population on various accounts. According to the United States Census Bureau and consequent studies conducted by the Brookings Institute, it is evident that the nation is diversifying at an unprecedented rate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census Results). In the 1980s, white Americans constituted 80% of the nation's population, whereas Black, Latino, and Asian Americans accounted for 11.5%, 6.5%, and 1.8% respectively. By 2019, the white population had declined to 60.1%. Relatively, the Latino and Asian community grew to 25% and 7.8%. Notably, this increase in diversity can be attributed to the younger population, as data shows that more than half of individuals under the age of 16 identified as a racial or ethnic minority.

Beyond racial diversity within the United States, it is also important to note the presence of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism can be described as the various ethnic groups coexisting within the same area, allowing each other to retain their identity and practice their cultural traditions. For example, New York is home to a very culturally diverse population and the city works to effectively protect and celebrate cultural differences. As mass immigration marks the beginning of the nation, the United States has been home to various immigrant cultures that have been transformed through assimilation. As found in a *Pluralistic Future,* philosopher William James describes a "plural society" and argues that it is "crucial to the formation of philosophical and social humanism to help build a better, more egalitarian society" (James, 1909, p. 4).

Diversity is defined as characteristics people use to understand themselves, relative to those around them. Simply put, it is what makes one person or group different from another.

These can be demographic attributes, such as race, gender, and sexuality. They can also be found in culture and background. Plainly, diversity has existed for as long as man has and is a hallmark of human existence. It is in the sharing of different knowledge and respectful dialogue can there be a greater understanding of what progress looks like and entails. In 2001, the United Nations General Assembly published the Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity, in which Article 1 reads that "cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature" (United Nations, 2001).

Though there is no agreed upon metric of diversity nor consensus on when diversity has been met, there are many factors that can indicate steps towards the right direction. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights identifies a list of protected characteristics that have been deemed important to one's self identity. Though this list is not exhaustive, it includes natural born traits such as race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and physical ability (UDHR, 1948, Article 2). There are also forms of external diversity that consider how one's experiences and circumstances have shaped them as people. This can include features such as one's religion, socioeconomic class, and education.

3.1 Visibility for building Trust and Empathy

Diversity also in turn increases visibility of groups that have been historically marginalized, which can help reduce discrimination. It is human nature to fear what is unknown, and in many cases, the unknown is simply something that you have yet to experience. For example, I was scared of dogs growing up because my mother always warned me that dogs can be aggressive and bite. However, my family adopted a dog when I was 13 and through continual exposure, I was able to not only overcome my fear of dogs but also learn to love them. This is

not to say that an 80-pound German Shepherd does not still make me nervous; however, my experience with my dog allows me to be more comfortable around dogs in general. This concept is applicable to situations on a much more serious level, such as sexual orientation discrimination. If Michael has never met a queer person in his life and exists in a society where homophobia is normalized, it would be instinctive for him to believe what he is told given his lack of personal experience. Conversely, if Michael were to meet a queer person and learn about their personhood in addition to their sexuality, it is more likely that he would realize that being queer is perfectly normal and natural. It is with these personal exposures to previously unknown people and ideas do individuals become more accepting and act more empathetically.

Within an interview discussing his book *The Conversation: How Seeking and Speaking the Truth About Racism Can Radically Transform Individuals and Organizations,* social psychologist Robert Livingston utilizes psychology studies to support his claim that "racism can be battled with constructive dialogue" (Laidler, 2021). He cites an empirical psychological study from the 1950s, in which researchers compared two groups of women who volunteered to serve food at the Red Cross. In this case, both groups of women were given the nutritional value of organ meats and encouraged to serve hearts, kidneys, and livers more. One of the groups of women were allowed to talk amongst themselves about the value of organ meat, whereas the other group did not interact with the organ meat any further. The study found that the women from the first group served organ meat 10 times more than the other group. Livingston concludes that this study "demonstrates the power of conversation, and what happens when you have information plus human connection" (Laidler). Though it is normal to be weary of what is unfamiliar, it is clear that continually educating and humanizing the unknown has immense value in overcoming that fear.

This sentiment is echoed by Bryan Stevenson, the founder and executive of the Equal Justice Initiative. In a keynote speech during the Carnegie Foundation Summit on Improvement in Education, Stevenson emphasizes the importance of proximity in fighting seemingly distant problems, such as poverty. He asserts that "you cannot be an effective problem-solver from a distance. There are details and nuances to problems that you will miss unless you are close enough to observe those details" (Stevenson, 2016). He cites various examples showing how gaining visibility, through avenues such as shadowing users, allows one to become more empathetic to a cause that may not be personal. This method of "getting proximate to suffering" highlights the importance of elevating problems, and people who experience these problems, to a higher visibility in order to reach more people. If a higher percentage of the population is aware of an issue or new perspective, this can effectively prompt more sensitive and productive discourse and action.

3.2 Inspiring a Future Generation

Additionally, diversity is important to fostering the next generation as community members who believe that they can achieve their goals, regardless of their characteristics. As of 2021, 86 percent (430 men) of *Fortune* 500 CEOs were white men (Fortune, 2021). Relatively, there were 2 Black men, 10 Asian men, and 17 Latino men who served as CEOs. This does not account for the staggering gender disparity, in which there were 34 white women, 2 Black women, 5 Asian women, and 0 Latina women in this position of power. It is common for children of color to recognize their minority characteristics as intrinsically negative, as it is often what makes it difficult to successfully assimilate within the dominant culture. This can subconsciously reinforce the false narrative that people from a certain background cannot

achieve their aspirations, as they perceive that no one who looks like them has. Though this phenomenon may not be rooted in fact, the doubt and discouragement it creates has tangible effects on whether people pursue these opportunities.

If there are more minority members in positions of power, there are more people who can share their experiences and help people who look like them in navigating these feelings of inadequacy. Though support is not only found in those within those with like characteristics, it is natural that those who come from the same standpoint are in a similar position to understand each other's experiences. These relationships often inherently come with trust, which allows both parties to more comfortably share their personal insecurities and journeys with. For example, I think back to third grade when a young boy in my class called me a "chink". Without even really understanding the racial connotation behind the word, I remember feeling embarrassed for being Asian and wanting nothing more than to vanish from the classroom. At that moment, my white teacher immediately reprimanded the boy and tried to console me by saying "he did not mean it". It was not until an Asian teacher pulled me aside at lunch and had an honest conversation about the discrimination Asians experience did I feel less mortified and alone. Ms. Foo assured me that she understood how I felt and that she was always available to talk, both about race and anything else I wanted. To this day, she is one of my greatest mentors and someone I trust immensely. This form of mentorship has irreplaceable value in achieving the goal of equity, in which society actively seeks to place more members of marginalized groups in power.

Furthermore, the literal visibility of a racially diverse group of leaders can have an invaluable impact on affirming and inspiring the younger generation to pursue similar goals. As an Asian woman pursuing a career in politics, it is difficult to find Asian politicians to look up to, let alone Asian women. Underlying every opportunity I have worked towards has always been a

question of whether this could be a reality, which is further validated by the lack of leaders who looked like me. It was not until 2021 did Kamala Harris become the first female, Black, and Asian vice-president of the United States (Pew Research Center, 2021). Though it may sound simple, seeing a woman from my community achieve a goal that I have breeds hope that the door is open as long as I work hard for it.

3.3 Institutional Support

Grutter v. Bollinger was a landmark United States Supreme Court decision that held that a student admissions process that utilizes affirmative action policies that favor underrepresented minority groups does not violate the Fourteenth Amendment. In this case, Barbara Grutter alleged that she was denied admissions to the University of Michigan Law School because her race was the predominant factor. Specifically, Grutter stipulated that applicants from minority racial groups with equivalent "credentials" had a higher chance for admissions, effectively using race as an application factor. The University argued that there was an interest for the institution to achieve a "critical mass" of students from minority groups to "ensure that these minority students do not feel isolated or like spokespersons for their race; to provide adequate opportunities for the type of interaction upon which the educational benefits of diversity depend; and to challenge all students to think critically and re-examine stereotypes" (*Grutter v. Bollinger., 2003*).

Regents of the University of California v. Bakke involved a similar issue concerning race and admissions within higher educational institutions. In this case, the Supreme Court held that affirmative action is permissible as there is in fact a compelling state interest in diversity (*Regents of the University of California v. Bakke., 1978)*. Based on past precedents, American

constitutionality properly understood grants all individuals equal access to governmental

opportunities and benefits, regardless of their race or background. This racial classification is

only justifiable in cases with compelling governmental interest, which would involve

demonstrated necessity. Therefore, the University of California system must prove that the state

government has a compelling interest in having a racially diverse population. Within this case

specifically, Justice Powell held that the university's quota system was too restrictive in meeting

this goal, whereas considering race would serve the same end in a constitutionally valid way.

  The Supreme Court took up the *Grutter* case and ruled that "the law school's [use of]

narrowly tailored use of race in admissions decisions to further a compelling interest in obtaining

the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body" is indeed constitutional

(O'Connor*, 1978)*. Citing the position found in the earlier *Bakke* case, Justice O'Connor

recognized that affirmative action was effective in achieving racial diversity. Specifically, she

noted that racial diversity is essential in education insofar that achieving a critical mass would

allow for "substantial, important, and laudable educational benefits" (O'Connor, 1978). This

claim is further supported by expert studies that indicate racial diversity in education effectively

prepares students for the diversity found in the workforce. For example, highly ranked officers

and military members have indicated that having a racially diverse squadron is imperative to

national security. In an amicus curiae brief for the recent affirmative action cases, a group of

former military generals wrote that "history has shown that placing a diverse Armed Forces

under the command of a homogeneous leadership is a recipe of internal resentment, discord, and

violence" (*SFFA v. Harvard.,* 2022, Amicus Brief). As mentioned above, diversity in these

arenas also has unmatched utility in creating visibility that opens the pathway to future leaders.

However, it is important to note that Justice O'Connor does not provide that affirmative action is

a permanent solution, aiming for a future in which race-neutral admissions can still garner adequate diversity.

Consequently, *Grutter v. Bollinger* allows public higher education institutions to use race as a positive factor in the admissions process. Effectively, the court validated that there is a compelling governmental interest in establishing greater racial diversity. Distinct from the value of standpoint diversity, literal racial diversity also holds value in terms of achieving visibility.

3.4 Takeaway from Visibility

Throughout this paper, I have drawn attention to the importance of diversity in standpoint and visibility in effective political representation; however, it is important to clearly carve out how and why they are different. Standpoint epistemology holds that an important aspect of knowledge is in recognizing the standpoint that forms the basis of the knowledge. In this way, standpoint is not inherent within anyone, though certain people may be in a better position to acquire it. Through rigorous learning and listening, unique standpoints can have an invaluable impact on the breadth and quality of discussion, which can in turn lead to better public policymaking. Given the American political process rests on elected representatives conveying the needs of their constituents, it is incredibly important for those in office to have achieved the standpoints of those who they aim to advocate for. Standpoint epistemology is thus valuable within the contents of how to best represent, making it a useful tool to evaluate current forms of representation.

The power of visibility brings to light to the impact of seeing someone who shares the characteristics you have in positions of power, as it relates to strengthening trust between the representative and constituents as well as inspiring future generations. Given representatives

often speak for a diverse population in the United States, there is incredible harm in only having representatives that share similar identity characteristics. Whereas standpoint epistemology recognizes that harm in terms of the loss of ideological and perspective diversity, visibility understands it through the erosion of strong relationships and possibility. If you already have distrust within a government that has historically been led by members of the dominant group, perceiving a member of your own community could be an effective mean to rebuild that trust. Furthermore, seeing someone who has similar characteristics, and likely similar life experiences because of that trait, can inspire people to get involved and pursue comparable opportunities. This can break the glass ceiling for many members in marginalized communities, and encourage future leaders to take up positions that seemed previously impossible.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

As midterm elections geared up this fall, I reflected on how my identity and values manifest in policy making. Once again, I had the opportunity to vote for Representative Katie Porter and determine if I personally found her to be an effective representative. In doing so, I considered issues ranging from the rise in API hate over the past two years due to the misinformation about the pandemic as well as the overturning of *Roe.* With an ignited passion for Asian American politics, I worked directly on Jay Chen's campaign, an Asian American veteran hoping to unseat Young Kim. This further prompted me to evaluate exactly what constituted the best representation for not only myself, but my broader Asian community.

The theory of standpoint epistemology would purport that Katie Porter and Young Kim could be equally effective representatives in the context of serving their predominantly Asian constituency. Though Kim might originally be in a better position to understand the API community and their corresponding needs, standpoint theory stipulates that knowledge is not inherent and can be learned. Though by which process and metric can remain debated, anyone who continually makes an honest effort to become educated can acquire the knowledge necessary to reach consciousness. In essence, if Porter took the necessary steps to increase her perspective on the API community, standpoint theory would posit that she could be as successful of a representative as Kim.

Therefore, standpoint epistemology recognizes that if Kim and Porter had both done the work, Kim is likely to come away with more relevant knowledge. This is because Kim is in a better position to acquire the relevant knowledge necessary to be the best representative possible for her largely Asian constituency. However, in analyzing her legislative record and direct involvement with Asian community groups, I find that she has not made a meaningful enough

effort to understand the standpoint of Asian Americans within her district. Conversely, though Porter did not begin in an easier position than Kim, she has dedicated significant time and energy to understanding the community she is advocating for. For those reasons, I find that standpoint theory would support the claim that Porter is able to better represent Asian American concerns than Kim.

Visibility; however, recognizes the value of diversity in appearance. As minority communities have been historically marginalized, people who hold positions of power largely remain white men. This is harmful for a plethora of reasons, such as prolonging the false narrative that members of minority communities cannot be elevated to power and the lack of mentorship opportunities. On this account, Young Kim is valuable as a representative because she can serve as an example for others. When young Asian women, like myself, see someone who breaks the norm of what a politician looks like, there is a direct impact on the confidence that someday this could become my reality. Likewise, there are more opportunities for women of color to trust in the institutions and seek mentors who have shared experiences. This is incredibly important in fostering a younger generation who are dedicated and passionate about civic engagement and the future of our country. Though Porter could be an effective representative, she does not offer the unique visibility that her Asian counterpart would.

Effective political representation is an ever-evolving question that deserves to be reexamined throughout time, and the representation of minority communities deserve special and careful attention. 2020 was a difficult and transformative year for so many reasons, with one being the forced racial awakening across the United States. It was during this time I came face to face with my Asian American identity and reflected on how it intersects with my passion for politics. Born moreso from necessity, I was compelled to examine current political practices,

such as representation, and work to understand how we can be better for each other. We must be better for each other.

      Political representation of minority groups needs to consider the unique equalizing treatment that still needs to occur to achieve a truly democratic state. Taking into account both standpoint theory and the importance of visibility, it is clear that the most ideal representative would be someone from the community who is committed to continually learning and serving the interests of that community.

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