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On the Rise: Asian American Women Elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives

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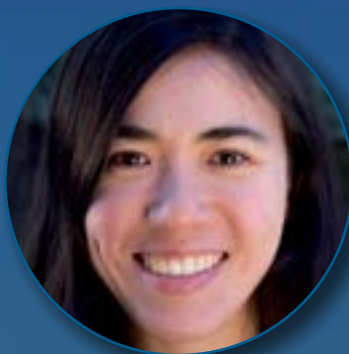
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ON THE RISE

**Asian American Women Elected to the
Massachusetts House of Representatives**

**Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy and
Institute for Asian American Studies**

AUGUST 2022



INTRODUCTION

Comprised of 160 State Representatives and 40 State Senators, the bicameral Massachusetts Legislature serves all residents and communities of the Commonwealth yet there has been limited racial, ethnic, and gender diversity reflected in the membership of the legislature for most of its existence. While Massachusetts has a substantial and rapidly growing Asian American population, there has historically been very limited representation by Asian American women in the Massachusetts Legislature, as documented by the Asian American Commission of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts¹, yet 2011 represented a turning point.

In 2011, former State Representative Keiko Orrall became the first Asian American woman to serve in the House and also the first Japanese American woman to serve in the legislature.

Representative Orrall served in the House from 2011 to 2018 followed by Tram Nguyen and Maria Robinson, both of whom were elected in 2018 and were the first Vietnamese American woman and Korean American woman to hold seats in the legislature. Robinson was recently appointed as Director of the Grid Deployment Office in the United States Department of Energy. In 2020, two women of Asian descent, Vanna Howard and Erika Uyterhoeven, were elected to the Massachusetts House, joining Representatives Nguyen and Robinson. Cambodian American Vanna Howard and Japanese American Erika Uyterhoeven were sworn into office in January 2021.

Two recent publications, *Profiles in Leadership: Women of Color Elected to Office in Massachusetts* released by the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy in May 2021 and the *AAPI Women in Politics Report Massachusetts: Focus – 2021* issued by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' Asian American Commission in August 2021, demonstrate that Asian American women have made strides in electoral politics in the Commonwealth, even while barriers to office persist.²

In just one decade, the Massachusetts House of Representatives has seen the number of Asian American women go from zero to five—a notable increase that deserves not just acknowledgement but analysis. What drew these five women to step up to run and serve in the Massachusetts House? What do their campaign and officeholding experiences tell us about the dynamics of being Asian American, female, Korean, Japanese, Cambodian, Vietnamese, adopted, an immigrant, and so much more that make up their multiple, intersecting identities?

This brief focuses on the narratives of these five Asian American women who have served or are currently serving in the Massachusetts House of Representatives. During in-depth conversations about their activism and advocacy, professional careers, political campaigns and public service, they reflected on what drew them to public service as well as their perspectives on leadership and community. They spoke about how their identities shape their experiences and roles as lawmakers and as leaders in a white male-dominated institution—albeit one that is undergoing shifts in its composition. They also offered words of encouragement to women of color interested in making a difference through government and politics and addressed Asian American women in particular. It's important to note the timing of interviews with the women featured in this publication given the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and myriad effects of the public health emergency—particularly on campaigns run during this time and increased acts of hate, discrimination, and violence against Asian Americans. Interviews with former Representative Orrall, and Representative Nguyen and then Representative Robinson took place in September to November 2019, while interviews with Representatives Uyterhoeven and Howard were conducted in May and June 2021. The following analysis, therefore, draws from interviews completed at different times and, as a result, highlight conditions and contexts of the time.

ASIAN AMERICANS IN MASSACHUSETTS

The Asian American population in Massachusetts continues to grow in both size and diversity. As of the 2020 Decennial Census, Asian Americans (of one race) number 507,934 and are 7% of the total population in the state. Including Asian Americans who identify as multiracial, that percentage increases to 8%. Between 2010 and 2020, the Asian American population increased more than 45%.

According to 2019 estimates, there are more than a dozen Asian subgroups that number over 3,000 in Massachusetts, with Nepalese being the group that has grown the fastest of these since 2010. Chinese Americans remain the largest subgroup in the state at over 175,000, but Indian Americans, the second largest at nearly 125,000, are growing at a faster rate—62% compared to 49% for Chinese. The two subgroups comprise more than 6 out of 10 Asian Americans in Massachusetts. Vietnamese Americans are the third largest subgroup, at 10%.



KEIKO MATSUDO ORRALL

(2011 - 2018)

Served four terms

Republican - 12th Bristol (Twelfth Bristol, Consisting of Berkley; Taunton: Ward 3: Precinct B, Ward 4; Lakeville (Plymouth County); Middleborough: Precincts 2, 4, 5 (Plymouth County))

First Asian American woman and first Japanese American to be elected to the Massachusetts Legislature

First woman of color to run for statewide office in Massachusetts

EDUCATION

BA, Smith College

PRIORITIES AND COMMITTEES

Legislative Priorities:

Financial needs of 12th Bristol District; opening Massasoit State Park that had been closed for seven years; Assawompset Pond Complex management; casino mitigation; education issues related to PARCC testing assessments and Common Core standards; international opportunities through exports to Asian countries; agriculture and the cranberry industry

Joint Committees:

Economic Development and Emerging Technologies

Labor and Workforce Development

State Administration and Regulatory Oversight

Public Health Judiciary

Export Development

Keiko Matsudo Orrall was the first Asian American woman and first Japanese American elected to the Massachusetts Legislature in a 2011 special election. In addition to legislative committee work, she served on UMass Boston's Center for Women and Public Policy Advisory Board, the Pay Equity Commission, and the Massachusetts Caucus of Women Legislators, and has worked to support women in public office. She ran for Massachusetts State Treasurer in 2018 becoming the first woman of color to run for statewide office. Over the course of her legislative career, Orrall prioritized connecting people, helping small businesses, and championing efforts to promote diversity and inclusion. She has received recognition and awards from various organizations including the Massachusetts Restaurant and Business Alliance, the Commonwealth's cranberry industry, the American Legion, and the National Federation of Women Legislators. She was a member of the White House Initiative for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Presidential Commission. In 2019 she received the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Rays Award from the Emperor of Japan. Orrall served as the Massachusetts Republican National Committeewoman from 2016 until 2020.

Orrall currently serves as the Executive Director for the Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism. Serving all aspects of the tourism industry, Director Orrall meets regularly with stakeholders regarding opportunities for tourism, sports, and film in the Commonwealth. She is Chair of the Massachusetts Marketing Partnership, serves on the board of Discover New England and was appointed to the Brand USA Advisory Board, the nation's destination marketing organization promoting international travel and trade. She has participated in national and international panels promoting Massachusetts on the global stage.



MARIA D. ROBINSON

(2019 - 2022)

Served through mid-point of second term when she joined the Biden-Harris administration

Democrat - 6th Middlesex District (Sixth Middlesex, Consisting of Framingham: Precincts 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15)

First Korean American sworn into the Massachusetts Legislature

EDUCATION

Masters in Energy Law, University of Tulsa

SB Chemical Engineering,
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

PRIORITIES AND COMMITTEES

Legislative Priorities:

Clean energy; Racial equity; Civil rights

Joint Committees:

Advanced Information Technology, the Internet and Cybersecurity

Higher Education; Racial Equity, Civil Rights, and Inclusion

State Administration and Regulatory Oversight

In 2018, Maria Robinson was the first Korean American to be sworn into the Massachusetts Legislature. She brought her expertise in renewable clean energy from her time when she led Advanced Energy Economy's program on wholesale markets, leading the Clean Power Plan campaign, and her work on renewable energy projects at Navigant Consulting. Her priorities included education, LGBTQ+ rights, clean energy, and protecting the rights of all residents. Robinson's previous positions include serving as a Director of Wholesale Market Policy at Advanced Energy Economy and as a Senior Consultant at Renewable Energy Group at Navigant Consulting. In September 2021, President Biden nominated her to serve as Assistant Secretary in the Office of Electricity at the United States Department of Energy yet her nomination was stalled in the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. She was sworn in as the first-ever U.S. Energy Director of Grid Deployment in July 2022.



TRAM T. NGUYEN

(2019 - PRESENT)

Serving in her second term

Democrat - 18th Essex District (Eighteenth Essex, Consisting of Andover: Precincts 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9; Boxford: Precinct 1; North Andover: Precincts 6, 7, 8; Tewksbury: Precincts 3, 3A (Middlesex County))

First Vietnamese American to be sworn into the Massachusetts House

First Vietnamese American woman elected to the Massachusetts Legislature

EDUCATION

JD, Northeastern University
School of Law

BA, Tufts University

PRIORITIES AND COMMITTEES

Legislative Priorities:

Racial and gender equity, reproductive rights, environmental protection, worker's rights, rights for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, gun safety, addressing the opioid epidemic, and animal protection

Joint Committees:

Labor and Workforce Development
(Vice Chair)

Mental Health, Substance Use, and
Recovery

Municipalities and Regional
Government

House Committee on Human
Resources and Employee Engagement

Co-Chair, Special Commission on
Structural Racism in the Probation Service

In 2018, Tram Nguyen became the first Vietnamese American to be sworn into the Massachusetts Legislature after defeating a four-term lawmaker, earning 54% of the vote. She is a first generation Vietnamese-American immigrant and was the first person in her family to graduate from college and law school.

From the start of her legal career until she took office, Tram worked at Greater Boston Legal Services as a legal aid attorney and advocated for domestic violence survivors, workers, seniors, veterans, persons with disabilities, and children. She also engaged in legislative advocacy and worked with statewide coalitions, lawmakers, and lawmaking bodies to push for laws that address issues of racial and economic justice and protect the rights of the most vulnerable populations. Her priorities also include education, healthcare, transportation, and equality, diversity and inclusion.

When Tram was elected, she became the first Vietnamese American woman in elected office in the Commonwealth, the first Vietnamese American elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives, the first Asian American on the Board of Directors of the Massachusetts Caucus of Women Legislators, and the first Asian American woman to serve as House vice chair of a committee. Tram is currently vice chair of the Labor & Workforce Development Committee, and a member of the House Committee on Human Resources and Employee Engagement; the Joint Committee on Mental Health, Substance Use and Recovery; and the Joint Committee on Municipalities and Regional Government.

As an attorney, she received the Lawrence Bar Association Merit Award, the Vietnamese American Bar Association Public Service Award, the Reginald Heber Smith Award for innovation and excellence in legal advocacy, and the UAW Social Justice Award. As a legislator, she's received the Women's Empowerment Award (2019), Asian American Women Political Initiative Legislator of the Year Award (2019), YDMA Young Democratic Elected of the Year Award (2020), Council of State Government 20 under 40 Award (2020), NewDEAL Leader (2021), Gabby Giffords Rising Star Award from EMILY's List (Nominee, 2021), Caring Bear Award from the Caring Force of the Providers' Council (2021), Massachusetts Office for Victim Assistance Legislator of the Year Award (2022), and YWCA Northeastern Massachusetts Tribute to Women Award Recipient (2022).



VANNA HOWARD

(2021 - PRESENT)

Serving in her first term

Democrat - 17th Middlesex, Consisting of Chelmsford: Precinct 4; Lowell: Ward 1, Ward 2: Precinct 3, Ward 4: Precincts 2, 3, Wards 10, 11

First Cambodian American woman elected to the Massachusetts Legislature

EDUCATION

Harvard Business School LEADS Program (2022)

AA, Middlesex Community College

PRIORITIES AND COMMITTEES

Legislative Priorities:

Housing Affordability; Pandemic Recovery, Quality health care and education; Childcare availability and affordability; Public and mental health support and substance abuse recovery

Joint Committees:

Education; Cannabis Policy; Public Health; Racial Equity, Civil Rights, and Inclusion

Special Commission on Structural Racism at the Department of Correction

Vanna Howard is a refugee from the Khmer Rouge (Cambodian Genocide) and the first Cambodian American woman in the United States to be elected as a State Representative. An active community member in the City of Lowell, she is involved in the Lowell Housing Authority, Project LEARN, the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association, Boys and Girls Club of Greater Lowell, Mill City Grows, Acre Family Childcare, Ironstone Farm, Lowell Women's Week, and the Cultural Organization of Lowell, as well as the statewide Massachusetts Asian American Commission. In 2020, she defeated a 22-year incumbent for a seat in the Massachusetts House.



ERIKA UYTERHOEVEN

(2021 - PRESENT)

Serving in her first term

Democrat - 27th Middlesex, Consisting of Somerville: Ward 2: Precincts 2, 3, Wards 3, 5, 6

First Japanese American Democrat elected to the Massachusetts Legislature

EDUCATION

MBA, Harvard University

MPP, Toulouse School of Economics

BA, Wellesley College

PRIORITIES AND COMMITTEES

Legislative Priorities:

Housing as a human right; Fighting for racial justice; Ensuring a livable climate for all; and putting people over profit

Joint Committees:

Elder Affairs; Export Development; Public Service; Revenue

Erika Uyterhoeven was raised by a single mother who immigrated from Japan to Massachusetts. Actively involved in grassroots organizing and advocacy work, she was a co-founder of Act on Mass, a nonprofit dedicated to activating grassroots organizers and voters to hold Massachusetts legislators accountable on progressive issues.

MAKING "FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE": REFLECTIONS ON THE PATH TO OFFICE

"I wanted to go to Beacon Hill and have my voice heard. We have a two-party system. We need a balance of ideas and currently have one dominant party. We need both sides represented to get the best solutions in government. We need all kinds and colors of people represented." ~Keiko Orrall

While each Representative had a different journey to office, collectively their narratives reflect commonly shared experiences as Asian American women breaking through longstanding barriers, fostering deep connections to community, and taking on pivotal civic and policy leadership roles that prompted them to seek a seat in the Massachusetts House.

Former Representative Orrall was involved in her hometown as an elected official on the finance committee and engaged in the community as a parent. Orrall's heritage is Japanese and German Irish. Her father is Japanese and grew up on a sugar cane plantation in Hawaii. Her mom is German Irish from Indiana. Her parents met in college and settled in Cincinnati, Ohio. Orrall is one of five children and attended college in Massachusetts where she met her husband of 31 years.

She gained confidence and leadership skills through her experience as junior class president at Smith College: "That's where having a mentor from the class ahead of me made all the difference. She not only encouraged me to try, she showed me how. I ran and won that position, which opened up another amazing opportunity as the student representative on the Board of Trustees."

After college, she worked in education and raised two children. She was involved in her hometown of Lakeville, Massachusetts as an elected official on the finance committee and was engaged in the community as a parent. She ran for State Representative in 2011 for an open seat in a special election. The challenges to being elected were tremendous as a triple minority—woman, Asian, Republican. One of her motivations to run for public office was to be part of the conversation, especially as a Republican in Massachusetts which is heavily Democratic.

"I wanted to go to Beacon Hill and have my voice heard. We have a two-party system. We need a balance of ideas and currently have one dominant party. We need both sides represented to get the best solutions in government. We need all kinds and colors of people represented."

Always drawn to the idea of public service as a Girl Scout for a dozen years, Former Representative Robinson's decision to get involved in politics came from the 2016 presidential election outcome and her family. After the election, she served as a member of the Framingham Democratic Town Committee and engaged with the Democratic Party, and then attended Emerge Massachusetts, a training program to provide aspiring women leaders the skills and network to run for office. Her involvement in local politics also included service as an elected Town Meeting member. With the passing of the State Representative in her district, the opportunity to run presented itself. Robinson recalled knowing that if she didn't try, she would regret it for a long time. In considering the decision to seek a seat in the Massachusetts House, she noted,

"To me, this is one of the best things that I can be doing with my life is representing the 40,000 people in my district as well as everybody else throughout Massachusetts."

Robinson's experience of fostering children with her husband exposed her to the shortcomings of government when it came to supporting vulnerable communities and the role that she could play to change policies and systems:

"... my husband and I started fostering children. And that was a really eye-opening experience to understand the ways in which government, which I had always viewed as an ally, was in many ways failing some of our most vulnerable people and wanted to make sure that I was part of a change...."

She explained that "especially around issues like climate change or education funding, young people have a very different mindset... about how to make fundamental change." Referring to the current period as one in which "people are asking for big change and expecting more from their government," she referred to being "accountable to the people who voted me in."

Representative Nguyen explained how she was engaged in public service from the start of her legal career, with a focus on helping and advocating for vulnerable communities. Her understanding and compassion for them, she explained, come from being able to relate to them because of her upbringing in an immigrant family. Witnessing her parents' struggles—such as working two to three jobs, encountering racism, and dealing with workplace discrimination—she eventually saw such patterns in the communities she served as an attorney. Her identity “allowed [her]” to be in her role as a legislator and makes her “more passionate about these issues” because she is aware how policies “actually impact people in real life.”

Similar to Representative Nguyen, Representative Howard's journey to office stemmed from her experiences of coming to the United States from a Southeast Asian refugee background at a young age, acclimating to the United States, and confronting challenges experienced at a personal level that reflected common difficulties faced by immigrant communities.

For Representative Howard, the combination of her Southeast Asian refugee background and great mentorship led her to want to serve in the House of Representatives. Howard came to the United States in the 1980s to flee from the Khmer Rouge (the Cambodian genocide). At eleven years old when she re-settled, she was put into the public school system starting in the 7th grade. While her peers were learning subjects such as social studies and math, she was learning the alphabet. She recalled,

“It was a struggle learning the English language... It took many years for me to grasp the English language.”

After college, she worked as a legal secretary at a private law firm in Lowell and then for Congresswoman Niki Tsongas—first as a volunteer for the campaign, and then as a paid staffer. Utilizing her bilingual capacity, she was able to be the “eyes and ears for [Tsongas]” for Lowell's Asian community and in the African community when it came to issues such as immigration and housing.

“I never considered running for office because I was not politically involved until Congresswoman Niki Tsongas. When she was running for Congress for the seat, I volunteered here and there.... got to see the issues... how the sausage factory operates... I learned that's a place that can accomplish great things on big ideas and make that change.”

Representative Howard ran during the height of anti-hate Asian violence and the start of the pandemic in 2020. With support from her team, she recognized how vital it was to wage this campaign and be there for her community.

Representative Uytendhoeven's “foray into politics” was through her experience as a paid staff member on Bernie Sanders' 2016 campaign team. Before that, she worked as an antitrust economist. Uytendhoeven was raised by a single Japanese immigrant mother and grew up in a community that “did not have people of [her] mom's background.” A lot of her classmates came from nuclear families, and had parents employed in professions such as law and medicine. After the campaign, she shifted from someone who thought “things happen to me,” to someone who felt “it's our responsibility to shape the world that we live in.”

The campaign experience was something of a game changer for Uytendhoeven: “I completely shifted my perspective on my responsibility in the world, and responsibility to my community, and also built a sense of community, which was something that I lacked for a while, especially in my childhood.”

An unequivocal commitment to community characterized many of the Representatives' narratives about their path to office. Each Representative spoke to the importance of ensuring that all voices from the community were represented at the table.

ENSURING THAT “OUR VOICES ARE AT THE TABLE”

“We tend to be forgotten.” ~Tram Nguyen

While all five women came from different backgrounds and experienced distinctly unique upbringings, they collectively referred to concerns and interests that motivated them to serve their communities through elected leadership. For them, having a voice and seat at the “table” reflected the commonly-invoked intention of making a difference as political leaders and empowering others to have a voice in policymaking.

In the words of Representative Nguyen: “So in order to be at the table, you have to speak up, right? And that was why I got into advocacy work because I feel like my passion is in working with people and empowering them to speak up for themselves.”

Representative Nguyen took many Asian American Studies courses during her undergraduate years at Tufts University. They helped her gain “a better understanding of our community, what it means to be Asian American, what it means to be living in this community, and in this country, our state and how our identity plays out.” She recognized the significance of different voices at the table, particularly those of Asian Americans because “we tend to be forgotten” and not speak up. For these reasons, Nguyen entered into advocacy work and then became a legislator because she felt it was her passion to work with people and empower them to speak up for themselves.

Representative Howard similarly spoke of the need to bring a different perspective to the policymaking table, given the lack of gender and racial diversity of those who had served as representative in the past. Driven by her understanding that change was necessary, Representative Howard determined that it was important to run because her current position provides a place to accomplish “great things” and make “great change.” She understood the importance of having a woman’s perspective in the position that she now holds—especially given that, historically, there had never been a woman in the seat. As she explained, “When you want to talk about women’s issues, girl issues, you need a woman at the table.”

For former Representative Orrall, it was important to have a diversity of ideas and faces in politics. She recalled how one of her motivations to become an officeholder was the need to be part of the conversation, especially as a Republican in her hometown which was largely Democratic.

“I just wanted to go in and have my voice heard and I feel like we need a two-party system. We need a balance of ideas. And so that’s what I ran on.”

Representative Uytterhoeven grew more involved in her community by helping out in local electoral campaigns for state representatives, fighting alongside progressive advocacy groups and labor unions, and then most notably founding Act on Mass, an organization with a mission to “basically build a good and health democracy in the Massachusetts Legislature.” She explained that, “in a lot of ways...[the legislature] leaves a lot... of voices of communities out of the political process.”

Uytterhoeven’s drive to ensure access to members of the community who do not have a seat at the table [“in the room”] shaped what she sees as a vital aspect of her role as a state legislator. As she remarked,

“How do we bring in other people to the table? How do we open these doors for people who have never had access to it?”

INTERSECTING IDENTITIES

While there were commonalities in experience and perspective across the reflections offered by the Asian American women of focus in this publication, it's important to recognize the tremendous diversity in their racial and family backgrounds as well as their personal and professional journeys. The concept of identity holds different meanings to them collectively, and, for many, their individual understandings of identity has evolved over time both as people and as elected officials.

Former Representative Robinson was adopted from Korea at five months old—and while she does identify as Korean-American, she explained that the “hyphen is doing a lot of heavy lifting there.” She grew up in an area where she was the only Asian person that she really knew outside of some other adoptees. It wasn't until college that she came into contact with Asian cultures and communities.

“I've been doing a lot of catching up, I think culturally, and spending a lot of time getting to know the Korean community here in Massachusetts a lot better.”

In addressing the importance of identity, Robinson remarked how, “striving for that sense of identity and belonging I think is important to everybody. And the more people that we can sort of find ties with, no matter how limited they are, I think the better communities are going to be overall.”

Others made similar connections between identity, belonging, and community, with Representative Nguyen speaking to intersectional identities and how different elements of identity interact and constantly shape experience.

Representative Nguyen spoke of “multiple dimensions of identity that can make up a person, and those identities can intersect and interact with one another to influence the way they experience the world.” She explained that “We are made up of what we identify with, but also our backgrounds, our experiences, all of that makes up who we are. I don't think there's any given moment that I think I'm this and nothing else because you can't be one without the other. I don't think they can be separated.”

Experiencing the State House as an Asian American female elected has, at times, entailed challenges related to shared identities of race, gender, immigrant status, and country of origin. Some of the women shared anecdotes of being stereotyped and subjected to microaggressions.

Maria Robinson expressed that her identities “impact the day-to-day work in sometimes frustrating ways.” She remembered a time when she sent out a newsletter with a photo that included her, but the photo's caption didn't identify her. Her aide fielded a call from someone saying they didn't think the “Asian one” could possibly be “Maria Robinson.” Despite similar doubts from others at times who questioned her identity as a State Representative, she stated that her identity as a woman and a young person is representative of the “kinds of change that [she sees] people wanting to achieve.”

Other examples of challenges to or misperceptions about identity were offered by the women interviewed. Orrall recalled how her identity has, at times, been called into question: “Because of my features walking into the room, I am immediately identified as a woman and as an Asian. “Oh, you don't speak Japanese?” No, I don't speak Japanese. They immediately assume that, how long have you been in the country? Oh, okay. Well, I was born in Ohio. Yeah. Because I mean that I would get that. Well, where are you from? I'm from Lakeville. Where are you from? Well, originally I'm from Cincinnati. Where are you from? Are you Chinese or something? That type of conversation happens on a regular basis.” She noted that her experience stands in stark contrast to that of her husband who is currently serving in the same seat she held. She commented that while he is accepted as a State Representative without any doubt, for Representative Orrall, “she'd have to walk in and... prove that [she deserved] that seat at the table.” Furthermore, Orrall spoke of the stereotypes of being “quiet, demure, [and] easy going” that she had to cut through as well.

Similar to what former Representative Orrall described as she confronted questions about her background, Representative Nguyen recalled what she experienced during her run against an incumbent who'd been in office for eight years and lived in the district for about 30 years. Her opponent painted Nguyen as a perpetual foreigner—a stereotype that depicts Asian American and Pacific Islanders as outsiders and aliens regardless of where they were born or how long they have lived in the United States: “He said who is this person who's running against me? Who's not from here? But you know what that meant. “Not from here.”

Yet Representative Nguyen grew up in the Merrimack Valley. Her middle to high school teachers came out to support her during her campaign. She relied on everyone during the campaign, from her former college peers to people who worked for her.

Amidst challenging circumstances, Representatives Uytendaele and Howard ran their campaigns in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic—on top of the Black Lives Matter protests and the spike of coronavirus-related racism and heightened

discrimination against the Asian community. Representative Uytendaele reflected on how dominant perceptions of Asian American women came into play in her experience on the campaign trail: “I think the experience of being othered and marginalized as both an Asian American woman, and particularly the way white supremacy expects me to be well-behaved and quiet, and not fighting... that was some of the emotions that came out” during my campaign. She spoke of the contradiction she saw in perceptions about race and gender: “We love Asian ... We love women of color, until they try to seek power... then there’s a backlash.”

Representative Uytendaele shared that her opponent’s tactics against her were steeped in “very racist accusations [and] narratives,” and offered an example of calling out her mother as not an “immigrant” because Asian Americans “[weren’t] people of color.” The anti-Asian rhetoric existed before her campaign—it was something that was “always with me,” she noted, but was heightened over the course of her campaign as reports of anti-Asian hate crimes continued to exponentially climb, especially after the Atlanta massacre. She remarked, “It always was with me, anti-Asian hate and racism, through my life, but it was so pronounced in my candidacy, or through my campaign.”

Representative Howard had a great campaign team and good advice during her campaign, but it was “also very scary” given the rampant anti-Asian rhetoric and scapegoating out of Washington, DC. Her decision to keep going despite the challenges was vital. She explained that it was critical for her as part of the AAPI community to speak out against the attacks: “It’s very important because I was able to speak out about the attacks on our AAPI community. So I will continue to speak up and speak out, because this is not a moment, I keep saying, it’s not a moment. It’s a movement, that we no longer be silent on this anti-Asian hate. So we need to continue to speak up and speak out with this sort of violence and degradation against us.”

Similar experiences related to her gender and racial identity have occurred in her role as a State Representative. For example, Representative Howard recalled a time she was invited for an interview on a local news show. A white colleague suggested she should not introduce herself as a “woman of color.” The way that one identifies oneself is extremely personal, and Representative Howard found it “insulting and disrespectful” to have someone else dictate her identity.

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY: “WE’RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER”

“We all come together, respect each other’s opinion” ~Vanna Howard

When it came to defining community, the concepts of reliance, shared values and interests, common geography, unity, and respect all surfaced in the interviews conducted.

As Representative Nguyen explained, community can take on various meanings and broadening the circles of community is key in politics:

“I think most people have different communities that they don’t even think about until they’re put in a situation and they have to think about who can I rely on.... But ever since I’ve been in politics, you realize that the community is so much bigger than that where we need to be— connecting with people so outside that circle, because that’s how ideas are exchanged.”

As an adoptee with no relationship to her family of origin, former Representative Robinson highlighted the opportunity to choose one’s family and community. She spoke about the process of learning about the Korean community and the significance of identifying ties to others as vital to strengthening communities.

“It’s been interesting trying to learn more about the Korean community, which I identify as. But I’m also not fully a part of it in many ways... striving for that sense of identity and belonging I think is important to everybody. And the more people that we can sort of find ties with, no matter how limited they are, I think the better communities are going to be overall.”

Representative Howard highlighted that in the word “community,” there’s also the word “unity” which signifies that “...we all come together, respect each other’s opinion.” She explained that, as a legislator, she recognizes that not everyone is going to come to the same resolution. While there will be disagreements, she said at the end of it all, “we’re all in this together” for the best interest of us—the constituents across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Representative Uytendaele expressed that, for her, community encompasses those who share her values and goals. Her sense of community related to anyone who believes and supports the “abolition of capitalism, tearing apart systems... and fighting in the space” for a more equitable, just society.

DEFINING LEADERSHIP: “NO LEADER DOES ANYTHING ALONE”

“Leadership means doing what’s right even when it’s difficult.” ~Maria Robinson

It was striking how much community worked into the definitions of leadership offered by the Asian American women elected to the Massachusetts House. As Representative Uytterhoeven pointed out, the definitions of community and leadership are “intertwined” and it’s not possible to have “one without the other.” In addition, most spoke in-depth about how the work of a leader is not a solo endeavor but about other people—with empowerment and support as key facets of leadership in practice. Representative Nguyen explained that leadership means to “empower,” “support,” and “guide” community members.

Former Representative Orrall expressed how leadership is a process of “empowering someone to come behind [her]” recognizing that “I’m here for a second.”

Robinson described leadership as doing “what’s right even when it’s difficult” saying that there’s value in standing up for one’s beliefs, regardless of the outcome.

In terms of whether or not they saw themselves as leaders, the women described different orientations toward leadership. Howard expressed she doesn’t see herself as a leader, but on the same level with the other members of the Legislature. She described this as being “in the trench with everybody.”

In seeing herself as a leader, Orrall highlighted the significance of coming into a position where she was the “first” and the need to “set a good example.” Representative Nguyen also cited the importance of leading “by example.”

Representatives Nguyen, Robinson, and Uytterhoeven cited how leadership for them entailed a continual learning process. Representative Nguyen noted that she aspires to continue being a good leader and to have “advisors” and “people” close to her on her leadership journey. Representative Uytterhoeven explained she’s working toward leadership and it is her intention to develop the next generation of leaders.

“We Need You”

ADVICE AND LESSONS FOR WOMEN OF COLOR

“Find it in you. Learn the ins and outs of the subject that you’re interested in. Learn the ins and out, in depth. Deal with that issue, and pound the pavement, show up, and you will make that difference you sought.”

-Vanna Howard, State Representative

“First of all, just do it and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. I can’t tell you how many people told me not to run for office. And because I had such a strong support system, in my family and my friends who did tell me to do it, I felt the courage to just do it. I think there’s just a statistic that says, you know, women need to be asked seven times before they finally decide to run for office. And actually Asian American women—actually women of color—generally might not be asked at all. So I like to say I’m asking you, do you want to run for office? Please do.”

-Tram Nguyen, State Representative

“Be a part of your school board, be a part of your city council, get involved with your different civic activities in your civic groups. We need you. We need you to participate and be a voice.”
“Find those stars. Find people that you like you want to be, you value what they’ve contributed.”

-Keiko Orrall, Former State Representative

“I think women, and especially women of color, should run for public office, even though there are a lot of forces out there telling you that you shouldn’t. I’m here to tell you that you are worthy, you are capable and you can absolutely be in public office and win a campaign. The best advice I can give you is to make sure that you are taking care of yourself, because people give a lot of themselves through the process of campaigning and making sure that you take care of you, and of your family and loved ones is of utmost importance because that makes you not just a better candidate, but a better person overall. But I have faith in you and you can absolutely do it.”

-Maria Robinson, State Representative

“Anyone can do the job because it’s not a defined job. We’re used to resume building, and being qualified, and getting the approval. When women of color, which again, the white men I have to trip over through election season never ask the question, like, “Can I do this?” but somehow, when you have intersections of race, class, and gender, the questions like, “Oh, can I do this?”
It’s not a question of, “Can you do this?” It’s a question of, “Should you do this?”
That’s a very different question.”

-Erika Uytterhoeven, State Representative

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Katie Mai

Katie Mai (she/they) is a UMass Boston graduate, completing her degree in Psychology and Program of Study in Asian American Studies in 2020. From her senior year to the present, Katie has worked as a Research Assistant for both the Institute for Asian American Studies and Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy on the *Massachusetts Representation Project: Diverse Leadership for a Diverse Commonwealth* initiative and the center's 2021 publication *Profiles in Leadership: Women Elected to Office in Massachusetts*. Currently, she is a first-year social work graduate student with the goal of serving her community.

AUTHOR REFLECTION

Several factors influenced this publication. First, it was inspired by my experience as a fellow in the Asian American Women's Political Initiative (AAWPI) in 2017. At the time, I spent a spring semester as a legislative intern at the Massachusetts State House, placed in the office for the Joint Committee on Health Care Financing under former Representative Jeffrey Sánchez. I was inspired by my education at UMass Boston, particularly in the Asian American Studies Program, and my campus involvement. Asian American Studies allowed me to learn about the real lived experiences, issues, and history of my community for the first time in a classroom setting. All of the knowledge and the connections I gained from the program led me to my leadership role on campus as the Coordinator for the Asian Student Center. There, I was given the opportunity to collaborate with the student-led centers and organizations, staff and administrators, and produce intentional programming to primarily support and engage with the Asian American student population.

I believe all of these opportunities and my community developed a strong sense of my Asian American identity and other identities, and understand how they influence the way I interact with the world, how the world interacts with me, and the work that I choose to do.

As I reflect on the conversations I had with these former and current Asian American women legislators, I think about my time in AAWPI. With all the institutional changes that allowed for voting to be accessible for communities of color, there is still a lack of women of color in political representation—especially Asian American women—in the Massachusetts House of Representatives and Senate. The significant achievements of Keiko Orrall, Tram Nguyen, Maria Robinson, Erika Uyterhoeven, and Vanna Howard began the rise of Asian American women in the state legislature. Yet, their success is but the start. The experiences of their political journeys before and during their time in office is evidence that we must remain vigilant that their faces—like mine—continue to be reflected in the political leadership throughout the Commonwealth.

To be truthful, I had that thought before and during when I was in AAWPI. I entered the Massachusetts State House without any prior knowledge of government and politics, and felt discouraged about the steep learning curve that I had to overcome. The lack of faces that looked like mine in political leadership made it difficult to be there because it felt like I didn't belong. I was terrified to be in a place filled with people that meant to serve me and my community, but for the most part, looked nothing like me or could not personally relate to me. However, thanks to AAWPI's support and my fellowship experience, by the end I realized that I did deserve to have a "seat at the table."

Interviewing these current and former legislators provided me deeper insight into the challenges of breaking in and staying in the political arena as an Asian American woman. Among the key take-aways from the interviews I conducted were the following:

1. **The personal is political.** These Asian American women participated in politics because it affected them and their communities. They knew well the consequences of not being “at the table” and were driven to be agents of change given their backgrounds and life experiences. For the most part, these women saw elective office as a way to facilitate and advance issues of personal experience and commitment. Whether pursuing sound energy policy or dealing with issues of domestic violence or challenges facing refugee women, they saw being legislators as a way to further these ends and to move into other areas that reflect their personal passions and public needs.
2. They demonstrated that **the “wait your turn” approach is becoming an outdated barrier to political leadership.** They saw a need and responded to it, thereby bucking the expectation that often faces women and persons of color—that state legislative seats generally require serving on local governing bodies first.
3. **The dominant perception of what a state legislator looks like meant that they faced particular challenges** as Asian American women and dominant stereotypes about them, accompanied life on the campaign trail and once elected. Some had trouble knowing or simply accepting traditions perceived by some as keeping new legislators “in their place.”
4. **Mentorship and a supportive network, both formal and informal, can be game-changers.** The political realm is often not easy to navigate on one’s own and the journeys of the Asian American women who have been elected to the Massachusetts House suggest that mentorship and a supportive, sustained network are critically important.
5. **Leadership is not about a person, but one’s community.** To lead is not something done on one’s own, but through colleagues, community members and stakeholders for the purpose of achieving common goals.

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You can learn more about it here: <https://www.aawpi.org/>.

SOURCES

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APPENDIX. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you tell me about your background?
 - a. Where you grew up
 - b. Ethnicity and race
 - c. Past public service (political, nonprofit, etc.)
 - d. Your current position
2. How did you get into politics? What made you want to get into politics?
 - a. What was it like to be a candidate?
3. How would you define “community”?
 - a. And what does it look like for you?
4. How do you define “leadership”?
 - a. What does leadership look like for you?
 - b. Do you consider yourself to be a leader? “
5. As a legislator, what aspects (ethnic, gender) of your identity feel primary to you?
6. Do you think these identities have impacted your leadership and the work that you do? If so, how? Why or why not?
 - a. How do you think these identities influence others with whom you work?
7. Any lessons or words of advice for women of color who aspire to be officeholders?
8. Anything else that you'd like to add?