OPINION

How Andrew Yang can and should advance racial understanding

By Neil Gong and Xiaohong Xu | on December 12, 2019

Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang speaks at the National Action Networks Southeast Regional Conference on Nov. 21 in Atlanta.

Photo: Elijah Nouvelage / Getty Images
Andrew Yang passed a major hurdle this week by qualifying for the Democratic debate next Thursday. With Kamala Harris’ exit, he has become the leading candidate of color. As the only nonwhite person on the stage, he will have a tremendous opportunity to change the racial narrative, broaden his base and reshape perceptions of Asian Americans.

So far, however, his candidacy has been marked by his rejection of “identity politics.” Consider his remarkably economic determinist approach to cultural and racial polarization. Yang suggests we need to “go a level deeper, (and ask) why are so many Americans now struggling and turning on each other?” His answer is economic insecurity, to be addressed by universal basic income. This is an important perspective with appeal in a general election, but it spells disaster for the Democratic nomination, where any candidate must face issues of racial justice and identity head on.

Now the racial question may be thrust on him. This presents a chance to resolve his messaging dilemma, if he can learn to talk seriously about race in America and tie it to his signature policy proposal.

How should he take advantage of this moment?

As sociologists who study the relationship between culture and politics, we know that racial tropes already powerfully frame how audiences read him. We also know Yang must do more than invoke “model minority” stereotypes that risk pitting Asians against other people of color, and paint him as a competent technocrat rather than leader. Instead of avoiding race, he should lean into it. At the debates and after, he must explain how his background offers a fresh perspective on polarized race relations and why his policies can provide a way forward.
Imagine an Asian American version of President Obama’s 2008 “A More Perfect Union” speech, one that takes inequality beyond economics seriously and shows why he is positioned to lead. Beyond humanizing Yang, it will introduce audiences to a more nuanced picture of Asians in America, demonstrate moral authority and foster a universalism of cross-racial solidarity rather than colorblindness.

Recall how Obama masterfully mobilized the language of racial justice in an inclusive call for national healing. He narrated the African American experience as a long and arduous struggle that other Americans could join. How might Yang rebrand the Asian American story to resolve his messaging dilemma? Here are two histories that, if woven together, can offer a commanding narrative of why the Asian American experience prepares him to fight for Americans of all backgrounds.

First is the model minority story. From the Chinese who built the Transcontinental Railroad to the refugees who came in the wake of the Vietnam War, Asian Americans have escaped insecurity wrought by poverty, civil wars and political violence. This has made them keenly aware of the power of resource security. Alongside their more privileged counterparts who came for educational opportunities yet found political power stymied, they raised their children to pursue careers that guaranteed individual material security and social respect. Some achieved the American Dream.

Second is a story of collective struggle. From the railroad workers who engaged in labor strikes, to the Japanese Americans who fought to free Jewish prisoners from concentration camps while their own families were interned, to Grace Lee Boggs and others in the Black Freedom Movement, to Philip Vera Cruz and other Filipinos who co-founded the United Farm Workers with Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, Asian Americans have seen when the American Dream
was systematically denied. They have fought for the greater freedom of all.

Yang’s focus on economic security through universal basic income, crucial in our moment of wealth inequality, can be grounded in the first side of the Asian American experience and offered as a colorblind universalism to all voters. His decision to move from the business sector, to nonprofit, and then public service may reflect the second side. If he genuinely engages the tradition of collective struggle, he can learn from Asian Americans’ rarely told history of courage and moral leadership in collaboration with multicultural social movements. He can wield policy in ways that speak to the specific needs of black and brown communities.

This rhetoric, of course, will require follow-through. Yang must articulate the path forward from universal basic income toward justice and collective flourishing, rather than as an end point.

If Yang learns to take racial grievance seriously, as something intertwined with but also distinct from economics, he can strengthen his campaign for both the primary and general audiences. Done right, he can connect his policy proposals to the struggles of Americans with diverse histories and needs. He can offer a deeper universalism, not based on colorblindness, but earned through coalition building and solidarity.

Whatever the outcome of Yang’s candidacy, this could be his contribution to “a more perfect union.”

*Neil Gong is an assistant professor of sociology at UC San Diego and the Michigan Society of Fellows. Xiaohong Xu is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Michigan.*