

MATH OUTSIDE THE BUBBLE



Is MATH the New MAGA?

Sophia D. Merow

Until 2019, *math* was a syllable seldom shouted. Then serial entrepreneur Andrew Yang put the four-letter word at the center of his long-shot bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, and *math's* rise to unforeseen prominence on the political stage began—with an applause line.

Yang launched his White House run in November 2017, but the declaration that has since appeared in nearly every account of his candidacy didn't get traction until the first quarter of 2019, after his breakout February appearance on the popular podcast *The Joe Rogan Experience*. "The opposite of Donald Trump," Yang announced during interviews and at rallies, "is an Asian man who likes math."

No one disputes the "Asian man" part of Yang's self-characterization; the 44-year-old father of two is the son of Taiwanese immigrants.¹ The proclaimed fondness for math, though, is more puzzling. Yang's résumé—his economics major, his law degree, his stints with healthcare software and GMAT test prep startups, his creation of the nonprofit fellowship program Venture for America—contains nothing suggestive of an appreciation for *mathematics* per se. Yang likes to say he "did the math" and gives statistics-laden stump speeches that sound at times like TED talks or

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¹ Some have noted, with varying levels of (dis)approval, that Yang's statement plays into the "model minority myth" that pegs Asian Americans as high achievers, particularly in subjects like math. Yang is mindful of the stereotype, he told the *New York Times* (<https://nyti.ms/2T1U5vF>), but is just being true to himself. "It would be unfortunate if you say, 'I'm an Asian guy who likes math, thus, all Asian guys like math,'" he said.

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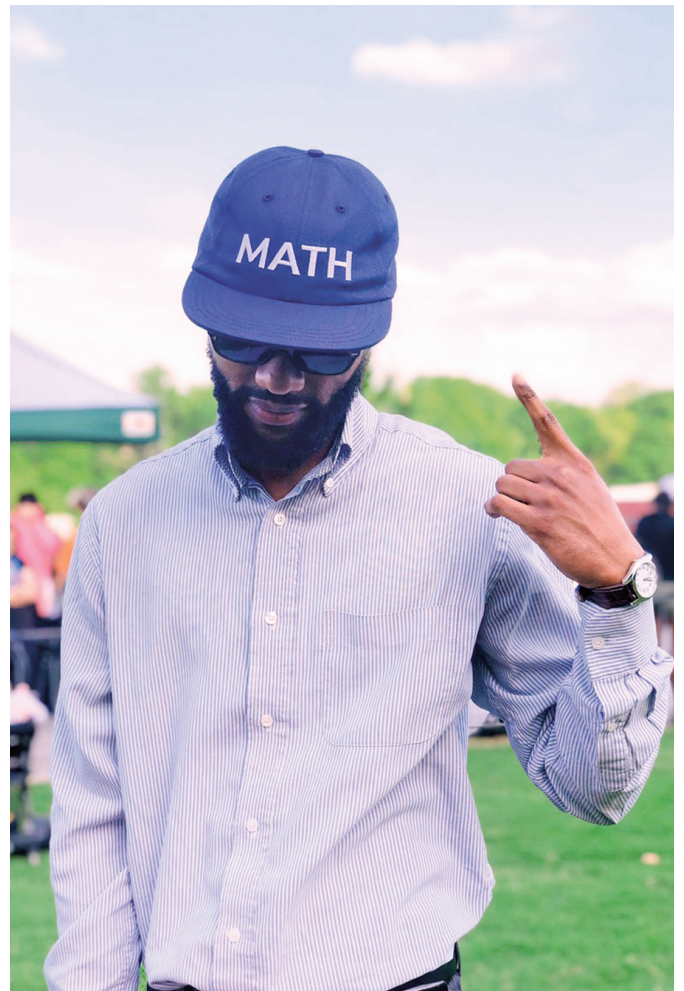


Figure 1. Yang supporter and Blockchain developer Tyler Hunter sports a MATH hat.

economics lectures, but he does not seem to share fellow lawyer and presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln's inclination to pore over Euclid's *Elements*.

And then there's the question of whether Yang and Trump are sufficiently antonymous.² When former George W. Bush adviser Mark McKinnon discussed with college students at the Yale Politics Initiative which of the Democratic contenders offered the clearest contrast to Trump, they identified not Yang but Pete Buttigieg (<https://cnn.it/2YGsP6Q>). Even *Daily Show* host Trevor Noah challenged Yang's claim. "The opposite of Donald Trump isn't an Asian man who likes math," he quipped. "It's a Mexican lady who likes her children. Come on now."³

The "opposite of Donald Trump" line reliably elicited cheers and chuckles, but not screams. To cement *math's* place as the so-called Yang Gang's rallying cry, it took *merch*.

On March 19, the Yang team gauged supporters' affinity for *math* by stocking the campaign's online store with a limited first edition print of a navy blue baseball cap with "MATH" emblazoned on the front, "Yang 2020" on the back, and Yang's signature on the tag. "It will make you better at long division," promised a post on the Andrew Yang for President 2020 Facebook page. All 500 sold out in 22 minutes.

By Tax Day, when Yang held a rally at the Lincoln Memorial, the *math*-centric messaging was both seen and heard. In a piece for *The American Conservative* (<https://bit.ly/2YH0spc>), Remso W. Martinez described the assemblage as "a large crowd of people wearing hats and holding signs that said 'math.'" According to *Business Insider's* account of the event (<https://bit.ly/2MEjQR1>), each of the many times Yang said "math" or "I looked at the numbers," supporters raised their signs and shouted in unison: "math!"

All-caps typography can signify yelling, sure, but it can also indicate an acronym afoot. "Turns out MATH can stand for a few things," Yang tweeted on May 5. Move America Towards Humanity, he proposed, or Make American Truckers Hopeful.⁴ "Make A Thousand Happen" submitted an apparent fan of Yang's signature plan to give each American adult a "Freedom Dividend" of 1,000 dollars per month. Before long, though, the definitive interpretation emerged. As Yang explained to SupertutorTV's Brooke Hanson in June (<https://bit.ly/2LX5VXc>), "It stands for 'make America think harder,' which is what we have to do."

² Even Yang initially phrased the opposition differently: An August 2018 tweet read, "Someone said that the opposite of Donald Trump is a smart Asian guy who likes facts..."

³ Stephen Colbert offered his own formulation in his post-debate commentary in late July: "The opposite of Donald Trump is a black woman who has spellcheck."

⁴ Yang predicts that automation will put long-haul truckers out of work and proposes a version of universal basic income to ease their transition into other lines of work.

Although Yang 2020's assortment of MATH swag had expanded by August to include shirts, buttons, stickers, and a bandana (adorned with area, perimeter, and volume formulae; trig identities; a trapezoid inscribed inside a circle; and general quadratics in standard and slightly nonstandard form), the jury was still out on the wisdom of Yang's strategy.

Doubters tended to focus on (1) widespread aversion to mathematics⁵ and (2) the advisability of appealing to voters' hearts rather than their heads. "The word 'math' is not one that any sane political consultant would pick to resonate with voters," said East Carolina University political scientist Jody Baumgartner.

Others argued that the MATH messaging worked precisely because it telegraphed the candidate's predilection for the rational over the emotional. "Everyone is tired of all of the emotional drama," Yang volunteer (and mathematical neuroscience PhD) Tami Joy Schlichter told *The Christian Science Monitor* (<https://bit.ly/2X2oMVZ>). "We just want someone that's going to pay attention to an issue, do the research, and solve it according to what the data says." Supporters also offered anecdotal evidence that the electorate may be less math-averse than often assumed. They called the MATH hat "a conversation starter," a "stealthy way to gain goodwill with strangers," a "chick magnet" even.

Ken Cosgrove, who studies political marketing at Suffolk University in Boston, likewise pushed back against this author's description of math as "a word with which many Americans have a negative association." "The other way one could look at MATH is as being the ultimate truth of the matter," Cosgrove wrote to me in July. "Politicians will tell us lots of stories, but the question is if they do the math on the story does it add up to what they're claiming. Yang's inviting Americans to do the math and see for themselves."

NOTE. The Yang campaign did not respond to any of multiple requests for comment.



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Credits

Figure 1 is courtesy of Tyler Hunter, @TylerHunter06. Author photo is by David Gabel.

⁵ "As a math-challenged American, I felt personally victimized by this strange slogan," wrote the aforementioned Martinez.