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Multiplexing Racial and Ethnic Planes: Chinese American Politics in Globalized Immigrant Suburbs

James S. Lai

No specific minority or foreign group should ever dictate the outcome of the election. I don't care if the Chinese population in Edison (New Jersey) has quadrupled in the last year, Chinese should never dictate the outcome of an American election, Americans should.

—Craig Carton, co-host of the popular
New Jersey radio program, "Jersey Guys," April 2005

Introduction

Contemporary American suburbs offer critical insights into the multiple planes of racial and ethnic consciousness and community formations that shape new Chinese American political agendas. In a 2009 *Amerasia Journal* article entitled "A New Gateway: Asian American Political Power in the 21st Century," I examined the importance of location for understanding the ability of Asian American communities to attain and sustain elected representation.¹ Like real estate, location matters in explaining the political question of "where" Asian Americans are winning elected representation in American politics. That article's thesis was that, rather than focusing solely on metropolitan gateways that had been central to the twentieth-century experiences of Asian Americans, we need also to focus on the small- to medium-sized twenty-first-century gateway suburbs with total populations between 30,000 to 110,000. These locations are where the pathways to political incor-

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poration are happening more rapidly and dramatically, as Asian ethnic media and politically mature community-based organizations and interest groups are emerging within largely Asian immigrant suburbs.

This article expands on the above thesis by disentangling the multiple planes that form the complex environment unique to global immigrant suburbs and the nuanced political strategies that Chinese American candidates must pursue through the process referred to as *multiplexing*. Chinese American candidates must negotiate the racial formations that cast and conflate them and other Asian candidates as “permanent aliens” or “perpetual foreigners” whose interests are seen as suspect and threatening by those white residents who oppose the demographic shifts and political changes taking shape in these global suburbs.² To illustrate the prospects and challenges of new Chinese American politics, this article draws primarily from the two suburbs of Cupertino, California and Sugar Land, Texas, which have witnessed dramatic demographic and political shifts among their large Chinese immigrant populations during the last decade. Both cities are emblematic of the complex environments that envelop contemporary global Chinese immigrant suburbs and provide cautionary tales on the importance of multiplexing as a necessary political strategy for electoral success.

Global immigrant suburbs challenge and update the political concept of pluralism, which states that multiple power centers, including elites and masses, operate in local politics in an open and equal playing field. In short, pluralism assumes that there are multiple access points into the political system for all groups to enter, even if resources may differ among them. Rodney Hero has argued in his seminal 1992 book *Latinos and the U.S. Political System: Two-Tiered Pluralism* that pluralism did not exist for Latinos and Chicanos who did not have equal access to multiple political spheres in metropolises such as San Antonio, Los Angeles, New York City, and Miami due to the presence of entrenched elites; this resulted in what he termed “two-tiered pluralism.”³ Diane Pinderhughes found similar results for African Americans in Chicago, where racial and ethnic hierarchies existed that shut out African American reformers from the city’s political machine.⁴ While similar structural barriers exist in global immigrant suburbs and multiracial metropolises, I argue that what is unique about Chinese American politics with regard to pluralism is the presence of five racial and ethnic planes that may complicate group political

action in the form of elected representation, even as the demographics in these cities change.

Multiplexing Politics: The Five Planes

Multiplexing is the process by which Chinese American candidates pursue nuanced campaign strategies that simultaneously address the multiple racial and ethnic planes in American suburbs. Those candidates who pursue a traditional single plane strategy that focuses solely on mobilizing voters and contributors in the Chinese American community do so at their own political peril as other external and internal planes exist that require new strategies. Tritia Toyota, in *Envisioning America: New Chinese Americans and the Politics of Belonging*, observes that new Chinese immigrants in southern California arrive with higher education and more economic wealth than previous cohorts. Yet despite their social and class advantages, they still encounter racial constructions in the form of group perceptions that confine and limit their economic, social, and political mobility.⁵ Political scientist Claire Kim points out that contemporary Asian Americans must work within a third space as “conditional citizens” to achieve the goal of political incorporation that is neither black nor white, and one that increasingly pits them against established racial minorities by painting them as new economic oppressors. This can be seen with Korean small businesses with African American patrons in cities such as Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and New York City.⁶ Such racial, ethnic, and class tensions also undermine the ability of new Chinese American candidates to construct multiracial coalitions in suburbs, vital for local political incorporation that begins with descriptive or ethnic representation.

Given this social and political milieu, I submit that five racial-ethnic political planes are essential to understanding new Chinese American politics taking shape. These planes, in order of our discussion, are:

1. Permanent alien and perceived group threat
2. Demographic concentration of Asian populations
3. New ethnic paradigms and cleavages
4. Cross-racial conditions and zero-sum politics
5. Cross-ethnic coalition challenges

These multiple racial-ethnic dimensions are not mutually exclusive or independent of each other, as they often intersect. More-

over, it is equally important to understand that candidate sensitivity to these planes does not necessarily mitigate or prevent them from arising at some point during their campaigns as opponents may purposely inject them into elections.

Plane One: Permanent Alien and Perceived Group Threat

The permanent alien image is central to understanding the subject formation and the racial consciousness of the Chinese American experience from the early nineteenth century to the present. An underlying aspect of this image is questioning the loyalty of Chinese Americans, whether foreign- or U.S.-born, as U.S. citizens, and thus whether they are able to assimilate. Contemporary examples include John Huang and the 1996 Democratic National Committee campaign finance scandal, the 1997 Wen Ho Lee espionage trial, and the current white flight away from Chinese immigrant suburbs such as Cupertino, California.⁷ Immigrant suburbs are not immune to this racial plane despite class similarities among Chinese American and white residents. If anything, they become more salient than in metropolises due to the dramatic demographic shifts taking shape in these suburbs, as my discussion of plane two will illustrate.

The political impact of this permanent alien stereotype is the perceived group threat or an “us versus them” mentality among long-time white suburban residents who view Chinese and other Asian immigrants as foreigners whose group interests run counter to American interests. This plane can facilitate a “tipping point” among long-time white residents at the voting booth, who feel that their city is changing too rapidly and that Chinese Americans are gaining too much power (e.g., winning the majority of the city council) too quickly. Chinese American candidates in this environment must be careful to address this plane as they often feel the brunt of perceived group threat in the form of white voter backlash. For example, during a March 2003 Cupertino city council meeting, then Vice Mayor Sandy James, who is white, raised the issue of the “lack of procedures” after Fred Chan, a Chinese American, gave \$250,000 for a new community center to carry his name, by asking: “What do we know about these people?”⁸ For many Chinese American community leaders at the time, such as Cupertino Mayor Michael Chang and councilmember Patrick Kwok, Vice Mayor James’s use of the term “these people” was an attempt to play the race card by casting Chinese Americans as aliens. Fred Chan would eventually withdraw his donation, but the controversy revealed

the underlying perceived group threat taking shape among white residents in the suburb.

Another example occurred in Sugar Land, Texas (recently recognized for a third year as a “community of respect” by the Anti-Defamation League) during the 2008 mayoral election that pitted Daniel Wong, a Chinese American immigrant who became the city’s first Asian American city councilman in 2004, against James Thompson, who also previously served on the Sugar Land city council. Hindsight reveals why this was no ordinary election between two candidates, but one that represented a high-stakes scenario that would boil over.

Over the past thirty years, Sugar Land has become a suburban destination for Chinese, Asian Indian, and Vietnamese immigrants who are highly educated professionals and entrepreneurs attracted by the city’s country living, strong public schools, affordable housing, and close proximity to Houston, home to over 300 software companies that have generated more than \$4.2 billion in sales. During this period, the suburb’s total population has grown to 79,943 in 2006, in which the general Asian American community represented 23.8 percent of the city’s total population and was the second largest racial group behind only whites. Among the city’s Asian population in 2000, Chinese, Asian Indian, and Vietnamese accounted for 10.1 percent, 6.8 percent, and 2 percent, respectively.

These suburban transformations in Sugar Land have also resulted in unprecedented Asian American electoral success. In 2002, Daniel Wong defeated Karyn Dean by receiving 52 percent of the vote for Council Position At-Large Position Two, establishing a political precedent. In 2004, Thomas Abraham, an Asian Indian immigrant, ran against Mike Casey for Council Position At-Large Position One, barely winning by two votes. In 2008, with Wong running for mayor, two Asian Americans, S.B. Gaddi, an Asian Indian, and Adnand Siddiqui, a Pakistani American, declared their candidacies for his former at-large district seat. (Siddiqui eventually withdrew from the election, leaving Gaddi as the sole Asian American candidate.) In a span of four election cycles, from 2002 to 2008, Asian Americans were poised to win half of Sugar Land’s city council seats. Yet with these election wins by Asian American candidates, a sense of power struggle was taking shape that fueled potential fears that Chinese immigrants, as the city’s largest Asian ethnic group, were gaining too much power too quickly, symbolized by Daniel Wong’s 2008 mayoral campaign. According

to Naomi Lam, who was the first Chinese American to be elected trustee to the Fort Bend Independent School District in 2001 and who unsuccessfully ran for Sugar Land city council in 2004: "I'm concerned that there is a white backlash among voters in this mayoral election, which is why I felt it wasn't the right time to run again for city council."⁹

During the 2008 mayoral primary election, neither Daniel Wong (2,824 total votes for 34.9 percent) nor James Thompson (3,652 total votes for 45.1 percent) received the required majority percentage of the votes, which would force a June 21, 2008 general election. With only 17 percent of the Sugar Land registered voters voting in the primary election, Wong's largest number of votes came through absentee votes (1,434) prior to the May 10 election. A large majority of these votes likely came from the Chinese American community in Sugar Land, as this was one of the key campaign strategies that Wong's campaign consultants utilized given the proclivity of Chinese immigrant voters to vote absentee. Wong was the only candidate among three who received more early votes than votes on Election Day, which would further indicate the strong voter support that he received from the Chinese American community. The Sugar Land Chinese American community, with the assistance from the 80/20 Houston Political Action Committee, a key political locus in Houston Asian American politics, intensified their mobilization around Wong's campaign through several voter mobilization efforts during the eight-week period between the primary and general elections.

The 2008 Sugar Land mayoral general election results illustrated that Wong was unable to overcome Thompson's momentum from the primary, as Thompson would win nearly 61 percent of the total votes. The process and outcome of the election raise the salient questions of whether perceived group threat and tipping point politics hindered Wong. One explicit example of group threat and tipping point politics appeared in print, occurring only three days before the primary election on May 7, 2008 in the *Fort Bend/Southwest Star*, the major local newspaper in Fort Bend County. In the editorial opinion column, "Bev's Burner," the newspaper's owner, Beverly K. Carter makes the following claim:

Everything hasn't been sweeter. . . In Sugar Land, where a new mayor and new city councilperson are on the ballot, the public contest has been something Fort Bend County has seldom seen—overt racism. . . of the Asian kind. I received a letter from

a writer with a supposed Chinese surname, Ahmed Zhiang. Since no telephone number was on the letter and I couldn't verify the writer, I didn't run it. However, Mr. Zhiang sounds like he is well-connected in the Asian community. He claims that since Sugar Land has 30 percent Asian population, and the city government likes to color itself as "diverse" and "multicultural," it is ripe for the election of an Asian mayor. . . According to Mr. Zhiang, a Chinese man named Fong, whose head is shaven to make him look like a Buddhist monk, is a central figure in the conspiracy. . . Fong and another conspirator, known only as Mustafa, regularly address the Asian community groups urging them to vote solely upon the issue of race.¹⁰

The editorial commentary above clearly illustrates the political perils of plane one as it may result in white voter retrenchment against Chinese American candidates. Carter's editorial blatantly seeks to frame the Chinese American and Asian American community's support of Wong's candidacy among white readers' minds as only benefitting one racial community as opposed to representing the broader community. Using "Ahmed Zhiang" as a convenient racial scapegoat to mobilize white voters along racial lines against Wong in favor of Thompson is clearly strategic. By describing Cecil Fong, the head of the 80/20 Houston PAC, as a "Buddhist monk" and "conspirator" associating with a untrustworthy person "known only as Mustafa" (actually Wong's campaign consultant, Mustafa Tameez), Carter's editorial intended to create an "us versus them" mentality among white readers and voters. Daniel Wong's campaign would never recover from Carter's editorial, despite a rebuttal letter by Cecil Fong that appeared in the *Fort Bend/Southwest Star* the following week.

Tipping point politics have indeed become a natural part of new Chinese American politics. The complex dynamics here may also involve the cross-section of white voters who would be willing to vote for an Asian American candidate as well as the cross-section of Chinese American voters who would support a white candidate. Nevertheless, Chinese American candidates, as well as other Asian American candidates, are conscious of racial perceptions and may purposely deracialize their campaigns. However, as illustrated historically with African American candidates in urban politics, any attempt to deracialize can be abruptly changed by the strategies of their opponents, who seek to introduce either explicit or subtle racial messages to white constituents, often making up the largest racial voting bloc. Af-

rican Americans candidates in local politics have been forced to build biracial alliances with progressive white voters who share common interests and ideology as a means to overcome white conservative voting blocs.¹¹ Perhaps the most visible example is former Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, who led a predominantly biracial coalition among African Americans in City Council District 8 and Jewish American progressives in City Council District 5 to become the longest serving African American mayor in U.S. history, from 1971 to 2001.¹²

Similarly, Asian American candidates in both the metropolises and suburbs may deracialize their campaigns by toggling or calibrating their respective campaign messages to various constituencies in order to build cross-racial coalitions. For example, Vietnamese American candidates in the suburbs of Westminster and Garden Grove that form Orange County, California's "Little Saigon" often toggle the content and focus of their campaign messages to Vietnamese Americans, as transmitted through various forms of ethnic media, with their messages to their white constituents.¹³ Such is also the case for new Chinese American politics in the suburbs, where the Chinese media serves a key political ally for Chinese immigrant candidates; the "earned" or free coverage of their respective campaigns can give them name-recognition and the potential to mobilize the large Chinese immigrant population in the form of voter registration and campaign contributions.

In Cupertino, for example, Kris Wang, an immigrant from Taiwan who previously served on the Cupertino City Parks and Recreations Commission, became the first female of Chinese descent to be elected to the city council in 2003. Wang's strategic use of the Chinese ethnic media can be seen in the coverage of her campaign by the two largest Chinese/Taiwanese print dailies in the continental United States, *Sing Tao* and *World Journal*. During the four-month period that began with the official announcement of her candidacy (August 2003) to Election Day (November 4, 2003), a total of seventeen articles related to Wang appeared in *Sing Tao Daily* (eight articles) and *World Journal* (nine articles). For example, on August 7, 2003, a story with the following headline appeared in the *World Journal*: "Cupertino City Council Election. Kris Wang Establishes Web Site. Emphasizes That in the Future She Will Represent All Residents. Endorsed by Michael Chang, Patrick Kwok, and Barry Chang." The article provided the website address of her campaign. Wang prompted both Chi-

nese/Taiwanese American immigrants and U.S. citizen readers of the *World Journal* to register to vote in the article: “To vote in the November 4th election, you must register to vote before October 20th. . .and if you won’t be in town November 4th, you can also arrange for an absentee ballot in advance, and this way your vote won’t be lost.” Several other articles that appeared in both newspapers included coverage of Wang’s campaign fundraisers and political endorsements throughout Santa Clara County, along with photos. Through Chinese-language newspapers, Wang was able to convey different messages to the large Chinese immigrant community that focused on group political action, in comparison to her message to white voters—the majority of Cupertino—that focused on slow growth and affordable housing.

While toggling is a necessary strategy for new Chinese American politics, it can be politically dangerous if differing messages collide. For example, during T.N. Ho’s 2008 Cupertino city council campaign, the candidate gave a talk in Chinese at a Chinese community forum in which he allegedly stated in Mandarin, according to the October 16, 2007 edition of the *Sing Tao Daily*, that he was running “to form a majority of Chinese Americans in the city council so as to push for programs favoring the Chinese community.” This quotation was intended to be calibrated only to an insurgent Chinese constituency, but was purposely made into a larger public issue when former Cupertino City Mayor Barbara Rogers somehow learned about the quote and criticized Ho for his comment. Ho was forced to address the alleged comment at a January 23, 2008 public candidate forum that the statement was false and that he intended to serve the entire community. According to Ho:

What I actually said was I wanted Barry Chang to be elected with Kris Wang, and I would run in February. I said I hoped the three of us would work together to stop overbuilding. I never wanted to build a Chinese bloc. . .I’ve never voted on a racial line.¹⁴

After the October 16 story was published, *Sing Tao Daily* published two corrections on December 1 and 14, 2007, stating that the alleged comment was never made by Ho. Nevertheless, Ho would undermine any trust that he developed among skeptical white voters who viewed his alleged comments as another example of perceived group threat; Ho finished a distant second for the one open seat in the 2008 election.

Plane Two: Community Changes Due to Scale and Concentration of Chinese Immigration

On August 9, 2003, the Cupertino city government sponsored a public forum entitled "A Time to Talk" attended by 150 residents who candidly shared their perspectives and concerns on the changing demographics of the city. Long-time white residents at the public forum felt that the city was changing too fast and that it did not feel like home anymore. One man publicly stated at the forum, "On my whole block, 90 percent are Asian. I can't talk to them." He continued by criticizing the use of Chinese language schools and wanted to know why "they" are not making more of an effort to learn English.¹⁵

The second plane of new Chinese American politics involves an important aspect that differentiates Asian global suburbs from metropolises—the dramatic scale and concentration of recent Chinese and other Asian immigrants as a significant percentage of the city's general population. During the past two decades, tremendous demographic shifts in small- to medium-sized suburbs have resulted in majority and plurality Asian suburbs. For example, in 1980, only one Asian American majority city, Monterey Park, California, existed in the continental United States. In 2000, six Asian American majority suburbs existed, all of them in California.¹⁶ Today, Asian American immigrants, together with U.S.-born Asians, are making the suburbs their primary destination over the past decade. In 2000, 51 percent of Asian Americans nationally lived in suburbs, compared to 33 percent for African Americans, 45 percent for Latinos, and 54 percent for whites.¹⁷ From 2000 to 2004, fewer than half (47 percent) of the Asian American population gains occurred in large metropolitan cities, compared to 53 percent during the 1990s.¹⁸

Perhaps the most visible region where global Asian-influenced suburbs have most recently and dramatically taken shape in the U.S. is Santa Clara County, California, which is internationally known as Silicon Valley. Since its birth with the 1971 invention of the microprocessor, Silicon Valley has become home to highly educated Asians recruited and trained in both the U.S. and abroad, including immigrant entrepreneurs and blue-collar workers.¹⁹ The rise of Silicon Valley has spurred the emergence of global Asian-influenced suburbs throughout this region. According to a recent 2007 update by the U.S. Census Bureau, Santa Clara County witnessed the nation's fastest growth of Asian immigra-

tion for any U.S. county from July 2006 to July 2007, growing nearly 3.3 percent, a total increase of 17,614 Asian immigrants.²⁰ While California may be home to the most global Asian suburbs, this is a national phenomenon, as other high-tech suburbs are emerging in other regions such as the Pacific Northwest in Bellevue, Washington; the Southwest in Harris and Fort Bend Counties in Texas; and in the Mid-Atlantic region in Montgomery County, Maryland. As such global suburbs continue to emerge due to the significant scale and concentration of Chinese immigration over the past two decades, tipping point politics subsequently follow.

A 2008 special election in Cupertino reveals how an emerging Asian immigrant majority can fuel tipping point politics in the form of white retrenchment in the voting booth. The streak of electing four successive Chinese American candidates to the Cupertino city council beginning in 1995 would abruptly end in 2008. During the 2008 special election, voters would choose a candidate to replace former councilmember Patrick Kwok, who resigned to accept a representative appointment in the Santa Clara Water District in 2007. Among the field of three candidates, two were Chinese immigrants, T.N. Ho and Chihua Wei, with the other candidate, Mark Santoro, the only white candidate. Ho and Wei were clearly crossover candidates, as both had previous political experience in local government prior to their 2008 Cupertino city council campaigns. T.N. Ho, a high-tech professional who emigrated from Taiwan, had previously served on the Santa Clara Board of Education for over a dozen years. Chihua Wei, a 24-year resident of Cupertino who left Taiwan to pursue a Master's degree in Electrical Computer Engineering, previously served on the Housing Commission and focused his campaign platform on smart growth. In comparison to the two Chinese American candidates, Mark Santoro held a Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering, but, unlike Ho and Wei, had no previous community public service aside from running for city council in 2007. In short, the political platforms of Ho, Wei, and Santoro were similar in that they all focused on the salient issues of smart growth, maintaining public school excellence, and maintaining affordable family housing, all important issues among a majority of Cupertino residents.

Given the existence of similar campaign platforms among the three candidates, the results of the 2008 special Cupertino city council election suggests the emergence of tipping point politics as Chinese American descriptive representation was perceived as a threat to the status quo among a majority of white voters. San-

toro finished in first place with 5,642 total votes for 55.4 percent, followed by T.N. Ho (3,748 for 36.8 percent) and Chihua Wei (802 for 7.9 percent). Chinese votes were likely split between Ho and Wei, which would explain why both candidates' combined votes (4,550) were 1,092 fewer than Santoro's votes (5,642). Given this margin, it is likely that a large percentage of white voters supported Santoro due to issues around race and populist/anti-special interest platforms. For example, Santoro's "For the People" campaign strategy likely resonated with voters who were weary of interest group politics in Cupertino. However, it is not conclusive whether this segment of the voter base was enough to sustain Santoro's nearly 56 percent voter support, which was nearly 17 percentage points higher than second place finisher T.N. Ho.

Other issues such as perceived group threat of Chinese Americans among white voters likely played a role in Santoro's convincing election. The emotional attachments of Cupertino's voters to the three city council candidates' racial backgrounds were likely central to the electoral outcome in 2008, even if the exact impact cannot be determined without exit poll or individual survey data. Santoro's surname in juxtaposition to Ho and Wei's surnames on the voting ballot might have amplified these emotions among the older white voters, who form the largest racial voting bloc among the approximately 25,000 registered voters in Cupertino.²¹ One long-time and influential Cupertino resident of Italian descent who has access to many fellow residents through a community institution, confided to me after the 2008 election: "I believe Santoro was the recipient of white votes because of the concern that Asians are taking over the city council."²²

Plane Three: New Ethnic Candidate Paradigms and Cleavages among Chinese Immigrant Voters

Chinese immigrant voters represent the largest segment of the Chinese American population in the suburbs. In Cupertino, it is estimated that nearly 25 percent of the Cupertino population speaks Chinese.²³ Given this percentage, the new Chinese immigrant voter cannot be ignored. However, it would be incorrect to assume that new Chinese immigrant voters are politically unsophisticated in relation to Chinese American candidates who are rapidly emerging in Chinese immigrant influenced suburbs. Paradigms and cleavages are developing among new Chinese immigrant voters around ethnic candidates' generational backgrounds, their fluency of Chinese, and the issues for which they stand. According to Gilbert Wong:

Ethnicity is no longer a novelty for Asian American candidates in Cupertino. The issues are what matters along with the background of the candidate, such as whether they are Chinese enough for the first generation Chinese American voters."²⁴

The generational background and cultural authenticity of Chinese American candidates emerged during the 2007 Cupertino city council election that included four Chinese American candidates, three of which were immigrants, running for two open seats. The only non-immigrant Chinese American candidate running was Gilbert Wong, who had previously served on the high-profile Housing Commission, a pipeline position for city council. During a Chinese candidate forum on a local Chinese radio station, Chinese immigrant Barry Chang attacked Gilbert Wong for not being Chinese enough in an attempt to appeal to immigrant Chinese listeners. Clearly, Chang was attempting to separate himself from Wong because he knew Wong did not speak Chinese. Wong was only able to overcome Chang's public attack because he understood the importance of multiplexing his campaign strategy to address the other competing planes, such as building cross-racial coalitions with white voters and contributors that would ultimately allow him to win the second open seat. Political cleavages around generation and ethnicity are common in the Chinese American community in large metropolitan urban cities, as seen most recently in San Francisco politics.²⁵ However, similar cleavages are now emerging among Chinese immigrant voters in the suburban context as immigrant and U.S.-born Chinese American candidates often run against each other.

Aside from a Chinese American candidate's authenticity in practicing Chinese culture, other issues are emerging, including support for public bilingual language programs aimed at children of foreign-born parents and the impact of slow versus smart growth on the quality of public schools. An example of the importance of ESL programs in mobilizing Chinese immigrant parents occurred in 2003, when Chinese Americans united with Mexican Americans in Bellevue, Washington, a global immigrant suburb near Seattle, to support Grace Seo, a popular Korean American ESL public school teacher who was released from her position for allegedly speaking with an accent despite having worked for two-and-a-half years at the Stevenson Elementary School. On July 30, 2003, a coalition of immigrant community leaders packed the meeting chambers of the Bellevue School District to voice their concerns about drastic changes to the district's existing

ESL program. Eastside Asian Pacific Islander organization leader Nadine Shiroma, who helped to form a group that works with the Superintendent on a variety of policy related issues and concerns, the Asian Parent Advisory Committee, stated:

Grace Seo's case was a defining moment for me in my many years of grass-roots activism on the Eastside because we were able to mobilize so many Chinese American and Mexican American parents on such short notice. I see the area of education, in regard to immigrant concerns, as a future political battleground in Bellevue.²⁶

In 2004, Chinese immigrants in Cupertino mobilized around their concerns for slow growth and were an integral part of the Cupertino Concerned Citizens (CCC) coalition, which opposed an established Chinese American community leader's support from the pro-growth Alliance for a Better Cupertino (ABC) on a controversial housing development that would impact class enrollments at nearby Cupertino High School. The political maturation of new Chinese immigrants is exemplified by the political action of Patti Chi, an immigrant from Taiwan who arrived in the U.S. her senior year in high school, graduated from Santa Clara University, and purchased her first home in Cupertino in 2000. Chi, like many Cupertino residents, became concerned about the city rezoning of a 520-unit condominium near her home, which would impact the small-town character of the city and its nearby schools. Chi established a community-based organization known as CARE (Cupertino Against Rezoning). According to a 2006 article about Chi in the *World Journal*:

On the morning of April 19 (2006), Chi, pushing her two year-old daughter in a stroller, went with some neighbors to present more than 9,900 signatures to the Cupertino City Hall. . . Chi and another Chinese American, Helen Luk, became the representatives for those filling the petitions. . . . That year she also swore an oath to become an American citizen, "In the past few months, I have discovered that there really are a lot of Chinese people in Cupertino, and Asian Americans are registered voters. They aren't as few as I thought, and everyone is enthusiastic."

As new Chinese immigrant voters mature politically into a strong presence in Chinese-influenced suburbs, the old paradigm of Chinese American candidates winning immediate support from the Chinese immigrant community is no longer guaranteed. Candidate backgrounds and campaign platforms take on increased

salience. This dynamic illustrates the intersection and tensions between planes two and three. As the Chinese immigrant community reaches a critical mass, many Chinese immigrant parents begin to support issues such as the quality of public school districts, language schools, and bilingual education programs. Chinese American candidates must address this third plane, while also being cognizant of plane two's perceived group threat and tipping point politics among white voters. With regards to the issue of Chinese-language schools, Cupertino city councilmember Barry Chang understands this fine line. In 2008, as the Vice President of the Cupertino District School Board, Chang introduced the idea of implementing a Mandarin immersion kindergarten class that resulted in him receiving multiple death threats and hate mail from angry white residents.

Plane Four: Cross-Racial Coalition Building and Zero-Sum Game Politics

The challenges of cross-racial coalition building in the metropolis have been well documented.²⁷ Political scientists Rogers Smith and Desmond King argue that from the post-Civil Rights era to the present, two competing racial and political axes—race consciousness and non-racial order—seek to articulate the political landscape through their respective lenses. The authors cautiously warn that, as these two axes compete with each other, an increasing divide in the socio-economic statuses among racial minority groups is simultaneously occurring that threatens to pit them against each other for limited resources through fostering zero-sum game politics.²⁸

An example of multi-racial competition and zero-sum game politics in the metropolitan context was the 2001 Los Angeles Mayoral election, in which Antonio Villaraigosa attempted to become the first Latino mayor in the city's history to signal the rise of the Mexican American community. For African American voters, Villaraigosa's campaign signaled something different—Mexican Americans were gaining power too quickly. As a result, the logical coupling of African Americans and Mexican Americans along similar social and economic issues never materialized. Instead, African American voters overwhelmingly found alliance not with Villaraigosa, but his competitor, James Hahn, a white moderate whose father Kenneth was a civil rights champion of the Los Angeles African American community.²⁹ Inevitably, Villaraigosa's multi-racial coalition with African American voters failed, allowing

Hahn to win the 2004 mayoral election. Such political couplings among racial minority groups in urban politics reflect how unpredictable and volatile the metropolitan setting can be for minority candidates, particularly when zero-sum game politics emerges among minority communities.

Zero-sum game politics are also emerging between new Asian immigrants and Latinos in the suburbs where both groups are significant populations. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Asian Americans and Latinos comprise of 30.5 and 25.7 percent of Santa Clara County's total population, respectively, constituting the second and third largest racial populations. In Orange County, Asians and Latinos represent 16.2 and 33.8 percent of the total population, respectively. Unfortunately, zero-sum politics have followed in the racially commingled suburbs of both regions. A recent example occurred in Orange County's Little Saigon during the June 2006 general election for the 47th U.S. Congressional District, when Vietnamese American refugee Tan D. Nguyen, who had won a heated three-candidate race for the Republican nomination by winning over 55 percent of the vote, was pitted against Democrat Loretta Sanchez, a Mexican American who previously made history by becoming Orange County's first Latina U.S. Representative after changing parties and defeating six-term incumbent Republican Bob Dornan for the 46th U.S. Congressional seat. Sanchez would easily defeat Nguyen in the 2006 general election by winning 62 percent of the vote. Controversy emerged during the election when Nguyen would be investigated by federal authorities for alleged Latino American voter intimidation in the form of a Spanish language mailer that stated:

You are being sent this letter because you were recently registered to vote. If you are a citizen of the United States, we ask that you participate in the democratic process of voting. You are advised that if your residence in this country is illegal or you are an immigrant, voting in a federal election is a crime that could result in imprisonment, and you will be deported for voting without having the right to do so.³⁰

Although Nguyen would be exonerated of voter intimidation by federal investigators, the incident reveals the high-cost stakes that involve both Asian American and Latino American candidates in political districts that are racially commingled, and how they can create electoral competition and racial tensions between these communities.

Given the emerging political competition and tensions between both Asian and Latino communities in large immigrant suburbs, Chinese American community leaders are adopting nuanced political strategies in the form of community-building institutions. One example is former Cupertino city councilmember Michael Chang, a Chinese immigrant who became the first Chinese American elected to Cupertino city council in 1998. Chang, who holds a Ph.D. from Stanford University in Education and is a professor at DeAnza Community College in Cupertino, realizes the relationship between group empowerment and multicultural education. As a result, Chang, with Ruben Abrica, the first Latino mayor of East Palo Alto, established the annual Civic Leadership Program, the first of its kind in the nation, as part of his larger Asian Pacific American Leadership Institute (APALI), to target two key audiences: politically active Asian American and Latino professionals who are likely to run in the future. In 2009, the Civic Leadership program brought together over thirty Asian American and Latino participants, including college students from local universities and junior colleges, white collar professionals, and local elected officials, to discuss solutions to various issues affecting both racial communities. One goal was to encourage future candidates not to view each other as political adversaries, but as allies who can build cross-racial coalitions around common interests and ideologies.

Plane Five: Prospects and Challenges of Cross-Ethnic Coalition Building

While class issues among Asian ethnic groups are somewhat mitigated by the pulling forces that draw them primarily to these suburbs, ethnicity remains salient in coalition building. Competition for political power in globalized immigrant suburbs can emerge between “established” and “insurgent” Asian ethnic groups that threatens to undermine cross-ethnic coalitions. This trend is most evident in high-tech suburbs where Chinese and Asian Indians represent the two largest H1B Visa groups. Therefore, cross-ethnic alliances between both highly educated groups will be essential in globalized immigrant suburbs. In Cupertino, the 2007 campaign of Raj Abhyanker, an Asian Indian patent attorney, posed a threat of a different kind to Gilbert Wong’s campaign, potentially pitting Asian Indian against Chinese American community interests. Abhyanker’s campaign marked the first time that an Asian Indian ran for Cupertino city council. Although Abhyanker was not

elected, his campaign foreshadowed future challenges in building a cross-ethnic alliance between both communities in which racial identity would transcend their ethnic political allegiances.

The Asian Indian community in Silicon Valley will become a key player in Asian American politics, given that forty percent of the region's high-tech start-ups employ Indian Americans on staff, along with the fact that President Bill Clinton raised \$1.4 million in two Asian Indian-hosted fundraisers in Silicon Valley during the 2000 Presidential race.³¹ In Cupertino, Asian Indians are beginning to awaken politically in a city has never had an Indian American city councilmember, despite this ethnic group representing nearly 9 percent of the city population. Abhyanker's 2007 campaign reflects the positive trajectory of the Cupertino Indian American community's political maturation. While Abhyanker's campaign and the city's Asian Indian vote did not influence the outcome of the 2007 election for Gilbert Wong, the political maturation of the Asian Indian community presents future challenges and opportunities for Chinese Americans for cross-ethnic alliances between both immigrant communities. Despite the similar socio-economic backgrounds of Asian Indian Americans and Chinese Americans, current signs point to future challenges as Chinese Americans have become the majority on the city council: As a result of this perceived competition over limited political resources, it is not surprising that Abhyanker decided at the last minute not to run in the 2008 special election, but instead chose to endorse Santoro over Ho and Wei, the two Chinese immigrant candidates.

The importance of strong leadership in the form of visionary Asian American candidates and political operatives who can articulate common ideology and similar interests that bind ethnic communities, as opposed to perceiving their interests as a zero-sum game, is essential. Such was the case during the 2008 Sugar Land mayoral election with Mustafa Tameez, a Pakistani immigrant who served as one of Daniel Wong's campaign consultants. Tameez is a well-respected Houston-based political consultant who helped engineer the successful 1998 mayoral campaign of Lee Brown, Houston's first African American mayor—which for the first time in city's history, included Asian Americans as, key partners in the winning multiracial coalition. According to Tameez:

We (Daniel Wong) can win in Sugar Land. . .but what makes it difficult to win is if that South Asian and East Asian coalition does not form. I don't think necessarily that can happen unless a catalyst, such as a political operative or an established Asian

American elected official, from the outside comes in and show how it is done. The first generation guys who are running find it very difficult (to form cross-ethnic coalitions) because there are multiple factions within their respective ethnic communities.³²

Tameez attempted to construct a cross-ethnic coalition among Sugar Land's large Asian American population to support Daniel Wong. The first effort was to mobilize Chinese American and South Asian (mostly Asian Indian and Pakistani Americans) communities to vote during the city's early voting schedule that occurred on June 9 and 16. The get-out-the-early-vote drive was facilitated by a formal campaign website that provided all the necessary dates and locations of the early voting schedule, which would likely benefit Wong because Asian Americans tend to use absentee ballots, as reflected by the primary election results. For those who were not likely to vote early, the front page of the website reminds the viewer of the general election date and time—June 21, 2008, from 7 AM to 7 PM—and that “you MUST go to your own precinct location.” The success or failure of Wong's historic mayoral campaign depended on whether he could mobilize and construct the necessary coalition among the diverse voter base in Sugar Land.

To facilitate an Asian American coalition, Tameez designed and distributed a series of concentrated mailers during the last month prior to the general election that was ethnically sensitive to the Chinese American, Asian Indian, and Pakistani American communities. For example, a hand-written form letter endorsing Daniel Wong with a message addressing each respective community was attached to the doors of all identified Chinese American, Asian Indian, and Pakistani American registered voters. Among the registered white Democrats in Sugar Land, political mailers were sent to them that focused on Democratic Party interests, while endorsing Wong to create a contrast with Republican James Thompson. Like many cities, Sugar Land's city council and mayoral races are non-partisan, but the reality is that political ideology is still very important among its voters.

The result of the 2008 election was the largest turnout among Asian American registered voters for a city-wide election, many of them likely supporting Daniel Wong's historic mayoral campaign. Yet despite this unprecedented voter turnout, a sobering outcome of the election was that even a well-respected and experienced political operative like Mustafa Tameez could not have foreseen nor prevented other intersecting planes—such as perceived group threat and tipping point politics—from emerging

and offsetting any efforts at constructing cross-ethnic and cross-racial coalitions.

The Future

Globalized immigrant suburbs present a great opportunity for new and unprecedented levels of Chinese American political incorporation in the United States. Yet these suburbs also pose equally unique challenges in the form of the five major planes or political dimensions that require Chinese American candidates to pursue complex campaign strategies. Such challenges can be mitigated, but not prevented, in many of these evolving suburbs due to political growing pains. The law of inertia will likely allow future Chinese American candidates to overcome these challenging planes over time. In Cupertino, after the 2008 special election in which tipping point politics fully reared its head, many of the Chinese American community leaders predicted a future roll-back in Chinese American political incorporation by white voters. However, two years after this tipping point election, Chinese American political incorporation has reached greater heights than ever before, as marked in two monumental elections. During the 2008 election for the California State Assembly District 22 seat (which represents several large Asian-influenced suburbs including Fremont and Cupertino), two competing coalitions formed around slow growth and smart growth local initiatives, each with backing from mainstream interest groups like the Sierra Club. Two Chinese American candidates led the respective coalitions, with smart growth proponent Paul Fong emerging victorious over Kris Wang, who advocated for slow growth. Even former California Assemblywoman Zoe Lofgren, who was term limited out of the 22nd District seat, publicly endorsed both Fong and Wang in order to avoid any political controversy with the emerging Chinese American electorate.

The second development was the November 2009 Cupertino city council election in which Barry Chang was elected to the Cupertino city council, thereby creating a Chinese American majority city council for the first time in the city's history. Both Paul Fong and Barry Chang illustrate the prototypical Chinese American candidate who is successful, individuals who can effectively multiplex campaign strategies to address simultaneously the competing racial and ethnic planes. Long-term group political incorporation rests on whether such a pipeline of candidates can be created who are prepared to take on the increasingly chal-

lenging environments of globalized immigrant suburbs. How to build and to maintain the necessary cross-racial and cross-ethnic alliances will determine the future multiracial politics in the United States.

Notes

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