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A New Gateway: Asian American Political Power in the 21st Century

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Asian American Political Power in the 21st Century

James S. Lai

Don T. Nakanishi's prescient 1985 *Amerasia Journal* essay, "Asian American Politics: An Agenda for Research" argued for an interdisciplinary approach to gain a better understanding of Asian American politics. His essay provided an integrated micro/macro and a domestic/transnational approach that was well ahead of its time.[1] Nakanishi's timely essay would prove influential in defining future research parameters of the political behavior of Asian Americans. At the time of the essay's publication, Asians, compared to African Americans and Latinos, were not found in the extant political science literature. Nearly twenty-five years later, however, Nakanishi's interdisciplinary approach has become even more useful for studying Asian American politics. What follows is my incorporation and application of Nakanishi's earlier ideas to looking at Asian American political power today.

What does such an interdisciplinary approach entail? It would first take a historical and geographical approach to understanding patterns of community formation. Due to globalization and a restructuring of the U.S. economy, contemporary Asian American immigrants represent a wide range of socio-economic groups that include white collar professionals, middle and lower class small business entrepreneurs, H-1B visa high tech workers, and refugees. Many of them are now voluntarily moving directly into the emerging twenty-first century gateway—the small and medium size Asian influenced suburb throughout the continental United States.

Shifting Political Terrains: Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Gateways

Location does matter in understanding the trajectories of Asian American political behavior and incorporation. Large urban gate-

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way cities will always remain central for studying Asian American politics. However, a significant percentage of Asian American immigrants are circumventing large urban cities for small to medium size suburbs.[2] For example, during 2004-05, forty percent of arriving Asian immigrants moved directly into the suburbs.[3]

The suburbanization of Asian American politics during the last twenty years parallels the rise of Asian American majority cities. The 2000 U.S. Census identified six Asian American majority cities in California.[4]   In comparison, in 1980, only one Asian American majority city (the suburb of Monterey Park in Los Angeles County) existed in the continental United States. All of these Asian American majority cities are small to medium size suburbs with populations ranging from 25,000 to 110,000 and have gone through demographic and political transformations. Asian Americans choose to live in these cities because of their strong public schools, established ethnic networks, growing economic opportunities, and gravitational migration based on existing ethnic networks. As a result, it is within the context of small to medium size suburbs where the pathways to political incorporation are moving faster than in large metropolitan cities. Asian Americans, many of them immigrants, are rapidly winning seats in their local governments by building bi-racial political coalitions with whites and Asians. Class issues are less likely to emerge in the context of these small to medium size suburbs than in larger metropolitan cities because cross-racial and ethnic alliances can be built around common suburban interests around such issues as public schools and economic development.

An interdisciplinary focus would not only shift the focus of Asian American political mobilization and incorporation from large cities to the small to medium size suburbs, but it would also provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of both the traditional and non-traditional forms of Asian American political participation that are part and parcel of these immigrant suburbs. While Asian American political muscle continues to be flexed in the form of campaign contributions, non-traditional political loci are rapidly emerging in these suburbs such as pan-ethnic public non-profit organizations and the ethnic media that cater to the interests of its large immigrant populations.[5]   For instance, the understudied ethnic media in the political science literature can play an important role during group political mobilization by providing Asian American candidates with a cost-effective strategy for voter outreach that incorporates both old and new Asian

Americans into the electoral process and for outreaching to potential Asian American contributors beyond local district boundaries.[6] Another recent study found successful Vietnamese American candidates in Westminster and San Jose, California "toggle"their campaign messages in nuanced and varied ways when going from the mainstream, English speaking constituency to their Vietnamese speaking constituency.[7] This trend is also in line with other Asian American ethnic groups containing a large immigrant population where the ethnic media is entrenched. These findings shed light on how newly emerging forms of Asian American political behaviors are taking shape in the suburban context.

Suburbs as "Political Incubators": Create an Asian American Pipeline of Local and State Representatives

Asian American influenced suburbs represent "political incubators" that have allowed communities to develop formal pipelines of candidates running for local elected offices eventually leading to higher levels including the state and federal legislatures. Within such incubator suburbs, Asian American political organizations, the ethnic media, and other important political loci are influential during group political mobilization around Asian American candidate campaigns. The result has been unprecedented Asian American political gains in American politics. In some California suburbs, such as Westminster and Monterey Park, Asian Americans have become the majority of their respective city councils with other suburbs rapidly following.

Scholars who exclusively study immigrant political incorporation in large cities have witnessed the opposite—a dearth of successful local Asian American candidates and no formal candidate pipeline. In the two cities, Los Angeles and New York City, with the largest aggregate Asian American populations, only one Asian American has been elected to each city's respective city councils—former Los Angeles city councilmember Michael Woo (District 13) in 1985 and current New York City Councilmember John Liu (District 20) in 2001. In Los Angeles, no serious Asian American candidate has emerged since Woo in any of its fifteen council districts. The complex reasons why Asian Americans have not attained descriptive representation even comparable to their population numbers in such large urban cities include the following factors: district elections in large cities that have harmed more than helped Asian American candidates due to the residential dispersion of Asian Americans; ethnic competition and the lack

of common ideological interests that have limited political mobilization efforts; entrenched political interests that have made it harder for emergent immigrant groups like Asian Americans to attain descriptive representation; and the lack of a formal pipeline that has allowed for a systematic approach to building political power bases that other racial groups have achieved.

Asian American candidates in these suburbs are winning, sustaining, and building on Asian American elected representation in their respective local governments, an important measuring stick of political power. The emerging Asian American influenced suburb has provided a critical mass that has fueled local political mobilization efforts resulting in unprecedented numbers of descriptive representatives in local government. For the first time on the continental United States, like African Americans and Latinos, Asian Americans in California have established political power bases in the following areas: Santa Clara County and Orange County. In the former area, a pan-ethnic coalition among the distinct Asian American communities is forming along with incorporation into the local and state Democratic Party infrastructure that has contributed to it containing the largest number of Asian American elected officials for any county on the continental U.S. The latter area is fueled by the maturation of the Vietnamese American community in the key suburbs of Westminster and Garden Grove that comprise "Little Saigon" by the largest number of Vietnamese Americans for any county in the continental U.S., and by incorporation into the local and state Republican Party infrastructure.

While California leads the charge in the suburbanization of Asian American politics, it is certainly not alone. In small to medium size suburbs throughout the continental United States, such as Bellevue, WA (outside of Seattle), Sugar Land, TX (outside of Houston), the suburbs of Montgomery County, MD, and Eau Claire, WI, Asian American immigrants and refugees are attaining elected representation in their respective local and state governments. In the case of Eau Claire, WI, Hmong Americans, a neglected and understudied Asian American ethnic group, are defying the belief that low socio-economic status determines low political participation. This Asian American refugee community has elected four different Hmong Americans to its city council over the past decade while larger Hmong American populated cities like St. Paul and Minneapolis still have not elected any Hmong American to their respective city councils.

The suburban phenomenon in Asian American politics in the continental United States has also for the first time in American politics created a formal Asian American candidate pipeline from the local to the state level. In California, after the June 2008 state primary elections, an historic eleven Asian American state representatives will serve in the State Legislature in comparison to the period of 1980 to 1993 when no Asian American was elected. Many of these Asian American state representatives are emerging in electoral districts of suburban cities that include significant Asian American populations. California Assemblyman Michael Eng's D-49th Assembly District contains large portions of suburbs like Monterey Park, Rosemead, San Marino, and Alhambra. California Assemblyman Paul Fong's D-22nd Assembly District contains large portions of suburbs like Cupertino, Sunnyvale, Milpitas, and Santa Clara. All are examples of state level Asian Americans who rely heavily on their suburban bases to win elections in the recent five years.

Future Trajectory

A nuanced understanding of the emerging modes of Asian American political behavior and power, both present and future, can be best attained through an inter-disciplinary approach. Such an approach would clarify the following political picture: for the first time in American politics on the continental U.S., Asian Americans are attaining unprecedented levels of political incorporation outside of the traditional 20th century gateway of the large metropolitan city in the context of the new 21st century gateway—small to medium size suburbs—by forming political pipelines, developing community political loci ranging from community-based organizations to the trans-national ethnic media that politically mobilize their respective large Asian American communities around Asian candidates in both traditional and non-traditional ways. This suburban dimension reflects the future trajectory of where Asian American political incorporation is most rapidly taking shape with its unique challenges and potential opportunities.

Notes

1. Don T. Nakanishi, "Asian American Politics: An Agenda for Research," *Amerasia Journal* 12:2 (1985): 1-27.

2. Wei Li and Emily Skop, "Enclaves, Ethnoburbs, and New Patterns of Settlement among Asian Immigrants." In Min Zhou and James V. Gatewood, eds., *Contemporary Asian America: Multidisciplinary Reader*, second edition (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2008), 222-236.

3. Sam Roberts, "In Shift, 40% of Immigrants Move Directly to Suburbs." *New York Times* (October 17, 2007), http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/17/us/17census.html.

4. These six Asian American majority cities in California are the following: Daly City (50.8 percent Asian American), Cerritos (58.4 percent), Milpitas (51.8 percent), Monterey Park (61.8 percent), Rowland Heights (50.3 percent), and Walnut (55.8 percent).

5. Chi-kan Richard Hung, "Growth and Diversity of Asian American Nonprofit Organizations," in Paul M. Ong (ed.), *The State of Asian America: Trajectory of Civic and Political Engagement*, Volume V (Los Angeles, CA: LEAP Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute, 2008), 181-206.

6. James S. Lai and Kim Geron, "When Asian Americans Run: The Suburban and Urban Dimensions of Asian American Candidates in California Local Politics," *California Politics & Policy* 10:1 (Los Angeles, CA: California State Los Angeles, Pat Brown Institute of Public Affairs, June 2006), 62-88.

7. Christian Collet, "Minority Candidates, Alternative Media, and MultiethnicAmerica: Deracialization or Toggling?" *Perspectives on Politics* 6:4 (December 2008): 707-728.