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VOTING BEHAVIOR AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

James S. Lai

Asian Americans have been labeled as the “next sleeping giant” in American politics in key geopolitical states such as California, Texas, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, and Washington.¹ Much of this perception is fueled by the dramatic growth of Asian American communities in these and other states as a result of federal immigration reforms beginning in 1965. This section highlights the major areas of Asian American political participation and behavior that will likely determine whether Asian American politics will live up to this label. These include voter behavior and turnout in local, state, and federal elections as recently as the 2008 presidential election, their roles in multiracial and panethnic coalition-building, historical and contemporary social movements, and recent trajectories in local politics.

The partisanship of Asian American voters has traditionally been limited to the Democratic Party because of the predominantly working-class backgrounds of the early immigrants in the United States and the salient issues that matter to them. Recent scholarship has found an upswing of both Republican and independent voters in Asian American immigrants who have arrived since 1965 because of their higher socioeconomic statuses, immigrant experiences, and political ideologies.² As a result, the Asian American vote is seen as a potential racial voting bloc and subsequently a swing vote in states with large Asian American populations in a two-party system during important statewide elections, ranging from the state legislature to the U.S. presidency.

While the potential for Asian American politics is great at the state level in key geopolitical states such as California, it is even greater at the local level. For example, Asian Americans comprise nearly 14 percent of California's state population and nearly 1.1 million voters, and there are currently six Asian American–majority cities in California (where they account for more than 50 percent of the city's population).³ 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 between 25,000 to 100,000. They have witnessed tremendous demographic shifts and subsequent local political incorporation efforts as Asian Americans have chosen to live in these cities because of their high-quality public schools, established ethnic networks, growing economic opportunity because of globalization patterns, and gravitational migration based on these factors. While many challenges exist both within and outside of the Asian American community in attaining political power in these suburbs, the pathways to political incorporation, beginning with elected representation of Asian Americans, are moving faster in the suburban context than in traditionally large urban metropolitan cities, such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City.

Beyond these recent Asian American–majority suburbs, even more suburbs in California exist where Asian Americans are the plurality population, the largest racial group where no racial majority is present, and those suburbs where Asian Americans are a substantial population base of greater than 20 percent of the city population. Such findings are in stark contrast to the pre-1965 era in which a majority of Asian Americans lived in self-contained ethnic enclaves, such as Chinatowns and Little Tokyos, in major metropolitan cities that served as gateways for predominantly working-class immigrants. Currently, a broader socioeconomic range of Asian American immigrants are moving directly to the suburbs at a rate of nearly 40 percent in recent years.⁴

In California state and local electoral districts that contain these Asian American–influenced suburbs, Asian American–elected representation has gradually followed. In California state level politics, after the June 2008 state primary elections, a historic eleven Asian American state representatives will serve in the state capitol, in comparison to the period of 1980–1993 when no Asian American served in the state legislature. A majority of these newly elected Asian American state representatives are emerging from electoral districts of suburban cities that include significant Asian American populations, such as California Assemblyman Michael Eng (D-49th Assembly District, which contains large portions of suburbs like Monterey Park, Rosemead, San Marino, and Alhambra), who was elected in November 2006, and California Assemblyman Paul Fong (D-22nd Assembly District, which contains large portions of suburbs like Cupertino, Sunnyvale, Milpitas, and Santa Clara), who was elected in November 2008.

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Attorney Linda Nguyen, left, gestures during a debate with school board member Madison Nguyen, right, in San Jose, CA, August 2005. The city council race between two candidates named Nguyen marks the political awakening of San Jose's Vietnamese community, a fast-growing immigrant group that began arriving three decades ago as political refugees from war-ravaged Vietnam. (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma)

Even more impressive than Asian American candidates' recent successes in California state level elections has been their electoral success in small to medium suburbs, where they are not only winning city council elections, but are also sustaining and building on Asian American–elected representation in their respective local governments, an important measuring stick for group political power. One of the most important challenges that Asian Americans have faced historically has been matching their minority counterparts in replacing Asian American representatives with other coethnics at the state level. One study found that among the thirteen Asian American state-level officials who served in the California State Legislature during 1960–2004, none was replaced by a coethnic. In comparison, 81.3 percent of Latino Democrats and 85 percent of black Democrats were replaced by co-ethnics during this period.⁵ Reasons for this inability to sustain Asian American–elected officials include intense competition for limited seats with other racial groups, entrenched party interests that make it extremely difficult for recent immigrants to gain their support, a low voter-turnout rate of Asian American immigrants because of low U.S. naturalization rates among the majority foreign-born population, districts that contain few heavily concentrated Asian American populations that can serve as a base, and the lack of a formal pipeline to develop experienced candidates.⁶

The inability to sustain Asian American–elected representation at the state level is not as acute of an issue in small to medium suburbs for the following reasons: local elections are typically citywide, which allows for the racial mobilization of Asian American voters and contributors to support Asian American candidates' campaigns; and the emergence of various political loci, such as panethnic community-based organizations and the ethnic media, in the Asian American community that facilitate group political mobilization. For example, in California suburbs like Cupertino (Santa Clara County), Gardena (Los Angeles County), and Westminster (Orange County), where Asian Americans account for 46 percent, 27 percent, and 31 percent of their respective city populations and many of these community loci are civically engaged around Asian American candidates' campaigns, Asian Americans have achieved a majority or near majority representation on their respective city councils. In Gardena, for two successive generations a majority of Japanese American city council members have served on the five-person council. In Cupertino, Asian Americans will likely attain a majority of the city council in the next local election cycle in 2009. Asian American majority–led local governments had occurred only in cities in Hawai'i, but they are now beginning to happen slowly in California.

While California leads the charge in the suburbanization of Asian American politics, it is certainly not alone. In suburbs throughout the United States, such as Bellevue (outside of Seattle, WA), Sugar Land (outside of Houston, TX), and Eau Claire (in Wisconsin, near the Minnesota border), Asian American immigrants and refugees are building on elected representation in their respective local governments. In the case of Eau Claire, Hmong Americans are defying the belief that low socioeconomic status determines low political participation, as this Asian American refugee community has elected four different Hmong

Americans to its city council over the past decade. Two primary reasons for Asian American electoral success in these suburbs are the socioeconomic backgrounds that Asian American candidates share with whites and other racial groups and the significant Asian American populations that serve as a base for their electoral support.

At the forefront of group political mobilization efforts in these transformed suburbs are Asian American immigrants, who are beginning to awaken politically, going beyond the well-documented campaign contributions to seeking and running for elected positions in these cities, from school boards to the mayor's office. Those Asian American immigrants who decide to run for elected office are typically educated professionals who have been in the United States for several decades, who want to give back to the larger community. It is this stage of Asian American immigrant political behavior, often reserved for later generations, that is challenging the traditional assumption that immigrants do not participate extensively in electoral politics beyond voting.

The electoral successes of Asian Americans running for local offices in such cities beget future Asian American candidates. In California, multiple Asian American candidates running for the same seat is becoming more common. For example, at the state level, during the 2008 California State Assembly, District 22 election (located in Santa Clara County), three of the four candidates running in the Democratic primary were Asian American, with one of them eventually winning. A local election example occurred recently in the city of San Jose, the third largest city in California and home to the largest Vietnamese American community in any major U.S. city. In a 2005 election for the San Jose City Council, District 7 seat, two Vietnamese Americans (Madison Nguyen and Linda Nguyen) ran against each other in an attempt to become the city's first Vietnamese American city council member. The concern, as has been historically the case, is that the Vietnamese American vote would be split with multiple candidates, but what eventually happened was that the Vietnamese American community's voter turnout was so great that it propelled both Vietnamese American candidates into the general election, ensuring that history would be made. In many ways, these recent examples illustrate that Asian American candidates are not only running for elected positions more frequently, but that they are also more politically sophisticated than previous ethnic candidates who solely relied on their Asian ethnic constituencies. One recent study of successful Asian American candidates found that they focus on both multiracial and pan-Asian American ethnic coalition strategies in the areas of voters and contributors.⁷

MULTIPLE STAGES

Asian American suburban transformations do not occur overnight but instead are shaped by historical and contemporary community settlement patterns, as well as the formation of important community political agents (e.g., community-based organizations and the ethnic media) and networks that

provide the necessary institutional infrastructure for local political incorporation efforts. Similar to Latinos, who were labeled as the previous political sleeping giant in California and the Southwest, Asian Americans face unique challenges that are reflective of their community's demographics and experiences in the United States. As a result, the current state of Asian Americans in American politics is the culmination of multiple stages of their experiences in the United States, beginning with their legal challenges of racial exclusionary laws to the contemporary suburbanization of Asian American politics. To understand better the current and future political trajectories of Asian Americans in politics, these multiple stages of Asian American political behaviors, which extend beyond traditional forms such as voting, must be examined closely. In doing so, a comprehensive understanding of the major contemporary issues can be fully ascertained and addressed as this community comes of political age in the near future.

Early Forms of Political Participation, Late 1800s to the 1950s

The history of Asian Americans in the United States is long and rich, encompassing more than 160 years and beginning with the arrival of the first wave of Chinese gold miners to California in 1848.⁸ Since this period, many political events have affected their citizenship and political rights in the United States. Such elderly Asian American immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century have been perceived as "apolitical" in the traditional sense of political participation, defined as voting, but they were unable to vote because they could not become naturalized U.S. citizens. Although early Asians in America could not vote, they did practice other forms of political participation in order to protect themselves against discriminatory laws.

Because of anti-Asian sentiments in the form of discriminatory laws, early Asian leaders used avenues that were available to them, such as the U.S. court system.⁹ Chinese immigrants during this period were outsiders to mainstream political institutions because they could neither vote nor testify in court. Nevertheless, early Chinese community leaders were able to use the U.S. court system with the help of white lawyers to contest for constitutional rights, such as equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. Many of the late nineteenth century Chinese leaders arose from labor associations such as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA), also known as the Chinese Six Companies in San Francisco. Often, their interests would have to be pursued in the courts. One important case decided in 1886 by the U.S. Supreme Court was *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* (118 U.S. 356), in which the majority ruled that the San Francisco Ordinance requiring wooden laundry facilities to obtain permits unfairly discriminated against Chinese businesses and therefore was a violation of their Fourteenth Amendment equal protection status. This case stands as an important case today and is often cited as a precedent. *Yick Wo* illustrates one historical

instance where early Chinese in America challenged discriminatory laws through the U.S. court system. Moreover, it illustrates that early Asians in America were indeed politically conscious despite—or perhaps because of—their lack of basic constitutional rights. This form of political activity was not only practiced among early Chinese in America, but among other Asian ethnic groups as well.

Another example of nontraditional political participation can be seen with Japanese American community leaders who also struggled for constitutional rights and protections. Perhaps the most famous historical examples are the World War II internment cases decided by the U.S. Supreme Court, where individual Japanese Americans challenged curfew and removal orders issued by government authorities. In the 1944 case, *Korematsu v. U.S.* (323 U.S. 214), the U.S. Supreme Court used the strict scrutiny standard for the first time in addressing an equal protection violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. The U.S. Supreme Court's majority decided that Executive Order 9066 did not violate equal protection status of American citizens of Japanese ancestry, and thus required them to report to relocation centers across the west. Almost fifty years later, President George Bush signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which issued a formal apology to Japanese American survivors and a sum of \$20,000 to all internment camp survivors. This act resulted from the efforts of Japanese American national and local leaders who lobbied to rectify this past civil rights injustice by framing the issue of Japanese American internment as a civil liberty issue, and by their building multiracial coalitions with whites and African Americans, in particular, that extended this civil rights issue beyond the Japanese American community.¹⁰

A final example of early Asian American political participation through the U.S. court system for greater civil protections was the Japanese American community's successful overturn of the discriminatory California Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920, which prevented those with alien status from owning land and limited the length of leases. These land laws were a direct threat to the burgeoning Japanese American-owned agricultural businesses and were eventually overturned in a series of California State Supreme Court cases during the 1930s.¹¹

The ability for Asian Americans to sustain a viable second generation of U.S.-born offspring who could participate in U.S. civic institutions would be delayed by state and federal antimiscegenation laws that forbade interracial marriages with whites, and the National Origins Act of 1924, which prevented immigrants from national origins that were declared "ineligible for citizenship" by the U.S. Constitution. Only Japanese Americans saw a substantial second generation emerge in the early twentieth century, because the Gentlemen's Agreement had enabled Japanese immigrants to bring spouses from Japan, despite restrictions otherwise preventing immigration from Asia. Other Asian Americans, however, found marriage prospects very limited by the combination of antimiscegenation laws and immigration restrictions. For Asian Americans

during this period of anti-Asian sentiment, the idea of becoming full partners in the American society was a distant dream.

Asian American Movement and Immigration Reform

The 1960s and 1970s represent a crucial period in the formation of the political identity of Asian Americans today. This is when the second generation of Asian Americans came of age politically in the era identified as the “Asian American Movement.” On the continental United States, particularly along the West Coast, Asian American activists, students, community leaders began to form multiracial and panethnic coalitions to achieve greater social and economic opportunities for its largely immigrant population. This was a microcosm of the civil rights and the antiwar movements of this era. For Asian Americans, like their minority counterparts, a new group consciousness as “Asian Americans” emerged out of these struggles. As community-based organizations and its leadership emerged and developed in the subsequent decades, so did their political vision regarding the Asian American community. In particular, the pursuit for greater Asian American–elected representation at all levels of American government would be a logical extension of the Asian American movement in the subsequent decades. However, this goal would be challenged by the very root of this community’s potential—the contemporary formation of the Asian American community as a result of immigration reform that would change the face and politics of this community.

Social movements involving Asian and Pacific Islander groups were not limited to the U.S. mainland. In Hawai‘i, for those who identified as whole or in part as Native Hawaiian or as Hawaiian nationals, the Hawaiian Sovereignty movement would begin to take shape and coincide with the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Red Power Movement of Native Americans on the continental United States. Its goals, similar to the Red Power Movement, emphasized self-determination, sovereignty, and self-governance primarily for Native Hawaiians who had their lands stripped from them illegally as part of the United States’ annexation of Hawai‘i in 1898. The issue of how to address this issue varies among activists, ranging from the idea of a “nation within a nation” status proposed by U.S. Senator Daniel Akaka (D-HI), to monetary reparations from the U.S. government for their economic grievances, to complete independence of Hawai‘i from the United States.

The current national Asian American population on the continental U.S. is a young and foreign-born community with the majority arriving in the United States during the past three decades. This trend was the result of dramatic reforms to immigration laws by the U.S. Congress that would allow for inclusion rather than exclusion of Asian immigrants to the United States. Particularly key was the monumental Immigration Act of 1965, which allowed a second generation of Asian Americans to develop because families could arrive en masse after forty years of racial exclusion by the National Origins Act of 1924. Along with the opportunity to immigrate after 1965 was the

opportunity for immigrants from Asia to become naturalized U.S. citizens as soon as the standard waiting period was fulfilled, an opportunity that some earlier generations of Asian immigrants did not have until 1956. These two monumental developments would usher in a second stage of Asian American political participation that would provide the foundation for the contemporary period and subsequent stages of Asian American politics. During this stage, established U.S.-born Asian American political leadership and community leaders would attempt to naturalize and bring together their growing and diverse immigrant population.

The term Asian and Pacific Islanders encompasses more than twenty-five different ethnic groups, all with unique cultures and histories of migration and settlement in the United States. In 2000, more than 2 million Asian Americans were biracial or multiracial. As multiracial and ethnic Asian Americans become more politically involved, one of the primary challenges for the general Asian American community will be to create inclusive political organizations that can represent the diverse interests of Asian Americans, as well as can reach out and build viable coalitions with other communities. Underlying this challenge is the shift from the traditional biracial, black-white paradigm that has historically defined American race relations to a multiracial one that includes Latinos and Asian Americans.¹²

If the political maturation of Asian Americans is to signal a new era in racial politics, then the group will have to overcome at least two major challenges. First, Asian Americans have comparatively low voter registration and turnout rates.¹³ Second, they are the most geographically dispersed and residentially integrated minority group.¹⁴ Both of these conditions have tended to deflate the impact that their recent population increases might suggest. On the other hand, the rapid population growth of Asian Americans during the 1990s has laid the foundation for increased representation, particularly in the formation of political districts with substantial Asian American populations. According to the Democratic National Committee, for instance, congressional districts with an Asian American population of 5 percent or more have increased from sixty-three districts in 1990 to ninety-six in 2000. While California is leading the charge, it is certainly by no means alone. This population growth is also occurring in states such as New Jersey, Minnesota, Oregon, Nevada, and Pennsylvania. In New Jersey, during the last decade, the number of congressional districts with an Asian American population of 5 percent or more increased from one to eight.¹⁵ As a result, Asian American voters have the potential to play a greater role in future state and federal politics on the continental United States, and it is more likely that more Asian American candidates will also emerge.

EMERGENCE OF ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

For Asian Americans, the decades after the 1960s symbolized a period of increased political activity.¹⁶ The struggle for Asian American-elected officials is very much a continuation of the goals of the Asian American Movement,

which sought self-empowerment in the electoral political arena. This was evident with the emergence of Asian American–elected officials at the federal level, particularly from Hawai‘i and California. In Hawai‘i, where Asian Americans represent the majority population, the first Asian American federal elected officials were U.S. Senators Spark Matsunaga (D-HI) and Daniel Inouye (D-HI), who were both elected in 1962. The late Patsy T. Mink (D-HI) would be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1964.

While Asian American representation grew in Hawai‘i, Asian Americans were relatively underrepresented on the continental United States. A majority of the Asian American elected federal officials on the U.S. mainland were from California. S. I. Hayakawa (R-CA) served as a U.S. Senator from 1976 to 1982. Norman Mineta (D-CA) served in U.S. House of Representatives from 1974 to 1996. The late Robert Matsui (D-CA) was first elected in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1978 and eventually served 13 full terms. One Asian American (Mike Honda from District 15) from California serves in the U.S. House of Representatives, after being elected in 2000.

Despite these pioneer Asian American–elected officials at the federal level, Asian American political representation has been extremely limited in the major metropolitan cities where many substantial Asian American communities were forming. For example, in the large gateway cities of Los Angeles and New York City, only two Asian American city council members have ever been elected in their respective histories. Michael Woo became the only Asian American to be elected to Los Angeles’ fifteen-person city council in 1985, and most recently, John Liu, was elected to the New York City’s fifty-one-person city council in 2001. Given the large Asian American immigrant populations and the lack of mainstream civic institutions engaging this community, Asian American community-based organizations would play an important role in providing social services and a political voice.

Differences exist in regard to the political experiences for Asian American–elected officials on the continental United States compared with those in Hawai‘i, where Asian Americans have historically attained the most elected representation. The first difference is that Asian Americans in Hawai‘i represent the majority, whereas this is not the case on the continental United States. Therefore, for Asian American candidates running on the continental United States, it would be an unwise political strategy to rely solely on this racial group’s bloc vote. Successful Asian American candidates must pursue two-tiered campaign strategies that involve mandatory cross-racial alliances with white voters and contributors, the first tier, and strategic targeting of Asian American resources within and outside of their districts, the second tier.

A second difference is that Asian American–elected officials and candidates on the continental United States tend to rely more heavily than their Hawaiian counterparts for support by Asian American community elites (namely community-based organization leaders, community activists, and the ethnic media) for access to political resources.¹⁷ One of the most important among these political resources is campaign contributions, an area where Asian

Americans on the continental United States have historically wielded their political muscle in local, state, and federal politics.¹⁸ In 1996, Asian Americans were at the center of a campaign contribution scandal that involved allegations of foreign interests gaining access to the White House through illegal campaign contributions to former Vice President Al Gore and the Democratic National Committee. This prompted a bipartisan Senate investigation into the matter, and a federal civil rights investigation fueled by Asian American community leadership who declared it to be a second invocation of the “yellow peril” image.¹⁹

The experiences of Asian American–elected officials on the continental United States are also different from African American and Latino elected officials in one important aspect—they tend to be nonethnic representatives in state districts.²⁰ State level Asian American–elected officials on the continental United States emerge from non-Asian districts that are either heavily white or multiracial. African American and Latino elected officials at the local, state, and federal levels tend to emerge from political districts in which they represent the majority or a substantial portion of the total population.²¹ At the federal level, twenty-three of thirty-nine African American House Representatives represented districts in 1998 where this group’s voting age population was 50 percent or more of the population.²² For Latinos, seventeen of nineteen members of Congress were in districts where the Latino population was at least 50 percent.²³ In contrast, Asian American–elected officials on the continental United States typically represent non-Asian majority districts at all three levels of government where Asian constituents are a minority or nonexistent. A vivid example is U.S. Representative David Wu (D-OR), who is one of three Asian Americans elected to the U.S. Congress from the mainland and whose district contains less than 5 percent Asian Americans. One notable exception to this trend is U.S. Representative Mike Honda (D-CA) who is elected from a congressional district in Santa Clara County that contains many suburbs with large Asian American populations.

Community Political Leaders and Mobilization

Asian American community-based organizations and other community elites undertake a variety of roles in group political mobilization such as get-out-the-vote drives to organizing candidate forums and training sessions. These roles depend on the geographic context of the cities they are located within and the type of political district. For Asian Americans in large metropolitan gateway cities on the continental United States, the lack of ethnic representation has led to a political void as seen with gateway cities such as Los Angeles and New York City, where the two largest Asian American aggregate populations reside. As a result of this electoral void in such large metropolitan cities, Asian American community leaders, organizations, and activists have played a significant role in representing and advocating Asian American interests to local and state representatives through a variety of ways.

Asian American community-based groups can act as a conduit with mainstream elected officials and institutions, particularly in large metropolitan gateway cities with large Asian American populations. For example, in Los Angeles Koreatown, the commercial and organizational focal point for the largest population of Korean Americans in the nation, Korean American community-based organizations have provided their substantial ethnic community with a political voice in expressing their concerns to mainstream elected representatives and institutions. One such organization is the Korean American Coalition (KAC), which is nonprofit and nonpartisan, representing the interests of more than 500,000 Korean Americans living in Southern California. During its existence, KAC has conducted an annual legislative luncheon in Southern California with local and statewide elected officials and legislative aides, who are invited to Koreatown to meet with Korean American community leaders/organizations. In the past, the elected officials who have been invited to their legislative luncheons included a formidable list of former local, state, and federal elected officials including California Governor Gray Davis, former Governor Pete Wilson, U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer, U.S. Congressman Xavier Bacerra, and Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan. Their luncheons have served as a forum to present and discuss issues affecting Korean Americans in Southern California.

Community-based organizations have helped to recruit and to train potential Asian American candidates with the hope of establishing a formal pipeline of candidates in key regions throughout the United States. At the local level, the Japanese American Citizens' League chapter in Los Angeles has held candidate training workshops led by Asian American–elected officials, who worked hand in hand toward the goal of increasing elected representation. These workshops usually feature current and past Asian American–elected officials, campaign strategists, and political researchers. At the national level, the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies, the only national Asian American public policy institute in Washington, DC, and the University of California at Los Angeles Asian American Studies Center, a leading research center on Asian Americans, annually co-sponsor a National Leadership Academy for Asian American–elected officials in Washington, DC. Various Asian American candidates and elected official participants from across the country attend the three-day workshops. This event includes training sessions with current and former Asian American–elected officials, Congressional staffers, political and public relations consultants, fundraisers, and print and broadcast journalists. Such events are certainly not limited to California and Washington, DC, as emerging Asian American political mobilization is taking shape in other major states. Most recently, in March 2008, a one-day Asian American candidate training session sponsored by the Washington, DC, nonprofit, community-based organization Progressive Alliance took place in the emerging suburb of Bellevue, WA, where Asian Americans represent more than a quarter of the city population and where two Asian American city council members (Conrad Lee and Patsy Bonincontri) serve on the five-person council.

The success of the inaugural 1999 Leadership Academy for Asian American Elected Officials resulted in the formation of the Asian American Political Education Institute in California. The cosponsors of this political education institute are two of the most visible Asian American community and academic organizations in Los Angeles County, the Chinese Americans United for Self-Empowerment (CAUSE) and the University of California at Los Angeles' Asian American Studies Center. According to their press release, the mission of the institute was "to gather top notch political consultants, elected officials, community leaders, and media together with individuals who are interested in seeking elected offices for two days of interactive panel discussions and training. . . . Through this institute we strive to enhance the success rate of Asian American candidates by discussing issues facing these candidates . . . and provide our community with a better understanding of the mechanics of political campaigns."²⁴

Another important Asian American community resource in the continental United States is the emergence of transnational Asian American ethnic media, which caters to the large bilingual and transnational Asian American immigrant communities. In Los Angeles and Orange Counties alone, it is estimated that there were nearly 200 different Asian and Pacific Islander media outlets ranging from newspapers and journals to radio and television programs.²⁵ Besides providing immigrants bilingual and unilingual information on United States and international news in their respective homelands, the ethnic print media can also provide Asian American candidates who chose to target them with important media exposure to a large segment of Asian foreign-born, bilingual population of potential voters and donors. Given this strong presence in the Asian and Pacific Islander foreign-born population, it was no surprise that high-profile candidates such as Republican Matt Fong, a Chinese American and son of former California State Secretary March Fong-Eu, targeted the Chinese American print media, in order to get his message out to prospective Chinese American voters and contributors during his closely contested 1998 bid in California for the U.S. Senate against incumbent Senator Barbara Boxer.

The advantage of targeting the ethnic media was that it provided Fong a cost-effective medium to advertise his campaign to potential Asian American voters and contributors, who could tip the balance of a close election in his favor. During the Republican primary election, Fong's greatest challenger Darrell Issa spent \$2 million dollars in radio advertisements alone. While Fong targeted the mainstream media during his campaign, he also focused his limited resources on the Asian ethnic media. An example of the cost-effectiveness of advertising in Asian ethnic print media versus mainstream print media can be seen in the following: a full-page advertisement in the *San Francisco Chronicle* costs \$55,000 compared with \$1,200 for a full-page advertisement in *Sing Tao*, a Bay Area Chinese language newspaper with a national circulation of 60,000. Fong used the Chinese American print media to his advantage, and even credited them with helping him win his Republican primary election.²⁶

These organizations, with the support of community leaders and activists through many grass-roots activities, attempt to educate and influence local and

statewide elected officials. An example can be seen in Santa Clara County in California with the Asian Pacific American Silicon Valley Democratic Club (APASVDC), which has been successful in helping elect more than thirty Asian American candidates, the most for any continental U.S. county region, since 2002.²⁷ Historically focused on local elections, this political organization has begun to support Asian American candidates running for statewide positions with the most recent one being Paul Fong's 2008 California Assembly District 22 campaign. Fong is one of the founders of APASVDC and an important Asian American community player in Santa Clara County local politics.

PANETHNIC CHALLENGE

The challenges to constructing and maintaining any type of political coalition in American politics are many. One such challenge is the salience of race and ethnicity in today's political arenas. In regard to ethnic salience, one contemporary trend in California politics is for ethnic groups to "go it alone."²⁸ This is particularly the case among recent immigrant Asian ethnic groups (post-1965) who do not necessarily identify with issues that marked the political struggles of more established Asian American groups during the social movements of the sixties and with current movements that espouse similar group ideologies. As a result, panethnic coalitions among Asian Americans are difficult to construct and tend to be short-lived, given the contemporary characteristics of Asian Americans. Other factors that diminish the potential for a pan-Asian identity among recent Asian immigrants include differences in socioeconomic background such as education and income, generation issues, and homeland politics.²⁹

One of the primary barriers to whether Asian Americans can form a racial bloc vote in key swing states stems from the very root of their potential, such as their extraordinary diversity and growth. One recent national survey of Asian American public opinions in several major metropolitan cities, it was found that a panethnic identity is gradually emerging in the first-generation Asian American community, in terms of the public opinion survey measure of "linked group fate" (what happens to another Asian ethnic group adversely affects their own ethnic group), although not when measured by other survey measures such as "shared cultured."³⁰ Such a measure of panethnic identity is likely to increase over time particularly among the latter generations, which bodes well for future panethnic coalitions.

For Asian Americans, their political success is not only defined by their ability to form panethnic coalitions within its ethnically diverse community and cross-racial coalitions with whites, but also to develop positive race relations with African Americans and Latinos. In many racially commingled cities such as Los Angeles, the challenges are there as exemplified by the 1991 Los Angeles uprisings that represented the nation's first multiracial riots in which Korean American-owned businesses suffered the greatest losses, estimated at \$400 million during the several days of burning, looting, and rioting.³¹ In a telling 1993

Los Angeles Times survey of southern Californians, 45 percent of African American respondents identified Asian Americans as the second most prejudiced group, only behind whites at 65 percent, which represented a 19 percent increase from a similar 1989 survey. Moreover, African American respondents most frequently identified Asian Americans as the one racial group that is gaining economic power that is not good for Southern California.³² The challenges within such contexts are to find the common interests that exist but that are overshadowed by zero-sum-based racial politics.³³ Hate crimes in the post-9/11 era have seen increased targeting of Asian Indians and Pakistani Americans at local, state, and national levels that raise future concerns for race relations in multiracial cities, while at the same time serves as a salient issue that can potentially unite the diverse Asian American community.

OUTLOOK

Politics is an increasingly important issue for Asian Americans as they continue to participate in U.S. mainstream and community-based civic institutions. As new and old members of this community enter the political arena and participate through a myriad of ways, the trajectory of Asian Americans in politics remains extremely optimistic. Asian American-elected leadership has begun to emerge in the continental United States, primarily at the local and state levels, that rivals the number of those in Hawai‘i; however, many contemporary political challenges exist for Asian Americans as they seek to naturalize and vote consistently, and attempt to build cross-racial and panethnic coalitions around both Asian and non-Asian American candidates. Whether this can be achieved and sustained in the near future remains to be seen.

If in fact the Asian American community is to sustain a positive trajectory of political growth and influence in future statewide and national elections, a triangulation must occur among the following three Asian American community loci: community-based and national organizations, Asian American candidates and elected officials, and the emerging and influential Asian American media. Concomitantly, the two major parties must legitimately focus on recruiting and incorporating Asian American voters, contributors, and candidates. This process is most evident in the South Bay of northern California and Orange County in southern California, where Asian Americans are emerging as legitimate coalition partners with whites and Latinos, and where Asian American candidates are receiving the necessary party support from both Democrats and Republicans in winning key political offices. Grassroots mobilization efforts involving these three community loci around a progressive ideology will allow Asian Americans to achieve greater political incorporation in small to medium cities in these important regions. The formation of this important political infrastructure within the regional Asian American communities has been gradually taking shape over the past three decades and will play an important role in determining whether Asian Americans can live up to their “sleeping giant status” in American Politics.

NOTES

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