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Asian Pacific American Political Participation and Representation in Elective Office

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Summary

As one of the fastest growing segments of the population, Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) have seemed to be on the verge of greater political activity. As yet, the steep increase in the Asian Pacific American population during the last 35 years has not resulted in a corresponding increase in the level of political participation. Voter turnout for Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) has lagged behind that of whites and blacks, while Asian Pacific American and Hispanic turnout rates are similar (45% for Hispanics in the 2000 election compared with 43% for Asian Pacific Americans).

Asian immigration to the United States began in the 1840s, and continued throughout the settlement of western and Pacific coast states. Most early immigrants were Chinese laborers whose destinations were the railroads and the mining camps that transformed the western frontier. But restrictive immigration policies and native hostility toward Asian workers (sometimes erupting into riots) followed the settlement period, resulting in self-segregation and the formation of “Chinatowns” in many cities. The adoption of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 (which barred entry to contract laborers for 10 years; 22 Stat. 58) and the Gentlemen’s Agreement with Japan in 1908 (whereby Japan agreed to withhold passports from laborers bound for the U.S.) virtually closed off immigration from Asia.

New immigration laws were adopted in 1952 and 1965 that modified earlier restrictions on immigration from Asia. The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 (66 Stat. 163) eased some restrictions on gaining citizenship and abolished the category called “alien, ineligible for citizenship,” which applied to many immigrants from Asia. In 1965, the Immigration and Nationality Act (79 Stat. 911) was amended to eliminate the national quota system and establish new limits of approximately 20,000 immigrants from each Asian country. After that, a renewed flow of immigrants began arriving from Asian countries. Whereas most earlier Asian immigrants arrived from China and Japan, the 1965 changes to immigration laws resulted in a sharp increase in the number of immigrants from India, Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, and, to a lesser extent, from Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Pakistan.

Table 1. Asian Immigration to the United States, 1971-1990

Place of Origin	1971-1980	1981-1990	Total
China	203,522	474,103	677,625
Hong Kong	47,501	63,016	110,517
Japan	47,914	43,248	91,162
Philippines	360,216	494,971	855,187
Korea	271,463	338,872	610,335
India	176,716	261,841	438,557
Vietnam	178,681	401,419	580,100
Cambodia	8,426	116,571	124,997
Laos	22,566	145,444	168,010
Thailand	44,055	64,437	108,492
Pakistan	31,247	61,364	92,611

Source: Herbert R. Barringer, Robert W. Gardner, and Michael J. Levin, *Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States* (New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1993), pp. 25-26.

Because the study of Asian Pacific American electoral involvement is a recent phenomenon, little is known about APA political participation historically. Asian immigrants were subject to official and unofficial hostility after they began arriving in the 1840s (anti-Asian immigration laws, discrimination and mob violence, barriers to citizenship, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II). Such attitudes may have discouraged political activity. But the social and political dynamic has changed within the Asian Pacific American population, due in part to recent immigration patterns. In 1960, Asian Pacific Americans numbered 900,000 (0.06% of the total population). By 2000, the APA population exceeded eleven million (4.2% of the population), making it one of the fastest-growing populations in the country. Because of this dramatic change in the size and composition of the population, political observers within and outside the APA community anticipate greater political activity.

Voter Turnout

National voter turnout rates for Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) have been available only since 1992, and these data suggest that their participation is lower than that of whites and blacks and similar to Hispanic turnout (see **Table 2**, below). Observers offer a number of reasons to explain the comparatively low rates of voting participation: 1) nearly 70% of Asian Pacific Americans were born outside the U.S., and those who are not yet citizens are not eligible to vote; 2) for some immigrants, a fear or distrust of political involvement carried over from their home countries may inhibit participation; 3) immigrants who do not speak or understand English, or do so only with difficulty, may be discouraged by an “official” activity such as registering and voting; 4) the APA

population is comparatively young (APA median age is 30 years compared to a national median of 33 years), and turnout is traditionally lowest among younger voters.¹

Table 2. Voter Participation Rates in Presidential Elections, 1992, 1996, and 2000 by Race and Hispanic Origin

	1992	1996	2000
Asian	27.3%	45.0%	43.3%
White	63.6%	60.7%	61.8%
Hispanic	28.9%	44.3%	45.1%
Black	54.0%	53.0%	56.8%

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1996," [http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.html], visited March 3, 1998, and "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000," P20-542, issued February 2002, p.5.

Asian Pacific American voters accounted for one percent of all voters in 1992 and 1996 and two percent of voters in 2000, compared with Hispanics, for example, who accounted for 4% to 7%. In California, APAs were about 5% of the electorate in recent elections, according to exit polls from the *Los Angeles Times*, whereas Hispanics accounted for 8%, 10%, 12%, and 13% of voters, respectively, in statewide elections since 1994.² According to a 1998 city-wide poll by the *San Francisco Examiner*, "After several years of intensive organizing, Asian Americans still have the lowest rate of voter registration, voter turnout and general interest in politics of all The City's major racial and ethnic groups."³

Despite the potential difficulties immigrants face with respect to voting, a number of factors could work to offset the low rate of participation among APAs. A 1996 national study by the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA found that more than 80% of Asian immigrants become citizens, a step necessary to meet the citizenship requirement for voter registration. A poll of San Francisco's ethnic groups found a similarly high rate of naturalization for APAs (76%), which favorably compared with a 61% naturalization rate for Hispanics in the city.⁴ Once registered, APA voters "are among the most likely voters to go to the polls on election day," according to the UCLA study.⁵ For example, a study by the Chinese American Voters Education Committee reported that 61% of APA voters

¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *We the Asian Americans*, WE-3, September, 1993. p. 3.

² *Los Angeles Times* exit polls, 1994, 1996, and 1998.

³ Julie Chao, "Despite Gains, City's Asian Americans Still Vote Less, Care Less than Other Groups," p. C1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Associated Press, Migration News Clip, "Study Tracks Asian Immigrants," available at [http://www.iom.ch/News/c_960327.htm], visited Dec. 10, 1996.

turned out in San Francisco in the November 1996 election, compared with a 59% turnout rate for all voters in the city.⁶

As for language problems with respect to voting, Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act provides that bilingual voting materials are available in certain communities for voters who experience difficulty with English. Section 203 applies to communities where members of a language minority with limited English abilities are 5% of voting age citizens, or the community includes 10,000 members of a language minority who have difficulty with English, and the illiteracy rate for the group exceeds the national illiteracy rate. In California, four counties offer voting materials in one or more languages other than English (Chinese, Japanese, Tagalog, and Vietnamese); in two New York counties and in the borough of Queens, voting materials in Chinese are available; and in Hawaii, voting materials are available in the city and county of Honolulu in Japanese and Tagalog and, in two other counties, in Tagalog only.

Voting Patterns in Elections

Partisan voting patterns are mixed for Asian Pacific American voters, according to exit polls for Presidential and U.S. House elections since 1990. Asian Pacific American voters cast 55% of their votes for President Bush in 1992, a plurality (48%) of their votes for Senator Dole in 1996 (Governor Clinton won 31% of the vote in 1992 and, as the incumbent President, won 43% of the vote in 1996), and 62% of their votes for Vice President Gore in 2000. In contrast, APA voters cast a majority of their ballots for Democratic candidates in U.S. House elections in 1990, 1994, and 1998, while a majority voted for Republican candidates in House elections in 1992 and 1996. The results from the 1996 and 1998 House elections illustrate the shifting electoral tendencies of APA voters: a solid majority (56%) voted Republican in 1996 and a slightly higher percentage (57%) voted Democratic in 1998.

⁶ Ramon G. McLeod, "More Asians Turning Out, Voting in S.F. : Record Levels Contrast With Past Uninvolvement," [http://www.vpac-usa.org/asian/sf_asian.html], visited April 23, 1998.

Table 3. Voting Patterns in Presidential Elections, 1992, 1996, and 2000, by Race and Hispanic Origin

		Asian	White	Black	Hispanic
1992	Clinton (D)	31%	39%	83%	61%
	Bush (R)	55%	40%	10%	25%
	Perot (I)	15%	20%	7%	14%
1996	Clinton (D)	43%	43%	84%	72%
	Dole (R)	48%	46%	12%	21%
	Perot (I)	8%	9%	4%	6%
2000	Bush (R)	37%	54%	9%	38%
	Gore (D)	62%	43%	90%	61%
	Nader	1%	3%	1%	1%

Source: Marjorie Connelly, "Portrait of the Electorate," *The New York Times*, Nov. 10, 1996, p. 28; 2000 data from "The National Electorate," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 9, 2000.

Voting patterns in California, where nearly 40% of Asian Pacific Americans live, tend to mirror national voting trends for APAs. According to *Los Angeles Times* exit polls, APA voters cast a majority of their ballots for the Democratic candidate in six of seven elections for U.S. Senator since 1986. In gubernatorial elections, APA voters cast a majority of their votes for the Democratic candidate three times and for the Republican candidate once.

Table 4. Asian Pacific American Voting Trends in Senatorial and Gubernatorial Elections in California, 1986-2000

Year		U.S. Senator		Governor	
		Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep
2000		64%	33%	n.a.	n.a.
1998		48%	51%	65%	35%
1994		52%	40%	50%	46%
1992	special election	62%	36%	n.a.	n.a.
	general election	51%	44%	n.a.	n.a.
1990		n.a.	n.a.	52%	44%
1988		51%	47%	n.a.	n.a.
1986		56%	41%	39%	59%

Source: 1988 and 1986 figures are from the Field Institute, *Voting in the 1998 General Election*, Dec. 1988, and *A Survey of 1986 General Election Voters*, Dec. 1986; 1990 through 2000 statistics are from various issues of the *Los Angeles Times*: Nov. 9, 2000, Nov. 3, 1998, Nov. 10, 1994, Nov. 5, 1992, and Nov. 7, 1990.

Representation Among Elected Officials

The 108th Congress includes seven Asian Pacific Americans: two Senators and five Members of the House of Representatives. There are two members from Hawaii, two from California, and one each from Oregon and Virginia, as well as one Delegate from American Samoa. Historically, there have been 33 APA Members of Congress, beginning with Dalip Singh Saund, who was elected in 1956 to the 85th Congress from California.⁷

Table 5. Asian Pacific American Members and Delegates in the 108th Congress

Name	State	Chamber	Years of service
Daniel Akaka, D	Hawaii	Senate	1990-present (House, 1977-90)
Eni F. H. Faleomavaea, D	American Samoa	House	1989-present
Michael M. Honda, D	California	House	2001-present
Daniel K. Inouye, D	Hawaii	Senate	1963-present
Robert T. Matsui, D	California, 5 th	House	1979-present
Robert C. Scott, D ⁸	Virginia	House	1993-present
David Wu, D	Oregon, 1 st	House	1999-present

Source: CRS Report 97-938 GOV, *Asian Pacific Americans in the United States Congress*, by Lorraine Tong.

At the state level, Gary Locke was elected governor of Washington in 1996, becoming the first Asian Pacific American elected to the office outside Hawaii, and the first Chinese American governor as well. Ben Cayetano became the first Filipino American state chief executive when he was elected governor of Hawaii in 1994.

⁷ This number includes 13 Resident Commissioners from the Philippine Islands who were elected to Congress between 1907 and 1946. For further information, see CRS Report 97-398 GOV, *Asian Pacific Americans in the United States Congress*, by Lorraine Tong.

⁸ Rep. Scott is African American with Filipino heritage.