

Breaking New Ground:  
Asian Pacific Americans  
and  
Redistricting  
in the Greater  
Downtown Area



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for Fair Representation at  
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## **BREAKING NEW GROUND: ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICANS IN THE GREATER DOWNTOWN AREA**

**Asian Pacific Americans for Fair Representation  
at University of California, Los Angeles**

### **Introduction**

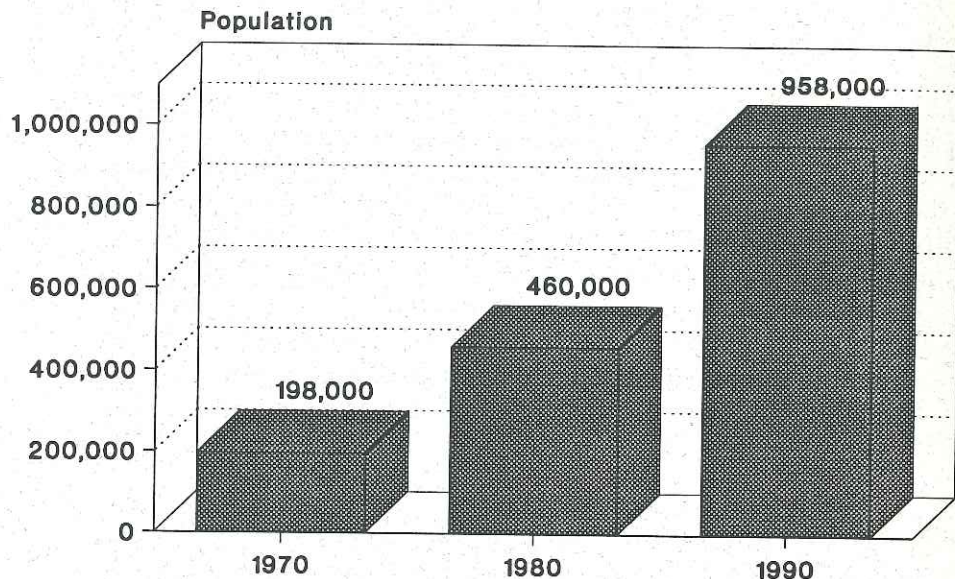
The phenomenal growth of Asian Pacific Americans is transforming our communities and raising new challenges. The 1990 Census reports that our numbers have increased by 127 percent just within the last ten years, and today, we account for more than 10 percent of California's total population. Asian Pacific Americans have experienced the single largest increase by any minority group in California. In Los Angeles City alone, we have grown over 74.4% and now make up at least 10% of the total population. Redistricting in 1991-1992 is an opportunity for Asian Pacific Americans to achieve greater political representation. This is a step that will secure a brighter future.

Our growing numbers require a legislative body that will be more responsive to our social and commercial needs. These needs will only be realistically met through political means, for it is the legislative body who determines the allocation of funding for social programs. Planned expansion and redevelopment of our commercial areas must also be accommodated by our elected officials. Through political participation, we can ensure that these elected officials will respond to the needs and interests of our communities.

It is imperative that Asian Pacific Americans utilize the redistricting process to ensure fair political representation. In the

redistricting process, electoral district boundaries must be redefined every ten years after the Census count. The redrawing of the lines is to account for demographic shifts, for the law requires all districts to be approximately equal in population. Through redistricting, we can advocate the drawing of a district that will concentrate our numbers and promote the formation of an Asian political base. This political base will enable us to elect officials that are sensitive and responsive to our needs.

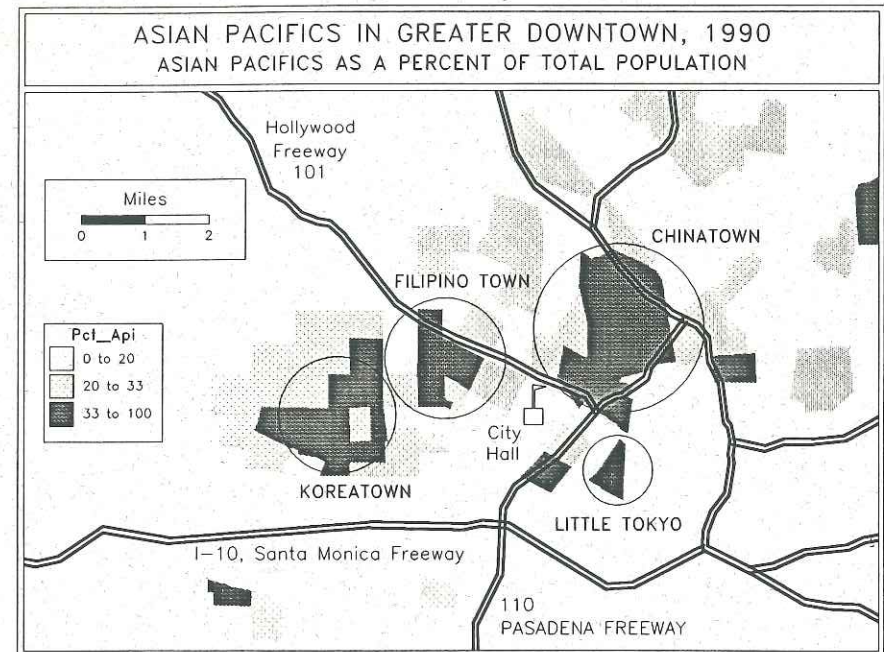
## Asian Pacific Americans in Los Angeles County 1970-1990



### Community Profiles

Asian Pacific Americans in the Greater Downtown Los Angeles area have the potential to form a viable political base. This area encompasses the communities of a variety of Asian Pacific

American cultures and ethnicity and includes Chinatown, Little Tokyo, Koreatown, and Filipinotown. Each community represents an ethnic core with its own unique history, culture, and identity. However, we all face a set of common social and economic problems, while also suffering from a lack of political responsiveness on the part of elected officials.



Chinatown is the oldest Asian Pacific American community established in the early 1860's as a cultural and social center for immigrants. Over a century later, Chinatown maintains a distinct social and economic system that serves a significant portion of the Chinese and Vietnamese population of Los Angeles. For many immigrants, Chinatown serves as a temporary residential area that is a "jumping point," from where they later move to new population centers such as Diamond Bar and Monterey Park.

Approximately 70%-80% of the residents have little or no english communication skills. This lack of english skills limits employment opportunity and the ability to utilize governmental assistance programs. As residents, they are entitled to programs such as public assistance, medical care, and food stamps. Despite the tremendous need for social services, there is only the Chinatown Service Center. Even though the Center is making an effort to provide assistance in many areas of social need, it is limited in its capacities due to funding. Moreover, with the increased need for social services, the issue of funding becomes an imminent threat to the Center's existence.

Little Tokyo, since its beginning in 1885, has been an "ethnic core" for Japanese Americans. By providing distinctive cultural and commercial facilities, Little Tokyo has been an area of cultural and social identification not only for its residents, but also for the 130,000 Japanese in Los Angeles County. As a result, it has been designated by redevelopers to become the new center of Japanese and Japanese American culture and commerce.

Beginning in 1970, Little Tokyo has been a target of commercial redevelopment. Over the last two decades, new projects were responsible for the redevelopment of 74% of the 64 acre area. The rapid redevelopment raised concerns about its impact. The completed and proposed construction projects have been dramatically changing the landscape and function of the Little Tokyo area. The impact of the redevelopment plan ranges from the elimination of low cost housing to the over-saturation of hotels and commercial offices.

The effect of this situation is that many Japanese Americans and their organizations in Little Tokyo may be displaced from this "ethnic core." Future social service facilities, such as the Japanese Cultural and Community Center, and low cost senior citizen dwellings, such as the Miyako Gardens and the Little Tokyo Towers, will be kept from this area due to rising costs. The consequences of these circumstances is that Little Tokyo's basis as a cultural and community center will be dissolved. In addition, it is presumable that in the political arena, the social needs of the community will be overshadowed by commercial interests.

Koreatown is a cultural and economic community that has been flourishing since the 1960's. Today, with over 145,000 Korean residents, Los Angeles County has the largest population of Koreans in the nation. In Southern California, one in every five Koreans live in Koreatown. Moreover, Koreatown has the largest concentration of Korean-owned businesses in the United States.

As a cultural and social center, Koreatown serves as an area of ethnic and cultural identification for many Koreans. The social community and commercial facilities that are available in this area are widely utilized. Therefore, any changes or advancements will have broad effects on all Korean Americans. Currently, Koreatown has many great needs: increased police protection, social funding, and redevelopment and expansion of the commercial district.

During this past decade, Koreatown has developed significantly socially and economically. In the social sector, community service organizations, such as the Korean Youth Center, have expanded in their number and types of programs to meet increased needs. Funding for these programs remains problematic. A social issue that has become Koreatown's primary concern is the increase in crimes. Nevertheless, Koreatown has not been allocated adequate funding for increased police protection. In the economic sector, there is an essential need for expansion and redevelopment of the commercial district. However, this need has not yet been responded to by city planning officials. They allow the city to continue maintaining zoning policies that have become obsolete and only serve as barriers to the continual economic growth of Koreatown.

Asian Pacific American Population in Central Los Angeles		
Area	Number of Asian Pacific American	Total Number of People in the Area
Koreatown	33,781	112,707
Chinatown	19,149	63,204
Little Tokyo	7,265	30,662

Even though Chinatown, Little Tokyo, and Koreatown are the largest Asian Pacific Communities, they do not comprise all of the Asian ethnic groups that exist in the Greater Downtown Los Angeles area. There are many other ethnic groups that reside in less visible communities. Two of these communities are the Pilipinos and the Vietnamese. Both groups comprise a large portion of the total Asian Pacific American population.

The Pilipino community originated in the 1920's in an area around Weller Street. Since then it has suffered numerous instances of displacement due to urban redevelopment. From its original area, Pilipinotown has been displaced to the Bunker Hill area (near City Hall) and to its current area, which is directly northeast of Koreatown. Pilipinotown currently extends from West Lake to Hollywood. Its core area is around Temple St. and Beverly Blvd, where the businesses, professional offices, and restaurants are centered.

The Vietnamese, who arrived in the 1970's, are relatively new to the Greater Downtown Los Angeles Area. There are 63,000 Vietnamese people living in Los Angeles County, with a sizeable portion living in the Chinatown area. Their presence is particularly noticeable in the business sector where many shops directly cater to the Vietnamese people.

Even though each community may have its own particular needs, the residents of all these communities suffer from similar problems. While they are in need of language classes, employment assistance, and health and mental health services (to deal with culture shock), they also face juvenile delinquency (high school drop-outs and gangs), a lack of adequate housing (for the elderly), and problems in commercial development.

Although diverse in culture, all of the Asian Pacific American groups share similar needs and the common dilemma of lacking an effective voice in the legislative process. Being "ethnic cores," the social and economic sufferings of these communities have a wide ranging effect. While these problems directly impact the residents of

these areas, individuals who identify to these communities' cultural centers and utilize their commercial and social service facilities will also be affected. By not participating in the political arena to ensure our representation, we have allowed elected officials to remain unresponsive to the needs of all our communities.

The redistricting process presents Asian Pacific Americans with the chance to gain political representation. In addition, redistricting provides us with the opportunity to revitalize our "ethnic core" areas into places that we can be proud of.

### **Redistricting: An Opportunity**

While the dramatic increase in the Asian Pacific American population has profound implications for our communities, this growth is not yet reflected in Asian Pacific Americans holding political offices. Unfortunately, less than 2% of all the major elected offices are held by Asian Pacific Americans. This number is not adequate to handle our growing political needs. This figure also reflects our lack of a political base that is capable of supporting candidates. Until now, Asian Pacific Americans have not been able to form a strong political base because our communities have been fragmented into different districts. The splitting of communities into separate districts is one form of "gerrymandering" that dilutes the voting power and strength of a particular community. With our voting strength diluted, our ability to influence the political process is reduced. Therefore, gerrymandering is a tool used to reduce the chances for ethnic minorities to be elected, while protecting the seats of incumbent politicians. Since our communities share common needs, we have a legitimate right to be kept together in a single district.

Creating a formidable political base is essential to achieving political representation. By having district lines drawn to maintain the integrity of Asian Pacific American communities, it will enable us to exert more influence at the voting polls. A concentration of Asian Pacific Americans within a district will create a voting bloc which will have the potential to become a political base. If this large group

of voters is organized to function together, it will become a political base that is capable of influencing elected officials and legislation. By building a strong "Asian voting bloc," our communities' needs and interests can be politically represented. It is through having a political base, which is recognizable as a formidable political unit, that we may acquire fair political representation. Through the redistricting process, Asian Pacific Americans can ensure that boundary lines are drawn to facilitate the development of a political base for the present and the future.

Community	Los Angeles City Council Districts	
	1982	1986
(1). Korean Community	4th, 10th	4th, 8th, 10th
(2). Chinese Community	4th, 9th, 13th, 14th	9th, 13th
(3). Filipino Community	4th, 13th	2nd, 4th, 10th, 13th

It is essential that Asian Pacific Americans become involve in the redistricting process, so as to unify our political voice. This process is a means of avoiding another decade of having gerrymandered districts, a diluted political voice, and inadequate political representation.

### The Redistricting Movement

There are many ways for an individual to get involved and to help ensure that the redistricting process will be done fairly. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 makes it illegal to dilute the votes of Asian Pacific Americans and to deny us fair political representation. Since the law only goes so far, it is up to us to effect change and mend the situation. There are numerous Asian Pacific American organizations

and individuals that are addressing the situation by actively pursuing fair redistricting. These organizations are now striving for fair redistricting. It is now up to concerned individuals to join and support these efforts to ensure the success of the redistricting movement.

Listed are some coordinators of the Asian Pacific American redistricting movement. They are a means to get involved and become more educated about this process: Coalition for Asian Pacific Americans for Fair Reapportionment: Allison Tom (213) 748-2022; Mas Fukai (213) 974-1075; Koreatown Redistricting Commission: Jerry Yu (213) 380-6175.

By joining this effort, Asian Pacific Americans can guarantee the formation of a strong movement that will not tolerate the disruption of our political base. Our involvement in the hearings and meetings that are scheduled for the redistricting process will influence how our district boundaries will be drawn.

### A Unified Effort

The success of the Asian Pacific American redistricting effort will be depend upon our ability to organize. The first stage of organizing is up to each community and ethnic group. There has to be a unified effort to approach the redistricting process. A common agenda must be formulated by organizations to create a single formidable voice. With the common goal of political representation as a unifying point, all redistricting organizations need to come together and build a coalition. If a coalition effort is not achieved, then Asian Pacific Americans will be responsible for fragmenting their own political base. Within each community, the organization of individual and group activism must also include the involvement of the business community. The business community maintains direct relations with the legislative body. These political ties can serve to propel the redistricting movement by eliciting support from incumbent politicians. The next stage of organization is the building of a coalition amongst communities. This effort will harness the support of all Asian Pacific Americans into a unified political voice.

## Conclusion

It is time for Asian Pacific Americans in the 1990s to break new ground! Redistricting will allow us to impact the political arena and to empower our communities. Besides fighting for an Asian district, it is essential to increase voter registration drives to ensure our electoral capabilities. Education is equally important, for it will keep voters informed and generate more interest and support from Asian Pacific Americans regarding our communities' political agendas. In addition, coalition-building with Latinos and African Americans will allow for an exchange of information and thus prevent us from stepping on each other's toes in the struggle for fair representation.

While there are many steps to fair representation, redistricting is "the first step" that needs to be taken, since its results (the boundary lines) will be set for the next ten years. Henceforth, we need to start out with a fixed, stable environment that will enable us to build our political foundation. Only in having a stable political foundation can we begin to promote the interests of our people. Thus, Asian Pacific American empowerment starts with representation, and fair representation starts with you...

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# Asian Pacific Americans in Los Angeles County, 1990

## Asian Pacifics as a Percent of Total Census Tract Population

