

**REDISTRICTING AND POLITICAL  
EMPOWERMENT  
OF ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICANS  
IN LOS ANGELES:  
A POSITION PAPER**

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**Introduction**

Asian Pacific Americans are on the verge of becoming a major force in electoral politics in Los Angeles. Fueled by sizeable immigration since 1965,<sup>1</sup> the Asian Pacific population in Los Angeles County has grown to nearly one million in 1990. Today, there is more Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) in this one county than in any state other than California. Comprising 10.8% of the county's residents, Asian Pacific Americans are close in number to that of African Americans, the second largest minority group who make up 11.2% of the county. Census data show that APAs doubled their share of the county's population from three percent in 1970 to six percent in 1980, and grew to eleven percent in 1990. By the end of the century, Asian Pacific Americans are projected to comprise over one-seventh of the county's total population.<sup>2</sup> This dramatic population growth should embolden Asian Pacific Americans in the county to seek greater political empowerment. As the largest APA community in the nation, their success will have broad national implications for all Asian Pacific Americans.

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Thus far, Asian Pacific Americans have been noted for their generous financial contributions to political campaigns. They have donated funds disproportionate to their numbers. For example, in his 1986 gubernatorial campaign, about ten percent of Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley's financial donations came from Asian Pacific Americans statewide, compared to their less than six percent of the state's population.<sup>3</sup> However indirect, campaign contributions give donors political power. At the very least, major donors get the politician's ear, and can use their leverage to press for political appointments of Asian Pacific Americans.

Asian Pacific Americans have also begun to climb the political ladder as legislative aides and analysts, consultants, researchers, press secretaries, campaign managers, attorneys, and advisers. This cadre of bright, politically astute staffers monitors public policy decisions that affect Asian Pacific Americans or their countries of origin, juggling issues ranging from education and health, to licensing requirements and transportation.<sup>4</sup>

The Asian Pacific American community needs to build on the political gains made as campaign donors and political aides by addressing the under-representation in elective office. Since 1980, no Asian or Pacific American has held a seat in the California Legislature. Although Asian Pacific Americans now comprise ten percent of the state's population, they hold only two percent of the state's top 300 elected offices and only one percent of city council and school board seats.<sup>5</sup> What accounts for this under-representation? More importantly, can Asian Pacific Americans improve their political situation in the upcoming 1991 reapportionment and redistricting?

This position paper explores the potential of Asian Pacific Americans in Los Angeles becoming a viable voting bloc in a major electoral district, for example, congressional, state assembly, and state senatorial districts, county supervisorial, and city council districts. A viable voting bloc exists when the Asian Pacific American population is sufficiently large so that when they act in unison, they can have a major, or dominant, influence on the election of the district's representative. Unless Asian Pacific Americans comprise a decisive voting bloc in an electoral district,

elected officials will never view the concerns of this population as their primary mandate.

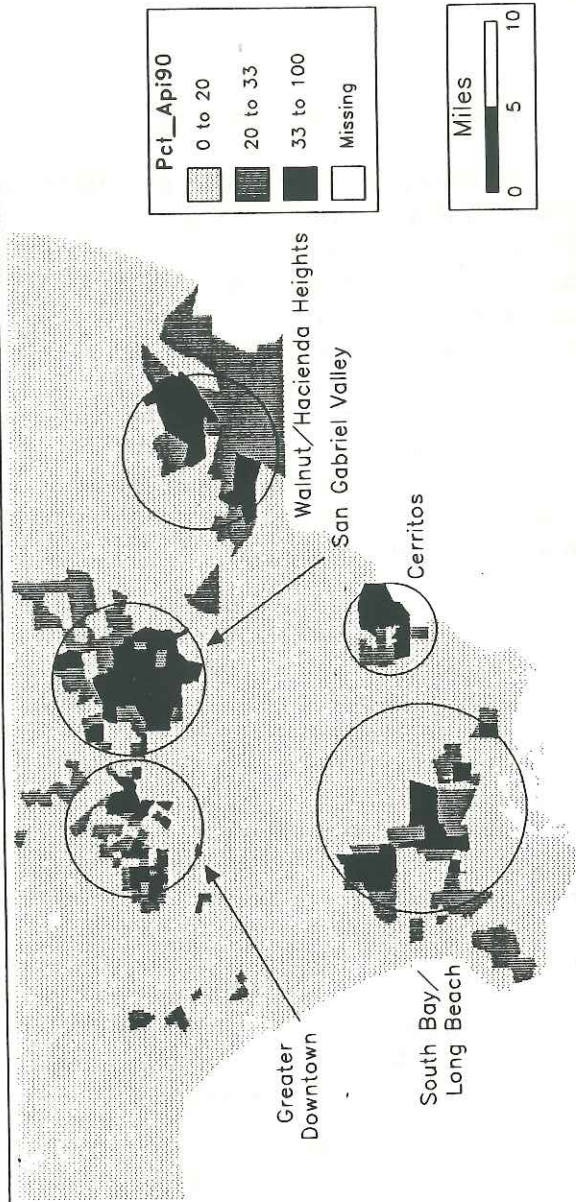
### Asian Americans and Redistricting

By constitutional mandate, the United States is required to reapportion congressional seats according to population. In the sixties, reapportionment to ensure population equity for state and local election districts was also required.<sup>6</sup> Although reapportionment is dictated by numbers, determining the district boundaries is a political process. The decision of where to draw the district lines commands the attention of the political community every ten years, when the official decennial count of the nation's population is taken. Redistricting lines are drawn to protect incumbents,<sup>7</sup> but line drawers must also abide by a set of guidelines. As an example, they should maintain the integrity of minority communities.

The dramatic growth of the APA population has placed it in a position where its members can become serious participants in the upcoming reapportionment and redistricting process. Over the last two decades, the APA neighborhoods have grown tremendously, and today there are five distinctive clusters: the greater downtown Los Angeles area, which includes Koreatown, Chinatown, and Little Tokyo; the San Gabriel Valley, with the highest concentration in Monterey Park and Alhambra; the region in the southern part of the county, which includes Gardena, Torrance, Carson, and parts of Long Beach; the area around Cerritos; and an eastern region, which includes Walnut and Hacienda Heights.<sup>8</sup> These communities do not form a single contiguous area, as shown in the map on the following page, but they can nonetheless serve as territorial bases for constructing districts where Asians will emerge as a key or even a dominant population by the end of the century.<sup>9</sup>

Putting all other considerations aside and looking strictly at numbers, there are two or three assembly districts that can be created in Los Angeles with APAs comprising about a third of the population. More importantly, if the population in these districts continues to change at the same rate as they did during the

Asian Pacific Americans in Los Angeles County, 1990  
 API as a Percent of Total Population in a Census Tract



eighties, then APAs will emerge as the single largest racial group by the year 2000. The importance of these hypothesized districts does not lie in some distant future. In the nineties, these districts can stimulate greater political participation, lead to the development of political institutions, and serve as training ground for some would-be Asian or Pacific American politicians.

Drawing hypothetical districts is vastly easier than having them realized. Legislators and other advocacy groups will not promote the interests of the APA community unless it makes political sense to do so. Asian Pacific Americans cannot, and should not, assume that their increased population will automatically result in districts that are favorable to them. Redistricting is ultimately political, and APAs must mobilize politically if they are to have a voice in the process.

#### Developing a Voting Bloc

Creating an Asian Pacific American district is just an initial step in creating a viable voting bloc. Group empowerment requires that Asian Pacific Americans address two additional goals. The first is to increase their registration and voting rates, and the second is to create unity.

A recent statewide Field survey<sup>10</sup> revealed that Asians had the lowest registration rate among all groups. Taking only adult citizens, the study found the Asian registration rate to be 39%, compared to 65% for Whites (non-Hispanic), 58% for Blacks, and 42% for Hispanics. As a percent of the total California population, Asians accounted for only 4% of registered voters and 3% of those who voted in the June 1990 primary. Although less current, data for Los Angeles reveal a similar pattern. In 1986, Asians made up eight percent of the county's adult population but only four percent of its voters. An analysis of the voter registration lists for the June 1984 primary found considerable ethnic variation in registration rates, ranging from 43% for Japanese to 4% for Vietnamese.<sup>11</sup>

Fortunately, the problem of low registration rates is not a permanent one. The large immigrant population within the Asian

Pacific American communities explains their relatively low electoral participation. The very force that has increased the Asian population -- immigration -- has also created a population where the majority of the adults are foreign born. In 1980, over two-thirds of the adult APAs in Los Angeles County were foreign born. Projections for the whole state indicate that immigrants will still be a majority by the end of the century.<sup>12</sup> Over time, the registration rates will increase as more immigrants become naturalized<sup>13</sup> and as the number of American-born APAs increases.

Indeed, Asian Pacific American immigrants have high rates of naturalization compared to other immigrant groups, in part because many of them have high educational attainment and socio-economic status, both of which are positively correlated with political participation. It is also evident that community groups are now supporting educational and informational programs that will accelerate the naturalization process and increase the registration rates.

The second goal to becoming an Asian Pacific voting bloc is unity. Although classified as a single "racial" group, Asian Pacific Americans are divided along class, ethnic, and generational lines. Foreign policies also divide Asian Pacific groups. Coming from different homelands, they do not share a common interest in foreign policies. Within individual immigrant communities, people are divided over the politics of their countries of origin.<sup>14</sup> These differences translate into differences in political attitudes.

Asian Pacific American political differences can be seen in their affiliations. As a group, Asian Pacific Americans are neither predominantly Republican nor Democratic. Party affiliations vary among the various Asian groups with Japanese Americans identifying with the Democratic Party to a greater extent than other Asian American groups.<sup>15</sup> The Republican Party has tended to attract Asian immigrants with anti-Communist and free-enterprise values. Assimilation tends to increase the odds of their being Democratic. However, their Democratic Party affiliation lags behind that of similarly assimilated Latinos.<sup>16</sup> Finally, studies in San Francisco and Los Angeles indicate a high percentage of independent voters among Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and

Asian Indians, in which approximately one in five declined to specify a party affiliation.<sup>17</sup>

Despite this diversity, there is some movement towards a united Asian Pacific American community. While coalition-building in Los Angeles has been most organized and effective in the social service arena,<sup>18</sup> there are also APA bar associations, civil rights groups, educational organizations, and public employee organizations. These groups are working to overcome differences by constantly striving to include all ethnic and income groups in their leadership and membership.<sup>19</sup>

In the political arena, Asian Pacific Americans are building coalitions that seek to integrate the interest of diverse groups and build on existing strengths.<sup>20</sup> Their goal is to eliminate any potential infighting so that APAs can emerge as a singular political force. This entails confronting the ethnic chauvinism that makes it difficult for the Asian Pacific communities to settle on a consensus candidate. In the past, APAs have rallied behind a single candidate in non-partisan elections. Recent examples are: Michael Woo in Los Angeles City, Warren Furutani in the Los Angeles Unified School District, and Judy Chu in Monterey Park. The continued effectiveness and credibility of any coalition must be built on having equal representation for all Asian Pacific groups.

### The Immediate Political Agenda

We propose that the issue of redistricting be a priority item on the Asian Pacific American political agenda. The results from a survey<sup>21</sup> of various members of the Los Angeles Asian Pacific community indicate that there is now enormous interest in participating in the next round of redistricting. This will not be a simple task. Asian Pacific Americans are behind in their analysis, community organizing, and legal participation. They have little experience in redistricting.<sup>22</sup> To participate effectively in the redistricting process, Asian Pacific Americans need more analyses, education, and institution building. Above all, they need a widely accepted strategy.

This can start with a discussion and debate on the merits and the undesirability of pursuing the hypothetical assembly districts. In the end, some may conclude that the Asian Pacific American interest is best served by not having the population concentrated in any district. Regardless of the outcome of this debate, we must recognize that Asian Pacific Americans have a major stake in the redrawing of assembly district lines as well as that of other electoral boundaries. With their population growth, Asian Pacific Americans have the potential of becoming a new major force in American politics if a broad-based strategy and strength is developed through a united coalition. The challenge for Asian Pacific Americans is to continue to find common ground as a group.

Along the same line, Asian Pacific Americans must work with other ethnic groups. Asian Pacific Americans share a common interest with African Americans and Latinos as groups that have historically been disenfranchised. Working together will enhance the chances of Asian Pacific Americans to make significant gains in the 1991-92 redistricting. Latinos, Asian Pacific Americans and African Americans together constitute a majority of California population. This demographic advantage can be translated into minority political power only if the three communities are able to forge a strong political coalition.

## NOTES

1. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act eliminated the discriminatory national origins quotas, making it possible for persons from Asian countries to immigrate to the United States.
2. This projection is taken from estimates and projections generated by the County of Los Angeles. We have adjusted the reported numbers downwards since the County's numbers are based on the category, "Asians and Others." Their figures indicate that this category makes up over 12% of the current population and about 16% of the population at the end of the century.
3. Judy Tachibana, "California's Asians: Power From a Growing Population," California Journal, November 1986, pp. 535-543.
4. Sonni Efron, "Politics Are Changing for Asian-Americans," Los Angeles Times, August 13, 1990, p.A3.
5. Efron, p. A3.
6. This was brought about by a U.S. Supreme Court decision in the sixties which held that federal courts had jurisdiction over complaints against malapportioned legislatures. See Baker v. Carr, 169 U.S. 186.
7. See, for example, George Hatch, "Redistricting: Stacking the Decks for Incumbents," Los Angeles Times, August 17, 1990, p. B3; Alan C. Miller, "Partisan Battle Looms Over New Congressional Seats," Los Angeles Times, September 2, 1990, p. A3; Leroy Hardy and Alan Heslop, Redistricting Reform: An Action Program, The Rose Institute of State and Local Government. Claremont, CA.: 1990.
8. Although not as segregated as African Americans and Latinos, APAs are not fully integrated residentially. This pattern is revealed in the dissimilarity index, which ranges from zero (0), indicating full integration, to one (1), indicating complete segregation. In 1980, the index was .811 for African Americans, .570 for Latinos, and .431 for Asians (Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, "Trends in the Residential Segregation of Blacks,

Hispanics, and Asians: 1970-1980," American Sociological Review, 52 (1987): 802-825).

9. The strategy for APAs will have to be different from those for other minority groups. African Americans are heavily concentrated in South Central Los Angeles, which includes Watts. This area has served as a base for electing African American politicians or sympathetic white politicians. Latinos are heavily concentrated around the central business district, in the adjacent greater Los Angeles area, and into communities immediately to the east. Like African Americans, Latinos have used this territorial base for electing Latino politicians.

10. "A Digest on California's Political Demography," California Opinion Index, The Field Institute. San Francisco: August 1990.

11. The Japanese had the highest rate (43%), followed by the Chinese (36%), the Samoans (28%), and the Filipinos (27%). Asian Indians, Koreans, and Vietnamese registered at much lower rates of 17%, 13%, and 4%, respectively. These percentages are taken from a study conducted by Professor Don Nakanishi in 1986, sponsored by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California, and funded by the Southwest Registration Project of San Antonio and the UCLA Academic Senate.

12. Paul Ong, "California's Asian Population: Past Trends and Projections for the Year 2000," Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning, UCLA, 1989.

13. An analysis 1980 census data shows the naturalization rate of 36% for A/PA immigrants who had been in the country five to ten years, 56% for those in the country eleven to fifteen years, and 80% for those here for more than fifteen years.

14. Madge Bello and Vince Reyes, "Filipino Americans and the Marcos Overthrow: The Transformation of Political Consciousness," Amerasia Journal, 13:1 (1986-87); Bruce Cain, "Asian American Electoral Power: Imminent or Illusory?" Election Politics 9:2 (1988): 27-30.

15. Grant Din, "An Analysis of Asian/Pacific American Registration and Voting Patterns in San Francisco." Masters thesis, Claremont Graduate School, 1984.

16. Bruce Cain, D. Roderick Kiewiet, and Carole J. Uhlaner, "Race, Ideology, and Economics Shape Immigrant Party Preferences," Public Affairs Report, May 1990, pp. 8-9.

17. Din, "An Analysis of Asian/Pacific American Registration;" Nakanishi, "The UCLA Asian Pacific American Voter Registration Study."

18. Presently, the Asian Pacific Planning Council (APPCON) is the largest federation of Asian Pacific social service agencies in Southern California. Founded in 1976, it now has over forty member organizations and agencies.

19. At this time, membership in these groups is disproportionately over-represented by citizens of Japanese and Chinese ancestry, and by highly educated professionals. Although the largest Asian Pacific American group in the state and in the country, Filipino Americans remain critically under-represented. The working class is also under-represented because some organizations require exorbitant fees, or professional qualifications, or both. The unequal distribution of political power among Asian Pacific subgroups often leads to factionalism and infighting, as less successful groups question the benefits of an Asian Pacific American coalition. These differences are unavoidable because the inequalities are the product of a larger historical process and not necessarily the result of over elitism. The issue here is not to deny these difficulties but, rather, to overcome them.

20. There are still inter-ethnic differences in political participation and orientation. Traditionally, Japanese and Chinese Americans have dominated Asian American electoral politics in California. Some immigrant communities, particularly the Filipinos and Koreans, have begun to organize politically. In 1990, the five-year old Korean American National Political Action Committee registered some 7,000 new Korean American voters in the Los Angeles area in just six weeks. Besides joining Asian Pacific coalitions, Filipinos have also linked up with Latino organizations

because they share many cultural commonalities and economic difficulties.

21. The survey was conducted in August 1990 by the Reapportionment Analysis Project of the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA. Questionnaires were distributed at a meeting of the Coalition of Asian Pacific Americans for Fair Reapportionment and mailed to 200 other Asian and Pacific Americans in Los Angeles County, including organization and community leaders, students, city council members, mayors, judges, and other elected and appointed officials. See Azores and Okamoto, Asian Pacific American Awareness and Involvement in Redistricting, UCLA Asian American Studies Public Policy Project, 1991.

22. Our research shows that only a few Asian Americans monitored the redrawing of Los Angeles' district boundaries in 1981-82. The Asian Pacific American Legal Center was active in the 1985 redistricting of the city council, but Asian Pacific Americans were absent in the law suit that alleged that county had disenfranchised Latinos by diluting their numbers through gerrymandering.