

# Empowering Our Communities: Political Policy

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How much influence will the increasing Asian Pacific American population have on the political empowerment of our communities? By the year 2020 Asian Pacific Americans will number 18 to 20 million nationally and seven to eight million in California alone. Even during the next ten years, our population will leap to ten million or more nationally.

Political empowerment should be defined not only by the number of Asian Pacific Americans who hold elected offices, but also by the ability of our communities to influence the outcome of elections and the development, passage and implementation of policies which benefit our people. Looking at political empowerment from this perspective allows us to gauge our success by broader criteria.

Significant research and community-wide dialogue on our empowerment strategies have been lacking. What we can learn from the experiences of other U.S. ethnic groups? One of the strategic debates in the African American community has been what to do about their perceived or actual decreasing political clout, while the number of elected African American officials has dramatically increased over the past 20 years. Latinos also will be able to elect more representatives to local and

statewide offices in the 1990s, yet will this translate into favorable policies affording opportunities for a group that is destined to be the largest ethnic group in the U.S. in the next century? What lessons does the Jewish American experience have for Asian Pacific Americans? Jewish Americans have been successful both in electing many Jewish Americans to public office and in influencing U.S. policies on Israel and other issues. As Asian Pacific Americans work for our own political empowerment, we will need a far deeper understanding of the experiences of other ethnic groups. A comprehensive understanding of these experiences will assist in a comprehensive political empowerment strategy. There are also many unique characteristics of the Asian Pacific American community which require close scrutiny.

### **Responding to the Complexities of a Changing Community**

What are the characteristics of our population that will advance or impede this political empowerment? What are the challenges and barriers facing us in the coming decades? Seven population characteristics will directly affect our political involvement:

1. Our population will continue to be fueled by new immigration. In Los Angeles, site of the largest population concentration of Asian Pacific Americans in the U.S., two-thirds of our population is foreign born. While our rate of citizenship naturalization is higher than that of Latinos, Asian newcomers will not be able to vote if they remain permanent residents.
2. Our population is concentrated in immigrant centers like Koreatown, Chinatown and others, but there is also a significant degree of dispersal. The dispersal is greater than that of Latinos and African Americans. The ethnic bloc vote, then, may be possible for our community, but we will have less influence than other minorities because our population is more dispersed and because our concentrations tend to consist of newer immigrants.

3. Our population has a broad range of income strata. While our community has a much larger percentage of poor than is commonly believed (about 15 percent nationally), we have very significant middle income and higher income strata. The potential for class conflict in formulating policies for our community is apparent. There is also a significant ability for some in our community to donate hefty amounts to political campaigns. In fact, in most large populations centers, Asian Pacific Americans contribute to candidates in amounts greater than our proportion of the total population. A reconciliation between these varied interests is a significant challenge in the development of a viable political strategy.
4. Thus far, all Asian Pacific Americans who hold office have been elected by a majority of non-Asian voters. Our politicians have succeeded only by being able to “cross over” to non-Asians for support. The ability to have multi-group appeal and respond to a cross-section of residents is a major strength of our office holders. However, the number of our elected officials remains small, so the question is whether this process will continue to occur at a snail’s pace or whether it can be accelerated.
5. Our population has few political organizations that have sufficient numbers of staff or funding to conduct major campaigns. While some local organizations have launched successful voter registration drives, few have the capability for mounting sustained and sophisticated campaigns. There is currently no equivalent within our community to the South West Voter Registration Project.
6. The population centers of Asian Pacific Americans tend to be close to or intertwined with population centers of other minority groups. The implications of this situation means that Asian Pacific American candidates must build

coalitions with other minority populations if they are to have a chance of winning. It also means that the use of voting rights laws will have to deal with greater complexities than in the past, which have largely dealt with a majority and a minority population (e.g., African Americans in the South).

7. Voter registration data for various Asian Pacific ethnic groups indicate that less than 25 percent of age-eligible Asian Pacific Americans are registered to vote and that members of our community are affiliated with both the Democratic and Republican parties. This split means a more difficult time in developing an Asian Pacific bloc vote to win partisan elections.

The above characteristics reveal the complexity of the Asian Pacific American population and the challenges facing us in mobilizing our community politically. Perhaps one conclusion is clear—population growth will enhance the potential for political empowerment for our community, but developing this potential will certainly not be easy. That potential will only be realized by providing a level playing field in the voting process and by organizing in the community at a significantly greater level than in the past.

### **Overcoming Structural Barriers: Redistricting and the Voting Process**

Asian Pacific Americans also confront structural challenges and barriers to political empowerment. Although many of the overt legal barriers to citizenship and voting have been removed over the past 40 years, several structural impediments continue to frustrate the political aspirations of Asian Pacific Americans.

One of the important structural barriers limiting our political participation is the unfairness in redistricting. Redistricting is the process of drawing political boundaries for elections. It plays a fundamental role in determining the political strength of a community of interest. When a community of interest is maintained intact in one district, that community's voting strength is greatly enhanced. A single official is held

accountable to that community, and services are easier to come by. However, when a community is fragmented into several different districts, its overall voting strength is diluted. When a crucial issue for the community arises and the community demands accountability from an elected official, the official can divert the problem to his counterpart in an adjacent district. This practice can go on indefinitely until the issue is dead, or members of the community give up in frustration.

The legal basis for fair reapportionment is the Federal Voting Rights Act of 1965, 42 U.S.C. 1971 et seq. (1988) Section 2. It prohibits any voting practice or procedure "imposed or applied by any State or political subdivision in a manner which results in the denial of the abridgement of the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color" or language minority status. Plaintiffs can establish a Section 2 violation by a showing of discriminatory intent, or by a showing of discriminatory effect, based on the totality of the circumstances. In addition, in *Garza v. County of Los Angeles*, 918 F.2d 763 (9th Cir. 1990), cert. denied, 111 S. Ct. 578 (1991), the court found that Los Angeles County intentionally discriminated against the Latino community in redrawing district lines. The court ruled that the County was aware that its redistricting plan would continue to divide the Latino community and "further impair the ability of [minorities] to gain representation on the [government body]." Federal laws protect a minority community's voting rights and require that these communities be kept intact within single legislative districts, where possible.

Reapportionment is an important issue for the Asian Pacific community. Political empowerment is facilitated when a community's voting power is not divided arbitrarily. A strong, legally defensible reapportionment scheme can strengthen the minority voters' voice and forces elected officials to become more responsive to their community issues.

In 1991, Asian Pacific Americans in key cities of the U.S. were significantly involved in redistricting. The valuable experiences of this first-time participation have just begun to be summarized. California redistricting was a mixed success for Asian Pacific Americans. In northern and southern California, there was unprecedented Asian Pacific American involvement at hearings and significant coalitions. In addition, the Coalition of Asian Pacific Americans for Fair Reapportionment (CAPAFR) was able to work with Latinos and other minorities.

In Los Angeles, CAPAFR focused on the three largest Asian Pacific core regions in Los Angeles County: San Gabriel Valley, the South Bay, and Central Los Angeles. Due to lack of resources to develop redistricting plans for all areas, CAPAFR focused locally on the city of Los Angeles and at the state level on the Assembly districts, the smaller of State legislative districts. In California, an Assembly district consists of about 370,000 residents, while a Senate district has approximately 740,000 residents. In contrast, a Congressional district can have as many as 573,000 residents.

The highest Asian Pacific population concentration in Southern California's state assembly is 28 percent in San Gabriel Valley's district 49, which includes the cities of Monterey Park, Rosemead, San Gabriel and Alhambra. CAPAFR was able to keep this Asian Pacific community intact in the state's final redistricting plan, having been split into three districts in the 1981 redistricting plan.

Reapportionment does not necessarily mean a zero-sum game where there are winners and losers among minority groups. San Gabriel Valley CAPAFR was able to work out and agree upon a plan with the San Gabriel Valley Latino Redistricting Committee. (Asians are second only to Latinos as the largest minority group in that region.) This success was partly due to the negotiating efforts of community leaders, common interests and a commitment to follow through with future projects such as voter registration and resolution of Asian-Latino student conflicts in the district.

Another political structural barrier involves the voting process. Much of our Asian Pacific American population is college educated, either in their former countries or in the United States. However, they have limited English proficiency. For this reason, bilingual ballots are necessary for members of our community to participate in the electoral process. In the past, the benchmark for providing bilingual ballots was 5 percent of the total voting age population. However, based on this guideline, many large counties, such as Los Angeles, with substantial numbers of language minority citizens, were not covered. Los Angeles County alone has a total population of nearly 9 million and covers an area of 4,063 square miles, which is larger than the state of Delaware and Rhode Island combined.

Language diversity exists among Asian Pacific Americans. Several

Asian Pacific ethnic groups have more than 10,000 persons requiring bilingual ballots. However, according to the former federal 5 percent benchmark, an ethnic group would need to have 450,000 persons requiring bilingual ballots before the guidelines would take effect.

In the summer of 1992, Asian Pacific Americans achieved a victory with the signing into law of a 15-year extension to the bilingual provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, introduced by Senator Simon of Illinois. Under the new law, voting materials are required in jurisdictions which reach the 5 percent threshold as well as jurisdictions with at least 10,000 voting-age, single language, limited English proficient citizens. Los Angeles will now provide multilingual assistance in six languages: English, Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, Japanese and Vietnamese. Bilingual ballots will enable many limited English proficient citizens to take part in the political process.

Although barriers such as unfair redistricting and inaccessibility to bilingual ballots may at first seem insurmountable, this is not the case. Significant lobbying by Asian Pacific American groups such as the Japanese American Citizens League, Organization of Chinese Americans, Chinese American Citizens Alliance, the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, and the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association gave a big boost to the legislation. Progress was also made through efforts at coalition building with other ethnic communities. For example, Asian groups worked closely with the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) and other key Latino organizations to advocate for the passage of bilingual ballot provisions. In addition, the Latino's community victory in *Garza v. County of Los Angeles* has raised the hopes for all ethnic groups for legal remedies against government bodies that violate the political rights of minority communities.

Asian Pacific Americans were active in redistricting efforts in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and other Asian Pacific American key population centers of the United States. We have also become more sophisticated in advocating legislative changes. Fair redistricting and access to bilingual ballots will help to remove structural barriers facing our community. These measures alone will not get Asian Pacific Americans elected but will help to create the basis for political empowerment.

## **The Need for a Comprehensive Approach to Empowerment**

Exciting, attracting and mobilizing the Asian Pacific American voter will be the long-term key to political empowerment. Asian Pacific Americans must adopt a comprehensive approach to political empowerment involving the development of candidates, voter registration, and coalition building. Today, Asian Pacific Americans account for almost 10 percent of California's population, but until recently there were no legislators of Asian Pacific heritage among the 120 Assembly and Senate representatives. Congressman Robert Matsui recently reported that while we may be 10 percent of California's population we are only 2 percent of the electorate. In most communities, less than 25 percent of Asian Pacific Americans over age 18 are registered to vote.

A comprehensive approach to empowerment involves five components:

1. Talented Asian Pacific American candidates must be encouraged to run for office, and supported by our community. A strong emphasis on local elections and appealing to a cross-section of voters will develop the base for chances at higher elective offices.
2. Voting must be increased through a variety of strategies, such as expanded nonpartisan and partisan voter registration drives, citizenship campaigns, and get-out-the-vote mobilizations.
3. Newly won voting rights such as bilingual ballot provisions must be fully utilized to encourage political participation.
4. Donors must get "a bigger bang for their buck" by working with the community to identify issues and then influencing the candidate to support these measures.
5. Grassroots organizing and coalition politics must be encouraged, both within the Asian Pacific community and with other ethnic groups. Debate and resolution over the



“agenda”—or significant rallying issues—for Asian Pacific Americans must be a cornerstone of such organizing, for the fragmentation within the communities cannot be solved with organizing techniques alone.

Understanding the unique characteristics of the Asian Pacific American population, removing structural barriers to voting, and finding ways to excite our voters are key steps to unlocking the potential for our influence in American politics. In the aftermath of the Los Angeles civil unrest, where over 3,500 Asian Pacific Americans lost stores and a few lost their lives, many have questioned whether politicians and police simply abandoned the victims. Substantial assistance has been lacking. Perhaps this tragedy will send a strong signal to our communities that political empowerment is not a luxury; it is a necessity.