

# Becoming Citizens, Becoming Voters: The Naturalization and Political Participation Of Asian Pacific Immigrants

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In his address to the national conference of the Southwest Voter Registration Project in 1995, Vice President Albert Gore heralded naturalization as the final stage of incorporating an immigrant into American society.<sup>1</sup> Naturalization is not merely a technical change in immigration status. The passage to citizenship also is more than the required level of acculturation defined by a basic command of the English language and knowledge of U.S. history and its political institutions. With this act, immigrants abandon allegiance to their country of origin and pledge loyalty to the United States.

The acquisition of citizenship marks the beginning of full political and social membership in this country. The individual acquires new civil and legal rights, with the opportunity to vote and to participate in the electoral process perhaps the most important. The stakes are also economic. In today's growing anti-immigrant climate, citizenship has become a litmus test for inclusion in America's social contract. Consider, for instance, current proposals to require citizenship for programs such as SSI (Supplementary Security Income) for the elderly and AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) for families with children.<sup>2</sup>

Naturalization and political participation have profound implications for groups, as well as individuals. The political strength of an immigrant-dominated population within our electoral system hinges on two interrelated but distinct processes: (1) the group's naturalization rate, that is, the relative proportion of immigrants with citizenship; and (2) the rates by

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which naturalized and native-born citizens both register to vote and actually vote during elections. Low rates in either situation dilute an immigrant-dominated group's potential electoral power, and thus diminishes its influence on legislation and public policy. Citizenship and civic participation also are regarded by the general public as indicators of the ability and willingness of a group to assimilate and become "Americanized" rather than to separate from the mainstream. While high rates of naturalization and civic participation do not guarantee that members of a group will be accepted as equals, low rates foster a sense of political isolation and provide fodder for nativist movements.

Although becoming a citizen and a voter are often viewed as simultaneous processes, they are distinct and temporally distant forms of membership and participation. Most adult immigrants and refugees acquired their fundamental political values, attitudes, and behavioral orientations in countries that have sociopolitical systems, traditions, and expectations that are different from those in the United States. Indeed, many came from countries where voting was not permitted, limited to a privileged few, or was widely viewed as being inconsequential because of the dominance of a single political party. As a result, these immigrants must undergo a process of political acculturation beyond the rudimentary exposure to the basic structure of the U.S. government presented in adult citizenship classes. The general notion of participating in electoral politics is a prolonged and complicated process of social learning for immigrants—as it may be for many native-born citizens as well.

Using an empirical approach, this essay examines rates of naturalization, voter registration, and voting behavior for Asian Pacific immigrants and refugees. The first section explores the overall trends in naturalization between Asian and other groups of immigrants during the past three decades. Factors that have the greatest influence on whether Asian immigrants become naturalized are also measured. The second section analyzes the political participation of immigrant and native-born Asian Pacific Americans, with special attention to voter registration and electoral involvement. Comparisons are made between Asian Pacific Americans and other groups in American society, and the analysis explores factors that account for differences in participation rates. A concluding section summarizes major findings and offers several policy recommendations.

## **Becoming Citizens: Naturalization and Asian Immigrants**

The status of Asian Pacific Americans, as an immigrant-dominated population, is greatly affected by the rate of naturalization. While the number of U.S.-born citizens doubled between 1970 and 1990, the foreign-born population grew over eight-fold because of the Immigration Act of 1965. As a consequence, the proportion of U.S.-born citizens in Asian Pacific America declined from 52 percent to 21 percent. Although U.S.-born citizens continued to comprise a large majority of the Japanese American community from 1970 to 1990, newer and rapidly growing groups such as Southeast Asians, Koreans, and Asian Indians were predominantly foreign-born. Since the early 1970s, immigrants have constituted a growing majority of the Asian Pacific American adult population; each decade the number of foreign-born adults has more than doubled (See Table 1. All tables located at the end of this essay). Given these demographic trends, naturalization rates very directly determine the size of the Asian Pacific American population eligible to vote and also its political future.

This section of the report examines naturalization rates and influences for Asian Pacific immigrants over the minimum eligibility age of 18.<sup>3</sup> The analysis is based on samples from the three census periods that looked at individuals. The advantage of this data source is the large sampling which allows for detailed tabulations and reasonable estimates of the characteristics of the entire population.<sup>4</sup> While the 1970 sample includes only 1 percent of the total U.S. population, the 1980 and 1990 samples include 5 percent of the population. The samples also contain information on nativity, racial and ethnic identity, demographic characteristics, educational attainment, and a host of other variables.

There are limitations, however. The census does not distinguish between legal immigrants, undocumented aliens, and some foreign visitors. Foreign tourists (without an established residence) are excluded, but those on employment or student visas are included. Thus the immigrant population in the census can be best described as the foreign-born population with an established U.S. residence. The census data also do not follow individuals over a period of time; the data refer to the characteristics of the sample at one point in time. But profiles, rates, and other demographic features of the 1970, 1980 and 1990 populations can be compared.

The census uses five categories to define U.S. citizenship: (1) those born in the United States (citizens by *jus solis*), (2) those who are citizens

through birth in a U.S. territory, (3) those born abroad to U.S. citizens (citizens by *jus sanguini*), (4) alien immigrants, and (5) naturalized immigrants.<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of this report, the foreign-born population is comprised of those in the last two categories, and the naturalized population is comprised of those in the last category. The terms “foreign-born” and “immigrant” are used interchangeably.

The data reveal the following: (1) Asian Pacific immigrants are naturalizing at a rate comparable to that of non-Hispanic white immigrants. (2) Length of residence in the United States is the single most important factor in determining naturalization rates. (3) This time-dependent process, along with the underlying acculturation process, appears remarkably stable over the decades. (4) While time is the most important factor, ethnicity, age, and level of education are among other influential factors.

### Overall Pattern of Naturalization

Between 1970 and 1990, the naturalization rate for all immigrants fell 24 percentage points from 67 percent to 43 percent (See Table 2). Two factors are behind this decline. The first relates to a resumption of large-scale immigration in 1960s, and the second simply reflects actual changes in naturalization rates within certain groups.

After the 1965 immigration changes, the adult immigrant population more than doubled from less than 8.5 million in 1970 to over 17.5 million in 1990. Renewed large-scale immigration altered the proportion of immigrants who resided in the United States for a lengthy period of time.<sup>6</sup> A majority (55 percent) of the 1970 adult immigrants had lived in the United States for 21 or more years, but two decades later only about a third (35 percent) had lived in the United States for that length of time. This decline in the number of long-term immigrants occurred despite an increase in the absolute number of long-term residents from 4.9 million to 6.2 million. On the other hand, newer immigrants (those in the country for no more than 10 years) increased from 25 percent to 39 percent of all adult immigrants. In absolute numbers, their ranks grew from 2.2 million to 6.9 million.

Given the large number of recent immigrants, the decline in the relative number of citizens among adult immigrants from 1970 to 1990 is no surprise. In fact, this recomposition accounts for nearly half of the overall decline.<sup>7</sup>

The rest of the decline is attributable to the second factor, changes in the naturalization rate. Comparing groups who have resided in the United

States for different periods of time presents a clear picture. In 1970, 20 percent of those who had been in the country for ten years or less were naturalized. In 1990, only 15 percent of that group was naturalized. For those who had resided in the country for more than two decades, the naturalization figure dropped from 90 percent in 1970 to 74 percent in 1990.<sup>8</sup> Some social, cultural, and economic explanations for this decline are considered below.

### Racial Variations

A racial recomposition of the foreign-born population has accompanied the renewal of large-scale immigration.<sup>9</sup> Sources of modern immigration differ dramatically from that of earlier immigration. For the first two-thirds of the century, Europeans dominated immigration flows into the United States. After the elimination of racially biased quotas in 1965, people from the Asia Pacific and Latin America have dominated. Non-Hispanic whites comprised 75 percent of all adult immigrants in 1970 but less than 20 percent in 1990. Latinos and Asian Pacific Islanders were less than a quarter of all immigrants in 1970, but today they constitute the vast majority.<sup>10</sup>

The racial recomposition has favored some populations that have low naturalization rates. Mexicans, for example, are not only the single largest group of recent immigrants but also a group with a substantially lower than average rate of naturalization (Skerry, 1993; Tomas Rivera Center, 1994). They generally are not proficient in English; they maintain ties to Mexico through occasional visits; and, relative to other immigrants, they are less educated. These factors may contribute to their low naturalization rate. The shift to non-European immigrants, however, cannot solely explain the drop in naturalization rates, because recent non-Hispanic white immigrants *also* maintain a lower than average naturalization rate.

Naturalization rates for Asian immigrants over three decennial censuses did not decrease. Overall rates have fluctuated around 40 percent (See Table 2). Although all non-Hispanic white immigrants exhibited higher overall rates, rates are directly related to the fact that most long-term residents for the three census years were non-Hispanic whites (See Table 3). On the other hand, newer immigrants were predominantly Asian and Pacific Islanders.

Over time, naturalization rates for Asian Pacifics have changed for both new and long-term residents. In 1970, Asian rates were consistently low for all cohorts, especially for long-term residents. The substantially lower

rate for long-term Asian residents versus non-Hispanic whites (68 percent versus 92 percent, Table 3) is a historical legacy. Prior to 1952, most Asian immigrants were ineligible for citizenship (Hing, 1993). Historical restrictions not only delayed naturalization for those who wanted to become citizens, but years of discrimination alienated many other Asian immigrants and dampened their desire to naturalize. By 1980, however, the naturalization rates for non-Hispanic whites declined while those for Asians improved. Asians had a higher rate among those in the country for ten years or less. By 1990, all Asian rates were at least equal to, or considerably higher than, those of non-Hispanic whites.

The fact that many immigrants return to their native lands permanently should be taken into account for a more accurate naturalization rate calculation. Return migration is more extensive for non-Hispanic whites than for Asians (Liang, 1994; Jasso and Rosenzweig, 1990). Calculations by the Immigration and Naturalization Service that include return-migrants show that immigrants from Asian Pacific countries have the highest naturalization rates (INS, 1990). The top three Asian Pacific communities are Vietnamese (78 percent), Chinese (63 percent), and Filipino Americans (63 percent).<sup>11</sup> Among the bottom five nationality groups are Canadians (12 percent), the British (20 percent), and Italians (23 percent).<sup>12</sup>

### **Time-Dependent Acculturation**

As noted, length of residence in the United States is the most powerful determinant of whether a person will naturalize. This is partly a product of the residency requirement for naturalization, which is usually five years, although the period for spouses of citizens is reduced to three. Other constraints on naturalization may be more important. Acculturation, the broad process of learning and adopting the language, values, and norms of the host society, is a central factor.

A strong correlation between time in the United States and the level of assimilation has been demonstrated. The level of economic assimilation, as measured by immigrant earnings compared to that of U.S.-born ethnic counterparts with similar education and years of work experience, starts from a low point at the time of entry and gradually improves over a fifteen-year period; at that point, immigrants reach parity (See Borjas, 1990). Understanding English and societal institutions also improve over time.

Naturalization rates of Asian immigrants show a remarkably similar pattern for all three censuses. Graph 1 compares the rates in five-year increments.<sup>13</sup> Prior to five years, few naturalizations occur, due largely to the

five-year residency requirement for most immigrants.<sup>14</sup> The greatest increase occurs among those in the country between 5 and 15 years. The data suggest that two-thirds of all naturalizations take place within this range.<sup>15</sup> The naturalization rate continues to increase after residency of more than 15 years, but in smaller increments. The one exception to the overall pattern is for those who have been in the country for over a quarter century. In 1970, only a third of this cohort were citizens, due to the legacy of discrimination encountered by earlier immigrants. Over time, this effect faded as the number of pre-World War II immigrants declined. By 1990, 84 percent of the Asian Pacific immigrants in the country for more than 25 years were citizens.

The influence of length of residence on the naturalization rate can also be seen in data for comparable groups in different census years. Although the census does not identify and follow the same groups each census, a dynamic process can be inferred from observed differences among groups at the same point in time. For example, because the naturalization rate in 1990 for those in the country for 11 to 15 years was higher than the rate for those in the country for 6 to 10 years, the inference is that the increase was due to being in the country an additional five years.<sup>16</sup> This is a reasonable assumption given the relative stability of the pattern of naturalization rates observed in Graph 1.

This type of analysis allows a further step in determining how naturalization rates change with time. While the census data are not longitudinal, samples can be used to estimate changes for a given cohort over time. For example, the group whose members were from 18 and 40 years old in 1970 would be roughly the same group with members from 28 and 50 in 1980, and 38 and 60 in 1990.<sup>17</sup> While the census sample does not include the same individuals in all three decades, statistical principles permit the use of the data to develop representative profiles as this cohort aged over time. This method can be further refined by dividing the cohort by period of entry into the United States and tracking each group over time. Using this approach, longitudinal changes in naturalization for each cohort can be estimated. Table 4 compares the results of this exercise with the rates observed in cross-sectional analysis. In spite of minor differences, patterns are remarkably similar.

While time in the United States is perhaps the single most important factor in determining the naturalization rate, the entire process is not simple. Changes in the rate are based on a more fundamental phenomenon: accul-

turation that unfolds over time, such as learning English language, acquiring a knowledge of U.S. institutions, and strengthening one's sense of identity as an American. These changes are no doubt influenced by demands of everyday life. Like most residents, immigrants work to earn a living, while coping with family responsibilities.

Larger societal forces also influence the process. Historically, the dampening effect of discrimination was clear. More recently, the growth of anti-immigrant sentiments, particularly in California, has also affected the behavior of immigrants. The fear created by efforts such as Proposition 187 has led to a noticeable increase in naturalization applicants.

### Intra-Cohort Variations

In addition to length of residence and the acculturation process, naturalization rates are also affected by ethnicity, age, English language ability, and education. Table 5 presents an analysis on those falling between the ages of 6 and 20, the range when changes in rates are most dramatic.

Among major ethnic groups, the difference between the highest and lowest naturalization rates is about 50 percentage points. Japanese immigrants exhibited the lowest rates: for those in the country from 6 to 10 years, only 1 in 14 was a citizen. Although the rate increased as residency increased, only 1 in 3 Japanese immigrants in the country 16 to 20 years was a citizen. This strikingly low level of naturalization may be tied to Japanese transnational corporations. With increased trade with the United States, many of these companies establish operations in the country and bring a significant number of nationals to work. Sizable and visible communities of these employees and their families have been established in places like New York City and parts of Southern California. This transpacific movement in turn fostered the migration of other Japanese who work in restaurants, clubs, and other businesses serving corporate-based Japanese communities. Many of these Japanese do not regard themselves as immigrants, even after residing in the country for a number of years.

Filipinos represent the other end of the spectrum with the highest naturalization rates. In many respects, they are the most "Americanized" of Asian Pacific immigrants. The history of U.S. colonization from 1898 to 1946 has left a legacy in the Philippines where English, once the official language, remains the language of choice for many Filipinos. Many aspects of U.S. culture also have become deeply embedded in Filipino society and identity. This pre-migration acculturation has facilitated the naturalization process for Filipino immigrants in the United States. This "headstart" is re-



flected in the 1990 census, in which nearly half of those who had been here for 6 to 10 years were citizens.

Naturalization rates of other Asian Pacific immigrant groups fall between those of the Japanese and Filipinos (See Table 5). As length of residence increased, however, the naturalization level for the other groups approached that for Filipinos. In other words, the early advantage enjoyed by Filipinos in terms of "Americanization" disappeared as the other groups acculturated. The rate for Southeast Asians was similar to that of Chinese and Koreans. This may be surprising because Southeast Asians are less likely to have formed a pre-migration sense of attachment to the United States because they are predominantly refugees. On the other hand, refugees may be more likely to sever ties with the home country because of a revolutionary change in government, thus prompting the formation of allegiance to the United States.

Younger immigrants are also more likely to be citizens (See Table 5). Having spent most of their lives in another society and culture, older immigrants may find that breaking their attachment is not easy. Middle-age immigrants are also burdened by the daily demands of working and raising a family. Younger immigrants, on the other hand, are being raised and educated in the United States, so *American* behaviors and values become *their* behaviors and values.

Differences in English-language ability also generate variations in the naturalization rates (See Table 5). Among those who do not speak English, only 1 in 10 was a citizen in 1990. Even among those who had lived in the country for 16 to 20 years, only 1 in 4 was naturalized. Rates generally increased with improved English language ability. Those whose English proficiency was "very good," for example, were 3 to 6 times more likely to be naturalized than those who did not speak English.

Educational attainment also influences the likelihood of being a citizen but not in a linear fashion. The naturalization rate increased with years of schooling up to an undergraduate education. For example, among immigrants in the country for 6 to 10 years, those with some college education were more than twice as likely to be naturalized than those with no more than an elementary school education. This pattern suggests that more formal education enabled an immigrant to acquire more quickly the knowledge required to pass the naturalization exam. This educational effect, however, was smaller among those in the country for 16 to 20 years.

Graduate school experience played a different role. Those with a doctorate degree had lower naturalization rates than those with a master's de-

gree,<sup>18</sup> who in turn had lower rates than those with a bachelor's degree. This outcome was particularly noticeable among those in the country for 6 to 10 years. Although this pattern may be puzzling at first glance, the result in fact is not surprising since many of those with more than an undergraduate education are in the country on temporary visas to pursue additional graduate and post-doctorate training, and thus are not eligible for citizenship (Ong, et al., 1992). Naturalization rates of doctorate degree holders—even those with over 11 years U.S. residency—were lower than those with bachelor's degrees.

The data support the thesis that age, English language ability, and education influence the naturalization rate in an interrelated way. Elderly immigrants, for example, may be more likely to have a poor command of English or to have less education. Those with advanced degrees may be more likely to have a better command of English. An analysis to determine if these factors have an independent effect on odds of an immigrant becoming a citizen sheds some light.<sup>19</sup> Results are consistent with patterns discussed above: (1) the likelihood of naturalization decreases with age but increases with English language ability, and (2) the effect of education is nonlinear, with the odds increasing up to an undergraduate education and then decreasing with additional graduate training. Moreover, ethnic variations discussed earlier also hold, with Filipinos having the highest probability of being citizens and the Japanese the lowest.

### **Becoming Voters: The Electoral Participation of Asian Immigrants**

In recent years, a number of political commentators and scholars have speculated about whether Asian Pacific Americans will become a major new force in American electoral politics, because of their dramatic demographic growth and concentration in certain key electoral states like California, New York, and Texas (Tachibana, 1986; Cain, 1988; Stokes, 1988; Nakanishi, 1991; Karnow, 1992; Miller, 1995). Many believe that if Asian Pacific American — like American Jewish — voters come to represent a proportion of the electorate that is comparable to, if not greater than, their share of the total population, then they could become a highly influential “swing vote” in critical local, state, and presidential elections. In California, for example, the state with the most congressional seats and electoral college votes, if Asian Pacific Americans, who are 1-in-10 residents of the state

also became 1-in-10 voters, then they could play a strategically important role in national and local elections. Indeed, their voting potential coupled with their proven record of campaign funding could elevate Asian Pacific Americans to the status of leading players in the grand theater of American politics (*Asianweek*, 1984).

During the past decade, the increase in the political participation and presence of Asian Pacific Americans in electoral politics is unmistakable. The 1995 edition of the "Asian Pacific American Political Roster and Resource Guide" (Nakanishi and Lai, 1995) listed over 1,200 Asian Pacific American elected and major appointed officials for the federal government and 31 different states. In contrast, the first edition of this directory, published in 1978, listed several hundred politicians, primarily holding offices in Hawaii and California (Nakanishi, 1978). The vast majority of 1978 officials were second and third generation Asian Pacific Americans, primarily Japanese Americans. Today, a growing number of recently elected officeholders are immigrants, such as Jay Kim of Walnut, California, the first Korean American elected to Congress; David Valderrama, the first Filipino American elected as a delegate to the Maryland Assembly; and City Councilmember Tony Lam of Westminster, California, the first Vietnamese American elected to public office. In the past few years, Asian Pacific American candidates also have run well-financed, professional — though ultimately unsuccessful — mayoral campaigns for some of the nation's largest cities, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland.

There is more, however, to this seemingly optimistic and glowing assessment of Asian Pacific American electoral achievements. In reality, this immigrant-dominant population has yet to reach its full political potential, especially in transforming its extraordinary population growth into comparable proportions of registered voters who actually vote. In California, for example, Asian Pacific Americans may represent 1-in-10 residents but are no more than 1-in-20 of the state's registered voters and only 3 out of 100 of those who actually vote (The Field Institute, 1992).

The size, characteristics, and impact of the Asian Pacific American electorate are constantly evolving in relation to historical and contemporary conditions. Institutional structures as well as individual personalities are relevant at both the grassroots and leadership levels. Early Chinese and Japanese immigrants were disenfranchised and excluded from fully participating in American life because of discriminatory laws and policies, such as the 1870 naturalization law, *Ozawa v. United States* (1922), and *Thind v. United States* (1923), which forbade Asian immigrants from becoming natu-

ralized citizens. These legal barriers prevented early Asian Pacific immigrants from being involved in electoral politics of any form—be it the type of ward politics practiced by European immigrants in East Coast and Midwest cities or simply to vote for their candidate in a presidential election. Barriers significantly delayed the development of electoral participation and representation by Asian Pacific Americans until the second and subsequent generations, decades after their initial period of immigration. Early Asian immigrants and their descendants were scapegoated for political gain by opportunistic politicians and anti-Asian social movements and political parties. The most disastrous example was the wholesale incarceration of 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II.

This legacy of political exclusion and isolation has many contemporary manifestations. Asian Pacific American civil rights groups remain vigilant in seeking the elimination of a number of “political structural barriers” (Kwoh and Hui, 1993), such as the unfair redistricting of Asian Pacific American communities and the lack of bilingual ballots and voting materials, which prevents less English-proficient Asian Pacific Americans from exercising their full voting rights (Bai, 1991). Likewise, grassroots voter registration campaigns in Asian Pacific American communities have had to confront and overcome deep-seated views of political inefficacy, political alienation, and mistrust of government held by large segments of the immigrant Asian Pacific American population. And elected officials and major political parties pay little attention to the unique public policy and quality-of-life needs and issues of Asian Pacific Americans (Nakanishi, 1992).

This section of the report analyzes levels and determinants of voter registration and voting by naturalized Asian Pacific immigrants over the age of 18, compared to native-born Asian Pacific Americans and other racial and ethnic populations. The analysis is based on the Census Bureau’s 1990, 1992, and 1994 Current Population Surveys (CPS). The 1994 CPS data, which will be the primary focus of analysis, was particularly useful because it provided detailed information on the citizenship status of individuals similar to the decennial census, as mentioned in the previous section on naturalization. This made it possible to differentiate between Asian Pacific Americans who were foreign-born and native-born, as well as immigrants and refugees who were naturalized and those who were not.

Unfortunately, this data source does not enable an analysis of differences in electoral participation among the array of Asian Pacific ethnic communities. Previous studies have found that rates of voter registration vary markedly, with Japanese Americans having the highest proportion of regis-

tered voters and Southeast Asians having the lowest percentage (Nakanishi, 1991). Despite their limitations, advantages of the CPS data are that they allow an examination of both national and regional trends with a sufficiently large sample of Asian Pacific Americans,<sup>20</sup> and an analysis of potential differences in registration and voting rates in relation to native-born and naturalized citizens, which has rarely been examined rigorously (Din, 1984; Nakanishi, 1991; Horton, 1995; Shinagawa, 1995; Tam, 1995).

Major findings are that naturalized Asian Pacific immigrants and refugees have lower rates of voter registration than native-born citizens. Asian Pacific naturalized citizens who have been in the country for over 20 years, however, have registration rates that are comparable to, or exceed those of, the native-born, while those who arrived over 30 years ago have higher rates for both registration and voting. As in the case of naturalization rates, statistical analysis revealed that year of entry was the single most important factor in determining voter registration rates. In terms of actual voting, best predictors included not only year of entry but also educational attainment and age. And finally, characteristics of Asian Pacific American voters as a whole, as well as between native-born and foreign-born, reflect an ethnic electorate that is far from being monolithic with respect to political party affiliations, ideological preferences, and voting preferences. Rather, these groups have many dimensions of diversity, which are influencing their continued development.

### **Rates of Voter Registration**

The Asian Pacific population in the United States is characterized by the largest proportion of individuals over the age of 18 who cannot take the first step towards participating in American electoral politics, that is, registering to vote, because they are not citizens. In 1994, 55 percent of adult Asians were not citizens in contrast to 44 percent of the Latinos, 5 percent African Americans, and 2 percent Non-Hispanic whites. The proportion of non-citizens varied by geographic region, with Honolulu having the lowest percentage of non-citizens among its adult Asian population (21 percent), and New York (73 percent) having the highest. Sixty-three percent of adult Asians in Los Angeles County and 52 percent in the Oakland-San Francisco region also were not citizens.

Nationwide, in 1994, approximately 1,166,450 Asian Pacific American were registered to vote, of whom 58 percent (680,750) were U.S.-born and 42 percent (485,700) were foreign-born (Table 6). California's Asian Pacific American electorate, which accounted for 40 percent of the country's

Asian Pacific American registered voters, mirrored the nation's composition of U.S.-born (58 percent) to foreign-born (42 percent) voters. Hawaii, on the other hand, which has witnessed far less recent immigration than many mainland states, had an overwhelmingly U.S.-born Asian Pacific American electorate (88 percent).

Native and naturalized Asian Pacific American citizens exhibited very low overall rates of voter registration. Nationally, 1994 CPS census data estimated that only 53 percent of all Asian Pacific American citizens — as well as 53 percent of Latino citizens — were registered in contrast to 61 percent of African Americans and 69 percent of Non-Hispanic whites. Similar patterns were observed in 1992 for these population groups in Los Angeles, Oakland-San Francisco, New York, and Honolulu. Indeed, in some regions, differences in voter registration rates between Asian Pacific Americans and Non-Hispanic whites, who usually have the highest rates of registration, were quite substantial. In 1992, for example, in the Oakland-San Francisco region, 56 percent of all adult Asian Pacific American citizens were registered to vote compared to 86 percent of Non-Hispanic whites, 73 percent African Americans, and 63 percent Latino American citizens. At the same time, regional differences in voter registration rates for Asian Pacific American communities were apparent, with Los Angeles having the highest (64 percent) and New York having the lowest (54 percent).

Many previous studies have found that Asian Pacific Americans have lower rates of voter registration than African Americans and non-Hispanic whites, and usually the same or somewhat lower rates than that of Latinos. The findings here are consistent, and remain extremely puzzling, because of the relatively high, group-level attainment levels of Asian Pacific Americans in education and other socioeconomic variables. These factors have been long associated with active electoral participation in political science research (Nakanishi, 1986a, 1991; Cain, 1988; Field Institute, 1992; Erie and Brackman, 1993; Lien, 1994).

Among Asian Pacific American citizens, those who were born in the United States have a higher *overall* rate of voter registration than those who were born abroad and have become naturalized. In 1994, as Table 7 illustrates, 56 percent of all U.S.-born Asian Americans were registered compared to 49 percent of those who were naturalized. Indeed, foreign-born Asian Pacific American citizens had among the lowest rates of any group, including Latino naturalized citizens (53 percent). In terms of electoral participation beyond registration, however, both Asian Pacific American naturalized and native-born voters had among the highest rates of voting

during the 1994 elections. Therefore, Asian Pacific immigrants appear to reflect a provocative series of discrete, non-linear trends from becoming citizens to becoming registered voters and then to becoming actual voters: they have one of the highest rates of naturalization after immigrating, but one of the lowest rates of voter registration after becoming citizens. Once registered, however, Asian Pacific American naturalized citizens have among the highest rates of voting of any group.

A closer and more detailed examination of Asian naturalized citizens indicates that those who immigrated over 20 years ago, prior to 1975, have rates of voter registration comparable to, if not greater than, those who were born in the United States (See Tables 8 and 9). Indeed, this was the case for practically all age groups, educational attainment levels, and for women. On the other hand, Asian Pacific naturalized citizens who immigrated within the past twenty years have rates of registration that are substantially lower than native-born citizens and naturalized citizens who arrived before 1975. This was consistent for practically all age and educational attainment levels, as well as for men and women. Like naturalization, statistical analysis revealed that year of entry was the best predictor of voter registration for Asian naturalized citizens. For voting, year of entry, educational attainment, and age were the strongest explanatory variables for Asian naturalized registered voters.

Like the process of naturalization, the importance of time-dependent variables for electoral participation is consistent with the view that immigrants and refugees must often undergo a prolonged and multifaceted process of social adaptation and learning before fully participating in their newly-adopted country. Becoming actively involved in American electoral politics and politically acculturated may be one of the most complex, lengthy, and least understood learning experiences. Adult Asian Pacific immigrants and refugees, like other groups of migrants (Gittleman, 1982), largely acquired their core political values, attitudes, and behavioral orientations in sociopolitical systems that differed from that of the United States. Some of their countries of origin did not have universal suffrage, others were dominated by a single political party (which made voting nearly inconsequential), and still others were in extreme political upheaval as a result of civil war or international conflict. Indeed, one of the major reasons why many Asian refugees left their homelands was to escape some of the most horrendous political situations like the killing fields in Cambodia.

As a result, previously learned lessons and orientations toward government and political activities may not be easily supplanted nor supplemented.

For example, adult education classes in American civics and government which immigrants usually take to prepare for naturalization examinations expose them to the most rudimentary facts about American government. At the same time, though, they probably have little or no impact on preexisting political belief systems, the general sense of political efficacy and distrust toward government, or knowledge of American political traditions, current policy debates, and political party agendas. Learning about and becoming actively involved in politics “American style” through registering to vote and voting in elections take place through a range of personal and group experiences that go beyond citizenship classes. Over time, this evolution occurs in conjunction with other aspects of acculturating to American life and society.

The Asian Pacific American electorate is clearly in the process of transformation and change. Its future characteristics and impact will be largely determined by the extent to which newly naturalized Asian immigrants and refugees are incorporated into the political system and encouraged to register to vote and to cast their ballots. An electorate that “looks like Asian Pacific America,” in all of its dimensions of diversity, especially in becoming predominantly foreign-born rather than reflecting its current native-born majority profile, may have far different partisan preferences and public policy priorities.

The Asian Pacific American voters in the city of Monterey Park in Los Angeles County may be illustrative ( See Table 10). In 1984, the city had a plurality of Democrats (43 percent) over Republicans (31 percent) among Chinese American voters, and also a high proportion of individuals (25 percent) who specified no party affiliations and considered themselves to be independents.<sup>21</sup> By 1989, Chinese American voters, who accounted for the vast majority of new registered voters in Monterey Park since 1984, were nearly evenly divided among Democrats (35 percent), Republicans (37 percent), and independents (26 percent) (Nakanishi, 1986a, 1991). The Asian Pacific American electorate in the city changed its overall partisan orientation through the addition of these new, largely Chinese American registered voters. In 1984, the city’s Asian Pacific American voters as a whole showed a slight majority for the Democrats. By 1989, with an increase of over 2,500 new registered voters, the Asian Pacific American electorate in the city could no longer be characterized in this manner. In an analogous fashion, the Asian Pacific American electorate at both the grassroots and leadership levels nationally have undergone, and will continue to undergo, significant changes with the increased future political participation of Asian Pacific immigrants and refugees.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

Large-scale immigration from Asia since the enactment of the Immigration Act of 1965 has had a dramatic impact on many states and regions across the nation, as well as on the Asian Pacific American population.<sup>22</sup> From a largely native-born group of 1.5 million in 1970, Asian Pacific Americans became a predominantly immigrant population of 3.5 million in 1980. By 1990, the population had doubled again to 7.2 million nationwide, of which 66 percent were foreign-born. Recent projections estimate that Asian Pacific Americans will continue to increase to nearly 12 million by 2000, and nearly 20 million by 2020. The foreign-born sector is expected to remain the majority beyond 2020 (Ong and Hee, 1993).

The issues of naturalization and electoral participation will remain compelling and critical for both the Asian Pacific American population and for American society generally for many years to come. Asian immigrants have the highest rates of naturalization of any group, including those who came from Europe, and do not remain permanent aliens in this country. They “Americanize,” become full citizens, participate actively in all sectors of American life, and should be entitled to all their citizenship rights and privileges. At the same time, Asian Pacific immigrants like their native-born counterparts have extremely low overall rates of voter registration when compared with other groups. Asian Pacific immigrants appear, however, to attain levels of political involvement that are the same, if not better, than those of native-born Asian citizens with the passage of a substantial period of time—over two decades—and with increased acculturation.

The political incorporation of naturalized (*and* native-born) Asian Pacific Americans into the American electoral system needs to be accelerated. Challenging contemporary remnants of the political exclusion and isolation that Asian Pacific Americans experienced in the past is a responsibility to be shared with the two major political parties and others who believe that citizens should be able to exercise fully their right to vote. Unfair redistricting of Asian Pacific American communities, lack of bilingual voter registration application forms and ballots, and opposition to the implementation of legislation like the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (a.k.a. the Motor Voter Act) perpetuate “political structural barriers,” which must be challenged and replaced by fair and inclusive political practices and policies. Asian immigrants have much to contribute to all aspects of American political life—as voters, campaign workers, financial donors, policy experts, and elected officials—and must be allowed and encouraged to

participate fully. To do so is to continue a political tradition as old as the nation itself of benefiting from the special leadership talents and contributions of individuals who came to the United States from all corners of the world and shaped its domestic and international programs and policies.

In recent years, the incentive and necessity for Asian Pacific immigrants and their native-born counterparts to naturalize and become more involved in electoral politics have been greatly enhanced in both obvious and unexpected ways. Politicians and the major political parties, who had long neglected to address the unique interests and concerns of Asian Pacific Americans, have become increasingly responsive and attentive, especially to the growing sector of the Asian Pacific American population that contributes sizable donations to campaign coffers. Less interest, however, has been shown toward augmenting the long-term voting potential of Asian Pacific Americans, and few attempts have been made by either the Democratic or Republican party to finance voter registration and education campaigns in Asian Pacific American communities.

The increasing number of Asian Pacific Americans, especially those of immigrant background, who are seeking public office appears, however, to be stimulating greater electoral participation among Asian Pacific Americans at the grassroots level. For example, Asian Pacific American candidates are now regularly making special efforts to seek monetary donations and register new voters among Asian Pacific Americans in jurisdictions in which they are running for office. These activities provide Asian immigrants with important and direct vantage points from which to understand the workings of the American political system, thereby facilitating their political acculturation. At the same time, a wide array of advocacy and social services groups have formed in Asian Pacific American communities across the nation, and a number of different community-based outreach campaigns have been launched to promote citizenship and to register individuals, particularly those who have just been naturalized. Finally, disastrous events like the 1992 civil unrest in Los Angeles, in which over 2,000 Korean American and Asian-owned businesses were destroyed, have underscored the need for immigrant-dominant communities to place greater organizational and leadership activities toward augmenting their access to, and influence in, local government and other policy arenas, as well as to increasing their representation in voter registration rolls.

The decade of the 1990s and the start of the new century are often viewed in glowing and optimistic terms because of seemingly positive demographic trends. The period will be important to witness and analyze

because of the extraordinary challenges and opportunities that it will undoubtedly present for Asian Pacific Americans in seeking realization of their full potential as citizens and electoral participants. The level of success that they will achieve in the future, however, will not be solely determined by the Asian Pacific American population, or its leaders and organizations. Success will require the partnership, assistance, and intervention of a wide array of groups and leaders in both private and public sectors. Whether Asian Pacific Americans become a major new political force in the American electoral system is nearly impossible to predict with any precision. Our ability to raise and seriously entertain such a question in the context of the disenfranchisement and exclusion that Asian Pacific Americans faced in the past is quite revealing in itself.

## Notes

- 1 Albert Gore, "Keynote Address." (Pasadena, Calif., 14 July 1995).
- 2 The 1995 Personal Responsibility Act.
- 3 To become citizens, immigrants: (1) must be at least 18 years of age; (2) have been lawfully admitted to the United States for permanent residence; (3) have lived in the United States continuously for five consecutive years; (4) are able to speak, read and write English; (5) pass an exam on U.S. government and history; (6) be of good moral character; and (7) are able to show loyalty to the United States by taking an oath of allegiance. There are exceptions to these rules: (1) the spouse or child of a United States citizen becomes eligible in three years; (2) a child who immigrates with his or her parent may become a citizen when the parent naturalizes; (3) an adopted children is eligible for administrative naturalization; (4) an alien who served in World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam, or Grenada may naturalize without permanent residence requirements in some situations; (5) an alien who has served in the Armed Forces for three years may be able to naturalize without meeting certain requirements; (6) former U.S. citizens may waive some requirements; and (7) employees of organizations that promote the U.S. interests in foreign countries may naturalize without meeting these requirements.
- 4 The number of adult Asian immigrants in the samples are over 10,000 for 1970, 87,000 for 1980, and 182,000 for 1990.
- 5 The 1970 Census used only four categories: naturalized U.S. citizen, alien, born abroad of American parents, and native-born.
- 6 The number of years in this country is estimated based on time of entry into the United States. The census does not report whether a respondent has been in the country continuously.

- 7 The observed change can be decomposed into three components: (1) the difference due to a change in the composition of the population holding naturalization rates for each subgroup constant, (2) the difference due to a change in naturalization rates holding the composition constant, and (3) the difference due to the interaction of the changes in rates and composition. Calculations indicate the compositional shift accounts for just slightly less than half of the decline—that is, 11.2 of the 23.5 percentage points difference in the 1970 and 1990 naturalization rates.
- 8 The contribution of lower rates with each cohort can be estimated through decomposition with one component being the change in within-group rates between 1970 and 1990, holding the composition by years in the United States to that observed for 1970. Calculations indicate that the within-group drop in naturalization rates accounts for 53 percent of the overall decline for all immigrants—that is, 12.5 of the 23.5 percentage points difference in the naturalization rates for 1970 and 1990.
- 9 For the purpose of this paper, the four major racial groups are defined as Asians, African Americans, non-Hispanic whites, and Hispanics. The Hispanic classification is nominally an ethnic classification, but being Hispanic in U.S. society is often ascriptive in a manner similar to membership in a racial group.
- 10 Editor's note: see the articles by Larry Shinagawa and Robert Jiobu in the demographic section of this volume.
- 11 Rates are based on administrative records on the total number of legal immigrants admitted and the total number of persons who naturalized. Rates reported in the text are for the cohort of immigrants who entered between 1970 and 1979. The number of persons from this cohort who naturalized is based on INS records from 1970 to 1990.
- 12 The two other nations are Mexico (14 percent) and the Dominican Republic (22 percent).
- 13 Categories beyond 20 years for the 1980 Census differ from those for the other two censuses. For the 1980 Census, the categories are 21-29 and 30-plus years.
- 14 The low rate is also due to the inclusion of foreign-born persons on temporary visas in the United States. As stated earlier, the census does not differentiate between permanent immigrants and those on temporary visas. The latter are likely to be here for a short time and thus are concentrated among newly-arrived aliens.
- 15 The estimate depends on assumptions regarding the naturalization rate in the fifth year and the fifteenth year and the relative number who would never naturalize. One difficulty making an estimate is the nonlinear nature of the naturalization rates, with a noticeable decrease in the change with more years in the United States. If we assume that the rates are 10 percent in the fifth year and 70 percent in the fifteenth year, and that 10 percent would never naturalize, then two-thirds of all naturalization would have occurred in the 5-15 year range.
- 16 Repeated for the 6-to-10 year group over the next five years; consequently, the difference in the naturalization rates between the two groups observed in the cross-sectional data would not be an accurate predictor of the increase in rate experienced by the 6-to-10 year group over the subsequent five years.
- 17 There are changes in the cohort from one census to another due to death, emigration and changes in how respondents report their time of entry into the United States. It is, however, beyond the scope of this study to examine how these factors may affect our estimates.
- 18 This includes those with a non-doctorate professional degree.

- 19 The results of this multivariate analysis based on logit regressions are available from the authors.
- 20 The 1994 CPS included 3,317 Asians out of a total sample of 102,197. The 1990 survey included 2,914 Asians among 105,875; and the 1992 had 3,443 Asians among 102,901. Both weighted and unweighted data were analyzed for this report.
- 21 Other studies have also found that some groups of Asian American voters register in higher than expected proportions as "no party" or independents. See Din, 1984, and Chen, *et al.*, 1989.
- 22 These population figures include both Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (*e.g.*, Hawaiians, Samoans, Guamanians, Tongans, Fijians, Palauans, Northern Mariana Islands, and Tahitians). From 1980 to 1990, Pacific Islanders increased by 41 percent from 259,566 to 365,024.

**Table 1 Nativity of Asian Pacific Americans  
18 years and older**

	1970	1980	1990
Population (in thousands)			
Total Asian Pacific Americans	969	2,498	4,938
U.S.-born Citizens	502	741	1,022
Immigrants	468	1,758	3,916
Percent U.S.-Born Citizens	52%	30%	21%
Distribution by Ethnicity			
Japanese	411	567	706
Chinese	288	598	1,261
Filipino	214	538	1,033
Koreans	57	227	548
SE Asians	—	143	592
Asian Indians	—	274	555
Percent U.S.-born Citizens			
Japanese	73%	68%	65%
Chinese	39%	26%	19%
Filipino	30%	19%	20%
Koreans	43%	7%	8%
SE Asians	—	2%	2%
Asian Indians	—	17%	6%

Estimates from Public Use Micro Samples  
U.S.-born category includes those born to U.S. citizens

**Table 5**  
**Detailed Naturalization Rates of Asian Immigrants**

	Years in the United States		
	6-10	11-15	16-20
<b>By Ethnicity</b>			
Japanese	7%	18%	35%
Chinese	34%	67%	80%
Filipinos	45%	73%	83%
Koreans	27%	62%	82%
SE Asians	32%	62%	N.A.
Asian Indians	26%	53%	68%
<b>By Age</b>			
18-29	34%	67%	80%
30-39	35%	65%	76%
40-49	33%	64%	77%
50-59	29%	59%	75%
60 plus	23%	44%	60%
<b>By Education Level</b>			
0-8 years	17%	36%	56%
9-11 years	29%	54%	69%
High School	34%	61%	71%
Some College	43%	70%	77%
Bachelor's	39%	73%	83%
Master's	25%	67%	79%
Doctorate	15%	49%	75%
<b>By English Language Ability</b>			
None	6%	12%	26%
Poor	22%	47%	66%
Good	39%	69%	76%
Very Good	38%	68%	79%
Only English	33%	62%	77%

Estimates from Public Use Micro Samples

**Table 6 Distribution of Naturalized and U.S. Born Asian Pacific American Registered Voters, 1994**

	California	Hawaii	Rest of Nation	National Total
U.S.-Born	271,820 (58%)	218,580 (88%)	189,790 (42%)	680,190 (58%)
Naturalized	194,840 (42%)	29,170 (12%)	261,680 (58%)	485,710 (42%)
Total	466,660	247,770	451,470	1,165,900
% of national Total	40%	21%	39%	100%

Current Population Survey, 1994

**Table 7 Voter Registration and Turnout Rates, 1994**

	% Registered to Vote	% Voted in 1994 Elections
<b>Asian Pacific Americans</b>		
U.S.-Born	56%	78%
Foreign Born	49%	74%
Overall	53%	76%
<b>Latinos</b>		
U.S.-Born	53%	62%
Foreign Born	53%	74%
Overall	53%	64%
<b>African Americans</b>		
U.S.-Born	61%	63%
Foreign Born	58%	78%
Overall	61%	63%
<b>Non-Hispanic Whites</b>		
U.S.-Born	69%	73%
Foreign Born	68%	78%
Overall	69%	73%

Current Population Survey, 1994

**Table 8 Registration and Voting by Year of Immigration  
for Naturalized and U.S. born Citizens, 1994**

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	% Registered to Vote Year of Immigration for Naturalized Citizens	% Actually Voted
Pre-1965	77%	92%
1965-1974	57%	66%
1975-1985	43%	71%
1986-1994	26%	81%
Overall	49%	74%
U.S.-Born	56%	78%

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Current Population Survey, 1994



**Table 9 Detailed Rates of Voter Registration of Asian Pacific American Naturalized and Native-Born Citizens, 18 years and older**

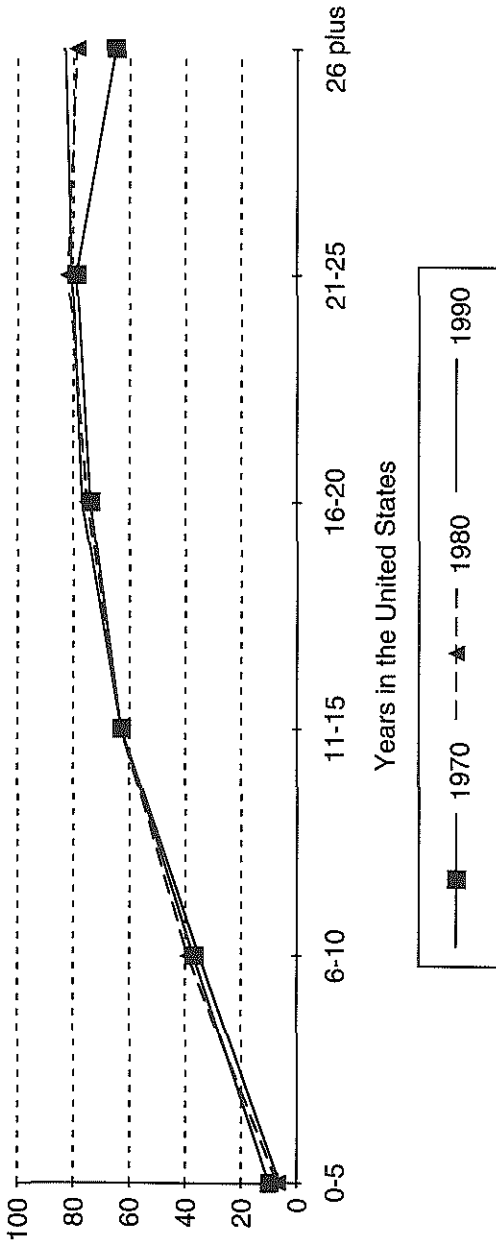
	Number of Years in the U.S. (Naturalized Citizens)				U.S.-Born
	6-10	11-14	15-19	20+	
<b>By Age</b>					
18-24	0%	20%	15%	10%	26%
25-29	13%	16%	0%	31%	25%
30-39	3%	15%	4%	40%	31%
40-49	8%	37%	42%	20%	24%
50-59	0%	19%	20%	51%	22%
60 plus	0%	0%	12%	41%	40%
<b>By Education Level</b>					
0-8 years	0%	11%	26%	33%	24%
9-12 years	0%	0%	13%	45%	16%
High School	16%	20%	33%	28%	16%
Some college	1%	18%	23%	28%	32%
BA	5%	12%	27%	45%	43%
Graduate Degree	0%	66%	18%	41%	35%
<b>By Gender</b>					
Males	6%	20%	23%	29%	32%
Females	6%	21%	27%	39%	29%
Current Population Survey, 1994					

**Table 10: Asian Pacific American Registered Voters,  
Monterey Park, California, 1984 and 1989**

	# Registered	Democrats	Republicans	Other No.	Parties
'84 Citywide	22,021	13,657	5,564	368	2,290
	(100%)	(62%)	(25%)	(2%)	(10%)
'89 Citywide	23,184	13,243	6,684	369	2,888
	(100%)	(57%)	(29 %)	(2 %)	(13%)
'84-'89 Net Gain/Loss	+1,163	-414	+1,120	+1	+598
'84 Asian Pacific Total	6,441	3,265	1,944	54	1,178
	(100%)	(51%)	(30%)	(1%)	(18%)
'89 Asian Pacific Total	8,988	3,754	3,198	168	1,868
	(100%)	(42%)	(36%)	(2%)	(21%)
'84-'89 Net Loss/Gain	+2547	+489	+1254	+114	+690
'84 Non-Asian Pacific Total	15,438	10,392	3,620	314	1,112
	(100%)	(67%)	(23%)	(2%)	(7%)
'89 Non-Asian Pacific Total	14,196	9,489	3,486	201	1,020
	(100%)	(67%)	(25%)	(1%)	(7%)
'84-'89 Net Loss/Gain	-1,242	-903	-134	-113	-92
'84 Chinese Americans	3,152	1,360	972	23	797
	(100%)	(43%)	(31%)	(1%)	(25%)
'89 Chinese Americans	5,356	1,868	1,989	100	1,399
	(100%)	(35%)	(37%)	(2%)	(26%)
'84-'89 Net Gain/Loss	+2,204	+508	+1,017	+77	+602
'84 Japanese Americans	2,586	1,429	838	21	298
	(100%)	(55%)	(32%)	(1%)	(12%)
'89 Japanese Americans	2,919	1,516	991	42	370
	(100%)	(52%)	(34%)	(1%)	(13%)
'84-'89 Net Gain/Loss	+343	+87	+153	+21	+72

Source: UCLA Asian Pacific American Voter Registration Project, 1995

**Graph 1**  
**Naturalization Rates Among Asian Pacific Immigrants**  
**by Years in the United States**



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Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP) is a nonprofit, non-partisan, educational, community based organization founded in 1982 to develop, strengthen, and expand the leadership roles played by Asian Pacific Americans within their own communities as well as in the mainstream institutions.

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Clara Chu, *Library & Information Science*  
Cindy Fan, *Geography*  
Wei-Yin Hu, *Economics*  
Yuji Ichioka, *Asian American Studies Center/History*  
Marjorie Kagawa-Singer, *Public Health*  
Jerry Kang, *Law*  
Snehendu Kat, *Public Health*  
Harry Kitano, *Emeritus, Social Welfare*  
Jinqi Ling, *English*  
David Wong Louie, *English*  
Mitchell Maki, *Social Welfare*  
Takashi Makinodan, *Medicine*  
Valerie Matsumoto, *History*  
Ailee Moon, *Social Welfare*  
Robert Nakamura, *Film & Television*  
Kazuo Nihira, *Psychiatry & Biobehavioral Sciences*  
William Ouchi, *Management*  
Paul Ong, *Urban Planning*  
Geraldine Padilla, *Nursing*  
Kyeyoung Park, *Anthropology*  
Julie Roque, *Urban Planning*  
Michael Salzman, *History*  
Shu-mei Shih, *East Asian Languages & Cultures*  
Zhixin (Justine) Su, *Education*  
Stanley Sue, *Psychology*  
David Takeuchi, *Psychiatry*  
James Tong, *Political Science*  
Cindy Yee-Bradbury, *Psychology*  
Henry Yu, *History*  
Min Zhou, *Sociology*  
Don T. Nakanishi, *Education & Center Director, ex-officio*  
Shirley Hune, *Urban Planning & Associate Dean, Graduate Programs*