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Asian Pacific Americans and the New Minority Politics

Almost a decade ago, historian Gary Okihiro asked “Is yellow black or white?” (Okihiro 1994). Although Okihiro argued for solidarity between nonwhite groups, he noted that yellow is neither black nor white: That dichotomous racial framework does not adequately represent Asian Americans. Similarly, a political framework that was developed when African Americans were overwhelmingly the nation’s most numerous minority does not fully capture the politics of Americans of Asian and Pacific Islander ancestry. As recent waves of non-European immigrants have required a broader conception of what it means to be an American, they have also made it necessary for political scientists to develop an expanded notion of the scope of minority politics.¹

An adequate understanding of Asian Pacific American (APA) politics requires attention to global forces and nondomestic developments, as well as non-electoral forms of political activity (Nakanishi 1985–86).² While APA groups have often been deeply concerned about

elections, it has not always been *American* elections and political affairs that have attracted their interest. American foreign policy has been of great importance to APAs, not just for its effects on overseas political concerns, but also for its role in shaping APA communities in the United States. Domestic elections, social movements, and legislative politics continue to be of great importance, but scholars now must consider both the influences of and consequences for minority–majority relations, and the role of interminority relations as well. Along with Latinos, Asian Pacific Americans have helped to create a new minority politics (Nakanishi 1991).

Caution is needed when using the APA label. As contributors to this symposium observe, some conditions have promoted APA unity, while other circumstances may encourage fragmentation. APAs have no numerically dominant subgroup (unlike Latinos), and, for much of their history, the

APA subgroups stressed their *ethnic* identity—e.g. Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Filipino—rather than their *panethnic* (i.e., “Oriental” or “Asian”) affiliation (Daniels 1988).

Also, “Asian and Pacific Islander” remains a category in flux. The formal government designation dates only to 1977 (Wright 1994), and, by the 1990s, Native Hawaiian groups were asking to be moved out from that grouping and instead be placed in the “American Indian and Alaska Native” category, arguing that their history and current socioeconomic status was closer to that of Native Americans than Asian Americans.³ Although the Census Bureau rejected that request, it ultimately agreed to create a new racial category, formally separating “Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander” from “Asian American” (Espiritu and Omi 2000).

Nevertheless, there continue to be important factors promoting a pan-APA identity. The Asian American movement of the late 1960s—which coined the term “Asian American,” in 1969—recognized that all Asian ancestry groups shared a history of racial discrimination (Uyematsu 1971; Wei 1993). As with other groups of color, APAs are liable to experience “racial lumping,” which emphasizes a general panethnic identity, regardless of how specific individuals identify themselves (Espiritu 1992). Just as some West Indian immigrants have found that outsiders usually view them as “black” (Waters 1999), APAs usually find that most Americans fail to note ethnic distinctions. Particularly in times of intense racial hostility and discrimination, APAs often find that they all become “Japs,” “Chinks,” “gooks,” or whatever the slur du jour might be. Panethnic marginalization has provided a powerful incentive for cooperation between APA subgroups, who have worked together on issues such as anti-Asian violence, college admissions controversies, and the “glass ceiling” for APAs (Lien 2001; Takagi 1992; Zia 2000).

The Political Marginalization of Asian Pacific Americans

Asian Americans have confronted the American racial hierarchy from the time

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they first immigrated to the United States in substantial numbers.⁴ In 1790 Congress had limited citizenship to “free white persons,” but that nebulous category was not defined, and the act relied instead on a clear understanding of who was to be excluded: African Americans and American Indians (Haney Lopez 1996; Jacobson 1998). For Asian immigrants, it was clear that they were neither black, white, nor red, but it was also clear that whites enjoyed privileges denied other groups, so Asians sued to be classified as

“white.”⁵ From the late 1870s into the mid-1920s, the courts left a trail of tortured reasoning that made clear only that “white” was a social and political construction. In 1922, the issue finally reached the United States Supreme Court, in *Ozawa v. United States* (260 U.S. 178, 1922), and the Court declared that Asian immigrants were not “white,” and therefore not eligible for citizenship (Daniels 1988; Haney Lopez 1996; Jacobson 1998).

In the legal environment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a lack of citizenship meant vulnerability to a variety of political assaults. Congress passed increasingly onerous Asian-immigration restrictions, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which was the first U.S. immigration law restricting migration from a specific nation, while state and local officials approved discriminatory tax and regulatory legislation, such as antisegregation laws, or bans on land ownership (Chan 1991; Daniels 1988).⁶

By the mid-1920s, Congress had shut the door to most Asian immigrants. Filipino immigrants alone still had easy access, due to their status as “American nationals” (since the Philippines was under American control at the time), but the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 ended that, limiting Filipino immigration to 50 per year (Chan 1991; Hing 1993; Takaki 1998). While the fortunes of Chinese Americans improved somewhat once China became a U.S. ally during World War II, over 120,000 Japanese Americans—two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens—were interned in concentration camps, often losing everything but what they could take on the trains and buses (Kitagawa 1967; Thomas and Nishimoto 1946; Weglyn 1976).

Beginning in 1943, racist naturalization and immigration laws began to change, culminating in the 1965

TABLE 1
Asian Pacific American Population, 2000^a

Asian Indian	1,678,765	15.8%
Chinese	2,432,585	22.9%
Filipino	1,850,314	17.4%
Japanese	796,700	7.5%
Korean	1,076,872	10.1%
Vietnamese	1,122,528	10.5%
Other Asian ^b	1,285,234	12.1%
Native Hawaiian	140,652	1.3%
Guamanian or Chamorro	58,240	0.5%
Samoan	91,029	0.9%
Other Pacific Islander ^c	108,914	1.0%
TOTAL	10,641,833	

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001

^aFor those who selected only one race, except as indicated.

^bIncludes both those who chose only “Other Asian,” and those who chose two or more Asian categories.

^cIncludes both those who chose only “Other Pacific Islander,” and those who chose two or more Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander Categories.

Immigration Act, which repealed quotas that favored Western European immigrants and replaced the greatest emphasis on family reunification. This watershed in immigration policy helped pave the way for unprecedented levels of immigration from Asian and Latin America.⁷ APA voters have become a potentially powerful voting bloc in California, and the number of APA elected officials has grown rapidly in the last two decades, particularly at the local level. In addition, the new immigrants have given rise to concerns—including cross-national campaigns and interminority relations—that have not usually been seen as part of minority politics.

The New Minority Politics

Perhaps the most sensitive topic in minority politics today is the issue of interminority relations. In the past, this issue received infrequent attention, when “minority” was virtually synonymous with “black.” Today, however, Latinos are approximately equal in number to African Americans, and the nation’s 12 million APAs are a growing presence in many major cities from California to New York, from Illinois to Texas.

As Claire Jean Kim and Taeku Lee note in “Interracial Politics: Asian Pacific Americans and Other Communities of Color,” the violence in Los Angeles in 1992 (in the wake of the first trial of the police officers accused of assaulting Rodney King) dramatically demonstrated that the black–white framework was inadequate for explaining American race relations. The rapidly growing numbers of APAs and Latinos have created the possibility of powerful political coalitions, but have also increased the likelihood

of interminority tensions.

Conflicts between APAs and African Americans have received the most attention (e.g. Kim 2000), but Kim and Lee note that Latino–APA tensions exist as well. Even the APA population is not entirely politically united. In Hawaii, for instance, some consider Asian Americans to be oppressors of Native Hawaiians. Despite many obstacles to

TABLE 2
APA Population, 1960–2000^a

1960	980,337
1970	1,528,398
1980	3,707,341
1990	7,226,986
2000 ^a	10,641,833 (13,647,656)

SOURCE: Robert W. Gardner, Bryant Robey, and Peter C. Smith, “Asian Americans: Growth, Change, and Diversity,” *Population Bulletin*, vol. 40, no. 4 (reprint), February 1989; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000.

^aFirst number is for those who specified only one race; the number in parentheses includes all those in the first number, plus those who specified more than one race.

cooperation, however, significant APA panethnic political coalitions have formed (Espiritu 1992; Zia 2000), and APA groups have built coalitions with other communities of color (Saito 1998; Saito and Park 2000).

Also important in the new minority politics are transnational interests, which may increase the importance of ethnic attachments at the expense of broader ties. In “Global Forces, Foreign Policy, and Asian-Pacific Americans,” Paul Watanabe observes that APA immigrants’ focus on the affairs of their native countries directs their atten-

TABLE 3
20 Largest APA Populations, by State

1 California	4,377,143	11 Pennsylvania	257,391
2 New York	1,197,812	12 Maryland	244,587
3 Hawaii	985,899	13 Michigan	215,605
4 Texas	673,287	14 Georgia	209,501
5 New Jersey	534,421	15 Minnesota	168,281
6 Illinois	485,497	16 Ohio	166,760
7 Washington	438,502	17 North Carolina	144,786
8 Florida	357,011	18 Oregon	143,358
9 Virginia	314,543	19 Arizona	132,087
10 Massachusetts	273,518	20 Colorado	130,932

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census 2000 Redistricting Data, available at <http://www.census.gov/clo/www/redistricting.html>.

tion away from American domestic policy—where they may share many interests with other APA subgroups—to foreign affairs, where their sense of ethnic distinctiveness is reinforced. Although it remains to be seen whether this will undermine the development of a stronger panethnic identity, it makes it unlikely that such a panethnic identity will be fueled by a shared vision of foreign policy, as was the case for the Asian-American movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which was bound together in part by shared opposition to the Vietnam War (Wei 1993).

In addition, Watanabe notes, American foreign and domestic policy may have a profound effect on APA communities. Immigration to the United States tends to originate from areas where the inhabitants have significant knowledge of or ties to America (Reimers 1985; Rumbaut 1997). The influx of Southeast Asians is perhaps the most dramatic example of this, and reminds us that the shape of APA communities will likely be influenced by future American policy here and abroad.

APA Organized Interests and Public Opinion

The influence of global forces may be seen in the priorities of some APA organized interests. In “Asian Pacific American Social Movements and Interest Groups,” Kim Geron, Enrique de la Cruz, Leland T. Saito, and Jaideep Singh describe one prominent example of this, the Filipino-American opposition to the Marcos regime. Geron et al.’s account of the anti-Marcos movement illustrates Watanabe’s observation that APA groups sometimes focus on overseas rather than domestic concerns. Furthermore, Geron et al. describe how domestic concerns have led interest groups to build panethnic alliances, which again illustrates Watanabe’s analysis. Anti-Asian violence and bigotry has been particularly effective at drawing together disparate APA groups. The most recent—and best—survey of Asian-American political attitudes also suggests that a panethnic identity has taken root, although it also finds evidence of continued strong ethnic attachments (Lien et al. 2001)

Geron and his coauthors offer a fascinating account of the evolution of South Asian American politics. They note how South Asian immigrants had tended to focus on

politics in their native countries, but in recent years there has been more involvement in American politics. This demonstrates a classic pattern followed by many immigrant groups who join together to defend ethnic enclaves. Faced with hostility or other American problems, South



Facing History. Over 120,000 Japanese Americans—two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens—were interned during World War II. Photo courtesy of the UCLA Asian American Studies Center.

Asian Americans have responded by becoming active in domestic politics.

Although APAs have long been politically active—forming interest groups to press their causes and turning to the courts when legislatures were unsupportive—APA

voting rates have remained low, particularly outside of Hawaii. This seems particularly curious given their high median socioeconomic measures.⁸

In their article, "Asian Pacific American Public Opinion and Political Participation," Pei-te Lien, Christian Collet, Janelle Wong, and S. Karthick Ramakrishnan explain this paradox, noting that the "simple act of voting" is not so simple for many APA immigrants. Lien et al. observe that the "costs" of voting are higher for immigrants (who must first be naturalized, then register, then turn out). They also show that APAs engage in other forms of participation as well, and that their role as campaign contributors may be exaggerated.

Lien and her colleagues warn against analyzing APA participation using explanatory frameworks based on non-APA data. Individual variables—e.g., income, education, length of residence—that seem to exert an important influence on non-APA voting appear to have minor influence on APAs, while contextual variables—e.g., community organization efforts or the presence of ethnic candidates—do appear to be important.

Growing APA political participation is in part reflected in the growing numbers of APA elected officials. This is described in "Asian Pacific-American Campaigns, Elections, and Elected Officials," by James S. Lai, Wendy K. Tam Cho, Thomas P. Kim, and Okiyoshi Takeda, who observe that APAs have been particularly successful at the state and local level. For example, according to the 2000–2001 *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*, there are over 2,200 APA elected and major appointed

tute a majority in all local, state, and federal districts. On the mainland, in contrast, APAs rarely make up the majority of any legislative district, requiring coalition building if APA candidates are to be successful. At the state and local level, APA candidates appear to have also been

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able to win panethnic support, although the picture is less clear in congressional races.

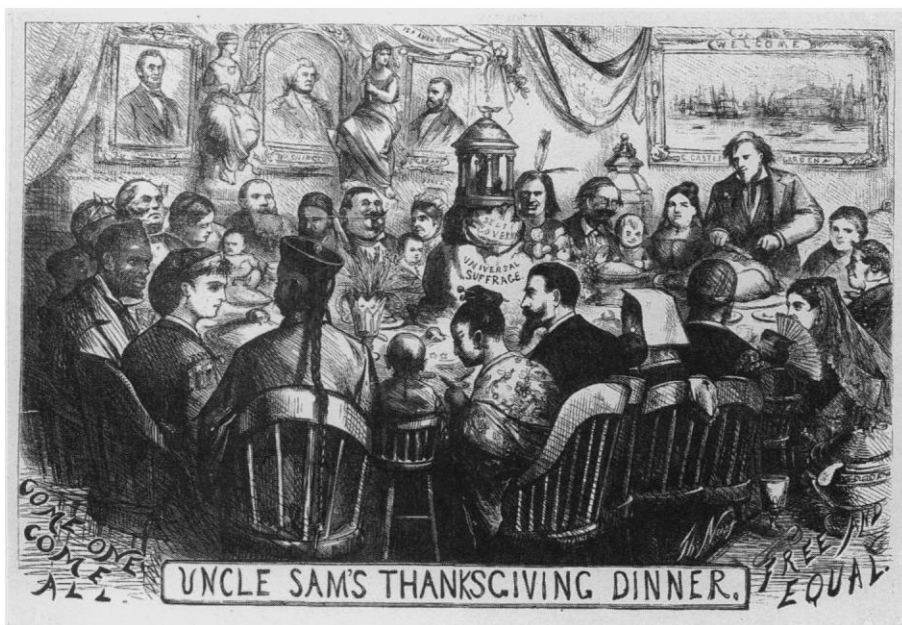
Asian Pacific-American Politics: Continuing Questions

With America's expanding APA population, it is not surprising that APAs are experiencing growing success in electoral politics. The majority of APAs are immigrants, and as they become more acculturated and are able to participate more fully in the sectors of American society, their political participation and incorporation increases as well.⁹ Furthermore, like American Jews, APAs are concentrated in several key electorally rich states—most notably, California and New York—thus increasing their potential for political influence in the future.

Nevertheless, many worry that marginalization persists. A recent nationwide poll commissioned by the Chinese American Committee of 100 showed considerable unease with Asian Americans, with almost half of the respondents agreeing that the United States had a problem with Chinese Americans passing secret information to China ("American Attitudes toward Chinese Americans and Asian Americans" 2001). As we prepared this introduction, United States Congressman David Wu (D-Ore.) was denied entrance to the U.S. Energy Department, where he was scheduled to give a speech. Guards there apparently refused to believe him when he told them he was an American citizen—even after he produced his congressional identification (Kamen 2001).¹⁰

This and much other evidence suggests that the integration of APAs remains very partial. Asian Pacific Americans are at least as likely to be viewed as "forever foreigners" as they are to be seen as "honorary whites" (Tuan 1998), making it likely that APA politics will retain distinctive characteristics for

many years to come, and will continue to present political scientists with intriguing questions. Pursuit of answers will give insight into a rapidly growing panethnic group and a better understanding of the ways in which America is transforming due to its diverse array of inhabitants.



Free and Equal? In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Asians faced tough immigration restrictions. Today Asian Americans number nearly 12 million. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

officials in 33 different states and the federal level (Nakanishi and Lai 2001).

Any assessment of APA campaigns and elections must consider Hawaii and the mainland as separate cases. Lai et al. describe the uniqueness of Hawaii, where APAs consti-

Notes

1. The distinct characteristics of Asian Pacific-American (APA) politics have led to the formation of Asian Pacific American Caucus (APAC), an APSA-related group. APAC helps to bring together political scientists and other scholars who study APA politics.

2. We generally use the term “Asian Pacific Americans,” to refer to Americans of Asian or Pacific Islander ancestry. When discussing early immigration, however, we often use the term “Asian American,” since Pacific Islander immigration to the mainland was negligible in the nineteenth century. By the late nineteenth, the most numerous group of Pacific Islander Americans, native Hawaiians, had substantial political concerns over the governance of their islands, but they, of course, were not immigrants. Some writers prefer the term “Asian and Pacific Islander” (API). Others use the term “Asian and Pacific Islander American” (APIA). As noted later in this article, some prefer to separate Asian Americans from Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders.

3. As the Office of Management and Budget was formulating their now-widely used five racial and ethnic categories (American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, White, and Hispanic), they also agreed to reclassify those of Asian Indian ancestry, moving them from the “white/Caucasian” category into the “Asian or Pacific Islander” category (Espiritu and Omi 2000).

4. The earliest Asian immigrants, Filipinos, immigrated prior to the creation of the United States. Filipinos had been pressed into service on Spanish galleons, and apparently were visiting the Americas as early as the late sixteenth century. Some of the sailors jumped ship during these stops, and, by the 1760s, they or their descendants had found their way to what is now Louisiana (Espina 1988). Relatively little is known about these early Asian Americans, and this article focuses on the later—and better-known—Asian immigration, which began to become substantial in the 1840s.

5. Because of the Fifteenth Amendment and the Naturalization Act of 1870 (which was amended in 1875), African Americans were citizens with the right to vote, although this right was usually enjoyed in its breach (Daniels 1988; Haney Lopez 1996; Jacobson 1998). In this case, then, being considered *either* white or black would have provided some political benefit for Asian Americans, although the “white” category obviously possessed vastly greater advantages.

6. APAs also faced physical attacks on themselves or their property. Throughout the western United States—Los Angeles; San Francisco; Denver; Rock Springs, Wyoming; and dozens of other places—mobs terrorized and murdered Asian immigrants (Chan 1991; Daniels 1988; Takaki 1998).

7. Figures in Table 2 represent the growth of the APA population, but should be used with caution. Racial totals from 2000 are not comparable to previous decades, because the 2000 census gave respondents the option of checking more than one race. In addition, Pacific Islander totals were not reported before 1980 (in 1970, the Census only reported the number of respondents choosing “Hawaiian,” but not the number who wrote in other Pacific Islander categories). The number of Pacific Islanders was very small, however. For 1960, the Census Bureau reported Native Hawaiian totals only for those living in Hawaii, where residents were given options including “Hawaiian” and “Part Hawaiian.” We have combined these two categories, and added the sum to the Asian totals to produce the APA population for 1960. Also, in 1960, the Asian numbers include only Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos. Other Asian-American groups were very small (they probably totaled less than 20,000), however, so their omission should not distort the data significantly.

8. The emphasis on high socioeconomic levels is a sore spot for many APA activists, who point out that they exaggerate APA success. Although Asian Americans do indeed have a very high median family income, they also have a greater number of family members working, and they are more likely to live in areas with high housing costs. One of the primary reasons that Native Hawaiians sought to be disassociated from Asian Americans was that Native Hawaiians had median levels closer to American Indians. Being grouped with Asian Americans, however, made it increasingly likely that Native Hawaiians would be ineligible for programs to aid the disadvantaged, since APAs as a whole are not seen as disadvantaged. Large numbers of Southeast Asian Americans also live in poverty and have low education levels.

9. In 1998, approximately 60% of APAs were foreign-born; by comparison, only about 38% of Latinos were foreign-born (Pollard and O’Hare 1999).

10. A full list of these types of incidents would be very long. In addition to anti-Asian violence (see, for example, Zia 2000), APA groups have expressed concern over things such as the charges against Wen Ho Lee, who it appears became an espionage suspect in part because of his ancestry. Congressman Wu’s denial of entry to the Energy Department may be due to heightened security after the charges that China had obtained extremely valuable nuclear secrets. Lee had been charged with passing those secrets to the Chinese, but all charges of espionage were dropped. The Wu incident fuels the fears of APAs that Asian features mark one as an espionage suspect.

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