



## Asian Pacific-American Campaigns, Elections, and Elected Officials

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# Asian Pacific-American Campaigns, Elections, and Elected Officials

## Introduction: The Emerging Political Status of Asian-American Elected Officials

Research on Asian-American elected officials is scarce, but Asian-American officeholders are not. The *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac* (Lai and Nakanishi 2001) lists hundreds of Asian Americans who hold elected offices in national, state, and local governments, in addition to a number of appointed officials and judges. Furthermore, increasing numbers of Asian-American political candidates run for national and state-level offices (Cho 2000a; Lien forthcoming), and there have been periodic Asian-American political movements (Wei 1993). Nevertheless, Asian-American political leadership and Asian-Americans' roles in campaigns have often been overlooked in the discussion of minority politics, in part due to the community's relatively young and largely foreign-born population (Brackman and Erie 1995).

When discussing Asian-American political leadership, it is important to distinguish between Hawaii and the U.S. mainland. Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Hawaiians together constitute a majority in all of Hawaii's local, state, and federal level districts. As a result, the perception among Asian Americans in Hawaii is that they are the "main-

stream" in regard to local and statewide political incorporation. This numerical representation has historically led to Asian-American elected leadership in and from Hawaii. At the national level, many of the most influential and experienced Asian-American elected officials have come from Hawaii, e.g., U.S. Senators Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii) and Daniel Akaka (D-Hawaii), and U.S. Representative Patsy Mink (D-Hawaii).

However, Asian-American elected leadership has also emerged from states with large Asian populations: California, Washington, Oregon, New York, and Texas. In 1956, Dalip Singh Saund (D-California) became the first Asian American elected to

the U.S. Congress from a mainland state (Coleman 2000), and, since the 1960s, the number of Asian-American elected officials from the continental United States has slowly increased.

Mainland Asian candidates face much greater challenges than their counterparts in Hawaii. For example, in California, where over 40% of the Asian-American population resides, the combined population of over 30 Asian and Pacific Islander ethnic groups constituted less than 15% of the state's population in the 2000 census. As a result, successful Asian-American candidates must pursue mainstream and multiethnic or panethnic strategies.

## The Crossover Appeal and Campaign Strategies of Asian-American Candidates

In contrast to African-American and Latino candidates, Asian-American elected officials on the United States mainland primarily emerge from political districts where Asians make up much less than 50% of the population. At the federal congressional level, 14 out of the 17 African American representatives in 1982 represented districts where African Americans composed 40% or more of the population. For Latino elected officials in 1982, seven of the 10 Latino congressional Representatives were elected from districts where Latinos represented 50% or more of the population (Espiritu 1992; Moore and Pachon 1985). In contrast, a majority of the state and federal level Asian Pacific American elected officials on the U.S. mainland represented non-Asian districts.<sup>1</sup> Of the 50 mainland congressional districts with the largest Asian Pacific-American populations, only two were represented by an Asian-Pacific American in the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress (*National Directory of Asian Pacific American Organizations* 1997-98).

Compared to their Hawaiian cohorts, Asian-American candidates on the United States mainland are more likely to run as "mainstream" or "crossover" candidates.<sup>2</sup> Previous studies have indicated that Asian-American candidates on the United States mainland are most likely among all minority groups to be elected by another racial group (Lai 2000b; Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989). The ability of Asian-American candidates to appeal to non-Asian constituents in contemporary

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**TABLE 1**  
**Top 10 Congressional Districts with the Largest Percentage of Asian Americans**

Rank 1990	House District	Major City	Asian-American % in District	White %	African-American %	Hispanic (Any Race) %	Member, 107th Congress (Party, Race)
1	HI-1	Honolulu	66.7%	29	2	5	Abercrombie (D, White)
2	HI-2	Hilo	57.1%	38	2	9	Mink (D, Asian)
3	CA-8	San Francisco	27.8%	52	13	15	Pelosi (D, White)
4	CA-12	Daly City	25.7%	65	4	14	Lantos (D, White)
5	CA-31	El Monte	22.9%	48	2	58	Solis (D, Latino)
6	CA-30	Los Angeles	21.4%	44	3	60	Becerra (D, Latino)
7	CA-16	San Jose	21.1%	55	5	36	Lofgren (D, White)
8	NY-12	New York	19.5%	34	14	57	Velazquez (D, Latino)
9	CA-13	Fremont	19.4%	64	7	18	Stark (D, White)
10	CA-9	Oakland	15.8%	45	32	11	Lee (D, African)

politics has challenged traditional notions of racial and ethnic cleavages that were part of multiracial coalitions during the late twentieth century (Rodriguez 1998). Matt Fong, the former California State Treasurer and 1998 California U.S. Senate candidate, argues that Asian Americans represent a “neutral minority” candidate who can appeal to both mainstream and minority groups based on their socioeconomic statuses and historical experiences with discrimination (Rodriguez 1998). With a geographically dispersed and largely foreign-born population (nearly 70 percent), successful Asian-American candidates at all levels must seek the support of non-Asian constituents and focus on broader campaign issues. In 2000, on the mainland, neither the U.S. congressional districts with the 10 largest Asian-American populations nor the 10 fastest growing Asian-American districts were represented by an Asian-American elected official (Office of Asian Pacific American Outreach, Democratic National Committee 1999).

As illustrated in Table 1, in 1990, no Asian majority congressional district currently exists on the United States

mainland. The largest mainland Asian congressional district is California District 8, where Asians accounted for nearly 28% of the constituency. However, in California, where nearly 40% of the nation’s Asian-American population resides, it is very likely that an Asian majority district will develop in the near future. In comparison, Asians represented a clear majority in Hawaii Congressional Districts 1 and 2, where they represented 67% and 57% of the population, respectively (Office of Asian Pacific American Outreach, Democratic National Committee 1999).

Asian-American candidates may increase Asian-American political participation (Nakanishi 1986; Lai 2000b). Voting studies have illustrated that Asian-American candidates may bring out Asian voters at the local and state levels and increase new voter registration (Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California Exit Poll 1996). As we will discuss later, Asian Americans have been shown to give campaign contributions to Asian-American candidates at all levels — even to those candidates running outside of their districts. Asian-American

**TABLE 2**  
**Asian Americans Who Have Served in the United States Congress**

Years Served	Member	Ethnicity	Party	District
<b>House</b>				
1957–1963	Dalip Singh Saund	South Asian American	Democrat	California 29th
1959–1963	Daniel K. Inouye	Japanese American	Democrat	Hawaii At-Large
1963–1977	Spark M. Matsunaga	Japanese American	Democrat	Hawaii At-Large, then 1st
1965–1977	Patsy T. Mink	Japanese American	Democrat	Hawaii At-Large, then 2nd
1975–1995	Norman Y. Mineta	Japanese American	Democrat	California 13th, then 15th
1977–1990	Daniel K. Akaka	Chinese & Native Hawaiian	Democrat	Hawaii 2nd
1979–present	Robert T. Matsui	Japanese American	Democrat	California 3rd, then 5th
1987–1991	Patricia F. Saiki	Japanese American	Republican	Hawaii 1st
1990–present	Patsy T. Mink	Japanese American	Democrat	Hawaii 2nd
1993–present	Robert C. Scott	African & Filipino American	Democrat	Virginia 3rd
1993–1999	Jay C. Kim	Korean American	Republican	California 41st
1999–present	David Wu	Chinese American	Democrat	Oregon 1st
2001–present	Mike Honda	Japanese American	Democrat	California 15th
<b>Senate</b>				
1959–1977	Hiram L. Fong	Chinese American	Republican	Hawaii
1963–present	Daniel K. Inouye	Japanese American	Democrat	Hawaii
1977–1983	S. I. Hayakawa	Japanese American	Republican	California
1977–1990	Spark M. Matsunaga	Japanese American	Democrat	Hawaii
1990–present	Daniel K. Akaka	Chinese & Native Hawaiian	Democrat	Hawaii

candidates, similar to other minority candidates, have relied on community-based, grassroots organizations for financial support. Such Asian-American community-based organizations also provide other invaluable forms of support for Asian-American candidates, ranging from campaign volunteers to get-out-the-vote drives (Lai 2000b; Saito and Park 2000). In many instances, the support of community-based organizations makes the difference in a local or statewide election. In 1998, Republican Matt Fong credited grassroots Asian-American organizations and individuals in providing the swing votes necessary to win his closely contested primary victory over challenger Darryl Issa (Lin 1998).

Five representatives and two senators of Asian descent serve the current in the current 107th Congress. Table 2 lists all 15 past and current Asian American voting members of Congress.<sup>3</sup> The majority are from Hawaii, are Democrats, and are Japanese Americans. However, the first Asian-American member of Congress came from a South Asian population group—which has not since been represented on the Hill. Moreover, Filipinos, whose current population nearly matches that of Chinese (the largest Asian-American ethnic group), have scarcely been elected to Congress.<sup>4</sup> Like other minority racial and ethnic groups, Asian Americans do not have their own representatives in Congress in proportion to their share of the national population (4%, which corresponds to 17 House members and four Senators).

It is noteworthy that districts that encompass regional Chinatowns (Monterey Park in CA-31 and NYC Chinatown in NY-12) are both represented by Latino members. Asian Americans and Latinos exhibit a similar, rapid pattern of population growth. As latecomers, they tend to reside in the same geographic areas, but the latter tends to outnumber the former. In Southern California, these two racial groups have competed for mayoral, state assembly, and congressional seats, but at the same time, their political leaders have also sought to collaborate in redistricting and civil rights activities (Saito 1998b).

### Pan-Asian American Representation

Given the small numbers of Asian-American congressional members, it is natural that the few Asian-American members have assumed the role of advocates for all Asian Americans. The most notable example of this activity is the passage of a bill in 1988 to redress the World War II internment of Japanese Americans. In 1942, President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 authorized the relocation of approximately 120,000 people of Japanese descent, two-thirds of whom were native born, to 10 relocation camps in deserted areas of western and central states. Senators Matsunaga and Inouye and Representatives Matsui and Mineta explored ways for redress, first by establishing a government commission to investigate the issue and later by introducing bills to

authorize financial compensation for survivors (Hatamiya 1993).

Another example is Senator Daniel Inouye's (D-Hawaii) efforts to gain benefits for Filipino veterans.<sup>6</sup> During World War II, hundreds of thousands of residents in the Philippines fought for the United States against Japan, but they became ineligible for U.S. veterans' benefits because of legislative changes in 1946, when the Philippines became an independent country. As of today, they receive only half of the benefits that other World War II veterans who were not U.S. nationals are entitled to receive. As a result of an immigration act in 1990 that expedited naturalization from the Philippines, 25,000 Filipino veterans currently reside in the United States (mostly California), but many of them are old and in poor health (Vergara 1997).

Yet another example of Asian-American congressional members working for the greater Asian population is

**TABLE 3**  
Total Number of APA Elected Officials in Key Local, State, and Federal Positions

Year	Local	State	Federal	Total
1978	52	63	5	120
1979	69	68	6	143
1980	98	69	6	173
1982	109	59	6	174
1984	109	59	5	173
1995	157	66	8	231
1996	181	66	7	254
1998	187	67	7	261
2000	248	73	7	328

Source: Compiled from the *National Asian American Political Almanac*, First to Ninth Editions.



**Crossover Appeal.** Norman Mineta became the first Japanese American elected to Congress from the U.S. mainland in 1975. He went on to serve 20 years before joining the Clinton administration, and later (seen here) the Bush administration. AP photo/J. Scott Applewhite.

Representative David Wu's (D-Oregon) resolution in the 106th Congress (1999-2000) to condemn stereotypes against Asian Americans. Between February 1999, when the *New York Times* first reported Chinese "espionage" of U.S. nuclear secrets, and September 2000, when prime

suspect Wen Ho Lee was released (with 58 of his 59 counts dropped), many Asian Americans feared that they might be seen as disloyal aliens. Wu, the vice chair of the congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, succeeded in having a concurrent resolution approved by the House, although it failed to pass the Senate (Takeda 2001).

### Increased Elected Representation at the Local and State Levels

Asian-American candidates have had their most success at the state and local levels. In 2000, 73 Asian Americans served in state legislatures, mostly in Hawaii (Lai and Nakanishi 2001).

The geographic diversity of Asian-American elected representation has increased. In 2000, states with Asian-American state-level elected officials included Washington (3), California (3), Arizona (1), Minnesota (1), and New Hampshire (1). In California, Representatives Wilma Chan and Carol Liu became the first Asian-American women to be elected to the California State Assembly since March Fong Eu in 1966.

Asian American elected officials have also become more ethnically diverse, primarily due to the 1965 reforms to the Immigration and Naturalization Act, which have profoundly shaped the contemporary development of Asians in the United States (Hing 1993). Historically, Japanese and Chinese Americans represented a majority of

Asian-American elected officials, along with a few Filipino and Korean Americans (Espiritu 1992). However, other Asian ethnic groups, particularly those from Southeast Asia are entering electoral politics. As a result, the current group of Asian-American elected officials at all three governmental levels represent the most ethnically diverse group to date (Lai 2000b).

Recent examples include Tony Lam (elected to the city council of Westminster, California in 1992), the first Vietnamese-American elected official in the United States, and Chanrithy Uong (elected to the city council of Lowell, Massachusetts in 1998), the first Cambodian-American elected official in the United States. Choua Lee became the first Hmong-American elected official when she won a school board seat in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1991. In Hawaii, Ben Cayetano became the nation's first Filipino-American elected governor in 1994, and Washington state's Gary Locke became the first Asian-American governor on the United States mainland in 1996 (Coleman 2000).

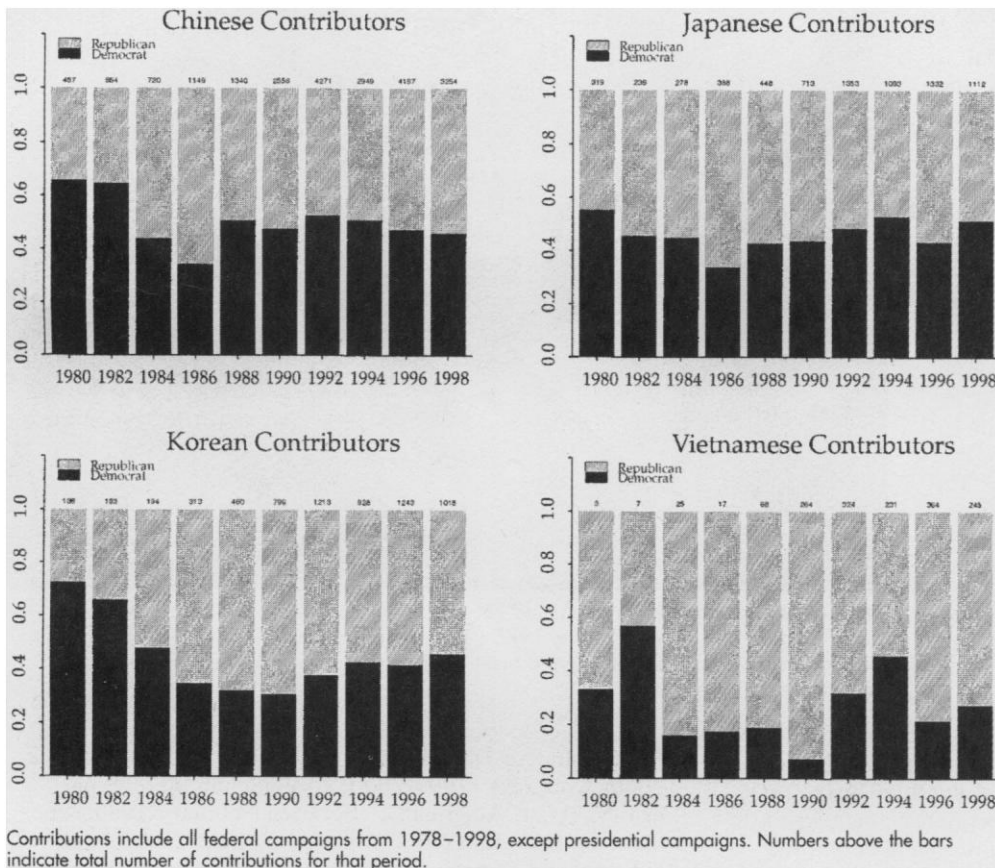
### Asian-American Campaign Contributions in Federal-Level Campaigns

While most Asian-American political activity gets little publicity, Asian campaign contributors receive more than their share of attention. Asian Americans are regarded as big contributors, and the widely-publicized 1996 campaign finance scandal involving John Huang and Charlie Trie thrust Asian-American donors into the limelight. In 1996, the Democratic National Committee collected a record-breaking \$5 million from John Huang's efforts, although over \$1 million was eventually returned to donors (Miller 1996).

Republicans have also recognized the financial potential of Asian Americans.

There is little scholarly research on Asian-American contributors. Instead, our knowledge in this area may be characterized as emerging folklore, such as Ron Unz's claim that Asians are on the verge of becoming "Republican Jews," deep-pocketed donors "without the liberal guilt" (Unz 1994). After Matt Fong introduced Bob Dole at a rally of ethnic supporters in California, Roy Wong, the Asian-American get-out-the-vote director concluded, "This is the first time the Asian community has been reached out to so aggressively" (Lin 1996). Leaders of both parties

**FIGURE 1**  
**Contributions to Democrat and Republican Candidates and PACs**



believe that “the economic success of many Asian immigrants should soon make them a major source of political funding” (Unz 1994).

Examining campaign donations from every Asian donor in the period 1978–1998 reveals a less dramatic story. Asian donors respond foremost to Asian-American candidates, and are not, as journalistic accounts imply, a source of funds for all candidates. Figure 1 shows that Chinese and Japanese partisan loyalties are split, while Koreans are more Republican, and Vietnamese even more so. The interethnic variations in Figure 2 suggest that Asian contributors contribute largely to co-ethnics. Chinese contributions to Asian candidates spiked when Chinese-American candidates were present—S.B. Woo in 1988 and 1992, who ran for the Delaware U.S. Senate and the U.S. House, respectively, and Matt Fong in 1998, who ran for the U.S. Senate in California. In 1992–98, when Korean contributions to Asians were highest, Jay Kim, a Korean American candidate, ran for the U.S. House. Japanese Americans Robert Matsui and Norman Mineta ran congressional campaigns throughout the entire period studied. Asian congressional candidates are able to attract contributions from coethnics, but not necessarily from the broader Asian American population.

Mainland Asian-American donors do not seem to contribute strategically. They prefer to fund Asian-American candidates wherever they might be found nationwide, rather than concentrating on candidates in their districts (Cho 2000a).

In Hawaii, where Asian culture is more prominent and ethnic mixing more common, Asian Americans are more strategic contributors. Although there is still a preference toward Asian candidates, competitive candidates receive more support than less competitive ones, and many contri-

## Asian congressional candidates are able to attract contributions from coethnics, but not necessarily from the broader Asian American population.

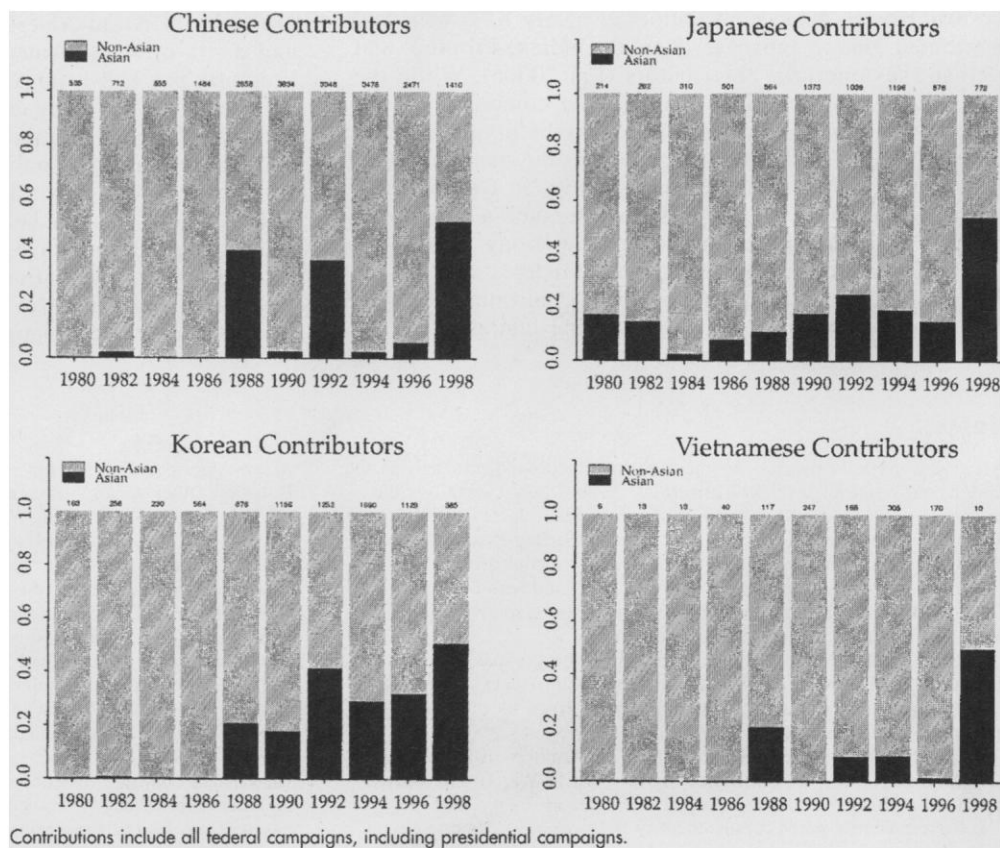
butions are for candidates within the contributor’s district, or at least within the state. Political party cues are significant, unlike on the mainland (Cho 2000b). It seems that the Hawaiian context encourages Asians to move beyond ethnic politics, toward a more post-ethnic notion of group identity.

All of these observations are bolstered by the patterns that are emerging on the U.S. mainland. Asian Americans who are younger and live in more multicultural counties seem to conform more to party cues than ethnic cues (Tam 1995).

### Asian-American Campaign Contributions at the Local and State Levels

Asian-American candidates have also relied greatly on Asian-American contributors in local and state elections (Lai 2000a). In California, Asian Americans have sometimes been important donors to non-Asian candidates. In Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley’s 1982 and 1986 re-election campaigns, Asian Americans contributed 10% of Bradley’s statewide donations despite representing only 6 % of the entire population (Tachibana 1986). With Asian-American voting limited by a large foreign-born and relatively young population, some political scholars have viewed campaign contributions as Asian Americans’ most viable political strength (Lai 2000a; Nakanishi 1998; Saito 1998a). While no strong panethnic coalition

**FIGURE 2**  
Contributions from Asian donors (separated by ethnicity) to Asian American and Non-Asian American Candidates



was found to exist among Asian ethnic contributors to federal-level Asian-American candidates, local and state-level elections are beginning to reveal a gradual development of a panethnic strategy. A majority of Asian-American candidates on the U.S. mainland have emerged from non-Asian majority districts. As a result of their constituencies, Asian-American candidates are beginning to realize that those who are most successful have run as mainstream or crossover candidates. Such a crossover candidate strategy does not necessarily preclude Asian-American candidates from targeting Asian-American contributors. In fact, one recent national survey of current elected officials found that nearly one-third of Asian-American local, state, and federal-level elected officials relied on Asian-American contributions (Lai 2000b).

Perhaps the most vivid example of this crossover appeal occurred in 1992 when former Los Angeles city councilmember Michael Woo ran for mayor of the city of Los Angeles against self-financed multimillionaire candidate Richard Riordan. Despite Los Angeles's mayoral race being a local and nonpartisan election, Woo received contributions from Asian Americans from 17 different states (Lai 2000a). In total, Woo received approximately a quarter of his total contributions from a Asian-American nationwide, primarily Chinese Americans. A fundamental reason was the ethnic pride that many Chinese Americans outside of California felt as Woo, a third-generation Chinese American, tried to become mayor of the nation's second-largest city. Although a majority of Woo's Asian contributions were from Chinese Americans, over 10% of his Asian contributions came from Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese, and Indian Americans. During the 1998 California U.S. Senate primary election, Republican challenger Matt Fong was able to raise nearly 9% of his Asian-American contributions from outside of California. Similar to Woo, Chinese Americans composed the majority of Asian contributors at nearly 87% with 13% distributed among Japanese, Korean, Indian, Filipino, and Vietnamese-American contributors (Lai 2000b). While the respective Asian-American contribution compositions of both the Woo and Fong campaigns may be atypical, they indicate a slow but steady progression of Asian-American contributions toward a panethnic identity in California politics. The potentials of constructing such a panethnic identity increase with the presence of a strong Asian-American candidate. However, the challenges of panethnic coalitions, like all political coalitions, is maintaining them in the face of differing interests and

ideologies (Espiritu 1992; Espiritu and Ong 1994; Lai 2000a; Sonenshein 1993). Nevertheless, there have been numerous local and statewide elections in which Asian-American contributors have played a significant role in providing key political support to Asian-American candidates' campaigns.

## **Conclusion: Toward a Research Agenda on Asian Americans and Elected Officials**

We began this essay with the comment that research on Asian-American elected officials and representation issues is scarce. Why the scarcity of research on the representation of Asian Americans through elected officials?

Paradoxically, part of the answer lies in existing scholarship on Asian-American politics. Research on the internal heterogeneity of Asian America has led many scholars to assume that the great diversity in areas such as ancestry, ideology, or socioeconomic status has prevented Asian Americans from becoming a cohesive political force. The literature on state-sponsored discrimination against Asian Americans seems to suggest that Asian-American political activity has been greatly depressed by racist practices. This has led to an emphasis on "politics by other means"—the view that Asian Americans are quite political, but that this political activity largely manifested itself in non-electoral activities such as cultural politics, labor politics, and feminist politics.

No doubt, a larger, more expansive notion of politics is necessary to capture the full breadth of Asian-American political activity. But the active participation of Asian Americans in non-electoral or "alternative" political arenas does not diminish the importance of politics within mainstream political institutions.

Consequently, while scholars of Asian-American politics have gone far in identifying the hurdles and prospects of Asian Americans and in clarifying the breadth and depth of Asian-American political participation, the literature has had little to say about the relationship between politically organized Asian Americans and external strategic political elites, and it has provided little insight on important political events involving Asian Americans working within mainstream institutions. The writers of this chapter believe the need for an emerging research agenda of Asian-American politics: one that will take seriously the relationship between strategic politicians of Asian-American descent and the political institutions that define our nation's public life.

## **Notes**

1. Asian majority districts on the U.S. mainland exist primarily at the school board-district level in California. School board positions have served as a springboard for many Asian-American elected officials at all levels. Recent examples include current U.S. Representative Michael Honda, who served as a school board member in San Jose, California; and current Cupertino City Councilmembers Michael Chang and Barry Chang, who both served on the Cupertino School board prior to their current elected positions.

2. The term "mainstream" is site-specific when comparing Hawaii and the U.S. Mainland. In Hawaii, the term "mainstream" equates to Asian, Hawaiian, and Pacific-Islander culture, given its majority Asian and Pacific Islander population.

3. Tong's (2000) more inclusive list of 31 members includes resident commissioners from the Philippines before World War II and nonvoting members from Guam and American Samoa.

4. Robert Scott's part-Filipino identity only recently came to be known among the Asian-American community. In 1994, the first

Asian-American Filipino governor, Benjamin Cayetano, was elected in Hawaii. Other Asian American governors have been George Ariyoshi (D-Hawaii, 1975–86), John Waihee (D-Hawaii, 1987–94) and Gary Locke (D-Washington, 1997–present).

5. Mineta became the first Asian-American cabinet member in 2000 when Richard Daley resigned as the Secretary of Commerce to join the Gore presidential campaign team, and Mineta was named as Daley's replacement. President George W. Bush chose Mineta to be Transportation Secretary (he was chair of the House Public Works and Transportation committee during the 103rd Congress, 1993–94), and chose another Asian American, Elaine Chao, to be Labor Secretary.

6. Filipino veterans' demands were partially met during the 106th Congress (1999–2000) when a bill was enacted into law, allowing the veterans to continue to receive 75% of Supplementary Security Income (SSI) if they go back to the Philippines. Another bill was enacted into law to appropriate benefits for disabled veterans.

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