

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITORS

Voting: The Biggest Challenge and What Can Be Done

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Voting is one of the fundamental cornerstones of a democratic nation. The right to cast a ballot is one that denotes full civil membership in our society. It is also an essential building block of a minority community's political infrastructure and a major asset that can advance as well as protect its group interests. The right to vote, of course, has been contested throughout much of American history. The struggles through civil rights litigation, legislation, and activism have been fought to ensure minority groups and women have the same voting rights and opportunities as all other citizens. There has been progress, but more needs to be done.

For Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs), the development of a viable and influential electorate is perhaps the most formidable challenge to their political empowerment. AAPIs have gained increasing visibility with the over 2,000 AAPI elected and major appointed officials across the nation. They include Washington Governor Gary Locke, presidential cabinet secretaries Elaine Chao and Norman Mineta, members of Congress, and a number of state legislatures and municipalities (Nakanishi and Lai 2003b). Moreover, a record number of AAPIs were delegates to the 2004 Democratic Convention. At the same time, this immigrant-dominant population has yet to reach its full electoral potential.

The reality is that we have a long ways to go in transforming the extraordinary population growth of AAPIs from 1.5 million in 1970 to over 12 million in 2000 into an effective voting constituency. Researchers, community leaders, and political organizers have long known that AAPIs (even after taking into account the large numbers who cannot participate because they are not citizens) have among the lowest rates of voter registration and voting of all racial groups (Nakanishi 1986; Cain 1988; Ong and Nakanishi 1996; Lien, Conway, Wong 2004). In California, for example, the respected Field Institute, which regularly conducts surveys and exit polls of the state's voting population, has found that, "Greater than three

in four white non-Hispanics (78%) are registered to vote, 71% of blacks, and only about half of Latino and Asian citizens are registered to vote” (Field Institute 2002). As a result, the over four million AAPIs in the state show a declining pattern of political participation: they are 12 percent of California’s total population, but account for about 6 percent of all registered voters and 5 percent of those who regularly vote in elections. White non-Hispanics and African Americans, in contrast, demonstrate the opposite and represent a greater proportion of registered voters and those who regularly vote than their percentages of the state’s inhabitants. AAPI voters are further handicapped by a lack of unity. They are fragmented along multiple lines—nativity, economic class, and party affiliation (Ong and Lee 2001).

Without question, the present and future size, characteristics, and impact of the AAPI electorate in California and elsewhere are dynamically evolving in relation to historical and contemporary conditions at both the individual and structural levels. For example, early AAPI immigrants—like other peoples of color and women—were disenfranchised. They were excluded from fully and meaningfully participating in American life and politics because of a plethora of discriminatory laws and policies like *Ozawa v. United States* [1922], which forbade Asian immigrants from becoming naturalized citizens. This delayed the development of a voting tradition among AAPIs until largely after World War II with the maturation of a growing number of second-generation Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Indian, and other AAPI Americans. At the same time, AAPIs were more likely to be targeted as scapegoats rather than potential recruits and supporters by the major political parties and some of their most influential leaders.

This legacy of political exclusion and isolation has had many contemporary manifestations. AAPI civil rights groups have remained vigilant in seeking the elimination of a number of “political structural barriers,” (Kwoh and Hui 1993) such as the unfair redistricting of AAPI communities and the lack of adequate bilingual voting materials and ballots. Likewise, voter registration and other political organizing efforts have had to come to grips with deep-seated attitudes of political inefficacy, political alienation, and mistrust of government held by large sectors of the AAPI population as a result of their experiences in American society or in other countries of origin. This is compounded by a lack of genuine attention and commitment shown by many elected officials and the political parties toward the public policy and quality-of-

life needs and issues of AAPIs.

This special issue of *AAPI Nexus* contributes to the goal of increasing the electoral participation and impact of AAPIs through an array of provocative, policy-rich, and hopefully helpful practitioner commentaries, policy research reports, and detailed accounts of exit polls and voting rights compliance strategies that might be used in AAPI communities across the nation during the November 2004 presidential elections and in the future. The articles in this special issue are written by those who work or are affiliated with many of the most significant, long-standing AAPI organizations that have sought to enhance the electoral participation of AAPIs through voter registration campaigns, redistricting efforts, voter education projects, political action research, lobbying, legislation, and litigation. They analyze and share practical insights and lessons drawn from the political experiences of AAPI voters and communities in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, and other locales across the nation. By doing so, the articles also contribute to the growing theoretical, public policy, and empirical literature on Asian American politics (Saito 1998; Aoki and Nakanishi 2001; Chang 2001; Lien 2001; Nakanishi and Lai 2003a; Lien, Conway, Wong 2004).

The two practitioner's essays in this issue deal with the necessity to increase, organize, and leverage AAPI voters for presidential and local elections, and more generally to enhance the political stature and participation of AAPIs in all forms of politics, be it electoral or non-electoral, or domestic or transnational in focus. The first commentary, "Vote to Empower Yourself, Stupid," is written by S. B. Woo, former lieutenant governor of the state of Delaware and president of 80-20 PAC, Inc. It provides a thought-provoking analysis of why AAPIs should adopt a bloc-voting strategy in order to advance their political agenda, particularly in presidential contests because of the concentration of AAPIs in many of the states with the highest numbers of electoral votes like California, New York, Texas, and New Jersey. The second essay, "The Local/Global Politics of Boston's Viet-Vote," is written by James Dien Bui of Viet-AID, a community development corporation in Boston, as well as Shirley Suet-ling Tang and Peter Nien-chu Kiang, both of the University of Massachusetts, Boston. In their article, they describe how a racially disparaging remark by one of Boston's foremost city council members spurred a coalition of Vietnamese American groups called Viet-Vote to launch a major voter registration campaign and other programs to increase the political awareness

and involvement of Vietnamese Americans in Boston politics. The commentary also analyzes the impact that the increasing numbers of registered voters had on subsequent efforts to advance the local and transnational political issues of the community.

The two empirical policy research articles are by Tarry Hum of Queens College of the City University of New York and Janelle Wong of the University of Southern California. Hum's study, "Asian Immigrant Settlements in New York City: Defining 'Communities of Interest,'" describes and analyzes an extensive survey that was conducted by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) to determine "communities of interest" among New York City's large and diverse population of AAPIs, which now numbers nearly a million residents. She reports on what the survey revealed about the characteristics, issues, and concerns of AAPIs in different New York boroughs and neighborhoods, but also how AALDEF and other AAPI organizations used the findings to influence the 2001 redistricting decision-making process in order to create city council districts that would increase the opportunities for AAPI candidates to be elected and for AAPIs to be in political jurisdictions with other residents who were more likely to share their policy preferences. Wong's article, "Getting Out the Vote among Asian Americans in Los Angeles County: The Effects of Phone Canvassing" evaluates an outreach effort undertaken with CAUSE/Vision 21, an organization in Los Angeles County which seeks to increase voter participation among AAPIs in the region. The article examines the impact of personal contact in increasing voter turnout. Wong provides a highly insightful analysis of the different effects that person-to-person telephone canvassing had on voter turnout in a specific election for various ethnic groups and generations of AAPI voters.

The issue concludes with two articles in our almanac section of the journal, which seeks to provide practical and policy-related analytical tools and procedures for AAPI community research. The first article, "Polling AAPI Voters," written by Daniel Kikuo Ichinose of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California (APALC), provides a detailed discussion on why AAPI communities should organize exit polls among AAPI voters during elections, how they should go about doing them, and how they should analyze and disseminate the results. A sample exit poll questionnaire is also included. The second article in the almanac section is written by Glenn D. Magpantay of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF). In his article, "Ensuring Asian

American Access to Democracy in New York City,” Magpantay analyzes the extensive, multifaceted approach that AALDEF and other AAPI organizations in New York City have undertaken for many years to insure that AAPI voters can rightfully and meaningfully participate in the electoral process, particularly by monitoring compliance with the federal Voting Rights Act. Section 2 of the Act forbids discrimination against racial, ethnic, and language minorities, while Section 203 mandates the availability of translated ballots and other voting materials, as well as oral assistance. Magpantay provides a detailed account of the large numbers of volunteers who are trained and deployed to polling booths across the city to observe and record potential violations of the Voting Rights Act for AAPI voters. He also analyzes the rationale for organizing a large-scale exit poll of AAPI voters during elections not only to understand their voting preferences, but also to gather additional information on any problems they may have encountered in casting their ballots, which serves to further document potential violations of the Voting Rights Act and other election policies.

Hopefully, there will come a time in the future when the title of this article will elicit curiosity or laughter because AAPIs will have become one of the most active and influential groups in American electoral politics with rates of voter registration and voting that at least match, if not exceed, those of other groups of citizens.

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