

# WHEN ASIAN AMERICANS RUN: The Suburban and Urban Dimensions of Asian American Candidates in California Local Politics

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## INTRODUCTION

Asian Americans constitute a newly emerging player in California local and state politics. The recent elections of Van Tran, Leland Yee, Alan Nakanishi, and Alberto Torrico to the California State Assembly not only serve as state-level examples of this point but also demonstrate the ethnic, partisan, and geographic diversity of eight Asian Americans in the California State Assembly.<sup>1</sup> Although numerical gains have occurred at the state level, the local-level represents the area where Asian American candidates have found their greatest political success in California politics. For example, 68 Asian Americans currently serve on city councils throughout California, the largest number among all states, including Hawaii.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the numerical rise of Asian American local officials in California over the past three decades, few studies focus on the processes and local contexts by which Asian Americans have been elected to citywide offices in California.<sup>3</sup> Journalists have provided anecdotal information to detail the growth of Asian American politics in California (Gurwitt, 1990; Miller, 1995; Corcoran, 2003; Corcoran, 2004; Brown, 2004). Previous scholarly studies have examined Asian American political behavior and public opinion in local contexts (Fong, 1994; Nakanishi, 1998; Saito, 1998a; 1998b; Lien, Conway, and Wong, 2004). Although these studies have illuminated different facets of Asian American political behavior, little is still known about the processes, strategies, and barriers that Asian American candidates face in California local politics, the size of cities in which they are elected, the influence of a strong political ideology in mobilizing the Asian American community, and how their experiences differ from other racial and ethnic minority candidates.—

Similar to the experiences of other racial minorities, Asian Americans have struggled for full democratic inclusion in the United States.<sup>4</sup> A majority of Asian American candidates, like their African American and Latino cohorts, have relied on the local context as the initial entryway into California politics. An example is current U.S. Representative Michael Honda (D-California), who began his political career on the San Jose (CA) Unified School Board District. At the statewide level, Asian American candidates, unlike their

African American and Latino counterparts, have not been able to sustain or increase the number of elected representatives in the California Legislature. One recent study found that among the 13 Asian American state-level officials who served in the state capitol during 1960-2004, none was replaced by coethnics (other Asian Americans). In comparison, 81.3% of Latino Democrats and 85% of Black Democrats were replaced by coethnics during this period (Guerra, 2004). Reasons for this inability to sustain statewide Asian American elected officials include intense competition for limited seats with other racial groups, a low voter-turnout rate due to low U.S. naturalization rates among the majority foreign-born population, few heavily Asian American concentrated statewide districts, and lack of a formal pipeline of experienced candidates (Lai, Tam-Cho, Kim, & Takeda, 2001).

The inability to replace Asian American elected officials for California statewide positions does not necessarily apply at the city level, particularly in small- to medium-sized suburban and urban cities.<sup>5</sup> Within such cities, Asian Americans have not only been able to be elected once, but they have been able to achieve sustainability in their representation by electing a second and third generation of elected officials. In contrast, Asian Americans have found it more difficult to win elections and to sustain elected representation in larger urban gateway cities despite large Asian American populations.<sup>6</sup>

#### **ASIAN AMERICANS AND CALIFORNIA LOCAL POLITICS: THE ELECTORAL DIMENSIONS OF SMALL- AND MEDIUM-SIZED SUBURBAN AND URBAN CITIES**

To understand the electoral dimensions of Asian American candidates in small- and medium-sized suburban and urban cities, it is first necessary to understand Asian American demographics and geographic dispersion taking shape in California. While the Asian American populations have increased in small- and medium-sized urban cities, the suburbanization of the Asian American population represents the fastest growing area of residential settlement and provides the local context to understand the most recent local political and demographic developments in California, where 70% (U.S. Census, 2000) of the total U.S. Asian American population resides. In 2000, 53% of the total Asian American population in California metropolitan cities lived in suburbs (American Communities Project, 2000).

*Small- to medium-sized suburban and urban cities in California have undergone tremendous demographic growth among their Asian American populations during the past three decades. Scholars have labeled such cities "ethnoburbs" (Li, 1998), which are generally defined as those cities impacted by the influx of transnational capital and labor from geographic regions such as the Pacific Rim. In many of these cities, Asian Americans now find themselves a significant if not the majority or plurality population.<sup>7</sup> According to the 2000 U.S. Census, California is the only state on the continental United States that contains majority Asian American cities (6 in total), all situated on the periphery of large traditional urban gateway cities such as San Francisco and Los Angeles.*

**Table 1. Top five Cities with the Highest Percentage of Asian American City Council Members in Los Angeles, Alameda, and Santa Clara Counties, 2005**

CALIFORNIA COUNTY	TOTAL POP	ASIAN %	PACIFIC ISLANDER %	TOTAL # OF SEATS ON THE CITY COUNCIL	# OF ASIAN AMERICAN CITY COUNCIL MMBERS. (% OF TOTAL CITY COUNCIL SEATS)	# OF BLACK CITY COUNCIL MEMBERS	# OF LATINO CITY COUNCIL MEMBER
<b>LOS ANGELES COUNTY</b>	<b>9,519,338</b>	<b>11.8</b>	<b>23,265</b>	<b>450</b>	<b>21 (4.8%)</b>	<b>22 (5.0%)</b>	<b>119 (26.4%)</b>
Gardena	57,746	26.6	381	5	3 (60%)	0	2 (40%)
Arcadia	53,054	45.3	29	5	2 (40%)	0	0
Monterey Park	60,051	61.5	24	5	2 (40%)	0	2 (40%)
Walnut	30,004	55.5	22	5	2 (40%)	0	0
Cerritos	51,488	58.2	89	5	1 (20%)	0	0
<b>ALAMEDA COUNTY</b>	<b>1,443,741</b>	<b>20.3</b>	<b>8,458</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>7 (7.6%)</b>	<b>7 (7.6%)</b>	<b>5 (5.4%)</b>
Oakland	399,484	15.1	1,866	8	3 (37.5%)	2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)
Alameda	72,259	26.0	407	5	1 (20%)	0	0
Albany	16,444	24.9	20	5	1 (20%)	0	0
Fremont	203,413	36.8	736	5	1 (20%)	0	0
Union City	66,869	43.0	577	5	1 (20%)	0	1 (20%)
<b>SANTA CLARA COUNTY</b>	<b>1,682,585</b>	<b>25.4</b>	<b>5,040</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>8 (9.1%)</b>	<b>1 (1.1%)</b>	<b>8 (9.1%)</b>
Cupertino	50,546	44.3	58	5	2 (40%)	0	1 (20%)
Milpitas	62,698	51.5	347	5	1 (20%)	0	0
Morgan Hill	33,556	5.9	50	5	1 (20%)	0	0
Palo Alto	58,598	17.2	81	9	1 (11.1%)	0	0
San Jose	894,943	26.6	3,093	11	1 (9.1%)	1 (9.1%)	3 (27.3%)

Source: U. S. Census (2000), PL94-171.

Table 1 illustrates the top five cities with the highest percentage of Asian American city council representation in the counties of the three case studies: Los Angeles County (Gardena), Alameda County (Oakland), and Santa Clara County (Cupertino). The last two columns of Table 1 provide percentages of Black and Latino city council members within the cities. Two trends are reflected in the data. First, as argued by political incorporation theory, a substantial Asian American citywide population and voting base serves as an important precursor, but not a predictor, for Asian American city council representation. The Asian American populations in these cities range from 15% to 62% of their respective city's total populations, with only four of the fifteen cities containing majority Asian American populations. Second, a majority of the cities with the highest percentage of Asian American city council representation in the three California counties are small- and medium-sized suburban and urban cities as opposed to large urban cities. All of these cities have total populations of less than 75,000 with the exception of Oakland (399,484) and San Jose (894,943). As the Asian American populations continue to grow in such California cities, Asian American candidates have found some recent success in winning and sustaining descriptive representation (electing a coethnic) in citywide office.

### DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION AND POLITICAL INCORPORATION

One of the key and initial strategies employed by Asian Americans, as seen with other racial minorities, to gain a stronger voice on city councils is running and electing their own racial/ethnic candidates. We refer to this goal as *descriptive representation*, which is defined as electing a representative from one's constituents, including one's racial or ethnic group (Pitkin, 1967; Mansbridge, 1999). Previous studies have illustrated that minority descriptive representation is the first step to attaining group influence in city governments (Henry, 1994; Takash, 1999; Pelissero, Holian, and Tomaka, 2000).

*Political incorporation* is generally defined as the extent to which a minority group is effectively represented in local policy making concerning issues of greatest interest to them (Browning, Marshall, & Tabb, 1984; 2000). The three necessary components for strong minority political mobilization to occur at the local level are the need for strong community-based organizations, political maturity in minority communities, and a sizeable minority population (Browning, Marshall, & Tabb, 1984; Henry, 1994).

The following outcomes or levels regarding the political incorporation of minority groups in local governments are most likely to occur: (1) Exclusion or no political incorporation in which the group is completely shut out by the dominant governing coalition, (2) Medium political incorporation, or a minority group's ability to win descriptive representation (coethnic officeholders), and (3) Strong political incorporation or substantive authority and influence, referring to the institutionalization of group interests in city politics that extends beyond descriptive representation as measured by resource allocation, city appointments, and membership in the dominant governing coalition (Browning, Marshall, & Tabb, 2000). In California local politics, Asian Americans have yet to attain strong political incorporation. However in a growing number of California cities, particularly in the local context of medium- and smaller-sized suburban and urban cities, Asian Americans

are achieving medium political incorporation by demonstrating the ability to attain and sustain descriptive representation in citywide positions from the city council to the school board, which has allowed them to influence local policies through key city commission appointments.<sup>8</sup>

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND ARGUMENTS

This qualitative study examines the processes and the strategies utilized by Asian American candidates and community activists to gain descriptive representation and higher levels of political incorporation in medium-sized and small California suburban and urban cities, where they have been most successful. To determine these processes and strategies, we investigate the following research questions:

- 1) What types of political strategies, ideologies, and coalitions do successful Asian American candidates pursue in the context of small- to medium-sized suburban and urban cities in California?
- 2) What impact, if any, do Asian American community institutions (i.e., political and community-based organizations) have on local Asian American campaigns in these cities?
- 3) Have Asian American elected officials made a difference in their group's political incorporation (i.e., city commission appointments, the institutionalization of group interests) once they are elected?
- 4) What are the barriers, both institutional and cultural, that have prevented Asian Americans from attaining strong political incorporation in these case cities?

We argue that Asian American political incorporation is more likely to occur in smaller- to medium-sized cities than in large urban cities in the state due to the following factors: the presence of a significant Asian American population base, less competition for limited seats, the existence of strong community-based organization networks, a history of strong leadership and ideological unity within the community, and a strong reliance on cross-racial alliances. Many of these factors, particularly the presence of a significant Asian American population base, are often missing in larger cities and make the task of political incorporation for Asian Americans more difficult. Using these factors as criteria, we evaluate the three case studies to determine if there is medium political incorporation (sustained descriptive representation of ethnic officeholders) or strong political incorporation (substantive authority and influence).

### RESEARCH METHODS

This study examined the political processes that allow Asian American candidates to attain successful election in medium- to small-sized cities, and whether they have been effective in gaining political incorporation once elected.<sup>9</sup> The three case studies (Oakland, Cupertino, and Gardena) were chosen primarily based on the success of Asian Americans in these cities to elect and sustain descriptive representatives on the city coun-

cil, as one indicator of political incorporation in these respective cities. As seen in the above Table 1, each of the three cases currently contains the largest number of Asian American city councilmembers in proportion to total city council seats for their respective counties. The three California counties (Santa Clara, Alameda, and Los Angeles) represented by the cases contain the largest Asian American populations in the state. They fit the criteria of having small- and medium-sized suburban and urban cities in order to examine the research questions and arguments regarding what political factors, processes, and strategies have allowed Asian Americans to attain greater levels of descriptive representation than in large urban cities.

Interviews are conducted with past and present Asian American elected officials and community leaders to examine the similarities and differences in local political context for each of the city case studies. Government documents and other secondary resources are examined to provide different methods of assessing the case study findings in relation to the research questions and arguments.

### **SUSTAINING AND BUILDING ON ASIAN AMERICAN DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION: CUPERTINO, GARDENA, AND OAKLAND CASE STUDIES**

The inability of Asian Americans to sustain descriptive representation in large urban cities, such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, and their ability to find electoral success in small- to medium-sized suburban and urban cities, illustrates the current political trajectory of Asian American elected officials in California local politics. Few continental U.S. cities have achieved the level of political incorporation for Asian Americans that is discussed in the Cupertino, Gardena, and Oakland case studies. In all three cities, Asian Americans have achieved political incorporation in the form of sustained descriptive representation on their respective city councils, increased city commission appointments, and an institutionalized presence in local government affairs.

#### **CUPERTINO (CA) CASE STUDY**

During the past twenty years, Cupertino has witnessed a dramatic demographic growth in the Asian population similar to several other suburban communities in Northern and Southern California. Cupertino, a city best known for being the corporate headquarters of Apple Computers, underwent a demographic transformation in the decades that followed the emergence of Silicon Valley with the 1971 invention of the microprocessor. In 1980, the Asian American population in Cupertino was 6.7% while Whites represented 87%. Twenty years later, with a total population of approximately 52,000, Asian Americans now account for 44.6% (+69%) of the city's total population compared with Whites at 48% (-55%). Chinese Americans (23.8%) account for the largest Asian ethnic group followed by Asian Indians (8.7%), Japanese Americans (4.6%), Korean Americans (4.2%), and Vietnamese Americans (1.0%).

**Table 2. Racial Representation on Cupertino City Council, 2005**

CIVIC BOARD	CITY COUNCIL (5 TOTAL SEATS)
Asian American	(2) Patrick Kwok–Mayor / Kris Wang–Councilmember
White	(2) Richard Lowenthal–Vice Mayor / Sandra James–Councilmember
Latino	(1) Dolly Sandoval–Councilmember

Source: Corcoran, K. (2003, June 22). A City Divided by Change. *San Jose Mercury News*, p., 25A.

Table 2 illustrates the racial representation on the Cupertino city council in 2005. Asian Americans, along with Whites, account for the largest racial group on the city council. Approximately one third of recent Asian American elected officials in Santa Clara County are situated in Cupertino.<sup>10</sup> With increased Asian American demographic growth and political representation in Cupertino have come increased racial tensions between long-time White residents and the perceived recent Asian/Asian American encroachment on the city's character and identity (Corcoran, 2003).<sup>11</sup>

#### **SUSTAINED DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION THROUGH A CANDIDATE PIPELINE: THE POLITICAL RECRUITMENT OF KRIS WANG**

One perspective advanced regarding minority political power is that the group has an ability not only to attain descriptive representation by electing a member of the group but also to sustain this power by electing another coethnic (Guerra, 1998). The Asian American community in Cupertino faced the sustainability test of replacing ethnic officials with coethnics during the November 2003 citywide election. Because then Cupertino Mayor Dr. Michael Chang was about to be termed out of office in 2003, many Asian American community activists, including Chang, believed it was necessary to replace his seat with another Asian American candidate. Various community leaders met and compiled a short list of potential Asian American candidates with the most political experience. The most competitive Asian American candidate to emerge was Kris Wang, a Chinese American woman who previously served as an appointee on the visible City Parks and Recreations Commission.<sup>12</sup>

Wang's city council campaign received a great deal of political support, particularly in the important area of campaign contributions, from Asian Americans throughout Santa Clara County. In regard to campaign contributions, Wang received a majority (69%) of her campaign contributions from Chinese/Taiwanese American individuals who accounted for \$4,700 of the total \$6,800 that she received. The fact that Chinese/Taiwanese Americans contributed nearly a majority of Wang's monetary contributions should not be a surprise given that they most likely came from her inner circle of supporters. However, the findings also demonstrate that Wang did not rely solely on Asian American contributions. Her campaign strategy emphasized the importance of garnering cross-racial support from Whites who accounted for the remaining 31% of her contributions. In November 2003,

Wang made history as the first Asian American woman on the Cupertino City Council. As the only Asian American candidate in a field of four candidates with the top two being elected to the city council, Wang finished a strong second with 4,078 votes for 34.25% of the total votes.

### **THE PRESENCE OF A STRONG POLITICAL IDEOLOGY: IMPLEMENTING THE ASIAN AMERICAN MOVEMENT INTO CUPERTINO POLITICS**

Ideology represents a key reason as to why Asian Americans in Cupertino have been able to mobilize their large population base and successfully elect Asian Americans on the city council. The presence of a strong political ideology and strategy in the Asian American community has guided its leadership's quest for descriptive representation. This ideology and strategy is modeled after the Asian American Movement of the 1960s, which advocated self-determination and group empowerment for Asian Americans in civil rights and access to higher education in public universities (Omatsu, 2003). In many ways, Cupertino politics today represents a continuation of the movement into the field of electoral politics focusing on Asian American political incorporation and self-determination in the area of descriptive representation on city government.

One of the most influential Asian Americans who helped to establish the foundation for Asian American politics in Cupertino during the mid-1990s is Michael Chang, the first Asian American to be elected to the Cupertino city council in 1995. The vision that guided Chang to run for city council was based on the need for greater Asian American elected representation in the city. Underlying this need for greater elected representation were the principles of the Asian American Movement of the 1960s. According to Chang: "I came out of the Asian American Movement (as a student). I use most of the principles of this student movement as yardsticks for Asian Americans in the political arena" (M. Chang, Personal Interview, September 16, 2003). Chang, who earned a doctorate from Stanford University and teaches Asian American Studies at De Anza Community College, was a participant in the student movements of the 1960s that defined the beginnings of the Asian American Movement. He applied these principles to the electoral arena. After being elected, Chang began to appoint Asian Americans to key citywide commissions and to recruit future Asian American councilmembers, such as Patrick Kwok and Kris Wang, with the goal of increased representation for Asian Americans in local politics. According to Chang, "Increased representation is solely not enough to sustain future Asian American political incorporation" (M. Chang, Personal Interview, September 16, 2003).

Another key Asian American who was instrumental in establishing the Asian American Movement as the primary ideology guiding Asian American politics in Cupertino is Paul Fong, a professor of political science and Asian American studies at Evergreen Community College. Fong, like Chang, was also a participant in the Asian American Movement. Fong realized the necessity of establishing an Asian American voice in local politics by creating local political institutions that reflect their group interests and concerns (P. Fong, Personal Interview, August 13, 2003). With this vision, Fong, along with Michael



Chang, cofounded the Asian Pacific American Silicon Valley Democratic Club (APASVDC), a Santa Clara County chapter of the California Democratic Party, which has increasingly become a key political player in Santa Clara County politics (Corcoran, 2004). The organization has been instrumental in helping to elect 27 Asian Americans to local offices throughout Santa Clara County during the past decade.

### **POLITICAL INCORPORATION BEYOND DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION**

The impact of Asian American councilmembers on the Cupertino city council has allowed for a medium level of political incorporation that extends beyond descriptive representation. Appointments to city commissions are one indicator of policy influence. Asian Americans constitute one of the largest racial groups among all appointed commissioners, occupying positions on key city commissions. An example is the Housing Commission, which an Asian American currently chairs until 2007, whose appointment was supported by both Kwok and Wang. High-profile and influential city commissions, such as the Parks and Recreations Commission, the Planning Commission, and the Public Safety Commission, each have two Asian American members serving terms among their respective five-person commissions.— During the past two years, both Kwok and Wang have supported six Asian American commission appointments or reappointments. A minimum number of three city councilmembers are needed among the five to appoint/reappoint city commissioners. According to Kris Wang:

Patrick and I have always supported qualified Asian American appointments to city commissions. For example, this year, we both supported the hiring of an Asian American Library Commissioner to replace the sole Asian American Library commissioner who was retiring. It is important that an Asian American voice remain on the commission given how the Asian American community is the largest user of the city library. (K. Wang, Personal Interview, July 18, 2005)

A second area in which Asian American descriptive representatives on the city council have an impact on group political incorporation is by being a vocal advocate for the hiring of Asian Americans in city government. City employment reflects another measure of minority political incorporation once descriptive representatives are in office (Brownling, Marshall, & Tabb, 2003). In Cupertino, Asian American city councilmembers have taken proactive measures to insure equal representation of Asian Americans in city hiring practices. As Kris Wang stated:

We [Patrick Kwok and I] encourage Asian American community members to apply for citywide positions by placing news items in the local ethnic newspapers to announce position openings and to encourage qualified applicants. We are also in contact with the city manager to remind him to be mindful of Asian American applicants for positions where they are underrepresented." (K. Wang, Personal Interview, July 18, 2005)

The final area to measure political incorporation of group interests is their institutionalization in citywide public affairs. For example, former mayor Michael Chang, with sup-

port from the Taiwanese American community, was instrumental in establishing the Taiwan Sister City culture and exchange program. Other examples include the institutionalization of Asian American events throughout the city, such as the Annual Moon Festival, which celebrates Chinese New Year, and the annual summer Bay Area Taiwanese American Olympics, which features over one hundred Taiwanese American community-based organizations throughout Northern California that participate in various athletic and goodwill games at De Anza Community College, where many high-profile city officials, both Asian American and non-Asian, attend the opening ceremonies. All of these public events have provided an institutionalized presence for Asian Americans in Cupertino that extend beyond the city council.

### BARRIERS TO STRONG POLITICAL INCORPORATION

Despite these measures of political incorporation, Asian Americans are still not at the highest level of political incorporation, substantive authority, and influence, in regard to being part of the dominant coalitions that make the key economic and political decisions in Cupertino. Asian Americans have still struggled, even with the presence of two Asian Americans on the current city council, to have a consistent voice. For instance, Asian American businesses are still learning to play the political game of backdoor politics that have allowed non-Asian businesses to circumvent formal city zoning procedures. Councilmember Wang attributes this lack of influence to other factors, such as cultural practices where Asian American business interests are not aggressive enough and do not understand how the political system works. Organized special interest groups, such as the Concerned Citizens of Cupertino (CCC), a special interest group attempting to limit suburban sprawl in the city, and the Alliance for a Better Cupertino (ABC), a pro-growth group, have circumvented the city council in battling each other to determine what can be built, how it is built, and all other rules governing growth in Cupertino (*Cupertino Courier*, July 20, 2004). For instance, during the January 22, 2004, meeting of the Cupertino City Council, the CCC introduced three initiatives (Building Height Initiative, Density Initiative, and Setback Initiative) and was able to get the required number of signatures placed on the November 2004 citywide ballot (*Cupertino Courier*, July 24, 2004). Asian American interests must compete with such special interest groups, such as the CCC, which has been successful in circumventing the Cupertino city council by bringing its initiatives directly to the city voters.

Given the large percentage of foreign born among the predominantly Chinese and Taiwanese American community, the next five to ten years will essentially determine whether the Cupertino Asian American community can translate their political representation into the substantive authority and influence. Nevertheless, this group has made significant in-roads during the past ten years in going from no descriptive representative and few city commissioners to having three descriptive representatives (and more that are likely to follow) and one of the largest percentages of city commissioners

### GARDENA (CA) CASE STUDY

The city of Gardena currently contains nearly 60,000 residents in 6.2 square miles of a racially diverse community. The city was incorporated into Los Angeles County in 1930. Since this period, Gardena has witnessed a longer and more fruitful descriptive representation of Japanese American elected officials within its city government than any other city in the continental United States. Beginning in the late 1950s, a large Japanese American community consisting of both first- and second-generation-born Americans began to settle in Gardena, after returning from World War II internment camps. Real estate developers, through *the Rafu Shimpō*, a Japanese American newspaper, targeted many of the second-generation Japanese Americans that moved into the city in the fifties and sixties. According to Bruce Kaji, former city treasurer and the first Japanese American elected official in Gardena,

Gardena was the only community in the Los Angeles area where developers sought to sell homes specifically to the Nisei. There was a strong element of new homes targeted to them, whereas the Nisei did not feel welcome anywhere else. (B. Kaji, Personal Interview, July 22, 2004)

**Table 3. Japanese American Elected officials in Gardena, 1960–Present**

CITY TREASURER	YEAR ELECTED
Bruce Kaji	1960 (resigned 1962)
George Kobayashi	1974(appointed),1976-1988
CITY CLERK	YEAR ELECTED
May Doi	1980-1999 (retired)
CITY COUNCIL	YEAR ELECTED
Kiyoto "Ken" Nakaoka	1966-1972
Paul T. Bannai	1972
Masani "Mas" Fukai	1974
Vince Okomoto	1976
Paul Y. Tsukahara	1980
Terrence Terauchi	1999
Paul Tanaka	1999
Grant Nakaoka (son of Ken)	2001-03
Ronald K. Ikejiri	2001
Paul Tanaka	2003 (reelected)
MAYOR	YEAR ELECTED
Kiyoto "Ken" Nakaoka	1972
Terrence Terauchi	2001
Paul Tanaka	2005

Source: Gardena City Clerk's Office.

The ability of the Nisei to form a community set the foundation for their political incorporation in Gardena. Their influence is apparent in a report by the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations that investigated the burning of the Gardena Buddhist Church in the early 1980s: "The contributions of the Japanese American to the growth, stability and vitality of the area are substantial...The presence of Japanese Americans in the professional and business communities is pervasive in the Gardena Valley area" (Olive, 1982).

The Gardena Japanese American community has been able to translate their significant population size into two generations of descriptive representation in various citywide positions. As the Japanese American community developed, so did their descriptive representation at the city level. Currently, Japanese Americans comprise 43.3% of the total Asian American population in Gardena, the largest of any Asian American ethnic group, and 11.3% of the city population.

Table 3 vividly shows the extent to which Japanese Americans have attained key city positions over two generations in Gardena since 1960. Ken Nakaoka became the first Japanese American to be elected in Gardena city council in 1962 and later was elected as mayor, becoming the first Japanese American, elected city mayor in the United States. He would later serve as a role model for Paul Bannai, a second-generation Japanese American who became the second Japanese American to be elected to the Gardena city council in 1972. He ran the following year for the California Assembly District seat that included Gardena and served three terms. Although a resident of Gardena, Bannai credits social organizations, such as the Lions Club, the Kiwanis, and the Nisei Veterans Association, that formed the foundation for his political life. According to Bannai,

All of the service organizations in our community, such as the Lions Club, were not primarily what you would call Japanese-American clubs. From an economic and business standpoint, it was good to belong... [I]f you are active, then you can contribute to the benefit and growth of the community... . Once you get in, and find that you want to contribute, you are pushed up the ladder, so to say." (Douglass, 1989, p. 92)

Membership and activity in these organizations allowed Bannai to be recognized and eventually appointed to the City of Gardena Planning Commission in 1969, which would later serve as his springboard to the city council.

The legacy of Bannai and Nakaoka would mark the beginnings of strong descriptive representation for Japanese Americans in Gardena politics. Masani (Mas) Fukai joined the council in 1974 and Vince Okamoto served on the city council beginning in 1978, while George Kobayashi served as the City Treasurer. Paul Tsukahara would become the third Asian American to serve on the Gardena city council in 1980.

The influence of Mas Fukai is well known among veteran Asian American political circles in the Los Angeles area. Fukai was picked by then Los Angeles County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn to join Hahn's staff in 1974 and later became his chief deputy in 1987. Fukai gained a reputation as a consummate fund-raiser and supporter of many local Asian political candidates by the late 1980s (Goodman, 1989). Fukai left the council in 1998, and during 2004, the five-person Gardena city council consisted of three Japanese Americans

(Mayor Terrance Terauchi, Mayor Pro Tem Ron Ikejiri, and Paul Tanaka), one African American (Steven Bradford), and one Latino (Oscar Medrano, Jr.). In 2006 Ikejiri and Tanaka remain on the city council with Terauchi being termed out of office. Tanaka currently serves as city mayor.

### **SUSTAINING DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION AND BECOMING THE MAJORITY OF THE GARDENA CITY COUNCIL**

The ability of Japanese Americans to maintain and sustain descriptive representation on the Gardena city council for two generations represents an impressive feat for Asian Americans in California local politics. Many reasons help to explain how the Gardena Japanese American community has been able to achieve this distinction. City Councilmember Ron Ikejiri offers his primary explanation as to why: "The political history of Japanese Americans is due to the Sansei [third generation] staying in Gardena." Because the Sansei chose to remain in Gardena as they attained greater socioeconomic status, as opposed to moving to more affluent suburban areas, third generation Japanese Americans, such as Ikejiri, were allowed elected leadership to continue the descriptive representation that the Nisei began after World War II. Thus, the established track records of Nisei officials benefited future Sansei elected officials in a city where Japanese Americans had gained respect. According to Bruce Kaji: "Japanese were clearly accepted in Gardena which made it easier for them [Sansei] to get elected" (B. Kaji, Personal Interview, July 22, 2004).

Another reason that has contributed to the recent Japanese American majority on the city council has been their primary reliance on cross-racial coalitions. Despite being approximately 11% of the city population, Japanese American candidates in Gardena have been able to sustain and build upon descriptive representation over time through cross-racial coalitions, particularly with the majority Mexican American population and Whites. One factor that has contributed to Japanese American candidates' cross-racial support has been their professional status. As former Gardena Mayor Terrance Terauchi explained, "Japanese Americans have to be able to be cross over and obtain broad support.... Also, we are all well- educated professionals.... We are people who[m] the entire community can be proud of" (T. Terauchi, Personal Interview, August 4, 2004). Terauchi's campaign strategy has been to create a base support of Japanese Americans with broader community support: "You cannot focus on Japanese Americans. But they were my biggest supporters. They put the word out and volunteered to help my campaign" (T. Terauchi, Personal Interview, August 8, 2004).

Through their professional organizations and mainstream community groups, Japanese American elected officials in Gardena have been successful at developing cross-racial networks to their political advantage. They have achieved cross-racial networks essentially by becoming part of mainstream institutions. As discussed before with Gardena pioneer Paul Bannai, past and current Gardena city councilmembers are also active in mainstream community groups. For example, former city councilman Terauchi was a member of the Optimistic Club, Elk's Club, the Chamber of Commerce, YMCA (sits on

the executive board), and the Japanese American Citizens' League. The image of a nonthreatening racial candidate has played a role in the success of past and present Japanese American candidates by allowing them to build and foster cross-racial coalitions. Such coalitions would not have been as likely without the first generation of Japanese American elected officials in Gardena. As Gary Kohatsu, editor of the *Gardena Valley News*, pointed out:

There is a sense of a comfort zone among the older [non-Japanese American] Gardena voters regarding having a strong Japanese American presence on the city council. The first generation of Japanese American leaders from Ken Nakaoka to Paul Bannai were responsible for allowing this to be accepted without question." (G. Kohatsu, Personal Interview, July 21, 2005)

The unprecedented success of Japanese Americans in Gardena to elect and sustain descriptive representatives over two generations has led to mixed results in regard to their local political incorporation. On the one hand, the current success of Japanese Americans on the city council has led to increased political incorporation in Gardena politics as seen in the appointment of numerous Asian Americans to influential city commissions. All city commission appointments in Gardena are done by the mayor and city councilmembers. The presence of Asian Americans, and especially Japanese Americans, on the several influential city commissions is noticeable. For instance, the Planning and Environmental Quality Commission, one of the most powerful commissions, consists of five members—two are Japanese American.—A total of eight Asian Americans, the second largest number among all racial groups, serve on all five citywide commissions. However, on the other hand, Japanese Americans are still not part of the dominant coalitions that influence key city policies.

### BARRIERS TO STRONG POLITICAL INCORPORATION

Despite the appointments of Japanese Americans to key city commissions by the Japanese American city councilmembers, barriers still remain as to whether Japanese Americans can become a part of any of ruling coalitions in Gardena politics around the key policy issues. One common explanation offered by the recent group of Japanese American elected officials is the presence of cultural barriers within the Japanese American community. Former Gardena city councilmember Grant Nakaoka believes that Japanese culture inhibits many community members from seeking special interest favors from the Japanese American city council because such behavior is discouraged within traditional Japanese culture as practiced by the older generation (G. Nakaoka, Personal Interview, July 25, 2005). Current Mayor Paul Tanaka, a fourth-generation Japanese American, echoed similar sentiments:

I was not raised by my conservative Japanese American parents to stand out and to challenge the system, but to change it through peaceful ways.... I believe in being a champion of all people, not just the Japanese American community." (P. Tanaka, Personal Interview, July 27, 2005)

Due to such cultural beliefs, many Japanese Americans in Gardena are less likely to organize and lobby city council in favor of such interests. Instead, their impact on the city council agenda has been subtle. Japanese Americans account for nearly one third of the Gardena electorate. The subtle influence of this significant Japanese American voting bloc on city policies can be seen with issues pertaining to the elderly. Gardena currently boasts one of the most comprehensive senior programs among all cities in the South Bay region of Los Angeles County. Much of this can be attributed to the political influence of the growing elderly within the Japanese American community. According to Mayor Tanaka,

In most cities, crime is the top concern among residents with issues regarding the elderly far below. In Gardena, according to one confidential public opinion poll by the city, issues concerning the elderly rank at the top. The influence of the Japanese American community is one of the key reasons why this is the most important issue." (P. Tanaka, Personal Interview, July 27, 2005)

The location and participants of the various citywide senior citizen programs demonstrate the influence of Japanese Americans. For instance, the Gardena Community Action Meal Program offers free daily meals to senior citizens over the age of 60 at the Japanese American Cultural Institute and the Paul Nakaoka Community Center. The Senior Citizens Program, also located in the Nakaoka Community Center, provides daily, monthly, and yearly activities ranging from flu immunizations to a senior health fair. Many of the volunteers and participants are Japanese American.

Education, particularly the public high school system, has not been a major issue for the Japanese American community in Gardena primarily because the city's main high school, Gardena High, is not owned or operated by the city but remains under the control of the Los Angeles Unified School District. As a result, the Gardena city council has been powerless in its ability to address the recent decline of Gardena High and its rising dropout rates. Many Japanese Americans in Gardena have chosen to move away to allow their children to attend better high schools rather than to address the current ills of Gardena High. The flight of younger Japanese American families away from Gardena will likely negatively impact the future growth of the Japanese American community in Gardena and reduce the likelihood of a third generation of Japanese American city councilmembers.

Another reason that may explain the invisibility of the Japanese American influence in key policy areas is that few local issues are specifically defined as Japanese American. This has not been the case at the federal level as seen with the National Redress and Reparations Movement, which began after World War II with the incarceration of Japanese American citizens and would eventually result in the American Civil Liberties Act in 1992. The Japanese American community is one of the most socially and economically assimilated groups among all Asian American ethnic groups, given their long history in the United States. Many of their key issues are often conflated with the mainstream in such areas as education, crime, and employment. As Gary Kohatsu pointed out: "Unless its about tearing down a Japanese American retirement home or a cultural institution, you are not likely to see Japanese Americans organize and try to influence the city council" (G. Kohatsu, Personal Interview, July 25, 2005). Having to contend with such cultural factors, the Japanese American community has

been a less visible partner in the dominant coalitions in Gardena politics, but it does not indicate its lack of influence beyond descriptive representation.

### OAKLAND (CA) CASE STUDY

Unlike the previous case studies, Oakland is a medium-sized urban center of 400,000, not a small suburban city. Yet, unlike in other medium- and large-sized cities in the state, Asian Americans have built and sustained a consistent Asian American presence in local electoral politics since the 1950s, involving both Japanese and Chinese Americans without being a large percentage of the population. The city is an excellent example of the power of using coalition politics. Before the 1960s, Asian Americans in Oakland were a visible minority, but they did not actively pursue local electoral office. The political incorporation of Asian Americans began in the 1960s, with the appointment of Frank Ogawa to the city council in 1966. Ogawa was the first Japanese American to hold office in a major city on the mainland. This was followed by the election of local Democratic Party and education activist March Fong Eu, from the Oakland area, to serve in the California Assembly in 1966. She became the first Asian American woman to hold a seat in the California Assembly and later became Secretary of State.

Chinese Americans began serving on the Oakland City Council in 1967, when Dr. Raymond Eng, a fourth-generation Chinese American, was elected after losing during two previous tries in 1959 and 1963. He remained on the council until 1983. In 1994, Henry Chang was appointed to the council to replace Mr. Ogawa, who passed away after 28 years in office. Before he was appointed to the council, Mr. Chang had a long career in the local business community and as an appointee on various boards and commissions. His strong track record of community service and strong support in the Chinese community enabled him to gain his appointment (H. Chang, Personal Interview, June 15, 2003).

Up to this time, Asian Americans in Oakland followed neither the protest strategy employed by militant African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s nor the electoral strategy to mobilize the group and run candidates for office, as their numbers were small and many could not vote because they were recent immigrants and not citizens. Instead, both councilmembers Ogawa and Chang were first appointed to office and later won their elections as incumbents. Their entryway to electoral office in Oakland via appointment was based on recognition for their civic contributions. Mr. Ogawa was a Republican and was viewed as nonthreatening by the downtown business elites in power during the conservative republican era up to the 1970s. When African Americans became the dominant political force in the 1980s and 1990s, Ogawa was loyal to the two African American mayors and won their endorsements. When Ogawa passed away, Mr. Chang was well positioned for nomination to the council, and afterwards, he became a loyal supporter of Oakland Mayor Elihu Harris.

In addition to the early period when Asian Americans achieved visibility, if not strong descriptive representation, by appointment and reelection to the city council, they also successfully negotiated a change in electoral structure in the 1980s. After many years of complaints by African Americans and others that the at-large election system enabled



control of the city council by a small handful of wealthy, politically influential, incumbents, in 1980, an ad-hoc committee in Oakland launched a petition drive to amend the city charter to provide for district elections. The Committee on District Elections was a coalition of activists from the Black community, labor, liberal Whites, Asians, and Latinos (Oden, 1999). In 1980, Measure H was passed by 62% of the voters and created district elections. In 1983, Eng left the council, but Ogawa remained on as the “at-large” council member. This seat remained an at-large seat, and the other seven council seats were divided into districts. Ogawa served on the council until 1994 and was a loyal supporter of Mayor Lionel Wilson, the first African American mayor, who was first elected in 1977, and his successor, Elihu Harris.

### **POLITICAL INCORPORATION BEYOND DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION: THE 1992-93 REDISTRICTING CAMPAIGN**

By the 1990s, a new energy emerged in the Asian community to achieve electoral success. The Asian community argued that since district elections had been established in Oakland in 1980, the downtown/Chinatown area were divided into several council districts, thus diluting the Asian vote and making it difficult to win election to council. The Oakland Asian American Redistricting Task Force was formed to change the existing district boundaries, based on the 1990 Census, to create a better opportunity to elect an Asian American to the city council. The effort by Asian community activists, who had been active in Chinatown and other Asian community activities for many years, worked on creating a majority Asian American council district that would encompass Chinatown and surrounding neighborhoods, including the East Lake District. The Task Force proposed a district that had more than 50% Asian American population.

After a months-long struggle, with both public and private debate about the district lines, the council voted to create a newly configured district in 1993. The council member who represented Chinatown at the time claimed that the redistricting effort would destroy the district. In the next election for the newly configured District 2 seat in 1994, Lily Hu, a Chinese community activist, who had participated in the redistricting committee, was unsuccessful in her electoral campaign bid. Ms. Hu’s campaign attempted to mobilize Asian American voters; however, while the population of the district was majority Asian, most were noncitizens and could not vote. The voters in the district were overwhelmingly White, and they supported the White candidate for office (L. Hu, Personal Interview, August 18, 2003).

### **SUSTAINING AND BUILDING DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION: MORE ASIAN AMERICANS ELECTED IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

Asian Americans would have to wait until 2000 to add another member to the city council. In 2000, Mayor Jerry Brown appointed Danny Wan from a group of candidates when the District 2 seat opened up. Council member Wan had emigrated from Taiwan and became a schoolteacher and later an attorney with expertise in the public financing of

municipal projects. He previously was elected in 1996 to a seat on the East Bay Municipal Utility District and gained the attention of Brown and other political leaders (D. Wan, Personal Interview, June 8, 2003). District 2 includes Chinatown and the New Chinatown area of East Lake and had an Asian population of almost 40%. Subsequently, Mr. Wan ran unopposed and won reelection in 2002. He, like the other Asian Americans who came before him on the city council, has voted loyally with the dominant majority coalition that governs the city (Gammon, 2005).

In addition to being appointed to the city council by various mayors as Frank Ogawa, Henry Chang, and Danny Wan all did, Councilmember Jean Quan was elected in 2002 from District 4, a mostly affluent part of the city, where Asian Americans are 19% of the district's population. She was the first Asian American woman elected to city office. She defeated a wealthy White male candidate who had the strong backing of Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown and much of the political establishment. Ms. Quan's strong record of labor and community activism, her experience as an Oakland school board member, combined with a well-organized political campaign that involved going door-to-door in the district paid off with a strong electoral showing (J. Quan, Personal Interview, July 10, 2003). Her victory signaled that Asian Americans can run independently, build multiracial campaigns, and be successful in the electoral arena.

The election of three Asian Americans on the eight member city council, in a city with a population of 13% Asians Americans in 2000, could lead to the misinterpretation that Asian Americans have been fully incorporated into local politics.— In addition to the three city council positions, an Asian American, Ted Dang, ran a credible campaign for mayor in 1994. Incorporation involves playing a dominant role in the governing coalition. Asian Americans are partners in the governing coalition. They do not have a well-organized PAC that can endorse and get its candidates elected. Individuals from different backgrounds and political tendencies seek election without a well-coordinated effort by Asians citywide, yet once Asian Americans seek an office, other Asian Americans usually support them, and there have been no bitter contests of Asian Americans running against each other for the same seat.

Asian Americans have also been active in public education for many decades, around Chinatown schools and, more recently, in other educational issues as well. Currently, there are two Asian American elected members among the ten elected to the Oakland School board. David Kakishiba is the representative for District 2, the district that includes Chinatown and the San Antonio communities where a large portion of the ethnic Asian communities live. Also, Henry Yee, of District 5, represents portions of Oakland's hillside communities. Yee has been involved with Oakland public schools since 1973 as a teacher and administrator. Kakishiba is Executive Director of the East Bay Asian Youth Center. The issue of quality education has simmered for many decades in Oakland, and Asian Americans have aggressively sought to address the issue as parents, teachers, and Board of Education members. They have established themselves as vocal leaders in the educational reform movement.

A key leader of the educational rights movement in the 1980s, Assembly member Wilma Chan established her leadership fighting for the rights of Chinese American and other

immigrant parents. She represents a district that includes Oakland and the City of Alameda. She is another example of how Asian Americans have transitioned from educational rights activists into mainstream politicians. After serving for four years on the school board with the strong support of the Chinese and Asian American communities, she won election to a seat on the Alameda County Board of Supervisors in 1994. Her campaign focused on the rights of children and low-income families. She built an effective multiracial coalition to win her supervisor's seat and then expanded this coalition to win Oakland's assembly seat in 2000.

The cadre of elected Asian American officials is an indication of the growing political clout of Asian Americans in Oakland. In no other city on the mainland are Asian Americans elected in such high percentages; yet this in a city where they are a relatively small percentage of the population. Oakland is the third-largest city in the San Francisco Bay Area with fewer Asian Americans and a smaller percentage of the total population than in the larger cities of San Francisco and San Jose. In addition to holding elected office, influential Asian Americans have been appointed to key commission positions, such as local developer Phil Tagami, who has served on both the Planning Commission and the Port of Oakland Commission. Currently there is at least one Asian American on most of the city's boards and commissions, including two members of the Planning Commission, Citizen's Police Review Board, and the Board President of the powerful Port of Oakland Commission. Despite its relatively small population, the diverse Asian American community in Oakland has learned the following: support Asian American candidates and do not run against one another; build ties with others in power, be they White or Black; run electoral campaigns with inclusive themes; and run candidates not viewed as a threat to those with more political clout. By pursuing these strategies, they have been very successful in achieving electoral representation greater than their population numbers and are minor partners in the governing coalition.

### **BARRIERS TO STRONG POLITICAL INCORPORATION**

Despite some electoral successes, Asian Americans still face many political barriers to attaining strong political incorporation, as defined by sustained elected representation, resource allocation, city appointments, and membership in the dominant coalition. This is due in part to appointed Asian American candidates' ties with the governing coalition. They were viewed as acceptable by the ruling political machine of the day, which they have used to gain a seat on the city council three different times since the 1950s, and later were able to translate their incumbency status to win their seats outright in the next election cycle. This does not necessarily translate into sustained political success of the next generation of Asian American elected officials and membership in the dominant coalitions. For example, in early 2005, Danny Wan, resigned from his position as Second District Councilmember and supported his chief of staff, Pat Kernighan, a non-Asian American who was backed by the dominant political establishment and outspent all the other candidates, including David Kakishiba, who finished a strong second, in the special election. This seat is important because it was drawn up in the early 1990s with the highest

percentage of Asian Americans of any council district to enable an Asian American a strong opportunity to win a seat on the council. With the loss of this seat, Asian Americans still hold 2 of 8 seats on the city council, but they have not achieved strong political incorporation in this multiethnic city, and their presence in the governing coalition will continually be contested.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of the Cupertino, Gardena, and Oakland case studies suggest the pathways to descriptive representation among Asian Americans may move more quickly in small- to medium-sized suburban and urban cities than in large urban cities due to the following factors: the presence of a significant Asia American population base, less competition for limited seats compared with larger urban cities, the presence of strong community-based organization networks, a history of strong leadership and ideology within the community, and the ability to build substantial political support within and outside the Asian American community. All three case studies contained all or most of these factors, which have translated to sustained descriptive representation for Asian Americans on the city councils in each city. Such factors help to explain why Asian American candidates have been more successful in these small- to medium-sized suburban and urban cities than in others.

Asian American electoral success in the context of small- to medium-sized suburban and urban cities will likely continue in California politics. Asian American elected officials, as seen in all three case studies, can positively impact group political incorporation through strategic commission appointments and recruiting of future candidates. The important role of the education field as a training ground for past and current Asian American city councilmembers will also contribute to future electoral success. Current examples are Kris Wang (Cupertino) and Jean Quan (Oakland), whose respective experiences on school boards have allowed them to pursue other elected positions. However, if Asian Americans are to attain strong political incorporation (i.e., substantive authority and influence beyond descriptive representation), various barriers within and outside of their communities need to be addressed.

Barriers to strong political incorporation were present in all three cases due to two factors. First, the respective Asian American communities in all three cases experienced different rates of political incorporation, mainly due to uneven political development and acculturation. In Gardena, the Japanese American community is most politically established and acculturated, having flourished since the post-World War II period, which allowed for the emergence of mainstream second-generation Japanese American candidates such as Mas Fukai and Paul Bannai during the 1960s. These political mavericks served as important role models for the current group of Japanese American city councilmembers. In contrast, the Chinese and Taiwanese American communities in Cupertino and Oakland reflect the contemporary trajectory of Asian American politics, one that is predominantly recent and foreign-born. As a result, the Cupertino and Oakland Asian American communities have experienced neither the same length of political

success nor the same degree of political acculturation as the Japanese American community in Gardena. This has contributed to the variance in political incorporation among the case studies. Second, as a result of this uneven political development, lack of organized economic and political special interests within more recent Asian American communities has limited their ability to compete with other special interests that form the dominant coalitions in the economic arena. The creation of Asian American community-based political institutions, such as the APASVDC in Cupertino, that seek both pan-Asian and cross-racial alliances represent attempts to address this barrier.

The political influence of Asian Americans in California local politics will take the greatest shape in small- to medium-sized suburban and urban cities. The political incorporation of Asian Americans will increase in such local contexts as their communities continue to grow and be fueled by good schools, economic opportunities, and safe communities. Whether Asian Americans can overcome various political barriers and parlay these numbers into the strong political incorporation at the local level remains to be seen, but it is certain that they are an emerging political player to be reckoned with.

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## NOTES

- 1 Asian Americans currently serving in the California State Assembly are the following: Wilma Chan (District 16), Judy Chu (District 49), Shirley Horton (District 78), Carol Liu (District 44), Alan Nakanishi (District 10), Alberto Torrico (District 20), Van Tran (District 68), and Leland Yee (District 12).



- 2 The 2005-06 *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*, Twelfth Edition, found a grand total of 123 Asian American city councilmembers among the following states (totals): California (68), Hawaii (21), Washington (8), Massachusetts (4), Alaska (2), Illinois (1), Michigan (10), New Jersey (7), New York (2), Texas (4), Utah (3), Louisiana (2), Connecticut (2), Virginia (1), Colorado (1), Arizona (1), Alabama (1), Illinois (1), Rhode Island (1), and Wisconsin (1).
- 3 During 2003, a total of 56 Asian Americans served on various city councils throughout California (2003-04 *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*) as councilmembers, mayors, or vice mayors. In comparison with the previous decade, during 1996, a total of 35 Asian Americans served on various city councils in California (Lai, 1996) in similar positions.
- 4 For over 150 years, Asian Americans, similar to other racial minorities, have struggled for basic civil rights and protections that represent full democratic inclusion in the United States. The political experiences of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Asian Americans in the United States limited their political participation as naturalized citizens due to discriminatory federal immigration and naturalization policies (Aoki & Nakanishi, 2001). The passage of the McCarran-Walter Act in 1952 ended nearly thirty years of blanket exclusion of Asian immigration to the United States by instituting a formal quota system and allowing Asian Americans to become naturalized U.S. citizens (Chan, 1991). The turning point for Asian American political participation in American politics occurred in 1965 with passage of the 1965 Immigration Act by the U.S. Congress. The 1965 Immigration Act was an amendment to the McCarran-Walter Act and finally placed Asian immigration on equal footing with European immigration by allowing an annual quota of 20,000 visas per Asian country (Chan, 1991). As a result, its lasting significance was that it created significant Asian American communities as families arrived together, which paved the way for future generations. Since 1965 to the present, Asian Americans have become one of the fastest growing and most ethnically heterogeneous racial groups in the United States. Currently, the U.S. census category "Asian" and "Pacific Islander" consists of over 25 ethnic groups, with different social, economic, and political backgrounds from their respective homelands. With this growth and diversity comes both political promise and challenges in American politics. A majority of the Asian American population is foreign-born and young, aside from ethnic differences, which poses new political challenges that will determine whether Asian Americans can become influential political players in California state and local politics.
- 5 For our study, we define *medium-sized* cities as those with a total population over 100,000 and *small-sized* cities as those with a total population of 20,000 to 100,000.
- 6 One major barrier to sustained Asian American elected representation in larger cities is the utilization of district election systems in cities that are divided into several geographic districts. Four of the largest cities in California (Los Angeles, San Diego, San Jose, and San Francisco) implement district elections for their respective city

council seats, and Asian Americans have struggled in all four cities to gain descriptive representation on their respective city councils. One of the most formidable obstacles for Asian American candidates in many of these large cities, as seen with Los Angeles, is that the Asian American population is not concentrated in sufficient numbers within a single geographic district to win a council seat (Sonenshein, 2005).

- 7 Asian American majority cities are a recent phenomenon on the continental United States. California is the only state in the continental United States that contains cities where the Asian American population accounts for either a majority or a plurality. During the 1970s, no U.S. continental city contained a majority Asian American population base. A decade later, during the 1980s, one exception was Monterey Park, a city located in the San Gabriel Valley region of Los Angeles County and labeled the first "suburban Chinatown" (Fong, 1994). Since the 1980s, Asian Americans in Monterey Park have enjoyed strong descriptive representation (Saito, 1998b). All of these six cities are considered small in population size, the largest one being Daly City with a population size of slightly over 100,000. In such cities, Asian Americans, both immigrant and U.S.-born, are beginning to reshape local government functions ranging from the need for increased Asian American descriptive representation to government responsiveness in areas such as bilingual voting materials, police enforcement, and public programs and services (Lewis & Ramakrishnan, 2004).
- 8 It is important to note that each of these elected positions has different political processes and is by no means the same as any other. For instance, a larger number of school board seats typically exists compared with the number of city councilmember seats, and often school districts span more than one city. In comparison, individuals who are appointed to city commissions must undergo a rigorous interview process by the city council and mayor. The nuances of how Asian Americans have attained such citywide positions should not be generalized, as they require different strategies.
- 9 Oakland, a medium-sized city, contains a population of approximately 400,000 (U.S. Census, 2000), while Cupertino and Gardena, both small-sized cities, contain populations of approximately 51,000 and 57,000, respectively.
- 10 In 2003, there were 35 Asian American elected officials in Santa Clara County (23 School Board Trustees, 2 Community College Trustees, 3 County Board of Trustees, 4 City Council members, 2 City Mayors, and 1 Congressional Representative). Among these, 10 Asian American elected officials were in Cupertino (5 School Board Trustees, 1 Congressional Representative, 1 Community College Trustee, 1 County Board of Trustees, 1 City Councilmember, and 1 City Mayor).
- 11 An example of racial tension occurred during one 2003 Cupertino city council meeting discussion of a city building being named after an Asian donor, Cupertino Vice Mayor Sandra James, a Caucasian, exacerbated this tension by asking, "Who are these people?" Regardless of James' intention, for Asian American community activists and council representatives, this seemingly innocuous question spurred deep

feelings that underlie the racial tensions felt during Cupertino's rapid transformation of a U.S. mainland city. James would not apologize for her comments despite pressure from Asian American community groups and from others such as the California Democratic Party (Corcoran, 2003).

- 12 The trajectory of Kris Wang's political career is exemplary of many Asian American immigrants who enter into public office through the education sector. After arriving in San Jose from Taiwan in 1980 with \$300 in savings, Wang first became active in Cupertino politics after being encouraged by then Cupertino city councilmember Michael Chang to seek an appointment to the Cupertino City Parks and Recreation commission, which provided her the important experience and public exposure on a high-profile city commission.