

## "Asian Americans and American Politics: From Discrimination to Participation"

By Carmencita-Mia Q. Fulgado

If the Asian American is to live in a very complex America and an even more complex world, and if he is to be able to assert his own humanity in these spheres, he must know his own cultural history as an Asian American. -- An Asian American student, 1968 (Wei 44)

Racial and ethnic identity will always be a challenging issue, especially in American society. I have often wondered while filling out forms and applications which category most appropriately represents my background - Am I "Asian American" or "Asian Pacific Islander?" I have concluded that the best choice is "Other" and a blank line that allows me to write specifically: "Filipino American." I contemplate my identity as an Asian American to illustrate the importance of racial and/or ethnic identification with respect to politics and how racial discrimination is a significant barrier to political participation.

The term *Asian American* refers to American-born Asians and to post-1965 arrivals, most of whom come to this country with the intention of settling permanently (*Espiritu xi*). Prior to this period, Asians can be referred to as immigrants. The terms *Asian American* and *Asian Pacific American* are also terms that derived by the use of government agencies for their administrative convenience. What does it mean to be Asian American? More importantly, what does it mean to be an American? The ability of immigrants from Asia to participate as equals in American society has been affected by the varying definitions of who is an American. Being an American can range from terms concerning race, nationality and country of origin, or by religion and culture. Being an American can also be defined on the basis of a belief in the American democratic system. For Asian immigrants, if becoming an American means full acceptance and the chance for equal participation in the mainstream, most immigrants would want to become an American. Yet some immigrants might be less enthusiastic if becoming an American means giving up one's cultural heritage in order to participate in the mainstream. And certainly many immigrants would not wish to become American if it means domination and acting in a second-class role.

Asian Americans are often referred to as the *model minority* and the *forgotten minority*. Why explore such concepts of Asian Americans? It is meant to provide a starting point towards analyzing the many barriers to political participation for Asian Americans. The ability to have a say in the workings of government, either as an elected official or as a voter, is a powerful empowerment tool fostered by American society. Asian Americans are the fastest growing ethnic population in the United States, yet the community's political strength has yet to be fully realized. According to the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) (*AALDEF, Voting*) in New York, which boasts the nation's second largest Asian population at more than 800,000, there has never been an Asian American elected to city-wide, state-wide, or national office. This is a startling and perilous fact. The stereotype of Asian Americans as a *model minority* has obscured the continuing barriers that prevent Asian Americans from participating effectively as candidates or as voters.

According to Henry H.L. Kitano and Roger Daniels in their study of Asian Americans as an "emerging minority," some Asians prefer to retain their strong ethnic ties, and hence their definition of being American is based on a *pluralistic model* (Kitano & Daniels 5). Asians may see themselves primarily as Asians, believing that the meaning of America lies in its recognition of diversity. Others may feel that America will never accept people of color as equals and thus, may prefer to live their lives within ethnic boundaries. Nevertheless, these various definitions are not static. American society is and has been experiencing numerous changes that deal with the issues of the Asian American minority.

In his analysis of the Asian American Movement, William Wei postulates that Asian Americans are perceived with different images, from being seen as foreigners (physically and culturally) whose issues and concerns are therefore irrelevant to the rest of society, to being viewed as America's *model minority* (Wei 4). Wei suggests that the "concept of *Asian American* implies that there can be a communal consciousness and a unique culture that is neither Asian nor American, but Asian American. In defining their own identity

and culture, Asian Americans bring together previously isolated and ineffective struggles against the oppression of Asian communities into a coherent pan-Asian movement for social change" (Wei 1). The image of the *model minority* stereotype suggests the idea of a group that has successfully integrated into American society despite seemingly insurmountable racial barriers. Asian Americans are more adept than other people of color at "making it" in mainstream society.

According to Gordon H. Chang's study of Asian Americans and politics, since the mid- 1960s, Asian Americans have been widely "valorized" relative to blacks via the *model minority* myth:

The often explicit suggestion is that blacks failed in American society because of their own deficiencies: after all, if Asian Americans can make it why can't blacks? [...] Yet the model minority does not claim that Asian Americans are culturally assimilated into white society: instead it posits their material success and attributes this to their ongoing cultural distinctiveness. It also suggests that Asian Americans are too busy getting ahead and making money to worry about politics, thus echoing the old trope of Asian American apoliticalness. (Chang 54)

Chang argues that the *model minority* myth has led Asian Americans to become culturally distinct from other minority groups, specifically African-Americans. Asian Americans are revered as diligent, disciplined, having strong family values, and having respect for authority and for education. Such characteristics are what define the *model minority*. Yet despite the role Asians held as virtuous laborers in the mid-late-nineteenth century, Asians were viewed to be culturally "unassimilable" into "white society." Therefore, as Asian Americans finally gained what Chang refers to as "relative valorization" (cultural recognition) they became ostracized from civic participation. Asian Americans became more concerned with maintaining economic stability and focused on "getting ahead" in America. For Asian Americans, political participation was not perceived as important as making money.

Specifically in the New York City area, Asian Americans are known as the *forgotten minority*. The New York State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights prepared a report (November 1977) on Asian Americans in New York City, entitled *The Forgotten Minority*. The report illustrates that Asian Americans have lived up to the *model minority* stereotype in that they are representative of a minority that has been able to assimilate into American society despite historical barriers (New York State 1). Asian Americans in New York City, however, also suffer much of the social deprivation and economic discrimination experienced by other minority Americans. Often their struggle has been ignored by Federal, State, and local agencies responsible for providing services to all Americans.

American history illustrates the many barriers to political participation for Asian Americans. Nonetheless, several measures have been taken to develop political activity among the growing minority. The political scope of New York, for example, has experienced changes in its electoral process to provide better opportunities for Asian American civic life. Analyzing such changes help determine the growing trends of Asian American political life in the New York City area for the new millennium.

Discrimination against Asians has been evident from the very early years of their migration to America. For instance, in the mid-nineteenth century (1840s-1870s) there was no formal immigration policy - anyone willing to work was welcome. Chinese laborers filled a critical labor gap, working the mines and building the railroads, but when their labor was no longer needed, their race and nationality became an issue (Kitano & Daniels 4). In 1882, Chinese laborers were no longer allowed to immigrate to this country. Race and nationality as criteria for becoming "American" were reinforced in 1917 and 1924, when immigration policy extended discrimination to almost all "Orientals" as they were known during that time period.

Evidently, immigration has been one major issue behind the American history of the barriers to Asian American political participation. Words and phrases such as "yellow hordes," "pagans," and "unassimilable" were indicative of majority group feelings against immigrants from across the Pacific, and these prejudices led to anti-Asian legislation (12). Angelo N. Ancheta examines the racial subordination of Asian Americans: "Anti-Asian sentiment engendered anti-Asian laws. The legal subordination of Asian

Americans on the West Coast paralleled the treatment of African Americans in the following Reconstruction: segregation was sanctioned and discriminatory laws abounded at all levels of government" (Ancheta 22). Legalization discrimination took many forms, but immigration and naturalization legislation was especially critical.

Asians in America have been a disenfranchised group throughout most of their history. Anti-Asian laws came in three forms: (1) federal naturalization laws that imposed a racial barrier on Asian immigrants seeking United States citizenship; (2) federal immigration laws limiting migration from Asian and Pacific Island countries; (3) state and local laws discriminating against Asians, often based on their ineligibility for citizenship (Ancheta 22). Asian Americans have been disenfranchised by discriminatory laws that denied citizenship to Asian immigrants and rendered them ineligible to vote. It was not until 1943 that Chinese Americans were first permitted to become citizens; for Asian Indians, it was 1946. For Japanese Americans and other Asian Americans, that right did not come until 1952. The legacy of these discriminatory policies and the notion of Asian Americans as foreigners is still strongly felt today, impeding the Asian American political participation.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s exposed the pervasive problem of racism in American society and raised questions about exactly how democratic the nation's system was. It was during this time of political upheaval that members of the various Asian ethnic groups decided to band together and act politically. Thus, the Asian American Movement was born. The Asian American Movement along with the implementation of the 1965 Immigration Act helped the Asian community overcome the historical and political barriers to civic participation. The Movement, as it was popularly called, was primarily the result of the convergence of two historical developments: (1) the emergence of a generation of college-age Asian Americans and (2) the public protests surrounding the Vietnam War (Wei 1). The Movement organized and enticed Asian Americans to contemplate their identity and culture as being an *Asian American*. In order to assert one's constitutional rights he/she is entitled to as an American, one must also know his/her cultural history.

During the period of the Asian American Movement, several acts were passed and adopted that prohibited discrimination against minorities. The Immigration Act of October 3, 1965 abolished the national origins quota system, removing discriminatory restrictions on Asian immigration to the United States (Wei 30). The 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act prohibited discrimination in voting, education, employment, and public facilities and gave the federal government the power to enforce desegregation by denying federal funds to segregated schools and programs (Wei 12). Thus, as the voices and concerns of Asian Americans were being more and more articulated during the Movement, legislation changed and provided for more active political participation from the growing minority. The changes in law have changed the composition of the nation's immigrant population, yet it has also started to break down the barriers to political participation for Asian Americans.

Do the Asian Americans have a promising future of civic life in New York City? To put it simply, yes. With the success of the Asian American Movement of the 1960s and the continuous growing population of Asians in New York, Asian Americans have the potential of making a political impact. Asian Americans, although often stereotyped as the "successful model-minority," "the most silent minority," and "the quiet Americans," need to become a "recognized minority." As Asian Americans prepare for the 21st century, the minority must focus on building community empowerment.

The greatest needs within the Asian American community are to build awareness of the importance of civic participation and to increase voter registration. Statistics show that Asian Americans, once registered to vote, are among the most active and engaged in the country. The Current Population Survey of 1994 shows that 76% of registered Asian American voters voted in the 1994 elections (Jo 2, 7). The percentage of the population registered to vote, however, remains among the lowest of all ethnic groups. Nationwide, half of eligible Asian Americans (53%) are registered to vote. In New York City, for example, only slightly higher than 1 in 5 eligible Asian Americans is registered to vote (AALDEF, *Voting*).

Whether by playing an active role in the so-called redistricting process, or advocating the proportional system of voting, Asian Americans can strengthen civic clout. Nevertheless, Asian Americans need to be informed about voting issues. The dawning of this new millennium hold great significance for the political participation of Asian Americans and all Americans for that matter. According to the AALDEF, there are three vital actions that must be taken for increased political involvement in the Asian American community: (1) more voter registration, (2) reaching out to the Asian American population...promoting awareness, and (3) fostering community involvement...volunteering for national, state, local campaigns (AALDEF, *Voting*).

Along with building community empowerment Asian Americans must also find resolutions to the recent voting problems. The recent "Asian American Exit Poll Preliminary Results" released by the AALDEF indicates the several problems Asian Americans faced at the voting polls (AALDEF, "Asian"). For example, about 250 voters reported that they were asked to show identification. About 150 voters reported that their name was not listed in the book of registered voters. About 150 voters reported that they had to vote by paper ballot. More than three dozen voters reported that poll workers were hostile to them. A few voters reported that the translation given to them was poor or biased. Such problems at the voting site are current barriers to political participation for Asian Americans, but with the help of organizations like the AALDEF that provide this information to the general public, the proper steps can be taken to alleviate the problems.

Asian Americans have experienced much racial subjugation and discrimination. Anti-Asian laws and exclusionary laws prevented Asians from immigrating to the United States and prohibited them from citizenship. Asian Americans have often been viewed as foreigners in their own country (America). Yet they are also seen as the *model minority* in that they have overcome hardships through their constant diligence and persevering work ethic. Asian American studies indicate that one factor which has been viewed as hindering to some Asian Americans (Korean and Chinese) from participating fully in American politics is their overwhelming concern with "homeland politics," a concern which has directed them away from issues pertinent to their lives in the United States (Jo 2).

Despite these barriers, Asian Americans have been able to organize themselves politically. The emergence of the Asian American Movement was a watershed in the history of Asians in America. It was and remains a viable means to [politically] empower Asians in America by redefining them as Asian Americans and organizing them into an inter-Asian coalition to raise their socio-historical status and to improve their lives (Wei 271). And at the heart of the Movement was the city of New York with its Asian American college students and activists protesting for political empowerment.

What is political empowerment? It is the ability to invest one's strength to gaining power. It is the capacity in which one exercises his or her fundamental constitutional rights. Political empowerment for Asian Americans can only be fostered through awareness and involvement. Whether it was by political demonstrations, rallies, or finally landmark Supreme Court cases, Asian Americans empowered themselves by voicing their concerns.

Even after the Movement, Asian Americans are a dramatically growing population in New York and with numbers comes power, yet only if those numbers are organized. Thus, the importance of voting rights and systems came into existence. In order to accommodate the Asian Americans, "majority-minority" initiatives were implemented. Even though the method of redistricting did not prove to be as successful as hoped, and whether or not the proportional system of voting will take place in New York city council elections, such advancements are a good indication that Asian American political involvement will continue on a positive trend.

#### Works Consulted

Ancheta, Angelo N. *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience*. New Jersey: Rutgers University, 1998.

Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund. *AALDEF's APA 2000: Voting Rights and Building Community Empowerment*. <http://www.aaldef.org> 2001.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Asian American Exit Poll Preliminary Results." Media Release: Sept. 27, 2001.

Center for Voting and Democracy. Asian American Policy Review. *New Means for Political Empowerment in the Asian Pacific Community*. Spring 2001 and *Voting Rights* <http://www.fairvote.org/op-eds/asianpolicy.htm>

Chang, Gordon H., Ed. *Asian Americans and Politics: Perspectives, Experiences, Prospects*. California: Stanford University Press, 2001.

Espiritu, Yen Le. *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992.

Jo, Yun-Hwan, Ed. *Political Participation of Asian Americans: Problems and Strategies*. Occasional Paper Series, No. 6. Pacific/Asian American Health Research Center, 1980.

Kitano, Harry H.L. and Roger Daniels. *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities, Second Ed.*

New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995.

Nakanishi, Don T. "Asian American Politics: An Agenda for Research." *Amerasia* 12:2, 1985- 1986 in Franklin Ng's *Asians in America: Asian American Interethnic Relations and Politics*. Vol.5 New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998.

New York State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights. *The Forgotten Minority: Asian Americans in New York City*. New York: GPO, 1977.

Saito, Leland T. "Asian Americans and Multiracial Political Coalitions: New York City's Chinatown and Redistricting, 1990-1991" in Gordon H. Chang's *Asian Americans and Politics: Perspectives, Experiences, Prospects*.

Wei, William. *The Asian American Movement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.