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# Introduction

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The United States is a nation of immigrants and suburbs. Every American can trace ancestral roots to an immigrant, and nearly one in two Americans today lives in some type of suburb (Oliver and Ha 2007). Over the past three decades, Asian American immigrants have circumvented the traditional twentieth-century gateways or large metropolises, such as Los Angeles and New York City, for new twenty-first-century gateways embodied in the form of small- to medium-sized suburbs (Li and Skop 2004; Massey 2008; Singer, Hardwick, and Brettell 2008). Such direct migration into small- and medium-sized suburbs is dramatically changing both the demographic and political characteristics of the respective local communities that Asian Americans have chosen to make their new home. Given this trend, I would be remiss to discuss contemporary immigrant politics without focusing on the local context of immigrant-influenced suburbs.

Political scholars have largely ignored the recent immigration trends to the suburbs when discussing immigrant political incorporation by focusing mainly on immigrant communities in large cities. These cities were the primary entryway for a majority of Asian American immigrants arriving in the United States before the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Since this period, however, significant percentages of Asian American immigrants have moved directly to the suburbs due to the quota preferences given to those with high education and wealthy backgrounds as opposed to only those with working-class backgrounds.

The configuration of the Asian American community has been created and re-created through immigration policy since the early twentieth century. Asian Americans, perhaps more than any other racial group, benefited most from the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 because it finally allowed them to immigrate to the United States en masse with families and to sustain a future

## 2 *Asian American Political Action*

generation after over forty years of racial exclusion dating back to the National Origins Act of 1924 (Chan 1991). Since 1965, Asian Americans have become one of the fastest-growing racial groups throughout the continental United States.

Map 1 illustrates the percentage of the Asian American population in each state and the rapid geographic dispersion of this community throughout the nation. While Hawaii and California respectively contain the largest Asian American populations at 42.8 percent and 12.1 percent, they are by no means alone. Tremendous demographic growth for Asian Americans has occurred in states located in major regions throughout the continental United States, such as Maryland, Virginia, Texas, New Jersey, and Illinois, states that have all seen double-digit growth of their respective Asian American communities from the previous decennial census.

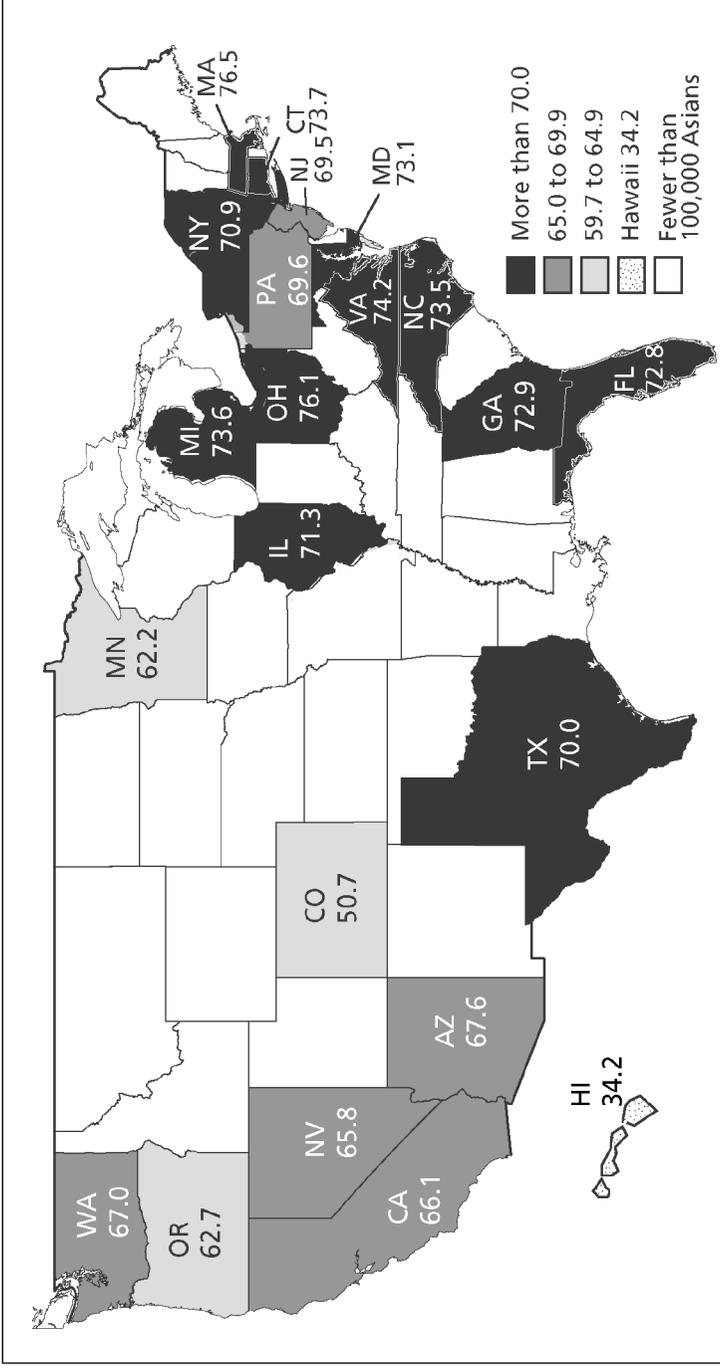
The national geographic distribution of Asian Americans by states is due to the socioeconomic stratifications in their respective ethnic community settlement patterns. For example, while an overwhelming majority of foreign- and native-born Japanese and Filipino Americans choose to settle exclusively on the West Coast, a majority of the Southeast Asian refugee groups, such as the Hmong and Cambodian Americans, are located in the Midwest and the eastern states. Many of these emerging Asian American communities east of California are challenging traditional black and white race relations in their respective regions and cities.

As illustrated in Map 2, a clear majority of the Asian American populations by state are foreign-born or first-generation immigrants. In 2006, approximately 70 percent of the national Asian American population was foreign born, with a majority having been in the United States for less than thirty years. In all of these states, many immigrants have directly entered suburbs where Asian American immigrant social and economic networks exist through the process known as “gravitational migration.” Asian American immigrants often do not randomly choose the suburbs they live in, unlike their refugee counterparts, who are typically sponsored by local churches and organizations in various suburbs throughout the nation.

Immigration undoubtedly continues to fuel the growth of the Asian American community today. In 2008, the national Asian American community reached over 14 million, or 5 percent of the nation’s population, the largest percentage growth from the previous decennial census for any racial group in the country. During the period 2004 and 2005, more than half (52 percent) of the national Asian American population growth was due to new immigrants (Kelly 2010). Many of these immigrants have a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, from the highly educated to political refugees, all of whom have been vetted through a series of seven hierarchical preferences (Chan 1991). As a result of international economic restructuring, which facilitates the movement of transnational capital and skilled laborers, many Asian immigrants are



Map 2 Asian American Foreign-Born Household Populations by States, US Census 2004



Source: Lai, James S., and Don T. Nakanishi, eds. 2007. *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Asian American Studies Press, p. 60.

recruited to work in high-tech regions such as Silicon Valley in the Bay Area of Northern California, which currently contains two Asian American majority cities, Milpitas and Cupertino, according to US Census 2010 projections (Li and Skop 2004).

The results of such transnational movements have been major demographic growth in cities throughout California, where Asian Americans account for nearly 5 million of the state's total population (US Census 2004). In particular, Asian Americans are migrating in significant numbers to small- to medium-sized suburbs throughout Northern and Southern California. This effectively is transforming them from mostly white suburbs to Asian American majority and plurality suburbs and, in the process, changing both the demographic and political cultures of these cities.

Twentieth-century gateway cities still remain viable destinations and significant centers for recent Asian immigrant community formation, but this trend is not as large as it was several decades ago. For example, from 2000 to 2004, fewer than half (47 percent) of the Asian American population gains occurred in large cities compared to 53 percent during the 1990s (Li and Skop 2004). The significance of this trend is that suburbs are becoming the primary destination for both foreign- and US-born Asian Americans. According to one study, class issues have less effect on suburban settlement patterns among Asian Americans than in large cities. More affluent Asian immigrants choose to move directly to the suburbs as opposed to large cities because of their desire and ability to pay for newer homes in safer neighborhoods with better public schools, which are all factors that attract residents. Less affluent Asian American immigrants also choose to live in the outer rings of these small- to medium-sized suburbs in rental homes or apartments in order to have access to such public amenities, particularly the public school systems along with the emerging ethnic resources and networks (Li and Skop 2004).

### **New Asian American Community Formation Patterns, Pre-1965 vs. Post-1965**

Small- to medium-sized (30,000 to 110,000 in total population) cities with significant Asian American populations defy the common stereotype of suburbs as mostly containing white populations as attributed to their flight away from metropolises. These Asian-influenced suburbs are also changing the traditional notions of Asian enclaves in large cities with regard to their demographic makeup due to ethnic clustering. Whereas the pre-1965 Asian enclaves composed of Chinatowns, Little Tokyos, and Manila Towns were monoethnic, self-contained urban ghettos, the post-1965 Asian American suburbs tend to be multiethnic and open to attract a diverse representation of Asian immigrants ranging from skill-based preferences to refugee resettlement. Subsequently, this has resulted

in unique Asian American community formations and institutional development. With regard to the latter, the emergence of the ethnic media in print and electronic forms has rapidly developed in these small- to medium-sized suburbs that cater to the ethnic markets that are bilingual and transnational in character.

The demographic shifts of Asian American suburbs are only part of a larger picture because they have also served as the primary sites for their political incorporation. In the book, I examine how Asian American immigrants in ten suburb case studies are winning and sustaining elected representation in local governments throughout the nation, which is an important litmus test for measuring a group's political incorporation and power. Asian Americans have not demonstrated this measure of political power at any level in American politics until recently in these Transformed suburbs, which have two classifications, Types I and II. Transformed I suburbs are defined as large Asian American–populated cities where Asian Americans comprise 30 percent or more of the total city population, and Transformed II suburbs are small- to medium-sized Asian American–populated cities where Asian Americans comprise less than 30 percent of the total city population. Both Transformed I and II suburbs have attained medium to strong political incorporation that begins with descriptive, or racial and ethnic, representation that is facilitated by the development of key Asian American political loci (see Chapter 2, Table 2.1).

Unlike in large cities with significant Asian American populations, Asian-influenced suburbs throughout California and other states have witnessed



**New Asian American Community Formation Patterns,  
Pre-1965 vs. Post-1965**

On the left, San Francisco's Chinatown, established in the 1840s, is the oldest urban Chinatown in North America. On the right, an Asian megamall in the suburb of Milpitas, California, in the Silicon Valley (photos courtesy of the author).

heightened political mobilization efforts, which have yielded some unprecedented political gains for their respective Asian American communities. Such political gains are sometimes met with resistance from the outgoing demographic majority in these suburbs, and can result in what is termed “tipping point” politics in the form of voter mobilization and retrenchment against Asian American candidates at the voting booth. As newly forming Asian American majorities in these suburbs take shape, it is understandable that such resistance will occur among the outgoing majority, particularly if the latter perceives the former as gaining political power too fast. Tipping point politics is evident in two of the Asian American–influenced suburbs that I examined (Cupertino, California, and Sugar Land, Texas), but remains a cautionary tale for all suburbs that are following similar demographic and political trajectories.

Asian American political incorporation in many of these Asian-influenced suburbs have extended beyond traditional political behaviors such as naturalizing and voting to include latter forms of political behavior, such as running for political office and participating in the making of public policies. The fruits of such local political incorporation efforts in the suburbs have challenged previous political behavior studies in American politics that suggest it takes decades for immigrant groups to become active in politics (Parenti 1967). Instead, it is often first-generation Asian Americans who are the political pioneers in their respective suburbs to run for elected office and mobilize both new and old voters and contributors into the political process along the way.

The political incorporation of Asian Americans in these suburbs does not occur overnight. It is the result of the conflation of the following community factors: substantial demographic shifts over a period of time, the development of Asian American political loci that serve multifaceted roles in the community, and the rise of Asian American candidates. In Chapters 5 through 13, maps are provided to capture these dramatic demographic shifts. Data from the 2000 US Census are used as the source for these maps; only the decennial census contains data for Asian American (racial and ethnic) populations as a percentage of the total population at the census tract level, which are reflected in the maps. Political incorporation begins with gaining Asian American elected representation at the local level, a litmus test for whether Asian Americans are becoming full partners in the democratic and decisionmaking processes in their communities. Central to their local political mobilization efforts are the multiple political loci in the Asian American community that are involved during group political mobilization in suburbs around Asian American candidates’ campaigns, which I conceptualize and discuss in Chapter 2. I describe the unique challenges faced in attaining full or strong political incorporation in Asian-influenced suburbs in each of the ten case studies, which reveal both unique and similar internal and external factors.

A large foreign-born population has not completely impeded Asian American political mobilization and incorporation efforts in the suburbs. Newly

emerging immigrant groups, along with the US born, have begun to make significant inroads into American politics similar to other minority groups before them. The prior perception of immigrant political behavior was that it was limited to early forms of political incorporation such as US naturalization, campaign contributions, and voting. Subsequent stages of political incorporation such as running for elected positions in local government were reserved for later generations because the immigrant generation either had been interested only in homeland politics or discouraged from participating fully in the political process in its respective homeland, which impeded its participation in American politics. Despite this common narrative, my findings illustrate otherwise.

Location is critical to understanding how Asian American group political mobilization and incorporation are taking shape and most likely to occur. African Americans and Mexican Americans have attained and sustained numerical gains in local and statewide descriptive representatives in both urban and rural contexts. But in contrast, Asian Americans are now demonstrating their ability to maintain and replicate political power in the form of racial and ethnic representatives in local governments to the point where they have attained majority representation within these suburbs. It is this ability to sustain political power that has eluded Asian Americans until recently within the context of small- to medium-sized suburbs, as I will demonstrate in the ten case studies in the book.

The respective histories of Asian American political mobilization and incorporation in these emerging suburbs are distinct. Each contains different Asian American communities, organizations, and political ideologies that have come to symbolize the complexities of this racial group. The development of these political factors that facilitate Asian American political action varies by suburbs, which explains the differences in chapter lengths for those suburbs that are much further along this political trajectory, such as Cupertino (Chapter 5), Garden Grove/Westminster (Chapter 6), and Bellevue (Chapter 10) than in suburbs such as Daly City (Chapter 11) and Fitchburg (Chapter 13). I carefully examine each separate case study to reveal the common and distinct political potentials and challenges of Asian Americans within a theoretical framework of group political mobilization. This framework is nuanced toward understanding Asian American politics in the suburban context due to the different stages of development of Asian American political loci. Only through such a theoretical approach can we understand why the level of Asian American political incorporation in these suburbs varies by city.

While each of the ten suburb cases in this book must be examined separately, comparative analyses can also reveal important insights. Each of the ten suburbs shows many similarities and differences of Asian American political incorporation in local government. Similarities include the incredible dedication of Asian American individual leaders and community groups in achieving this goal. Differences include internal Asian American ethnic group characteristics that may serve as an impediment to local political incorporation.

Despite these similarities and differences, an overwhelming number of Asian American candidates and elected officials whom I interviewed reiterated a common theme as to why they decided to run for local office in their respective suburbs. This theme is the necessity of giving back to the community and country that have given so much to them. This central message is at the heart of the book. Therefore, political incorporation efforts in such suburbs by Asian American groups are not an attempt to empower for group self-interest. Instead, the goal is to transform the local civic institutions so that they will mirror the changing constituency in the form of redistributing substantive policies such as public hiring, better schools, and community redevelopment in order to reflect its evolving needs. It is an effort to rectify the disconnection between the changing demographics of the general community and its elected representatives.

Achieving descriptive representation requires nuanced strategies by Asian American candidates for coalition building across racial lines. In order for Asian American candidates to construct winning local political coalitions in multi-racial and ethnic suburbs that reflect these demographic shifts, the following factors must be present within the Asian American community: (1) strong leadership, (2) a unifying political ideology that transcends ethnic interests in favor of racial interests, and (3) a mobilization of developed political loci (e.g., community-based organizations, ethnic media) around the campaigns. These factors of Asian American political incorporation in the suburbs shed light on the understanding of the future trajectory of how successful multiracial coalitions that contain both racial minorities and whites can be constructed and maintained in minority-majority cities and states. As previous studies note, political incorporation is not the end goal, but the beginning, as progressive minority-led regimes must avoid focusing on zero-sum-game politics and instead focus on broader issues that resonate with the broader community to allow minority issues to make their way onto local, state, and national agendas (Hochschild and Rogers 2000). The result for Asian Americans has been a level of group political mobilization and incorporation in local and state politics not experienced before in American politics.