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Asians Flex Muscles in California Politics

By CINDY CHANG
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Correction Appended

LOS ANGELES, Feb. 26 — When Leland Yee ran for the San Francisco school board in 1986, Asian-American elected officials in [California](#) were rare and misconceptions about them rampant. Mr. Yee, who immigrated from China at age 3 and has a doctorate in child psychology, recalled that some people at the time wondered if he knew how to speak English properly.



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

State Senator Leland Yee is among a growing number of Asian-American public officials in California. At a State of the State speech by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Mr. Yee spoke with Senator Mark Ridley-Thomas.

Mr. Yee won that election and went on to serve four years in the State Assembly before being elected in November to the State Senate. He is California's first Asian-American senator in more than 30 years, and its first of Chinese descent.

California's 4.4 million Asians constitute the state's second-largest ethnic minority group (after Latinos) and the largest Asian population in the country, but they have been underrepresented in elected office. Now they are moving beyond fund-raising, where they have long been a

force, to elect representatives of their own.

Last year for the first time, Asian candidates across the state were supported by a major political action committee, the Asian American Small Business P.A.C. In addition, the California Asian Pacific Islander Legislative Caucus, a coalition of Democratic legislators of Asian ancestry, helped organize crews of bilingual volunteers to knock on doors and make sure Asian voters made it to the polls.


There are now nine Asian-Americans in the State Legislature, compared with one 10 years ago. In November, a Chinese-American, John Chiang, was elected state controller. Four of the five members of the Board of Equalization, which administers the state's tax policies, are Asian-American, including Mr. Chiang.

"If you look back a decade or two ago, there was a considerable amount of talk about Latinos being the sleeping giant in politics, that they'd reached a certain level of potentially having impact," said Paul Ong, a professor at the [University of California](#), Los Angeles, who has written about Asians' growing influence in the state. "Asians are at that point."

If Asians can continue to build on their recent successes and muster voter turnout close to their share of the population, "they will literally be the balance of power in most elections," said Garry South, a Democratic political consultant who informally advised several Asian-American candidates last fall.

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Which classic car's ad was "It's a lot more than you bargained for"?

The [Census Bureau](#) projects that the number of Asians statewide will nearly double in the next two decades. Of the state's 2005 estimated population of 35 million, Latinos accounted for 36 percent, or about 12.5 million; Asians 12 percent, or 4.4 million; and blacks 6 percent, or 2.2 million.

Should the number of Asian-American elected officials continue to grow, the issues many of them have pursued — bilingual language assistance, equitable admissions standards at state universities and affordable health care — will become increasingly visible.

Despite efforts by political candidates and nonprofit groups, though, Asian immigrants are registered to vote at rates much lower than the general population. Only recently have Asian-Americans begun to develop the fund-raising and campaign operations that have helped blacks and Latinos solidify their bases.

According to a study by S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, an assistant professor of political science at the University of California, Riverside, only 37 percent of Asian-Americans in California voted in the 2004 elections, compared with 68 percent of blacks and 73 percent of whites. Latino turnout, at 32 percent, was even lower.

The disparity can partly be explained by lower rates of citizenship: only 67 percent of Asians and 59 percent of Latinos living in California at the time were citizens. But even those who were citizens had much lower rates of voter registration than other ethnic groups.

"I don't doubt that they're doing better than they were before, but I don't think that they've reached any sort of critical mass or threshold," said Antonio Gonzalez, president of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, a nonprofit that promotes civic participation among Latinos. "I don't think they conceive of themselves yet as coherent and cohesive as one needs to."

Still, progress on turnout and an increased willingness on the part of non-Asians to vote for Asian candidates helped spur the gains of the past decade, analysts say.

It took years, but the Asian-American political community has recovered from a series of demoralizing fund-raising scandals in the 1990s, including a controversial 1996 appearance at a Buddhist temple in the Los Angeles area by Vice President [Al Gore](#).

Already, some non-Asian politicians are paying attention. The Democratic campaigns for governor of [Gray Davis](#) in 2002 and Steve Westly last year — both of which Mr. South helped to run — featured advertisements on Asian-language television stations and news conferences geared toward Asian media.

But there is still a long way to go, Asian politicians and political analysts agree, with much depending on the progress Asian-Americans make in strengthening the nascent organizations they have built to support candidates and get out the vote.

Though the number of Asian-American local and state officials is growing, there are only two Asian representatives from California in Congress, of seven Asian-American members in all.

"We're still two to four election cycles from fulfilling expectations," said Assemblyman Alberto Torrico, chairman of the California Asian Pacific Islander Legislative Caucus.

Correction: March 1, 2007

An article on Tuesday about the increase in the number of California office holders who are Asian-Americans misstated the number of Asian-Americans on the five-member Board of Equalization. There are four, not three.

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