

Chronological: Amerasia Organization, CSU Asian American Politics in Hawaii and the Mainland

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ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICS IN HAWAII & THE MAINLAND

Hawaii's experiences in ethnic politics are a constant source of fascination, especially for students of politics and government outside the island community. Even a cursory examination of these experiences will inevitably lead to the conclusion that one cannot quite equate the politics of Hawaii with any other state of the Union. There are too many differences.

In no other state will you find a society composed of such a myriad of ethnic groups such as those in Hawaii. And in no other state will you find such a concentrated population of Asian Americans, the largest Asian minorities in Hawaii's plural society being the Japanese, Filipino, Chinese and Korean.

These four major Asian American groups constitute nearly 50 per cent of Hawaii's total population. The last state-run population survey, conducted three years ago, reported the following breakdown by ethnic group: Japanese, about 32 per cent; Filipino, 10.5 per cent; Chinese, about 5 per cent; and Korean, about 1 per cent. Because this survey excluded persons connected with the military service and installations, Caucasians only comprised about 21 per cent of the State's population.

Unlike other states, Hawaii has an extremely small black population--less than 1 per cent--that contrasts with the national figure of about 10 per cent. Also the Puerto Rican population in Hawaii is less than 1 per cent.

So because of the great plurality of Asian Americans in Hawaii, it is understandable that Hawaii's political experiences in recent decades have involved an overwhelming influx of Asians into the political arena. Considerable numbers of Asian Americans today seek public office, and many succeed.

Their entry into politics has not been altogether a cooperative effort, however. I wish to interject here that one should not make the conceptual mistake of unthinkingly lumping together all the Asian groups in Hawaii, under the impression that the Japanese, Filipino, Chinese and Korean groups operate a formidable, monolithic political machine.

Very real and profound cultural, historical and linguistic differences have separated the Asian groups over the years, and relationships among them have not been overly amicable.

In fact, to this day Hawaii has not seen a working, organized Asian coalition. Despite overt successes at the polls by Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans and others, intra-ethnic relations among the minority politicians often has been marred by less-than-sincere cooperation.

I need not over-stress that intra-ethnic friction among Asian minorities in Hawaii stems from deep-seated emotions still prevalent throughout much of Asia. The Japanese occupation of the Philippines during World War II left bitter memories still in the minds of Filipinos now in Hawaii.

Japanese occupation of Korea, the infamous rape of Nanking and the bombing of Canton stirred hatred and bitterness that, for many people today, cannot be forgotten.

Even among the Asian groups who settled in Hawaii long before World War II, memories linger of fights between Filipino and Japanese workers during the Hawaiian sugar plantation riots of the 1920s. Others recall how the Chinese, Japanese and Filipino immigrants to Hawaii played off each other for economic advantage.

I might add parenthetically, that more of the Asian interracial marriages in Hawaii, until only recently, involved white and Asian partners. Now, younger people seem to have set aside historic animosities long held by their elders, as intermarriage among Asian groups occur more frequently.

Throughout history, there never has been a white majority in Hawaii's population. But for over a span of nearly a century, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, the white minority dominated the political system, either by exerting influence from outside the government offices, or by assuming the government offices themselves.

Those of you who may be familiar with Hawaiian history will recall the critical 1954 Territorial election. That marked the end of the years of tight, unified rule by the white minority. A Honolulu police captain, John Burns, who grew up in the slums of Honolulu, led a coalition of independent Democrats--primarily Nisei Japanese Americans--that challenged the reign of the white, Republican "Big Five" corporate and political power group.

I was one of those privileged to participate in the 1954 election, an election that has since been called Hawaii's "revolution by ballot".

As a group we were full of ideas and filled with idealism. All of us, who chose the Democratic Party banner, wanted to

remake society in Hawaii. We wanted to provide for many who had up to then lacked an opportunity to play an equal and meaningful part in the government and life of our Islands a decent chance to share fully in the economic activity and political life of Hawaii.

Our political strategy then was to seek out labor support, and to rally Nisei Japanese Americans and native Hawaiian voters around our candidates.

In the end, we succeeded in generating broad-based appeal among all voting groups, largely because Hawaii was overdue for the kind of progressive change we advocated. The pre-dominantly Asian American politicians in the 1954 movement captured two-thirds of the seats in the House and almost an equal proportion in the Senate; the young, new Democratic Party secured its first majority in the Territorial Legislature.

Today, we have an unusual political situation in Hawaii. Record-breaking numbers of Asian Americans have assumed key political posts throughout the State. Japanese Americans, for example, occupy the Office of the Governor, a U. S. Senate seat, two Congressional seats, the Office of State Senate President, Speaker of the House and several seats in the State Legislature, local councils and State Cabinet. One of Hawaii's U. S. Senators is a Chinese American. Filipino and Korean Americans are represented in the Legislature and Cabinet.

Many have suggested that there is an overabundance of Japanese Americans in Hawaii's government; some even suggest an "imbalance".

I hasten to point out, however, that this ethnic phenomenon is not the result of any recognizable pattern of bloc voting or even collusion among politicians. To date, it appears that most voters are not concerned primarily with ethnic backgrounds of political candidates. Personality and political views have put ethnicity in a back seat. This does not mean a candidate's ethnicity is ignored or overlooked; that is impossible. But today the voters and the candidates both are fully aware that singular appeals to "ethnic blocs" --whether Japanese, Hawaiian, Portuguese or Filipino--spell defeat at the polls. Political success in Hawaii requires broad-based support and votes that cut across ethnic lines.

In my case, I am pleased to report that in all of my campaigns and elections in my political career of more than 20 years, I have enjoyed uniformly favorable reaction and support from all segments of the community. In my first race for the U. S. Senate in 1962, I confronted Ben Dillingham,

one of Hawaii's best known Republicans and a member of one of Hawaii's most powerful families. In that election, I received more white votes than did he.

In my last Senate campaign in 1974, you may be interested to know that a poll I commissioned at election time revealed that 92 per cent of the Filipino voters in Hawaii supported me, as compared to 85 per cent of the Japanese voters. I mention this in reference to my earlier remarks about intra-ethnic relations in Hawaii. I suspect some observers would have predicted that being a Japanese American, I automatically would carry all of the Japanese American vote; the poll showed otherwise.

All of this, perhaps, explains the fascination that so many political observers have about Hawaii. Without a doubt, Hawaii's plural society offers an Asian American citizen an exceptional opportunity to try his or her hand in electoral politics. And the record shows considerable success.

But because of the stark differences, both in regard to demographics and politics, between Hawaii and the Mainland states, one cannot assume the situation in Hawaii can be exported into any other American community.

To a large extent, Asian Americans on the Mainland, who aspire to run for public office, must confront a different type of political obstacle course in a political arena where clear-cut ethnic majorities--as opposed to ethnic pluralities--prevail and influence outcomes.

In spite of this, I sincerely believe that the record, service and public exposure of Hawaii's Nisei Japanese American office holders suggests to the non-Asian American that Asians are equally capable, equally articulate, equally courageous, equally dedicated, equally loyal and equally American with any other American political leader.

I sincerely believe that the performance of Hawaii's public officials already has made it easier for Asian Americans elsewhere to seek public office.

I sincerely believe that Hawaii's political situation, though perhaps unusual, has had some impact on Mainland perceptions; it has made many non-Asian Americans aware of their fellow citizens as politically-capable equals in our Nation's democratic system. The degree of this impact cannot yet be measured. Surely historians at a later date may be able to assess this further.

The coming years may change the complexion of Hawaii's electorate and thereby affect the numbers of Asian American office holders. I say this because census reports since Statehood show an increasing number of Caucasian immigrants in Hawaii. Many predict whites will become an actual majority in the Islands in the next decade.

Though this shift may occur, I am certain Asian Americans will continue for a long time to play an active role in the Hawaiian political scene. All of us have had a taste of politics, and it is unlikely we will return to a position of political inactivity, either self-imposed or forced from the outside. And we already have established a credible record as political leaders.

Political activity among Asian Americans on the Mainland promises to continue, too. And I would add that it promises to expand and grow as well.

At the national level, Representative Norman Mineta from San Jose has distinguished himself as a fully capable and exemplary freshman Congressman. When he assumed office following his service as Mayor of San Jose, he was selected by his peers--his fellow reformers and young Turks of the House--to be their leader.

Norman Mineta was selected not because he was Asian American. He was selected because he demonstrated leadership. He obviously has much talent. And he has gained the respect of his colleagues on Capitol Hill.

It is not too far fetched to suggest that the time will come when Asian Americans will hold several state-wide offices in major states. Further, the time will come when an Asian will aspire, and will be elected to higher national office.

As you know, these kinds of thoughts were but pipedreams a few years ago.

Today, they are no longer dreams, but serious possibilities.