

Asian-American political profile rising in US

By JULIANA BARBASSA, Associated Press Writer

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When three newly elected Chinese-American city supervisors climbed on stage in Chinatown, flanked by dragon dancers and lit up by camera flashes, they were hailed for making history in a city their forebears have shaped since the Gold Rush Days.

Now their November sweep has been topped with the election of one of them, David Chiu, as president of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors — the second most powerful position in local government.

It is fitting that San Francisco, which is 34 percent Asian and home of the nation's oldest Chinatown, is leading the way on Asian-American political representation. But the country's fastest growing minority group also is reaching new heights on the state and national stage.

Experts say their newfound clout is not due to numbers alone.

The political engagement of Asian-Americans is growing. Many immigrants are earning citizenship. Community organizations are mounting voter registration drives. Ethnic media increasingly are endorsing candidates and covering political campaigns. And politicians are scoring victories, even in areas without a strong Asian electorate.

Countrywide, there are more than 2,000 Asian and Pacific Islander elected and appointed representatives, according to UCLA's Asian American Studies Center. In California, Asian-Americans hold two seats in the state Senate, 10 in the Assembly, plus the posts of state controller and chief of the Board of Equalization. A decade ago, there was only one high-ranking Asian-American official, the state treasurer.

"We're finally gaining full admission to the club," said David Lee, who teaches political science at San Francisco State University.

The Asian-American population has expanded from 0.5 percent in 1960 — prior to repeal of restrictive immigration laws — to 5 percent now. The U.S. Census projects they will grow to 8 percent by 2050.



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A push by voter education groups to turn new citizens into voters has helped make this ethnic group a political force in California, where their numbers are largest.

Making an impact on the national ballot box remains a greater challenge. Asian-Americans are scattered geographically, and they are still a predominantly immigrant group, with only about two out of three of them citizens. They are underrepresented politically, holding a smaller proportion of elected positions than their share of the population.

Many people of Asian descent have stepped beyond their national identities to develop a pan-Asian perspective, giving both money and votes to Asian-American candidates who might not share their national origin, according to Don Nakanishi, director of the UCLA Asian American Studies Center.

That has translated into victories at the local level, where Asian-American politicians are poised for higher office. "People are moving up — it's happening very quickly," said C.C. Yin, a businessman who helped found the Asian Pacific Islander American Political Association, which nurtures future leaders.

Chinese-language newspapers are increasingly reporting on political campaigns, encouraging readers to vote, and endorsing candidates, said Tim Lau, editor in chief of the West Coast Sing Tao Daily, the largest of the San Francisco Bay Area's five Chinese-language dailies.

"We realized we had a responsibility to our readers," Lau said.

In addition, states with legislative term limits, such as California, have seen opportunities open up for minorities who might have had a tougher time fighting entrenched incumbents.

"Having the field cleared and giving everyone a clean slate has been particularly helpful to Chinese-Americans," said state Sen. Leland Yee, who rose from positions on San Francisco's school board and board of supervisors to become the first Chinese-American elected to the state Senate.

"What you're seeing is a changing of the guard."

Meanwhile, the American-educated children of earlier generations of immigrants are entering politics.

"We represent a new demographic," said Chiu, the new board president, saying he could not have become a supervisor without the support of interest groups outside Chinatown. "We have our feet in both our ethnic communities and the broader mainstream community. And that's essential — to win, we had to build multiracial coalitions."

That need also was apparent in Louisiana where voters elected Republican U.S. Rep. Anh "Joseph" Cao last year, making him the first Vietnamese-American in Congress. His victory followed the election of Bobby Jindal, a son of Punjabi immigrants, to Congress and then to the governorship in

2007.

The election of Barack Obama and his consideration of several Asian-Americans for high-profile positions also serve as incentives for Asian-Americans to jump into politics, said Nakanishi.

"After Obama, it's not unthinkable that a guy like Jindal could become president some day," he said. "There is still a lot pioneering going on, but Asian-Americans are really becoming an even more viable and visible actor in American politics."

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