

How They Got Here: APIA Politicians Past and Present

Preface

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Understanding how Asian Pacific Islander Americans (APIAs) emerge as politicians begins with the history of APIA voting rights and citizenship. In the United States, voting rights are tied to citizenship status. Without citizenship, it is almost impossible to vote and become a politician. In the 1700s (e.g., Naturalization Act of 1790), voting rights were restricted to only white men. In the 1800s, the United States slowly saw voting barriers recede. However, centuries of racism and discrimination prevented the naturalization of Asian Pacific Islanders (APIs) and communities of color, making the right to vote challenging.

In the mid-1800s, Chinese laborers began immigrating to the United States, working in gold mines, agricultural fields, and factory industries. In the 1870s, Japanese laborers also began to arrive. Unfortunately, in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act banned Chinese laborers from entering the country. Following this Act, other API groups were stopped from coming to America, and court rulings prevented the API population from becoming naturalized citizens. Therefore, APIs could not vote despite their considerable contributions to American history. In 1920, Congress passed the 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote. However, despite API participation from pioneering suffragists such as Komako Kimura, the movement failed to eliminate voting barriers against women of color. Not until 1943 and beyond did federal policies preventing APIs from naturalization begin to lift (e.g., McCarran-Walter Act of 1952), thus enabling eligible APIs to become citizens. Filipinos living in the United States could naturalize and vote when the Philippine Islands became independent in 1946. Then in 1959, when Hawai'i became a state, its citizens also gained the right to vote. As a result, all eligible APIAs can vote and run for office in the United States today.

In 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act (VRA), which prohibited racial discrimination in voting. A decade later, Congress added protections for voters with limited English skills to VRA, which was later expanded in 1992. However, the 2013 *Shelby v. Holder* decision took away key sections of VRA, one of them requiring state and local governments to have voting law changes reviewed before passing. Following this decision, rallies and organizational efforts stepped up to protect voter rights. Unfortunately, in *Brnovich v. Democratic National*

Committee (2021), the Supreme Court ruled that voting restrictions that heavily affected APIAs and communities of color did not necessarily violate VRA; therefore, weakening VRA and making it unable to stop voter discrimination.

Today, securing voting rights for APIAs and communities of color remains an ongoing battle. However, it is crucial to acknowledge how we have progressed from the 1700s to 2023. Obtaining citizenship and voting rights led to some outstanding pioneering APIA politicians: Patsy Mink, the first Asian American woman to serve in Congress in 1964; Mike Gabbard, the first Hawaiian senator of Samoan descent and his daughter, former Hawaiian congresswoman, Tulsi Gabbard; Mark Takano, the first openly gay Asian American elected to Congress in 2012; and Kamala Harris, the first African-Asian American woman to become Vice President of the United States in 2020. According to the 2020 US Census Bureau, the turnout of APIA votes hit a record 59.7%, and APIAs made up 0.9% of elected officials, the highest numbers recorded at the time of this publication. Gradually, more APIAs are entering politics, and APIA voter participation is increasing.

This activity book for elementary school students is created by Asian American Studies students at San Francisco State University to honor many past and present APIA politicians and to understand the voting process that made their elections possible. This year's commemoration marks the APIA Biography Project's 10th Annual Asian Pacific Islander American Heritage Month Celebration at the San Francisco Main Public Library on April 30, 2023. In addition to this in-person community kick-off event, the APIA website (apiabiography.sfsu.edu) features activities and a variety of resources. For the entire month of May 2023, with the full collaboration of the San Francisco Main Public Library, our annual APIA Wall of Fame is displayed at the Children's Center in addition to a special Chinese American display at the Chinese Center. Cosponsoring community partners include the San Francisco Main Public Library (SFPL), The Association of Chinese Teachers (TACT), and the Square and Circle Club (S&C).

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