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Words of Wisdom

Asian and Pacific American Voting

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> *The field of Asian American politics is rapidly expanding with the continuous contributions of a growing number of political scientists—as well as other social scientists, historians, and public policy analysts—who have sought to document, analyze, theorize, and forecast the political dimensions of the Asian American experience. Most of these works focus on the electoral participation and representation of Asian Americans in relation to American domestic politics. . . . Although electoral politics undoubtedly will continue to be important, there are other aspects of Asian American politics which have been and will likely continue to be compelling and worthy of serious scholarly and policy attention.*

These are the words of wisdom by the late Don T. Nakanishi in the Forward to our edited book on Asian American transnational politics (Collet and Lien 2009, ix). Nakanishi, the founding co-editor of the *Amerasia Journal* (1971–present) and long-term director of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Center for Asian American Studies (1990–2010), penned the nation's first doctoral thesis on Asian American politics where he sought to identify a new paradigm in the studying of U.S. minority politics by focusing on the non-electoral and non-domestic dimension (Nakanishi 1975). He further explicated the interplay between domestic and non-domestic, electoral and non-electoral, and micro versus macro approaches to exploring the rich and complex world of Asian American politics in a seminal publication that has been unmatched in its scope and diversity of coverage on the topic (Nakanishi 1986).

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Over the years, the supply of political science students and scholars who study Asian American politics has continued to expand, especially after the publication and public release of the 2008 National Asian American Survey (Wong et al. 2011). Today, the collection of the 2016 Collaborative Multiracial Post-election Survey has launched a new milestone in studying Asian American politics through survey research, and Masuoka et al. (2018) have done a remarkable job demonstrating the benefits in advancing voting behavior research by disaggregating the voting-age population into three types and by controlling confounding factors such as language of media use and group-based identity and experiences. However, it is important for the young and rising generations of Asian American scholars to acknowledge the trail-blazing efforts by Nakanishi and the UCLA Asian Pacific American Voters Project described in the 1986 article. It was in that publication where Nakanishi raised awareness to the curious gaps between socioeconomic and political incorporation of Asian Americans and, despite interethnic and inter-municipal differences, it identified the overall partisan orientation of Asian American registered voters in Los Angeles to be Democratic even if they constituted a slim majority of 52%.

Given the community's "model minority" image and the predominantly foreign-born population whose immigration was largely prohibited until the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, one common pitfall when studying statistics of the population is to characterize Asian Americans as perpetually apathetic or more interested in politics in and of Asia than what occurred to Asians in the United States proper. Another pitfall, when neglecting the huge gaps between voting-age adults and registered voters, is to characterize Asians as solidly Democrats when only a portion of the adult population is eligible to vote. Through his characteristic attention to methodological details, Nakanishi was keenly aware of the limitations in quantitatively-oriented, survey-based research in capturing the diversity and complexity of Asian American politics. Whereas election-centered research is vital and essential, Nakanishi (2009) cautioned that "to focus only on ballot-box issues will not be enough" (xiv). In both then and now, his foresight on exploring the non-electoral and non-domestic dimension of research remain compelling, and may become even more prominent and consequential during the 21st century.

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