



Launching an “Everybody Vote” Initiative

Planting the Seed of Chinese-American Political Power



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Article translated from the original Chinese by Andrew Li and Clifton Yin.

Two events recently occurred which left a deep impression on me. Firstly, the Taiwan presidential election saw a voter participation rate of 76.5%, a point of great pride. I saw many elderly people, including many on wheelchairs, heading to vote. Many people even returned to their own voting districts to take part in the important election. As a result, every voter was greatly empowered and the election both represented the success of democracy and won the attention of a global audience. Most admirable of all is the fact that Taiwan has an electoral policy that automatically makes citizens eligible to vote without continually registering. The “76.5%” statistic thus reflects the entire populace; the United States, in comparison, requires citizens to register to vote before doing so, thus disenfranchising many unknowingly eligible citizens.

It is estimated that approximately 50% of Chinese-Americans are registered to vote. Assuming the voting rate to be 50% as well, then the actual proportion of voting Chinese-Americans is at most 25%. This is a strong contrast with voter participation in Taiwan.

The other development is the results of a Gallup poll which revealed that Americans view China as their number 3 enemy, right behind Iran and Iraq. Subsequently, CNN host Jack Cafferty made an insulting comment towards China. Only following verbal protests from overseas Chinese did CNN give a weak apology, lacking sincerity – which resulted in further protests by the Chinese community, a great example of the community coming together strongly. This also led me to remember how, some years ago, the Chinese community sought justice on behalf of Wen Ho Lee. However, if we think about it, similar events have occurred over and over again. I believe the main reason is the overseas Chinese community’s lack of power in the American political system.

In recent years, Chinese-Americans have started to be represented in state and local government, with many elected to public office. For example, John Chiang was recently elected to State Controller. Nevertheless, among the hundreds of members of Congress, there is only one ethnic Chinese: David Wu of Oregon. Therefore, when it comes to American politics, Chinese-Americans lack significant power. All of America envies the Jewish community’s political influence; that community constitutes only a small percentage of the full American population, but nevertheless exercises potent political power. I believe the Gallup poll would therefore never designate Israel as an “enemy of America,” nor would CNN dare insult Jewish-Americans.

Furthermore, Mexican-Americans have started to work together because of immigration policies and have become very influential. They wield significant power in the California State Legislature and in regard to the presidential election, Hispanics are viewed as an important vote. Why are they viewed as such? Because they turn out to vote. Why are less Chinese-Americans voting? Let's discuss this point.

In America, most Chinese-Americans' interest in politics is not high. It can be said that the San Francisco Bay Area is where Chinese-Americans are most active politically, with other areas looking to them for inspiration. Since the 1980s, every year has seen members of the community elected to local school boards, city councils, and state legislative seats. The number of people running for office, too, is increasing. Nevertheless, this rate of growth is not substantial enough; were it to be compared to the growth in numbers of engineers, it would be considered miniscule.

Voter registration is always happening in the Bay Area, but Chinese-American voting levels are still low, especially in light of a still low registration rate. Amongst one's family and friends, there are many citizens who have never voted – some people could be too busy, or could even have become so disappointed in politics that they have lost interest. I think the most important reason is that when we immigrated to the U.S., it was for opportunities in education, employment and the like, and not for politics. Political involvement was considered a low priority. This is also a “what came first, the chicken or the egg?” issue – because our political power is weak, it is thus hard to get people motivated, which leads to results being few and far between, thus making it all the more difficult to get people involved. Fortunately, under the media's continuing support, we are seeing welcome developments on the ground with Chinese-American voter participation on the rise. This has been reflected in political influence. The Chinese community knows the importance of civic affairs, but there is still a very long road ahead.

Two years ago, we formed a good government group hoping to encourage Chinese-Americans to run for state and federal office. This has given us the opportunity of involving more Chinese-Americans in government and with the support of both the media and friends, we have seen many people join up. Nevertheless, we hope to gain still greater momentum.

The road is long, but we must walk on. We can admire the political power of the Jewish community, but they too had to take it one step at a time before arriving at the present. Our next generation needs a supportive political environment to let them develop. Every step we take today is one they do not have to take, allowing us to plant a political seed on behalf of the Chinese-American community. Think about it: if Chinese-Americans had a voting rate of 76.5% akin to Taiwan, the American political community would turn to us for advice and CNN would never again disrespect China.

Let us work together to launch an “everybody vote” initiative and show the power of the Chinese-American community in the November 2008 election. It is now the internet era and one can register to vote online at www.sos.ca.gov (SOS.CA representing the Secretary of State of California). After logging into the website, click “voter registration” and within minutes the process will be complete. In America, one can also vote through mail, also known as “absentee voting” – registered voters do not need to show up at the voting station but can do everything via the post. One person, one vote. Every vote counts and power can not be neglected. Let us start to get people involved in the “everybody vote” initiative. If you have any questions, the Asian Pacific Islander Public Affairs Association (APAPA) is fully supporting voter registration. Please visit www.apapa.org or call (916) 329-7200.