

ADVOCACY AGENCIES AND POLITICS IN ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

by Malcolm Collier
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Introduction

This essay explores the connection between the development of advocacy oriented agencies and the changing character of Asian American involvement in local politics. Most examples used come from the context the Chinese American communities of San Francisco, California but similar patterns are found in other Asian American communities as well.[1]

Until recently, the dominant characteristic of Asian American involvement in electoral politics has been absence. Historically, this was largely the product of restrictions on citizenship and other forms of discrimination which served to prevent or discourage participation while also restricting the numbers of Asian Americans. Changing immigration laws and the re-affirmation of minority civil rights have led to large increases in the numbers of Asians in the United States and removal of legal barriers to political activity. Participation in electoral politics by Asian Americans is beginning to grow although still constrained by a variety of social and political factors. An important basis for this increased activity is the prior development of "advocacy politics," beginning in the late 1960's.

The Nature of Advocacy Politics

"Advocacy politics" as discussed here is the use of social service agencies, programs, and community organizations as bases from which to publicly advocate the interests of Asian American communities and constituencies before governmental commissions, agencies, administrators, and elected bodies or officials. The goal of such advocacy is to affect government on both administrative and policy levels. Subjects addressed in the advocacy process can range from details of local permit application processes to the character of federal legislation on immigration. Zoning, schools, transportation, health, housing, employment, law enforcement, appointments to boards and commissions, funding of programs, selection of judges, and all forms of local, state, and federal legislation are subject to political influence through advocacy activities. Involvement in advocacy leads to increased public contact with government officials, politicians, and ultimately electoral politics.

1. This essay draws on a number of sources: Experience as a board member of the Chinatown Resource Center (CRC); professional experience with a number of advocacy agencies, both in Asian American communities and in American Indian contexts in Arizona and Alaska; personal contacts with a wide range of advocacy agencies and individuals in San Francisco and elsewhere; and on discussions over many years with people active in these contexts. The significance of new advocacy agencies and processes was originally suggested by Irene Dea Collier.

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The nature of advocacy work can be illustrated by examples from the Chinese American communities in San Francisco. Here, the late 1960's and 1970's saw the formation of a number of new agencies and organizations that often provided specific services to clients but which also saw vigorous, public advancement of Chinese American needs and views as a primary activity. Self Help for the Elderly, Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA), On Lok, Chinatown Neighborhood Improvement Resource Center (CNIRC, now called Chinatown Resource Center or CRC), and the Association of Chinese Teachers (TACT) are examples of such agencies or organizations and this list is far from complete. Individuals from these groups, most especially the director or chief officer, were and are expected to spend a major part of their time asserting the needs and views of the organization before public officials and bodies. The scope of such activity varies, those with a heavy service emphasis like Self Help may focus more directly on immediate needs of their organizations and clients while other groups, CRC and CAA being good examples, are more diverse in the range of their advocacy. In recent years the older, more traditional organizations in the community have also begun to engage in public advocacy. A major focus of efforts is on a city level, as this is the political entity that most directly affects the Chinese American communities, but most groups have lobbied and testified on state and federal levels as well.

Advocacy takes a variety of forms. One is direct testimony and comment to governmental bodies, as took place with regard to the development of new zoning and planning regulations for Chinatown in the middle 1980's. Representatives from the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, CRC, and Chinese Six Companies, and other Chinatown organizations, all testified at Planning Department and Commission hearings and presented data and suggested plans of their own to support their various positions on the subject. Another form of activity involves the use of the press as a means of political pressure, as reflected in the following example: Henry Der of CAA used a February, 1986, release to the press of a research report on the lack of representation of Asian Americans in policy and administrative positions in city government to charge insensitivity and discrimination in appointive actions by the mayor. Although the changes were denied by city officials, the press coverage was shortly followed by a number of appointments of Asians to city commissions and administrative positions. Advocacy work can also involve legal action, as in current (1989) challenges of San Francisco City and County civil service practices by Filipino American community groups. The focus of this essay is on local level politics but advocacy also occurs on a state and national level, as in the recent activities of the Asian Law Caucus and the Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA) with regard to proposed changes in immigration laws or the work of various Japanese American organizations on the issues of redress and reparations for Japanese Americans held in concentration camps during World War II.

It is also possible for individuals to perform advocacy roles apart from any formal program or organization. The activities of George Woo as an advocate for youth interests in the 1960's, which helped introduce the concept of advocacy to many people, is an example. While individuals can advocate in this manner, most believe that advocacy is more effective when associated with an organization or program. Sometimes this leads to the formation of organizations solely for the purpose of creating an illusion of a formal entity. A example was the short lived Chinatown Improvement Association (CIA). Mr. Tom Hsieh (now a supervisor), in presenting a pro-development

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position regarding a planned tower on Stockton Street to city agencies, claimed to speak as representative of this organization. Although the organization was quickly enveloped in controversy when some of the alleged members told the press they knew nothing about its existence, the important point is that Mr. Hsieh and his associates felt the need to present the image of advocating for a formal group in order to have more impact.

The Origins of Advocacy

The modern development of advocacy politics in Asian American communities was the product of a particular social and political context. Three federal legislative actions are particularly important; the Civil Rights Act, the Immigration Reform Act, and the War on Poverty. The Civil Rights Act and the civil rights movement that produced it affirmed the right of minority Americans to a political voice and provided models for the advocacy of minority concerns. The Immigration Reform Act for the first time provided for equal immigration from Asia and by 1968-69 there was a rapid increase in Asian American immigrant populations. It was soon evident that existing community organizations and public social service agencies were not capable of properly providing for the needs of this growing population. Individuals and groups within Asian American communities became concerned about the growing gap between needs and services. Concurrently, the Johnson administration had started what was called the "War on Poverty," encompassing a large range of federally funded programs intended to "end" social and economic poverty in America. An important characteristic of many of these programs were guidelines that mandated formation of community advisory and/or governing boards and encouraged projects that involved advocating for the clientele whom the programs served. Many of the organizations listed earlier were initially funded by such federal programs and incorporated both community boards and advocacy roles.

Another factor shaping these new organizations was that they were generally formed and staffed by a younger generation of Asian Americans, both immigrant and American born. Better educated in American terms and raised in environments that promised more rights and freedoms than the periods of extreme discrimination and hostility experienced by the older generation, they were more willing to openly challenge and criticize the social and political structure, both within their own communities and at large.

It should be noted that in the past many older and traditional community organizations have engaged in advocacy to protect the rights of Asian Americans. Notable examples in the Chinese American communities are the many court challenges of restrictive laws by Chinese Americans in the 19th century. Some older organizations, like the Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA), were formed primarily as advocacy organizations. Most of this earlier advocacy took place in a different social and political context than exists today. In the past, Asians had little possibility for a real political voice because of restrictions on citizenship and other forms of discrimination, as well as the small size of the communities resulting from immigration restrictions. Consequently, earlier forms of advocacy had little potential for leading to further electoral political participation and by the 1960's many older organizations used private rather than public contacts with officials and politicians as a means of influencing the political process. The perceptions of the younger generation in the 1960's was that these older

approaches were no longer capable of promoting the interests and needs of Asian American communities. Many also felt that the "traditional" groups no longer represented the true interests of the communities and did not allow for participation from new and younger groups.

The Political Products of Advocacy

While advocacy has had important immediate results in the creation of new services and policies for Asian American communities it also has long term and important political effects. Advocacy work has led to increased political sophistication and activity. As people have engaged in advocacy they found they had to become more familiar with government, regulations, politicians and political processes. Development of contacts and knowledge provides advance information on issues affecting communities and provides the basis for successful advocacy. Successful advocacy often depends on the political education of agency clients, staff, and governing boards. These people have to be informed about the advocacy work, may be needed to assist, and their approval is generally needed if the advocacy work is to continue. Consequently, most agencies and organizations engage in forms of political organizing and education, both formal and informal. These activities have led to a gradual increase in awareness within the communities of political processes and issues, which is a necessity if the largely immigrant populations of many Asian American communities are indeed to have a significant political voice in the future.

On a practical level, the agencies and organizations have had to use advocacy to compensate for the lack of political representation of Asian American communities in elected and policy making positions in government. This puts a heavy load on Asian American community agencies and individuals because they have to carry out a larger range of political responsibilities than is necessary in some other communities. Even the best advocacy work cannot, however, make up for lack of people in political positions, whether elected or appointed, as it is such people that provide much of the information needed for groups to be able to present strong, informed views to other politicians and government entities.

This reality helps promote a belief within advocacy agencies that if Asian Americans are to have impact on political decisions they will need to get themselves involved in elections, either to help determine who is elected or to obligate politicians. Because many organizations engaged in advocacy have legal restriction on their participation in partisan electoral politics it is often necessary for agency staff to act as individuals or to join overtly political organizations or other organizations that can engage openly in political elections. In this manner many members of organizations like TACT and CAA became active in the membership or political work of the Chinese American Democratic Club (CADC) while individuals from CRC and associated organizations at one point attempted to start a political group called the Chinese American Political Association (CAPA) when they felt that their political views were not being represented by CADC. CAPA did not last and some of the individuals involved later developed connections with the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce. Political and business organizations can raise money for candidates, endorse people for political office, and engage in the full range of partisan politics.

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Similar patterns are found in other Asian American communities. Both the Japanese American Youth Center (JCYC) and Kimochi Kai, which are social service agencies with advocacy roles, have had individuals active in the Japanese American Democratic Club. There are similar connections between political clubs in the Filipino community and Filipino American community agencies. In San Francisco such activity usually focuses on the Democratic party because, as Jeff Mori of JCYC puts it, "in this city, politics is the Democratic party."

The combination of advocacy and political activity makes politicians and government officials more familiar with individual Asian Americans and slightly more sensitive to the long range potential political clout of a growing Asian American population. One result is that they are somewhat more aware of Asian Americans interests because they may find themselves publicly called to account for their actions. In a few extreme cases officials have lost their positions, as was the case with Thomas Kearny, a former Registrar of Voters for San Francisco, who lost his position after making unacceptable remarks about Asians.

Advocacy Activity and Appointive Politics

Another result of advocacy is an increase in the selection of Asian Americans for appointive political positions like judgeships and public boards, commissions and committees. Appointment to such positions is made by elected officials and these appointments are important because it is the decisions of these appointed individuals and commissions that often have the most direct impact on Asian American communities. Advocacy activity by Asian American community groups affects political appointments on several levels. First, advocacy activity is often used to inform politicians as to community needs that require representation on boards and commissions. Second, advocacy can also be used to put direct pressure on politicians to respond to those needs through appointments. Third, advocacy activities put people in regular contact with politicians, making politicians more familiar with the pool of individuals available for appointments. Finally, the involvement of individuals associated with the advocacy agencies in overt political activity begins to obligate the politicians to them.

Most of the Asian Americans appointed to city boards and commissions in recent years have had connections with advocacy organizations and the political clubs. Recent (1989) Chinese American political appointments by SF Mayor Agnos illustrate this point. Of some 20 Chinese American appointments to city commissions, boards, committees and political positions, 9 have direct connections to advocacy organizations and at least 17 have connections to either advocacy agencies and/or associated political organizations. Some examples: Deputy Mayor James Ho was president of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and a board member of CRC, Lonnie Chin (Library Commission) is a long time member of TACT and a board member for CRC, Wayne Hu (Planning Commission) is a board member for On Lok Senior Health Services and a member of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Gordon Chin (Public Utilities Commission) is director of CRC. These appointments were clearly the result of political activity associated with advocacy, both formal and informal, but the long term political results remain to be seen. Generally speaking, Asian Americans remain under represented in appointed political positions in most areas with large Asian American populations.

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There are some serious constraints on the appointment of people from advocacy agencies to political positions due to conflict of interest laws. Unless the political position is unrelated to the area of policy interest of the agency, appointees usually have to sever their connections with the agency. This reality is one of the reasons why many political appointees come from agency boards of directors (who can readily resign if there are conflict of interest problems) rather than from among advocacy agency staffs or directors who might have to give up their jobs if appointed to a board or commission directly related to the area of activity of the agency.

Electoral Politics

Activity in appointed positions can provide the larger political visibility and connections necessary for running for elected offices. This one reason why an increase in numbers of Asian Americans in appointed political positions is an important step in the direction of increased numbers of elected officials. The function of appointive positions as a "stepping stone" to elected political office is illustrated by the case of former S.F. Board of Education member Richard Cerbatos. An important member of the Filipino American Democratic Club, Cerbatos was appointed to the San Francisco Board of Permit Appeals and subsequently became an elected member of the Board of Education. People with political ambitions often seek such appointments and then use them to help add political credibility, as with former Police Commissioner Tom Hsieh, now on the SF Board of Supervisors.

The role of advocacy agencies and activities in this process is important, particularly to the extent that these have led to increased numbers of Asian Americans in appointed positions. However, while some individuals in key advocacy roles as staff of agencies are found on advisory committees and smaller boards, few have made any signs of running for elected office, in large part because this would mean abandoning their jobs or because they feel that it would undermine their credibility as advocates. What is beginning to happen, as election to political offices becomes a real possibility, is that individuals with ambitions for political office or influence are associating themselves with community advocacy agencies as board members or important donors in order to enhance their political connections and influence rather than simply out of interest in the goals of the agencies. This strategy may speed the election of Asian Americans to political offices but it also raises questions of motivations and responsibility to the communities. It is possible that a new stage of Asian American political development is beginning in which the direct political role of advocacy agencies will decline or change.

A Final Note

While the role of advocacy agencies in the political activity of Asian Americans will change and may become less important with time, it is clear that the advocacy agencies continue to provide communities with a political voice and help lay the foundation for influence in the electoral arena. The impact of advocacy political processes on the political activities of Asian Americans is perhaps confirmed by an examination of who in the Asian American communities engages in public advocacy politics. Throughout the 1960's and 1970's public advocacy in the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino American

communities of San Francisco was largely the territory of the more "liberal" sectors of these communities. Now, however, almost all political sectors attempt to engage in advocacy roles, in recognition of a change in political processes and the importance of advocacy in political relationships between community and the surrounding society. To some people's dismay, this produces an image of lack of unity but such diversity probably is a sign of a growing political awareness that was absent in times past when the communities put forth a facade of unity.

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