

## **ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICS WEB UPDATE**

There were a number of significant developments for prominent APA government officials as the Obama administration neared the halfway point of its first term. This update focuses primarily on changes in congressional membership, but we note a few other notable changes as well.

### **THE 112<sup>TH</sup> CONGRESS (2011-12)**

#### **Changes in the House**

In the 2010 elections, APA members lost two seats, while two APA newcomers won seats in the House of Representative, for a total of seven APA House members (Austria, Clarke, Hanabusa, Hirono, Honda, Matsui, Scott, and Wu).

#### **APA HOUSE MEMBERS IN THE 112<sup>TH</sup> CONGRESS (As of May 2011)**

<b><u>NAME</u></b>	<b><u>PARTY</u></b>	<b><u>DISTRICT</u></b>	<b><u>ASIAN ANCESTRY</u></b>
Steve Austria	Republican	Ohio 7 <sup>th</sup>	Filipino
Hansen Clarke	Democrat	Michigan 13 <sup>th</sup>	Indian/Bangladeshi
Colleen Hanabusa	Democrat	Hawai'i 1 <sup>st</sup>	Japanese
Mazie K. Hirono	Democrat	Hawai'i 2 <sup>nd</sup>	Japanese
Mike Honda	Democrat	California 15 <sup>th</sup>	Japanese
Doris O. Matsui	Democrat	California 5 <sup>th</sup>	Japanese
Robert C. "Bobby" Scott	Democrat	Virginia 3 <sup>rd</sup>	Filipino
David Wu	Democrat	Oregon 1 <sup>st</sup>	Chinese

Interestingly, the two APA members who lost their seats, Anh "Joseph" Cao and Charles Djou, were Republicans, given the Republican landslide victory (Republicans gained 63 seats). However, each of them had unique circumstances that demonstrate the limits of national tides.

In the case of Cao, the district he represented, the Louisiana 2nd, was 57.2 percent African American (Asian American comprised only 3.7 percent). The district has long been represented by William Jennings Jefferson, an African American member. But Jefferson was hurt by corruption charges, including a widely publicized FBI raid that reportedly discovered \$90,000 in the freezer in his home. Further hurting Jefferson were Louisiana's unique election rules, resulting in a Democratic run-off election on the day of the presidential election in November, preventing him from benefiting from the

surge of African Americans who turned out to vote for Barack Obama. Instead, the Louisiana 2<sup>nd</sup> district general election was held in December 2008, where Cao was able to unseat Jefferson. However, it was clear that it would be difficult for Cao to retain a seat in an African American majority district. Even becoming the only Republican who cast a “yea” vote on Obama’s “Affordable Health Care for America Act” (H.R.3962, Roll Call No.887 on Nov. 7, 2009) did not help. Cao lost to Cedric Richmond, an African American Democrat and state representative, in the 2010 general election, by the wide margin of 64.6 percent to 33.5 percent.

In the case of Djou, his election to Hawai‘i 1st district was a lucky one. In May 2010 Neil Abercrombie who is white and who had long held the district, quit the House to concentrate on his bid for governor (he went on to win the statehouse in the November election). Then, a special election was held, where two Democrats—Colleen Hanabusa (Japanese American), the Hawai‘i state senate president, and Ed Case (white), who once represented Hawai‘i’s 2nd congressional district ran, along with Charles Djou. Democratic votes were split between Hanabusa and Case, allowing Djou to win in a district that was heavily Democratic (the vote was 40.3 percent for Djou, 31.4 percent for Hanabusa, and 28.2 percent for Case). Case, afraid that Djou would be reelected if Case continued to campaign, withdrew from the November race and threw his support to Hanabusa. Thus, although Djou was an incumbent, his time in office had been very short, and he was also faced with the difficulty of traveling the long distance between Hawai‘i and Washington D.C. in order to campaign. Djou lost to Hanabusa in the November general election by a 53.2 to 46.8 percent margin.

Although Cao and Djou served for only short periods, their elections were historic. Anh “Joseph” Cao became the first Vietnamese American to serve in the U.S. Congress. Some speculated that the title would go to Van Tran, California State Assembly member, but Tran, also a Republican, lost a 2010 race to incumbent Loretta Sanchez in California’s 47th district.

Djou’s mother was born in Thailand, so he became the first Thai American to serve in Congress (an honor that Tammy Duckworth, now Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs at the Department of Veterans Affairs, almost won in the 2006 election). His paternal ancestry is Chinese. According to his campaign website, though his family name was Zhou, his grandfather, who was working for a French company in Shanghai, got a French name “Dijou” from his boss. When he fled to Hong

Kong in 1948, he spelled “Djou” on an immigration paper for the British government, which explains how a Chinese-ancestry congressman ended up with a family name that did not sound very Chinese.

On a side note, Hanabusa’s election increased the number of Buddhists in Congress from two to three. The other two, elected in 2006, were the first Buddhists elected to Congress—Mazie Hirono, Hanabusa’s colleague from Hawai‘i’s 2nd district and Hank Johnson (D-GA). Given that Buddhism is the dominant religion in Japan, it is not surprising, that Hirono, an immigrant born in Japan is Buddhist. Substantial numbers of Japanese Americans are Christian, but a significant percentage are Buddhist, as is the case with Hanabusa, a yonsei (meaning “fourth generation” in Japanese). Hannabusa’s religion earned a reference in her Wikipedia entry: “Hanabusa's election makes Hawaii the only state with a majority non-Christian House delegation.” One can argue that this is less notable than implied, as Hawai‘i has only two House seats.

The election of Hansen Clarke had some similarities to Joseph Cao’s victory in 2008. Clarke mounted a primary challenge to a long-time incumbent, Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, whose candidacy likely suffered from its association with the scandal-ridden former mayor of Detroit, Kwame Kilpatrick, who happened to be Carolyn Kilpatrick’s son.

Clarke was not simply an opportunist, however, and brought with him a compelling biography that some likened to that of Barack Obama. The son of a south Asian immigrant father and African American mother, Clarke grew up in a poor section of Detroit. His father died when he was only 8, after which the family scraped by on his mother’s wages as a school crossing guard, housekeeper, and other jobs, supplemented by food stamps. His talents got him scholarships to elite schools such as Phillips Exeter, but his educational path was not smooth, and he ended up earning a GED. He later found himself at Cornell, but his mother’s death during his first semester left him adrift, and he returned to Detroit, where he survived on public assistance until he convinced Cornell to give him another chance. Raised initially as a Muslim, with a mother who attended the African Methodist Episcopal church, converted to Catholicism, and married to a Korean American woman, Clarke encompasses a mind-boggling range of diversity in his life experiences.

In addition, Clarke’s ancestry epitomizes the situational and constructed nature of

ethnoracial identity. Widely identified as the “first Bangladeshi American elected to Congress,” Clarke’s own House website identifies his father as “Indian,” although Clarke has embraced a Bangladeshi heritage. The lack of ancestral clarity is due to shifting geopolitical tides. Clarke’s father apparently immigrated before the division of India and Pakistan, thereby making him an Indian (i.e., South Asian Indian) when he entered the United States. Not until the 1947 was there a separate state of Pakistan, with its bizarre geographic division into West (to the west of India) and East (between India and Burma/Myanmar). It was another quarter century before East Pakistan became Bangladesh, thereby “creating” Bangladeshis, whose heritage Clarke now embraces. Clarke as Bangladeshi is more historic than Clarke as Indian, of course, since Dalip Singh Saud was both the first Indian American and the first APA elected to Congress.

While most APAs in Congress have ancestral roots in only one country, it seems likely that the growing diversity of the United States will lead to more APA political figures with more diverse ancestries, such as that of Charles Djou, or Bobby Scott (whose heritage includes ancestors from Africa as well as Asia).

#### Developments in the Senate

On the Senate side, Daniel K. Inouye easily won reelection for a ninth term (which means he already had spent 48 years in the Senate by the beginning of the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress). With the death of Robert Byrd (D-WV) in June 2010, Inouye became president pro tempore of the Senate, a position given to the most senior member of the majority party in the Senate. This puts him third in line in the order of succession of the president—behind only Vice President Joe Biden and House Speaker John Boehner. He continues to serve as chair of the Appropriations Committee, often considered the most powerful chair in the chamber.

Another APA member was “added” to the Senate when it became known that John Ensign had Filipino ancestry. As with Steve Austria, Ensign’s case highlights another aspect of what we have termed the politics of identity: in both cases, Asian American ancestry was of little or no significance unless they chose to give it importance. In Ensign’s case, however, personal scandal inflicted such political damage that he chose to resign before his term was finished, leaving Senators Daniel K. Akaka and Inouye as once again the only two APA members of that chamber.

## **OTHER PROMINENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS**

While some were hailing Hansen Clarke as a rising star, another newcomer of South Asian ancestry was attracting even more attention. Nikki Haley, the child of Indian immigrants, became the first female APA governor in the United States. Initially elected to the South Carolina state legislature in 2004, Haley became one of the favorites of Tea Party supporters when she ran for governor in 2010. Haley might also have been the first Sikh governor, but she reportedly converted to Christianity, and her website states that she and her husband attend a United Methodist church. Haley's conversion appears to have happened strikingly close to the blossoming of her political career, unlike the case of Bobby Jindal, who apparently converted from Hinduism to Christianity in high school.

On the other side of the continent, Edwin M. Lee became the first Asian American mayor of San Francisco in January 2011. While a number of Asian Americans have served as mayor of other cities, perhaps the most striking aspect is that it took so long for an Asian American to ascend to the mayor's office in San Francisco, a city which has long had a large Asian American population. Lee, a Chinese American, was named to the position by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors after Gavin Newsom (who attracted national attention when he directed the city clerk to begin registering same-sex marriages) resigned from the mayor's office to become lieutenant governor of California.

One other notable change occurred at the national level, in the executive branch. President Obama nominated Gary Locke to be U.S. ambassador to China (Obama's first ambassador to China, John Huntsman resigned to pursue his presidential ambitions). Locke had been serving in Obama's Cabinet as Secretary of Commerce, so this shift will leave Obama's Cabinet with two Asian Americans: Secretary of Energy Steven Chu, and Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki.

## **LOOKING FORWARD**

Looking toward 2012, one change is certain: Akaka has announced that he will not seek reelection to the Senate, opening the way for considerable competition for his seat. Given the Democrat's narrow majority in the Senate, every open seat is likely to be hotly contested, as the Republicans seek to regain the majority, and the Democrats seek

to retain it.

As of late May 2011, Hawai'i second district representative Mazie Hirono has formally announced her candidacy to succeed Akaka, and Colleen Hanabusa, Hawai'i's other representative, is one of a number of other possible candidates.

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