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Practitioner's Essay

Vote to Empower Yourself, Stupid¹

S.B. Woo

Introduction

Asian Americans (AAs) lack political maturity for two main reasons: family education and Asian political culture. First, we lack family education in what politics in America is all about. We are mostly first- and second-generation immigrants. Our parents and grandparents had none or little knowledge of American politics, especially the practical considerations of how to vote to advance their own interests and why it is proper to do so. In comparison, most other Americans had, since their youth, participated in numerous family conversations about politics, for whom to vote, and why. Second, AAs lack the cultural background in democracy. In contrast, the earlier generations of immigrants to America, be they Irish, Polish, or Italian, all had some cultural awareness of democracy and the power of the ballot box. As a result, most AAs vote according to the value system of politics in their respective "old country."

The "stupid" in the title applies to me alone. For even after my years of political activity, I still lacked political maturity. I did not understand how to vote even after serving as the Lieutenant Governor of Delaware for four years, running for the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House, rubbing shoulders with countless astute politicians, listening to the advice of high-powered and high-priced political consultants, and having run six state-wide campaigns during which I spent a total of over \$3.5 million in campaign funds.

After leaving politics, I finally had the time to reflect on the events that occurred during my tenure in office and throughout my political career. I started to realize what voting and politics are all about. During my past four years with the 80-20 PAC, Inc. (80-20), a political action committee that advocates a swing bloc vote to win equal opportunity and justice for AAs, I have had the opportunity to put my realizations into practice. Finally, I may be "getting it."

This essay begins by exploring how the framers of the American Constitution had intended for its citizens to use their voting power. Then it estimates the voting power of the AA community. Finally, the article suggests how to use that power to serve our own interests, and how our apparently self-centered endeavor benefits America.

How to Vote?

Vote our own interest! This is not being too self-centered. The framers of America's Constitution had always assumed that people would vote their self-interest. That was why our political system was laced with layers of checks and balances. That is why we have three branches of government—executive, legislative and judicial in the city, county, state and the federal levels. That is why we have a multiple party system.

If you need empirical evidence, beyond a theoretical understanding of our political system, that American people vote their own interest, just listen to the motto coined by Tip O'Neill: "All politics is local." He was the Speaker of the House and was highly respected for his political skills. The statement that "all politics is local" reveals what politicians had always known—American people vote their local, not national, interests.

You may also want to know that our senators and representatives normally vote their partisan or respective state's interest. For example, when specific military bases are to be cut to reduce waste, the senators and representatives from the affected states almost always vote against it. Another example is the frequent votes on national issues, including whether to investigate political scandals, that are often split along party lines.

Asian Americans need to vote our own interest to help not only ourselves but also America. This is consistent with a well respected economic theory known as the "The Invisible Hand." It says that if every individual or group maximizes its own interest, then the interest of the entire unit that is composed of all those individuals and groups will automatically be maximized. It is as if an invisible hand has been guiding the conflicting interests to make them work toward a common goal. America is a market-driven society. Our democracy operates pretty much like the market economy.

The following example shows that we failed both America

and ourselves when we failed to vote our own interest. Since 1965, the year of the great Civil Rights Movement, the glass ceiling above minority Americans has been systematically eliminated owing to the introduction of Executive Order 11246. E.O. 11246 is a powerful federal law that compels American institutions to practice equal opportunity with all Americans or be prohibited by the Labor Department from engaging in projects with more than \$10,000 federal money in them—practically all large business opportunities.² As a result, all minorities have reached rough equity except for AAs because E.O. 11246 has been enforced for all Americans except for AAs.

For example, an average AA's chance to rise to the executive or administrator level within institutions of higher education is only one-third of that of all other Americans.³ Our ratio is only slightly better than that of the "resident Aliens"—another indication that America has treated its Asian citizens as "perpetual foreigners." The situation in the corporate world is much worse. All AA CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, with one exception, started the companies themselves. A similar statement can be made regarding government institutions. Both AAs and politicians are responsible for this shameful situation. Politicians were at fault because they enforced E.O. 11246 selectively—for every American but us. We were also at fault because we lacked the political maturity to understand that we couldn't expect politicians to serve our interests unless we can serve their interests.

If we want politicians to fight for us and enforce laws on our behalf, we need to demonstrate the ability to reward such politicians with money and votes, preferably a bloc vote when politicians are running.

How Much Voting Power?

In 2004, there will be an estimated 2.5 million AAs voting in the presidential election, representing about 2.2 percent of the national vote.⁴ While the percentage is small, it can translate into considerable more political clout for three reasons. First, the concentration of our population is in California.⁵ Second, California is a pivotal state in any presidential election because it has fifty-five electoral college votes or 20 percent of the needed votes to become the next president of the U.S. Third, an AA bloc vote has emerged under the leadership of 80-20 in recent years to possibly

tilt the state to one candidate or the other. In 2004, AAs could make or unmake the next U.S. president.

Is a bloc vote good for America? A bloc vote is the most effective way for a small minority to establish its necessary political clout with which to protect its rights.⁶ Bloc votes by AAs are particularly potent in a close race because they can be the swing vote. Take, for example, two candidates who run against each other in a political division, which for simplicity is assumed to have two constituent groups only. One group has 1 million votes (8 percent) and the other has 11 million votes (92 percent). Candidate A, a novice, courts the larger group, not being aware that the smaller constituent group has the internal political cohesion to deliver a bloc vote in the ratio of 8/2 while the larger group does not. When the ballots are open, candidate A wins the larger community by the ratio of 52/48. The margin of difference is 4 percent. Since the larger group has 11 millions votes, 4 percent of 11 million votes provides a winning margin of 440,000 votes to candidate A. His opponent, candidate B, is a seasoned politician. She courts the smaller group and wins that community by a ratio of 80/20, which is the voting pattern of the Jewish Americans and African Americans. The difference between 80 percent and 20 percent is 60 percent. Sixty percent of 1 million votes is 600,000 votes. As a result, candidate B wins the election by (600,000-440,000) or 160,000 votes.

Being a swing vote is a real possibility for the 2004 presidential election. Real figures are used, although some assumptions are made. In 2000, Californians voted 54 percent for Gore and 43 percent for Bush, AAs split 70 percent and 28 percent.⁷ Such an overwhelming support for a Democratic presidential nominee is astounding because AAs used to vote in favor of the Republican presidential candidates.⁸ In that election, 80-20 endorsed Gore. If 80-20, as a two-year-old organization in 2000, delivered better than 70/30 in California to its endorsed candidate, how would it do in 2004? In 2004, 80-20 aims to deliver 80-20, its namesake, to its endorsed candidates. By then, 80-20 will be six years old. Its e-mail list has expanded from 300,000 in the year 2000 to 1.1 million. It didn't have a single dues-paying member in 2000; it has more than 2000 members in 2003. In 2004, if 80-20 endorses Mr. Bush and succeeds in delivering 80/20 to him, then Bush's initial disadvantage in 2000 will decrease from 11 points to 3 points, making California a hotly contested state.

If the above scenario occurs, both the Democratic and the Republican parties will be pouring a huge amount of campaign resources into California. The AA media will be getting a huge amount of political advertisement. The scholars in Asian American Studies in California's universities will be called upon by both political parties for political consultation. But more importantly, because the two parties will be fighting over our votes, the rightful concerns of the Asian Americans will be listened to.

Applying Political Clout

We need to apply our budding political clout in areas of gross inequity that affect the largest number of Asian Americans first. There may be two areas. The first is shattering the glass ceiling. AA is the nation's only minority for whom the Executive Order 11246 has not been enforced—a gross inequity. In addition, all AAs have jobs or have had jobs or have loved ones whose jobs help sustain the livelihood of these AAs. Hence, every AA yearns for equal opportunity in salary increments, promotion and rising to the top. 80-20 sent a questionnaire containing the following three questions to all presidential candidates aiming to break the glass ceiling with the written commitment of the next president:

- (1) If elected, will you direct the Labor Secretary to hold public hearings regarding the validity of the huge amount of statistical data strongly suggesting discriminatory practices against Asian Pacific Americans in workplaces today?
- (2) If the data were shown valid, will you issue a directive to the Labor Department asking it to focus on enforcing Executive Order 11246 on behalf of Asian Pacific Americans, since in the past similar efforts have already been made on behalf of women and other minorities?
- (3) Two years after you have issued a directive described in item 2, will you meet with a group of Asian Pacific American leaders, put together jointly by 80-20 and the Labor Department, to review the progress in extending equal opportunity to Asian Pacific Americans?

80-20 recommends that no financial or other forms of contributions be given until a candidate responds positively to 80-20's questionnaire. After all, "Leverage is the currency of politics." At the time of writing this essay, Senator John Kerry has answered with "yes/yes/yes" and signed his responses, but President George Bush has not.

The second area that would be gross inequity affecting the largest number of AAs is the threat of being interned. In WWII, Japanese Americans were interned but not the German and Italian Americans. In hindsight, this country has recognized injustice of that action. In 1983, when the war hysteria was gone, and cooler head prevailed, the blue-ribbon Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilian (CWRIC) reported:

In sum, Executive Order 9066 (Pres. F.D. Roosevelt's order to intern) was not justified by military necessity. . .The broad historical causes that shaped these decisions were race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.

Unfortunately, that lesson may be ignored at this time. We are one of the two ethnic groups, the other being the Arab American, who may still face the danger of being interned because of "war hysteria." Mass internment is not impossible in the twenty-first century.

On February 4, 2003, Congress member Howard Coble, Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security, justified the internment of Japanese Americans in WWII on a radio interview this way. He said:

We were at war. They (Japanese Americans) were an endangered species. For many of these Japanese Americans, it wasn't safe for them to be on the street. . .Some probably were intent on doing harm to us. . .

Coble's words implied that internment was justified on military grounds and that our government was actually doing Japanese Americans a favor by interning them—protecting "an endangered species." Those of us who think internment is impossible nowadays were probably remembering the findings of the CWRIC. However, such findings apparently had no effect on a powerful politician like Mr. Coble, who is in a key position to recommend whether to intern American citizens. So think again and be vigilant! How do we know that a politician like Coble may not want to "protect us" again?

Concluding Remarks

AAs must vote our own enlightened interests. We must understand that leverage is the currency of politics and practice it. When we have that kind of political maturity, we and our children

will benefit. Indeed, such political maturation helps make America “a more perfect Union.”

Notes

1. This article is dedicated to all those who have contributed generously to my campaigns and given me the opportunity to learn about politics in America. It is also my apology to fellow AAs for being so slow in repaying them for the tuition that they provided on my behalf for my political education. Some Asian Americans may not like what I have to say in this article. That is understandable. After all, it took over ten years of deep involvement in politics and a reasonably large war chest for me to even begin understanding that America expects its citizens to vote their own interest.
2. Visit <<http://www.dol.gov/esa/regs/compliance/ofccp/fs11246.htm>>.
3. University administrators are recruited almost exclusively from the ranks of faculty and professionals already employed in the academic world. Hence the ratio of [administrators/(faculty + professionals)], broken down to races, is a measure of the opportunity enjoyed by American citizens of different races. For full-time staff nationwide, that ratio for blacks (non-Hispanic) is 0.193. That is, for every 100 black faculty and professionals there are 19 black administrators. The ratio for Native American is 0.169; for white (non-Hispanic) is 0.157; and for Hispanic is 0.145. The national average is 0.150. However, it is only 0.057 for Asian American. The only group that has a lower number is the “resident aliens,” whose ratio is 0.046. <<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d02/tables/XLS/Tab224.xls>>
4. This is based on extrapolating from existing data. In 2000, 2.04 million APAs voted in the presidential election (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Amie Jamieson, Hyon B. Smith and Jennifer Day, issued Feb., 2002). This low number out of a total population of 12 million is due to several factors. Only 68 percent of the 12 million are eighteen and older—the minimum age required to register to vote. Of those only 58 percent are citizens. Of citizens who are eighteen and older, only 52 percent registered in 2000. Of those, only 83 percent actually vote (Jamieson, Smith and Day). Taking all of those percentages into consideration produces the 2.04 million votes (12 million \times 0.68 \times 0.58 \times 0.52 \times 0.83). It is projected that the number of AA voters will increase by 20 percent by 2004.
5. About 40 percent of AAs live in California. As a result, AAs represent 8 percent of the voters in California, which is four times the average of 2 percent nationally.
6. David Broder, perhaps the country’s most respected political columnist, recently calls this approach one of the “unnoticed glories of American life.” See <<http://www.80-20initiative.net/broder.html>>.

7. According to a national poll partially sponsored by the National Science Foundation and conducted by a group of professors from Utah, Yale, Harvard and Florida State, AAs voted 66/31/3 for Gore/Bush/Nader in 2000. See <http://www.80-20initiative.net/NAA_Political_Survey.pdf>. Additional information from private communication with the Principal Investigator of the NSH Survey, Prof. Pei-te Lien.
8. According to the New York Times, in 1996, AAs voted nationwide 43/48/8 for Clinton/ Dole/ Perot; in 1992 AAs voted 31/55/15 for Clinton/Bush/Perot.

S.B. Woo is the president of the 80-20 PAC, Inc, a retired physics professor and former Lt. Governor of Delaware (1985-1989). He was born in Shanghai, China and came to the U.S. from Hong Kong at the age of 18. His past experiences include being the founding president of the faculty bargaining unit at the University of Delaware, the Chief Spokesman and Chief Negotiator; Trustee of the University of Delaware; a Fellow at the Institute of Politics, the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University; and serving as the national president of the Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA). He is listed in the Who's Who in America. A life-sized picture of him is displayed in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington D.C. He received his B.S., summa cum laude, in mathematics and physics from Georgetown College in Kentucky and his Ph.D. in Physics from Washington University in St. Louis in 1964.

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