

The Many Firsts for Advancing Asian Pacific American Politics at the WPSA

by Pei-te Lien and Andrew Aoki

The **Asian Pacific American Caucus** ([APAC](#)) was founded over 20 years ago as a Related Group of the American Political Science Association (APSA), the first group of its type in our discipline. A main purpose of founding APAC was to secure panel space on the annual meeting program and to provide networking opportunities for its members. However, our interest in promoting the visibility and influence of scholarship on Asian Pacific American (APA) politics has been limited by the miniscule panel allocation at the APSA meeting. Our dream in attracting focused attention to the studying of APA politics by occupying a substantial and contiguous space in the annual meeting program came true when WPSA agreed to sponsor a full afternoon of presentations on APA politics in the 2013 meeting. This development became the launching pad for the **Mini-Conference on Asian Pacific American Politics**, a WPSA first for a national conference on the topic.

The inaugural event took the form of a pre-conference workshop at the annual meeting in Los Angeles on March 27, 2013. The event benefitted from the location in southern California and attracted a strong and diverse line-up of presenters and a solid turnout of scholars, students, and community activists. Presenters include Daniel Ichinose of the Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium (APALC or Asian American Advancing Justice-LA), Paul Ong and Loan Le of UC Los Angeles, Lisa Garcia Bedolla of UC Berkeley, Jane Junn of USC, S. Karthick Ramakrishnan of UC Riverside, Kenneth Chaiprasert of UC Irvine, and Jeanette Harvie and Pei-te Lien of UC Santa Barbara.

This historic gathering was organized by Pei-te Lien (WPSA Council, 2009-12) to help celebrate and bring attention to the founding of the WPSA **Committee of the Status of Asian Pacific Americans in the Profession**. The idea for the mini-conference began to grow several years earlier when visionary WPSA leaders approached Lien to spearhead the formation of a preparatory committee to address the welfare and issues impacting members of Asian and Pacific Islander descent in the association. The invitation was perceived as an excellent opportunity to advance the visibility and influence of APAs in the profession, mirroring similar committees on women, Blacks, and Latinos/as in the

Association. In 2012, ten years after establishing the [Committee on the Status of Asian Pacific Americans in the Profession](#) at the APSA, the WPSA became the first and is still the only regional political science association to boast a status committee on APAs.

APSA was the nation's first professional association to establish a status committee to study Asian Pacific Americans and their politics, started as a result of the lobbying efforts of the APAC. Co-founded by Andrew Aoki (WPSA Council 2016-19) and Pei-te Lien in 1999, APAC worked to increase the visibility and influence of scholarship on APA politics and of APA scholars in the discipline. It envisioned the provision of a special meeting space to help connect students, scholars, and concerned individuals who shared an interest in and commitment to the teaching and learning of Asian Americans (and, to a lesser extent, Pacific Islanders) and their politics. In 2001-02, former senior APAC co-chair Jane Junn (WPSA President, 2018-19) collaborated with James Lai, then junior APAC co-chair, to draft a memo requesting that the APSA Council establish a status committee on APAs; the Council approved the request promptly. From its founding, the majority of those serving on the APSA status committee have been APAC members.

The establishment of the WPSA status committee on APAs created another organized group at the national level that played a formative role, especially in earlier years, in promoting the study of APA politics at a scholarly conference. One of the main contributions of the status committee has been organizing a conference within a conference or a mini-conference on APA politics on a nearly annual basis. Status committee members also choose the recipient of the **Best Paper Award on APA Politics**—an award that marked another “first” for the WPSA, as its conference became the first to recognize an outstanding paper on APA politics, an award accompanied by a \$250 prize. Similar to the case at APSA, APAC members have been the leaders in creating and sustaining APA-oriented activities at the WPSA. For example, APAC member Loan Le has coordinated or co-coordinated (with other APAC leaders) several of the recent APA mini-conferences at the WPSA annual meetings.

The **Mini-conference on APA Politics** is typically a day-long meeting, with four panels on research presentations and roundtable discussions of current affairs

and/or professional development. In addition, there is a business meeting for members of the WPSA status committee and APAC to convene together. Over the years, topics covered in the mini-conference on APA politics have included the model minority and perpetual foreigner images, racial oppression, sexual harassment, partisan orientation, candidate and voter preferences, and electoral trajectories by race and gender in local, state, and national offices, as well as other topics. In the 2021 meeting, the topic of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander politics gained unprecedented prominence thanks to the leadership efforts of Ngoc Phan (APAC co-chair 2021-23), who also sits on the WPSA APA status committee (2020-23). The understudied topic of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander American politics got further attention when the WPSA APA status committee bestowed the best paper award to Ngoc Phan and Kevin Lujan Lee's analysis of social science and the analysis of Native Hawaiian politics.

In 2016, in the wake of the untimely death of UCLA Professor Don T. Nakanishi, at the urging of Aoki and Lien and with spontaneous support from many others, the WPSA moved quickly to establish the **Don T. Nakanishi Award for Distinguished Scholarship and Service in Asian Pacific American Politics**. A brisk fundraising campaign quickly established the **Nakanishi Endowment Fund**. The annual award recognizes outstanding scholarship or service that advances the understanding or practice of Asian Pacific American politics. The recipient is someone who has made a significant contribution to the advancement of APA politics and/or whose professional work has made a substantial contribution to the community. Until 2022, the award has been given either through the form of an outstanding conference paper or a recently published book but not both.

In light of the growing field and number of junior scholars, and in consistence with the practices of other WPSA best paper awards, the Nakanishi Award on best paper has been renamed WPSA Best Paper Award on APA Politics after 2021. It will be issued on an annual basis and refereed by members of the APA status committee. Starting with the 2022 meeting, a separate WPSA **Nakanishi Award Committee** is formed, in consultation with APAC, to help evaluate the nominees for best book and/or distinguished service.

Finally, since 2018, WPSA has helped maintain the **Fund for Asian Pacific Americans**, whose revenues include monies collected from APAC members at

annual business meetings. Another of the nation's first, this Fund aims to support the promotion of APA research and education efforts broadly defined, fund awards for scholarship and service, and subsidize meetings, events, and other publicity needs.