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FILIPINOS FOR GARCETTI: ETHNIC POLITICAL ORGANIZING IN LOS ANGELES AND ASIAN AMERICAN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN CITIES

GEORGE VILLANUEVA

INTRODUCTION

Asian Pacific Islanders have been identified by the US Census Bureau as the fastest growing racial population in the United States in this decade. Despite this demographic explosion, little research has been done on the disaggregation of Asian American ethnicities and their participation in electoral politics. In addition, most of the studies that do emerge focus on Asian American political participation at the state and national levels, creating a need for scholarship on how Asian American groups engage in electoral politics at the local level. This work contributes to the body of multiethnic political engagement microstudies in major cities through the examination of Filipino Americans—who now make up the largest Asian American ethnic group in the City of Los Angeles—organizing of Filipinos for Garcetti. The campaign was made up of Filipino American community advocates who organized community support, fundraisers, and votes for Eric Garcetti’s successful bid to become the forty-second mayor of Los Angeles.

Mainstream media coverage of the 2013 Los Angeles mayoral campaign focused on general campaign activities and major endorsements by elected officials, developers, established advocacy groups (e.g., unions), celebrities, and political insiders. Unsurprisingly, the critical emergence of grassroots ethnic political organizing and civic engagement—especially from newer ethnic minorities such as Asian Americans and Latinos, who together make up a majority of the city’s population—was largely disregarded by the mainstream media. But the lack of media coverage did not reflect the substantial role that these groups played in the election.

Multiethnic civic engagement has generally focused on candidate outreach to ethnic groups, but studies would be incomplete without an examination of whether ethnic groups self-organize to become collectively engaged in the political process. Asian Americans in particular cannot rest assured that their rising populations in major cities will guarantee resources from city governments and politicians. Instead, Asian American ethnic groups must continue to think about and engage in political organizing that offers pathways for civic engagement and political visibility.

Informed by ‘Communication Infrastructure Theory’ (CIT)—a framework that emphasizes the construction of community through local storytelling networks—I argue that *Filipinos for Garcetti* adds to the emerging practices of Asian American civic engagement in cities by demonstrating the critical role of ethnic-specific political organizing. *Filipinos for Garcetti*, with its connection to the longer history of Filipino American community organizing, activated local Filipino storytelling networks for civic engagement by advocating for resources from Mayor Garcetti before, during, and after the mayoral campaign.

In addition to academic sources, this article is informed by the author’s own participation and observation of Filipino American community activism and LA city politics during his years as a Council District 13 field deputy, Filipino American advocate, and doctoral student at the University of Southern California. From 2001 to 2003, the author served as the first Filipino American field deputy for Councilmember Garcetti and was assigned to the Temple Beverly corridor, later officially named Historic Filipinotown. The author, along with two other Filipino Americans on Councilmember Garcetti’s staff, maintained critical relationships and advocated within government in the interest of the Filipino American community during the Councilmember’s twelve-year tenure.

This analysis of the political ethnic organizing by *Filipinos for Garcetti* yields three significant implications for Asian American civic engagement in cities: (1) it shows how newer ethnic immigrant storytelling networks in cities must be activated by members of that storytelling network for the purposes of civic engagement, (2) it highlights the emergence of ‘new minority politics,’ which expands the traditional Black-White paradigm and explains why candidates must pay attention to Asian American integration into local electoral politics, and (3) it demonstrates the importance of political representation within city government to the process of racial formation and immigrant integration for Asian American communities.

Part I will briefly introduce the theoretical framework of CIT and recent applications of the theory. Part II will discuss the Filipino American community’s history of activism and organizing in Los Angeles. Part III will explore the activation of the Filipino American community for *Garcetti*. Finally, Part IV will discuss some of the implications of analyzing the success of *Filipinos for Garcetti* through the lens of CIT.

1. COMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE THEORY

Communication Infrastructure Theory is a social-ecological framework that articulates the local dynamics of urban communities by examining their communication infrastructure. According to CIT, the communication resources of a community are constructed through two components: the

Storytelling Network and the surrounding Communication Action Context. Because a community is based on its members' shared stories, it is critical to examine and invest into resources that facilitate these connections.

The first component is the 'Storytelling Network'—the network of actors within a community—which consists of three nodes: (1) residents and families, (2) community organizations, and (3) geo-ethnic media, or local media aimed at a particular ethnicity or geography. As we will discuss later, empirical research has shown that strengthening the connection and integration of these nodes is critical to increasing civic engagement and collective efficacy.

The second component is the 'Communication Action Context,' which recognizes that storytelling networks are embedded within a local environment that can facilitate or impede communication between residents. Some examples of these pieces are: quality and availability of parks or other public spaces, real and perceived public safety, quality of schools and community centers, and other environmental characteristics—all of which are dependent on the local place.

As research teams have applied the storytelling network to more engaged, community-based research, the word "activation" has emerged to indicate the benefit of moving the storytelling network toward specific advocacy goals. The CIT framework has been especially useful for those occupying a hybrid researcher-advocate role because it can be used both to inform organizing strategies and to analyze their success.

Previous CIT research has demonstrated that when a local storytelling network's nodes are strongly connected, there is a positive impact on neighborhood belonging, civic participation, and collective efficacy—three crucial elements of civic engagement in urban communities. Other scholars have used the CIT approach to local storytelling networks to both inform and analyze the launch of a hyper-

local news website called Alhambra Source. This platform successfully engaged local residents from the multiethnic Chinese, Latino, and Anglo suburban city of Alhambra in Southern California to contribute community journalism to the news website.

Researchers from the USC Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism have also successfully applied the CIT framework to activate local storytelling networks in the community surrounding the university. The first, a translational website called MetaConnects shares community-based research and tools for practitioners seeking to promote social change in their local neighborhoods. The second, a community-wide project at USC called Ride South LA, brought researchers, community organizations, and local residents together to design a mobile phone engagement strategy that celebrates the neighborhood's cultural landmarks through bicycle tours while advocating for improved bicycle infrastructure.

This paper focuses on the value that CIT can add to a community practitioner-scholar's understanding of community activation in service of civic engagement in cities. For this current work, it is beneficial to use CIT as a conceptual framework that views the Filipino American community in Los Angeles as a specific storytelling network that was activated for the purposes of ethnic political organizing during the 2013 Los Angeles Mayoral campaign. As this case will illustrate, Filipino Americans have had a long history of activating their own storytelling network in Los Angeles for the purpose of community building. This longer history of self-activation by Filipino Americans enabled the recent manifestation of the political organizing that took place in Filipinos for Garcetti.

2. FILIPINO AMERICAN COMMUNITY ACTIVISM FORMATIONS IN LOS ANGELES

Filipino American community activism in Los Angeles must be situated in the broader context of the racial, cultural, and political

representation of Asian Americans in the United States. Race scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant see such community activism as 'racial formations,' understood as processes of "historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized." Scholars have used racial formation theory to examine Asian American community identity constructions in suburban geographies such as the San Gabriel Valley, a large Asian American enclave just outside of Los Angeles. These studies reveal the significant impact of the Chinese population on the local place and how their ethnic identities shaped their negotiation of everyday life in response to the structural expectations of whiteness that dominated—and continue to dominate—the region. Racial formations are primarily executed in these studies to show the resiliency of Asian American communities as they adapt to ethnic and racial tensions that are provoked by changing demographics.

Scholars have pointed to Filipino American struggles for ethnic and political representation as a racial formation project that is structured in response to whiteness and to the history of exclusion that subjugated Filipino Americans as an invisible community. After the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Cellar Act, abolished immigration quotas based on country of origin, the Filipino American community began to organize more aggressively. The Filipino American ethnic recognition movements in Los Angeles were a resulting racial formation project which disrupted structures of Whiteness and how capitalism in the United States expects to consume Asian American culture. Scholars also point to the history of mobilizing for a Filipinotown in Los Angeles in the 1970s and 1980s as a formation constructed in dialectical relationship with the expectations that Whites and the dominant capitalist culture have regarding the consumption of Asian American ethnicities in the same way that the United States has consumed

Chinatowns—as the categorized place in cities to experience and to consume the ethnic other through restaurants and cultural tourism.

Filipinotown movements have taken longer to establish because they have not fit neatly into these expectations of place—even in a city like Los Angeles where Filipino Americans have historically been the second-largest Asian American ethnic group. Instead, Filipinotown movements have been more in line with the goal of memorializing and recognizing the community’s ethnic heritage. This analysis drives home the point that Filipino Americans have felt the need both to organize themselves in response to structures of White expectations and consumerism of the other, and to activate their own storytelling networks to advocate for their own political, cultural, and community interests.

The Filipino American community’s activation of its own storytelling networks for community activism after the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act led to the creation of a host of Filipino American community-based organizations that have since advocated for community interests. These organizations have primarily worked out of the Temple-Beverly corridor, a locality that served as one of the original areas where Filipino immigrants settled in the 1940s after being displaced by redevelopment efforts downtown earlier in the twentieth century. Key organizations include Search to Involve Pilipino Americans (SIPA), Filipino American Service Group, Incorporated (FASGI), FilAm ARTS, and the Pilipino Workers Center (PWC). Some of these organizations have been operating since the 1970s. These organizations create robust Community Organizations nodes within the CIT framework and serve as a resource to facilitate the broader civic engagement of the Filipino American community.

For example, SIPA has been serving local Filipino families with social services for over three decades while dedicating resources to community and economic development in the Temple-Beverly corridor. FASGI has played a significant role in registering Filipino American voters, supporting Filipino American World War II Veterans, and providing transitional housing for vulnerable populations. FilAm ARTS has served as a site for Filipino cultural schooling and has organized the annual Festival of Philippine Arts and Culture since 1992. PWC has been instrumental in organizing recent immigrants and domestic workers for worker rights campaigns while also building an affordable housing development in the area to stave off gentrification. This existing storytelling network, created in large part by the work of these community-based organizations, played a pivotal role in pushing for resources for the community and maintaining a relationship with elected officials, including then-Councilmember Eric Garcetti.

3. ACTIVATING THE FILIPINO AMERICAN COMMUNITY FOR GARCETTI

Mayor Eric Garcetti was the councilmember representing the Thirteenth Council District in Los Angeles before running for mayor. Existing Filipino-American storytelling networks were first brought to Councilmember Garcetti’s attention when the community was activated to push for the establishment of a Filipinotown city designation for the Temple-Beverly corridor, which was located in the Thirteenth Council District. The successful designation of the Temple-Beverly corridor as Historic Filipinotown did not come until August 2002, when then-Councilmember Garcetti worked with Filipino-American community activists to hold a community consultation process and introduce legislation a year after his election. The ‘Historic’ label was intended to recognize the area as both the original gateway and the current locality for Filipino immigrant settlement, business presence, and community-based activity. A significant political relationship was formed between the Filipino American community and Garcetti through this process, and as a result, Garcetti maintained a staff position assigned to the Historic Filipinotown neighborhood throughout his tenure that was held by a rotation of three

Filipino Americans.

This was important because even though Councilmember Garcetti and his staff were responsible for the whole council district, the Filipino American staff members were able to bring the broader interests of Filipino Americans to light. This included endorsing and assisting with the effort to use a city park in San Pedro as the site of the annual Festival of Philippine Arts and Culture. Filipino American staff were also in a better position to learn about sources of city funding that could be made available for beautification projects in the Historic Filipinotown area. This knowledge, combined with the Filipino American staff members' interest in making resources available to the Historic Filipinotown community, helped to connect projects such as the Filipino World War II Veterans monument in Historic Filipinotown and streetscape improvements that reflected the cultural heritage of Filipinos in the neighborhood with needed financial and political support—further strengthening the area's communication action context and enabling greater community connections.

The Filipinos for Garcetti operation during the Los Angeles mayoral campaign came directly out of the previous work that then-Councilmember Garcetti's former Filipino American staff had engaged in with the Filipino American community. This group served as the lead organizers for activities leading up to the 2013 mayoral election and were intent on activating the Filipino American storytelling networks for the purpose of civic engagement. It was clear from observing years of electoral politics in Los Angeles that racial and ethnic groups did not gain power with elected officials exclusively by collectively protesting for resources outside of government; it also required participation in campaign activities that led to the election of candidates who paid attention to the interests of those organized communities that helped put these candidates in office.

With this goal in mind, Filipinos for Garcetti organized two primary fundraisers attended by close to one-hundred supporters each and which resulted in over \$25,000 in campaign contributions. Additionally, the lead organizers helped to recruit Filipino Americans for phone banking and neighborhood canvassing across the city. Lastly, the lead organizers served as points of contact for Filipino ethnic media that wanted to report on the campaign's engagement of Filipino Americans.

4. IMPLICATIONS OF FILIPINOS FOR GARCETTI

ACTIVATING ETHNIC STORYTELLING NETWORKS

The storytelling network component of CIT is a helpful framework to use when thinking about the activation of the various Asian American ethnic communities that now call cities in the United States home. Politically, the Filipinos for Garcetti case demonstrates the activation of a Filipino ethnic storytelling network by Filipino American organizers and participants in pursuit of a goal of civic engagement during the 2013 mayoral campaign. It also illustrates that organizing ethnic groups to participate in local electoral politics will require ethnic-specific strategies led by organizers of the same heritage who come from the community.

We have seen this same phenomenon of storytelling network activation by ethnic and racial members of particular communities in the history of Black Power movements in the 1960s, and more recently in the Black Lives Matter organizing taking place across the nation. Black Lives Matter organizers overtly address the significance of Black community members organizing their movements for their own advocacy interests—coalescing in large part around the stories of racial tension and police brutality in their own communities and across the country. Filipino community activism both before and after the 2013 mayoral

election serves as an example of Asian American ethnic storytelling network activation and will continue to have the most success and relevance if the Filipino American community itself takes leadership of this movement.

It is important to highlight that the activation of the Filipino American storytelling network by Filipinos for Garcetti took shape through various strategies that were aimed at the Filipino ethnic experience. The fundraising events that carried the Filipinos for Garcetti name were particularly useful because they distinguished themselves from traditional fundraisers named after the general campaign or sponsored by specific individual hosts. The ethnicity-specific campaign moniker signified that the effort was paying attention to Filipino Americans as a collective within the city instead of focusing on specific individuals.

Supporters who spoke Tagalog, the primary Filipino dialect, were also recruited to participate in campaign phone banking that targeted Filipino households. Even though many Filipino Americans speak English due to the history of American colonialism in the Philippines, Filipinos who spoke Tagalog were more likely to feel comfortable communicating about the campaign with callers who possessed similar language and cultural capabilities. This observation underscores the findings of Philippine studies scholars who argue that speaking Tagalog is a form of resistance to American colonization, and that Filipino diasporas will exert Tagalog as an expression of power over their own everyday lives outside of their homeland.

These ethnic-specific strategies activated by organizers of Filipinos for Garcetti augmented general campaign activities that used traditional voter outreach that did not effectively reach the greater potential voters of Filipino heritage, like television ads and English language materials. An ethnic storytelling network approach encourages city electoral campaign

practitioners to consider the different ethnic language and cultural contexts that may need to be considered in order to produce better civic engagement outcomes among the diverse Asian American communities in cities.

Shifting Demographics and New Minority Politics

Along with the burgeoning Latino populations across the nation, major cities are faced with constituent politics that are vastly different from the racial and ethnic makeup of the previous century. Indeed, Aoki and Nakanishi contend that the demographic rise of Asian Americans and Latinos constitute “new minority politics” that transcend the historical Black-White dichotomy that dominated electoral politics of the past. This is particularly the case with major cities like Los Angeles, whose ethnic diversity requires new multiethnic strategies for civic engagement. Demographers project that in Los Angeles, the Asian American and Latino populations will continue to increase through 2030 while white and Black populations decrease. From 2000 to 2010, the Asian Pacific Islander population in the City of Los Angeles has seen a 20 percent increase. In the City of Los Angeles, Filipinos are the largest Asian American ethnic group (See Table 1).

Table 1

2010 Asian American Population in the City of Los Angeles

Ethnic Group	Total Population
Filipino	122787
Korean	108282
Chinese	61950
Japanese	32619
Indian	32996
Vietnamese	19969
Thai	12349
Taiwanese	4559
Cambodian	3446

Source: 2010 US Census, City of Los Angeles Office of Immigrant Affairs

From a numbers perspective it makes political sense for politicians and city governments to engage Filipinos as part of this landscape of the “new minority politics.” Yet, as political scientists point out, the increasing number of Asian Americans does not translate into political participation. Furthermore, one cannot assume that politicians will automatically pay attention to new ethnic minority groups when efficient and successful political campaigns depend on targeting those constituencies, such as White and Black voting blocs, that are already engaged. Therefore, it was critical for Filipino Americans to take it upon themselves to organize their own community storytelling networks toward a goal of political recognition and presence.

The reality of a “new minority politics” surfaced in Los Angeles in 2015 when, for only the second time in Los Angeles’ history, an Asian American was elected into the City Council. When Councilmember David Ryu, a Korean American, won his hotly contested City Council seat, he took political organizing and Asian American civic engagement to a new level by showing the promise that Asian American ethnic groups are not limited to political organizing, but are also able to make up the face of elected officials in major cities like Los Angeles. Even though a broad multiethnic coalition brought him to office, he was backed by substantial Asian American financial support and votes from the Koreatown neighborhood that is partially located within his district. The coalescing of storytelling networks around a candidate that showed clear interest in ethnic-specific

communities throughout their career paralleled much of what occurred in the organizing for Filipinos for Garcetti.

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION MATTERS

As the lead organizers for Filipinos for Garcetti learned from their past positions within Councilmember Garcetti's office, representation on staff and on city commissions provides political visibility and access for communities in the city. Even though the race and ethnicity of government representatives do not necessarily translate into ethnic minorities receiving attention within electoral politics, this ethnic consubstantiality does indicate to newer ethnic minorities that efforts are being made to increase their belonging in the city. Consubstantiality is defined by noted communication scholar Kenneth Burke as "a practice-related concept based on stylistic identifications and symbolic structures, which persuade and produce acceptance: an acting-together within, and defined by, a common context." Consubstantiality with ethnic communities is aligned with the canons of communication scholarship on civic engagement, as scholars like Burke have long established the significance of consubstantiality as a strategy for political rhetors, governments, and media to establish identification with their audiences or constituencies.

As an example, one of the major Filipino American newspapers, *Asian Journal*, covered the city council confirmations of several Filipino Americans who were appointed to various citywide commissions. Political representation within city government is newsworthy for Filipino American communities in Los Angeles largely because it establishes a form of ethnic consubstantiality between local government and Filipino Americans. For Asian American civic engagement on the whole, Filipino American political representation within elected official staffs and appointed commissions expands beyond the celebration of Asian American population growth; it shows that political institutions charged with public policies that govern neighborhoods can—and should—be ethnically representative of shifting demographics. The activation of ethnic storytelling networks for the purpose of civic engagement is critical to the emergent multiethnic face of Los Angeles, but at the end of the day Filipinos for Garcetti as a political organizing vehicle can also be evaluated by outcomes related to political representation within city government. As Asian American scholar James Lai declares, there is a dearth of Asian American political representation at the elected official government level—both in terms of elected officials and staff—in major cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. For this reason, when it comes to political representation, it is important to study both the voting patterns of Asian American groups in multiple cycles and whether the community is making in-roads into positions within elected official staffs and related government bodies.

For the measure of political representation that ensued as a result of Filipinos for Garcetti political organizing, we can assess the Filipino American makeup of the mayor's staff and citywide citizen commissions appointed by the mayor one year after his inauguration in July 2013. One year in office is an appropriate juncture to assess representation because the mayor and his senior staff have had the necessary time to establish the administration's full staff and appoint members to the various citizen commissions that oversee citywide policies.

By the first year of Mayor Garcetti's tenure, about nine of the mayor's staff and eleven appointed citizen commissioners were Filipino Americans—roughly four percent in each category. Staff positions held by Filipino Americans included important posts in External Affairs and the newly-opened Immigrant Affairs Office; Filipino Americans were also appointed to significant commissions including Area Planning, Building and Safety, Transportation, Affordable Housing, and Municipal Elections. With the Filipino American community making up roughly four percent of the 3.8 million residents of the City of Los Angeles, the mayor's appointments roughly reflect the city's demographics for the Filipino American community. More importantly, the seniority and significance of these roles provides insight and access for the Filipino American community's storytelling networks to continue to mobilize themselves toward greater civic engagement.

CONCLUSION

Filipinos are the largest Asian American ethnic group in the City of Los Angeles, and while this alone warrants that city elected officials pay attention to the concerns of Filipino Americans, it should not be assumed that elected officials will account for the community automatically. Instead, Filipino Americans will need to organize around their community interests and engage political institutions to ensure that city resources are distributed to the neighborhoods in which they live and work. From the perspective of Communication Infrastructure Theory, this article demonstrates the long history of Filipino Americans activation of their own storytelling networks for community building and, subsequently, for civic engagement that led to the political organizing of Filipinos for Garcetti during the most recent mayoral campaign. Moreover, this case takes seriously the emergent "new minority politics" landscape in the country and illustrates an on-the-ground account of a racial formation project focused on Filipino Americans building relationships with existing political institutions. To underscore an earlier point, Filipino Americans, like other ethnic groups of the past, are active citizens willing to productively contribute to public life; they have not stood on the sidelines when it comes to political representation in cities.

Asian American ethnic groups should activate their own storytelling networks and turn the discourse

circulated by residents, community organizations, and ethnic media toward issues of civic engagement that will lead to political organizing that advocates for greater resources from city governments for their communities. This investment into pieces of the Communication Action Context will ensure that the communities are better able to self-organize in the future. Asian Americans will continue to make up the fastest growing racial population, especially in the most populated cities of the country; yet, there is a dearth of Asian American political representation at the government level in major cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Filipinos for Garcetti shows that there is a way to bring the Asian American communities' concerns to light and to encourage their greater participation within public life.

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