Naturalization of S.F. Chinese Immigrants: The Surge in the 1990s

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NATURALIZATION OF S.F. CHINESE IMMIGRANTS THE SURGE IN THE 1990s

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Introduction:

For the first time in decades, the 1990s experienced a significant increase in naturalization. The number of naturalized U.S. citizens rose from 6.5 to 11 million citizens by 2002 (Figure 1; Fix, Passel and Sucher, 2003). Chinese Americans in particular experienced a surge in naturalization during the 1990s. From 2002-2004, California had the largest percentage of naturalized persons. Immigrants from Asian countries comprised a significant portion of the total naturalized between 2002 and 2004. Additionally, the San Francisco metropolitan area had the tenth largest naturalization rate from 2002 to 2004 (Rytina and Saeger, 2005). At the same time, legislation and political events targeted immigrants in California, creating a negative political climate for foreign-born residents.

This study examines naturalization rates among the Chinese-American population living in San Francisco during 1980-2000. This study compares the characteristics of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco who became citizens and those who have yet to become naturalized during this large wave of immigration and subsequent anti-immigrant legislation and sentiment. Previous research has examined Chinese immigrants on a larger scale; however, this study examines a smaller sample to account for differences associated with a specific region.

Naturalization is the citizenship mechanism that grants immigrants constitutional rights and benefits as well as political participation in US society. Legal permanent US residents who are 18 years of age or older and have lived in the country for at least five years are eligible to gain citizenship (Rytina and Saeger, 2005). Becoming a citizen is the first benchmark toward immigrant civic participation. The rate of naturalization among Asian Pacific Americans determines the size of the APA population eligible to vote and also its political future as a voting base. In order to study immigrant Chinese voting behavior, it is necessary to first study the likelihood of naturalization among this group. Measuring naturalization rates over time and collecting demographic data aids in tracking the variation in the immigrant voter pool. A regression model is applied to study the influence of certain immigrant characteristics that influence the decision to naturalize. Characteristics such as age, sex, educational attainment, years of residence in the US, English language ability and place of birth have been thought to be strong indicators of naturalization rates among foreign-born populations (Ong and Nakanishi, 1996).

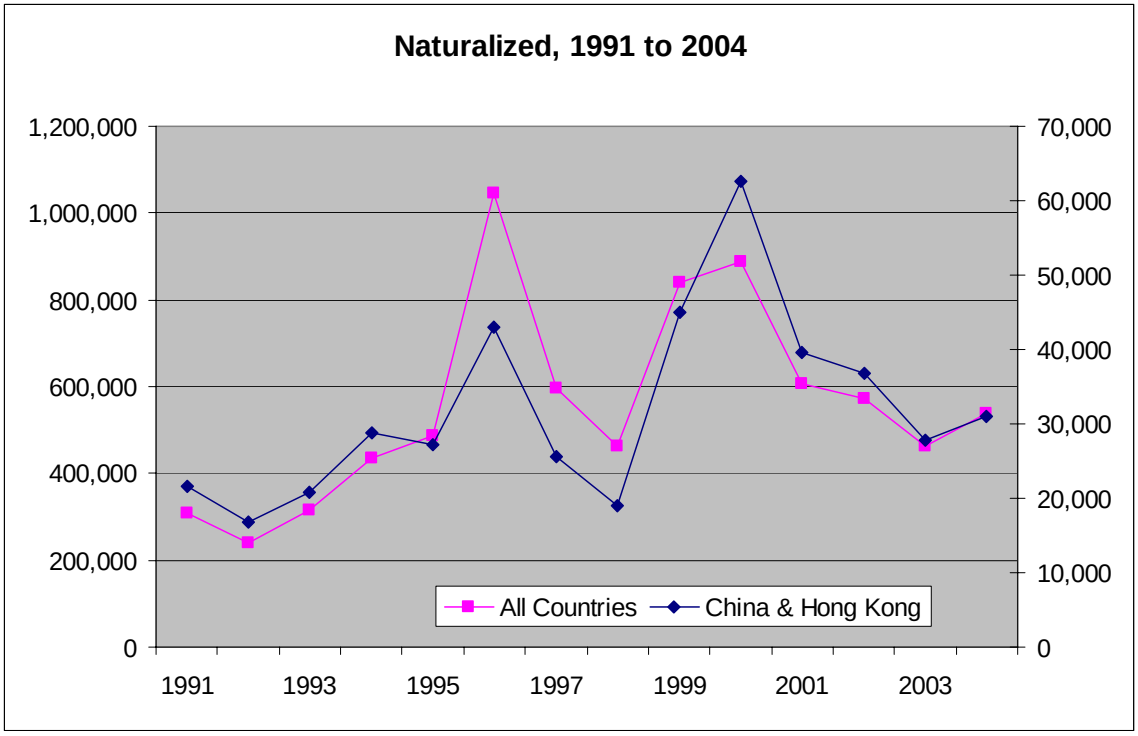

Figure 1: Number of Chinese Americans, from various countries naturalized between 1991 and 2004.

While individual decisions play major roles in influencing naturalization and voting patterns, societal factors can also affect behavior. The increasing anti-immigrant activities over the last two decades compelled many immigrants to naturalize and also vote (Pantoja, Ramirez and Segura, 2001). Many of these efforts took place in California. In a xenophobic response to the growing number of non-English speaking immigrants, California voters approved two propositions in the 1980s to make English the official language (Loo and Ong, 1998).

This contemporary anti-immigrant movement in the Golden State culminated in the passage of the 1994 Proposition 187, which attempted to prohibit undocumented immigrants from receiving publicly funded benefits. At the national level, restrictions on immigrants took the form of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, which included restrictions on benefits for legal immigrants (Yoo, 2003). These developments, particularly during the 1990s, had a profound impact on many non-citizen immigrants, who sought shelter from anti-immigrant restrictions through naturalization.

The wave of anti-immigrant activities also compelled community organizations and advocacy groups to take on initiatives to increase the political clout of immigrants through naturalization and voter registration drives, and "turn-out-the-vote" programs (Chin, 1996; Estrada and Marcos, 1997; Bui, et al., 2004; Magpantay, 2004; Wong, 2004). These collective efforts, along with the increased individual motivation, may have facilitated increased citizenship rates, which can be seen in the administrative data on all immigrants (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2003). The number of applications for citizenship grew from about 207 thousand in 1991 to a peak of 1.4 million in 1997. The number of those who naturalized increased from 308 thousand in 1991 to a peak of

over a million in 1996, and then declined[1]. Among Asians, the naturalization numbers increased from 168 thousand in 1991 to 307 thousand in 1996.

Other Chinese-American high-profile issues also influenced naturalization in the 1990s. The 1996 Presidential Fundraising Scandal and the 1999 Wen Ho Lee case played large roles in the characterization of Chinese-American citizenship in the general public (Wang, 2003; Turnbull, 2003). The fundraising scandal racialized political corruption by highlighting Asians such as Chinese-American John Huang's involvement in illegally soliciting Asian business executives for funds for the Democratic National Convention and Bill Clinton's presidential campaign (Wang, 2003). The other high-profile case involved Chinese-American Wen Ho Lee, a nuclear scientist who was accused of mishandling information and investigated for selling secrets to China. While the spying charges were later dropped, Lee spent nine months in jail during the FBI investigation. Both issues cast negative stereotypes of Chinese Americans as foreigners and "denaturalized" Asian Americans, who were portrayed as having divided loyalties (Wang, 2003).

San Francisco offers a unique setting to study Chinese immigrant voters. Known in Cantonese as the "Big City," the city is home to the first Chinese urban settlement in the United States. San Francisco was also the focal point of the anti-Chinese movement during the latter part of the nineteenth century (Ong, 1981). During most of the twentieth century, the Chinese community remained relatively small and isolated due to racist immigration laws and white antipathy. Since the elimination of racially based quotas in 1965, the Chinese population expanded rapidly.

In 2000, San Francisco had the second largest Chinese population. New York City had a larger Chinese population (in part because of the artifact of political boundaries, with New York City comprising almost all of its metropolitan area while San Francisco City is only a small part of its metropolitan area), but the percentage of the total population that is Chinese is significantly higher in San Francisco City. According to recent population estimates since the 2000 Census, nearly one in four San Franciscans is Chinese. Among the Chinese, seven of every ten are foreign-born, and the proportion is higher among adults.

Demographic Indicators of Recently Naturalized Immigrants:

This study compares the characteristics of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco who became citizens and those who have yet to become naturalized between 1980 and 2000. The demographics of both groups have been studied using Public Use Microdata Samples from 1980, 1990 and 2000 data to determine whether the odds of being naturalized increased dramatically over time, after controlling for factors such as age, gender, length of residency in the **US**, education and place of birth. The samples show that over two decades, the number of Chinese-American naturalized citizens increased, with a minimal increase between 1980 and 1990 and a 62 percentage point increase in Chinese-American naturalized citizens from 1990 to 2000. (See Figure 1.) Additionally, each sample indicates that the rate of naturalization is larger for Chinese immigrant residents who have lived in the US longer than 20 years than for newer residents. (See Figure 2.)

[1] The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 contributed to this growth but only accounted for about a third of the increase (Rytina, 2001).

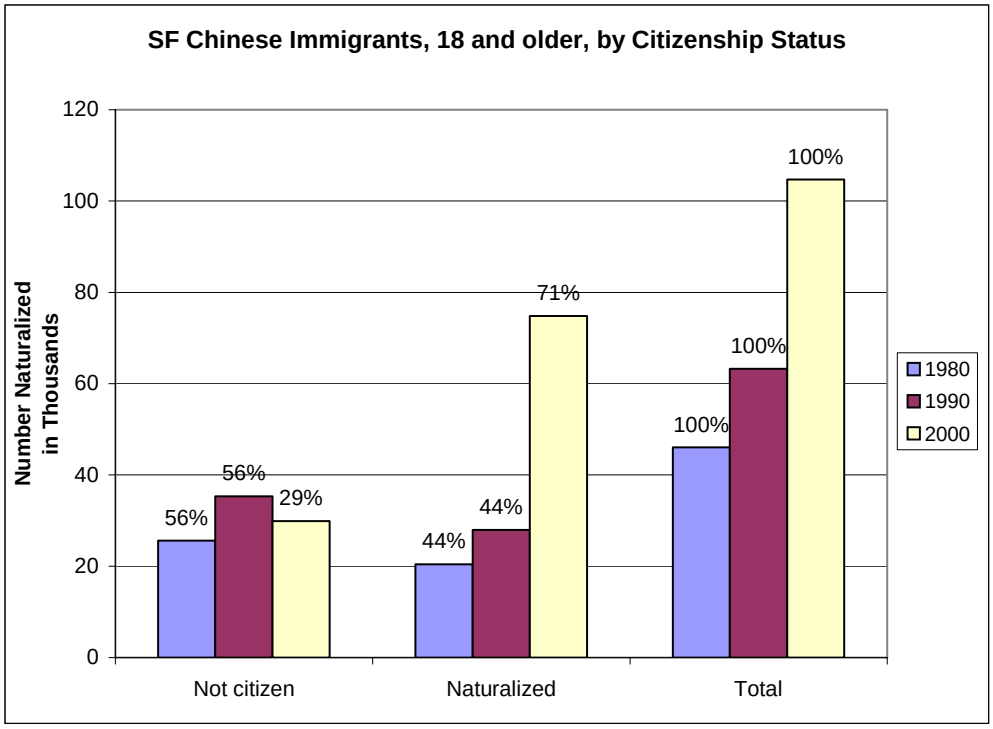

Figure 1

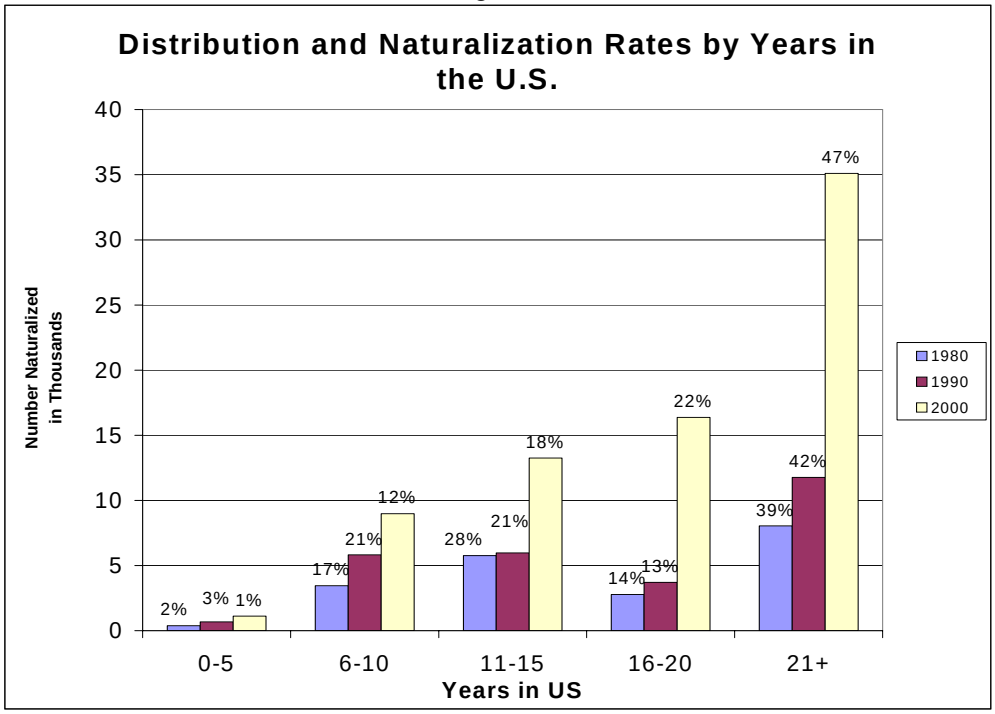

Figure 2

For those in the sample who recently naturalized, this study also compared the change in demographics of these citizens who have lived in San Francisco over 20 years. This study examined the differences in citizenship, age, sex, number of years in the US,

education attainment, English language ability and place of birth of this group during each of the three time periods. Across the three time periods, most of the naturalized respondents emigrated from mainland China and over half of each group reported they spoke limited or no English. The mean age of those who immigrated is 47 years. Additionally, the majority of the respondents in the three samples are female, and over 40 percent have a high school degree or lower. However, tenure in the US varied consistently across each of the three periods. The rate of naturalization also significantly increased from 44 percent in 1980 and 1990 to 71 percent in 2000. (See Table 1.)

Table 1 – Key Variables

Variable Means	**TOTAL (n=9949)**	**1980 (n=2302)**	**1990 (n=2912)**	**2000 (n=4735)**
Variable	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
NATURALIZED	0.576	0.444	0.442	0.715
MALE	0.457	0.465	0.459	0.452
AGE	47.660	45.591	46.135	49.490
YRS0_5	0.210	0.299	0.278	0.129
YRS6_10	0.191	0.187	0.250	0.156
YRS11_15	0.172	0.205	0.152	0.170
YRS16_20	0.134	0.089	0.080	0.185
YRS21_PLUS	0.294	0.220	0.239	0.360
LESS_HS	*0.454*	*0.487*	0.489	*0.418*
HS	0.180	0.202	0.181	0.170
SOME_COLL	0.184	0.162	0.187	0.192
BA_PLUS	0.182	0.149	0.143	0.220
VERY_WELL	*0.227*	*0.217*	0.193	*0.251*
WELL	0.244	0.265	0.237	0.239
LIMITED	0.342	0.314	*0.361*	0.343
NONE	0.187	0.204	0.209	0.167
HK	0.142	0.129	0.140	0.149
OTHER	0.166	0.140	0.175	0.171
CHINA	0.692	0.730	0.685	0.680

After accounting for other factors, such as the time lag between immigration and citizenship eligibility, a logistic regression model was used to determine the strength of individual characteristics that influence the probability of naturalizing. Data from 1980, 1990 and 2000 were used to determine trends over the two decades. This model was used because naturalization is a discrete dependent variable. The functional form is as follows:

$$\Pr_i (\text{Naturalization}_{i,t}) = e^{\beta Z \varepsilon i}/(1+e^{\beta Z + \varepsilon i})$$
$$\text{for Naturalization}_{i,t} \subset (1,0)$$

Where Z is the vector of all independent variables, beta (β) is the vector of estimated coefficients, and epsilon (∑) is the error term.

Because of the non-linear relationship, which produces a binary outcome, the coefficients must be transformed to derive marginal changes in probability due to a one-unit change in an independent variable. This marginal effect is estimated as follows:

$$\Delta Pr/\Delta x = C[p(1-p)]$$

Where C is the estimated coefficient for independent variable x and p is the observed probability of the dependent variable (naturalization).

The following independent variables were studied to determine their influence on the probability of naturalization among San Francisco's Chinese immigrants: age, sex, years in the Unites States, educational attainment, range of English language ability and place of birth. (See Table 1.)

The age of this immigrant group is used as an indicator of naturalization rates among Chinese in San Francisco. Previous studies have revealed that younger Asian immigrants are also more likely to become citizens because many receive their education in the US, which creates an easier transition to a new culture and society (Ong and Nakanishi, 1996). Recent national naturalization rates indicate that more than one-half of those naturalized were between the ages of 25 and 44, with the median age at 38 (Rytina and Saeger, 2005). Accounting for citizenship requirements that produce a time gap between immigration and naturalization, this model only includes residents over 18 years of age.

Recent US naturalization studies report that over half of those who naturalized in 2002 through 2004 were female (Rytina and Saeger, 2005). Measuring the probability of males in the naturalized sample can indicate whether this broader pattern is true within the Chinese immigrant population.

Length of residency is "the most powerful determinant" of naturalization, particularly among Asian Americans (Ong and Nakanishi, 1996). While fewer immigrants naturalize in the early years of living in the US, due to the five-year residency requirement, naturalization rates increase after this period. Nationwide, the median number of years of residence before naturalization was 8 years in 2004 (Rytina and Saeger, 2005). Acculturation, which occurs over time as one learns a language and acquires a society's norms, also plays a large role in encouraging naturalization (Ong and Nakanishi, 1996). The model in this study takes into account citizenship requirements by including only residents who have lived in the US longer than 5 years.

Immigrants eligible for naturalization tend to be clustered at the top and bottom of the range of educational attainment. The 2002 Current Population Survey reported 25 percent of the eligible immigrants have less than a 9th grade education while 23 percent hold a bachelor's degree or higher. However, recently naturalized immigrants, as a group, have a different distribution of educational attainment. Those with less than a 9th grade education make up only 9 percent of the recently naturalized population, while 35 percent hold at least a bachelor's degree. These figures show that while immigrants eligible for naturalization have very high and very low educational backgrounds, those

with high educational backgrounds naturalize at higher rates (Fix, Passel, and Sucher, 2003).

The degree of English language proficiency is another indicator of naturalization. Those who acquire the language are more acculturated and may feel more connected to the host country. They may also have an advanced degree (Ong and Nakanishi, 1996). As a result, they may be more inclined to naturalize. According to the Urban Institute, approximately 60 percent of those currently eligible to naturalize have limited English language ability. There is also a large percentage of limited English proficient legal immigrants who are "soon-to-be eligible" for naturalization. Just over half of the recently naturalized population has limited English proficiency (Fix, Passel and Sucher, 2003).

Past research indicates that place of birth can also affect naturalization rates (Woodrow-Lafield, Xu, Kersen and Poch, 2004). Additionally, sending regions have different rates of eligibility and naturalization. For example, since 2001, only 21 percent of the eligible Mexican immigrants naturalized while 57 percent of eligible Asian immigrants became citizens (Fix, Passel and Sucher, 2003). National origin among these immigrants was included as an indicator of whether an eligible resident will naturalize. While most Chinese immigrants come from mainland China, there is a significant portion that moves to the US from countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam. The rate of naturalization of these Chinese immigrants may be different because of the immigration policies, politics or other characteristics of the sending country.

Table 2 – Logit Regression Results

Variable	Total (n=9949)	1980 (n=2302)	1990 (n=2912)	2000 (n=4735)
Constant	-3.9759 ***	-4.7111 ****	-4.5036 ***	-2.3540 ***
MALE	-0.1875 ***	-0.00894	-0.1617 ***	-0.3357 ***
AGE	0.0239 ***	0.0575 ***	0.0598 ***	-0.0164 ***
AGE_SQ/100	-0.021 ***	-0.059 ***	-0.066 ***	0.0239 ***
YRS6_10	2.7856 ***	3.1329 ***	2.7133 ***	2.6559 ***
YRS11_15	3.7902 ***	4.1523 ***	3.7923 ***	3.6292 ***
YRS16_20	4.2837 ***	4.4669 ***	4.4683 ***	4.216 ***
YRS21_PLUS	4.9828 ***	5.1295 ***	4.9727 ***	5.1011 ***
HS	0.2235 ***	0.0816 *	0.2486 ***	0.2306 ***
SOME_COLL	0.629 ***	0.662 ***	0.6409 ***	0.5207 ***
BA_PLUS	0.2926 ***	0.2042 ***	0.6271 ***	0.133 ***
WELL	0.2714 ***	0.0388	0.2871 ***	0.393 ***
LIMITED	0.0596 **	-0.2123 ***	-0.0166	0.297 ***
NONE	-1.4429 ***	-1.6763 ***	-1.8526 ***	-1.1517 ***
HK	0.2371 ***	0.0464	0.1663 ***	0.3477 ***
OTHER	0.1581 ***	0.3362 ***	0.188 ***	0.0746 **
Yr1990	-0.0166			
Yr2000	0.8774 ***			

* significant at 5% confidence level
** significant at 1% confidence level
*** significant at 0.1% confidence level

Table 2 describes the degree to which these indicators influence the odds of naturalization among Chinese immigrants in this sample over the course of 20 years. These indicators are consistent with previous research on naturalization factors. Across the three time periods, naturalized citizens were more likely to be women and have lived in the US for 20 years or longer. The strong indicator of naturalization was length of time living in the US, as reflected in previous research. Being more highly educated was also a strong predictor of naturalization. The study also shows that those who were not naturalized were less likely to have any English language ability. Those more likely to naturalize were either younger in age or older. Chinese immigrants who were born outside of mainland China, in Hong Kong and other countries, were more likely to naturalize than those born in mainland China.[2]

External Factors affecting Naturalization:

Naturalization rates among Chinese immigrants increased dramatically in the 1990s as a response to anti-immigrant legislation such as propositions 187 and 209. The need for individual protections against anti-Asian sentiment also arose as a result of key ethnic-specific events such as the Wen Ho Lee case and the presidential campaign financial scandal in the late 1990s. These high-profile events created a sense of vulnerability for Chinese living in America. A response to the negative stereotypes and threat of losing services was to gain legal protections through naturalization. Additionally, this increase in recent naturalizations among this group has also contributed to expanding a potential voter base that may be able to influence policy and elections.

This sample shows that while naturalization increased over these two decades, individual indicators of naturalization remained mostly consistent with larger trends in Asian naturalization (Ong and Nakanishi, 1996). The longer Chinese immigrants live in the US, the more likely it is that they will naturalize. Also, as their connection to their host country increases, their willingness to form institutional ties also increases. Older and younger immigrants may be more likely to naturalize than those who are middle-aged. Younger immigrants may be more likely to become citizens because they may have obtained education in the United States and become more aware of the process of naturalization and voting. Older immigrants may naturalize to obtain public services. Past research has indicated that younger immigrants tend to naturalize at higher rates than the middle-aged (Ong and Nakanishi, 1996). However, this study shows that older immigrant also naturalize at higher rates than the middle-aged. This change may be due in part to the increased awareness of recent anti-immigrant sentiment as well as the anti-immigrant legislation. Receiving higher education also influences the decision to naturalize. Additionally, being female and acquiring more English language skills are also strong indicators of naturalization among this group. If indicators of naturalization held steady as naturalization increased, this indicates that there are external factors contributing to this surge of citizenship acquisition.

The survey of Chinese immigrant voters provides some additional insights into the surge in the naturalization rate between 1990 and 2000. When asked to give the primary reason for naturalizing, most respondents provided simple responses, such as a desire to live in the United States, and a few gave multiple reasons. Despite the

[2] For the purposes of this study and because of data limitations, Chinese immigrants from Taiwan are considered immigrants from mainland China.

limitations in interpreting the responses, it is possible to categorize the responses into broad categories. The responses reveal a diversity of reasons. Of the 259 (51 percent of the total sample) who naturalized in 1990 or later, the largest proportion (19 percent) gave reasons related to their ability to participate politically, with the right to vote being the most frequently cited. (The responses are weighted to account for the under representation of certain subgroups in the final sample. See the appendix for an explanation.) Nearly as many (18 percent) stated that they naturalized to become eligible for benefits and basic rights that come with being a citizen. Fourteen percent (14 percent) gave responses consistent with what can be considered American idealism, particular the concepts of freedom and democracy. Roughly 12 percent simply expressed the notion that they have come to consider the United States to be their home, suggesting that they have reached a critical point in the assimilation process. Another 11 percent gave family-related reasons, particularly the ability to unite with their family. What is equally interesting is that few gave responses related to economic opportunity (3 percent) or security (5 percent). What these results indicate is that many of those who naturalized did so for reasons not associated with recent events. They hold more traditional concerns and values, such as family reunification and patriotism for the "American way," and they have come to see their lives as anchored in American society rather than to their homeland. Others, however, may have been influenced at least in part by the increasingly polarized debate about immigrants. Becoming a citizen either offered them a degree of protection from anti-immigrant restrictions or provided them with a means to engage in voting to influence outcomes. In other words, the surge in naturalization was not only part of the normal process of "becoming American," but was also a response by Chinese immigrants to the hostile political climate.

The results of this study also have implications for Chinese immigrants as a potential voting base. Increasing naturalization within a certain group precedes the building of any potential political base. Once immigrants are naturalized, they may further their citizenship by registering to vote. As a result of the 1990s naturalization surge, a growing base of immigrant voters with potential electoral power may have emerged. Despite its large absolute and relative numbers, Chinese have only recently emerged as a significant political force in the City (Lee, 2003). Historically, they were excluded from voting because of discriminatory restrictions. During the 1970s and 1980s, their political power was diluted by the relatively large number of non-citizen immigrants. Things have improved in recent years, although the naturalization rate is still low among recent arrivals. (See Table 2.) According to estimates from CAVEC (Chinese American Voters Education Committee), Chinese-American registered voters grew to 18 percent of all registered voters in 2004, up dramatically from only 12 percent a decade ago, with much of the increase coming from newly registered immigrants. More important, Chinese Americans have emerged as a critical swing vote. Their presence at the ballot box has been credited for the election of Mayor Newsom in 2004.Although citizenship and voting are separate forms of membership and participation, both are individual responses to gaining legal protection against anti-immigrant sentiment, although voting appears to be a more pronounced response (Ong and Lee, 2001). By studying the indicators that predict naturalization patterns, advocacy groups can begin to form a picture of the Chinese Americans who comprise this potential political base. Studying this voter group's profile is an important tool for advocates who can study the

effectiveness of current citizenship drives and voter registration campaigns. Additionally, studying the characteristics of those who naturalize during a negative political climate can assist community groups in examining how external factors affect their citizenship outreach campaigns.

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