

For Asian-Americans, a New Political Resolve

By JAMES STERNGLD

LOS ANGELES, Sept. 21 — As the chairman of Al Gore's Presidential campaign, Tony Coelho routinely meets with wealthy Democratic fund-raisers to offer encouragement and listen to their views. But these feel-good pep talks are rarely as blunt or as riveting as the one held with about two dozen Asian-Americans here late one afternoon last month.

As several participants later recounted, Victor W. Hwang, a young lawyer who worked for the Democratic National Committee in 1996, broke the usual pattern of pleasantries and insisted that if Asian-Americans were to be pressed for millions of dollars in donations once again they expected clear benefits, like prime-time speakers at the Democratic convention next summer and a firm promise of a Cabinet-level appointment in a Gore Administration.

But that was just a warm-up for Mary Miyashita, a highly regarded Democratic fund-raiser for more than 40 years. Ms. Miyashita burst into sobs as she asked whether Mr. Gore could make a courtesy telephone call to John Huang, a Chinese-American who was at the center of the furor that erupted over illegal donations by Asians to President Clinton's 1996 re-election campaign. Like many Asian-Americans, Ms. Miyashita feels that Mr. Huang was unfairly vilified in the fund-raising scandal, less because of any violations of the law than because of his Asian ancestry.

"He listened very silently with his head bowed," Ms. Miyashita said, breaking into tears again as she recalled the meeting with Mr. Coelho. "Maybe I put him on the spot, but it was my personal way to begin the healing. I don't think it's started yet, but it so needs to happen because so many people are bitter."

In the relatively brief span of one Presidential cycle the role of Asian-Americans in national politics ap-

pears to have changed in fundamental ways. After years as one of the most financially generous but under-represented ethnic minorities in American politics, many Asian-Americans are nursing deep wounds from what they regard as a string of insulting scandals. And this time, they say, things will be different.

There will be less interest in photo opportunities with the candidates, the groups say, and instead a laser-like focus on getting more Asian-Americans appointed to positions in Washington and to judgeships, and on bolstering government efforts to fight hate crimes and discrimination.

In addition, many Asian-Americans say they are now taking political matters into their own hands by trying to transform the diverse Asian-American groups into an electoral bloc where the population is most concentrated, in California, which is also the biggest prize in the Presidential campaign.

These efforts are backed by a great deal of emotion, too, because of the shock of the campaign finance scandals. No one doubts now that some election finance laws were broken by Mr. Huang as well as by two political newcomers who had ties to Mr. Clinton, Johnny Chung and Yah Lin Trie. All have pleaded guilty to charges involving improper political fund-raising and hundreds of thousands of dollars of donations they solicited had to be returned. Privately, some Asian-Americans have expressed anger that the reckless efforts of these people harmed the reputation of the whole community.

But many Asian-Americans feel that the fund-raising scandals put anyone with an Asian surname under a humiliating cloud of suspicion — with many perfectly legitimate donors receiving calls from the F.B.I. They hold both political parties partly responsible. The Republicans, they say, exploited racist fears for political gain, while the Democrats did little to openly defend the loyalty and integrity of Asian-Americans.

Despite the pain, some Asian-American leaders say the process was ultimately beneficial.

"I think this has been a great experience," said Thomas Chan, a founder of the newly formed Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Los Angeles. "Finally, there's something galvanizing the Asian-American community. It's sad, but you have to have an event that shakes people to make them care. There was a paradigm shift. The focus now has got to be on practical things, like discrimination in jobs, glass ceilings at work, hate crimes and the appointment of Asian-Americans to important jobs in the next administration."

The meeting with Mr. Coelho is regarded here as a harbinger of some tough bargaining ahead by the Asian-American groups — a collection that includes Americans of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Philippine and Vietnamese descent, among others.

"They were expecting the usual meeting where everyone was real nice and just said their platitudes," Warren Furutani, an aide to the Speaker of the California State Assembly, Antonio Villaraigosa. "But there is a definite residue of bitterness, and that bitterness has really created a political vacuum."

Despite the bitterness, no one is suggesting that the flow of Asian money into American politics will subside. Mr. Furutani and others said donors will scrutinize candidates more closely.

"Fund-raising is a mechanical part of the system, and it can't be avoided," said Henry Tang, an investment banker and the chairman of the Committee of 100, an influential group of Chinese Americans in society and the arts. "But we will be getting into much more of the philosophical core of the candidates and what their policies will do for us."

What has made the campaign finance scandals a particularly bitter pill to swallow is that Asian-Americans have been one of the most generous ethnic groups in the country. They contributed, quite legally, about \$10 million in each of the last two Presidential elections, by some estimates, but the money seems to have earned little open support from the political parties they had financed.

"I haven't completely come to

Stung by Scandal, Asian Voters Find a New Resolve

grips with what I would call maltreatment by both parties," Mr. Tang said. "People drew a linkage between Asians who were breaking the law and Asian-Americans that was completely unfair. We felt helpless."

Those concerns were heightened earlier this year when a Chinese American scientist, Wen Ho Lee, was fired from the Los Alamos National Laboratory, where nuclear weapons are designed, on charges that he had violated security policies by downloading secret data to an unsecure

An ethnic group feels ill-treated by political parties.

computer.

Mr. Lee was widely reported to be under suspicion of handing over nuclear secrets to China, but he has not been charged with a crime and has denied any spying. Adding to the concerns, last month the former head of counterintelligence at Los Alamos, Robert S. Vrooman, said that Mr. Lee was singled out in large part because of his race, something the Energy Department denied.

Mr. Lee's case has particularly enraged Asian-American scientists and engineers who had generally steered away from politics and had felt their work for the national defense would place them above suspicion.

"Nothing remains the same today," said Bill Chang, a former bank chairman and now the president of the Chinese American Engineers and Scientists Association of Southern California, which has about 800 members. "I do have reports from other scientists, even professors, that they have suffered some kind of prejudice since this happened. It is just amazing to many of us. A lot of times we are looked at not as Americans, but as Chinese, even after all these years."

Matt Fong, a Republican who ran unsuccessfully against Barbara Boxer for a United States Senate seat in 1998 and is now a fund-raiser for Gov. George W. Bush of Texas, said the attacks on Mr. Lee were a catalyst for the new strains of political thinking.

"There's a new mood of activism that hadn't existed before, and it has a different flavor," Mr. Fong said. "The different flavor is Wen Ho Lee. That has caused a far more broad-based chill. What the community fears is the broad brush strokes in

which everyone of Chinese ancestry is suspected of spying for China."

As a result, party loyalties are being abandoned and Asian-Americans are looking to candidates who appear to offer benefits to their community. Jackson Tai, an investment banker and a lifelong Republican, said he had abandoned his old party because of what he felt was its eagerness to fan the flames of Asian racism. Now, he is raising money for former Senator Bill Bradley.

Indeed, Mr. Bradley has been picking up significant support in some Asian-American circles, in part because of what he is not: neither a Republican nor a member of the Clinton Administration. "The biggest failure was the Administration's unwillingness to openly defend Asian-Americans in the campaign financing scandal," said Dale Minami, who heads the Coalition of Asian Pacific Americans, based in San Francisco, and was a co-chairman of President Clinton's northern California committee in 1992. "That kind of sticks in the craw of a lot of Asian-Americans, and will for some time."

Though he did make a small number of appointments of Asian-Americans, Mr. Clinton is perceived as having not been vocal enough in supporting them during the scandals. And Mr. Gore has his own problems. He participated in a fund-raiser for Asian-Americans at a Buddhist temple here in 1996 at which, it was later disclosed, many improper contributions were made at a venue, a non-profit religious institution, where candidates are prohibited from soliciting donations. Mr. Gore's staff returned many of the improper donations, and some Asian-Americans say they detect a reluctance on his part to be identified too closely with them.

Kiki Moore, a Gore campaign spokeswoman, denied this, saying, "Absolutely not. This is a community he wants to work with." Indeed, the Asian Pacific American Bar Association said that the White House has just confirmed that Mr. Gore will deliver the keynote address at the group's annual convention here on Nov. 13.

Senator Dianne Feinstein, who has endorsed Mr. Gore, said she thinks he will win over many Asian-Americans once they hear his views, but she conceded he has a problem. "The Vice President, because of the Buddhist temple thing, may not have wanted to have ventured forth," Ms. Feinstein said. "My own view is that the community itself needs to come together and speak out."

That is what many Asian-Americans are doing. They are focused on the local, grass roots level, and are working on long range plans to develop a broader base for influence

over the political process. For instance, a new group was formed here, called Vision 21, to quicken the pace of voter registration and to do extensive exit polling after elections. Much of the polling will be used to convince candidates of the importance of the Asian-American votes.

There are also efforts to get more Asian residents to become citizens and, importantly, to find and train potential Asian-American candidates for public office.

"The community needs more facets and dimensions," said Don T. Nakanishi, director of the Asian-American Studies Center at the University of California at Los Angeles. "One can't participate effectively with just one means, like giving money."

Another effort is something called the 80/20 Initiative. This is a campaign to persuade the Asian-American community in California to vote as a bloc for the candidate — no matter which party — who demonstrates the strongest commitment to offering tangible policy benefits. The aim is to get 80 percent of registered Asian-American voters in the state to back the endorsed candidate.

This is not a completely fanciful strategy. In the 1998 elections here, Mr. Fong, a Republican, received nearly 59 percent of the Asian-American vote in his unsuccessful campaign against Senator Barbara Boxer. In the gubernatorial race, 64 percent of Asian-Americans voted for the Democratic candidate for governor, Gray Davis, who defeated a Republican candidate perceived to be anti-immigrant.

Some Asian-Americans consider the initiative slightly unrealistic, but at the least a potent symbol of the new mood. "It's a vehicle for peoples' frustration," said Mr. Tang of the Committee of 100. "80/20 is one of the new arrows in our quiver."

He added: "The word naïveté is too simple a word for where we were four years ago. Maybe sophomoric, in terms of the whole process. We were probably set back 10 years by what happened, but at least we're far more realistic now."