



TOPIC: Asian American Voices in Politics

GRADES: 7 - 12

BACKGROUND ESSAY

Patsy Mink faced both racial and gender discrimination as a Japanese American woman who was born in Hawaii. Many tried to deny her opportunities, such as attending medical school, practicing law and running for U.S. Congress. However, she was able to overcome obstacles and found success as both a lawyer and political leader, ultimately becoming the first woman of color elected to Congress in 1965. In the House of Representatives, she fought for gender and racial equality and was an author and sponsor of the Title IX law, which prohibits sexual discrimination in any federally-assisted education program or activity. She was a staunch supporter of the civil rights movement.

Prior to Patsy Mink serving, Daniel Inouye became the first U.S. Representative of Hawaii in 1959. Daniel Inouye served in the all-Nisei 442nd regiment during World War II. He lost his right arm during the war, but that didn't stop him from becoming a lawyer or Hawaii's first U.S. Representative in 1959. In Congress, he advocated for Hawaii's interests, strengthening its economy and protecting its natural resources. He became president pro tempore in 2010, making him the highest-ranking Asian American politician in U.S. history. His calm demeanor and integrity earned him a great reputation, and he was chosen to head many important committees as a result, including the committee that investigated the Watergate scandal.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Are you encouraged by Patsy Mink's persistence? Why or why not?

- What were the attitudes towards women in the mid-20th century? How did Mink's gender affect her political aspirations?
- How did Patsy Mink being a woman and person of color give her the character to advance policies and laws benefiting all Americans?
- What happens if diverse identities are not present and represented in positions that determine policy and laws?
- How did Daniel Inouye and Patsy Mink help Asian Americans move closer to political equality?
- Why do you think it's important for people to see themselves represented in Congress?

ACTIVITY

Since its founding, women have only made up 2% of individuals serving in Congress. Patsy Mink's victory was an incredible step forward -- both for women and Asian Americans.

- Who are some of the first women to serve in Congress?
- Who are some of the first Asian Americans to have political victories?

Write a biography on past or present Asian American politicians. Have students address:

- Describe the person's history, motivation, and political experience.
- What were some of her/his notable accomplishments?
- What issue/s is this person known to champion?
- What obstacles did this person face because of her/his race and/or gender?
- What is one thing that the student admires about this person?

Students will share their biography with the class.

Some suggested politicians are included below:

- Koji Ariyoshi. Koji Ariyoshi was born in Hawaii and worked on a plantation with his parents, sparking his interest in labor politics.
- Elaine Chao. Elaine Chao became the first Asian American woman and the first Chinese American to serve in a presidential cabinet when she was appointed Secretary of Labor by President George W. Bush.
- Tammy Duckworth. Tammy Duckworth was the first Thai-American woman elected to Congress. She is a former U.S. Army lieutenant colonel who is a U.S. Senator for Illinois.
- March Fong Eu was the first Asian Pacific Islander to hold a statewide elected executive office when she was elected California's Secretary of State,
- Hiram Fong. Hiram Fong was the son of Chinese immigrants who rose to prominence as Speaker of the Territorial House in Hawaii.
- Mazie Hirono. Born in Japan, Hirono is the first elected female senator from Hawaii and the first Asian-American woman senator. Notably, she was her party's (Democrat) first female nominee for governor in 2002.
- Daniel Inouye was a United States Senator serving Hawaii. He was the highest-ranking Asian American politician in U.S. history serving as President pro tempore of the senate from 2010 through 2012.
- Patsy Mink was the first woman of color to serve in the U.S. Congress. She was a trailblazer for women's rights as the author and sponsor of the Title IX law.

- Dalip Singh Saund. Dalip Singh Saund immigrated to the U.S. and became a farmer, judge, and Congressman representing California. Saund helped lead the ultimately successful campaign to amend immigration laws so Asian Indians could be eligible for U.S. citizenship.

Continue a discussion with the class after the biography share.

- What obstacles did the politicians face because of her/his race and/or gender?
- What notable steps did this person take to get elected or appointed to their position?
- Why is diversity important in representation?
- As you researched different figures, who did these people say influenced them or helped pave the way for their political career?

FURTHER INFORMATION

- [“Patsy Mink,”](#) National Women’s History Museum
- [“Daniel Inouye,”](#) Denso Encyclopedia



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