



Asian American Federation

Testimony to the New York Senate Standing Committee on Elections

July 28, 2021

Written Testimony

I want to thank the Senate Standing Committee on Elections for holding this hearing and giving the Asian American Federation (AAF) the opportunity to testify on the voting experiences of Asian Americans in New York City. I'm Ahmed Butt, Civic Engagement Coordinator at the Asian American Federation. AAF represents the collective voice of more than 70 member nonprofits serving 1.3 million Asian New Yorkers.

At the start of the pandemic, we saw a transformation in how voter outreach is being conducted both by city agencies and by local community organizations. Moving towards remote canvassing and outreach methods (phone, mail, online, etc.), organizations in our city reached larger numbers of voters and were able to focus their efforts demographically. Unfortunately, already-underfunded in-language outreach to limited-English proficient (LEP) voters was further impacted by the circumstances, and building trust in under-served communities became more challenging using these methods. This is especially true for communities speaking Asian languages other than those covered by the NYC Board of Elections (Bangla, Chinese, Korean). Resources in these languages were limited in scope and arrived late into the election season. This resulted in less outreach and fewer ranked-choice voting educational resources for LEP Asian community members. Two variables, taken together, highlighted, over the past several months, the importance of reaching LEP voters and prioritizing them: a pandemic that disproportionately impacted our communities and the implementation of ranked-choice voting, which in any circumstance would have required an unprecedented voter education drive.

Leading up to the June Primary Election, AAF created the AAPI Power Coalition which presently includes 10 Asian-serving community organizations in NYC. During the 2021 primary elections, our coalition made almost 1,750,000 contacts with Asian voters through targeted campaigns including phone, text and mail, in-person canvassing, and print & TV advertisements. To conduct our in-person canvassing, we relied largely on the translated printed materials created by DemocracyNYC which provided election information in 11 Asian languages. However, these resources were only made available to our organization at the start of June, weeks before Election Day. Having these resources earlier in the election season would have allowed for more in-person outreach by filling a resource gap experienced by us and our coalition members. As the Asian American Federation has consistently testified before the City and State, language access continues to be a primary bottleneck as Asian New Yorkers seek out government services or engage in civic life, and timeliness of translations has proven a key limitation.

Additionally, services that are available to LEP voters, including translated ballots and interpretation at polling places, could have been better utilized with increased outreach about

their availability. While these services are helpful, too few people are familiar with them. For upcoming elections, I recommend including details about these services in translated materials.

Organizations like AAF and our coalition members are trusted messengers to the communities we serve. With improved access to timely-translated voter outreach materials provided by city agencies, we can focus less of our efforts on creating translated materials to fill this resource gap. Key steps to improving access include providing translated materials, in the 11 Asian languages covered by DemocracyNYC, early in the election season when community organizations begin conducting voter outreach, and increasing awareness of services such as translated ballots and polling place interpreters. With these resources on hand, we can increase our in-person outreach to the diverse Asian communities we serve and build enthusiasm among community members to engage in the electoral process.

Recommendations:

- Distribute translated resources to community organizations earlier in the election season for upcoming elections.
- Create resources to build awareness of the availability of existing, under-utilized services such as translated ballots & request forms, and interpretation services at polling places.
- Increase funding to Asian-serving community organizations who are trusted in their communities to conduct effective, culturally competent voter outreach.
- Fund the full implementation of Local Law 30 across City agencies so Asian voters have access to high-quality, timely-translated voter education resources.

Our coalition members have led by example in how to engage diverse Asian communities, and this moment presents an opportunity to increase voter outreach in New York City by improving access to translated resources. We at the Asian American Federation thank you for allowing us to testify and look forward to working with all of you to help our Asian communities become more engaged in the electoral process.