A CASE STUDY OF ASSEMBLY DISTRICT 49

ASIAN AMERICAN FEDERATION

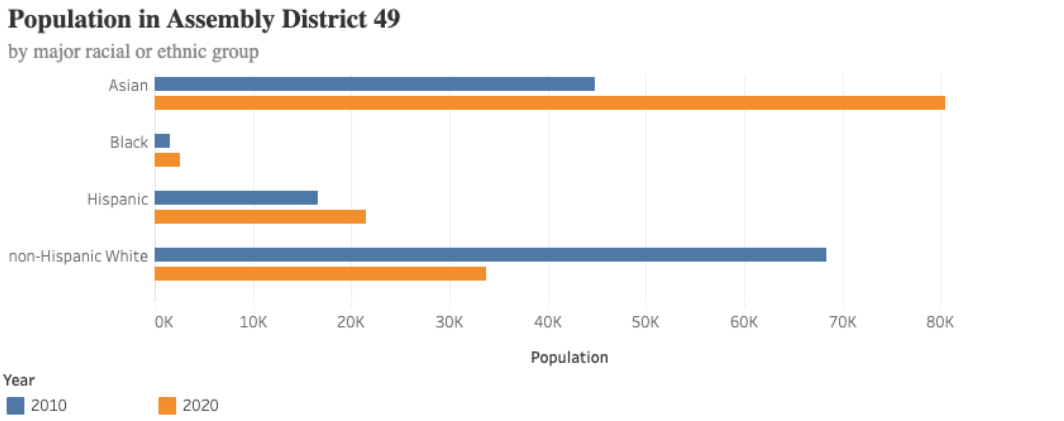
On January 1, 2023, Democrats will still have a firm grip on power in Albany, with control of every statewide office and both the Assembly and Senate. However, Republicans made inroads in the 2022 midterm elections, winning in a number of Assembly races in the city - especially in Southern Brooklyn which has been trending Republican for several years.[1] Democrat Peter Abbate, an Assemblymember who has held the seat since 1986, lost to his Republican challenger Lester Chang by 582 votes in Assembly District 49, a south Brooklyn district that covers parts of Borough Park, Dyker Heights and Bensonhurst. This brief analyzes preliminary voting data for 1. demographics of the Assembly District 49; 2. scenarios that examine how Asian American voting and turnout affects election results.

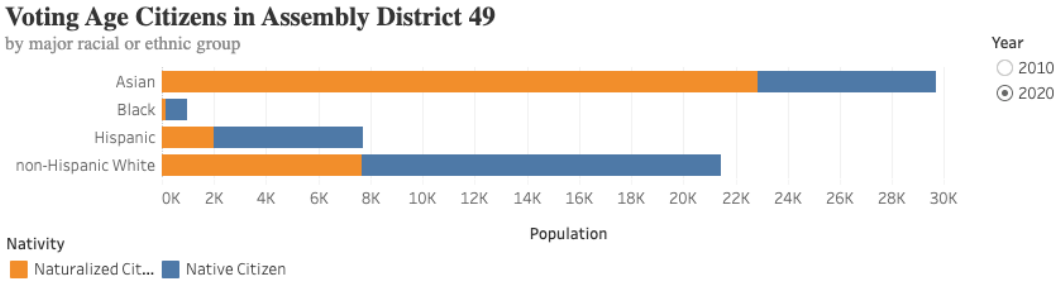
A FAST–GROWING ASIAN COMMUNITY

According to the 2020 decennial census, Assembly District 49 had a total population of 136,258 with Asians making up 59.0% (80,454). Asian Americans were the fastest growing major racial or ethnic group within the last decade, and have replaced non-Hispanic Whites as the majority population in the district. Within the district, there are 60,627 voting age citizens, with 49.0% (29,704) of them identifying as Asian. Among Asian American citizens, 23.1% (6,861) are American born, and 76.9% (22,843) are immigrants who have become naturalized citizens (Figure-1).[2] More than three out of every four Asian Americans eligible to vote in District 49 are immigrants.

[1] https://www.thecity.nyc/2021/12/1/22813256/new-york-city-mayor-election-results-map

[2] The decennial numbers are calculated with race/ethnicity alone and in any other combination categories. Data on citizenship status is based on 2020 American Community Survey 5-year data and are calculated with race/ethnicity alone categories.





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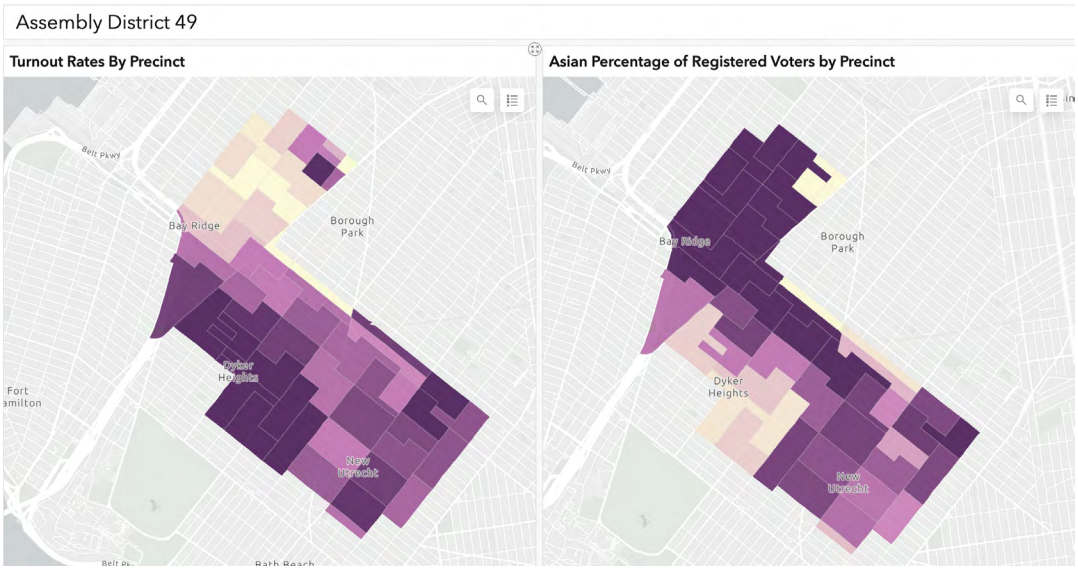
LACK OF ENGAGEMENT WITH ASIAN VOTERS

Based on the preliminary numbers, the 2022 midterm turnout rate for Brooklyn has kept pace with the city's turnout rate at 33%. However, the turnout rate for Assembly District 49 was approximately 28%.[3]

[3] New York State, New York City and Brooklyn turnout rates are based on: https://www.gothamgazette.com/state/11676-initial-voter-turnout-new-york-2022-general-election-hochul-zeldin. Assembly District 49 turnout rate is calculated based on votes for the Assemblymembers: https://vote.nyc/sites/default/files/pdf/election_results/2022/20221108General%20Election/00302000049Kings%20Member%20of%20the%20Assembly%2049th%20Assembly%20District%20Recap.pdf

Within District 49, there are 50,593 registered voters, with 45.9% (23,265) of them registered as Asian.[4] Although voting data along racial lines is not available at this point, we are able to use precinct-level voting counts to show some patterns of the turnout of Asian voters. Precincts near Borough Park have the highest percentage of Asian registered voters; they also had the lowest turnout rates in this midterm (Map 1). All the precincts with more than 50% of Asian registered voters had turnout rates lower than the district average of 28%, with some precincts' turnout rates as low as 15-16%.

[4] All data on registered voters is sourced from www.engagevoters.us



For the map of turnout rates, darker color stands for higher turnout and lighter color stands for lower turnout. For the map of Asian percentage of registered voters, darker color stands for higher percentage of Asian registered voters and lighter color stands for lower percentage of Asian registered voters.

Note: Out of 52 Precincts in Assembly District 49, precincts 1,20, and 52 do not have data on Assemblymember race.

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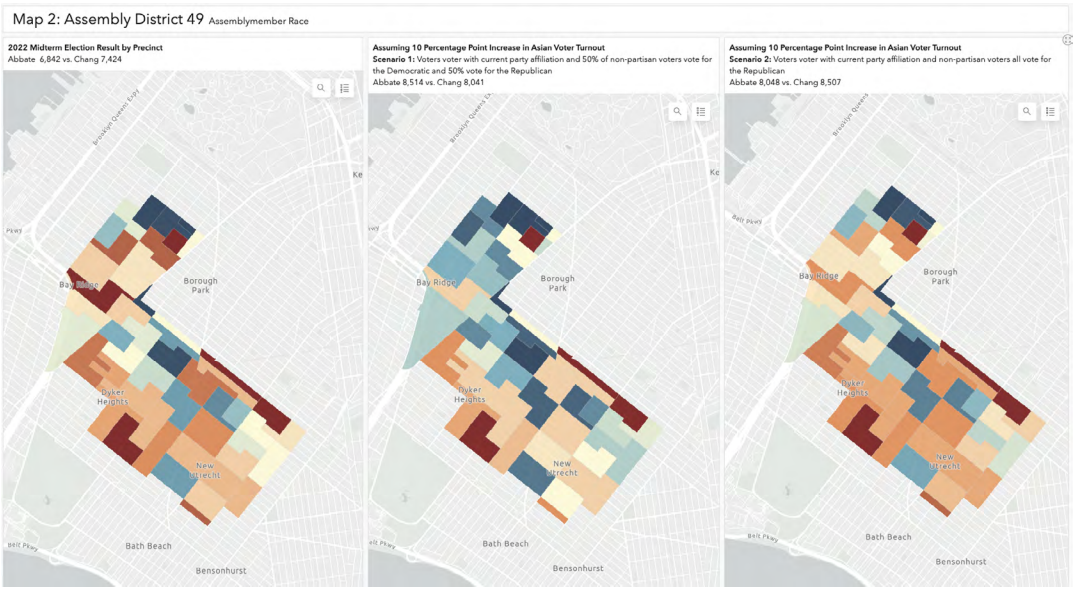
WHAT COULD HAVE HAPPENED ON NOVEMBER 8TH

While there were 23,265 registered Asian-identifying voters in District 49 on Election Day in the 2022 Assembly election, a total of 14,287 votes (of all races) were cast in the district, out of which Peter Abbate received 47.9% (6,842) and Lester Chang received 52.0% (7,424). And Abbate was a mere 4% behind Chang - the 582 votes difference only adds up to 2.5% of the Asian registered voters.[5] Given the estimates that Asian voters' turnout rates trail the general population in the district, there is a likely possibility that the election result could have been different had more Asian voters turned out to vote.

[5] Votes for Abbate and Chang do not add up to the total of 14,287 votes because of 21 write-ins. Source: https://vote.nyc/sites/default/files/pdf/election_results/2022/20221108General%20Election/00302000049Kings%20Member%20of%20the%20Assembly%2049th%20Assembly%20District%20Recap.pdf
582 also makes up only 2.0% of Asian voting age citizens or 2.5% of Asian naturalized citizens in the Assembly District 49.



Blue precincts are where the Democrats had over 50% of the votes, darker blue stands for higher percentage and lighter blue stands for lower percentage. Red precincts are where the Republican had over 50% of the votes, darker red stands for higher percentage and lighter red stands for lower percentage.

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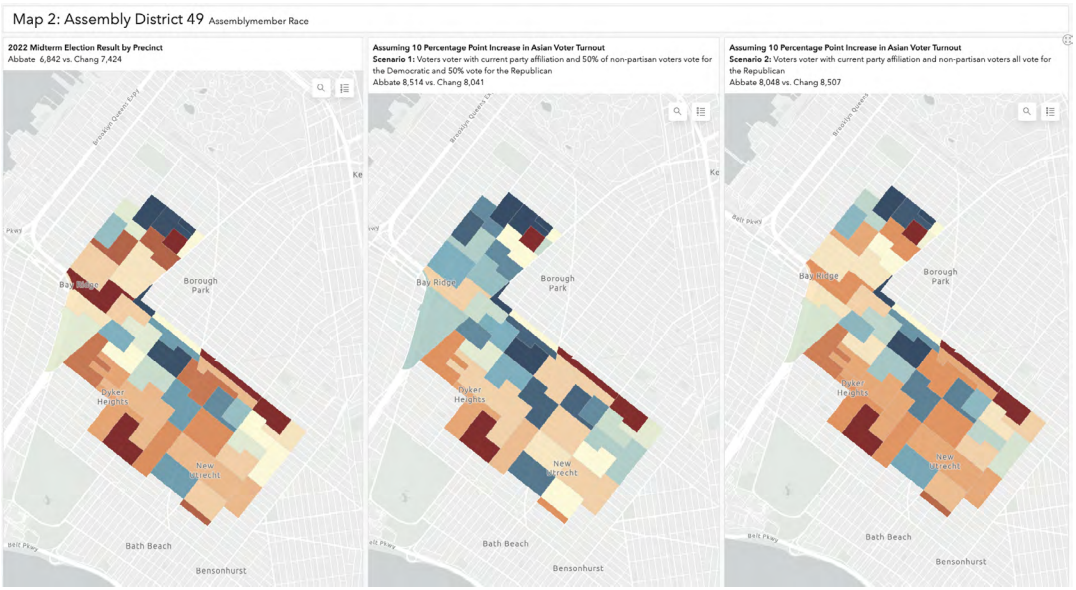
According to AAF's civic engagement report, culturally relevant and in-language outreach programs can increase Asian voter turnout by 10 percentage points. In 2021, AAF founded the AAPI Power Coalition, which included 8 non-profit organizations, to serve thousands of Asian Americans in low-voter-turnout districts in New York City. By utilizing a data-drive approach and incorporating an innovative mix of tools, including new voter outreach technologies and video campaigns on social media, AAPI Power Coalition's outreach efforts drove a statistically significant over 10 percentage point increase in voter turnout.



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And currently, among registered Asian voters in the Assembly District 49, 52.0% are registered as Democrats. And 6.9% are registered as Republican, while 40.3% are registered as unaffiliated. Therefore, by assuming a 10-percentage-point increase in Asian voter turnout (which would still leave almost all of the Asian concentrated precincts with turnouts rates lower than the district average), we generated two scenarios based on the current party affiliation (Map 2):

SCENARIO 1
NEUTRAL

All the Democratic registered voters will vote for the Democratic candidate and all the Republican voters will vote for the Republican candidate, while 50% of the non-affiliated registered voters will vote for the Democrats and the other 50% will vote for the Republican. **Under this scenario, almost all the Asian concentrated precincts will turn blue and help the Democrats win by 473 votes.**

SCENARIO 2
REPUBLICAN LEANING

All the Democratic registered voters will still vote for the Democratic candidate and all the Republican registered voters will vote for the Republican candidate, but all the non-affiliated registered voters will vote for the Republican. **Under this scenario, the Republican is still leading, but the gap is smaller than the actual election result at 459 votes.**

It would be easy to portray the Republican candidate's win in Assembly District 49 as a result of Asian voters aligning themselves with Asian candidates and argue that even with higher Asian voter turnout, most of them would have voted for Chang. On the contrary, we posit that Asian voters vote based on issues that resonate with them, instead of along party lines or the ethnicity of the candidate.[6] For example, while the Asian American Democratic candidate Iwen Chu narrowly beat Republican Vito LaBella by 215 votes out of over 35,000 cast for the state senate in District 17, she was behind LaBella in Assembly District 49 by 267 votes. We also generated 2 scenarios for the Chu/Labella race with the same assumptions:

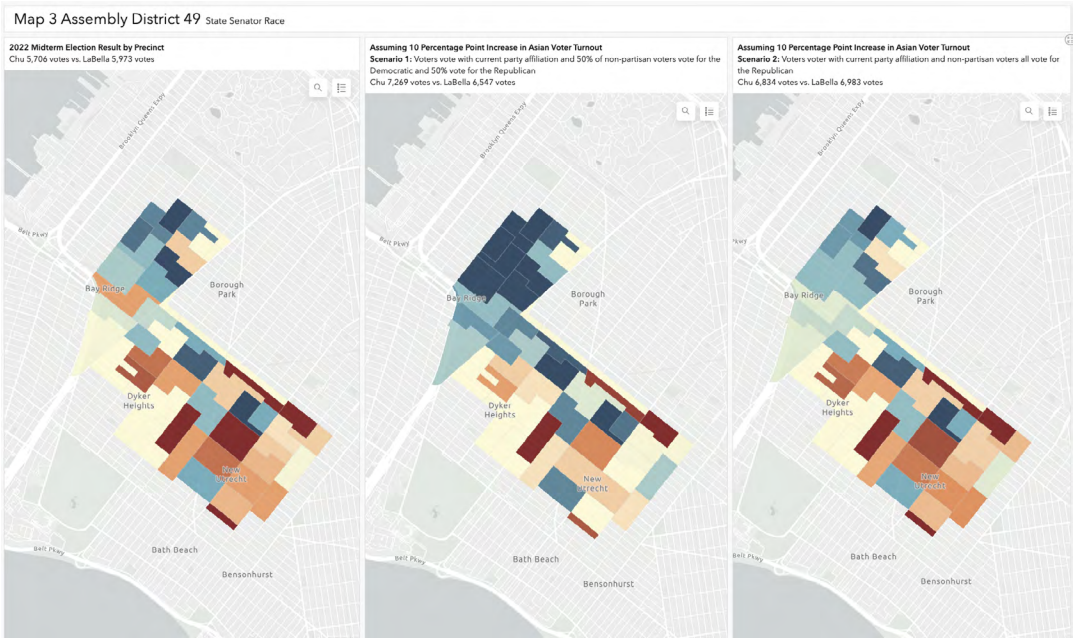
SCENARIO 1
NEUTRAL

Given a 10 percentage point increase in Asian voter turnout, voters will vote with current party affiliation and 50% of non-affiliated voters vote for the Democratic and 50% vote for the Republican. **Under this scenario, Chu would lead by 722 votes.**

SCENARIO 2
REPUBLICAN LEANING

Given a 10 percentage point increase in Asian voter turnout, voters will vote along the current party affiliation but non-affiliated voters all vote for the Republican. **Under this scenario, LaBella would lead by 149 which is smaller than the current lead.**

[6] https://www.asianwavealliance.org/endorsements



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Note: Out of 52 Precincts in Assembly District 49, precincts 1,2,3,20,35,36,40,41,46,48,51, and 52 do not have data on State Senator race.

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CONCLUSION

Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial group of eligible voters not only in Assembly District 49, but also in Brooklyn, New York City and State. However, they remain a largely ignored electorate. The District 49 election demonstrated that Asian voters can make the difference in a close race - when they vote. Moreover, while many Asian Americans continue to register as Democrats, what the data shows is that party identity is not set in stone and Asians cannot be taken for granted. As we saw in District 49 and elsewhere, Asian American voting behaviors have changed in sustained ways; and it may be worthwhile to consider how turnout and engagement matters in the long term.

In this election cycle Republican candidates prioritized public safety and education - which according to news reports prior to the election, and anecdotally-corroborated from organizations within our AAPI Power Coalition, were top issues for New York's Asian voters.[7]

Despite the voting patterns discussed here, Asian American voters are not a monolith. They are one of the most ethnically diverse populations compared to other racial groups. National origin and homeland and linguistic identity drive ethnic diversity, which in turn shapes differences in socioeconomic circumstances. With such diverse ethnicities and languages, Asian American communities often appear too socially and linguistically fractured for political campaigns to target effectively. However, the lesson is clear in this case study; marginalizing Asian American voters and/or oversimplifying or underinvesting in outreach to this ethnically diverse community will yield negative electoral outcomes. And as our community grows, these negative outcomes could have bigger cumulative detrimental effects on policy making.[8]

Our analysis in the Civic Engagement Report proved that with culturally relevant outreach in the languages voters speak, especially when this outreach is provided by trusted organizations with strong roots in a community, Asian Americans can be persuaded to be active voters, as well as enthusiastic supporters of policies. A community with strong social networks, and unique channels of communication, Asian Americans are known to engage their friends and acquaintances to advocate for issues they care about. For candidates interested in courting the Asian vote, the work of connection and engagement must be consistent and long-term rather than concentrated in the run-up to an election. Year-round involvement, and sustained engagement between election cycles with various Asian American groups is necessary to woo these communities. Only credible and deliverable promises that their communities and issues will continue to matter to the candidates after Election Day, will motivate Asian Americans, like everyone else, to vote.

[7] https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/11/new-york-election-results-republicans-had-a-good-night.html

[8] https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-04/asian-americans-could-take-decisive-role-in-us-mid-term-elections

KEY LESSONS IN OUTREACH IMPLEMENTATION

- While phone banks can effectively reach out to widely dispersed or multilingual populations, campaigns should ideally use face-to-face canvassing. Good canvassing practices require training to ensure that interactions between canvassers and voters are both conversational and informative.
- One innovative way to educate and engage with voters in neighborhoods with low turnout is to leverage community-centered events. By partnering with trusted local groups with deep reach into their communities, these events create an opportunity for local small businesses, activists, and faith leaders to gather and build a sense of community cohesion, which, in turn, helps to catalyze a "culture of voting" that is deeply rooted in community relationships and issues.
- Voters often desire information beyond how and where to vote. They have questions about whom they can vote for or who represents them in their districts. A voter guide that is multilingual and culturally sensitive can be effective in presenting nonpartisan information to voters. Using simple graphics to explain information would increase its impact and distribution in Asian communities.

At the time of publishing this briefing paper, there is a challenge to Chang's residency in the district and there are discussions about whether he will be seated by the State Assembly. Nevertheless, this analysis is valuable to highlight the opportunities for engaging Asian American voters in any election district.

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