



ASIAN AMERICAN FEDERATION

# CONNECTING TO POWER:

THE GROWING IMPACT OF  
NEW YORK CITY'S ASIAN VOTERS

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Cover photograph is from South Queens Women's March. Photos on pages 8 and 24 are from the Caribbean Equality Project; photo on page 17 is from Korean Community Services of Metropolitan New York, Inc.; and photo on page 23 is from Hamilton-Madison House.

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# PREFACE

Following the 2020 presidential election, one story took over the news: Asian Americans voted in unprecedented numbers across the country, frequently deciding the results of major elections in swing states. Across the board, Asian Americans voted at more than double the rate they had in 2016. The community's mobilization didn't stop at voting. Galvanized by the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian Americans organized robust grassroots efforts to stand up against anti-Asian hate and support struggling small businesses and community members—from fundraisers for Chinatown restaurants to PPE donations for frontline workers to free rides for Asian seniors.

Over the last decade, Asian Americans have been the fastest-growing voting bloc in New York City—accounting for almost 18 percent of the city's overall population. Over 27 percent of eligible Asian voters cast their ballots in last year's mayoral primary, driven by strong grassroots organizing, an increase in Asian candidates, and the community's reaction to hate crimes. This represented not only a record turnout in New York City's 2021 mayoral primary, but also the highest Asian turnout in history for a local New York election.

Despite significant population growth, contributions to electoral victories across the country, and an unprecedented number of Asian Americans rising to federal, state, and local offices, policymakers continue to overlook and underfund the community.

This report hopes to reverse the trend of neglecting Asian American communities and persuade political leaders and organizations to employ strategies that center and cater to Asian Americans. Its release, which coincides with the June primary election, will hopefully draw attention to the growing influence of Asian American voters in New York City.

We are grateful for Community Votes, Surdna Foundation, GoVoteNYC, CUNY Citizenship Now!, Bridge Philanthropic Consulting, and Democracy NYC for their support of Asian American Federation's civic engagement program. We are also grateful to the Korean American Community Foundation (KACF) for their generous support and shared vision of using this report to amplify Asian American voices and make our lives more visible.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With a population that exceeded 1.5 million in 2020, Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial group in New York City. This report investigates the demographics of Asian voting-age citizens in the city and finds that:

- Between 2013 and 2020, New York City's Asian citizen voting-age population grew from 581,490 to 694,940. This is a 19.5 percent growth over seven years, outpacing all other major racial groups.
- Chinese Americans accounted for 43.6 percent of New York City's Asian voting-age citizens. Indian Americans (18.6%), Korean Americans (7%), and Filipino Americans (6.5%) were the next three largest Asian ethnic groups.
- 68.7 percent of Asian voting-age citizens were born in another country, and 39.4 percent of Asian voting-age citizens had limited English proficiency in 2020.
- Asian voting-age citizens in the city were relatively young. 22.4 percent were between 18 and 29 years old, and 20.4 percent were between 30 and 39 years old in 2020.
- Overall, Asian voting-age citizens did well on measures of socioeconomic well-being compared with the overall New York City voting-age citizens, but this varied widely among Asian ethnic groups.

The Asian citizen voting-age population is growing, and they are playing a larger role in New York City's elections. By comparing turnout rates from the 2013 and 2021 New York City mayoral primaries, we discover that:

- The turnout rate of Asian eligible voters in the 2021 primary was 27.1 percent—about 11 percentage points higher than in 2013. Not only did Asian voters' turnout outpace Black and Hispanic voters in 2021, but they also had the biggest increase in turnout among the major racial groups between 2013 and 2021.
- Between 2013 and 2021, the turnout rate of all Asian ethnic groups increased. Among them, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese voters turned out at a rate equal to or higher than the overall rate in New York City in 2021.
- While younger Asian voters still lagged behind older Asian voters in terms of turnout, the turnout rate of Asian voters aged 18 to 29 more than tripled between 2013 and 2021.

Despite its growing political power and significance, the Asian American community is often considered too socially and linguistically fractured for political campaigns to target effectively. As a result, Asian Americans, particularly immigrants who have never voted, are often mischaracterized as “unlikely voters” and receive minimal campaign outreach.

However, we found that attempts to engage Asian American voters were successful by assessing the impact of the AAPI Power Coalition, a voter outreach program launched by the Asian American Federation (AAF) during the 2021 New York City primary. Through its in-language and culturally relevant outreach, the AAPI Power Coalition drove a statistically significant 11 percentage points increase in voter turnout as the program participants’ turnout increased from 15 percent to 26 percent.

In addition to a lack of voter outreach, Asian American voters suffer from systemic barriers to voting. Therefore, the objective of this report extends beyond recognizing Asian Americans as the city’s fastest-growing voting bloc to focusing on the challenges that they confront and the policy reforms that are required to overcome them:

- Asian American voters represent myriad national origins, faiths, languages, education, and income levels. Such diversity requires disaggregated data for policymakers and candidates to fully understand and address the unique needs of the communities they serve. Therefore, we recommend more local surveys that reach a wider sample of smaller Asian American groups and a faster data turnaround to present a more comprehensive and up-to-date picture of Asian American communities.
- To remove the language barriers that prevent Asian American voters with limited English proficiency from fully participating in the democratic process, we recommend assessing Election Day readiness to ensure that voting locations are stocked with translated materials and feature language assistance as required by Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act. We applaud the approval of New York’s John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act and urge the City Board of Elections (BOE) and other institutions to implement its provisions properly.
- Untold numbers of eligible Americans have been prevented from voting by widespread voter suppression tactics, such as barriers to voter registration and restrictions on casting ballots. To counter these practices, we recommend same-day or Election Day voter registration and no-excuse absentee voting, which would make the voting process more convenient. We also recommend a tiered system of review to ensure that a voter’s signature is not rejected on a single pass, as the mail-in ballots of Asian American voters are more likely than others to be disqualified.



# INTRODUCTION

Asian American population growth in New York City has been booming over the last decade, as has the political impact of Asian American voters. As of 2020, Asian Americans made up 13 percent of the citizen voting-age population. In the 2021 New York City primary, Asian American voters turned out at a historically unprecedented rate amid the COVID-19 aftermath and the ongoing spike in Anti-Asian violence. The Trump administration's new policies affecting immigrant communities, such as changes to public charge regulations and the Muslim ban, spurred heightened political engagement from Asian American communities and encouraged more Asian candidates to run for office in recent years. The rise in Asian American participation resulted from robust public campaigns from community-based organizations, which the city supported. Nonetheless, Asian American voters still face systemic barriers to having their voices heard and contributing to the democratic process. Therefore, this report aims to decipher the Asian voters in New York City, how to effectively engage them in the voting process, and how they shape local politics.

There are three chapters in this report. The first chapter examines the demographics of Asian citizens of voting age in New York City and how their electoral involvement has changed between the 2013 and 2021 primary. The second chapter explores how an AAF-founded voter outreach program debunks the stereotype that Asian Americans are "unlikely voters" by successfully raising voter turnout through a targeted voter outreach program. The final chapter covers the challenges that Asian voters in the city confront and lays out policy recommendations to alleviate these issues.

# ASIAN AMERICANS ARE NEW YORK CITY'S FASTEST-GROWING VOTING BLOC

In the last decade, Asian Americans have been the city's fastest-growing electorate compared to other major races and ethnicities. As of 2020, Asian Americans made up nearly 13 percent of the city's voting-age citizens. In the 2021 New York City Mayoral primary, more than 27 percent of Asian eligible voters cast ballots, making it the group's most participated-in local election in decades and dwarfing the 2013 primary (the last mayoral race with both Democratic and Republican primaries and no incumbent running) by roughly 11 percentage points.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, Asian American voters are not monolithic. Asian American voters are the most ethnically diverse population compared to other racial groups. National origins and homeland identity drive ethnic diversity, which in turn shapes differences in socioeconomic circumstances. Using data from the Census Bureau and Catalist, this chapter investigates the demographics of Asian American voters—as a whole and as a variety of ethnic subgroups—and how they affect electoral participation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eligible voters here refer to those who have registered to vote, this term is used interchangeably with “voters” in this report.

<sup>2</sup> For more detailed discussion on data source, please see Methodology.





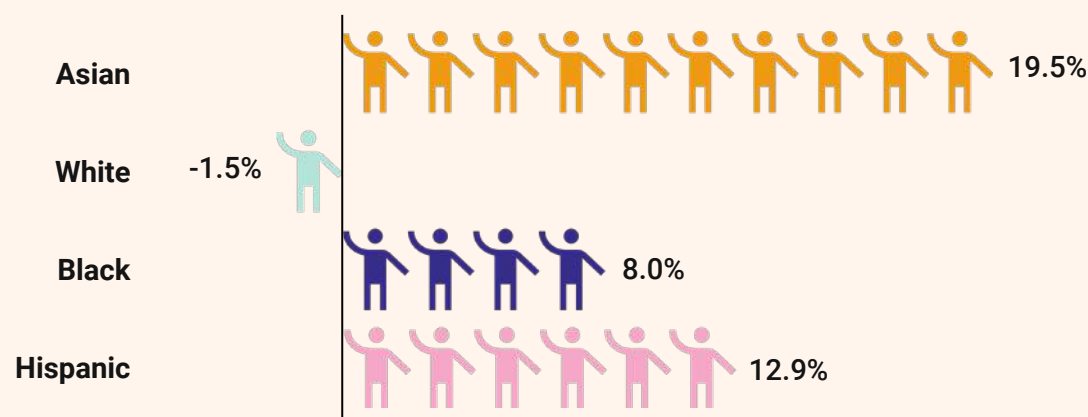
## DEMOGRAPHICS: ASIAN AMERICAN VOTERS ARE THE MOST ETHNICALLY DIVERSE

Between 2013 and 2020, New York City's Asian voting-age citizens grew from 581,490 to 694,940—a 19.5 percent increase that outpaced the 12.9 percent increase among Hispanics. Black voting-age citizens grew by 8 percent during this span, while their White counterparts decreased by 1.5 percent (Figure 1). Asians also made up a growing share of the city's voting-age citizens, from 11.3 percent in 2013 to 12.8 percent in 2020.

FIGURE 1

### GROWTH RATE OF VOTING-AGE CITIZENS BY MAJOR RACIAL GROUP

2013-2020, NEW YORK CITY



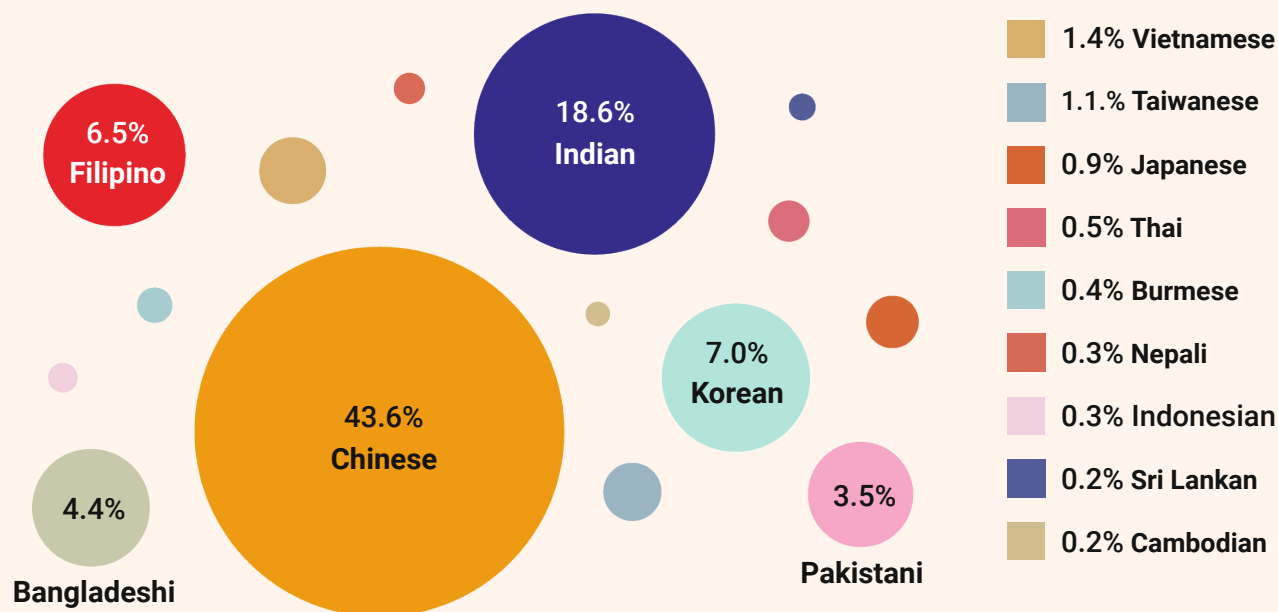
Source: AAF Analysis of American Community Survey 2013 and 2020 5-year Public Use Microdata Samples, U.S. Census Bureau

Chinese Americans were the largest ethnic group among Asian voting-age citizens in New York City, making up 43.6 percent, or 303,206 people as of 2020. The next three largest Asian ethnic groups were Indian Americans, who accounted for 18.6 percent (or 128,936), Korean Americans, who accounted for 7 percent (or 48,711 people), and Filipino Americans, who accounted for 6.5 percent (or 44,925 people). Bangladeshi (4.4 percent) and Pakistani (3.5 percent) communities each had more than 200,000 voting-age citizens. These six groups comprised 83.6 percent of New York City's Asian voting-age citizens (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

## PERCENTAGE OF ASIAN AMERICAN VOTING-AGE CITIZENS BY ETHNIC GROUP

2020, NEW YORK CITY



Source: AAF Analysis of American Community Survey 2020 5-year Public Use Microdata Samples, U.S. Census Bureau

In 2020, the median age of Asian voting-age citizens in New York City was 44, slightly lower than the city's general median age of 45. The age breakdown of Asian voting-age citizens reflects their relative youth. In 2020, 22.4 percent of Asian residents of voting age were between the ages of 18 and 29, and 20.4 percent were between the ages of 30 and 39. Nearly half of the Asian voting-age citizens in the city (42.7 percent) were in these two age categories (Figure 3).

It is also worth noting that in 2020, there were 240,796 Asian Americans under 18, accounting for 25.7 percent of all Asian Americans. Of that group, 76,198 were between 11 and 17 and will be eligible to vote in a few years.

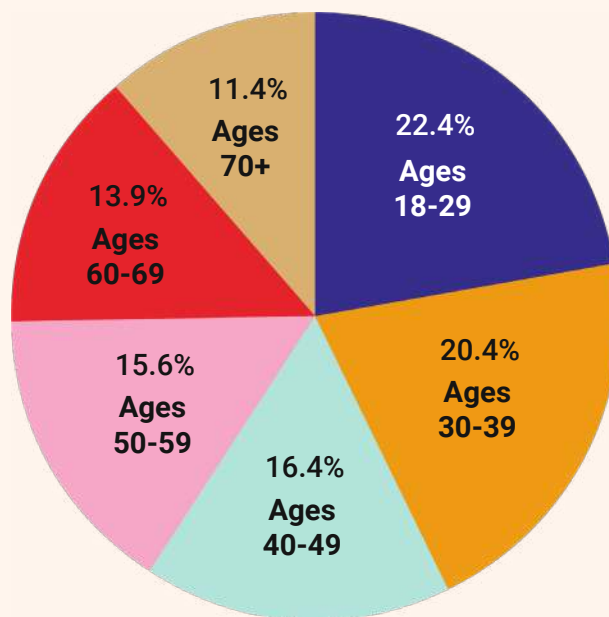
Around seven of ten Asian voting-age citizens (68.7%) were born in another country. In contrast, only 31.5 percent of the city's citizens of voting age were born elsewhere. However, these percentages vary across Asian ethnic groups depending on when and how they arrive in the United States. For example, Japanese were most likely to be natural-born citizens (58.6%), and they were largely the descendants of immigrants who arrived before World War II. On the other hand, many Burmese arrived as refugees recently, and the vast majority (88.7%) were foreign-born.

As of 2020, 60.6 percent of Asian voting-age citizens in New York City were “proficient” in English, meaning they either spoke only English or spoke the language very well—leaving 39.4 percent of Asian voting-age citizens with limited English proficiency (LEP). Filipino (19.4%), Japanese (20.3%), and Indian (20.5%) voting-age citizens had the lowest LEP rates, while Burmese (59.7%), Chinese (55.3%), and Bangladeshi (52.5%) had the highest LEP rates.

Overall, Asian American voting-age citizens did well on measures of economic well-being compared with general New York City voting-age citizens, but this varied widely among Asian ethnic groups. In 2020, the poverty rate of Asian voting-age citizens was 13.2 percent, lower than the poverty rate of the city's overall voting-age citizens at 14.8 percent. But there were large differences in poverty rates among Asian subgroups. Bangladeshi (16.4%), Burmese (15.8%), Chinese (15%), Indonesian (18.5%), and Pakistani (17.7%) groups had poverty rates as high as or higher than the city's average for voting-age citizens in 2020, while the Taiwanese (7.1%) and Filipino (7.9%) communities had the lowest poverty rates among Asian ethnic groups.

FIGURE 3

### PERCENTAGE OF ASIAN AMERICAN VOTING-AGE CITIZENS BY AGE GROUP 2020, NEW YORK CITY

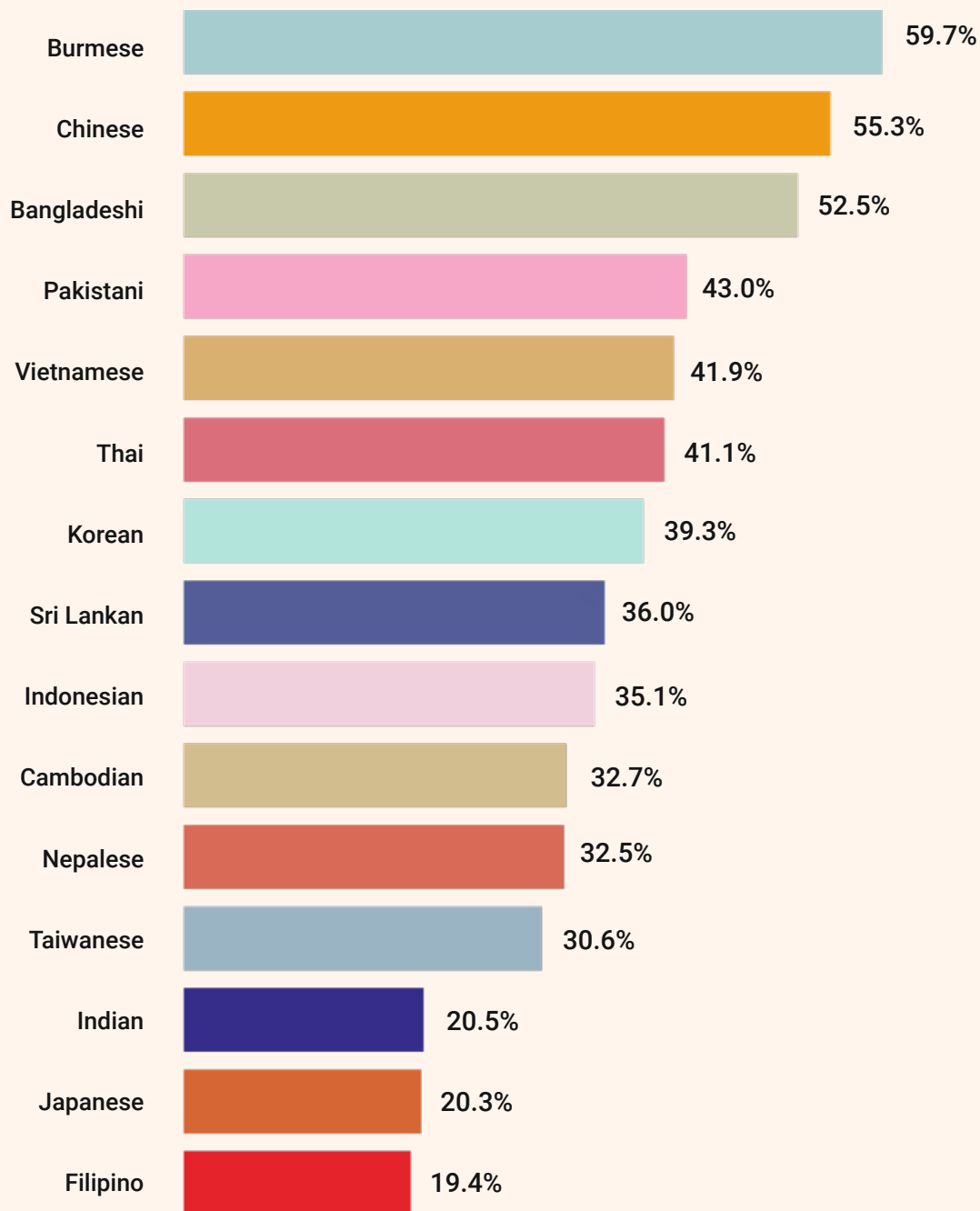


Source: AAF Analysis of American Community Survey 2020 5-year Public Use Microdata Samples, U.S. Census Bureau

FIGURE 4

## LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY RATES OF ASIAN AMERICAN VOTING-AGE CITIZENS BY ETHNIC GROUP

2020, NEW YORK CITY



Source: AAF Analysis of American Community Survey 2020 5-year Public Use Microdata Samples, U.S. Census Bureau

As of 2020, nearly half of Asian American citizens aged 25 and older (48.5%) had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 41.7 percent of the city's citizens in the same age range. Much like economic trends, there are wide disparities among ethnic groups. Among Asian American citizens in the city, Taiwanese aged 25 and older had the highest level of educational attainment, with 75.5 percent holding a bachelor's degree or more in 2020, while Cambodians were the least likely to have a college degree (27.7%).

## TURNOUT: GROWING AMONG ASIAN VOTERS

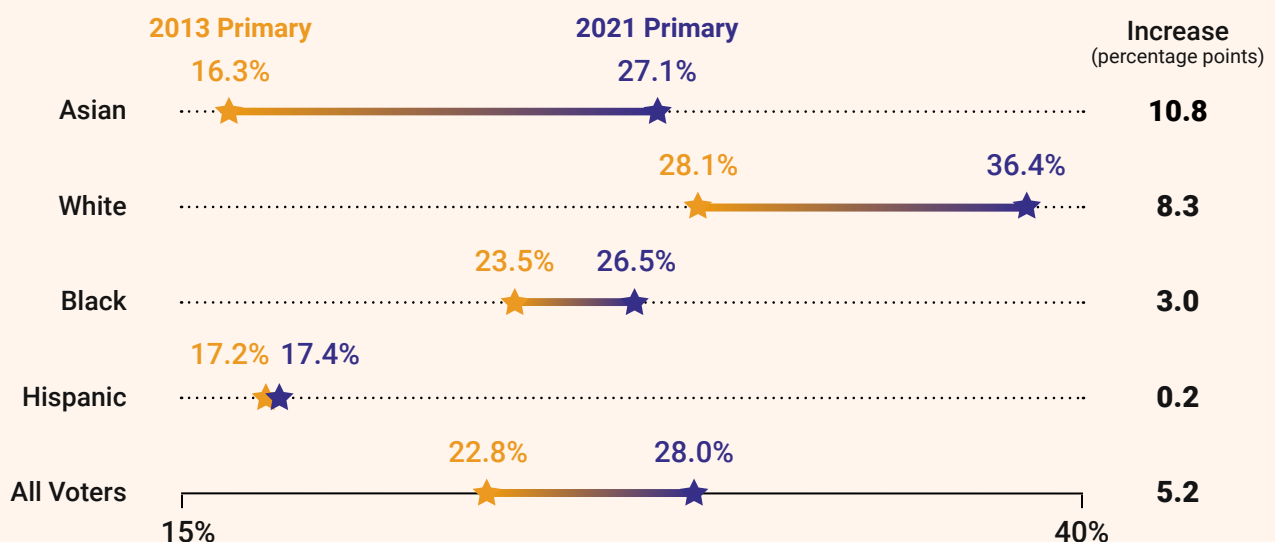
While the turnout for Asian eligible voters was the lowest among all the major racial groups for the 2013 primary, Asian voter turnout increased to 27.1 percent in the 2021 primary—higher than the turnout for Black and Hispanic voters.<sup>3</sup> This 10.8 percentage points increase from the 2013 primary surpassed all the other major racial groups. In the 2021 primary, the gap between the turnout for Asian voters and the overall turnout in the city was much smaller than in 2013 (Figure 5).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Voter turnout is calculated as the percentage of registered voters who participated in an election.

<sup>4</sup> This report uses data from Catalist to calculate the turnout rates. For the race category, Catalist uses modeled data. This means that these are best guesses about the person's race and not necessarily how the person would actually describe themselves. For more detailed discussion, please see Methodology.

FIGURE 5

### TURNOUT RATES BY MAJOR RACIAL GROUP NEW YORK CITY



Source: AAF Analysis of Catalist Database

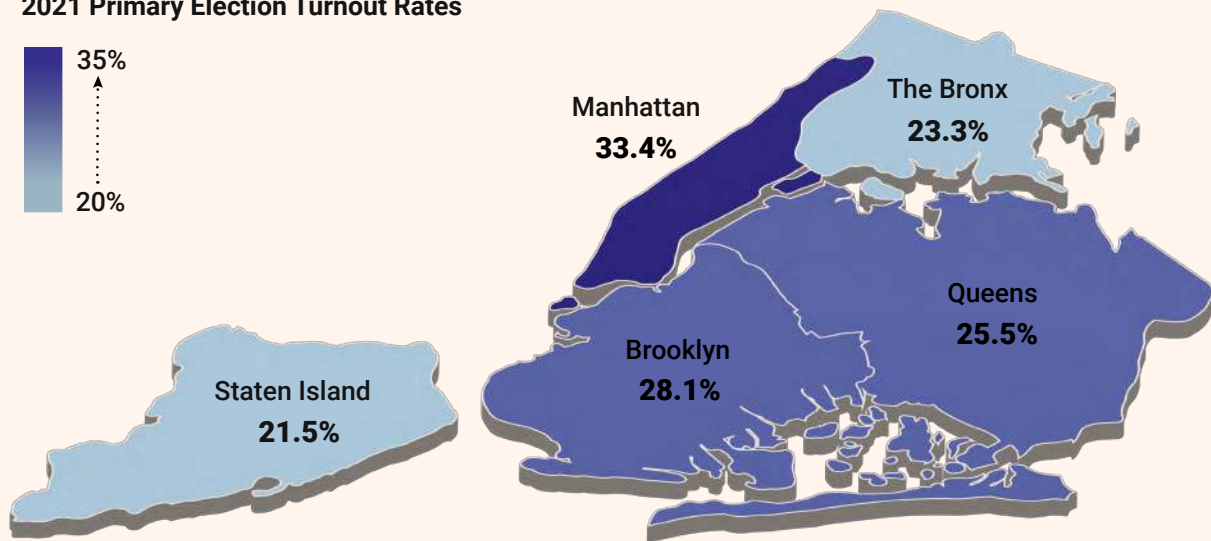


In the 2021 primary, Staten Island and the Bronx, the two boroughs with the fewest Asian voting-age citizens, had the lowest Asian voter turnout at 21.5 percent and 23.3 percent, respectively. Queens, even though it had the highest number of Asian voting-age citizens, did not have the highest turnout rate for Asian eligible voters. Instead, Manhattan had the highest percentage of Asian voter turnout (33.4%), followed by Brooklyn (28.1%) and Queens (25.5%) (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6

## ASIAN AMERICAN TURNOUT RATES BY BOROUGH NEW YORK CITY

2021 Primary Election Turnout Rates



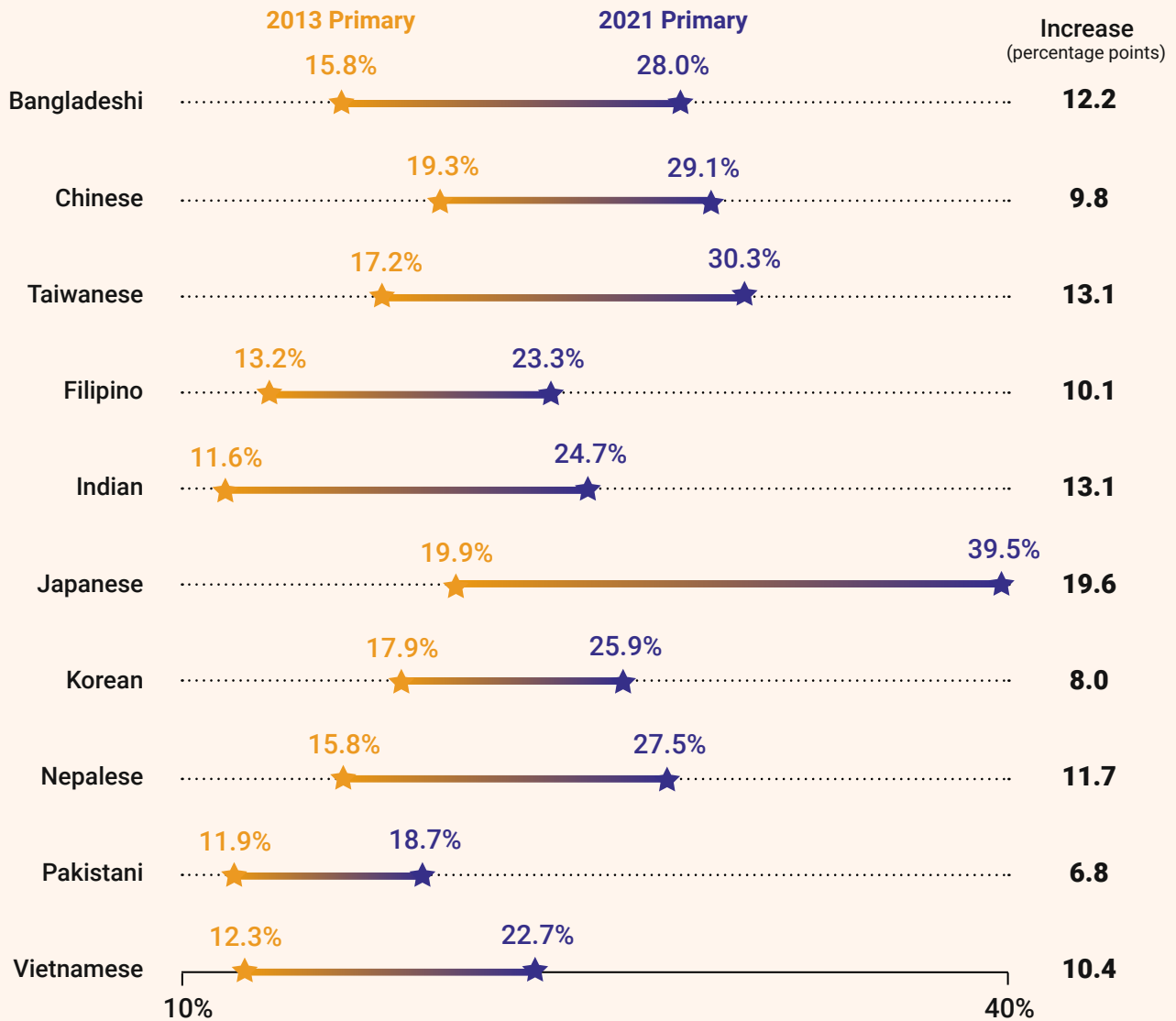
Source: AAF Analysis of Catalist Database

The turnout for all the Asian ethnic groups increased between 2013 and 2021.<sup>5</sup> Among Asian eligible voters, Japanese Americans not only had the highest turnout in both primaries but also the highest increase in turnout between the two primaries. In the 2021 primary,

<sup>5</sup> Due to the limitation in the Catalist Database, there are fewer ethnic groups included in the turnout analysis than those in the demographic analysis.

FIGURE 7

## ASIAN AMERICAN TURNOUT RATES BY ETHNIC GROUP NEW YORK CITY

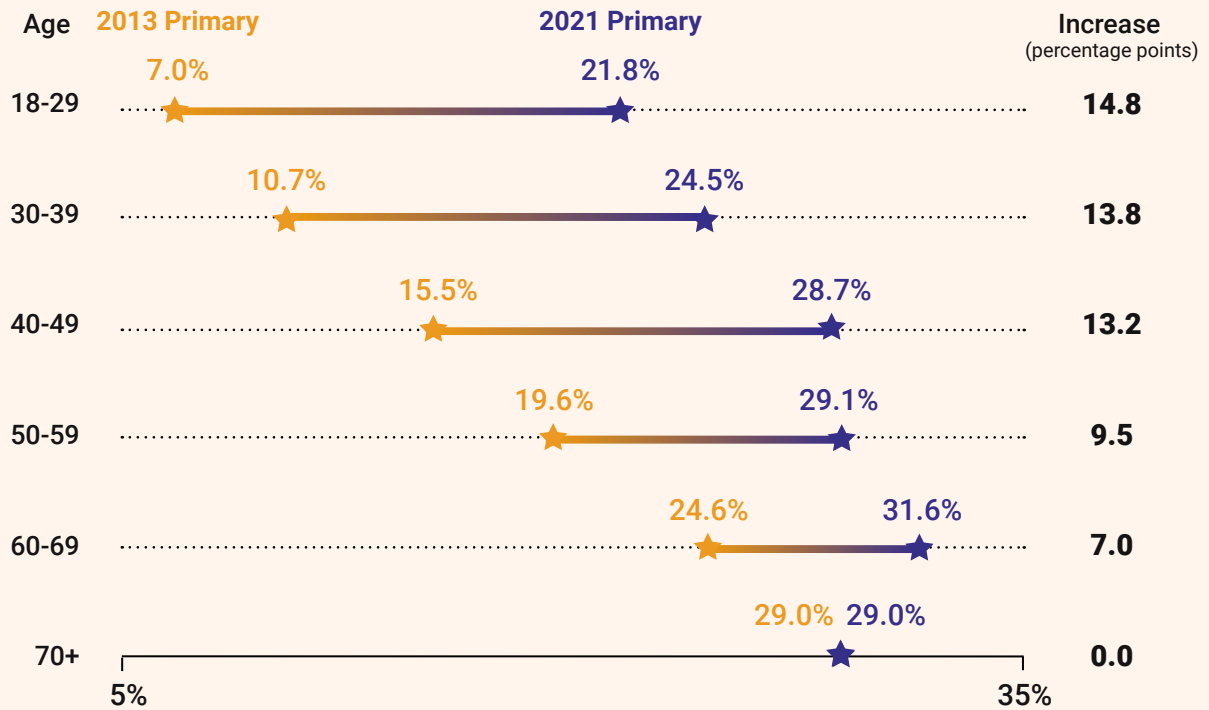


Source: AAF Analysis of Catalist Database

Bangladeshi, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese voters had turnout rates as high as or higher than the overall New York City turnout. While Indian voters had the lowest turnout rates in 2013, they had the second-highest numeric growth in turnout. (Figure 7).

FIGURE 8

## ASIAN AMERICAN TURNOUT RATES BY AGE GROUP NEW YORK CITY



Overall, voting turnout increases as people get older. This held true for Asian voters in New York City in both the 2013 and 2021 primaries. Voter turnout among Asian voters aged 18 to 29 and voters aged 30 to 39 was around 10 percent in 2013, which was significantly lower than the overall Asian turnout. While younger voters' turnout lagged behind that of older voters, turnout among voters aged 18 to 29 more than tripled between 2013 and 2021. The 14.8 percentage point gain for this youngest age group was the largest of all age groups, bringing their turnout in the 2021 primary to a more comparable level to the other age groups (Figure 8). This growth in younger Asian voters is noteworthy as raising youth turnout has been a strategic aim for political parties in New York City and the country as a whole.

## ASIAN VOTER ENGAGEMENT LEADS TO TURNOUT GAINS

As discussed in the previous chapter, despite Asians making up a growing share of the city's voting-age citizens, the turnout among Asian eligible voters trailed that of White eligible voters. Therefore, Asian Americans, especially immigrants who have never voted, are often stereotyped as “politically less active” and receive far less campaign outreach about voting than other racial and ethnic groups considered “more politically active.” This chapter discusses how a voter outreach program founded by AAF helps to dispel the myth of Asian Americans as “unlikely voters” by successfully increasing the voter turnout rates by more than 11 percentage points.

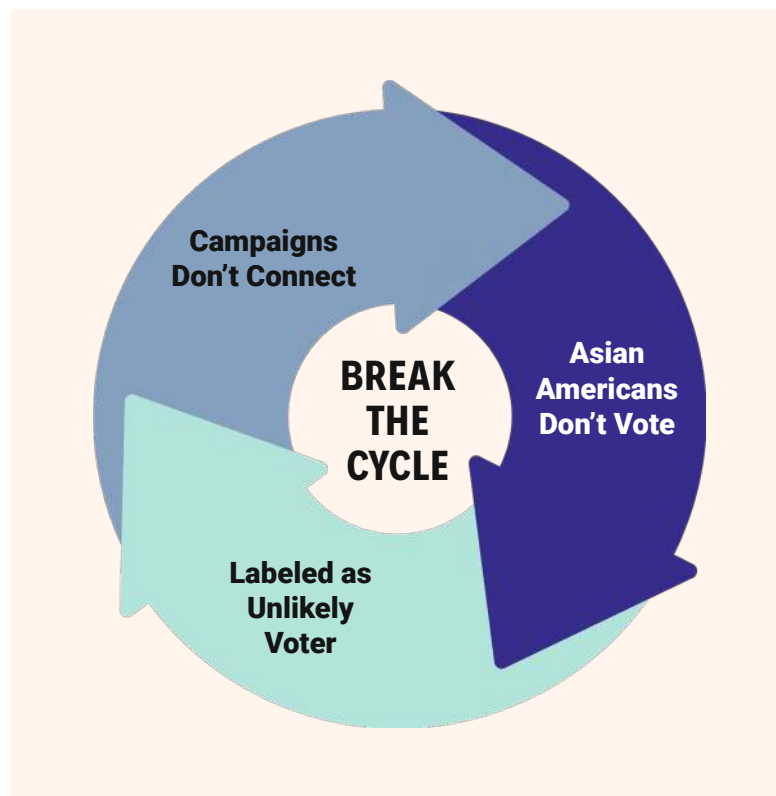


## POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS FAIL TO REACH OUT TO ASIAN VOTERS

Asian Americans have long been stigmatized as “unlikely voters.” One reason is that almost 70 percent of Asian American voters in New York City were born outside the United States, many in countries where they did not “participate actively” in democratic electoral processes. Even though immigrants must pass a civics test before becoming American citizens, they are not provided with comprehensive education about voting and the electoral process, which means they are left in the dark about the advantages of participating in a democracy.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the Asian American community, with its diverse ethnicities and languages, often appears too socially and linguistically fractured for political campaigns to target effectively. As a result, both major parties failed to properly engage the Asian American community. According to the 2020 Asian American Voter Survey, 58 percent of Asian Americans, a majority of those without a history of voting, reported receiving no contact from either Democrats or Republicans in the 2020 presidential election cycle.<sup>7</sup> Without voter engagement providing essential information about where and how to vote, those who have never voted before are less motivated to register, and the cycle repeats itself, creating a negative feedback loop (Figure 9).

FIGURE 9



<sup>6</sup> Cho, S., Nguyen, P., Levine, N., & Lee, Y. (2020, June 25). *Strengthening the Asian American Electorate*. Retrieved from American Bar Association: [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human\\_rights\\_magazine\\_home/voting-in-2020/strengthening-the-asian-american-electorate/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/voting-in-2020/strengthening-the-asian-american-electorate/)

<sup>7</sup> AAPI Vote, AAPI Data, Asian Americans Advancing Justice. (2020, September 15). *2020 Asian American Voter Survey*. Retrieved from AAPI Data: <https://aapidata.com/2020-survey/>

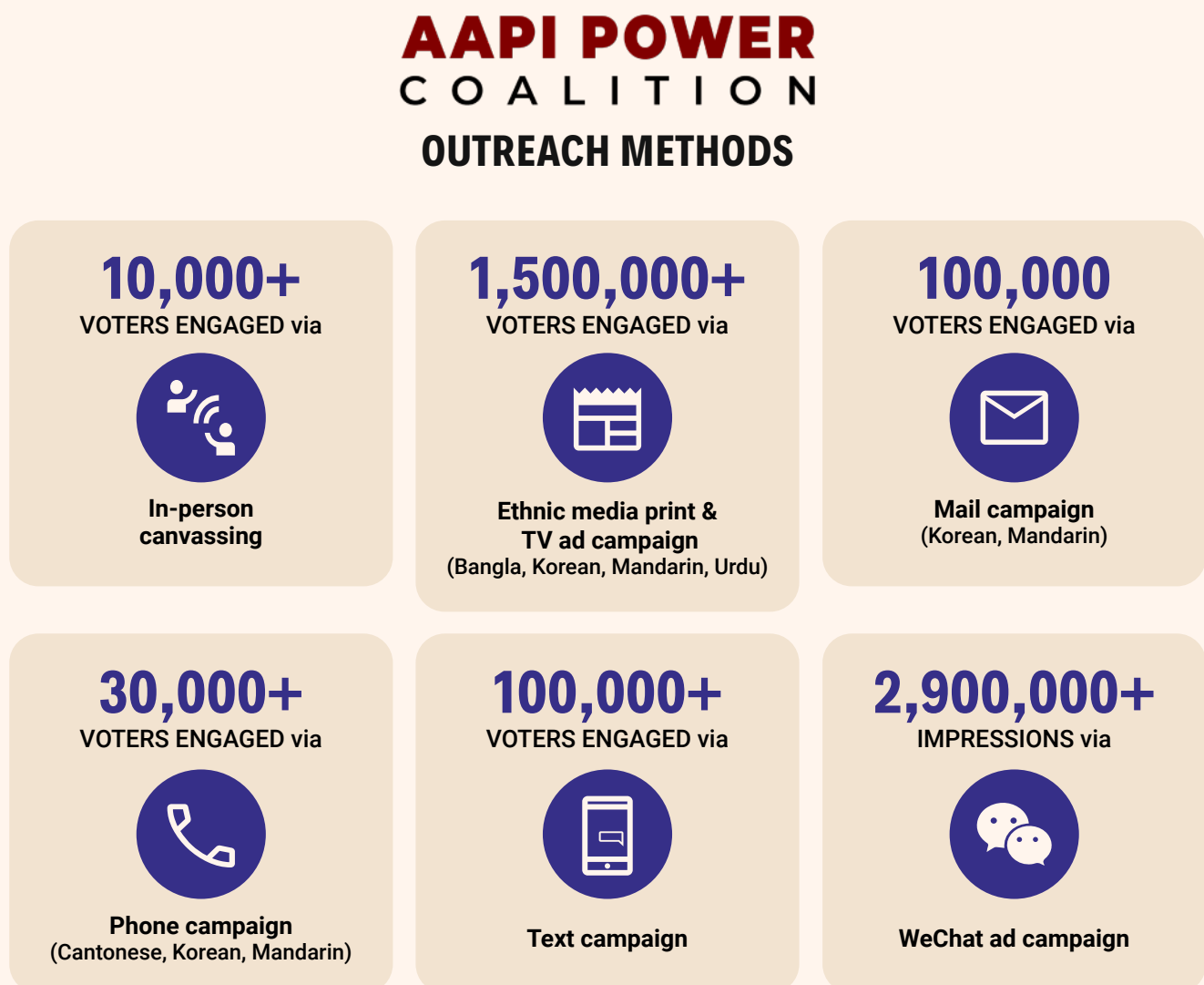


# AAPI POWER COALITION: A VOTER OUTREACH PROGRAM THAT WORKED

In 2021, AAF founded the AAPI Power Coalition to break this vicious cycle.<sup>8</sup> At the time of the primary election, the coalition included eight members, all non-profit organizations serving thousands of pan-Asian Americans in low-voter-turnout districts in New York City. AAF worked with these eight partners to build their capacity to participate in nonpartisan voter outreach to increase AAPI voter turnout in the 2021 elections. By utilizing a data-driven approach and incorporating an innovative mix of tools, including new voter outreach

<sup>8</sup> We want to acknowledge the other civic engagement work by AALDEF, AAFE, MinKwon and APAVOICE that have helped to increase the Asian voter turnout.

FIGURE 10



technologies and video campaigns on social media, AAF is using an evidence-based approach to evaluating what approaches are most effective in engaging the fast-growing AAPI electorate in New York City and beyond (Figure 10).

FIGURE 11

## AAPI POWER COALITION MEMBERS

### **TAP-NY**

*Serving the Taiwanese community*

### **Hamilton-Madison House**

*Serving the Chinese, Korean, Hispanic communities*

### **Caribbean Equality Project**

*Serving the Indo-Caribbean (Guyanese), Punjabi communities*

### **National Federation of Filipino American Associations**

*Serving the Filipino community*

### **Sapna NYC**

*Serving the South Asian (mostly Bangladeshi) communities*

### **Korean Community Services**

*Serving the Korean community*

### **South Queens Women's March**

*Serving the Indo-Caribbean (Guyanese), Punjabi communities*

### **Council of Peoples Organization**

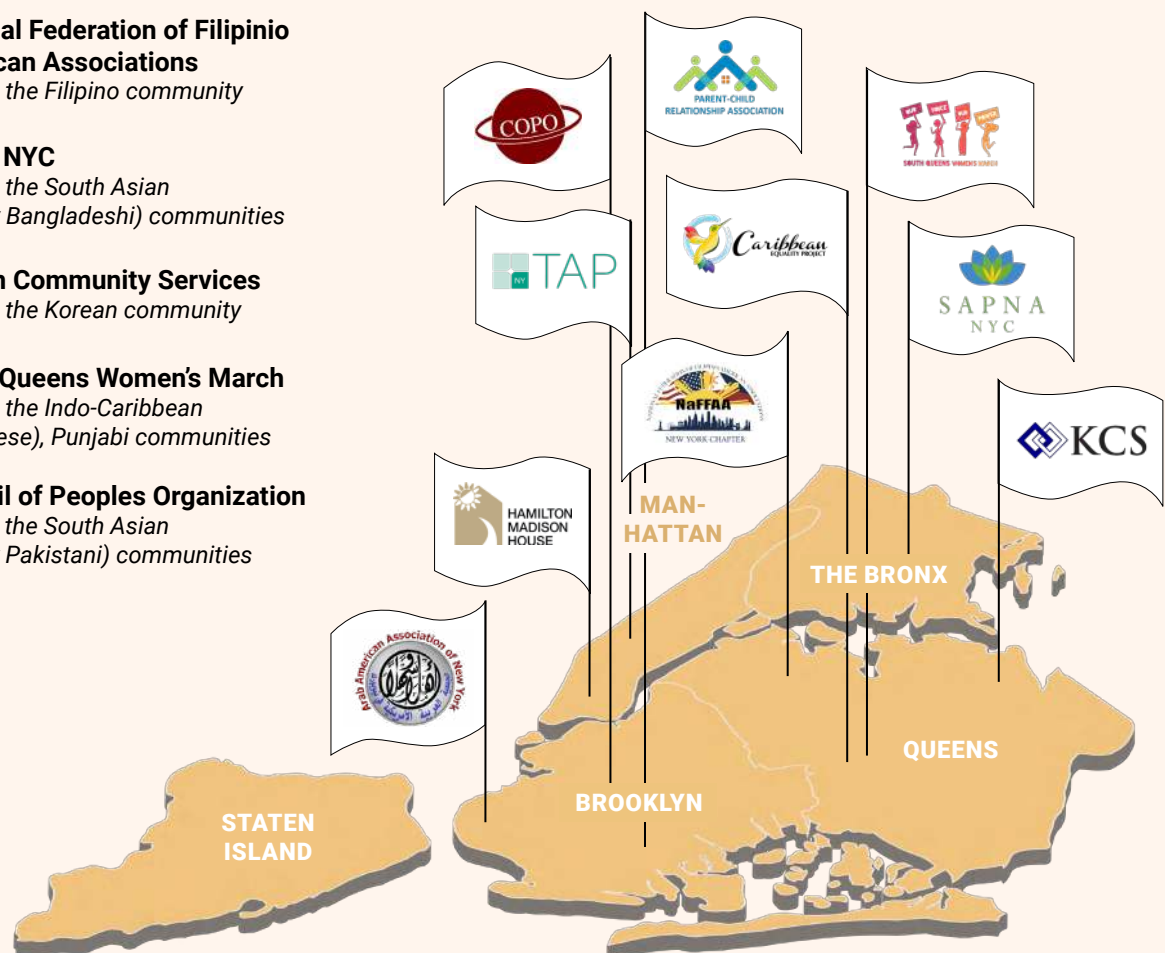
*Serving the South Asian (mostly Pakistani) communities*

### **Parent-Child Relationship Organization**

*Serving the Chinese community*

### **Arab American Association of New York**

*Serving the Arab community*

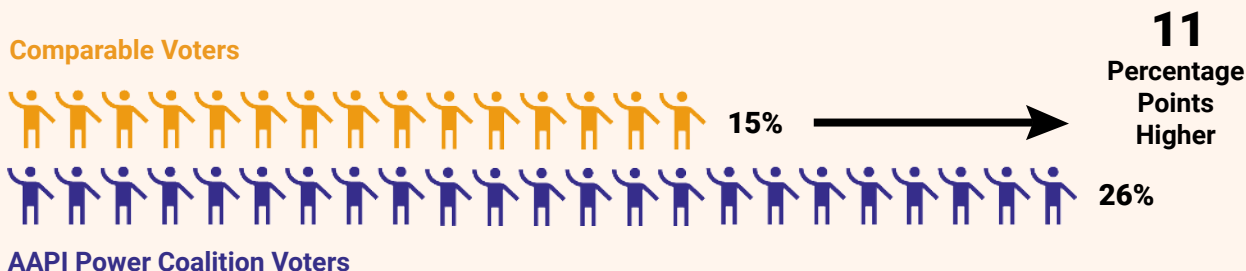


## OUTREACH IMPACT ON VOTER TURNOUT

Following the release of turnout rates for the 2021 primary election, AAF conducted an evaluation study on the impact of the AAPI Power Coalition's in-person outreach program on turnout rates.<sup>9</sup> Our primary data comes from Catalist, a purveyor of data on voting-age citizens in the United States. The Catalist data include each voter's demographic information and "voting propensity score," indicating the probability that the voter will turn out in an election. Catalist uses past voting history to determine the voting propensity score, and the calculations of the score were conducted before the 2021 primary election and independently of this study.<sup>10</sup>

FIGURE 12

### AAPI POWER COALITION'S IN-PERSON OUTREACH DROVE 11 PERCENTAGE POINT INCREASE IN VOTER TURNOUT



By using data from Catalist, we matched the AAPI Power Coalition voters to comparable voters. AAPI Power Coalition voters were contacted through our in-person voter outreach program, while comparable voters were represented by a set of registered voters in New York City that we paired with each AAPI Power Coalition voter by factoring in sex, race, age, income and voting propensity score. With such a matching process, we assume that each AAPI Power Coalition voter would have voted at the same rate as their comparable voter, absent our contact. Therefore, the difference between the AAPI Power Coalition voter turnout and the comparable voter turnout can be attributed to the voter outreach program.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> We only conducted evaluation on the in-person outreach program. Other programs were not evaluated due to the lack of comprehensive data.

<sup>10</sup> Scores on the 2021 Vote Propensity model range from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating a greater likelihood of voting. Models predicting past voting behavior were built from historical voter files archived shortly before the 2013 and 2017 general elections. Scores for the 2013 and 2017 models are then projected for 2021 voters and combined to generate the final scores.

<sup>11</sup> See Methodology for more details on the matching process and the evaluation model.

The turnout for AAPI Power Coalition voters was 26 percent in 2021. Based on our model, participating in the AAPI Power Coalition in-person outreach program drove a statistically significant 11 percentage point increase in voter turnout (Figure 12). The 11 percentage point increase indicates that these voters would have turned out at 15 percent if the in-person outreach program had not contacted them. This is a significant improvement as the 26 percent turnout is only slightly lower than the overall turnout in New York City, which was 28 percent.

Our experience has proven that with culturally relevant outreach in the languages voters speak, especially when provided by trusted organizations with strong roots in a community, Asian Americans can be not only active voters but also enthusiastic supporters of policies. When advocating for policy changes, they are also capable of engaging others through their strong social network.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, concrete actions can be taken to protect and encourage civic participation for Asian Americans and other voters of color (Box 1).

Moreover, the work of connection and engagement must be more consistent rather than concentrated in the run-up to an election. Year-round involvement with various Asian American groups is necessary to engage our 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.

<sup>12</sup> Hsu, H. (2020, November 2). *Are Asian Americans the Last Undecided Voters?* Retrieved from The New Yorker: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/11/02/are-asian-americans-the-last-undecided-voters/>



#### BOX 1

### Key Lessons in 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.

## CHALLENGES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Asian Americans are currently the fastest-growing racial group in the city, the state, and the country. In 2020, nearly 700,000 Asian American voting-age citizens resided in New York City. However, Asian American voters continue to face barriers at the ballot box. Despite the significant increase in Asian American voter turnout in the last decade, a racial imbalance in turnout persists because of a lack of comprehensive data, language barriers, and voter suppression tactics. This chapter delves into the challenges experienced by Asian American voters and makes recommendations on how to solve them so that Asian American voters have equal opportunities as other citizens to make their voices heard.



### COLLECT COMPREHENSIVE DISAGGREGATED DATA

In 2020, Asian Americans made up 13 percent of the New York City voting-age citizens, representing myriad national origins, faiths, languages, education, and income levels. Treating Asian Americans as a monolithic group obscures the different needs and opinions within the group and among ethnic subgroups.

To address these different challenges and complexities, comprehensive data collection disaggregated by ethnicity and geography is required. Candidates and political organizations can use this disaggregated data to successfully target and serve Asian American voters.



Although Asian Americans are a demographically and politically diverse group, data shows that Asian American voters had “remarkable solidarity” on the major issues of the day and are thus an important group for political organizations to engage.<sup>13</sup> According to the 2020 Asian American Voter Survey, Asian American voters leaned progressive on a range of issues. For example, they were more likely than the U.S. average to favor bigger government and more services, stronger legislation for controlling climate change, and stricter gun regulations.<sup>14</sup> More recently, a nonpartisan exit poll of 1,368 Asian American voters in the New York City 2021 primary elections showed that many Asian American voters have been victims of anti-Asian violence and ranked it as a top issue in deciding their choice for mayor.<sup>15</sup>

However, comprehensive data on Asian American voters is not gathered frequently enough. Building on existing national surveys that collect information on race, ethnicity, and other socioeconomic factors, like the American Community Survey or Current Population Survey, we recommend more local surveys that reach a larger sample of the smaller Asian American groups to get more accurate estimates for them. The added expense for the surveys would be worth it to have inclusive and insightful data that can be used to craft policy. Moreover, we advocate for more timely data collection. Most comprehensive data on Asian Americans is not publicly available for at least a year, rendering real-time analysis and policy responses impossible. Therefore, we recommend a faster turnaround of data so candidates and policymakers can have a more complete and updated picture of Asian American communities and play a more active role in increasing Asian American voter participation.

<sup>13</sup> Huang, A., Peng, A., & Chen, S. (2020, September 15). *Biden leads but party outreach remains abysmal*, *Asian American Voter Survey shows*. Retrieved from The Yappie: <https://theyappie.com/biden-leads-but-party-outreach-remains-abysmal-asian-american-voter-survey-shows/>

<sup>14</sup> 2020 Asian American Voter Survey (AAVS) was conducted by AAPI Data, APIAVote, and Asian Americans Advancing Justice. AAVS is the only pre-election national survey that collects disaggregated data on Asian American voters. Researchers collected responses from 1,569 registered Asian American voters of Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese descent. The interviews were conducted both online and over the phone and had several language options, including English, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese. The data is weighted across state and ethnicity.

<sup>15</sup> The exit poll was conducted by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF). AALDEF volunteers, including attorneys and community advocates, surveyed Asian American voters at 16 poll sites in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens. The multilingual exit poll included questions regarding voters’ first and second choices for mayor, ranked choice voting’s ease of use, and experience with anti-Asian violence and harassment. Voters were surveyed in English, Chinese, Korean, and Bengali.



## EXPAND LANGUAGE ACCESS

As discussed in Chapter 1, nearly 40 percent of Asian American voters in New York City have limited English proficiency (LEP), meaning that they speak English less than “very well.” Language barriers impede these individuals from understanding election information and candidate platforms during the campaign cycle and, in turn, prevent them from fully participating in the democratic process.

Even when they make it to the polls, LEP Asian Americans still face difficulties. Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act requires certain jurisdictions to provide translated voting materials and language assistance at polling places. However, in 2021 multiple primary election poll sites in New York City had a shortage of translators. Tables were set up to offer voters translation services, but some interpreters never showed up.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, we recommend assessments of Election Day readiness after each election to evaluate issues such as translator shortages. By highlighting these gaps and potentially implementing consequences for sites that fail to meet language accessibility standards, these audits can guarantee that voting sites are stocked with enough resources to adequately serve voters and avoid issues that hamper their participation in the future.

Additionally, jurisdictions covered under Section 203 can lose their status due to population change, even as communities remain in need.<sup>17</sup> While Local Law 30-2017 requires mayoral agencies to expand language assistance to LEP communities in non-covered jurisdictions, the New York City Board of Elections (BOE) is exempt from this requirement since New York State Election Law governs it.<sup>18</sup> For example, the New York City Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs provided additional translations of voter registration forms in 15 different languages. However, because the BOE does not officially offer forms in these languages, LEP voters still had to complete these translated forms in English.

Recently, Governor Hochul signed the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act of New York into law. Compared to Section 203, it seeks to more generously serve sizable communities

<sup>16</sup> City Limits. (2021, June 22). *Worker Shortages at Some NYC Polls: Missing Translators, ‘A Table With Nobody’*. Retrieved from City Limits: <https://citylimits.org/2021/06/22/nyc-poll-site-shortages-missing-translators-a-table-with-nobody/>

<sup>17</sup> A jurisdiction is covered under Section 203 where the number of United States citizens of voting age is a single language group within the jurisdiction:

- Is more than 10,000, or
- Is more than five percent of all voting age citizens, or
- On an Indian reservation, exceeds five percent of all reservation residents; and
- The illiteracy rate of the group is higher than the national illiteracy rate

<sup>18</sup> Local Law 30 of 2017 (LL30) in New York City is one of the strongest laws in the country and requires that covered city agencies appoint a language access coordinator, develop language access implementation plans, provide telephonic interpretation in at least 100 languages, translate their most commonly distributed documents into the 10 designated citywide languages, and post signage about the availability of free interpretation services, among other requirements.

that speak a common language (Table 1). If over 2% or 3,000 of voting-age citizens speak the same language in an election district, the City’s BOE is required to provide translation and interpretation services in that specific language. While we applaud the passage of the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act of New York and call for more efforts to ensure consistent language access to not only Asian Americans but all LEP voters, we also urge the City BOE and other institutions to implement this properly and promptly.

TABLE 1

## LANGUAGE SERVICE BY BOROUGH AND RELEVANT LAW

	Number of Citywide LEP speakers	Voting Rights Act	LL 30 Designated Citywide Languages (Mayoral Agencies)	John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act of New York
Chinese	33,4845	Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens	Citywide	Citywide
Korean	39,450	Queens	Citywide	Brooklyn, Bronx, Queens, Staten Island
Bengali	52,840	Queens	Citywide	Brooklyn, Bronx, Queens
Hindi	7,394	Queens	N/A	Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island
Punjabi	9,550	Queens	N/A	Brooklyn, Queens
Urdu	15,677	N/A	Citywide	Citywide

Source: New York City Campaign Finance Board

## PREVENT VOTER SUPPRESSION

Widespread voter suppression is a persistent issue that has afflicted not just Asian Americans but also other historically marginalized groups. Each election cycle, barriers in the voter registration process, restrictions on casting ballots, and discriminatory and partisan-rigged district maps prevent untold numbers of eligible Americans from voting.

Despite their growing numbers, Asian American communities continue to face disparities in voter registration. In 2022, 76 percent of Asian American voting-age citizens are registered to vote, compared with 91 percent of white citizens in New York City. Registering to vote can be difficult for naturalized and LEP citizens, as they must determine where and when to register and what materials are needed. For Asian American voters, who are more likely than the general population to vote via absentee ballot, another challenge is understanding the process of requesting an absentee ballot, signing the envelope, and finding drop boxes.<sup>19</sup> There have also been efforts to streamline the voter registration process through reforms such as online registration, automatic registration, and pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-olds. We also recommend common-sense solutions such as same-day or Election Day registration and no-excuse absentee voting to make voting more convenient.

<sup>19</sup> Wang, C., & Li, R. (2020, October 28). *Asian Americans more likely to use absentee ballots - and be rejected in Calif.* Retrieved from NBC News: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/asian-americans-more-likely-use-absentee-ballots-be-rejected-calif-n1245130/>



#### BOX 2

### Where Do Asian American LEP Voters Get Information

English-speaking Asian Americans get their information from a wide array of mainstream and alternative media outlets. Nevertheless, Asian Americans with LEP have substantially fewer options and tend to follow ethnic media—including print, broadcast, and digital social media outlets—as their primary news source.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the use of in-language social media apps like WeChat, WhatsApp, KakaoTalk, and Line to connect with LEP voters. According to the 2020 Asian American Voter Survey, nearly one in six Asian Americans say they use social media sites to discuss politics, granting such platforms considerable influence within Asian American communities.

However, misinformation goes largely unchallenged on Asian American social media. For example, WeChat is a popular social media site among Chinese Americans, attracting over 1.2 billion active monthly users worldwide.<sup>20</sup> For many, the site helps maintain connections with family and friends living in Asia and build community in the United States. The problem, however, is that the line between original content and news is especially blurred on WeChat. Posts tend to be unregulated, sensationalized, poorly researched, and repackaged versions of stories rife with misinformation.

<sup>20</sup> Thomala, L. L. (2022, May 6). *Number of active Wechat messenger accounts Q2 2011 - Q4 2021*. Retrieved from Statista: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/255778/number-of-active-wechat-messenger-accounts/>

Even after being registered, Asian American voters still face systemic hurdles when trying to cast their ballots. Under the new Help America Vote Act, ID checks are required only for certain first-time voters who registered by mail and did not provide a driver's license number or the last four digits of their Social Security number. However, AALDEF monitors have reported that Asian American voters were routinely asked for identification, even though they had already voted in several previous elections.<sup>21</sup>

Asian Americans have also experienced higher-than-average rejection rates nationwide for mail-in ballots. Signature mismatches are the most common reason for rejection for Asian American voters. Moreover, immigrant vote-by-mail (VBM) voters' signatures were more likely to be rejected than those of their native-born counterparts.<sup>22</sup> Absentee ballots, which are intended to make voting more accessible for qualified voters, are sometimes used to disenfranchise marginalized populations.

We recommend secure ways to verify a voter's signature, such as a tiered process in which staff with signature verification training review ballots closely to ensure that a voter's signature is not rejected on a single pass. By incorporating multiple layers of review and proper notice and opportunity to cure, policymakers can create a system that promotes transparency and integrity for all.

<sup>21</sup> Geringer-Sameth, E. (2021, November 5). *An Initial Look at Voter Turnout in the 2021 New York City General Election*. Retrieved from Gotham Gazette: <https://www.gothamgazette.com/city/10891-voter-turnout-2021-new-york-city-general-election/>

<sup>22</sup> Wang, C., & Li, R. (2020, October 28).



### BOX 3

## Issues with the Redistricting Process

Each U.S. state redraws its electoral districts every ten years based on the decennial census count. If districts are drawn fairly, the public can elect representatives who reflect the population's views as a whole. However, if the district lines are manipulated through gerrymandering, that is not the case, especially for voters of color who are in danger of getting sidelined even as they have become a larger share of the population.

In 2014, voters in New York approved an amendment to the state constitution, which created an appointed redistricting commission evenly split between Democrats and Republicans. However, the commission failed to reach an agreement on drawing new district lines in 2022. The state legislature took over the process, but the courts overturned the lines they drew, leaving a judicial Special Master in charge of redistricting.

Asian Americans and other minorities have been particularly concerned about their lack of participation in the redistricting process and how to avoid the same cycle from repeating itself every decade, in which a commission deadlocks, the Legislature acts, and the courts set the lines. All New Yorkers deserve a truly independent, voter-driven redistricting process that considers their input and lived experiences, not a broken process the state currently has.



# METHODOLOGY

## DATA SOURCES

The demographic analysis in the first chapter of this report relies on the American Community Survey (ACS) 2009-2013 5-Year Data and the ACS 2016-2020 5-Year Data from the Census Bureau.

The ACS is an ongoing survey that provides data every year—giving communities the current information they need to plan investments and services. The ACS covers a broad range of topics about the U.S. population’s social, economic, demographic, and housing characteristics. The 5-year estimates from the ACS are “period” estimates representing data collected over time. The primary advantage of using multiyear estimates is the increased statistical reliability of the data for less populated areas and small population subgroups.

The turnout analysis in the first and second chapters relies on the Catalist National Database, a unified national voter file with records going back over 15 years. It integrates data from the Census, commercial data, specialty data, and media market geographies. State file acquisitions, commercial refreshes, National Change of Address processing, and other normal data hygiene operations keep the Catalist National Database up to date. AAF is able to access this database as a member of the New York State Civic Engagement Table.

## TERMINOLOGY

Asian Americans in this report refer to Asian alone or in combination with one or more races, including anyone who identifies as Asian in any way. This report also includes comparisons between Asians and non-Asians—including all major racial groups (Hispanic, Black, and White). While the Census Bureau classified Hispanic as an ethnicity, this category was treated as a major racial category in our analysis. In this report, White Americans refer to non-Hispanic *White alone or in combination with one or more other races*; Black or African Americans refer to *Black alone or in combination with one or more other races*; Hispanic Americans refer to *a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race*.

Major Asian ethnic groups are reported based on Census categories, and Asians in the data are identified by nationality instead of ethnicity in several instances. While

the Census Bureau is constantly studying how they can better adjust their data collection and reporting to reflect the changing needs of our communities, we must work with the ethnicity labels that are currently available.

Please note that Catalist defines race differently from the Census Bureau. In the Catalist model, each person is only assigned one race, so a multiracial person would still only be assigned one race. The result is that a search for Asians will include some multiracial Asians and exclude some other multiracial Asians. It will also include some non-Asians who are inaccurately modeled as Asian and will exclude some Asians who are inaccurately modeled as non-Asian.

## MATCHING PROCEDURE

The ideal way to evaluate a program will be a randomized experiment with a completely randomized treatment assignment among the *population*. The reasoning behind randomized experiment calls for comparing the *treatment group* and the *control group*, which are the same except for the primary causal variable. This facilitates the evaluation of main causal effects in isolation by reducing the possibility of confounding effects from other variables. In our setting, the *population* will be the New York City voting-age citizens. The *treatment group* will be the AAPI Power Coalition voters contacted by the voter outreach program. The *control group* will be the comparable voters who were not contacted by the outreach program. Complete randomization of treatment will ensure that the only difference between the two groups was caused by whether they were contacted by the voter outreach program or not.

However, AAPI Power Coalition voters—the treatment group in our study—were not randomly selected, which means some individuals of the *population* were less likely to be included in the treatment group. In other words, AAPI Power Coalition voters were not representative of the *population*. They cannot be directly compared to the *control group* comprising the voters who were not contacted by the outreach program. Therefore, this study applies a matching procedure to reduce selection bias caused by the non-randomized assignment of treatment. The basic idea of matching is to construct a *control group* as similar to the *treatment group* as possible. The matching method finds two groups of subjects with the same observed characteristics, except that one receives the treatment and the other does not.

This study used *propensity score matching* to construct the control group.<sup>23</sup> First, we selected a random sample from the registered New York City voting-age citizens who were not contacted by the voter outreach program. Next, we created a propensity score

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<sup>23</sup> Propensity score matching is a statistical matching technique that attempts to estimate the effect of a treatment, policy, or other intervention by accounting for the covariates that predict receiving the treatment, which is a different concept from the “voting propensity score” in the Chapter 2.

for each unit of this random sample and the treatment group (the AAPI Power Coalition voters). To calculate propensity score, we used logistic regression with *treatment* as the outcome variable and covariates including age, sex, race, income, and past voting history as explanatory variables. We selected a control unit whose propensity score was the closest for each treatment unit. If there was more than one voter with the same propensity score, we randomly selected one of them. We repeated this procedure to obtain several matched control units for each treatment unit. The matching should be successful if the distribution of covariates for the matched control group is similar to the treatment group.

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