



OPENING THE GOLDEN DOOR, PART 1: 2010 SPECIAL ELECTION FOR THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL'S 28TH DISTRICT

November 2010

Taking Our Seat

Taking Our Seat was founded to empower South Asian-Americans (SAA) in the electoral process. The community's growth in population and economic power over the past decade has not translated to electoral influence. SAA voters do not have viable choices at the polls and for SAA candidates running for office the *Golden Door* to elected office has been closed. Not a single SAA has won a seat in the New York City Council or in either house of the State legislature.

SAA candidates cannot reach the City Council or a State office often due to a lack of a critical mass of voters in the community. Local efforts at voter registration and 'Get Out The Vote' campaigns have only achieved incremental results. Taking Our Seat realized that the SAA community is facing a problem larger than a lack of mobilization. The community is facing a systemic problem.

The problem is the physical boundaries of the political districts themselves. A fractured base of SAA voters spread over many districts cost SAA candidates endorsements, fundraising opportunities and forces them to reach far into non-neighboring communities at great expense and little success. With the community spread over many districts the only way for meaningful political participation has been through fundraising and many of those dollars left the community. This systemic flaw – where election district lines serve to limit SAA voters' choices and limit SAA candidates' chances – has led to a silencing of the SAA community in the electoral process.

Taking Our Seat seeks to level the playing field for SAA voters by moving beyond anecdotal evidence by analyzing population data within electoral district lines and comparing those numbers to voter registration information to help inform the upcoming City and State redistricting process. Data collection, research and analysis are the basis of our community organizing, legislative and legal advocacy efforts.

This series of briefings is called "Opening the Golden Door" in references to the poem *New Colossus* by Emma Lazarus found on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. The *Golden Door* in the poem is the opportunity waiting for immigrants in New York; those opportunities currently do not exist for the SAA community in the electoral process. Taking Our Seat aims to open the *Golden Door*.



Summary

Our first briefing begins with a simple question, our neighborhoods are divided among many electoral districts at all levels of government, but does that make a difference?

To find an answer, we began by analyzing the 28th City Council district. Our analysis was timely since a special election was called for November 2, 2010 to fill the vacancy created by the death of Councilmember Thomas White. It was understood within the community that the announcement of the special election was going to give a SAA community member an opportunity to hold elected office since the district covered SAA neighborhoods. Moreover, a special election would be non-partisan and without an incumbent, giving the maximum opportunity for anyone seeking office.

The analysis shows that 4225 SAA registered voters were arbitrarily left out of the voting process. These marginalized voters would have impacted the outcome of the election by potentially electing the first SAA legislator in the history of New York City.

To address this lack of representation, Taking Our Seat is launching a grassroots campaign: '**Brown Districts. Now.**' The campaign will mobilize the SAA community to impact the state and city redistricting process and redraw electoral boundary lines at the City, State and Federal level to keep SAA neighborhoods intact. Then, SAA voters will have more SAA choices at the ballot and SAA candidates will have a level playing field in seeking elected office.

Future reports will examine other neighborhoods in New York City where census information indicates SAA are clustered.

Detailed Findings:

The current boundary lines of the 28th Council district in Queens divide the SAA community among four different council districts: the 28th, 29th, 30th and 32nd.

Current district lines not only split the community, they split the community (primarily down Lefferts Boulevard and 101st Avenue) in a manner to include only 2 of the highest SAA density census tracts together. There are 3 other neighboring highest density census tracts (1000 or more SAA 18 and older) that are split with Council District 32 and 1 highest density census tract which is completely outside of the 28th district and located completely in the 32nd district. See map below.

Five other high density census tracts (750 or more) that are contiguous to those census tracts that border the 28th Council district are left out of the Council district.



Nearly 4225 SAA potential voters were left out of the November 2, 2010 special election due to the drawing of district lines that divided the predominantly SAA neighborhood.

When Thomas White last won reelection in 2009, his primary election margin of victory was four votes with a total of 6039 votes cast for 6 candidates. **In a climate of racially polarized voting that is the fact on the ground in local elections in New York, 4225 potential SAA voters would have had a significant impact on this election.**

Methodology:

Using the most recent available data from the 2008 American Community Service survey, we identified 30 census tracts throughout New York City with the highest levels of density of SAA 18 years and older. We used the common definition of SAA as Americans who can trace their ancestry back to South Asia or to a South Asian diaspora to the Caribbean or Africa. Countries include Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Trinidad/Tobago Guyana and Surinam.

We then identified 6 of these highest concentration SAA census tracts in New York City as being clustered in Southern Queens in the neighborhoods of Richmond Hill and Ozone Park; within or bordering the 28th Council district. We then identified five other high density SAA census tracts that border these six highest concentration census tracts, but are located outside of the 28th Council district. This clustering of highest and high density census tracts indicates the existence of a common neighborhood.

We then identified the election districts within the targeted census tracts. We analyzed voter registration information to determine the total number of SAA registered voters (Republican and Democrat) in those census tracts that were left out of the 28th Council district to determine how many more possible SAA voters would have been potential voters in the 28th district's special election.

Data Reference:

Census tracts analyzed:

- 1) Highest Density – 0838.00, 0840.00, 0106.00 and 0108.00
- 2) High Density – 0110.00, 0094.00, 0096.00, 0098.00, 0100.00, 0104.00, 0118.00, 0120.00 and 0122.00.

Voter registration reviewed in the following election districts:

23/021, 25/073, 25/074, 31/071, 31/076, 31/077, 31/083, 31/084, 31/086, 38/001, 38/002, 38/003, 38/004, 38/005, 38/006, 38/007, 38/008 and 38/018.



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