

ELECTION CENTRAL



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Voting Rights for Asian American and Pacific Islander Communities

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) is the fastest growing demographic in the country. Not only that, AAPI have also been the fastest growing group of eligible voters for the past two decades.

Historically, AAPI individuals have been considered “forever foreigners,” a perception that leads to AAPI communities being overlooked and excluded in American political discussions. Due to the perception of AAPI communities, neither political parties have particularly campaigned towards the group, leading to lack of resources and assistance to AAPI voters during the elections.

However, over the years, with more AAPIs being naturalized and young AAPI folks reaching the age of 18, the AAPI community is undeniably reshaping America through their participation in the political scenes.

One of the biggest AAPI diaspora in the country is right above the City of Richmond, in Fairfax County, Prince William County and Loudoun County, being one of the most powerful voting blocs in the state.

Let’s take a look at how the AAPI community has advocated for accessible voting in recent years.

Asian American Advancing Justice (AAAJ) is a non-profit organization advocating for voting rights through education and public policy.

One of the biggest barriers AAPI individuals face at the polls is the language barrier, according to AAJ. 3 out of 4 AAPI speak another language besides English at home. A third of the AAPI population is Limited English Proficient, meaning language assistance is very important for an already complex and intimidating voting process.

When the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed, the ballot became more accessible to AAPIs in the country, more specifically, the way Section 203 functioned.

Section 203 requires localities to provide language assistance to large language minorities and limited-English proficient citizens. This means that information that was provided in English, also must be provided in languages that serve the language minorities in the locality.

Section 203 was not enacted until 10 years later in 1975 and is considered the most critical section to ensure that AAPIs are able to cast their ballot without language discrimination. Since the implementation, Section 203 has increased AAPI voter registration between 1996 and 2004 at roughly 58.7 percent.

However, Section 203 has not quite lived up to its full potential due to lack of bilingual poll workers in areas where poll workers often only speak English. Many poll workers also might not understand the procedures of providing language assistance to a voter in need of it.

So what should voters who need language assistance do at the polling place?

1. Section 208 allows voters to bring in someone of their choice to provide any assistance, which includes translation.

Call [1-888-API-Vote](tel:1-888-API-Vote) and ask someone for in-language help on Election Day

The best practices for election offices, including our office, is:

1. Customize language assistance for the community
2. Have in-house language expertise available
3. Integrate language accessibility to all operations and elections
4. Recruiting bilingual poll workers

While language barrier is not the only hurdle that AAPIs face, it is certainly the biggest one. By providing better language assistance, we can better demonstrate the functions of democracy and election officials' commitment to serve their communities.