AAPI Voters Emerge As Political Force
in LA County and Battleground States

During Post-Election Debrief, Community Leaders Say Voter Engagement is Key To Increasing Turnout; Call for Better Data on AAPI Voting

LOS ANGELES–Here in Los Angeles County and across the country in key battleground states, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) voters are emerging as a political force with the power to sway local and national elections, according to community leaders who took part in a virtual, post-election debrief on Tuesday to look at preliminary voter turnout data and trends from the recent midterm election.

"In Los Angeles and elsewhere in the county and in the country, we know that the stakes are high and that we can make a difference when we turn out and where we turn out," said Candice Cho, Managing Director of Policy and Counsel for AAPI Equity Alliance (AAPI Equity), which hosted the debrief.

During the online event, Christine Chen, Executive Director of Asian Pacific Islander American Vote (APIAVote), shared preliminary voter turnout data from Georgia, where AAPIs increased their early voter turnout by 20.4% in 2022 compared to 2018. She credited intensive voter engagement efforts – from translating mail to door-knocking to phone calls to text messaging – for the increase.

All that work pays off, Chen said, because increasing voter registration, education and turnout "ultimately helps you be able to advocate on the various issues that are important to the AAPI community."

Participating community leaders agreed there are challenges when it comes to reaching AAPI voters, including the many different languages and ethnicities represented within the diverse AAPI community. "AAPIs are not a monolith," said Manjusha Kulkarni, Executive Director of AAPI Equity, as she shared concerns about candidates weaponizing ethnic and cultural differences.

Nowhere was that tactic more evident, Kulkarni said, than in the race for Orange County's Congressional District 45, a newly redrawn district where 35% of registered voters are AAPI.

The race, which pitted two AAPI candidates against each other, was recently won by Republican Michelle Steel over Democrat challenger Jay Chen. Kulkarni said Steel's campaign distributed misleading flyers that targeted Vietnamese voters' fears around China and communism.

"It is a tactic that was used in the past for one of her campaigns, as well," said Nancy Yap, Executive Director of Center for Asian Americans United for Self-Empowerment (CAUSE), adding that such flyers "continue to divide us as an Asian American community. It really doesn't allow us to do what I think is necessary when we're looking at over 35%. If we are able to build community…we could build towards having a very meaningful voice, a very loud voice at over 35% (of registered voters) in this district."

To avoid division along ethnic lines within the larger AAPI umbrella, participants in the debrief said community leaders must encourage and foster voter engagement. Voters need to know, "If you get a campaign flyer that you don't agree with, you are welcome to call the campaign office and let them know," Yap said. To help people get involved and stay active in elections and civic life, CAUSE offers voter resources and a public comment toolkit.

In addition to voter engagement, AAPI Equity representatives cited the need for improved voter and election data – including disaggregated information about specific AAPI ethnic groups – to provide a more accurate count of AAPI participation.

Currently the California Secretary of State identifies data from select ethnic groups based on surnames only, and during the debrief event, community leaders said this arbitrary system could belie an individual's actual ethnicity for numerous reasons, including blended families, shared linguistic characteristics, marriages and more.

Godfrey Plata, a civic engagement consultant for AAPI Equity, said Californians should be asking the Secretary of State why this flawed methodology is in use. "I'm Filipino but my last name is Plata," he said. "I get things in Spanish, Tagalog and English, so I don't really know which way my name is being estimated."

Despite the challenges, organizing, educating and engaging AAPI voters is showing promise to sway key elections, Kulkarni said. In Los Angeles County, AAPI voters helped Measure A pass overwhelmingly, giving the Board of Supervisors increased oversight of the Sheriff.

Vinny Eng, the sibling of Jazmyne Ha Eng who was killed by a Sheriff's Deputy in 2012, is a volunteer for the Check the Sheriff coalition. He said the passage of Measure A showed "the power of AAPIs, in growing solidarity with Black and Latino communities, to hold law enforcement accountable."

"When we show up to protect community members and to hold law enforcement accountable for sheriff and police violence, we are preventing violence as low-income API individuals who might

be subject to evictions and who might be subject to law enforcement entanglements that might jeopardize (us) and put (us) into deportation proceedings," Eng said.

Prior to the midterm election, AAPI Equity Alliance released a voter guide on 13 ballot initiatives at the state, county, and city levels, and on how the initiatives would impact APIs. The guide was translated into 14 AAPI languages, advertised in six ethnic newspapers, and texted to nearly 40,000 voters in LA County the week before election day.

"In LA County, we have 5.6 million registered voters, and over 639,000 identify in some way with the Asian or Pacific Islander community," Cho said. "That's over 11% of registered voters in the county. That is the margin of victory."

AAPI Equity Alliance (AAPI Equity) is a coalition of over 40 community based organizations serving the diverse needs of the 1.5 million Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Los Angeles County and beyond. It is dedicated to improving the lives of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders through civic engagement, capacity building, and policy advocacy.