



## Asian Americans for Equality

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My name is Christopher Kui and I am the Executive Director of Asian Americans For Equality, a citywide organization with social services, affordable housing development, homeownership lending, and small business development programs targeting a main client base of NYC's Asian and Asian American residents. Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Manhattan's redistricting hearings.

Today, Asian and Asian American residents constitute 13% of the City's population, numbering over 1 million. In our own study published last year called "Distinct Places, Shared Opportunity", AAFE found that of the over 1 million Asian residents in the City, almost 75% live in 20 community board districts that have over 12% Asian pluralities. In 9 of these districts, Asians make up more than 25% of the population.

Yet, according to a study by the Pew Research Center, while Asians are the fastest growing segment, they are still the least represented among all minorities in City Council. While a population of this size can conceivably be represented by five or six Asian American council members, today we still only have two Asian Americans City Council representatives, Margaret Chin in Lower Manhattan and Peter Koo in Flushing, Queens.

But even this was only possible because twenty years ago, the Redistricting Commission met and heard testimonies from all stakeholders, and with tremendous foresight created three Districts (1, 2, and 3), so that major pluralities were able to achieve political representation without impinging on each other. This allowed three strong women – a Chinese American, a staunch advocate of the LGBT community, and a Puerto Rican who is also in her own right a champion of the LGBT community – to represent the core constituents and major pluralities of those districts.

This decision was not done with the purpose of electing a specific individual. On the contrary, the districts were drawn so that the infrastructure was in place to allow for multiple candidates drawn from major pluralities to field viable choices for local voters. Nor are the current lines designed to keep a specific official in office, considering each election after the redistricting 20 years ago, for instance, featured multiple candidates in District 1 of Asian American descent. The boundaries are doing what it was designed to do – to allow for real electoral choice of more than one candidate from core pluralities.

As a result, history was made, and barriers were broken. For the first time in 160 years, Chinatown, the original Asian American neighborhood in New York City, was able to elect a council member of Chinese descent to represent itself.

At that time and still now, arguments of combining and lumping Asians and Latinos into one single district persists, because this will ensure at least one minority, Asian or Latino of being elected. The premise of this argument is flawed in several respects. Firstly, this arbitrarily forces disenfranchised minority groups into electoral “beggar thy neighbor” situations where it creates a false choice of either or, when the populations are still large enough to create opportunities for both Asians and Latinos. No redistricting should be done at the expense of other groups, but achieved in an informed manner where Asians can have elected representation while protecting the political will and aspirations of other minority groups in the borough. Haphazardly lumping Asians with other large minority plurality districts will only foster division and pit underrepresented groups against each other.

Secondly, the one district argument is premised on the assumption of declining population, particularly a percentage decline in Asians in the core Chinatown area. But every local Asian American social service and tenant organizing group, regardless of where one stands on district lines, can attest to the fact that population loss is not what is being experienced in the grassroots. The gentrification and dislocation of low income households did not simply make people disappear. In tenement after tenement, we find that households are doubling and tripling up in apartments, and staying under the radar to avoid eviction. Simply accepting population loss when it may not be clearly evident condemns thousands into underrepresentation, most especially if an entire district is lumped together with another based on that flawed assumption.

We are in support of keeping current District 1, 2 & 3 more or less intact during this districting process – any modification should be done to strengthen both Asian and Latino districts. While we are open to minor modification around the edges, we feel that the current configuration allows for each major group to keep the integrity of their neighborhoods without pitting the aspirations of the electoral process against each other. The current districts respect the Voting Rights Act, and ensure that minority groups are not forced into a zero sum game where having one representative comes at the expense of the other. This would be a huge step backwards if the Asian and Latino residents of Lower Manhattan can only pick one candidate to represent them.

It is said that the low income Asian and Latino residents in Lower Manhattan share common struggles. This is indeed true. But it is better that there are two voices in our City Council fighting for those interests and needs, than just one lone voice from the neighborhoods. As we look at the track record of Margaret Chin and Rosie Mendez, their strong collaboration in the City Council, on issues of affordable housing, senior citizens, schools, public housing, immigration and public health, to name a few, we can see the wisdom in having multiple strong voices for our residents.

Let us protect the hard earned gains that our Lower Manhattan community have achieved in these past 20 years, and let us keep these districts intact so that we may continue to build upon our successes to tackle the issues our residents continue to face.

Thank you for your time and consideration.