

## TAKING OUR SEAT

The South Asian Voice in Redistricting

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**New York State Senate Majority Conference  
Senate Legislative Task Force on  
Demographic Research and Reapportionment**

**Tuesday, December 14, 2010**

**Testimony of  
John P. Albert  
Taking Our Seat**

Good afternoon, my name is John Albert and I am with Taking Our Seat a Queens based non-partisan, not for profit organization founded to empower South Asian-Americans (SAA) in the electoral process by impacting the redistricting process. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to testify before you today.

My testimony covers your focus on fair representation for minority groups.

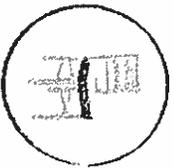
**Background on Taking Our Seat**

For Taking Our Seat, a SAA is anyone who can trace their ancestry back to the Subcontinent of 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 among others.

Taking Our Seat was formed because our 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 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-



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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 redistricting process. Data collection, research and analysis are the basis of our community organizing, legislative and legal advocacy efforts.

### **Analysis of South Asian Demographics**

Our analysis of 2008 American Community Survey data identifies thirty census tracts across Queens where SAA are found in the highest concentrations. From that point, Taking Our Seat identifies clusters of these census tracts and other highly SAA dense census tracts to identify naturally occurring neighborhoods of SAA. Our goal in the redistricting process is to keep SAA who live in these neighborhoods together in their respective districts.

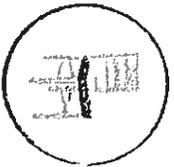
The goal is not to create affiliations and connections where they do not exist, but rather, to keep our community together in those neighborhoods where they have naturally settled so SAA can gain a voice in the electoral process. From our analysis, these 30 census tracts can be grouped within the following Queens neighborhoods:

Astoria, Bellerose, Briarwood, Corona, Elmhurst, Floral Park, Flushing, Forest Hills, Hillcrest, Jackson Heights, Jamaica, Queens Village, Richmond Hill, South Ozone Park, Woodhaven and Woodside.

Obviously for drawing what we label 'brown districts' some of these neighborhoods can be grouped together to get SAA representation at all levels of government: City Council, State Assembly, State Senate and Congress.

### **Drawing 'Brown' Districts**

Using the above analysis, Taking Our Seat has published a series of briefings on district lines and the most recent briefing covered the topic of the ease in redrawing district lines to empower SAA. We call these districts 'brown districts,' where naturally occurring SAA neighborhoods are grouped together within a



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district's boundaries. A 'brown district' need not have a minimum percentage of SAA or SAA voters.

Taking Our Seat discovered that the boundary lines of a 'brown district' can be drawn without stretching the imagination or reorienting the axis of political power in Queens. Taking Our Seat examined the 31<sup>st</sup> Assembly district as an example, but we can surmise that the same can be done in many parts of Queens where small adjustments in district lines will capture large pockets of SAA thereby creating multiple 'brown districts' at all levels of government.

Why did we focus on the 31<sup>st</sup> Assembly district? We found that 6 of the highest density SAA census tracts were near or within Richmond Hill and South Ozone Park, indicating a vibrant SAA community. Taking Our Seat's examination of census information revealed that while two of the highest density SAA census tracts in New York City are either wholly or predominantly within the 31<sup>st</sup> district, four other highest density census tracts in New York City are located just blocks from the boundaries of the 31<sup>st</sup> district or in the case of one of those census tracts (0106.00), a single city block is within the 31<sup>st</sup> district. More alarmingly, those four census tracts are split among four other Assembly districts (the 25<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 32<sup>nd</sup> and 38<sup>th</sup> districts) further diluting the SAA voter strength.

In drawing a 'brown district,' Taking Our Seat added those 4 census tracts to the 31<sup>st</sup> District and then, to smooth the contours of the new 'brown district,' added adjacent high-SAA-density election districts; all the while keeping within certain natural boundaries like the Van Wyck Expressway in the East and Atlantic Avenue in the North. (See attached Map, full report found on-line at: [http://www.takingourseat.org/tl\\_files/resources/GoldenDoorPart2Final.pdf](http://www.takingourseat.org/tl_files/resources/GoldenDoorPart2Final.pdf))

This new 'brown' area comprises a mere 22 election districts but would add 5963 registered Democratic and Republican SAA voters to the 31<sup>st</sup> District. Adding these 22 election districts would force anyone who seeks office in the 31<sup>st</sup> Assembly district to more closely address the needs of the SAA community in every corner of the district. This new boundary would also empower SAA voters to demand to have their concerns heard.

Taking Our Seat found that it is not necessary to add odd-contoured, unwieldy boundary lines to make a current Assembly district inclusive of larger numbers of SAA. In the case of the 31<sup>st</sup> Assembly District a viable 'brown district' can be drawn by adding only 22 new election districts which would move the district boundary a mere 6 city blocks to the north.



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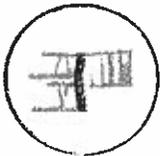
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Taking Our Seat recommends that any adjustment to the 31<sup>st</sup> district through redistricting include at a minimum this area in its entirety.

### Recommendations

Taking Our Seat requests that the Legislative Task Force on Demographic Research and Reapportionment support the empowerment of the SAA community and draw legislative lines to allow our community a true voice in the electoral process.

Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer your questions.



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## OPENING THE GOLDEN DOOR PART 2:

