

Split 7 Ways, Immigrant Neighborhood Seeks to Unify Its Political Power

As New York begins to draw new legislative districts, partisan fights may overshadow the electoral harm the process can do to some groups.



By Nicholas Fandos

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When Ejaz Nabie saw his congregation in Queens become ensnared in one of New York's worst Covid-19 outbreaks last winter, he did what any desperate community leader would do: He turned to his representative in state government for help.

For Mr. Nabie, the congregation's pastor, that meant trying seven of them.

The extraordinary outreach was not merely zealous, but a reflection of the surreal political geography of his Richmond Hill neighborhood and adjoining South Ozone Park. The south Queens area, whose residents are heavily Indo-Caribbean and Punjabi, is a prime example of the collateral damage caused by the way New York has historically drawn legislative boundaries.

Seven State Assembly districts slice through the few square miles around Mr. Nabie's Faith Assembly church — dividing blocks, congregations, even families. At several intersections, three out of four corners are split among different assembly members, leaving residents with no clear leader to turn to in state government.

"We should have one person who we could hold accountable," said Mr. Nabie, 61, recalling his struggle to secure masks and vaccine doses for his fellow immigrants from Guyana, Trinidad and elsewhere in the Caribbean. "Instead, I'm trying to hold seven persons accountable who are all evading me."

As New York begins the once-a-decade task of reshaping its congressional districts, the focus has mostly been on the kind of seismic clashes between Democrats and Republicans that help determine majorities in Washington and Albany.

But as Mr. Nabie's experience illustrates, redistricting also involves something more fundamental: the battle for representation, and how it can pit communities against one another and, sometimes, even their elected leaders' interests.



An intersection at 114th Street and Liberty Avenue in Queens. Three of four corners fall in different State Assembly districts. James Estrin/The New York Times

Asian American activists in other parts of the city are also trying to capitalize on their surge in population over the past decade to ensure that cohesive legislative districts replace splintered ones in Elmhurst, Queens, and in Sunset Park and Bensonhurst in Brooklyn.

Further afield, cities like Ithaca and Rochester that lean Democratic but were split by Republicans a decade ago for overtly partisan reasons are pushing for more coherent district lines.

But the situation in Richmond Hill may illustrate most clearly just how hard it can be to break decades of political inertia, particularly when those drawing the final lines could have an interest in maintaining the status quo.

“For any community to really come to its rightful place in America, you need folks from that community that rise up take on a leadership position and have a viable way to elected office,” said John Albert, a well-connected lobbyist and the founder of Taking Our Seat, a group that has helped organize a campaign to unite the area’s fractured legislative districts.

There is no easy answer for why exactly the cracks formed in Richmond Hill or why have persisted. There does not appear to have been an overt effort to keep South Asians out of power or to target the area. Instead, political scientists point to a mix of inertia, self-interest on the part of Democratic incumbents and legal precedents that tend to punish newcomers.

Roman B. Hedges, who helped draw the Assembly maps for three decades as a member of a legislative task force, defended the current boundaries as a best attempt at balancing competing political interests.

Another consideration, he said, involved the complex legal requirements created by the Voting Rights Act and the courts for protecting the ability of African Americans, Latinos and Asians to elect candidates of their choice and draw districts that are all of roughly equal size.

In an area as diverse as Queens, that means mapmakers must essentially preserve existing districts dominated by one of those groups before addressing what to do about newer or less homogeneous ones like Richmond Hill.

Part of the problem may be that the South Asian community’s size in the area is hard to measure. Although people of Indo-Caribbeans heritage trace their lineage to India, large numbers choose not to identify as “Asian” on census forms, selecting “other” instead. As a result, at least on paper, there is not the kind of dominant ethnic group that mapmakers must heed.

“Maybe it is not so much a plot to prevent as a hope to create elsewhere for other purposes,” Mr. Hedges said. “If you are in the community that is not the focus, maybe it feels like, ‘I was not paid attention to and I now am going to make my voice known.’”

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But there may be more politically oriented reasons.

Incumbents can pad their districts by slicing off as “filler” small parts of immigrant communities, which redistricting experts said are less likely to vote in primaries. That way, they can maintain the number of constituents required by law without diluting their own base of support.

Once that community matures and becomes more politically engaged, a lawmaker may have little incentive to give up those votes, preferring to keep the district lines intact.

“What I do know is what the community looks like now and what it’s looked like for a few decades now,” said Aminta Kilawan-Narine, the founder of the South Queens Women’s March, an advocacy group. “These lines are not reflective of that history, they are not reflective of the people who live here.”



John Albert is pushing to unite the Richmond Hill, Queens, area in one legislative district. For an immigrant group to truly establish itself in America, he said, its members need “a viable way to elected office.” James Estrin/The New York Times

South Ozone Park and Richmond Hill, which run north from John F. Kennedy Airport, through streets lined with Queen Anne-style homes and elevated subway lines, are familiar emblems of modern New York City. Traditional white ethnic enclaves have been reformulated by Latino and, later, South Asian immigrants, with stores selling saris and roti replacing Italian bakeries and German beer halls.

But although the influx of newcomers has coalesced and become a dominant force culturally, political power has lagged. That is largely because of an incoherent patchwork of City Council, State Senate and, above all, Assembly districts.

Divided among so many representatives, many in the community have grudgingly concluded that they are the priority of no one.

Take brick-and-mortar district offices, the linchpins of government services and administration that provide a point of contact for constituents, take feedback to Albany and act as clearing houses for state benefit and relief programs. Of the seven Assembly members who represent parts of the area, only one, David I. Weprin, has opened a district office.

“We felt as if we were not a part of the democratic process, we felt neglected, we felt voiceless,” said Taj Rajkumar, a Guyanese-American professor who ran unsuccessfully for an Assembly seat in 2000 on a platform that included a call for more immigrant services, a community center for older residents, increased job training and a health clinic.

“All of our struggles and all of our cries were falling on deaf ears,” Mr. Rajkumar said. “That was the sentiment of the community then and now.”

Those who favor redrawing district lines to unify a community’s voice have looked optimistically to New York’s new independent, bipartisan redistricting commission, which is supposed to remove lawmakers from the mapmaking process.

When the panel released its first draft maps in September, Democratic members proposed combining most of Richmond Hill and South Ozone Park in one Assembly district.

But it may not be that simple. The commission’s Republican members did not agree to the changes, and the panel appears headed for the kind of partisan gridlock that could doom its proposals. If that happens, the process would revert to the State Legislature, which may be less receptive to the community’s appeals.

The best hope for proponents of redrawing Richmond Hill’s district lines could be that the commission’s maps give the Legislature a new starting point, effectively shaming lawmakers.

Mr. Weprin acknowledged that his district made little sense geographically, with a major highway cutting Richmond Hill off from the heart of the district. He said he had done his best to represent an “area I didn’t know anything about” before becoming its assemblyman, and that he understood the community’s interest in having a single representative.

“I’m not going to actively lobby one way or another,” he said. “I could live with whatever the outcome is, but if I was going to lose that area, I’d want to see what they would offer me in terms of making up the population.”

Assemblywoman Jenifer Rajkumar, whose Woodhaven-based district collides with Mr. Weprin’s in Richmond Hill, has more fully positioned herself behind the drive to draw a single seat based there. In 2020, she became the first South Asian woman ever elected to state office in New York.

“Right now, the South Asian community is hungry and determined to be heard,” she said. “Things are changing. We are taking our seat at this table of power both in our state and nationally.”

In the pandemic’s darkest days, Mr. Nabie eventually succeeded in securing help for his parishioners: Mr. Weprin delivered personal protective equipment; city officials turned the church into an impromptu vaccination site.

Some damage, though, may take longer to repair.

“It has created a sense of apathy and disillusionment with the system,” he said. “People feel, ‘I don’t care anymore, they are not going to listen to me, they are not going to do anything for me.’ That’s a terrible place to be.”

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