

Asian American Voters Rallied for Democrats in 2020. Will They Again?

The party confronts a mood of frustration among the rising electoral force that helped vault it to power. The campaign in Georgia will test that bond.



By Alexander Burns

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JOHNS CREEK, Ga. — At a brightly lit restaurant in suburban Atlanta, nestled in a tidy neighborhood of office buildings and private drives, State Senator Michelle Au brought up the mass shooting that lingers as a singular trauma in the local Asian American community.

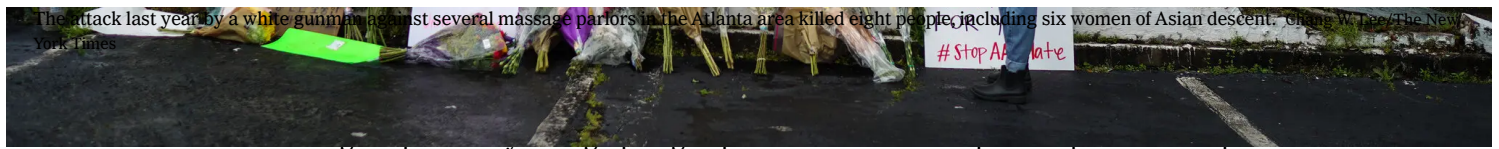
Addressing a predominantly Chinese American group of about 40 people, Dr. Au, a practicing anesthesiologist, delicately alluded to “the shootings that took place in metro Atlanta on March 16 of 2021” as she launched into a plea for new gun-control laws that Georgia Republicans oppose. She did not need to remind her audience of the details of the deadly attack carried out last year by a white gunman against several massage parlors in the Atlanta area, killing eight people including six women of Asian descent.

“Republicans, while they talk a big game about public safety, they don’t seem to be as interested in actually proposing concrete solutions to deal with it,” Dr. Au told the crowd.

The issue of gun safety is one of several that Democrats like Dr. Au are putting at the center of their argument to Asian American voters ahead of the November elections, as they work to win over the array of communities that make up America’s fastest-growing demographic group.

Dr. Au’s district — a well-paved tangle of shopping centers and office complexes where law firms list their names in Korean and Indian grocers compete for space with bubble tea chains — is a case study in the social and political complexity of an electoral force rising in swing states: the diverse collection of communities jammed into the census label “Asian American.”





in race baiting amid a wave of hate crimes against Asian Americans.

Yet just two years later, Democratic candidates in states like Georgia are confronting a mood of frustration and fear among Asian American voters that threatens to weaken the political coalition that turned Georgia blue for the first time this century.

The anxious mood, voters and local leaders say, comes from persistent alarm about public safety and a feeling of being overlooked by national political leaders despite growing electoral clout.

They warn that too many Democrats are still treating Asian Americans as a constituency of secondary importance, while Republicans continue pushing an agenda that is broadly unfriendly to Asian American communities even as the G.O.P. makes sporadic overtures on issues like education and crime.

The ongoing scourge of racist harassment and violence, stirred during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic and stoked by Mr. Trump's rhetoric, has kept the electorate on edge and heightened concerns about lax gun laws and crime. At Dr. Au's event in Johns Creek, one speaker brought up attacks against Asian Americans on the New York City subway as part of a national atmosphere of menace.



Narender G. Reddy, Dr. Au's opponent in her state legislative election this year, is an Indian American real estate agent and longtime Republican donor. Lynsey Weatherspoon for The New York Times

Several state elections in Georgia will represent a revealing test of Democrats' bond with the Asian American electorate. The party has nominated a number of Asian Americans for important races, including Bee Nguyen, a Vietnamese American state legislator running for secretary of state against the Republican incumbent, Brad Raffensperger, and Nabilah Islam, a Bangladeshi American seeking a State Senate seat in the Atlanta suburbs.

Republicans have put forward a handful of Asian American candidates, too: Dr. Au's opponent in her state legislative election this year, Narender G. Reddy, is an Indian American real estate agent and longtime Republican donor who has pressed Gov. Brian Kemp and other Republicans to do more to woo South Asian voters. There are signs this year that Mr. Kemp is making a meaningful effort.

Democrats are counting on voters in communities like Johns Creek, an affluent enclave some 25 miles from downtown Atlanta, to help Stacey Abrams defeat Mr. Kemp and re-elect Senator Raphael Warnock. About a quarter of residents in the area identify as Asian American.

In an interview, Dr. Au, 44, said Democrats needed to connect with Asian American voters on policy issues like gun safety and abortion rights rather than assuming Asian Americans would continue to vote Democratic chiefly out of distaste for Republicans. Economic frustrations over inflation and gas prices were part of the Asian American experience, too, she said.

The community, Dr. Au said, wants “to have a voice and have power and be listened to.”

“It’s not a safe thing to say that all voters of color, uniformly, will vote for Democrats because they have a more inclusive platform,” she said. “And I think it’s not safe to say that all Asian voters will vote for Democrats, because of that same reason.”



Johns Creek, an affluent enclave some 25 miles from downtown Atlanta, could be a pivotal community for the Democratic Party in November. About a quarter of the residents in the area identify as ethnically Asian. Nicole Craine for The New York Times

Asian American voters have steadily shifted in the direction of Democrats since the turn of the century, as a younger and more liberal generation has come of age politically, while conservative-leaning older voters have turned away from the Republican Party’s increasingly hard-line views on race and national identity.

Tracy Xu, a voter at Dr. Au’s event, said she planned to vote for Democrats in November because she was upset about gun crime and the rollback of abortion rights. The law enacted by Georgia Republicans to ban most abortions, Ms. Xu said, reminded her of the repressive reproductive policies in China, where she lived for the first half of her life.

But Ms. Xu, 51, who works in the financial industry, said she still considered herself a political independent and did not see either party as having a dominant advantage with voters like her.

“Just like the country’s split, our community is very split,” Ms. Xu said.



Tracy Xu, a voter at Dr. Au's event, said she planned to vote for Democrats this year because she was upset about gun crime and the rollback of abortion rights. Nicole Craine for The New York Times

A Fragile Alliance

The relationship between Democrats and the Asian American community was tested almost immediately after the 2020 election, in tense exchanges between Mr. Biden and Asian American lawmakers who questioned whether the incoming president understood the role their community had played in his victory.

Asian American voters made up about 4 percent of the national electorate in 2020, with studies showing they voted for Mr. Biden over Mr. Trump by a margin of roughly two to one. That was enough to secure victory for Democrats in a narrowly split state like Georgia.

Still, Republicans maintained support in more right-leaning parts of the community, particularly among older and more religious voters; in Southern California, Vietnamese American voters helped elect to Congress two Korean American Republican women who branded the Democratic Party as a vehicle for socialism.

Mr. Biden struggled at the outset to forge a tighter bond with Asian American political leaders, clashing with lawmakers over the near-absence of Asian Americans from early appointments to his administration. Private frustrations exploded into a damaging public spectacle when Senator Tammy Duckworth of Illinois, a Democrat of Thai ancestry, threatened a blockade of Mr. Biden's nominees until the administration pledged to put more Asian Americans in important positions.

Representative Judy Chu of California, the head of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, said lawmakers had been "severely disappointed" during the transition but that the president had given convincing assurances he recognized the influence of the Asian American vote.

After the spa shooting, Mr. Biden traveled to Georgia to meet with Asian American leaders. He was joined by Vice President Kamala Harris, herself the daughter of an Indian American immigrant. Weeks later, Mr. Biden returned for a rally marking his 100th day in office.



Asian businesses along Buford Highway in Doraville, Ga. Nicole Craine for The New York Times

Introducing him on that April day was Long Tran, a cafe owner in Dunwoody who said he spoke backstage with Mr. Biden about the shooting and the impact of “anti-Chinese rhetoric.” The president, Mr. Tran said, stressed that he and Ms. Harris “haven’t forgotten that Asian hate is still rising in the country and it’s something that needs to be addressed.”

Yet in the 2021 off-year elections, Republicans recovered some ground with Asian American voters in New York City and Virginia, offering a hard-edged message about crime and opposition to liberal education policies that would have reformed or abolished certain kinds of selective public-school programs that are popular with Asian families but that many Democrats regard as exclusionary of Black and Hispanic students.

Asian American voters motivated by similar concerns helped upend local politics in San Francisco, ejecting members of a left-wing school board and a progressive district attorney in recall elections that showed powerful currents of discontent within the overwhelmingly Democratic city.

This summer, focus groups conducted by national Democratic pollsters found Asian American voters expressing dismay that Democrats often prioritize other constituencies defined by race or sexual orientation above Asian Americans, according to two people briefed on the studies.



Long Tran, a Democratic candidate for the state legislature in a district with a large community of Asian American voters, said many people he met were uneasy about left-wing ideas on police reform and concerned about support on the right for lax firearm laws. Nicole Craine for The New York Times

Still, the Asian American Voter Survey, a large-scale poll conducted annually, found in July that Asian Americans leaned toward supporting Democratic congressional candidates by a margin of 54 percent to 27 percent. Those voters trusted Democrats more than Republicans on issues including guns, the environment and race — but split evenly on which party they preferred to handle the economy.

Mr. Trump remained intensely unpopular with Asian American voters.

EunSook Lee, the head of the AAPI Civic Engagement Fund, a progressive nonprofit, said Democrats still had a window to solidify their political relationship with the Asian American electorate.

Of Asian American voters, she said, “They care about reproductive rights. They care about gun control. And on all those issues, the Republican Party isn’t budging.”

Divide and Conquer

In a real estate office in Duluth, Ga., minutes away from Johns Creek, Mr. Reddy — Dr. Au’s Republican opponent — gave a blunt assessment of his party’s efforts to court Asian Americans: “Still not there.”

Mr. Reddy’s office is all but wallpapered with photos of himself with Republican politicians like George W. Bush and Mitt Romney, an expression of his personal devotion to the G.O.P. But Mr. Reddy, 71, said most of his Indian American friends saw the Republican Party as “all white.”

“That’s the only popular perception,” he said. “And there is truth to it, actually.”

The party, he said, had been harmed by episodes like a rally at the end of the Georgia Senate runoffs when Senator David Perdue, a Republican incumbent, had mocked the pronunciation of Ms. Harris’s first name. National Democratic organizations, including the advocacy group Indian American Impact, mounted a fierce campaign targeting Asian American voters with information about Mr. Perdue’s insulting conduct.

The G.O.P.'s business-friendly economic agenda could resonate in the community, Mr. Reddy argued, but Republicans were still seen as "anti-immigrant" and overly tied to Mr. Trump. A supporter of Mr. Trump for years, Mr. Reddy said it had grown difficult to justify his behavior.

Republicans in Georgia have taken something of a divide-and-conquer approach to the Asian American vote. The governor appointed the first Asian American justice to Georgia's Supreme Court and Republicans have recruited a few Asian American candidates to run in state legislative seats.

At the same time, the Republican-dominated legislature has used gerrymandering to break up ethnically Asian communities and mute their influence at the polls. Dr. Au became a victim of that strategy last year when Republicans demolished her State Senate district, prompting her to run for a Democratic-leaning seat in the lower chamber instead.

Mr. Tran, the businessman who introduced Mr. Biden last year in Atlanta, is now a Democratic candidate for the state legislature in a district with a large community of Asian American voters. Mr. Tran, 46, said he often found voters expressing unease about left-wing ideas on police reform.

He said he had encountered pervasive concern about gun violence and Republican support for lax firearm laws.

"Everyone is scared to death about guns," Mr. Tran said. "I was eating dim sum and the waiters were saying, 'We can't stop looking at the door and wondering if the next person who comes in will have a gun.'"