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CIVIC PARTICIPATION

# Here's what you need to know

**Protecting Democracy: Ensuring Fair Representation  
in an Age of Gerrymandering and Voter Suppression**

**January 15, 2026**

## Our Panelists

# CIVIC PARTICIPATION

## Protecting Democracy: Ensuring Fair Representation in an Age of Gerrymandering and Voter Suppression



### **Ami Gandhi**

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### **Sarah Xiyi Chen**

Senior Supervising Attorney, Voting Rights, Texas Civil Rights Project (TCRP)



### **Leah Wong**

Voting Rights Director, Asian American Legal Defense & Education Fund (AALDEF)

## People Power Can Stop Structural Harm

- Grassroots pressure can override even intense federal or partisan pressure when messaging is clear and sustained.
- Large-scale public opposition reframes redistricting from a political tactic into a community legitimacy issue.
- **Victories are most likely when advocates focus on voter impact, not party advantage.**

## REDISTRICTING IS A VOTING RIGHTS ISSUE EVERYWHERE

- Threats to fair maps exist in both red and blue states, regardless of partisan control.
- Supermajority Democratic leadership does not automatically protect communities of color from vote dilution.
- Mid-cycle redistricting creates unique risks by confusing voters close to elections.
- **Redistricting decisions have long-term consequences that outlast election cycles.**

## Message Discipline Determines Success

- **Advocacy was most effective when coalitions resisted expanding the issue beyond a single, clear demand.**
- Simple, values-based messaging mobilized diverse constituencies quickly.
- Avoiding ideological or partisan framing helped broaden public buy-in.
- Clear messaging allowed people to engage immediately, without technical knowledge.

## Big Ideas

# Coalitions Matter More Than Individual Organizations

- **No single organization or leader can achieve large-scale redistricting victories alone.**
- Decentralized coalitions allow for geographic reach and local credibility.
- Emergency moments can temporarily overcome fragmentation and capacity limits.
- **Willingness to share credit and align strategies** strengthens collective power.

# The Fight Is Shifting to the State and Local Levels

- As federal protections weaken, **State Voting Rights Acts are becoming essential tools.**
- Local election bodies quietly make decisions that shape voter access and participation.
- Grassroots engagement must happen before harm becomes visible, not only in crisis moments.
- Redistricting reform increasingly depends on sustained civic participation, not litigation alone.

## Our Panelists' Insight

# Partisan Alignment Does Not Equal Protection

The Illinois discussion complicated the assumption that political alignment safeguards voting rights. Even in a supermajority Democratic state, the panelists highlighted how redistricting decisions **can still result in vote dilution and weakened representation for communities of color**. Historical and recent examples, particularly in **East St. Louis** and **parts of Chicago**, illustrated how **technically legal maps can produce long-term harm when equity is subordinated to political strategy**.

This reality underscores the **limits of relying on party leadership as a proxy for justice**. The panelists emphasized that redistricting outcomes must be evaluated through the lens of **community power and representation**, not partisan gain.

***"The system is not designed for transparency, which is exactly why everyday people have to show up."** – Leah Wong*

# Coalition Work as Strategic Infrastructure

The panelists emphasized that coalition-building should be understood as long-term infrastructure rather than a temporary tactic. Rather than requiring perfect alignment, **success depends on agreeing to a shared goal, maintaining message discipline, and accepting distributed leadership**. This approach allows advocates to reach different regions, demographics, and political contexts simultaneously. All three experts noted that crisis moments can temporarily overcome fragmentation, but only if coalitions are willing to share credit, adapt strategies, and resist internal competition. **Effective coalitions expand reach without diluting purpose**, making them essential for statewide and regional advocacy.

## Our Panelists' Insight

### Effective Grassroots Advocacy in Practice

Across Indiana, Texas, and other states, the panelists identified consistent patterns in successful advocacy efforts. Grassroots wins were driven by **people showing up**—testifying at hearing, signing petitions, submitting public comments, and visibly opposing harmful proposals. **In Texas**, for example, community turnout helped block documentary proof-of-citizenship requirements and remove some of the most restrictive provisions from broader voter suppression legislation.

Importantly, the panel stressed that **local-level advocacy** often yields the greatest impact. City councils, election boards, school districts, and county commissions make decisions that directly shape voter access, often with little public scrutiny. While communities fail to engage in these spaces, harmful rules can pass quietly. Sustained local presence, rather than episodic mobilization, is a critical factor in protecting voting rights.

***“State leaders standing up against the federal government happened because of people power.”- Ami Gandhi***

## Our Panelists' Insight

### Indiana's Grassroots Power Model

The Indiana experience demonstrates that even in deeply restrictive political environments, **coordinated grassroots action can meaningfully alter outcomes**. Panelists described how intense federal pressure, threats, and intimidation created a climate where advocates expected yet another loss. Instead, widespread constituent opposition reframed mid-cycle redistricting as a legitimacy crisis rather than a partisan maneuver.

What made this intervention effective was **not just volume, but credibility**. Diverse messengers from across the state, grounded in their local communities, reinforced the same core demand. This sustained pressure ultimately gave state leaders political cover to resist federal influence, showing that **people power can disrupt top-down efforts when it is organized, visible, and strategically focused**.

***“People would not be trying so hard to take your vote away if it didn’t matter.” – Sarah Chen***

### Building Power Beyond This Moment

The three panelists emphasized that today's voting rights threats stem from decades-long strategies, not isolated events, and warned against treating redistricting as a one-off fight. **Sustained engagement and long-term power-building** are essential, as litigation—while important—is slow and uncertain amid weakening federal protections. Moreover, State Voting Rights Acts, local policy work, and early civic education are increasingly critical tools. **Democratic power is built incrementally** through consistent participation, strong coalitions, and attention to structural levers of governance.

## Resources

# Voter Protection & Election Assistance

### **866-OUR-VOTE (866-687-8683)**

- National, non-partisan voter protection hotline
- Provides real-time help with voter registration & access, and election issues
- Language-access companion hotlines available for multiple languages

# Voting Rights & Access Advocacy Groups

### **Common Cause**

- National organization focused on fair maps and voting access

### **Chicago Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights**

- Leads voting rights litigation and advocacy across Illinois and the Midwest

### **ACLU of Indiana**

- Support litigation, coalition-building, and public education on voting rights

### **Texas Civil Rights Project**

- Engages in voting rights litigation and advocacy in Texas

### **Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF)**

- National organization promoting civic education and election reform advocacy

# Policy & Structural Reform Tools

### **State Voting Rights Acts (SVRAs)**

- State-level laws designed to strengthen protections where the federal Voting Rights Act has been weakened
- Address vote dilution, discriminatory election practices, and language access gaps