



STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY

CLOSING THE GAP: ADVANCING
LANGUAGE ACCESS IN CHICAGO'S
EVOLVING ELECTORAL LANDSCAPE

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ABOUT SAAPRI

The South Asian American Policy & Research Institute (SAAPRI) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization established in 2001. Through community-based research and partnerships, SAAPRI drives impactful policy changes at the local, regional, and national level. We are dedicated to empowering and advocating for the South Asian American community by advancing data equity and ensuring representation that truly reflects their diverse experiences.

SAAPRI's work has included research and policy initiatives on civic engagement, hate crimes, access to health care, economic development, and immigration. Projects are designed to create dialogue and better understanding, drawing from SAAPRI's expertise in community-based research and collaborations with partner organizations, academic institutions, and community members. SAAPRI advances public policy by proposing data-driven objectives based on community outreach. SAAPRI voices the community's concerns to public officials at the local, state, and national levels; works strategically in cross-racial coalitions; hosts public forums; and participates in speaking engagements to various audiences, including media and government.

DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC ACTION PROGRAM

The Democracy & Civic Action program builds on SAAPRI's decades of dedication to increase and elevate civic engagement in Illinois' South Asian American community. Nationwide, Chicago remains one of the largest South Asian American hubs. Despite this, community members on average are less civically engaged and less likely to vote.

This has led to an underrepresentation of the South Asian American community in policy and decision-making processes that directly impact their lives. Our program works to close this gap and dismantle systemic barriers through several key efforts, including protecting and expanding voting rights by ensuring equitable access to the ballot, conducting get-out-the-vote initiatives, promoting census participation & fair redistricting, and advancing targeted data collection and research.

Executive Summary

This report evaluates the provision of South Asian language assistance through bilingual poll workers in Chicago elections, with particular attention to the effects of the 2022 precinct consolidation and its implications for South Asian voters. Building on SAAPRI's 2024 report, *Strengthening Democracy: Addressing and Overcoming Language Inequity in Elections*, this analysis extends that work by integrating American Community Survey (ACS) 2019–2023 data, precinct and ward boundary shapefiles, and area-weighted estimation methods to generate refined estimates of the South Asian Voting Eligible Population (VEP) at both the ward and precinct levels. These estimates help determine where language assistance was provided, particularly during the 2024 general election, and identify opportunities for expanding coverage in future elections.

Legal and Demographic Context

Since 2012, Cook County has been federally required under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) to provide language assistance to Asian Indian voters with limited English proficiency (LEP). The City of Chicago has implemented this mandate by offering Hindi paper ballots, along with touchscreen and audio ballot access in Hindi, Gujarati, and Urdu. In addition, bilingual poll workers are available to provide oral language assistance at designated precinct polling places.

Although the federal mandate applies only to Asian Indian LEP voters, the City expanded its language offerings in response to community feedback, recognizing that Hindi, Gujarati, and Urdu also serve other South Asian populations, including many Pakistani voters who speak or understand Urdu or Hindi.

While the legal mandate extends to Asian Indians, Chicago's precedent of expanding assistance beyond the federal minimum highlights the need to understand the broader linguistic diversity of South Asian communities. Reflecting this reality, SAAPRI's analysis examines language access for all major South Asian groups in Chicago rather than focusing exclusively on Asian Indians.

Chicago's South Asian electorate is both linguistically diverse and geographically concentrated, with an estimated 27,000 eligible voters in 2025 and high LEP rates across several language groups (ACS, 2019–2023 Estimates). Multiple precincts in key wards have South Asian VEP levels exceeding 20%, underscoring the need for expanded language assistance.

Executive Summary

Key Findings

- 1. Precinct Reduction:** Following the 2020 Census and 2022 redistricting, Chicago precincts declined from 2,069 to 1,291, a net 38% reduction. While the share of precincts with South Asian language assistance rose marginally (1.74% in 2020 to 1.94% in 2024), consolidation diluted South Asian concentrations and reduced eligibility for assistance.
- 2. Coverage Limitations:** In the 2024 general election, only 36 of 1,291 precincts (2.79%) provided South Asian language support, clustered in Wards 39, 40, 48, and 50. Six of the ten wards with the highest South Asian VEP, including Ward 42 with 2,935 South Asian eligible voters, had no precinct-level coverage.
- 3. Insufficient Reach:** Of 27,056 South Asian American VEP citywide, only 5,381 (19.9%) had access to language assistance in 2024. Expansion to 41 additional precincts, identified through VEP and LEP analysis, would increase coverage to approximately 13,800 voters, or 51% of the South Asian American electorate.
- 4. Priority Precincts:** Two independent methods (ACS 2015 LEP data and ACS 2019–2023 5-Year Estimates) identified 14 precincts with urgent need for expanded coverage, including Precincts 31 and 22 in Ward 39 and Precincts 1 and 7 in Ward 42. These areas combine high South Asian American VEP counts with elevated LEP burdens.

Recommendations

Expand precinct-level coverage to 41 additional precincts

- Extend South Asian language assistance to the 41 identified precincts, which would increase coverage from 19.9% to more than 50% of the South Asian American Voting Eligible Population (VEP). If full expansion is not immediately feasible, priority should be given to the 14 high-need precincts identified through combined VEP and LEP analysis to maximize immediate impact.

Broaden linguistic scope beyond Section 203 minimums

- While federal requirements apply only to Asian Indian languages, Chicago's South Asian electorate includes sizable LEP populations of Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu, and Nepali speakers. Expanding consideration of these languages, particularly in election judge recruitment and targeted voter outreach, would address significant unmet needs with relatively low additional cost.

Executive Summary

Strengthen bilingual election judge recruitment and placement.

- Increase the pool of election judges fluent in South Asian languages, including the use of a language-fluency test, to ensure adequate coverage in wards with the highest concentrations of South Asian American voting-eligible residents.
- Improve assignment practices to ensure judges are consistently placed in precincts where their language skills match voter needs.

Increase transparency and clarity in precinct selection criteria.

- In 2014, CBOE indicated that precincts would qualify for Asian Indian language assistance if at least 5% of the voting-age population belonged to a covered language-minority group. This percentage threshold was later lowered in response to feedback from community-based partners, recognizing the need to better serve a community that has historically been less engaged in the democratic processes. Since then, however, there has been no publicly available update on whether this benchmark remains in use or how these decisions are currently made.
- To build community trust and ensure equitable access, CBOE should provide greater clarity on the data and thresholds guiding precinct-level language assignments. Publishing the methodology and underlying data would not only demonstrate a consistent, evidence-based approach but also allow community partners to better support outreach, poll worker recruitment, and voter education in the identified precincts. Increased transparency would strengthen accountability while also fostering collaboration between election authorities and the communities they serve.

Enhance community engagement in implementation.

- Formalize consultation with Chicago-based South Asian community organizations to ensure that precinct assignments, language selection, and outreach strategies reflect evolving demographic realities.
- Leverage these partnerships for bilingual poll worker recruitment and voter education.

Executive Summary

Conclusion

As of 2024, **fewer than one in five** South Asian American voters in Chicago had access to in-language assistance at their precincts. Expansion to even a modest set of additional precincts would meaningfully increase participation, reduce systemic barriers, and ensure compliance with both the spirit and letter of the Voting Rights Act. Chicago has a unique opportunity to lead by example, especially at a time of federal retrenchment on LEP access under Executive Order 14224. Addressing these gaps is necessary not only to meet legal requirements but also to align election administration with the demographic realities of Chicago's electorate.

Explore the Data

Interactive ward- and precinct-level maps accompanying this report allow users to explore South Asian population distributions and language assistance coverage in greater detail (see Appendix C or visit: [Ward Map](#) and [Precinct Map](#))

Introduction

Language Access as a Democratic Imperative

Language access is a fundamental component of equitable voting. For many Limited English Proficient (LEP) communities, the availability of translated ballots, signage, and bilingual poll workers can be the deciding factor between participating in an election or being effectively excluded from the democratic process. Without adequate language support, voters may face confusion at polling places, be unable to understand voting materials, or refrain from voting altogether. Research from Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC, NALEO Educational Fund, and Fair Elections Center, published in *The Policymakers' Guide to Providing Language Access in Elections*, shows that jurisdictions effectively implementing Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act experience measurable increases in voter registration, turnout, and representation among Latino, Asian American, Native American, and other language-minority communities (Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC 2018)

The report highlights not only the practical benefits of improved access, such as higher participation and more candidates from underrepresented communities, but also the symbolic value of language assistance in creating a welcoming, inclusive civic environment. Even where legal enforcement has been required, these interventions have led to stronger relationships between election officials and community members, improved poll worker training, and greater trust in government. In this sense, language access is not only a legal requirement but a democratic imperative (Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC 2018)

Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act

Recognizing the vital link between language access and democratic inclusion, Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act requires certain jurisdictions to provide bilingual election assistance when thresholds of Limited English Proficient (LEP) voters are met. Coverage applies when a single language minority group makes up more than 10,000 voting-age citizens or over 5% of the voting-age population, and when that group has low English proficiency and literacy levels below the national average (U.S. Department of Justice, Language Minority Citizens, 2024).

Covered jurisdictions are legally obligated to provide translated voting materials, oral language assistance, and bilingual poll workers to ensure meaningful access throughout the electoral process. Compliance is overseen by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), and jurisdictions that fail to meet these standards may face legal action or federal monitoring.

In 2011, following the 2010 U.S. Census, the Census Bureau determined that Cook County, including the City of Chicago, met Section 203 coverage for the Asian Indian language group under the 10,000-LEP citizen threshold established by the 1992 Voting Rights Language Assistance Act. This designation, published in the Federal Register, obligated local jurisdictions to begin providing language assistance for Asian Indian LEP voters starting in early 2012.

Section 203 determinations are updated every five years. In December 2021, based on 2015–2019 ACS data, Cook County was once again identified as a covered jurisdiction for both Spanish and Asian Indian language minority groups, reaffirming that language access obligations remain in effect for Asian Indian LEP communities (Federal Register 2021).

While Section 203 does not mandate which Asian-Indian languages must be used, local election authorities, in the case of Chicago, the Chicago Board of Elections (CBOE), have discretion in how to implement assistance, as long as all eligible LEP voters receive meaningful access. In practice, this can include providing materials and support in Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu, Punjabi, or other languages widely spoken among South Asian residents.

Chicago's Approach to Language Assistance

Since 2012, the City of Chicago has offered language assistance in Hindi, Urdu, and Gujarati. To determine which languages to prioritize for the Asian Indian community, city officials consulted with local community organizations and residents, ultimately selecting these three languages.

Chicago's model of language assistance combines universal baseline access with targeted precinct-level support. At the most basic level, every precinct polling place in Chicago offers a touchscreen voting machine and audio ballot in 12 languages, including Hindi, Gujarati and Urdu. This ensures that every voter, in any precinct, technically has access to voting in their language through the machine.

However, this access is limited to touchscreen and audio ballots, which many voters do not use by default, and it does not ensure the presence of bilingual poll workers or translated paper ballots. While machine-based access provides a universal baseline, it is often insufficient for real-world LEP voters, particularly older individuals or those less familiar with technology.

Beyond this universal baseline, the Board of Elections uses a targeted precinct model to meet its Section 203 obligations, concentrating resources such as translated paper ballots, bilingual poll workers, and voter materials in precincts with the greatest demonstrated need.

According to a report authored by CBOE Executive Director Lance Gough (2014), precincts are targeted for Asian Indian language assistance **if 5% or more of the voting-age (18+) population within a precinct belongs to a covered language minority group**, as determined through Census data or surname analysis. This approach draws on federal precedent as well as internal practices developed under the Puerto Rican Organization for Political Action (PROPA) injunction (Gough 2014).

Although past Department of Justice enforcement actions have occasionally cited a threshold of 100 registered voters from a given language group as a practical guideline, this has never been a formal standard. Instead, CBOE has consistently relied on the 5% benchmark, which Executive Director Lance Gough noted in 2014 provides “equal or greater coverage for eligible language group members” (Gough 2014). As of now, no public documentation confirms whether the 5% benchmark remains official, though it is the most recent known guideline. Federal enforcement under Section 203 continues to rest solely on the 10,000 LEP citizens and 5% voting-age population thresholds reaffirmed by the Census Bureau in 2021.

In practice, CBOE provides Asian-Indian language assistance in several forms:

- Hindi, Urdu, and Gujarati touchscreen and audio ballots at all precincts citywide;
- Paper ballots and ballot applications in Hindi in targeted precincts;
- Recruitment and deployment of bilingual election judges fluent in Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu, or all in those precincts;

Multilingual staff at CBOE’s central office on Election Day, offering support in Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Polish, and Russian.

Why Hindi for Translated Ballots?

Hindi was chosen as the language for translated paper ballots and other official written election materials based on direct community feedback and its broad reach among Indian-origin residents, particularly North Indians. Hindi also has oral overlap with Urdu and is widely understood conversationally among some Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Nepali communities due to regional proximity and media exposure. Nationally, Hindi is the most widely spoken South Asian language, followed by Urdu, Telugu, Punjabi, and Gujarati (see Figure 1).

However, oral familiarity does not necessarily translate into reading or writing proficiency, meaning Hindi ballots alone cannot fully address the needs of all Asian Indian voters. To ensure meaningful access, in-person bilingual election judges and oral language assistance remain critical, especially in Gujarati and Urdu. Gujarati, in particular, has long-standing roots in Chicago’s South Asian community and shows high levels of limited English proficiency, with 44.1% of Gujarati speakers in Cook County reporting they speak English less than “very well” (see Figure 2).

Figure 1**Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Rates Among South Asian Language Speakers in United States (ACS B16001, 2023)**

Language	United States (Estimate)	Margin of Error	% LEP (within Group)
Hindi	892,434	±13,730	17.06
Urdu	521,397	±12,845	27.66
Telugu	472,646	±9,303	18.25
Nepali, Marathi, or other Indic languages:	458,483	±8,545	33.5
Gujarati	453,073	±9,758	32.21
Bengali	404,765	±8,707	41.15
Tamil	328,220	±7,446	14.85
Punjabi	319,639	±10,053	39.19
Malayalam, Kannada, or other Dravidian languages:	290,565	±6,659	21.25

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2023. Language Spoken at Home by Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over (Table B16001 - United States. American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. <https://data.census.gov/> | <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2023.B16001>

Figure 2**Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Rates Among South Asian Language Speakers in Cook County (ACS B16001, 2023)**

Language	Cook County Estimate	Margin of Error	% LEP (within Group)
Urdu	30,282	±6,562	28.23%
Gujarati	29,459	±5,104	44.12%
Hindi	21,539	±4,156	16.72%
Malayalam, Kannada, or other Dravidian languages:	9,824	±3,030	31.36%
Nepali, Marathi, or other Indic languages	8,005	±4,653	55.89%
Telugu	6,842	±2,430	12.83%
Bengali	4,723	±2,230	26.23%
Tamil	4,676	±1,889	15.95%
Punjabi	2,314	±1,401	24.72%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2023. Language Spoken at Home by Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over (Table B16001) - Cook County. American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. <https://data.census.gov/> | <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDTIY2023.B16001?q=Hindi&g=050XX00USI7031>

Evolving Language Needs Across Illinois

As language needs among Illinois' South Asian communities continue to grow, including speakers of Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, and Nepali, equitable participation increasingly depends on assistance that goes beyond electronic voting machines. In-person bilingual poll workers and translated paper ballots in additional South Asian languages are especially critical in South Asian dense neighborhoods, where many voters depend on oral or written assistance to cast their ballots confidently.

According to the 2025 Language Needs Assessment prepared for the Governor's Office of New Americans, over 60,000 Illinois residents who speak these languages do not speak English "very well," including 18,762 Gujarati speakers, 13,893 Urdu speakers, and 8,681 Hindi speakers, among others (Paral 2025). Yet very few polling places consistently offer translated materials or bilingual assistance in these languages.

Figure 3 Growth in South Asian Language Limited English Proficient (LEP) Populations Across Illinois (Paral 2025)

Language	LEP (2008–2012)	LEP (2018–2022)	Change	% Growth
Telugu	2,527	4,236	1,709	68%
Nepali	1,577	2,340	763	48%
Tamil	1,955	2,346	391	20%
Urdu	11,616	13,893	2,277	20%
Gujarati	28,115	20,165	-7,950	-28%
Bengali	1,881	1,500	-381	-20%
Hindi	10,773	8,681	-2,092	-19%

While longstanding South Asian language communities such as Gujarati and Hindi have slightly declined in LEP counts across the state, others like Telugu (+68%), Nepali (+48%), Tamil (+20%), and Urdu (+20%) have shown notable growth over the past decade (Paral 2025). This shift reflects both the evolving composition of Illinois' South Asian population and the need to reevaluate how language support is distributed across polling sites, not only in Chicago or suburban Cook County, but in emerging population centers statewide.

However, the federal framework that determines language access obligations has not evolved at the same pace. Under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act, current obligations apply only to "Asian Indian languages" – a category narrowly defined to include languages spoken primarily by people of Indian origin, such as Hindi/Urdu and Gujarati. This classification does not fully capture the linguistic diversity of the broader South Asian community, where many languages transcend national borders. For example, Bangla is spoken both in India and Bangladesh; Punjabi is widely spoken in India and Pakistan; and Tamil is spoken across India and Sri Lanka, though the dialects differ between the two countries. Meanwhile, Nepali, spoken in Nepal and by a growing immigrant population in Illinois, is not included in the "Asian Indian" category at all.

As a result, large portions of Chicago's and Illinois' South Asian electorate, particularly Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Nepali, and Sri Lankan voters, may be excluded from existing language access protections despite having comparable or greater English-language needs. This gap underscores the importance of expanding how "Asian Indian" and related language classifications are defined to reflect the full spectrum of South Asian communities in Illinois.

Executive Order 14224 (2025) and Language Access

On March 1, 2025, Executive Order 14224 designated English as the official language of the United States and revoked Executive Order 13166, which since 2000 had directed federal agencies and federally funded programs to ensure meaningful access for people with limited English proficiency (LEP). For the full Executive Order, visit www.whitehouse.gov

Following the order, the Department of Justice issued implementation guidance and suspended federal LEP resources pending review, and some agencies announced English-only shifts in services [\(U.S. Department of Justice 2025\)](#)

These changes do not alter statutory voting rights. Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act remains in effect and continues to require covered jurisdictions to provide minority-language election materials and assistance. Federal Register determinations identifying covered jurisdictions are legally binding until superseded; Section 208 also continues to allow voters to bring an assistant into the booth [\(U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division 2024\)](#)

In Chicago, therefore, the Board of Election Commissioners would continue to cover for "Asian Indian" language assistance.

Implication for South Asian voters in Chicago

While Executive Order 14224 may reduce federal LEP guidance and non-election translations in other public services, Chicago's election-related obligations under Section 203 are unchanged. Given recent precinct consolidation and the concentration of South Asian VEP in a subset of wards, sustaining and expanding targeted in-language election assistance (bilingual judges, translated materials, signage, and outreach) remains critical to ensure equitable access [\(Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division 2021\)](#).

ASSESSING SOUTH ASIAN LANGUAGE SUPPORT IN CHICAGO

While Cook County's Section 203 obligations apply specifically to the Asian Indian language group, Chicago's South Asian population is far more linguistically diverse. Communities speaking Urdu, Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, and Nepali also include thousands of Limited English Proficient (LEP) residents who face many of the same barriers to voting as Hindi speakers. Legally, CBOE is required to serve only Asian Indians under Section 203. However, from an equity and inclusion standpoint, limiting support to a single subgroup overlooks the broader reality of South Asian voters in Chicago. This analysis therefore adopts a wider lens, assessing language assistance not only for Asian Indians but across the full range of South Asian communities, with the goal of identifying unmet needs and advocating for more comprehensive coverage.

Building on the linguistic demographics of South Asian communities in Cook County and nationwide, the following sections focus on language support within the City of Chicago and highlight where CBOE could expand assistance. While this analysis is limited to Chicago, it is important to note that suburban Cook County also hosts rapidly growing South Asian communities. Assessing language access needs in those areas will be equally critical in the future.

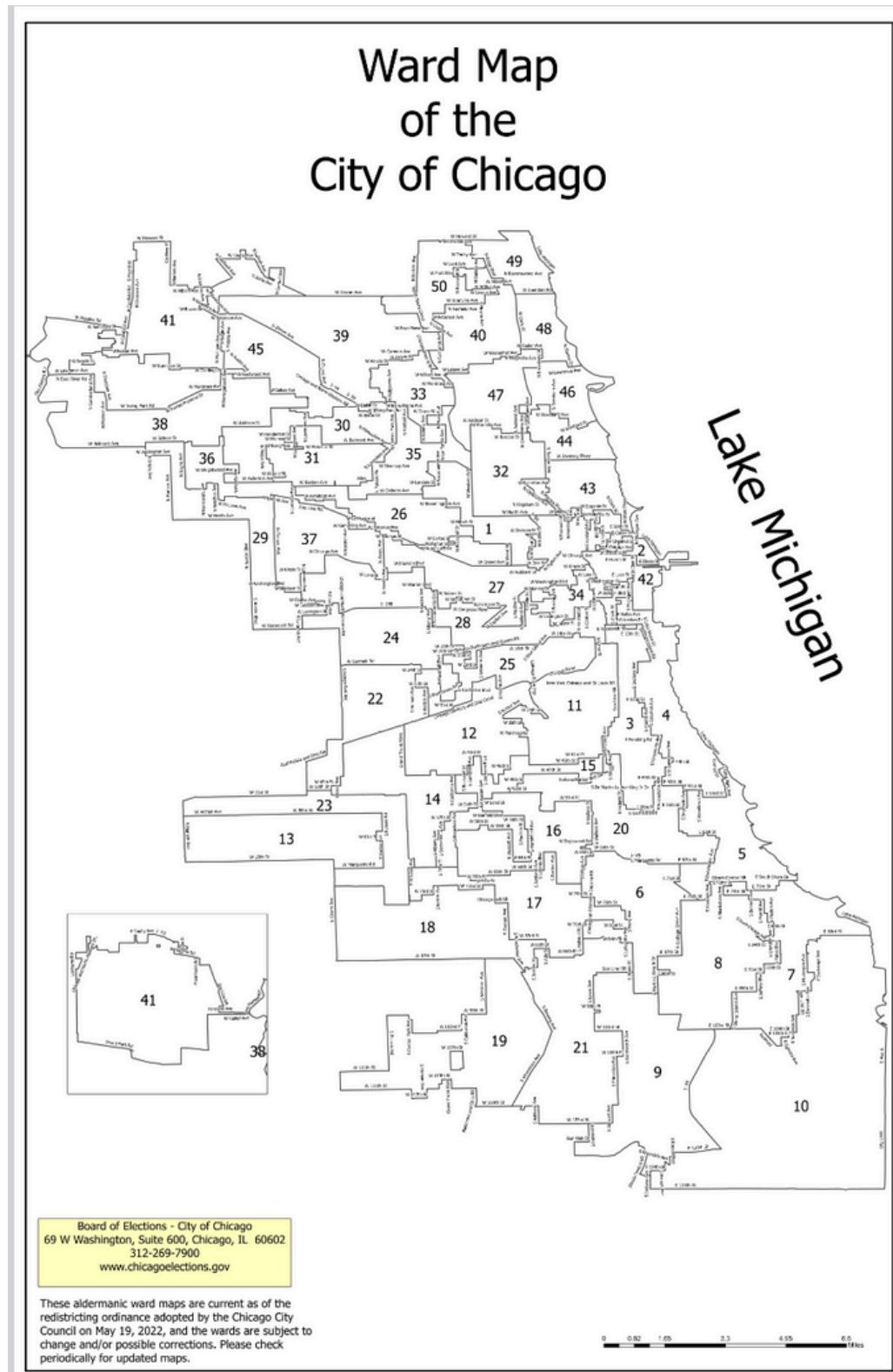
This study also draws on key findings from SAAPRI's 2024 publication, Strengthening Democracy: Addressing and Overcoming Language Inequity in Elections, which examined the consequences of precinct reductions and inconsistent bilingual support during the 2022–2023 election cycle. That report found that the consolidation plan adopted in May 2022, following redistricting, resulted in the loss of several bilingual polling places across Chicago, directly affecting access to translated materials and in-language poll worker support for LEP voters (Somani and Verma 2024).

In this follow-up analysis, SAAPRI provides a deeper assessment of where language assistance was available in 2024 and where significant gaps remain. At first glance, it may seem natural to compare precincts that offered language support in 2020 with those that did or did not in 2024. However, this comparison is not straightforward: precinct consolidation redrew boundaries and created substantially larger precincts, meaning a simple before-and-after comparison cannot capture the full extent of changes in access.

Instead, this research applies a more robust approach by analyzing the geographic distribution of South Asian communities, calculating the Voting Eligible Population (VEP), and incorporating Limited English Proficiency (LEP) data from the Census and ACS. Together, these measures present a clearer picture of where language access remains insufficient and where expansion is most needed in future elections.

The methodology relies on ACS 2019–2023 5-Year Estimates, Chicago precinct shapefiles, and Census tract data, using an area-weighted estimation method to translate tract-level demographics into precinct-level estimates. A detailed discussion of data sources, estimation methods, and limitations is provided in Appendix A.

Below is the current Ward Map of the City of Chicago, reflecting the redistricting ordinance adopted by the City Council on May 19, 2022 (City of Chicago 2022).



Source: <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/about/wards.html>

Background on Precinct Consolidation

Precinct consolidation refers to the process of reducing the total number of voting precincts in a jurisdiction by merging or eliminating existing ones. In Chicago, this occurred following the 2020 Census and 2022 redistricting process, significantly altering how voters are geographically assigned to polling places. To view an interactive map of precincts, visit data.cityofchicago.org

Pre-2020

- Most precincts had their own polling place
- This meant voters had easier local access, smaller crowd sizes.

2020 (COVID-19 Pandemic)

- Massive consolidation of polling locations across Chicago.
- Shift to fewer, centralized polling places serving multiple precincts.
- Justified as a public health measure and cost-saving tactic.

Mid- 2022

- Post-Census Ward Redistricting
 - New ward maps adopted in May 2022
 - This led to a reduction of precincts from 2,069 to 1,290, consolidating 779 precincts.

Nov 2022 Midterm

- Nearly half of all voters reported new polling place assignments due to consolidation post-redistricting. This marked as the first big election that used new precincts. Reduced precincts this year meant reduced LA support.

Precinct Reduction in Chicago (2020-2024)

Old total (2020)	New total (2022-2024)	Net Reduction
2,069 precincts	1,291 precincts	779 precincts

What Led to Fewer Precincts

Following the decennial 2020 U.S. Census, the Chicago City Council adopted new ward boundaries in May 2022. Shortly thereafter, on November 15, 2021, the State of Illinois enacted SB 536 (Public Act 102-0068), a “trailer” omnibus election bill providing updated guidance on precinct sizing (Illinois General Assembly 2021).

Under this law, counties outside Cook County could increase the maximum allowable number of registered voters per precinct to 1,200, while Cook County was permitted to expand precincts up to 1,800 registered voters, up from the previous maximum of 800. Election authorities were required to complete the new boundary configurations within 60 days of enactment, as stipulated in state law.

In 2020, Chicago had a total of 2,069 precincts. By 2024, following redistricting and precinct consolidation, that number had dropped to just 1,291. This represents a net loss of 779 precincts citywide, an overall decrease of approximately 38% across the city.

Why Proportional Gains Mask Real Gaps

As highlighted in SAAPRI’s Strengthening Democracy report (2024), this legislation contributed to a notable reduction in designated bilingual precincts. At first glance, one might argue that while the total number of precincts offering South Asian language support decreased, the **proportion** of bilingual precincts actually increased slightly, from **1.74% to 1.94%** (see Figure 6). However, this comparison is misleading.

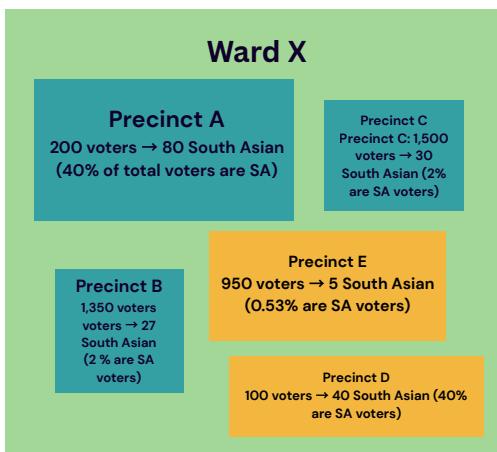
Figure 4 South Asian Language Availability in Chicago Precincts for Election 2020 vs 2024

Election Year	Total Number of Precincts	Precincts with South Asian Language Support	Share of Precincts with Support (%)
<u>2020</u>	2,069	56	1.74%
<u>2024</u>	1,291	36	1.94%

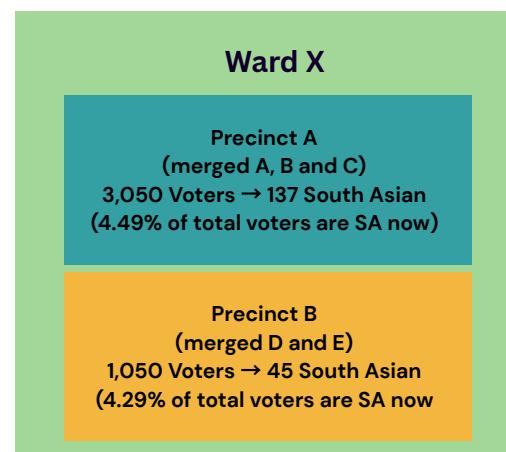
Due to consolidation, precincts became significantly **larger**, meaning that many smaller precincts which previously qualified for language assistance under Section 203 no longer met the population-based thresholds when merged with surrounding areas. As a result, the apparent increase in proportion does not reflect improved coverage, but rather a structural shift that resulted in the exclusion of high-need South Asian LEP communities from receiving in-language support.

While consolidation may have improved administrative efficiency, it inadvertently reduced the reach and effectiveness of South Asian language assistance, especially in neighborhoods with concentrated LEP populations.

Before Precinct Consolidation



After Consolidation



In the figure above, Ward X originally contained several precincts, including Precinct A, which had a high proportion of South Asian residents (40%). Because some of these precincts individually exceeded the city's 5% threshold, they can qualify for language assistance at the polls. After consolidation, however, former Precincts A, B, and C were combined into a new Precinct A, and Precincts D and E were combined into a new Precinct B. In these newly merged precincts, the proportion of South Asian residents now falls below 5%, meaning the city is no longer required to assign language assistance at these polling locations.

Under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act, a precinct or jurisdiction qualifies for language assistance only if a language minority group reaches a set threshold (e.g., 5% of the Voting Eligible Population or 10,000+ individuals) [\(Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division 2021\)](#).

In the graphic above, on the left side, several smaller precincts in Ward X individually had South Asian populations above the threshold, making them eligible for translated materials and bilingual poll workers. After consolidation, however, those same communities were merged into much larger precincts. Although the overall number of South Asian voters remained the same, their proportion of the total electorate dropped well below the threshold, eliminating eligibility for language assistance.

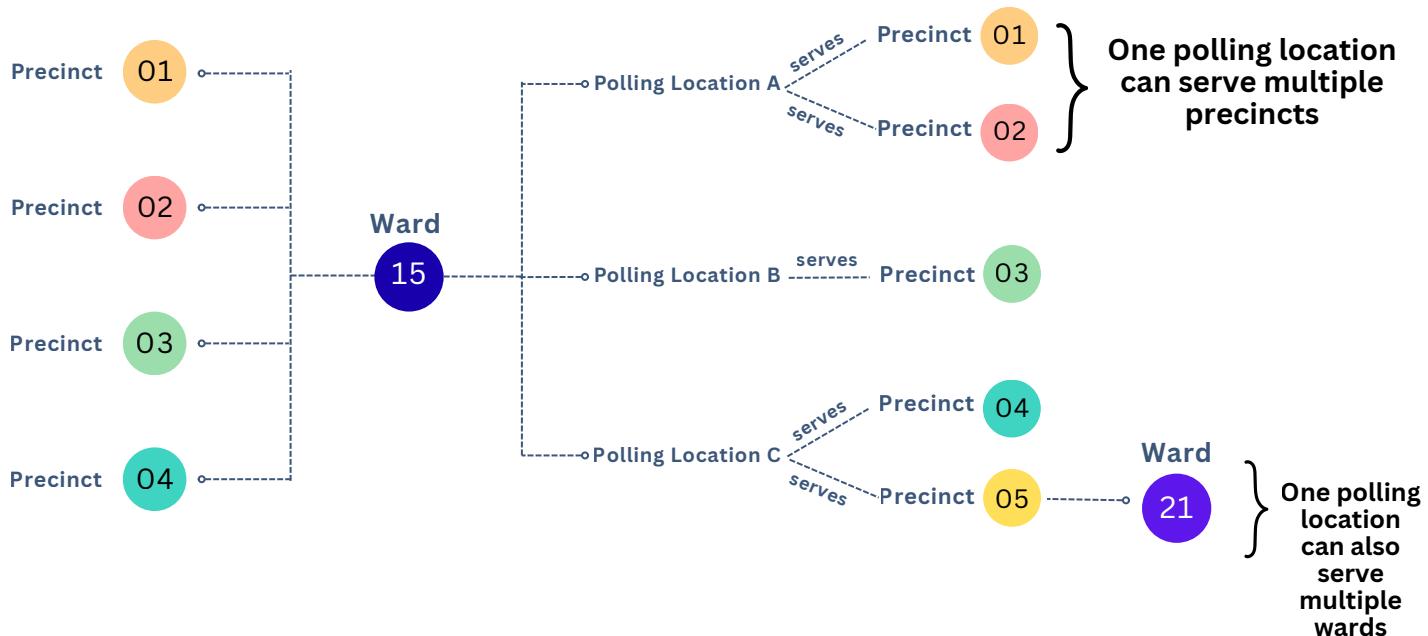
Why Need Has Not Declined

Although the number of precincts has declined significantly, this does not reflect a decline in community need. Geographic mobility data from the American Community Survey (2021) shows that 82% of Asian Indians and 85% of Pakistanis in Illinois lived in the same house the prior year, with most movers remaining within the same county. (Verma and Kurisinkal, 2024). This high level of residential stability suggests that precincts which qualified for language assistance in 2020 likely continue to serve similar LEP populations today. Therefore, the loss of South Asian language support in recent elections reflects a systemic issue caused by consolidation, not a demographic shift.

Polling Places Post-Consolidation

While the number of precincts in Chicago declined significantly, from 2,069 in 2020 to 1,291 by 2024, the total number of polling places remained relatively stable. For instance, in the 2022 election, 1,043 polling places were used to serve all 2,069 precincts, with many sites accommodating multiple precincts simultaneously, often described as polling places doing “double or triple duty.”

A single polling location may serve multiple precincts, and in some cases, a polling location may also serve voters from more than one ward.



Prior to consolidation, many precincts had dedicated or minimally shared polling locations. After consolidation, however, each polling place began serving significantly more voters, and the average precinct size increased by approximately 79%, from 550–750 voters per precinct to 1,165. This shift places an added strain on both voters and election staff.

Average Precinct Size

Pre Consolidation	Post Consolidation
550–750 voters	1,165 voters

Staffing Gaps and Bilingual Judge Challenges

Although the target of five election judges per precinct has remained unchanged since 2022, the overall reduction in precincts, from 2,069 in 2020 to 1,291 in 2024, has significantly lowered the total number of judges needed, from 10,345 to 6,450. As a result, each judge now serves a larger and more linguistically diverse electorate, making it increasingly difficult to provide adequate language assistance.

In high-LEP wards, these staffing gaps have had tangible effects. A single bilingual judge may be responsible for assisting hundreds of voters across multiple language groups, leading to longer wait times, miscommunication, and reduced support for LEP voters. SAAPRI interviews with South Asian bilingual judges revealed frequent issues with misassignment, underutilization, and voter confusion around the availability of language support. In the April 2023 mayoral runoff, several high-need precincts lacked bilingual coverage entirely (Somani and Verma 2024).

To ensure equitable access, targeted recruitment, training, and placement of bilingual judges must be prioritized, particularly in wards with high concentrations of South Asian voters.

EFFECTS OF CONSOLIDATION ON SOUTH ASIAN AMERICANS

Demographic Growth

In Cook County and the City of Chicago, South Asian American communities have experienced significant population growth, especially in areas like the Far North Side and Central Chicago, which together account for nearly 30,000 South Asian residents, over half of the city's total South Asian population.

While the Far North Side remains the most populous South Asian area, Central Chicago experienced a 47% increase between 2015 and 2020, and neighborhoods such as the North Side, Northwest Side, and Far Southeast Side also saw substantial growth (Verma and Kurisinkal, 2024).

These regions include well-known South Asian enclaves such as Devon Avenue in West Ridge (Ward 50), and parts of Albany Park (Ward 39), where many residents are Limited English Proficient (LEP) and rely on translated voting materials or bilingual poll workers.

Figure 5 Top 10 Chicago Wards by South Asian Population

Ward	South Asian Population Estimate
50	6,039
42	5,553
39	5,400
4	3,506
40	3,221
34	3,190
48	2,790
41	2,762
2	1,954
32	1,680

Figure 6 Top 10 Precincts by South Asian Population

Precinct	South Asian Population Estimate
23 (W4)	1,420
15 (W39)	1,248
7 (W42)	1,049
25 (W4)	957
1 (W42)	932
1 (W41)	815
2 (W41)	798
2 (W42)	756
15 (W50)	652
13 (W50)	613

South Asian Voting Eligible Population

This trend reflects not only overall population growth, but also an increase in the South Asian American voting-eligible population. To identify where these eligible voters are concentrated under the new ward boundaries drawn after redistricting, SAAPRI developed its own estimates of the South Asian Voting Eligible Population (VEP). Because the American Community Survey (ACS) does not provide VEP data disaggregated for South Asians, we created a proportional estimation method to approximate it.

These figures should be read as informed estimates rather than exact counts, derived using a proportional calculation method. A full explanation of the calculation, along with its limitations, is provided in Appendix A.

The tables below present the top 10 Chicago Wards and top 20 Precincts by their South Asian Voting Eligible Population.

Figure 7 Top 10 Wards and their South Asian Voting Eligible Population

Ward	SA VEP (18+ and Citizen) Estimate	% of SA VEP out of Total VEP
39	3,293	7.04%
42	2,935	5.63%
50	2,836	7.05%
34	1,686	5.94%
40	1,495	3.36%
41	1,457	1.98%
48	1,448	3.25%
32	1,117	2.47%
2	1,111	2.92%
4	1,058	2.52%

Figure 8 Top 20 Precincts and their South Asian Voting Eligible Population

Precinct	Ward	SA VEP	% of SA VEP out of Total VEP
1	42	673	16.24%
15	39	671	20.27%
7	42	592	11.76%
25	4	488	8.23%
1	41	441	2.35%
1	50	387	10.96%
31	39	336	14.02%
2	50	326	8.89%
15	28	317	5.95%
15	50	313	15.37%
30	41	302	7.43%
2	40	278	9.24%
27	48	270	6.93%
14	42	260	7.73%
3	40	256	6.47%
2	42	252	3.38%
19	39	251	24.83%
15	34	235	11.20%
28	39	225	21.82%
13	33	223	8.53%

Figure 8 shows that while some precincts stand out for their size (over 600 South Asian voters), others show especially high concentrations, exceeding 20% of the total VEP, indicating both numerical strength and significant community presence in key wards.

While South Asian populations have historically been concentrated in Chicago's northern wards, Ward 42 emerges as a notable outlier closer to the city's center, where the community is growing. Yet, as shown in Figure 9 below, Ward 42 currently does not provide any South Asian language support.

SOUTH ASIAN LANGUAGE COVERAGE IN 2024 ELECTION

Among the ten wards with the highest concentrations of South Asian Voters in Chicago, only four, **Wards 39, 50, 40, and 48**, had precincts offering South Asian language support (Hindi, Urdu, or Gujarati) in recent elections. The remaining six, Wards 42, 34, 41, 32, and 2 and 4 had no documented precincts providing such assistance, despite a sizable South Asian voting population.

Wards **5 (19th highest Ward), 33 (11th highest Ward), and 49 (22nd highest Ward)** each had at least one polling location offering South Asian language assistance, despite not being among the top 10 South Asian-dense wards as of 2025.

Figure 12 lists all precincts that provided South Asian language assistance during the 2024 election.

SOUTH ASIAN LANGUAGE COVERAGE IN 2024 ELECTION

Figure 9

South Asian Language Support in Chicago's Top 10 South Asian Voter-Dense Wards (2024)

Ward	Number of Precincts Per Ward	South Asian (SA) Language Assistance Present?	Precincts Offering SA Language Support (Election 2024)	Total Number of Precincts Offering SA Language Support	% of Precincts Per Ward Offering SA Language Support
39	35	Yes	6, 15, 19, 21, 26, 28, 35	7	20.00%
42	24	No	N/A	0	0.00%
50	28	Yes	1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 13, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 23, 26	13	46.42%
34	20	No	N/A	0	0.00%
40	23	Yes	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 11	7	30.43%
41	31	No	N/A	0	0.00%
48	35	Yes	8, 16, 18, 22, 33	5	14.29%
32	30	No	N/A	0	0.00%
2	25	No	N/A	0	0.00%
4	28	No	N/A	0	0.00%

The precincts in wards 5 and 49 where South Asian language support was provided have under 3% South Asian voting eligible population (see Figure 15).

Of the 36 precincts offering language assistance, 5 precincts have under 3% South Asian voting eligible population. Figure 10 below shows precincts with under 3% VEP that are still receiving South Asian language assistance.

Figure 10 Precincts Offering South Asian Language Assistance Despite <3% VEP (2024)

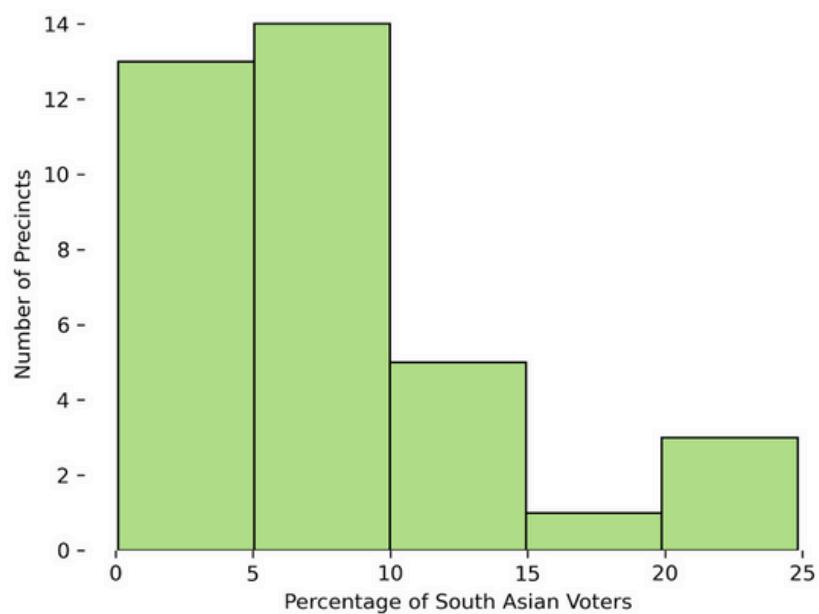
Precinct	% of SA VEP out of Total VEP
6 (W39)	0.1
12 (W5)	0.24
26 (W39)	0.27
8 (W40)	2.85
7 (W49)	2.89

The findings show that most precincts with South Asian language assistance in 2024 serve populations where South Asians make up between 5% and 10% of the Voting Eligible Population (VEP) (see Figure 16).

Notably, about **thirteen** precincts provide language support even though South Asians comprise only 0.1% to 5% of the VEP. At the same time, language access has been consistently implemented in all precincts where the South Asian share exceeds 20%, demonstrating strong coverage at higher concentrations.

These results should not be interpreted as a call to reduce support in precincts where South Asian VEP falls between 0.1% and 5%. Rather, they highlight the need for the City of Chicago to expand language assistance in precincts with relatively high South Asian VEP where access remains limited despite clear community need.

Figure 11 South Asian VEP Distribution in Precincts Offering Language Assistance



Distribution of South Asian Voting Eligible Population (VEP) across Chicago precincts with South Asian language assistance. Most precincts providing support have South Asian populations between 5% and 10% of the VEP, with fewer precincts serving communities above 15%.

Figure 12 Precincts Offering South Asian Language Assistance in the 2024 Election

Precinct	% of SA VEP out of Total VEP	SA VEP Estimate
15 (W39)	20.27	671
1 (W50)	10.96	387
2 (W50)	8.89	326
15 (W50)	15.37	313
2 (W40)	9.24	278
3 (W40)	6.47	256
19 (W39)	24.83	251
28 (W39)	21.82	225
13 (W50)	11.15	200
5 (W40)	7.84	210
35 (W39)	11.8	209
11 (W33)	10.74	196
21 (W39)	9.35	161
23 (W50)	6.88	161
8 (W50)	11.97	129
6 (W40)	9.17	120
16 (W48)	4.8	109
21 (W50)	6.42	104
20 (W50)	9.29	101
19 (W50)	9.29	100

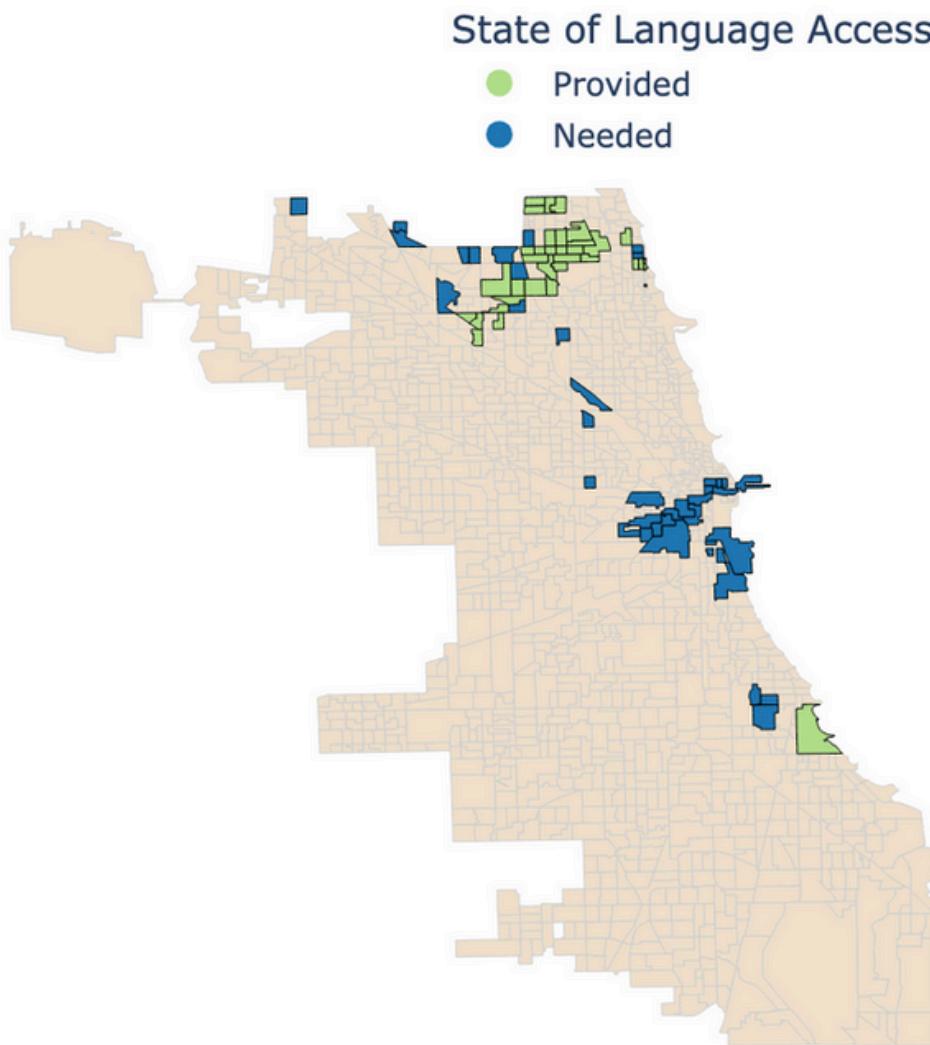
Precinct	% of SA VEP out of Total VEP	SA VEP Estimate
4 (W50)	4.42	122
7 (W49)	2.89	112
4 (W40)	4.06	95
26 (W50)	6.86	95
18 (W48)	4.79	84
11 (W40)	3.13	73
17 (W50)	6.56	66
3 (W50)	5.1	66
10 (W33)	3.91	61
8 (W40)	2.85	36
8 (W48)	4.51	26
33 (W48)	4.92	16
12 (W5)	0.24	13
22 (W48)	5.26	5
26 (W39)	0.27	3
6 (W39)	0.1	1

LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE GAPS

While the Chicago Board of Elections (CBOE) has implemented South Asian language assistance in precincts with sizable VEP, particularly those above 20%, important gaps persist in mid-range precincts where the South Asian population is substantial but currently underserved.

The following sections present an analysis of precincts where expanded South Asian language assistance is most warranted.

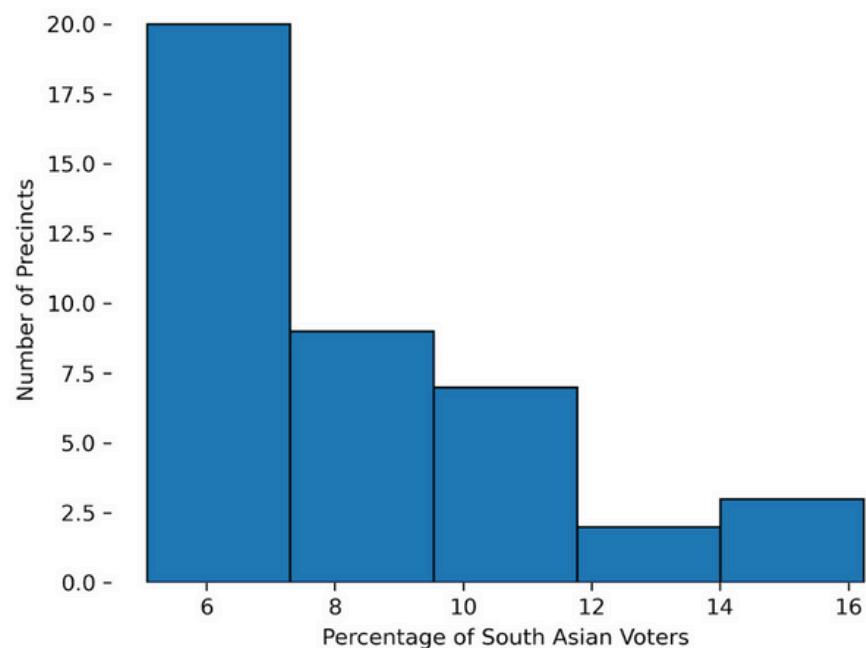
Figure 13 Chicago Precincts: Existing South Asian Language Assistance and Areas for Expansion



The map above illustrates which precincts offered South Asian language support during the 2024 elections and which did not. Precincts recommended for expanded coverage are highlighted in blue.

In 2024, only 36 of Chicago's 1,291 precincts, just 2.79%, provided South Asian language assistance, with most clustered in Wards 39, 40, 48, and 50 in the northern regions of Chicago. Although Hindi ballots were available citywide as required by law, the limited reach of in-person assistance underscores the need to expand language access for South Asian voters.

Figure 14 Distribution of South Asian VEP in Precincts Without Language Assistance



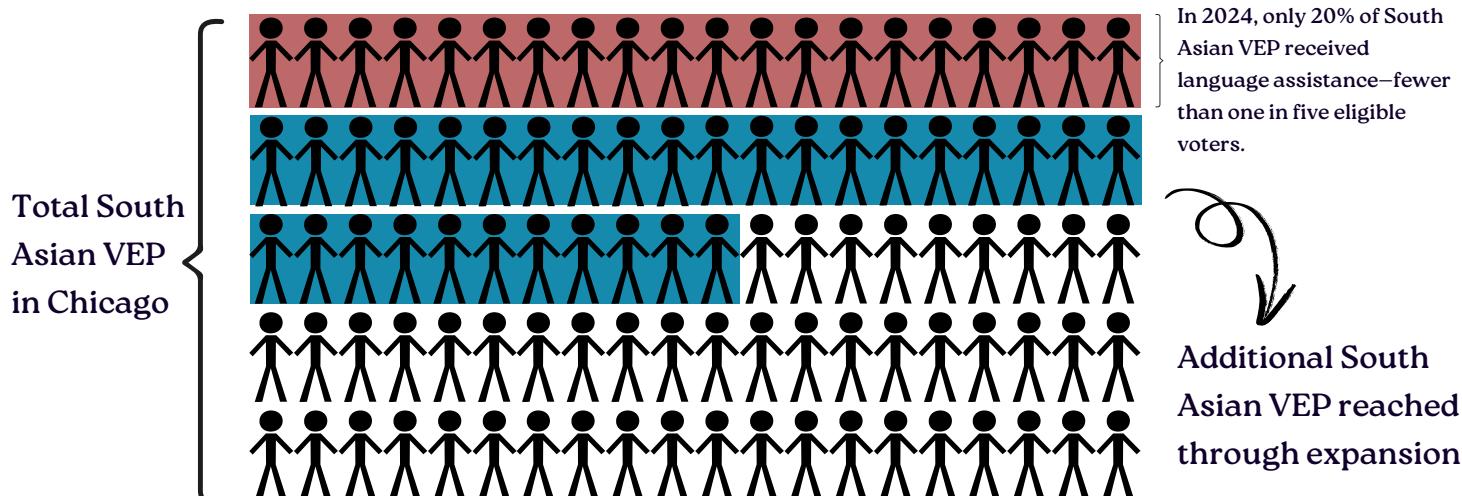
Distribution of South Asian Voting Eligible Population (VEP) in Chicago precincts without language assistance. Most precincts in this category fall within the 5-7% South Asian VEP range, indicating a notable share of South Asian voters receiving no support. A smaller number of precincts reach 10-16% South Asian VEP, underscoring clear gaps where sizable South Asian populations remain unserved.

EXPANSION

After conducting spatial analysis, demographic information was obtained for each precinct. Using the distribution of South Asian VEP across Chicago, criteria were developed to identify areas where language assistance could be expanded. The recommended threshold focuses on precincts with at least 100 South Asian VEP, representing at least 5% of the total VEP.

Applying this baseline would allow the CBOE to extend language assistance to 41 additional precincts. Such an expansion could reach approximately **8,425** more South Asian voters, compared to the **5,381 served in 2024**. With an estimated **27,056 South Asian VEP in Chicago**, only **19.9%** currently have access to language assistance; expansion to these 41 precincts would **increase coverage to 51%**. The full list of 41 precincts is shown in Figure 17.

Figure 15 Representation of South Asian Voting Eligible Population (VEP) with access to language assistance in Chicago.



Expanding assistance to 41 additional precincts would increase coverage to 51% of South Asian VEP.

The initial list of 41 precincts was created using the baseline criteria of at least 100 South Asian VEP and a minimum of 5% of the total VEP. Additional LEP data was incorporated to help identify where the need for language assistance is most urgent. Estimates of Limited English Proficient (LEP) populations were used to highlight the areas where CBOE should prioritize expansion. Since direct South Asian-specific LEP data is not available, estimates were generated using the share of residents who reported speaking English less than “very well.” Two complementary methods were applied:

Method 1 (Minimum Estimate, ACS 2015): A baseline estimate of the South Asian adult LEP population was calculated using tract-level data on speakers of Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, and Other Indic languages (Marathi, Nepali, and Konkani). Precincts where South Asian adults unable to speak English represented at least 2.5% of the total adult population were classified as areas of critical need. This dataset has not been updated since 2015.

Method 2 (Updated Estimate, ACS 2019–2023): Using the most recent ACS 5-Year Estimates, South Asian language speakers are classified under the “Asian and Pacific Islander” and “Indo-European” categories. Precincts were first filtered to include those where adults unable to speak English within either category made up at least 25% of the total adult LEP population. Within those precincts, further refinement identified where South Asian VEP made up the majority of the overall Asian VEP.

Figure 16 Precincts Eligible for Language Assistance Expansion (41 Total)

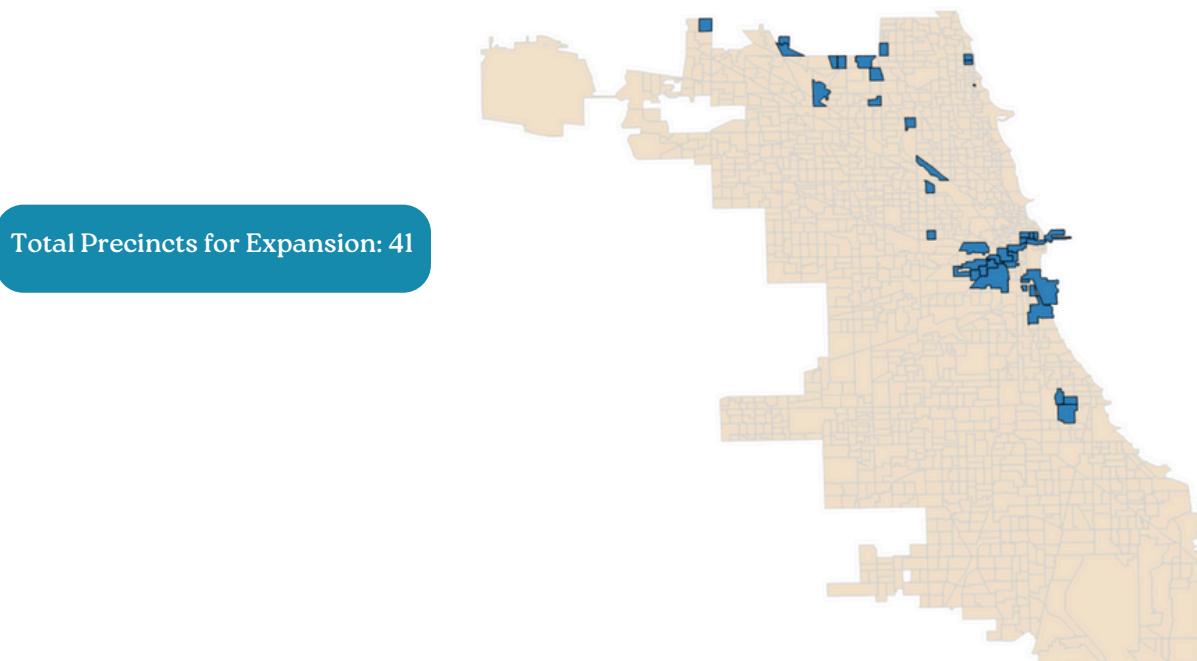


Figure 17 Precincts Identified for Language Access Expansion

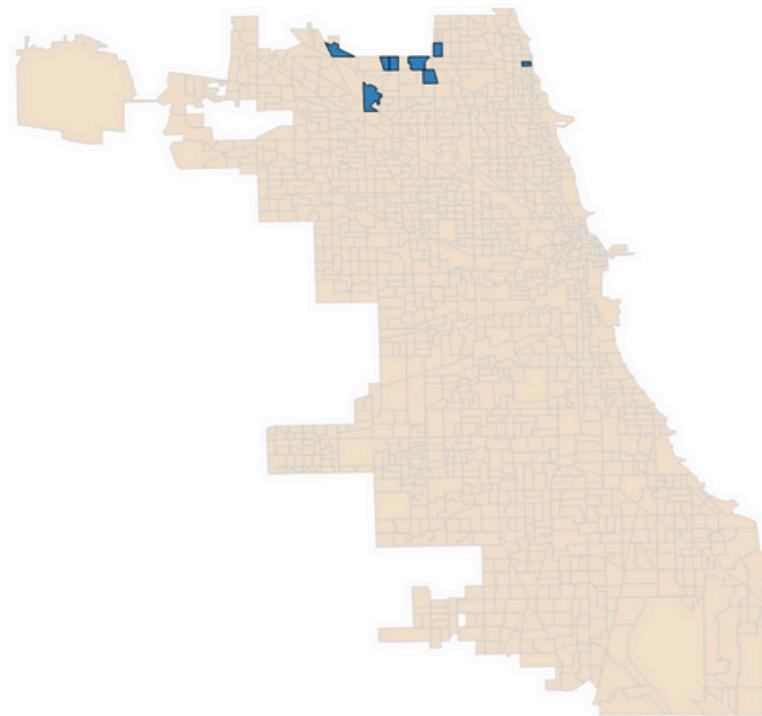
Precinct	% of SA VEP out of Total VEP	SA VEP
1 (W42)	16.24	673
7 (W42)	11.76	592
25 (W4)	8.23	488
31 (W39)	14.02	336
15 (W28)	5.95	317
30 (W41)	7.43	302
27 (W48)	6.93	270
14 (W42)	7.73	260
15 (W34)	11.2	235
13 (W33)	8.53	223
12 (W39)	10.72	221
3 (W34)	7	205
32 (W48)	7.7	190
11 (W42)	9.69	188
5 (W45)	8.03	186
11 (W34)	6.39	183
9 (W42)	8.1	171
10 (W50)	6.51	166
3 (W2)	11.48	161
19 (W3)	6.34	160
24 (W5)	6.55	159
13 (W28)	6.37	130

Precinct	% of SA VEP out of Total VEP	SA VEP
14 (W47)	12.96	200
3 (W45)	9.46	192
22 (W39)	11.52	188
4 (W2)	11.46	155
24 (W50)	7.1	155
13 (W20)	6.49	154
16 (W27)	5.07	149
21 (W5)	5.99	141
5 (W34)	7.02	140
25 (W36)	9.39	122
21 (W3)	7.09	120
24 (W4)	7.12	120
22 (W32)	6.49	117
11 (W39)	6.09	109
10 (W42)	6.98	106
18 (W34)	7.08	106
18 (W32)	5.27	104
9 (W48)	14.11	102

Figure 17

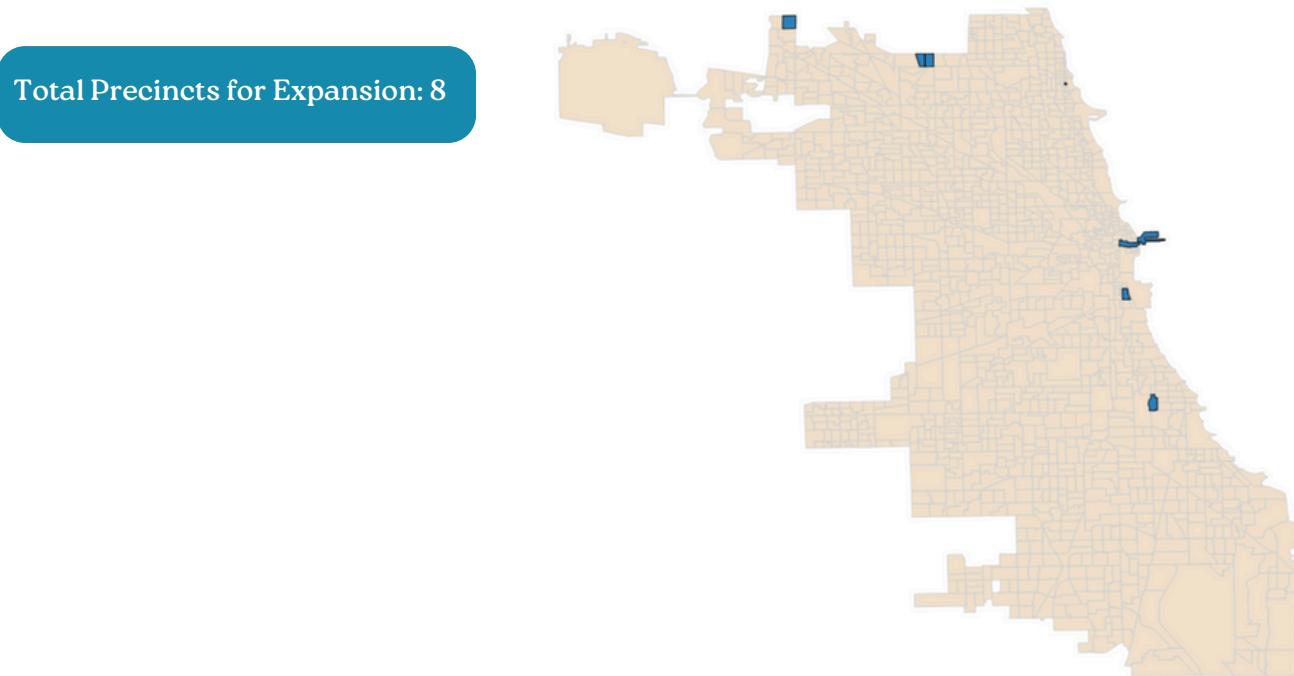
Method 1 Precincts for Language Assistance Expansion

Total Precincts for Expansion: 8



Precinct	% of SA VEP out of Total VEP	SA VEP (18+ and Citizen) Estimate
31 (W39)	14.02	336
12 (W39)	10.72	221
32 (W48)	7.7	190
22 (W39)	11.52	188
5 (W45)	8.03	186
10 (W50)	6.51	166
24 (W50)	7.1	155
11 (W39)	6.09	109

Figure 18 Method 2 Precincts for Language Assistance Expansion



Precinct	% of SA VEP out of Total VEP	SA VEP (18+ and Citizen) Estimate
1 (W42)	16.24	673
7 (W42)	11.76	592
31 (W39)	14.02	336
30 (W41)	7.43	302
22 (W39)	11.52	188
19 (W3)	6.34	160
13 (W20)	6.49	154
9 (W48)	14.11	102

Figure 19 Precincts Highlighted by Methods 1 and 2 as Critical for Expansion

Precinct	% of SA VEP out of Total VEP	SA VEP (18+ and Citizen) Estimate
1 (W42)	16.24	673
7 (W42)	11.76	592
31 (W39)	14.02	336
30 (W41)	7.43	302
12 (W39)	10.72	221
32 (W48)	7.7	190
22 (W39)	11.52	188
5 (W45)	8.03	186
10 (W50)	6.51	166
19 (W3)	6.34	160
24 (W50)	7.1	155
13 (W20)	6.49	154
11 (W39)	6.09	109
9 (W48)	14.11	102

CALL TO EXPAND LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE

The findings underscore that the Chicago Board of Elections has a critical opportunity to improve language access for South Asian American voters ahead of the 2026 election cycle. Currently, only about 20% of South Asian American VEP in Chicago are served by precinct-level assistance. Expanding coverage to 41 additional precincts would more than double that figure, reaching over half of South Asian voters citywide. This represents the long-term goal for equitable access.

Recognizing that 41 precincts constitute a sizable expansion, the two complementary methods outlined above were used to highlight where the need is most urgent. Together, these methods identified 14 precincts as immediate priorities for expansion. Notably, Precinct 31 (W39) and Precinct 22 (W39) were flagged by both methods, further validating their critical need for coverage.

At a minimum, CBOE should commit to expanding language assistance in these 14 high-need precincts, while working toward full expansion across all 41 identified precincts. Taking even this first step would allow thousands more South Asian American voters to cast their ballots with confidence and clarity. Importantly, Section 203 sets a floor, not a ceiling: Chicago has both the authority and the responsibility to move beyond bare legal compliance to ensure equitable access for all LEP voters.

Expanding coverage to these precincts would not only address unmet needs but also signal a meaningful commitment to inclusion. For South Asian communities who continue to encounter barriers at the polls, targeted expansion would send a powerful message that their participation is valued and their voices matter in shaping Chicago's democracy.

CONCLUSION

The findings in this report make clear that Chicago has significant gaps in language access that must be addressed. These local challenges are especially urgent in light of broader federal developments: although Section 203 obligations remain in place, the rollback of federal LEP guidance under Executive Order 14224 raises concerns about the future of language protections, underscoring the importance of strong local action.

Legally, Asian Indians are the only South Asian subgroup in Cook County that qualifies for Section 203 coverage. Yet, in addition to Hindi, Chicago's South Asian American communities are far more linguistically diverse, with sizable populations of Urdu, Gujarati, Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu, and Nepali speakers. Expanding language support beyond the minimum legal obligation would meaningfully increase voter participation and turnout across this broader community. Democracy is built on the principle of inclusion, and providing accessible election materials helps create a representative system that reflects the electorate it serves.

The Chicago Board of Election Commissioners (CBOE) should therefore direct resources to precincts and communities where language needs are most acute. Particular attention is warranted for Asian Indian residents who speak languages beyond Hindi, Urdu, or Gujarati. As shown in Figure 2, significant Limited English Proficiency (LEP) populations exist among Bengali, Punjabi, and Dravidian language speakers statewide, even if Cook County-level data is not yet available. Bengali, for example, qualifies as an Asian Indian language under Section 203 but also serves Bangladeshi voters, while Punjabi spans both Indian and Pakistani communities. Including these languages would expand access well beyond a single subgroup.

Smaller South Asian language groups also deserve attention. For example, the Nepali community does not yet meet federal thresholds for mandated assistance, but targeted outreach, such as recruiting bilingual poll workers in precincts with concentrated Nepali populations, would provide meaningful support at relatively low cost. Even modest measures in such communities would strengthen equity and prevent voters from being left behind.

By broadening language support, the CBOE can move beyond mere compliance and establish a national model. Chicago has both the opportunity and the responsibility to ensure that all South Asian American voters, irrespective of their language background, are able to participate fully in the democratic process.

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APPENDIX A: Data Sources

To conduct our spatial analysis of South Asian American populations across precincts in Chicago, we compiled and verified multiple geographic and demographic datasets.

Political Boundaries Shapefiles

We obtained the official shapefiles for census tracts and precincts in Chicago from the City of Chicago's Data Portal. We utilized the census tracts that the ACS 2019–2023 5-Year Estimates were based on.

- Illinois Census Tracts (2024)

Link: <https://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/geo/shapefiles/index.php?year=2024&layergroup=Census+Tracts>

- Chicago Precincts (2023)

https://data.cityofchicago.org/Facilities-Geographic-Boundaries/Boundaries-Ward-Precincts-2023-/6piy-vbxa/about_data

ACS Demographic Data

We obtained the total and demographic data from three datasets as per the 2023 dataset of the ACS 5-year estimates. The following datasets were filtered and downloaded for all census tracts in Cook County:

- B05003: *Sex by Age by Nativity and Citizenship Status* ([https://data.census.gov/table?q=B05003&g=050XX00US17031\\$1400000](https://data.census.gov/table?q=B05003&g=050XX00US17031$1400000))
 - This helped us obtain the total population in each census tract and also estimate the total voting eligible population. The total voting eligible population is calculated by adding columns where the population (male and female), accounting for nativity and naturalization as specified in the dataset.
- B05003D, *Sex by Age by Nativity and Citizenship Status (Asian Alone)* ([https://data.census.gov/table?q=B05003D:+Sex+by+Age+by+Nativity+and+Citizenship+Status+\(Asian+Alone\)&g=050XX00US17031\\$1400000](https://data.census.gov/table?q=B05003D:+Sex+by+Age+by+Nativity+and+Citizenship+Status+(Asian+Alone)&g=050XX00US17031$1400000))
 - This helped us obtain the total Asian population and estimate the total Asian voting eligible population.

- BO2015, Asian Alone by Selected Groups ([https://data.census.gov/table?q=BO2015:+Asian+Alone+by+Selected+Groups&g=050XX00US17031\\$1400000](https://data.census.gov/table?q=BO2015:+Asian+Alone+by+Selected+Groups&g=050XX00US17031$1400000))
 - This table includes individuals who identify as Asian alone and their Asian subgroups. Individuals who exist in some combination with other races or subgroups (for example, BO2018, Asian Alone or in Any Combination by Selected Groups), are more likely to be multilingual. Since the focus of this report is on populations with language access needs, we have assumed that biracial or multiracial individuals are likely to be proficient in English.
 - We then filtered the South Asian population from this dataset. The columns retained included Asian Indian, Pakistani, Nepali, Bhutanese, Bangladeshi, Sikh, Sri Lankan, and Other South Asian. These subgroups were then summed to obtain the total South Asian population.

Estimation of South Asian Voting Eligible Population

Direct data for the South Asian Voting-Eligible Population (VEP) (18+ and U.S. citizens) is not available at the census tract level in standard American Community Survey (ACS) tables.

To address this data gap, a synthetic estimation methodology was employed. This methodology, however, rests on a key assumption: that the age and citizenship profile of the South Asian population matches that of the broader “Asian Alone” population within each census tract.

In other words, we assume the share of adults who are citizens is the same for South Asians as for all Asians in that area. While this is a common and necessary approach for small-population estimates, it remains an important limitation to note, since South Asians may differ from the broader Asian population in terms of nativity, age distribution, or rates of naturalization.

The estimation was conducted in a multi-step process for each census tract.

Step 1: Calculate the proportion of Asians who are South Asian in each census tract

Where:

- Total South Asian Population = Sum of relevant subgroups from ACS Table B02015
- Total Asian Population = Sum of all groups listed under ACS Table B02015

$$P = \frac{\text{Total South Asian Population}}{\text{Total Asian Population}}$$

Step 2: Apply this proportion to the Asian VEP

Where:

- Total Asian VEP = From ACS Table B05003D ("Sex by Age by Citizenship Status for the Asian Alone Population")

$$\text{South Asian VEP Estimate} = P \times \text{Total Asian VEP}$$

Final Formula:

$$\text{South Asian VEP Estimate} = \left(\frac{\text{South Asian Pop}}{\text{Total Asian Pop}} \right) \times \text{Asian VEP}$$

LEP Estimates

Direct cross-tabulated data showing individuals who are South Asian, U.S. citizens, age 18+, and Limited English Proficient (LEP) is not available in standard ACS summary tables. While IPUMS microdata can theoretically enable such cross-tabulations, its geographic limitations at small-area levels (e.g., census tracts) make it unsuitable for this analysis.

Instead, we estimated the adult LEP population using:

1. ACS Table B16004: Age by Language Spoken at Home by Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over (link).

a. [https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2023.B16004?
q=B16004+Age+by+Language+Spoken+at+Home+by+Ability+to+Speak+English+for+the+Population+5+Years+and+Over&g=050XX00US17031\\$1400000](https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2023.B16004?&q=B16004+Age+by+Language+Spoken+at+Home+by+Ability+to+Speak+English+for+the+Population+5+Years+and+Over&g=050XX00US17031$1400000)

We aggregated counts from the columns “Speak English Not Well” and “Speak English Not At All,” filtered for the age categories “18 to 64” and “65 and over”, and summed results for each census tract.

In this dataset, South Asian languages are split into two broad categories:

- Other Indo-European languages (e.g., Hindi, Urdu, Nepali, Gujarati, Punjabi, Bengali)
- Asian and Pacific Island languages (capturing other South Asian languages)

We calculated adult LEP estimates separately for each category. We factored this in areas with a dense SA voting population and areas where the South Asian VEP makes up the majority of the Asian VEP demographic.

Additional Indicator From 2015

In order to find the South Asian language-speaking LEP population, we have used:

1. ACS Table B16001: Language Spoken at Home by Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over. This table, however, is not available at the census tract level after 2015. [https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2015.B16001?q=B16001:+Language+Spoken+at+Home+by+Ability+to+Speak+English+for+the+Population+5+Years+and+Over&g=050XX00US17031\\$1400000](https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2015.B16001?q=B16001:+Language+Spoken+at+Home+by+Ability+to+Speak+English+for+the+Population+5+Years+and+Over&g=050XX00US17031$1400000)
2. SO101 (2015) Age and Sex, filtered for all Census Tracts within Cook County: [https://data.census.gov/table?q=SO101:+Age+and+Sex&g=050XX00US17031\\$1400000&y=2015](https://data.census.gov/table?q=SO101:+Age+and+Sex&g=050XX00US17031$1400000&y=2015)

We chose to incorporate the 2015 data despite its lack of recency because migration data indicates that South Asians in Chicago have not experienced large-scale outmigration since then (SAAPRI Census Report 2024). As a result, the 2015 proportions of the South Asian language-speaking population remain a reasonable proxy for our estimates.

The dataset provides Limited English Proficiency (LEP) counts for Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, and an “Other Indic Languages” category (which includes Nepali, Marathi, and Konkani). Using these categories, we created a baseline estimate of the South Asian LEP population at the tract level.

To refine this estimate, we incorporated the percentage of adult population (provided in ACS Table SO101 (2015)), producing tract-level estimates of the South Asian LEP adult population. However, this estimate is conservative: several additional South Asian languages are reported only within broader Census categories (e.g., “Other Indo-European Languages,” “Other Asian Languages”), making it impossible to fully capture all South Asian LEP individuals.

Spatial Analysis

The spatial analysis was conducted in R, leveraging a suite of packages designed for robust data processing and visualization: `sf` (for spatial data operations), `dplyr` (for data wrangling), `readxl` (for importing source data), and `leaflet` (for interactive mapping).

Spatial Intersection

A spatial intersection was performed between the Illinois census tracts and voting precincts. This operation created a new dataset of smaller, unique polygons representing every area where a tract and precinct overlap. This foundational step ensures that demographic data can be accurately apportioned from the larger tract geography to the smaller, non-aligned precinct geography.

Area-Weighted Estimation

To translate census tract-level data into precinct-level estimates, we used an area-weighted estimation method. This approach was used in the SAAPRI 2015 report as well. This approach was applied to all the demographic variables, including population counts, voter eligibility data, language speakers, and their associated margins of error.

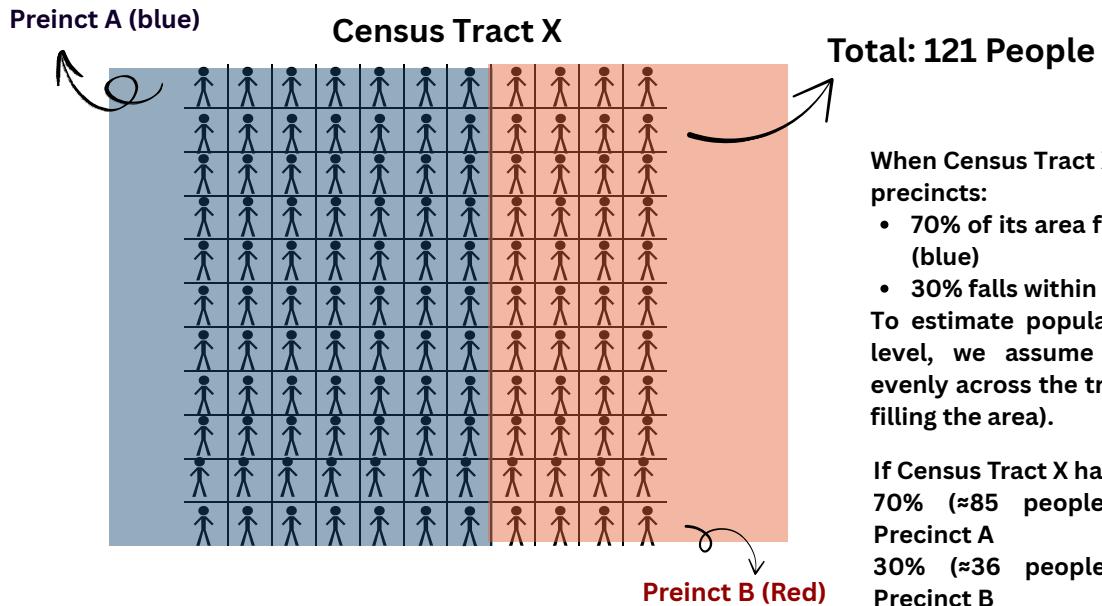
In simple terms, we looked at how much of each census tract's area fell within a given precinct and used that proportion as a "weight." For example, if 30% of a tract's area was inside a precinct, we assumed 30% of that tract's population (and related variables) belonged to the precinct. This method assumes uniform population distribution within each tract, a standard practice in spatial analysis when more precise address-level data is unavailable. Below, we've included a graphic that explains this method.

Aggregation and Outputs

After generating fractional estimates for each tract-precinct overlap, we aggregated them to create a single record for each of Chicago's 1,291 precincts. This produced a complete precinct-level dataset, from which we calculated proportional metrics such as the share of the voter population and the concentration of specific LEP groups. These measures provided the basis for identifying patterns and drawing meaningful conclusions.

Area-Weighted Estimation Explained

Our Assumption



When Census Tract X is overlaid with two precincts:

- 70% of its area falls within Precinct A (blue)
- 30% falls within Precinct B (red)

To estimate population at the precinct level, we assume people are spread evenly across the tract (like tiny squares filling the area).

If Census Tract X has 121 people, then:

70% (≈ 85 people) are assigned to Precinct A

30% (≈ 36 people) are assigned to Precinct B

Reality

Here, as you can see, Census Tract X is overlaid with the same two precincts again. Same truth holds now:

- 70% of its area still falls within Precinct A (blue), and
- 30% falls within Precinct B (red)

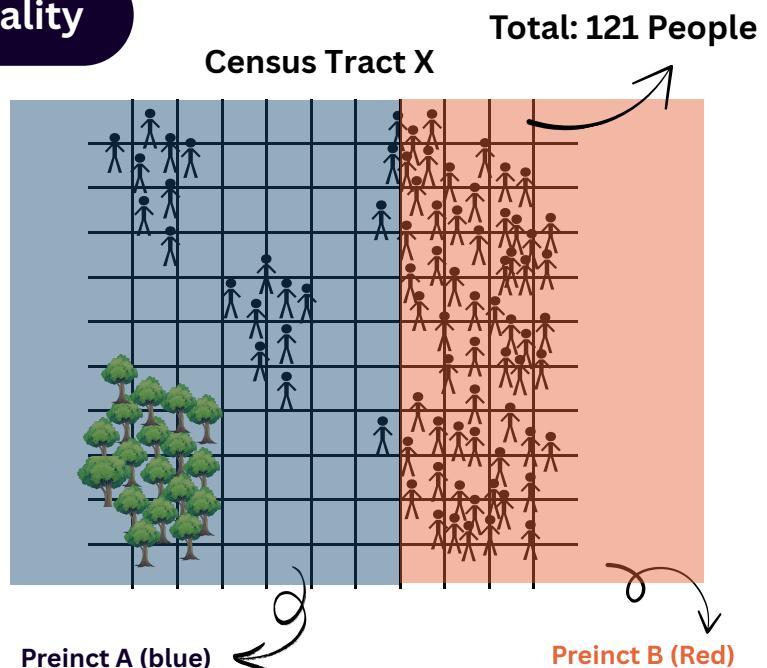
Now, if we estimate the population using the same method, we'd get the same results:

If Census Tract X has 121 people, then:

70% (≈ 85 people) are assigned to Precinct A

30% (≈ 36 people) are assigned to Precinct B

But in reality, this assumption can be misleading. Visually, it's clear that more people are concentrated in the red area than in the blue. Yet, because Precinct A covers 70% of the tract's area, the method assigns 70% of the total population (121) to Precinct A and only 30% to Precinct B, regardless of where residents actually live.



APPENDIX B: Limitations

This analysis relies on several data sources and estimation methods that carry inherent limitations.

First, American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates were used to approximate South Asian population and language needs; these estimates contain margins of error that may be amplified when data are disaggregated to small geographies such as precincts.

Second, the methodology for estimating the South Asian Voting-Eligible Population (VEP) assumes that age and citizenship patterns among South Asians mirror those of the broader Asian population within each census tract. While necessary for producing tract-level estimates, this introduces potential bias if South Asian subgroups differ significantly.

Spatial analysis also required translating tract-level data into precinct-level estimates using an area-weighted method. This approach assumes uniform population distribution within each tract, which may not fully reflect on-the-ground realities.

Finally, Limited English Proficiency (LEP) estimates were derived from broad ACS language categories that group multiple South Asian languages together, limiting the precision of subgroup-level findings.

Despite these limitations, the methods employed represent standard and widely accepted practices for small-area demographic analysis, and they provide the most reliable available estimates for understanding South Asian populations and language access needs at the precinct level.

APPENDIX C: INTERACTIVE MAPS

Explore the Data

Precinct-Level Interactive Map:

Visit our interactive map on GitHub to explore **precinct-level** details on South Asian populations and language access.

<https://saapri.github.io/Chicago-Language-Assistance-Expansion/LAReport-Map.html>

Ward Level Interactive Map:

Visit our interactive map on GitHub to explore **ward-level** details on South Asian populations and language access.

<https://saapri.github.io/Chicago-Language-Assistance-Expansion/LAReport-WardMap.html>

Datasets: To request the full datasets in CSV format, please email your request to anushka@saapri.org or saapri@saapri.org

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