

# **Political Participation Needed to Advance Our Cause**

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The political empowerment of the Filipino American community was the flashpoint at a lively community forum last week.

Under the theme, "Striving Toward an Empowered Filipino American Community," the forum was jointly conducted by 501 (c) (3) organizations, Filipino American for Human Services, Inc. (FAHSI), the Philippine American Friendship Committee (PAFCOM) and the Asian American Legal Defense Fund (AALDEF).

These organizations have greatly contributed to widespread efforts to enjoin more voters to participate in the city election of New York in November. They have separately conducted various activities which disseminate information on voter registration and voter rights.

I served as moderator with a panel of distinguished speakers who scrutinized various aspects of the political participation of the Filipino American community.

It was noted that despite our numbers, Filipino Americans, unlike other ethnic groups, surprisingly do not constitute a solid voting bloc in the city elections of New York, or any electoral exercise for that matter.

Indeed the question is not so much whether there is a Filipino American vote, but rather-- why isn't there a Filipino American vote?

Some speculate that Filipino Americans, unlike other ethnic groups, are better able to assimilate into mainstream American society so that they are less likely to identify with issues that affect Filipinos in America such as immigrant or labor rights, social services, or equal opportunity matters.

We need to change the way we see elections, in general. Unlike most

Americans, we cannot take the right to vote for granted. We need to see any electoral exercise as a chance to empower ourselves as one community with a common interest.

The elections are the chance we get every few years to pursue issues that affect us on a day-to-day basis. Unless, we participate in the political arena as one, we will not be heeded.

It must be emphasized that we have to make our voice heard on such gut-level issues as comprehensive immigration reform that will eliminate tremendous backlogs in family-based immigration, bring into the US essential foreign workers, and deal with the undocumented migrants. It is a rare Filipino American family who is not affected by the decades-long visa processing backlog that has prevented their reunification with children, parents or siblings.

The forthcoming city election in New York, in particular, is a chance for Filipino Americans to establish a political connection with city officials in order to bring forward our concerns, pursue our agenda and obtain access to much-needed services for the youth and elderly among us.

The political empowerment of the Filipino American community does not begin or end in an election. It is a long-drawn out effort to bring together people with different, sometimes even opposing, points of view to see that they have more to gain by collective political action than by a single vote.

We can begin by encouraging more and more Filipino Americans to participate in the elections and to raise their awareness of issues that affect them.

In addition, we must not forget to hold our elected officials accountable for the public trust we give them so that anyone who seeks our vote, will know that our vote is the vote of the Filipino American community.