

**PRESS RELEASE
FOR IMMEDIATE DISTRIBUTION
February 16, 2017**

Contact:

Randy Bunnao

(213) 241-0227

rbunnao@advancingjustice-la.org

ADVANCING JUSTICE – CALIFORNIA LAUDS INTRODUCTION OF ‘CALIFORNIA VOTING FOR ALL ACT’ TO IMPROVE LANGUAGE ACCESS IN CALIFORNIA ELECTIONS

Legislation, authored by Assemblymember Rob Bonta, will make California a nationwide leader on ensuring access to voting for immigrant communities.

SACRAMENTO -- While anti-immigrant rhetoric dominates the national conversation, Asian Americans Advancing Justice - California, composed of two sister organizations Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Asian Law Caucus and Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Los Angeles, has partnered with California Assemblymember Rob Bonta to introduce state legislation to make California's elections dramatically more accessible to limited-English proficient immigrant voters. Assemblymember Bonta is the Chair of the state legislature's Asian Pacific Islander Legislative Caucus.

Introduction of the "California Voting for All Act" (AB 918 - Bonta) will substantially strengthen the language assistance available to voters under state law. The bill will overhaul the use of translated "facsimile" ballots, making them more visible and more useful to limited-English voters. The bill will also hold counties accountable for the provision of bilingual poll workers for the first time and give limited-English voters more translated information about the services available to them.

"For California's democracy to be truly representative, and to grow as the size and diversity of our state grows, California has an obligation to provide the most effective language assistance in elections possible," said Jonathan Stein, staff attorney and voting rights program manager at Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Asian Law Caucus.

"No other state does anything like this," said Deanna Kitamura, staff attorney and voting rights program director at Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Los Angeles. "This bill will make California a nationwide leader in opening up democracy to immigrant communities."

"Voting is a fundamental privilege and duty," said Assemblymember Rob Bonta (D) Oakland, author of AB 918. "When we identify problems with voter access, it's our obligation to act so that every eligible voter can fully participate in their democracy. As the Chair of the Asian Pacific Islander Legislative Caucus, I'm committed to seeing that all voices are heard."

Background: Currently, California's two fastest-growing population groups - Asian Americans and Latinos - are also least likely to vote. Just 18% of eligible Asian Americans and 17% of eligible Latinos turned out to vote in the 2014 general election, compared to 40% of eligible non-Asian Americans and Latinos. Voters' language needs contribute to these stark turnout disparities. Of California's Asian American immigrants, 91% speak a language other than English at home. Of California Latinos, 75% speak Spanish at home. For these communities, effective language assistance in voting may mean the difference between being able to vote and being disenfranchised.

The vast majority of Californians who need language assistance when voting receive it under Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act, which effectively mandates fully bilingual elections when populations that speak non-English languages reach certain thresholds in a county. But California currently fails the 534,000 limited-English residents, including 327,000 Asian Americans and 207,000 Latinos, who live in precincts not covered by Section 203 and who instead receive language access protections under the terms of state law.

State law only requires that a "facsimile" ballot, a replica of an English ballot translated into a particular language, be posted on the wall of a polling place when the limited-English proficient speakers of that language comprise 3% of the precinct. Data from a massive 2016 poll monitoring effort organized by Advancing Justice - California shows that these facsimile ballots are often misplaced or not posted by poll workers. When facsimile ballots are made available, they are often overlooked by voters because elections offices do no public education about them, no signage in the polling place highlights them, and poll workers are not trained on using them. When they are available and are found by voters, they provide an inadequate form of assistance: voters have to vote while referring to a wall posting, denying them a private ballot. Furthermore, facsimile ballots are not available in any form to vote-by-mail voters, an increasing share of the California electorate.

State law also requires, when the same 3% threshold is met in a precinct, that elections offices make "reasonable efforts" to recruit bilingual poll workers to staff the polling places associated with those precincts. "Reasonable efforts" is not defined, leading to dramatically different implementation across counties. The state law does not require that bilingual poll workers be made visible to voters through nametags or polling place signage that identify their language skills.

The California Voting for All Act addresses all of these problems. It would overhaul the use of facsimile ballots in polling places, make facsimile ballots available to vote by mail voters for the first time, make bilingual poll workers significantly more visible to voters who need them, require elections offices to report publicly what success they do or do not have in recruiting bilingual poll workers, and increase the amount of translated voter education elections offices provide before Election Day.

For more information about the California Voting for All Act, please [click here](#).

###

Asian Americans Advancing Justice-California (Advancing Justice - CA) is a joint project of Advancing Justice- Asian Law Caucus and Advancing Justice - Los Angeles.