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Wrench in NYC's Political Machines

BY LISA WONG MACABASCO

New York is set to elect its first Asian American state legislator this November with businessman Jimmy Meng running against Republican Meilin Tan in the Queens borough of District 22.

And while Tan's campaign has gone all but unnoticed in the solidly Democratic district, Meng's upset win in the Democratic primary over incumbent Barry Grodenchik has made him the instant favorite and caused waves nationwide.

Locally, the political machines came on strong for Grodenchik, including New York's first APA city councilman, John Liu. Nationally, Meng's racially charged campaign—and even the strong family effort behind it—pointed to a new phase in Asian American politics.

The district is 51 percent Asian. The vast majority of the Asians are Chinese, and most of them originally emigrated from Taiwan. Asian American turnout in the Flushing neighborhood increased by 20 percent for Meng's election.

"A campaign based on ethnic appeal is something I could never support," Liu said. "The election results were very good in that we saw so many people voting for [the] first time. That always is bet-

ter for [the] democratic process. But, I do regret that the ethnic vote was turned out because of the very [ethnically] charged campaign appeal [by Meng]."

Grodenchik said candidates use whatever they can, including race, to appeal to voters. "Obviously I'd prefer people run on issues," he said. "That's what I tried to do."

Racial tensions tainted the election since the last time the two candidates faced each other in 2002. In that election, Jewish American Grodenchik beat Meng by a mere 126 votes. Afterwards, Meng's 21-year-old daughter, Caroline, was accused of anti-Semitism when she wrote on her website: "It's really sad Asians can't stick together. The Jews stick together and that's why they control everything."

Meng, Grodenchik and Liu denied any existing tension between Jewish Americans and Asian Americans in Flushing. "I don't think there was ever any tension," said Grace Meng, the candidate's other daughter and campaign manager, noting that her father's attorney is Jewish and that the campaign had many Jewish supporters.

Margaret Fung, executive director of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, was critical of Meng, saying he did not run an issues-oriented campaign.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JIMMY MENG

Jimmy Meng

"Every candidate has to decide what strategy he thinks will work to win constituents," Fung said. "An Asian American candidate shouldn't win just because Asians are concentrated in the district," she added. "The issue is who will best represent the interest of Asians in this district."

Grace Meng denied pandering to the ethnicity of Asian voters but said her father highlighted commonalities.

"We spoke with Latino voters, telling them why electing a Chinese American would benefit them,"

Grace said. "Whether it's race, age, profession, you try to explain why your background and platform would benefit them."

Jean Ren, former president of the Chinese Voters Association, said race was not the central issue and that Grodenchik simply did not serve the Flushing community.

"Jimmy deserves it," said Ren, a Republican. "He works hard. He goes to every corner to find out who needs what in Flushing. He really knows the local people and what they want. We don't see Grodenchik doing that for us. John Liu is the one planning and doing things. Grodenchik just stands next to him. He should have his own opinion. He is our speaker, but he's just following whatever John Liu did."

The controversy escalated to charges of voter fraud three weeks before the primary, when *NY1 News* reported that hundreds of voters, mostly Chinese, illegally registered nonresidential addresses.

The 191 fraudulent registrations implicated Meng since they were mostly from Chinese voters and some even registered as residing at Meng's campaign headquarters, a bookstore. However, Carolyn Meng said those addresses have been registered since 2002, implicating Liu's campaign.

"Go ask John Liu about those

false addresses," said Carolyn on election day.

The Board of Elections distributed lists of voters with questionable addresses to precincts in Flushing with instructions to challenge those voters and have them recite an oath that they indeed reside at those addresses. Few voters on the lists actually voted. No formal charges were brought against anyone.

Grace said the situation smacked of discrimination. "The Board of Elections and Grodenchik only decided to focus on Flushing and only Chinese voters," she said. "Obviously, it's a problem, but they should be analyzing it in the entire city—not just Chinese Americans in Flushing."

Meng's victory and Liu's victory in 2001 seem to point to a growing trend of Asian Americans being elected to office in New York City, which is unlikely to stop, according to Grodenchik.

"I think you'll see more and more of that," Grodenchik said. "It's just a natural progression."

"Clearly it's a trend," said Fung, whose group conducts yearly exit polls of Asian Americans. She added that over 50 percent of Asian Americans are registered Democrats.

"Asian American voters are now beginning to resemble New York City as a whole," she said.