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2026 ELECTION

Asian American groups backing James Talarico for Senate say he needs to step up his game

AAPI leaders who have endorsed Talarico point to a new poll first shared with NBC News showing that 50% of Asian voters in Texas know little or nothing about him.

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— U.S. Senate candidate James Talarico during a Texas primary election night event in Austin on March 4.

Jordan Vonderhaar / Bloomberg via Getty Images

By Natasha Korecki

Asian American groups in Texas say they are “sounding the alarm” on Democrat James Talarico’s Senate campaign, warning that if he wants to pull off an upset in Texas in November, he must change course on his outreach to voters in their community.

The warnings came from the three Asian American groups that have endorsed him.

The Asian Texans for Justice Action Fund announced in May that it backed Talarico, a Presbyterian seminarian. But since then, executive director Nabila Mansoor said his campaign has fallen short of reaching Asian voters she said he needs if he is to beat his Republican opponent, Attorney General Ken Paxton. The action fund is the sister group of Asian Texans for Justice, which says it represents more than 1.9 million Asians in the state.

Two other groups that backed Talarico – Asian American Democrats of Texas and the AAPI Victory Fund – also expressed worries to NBC News.

While Talarico has generated excitement in many corners of the state, Mansoor said that with only three months to go to Election Day, community groups do not feel the campaign is connecting with them.

“I think that’s what’s been lacking,” she said.

“He is the best person to win this race, but he will not win this race without the Texas Asian vote,” Mansoor added. “While we are doing everything we can to make sure that we are encouraging folks to vote for our endorsed candidates, there has to be something that’s coming from the campaign to back that up. That’s been a little bit disappointing.”

The Asian Texans for Justice Action Fund [commissioned a poll](#), first shared with NBC News, that it says underscores their worries. The survey, conducted in June by Tom K. Wong, an associate professor of political science and founding director of the U.S. Immigration Policy Center at the University of California San Diego, shows Talarico has a 15-point lead with Asian Texans over Paxton.

But 1 in 3 Asian voters are undecided or hold a preference outside the two-party choice. In addition, the survey shows nearly half of Asian voters in Texas know little or nothing about Talarico, and two-thirds say the Senate candidate needs to do more for their communities before earning their vote.

Those in the survey who identify as Asian include people of Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Pakistani and Taiwanese descent. In the poll, the electorate is nearly evenly divided among Democrats, Republicans and independents.

Lakshmi Ramakrishnan, who serves as secretary of the Asian American Democrats of Texas, said the Asian community in Texas feels as if it [has been under assault](#), including from those protesting mosque construction in parts of the state and a Republican platform that is [falsely claiming Muslims](#) are trying to widely [impose Shariah](#). This year, Paxton [asked a court](#) to designate one of the largest Muslim advocacy groups in the country, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a terror group.

While she said she agrees with some of Talarico's messages, she wants to see him more in the fight.

"The rhetoric, the idea that you can make our communities into a bogeyman. We are the fodder. We are the meat that they throw to get votes," she said of some Republican campaigns. "When there are Asian American communities that are being attacked, it would be nice to hear more from the statewide candidate pushing back against hate that we are experiencing."

Ramakrishnan drew parallels between today and Beto O'Rourke's 2018 Senate run. While O'Rourke ultimately lost, she said he was far more visible in Asian communities than Talarico.

"We endorsed him [Talarico] in the primaries in part because we asked every candidate: 'What is your commitment to Asian American communities?' And he actually did have concrete thoughts on it," she said. "But it's like, OK, we're still waiting a little bit for those commitments that he made when we endorsed him in the primary."

She did praise Talarico for a planned event this week in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and said she remained "optimistic" that he would do more as the campaign accelerates in the fall.

Some allies, meanwhile, praised Talarico's ties to the community. And his campaign noted it has held roundtables and discussions with Asian Americans, including talking to Asian American and Pacific Islander political caucuses in the state; hosting an AAPI fundraiser in Houston; and for the "community engagement event" with AAPI leaders and community members that is scheduled this week at a locally owned Asian restaurant in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. There are 100 RSVPs so far, according to the campaign.

"James has fought tirelessly for Texas' AAPI community in the Texas House and will build on that record in the U.S. Senate," Talarico spokesman JT Ennis said. "He has spoken out against anti-Asian and Islamophobic hate, hosted several community engagements with AAPI Texans, and is

endorsed by AAPI candidates across Texas. James knows in order to win Texas, we can't take any community for granted – and that includes AAPI Texans."

Talarico has said that his campaign is in the "teenager" phase and that he planned to do many more events in the run-up to Election Day.

Texas House Minority Leader Gene Wu, who has served as a leader in the AAPI community, also underscored Talarico's contributions, saying that he has "consistently shown up for Asian Americans in Texas."

"For over a decade, I've been fighting to defend Asian Americans against increasing attacks from Republicans, and James has been one of only a few members who have stood and fought with our community every single time," Wu said in a statement to NBC News. "I've seen it with my own eyes – on the House floor, in our neighborhoods, and on this campaign, where he's held roundtable after roundtable, met with AAPI leaders in every corner of this state, and stood with our community to celebrate Lunar New Year, and so much more. Anyone claiming James hasn't engaged Asian Texans simply hasn't been paying attention."

Zo Qadri, who is running for re-election as an Austin City Council member, said he has always been able to count on Talarico's outreach. He cited a time after the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel when Qadri, who is Muslim and of Pakistani descent, said his community was under assault. He said mosques were desecrated, people became vulgar and the situation devolved into his receiving death threats. Talarico made sure Qadri and others knew they had their back, he said.

"At times when things like that happen, not everyone is reaching out. Not everyone's checking in. Him doing that – it was a consistent presence – and it just meant a lot to me and the folks in my community," he said.

The complaints emanating from some Asian groups come as outside polls show a tight Texas Senate race. A trio of consecutive surveys [indicated a margin-of-error race](#) with Talarico holding a slight lead. Talarico's star rose early, leading him to [raise more than \\$70 million](#) compared with \$16.8 million by Paxton since 2025. Still, pulling off a victory is a tall order; a Democrat has not won a statewide race in Texas in more than three decades.

Becca DeFelice, the Texas state adviser for the AAPI Victory Fund, a national advocacy group, said that was all the more reason not to leave "any votes on the table."

DeFelice said, historically, the Asian American community gets forgotten as politicians focus on Black and Latino voters. DeFelice said the campaign should invest more with local community

groups who can help get out the vote and promote Talarico's message. She said the community would also like to see the campaign do more town halls, improve messaging that speaks directly to specific concerns in the community and increase visibility around issues facing Muslims – perhaps including a visit to a mosque.

“We need to see that a candidate is actually working to build trust within the community, that they're working to earn those votes. And I think that sometimes campaigns can kind of get pulled in every direction, especially in a state this size,” DeFelice said. “There's a lot of media attention on ‘We have to win back the Latino and Hispanic vote,’ and you're seeing a very concerted effort there. There's not necessarily a lot of attention on the fact that Asian voters are a huge voting bloc.”

About 2 million people in Texas identify as Asian, [according to the U.S. Census Bureau](#). They aren't the largest demographic group: [Hispanics make up the greatest share](#) of Texas' population. There are also more than 4.3 million [African Americans in Texas](#), the biggest Black population of any state, [according to the Pew Research Center](#).

But [Asian Americans](#) are the [fastest-growing group](#), according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In January, [Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research published a study](#) showing snapshots of that upward trend, including two counties that have some of the largest Asian populations in the state.

From 2010 to 2023, the Asian population in Fort Bend County – one of the fastest-growing counties in the nation – surged by 117%. In Montgomery County, which is part of the Houston metropolitan area, the Asian population grew by 180% in the same time period. Asians in Texas [have demonstrated](#) mixed political leanings.

As the numbers have risen, so too have issues facing the communities. That includes heightened Islamophobia and anti-Chinese sentiment, Mansoor said. She charged that Paxton's decisions as attorney general have further exacerbated the issue, including [backing a block on school vouchers](#) going to Islamic schools.

Paxton's campaign did not return a request for comment.

More broadly, Muslim groups have complained that [Republicans focused on anti-Islamic messaging](#) in their primaries earlier this year, including with some saying falsely that the groups were [attempting to impose Shariah](#) on those not practicing the Muslim faith in the state. In June, some Muslim attendees at a Republican Party convention [were told to convert or leave](#). Texas also passed [a law last year that banned Chinese individuals](#) from buying or renting certain properties in the state, a move that advocates said fanned the flames of racism.

Nick Rathod, who worked as the campaign manager for Beto O'Rourke's unsuccessful 2022 Texas gubernatorial run and is now vice president of strategy operations and donor engagement with the national AAPI Victory Fund, said Talarico still has the opportunity to engage but warned he was "running out of time."

"He's unknown. He is going to have to overcome that for them to actually come and turn out to vote. And that's where this engagement really needs to ramp up within the campaign, because there is an opportunity, but he has to really take advantage of it," Rathod said. "Without doing that, I just don't see a path to victory."



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