

The Tanaka Campaign:  
A Study of Challenging Incumbency and  
Utilizing Local Politics

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## **Introduction**

On June 7, 2022, the California Primary Elections took place to build a ticket for a number of general elections taking place in November. These elections include races for governor, city mayors, House of Representative seats, and Controller. In studying a single campaign, there is an opportunity to dig into a California election. This paper will examine the race of Greg Tanaka, focusing on history, data, messaging, and organization.

Greg Tanaka is a Los Angeles native and Caltech alumni who ran for Congress as a Democrat in California District 16. According to his website, Tanaka has nearly 15 years of experience in local politics and at least seven years of experience in the business and technology industries. Tanaka was first elected to Palo Alto City Council in 2016 and was reelected in 2020. Tanaka advocates for business-friendly legislation, and promotes himself as a representative of Silicon Valley, looking to aid restoration in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to his campaign website, Tanaka's priorities focus on justice, the environment, and the economy (*Greg Tanaka*).

## **Campaign History**

### *The Tanaka Campaign*

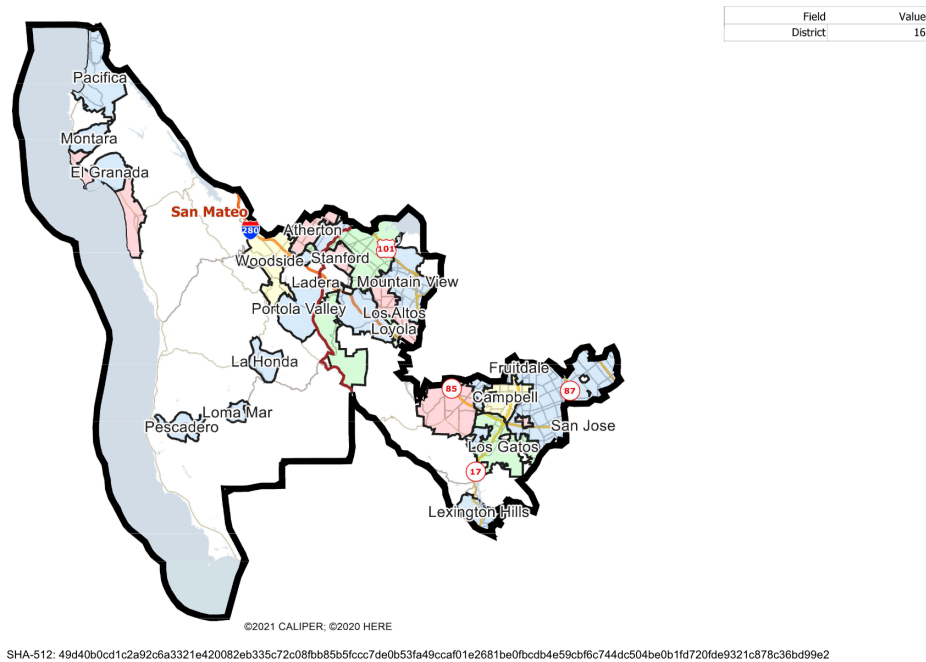
Previous to the 2022 campaign, Greg Tanaka's most recent campaign was the 2020 City Council Race. On November 3, 2020, Tanaka was awarded 9,043 votes to win reelection onto the council (Rubin). Still available on his website is Tanaka's 2020 City Council campaign page.

Immediately clicking onto this page presents a video ad made by Tanaka, which first humanizes him by bringing up his background, with his personal and financial struggles. The ad then proceeds to present the problem Tanaka chose to base his campaign around, the public health crisis due to COVID-19. By showing articles and video clips of his past work, Tanaka establishes his credibility and experience. Just below this video is an area to donate money, a biography, and a link to his endorsements, which include elected officials, community members, and organizations. At the bottom of the campaign page, there is a link to his governing plan, which includes policies he supported and legislation he wanted to pass, for areas such as budget shortfalls, public safety, and sustainability (*Greg Tanaka*).

#### *District Demographics and Voter Registration*

Tanaka's congressional campaign is in the 16th district in California, pictured below. However, after the 2020 Census, California was redistricted, so the current 16th district contains much of the same areas as the old 18th district. Both districts contained large parts of San Mateo, Santa Cruz, and Santa Clara counties. District 16 has a total population of 760,067 people and includes cities such as Pacifica, Stanford, San Jose, and Pescadero. Of this population, 56.69% are white, 25.45% are Asian, 13.68% are Latino, and 2.46% are black (*Final Maps*).

California Congressional Districts  
**District: 16**



*Figure 1: Congressional District 16*

According to the most recent records from the Secretary of State, within the three counties included in District 16, 1,603,348 of the 1,989,763 eligible voters are registered. Below is a table of statistics drawn from the voter registration data of the Secretary of State. While these statistics include people outside the district, as only parts of the counties are actually included in the district, this is an adequate predictor of district statistics, leading to an estimated 80.58% registration rate in District 16. Of these voters, about 53.06% are registered as Democrats and 15.59% as Republicans. An additional 26.61% of voters are registered with no party preference. Since 2012, voter eligibility has increased by about 11% while voter registration has increased by nearly twice this amount, suggesting an increase in political interest among the population (or implementation of automatic voter registration). During this same time period, Republican

registration has decreased by an estimated 7% while Democrat registration has increased by nearly 33% (*Voter registration*).

Year	Total Eligible	Registered	Democratic	Republican	No Party Preference	American Independent	Green	Libertarian	Other
2022	1989763	1603348	850724	250036	426648	39762	6796	13146	16246
2020	1895439	1633128	847559	260315	440985	36571	6564	12420	13961
2018	1905909	1444614	691566	236051	462756	29215	7088	9859	8079
2016	1887351	1428290	706249	262374	406149	29842	7642	9547	6487
2014	1836585	1303416	614977	265445	370318	28175	9473	8420	6608
2012	1785103	1337577	644314	276283	364752	28223	10026	7889	7360

Figure 2: Voter Registration Statistics

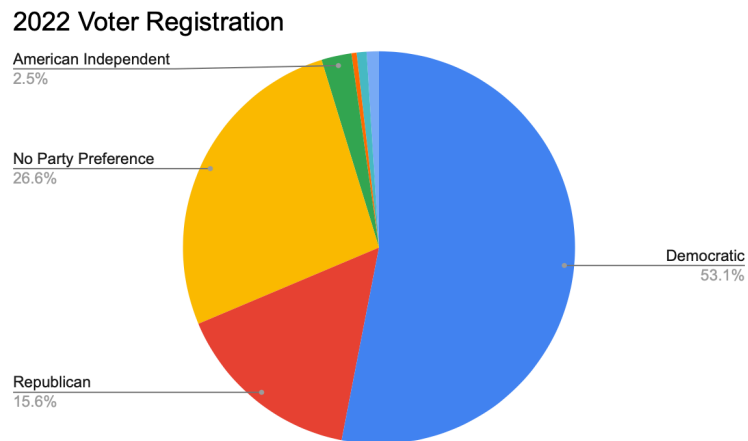


Figure 3: 2022 Voter Registration

### Past Elections

The incumbent of District 16 is Democrat Jim Costa (*Jim Costa*). However, due to redistricting, the most applicable incumbent to consider is Anna Eshoo from District 18, who represents similar areas of San Mateo, Santa Cruz, and Santa Clara counties as the new District 16. In the November 2020 general election, Anna Eshoo defeated her opponent Rishi Kumar with 157,044 votes to 97,964 votes, a win with a 23-point margin. In this election, Eshoo lost only 19 of the 203 voting precincts, of which most losses were only by a few votes. In this election, 240,914 of the votes were mail-in and 13,824 votes were election day votes (*18th Congressional District*).

## **Election Diagnostics**

### *Election Analysis*

On November 6, 2012, Anna Eshoo defeated incumbent Dennis Cardoza in the congressional race for District 18, a district known for being well above the national average in its population of Democratic voters (*California's 18th*). Since this election, Eshoo has won every following election to defend her seat, often by double-digit point margins. As a newcomer, Greg Tanaka seeks to challenge Eshoo's hold on her congressional seat, however, Tanaka faces many challenges. Because of Eshoo's long record and public history, she will be endeared in the minds of the voters, either simply through long-exposure bias or through actual documented support. Meanwhile, Tanaka only holds name recognition from his terms as a city councilor, and as such it will be harder for voters to trust him. Additionally, Eshoo continues to be the candidate with the highest campaign funding, outpacing her competitors by over \$1 million (*Anna Eshoo Campaign Finance*). Despite these disadvantages, Tanaka hopes to make a strong competitor and his chances for which are analyzed below.

### *Variables*

In building a forecasting model, there needs to be strong consideration of which variables to consider, to determine which can shape an election and which can be shaped by potential candidates. Additionally, data must be tracked over a long period of time in order to make it viable, as more data points ensure variation follows a pattern rather than randomness. Tracking over the past five election cycles (2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020) will help showcase a pattern over data that can be used for prediction in the upcoming 2022 election.

Because of her position as the most powerful competitor, Anna Eshoo's vote share creates a perfect dependent variable, as her extensive history allows for pattern building and her result can determine the likelihood that other candidates can trump her. By managing to predict a very low vote share for Eshoo, bringing her down to a hopeful 20-30%, this allows for nearly 40 points to accumulate for another candidate, such as Greg Tanaka.

Meanwhile, the independent variables must be malleable to candidate influence and must have a known effect on election results. As such, for this model, the independent variables are voter turnout, Democratic registration rates, and campaign finance. Voter turnout, in this case measured as the percentage of votes cast versus the number of registered voters, is a powerful tool in forecasting elections as an influx or decrease in votes can result in a change in vote share for the candidates. Democratic registration, or the percentage of voters registered as Democrats, will help examine the importance of party in elections, especially as this district moves from classic bipartisan elections towards an open primary of candidates from both parties. Finally, campaign finance, measured as the percent difference in fundraising between Eshoo and her largest competitor, will acknowledge the variation in outreach strategies, as campaigning costs money, oftentimes requiring much of it to be effective.

### *Forecasting Model*

In the model, the scale of the variables must remain consistent so that they can be compared to each other. As such, all variables will be noted as percentages of a whole and are relevant to the district-wide data. This will create a forecasting model that predicts for the entire district,

however, it will be less susceptible to extreme changes within a single precinct, which can happen in actuality. As a note, because of the lack of campaign finance history for Christine Russel, Eshoo's opponent in 2018, her money raised was taken as the money for the next greatest competitor, Michale Mellilo, who raised \$0 according to the Federal Exchange Commission (2018 Election).

The final data, presented in the figure below, was used with a linear regression model to determine the relationship between each independent variable and its effect on the dependent variable. Additionally, because voter turnout for the 2022 election is unknown, this can also be predicted using democrat registration as an independent variable. The resulting equations follow:

$$(1) \textit{Turnout} = -0.1413 + 2.8547(\textit{Dem Reg})$$

$$(2) \textit{Vote Share} = 0.4788 + 0.2656(\textit{Turnout}) - 0.3329(\textit{Dem Reg}) + 0.1820(\textit{Finance})$$

As evidenced in equation (1), voter turnout has a large, positive correlation with democratic registration, so candidates hoping to increase turnout should increase Democratic registration rates. Additionally, according to equation (2), Eshoo's vote share increases with increasing turnout and financing discrepancies, however decreases, with greatest correlation, as Democratic registration decreases. In reference to the validity of the equation (2) model, two values are important to consider. The R-squared value, which measures how closely the data follows the linear trend, 0.902, which is very close to 1 so the model is a strong representation of the data. The error for this model was 0.0264, meaning the data was on average 0.0246 units away from the model, a very small measure. These values ensure that the model is reliable and accurate to the data.

Year	Eshoo Vote Share	Voter Turnout	Democrat Registration	Campaign Finance
2022	-	-	0.54	0.927
2020	0.632	0.772	0.511	0.682
2018	0.745	0.745	0.466	1
2016	0.711	0.796	0.475	0.986
2014	0.678	0.523	0.451	0.972
2012	0.705	0.829	0.454	0.857

*Figure 4. Model Data*

Using equation (1) and plugging in current Democratic registration statistics from the Secretary of State, in which 54% of registered voters are Democrats, expected turnout is 86%. Using this value, along with the aforementioned Democratic registration as well as the difference between Eshoo and Tanaka's current fundraising, the predicted vote share for Anna Eshoo in the 2022 election is 69.62%.

### *Recommendations*

In order for Greg Tanaka to win the District 18 congressional seat, he must decrease Anna Eshoo's predicted vote share. There are multiple methods of doing so. If Greg Tanaka were to match Eshoo's fundraising, both raising over \$1.3 million, this would decrease the finance discrepancy variable to zero, resulting in Eshoo's vote share being 52.75%, an impressive 17-point drop. Additionally, decreasing democratic registration will decrease voter turnout and Eshoo's vote share. For example, by bringing democratic registration down to 25%, Eshoo's vote share drops four points to 65%. By combining these two methods, Eshoo's vote share drops 48.1%. Ultimately, Tanaka has an ability to manipulate the votes received by Anna Eshoo, thereby increasing his own vote share. By changing the independent factors measured here, most effectively by increasing fundraising, Tanaka would be able to decrease Eshoo's strength as a

candidate. Additionally, there are factors not measured under this model, such as outreach and public opinion, which may also provide avenues towards congressional victory.

## **Message Development**

### *Tanaka Website Messaging*

As a newcomer to a race against a well-established incumbent, Tanaka must convince the voter that making a change in representation is needed and that he is the best candidate to replace the incumbent, Anna Eshoo. To achieve this, Tanaka's website showcases the problems facing Americans today, in an attempt to mobilize voters towards wanting a change. By including a picture of a protest against Asian hate and discussing economic issues facing the area, Tanaka reminds voters that Eshoo has not solved every problem during her tenure as a congresswoman, subtly influencing voters to have a less favorable opinion of Eshoo. Additionally, Tanaka calls himself a visionary, offering detailed plans for solving issues facing Americans, including improvement of voting systems, environmental plans, and economic reforms (*Greg Tanaka*). By presenting himself as an agent of change in the minds of voters, Tanaka provides himself as a viable candidate in place of Eshoo.

In another attempt to distance himself from Eshoo, Tanaka's messaging seems to reference the age discrepancy between the two candidates, as Eshoo is 79 and Tanaka is 42. Tanaka's main slogan is that he is a "legislator for the digital age" (*Greg Tanaka*). The website continually references Silicon Valley and the changing digital landscape, both of which are more regularly associated with younger people. In an area where workers in large companies tend to be a decade

younger than the national average, voters may be more receptive to a candidate who represents these demographics (Swartz). Additionally, age in politics has become a conversation nationally, in reference to the physical and mental health of candidates, such as Donald Trump's susceptibility to COVID-19 and concerns over Joe Biden's mental capabilities, as well as in reference to the lack of representation, as the average age of congressional representatives is 57.6 years old, nearly twenty years over the national average ("Research Guides"). By referencing this in his messaging, Tanaka presents himself as the young, proactive candidate for a congressional seat.

Tanaka's messaging also seeks to endear him towards some of the more cynical voters, who may see politicians as inherently corrupt. Tanaka explains his past and current commitments to transparency and public accountability in his campaigns and tenures in office, through measures such as holding open office hours. Tanaka pledges in a slogan to "make Congress work for you," explicitly condemning current congress for its failings in making legislation in the best interest of the American people (*Greg Tanaka*). Tanaka recenters congress as public servants, reminding voters of the importance of a quality representative while offering himself as this candidate.

During a tumultuous and polarizing political period, Tanaka appeals to the voter who resents the status quo, promising change to any who vote for him.

### *Competition Messaging*

Greg Tanaka's greatest competition in the upcoming election is incumbent Anna Eshoo, looking to secure her sixth consecutive congressional seat. Eshoo's campaign website, which, inconveniently, appears as the second result in a google search, is simple in nature. It opens with

a single picture of Eshoo and a statement of her intent to run for reelection. Under the tab labeled “About” is a quick biography followed by drop-down menus explaining Eshoo’s experience in public policy, as well as the awards and honors she has received. Under the issues tab, Eshoo repeatedly emphasizes her desire to protect democracy, followed by secondary desires to strengthen the economy and protect voters’ rights. In the description of her issue stances, Eshoo repeatedly emphasizes her past votes and bills, highlighting her experience with current policy (*Anna Eshoo for Congress*). Overall, Eshoo relies on name recognition and political experience to convince District 16 to vote for her, rather than a flashy, wordy website and promises for change. While Tanaka must convince the voter that not only is he a good candidate, but that Eshoo is a bad one, Eshoo only has to convince voters that she has done a good job so far, and could continue to do so. As such, she allows for her past to speak for her future, while Tanaka emphasizes change and his possibility of doing good.

### *SWOT Analysis*

Below is a SWOT analysis of Greg Tanaka’s campaign messaging, meant to illustrate the successes and failings. After the table is a written explanation for each of the four categories, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

<p><b>Strengths:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clear and direct</li> <li>- Young</li> <li>- Entrepreneurial experience</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weaknesses:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Overly wordy</li> <li>- Lower funding</li> <li>- Lacking key endorsements</li> </ul>
<p><b>Opportunities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Competition’s legislation record</li> <li>- Shifting attitudes</li> </ul>	<p><b>Threats:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Complacent voters</li> <li>- Experienced competition</li> </ul>

Greg Tanaka's campaign messaging has many strengths. Tanaka is clear and direct, that is, he provides a voter with the exact information about himself, what he stands for, and what he hopes to achieve if elected. Tanaka does not diffuse or obfuscate, instead he declares where congress has failed and how he plans to change this. Additionally, as discussed previously, Tanaka is young, which appeals to a great number of voters. Finally, Tanaka also has entrepreneurial experience, lending credibility to his economic policies, which are especially crucial in the wake of the COVID-19 economic turmoil. Also, the voter base in District 16 is centered in Silicon Valley, an area of hopeful entrepreneurs and hardworking people, who will appreciate a candidate with these same qualities.

However, it is important to acknowledge the weaknesses of a candidate. As a relatively unknown candidate, Tanaka has much more information he must convey to the voters, leading to a much wordier campaign website. This may be unappealing to voters seeking ease of information. Additionally, Tanaka has much lower funding than his competition. This limits his messaging abilities, as he cannot spend as much on advertising, so Tanaka may not be able to reach every prospective voter. Another weakness is Tanaka's lack of key endorsements. Tanaka's endorsement list contains names such as ex-presidential candidate Andrew Yang as well as a long list of relatively unknown local leaders (*Greg Tanaka*). Meanwhile, Anna Eshoo is supported by the California Democratic Party, Planned Parenthood, Nancy Pelosi, Gavin Newsome, and a plethora of other national and local people of importance (*Anna Eshoo for Congress*). This evident disparity may cause distrust or unease for the voters, especially uninformed voters looking to make an easy decision.

Despite his weaknesses, there are multiple external opportunities Greg Tanaka can take advantage of to convince the public to support him. According to her Twitter account, Anna Eshoo's most recent bills she introduced either offer condolences to the families of people who passed during the pandemic, a kind but ultimately empty gesture, or aim to enforce sound level restrictions on TV advertisements ("Rep. Anna G. Eshoo"). Given current political concerns by Americans, who worry mainly about rapid inflation, issue politics, and climate resolutions, Eshoo's work can seem inconsequential or lacking. By bringing this to light and promising to be different, Tanaka can convince voters that Eshoo is ineffective and promise change for his own tenure in office. In addition, shifting attitudes towards the current politicians, as both the President and Congress's approval ratings are low, allow Tanaka an opportunity to present himself as an alternative. As voters become more disillusioned with their current representatives, they will seek out different options, and as such Tanaka must prove himself to be the best of the candidates.

Finally, there are a few threats to Tanaka's campaign. Some voters may be complacent, not looking to make changes or even too uncaring to worry about a congressional seat during a midterm election. These voters will oftentimes vote for the incumbent, or not at all, leading to lower voter turnout and denying Tanaka key votes. Tanaka must overcome this with his messaging and convince people of the importance of electing a new official into office. Also, while Eshoo's recent legislation may be lacking, her experience is an asset. Some voters may prefer a candidate who knows and understands the political arena, while Tanaka, who has only worked in local positions, can seem untested and unready for a national office. Eshoo's

experience also extends to campaigns, as she has won in the last five. As such, she creates a formidable opponent, who clearly knows how to win over potential voters.

## **Organizational Strategy**

### *Internal Structure*

Greg Tanaka's campaign is structured into different teams, each with a team lead, that manage a specific role within the campaign. These teams include human resources, data analysis, policy, event management, social media, content creation, canvassing, website/email, fundraising, and endorsements. Beyond this campaign organization, which included roles such as outreach specialists and a campaign manager, Tanaka also relies on voluntary help from community members and students. On his website, there is a tab dedicated to volunteer sign-ups, where people can offer their time to host online campaign events, pitch yard signs, and even become a social media ambassador for the campaign (*Greg Tanaka*). Additionally, Tanaka offers an internship program which gives part-time and full-time students incredible experience in working on political campaigns. These internships fill a variety of roles within the campaign, such as data analysis, social media, or even policy ("Virtual Congressional Campaign Internship").

### *Partners*

Tanaka's campaign relies on a number of outside partnerships to expand his network and contact his constituents. On his Facebook page, Tanaka posts a number of video endorsements, a number of which are from his fellow City Council members ("Greg Lin Tanaka"). By leaning on his

established connections in local politics, Tanaka is able to show his efficacy as a leader and public servant, as the people supporting him are all well-respected members of the community. Tanaka also relies on cultural connections for his campaign, as he was invited by Anamatangi Polynesian Voices to attend their 25th anniversary heritage festival. Tanaka also attended the Eid festival organized by American Muslim Voice Foundation (“Greg Lin Tanaka”). By taking part in cultural celebrations, Tanaka is able to show possible voters that he cares about them, their lives, and their beliefs, rather than just seeing them as votes.

Tanaka also has a few partnerships with nonlocal organizations. After being endorsed by Andrew Yang, Tanaka is partnered with the Forward Party (*Greg Tanaka*). This partnership makes Tanaka a more progressive, nonpartisan candidate who stands for change, as the slogan of the Forward Party is “Not Left, Not Right, Forward” (*Forward Party*). By cultivating this partnership, Tanaka is able to differentiate himself from long-time incumbent Anna Eshoo as a challenger looking for change. Tanaka is also partnered with BitBoy Crypto, a news organization that seeks to inform the public about anything relating to cryptocurrency (“About Us”). This partnership leads Tanaka to advocate for cryptocurrency, loudly and explicitly, a popular stance among tech moguls in Silicon Valley.

## **Electoral Democracy Reflection**

### *State of American Electoral Democracy*

American democracy has long been held as unshakeable, an immovable object against the unstoppable force of fascism and evil. However, in recent years, evidence has begun to suggest

that this perception is not as true as Americans once believed. There were concerns of Russian collusion in the 2016 election, followed by partisan attempts to undermine state and federal elections through claims of voter fraud, and recently peaking in the January 6th insurrection in Washington DC, an attempt to prevent the certification of the 2020 presidential election. The foundations of American democracy are in jeopardy.

### *Challenges for the Future*

Several challenges arise from the failings of American democracy. One matter to address is the low voter turnouts. The 2020 presidential election, which saw the highest voter turnout of the 21st century, still only had 66.8% of eligible citizens voting (US Census Bureau). Without full voter participation, there will not be an accurate gauge of Americans' beliefs and desires in government. In order to address this, there are many proposed actions that could occur.

Instituting automatic voter registration will increase turnout, as will creating easier pathways to voting, such as a national holiday on voting day, paid time off, or federal mail-in ballots.

Another challenge to address is the deliberate attacks on voting systems. Recent reports have come out stating that party-trained poll-workers are being placed in opposing precincts to challenge voters, partnered with lawyers ready to challenge vote counts and election certifications (Blake). Efforts must be made to ensure elections are fair and accurate to the voters, and that certifications are made with surety and not overturned by hearsay. With the January 6th congressional hearings, the Department of Justice is tasked with not only determining the cause and legality of the insurrection but also with setting a precedent for how similar situations can be addressed.

However, the most important challenge facing lawmakers is the lack of faith in American electoral systems. American democracy relies on the assumption that it is unbiased, or at least not biased to the point of fascism, and without the trust of the people, the entire system will fall apart. Misinformation campaigns such as the Republicans' "Big Lie," which alleges that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump illegally and should not have been awarded to Biden, only strengthen the popular distrust of political systems.

## **Conclusion**

Greg Tanaka's campaign was the story of an underdog vying to take down a well-established, long-time member of the House of Representatives. By emphasizing age and policy differences, as well as presenting his own strengths, Tanaka worked to grab control of the election.

Ultimately, despite his extensive community outreach, strong political and local partnerships, and expression of cultural and economic interests, Tanaka's efforts yielded only mild success. With 68% of precincts reporting, Greg Tanaka was awarded 4,898 votes, a 6.1% vote share, placing him in 5th behind Incumbent Anna Eshoo, Democrat Rishi Kumar, and Republicans Peter Ohtaki and Richard Fox (*"California 16th Congressional"*).

Tanaka fell short in the election for several reasons. His name recognition was significantly lower than that of the incumbent, as well as the other challengers who had previously run against Eshoo for the congressional seat. Tanaka recorded lower fundraising, decreasing his ability to pay for outreach and exposure. Additionally, some of the issues Tanaka was campaigning on are

more divisive to voters, such as nuclear power as a renewable energy source. By running on a more polarizing platform, Tanaka lost potential voters who may strongly oppose one aspect of his platform despite agreeing with its other facets. Also, Tanaka lost out on key endorsements, such as the California Democratic Party's endorsement of Eshoo.

While Tanaka may have lost this election, he has increased his name recognition within his district and also built strong partnerships locally that he may be able to nourish. Looking towards the future, Tanaka has great potential to run for this position again or another position within local and federal politics. Tanaka can learn from this campaign to make his next attempt successful. Not every campaign will be a success, but there will be information and skills to learn from each one, including Tanaka's 2022 District 16 congressional run.

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