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The Asian American Electorate in 2012: Estimates of Voter Registration in Eleven Massachusetts Cities and Towns


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The Asian American Electorate in 2012

Estimates of Voter Registration in Eleven Massachusetts Cities and Towns

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Massachusetts' Asian American community continues to grow rapidly¹ and accordingly Asian American electoral participation increases in importance. Voting is a vehicle to expand opportunities and to enhance their role in the selection of public officials and influencing public policies. This participation, however, does not come easily for some groups and especially for those with a large immigrant component such as the Asian American populations. To be eligible to vote, adult residents must be United States citizens by birth or naturalization, but that is not enough—citizens must also be registered to vote.

This report provides detailed estimates of voter registration by Asian Americans in Massachusetts. Specifically it includes analysis by the Institute for Asian American Studies (IAAS) of recent data² from the eleven cities and towns in Massachusetts with the largest voting age Asian American populations.³ The sizes of these populations range from 4,468 in Lynn to 48,017 in Boston. Data from this report will at times be compared to data from a similar IAAS study that was released in 2004.⁴

The information on voter registration is organized into three parts. The first section includes two different measures of voter registration: 1. the registration rate for Asian Americans of voting age, and 2. the registration rate for Asian Americans of voting age who are citizens. The second section examines the consequences of voter registration rates on actual and potential Asian American electoral influence by looking at: 1. the Asian American share of the voting age population, 2. the Asian American share of voting age citizens, and 3. the Asian American share of registered voters. The final section provides data on the party affiliations of Asian Americans who are registered to vote.

¹ From 2000 to 2010, the Asian American population in Massachusetts increased by 46.9%. (Census 2010 Summary File 1 and Census 2000 Summary File 1). In reporting U.S. Census data in this study, the “Asian alone” category is used. Consequently, the most conservative figures for the number of Asian Americans in various population groups are employed in this analysis.

² 2012 city and town resident lists are utilized for voter registration information. 2010 U.S. Census and 2006-2010 ACS five year data are utilized for calculations based on voting age and adult citizen populations. See the section on methodology for further discussion about how these databases were utilized for this study.

³ Boston, Brookline, Cambridge, Lowell, Lynn, Malden, Newton, Quincy, Somerville, Waltham, and Worcester.

⁴ Paul Y. Watanabe and Michael Liu. *Enabling the Asian American Electorate: 2003 Voter Registration in Eleven Massachusetts Cities and Towns*. Boston: Institute for Asian American Studies, 2004.



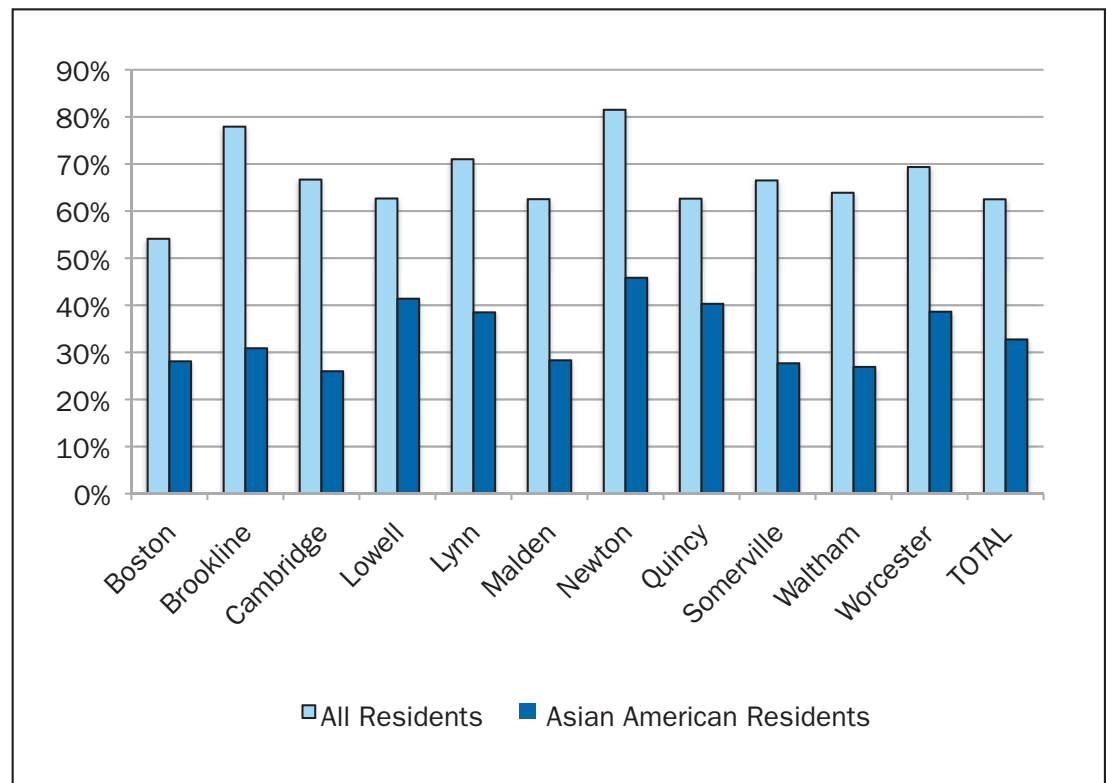
I. Asian American Voter Registration Rates

1. Rates for the Voting Age Population

The first requirement to register to vote is to be at least 18 years of age. Table 1 and figure 1 indicate that for the combined eleven cities and towns, 32.7% of Asian Americans of voting age were registered to vote.⁵ In comparison, for all adults residing in these cities and towns, 62.5% were registered to vote. The Asian American registration rate in 2004 was 25.5%.

Table 1 and figure 1 also show that the estimated registration rates for Asian Americans of voting age varied considerably by city or town. Newton, 45.8%, Lowell, 41.4%, and Quincy, 40.3%, stood alone with Asian American registration rates utilizing this measure that were over 40%. Worcester, 38.6%, Lynn, 38.5%, and Brookline, 30.9%, had rates over 30%. The cities with the lowest rates for Asian Americans were Malden, 28.3%, Boston, 28.1%, Somerville, 27.7%, Waltham, 26.9%, and Cambridge, 26%. In every city and town, the Asian American registration rates for those of voting age trailed the rates for the total voting age population by considerable margins.

Figure 1. Voter Registration Rates: Voting Age Population



⁵ Nationally 34.1% of Asian Americans of voting age were registered to vote in 2010. (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2010)

Table 1. Voter Registration Rates: Voting Age Population

City/Town	All Residents	Asian American Residents
Boston	54.1%	28.1%
Brookline	77.9%	30.9%
Cambridge	66.7%	26.0%
Lowell	62.7%	41.4%
Lynn	71.0%	38.5%
Malden	62.5%	28.3%
Newton	81.5%	45.8%
Quincy	62.6%	40.3%
Somerville	66.5%	27.7%
Waltham	63.9%	26.9%
Worcester	69.4%	38.6%
TOTAL	62.5%	32.7%

2. Rates for the Voting Age Citizen Population

A different perspective on Asian American voter registration is gained by examining registration rates for the adults who are citizens. This measure accounts for the requirement that those eligible to register to vote must be U.S. citizens in addition to being at least 18 years old. Citizenship is a particularly important criterion for eligibility to vote and, thus, a major factor with respect to Asian Americans because a significant number of Asian Americans are foreign born. For example, in 2010, 68.1% of Asian Americans residing in Massachusetts were born outside of the United States.⁶

The hurdle that the citizenship requirement poses for Asian Americans is significant. For the eleven combined cities and towns, only 59% of voting age Asian Americans were citizens compared to 83.5% of the total population. There was wide variability in Asian American citizenship rates among the eleven cities and towns. For example, Lynn, 71.9%, Newton, 66.8%, Lowell, 66.6%, and Boston, 61%, had Asian American citizenship rates greater than 60%. On the other hand, Asian American citizenship rates in Malden, 49.9%, and Waltham, 41.2%, were below 50%.⁷ For the total population in the individual cities and towns a consistently much higher percentage were citizens compared to Asian Americans. Newton had the highest rate at 90.7%. The one notable exception to this pattern was Lynn. Although Lynn had the lowest Asian American citizenship rate, 66.6%, it was still slightly higher than the city's total population rate, 66.4%.⁸

⁶ 2010 American Community Survey

⁷ The Asian American citizenship rates for the remaining cities and towns were Brookline, 59.7%, Quincy, 59.1%, Cambridge, 55.3%, Worcester, 52.6%, and Somerville, 51.8%. (ACS 2006-2010)

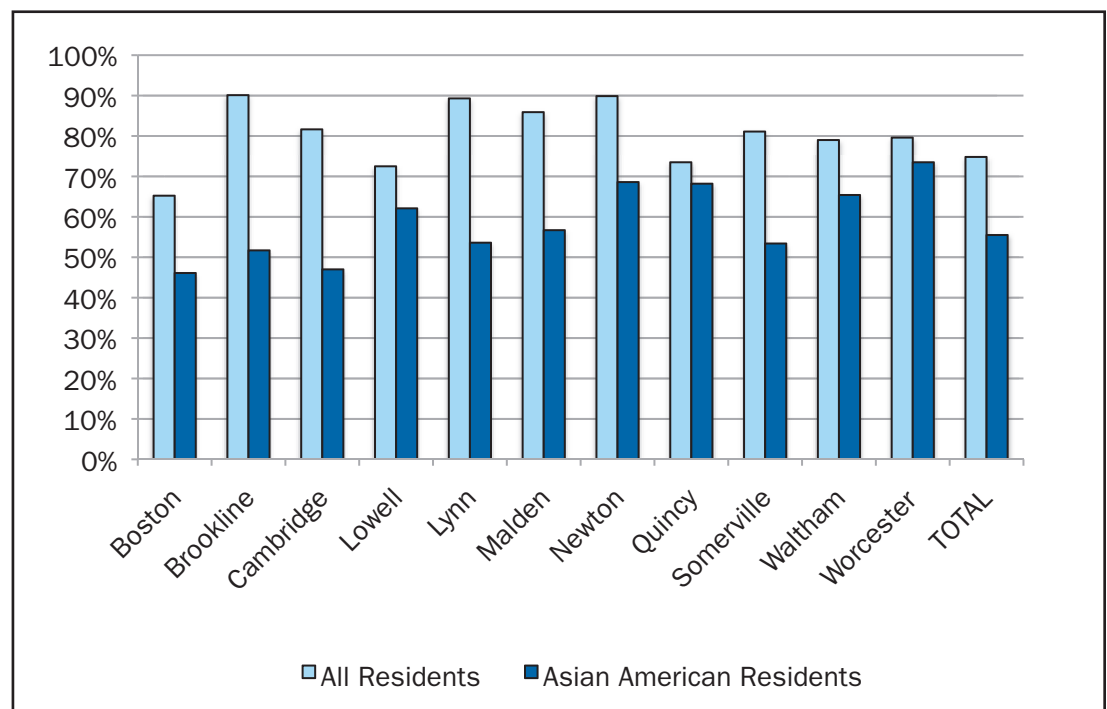
⁸ The citizenship rates for the total population in the remaining cities and towns were Worcester, 87.2%, Lowell, 86.5%, Brookline, 86.5%, Quincy, 85.2%, Boston, 83.2%, Somerville, 82%, Cambridge, 81.7%, Waltham, 80.9%, and Malden, 72.8% (ACS 2006-2010)

Table 2 and figure 2 report that, for the eleven cities and towns combined, 55.5% of the Asian Americans who were citizens were registered.⁹ Of all residents who were citizens in those cities and towns, 74.8% were registered. By removing non-citizens from the voting age population, therefore, the voter registration rate increased somewhat for the total population and grew significantly for Asian Americans.

Table 2. Voter Registration Rates: Voting Age Citizen Population

City/Town	All Residents	Asian American Residents
Boston	65.2%	46.1%
Brookline	90.1%	51.7%
Cambridge	81.6%	47.0%
Lowell	72.5%	62.1%
Lynn	89.3%	53.6%
Malden	85.9%	56.7%
Newton	89.9%	68.6%
Quincy	73.5%	68.2%
Somerville	81.1%	53.4%
Waltham	79.0%	65.4%
Worcester	79.6%	73.5%
TOTAL	74.8%	55.5%

Figure 2. Voter Registration Rates: Voting Age Citizen Population



⁹ Nationally 49.3% of Asian Americans who were citizens were registered to vote in 2010. (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2010)

The estimated voter registration rates for Asian Americans who were citizens, according to table 2 and figure 2, also varied from one city or town to the next. They ranged from Worcester, 73.5%, Newton, 68.6%, Quincy, 68.2%, Waltham, 65.4%, and Lowell, 62.1%, with Asian American registration levels above 60% to Malden, 56.7%, Lynn, 53.6%, Somerville, 53.4%, Brookline, 51.7%, Cambridge, 47%, and Boston 46.1%. In comparison, the voter registration rates for the total citizen population were 90.1% in Brookline at the high end and 65.2% in Boston at the low end.

Clearly, as the first measure of voter registration demonstrates, a major explanation for the relatively low number of registered Asian Americans in most jurisdictions is the large number of Asian Americans who are not citizens. It is also true, however, that, for those Asian Americans who are citizens, in many cases there remains a considerable disparity between their registration rates and those of the general population. It is reasonable to conclude that a mixture of structural, e.g., a high proportion of foreign-born Asian American residents, lower citizenship rates, etc., and individual factors, e.g., difficulties registering, motivation, etc., may account for generally lower Asian American voter registration rates.

II. The Asian American Share of Voting Age Population, Voting Age Citizens, and Registered Voters

1. Share of the Voting Age Population

By reporting the Asian American portion of the total voting age population, it is possible to provide some indication of the future potential electoral impact of Asian Americans in various jurisdictions. Table 3 and figure 3 indicate that Asian Americans accounted for 11.4 % of the combined adult residents of the eleven cities and towns. In terms of the total adult population in the individual cities and towns analyzed, Asian Americans constituted the largest share in Quincy, 22.9%, Malden, 20.1%, and Lowell, 18.9%. Even in the cities and towns with the smallest shares, Worcester, 5.9%, Lynn, 6.6%, Somerville, 8.8%, Boston 9.3%, Waltham, 9.8%, Newton, 10.9%, Brookline, 15.1%, and Cambridge, 15.6%, Asian Americans represented a rapidly growing sector. For example, in 2004, Asian Americans in the combined cities and towns were 10.1% of the voting age population. In fact, in every city and town the Asian American share was larger in 2012 compared to 2004.

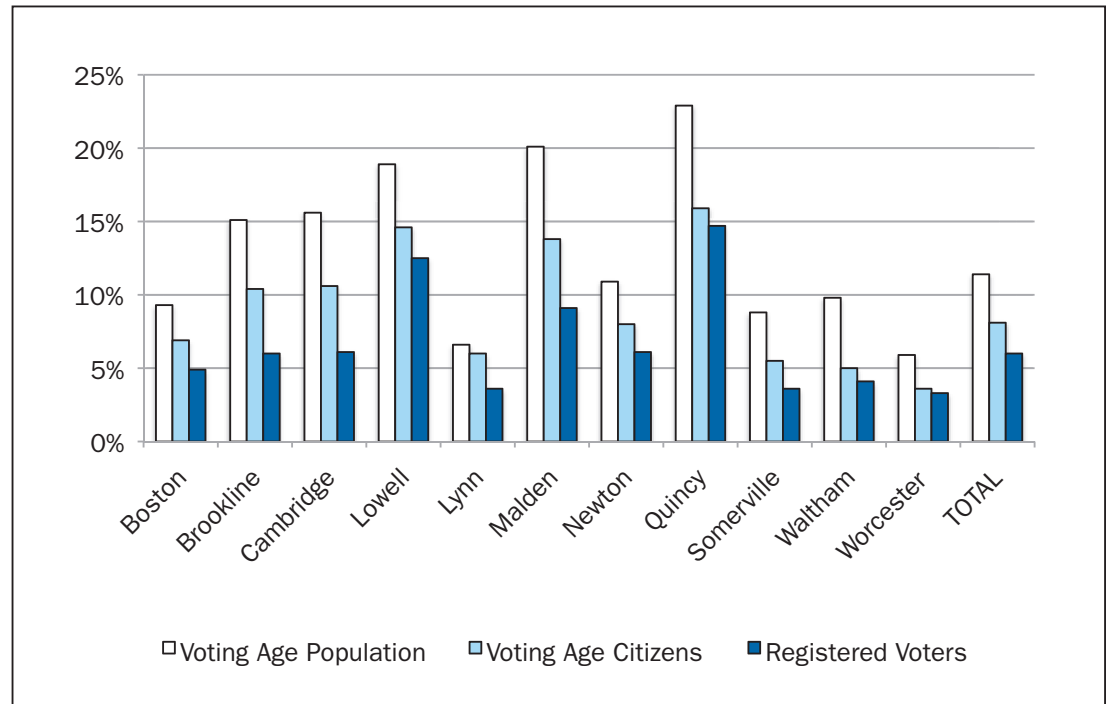
2. Share of the Voting Age Citizen Population

Data on the Asian American share of the adult citizen population offer a more immediate perspective on the political potential of Asian Americans. Table 3 and figure 3 report the Asian American share of the voting age citizen population. Asian Americans constituted 8.1% of the adult citizenry of the eleven cities and towns. Asian Americans accounted for the highest portions of total adult citizens in Quincy, 15.9%, Lowell, 14.6%, Malden, 13.8%, Cambridge, 10.6%, and Brookline, 10.4%. Asian Americans in Worcester, 3.6%, Waltham, 5%, Somerville, 5.5%, Lynn, 6%, Boston, 6.9%, and Newton, 8%, comprised the smallest shares of adult citizens.

Table 3. Asian American Share of Voting Age Population, Voting Age Citizen Population, and Registered Voters

City/Town	Voting Age Population	Voting Age Citizens	Registered Voters
Boston	9.3%	6.9%	4.9%
Brookline	15.1%	10.4%	6.0%
Cambridge	15.6%	10.6%	6.1%
Lowell	18.9%	14.6%	12.5%
Lynn	6.6%	6.0%	3.6%
Malden	20.1%	13.8%	9.1%
Newton	10.9%	8.0%	6.1%
Quincy	22.9%	15.9%	14.7%
Somerville	8.8%	5.5%	3.6%
Waltham	9.8%	5.0%	4.1%
Worcester	5.9%	3.6%	3.3%
TOTAL	11.4%	8.1%	6.0%

Figure 3. Asian American Share of Voting Age Population, Voting Age Citizen Population, and Registered Voters



Notably, the Asian American share of the voting age citizen population in each of the cities and towns was greater than their share in 2004.

The gap between the 11.4% of the voting age population that Asian Americans constituted and the 8.1% of the voting age citizen population that Asian Americans represented is what we identify as “the voter eligibility gap” (table 4 and figure 4). It reflects the barrier posed by citizenship requirements that limit the ability of Asian Americans to register to vote. While this gap was 3.3% for the combined cities and towns, it was much wider for cities and towns such as Quincy, 7%, Malden, 6.3%, Cambridge, 5%, Waltham, 4.8%, Brookline, 4.7%, and Lowell, 4.3%. More positively, on the other hand, the gap was smaller in Somerville, 3.2%, Newton, 2.9%, Boston, 2.5%, Worcester, 2.3%, and Lynn, at a miniscule 0.6%. While the gap still exists in all cities and towns, the trends are positive with the gaps narrowing since 2004.

3. Share of Registered Voters

Data on the Asian American estimated share of registered voters are also reported in table 3 and figure 3. This information offers a glimpse at the magnitude of the Asian American electorate overall and in the individual cities and towns. Of the total registered voters in the eleven cities and towns, Asian Americans accounted for 6%.¹⁰ As a percentage of registered voters in the eleven cities and towns, Asian Americans represented 14.7% in Quincy, 12.5% in Lowell, 9.1% in Malden, 6.1% in Newton and Cambridge, and 6% in Brookline at the high end. Asian Americans represented the smallest shares of registered voters in Worcester, 3.3%, Lynn and Somerville, 3.6%, Waltham, 4.1%, and Boston, 4.9%. In every city and town with the exception of Brookline the Asian American share of registered voters increased from 2004 to 2012. Overall, for the eleven cities and towns, the Asian American share of registered voters grew by 1.8% since 2004.

The gap between the 6% of registered voters that Asian Americans account for and their 8.1% share of the voting age citizen population is what we call “the voter registration gap” (table 4 and figure 4). This gap represents the distance between those who are fully eligible to register to vote and those who are actually registered. For Asian Americans in the combined cities and towns, the gap, therefore, was 2.1%. This figure is slightly higher than the combined gap for Asian Americans in 2004, 1.8%. The gaps in 2012 were especially large in Malden, 4.7%, Cambridge, 4.5%, and Brookline, 4.4%. On a more positive note, the Asian American voter registration gap in Worcester was only 0.3% and only 0.9% in Waltham. Assuredly a goal for the remaining cities and towns can be to emulate Worcester’s and Waltham’s example.

As we have indicated, rapid growth can be a foundation for enhanced Asian American political participation and influence. To take full advantage of the growing Asian American presence, however, the voter eligibility and voter registration gaps must be closed or turned around. Two major ways to achieve these

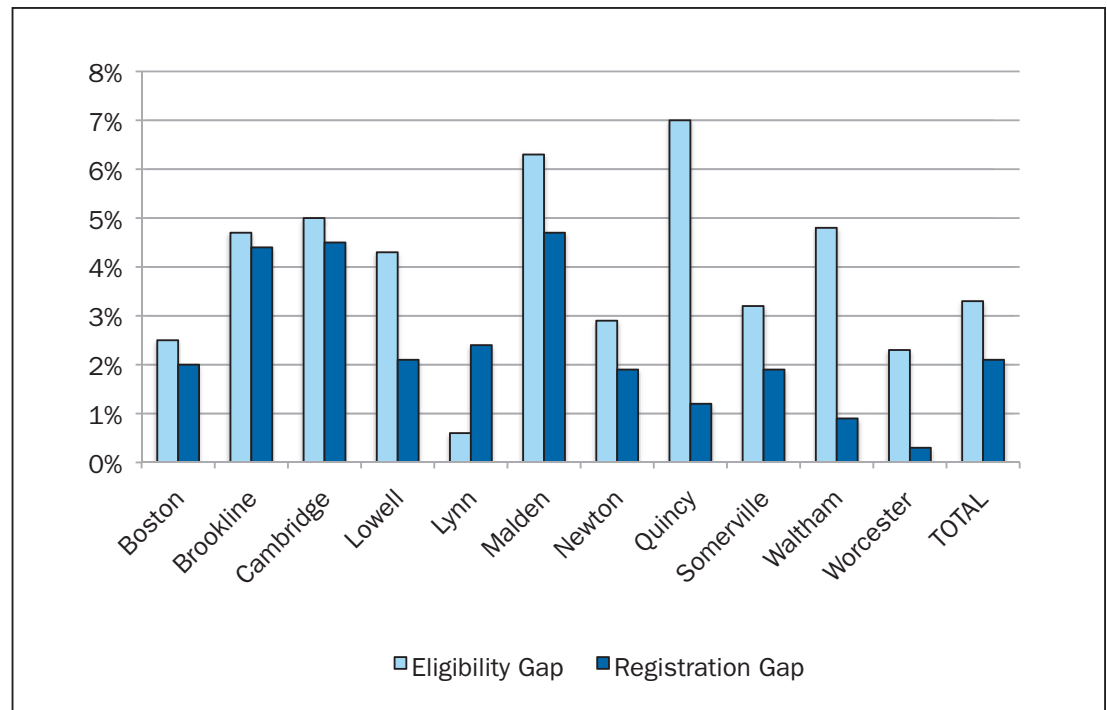
¹⁰ Nationally 2.7% of registered voters were Asian American in 2010. (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2010)

objectives are: 1. to increase the naturalization rates of Asian American immigrants and, thereby, close the eligibility gap, and 2. to increase the registration rates of those Asian Americans who are citizens and, thus, address the registration gap. Making considerable progress in increasing naturalization rates is a long and tedious process and a substantial challenge. This is not to say that efforts to ease the citizenship process are not worthwhile. It simply emphasizes the point that as the percentage of Asian American adults who are citizens increases it is critical that those citizens increase their registration rates. By doing so, the full and growing potential political impact of Asian Americans can be realized.

Table 4. Asian American Voter Eligibility and Voter Registration Gaps

	Eligibility Gap	Registration Gap
Boston	2.5%	2.0%
Brookline	4.7%	4.4%
Cambridge	5.0%	4.5%
Lowell	4.3%	2.1%
Lynn	0.6%	2.4%
Malden	6.3%	4.7%
Newton	2.9%	1.9%
Quincy	7.0%	1.2%
Somerville	3.2%	1.9%
Waltham	4.8%	0.9%
Worcester	2.3%	0.3%
TOTAL	3.3%	2.1%

Figure 4. Asian American Voter Eligibility and Voter Registration Gaps



III. The Party Affiliations of Asian Americans

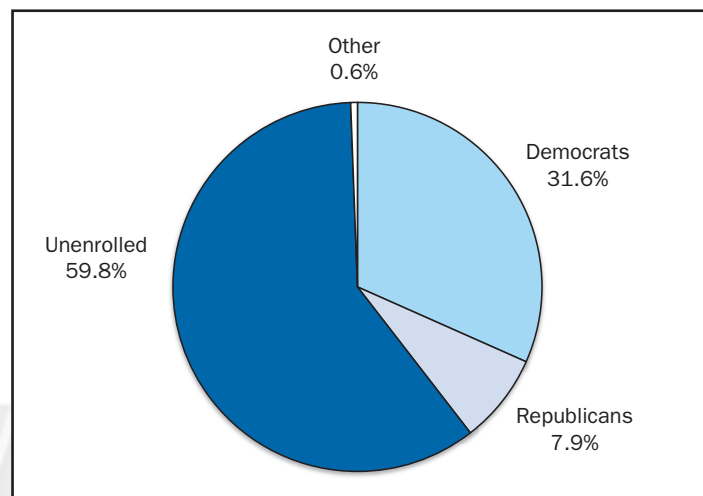
Table 5 and figure 5 and show that 59.8% of Asian Americans registered to vote in the eleven cities and towns did not designate a specific party affiliation, i.e., they were formally listed as “unenrolled.” Just under one-third, 31.6%, were enrolled as Democrats, 7.9% as Republicans, and 0.6% in other parties. In comparison, the Asian American party affiliation distribution in 2004 was unenrolled at 58%, Democrat 30.6%, Republican 10.4%, and other parties 0.9%. In summary, this means that for the total of these cities and towns, Asian Americans since 2004 were more likely to be unenrolled and Democrat and less likely to be Republican.

According to table 5, the cities and towns with the highest percentage of Asian Americans registered who did not designate a party affiliation were Quincy, Newton, Malden, and Waltham. Asian Americans were most heavily registered as Democrats in Cambridge, Somerville, Brookline, Lynn, and Boston. For Asian Americans registered as Republicans, the leading cities and towns were Worcester, Lynn, and Lowell.

Table 5. Party Affiliation of Asian Americans

City/Town	Democrats	Republicans	Unenrolled	Other
Boston	34.6%	7.7%	57.3%	0.3%
Brookline	38.1%	5.6%	56.0%	0.3%
Cambridge	44.6%	4.1%	50.7%	0.6%
Lowell	29.4%	11.0%	59.1%	0.4%
Lynn	36.6%	10.9%	52.1%	0.4%
Malden	26.4%	6.3%	65.1%	0.6%
Newton	27.7%	5.2%	65.5%	1.6%
Quincy	23.6%	6.7%	69.2%	0.4%
Somerville	42.7%	4.8%	51.5%	1.0%
Waltham	29.1%	6.4%	64.1%	0.4%
Worcester	23.0%	15.8%	59.4%	1.8%
TOTAL	31.6%	7.9%	59.8%	0.6%

Figure 5. Party Affiliation of Asian Americans



Conclusion

For the vast majority of Americans, the mechanics of enabling them to vote are pretty simple. Most Americans are citizens by birth so when they become eighteen years old the principal remaining hurdle as a preliminary to voting is the registration process. Asian Americans, in contrast, as we have seen in our analysis of eleven cities and towns in Massachusetts, are overwhelmingly foreign born and thus many must navigate the naturalization process. Although many Asian American immigrants do become citizens joining their American born brothers and sisters, the percentage of Asian American adults who are citizens still lags behind that of the general population. This voter eligibility gap must be narrowed.

For Asian American adults who are equipped with citizenship, there still remains, however, much that needs to be done to enable them to vote. The registration hurdle that faces all adult citizens is one that Asian Americans in most jurisdictions clear with less frequency than the overall population. In other words, dealing with the voter eligibility gap is difficult and still not enough. In addition, the voter registration gap must be narrowed to enable the full participation of Asian Americans in the electoral system.

The potential political impact of any group of course is based on more than numbers. The concentration of Asian Americans of voting age, as adult citizens, and as a share of registered voters helps offer some indication of the political weight that Asian Americans can and do possess. Our data indicates that at least in the cities and towns featured in this report on all of these measures the Asian American share is significant. Indeed not only is the share significant but just as important, it is growing. The challenge for Asian Americans in these communities is to take advantage of this increased political weight by increasing voter registration rates and turnout and other opportunities for full civic engagement.

Notes on Methodology

In reporting estimates of the shares of voting age and voting age citizen population in the eleven cities and towns, we relied on calculations based on 2010 U.S. Census data (voting age population) and American Community Survey 2006-2010 five year data (voting age citizen population) rather than on city and town resident lists. The non-response rate for surveys upon which the resident lists are derived is notoriously high. In this report, 2011 or 2012 resident lists from each of the eleven cities and towns were used to identify nearly 800,000 registered voters in the cities and towns and their party affiliations. For the purpose of identifying Asian American registered voters, Asian American resident records were extracted from the city and town resident listings through the identification of Asian surnames and given names. These names were checked against an extensive database of Asian names that was developed from three sources: a list compiled by the Institute for Asian Americans Studies of Asian surnames; a list compiled by Diane Lauderdale at the University of Chicago comprised of surnames for the six largest Asian ethnic groups in the United States and a given names list; and consultations with expert informants. A computer program was utilized to automatically extract the records of residents with Asian names. Efforts were made to limit racial misidentifications. For example, in the case of surnames that are common for more than one racial group, such as Lee, Young, and Ray, records were manually inspected for evidence of the likely race of the resident primarily by reviewing first and middle names and other household members. Names that remained in doubt were not included in the listing of Asian American registered voters. In the end, nearly 50,000 Asian American voters were identified.

Acknowledgements

Several staff members of the Institute for Asian Americans Studies contributed to this report. John Her obtained the resident lists and identified the registered voters who were likely to be Asian Americans. Shauna Lo laid out the report and coordinated its production. Carolyn Wong made a number of useful suggestions particularly relating to the use of the names lists. Laura Ng assisted with some of the calculations and editing. We are grateful to Diane Lauderdale for sharing her names list with us.

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