

University of Massachusetts Boston

## ScholarWorks at UMass Boston

---

Institute for Asian American Studies  
Publications

Institute for Asian American Studies

---

7-2012

### Asian American We: Civic Engagement among Low-Income Young Adults

Michael Liu

*University of Massachusetts Boston*, michael.liu@umb.edu

Star Wang

Janice Wong

Loan Dao

*University of Massachusetts Boston*, ltd2@stmarys-ca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.umb.edu/iaas\\_pubs](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/iaas_pubs)



Part of the [Asian American Studies Commons](#), [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Community-Based Research Commons](#), and the [Work, Economy and Organizations Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Liu, Michael; Wang, Star; Wong, Janice; and Dao, Loan, "Asian American We: Civic Engagement among Low-Income Young Adults" (2012). *Institute for Asian American Studies Publications*. 29.  
[https://scholarworks.umb.edu/iaas\\_pubs/29](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/iaas_pubs/29)

This Research Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute for Asian American Studies at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Institute for Asian American Studies Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@umb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@umb.edu).



# *Asian American We*

## **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG LOW-INCOME YOUNG ADULTS**



**Dr. Michael Liu, Star Wang, Janice Wong, and Dr. Loan Dao**

in cooperation with the  
Asian American Resource Workshop



July 2012

---

## **Asian American We: Civic Engagement among Low-Income Young Adults**

*Dr. Michael Liu, Star Wang, Janice Wong,  
and Dr. Loan Dao*

Institute for Asian American Studies

July 2012





# **Asian American We: Civic Engagement among Low-Income Young Adults**

*Dr. Michael Liu, Star Wang, Janice Wong, and Dr. Loan Dao*

## **Executive Summary**

This report describes a study of the civic participation of low-income Asian American adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five in the Boston area. It is based upon a mail survey with 100 respondents, focus groups, and organization interviews.

The study found that over 60% of the study population engaged in some form of civic participation, most commonly through fundraising or volunteer activities. Other activities included arts and culture with a social message, issues work, and electoral involvement. The area of greatest involvement was education. From the survey, civic engagement is correlated with female gender, higher education, and a perception of living in a low-income area. The demographics of the study population reflect a majority who are female, Chinese, attending college and in the labor force.<sup>1</sup> Vietnamese was the second most reported ethnicity, and most were residents of the cities of Boston and Quincy.

The study also showed potential for greater civic participation. The cohort indicated an interest in increasing and broadening their current engagement. The important motivators for civic engagement that emerged from the study are community building, awareness of issues, and material incentive. In order to activate individuals in this group to greater civic participation, advocacy and activist organizations should be aware of these factors and allocate appropriate resources to their further development. These organizations can also be more effective by soliciting widely and in diverse ways and being flexible in how they integrate participants.

---

<sup>1</sup> Respondents could be both in college and working.

## I. Introduction

The Institute for Asian American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston conducted a study of low-income Asian American young adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five in the Boston area. The study was intended to provide data to inform the planning process of a local Boston-area community group, the Asian American Resource Workshop (AARW). Primarily, the study considered the subject population's interest in and attitudes toward civic engagement and their current levels of civic engagement.

This study was comprised of surveys and focus group interviews. The study also analyzed 2010 Census data on the numbers of young Asian American adults in Greater Boston and incorporated interviews with organizational representatives to understand good practices in stimulating civic engagement.

The study focused on these questions:

1. What level of interest and involvement do young adult Asian Americans in low-income areas have in civic engagement?
2. What civic engagement issues and roles were of most interest to this population?
3. What barriers to civic engagement does this population face?
4. How should activist groups work with this population?

For the five cities surveyed, described below, there are an estimated 10,700 Asian Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 years of age.<sup>2</sup> The age 18-25 cohort is important to civic participation because this age range is a formative period for these individuals' adult working lives. The knowledge gained from this study will facilitate planning to increase civic engagement among low-income Asian American young adults.

The research team consists of principal investigator Dr. Michael Liu, Star Wang, and Janice Wong. Professor Loan Dao of the UMass Boston Asian American Studies Department conducted the focus groups. Dr. Liu and Star Wang authored the final report.

---

<sup>2</sup> Based on ACS 5-yr estimates of age groups and the estimated percentage of the 25-year-old cohort of 2.55% in the Asian American population.

## Background Literature

Civic engagement is essential to a working democracy. During the 1990s in the United States, widespread attention was paid to the issue of civic engagement due to a demonstrated rise in voter apathy, especially among the younger generation (Halstead 1999). Kymlicka and Norman (1994) wrote that the stability of a modern democracy depends on the qualities of its citizens in their desire to participate in the political process and their level of personal responsibility. Youth are an important component of the citizen population in this discussion; youth who are civically active or exposed to civic activities are more likely to vote and be involved in political or service organizations in adulthood (Youniss, McLellan, and Yates 1997). In addition, adults who are civically active have higher levels of social tolerance and engagement in community affairs (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995, 503-506).

Although civic engagement in general has been widely discussed within the literature, investigations of the civic engagement of minority groups, especially Asian Americans, have been more limited. This is true despite the fact that Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial group in the United States and therefore have assumed ever growing importance in American social and political arenas.<sup>3</sup> Of the limited literature that exists, most studies indicate that Asian Americans are less civically engaged than other racial groups. The 2010 Current Population Survey (CPS) Supplement on Volunteerism suggests that Asian Americans volunteer at a substantially lower rate than Whites, and other CPS studies indicated that Asian Americans vote at lower rates than any other racial group (U.S. Department of Commerce 2010).<sup>4</sup> Watanabe (2006) has cautioned, “it is absolutely critical to accept an expansive definition of participation to fully capture the dynamics of Asian Americans and politics...The limited view...led to erroneous characterizations of them as political disengaged and incompetent.” Asian Americans however appear to lag behind other racial groups in terms of civic engagement. Indeed, using more linguistically appropriate and probing methods than the CPS, Wong et al. (2011, 187-191) found that Asian Americans were involved in organizations at rates comparable to the general population.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever the level of involvement Asian Americans have as a whole, for low-income young Asian American adults, existing findings reinforce their possible detachment. Foster-Bey (2008) performed an analysis of an earlier CPS study on volunteerism

<sup>3</sup> The Asian American population grew 43.3% from 2000-2010 (U.S. Department of Commerce 2011)

<sup>4</sup> In studies at IAAS, however, Asian Americans registered to vote turn out at the same rate as the general population.

<sup>5</sup> The CPS is conducted only in English and Spanish, while Wong et al.'s study used eight languages and specifically asked about both secular and religious organizations.

and found that low-income economic status is correlated with lower levels of civic participation. Recent national studies of Asian American political behavior have found that, compared to other comparable Asian American age groupings, young Asian American citizens had the lowest percentage of voter registration, voter turnout, and organizational participation (Lien, Conway and Wong 2004, 152; Wong et al. 2011, 194-5, 297-9).

The importance of Asian American young adult voices in American civic life is self-evident. Skocpol and Fiorina (1999, 2) speak of the importance of an inclusive and pluralist civil society, observing with dismay that oftentimes in American society, the most civically active individuals “push extreme or narrow causes, framing an overall public debate only tangentially relevant to the values and concerns of most citizens.” Stepick and Stepick (2002) point out that the immigrant and U.S.-born children of immigrants are the fastest growing component of the U.S. population. They observe, “how these children integrate into U.S. society and the ways that they civically engage will greatly determine the nature of civil society in the United States over the next few decades.” This observation is particularly relevant to Asian Americans, who, the U.S. Census reports, have by far the largest percentage of immigrants among racial groups in the U.S. Their inclusion would contribute to a more representative democracy and more representative policies.

## **II. Results by Research Activity**

### **Mail Survey**

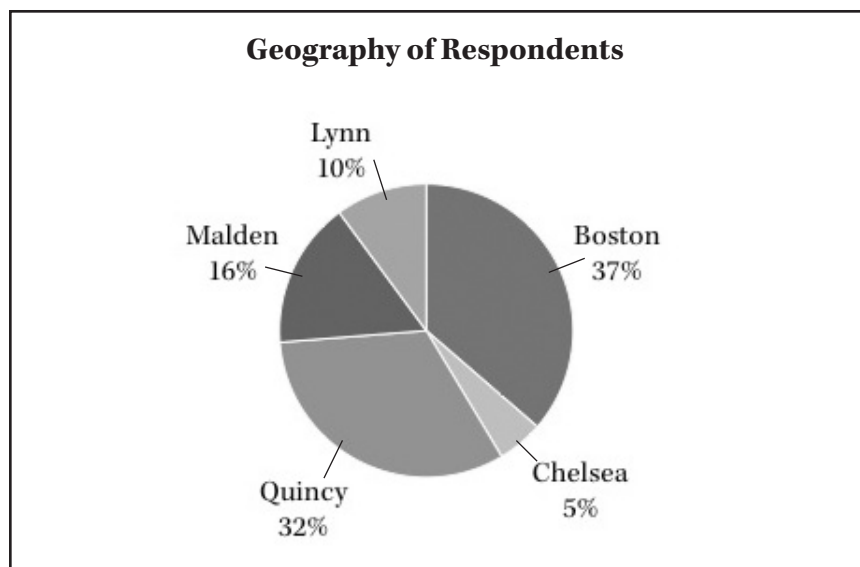
The mail survey generated 100 valid responses.<sup>6</sup> The survey included fourteen questions about civic participation and eight questions about demographic characteristics. The sampling was conducted randomly but in specific local geographies. The survey covered low-income zip code areas inside Route 128 (Interstate 95) – in parts of Boston, and in Chelsea, Malden, Quincy, and Lynn. Within Rt. 128, these cities, with the exception of Chelsea, have the largest concentrations of low-income Asian American populations.<sup>7</sup> Lynn was over-sampled to achieve better representation of Khmer respondents. Chelsea was also oversampled due to the smaller population of Asian Americans living in Chelsea. In all, over thirteen hundred surveys were mailed.

---

<sup>6</sup> Some responses received from outside the target area were voided.

<sup>7</sup> Chelsea was included as an interest area of the funder.

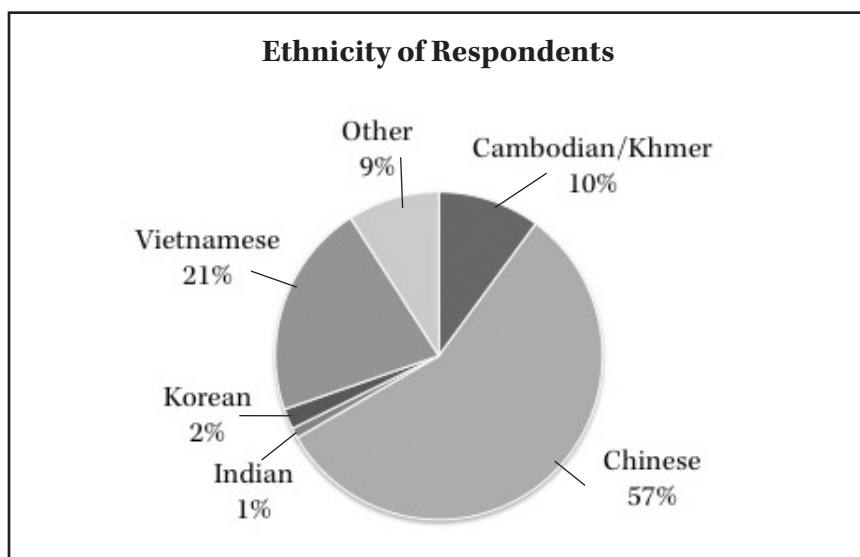




n=99

### 1) Survey Respondent Demographics

The majority (57%) of the respondents were Chinese. The next largest group was Vietnamese (21%) followed by Cambodian/Khmer (10%). In the "other" category, respondents consisted largely of Chinese-Vietnamese and Chinese-Cambodian. The preponderance of Chinese was largely a function of the population of the geographic area the survey was limited to. Quincy and Malden have large Chinese populations. Lowell, with the largest population of Cambodian/Khmer in the state, was outside of the target area.



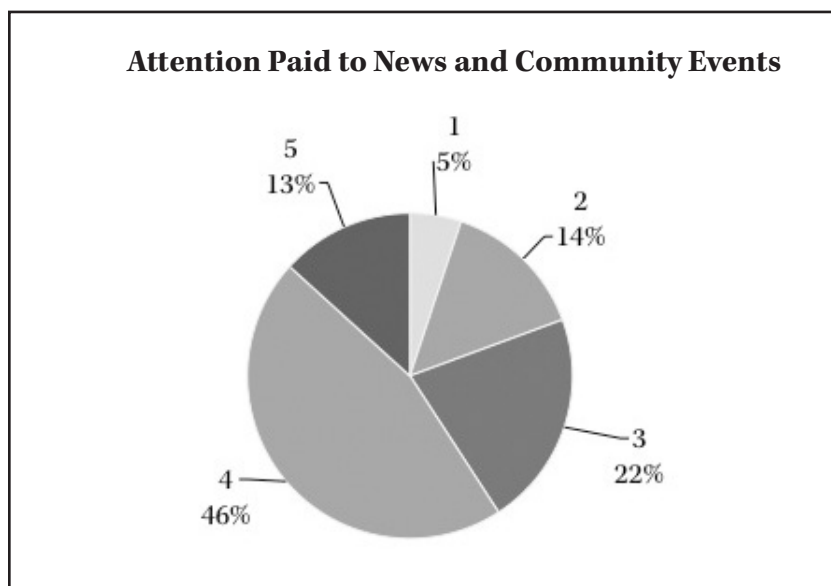
n=99

There were over two females for each male respondent. Seventy percent of respondents were attending college. About half were employed full or part time or unemployed, i.e., a part of the labor force. The respondents were fairly evenly distributed over the 18-25 age range.

<b>Additional Demographics</b>		
<b>Gender (n=98)</b>	<b>College Enrollment Status (n=99)</b>	<b>Labor Force Status (n=99)</b>
71 % Female	71% attending College	25% employed not in college
29% Male	29% not in College	4% unemployed not in college
		24% employed in college

## 2) Interest in Civic Affairs and Participation

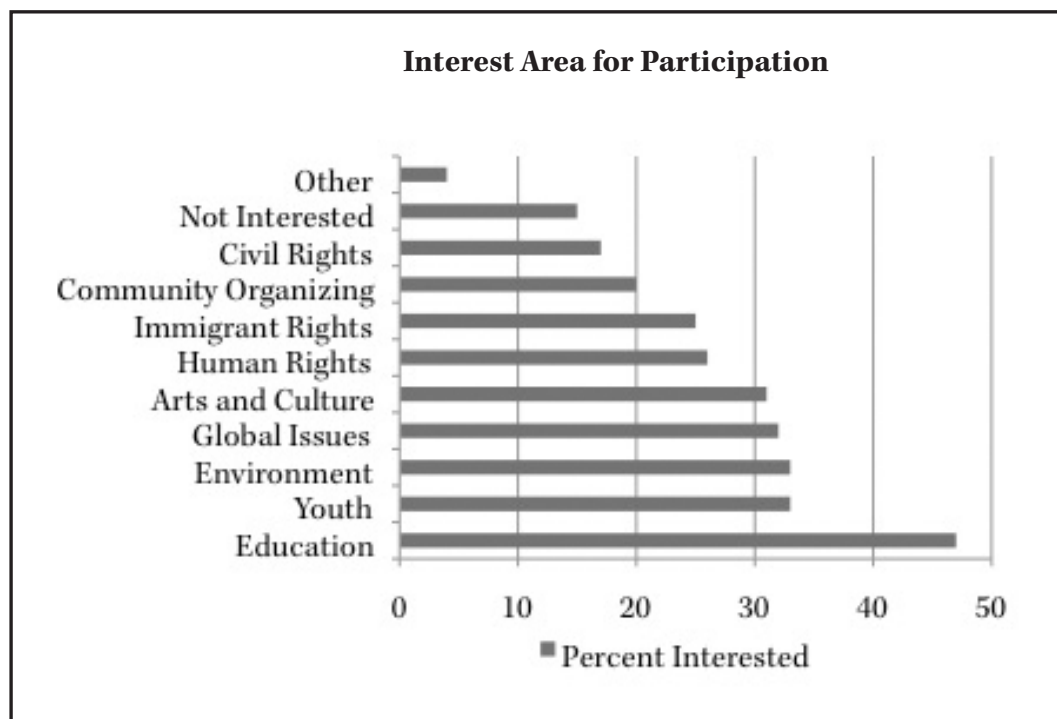
The respondents generally expressed interest in becoming active. They considered themselves attentive to current events. On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal), they rated their median attention level at 4. The average was 3.5.



Scale: 1="Not at all" to 5="A Great Deal"

n=98

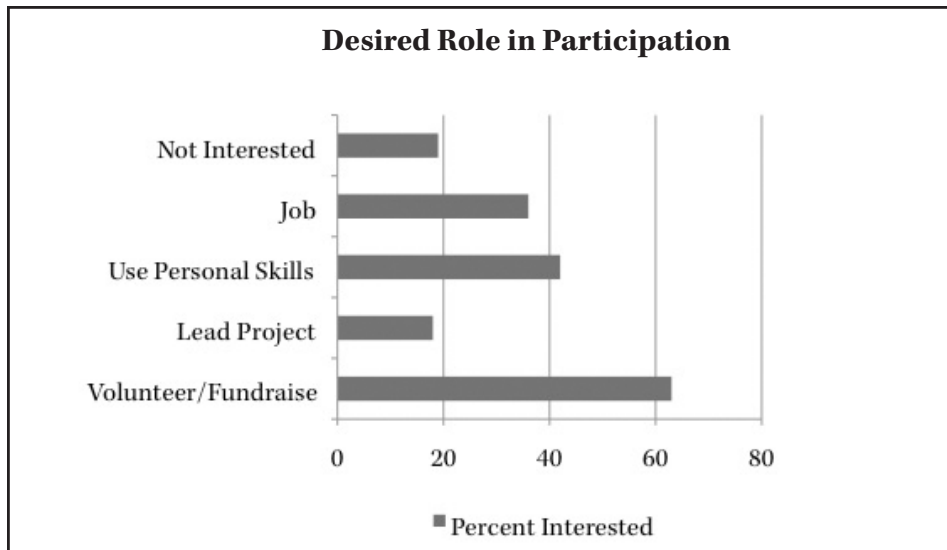
The respondents expressed the greatest interest in participating in the education area. Nearly half identified this area. About one in three expressed interest in youth, environment, global issues, or art and culture.<sup>8</sup>



n=98

When respondents were asked what role they desired, nearly 2 of 3 wanted to volunteer or fundraise, two of five wanted to use their personal skills to meet a need, and over 1 of 3 wanted a job in a community organization. Less than 1 of 5 expressed no interest in any role.

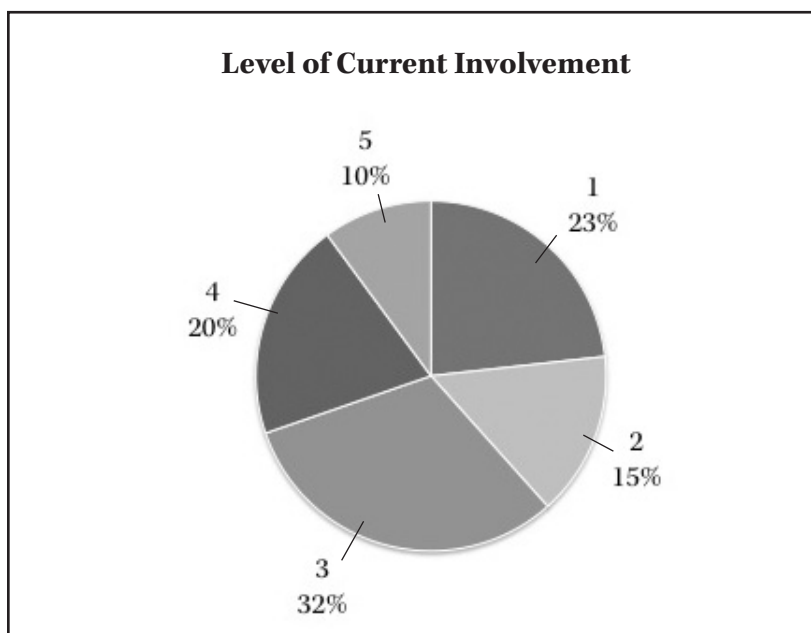
<sup>8</sup>In the “Interest Area” and “Desired Role” questions, respondents could select “all that apply.”



n=99

### 3) Current Civic Involvement

The respondents most often reported a moderate level of current involvement. The respondents rated their civic involvement on a scale of 1 (not involved) to 5 (very involved). The median level was 3 (neither not involved nor very involved) with an average of 2.8.

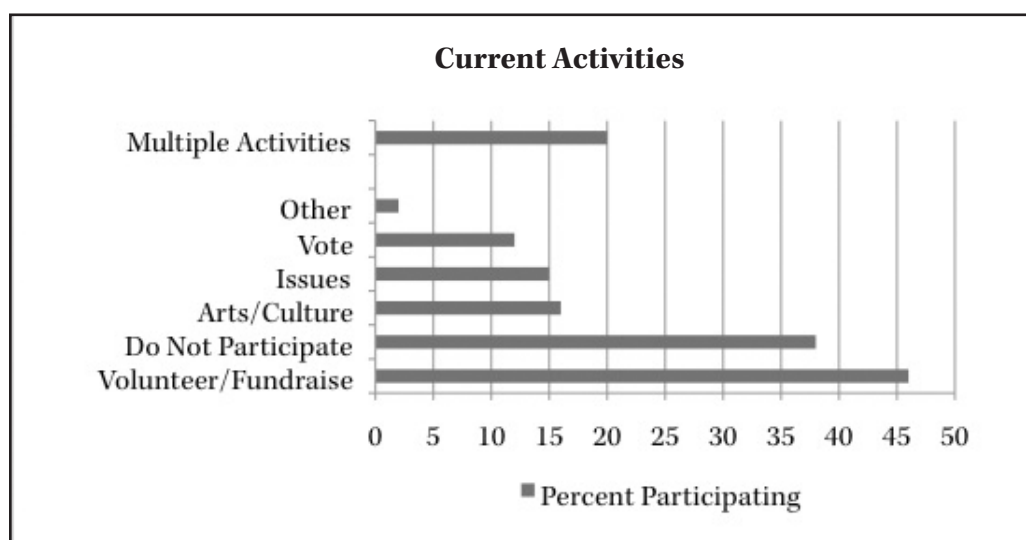


Scale: 1="Not involved" to 5="Very involved"

n=99

Thirty-six percent of respondents reported having voted in the past year. If respondents were referring to federal, state or local elections, this voter participation was a relatively high level.

The most common form of participation was volunteering and fundraising for community groups. Almost half of the respondents said they participate in volunteering or raising funds. Thirty-eight percent reported no participation in any activities. In declining frequency, arts and culture (16%), issues campaigns (15%),<sup>9</sup> and electoral activity (12%) were other forms of participation.

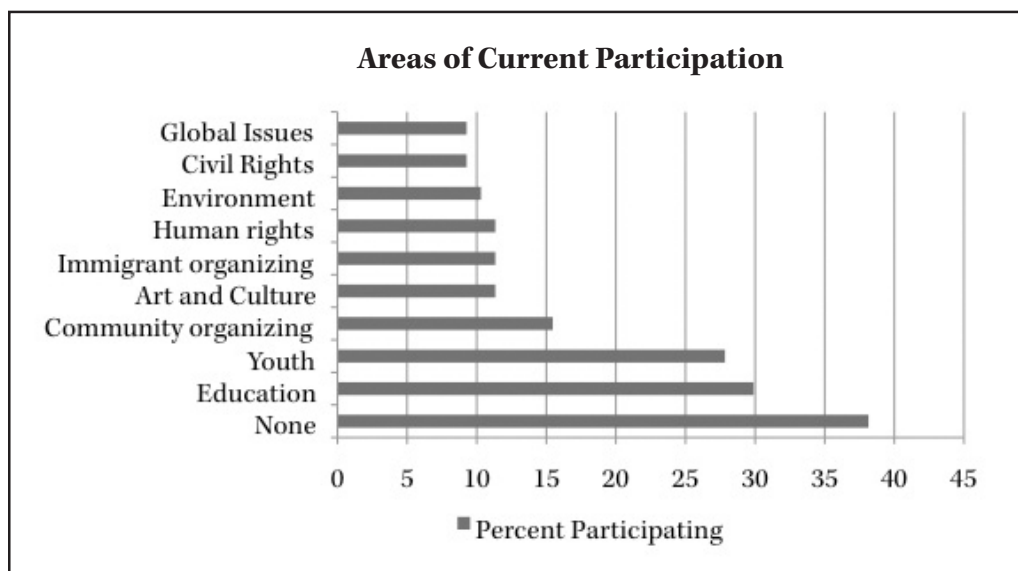


n=98

One in five survey respondents engaged in multiple activities. Of the multiple-engaged, those who engaged in issues through rallies and demonstrations were the most likely to volunteer and fundraise. Eighty percent of those engaged in issues also volunteered and raised funds, whereas two-thirds of those engaged in electoral activity also volunteered and raised funds. About half of those engaged in socially responsible arts and culture volunteered and raised funds for community groups. This may indicate that volunteering is an entry or complement to other activities.

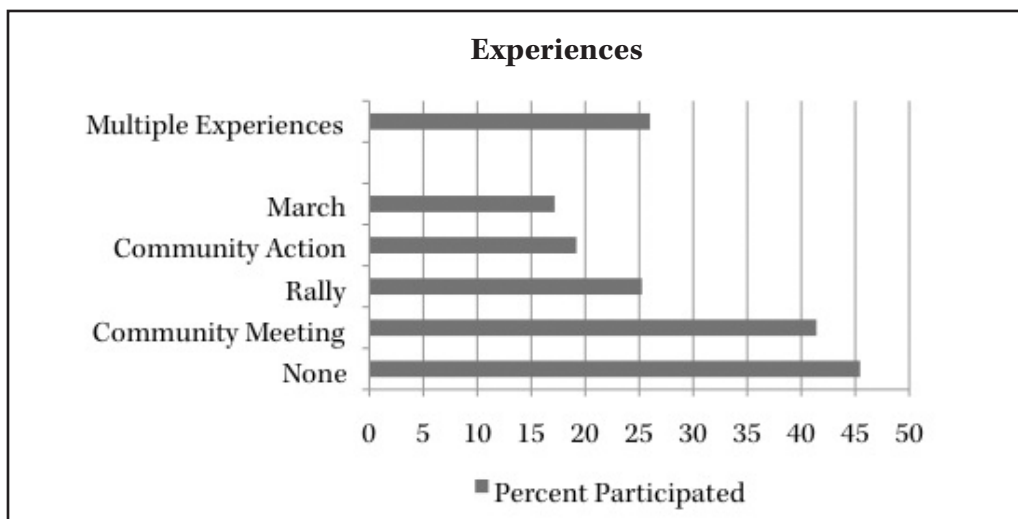
The issue areas that respondents were currently working on were education (29%) and youth (27%). Community organizing (15%) was the third most common area while all other areas – art and culture, civil rights, environment, global issues, human rights, and immigrant rights – were around 10%.

<sup>9</sup> Issues campaigns were described as “organizing through petitions, boycotts, contacting officials or the media, and/or protest rallies and marches”



n=97

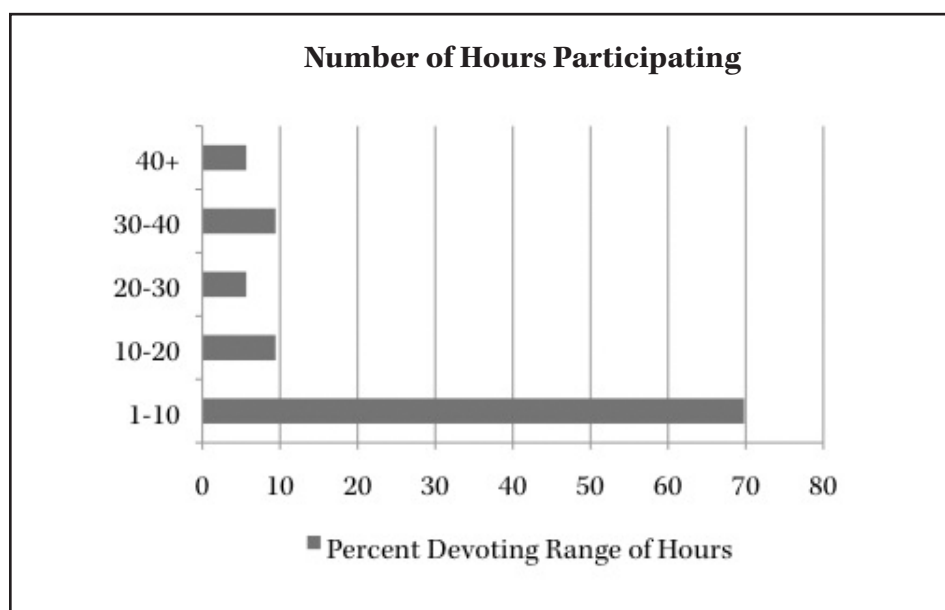
The respondents also described their experiences in civic engagement. Two out of five have participated in community meetings, and one in four has participated in a rally. One in five has participated in a community action and one-sixth participated in a march. One-quarter had multiple experiences. Of those who had marched, rallied or participated in a community action, over four out of five had multiple experiences while less than half of those who had gone to community meetings had other experiences. This indicates that those who engaged in more demonstrative activities participated more broadly.



n=99

Of the 43 survey respondents who were actively working on an issue, about 72% volunteered, while one in five participated as a staff member or intern. Seven percent sat on organizational boards.<sup>10</sup>

Of the respondents who reported devoting time to civic participation, most participated in the 1-10 hour per week range.<sup>11</sup> With the exception of one volunteer respondent, staff members, both part-time and full-time, were the ones devoting time at the highest ranges.



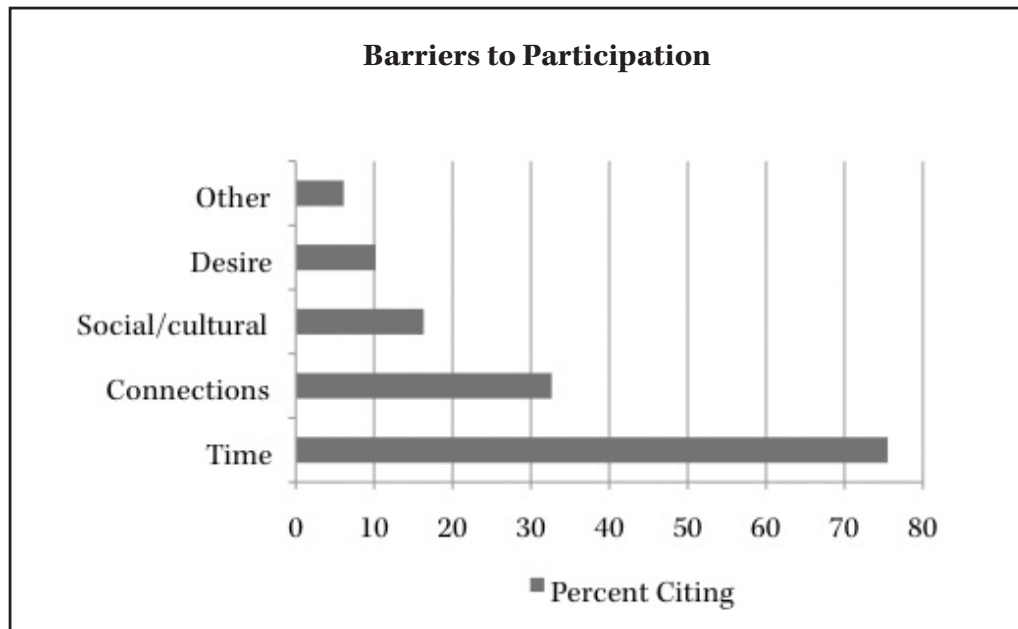
n=96

#### 4) Barriers and Communication

If a gap exists between the desire to participate and actual participation, what are the reasons? To try to address this, the study asked about barriers to participation. Expectedly, the respondents cited the primary barrier to participation as time – three-quarters mentioned this barrier. The next most frequent barrier was lack of connections. Only 10% cited a lack of desire to participate, though 6% cited other related reasons (motivation, personal priorities, money, etc.).

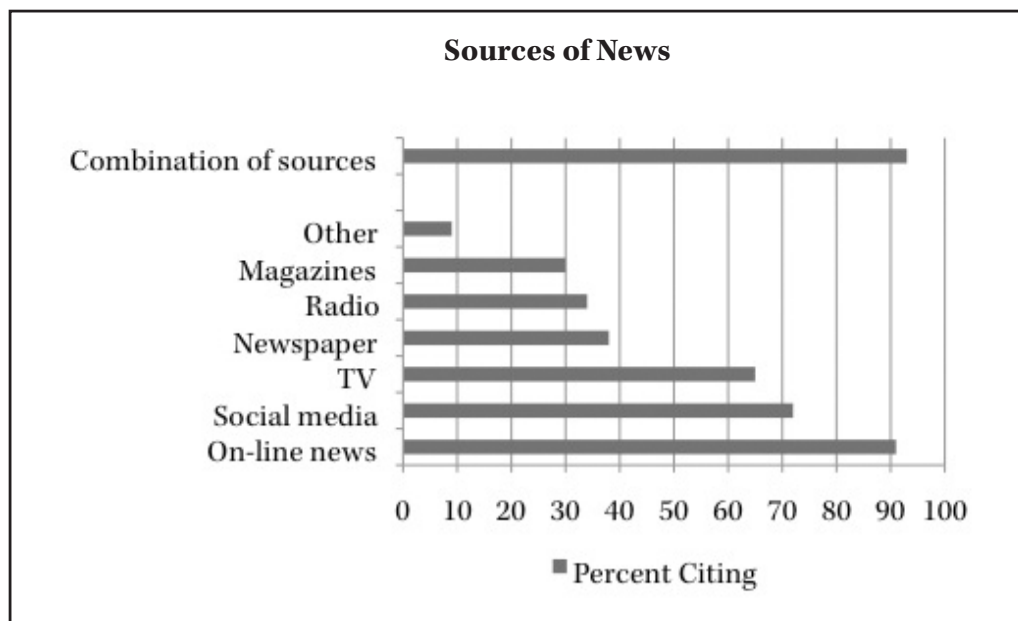
<sup>10</sup> Respondents could respond affirmatively to multiple roles, e.g., a respondent could say that they participated as a staff member, volunteer, as well as an intern. N=97.

<sup>11</sup> More than half (54 of 96) reported devoting time to civic participation.



n=98

The most common sources of information for this cohort were from on-line news and social media. Over 90% relied on a combination of sources and considered themselves somewhat more informed than those relying on a single source about current events.



n=100



## 5) Correlations with Civic Participation Index

A composite index of civic participation was created as a measure of the intensity of individual participation. The composite index combined 6 measures: questions 1 (attention to news), 6 (involvement in community activities), 7 (involvement in civic activities), 8 (current issue work), 9 (attendance at rallies and marches), 10 (role in issue work), and 11 (time spent on civic activities). Please see attached survey and description of composite index in the methodology section for a more detailed explanation of the index of individual participation. Subsequently, correlations of various variables with a composite index of civic participation were run.

This index was correlated with gender, educational attainment, citizenship, student status, and perception of their community. The strongest positive correlation toward the civic participation index was with the perception of their community as low-income. To a lesser extent, female gender and higher educational attainment were also associated with greater civic participation.

<b>Correlation with Composite Civic Participation Index</b>	
Variable	Pearson's function, r
Is a Citizen	-0.042
Enrolled in College	-0.134
Educational Attainment	+0.202
Female	+0.220
Live in a Low-Income Area	+0.303

## Focus Groups

In addition to the random survey mailing, the study conducted a series of focus groups comprised of interviewees who volunteered from the larger study sample. Ten survey respondents participated in the focus groups. During the focus group interviews, participants were asked to engage with a focus group facilitator and each other in answering a series of questions designed to collect information on the participants' thoughts on civic engagement. The most significant themes from these focus groups were as follows:

### a) Understanding "civic engagement"

The focus group participants' perception of civic engagement varied greatly. Eight participants mentioned giving back to society through neighborhood cleanups, knowing your neighbors, or anything for the greater good. Four participants mentioned voting or political action such as rallies, marches, or community action. Half of the focus group participants cited volunteering, and three said that gaining knowledge is a

form of civic engagement, citing activities such as reading the newspaper and learning about issues. A common understanding of civic engagement was elusive.

As described above, focus group participants' definition of civic engagement had a greater emphasis on service than political action. Twice as many focus group participants mentioned community service as did political action, and only one participant delineated a difference between these activities.

#### **b) Current and past civic engagement**

Three participants were currently involved in community organizations. Aside from these, seven participants had been involved in past service projects. Participants said that they most often were motivated to participate by the desire to feel part of a group, followed in frequency by the influence of Asian American studies classes, personal interest and satisfaction, and positive role models. One cited resume building as an important motivator.

The most frequently cited barrier was lack of time, followed by lack of information and feelings of exclusion. Other barriers were perceptions that they were not needed and language differences.

#### **c) Personal effects of civic engagement activities**

Nine participants reported that participating in civic engagement activities had a positive impact on them. They spoke of increased political or social awareness, increased connection to a community, feelings of pride, hope for change, improved leadership abilities, and increased maturity.

#### **d) Reasons for low civic engagement among peers**

The reasons that participants gave for their peers not being civically engaged were similar to their own reasons. The most common responses were lack of time, lack of knowledge or awareness, and skepticism that political issues affect them. A non-supportive environment was a common theme among the responses, with participants stating that a lack of civically engaged role models or service oriented college majors can prevent their peers from being civically engaged. Other barriers cited were culture, gender, and economic status.

#### **e) Advice to community leaders or organizations**

The most common suggestion was the need for more outreach from community organizations to engage young people, with attention to social media websites, such as Facebook and YouTube. Organizational structure with a clear leader, role and goals was important to one subject; some material incentives and racially diverse membership were also cited.

## **Best Practices**

Research team members met with a number of organizations that were engaging with the 18-25 age group around civic participation. The organizations included Hyde Square Task Force and City School, both leadership development organizations for youth, the Activist Training Institute, an API late college and post-college training program, the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), a research organization, and MassVote and the Chinese Progressive Association, two groups with a youth component. Hyde Square Task Force and City School focused primarily on high school age students but had begun working with alumni of the program who came back to the groups during and after college.

These groups proceeded from different positions in engaging young adults. CIRCLE worked with several community youth groups as a research facility, trainer, and technical consultant. They shared their observations from their work with such groups. The Hyde Square Task Force (HSTF) and City School had been very successful in engaging young adults. However, this success had been built on fairly large, vibrant high school age youth programs. Both programs had significant facilities. Grappling with how to integrate young adult graduates of their programs into organizations primarily designed for a younger cohort, HSTF and City School had primarily given these graduates roles in serving high school age students. The Chinese Progressive Association's Chinese Youth Initiative (CYI) and MassVote were working with the 18-25 cohort on similar bases but on a smaller scale. The Activist Training Institute's work most closely approximated the conceptual framework of first engaging young adults during the years of 18-25. CYI worked with Chinese American high school youth, and Activist Training Institute targeted Asian American young adults.

While some of these groups' circumstances obviously differed from those facing organizations like the AARW, some themes were relevant to the intended focus on engagement of the 18-25 years of age cohort. These were themes that more than one group cited as important.

### **a) Community**

These organizational interviews reinforced the focus group theme that community plays an important role in encouraging and sustaining people in civic participation. Particularly for Asian Americans, who face cultural barriers, and like others, daily life barriers, community provided rare support and incentive to continue activity. In some of the high-school-age-focused groups, community attachment arose from their time spent as younger participants. For a program like ATI, it was finding kindred colleagues interested in social issues and reinforcing those ideas.

Related to community, it was also important to develop shared values, goals, and visions; providing a space for alternative and unique discussions. A representative of CIRCLE noted that young adults don't often have the opportunity to discuss issues that are important to them. The City School directly organized a political education program for such discussions. ATI planners said their program provided a space for young activists to share their experiences and feelings about activism. They said imparting a vision that goes beyond learning specific skills and organizing projects was important in the development of activists. Paying continual attention to relationships likewise helps to sustain individual participation.

#### **b) Connecting the personal and the community**

The respondents noted that providing a community relevance and personal relevance to civic engagement was important, particularly for those who are lower income and face more challenges. Knowing how participation connected to the "I" and local issues actualized and highlighted engagement. To MassVote, young people had a difficult time visualizing the linkage between participation and local problems. When participants linked personal interests to those of a larger, community interest, their relationship to the world matured.

#### **c) Entry and later growth**

Entry is a theme to grapple deeply with. How do people find out about ways to start participating? Why would they become engaged? To facilitate entry into civic engagement, a material or other incentive such as skill building was often helpful, particularly for the younger people from low-income backgrounds. One of the ATI respondents described that incentive as her primary reason for beginning community work. Once engaged, she described her rapid transformation, where she envisioned a life built around civic activities.

Thus it seems that incentivizing entry is a worthwhile effort for organizations to undertake, in order to establish a long-term dedication to civic engagement. This theory is corroborated by best practices interviews with City School and Hyde Square Task Force, which both reported that their youth, once engaged, would return to the organizations after college, looking for ways to participate in the community.

#### **d) Other themes**

Some additional themes were the importance of providing role models and organized structures for participation as well as follow-up. Being prepared to work with people made civic participation significantly more compelling.

### **III. Findings**

In summary, looking at survey and interview results, the findings were:

#### **1) Civic Participation Gap**

The survey results indicated a gap between current civic engagement and willingness to participate, which implies unrealized potential for greater participation. Another vindication of that desire was that one-third of respondents were willing to consider working in civic associations and organizations. While time was the most widespread barrier to participation, the second was the lack of connections and knowledge of ways to get engaged. In focus groups, one subject said that, after graduating from school, without school-based structures, it was difficult to know how to start getting involved. The participants also seemed to have perceptions that there were high entry costs and obligations involved in civic participation.

Although lack of time is a generic barrier lacking specificity, the fact that awareness and lack of awareness mirror each other as a motivator and barrier, respectively, showed that educational outreach may be an important effort to continue, in addition to the social outreach that fosters community.

#### **2) Diverse interests and activated sectors**

Low-income individuals have tended to favor more localized concerns and issues. However, our young adult Asian American cohort indicated a broad range of interests. Although most of our respondents who were actively engaged worked primarily on localized concerns, they reported an unmet significant interest in broader issues. The environment and global issues were examples of broader issues. In our focus groups, environmental issues were often cited, and some expressed a preference for settings in which they could work with other racial groups.

#### **3) Fundraising/service and other activism**

Fundraising and volunteering were the activities most associated with other forms of civic engagement. They appeared to be entry points, as people engaged in other forms of civic participation were most likely to engage in multiple ways of engagement. Even if not entry points, fundraising and service had the broadest reach. Fundraising and service were also the forms of participation that interview subjects most often cited. To bring in volunteers, incentives in the form of skills or stipends were helpful. However, organizations have seen that programs such as training and education, especially those that express a broader vision and the possibility for change, can bring volunteers into other forms of participation. Although fundraising and volunteering were most often cited, marches, rallies, and voting were not uncommon experiences.

#### **4) Community**

Social relations were a significant factor in participation. Fairly consistently through the interviews, respondents cited community and community building as significant. They began or continued to participate because of existing or new friends and acquaintances. Especially for those less committed or new to civic engagement, feeling accepted and part of a community developed and retained their attachment. Community awareness was also associated with likely civic participation.

#### **5) Gender and educational differences**

Those respondents who are female and more educated tended to be more civically active.

### **IV. Methodology**

In the first part of this study, low-income areas in the Boston area were identified from U.S. Census Bureau data. The area was limited to the municipalities of known low-income Asian American concentrations inside the Route 128 (Interstate 95) - Boston, Chelsea, Malden, Quincy, and Lynn. Residents came from zip code areas with median household incomes that are 80% or less than that for the metropolitan area.<sup>12</sup>

For the survey, resident listings from each of these municipalities were used. Using a proprietary Asian names database, the resident listings for these zip codes were filtered for those with Asian last names. In cases of ambiguous last names, such as Lee, identifiable Asian first names were the criteria for inclusion in the filtered listings. The Asian ethnic name listings were filtered for those between the ages of 18-25. Finally, random names and addresses of the target population were extracted for the survey from these listings. The survey had a minimum goal of one hundred survey responses. Using a rule of thumb of 10% response rate, the initial mailing was about 1100 in size, with some subsequent oversampling of Chelsea and Lynn.<sup>13</sup> The oversampling went to new, random names and addresses and increased the total mailing to over 1300 surveys.

The recipients received a questionnaire of fourteen questions followed by eight demographic questions (see accompanying survey instrument). The survey asked for information about this population's interest, current involvement, and barriers to civic engagement. It also asked basic demographic information about age, neighborhood, ethnicity, educational attainment and student status, gender, and occupation. The recipients were given the option to complete the survey on-line. The on-line survey was on a commercial service called Survey Monkey.

---

<sup>12</sup> Boston-Cambridge-Quincy MA-NH Metropolitan Statistical Area (Massachusetts part)

<sup>13</sup> Of the 1200 surveys, over ten percent of the mailing was returned as "unknown addressee"



The surveys were anonymous, but respondents were given the option of entering their names into a random drawing to receive a small incentive for those completing the survey. The incentive was modest - a \$50 gift card. The survey responses were stored in an Excel database. They were analyzed using statistical tools in Excel.

The composite index of participation variable used in our correlation tests combined 6 measures: questions 1 (attention to news), 6 (involvement in community activities), 7 (involvement in civic activities), 8 (current issue work), 9 (attendance at rallies and marches), 10 (role in issue work), and 11 (time spent on civic activities). Responses to questions 1 and 6 were ordinal variables on a scale of 1-5, and the responses to these questions were directly added to the composite index. Questions 7, 8, and 9 asked respondents to “check one or more.” The total number of items checked for each respondent was added to the composite index. Finally, questions 10 and 11 asked for a level of involvement. These were ordinal variables but the lowest level of involvement was assigned a value of 0, the next level a value of 1, and so forth with increasing levels of involvement. This value was then added to the composite index. The composite index had a range of 2-36. Survey respondents who omitted any of these questions were excluded from the analysis.

To supplement the survey, focus group interviews were also organized. Survey participants who indicated interest in participating in a focus group for an additional monetary incentive (\$25) were contacted after survey outreach was completed. Ten survey participants successfully completed focus group interviews, which were conducted by Professor Loan Dao and held in groups of two to four interviewees. Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed prior to analysis.

While this study investigated civic engagement, it is relevant to note that the survey instrument did not define civic engagement explicitly, and the focus group facilitator encouraged study subjects to construct their own definition of civic engagement. Survey respondents were presented with a series of questions that suggested some examples of civic engagement, such as volunteering or fundraising, participating in issues campaigns, arts and cultural activities, and electoral work. Civic engagement was framed loosely, covering a variety of issue areas and action types, and consisting of both paid and unpaid work.

The study coordinators felt that a fixed definition of civic engagement would not serve the purpose of eliciting self-perceived levels of civic engagement, and would not be as communicative as providing concrete examples of civic activities. Focus groups participants apparently did not view civic engagement as predominantly political, which a fixed definition of civic participation may have suppressed.

Research team members also interviewed a few organizations that were engaged in civic engagement for young adults in this age range. Based on referrals, the groups

to be interviewed were identified. These groups were the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tisch College of Tufts University, the City School, a center for youth leadership development, the Hyde Square Task Force, a neighborhood empowerment group, MassVote, a voter organizing campaign, the Activist Training Institute, a collaborative training and leadership development program for young activists, and Chinese Youth Initiative, a program of the Chinese Progressive Association. Of these groups, only the last two were Asian American, while the others were multi-racial. The interviews were either audio-recorded or written notes were taken of the main points from the interviews. Reviewing the audio transcripts and notes identified repeated themes.

## **V. Study Limitations and Issues for Further Research**

This study was based on a limited sample size. Sample size however does not always limit validity. The study did not attempt any subgroup analysis, where the sample size would have been more critical. At any rate, a 1% sample of a population is considered a good minimum size. With the focus groups and best practices interviews, the planned study was expected to be sufficiently robust.

How this younger cohort would respond to a mail survey was uncertain. In fact, there was a lower response rate than in previous surveys that IAAS has conducted of other Asian American adults. Other researchers surveying this population may want to take into account this lower response rate to mail surveys – about 8%.

Another limitation was that respondents may be fully representative of the target population. For example, those who are more civically active might have been more likely to respond. The respondents were significantly more female than male, and the survey was conducted only in English.

Future studies may benefit from a larger samples size and the ability to conduct systematic follow-up questioning.

The study suggests issues that should be further explored. For example:

- 1) Why are female Asian Americans much more likely to engage in civic actions than males? The differential behavior between genders is consistent with government reports on the general population, which report that females are 20-30% more likely to volunteer than males (U.S. Department of Labor 2012). A substantially higher gender gap appeared in our study, indicating that unique dynamics may exist among Asian Americans.



2) How do judgments about one's community interact with civic engagement? The strongest correlation with the level of civic engagement was with the perception of living in a low-income community. A possible line of exploration is whether the assessment of greater needs of a low-income community motivates individuals to become involved. Alternatively, civic engagement may raise individuals' awareness of their communities' issues.

3) How do those who are civically active progress from personal interests to deeper civic commitments? Volunteering seems to be an entry point, and those activities that are the least confrontational to the status quo are the ones most widely practiced. What motivates people to go on to protest politics like rallies or engage in electoral political campaigns? Some focus group participants suggested areas to explore in discussing changes in their personal views and self-image. However, the trajectory of such development needs further explanation.

4) Why is lack of time viewed as a significant barrier to civic engagement? Future studies may ask why civic engagement is not a priority to individuals in the study population when compared to other life responsibilities and activities that take up time. Do people perceive civic engagement as disconnected from personal issues?

5) How do young Asian Americans adults compare with their peers in other racial/ethnic groups in civic engagement? For example, are the patterns of young adult Asian Americans similar to or different than those of other groups?

As the role and profile of Asian Americans increases in the U.S. civic life, the need for understanding and promoting civic engagement likewise increase in relevance. This modest survey is an effort to contribute to this work, and this specific population in the study has a significant role in civic life. The contributions of other scholars to further the body of knowledge on Asian American civic participation helps shed light on a poorly understood population.

## References

1. Foster-Bey, J., 2008. *Do Race, Ethnicity, Citizenship And Socio-Economic Status Determine Civic-Engagement?* Medford, MA: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.
2. Halstead, Ted. 1999. "A Politics for Generation X." *The Atlantic Monthly* August, 33.
3. Kymlicka, Will and Wayne Norman. 1994. "Return of the Citizen - a Survey of Recent Work on Citizenship Theory." *Ethics* 104(2): 352-381.
4. Lien, Pei-te, M.M. Conway, and Janelle Wong. 2004. *The Politics of Asian Americans: Diversity and Community*. New York: Routledge.
5. Skocpol, Theda and Morris P. Fiorina. 1999. In *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*. Edited by Skocpol and Fiorina, 1-23. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press and New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
6. Stepick, A. and C. Stepick. 2002. "Becoming American, Constructing Ethnicity: Immigrant Youth and Civic Engagement." *Applied Developmental Science* 6(4): 246-257.
7. U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration. 2011. *Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
8. U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration. 2010. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008: Population Characteristics*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
9. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2012. *Volunteering in the United States, 2011*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
10. Verba, Sidney, Kay L. Schlozman, and H Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
11. Watanabe, Paul. 2006. Review of *The Making of Asian America through Political Participation*, by Pei-te Lien, *The Politics of Asian Americans: Diversity and Community*, by Pei-te Lien, M. Margaret Conway, and Janelle Wong, and *Asian American Politics: Law, Participation, and Policy*, edited by Don T. Nakanishi and James S. Lai. *Amerasia Journal* 32(6):156-163.
12. Wong, Janelle, S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, Taeku Lee, and Jane Junn. 2011. *Asian American Political Participation: Emerging Constituents and Their Political Identities*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
13. Youniss, James, Jeffrey A. McLellan, and Miranda Yates. 1997. "What We Know About Engendering Civic Identity." *American Behavioral Scientist* 40(5): 620-631.

## Appendix

### UMass Boston: Institute for Asian American Studies Civic Participation Survey

This survey has 23 questions in total. All questions are optional but we hope that you will complete our survey in full.

#### **Your Interest in Civic Participation**

Please answer the following questions below about your interest in civic activities.

**1. How much attention do you pay to news and/or community events? (Circle a number on the scale)**

**1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5**  
None | | Neither | | A Great Deal

**2. How do you receive your news? (Check all that apply)**

- ☐ Newspapers
- ☐ Online news
- ☐ Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- ☐ Magazines
- ☐ TV
- ☐ Radio
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Not applicable

**3. Are you a United States Citizen?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not eligible

**4. Are you registered to Vote?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not eligible

**5. Have you voted in the past year?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not eligible

**TURN OVER TO THE NEXT PAGE**

### **Your Community Involvement and Civic Participation**

Please answer the following questions about your community involvement and civic participation.

**6. How involved are you in community activities? (Circle a number on the scale)**

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  
Not involved | Neither | Very Involved

**7. Do you participate in any of the following civic activities? (Check all that apply)**

- ☐ Volunteering or fundraising for organizations in your community
- ☐ Participating in issue campaigns (organizing through petitions, boycotts, contacting officials or the media, and/or protest rallies and marches)
- ☐ Arts and cultural activities with a social message
- ☐ Voter education, voter registration, Get Out the Vote, and/or electoral campaigns
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ No, I do not participate in any civic activities.

**8. What issue areas are you currently working on? (Check all that apply)**

- ☐ Youth
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Environment
- ☐ Community Organizing
- ☐ Civil Rights
- ☐ Immigrant Rights
- ☐ Human Rights
- ☐ Global Issues
- ☐ Arts and Culture
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ None

**9. Have you ever attended a... (Check all that apply)**

- ☐ Rally
- ☐ March
- ☐ Community Meeting
- ☐ Community Action
- ☐ None of the above

**10. If you are already actively working on an issue, are you a... (Check all that apply)**

- ☐ Staff member (full or part time)
- ☐ Intern (paid or unpaid)
- ☐ Volunteer
- ☐ Board Member
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ No, I am not actively working on an issue.

**11. How many hours per week do you spend on these activities?**

- ☐ 0 hours
- ☐ 1-10 hours
- ☐ 10-20 hours
- ☐ 20-30 hours
- ☐ 30-40 hours
- ☐ 40 hours or more

**Barriers to Your Civic Participation**

Please answer the following questions below about any barriers to your civic participation.

**12. Are any of the following obstacles preventing you from becoming more involved? (Check all that apply)**

- ☐ Time
- ☐ Social and cultural factors (such as peer, family, or community disapproval, religious bans, etc.)
- ☐ Lack of connections
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ There are NO obstacles.
- ☐ I do not want to be more involved.

**13. Are there issue areas listed below you would like to become more involved with? (Check all that apply)**

- ☐ Youth
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Environment
- ☐ Community Organizing
- ☐ Civil Rights
- ☐ Immigrant Rights
- ☐ Human Rights
- ☐ Global Issues
- ☐ Arts and Culture
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Not interested

**14. How would you like to become more involved? (Check all that apply)**

- ☐ Volunteer
- ☐ Lead a project
- ☐ Use my personal skills to meet a community need
- ☐ Apply for a job in a community organization
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ I am not interested in becoming more involved.

**TURN OVER TO THE NEXT PAGE**

**Background Information**

**15. Which of the following best describes how you identify your ethnicity?**

- ☐ Cambodian/Khmer
- ☐ Chinese
- ☐ Indian
- ☐ Japanese
- ☐ Korean
- ☐ Vietnamese
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**16. What is your age? (in years) \_\_\_\_\_**

**17. Are you currently attending college/university?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

**18. What is the highest level of schooling you have completed?**

- ☐ 9<sup>th</sup> grade or less
- ☐ Some high school
- ☐ High school graduate
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ College
- ☐ Graduate school

**19. What is your current occupation? \_\_\_\_\_**

**20. Which of the following best describes your gender?**

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**21. What is your zip code? \_\_\_\_\_**

**22. Do you live in a low income area?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't Know

**23. Would you be interested in participating in a focus group?**

We will provide \$25 for your time. If you are interested, please provide your name, address, and contact information in the box on the next page.

- ☐ Yes, I am interested in participating in a focus group.
- ☐ No, I am not interested in participating in a focus group.

**INSTITUTE FOR ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES**  
**University of Massachusetts Boston**

The Institute for Asian American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston conducts community-based research on Asian American issues, provides resources to Asian American communities in Massachusetts, and expands opportunities on campus for the study of Asian American experiences.

100 Morrissey Boulevard  
Boston, MA 02125-3393  
(617) 287-5650  
[www.iaas.umb.edu](http://www.iaas.umb.edu)  
[asianaminst@umb.edu](mailto:asianaminst@umb.edu)

Cover photos: api movement