

The Asian American Community Engagement Project: Voting Trends and Access in 2012



Prepared for Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Chicago
by South Asian American Policy & Research Institute (SAAPRI)



ASIAN AMERICANS
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CHICAGO



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Foreword

Twenty-one years ago, a group of Asian American activists, leaders, academics and organizers came together around what was then a “unique” concept – to establish the first pan-Asian American advocacy and community empowerment organization in Chicago. Partly borne out of hope and part frustration, a space was created and nurtured over 20 years by Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Filipino, and many other leaders who believed in the potential and power of pan-Asian organizing in our state. It was through their efforts and the ongoing efforts of a new generation of Asian American organizers, lawyers, academics, students, and community leaders to claim and own what it means to be Asian American.

In 2010, Asian Americans Advancing Justice—Chicago (formerly the Asian American Institute) was able to leverage the collective efforts of over 30 organizations in Chicago around Census outreach and advocacy where the potential impact and reach of pan-Asian American presence is best exemplified. By working with community-based organizations that have a commitment to service delivery and community empowerment, the Pan-Asian Voter Empowerment coalition (PAVE) continues to refine a model of outreach and mobilization that resulted in the lowest undercount percentages of any minority or racial group in the 2010 Census, as well as growing rates of voter registration and mobilization across our communities. Census data demonstrates visibility and representation – better schools, affordable housing, and improved access to public safety and healthcare.

As a continuing effort to raise the collective voice of our Asian American communities – The Asian American Community Engagement Project – Voting Trends and Access in 2012 – was published to offer a grounded, distinctive, but common voice around the political issues and civic engagement challenges that face our communities. We partnered with South Asian American Policy & Research Institute (SAAPRI) because of the organization’s expertise in conducting community-based research to reveal insights about Asian Americans and South Asian Americans. As the South Asian American population continues to grow at a rapid rate, it is crucial to incorporate their perspectives in our pan-Asian community engagement efforts. On behalf of our Pan-Asian Voter Empowerment coalition, we prepared this report not as a definitive source for all issues in our communities, but to continue promoting and informing ongoing discussions in our communities about the future of Asian American voters in Illinois.



Tuyet Le, Executive Director
Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Chicago

Acknowledgments

South Asian American Policy & Research Institute (SAAPRI) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization established in 2001 to improve the lives of South Asian Americans in the Chicago area, by using research to formulate equitable and socially responsible public policy recommendations. SAAPRI's work has included research and policy initiatives on civic engagement, hate crimes, access to health care, economic development, and the experiences of immigrants.

Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Chicago, formerly the Asian American Institute, was established in 1992 as a pan-Asian not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization. Its mission is to empower the Asian American community through advocacy, research, education, and coalition-building.

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Exit Poll Volunteers

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Introduction

Purpose of Research

South Asian American Policy and Research Institute (SAAPRI) and Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Chicago, formerly the Asian American Institute, conducted in-person exit polling research during the 2012 Illinois primary and general elections to learn about the opinions and experiences of Asian American and South Asian American voters.

The 2012 elections were important for the Asian American community as there were prominent local races featuring Asian Americans, as well as the first ever Hindi-translated ballot in the city of Chicago and suburban Cook County, as required by Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act.

During the primary election in March of 2012, SAAPRI and Advancing Justice-Chicago administered over 150 questionnaires. The surveys revealed a diverse portrait of the Asian American community. Almost a quarter of Asian American respondents cited using bilingual assistance at the polls, and even more voters reported needing assistance in a different language or format. Among the issues Asian American voters consistently cited as influencing their candidate choice were the economy, jobs, and candidates who understand and support Asian Americans and South Asian Americans.

SAAPRI and Advancing Justice-Chicago conducted exit polling research on a larger scale during the general elections in November 2012. This report provides an overview of the responses of Asian American voters who participated in exit polling immediately after voting in the 2012 general elections. The research reveals insights into the perspectives of Asian Americans in the Chicago area including people of Chinese, Korean, Indian, Laotian, Filipino, Pakistani, Japanese, Vietnamese, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Thai, Cambodian, and other Asian backgrounds.

Methods

Questionnaires were administered in-person and collected at the polls by Advancing Justice-Chicago and SAAPRI staff and volunteers after respondents finished voting during the 2012 general elections, primarily during the early voting dates of October 27 and November 3 and Election Day, November 6. Questionnaires were available in English as well as five Asian languages, as discussed further below in the Language section. Respondents were informed that participation in the research was anonymous and confidential and that the organizations are interested in analyzing the aggregate results.

Over 80 individuals across two Early Voting events and Election Day went to approximately 20 polling sites across the city and suburbs to survey Asian American voters. Most of the staff and volunteers who conducted exit polling, during early voting and on Election Day, did not include complete information about the voter's township/ward and precinct numbers. Furthermore, during early voting, it was more difficult for volunteers to determine voters' precinct because voters could vote outside of their precincts. Therefore, this report will not examine data based on location and precincts due to the lack of sufficient data. Suggestions for improvement of future exit polling methods are discussed further below in the Recommendations section of this report.

Over 80 individuals assisted in one way or another with exit polling research; this number includes numerous volunteers, as well as Advancing Justice-Chicago and SAAPRI staff who assisted with in-person exit polling or data entry of completed questionnaires. SAAPRI conducted training sessions for key volunteers and staff and also provided written tips for all people conducting exit polling. After reviewing the outcomes from exit polling during the primary elections, SAAPRI and Advancing Justice-Chicago implemented various modifications to

the exit polling process to improve the process for the general elections. As a result, there were notable improvements in the exit polling process between the primary and the general elections.

791 total exit poll questionnaires were collected from Asian American voters during the general elections, including South Asian Americans.¹ This number includes people who are biracial or multiracial and included an Asian American race or ethnicity as part of their answer about their race. This report analyzes the results of the responses from Asian American voters.



Asian American voters in Chicago and suburbs complete questionnaires

¹ This report reflects data entered as of November 16, 2012, and the majority of this data was entered by November 8, 2012.

Demographics

- Among the Asian American respondents, 28% were Chinese, 22% were Indian, 20% were Korean, 13% were Filipino, 11% were Laotian, 3% were Pakistani, 1% were Japanese, and 1% were Vietnamese. There were also less than 1% each of respondents who were, respectively, Cambodian, Hmong, Indonesian, Taiwanese, Tibetan, Burmese, Sri Lankan, Thai, or Bangladeshi, or who identified as “other” Asian American or Pacific Islander. These percentages are approximate and add up to slightly over 100 because some individuals reported more than one Asian category (for example, one voter responded as being Chinese and Cambodian).²
- About 26% of the respondents were South Asian American, including those who reported being Asian Indian (also called Indian American), Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Sri Lankan.

Figure 1: Race/Ethnicity of Respondents

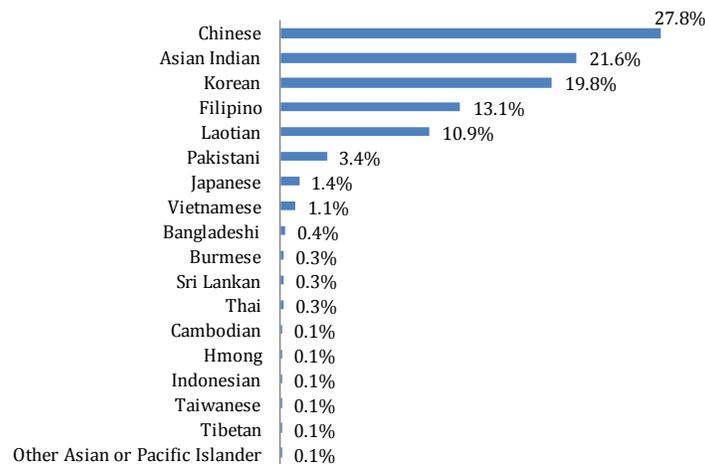
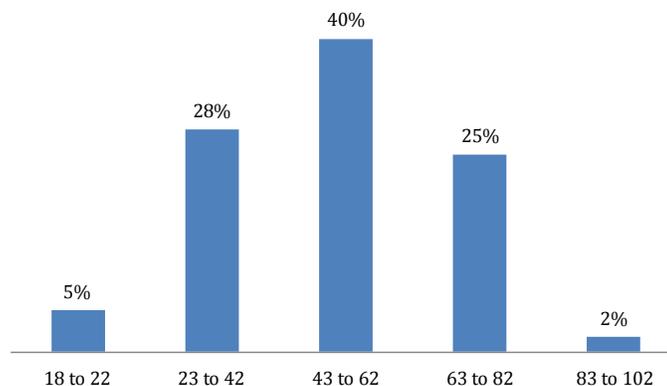


Figure 2: Age Group of Respondents



² It should be noted that, because Taiwanese was not listed as a separate category on the questionnaire, there were presumably Taiwanese respondents who listed themselves as Chinese. However, one participant specifically listed himself or herself as Taiwanese.

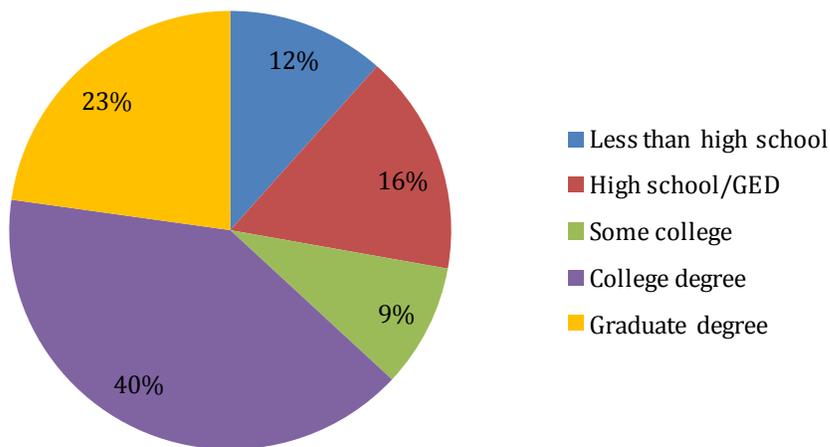
- About 45% of the Asian American respondents were male and 55% were female.
- 40% of the Asian American respondents were born between 1950 and 1969 (ages 40 to 62).
- 81% of the Asian American respondents noted that they were born outside of the United States. Of the foreign-born respondents, the average number of years that they have been in the United States is 25 years.

Table 1: Comparison of Respondents by Ethnicity and Place of Birth

Race/Ethnicity	Born in the U.S.	Foreign-Born
Chinese	28.4%	71.6%
South Asian ³	13.1%	86.9%
Korean	6.8%	93.2%

- Approximately 12% of the Asian American respondents reported having less than a high school education.

Figure 3: Education Levels of Respondents



³ In this table and throughout this report, the term “South Asian” refers to individuals of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Sri Lankan descent, alone or in combination with another race or ethnicity. As discussed in SAAPRI’s other publications, there is a need for additional data on these populations as well as smaller South Asian American populations.

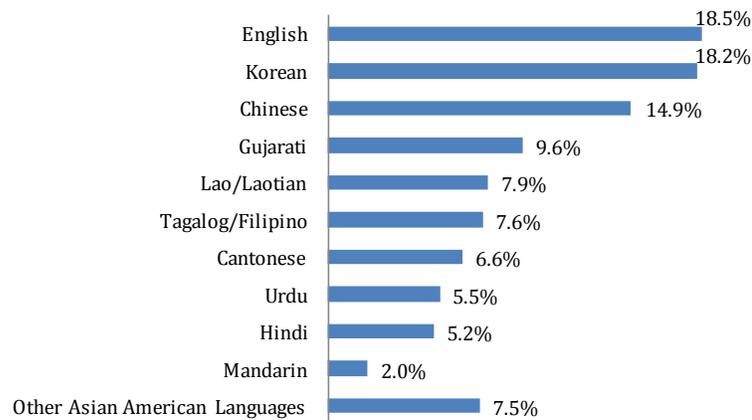
Language

- Questionnaires were available in English as well as five Asian languages. 64% of the Asian American respondents used English questionnaires (including those voters who responded orally and had a volunteer fill out the English questionnaire for them), 18% used Korean questionnaires, 12% used Chinese questionnaires, 6% used Lao questionnaires, 1% used Hindi questionnaires, and 0% used Cambodian/ Khmer questionnaires.
- **About 81.5% of the Asian American participants reported that English was not their native language.**



Advancing Justice-Chicago and SAAPRI staff administer questionnaire to Asian American voter during early voting at Warren Park in Chicago

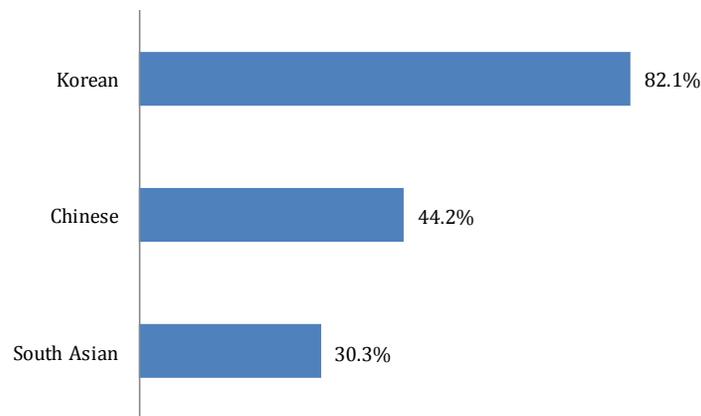
Figure 4: Native Languages of Respondents



- The above percentages are approximate and add up to slightly over 100 because some people reported more than one language category (for example, a few voters claimed both Hindi and Gujarati as their native languages). The question about native language was purposefully asked in an open-ended manner on the questionnaire, in order to be as broad as possible in capturing voters' input.
- As reflected above, among Asian American respondents, 14.9% of Asian American respondents listed Chinese as their native language (without specifying further), 6.6% listed Cantonese, and 2.0% listed Mandarin.

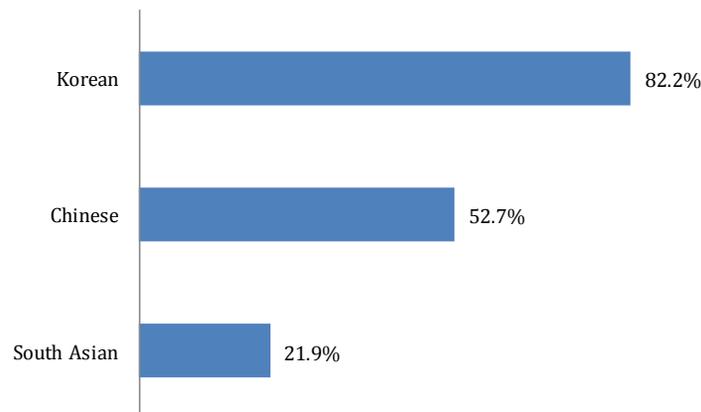
- Voted who listed an “other Asian American languages” listed native languages of the Asian languages of Burmese, Cambodian, Indonesian, Malay, Taiwanese, Thai, Tibetan, and Vietnamese, as well as the South Asian languages of Bengali, Kannada, Kudrati, Malayalam, Marathi, Memoni, Punjabi, Tamil, and Telugu.
- About 25% of the respondents reported having a South Asian language as their native language.
- **About 45% of Asian American voters responded that they understand spoken English less than very well.** Among Korean respondents, about 82% reported that they understand spoken English less than very well. For Chinese and South Asian respondents, although the rates of limited English proficiency are lower than for Koreans, the rates still point to notable language access barriers faced by all these groups.

Figure 5: Percentage of Selected Asian American Groups Who Understand Spoken English Less than Very Well



- **About 47% of Asian American respondents responded that they understand written English less than very well.** Among Korean respondents, about 82% reported that they understand written English less than very well. For Chinese and South Asian respondents, although the rates of limited English proficiency are lower than for Koreans, the rates still point to significant a notable language access barriers faced by all these groups.

Figure 6: Percentage of Selected Asian American Groups Who Understand Written English Less than Very Well



- Pursuant to Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act, in selected precincts in the City of Chicago and suburban Cook County, translated ballots are available in Chinese and Hindi, and oral assistance is available in Mandarin, Cantonese, Hindi, Gujarati, and Urdu.
- 15.4% of Asian American respondents declared they utilized a translated ballot (in another language).

Table 2: Percentage of Selected Asian American Groups Who Used Translated Ballots

Racial/Ethnic Background	Percentage Used Translated Ballot
Chinese	30.8%
Korean ⁴	15.6%
South Asian	6.8%

- 25.8% of Asian American voters stated they used a bilingual poll worker in their language.

Table 3: Percentage of Selected Asian American Groups Who Used Bilingual a Poll Worker

Racial/Ethnic Background	Percentage Used Bilingual Poll Worker
Chinese	41.8%
Korean ⁵	37.6%
South Asian	7.2%

⁴ Korean ballots are not available in the City of Chicago or suburban Cook County, and it is possible that this portion of the questionnaire caused Korean American and other voters to be confused; for example, they might have been referring to whether they received some other sort of language assistance from the election boards or community volunteers.

⁵ Bilingual poll workers who speak Korean are not required in the City of Chicago or suburban Cook County, and it is possible that this portion of the questionnaire caused Korean American and other voters to be confused; for example, they might have been referring to whether they received some other sort of language assistance from the election boards or community volunteers.

Civic Participation and Perspectives

- Among Asian American respondents, 72% of respondents responded that they voted for Democrats, 12% voted for Republicans, and 16% responded “Both.”

Figure 7: Political Party Selection by Ethnicity

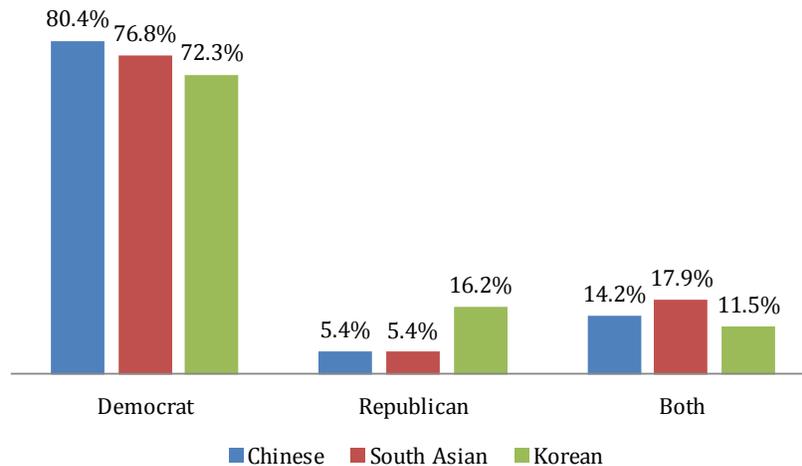
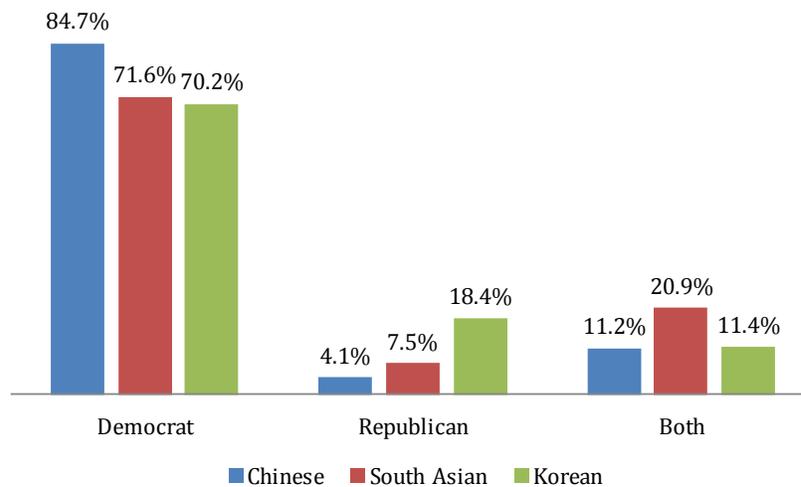


Figure 8: Political Party Selection by Ethnicity (Voters Over Age 50)



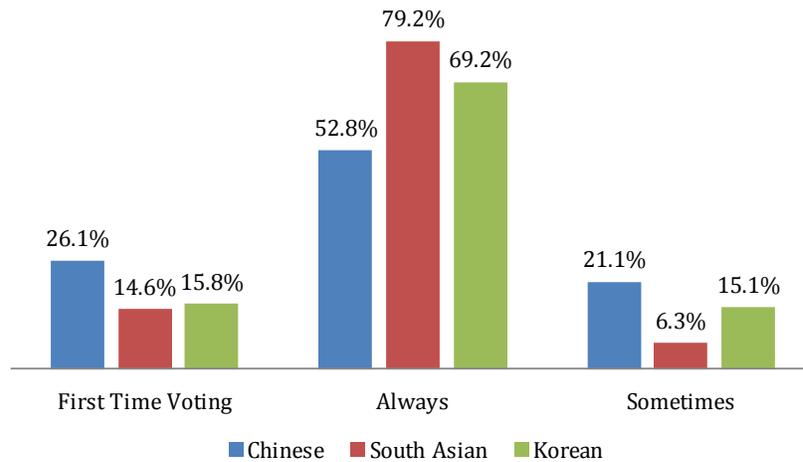
- South Asian voters who participated in the survey and answered the question about top three things that were most important to them when selecting a candidate (n = 135) primarily listed economy/jobs (51.1%), personal characteristics (20.0%), and healthcare (18.5%) in their responses.⁶
- Korean voters who participated in the survey and answered the question (n = 39) primarily stated that economy/jobs (18.0%), personal characteristics (15.4%), taxes (12.8%), and party affiliation (12.8%) were

⁶ Personal characteristics include ethics, trust, integrity, morals, and other similar characteristics.

among the top three things that were most important to them when selecting a candidate. It is important to note that only 39 of the Korean respondents answered this specific question.

- Chinese voters who participated in the survey and answered the question (n = 176) stated that economy/jobs (31.3%), personal characteristics (17.6%) and healthcare (14.8%) were among the top three things that were most important to them when selecting a candidate.
- About 20% of respondents were first time voters (in the United States). Approximately 66% said that they always vote, and 14% said that they sometimes vote.

Figure 9: Voting Frequency by Ethnicity



- The respondents were asked if they engaged in various listed civic-engagement activities. Of the Asian American voters who stated that they engaged in one of the listed forms of civic engagement (n=273), about 60% claimed that they have worked with other people to deal with some issue facing their community, 41% stated that they gave money to an individual candidate running for office (or a group that supported or opposed candidates), and 33% declared that they have called, written a letter to, or visited a government official to express their views on a public issue.⁷
- Responses to the question “For your friends and family members who do not vote, why not?” are summarized in Table 4.

⁷ These percentages add up to over 100 because participants had the option to select more than one civic-engagement activity.

Table 4: Reasons for Lack of Voter Engagement

Reason Why Family and Friends Do Not Vote	Percentage ⁸
Not a citizen	36.8%
Not interested	31.3%
Citizen but not registered to vote	22.5%
Limited English ability	19.0%
No transportation	4.0%
Other	12.5%

- The respondents who selected the “other” option to the question stated their friends and family do not vote due to the following reasons: age, ballot not in their language, business, busy, laziness, and uncertainty. It is important to note that some participants who selected the “other” option stated that all their family members and friends do in fact vote.

Volunteer Experiences

- SAAPRI administered three anonymous online surveys to volunteer and staff who conducted exit polling research: after the primary elections, after the October 2012 volunteer training (which occurred in preparation for the general elections), and after the general elections.
- During the general elections, volunteers and staff who administered exit polling questionnaires were asked how comfortable they felt identifying and approaching Asian American voters. About 45% stated moderately comfortable, 40% claimed very comfortable, and 15% declared extremely comfortable. These results indicate an improvement in the effectiveness of volunteer training, given that the reported comfort level was higher when compared to the primary.
- Additionally, volunteers were asked about their satisfaction in the exit polling project after they completed the research. Approximately 50% claimed they were extremely satisfied, 45% declared they were moderately satisfied and 5% stated they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. These results depict about a 40% increase (11.1% to 50%) in reporting “extremely satisfied,” as compared to volunteers’ experiences during the primary elections.
- Moreover, volunteers were requested to answer how likely they are to volunteer for Advancing Justice-Chicago or SAAPRI the future. About 45% declared they were extremely likely, 35% stated very likely and 20% claimed moderately likely. These percentages reflect an increase in the likelihood of continuing to volunteer with SAAPRI or Advancing Justice-Chicago, as compared to volunteers’ responses after the primary elections.

⁸ These percentages add up to over 100 because participants had the option to choose more than one reason.



SAAPRI staff and volunteers assist Urdu-speaking voter during early voting

Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations were collected from SAAPRI and Advancing Justice-Chicago staff and volunteers who administered questionnaires or conducted data entry. Modifications to the research methods, as well as increased staff time and coordination from community organizations carrying out the research, would make such research even more robust and useful in the future. Future efforts in exit polling and community engagement of Asian American voters in the Chicago area should aim to do the following:

- More disaggregation of data is needed, including disaggregation by ethnicity, language, country of origin, age, and location of voter (city versus suburbs).
- Several voters requested an exit polling questionnaire in Urdu or Gujarati. Translations in these and any other languages should be completed further in advance in order to improve the quality of the translation and create a process for translating survey responses yielded in languages other than English.
- Questions related to language assistance should be reworded to assess assistance under Sections 203 and 208 of the federal Voting Rights Act, as well as more general types of help. For example, some Korean voters responded that they used language assistance, even though such assistance is not mandated by local election boards, suggesting that voters were receiving assistance from volunteers or other sources.
- Improved methods should be used to ask voters sensitive questions, such as which parties and candidates they voted for. For example, staff and volunteers noted that many Korean voters did not like being asked about party and candidate.
- When asking how voters learned about the elections, researchers should take into consideration that many voters reported learning about the elections online or from their local library.

- Future research should take into consideration that the questionnaire length was challenging for many voters.
- Future research should consider the benefits and drawbacks of asking open-ended questions, such as, “What are the top 3 things that are most important to you when choosing a candidate?”
- Analysis of location of voter could be facilitated, for example, by pre-printing location information on questionnaires and providing additional training to volunteers about the importance of determining and writing the precinct number.
- With enhanced technological resources, such as tablets and laptop computers, the collection, entry, and analysis of data could be significantly streamlined, which would enable community organizations to devote more resources to reaching an even broader base of Asian American voters.
- In-person exit polling in the Chicago area should be better coordinated with other research on voter opinions and behavior, such as phone polling research and pre-election research, to facilitate comparison across Asian American and other populations on the local and national level.
- The Asian American community would benefit from additional research about voters’ views and experiences, so that voters can continue to have a voice even after Election Day. For example, one exit polling volunteer suggested that future research could study how community members voted on electricity aggregation, elected school boards, and other important local issues. As stated by the exit polling volunteer, it is important to “understand how aware Asian American voters are about city and state issues and whether they have an interest and...[opportunity] to participate in town halls where such issues are discussed.”

The diversity of Asian American population in terms of language and culture, along with the geographic distribution of Asian American voters across various neighborhoods and suburbs, poses great challenges and opportunities for this type of community-based research and engagement. In order to successfully incorporate the voices of a broad spectrum of Asian American voters, such research necessarily requires the involvement of multiple community-based organizations and a significant commitment of time and resources to carry out the work in a coordinated and effective manner. Accordingly, for future election cycles, Asian American communities need more resources in order to carry out such community-based research and provide even greater insights on the views and experiences of Asian American voters in the Chicago area.