STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE RIGHT TO VOTE: WHAT CHICAGO DATA TELLS US ABOUT SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN VOTING BEHAVIOR

OVERVIEW

This 2026 report of the Strengthening Democracy series at SAAPRI focuses on the city of Chicago, and examines South Asian American civic participation through voter registration, turnout, and broader forms of community engagement.

Chicago is home to one of the largest South Asian American populations in the United States and yet it is less engaged and less likely to vote and thus often underrepresented in policymaking. As the South Asian American population continues to grow, we anticipate being a driving force for conversations around electoral engagement and education in this community. Taking Chicago as a case study, we want to shed light on how South Asian Americans vote and the barriers they face to participating in elections using disaggregated data to better understand the diversity within the community. Through this penultimate piece of the Strengthening Democracy series, SAAPRI hopes to present a variety of recommendations aimed at mitigating barriers to voting for South Asian Americans in Chicago and serve as a potential model for advancing protections for historically underrepresented communities at large.

This report aims to serve as a valuable resource for election administrators, nonprofit and community-based organizations, civic and voter engagement groups, community organizers, elected officials, researchers and academic institutions, ethnic media, and other stakeholders working to better understand and engage South Asian American voters and expand meaningful and inclusive civic participation.

To examine these dynamics, this report analyzes the Chicago Board of Election Commission's registered-voter file across eleven wards, with 369,194 total registered voters, of whom 13,546 were identified as South Asian, spanning fourteen elections held between 2016 and 2024. It examines voter registration and turnout across general, primary, and municipal elections, and disaggregates participation by ward and precinct, age, gender, and voting method. The analysis that follows first outlines the data and methods used, then examines voter registration and turnout patterns, and concludes by identifying where South Asian American voter participation lags most and where voter engagement and mobilization efforts could have the greatest impact.

KEY FINDINGS

In each of the five November general elections from 2016 through 2024, South Asian American voter turnout ran 13 to 20 percentage points behind the non-South Asian electorate. Both groups follow the same broad rhythm, turnout highest in the two presidential-year elections (2020 and 2024) and lower in the midterms (2018 and 2022), but the gap holds steady across that rhythm rather than closing in high-turnout years. The 2024 general election recorded the highest turnout for both groups (57.7 percent for South Asian American voters and 71.9 percent for non–South Asian voters). However, the 14-point gap that year was nearly identical to the gap in 2016.

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GENERAL-ELECTION TURNOUT, SOUTH ASIAN VS. NON-SOUTH ASIAN

Election	SA Eligible Registrants	SA Voted	SA Turnout %	Non-SA Eligible Registrants	Non-SA Voted	Non-SA Turnout %
Nov 2016	11697	3993	34.1	317952	150837	47.4
Nov 2018	12327	3405	27.6	332043	148715	44.8
Nov 2020	12856	5888	45.8	341730	207516	60.7
Nov 2022	13203	3623	27.4	348568	164738	47.3
Nov 2024	13485	7780	57.7	354030	254643	71.9

Eligible Registrants = registered voters who were at least 18 years old at the time of each election, based on year of birth. This measure is distinct from the South Asian American Voting Eligible Population (VEP) estimate cited elsewhere in this report, which is a modeled, citywide estimate of voting-age South Asian residents regardless of registration status.

Turnout gaps are not distributed evenly within the South Asian electorate. Two demographic patterns stand out: 1) the difference between South Asian American and non–South Asian turnout varies substantially by age, and 2) registration and turnout patterns differ notably by gender.

Age: In the 2024 general election, turnout among non–South Asian voters followed the familiar pattern seen across U.S. electorates: turnout generally increased with age, from 61.2 percent among 18-to-24-year-olds to 75-76 percent among voters 55 and older. However, turnout among South Asian American voters followed a different pattern. It increased through middle age, peaking among 45-to-54-year-olds at 62.9 percent, before declining among older voters. Among South Asian American voters ages 65 and older, turnout was 52.7 percent, lower than the turnout rate among South Asian American voters in their twenties. As a result, the South Asian turnout gap is narrow among the youngest voters (7.6 points) and widest among the oldest (22.9 points). This indicates that South Asian American seniors have the largest relative participation gap among the age groups examined.

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Voting in-person: In the November 2024 general election, South Asian American voters were more likely to vote in person and less likely to vote by mail than non-South Asian voters. 41.0 percent of South Asian American voters cast their ballot in the precinct, compared to 36.0 percent of non-South Asian voters, while mail-in voting ran lower among South Asian American voters (21.9 percent) than non-South Asian voters (26.5 percent). The largest relative difference was in grace-period voting, same-day registration combined with voting, which South Asian American voters used at more than one-and-a-half times the rate of non-South Asian voters (6.3 percent versus 3.9 percent), consistent with the pattern elsewhere in this report that South Asian American voters register and engage with the process later than the broader electorate.

Gender: South Asian American voter registration and turnout diverge by gender in opposite directions. Among South Asian American registered voters, men outnumber women, 52.0 percent to 48.0 percent, the reverse of the broader electorate in these eleven wards, which is 52.4 percent female. Yet in every one of the five general elections examined, South Asian American women turned out at a higher rate than South Asian American men, by margins of roughly 1 to 4 percentage points. Taken together, these two data points paint different explanations for underrepresentation on each side: South Asian American men are the larger registered group but vote somewhat less reliably, while South Asian American women vote at a higher rate despite being a smaller share of voter registrations.

METHODOLOGY & LIMITATIONS

This report draws on the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners' registered-voter file for the eleven wards with the largest South Asian voting eligible populations (Wards 2, 4, 32, 34, 39, 40, 41, 42, 48, 49, and 50), comprising 369,194 total registered voters, with approximately 13,546 registered South Asian American voters in these wards combined. This data was obtained through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners.

The wards examined in this report were selected on the basis of South Asian population concentration. Ten of these, Wards 2, 4, 32, 34, 39, 40, 41, 42, 48, and 50, have the largest estimated South Asian Voting Eligible Population (VEP), as identified in SAAPRI's prior research.

That analysis estimated the South Asian VEP at the ward and precinct level using American Community Survey (ACS) 2019-2023 data, ward and precinct boundary shapefiles, and an area-weighted estimation method.

Chicago voter registration records do not include race or ethnicity, so South Asian American voters were identified indirectly through a two-stage name-based methodology.

In the first stage, the full voter file was matched against a list of South Asian surnames compiled by the research team from multiple sources. Voters whose surnames appeared on the voter list were classified as South Asian. Because the list was not exhaustive, a second stage was applied to the voters who remained.

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In the second stage, the surnames of the remaining voters were compiled into a frequency table showing how many voter records associated with each surname, and then manually sorted into three groups:

- Accepted: surnames that the research team was confident were South Asian, including South Asian surnames not already on the initial list. These voters were added directly to the South Asian group.
- Rejected: surnames that the team was confident were not South Asian, for example, common surnames such as Lee, Smith, or Thomas. These voters were removed from further analysis. Sorting by surname frequency allowed high-count, clearly non-South Asian names to be excluded efficiently.
- To be analyzed: ambiguous surnames whose origin could not be determined through manual review, for example, names that occur across several regions. Only this group was submitted to NamSor for further analysis.

In total, 13,546 of the 369,194 registered voters (3.7 percent) were identified as South Asian. This classification was treated as a fixed input to all subsequent analysis.

Each election in the file is recorded as a "how voted" field. A value of "NA" indicates that no ballot was cast in that election; any other value records the method used (in precinct, early voting, mail ballot, grace-period registration, same-day registration, provisional, nursing home, or other). Turnout was therefore measured as the share of eligible voters whose record showed any method other than "NA."
All tabulations produced in this report were analyzed twice and cross-checked: once in R, which serves as the analysis of record, and once independently in Python. Results were compared table by table and reconciled before each table was accepted. This dual-implementation process surfaced and corrected errors during the analysis, including an initially incomplete enumeration of voting-method categories. Because this affects South Asian and non-South Asian voters equally, the gap between the two groups, the central finding of this report, is not distorted by it.