

Electoral Engagement among Young Asian Americans

By: Surbhi Godsay, Researcher
September 2014

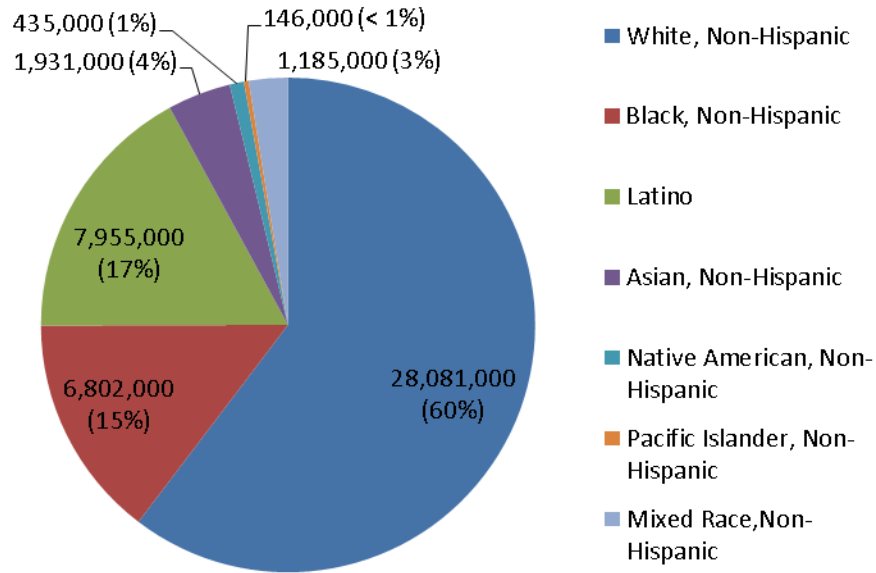
With racial and ethnic diversity among youth (ages 18-29) growing every year, it is increasingly important to understand how young people of different backgrounds participate in the nation's political and public life. Furthermore, youth are becoming an increasingly powerful part of the electorate, with young voters making up an essential part of President Obama's 2012 reelection coalition.

This fact sheet, one of three in a series on youth engagement by race and ethnicity (see related fact sheets for [African American youth](#) and [Hispanic youth](#)), examines historical data on the civic and political engagement of Asian Americans. Drawing on this data, we make several recommendations for how to better engage Asian American youth in the upcoming 2014 midterm election and more broadly going forward.

We use data from the most recent presidential elections (2008 and 2012) as well as the most recent midterm (2010) to describe voting and registration patterns, ideology, and vote choice of Asian American youth. However, we understand that the general label "Asian Americans" does not fully represent the linguistic, religious, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity within this group. Therefore, readers should interpret statistics about the Asian Americans with caution.

In general, Asian American youth were less likely than young people in other racial and ethnic groups to engage in formal electoral politics, but were active through political discussion and through donating to charitable causes. They were also least likely to be registered to vote in 2012, compared to their peers of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. In 2012, President Obama drew a disproportionate share of support among young Asian Americans—especially young Asian American men. Like other groups of young people, Asian Americans chose unemployment as the issue they cared about most.

Figure 1: Youth, Ages 18-29, by Race & Ethnicity



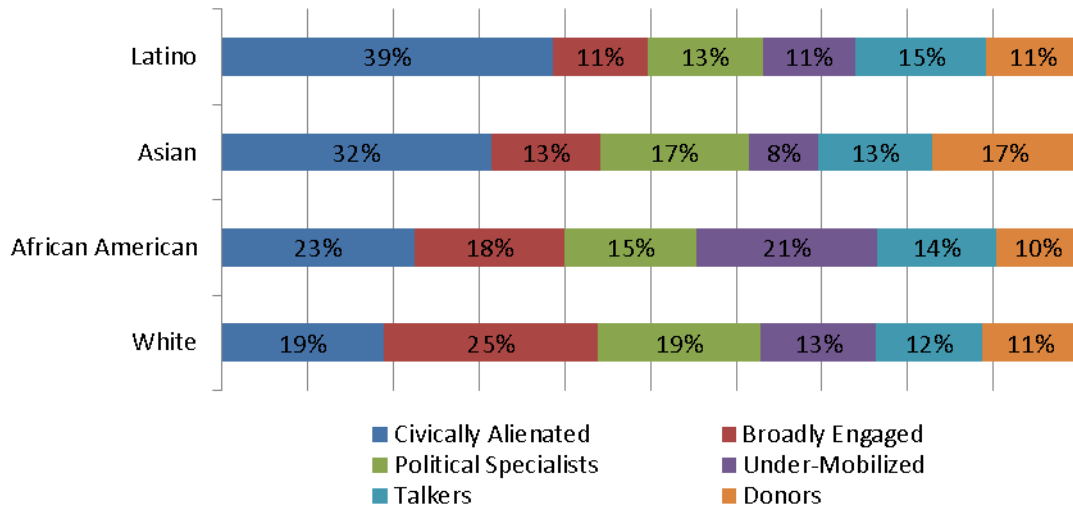
Source: CIRCLE analysis of Census Current Population Survey (CPS) March Basic Supplement, 2014

Asian American Youth: Political and Civic Engagement Patterns and Clusters

Previous research shows that youth engage politically and civically in diverse ways. In 2010, youth overall broke into six different clusters of engagement—or lack thereof—with just over a fifth of youth (21%) “broadly engaged” in many different leadership roles, and slightly more (23%) “civically alienated” from public life. Additional clusters emerged that showed some young people were “political specialists” focused solely on electoral activism (18%); “donors” who gave money to charitable causes and organizations (11%); the “under-mobilized” who were registered but did not vote in 2010 (14%); and “talkers” who reported discussing political issues both on and offline, but who did not take action (13%).

These patterns of engagement varied for youth of different racial and ethnic groups (*Figure 2*). Nearly a third of Asian American youth in 2010 were “civically alienated” and did not participate in any kind of civic or political engagement. However, Asian American young people were significantly more likely than their counterparts to donate money to charitable causes, and slightly more likely than Black or Hispanic youth to have high levels of political engagement but low levels of service participation.

Figure 2: Patterns of Youth Engagement, by Race & Ethnicity, 2010



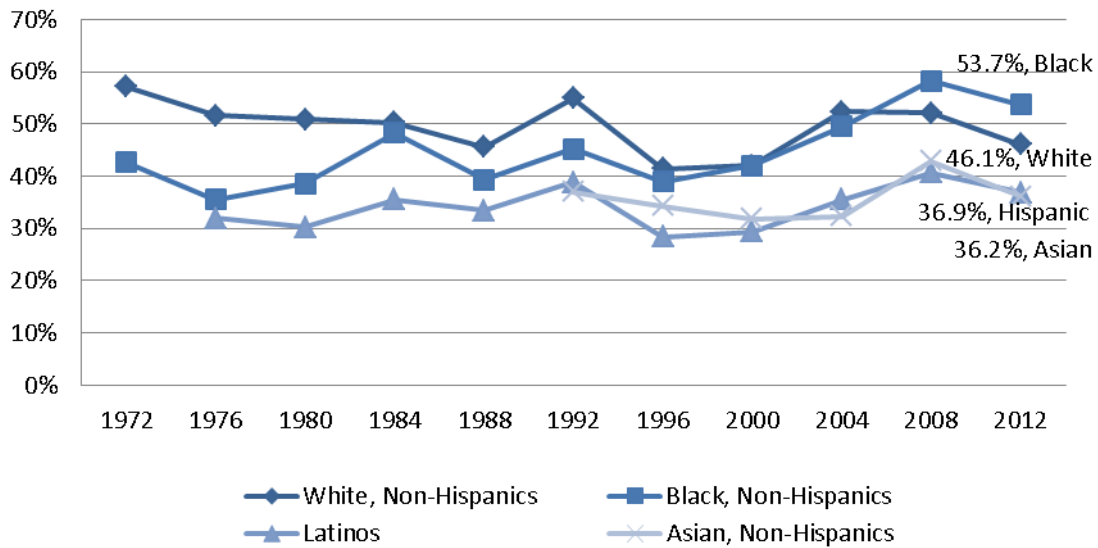
Source: CIRCLE analysis of Census Current Population Survey (CPS) November Civic Engagement Supplement, 2010

Voter Turnout among Asian American Youth

The 2008 presidential election marked the highest reported voter turnout among Asian youth (ages 18-29) since 1992, with a rate of 43%.¹ However, that turnout decreased to 36.2% in the 2012 election, when Black youth showed the highest youth turnout among all racial and ethnic groups (53.7%), and young Black and Hispanic women were the strongest supporters of President Obama. Similarly, in the 2010 midterm election, 17.6% of Asian American youth cast a ballot, while Black youth again went to the polls at the highest rate (27.5%) among all racial and ethnic groups. Despite their higher levels of support for President Obama, Hispanic and Asian American youth have consistently fallen behind in voter registration and turnout.

¹ 1992 was the first year the Census reported turnout estimates for Asian American youth.

Figure 3: 18 to 29-Year-Old Citizen Turnout in Presidential Elections, by Race, 1972-2012



Source: CIRCLE analysis of Census Current Population Survey November Voting & Registration Supplement, 1972-2012²

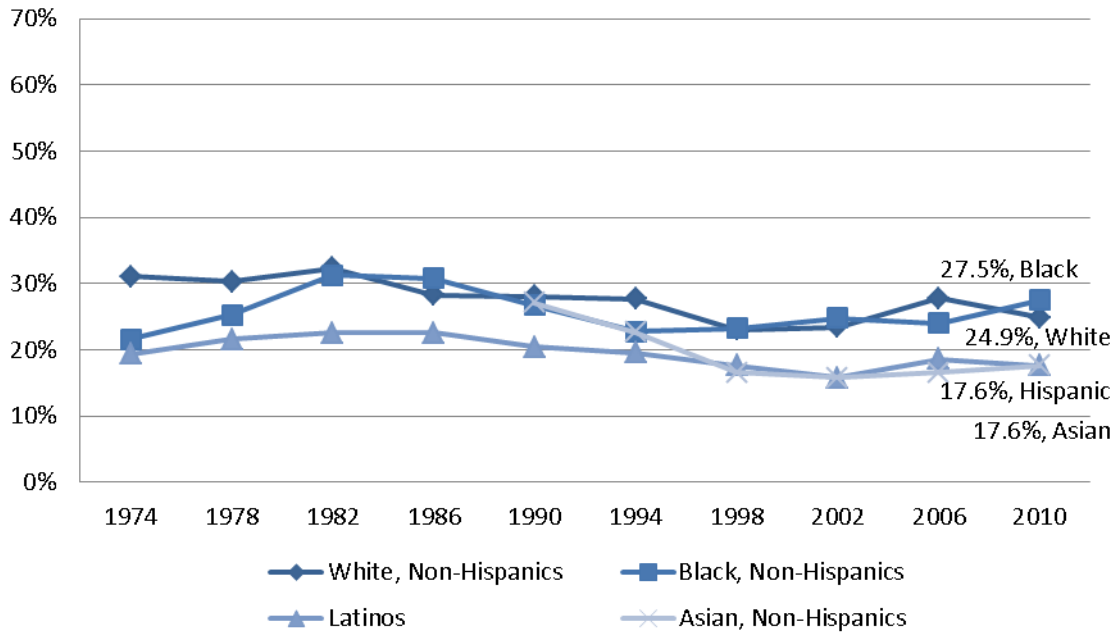
Reasons for Not Voting among Asian American Youth

In 2012, when asked why they didn't vote, 22.9% of registered young people across all ethnic groups responded that they were too busy or had conflicting work schedules—in 2010, 33.5% of them said the same. Additionally, 17.4% reported feeling like their vote would not make a difference, and 12.1% said they were out of town. Among young people of different backgrounds, Black and Asian American youth were most likely to report being too busy or having conflicting work schedules compared to other racial and ethnic groups, while Hispanic youth were most likely to report feeling like their vote would not make a difference.

Furthermore, [previous research](#) documents how youth without college experience are less likely to vote than youth with college experience. In 2008, young Asian Americans without college experience showed the lowest turnout among all racial and ethnic groups. Research has also shown that youth without college experience are interested in participating, but can face [a systemic lack of political and civic opportunities](#), which can consequently have negative effects on self-efficacy and motivation. It should be noted that Hispanic and Black youth are overrepresented among youth without college experience (18.5% and 21.2%, respectively).

² The following racial and ethnic groups: Native-American, Non-Hispanic, Pacific Islander, Non-Hispanic, and More Than One Race are not included in the graph. Sample sizes for these youth sub-populations are not large enough to report turnout or registration estimates.

Figure 4: 18 to 29-Year-Old Citizen Turnout in Midterm Elections, by Race, 1974-2010



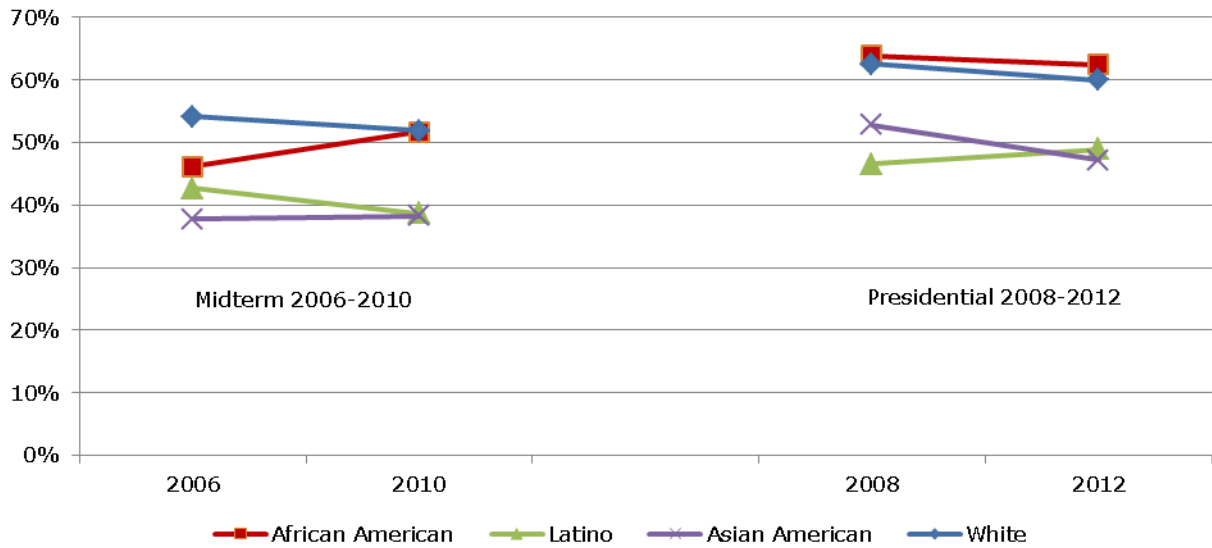
Source: CIRCLE analysis of Census Current Population Survey November Voting & Registration Supplement, 1974-2010

Voter Registration among Asian American Youth

[Research has also shown](#) how critical voter registration is to young people’s political engagement. In both midterm and presidential Elections, Asian American youth have fallen behind in youth voter registration. In the most recent midterm election years, Asian American youth voter registration was roughly the same: 37.8% in 2006 and 38.3% in 2010. The rate has been higher in presidential election years, as 52.8% of Asian American youth were registered in 2008 and 47.2% in 2012. Meanwhile, Black and White youth (62.4% and 60.0%, respectively) had the highest registration rates in 2012, up from 51.7% and 51.9% in 2010.³

³ The increase in registration rates between 2010 and 2012 does not reflect an upward trend in youth registration rates. This is a normal pattern between midterm and presidential elections, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 5: Voter Registration among 18 to 29-Year-Olds, by Race & Ethnicity



Source: CIRCLE Analysis of Census Current Population Survey November Voting & Registration Supplement, 2006-2012

Reasons for Not Registering among Asian American Youth

Young people had various reasons for not registering to vote in 2012. While a lack of interest in the election was the most common reason (41.1%), one fifth of youth (20.4%) reported that they did not meet the registration deadline, and 6.7% said they did not know how or where to register. The data was [similar in 2010](#), when 16.7% did not meet the registration deadline and 7.2% said they did not know where or how to do so.

There were no large differences in the reasons for not registering given by youth of different racial and ethnic groups. However, Hispanic and Black youth were most likely to report they did not meet registration deadlines or they did not know how or where to register, compared to their peers of other racial and ethnic groups.

Ideology, Issue Priorities, and Candidate Support among Asian American Youth

In 2012, the youth electorate as a whole was divided by race and gender in terms of candidate and party support. For instance, non-White young women were generally enthusiastic about President Obama, while non-White young men were satisfied, but not enthusiastic. Young White men were dissatisfied with President Obama and voted for his opponent. Similarly, in 2010, Black and Hispanic youth were significantly more likely to support Democratic House candidates, while over half of White youth supported Republican House candidates.

Data from the National Asian American Survey show that, in 2012, President Obama drew a disproportionate share of support among young Asian Americans (defined, in this instance, as ages 18 to 34), at a rate of 73%. The same data show that Asian American men were just

as likely as women to declare their support for President Obama over Mitt Romney.⁴ In this 2012 survey, Asian American youth were also more likely, compared to Asian Americans in other age groups, to say they approved of the president's job in office (66%).

Youth were [concerned primarily about economic issues in 2012](#), such as college loan debt, the federal deficit, and a lack of jobs. Asian American youth were no exception, citing economic issues such as unemployment (39.8%) and the federal budget deficit (23.5%) as the most important issues.⁵

According to data from the 2012 Pew Asian American Survey, Asian American youth aged 18-29 were most likely to consider themselves independents (44%) or Democrats (29.7%). In terms of ideology, they were most likely to identify as moderate (36.8%) or liberal (26.8%).⁶ This contrasts with youth of other racial and ethnic backgrounds: exit poll data show that Black youth were most likely to consider themselves moderate/conservative Democrats, and Hispanic youth were most likely to identify as liberal Democrats.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Engaging young people in politics [requires collaboration among multiple sectors](#). Youth need the tools to navigate a complex political environment; in the short term, getting youth registered, investing in personalized outreach, and providing necessary information (such as where to vote, when to vote, and how to use the voting machine) are key to increasing turnout. This is especially the case for young Asian Americans, who may engage civically in other ways but are not registered to vote or involved in other kinds of political activity at the same rate as their peers of other racial and ethnic backgrounds.

In the long term, strengthening civic education initiatives is a promising mechanism to engage youth in politics. Asian American youth can also be engaged through school activities. As Cohen & Kahne (2012) found, Asian American youth were the most likely, compared to other racial/ethnic youth groups, to engage in friendship and interest-driven activity online.⁷ They also found that youth who became involved in non-political, interest-driven activities were five times more likely to engage in some type of online participatory politics. This appears to be a promising mechanism for getting Asian American young people engaged in politics.

⁴ Karthick Ramakrishnan & Taeku Lee, Public Opinion of a Growing Electorate: Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in 2012 (Riverside, CA: National Asian American Survey, September, 2012), <http://www.naasurvey.com/resources/Home/NAAS12-sep25-election.pdf>

⁵ 2012 National Youth Survey, <http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/CIRCLE-youthvoting-individualPages.pdf>. The sample size for this data point was small (less than 300); population data for this statistic may show a different trend compared to this data.

⁶ Pew Research Center 2012 Asian-American Survey, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/asianamericans/>

⁷ Cohen, C., J. Kahne, B. Bowyer, E. Middaugh, and J. Rogowski. 2012. *Participatory politics: new media and youth political action*. (YPPSP Research Report). Retrieved from http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/sites/all/files/publications/YPP_Survey_Report_FULL.pdf