

# Politics, Social Media, & Peer Outreach:

## Mobilizing the Asian American Youth Electorate in the South

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**PAE Client: APIAVote (Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote)**

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*This Policy Analysis Exercise (PAE) reflects the views of the author and should not be viewed as representing the views of APIAVote or those of Harvard University or any of its faculty.*



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is written for the client organization APIAVote, or Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote. APIAVote is a national, nonpartisan organization with a vision of increasing civic engagement among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. A crucial part of APIAVote's mission involves mobilizing constituencies like the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) youth electorate ahead of the 2022 midterm elections and 2024 general election in the United States.

Given the significance of the AAPI youth electorate, as well as the dearth of in-depth data on the perspectives of young Asian Americans and their relationships vis-a-vis politics and social media, this project seeks to gather and interpret qualitative data from Asian American youth in key metropolitan areas in the South. Findings and recommendations developed from analyses of this data can then be used to inform APIAVote's digital engagement and youth mobilization strategies in upcoming election cycles.

This project's findings are based on data collected from qualitative interviews with twenty-two young Asian Americans in Georgia and Texas, in addition to a review of relevant literature. The sample of young Asian American interviewees varied across geographic location, level of political involvement, gender, age, and ethnic background.

The main findings from this project are summarized as follows:

- **Social media:** By and large, young Asian Americans reported spending considerable amounts of time on social media for the purposes of connection, information consumption, and entertainment. Some create and re-share political content to inform their peers, and others use the space to regularly express political opinions. Almost every interviewee discussed how their social media feeds contribute to their heightened disillusionment regarding the state of American politics.
- **Voting:** Interviewees overwhelmingly described voting as a civic duty that they can fulfill with relative ease, but they were split in their views on the impact of one's vote. Some youth reported that living in a swing state, hearing from immigrant parents who could not vote, or working with other young people to elect a candidate shifted their position on the power of voting.
- **Peer ambassadors:** Politically active youth noted that they could be mobilized as peer ambassadors if they have regular access to content that is concise, fact-based, visually appealing, and action-oriented. Seasoned peer ambassadors have demonstrated their ability to mobilize friends to engage in politics for the first time through creative modes of in-person and social media outreach.
- **Politically inactive youth:** Young Asian Americans who described being minimally engaged in politics attributed this to the perceived toxicity of online political content, in addition to the lack of change they associate with electoral politics.

However, interviewees also noted how trusted messengers in their communities or nonpartisan civic activities had piqued their interest in further political engagement.

- **Future election cycles:** The Asian American youth interviewed in this study identified the following issues as “most important” to them in upcoming elections: civil rights, education, pandemic response, health care, climate change, and immigration. Interviewees most frequently get their news from social media and indicated that it would be important for them to see political content that centers these issues.

The main recommendations that emerged from this project include:

- **Social media content:** Amidst growing disillusionment with politics among Asian American youth, create shareable, action-oriented content on Instagram and TikTok that highlights the passion, power, and impact of young voices.
- **Mobilizing youth ambassadors:** Empower existing peer ambassadors with the tools, prompts, and resources they need to generate further engagement and interaction with their audiences. Train potential youth ambassadors in relational organizing, and connect them to experienced ambassadors for mentorship and support.
- **Mobilizing politically inactive youth:** Focus messaging on the impact of elections, and partner with trusted messengers to host nonpartisan events and provide critical election information to politically inactive community members without judgment.
- **Voting behavior:** Partner with local organizations, high school educators, and Asian immigrant coalitions that can target social media campaigns and coordinate outreach programs that equip low-propensity voters with the information they need to make a plan to vote.

The report begins with background information on the Asian American and youth electorates, which is followed by an overview of research methodology; a presentation of findings, analyses, and relevant takeaways from the study; and a summary of key recommendations for the client organization.

For the purposes of this report, the terms “Asian American youth” and “young Asian Americans” are used interchangeably and refer to Asian Americans between the ages of 18-29, inclusive. The term “Asian American” is generally used when referring to populations or interview samples that do not include members of the Pacific Islander community. Findings gathered from the literature review and interview data also underscore that while the term “Asian American youth” is used to refer to a broad swath of young people, Asian Americans are not a monolith and instead comprise a highly diverse voting bloc in the United States.



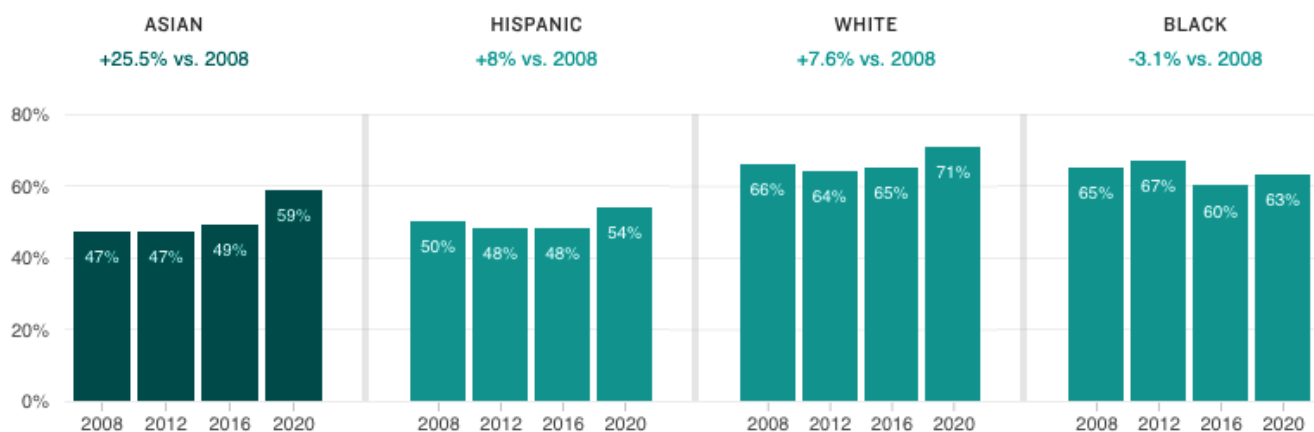
# BACKGROUND

## IMPORTANCE OF THE AAPI ELECTORATE

The Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) electorate played a decisive role in the 2020 United States presidential election. AAPI voters had the largest relative increase in turnout among all racial groups.<sup>1</sup> According to TargetSmart, the total number of votes cast by the AAPI community increased by over 47 percent from 2016, while the total number for all other voters increased by 12 percent overall.<sup>2</sup> AAPI turnout also surged, relative to 2016, more than any other racial group in every battleground state in the 2020 election.<sup>3</sup>

### Asian American Voter Turnout Spiked In 2020

Percentage of citizens over 18 that voted in the presidential elections from 2008-2020, broken down by race or ethnicity



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Credit: Ruth Talbot/NPR

Source: Ruth Talbot, *Asian American Voter Turnout Spiked in 2020*, Figure from U.S. Census Bureau data, NPR, May 22, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/22/999345393/the-growing-power-of-the-aapi-vote-by-the-numbers>.

<sup>1</sup> Yair Ghitza and Jonathan Robinson, "What Happened in 2020," Catalist, accessed October 2021, <https://catalist.us/wh-national/>.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Bonier, "The Unprecedented Impact of the AAPI Vote on the 2020 Election," TargetSmart, May 7, 2021, <https://insights.targetsmart.com/the-unprecedented-impact-of-the-aapi-vote-on-the-2020-election.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "The Unheralded Voting Bloc of 2020," Target Smart, November 13, 2020, <https://insights.targetsmart.com/the-unheralded-voting-bloc-of-2020.html>.

Nearly 50 percent of the AAPI electorate in 2020 had not voted in 2016.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, 23 percent of AAPI voters in 2020 were first-time voters in an American election, which exceeded the 12.2 percent of all other 2020 voters who cast a ballot for the first time.<sup>5</sup>

These statistics underscore a central insight: **the AAPI electorate is a growing voting bloc with an influence that cannot be discounted in future elections.** Asian Americans constitute the fastest growing racial group in the United States.<sup>6</sup> The community has grown by 81 percent since 2000 and is projected to double in population by 2060.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is critical to study the AAPI electorate in all of its diversity and examine the factors that contribute to political engagement among this population.

The historic turnout in 2020 occurred against a backdrop of distinct sociopolitical and sociocultural conditions for the AAPI community: a rise in anti-Asian hate incidents across the country, the use of racial epithets like “China virus” and “kung flu” by President Trump, the prospect of electing the nation’s first vice president of Asian descent, and increased AAPI allyship with the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>8</sup> Nationwide, the 2020 election also unfolded amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and coincided with 2020 census outreach efforts to underserved communities. As key AAPI stakeholders look to the upcoming 2022 midterm elections and 2024 general election, it is important to speak directly to Asian American voters and identify strategies to sustain engagement in future election cycles.

## IMPORTANCE OF THE YOUTH ELECTORATE

Data on the AAPI electorate continue to underscore another key insight: **AAPI voters are not a monolith.** The AAPI electorate is highly diverse and consists of voters from over twenty different countries of origin. Voters in this population also vary widely in their English proficiency levels, immigration status, educational attainment, socioeconomic status, and age.<sup>9</sup>

The AAPI youth electorate, therefore, is but one segment of the broader AAPI electorate that deserves close attention. In 2020, youth voter turnout (ages 18-29), which traditionally

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Bonier, “The Unprecedented Impact of the AAPI Vote on the 2020 Election,” TargetSmart, May 7, 2021, <https://insights.targetsmart.com/the-unprecedented-impact-of-the-aapi-vote-on-the-2020-election.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Domenico Montanaro, “The Growing Power Of The AAPI Vote, By The Numbers,” NPR, May 22, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/22/999345393/the-growing-power-of-the-aapi-vote-by-the-numbers>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Abby Budiman, “Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the U.S. electorate,” Pew Research Center, May 7, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/07/asian-americans-are-the-fastest-growing-racial-or-ethnic-group-in-the-u-s-electorate/>.

reports low rates, saw an 11-point increase from 2016.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, voting rates among younger AAPI voters (ages 18-34) increased by 15 points, from 41 percent in 2016 to 56 percent in 2020.<sup>11</sup>

According to the Harvard Youth Poll of over 2500 young people (ages 18-29), 36 percent of young Americans in 2021 considered themselves to be politically engaged or politically active, compared to 24 percent of young Americans in 2009.<sup>12</sup> The poll reported additional key insights regarding young people's political news sources, attitudes toward voting, and ideas around social media and its impact on their political voice. Notably, this poll did not include a racial category for "Asian" and instead had categories for "White," "Hispanic," "Black," "Other," and "2+ Races." Several exit polls from 2020 also followed a similar pattern of consigning Asian American voters to a catch-all "Other" category or "N/A" status.<sup>13</sup>

## PROBLEM STATEMENT AND OBJECTIVES

Despite the current and growing significance of the AAPI youth electorate to American politics, **there remains a lack of both robust data and scholarly attention being paid to this demographic.** In 2012, findings from the Youth Participatory Politics Survey indicated that Asian American youth, when compared to other racial groups, had the highest levels of access to the Internet, yet lowest levels of political participation.<sup>14</sup> Yet since 2012, few studies have explored the reasons for this discrepancy or the extent to which recent social media trends have influenced electoral engagement among Asian American youth.

Studies on the intersection of media and the AAPI electorate have largely focused on how older Asian immigrant communities interact with ethnic media and platforms like WeChat, KakaoTalk, and WhatsApp.<sup>15</sup> As a result, we do not have a robust understanding of how young Asian Americans of varying political ideologies are engaging with youth-centric platforms like TikTok, Snapchat, or Instagram.

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<sup>10</sup> "Half of Youth Voted in 2020, An 11-Point Increase from 2016," CIRCLE at Tufts University, April 29, 2021, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/half-youth-voted-2020-11-point-increase-2016>.

<sup>11</sup> Karthick Ramakrishnan, "In 2020, AAPIs saw the highest increases in voter turnout," Data Bits, AAPI Data, May 18, 2021, <https://aapidata.com/blog/2020-record-turnout/>.

<sup>12</sup> "Harvard Youth Poll: Top Trends and Takeaways," Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, April 23, 2021, <https://iop.harvard.edu/youth-poll/spring-2021-harvard-youth-poll>.

<sup>13</sup> Tom Bonier, "The Unprecedented Impact of the AAPI Vote on the 2020 Election," TargetSmart, May 7, 2021, <https://insights.targetsmart.com/the-unprecedented-impact-of-the-aapi-vote-on-the-2020-election.html>.

<sup>14</sup> "Survey finds youth use new media for peer-based participatory politics," University of Chicago, June 27, 2012, <https://news.uchicago.edu/story/survey-finds-youth-use-new-media-peer-based-participatory-politics>.

<sup>15</sup> Chi Zhang, "WeChatting American Politics: Misinformation, Polarization, and Immigrant Chinese Media," Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, April 19, 2018, [https://www.cjr.org/tow\\_center\\_reports/wechatting-american-politics-misinformation-polarization-and-immigrant-chinese-media.php#executive-summary](https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/wechatting-american-politics-misinformation-polarization-and-immigrant-chinese-media.php#executive-summary).



Recent survey data from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University indicate that 86 percent of Asian American youth reported paying close attention to the 2020 presidential election, and 38 percent of Asian youth reported engaging in digital media creation around social and political issues.<sup>16</sup> These statistics, however, do not communicate the underlying factors or motivations that contribute to these realities among Asian American youth.

This project aims to address some of these information gaps by gathering qualitative data directly from young Asian Americans, particularly in the South. The findings from these interviews have value for the client organization, APIAVote, whose mission is to increase civic engagement among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders across the United States. As APIAVote seeks to strengthen its youth programs in advance of upcoming election cycles, it is critical to understand what online engagement or peer outreach strategies might be most effective in mobilizing the Asian American youth electorate, especially in the midst of a pandemic that has relegated much of our social interactions to the digital realm. Both APIAVote and its partner organizations will benefit from more in-depth insights into how youth in the South are engaging politically in the lead-up to the 2022 midterm elections and 2024 general election.

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<sup>16</sup> Peter de Guzman and Abby Kiesa and Alberto Medina, “Strong Signs of Asian American Youth Engagement in 2020,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, September 9, 2020, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/strong-signs-asian-american-youth-engagement-2020>.

# METHODOLOGY

I began the research process by conducting a literature review on topics that include: the AAPI electorate at large, the youth electorate at large, political behavior among young Asian Americans, and youth political engagement via social media. The literature review yielded key information regarding existing trends and research gaps in these areas of study. Insights from the literature review and conversations with the client organization underscored the importance of gathering perspectives from Asian American youth in the South. The rationale for a research focus on the South—and in particular, key metropolitan areas in Georgia and Texas—is as follows:

- Asian Americans make up the fastest-growing racial group in the South. In fact, the Asian American population in the South grew by 69 percent from 2000 to 2010, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>17</sup>
- **Georgia:** In 2020, AAPI turnout in Georgia surged by nearly 62,000 votes relative to 2016, with the percent increase in AAPI votes representing the second highest state-level increase across the country.<sup>18</sup> This level of turnout is significant, as Georgia produced the “narrowest percent margin of victory” for President Biden.<sup>19</sup>
  - **Youth:** When looking at youth voting rates in the South, Georgia’s rate of 51 percent in 2020 represented one of the largest increases in youth turnout from 2016 to 2020 (an increase of 14 percentage points).<sup>20</sup>
  - **Atlanta Metro Area:** Specifically, CIRCLE analyses found that Georgia’s 6th and 7th Congressional Districts, or the Atlanta metropolitan area, emerged as two of the top ten districts on the 2020 Youth Electoral Significance Index, which predicted where youth would have the largest impacts in the 2020 election.<sup>21</sup> Notably, these districts were areas where the share of eligible Asian Americans in the electorate doubled that of the state of Georgia.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Peter de Guzman and Abby Kiesa and Alberto Medina, “Strong Signs of Asian American Youth Engagement in 2020,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, September 9, 2020, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/strong-signs-asian-american-youth-engagement-2020>.

<sup>18</sup> Tom Bonier, “The Unprecedented Impact of the AAPI Vote on the 2020 Election,” TargetSmart, May 7, 2021, <https://insights.targetsmart.com/the-unprecedented-impact-of-the-aapi-vote-on-the-2020-election.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> State-by-State 2020 Youth Voter Turnout: The South,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, March 30, 2021, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/state-state-2020-youth-voter-turnout-south>.

<sup>21</sup> Peter de Guzman and Abby Kiesa and Alberto Medina, “Strong Signs of Asian American Youth Engagement in 2020,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, September 9, 2020, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/strong-signs-asian-american-youth-engagement-2020>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

- **Texas:** The number of eligible AAPI voters in Texas grew by 46 percent between 2012 and 2018.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the Texas AAPI population at large grew by 137 percent between 2000 and 2020, and AAPI youth in particular make up 23 percent of the Asian American citizens of voting age in Texas.<sup>24</sup>
  - **Youth:** Youth turnout in Texas (41 percent) increased by 13 percentage points in 2020, when compared to 2016.<sup>25</sup> However, despite turnout jumping the most among youth than among all other ages in the state, Texas still ended up seeing a low youth turnout rate when compared to the rest of the country.<sup>26</sup>
  - **Houston Metro Area:** Specifically, around 20 percent of Texas's AAPI population resides in Harris County, which includes the Houston metropolitan area and has over 170,000 Asian American citizens of voting age.<sup>27</sup>

To find a sample of young Asian Americans in the South to interview, I first reached out to contacts provided to me by the client organization, APIAVote. I invited these individuals to fill out a short intake form and then reached out to schedule interviews with those who identified as Asian American and fell within the age range and geographic locations of interest (i.e., 18-29 years of age; metropolitan areas in Georgia and Texas). I then continued to schedule interviews to ensure a balanced and diverse sample of interviewees across age, location, political involvement, gender, and ethnic background. Finally, to ensure a sample of interviewees that spanned varying levels of political involvement, I used the snowball sampling method to recruit young Asian Americans who identified as minimally or moderately involved in politics. Upon completion of the interview, each interviewee received a small gift card as a token of appreciation for their time and participation.

To prepare the interview protocol, I first reviewed the overarching themes and statistics from the literature review; developed a series of hypotheses vis-a-vis Asian American youth and politics, social media, and peer outreach; wrote a set of interview questions to test the hypotheses; and then refined the instrument after feedback from a few experts in qualitative research.

In total, I interviewed 22 individuals via Zoom between December 10, 2021 and January 28, 2022. Of the 22 young Asian Americans interviewed:

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<sup>23</sup> "2020 State Factsheet: Texas," APIAVote and AAPI Data, accessed November 2021, <https://www.apiavote.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Texas-2020.pdf>.

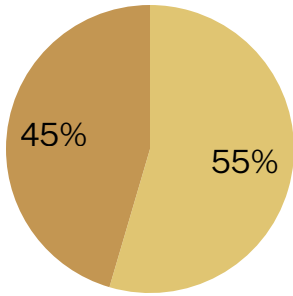
<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> "State-by-State 2020 Youth Voter Turnout: The South," CIRCLE at Tufts University, March 30, 2021, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/state-state-2020-youth-voter-turnout-south>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> "2020 State Factsheet: Texas," APIAVote and AAPI Data, accessed November 2021, <https://www.apiavote.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Texas-2020.pdf>.

● Greater Atlanta, GA  
● Greater Houston, TX

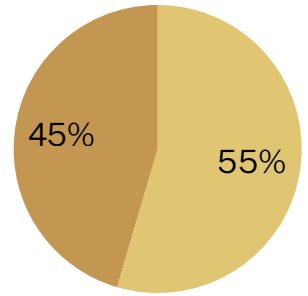


**Location**

•12 have extensive connections to the Greater Atlanta, GA area; while 10 have extensive connections to the Greater Houston, TX area.

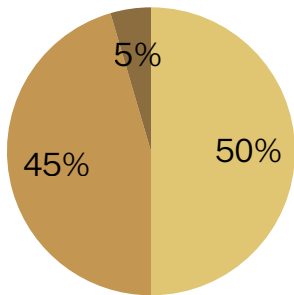
•12 identify as highly involved in politics, while 10 identify as minimally to moderately involved in politics.

● Highly involved  
● Minimally to moderately involved



**Political Involvement**

● Female  
● Male  
● Non-binary

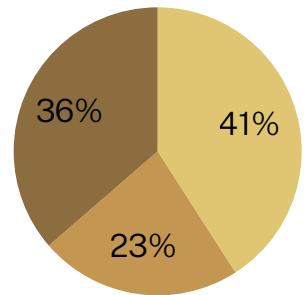


**Gender**

•11 identify as female, 10 identify as male, and 1 identifies as non-binary.

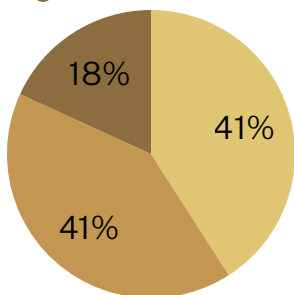
•9 fell in the ages 18-21 bracket, 5 fell in the ages 22-25 bracket, and 8 fell in the ages 26-29 bracket.

● Ages 18-21  
● Ages 22-25  
● Ages 26-29



**Age**

● East Asian  
● Southeast Asian  
● South Asian



**Ethnic Background**

•9 are of East Asian descent; 9 are of Southeast Asian descent; and 4 are of South Asian descent. The following ethnic backgrounds were represented in the sample: Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Indonesian, Korean, Singaporean, Taiwanese, Thai, and Vietnamese.

Additionally, 20 are children of immigrant(s), while 2 immigrated to the U.S. as children or young adults.

Interviewees over the age of 19 had all either attained, or were in the process of attaining, their bachelor's degree. Those who chose to self-describe their political ideologies mostly fell somewhere toward the left on the political spectrum. I did not collect any information

regarding interviewees' individual or family incomes. These attributes of the sample, combined with the  $n=22$  sample size, limit the generalizability of the findings to a larger universe of "all Asian American youth." The findings summarized in the following section should be read with this in mind.

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# FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

## TOPIC I: YOUNG ASIAN AMERICANS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

### ***Introduction***

Young Asian American interviewees, across all levels of political involvement in Georgia and Texas, noted that social media serves three main functions in their lives. Social media enables them to:

1. Stay connected to / communicate with friends.
  - Interviewees noted that social media often provides a sense of community and a space to share slices of their own life.
2. Remain informed about current events, politics, and changes in their community.
  - One interviewee described relying on social media to get a “real-time pulse of what is happening in the world.”
3. Access a regular form of entertainment.
  - Interviewees spoke about how various social media platforms serve as a daily form of leisure.

Given these functions, interviewees discussed how social media is an “incredibly necessary” part of their lives. Some youth reported checking different social media platforms multiple times an hour and reflected on how the increased time at home wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic had also increased their levels of engagement with social media. Data from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University confirms the degree to which social media has pervaded the lives of young people, noting that “social media use is nearly ubiquitous among youth: almost 90% of young people aged 18-29 use at least one social media site.”<sup>28</sup>

The most popular social media applications among this group of interviewees included Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, and Twitter. The next most commonly mentioned applications included GroupMe, Discord, YouTube, and Reddit. While the youngest cohort

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<sup>28</sup> “Five Takeaways on Social Media and the Youth Vote in 2018,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, November 15, 2018, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/five-takeaways-social-media-and-youth-vote-2018>.

of interviewees (ages 18-21) consistently mentioned TikTok more than older interviewees, Instagram was the most commonly cited application among all age cohorts. Some youth described Instagram content as being more high-quality due to the ability to pack more detail into posts and create more professional, visually appealing content.

Additionally, many of the youth articulated key distinctions between these social media platforms: not only did they view each application as serving different purposes in their lives, but they also expressed varying levels of connection to their networks on each application. Whereas some reported that they tended to interact more with strangers on platforms like TikTok and Twitter, they noted the highest levels of interaction with their “real-life friends” on Instagram and Snapchat.

*Takeaway: Given the relative ubiquity of social media use among youth, it is essential to understand where young Asian Americans are spending the most time and why. For this sample of interviewees, TikTok was more popular among those aged 18-21, while Instagram was most popular across the board. The youth reported using these platforms to stay connected, informed, and entertained.*

## **Social Media Feeds**

My interviews with young Asian Americans revealed several key insights regarding the nature and impact of their social media feeds. First, interviewees most commonly reported using social media to follow friends’ accounts, humor or meme accounts, political accounts, celebrities or influencers’ accounts, and accounts that aligned with their hobbies around sports, art, music, etc.

Second, interviewees consistently noted that they sensed a strong alignment between their own political views and those of the people they follow or engage with on social media. This alignment, for many, emerged both organically and as a result of a deliberately curated process. For one 25-year-old Asian American male in Atlanta, Georgia, this perception of high political alignment influenced his belief that it would be ineffective to post political content on social media, since he already knew most people’s opinions and believed that they would be unlikely to change.

Finally, when asked about how their social media feeds impact their political outlooks, young Asian American interviewees responded by lamenting the volume of content they consume and the fatigue associated with their consumption. Interviewees used the following words to describe how their social media feeds make them feel about politics: *uneasy, disheartened, forlorn, angry, frustrated, depressed, pessimistic, discouraged*. They discussed how their feeds often feel like “polarized echo chambers” that induce a sense of “impending doom.” One 18-year-old female from the Houston metropolitan area said:

“ I often have to take a break from social media—consuming so much negative news takes a toll on my mental health.”

While almost all of the interviewees described a relationship to social media consumption akin to “doom-scrolling,” two of the youth discussed how their social media feeds make them feel empowered, activated, and optimistic about politics. They cited the level of passion they observed from their friends online and identified social media as an excellent place to get involved in politics or activism.

These findings comport with trends identified by John Della Volpe, Director of Polling at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Institute of Politics. Della Volpe, who recently published a new book entitled *Fight: How Gen Z Is Channeling Their Fear And Passion To Save America*, has remarked that, “I don’t think there is any generation in 75 years that has been confronted with more chaos, more quickly in their young lives than Gen Z or Zoomers.”<sup>29</sup> Della Volpe highlights how this cohort of young Americans in their teens to early twenties has faced the aftermath of 9/11, the Great Recession, school shootings, the COVID-19 pandemic, and more—all of which have led to an acute sense of anxiety, hopelessness, depression, and isolation that frequently show up in youth polling data.<sup>30</sup> Yet Della Volpe’s research also confirms the resilience, passion, and value for community that are central to this particular generation.

*Takeaway: Young Asian Americans in this study demonstrated a high level of awareness regarding the polarization of their own social media feeds and the negative impact on their health and political outlooks. There is an appetite for content that empowers and inspires hope about the state of American politics and government.*

## Content Creation

According to CIRCLE, about 45 percent of young people “have engaged in one of three forms of media creation about social and political issues: creating content for submission, sharing their own experience, or creating visual media.”<sup>31</sup> About 38 percent of Asian youth reported engaging in one of the three forms of media creation, yet their engagement rate fell below that of Black, Latino, and white youth.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Juana Summers, “A New Look at How Turmoil is Defining the Lives and Politics of Generation Z,” NPR, January 18, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/18/1073335334/a-new-look-at-how-turmoil-is-defining-the-lives-and-politics-of-generation-z>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ruby Belle Booth, “Young People Created Media to Uplift their Voices in 2020,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, April 21, 2021, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/young-people-created-media-uplift-their-voices-2020>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

The Asian American interviewees who regularly produce social media content explained that content creation enables them to raise awareness about current events, elevate new or different perspectives among their social circles, amplify infographics that explain complex issues in a succinct manner, and “break the silence” on issues that do not get enough attention. One 27-year-old male in Atlanta described how he enjoyed posting more on Instagram and Facebook, as he knows more of his “followers” and “friends” on those platforms. The feeling of communicating with personal connections compels him to post or share more information on those sites in particular.

Other interviewees spoke to how the patterns of engagement and levels of response from their friends on social media also drove their desire to create and re-share content regularly. They highlighted the ease of posting content that can reach a wide audience instantaneously; the interactivity of the “Story” function which allows people to easily reply to their posts; the positive feedback they receive from friends who interact with their Stories and express an appreciation for the resources they have shared; and the versatility of the “Poll” or “Question” functions on Instagram, where content creators can ask questions and hear different perspectives from their followers. These findings are key to informing how APIAVote and its partner organizations can empower youth ambassadors to most effectively engage with existing connections on social media.

*Takeaway: Although national surveys indicate that Asian American youth create digital media content at lower rates than their peers of other racial backgrounds, those who already create content on political or other topics are committed to doing so based on opportunities to raise awareness and regularly engage with friends or other connections who follow them on social media.*

## **Social Media as a Democratic Tool**

According to data from CIRCLE, “digital media creation is...a valuable civic tool that helps young people recognize the power of their own voices in civic spaces...particularly for marginalized young people...it helps them link their skills, hobbies, and creative interests with political participation. Social media, particularly, allows teens to not only consume information, but to be active and creative participants in constructing their own civic understanding.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, content creation and engagement on social media can help young people feel like they are represented, informed, and connected participants in a democracy. This, in turn, can often lead to offline engagement as well.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Madeline McGee and Abby Kiesa and Sara Suzuki, “Media-Making about Social and Political Issues Builds Confidence in Teens,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, October 28, 2021, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/media-making-about-social-and-political-issues-builds-confidence-teens>.

<sup>34</sup> “Five Takeaways on Social Media and the Youth Vote in 2018,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, November 15, 2018, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/five-takeaways-social-media-and-youth-vote-2018>.

Young Asian American interviewees identified ways in which social media has enabled them to raise their voice and engage civically in novel ways. One interviewee described how social media has provided them with a platform that they can utilize instead of remaining silent. Another interviewee described how she used social media to express her dismay after a particular election result, and then outlined the potential impact that the politician's electoral success would have on statewide education policy. This kind of engagement creates effects for both the original creator and their audience on social media. For example, another 25-year-old from Texas described how powerful it was to see young people creating political change via original videos on TikTok. This in part inspired him to start creating daily Snapchat stories on various civic topics that he then continued for nine months straight. In either example, an individual's decision to raise their voice has ripple effects on those around them. One 26-year-old female in Georgia noted:

“ *Social media is a space where I can talk about things that I care about. Sometimes I voice my frustrations or process through writing...if I learned something, I want to pass [the info] on to whoever else might want to learn about it.*”

However, not all interviewees spoke favorably about the intersections of social media and political or civic engagement. Some interviewees mentioned the backlash they received from personal or professional contacts after posting political content on their social media accounts. They described how the friction that resulted from these interactions made them reevaluate their level of political engagement online. Many of the Asian American youth also mentioned that political conversations online often devolved into dogpiling, inflamed tempers, or vitriolic attacks. As a result, several believe that political discussions are simply too divisive or complex to engage in online; they instead prefer using offline ways of communicating that allow for greater depth.

Takeaway: *Many young Asian Americans in this study have embraced social media as a space in which they can express political opinions and engage in peer education around civics. Yet using social media as a civic tool is a double-edged sword: many youth also have firsthand experience with the hostility of online political engagement and are seeking how to best navigate the complications of online and offline political action.*



## TOPIC II: YOUNG ASIAN AMERICANS AND POLITICAL ACTIVITY

### **Political Activation Moments**

Interviewees most commonly cited the 2016 presidential election and the actions of Donald Trump as key factors that initiated their involvement in politics, or served as “political activation moments.” While the 2016 election was for many interviewees the first presidential election they were eligible to vote in, Trump in particular was identified, by name, by over twelve interviewees as the primary reason for their spike in electoral engagement. One 25-year-old male in Atlanta, Georgia said that before 2016:

“*I [had been] anti-politics; I didn’t think it was useful to be involved and didn’t think that what politicians said—or laws they passed—would necessarily affect people.*” Trump being elected, though, was the turning point. *“I saw that politics does impact us at a macro level, and [now] I don’t want to not be informed.”*

Others agreed with this sentiment. They discussed how pivotal the 2016 election season was, as Trump dominated culture and air waves so much that they could not avoid politics. One 29-year-old in Atlanta commented on how the election season “felt like everything was on fire;” the stakes felt very high, and there was less room to be apolitical. Even for older interviewees who had been eligible to vote in previous general elections, 2016 marked the first time they attended protests—after Trump was elected—which contributed to their “political awakening.” They saw, tangibly, how political action enabled them to challenge policies they viewed as detrimental and therefore identified 2016 as a key inflection point in their political formation.

After Trump, interviewees most commonly mentioned high school clubs or teachers as key factors that led to their political activation or engagement. One interviewee also noted how being a child of immigrants positioned him to see the stakes involved in politics up close from an early age.

Takeaway: Interviewees credited the following as key catalysts in their political activation: Trump and the 2016 election, high school clubs or teachers, and parental immigration experiences. In each case, interviewees described moving to a deeper level of political consciousness due to seeing the impact and stakes that politics can have on their everyday lives.

## ***Beliefs/Attitudes Regarding Voting and Its Impact***

Historically, Asian American youth, when compared to their peers of other racial groups, have exhibited lower levels of voter registration and formal engagement in electoral politics.<sup>35</sup> Past studies have also demonstrated that political engagement among young Asian Americans varies based on immigration histories, levels of educational attainment, and parental education levels.<sup>36</sup> Yet leading up to the 2020 presidential election, CIRCLE found that 86 percent of Asian American youth reported paying close attention to the election, compared to 75 percent of all youth who responded similarly.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, according to CIRCLE's analysis of 2020 Census and post-election poll data, Asian American youth turnout may have increased the most of any racial group in 2020 (see Figure 1 in Appendix), closing the gap in electoral participation between this group and other youth.<sup>38</sup>

For this project, the young Asian Americans I spoke to overwhelmingly described voting as a “civic duty” and a necessary part of participating in a democracy. Interviewees also overwhelmingly highlighted how the relative ease and convenience of voting made them inclined to vote in elections. One 27-year-old male in Atlanta remarked:

“ *If I have the ability to [vote], I want to try it — it’s a low barrier and not that hard to show up and cast a vote.*”

Others pointed to how their immigrant parents had not been able to vote in non-democratic countries and described how this shaped their belief in the importance of exercising this right and ability. Several interviewees noted their belief in the impact of their vote and saw voting as a way for their voices to count. One 28-year-old male in Houston said:

“ *Every vote matters and can be the decisive difference in a close election.*”

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<sup>35</sup> Surbhi Godsay, “Electoral Engagement Among Young Asian Americans,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, September 2014, [https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2019-12/youth\\_trends\\_asians\\_2014.pdf](https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2019-12/youth_trends_asians_2014.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> Peter de Guzman and Abby Kiesa and Alberto Medina, “Strong Signs of Asian American Youth Engagement in 2020,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, September 9, 2020, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/strong-signs-asian-american-youth-engagement-2020>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Peter de Guzman, “Driven by Key Issues, Asian Youth Increased their Political Participation,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, July 8, 2021, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/driven-key-issues-asian-youth-increased-their-political-participation>.

Another 29-year-old male in Atlanta described his view of voting by expressing his belief that:

*“ My voice does matter, and if I do want to see change, I need to do something; I need to vote.”*

When asked specifically about their belief in the power of young people to create change through voting or political engagement, the interviewees who were highly involved in politics all reported very positive answers. They discussed witnessing the power of young people to organize, impact policy, and drive larger-scale change through their own experiences of volunteering on campaigns or working with local organizations. One 19-year-old male in Georgia noted that he believed young people had played a determinant role in flipping Georgia from red to blue in 2020 because they had turned out to vote.

These findings align with surveys conducted by CIRCLE in which 80 percent of Asian American youth indicated agreement or strong agreement with the idea that young people can make change.<sup>39</sup> The same percentage of Asian American youth expressed belief in the idea that electoral outcomes from 2020 would significantly impact their communities, and 59 percent described feeling as though they are in a movement with members who would vote to make their views known.<sup>40</sup>

A common theme of disillusionment vis-a-vis voting also emerged from interviews with youth at all levels of political engagement. For example, one 26-year-old female in Atlanta shared that she votes regularly since it is easy for her and important to her to participate democratically, but she now has less hope in the idea that voting will change conditions in the long-term. She described an increased cynicism around voting after witnessing the Biden administration’s pandemic response and inaction around student debt cancellation. Another interviewee, a 19-year-old male in Atlanta, said:

*“ We hear all the time — especially in Georgia — if you don’t get out and vote, then it’s on you if no progress is made. Then people get out and vote and win by the slimmest margins because people are putting in so much effort. But then to see the state of things is like a gut punch in a lot of ways. On one hand it makes me feel apathetic, but then on the other hand it makes me want to work even harder, even outside of electoral politics. Maybe in the future I’ll put less emphasis on doing voter registration, and I’ll place more emphasis on [community] grocery delivery...It changes how I view the power of electoral politics and how much stock I put in*

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<sup>39</sup> Peter de Guzman and Abby Kiesa and Alberto Medina, “Strong Signs of Asian American Youth Engagement in 2020,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, September 9, 2020, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/strong-signs-asian-american-youth-engagement-2020>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

*individual races because it seems like day after day, things [are] not changing.”*

Additionally, a couple interviewees spoke about how recent voter suppression laws in their states contributed to their political disenchantment and would likely pose greater barriers to others who are seeking to make their voices heard.

Takeaway: *While nationwide youth surveys indicate an uptick in political awareness and voter turnout among Asian American youth, many interviewees have also expressed a growing disillusionment regarding the power of voting. They attributed their frustration to a perceived lack of change or movement in their everyday conditions. Across the board, young Asian American interviewees overwhelmingly view voting as a civic duty that they can fulfill with relative ease, though, and seemed most likely to believe in the power of the youth vote if they had witnessed electoral victories firsthand.*

## ***Impact of Geography on Voting Attitudes/Activity***

Similarly, multiple interviewees mentioned that their inclinations toward voting had been impacted by living in Georgia or Texas. One individual in Atlanta talked about how their social media feed amplified the importance of voting in a swing state; the buzz on social media had made them more inclined to vote and heightened the feeling that their vote really does matter in Georgia. Other interviewees expressed similar ideas. Two Asian American men who had moved from California to Georgia in recent years noted:

“ *I voted when I thought it would have an impact...in California, I didn't vote locally because I didn't think it would make a difference — now in Georgia, it's a different story.”*

“ *Seeing Georgia flip has changed my perspective on how much one individual voice or vote matters.”*

Both interviewees agreed that Georgia's electoral significance made them more involved in politics than they had been in a state like California.

Other individuals from Texas described similar feelings and other tensions. A couple interviewees discussed how they felt as though minority voters have a harder time making their voices heard in a place like Texas. For some of the more politically active individuals, that feeling motivated them to get even more involved in politics and capitalize on the

chance to flip Texas, from red to blue, even though that had once seemed impossible to them. One 26-year-old woman in Texas noted that she had not voted prior to 2020 because she had not felt that her vote would count much due to the setup of the Electoral College. However, as she heard murmurs about Texas being more purple in the lead-up to the 2020 election, she decided to get out and vote:

“ *It felt like my vote would count a bit more, whereas in previous elections it was hard to be enthused about voting because it was like, ‘Texas is going to be Republican anyway.’”*

Finally, for several Asian American youth in Georgia, the Atlanta spa shootings in March 2021 marked another critical activation point. The murder of six Asian women sparked protests and rallies in Atlanta that a couple interviewees reported attending and connecting with due to their Asian American identities. This place-based activism is significant and dovetails with what some researchers are noticing among Asian American youth across the country. Karthick Ramakrishnan, the Founder and Co-Director of AAPI Data, was quoted in NPR as saying:

“ *This second generation is coming of political age...especially during this moment of COVID and the increase in anti-Asian racism and hate incidents, you are seeing a kind of political consciousness that's forming that will likely last a generation. So I think looking ahead, we're going to see a lot more civic engagement, political activism among the younger Asian American population...especially given the circumstances of the past year.”<sup>41</sup>*

Takeaway: Place matters, especially when considering its impact on young Asian Americans' voting attitudes and activity. Several interviewees noted how social media contributed to an increased awareness of their state's electoral significance, which resulted in an increased inclination to vote or get involved. Asian Americans in key states like Georgia have also been uniquely impacted by recent acts of violence against Asians—growing activism among this population cannot be discounted.

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<sup>41</sup> Domenico Montanaro, “The Growing Power Of The AAPI Vote, By The Numbers,” NPR, May 22, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/22/999345393/the-growing-power-of-the-aapi-vote-by-the-numbers>.



## ***Voting and Social Media***

Interestingly, aside from one individual, every interviewee who reported voting in the 2020 presidential election also reported posting on social media and sharing that they had voted. Even those who are minimally or moderately engaged in political action described the social media post as an easy, actionable step that they had been happy to participate in on or before Election Day. Several voters in Georgia also mentioned the #PostThePeach campaign which further incentivized Asian American youth in Georgia to share on social media that they had voted. The campaign encouraged voters to post the Georgia peach sticker that they received upon voting, and according to several interviewees, promoted a sense of pride and connection among those who had gone out to vote. Indeed, social psychologists have noted that “I Voted” stickers can be powerful social-signaling tools that remind or compel others to go and vote.<sup>42</sup>

Widespread social media activity related to voting is significant, as studies have shown that youth who hear about elections on social media often experience a significant increase in their likelihood to vote.<sup>43</sup> A survey conducted by CIRCLE found that 28 percent of young people aged 18-24 “heard or read about the election on social media platforms but were not reached by traditional outreach groups such as political parties and campaigns.”<sup>44</sup> This is key to understanding how to best reach the community of young Asian Americans across the country who reported low-to-average levels of contact by political parties and youth organizations in 2020.<sup>45</sup>

*Takeaway: Interviewees’ responses demonstrate that posting a social media update or photo after voting is an accessible, common practice among Asian American youth of all levels of political involvement. Even simple election reminders on social media can have outsized impacts on others’ likelihoods of voting.*

## ***Issues at the Ballot Box***

CIRCLE’s youth surveys prior to the 2020 election found that Asian American youth at large viewed “racism” as an important electoral issue, with 36 percent of respondents identifying it as one of their top three issues and 13 percent of respondents selecting it as

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<sup>42</sup> Molly Callahan, “The Powerful Social Psychology Behind Those ‘I Voted’ Stickers,” News @ Northeastern, November 6, 2018, <https://news.northeastern.edu/2018/11/06/the-powerful-social-psychology-behind-those-i-voted-stickers/>.

<sup>43</sup> “Five Takeaways on Social Media and the Youth Vote in 2018,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, November 15, 2018, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/five-takeaways-social-media-and-youth-vote-2018>.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Peter de Guzman and Abby Kiesa and Alberto Medina, “Strong Signs of Asian American Youth Engagement in 2020,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, September 9, 2020, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/strong-signs-asian-american-youth-engagement-2020>.

their top issue.<sup>46</sup> This survey also noted that young Asian Americans were the most likely, compared to youth of other racial groups, to choose “the environment and climate change” as a top electoral issue.<sup>47</sup>

CIRCLE’s post-election survey found that a robust pandemic response, racism, and violence against people of color were top issues that young Asian Americans reported as determining their choice for president at the ballot box.<sup>48</sup>

The interviewees I spoke to in Georgia and Texas mentioned the following topics most frequently when asked about which issues were most important to them in the 2020 election: getting Trump out of office; COVID-19 pandemic response; student loan cancellation and education; health care; racial justice and civil rights; domestic social policy; and immigration.

*Takeaway: The AAPI youth electorate is diverse and complex, though surveys and interviews highlight young Asian Americans’ desire for leaders who can most competently address the COVID-19 pandemic, racism, and student loans — among other issues.*

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Peter de Guzman, “Driven by Key Issues, Asian Youth Increased their Political Participation,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, July 8, 2021, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/driven-key-issues-asian-youth-increased-their-political-participation>.

## TOPIC III: MOBILIZING PEER AMBASSADORS

### ***Importance of Peer Outreach***

According to CIRCLE, in recent years 34 percent of young Asian Americans indicated that they had registered others to vote.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, 46 percent of Asian American youth reported that they had tried to convince other young people to vote, indicating noteworthy levels of peer outreach among this community.<sup>50</sup> These levels of peer-to-peer civic outreach are crucial, as young Asian Americans consistently underscore the impact that youth outreach can have on their political activity.

For example, one female interviewee in the Atlanta metropolitan area discussed how she does not know when local elections occur until one of her friends shares information about the election on Instagram via links or infographics. Similarly, another female interviewee in Atlanta spoke about how she nearly forgot to vote in the previous election, but her sister had been the one who reminded and encouraged her to vote—which she eventually did. Additionally, a 29-year-old male interviewee in Georgia described how becoming friends with people who were very politically engaged influenced his decision to vote and eventually moved him from a minimal to moderate level of political involvement.

Existing research confirms the powerful impact of relational organizing, or political outreach to friends, family, and neighbors. Studies have found that delivering reminders to vote via social media can have “substantively large effects on political behavior” and voter turnout, particularly among college students.<sup>51</sup> Other recent experiments—in which volunteer captains made repeated efforts to contact everyone on a target list of friends, family, and acquaintances—have demonstrated that such relational efforts can increase turnout probability by 13 to 17 percent.<sup>52</sup>

*Takeaway: Asian American youth interviewees and existing literature both highlight the power of peer-to-peer outreach in activating young people’s involvement in politics, particularly around voting activity. Politically active youth often have trust and rapport with those around them and can serve as key ambassadors in reaching harder-to-reach segments*

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<sup>49</sup> Peter de Guzman and Abby Kiesa and Alberto Medina, “Strong Signs of Asian American Youth Engagement in 2020,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, September 9, 2020, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/strong-signs-asian-american-youth-engagement-2020>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Holly Teresi and Melissa R. Michelson, “Wired to Mobilize: The Effect of Social Networking Messages on Voter Turnout,” *The Social Science Journal* 52, no. 2 (June 2015): 195-204, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2014.09.004>.

<sup>52</sup> Matt Compton, “A ‘Truly Remarkable’ Look at Relational Organizing,” Blue State, April 30, 2020, <https://www.bluestate.co/news/truly-remarkable-look-at-relational-organizing/>.

## **Online and Offline Peer Outreach**

Interviewees provided multiple examples of how they have mobilized peers or family members through social media and in-person outreach. Each individual used creative modes of engagement that reached new voters or participants, as well as inspired others to change a political behavior. The act of taking this initiative also empowered and positioned these interviewees as trusted, engaged members of their communities. Some examples that interviewees mentioned are as follows:

- A 21-year-old woman in Texas spoke to her less-politically-engaged friends about politics on a near-daily basis. She then invited her friends to attend a political rally—seven to eight friends and roommates attended, several of whom had never been to a political rally before.
- An 18-year-old woman in Texas consistently shared articles and discussed political issues — one-on-one — with a family member who voted with one party throughout his life. In 2020, the family member ended up switching political parties and voted for the other party down the entire ticket.
- A 21-year-old in Texas made Facebook posts every week about politics and then invited a group of Asian American friends to canvass and phone bank together. Around 10 people attended, and most indicated that this was their first time volunteering in such a way.
- A 25-year-old man in Texas posted a daily Snapchat story about voting or political issues and continued this practice from March 2020 through November 2020, with 120+ people watching or engaging with the story daily.
- An 18-year-old woman in Texas started youth phone banks and publicized them on Instagram; followers were able to “swipe up” on her story, and around 30 people joined as first-time phone bankers.
- An 18-year-old woman in Texas was too young to vote in 2020 but created a voting guide and election worker guide for her high school friends. She was not approved to physically post the guides at school, so she posted them to Snapchat and Instagram—about five friends told her that they were signing

up to be election workers as a result of viewing her guides.

- A 19-year-old woman in Georgia conducted a ten-part Instagram story series that asked people to sign up to volunteer and phone bank. About nine friends signed up, and five were first-time phone bankers. This interviewee continued to post interactive “Did You Vote? Yes/No” polls on her Instagram story on Election Day.
- A 25-year-old woman in Georgia consistently direct-messaged friends who posted verifiably false information on social media and also regularly posted original content about early voting dates, polling locations, etc. This interviewee became a trusted source of political knowledge among her friends.

*Takeaway: Asian American youth have found a wide variety of creative modes of peer outreach. They have engaged in tailored, in-person outreach, as well as created original guides or content on Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram that informed their peers and mobilized them to take a political action — often for the first time.*

## **Activating Highly Involved Youth as Peer Ambassadors**

While most of the youth who shared the above stories of peer outreach are highly involved in politics, there are other Asian Americans who identified similar levels of involvement but are not regularly engaged in peer outreach. Some noted that while they enjoy volunteering for political causes, doing peer outreach on social media can feel like preaching to the choir. Others talked about how it can feel harder to be taken seriously as a high schooler among individuals who are not as heavily involved in politics. Yet almost all of the youth in this population reported that they follow politics on social media religiously. What kind of content would they view as worthy to re-share, and what would it take to equip them as peer ambassadors in their communities?

Highly involved youth reported that they would be inclined to re-share political content on social media that is easily digestible, timely, and contains elements of hope or clear action steps. The responses from Asian American interviewees expressed a desire for content that is:

- Explanatory and digestible. Posts should provide commentary or context on political events and then explain clearly why the event matters.
- Fact-based, with a modern feel. Posts should not “boogeyman” or attack the other side without statistics that support the claims; they should feel professional and high-quality.



- Timely, with elements of hope and clear action steps to take. Posts should highlight the impact that one's actions can have — “otherwise, it's paralyzing to just hear about [negative] issues without hearing about what you can do,” as one 26-year-old interviewee in Atlanta shared.

Finally, when elected officials post content, young Asian Americans described being inclined to share content in which politicians use humor, personal stories, and less filtering to speak directly to young people. They appreciated when elected officials exposed contradictions or injustices and consistently gave off an authentic, credible, and interactive vibe with their followers on social media. Asian American youth posting this kind of content among their peers can have wide-ranging impacts, as many themselves reported signing up to volunteer or learning about opportunities due to posts they saw from political groups online.

Takeaway: *To mobilize more Asian American youth at large, more highly involved youth will need to be mobilized as peer ambassadors within their communities or social networks. Interviewees gave specific themes, preferences, and characteristics that they hope to see in content that they would consider re-sharing — namely, content that is informative, fact-based, high-quality, action-oriented, and authentic.*

### **Attitudes Toward Politics and Social Media**

The interviewees who reported low levels of political engagement shared a few common themes when describing their attitudes toward politics and social media. By and large, they expressed the feeling that electoral politics does not have as much impact as they would like, and the mix of politics and social media can often produce environments of toxicity.

One interviewee in Houston described her skepticism and disenchantment toward politics, saying:

“ Nothing has really changed that much [so] what’s the point? Nothing is going to change. I can try so much, but if the government doesn’t do [anything], nothing is going to change...what is the difference between the candidates? What kind of impact does it have? It really feels like there isn’t that much of a role for me. I’m disillusioned by the whole thing and burnt out with COVID in all parts of my life.”

Another interviewee in Houston expressed a similar sentiment and described political news on social media as “disheartening” since it seems like politicians just keep making false promises. She continued by saying:

“ There isn’t really any change. [There are] all these issues of injustice, and nothing [is] really being done. Things have gotten worse, especially with the pandemic.”

Finally, other interviewees discussed how they try to avoid politics because of the inflammatory tone or bias they associate with political content, especially on social media. One interviewee in Atlanta noted that she does not enjoy political content because:

“ [It] can be really negative. It doesn’t really benefit me — it just makes me unhappy...and is not good for my mental health. [It’s] a bunch of people arguing with each other.”

Additionally, youth with minimal political engagement noted the following as reasons why they might not vote or vote regularly: not seeing the impact of their vote, not having much power as an individual in a national election, not having as much access to information about less-publicized elections or candidates, and not hearing about local elections in the first place.

*Takeaway: Asian American youth interviewees who reported low levels of political involvement indicated that they tend to avoid politics due to the perceived lack of change and impact that political engagement can have. When thinking about the intersection of politics and social media, several youth described the intense negativity of online political content. These attitudes often translate to voting behaviors or decisions as well.*

## **Reaching Minimally-Engaged Asian American Youth**

When asked about who or what might affect their levels of political engagement, young Asian American interviewees pointed to a few examples of trusted messengers in their communities, as well as other opportunities that had piqued their interest.

One interviewee in Houston described how she usually turns to a few close friends who have a strong interest in policy. She knows and trusts that they have done research on particular candidates or elections, and they provide her with a safe space where she can be inquisitive about politics and receive honest answers. She also noted that they have influenced her reasoning regarding elections before, and she values their relationship since she does not feel judged for knowing less about politics. Friends, or trusted messengers like these, made it easier for her to get information about when elections are occurring. In the absence of such information from trusted peers, she added, she has not voted in elections since 2020.

Another interviewee in Atlanta discussed his involvement in a local faith community for seven years and his trust of a local pastor whom he has known for three to four years. This interviewee noted how he trusts the pastor's values and would have felt much more inclined to vote in a local election had the local leader made a strong push to get involved. The local pastor acting as a trusted messenger would have legitimized the election, in his opinion, and made him feel more connected to the event.

Prior research on trusted messengers and low-propensity voters also underscores how important it can be for voters to hear outreach messages from ethnic media, trusted local organizations, and informal “spokespeople” in their communities.<sup>53</sup> While ideas regarding who is trustworthy can differ across partisan, geographic, and generational lines, research

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<sup>53</sup> “Reaching Low-Propensity Voters in California’s November 2020 Elections: Recommendations from Focus Group Research and Community Partner Engagement,” CSIUCR and California Common Cause, August 2020, <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/pdfs/covid-19-resources/csi-ccc-votemail-aug2020.pdf>.

seems to suggest that immediate family, close friends, professionals, and community leaders rank highly in terms of perceived trustworthiness across the board.<sup>54</sup> These messengers are valued for their perceived honesty, consistency with information, lack of bias, ability to present multiple perspectives, and access to knowledge.<sup>55</sup> Because of this trust, they can deliver information on important topics, inspire those around them to take action, or compel someone to change a stance on a social issue.<sup>56</sup>

Additionally, other minimally active individuals discussed how classes contributed to small spikes in their political involvement. One interviewee in Houston talked about how she engaged in civic activities like writing letters to elected officials as a result of research she was conducting for a particular class.

In terms of what content or resources might best reach Asian American youth who are less engaged in politics, interviewees discussed their appreciation for visually appealing content that displays facts from nonpartisan sources and outlines the immediate impact that one's actions might have. They noted their cynicism or frustration around hyperpartisan content and wanted to see entertaining yet authentic political content. They also expressed an interest in content that neatly summarizes or compares the platforms of each candidate in an election. Finally, they most favorably viewed politicians who are personable, offer fresh perspectives, and engage with people on the ground. Many interviewees mentioned Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as an elected official whom they feel embodies these characteristics.

*Takeaway: There are strategic opportunities to partner with trusted messengers like politically active youth, faith leaders, and educators to increase civic participation among minimally active Asian American youth. Such community members might also serve as conduits for disseminating informative, nonpartisan, and authentic political content that may mobilize young Asian Americans more effectively.*

## **Successful Mobilization Among Asian American Youth**

Youth interviewees who are minimally involved in politics also described instances during which they were mobilized to engage in civic activities. One individual in Atlanta discussed how a trusted messenger in his community encouraged him to sign a particular petition that was circulating on social media. The act of signing the petition took less than a minute, and the combination of a convenient action item paired with an endorsement from a trusted community member compelled him to engage politically.

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<sup>54</sup> “Trusted Messengers Study,” Ad Council, accessed February 2022, <https://www.adcouncil.org/tmstudy/>.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Another interviewee in Georgia spoke about how he had been very irritated by the influx of political texts and communications as a Georgia resident during the 2020 election cycle. However, he eventually decided to join a voter turnout event hosted by the Ossoff campaign. The textbank event involved participants texting friends and family to tell them to go vote, and he had appreciated how it felt more nonpartisan in nature and focused on raising voter participation. Because the event felt different in style compared to other political activities, he had been more inclined to participate.

CIRCLE reinforces some of these ideas by highlighting the power of social media in mobilizing young people who are not customarily involved in politics. CIRCLE researchers noted this, saying:

“*Social media alone do not create ‘civic attitudes’—but probably help cement them: ...therefore, social media can potentially help move young people from ‘intent’ to ‘action’ by helping them feel more confident that they have accurate information about how and where to vote, and that they have educated themselves further on candidates and issues.*”<sup>57</sup>

Takeaway: Young Asian Americans who are not regularly engaged politically still report instances in which they experienced resonance with political content or events. Interviewees identified examples involving nonpartisan civic events and trusted messengers who are active in politics. There are additional opportunities to utilize social media in mobilizing young people to move from a place of political intent to political action.

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<sup>57</sup> “Five Takeaways on Social Media and the Youth Vote in 2018,” CIRCLE at Tufts University, November 15, 2018, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/five-takeaways-social-media-and-youth-vote-2018>.

## TOPIC V: MOBILIZING ASIAN AMERICAN YOUTH IN UPCOMING ELECTIONS

Looking ahead to the upcoming U.S. elections in 2022 and 2024, most minimally-engaged Asian American youth reported that they had not seen much election-related content on social media, whereas highly-engaged youth reported seeing more election-related content in their feeds. Nonetheless, interviewees indicated relatively high likelihoods of voting in 2022 and 2024 if they are able to access enough information about the midterm elections in time. This finding underscores the importance of providing informative resources on upcoming elections to harder-to-reach constituencies in a timely manner.

In terms of issues that young Asian Americans identified as most important to them in future election cycles, the most commonly mentioned topics included: civil rights, education, pandemic response / public health, health care, climate change, and immigration.

Reaching Asian American youth where they are already spending time will also be key in upcoming election cycles. Interviewees most frequently reported that they get their political news from their social media feeds, news websites, podcasts, social media accounts belonging to news outlets, and short email newsletters published by various news outlets. Although podcasts might not fall under traditional social media, interviewees expressed that they appreciate podcasts that are brief (i.e., fitting within their daily commute times), incorporate diverse perspectives, and remain impartial or credible in nature.

Additionally, young Asian Americans were quick to note which politicians have and continue to influence them the most. Over eight interviewees mentioned Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, or AOC, by name—even the interviewees who were minimally involved in politics or expressed high degrees of disillusionment. They agreed that Ocasio-Cortez is different from other politicians in that she is young and comes across as an “ordinary person,” in addition to being someone who is actively making a difference and carrying herself as a positive voice in a more negative political climate. Texas interviewees also named Beto O’Rourke as a politician they connected with, and Georgia interviewees mentioned Stacey Abrams when asked the same question. Those who did not feel connected to any elected officials expressed that they value politicians who have integrity and consistency in what they say and do.

*Takeaway: To mobilize Asian American youth—especially those who are less active—ahead of the midterm elections, it will be critical to ensure that they have access to key information on the topics that matter most to them. Interviewees’ descriptions of whom they respect and*

*where they receive their news will be important factors in crafting effective, targeted mobilization messages.*



# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## Recommendations for Mobilizing the Asian American Youth Electorate

The following recommendations are limited by the fact that the sample of interviewees is not representative of *all* young Asian Americans. While the interviewees' responses offer insight into how young Asian Americans make sense of social media, voting, and peer outreach, the  $n=22$  sample size, geographic focus, and aforementioned factors limit the generalizability and certainty of the recommendations.<sup>58</sup>

These recommendations are derived directly from the findings and analyses in the previous section, and they are intended to fall within the client's economic, administrative, and political constraints. Additionally, the recommendations can be pursued in preparation for both of the upcoming election cycles in 2022 and 2024.

### General Social Media Mobilization and Content Creation

*How can we best reach Asian American youth on social media in our current political moment?*

#### **To reach Asian American youth “where they’re already at”:**

- ❖ Focus on having a strong presence on Instagram (and TikTok, for younger audiences) with regular, high-quality content.

#### **To break through the noise and polarization of social media:**

- ❖ Create unique content that highlights the passion, power, and impact of young people. Young Asian Americans have an appetite for content that empowers and

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<sup>58</sup> Additionally, while the umbrella term “Asian American youth” is used in some of the recommendations below, this project, as noted earlier, acknowledges the vast diversity of the AAPI community and recognizes the importance of data disaggregation. The  $n=22$  sample size for this project, however, limits the ability to meaningfully disaggregate the recommendations.

inspires hope about the state of American politics. Such content can draw a powerful contrast to the disheartening or “doom-inducing” content that saturates their social media feeds.

- Ideas for more unique content, as drawn from interview data, might include brief podcasts that: (1) discuss issues that are important to young Asian Americans in future election cycles;<sup>59</sup> and (2) highlight politicians or influencers who are viewed as young, in-touch, positive, and sincere.<sup>60</sup> Short newsletters might be another way of presenting this content.

**To mobilize politically active youth as peer ambassadors (i.e., those engaged in sharing political information with their networks) on social media:**

- ❖ Produce content that is informative, digestible, fact-based, and high-quality—in addition to containing elements of hope and clear action steps. Offer concrete invitations or even incentives for well-connected youth to share or repost such content.

**To reach youth through partnerships with politicians:**

- ❖ Post content in which politicians use humor and personal stories, as well as express authenticity and credibility. Highlights examples of how politicians’ actions or legislation impact real people and communities.

## Mobilizing Youth Ambassadors

*How can we best empower both novice and experienced Asian American youth ambassadors in reaching their peer networks?*

**To enable youth to reach large peer audiences and sustain engagement over time:**

- ❖ Equip youth ambassadors with the tools or content they need to post regular Stories on Instagram and Snapchat. Offer links to resources and prompts that youth ambassadors can post via the Poll or Question feature on Instagram Stories. According to interview data, interactive content that garners replies or further engagement from followers is key to fostering a sustained sense of community and fulfillment for both the creator and their audience.

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<sup>59</sup> Based on interview data from this project, top issues include: civil rights, education, pandemic response, health care, climate change, and immigration.

<sup>60</sup> The most commonly-mentioned politicians among this sample included Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Beto O’Rourke, and Stacey Abrams.

### **To provide youth with a healthier space in which to engage civically online:**

- ❖ Offer youth ambassadors support and training around recognizing or reporting unhealthy conduct on social media. Given various interviewees' firsthand experiences with severe backlash or hostile attacks as a result of online political activity, this kind of support can empower youth to draw healthy boundaries and participate in cultivating more welcoming spaces of online engagement.

### **To build on the strengths and initiative that active youth ambassadors have already displayed:**

- ❖ Train these leaders as peer mentors who can offer coaching and support to new youth ambassadors. Additionally, they can host workshops as resident experts and adapt the resources that they have already created (e.g., voting guides, Story templates, etc.) for use by other youth ambassadors in similar contexts.

### **To engage youth who are not currently active ambassadors:**

- ❖ Train them in relational organizing and empower them to contact friends, family, and acquaintances with reminders to vote and links to information on how to do so.

## **Mobilizing Politically Inactive Youth**

*Given existing barriers around political engagement, how can we best inform and mobilize politically inactive Asian American youth as members of the youth electorate?*

### **To activate youth who are discouraged by the perceived toxicity and lack of impact associated with politics:**

- ❖ Devise messaging strategies that highlight the impact of elections and feature examples of politicians who have spearheaded concrete change.
- ❖ Create social media content that is visually appealing, nonpartisan in nature, and authentic. Social media series focused on providing the necessary information or resources to move youth from political intent to political action (for example, on the matter of voting) can be particularly impactful. In some cases it may be powerful to collaborate with elected officials who are young, personable, and engaging.

- ❖ Partner with trusted messengers (i.e., local youth, faith and community leaders, educators, etc.) who are willing to use their influence to encourage civic or political engagement. Host accessible, nonpartisan events (e.g., voter registration drives) with these messengers leading the way—these types of events can often be gateways for further involvement.
- ❖ Offer opportunities to pair politically inactive youth with a peer ambassador who will answer questions without judgment, as well as provide verified information about local elections and candidates' platforms. This arrangement removes the toxicity associated with political discussions on social media.

## Mobilizing Youth of All Levels of Involvement to Vote

*What are action steps that APIAVote and its partner organizations can take to encourage Asian American youth to vote regularly?*

### **To target messaging or content toward low-propensity Asian American youth voters:**

- ❖ Partner with local organizations to design widespread social media campaigns that reach communities of young Asian Americans before and on Election Day. Enlist the help of local youth ambassadors who can amplify news about important elections and share resources on how to vote. Youth who hear about elections on social media often experience a significant increase in their likelihood of voting; thus, these social media campaigns should begin weeks before Election Day.
- ❖ Create social media stickers or frames that allow Asian American youth to share on social media that they have voted. Fun, creative graphics are an easy way to boost pride and connection among those who voted—interviewees noted how stickers that featured their state acted as a simple incentive to get out and vote.
- ❖ Partner with Asian immigrant voters or Asian immigrant coalitions for cross-generational civic engagement opportunities. Hearing from elders regarding the stakes and importance of voting can be especially powerful, given the comments from several interviewees about how it felt to hear stories from immigrant parents who could not vote in other countries.
- ❖ Share concrete stories about fellow youth who are organizing, impacting policy, and leading change within their communities. Amplifying accessible examples of young advocates can be powerful in reaching youth who feel cynical or disillusioned about voting or other electoral activities.

- ❖ Focus upcoming civic engagement campaigns on key issues for young Asian Americans like pandemic recovery, racism, and student loans.

### **To prepare younger Asian Americans to vote as soon as they reach voting age:**

- ❖ Create outreach programs or events that specifically engage high school students and connect them to opportunities like voter registration drives or poll worker jobs. Partner with high school educators who can plug these opportunities and reach Asian American youth even before they are eligible to vote. Interviewees noted that participating in these civic activities in high school enabled them to see their impact early on, which sustained their involvement in politics and voting for years to come.

### **To encourage low-propensity youth voters in battleground states to vote:**

- ❖ Create social media campaigns that amplify the impact that one's vote can have, especially in a swing state. Highlight statistics about small margins of victory and underscore the opportunity to impact the outcome of an election.
- ❖ Emphasize the relative convenience of casting a ballot—this might be achieved by featuring quotes from peers describing the ease with which they were able to vote, or posting infographics that clearly map out how to vote and assuage potential concerns.

## **Recommendations for Further Study**

*Given the qualitative and shorter-term nature of this study, what are some potential next steps for further research and inquiry?*

- ❖ Conduct an expanded study of Asian American youth in the South with a larger sample size—including respondents from a wider variety of towns, states, political affiliations, and education levels. Identify the degree to which a larger, even more diverse sample confirms or conflicts with findings outlined in this study.
  - With a larger sample size, it may be more feasible to meaningfully disaggregate recommendations according to young people's ethnic backgrounds, immigration statuses, language proficiency levels, etc. and provide tailored next steps.
- ❖ Organize in-depth focus groups that allow the client organization to do message tests and social media content tests to determine which of the recommended

messages or social media campaigns have the most impact among various demographics.

- ❖ Initiate a more quantitative study that examines the effect of social media messaging or voting posts on the voting behavior of low-propensity Asian American youth voters. This qualitative study provides promising insights, but more research needs to be conducted with this population of young Asian Americans at the center. There are also opportunities to explore important topics that were outside the scope of this project: social media misinformation and disinformation among Asian American youth, political outreach or communication across generations, growing youth activism and online outreach as a result of anti-Asian hate incidents, etc.
  - ❖ Conduct in-depth studies on modes of political engagement among Asian American youth on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, given their increasing significance to younger age cohorts.
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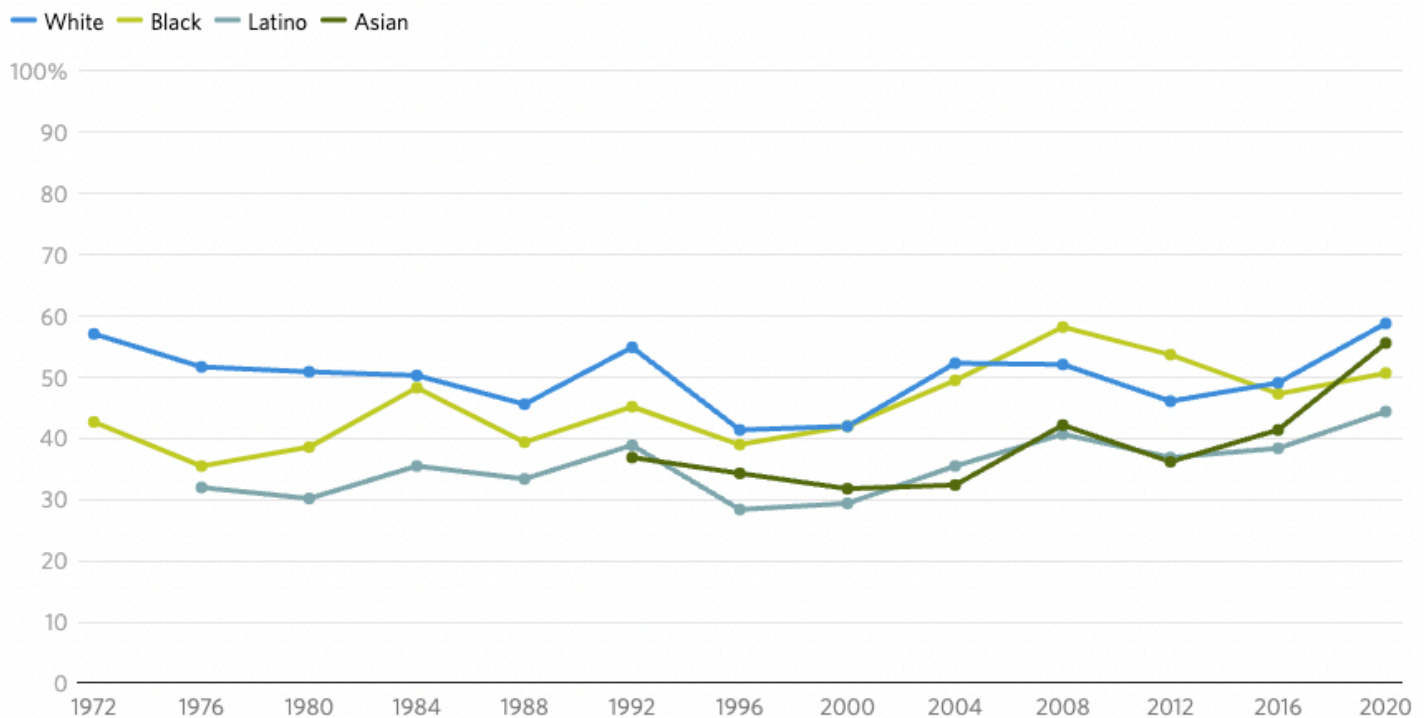


# APPENDIX

## [Appendix A]

Figure I:

### Historical Youth Voter Turnout by Race/Ethnicity in Presidential Elections



**Notes:** "Asian" includes Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders. Some survey data is limited in its ability to reliably represent all racial/ethnic groups. Some young people, namely Indigenous and multiracial youth, may not be represented above due to a lack of reliable data.

**CIRCLE** Tufts University Tisch College · CIRCLE

Source: CIRCLE analysis of Census Current Population Survey data, 1972-2020

Source: Peter de Guzman, *Historical Youth Voter Turnout by Race/Ethnicity in Presidential Elections*, Figure from CIRCLE analysis of Census Current Population Survey data, 1972-2020, July 8, 2021, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/driven-key-issues-asian-youth-increased-their-political-participation>.

## **[Appendix B]**

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