

UNLOCKING THE POWER OF IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

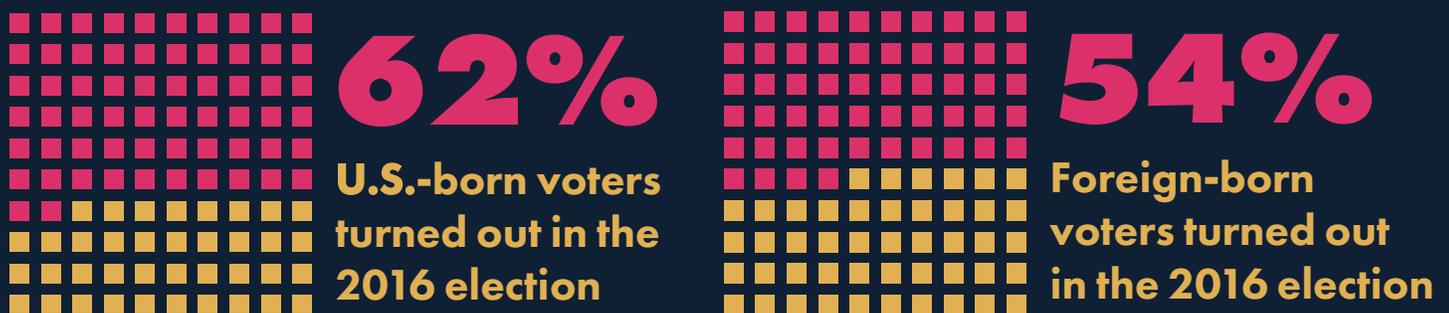
Thriving communities of first- and second- generation immigrants exist across the country, building robust networks of mutual support and honoring their shared cultures. Although some of these residents may be ineligible to vote, their American-born and/or naturalized family members do indeed have the right. Yet, voter participation gaps suggest voters from immigrant communities are turning out to vote at rates lower than their non-immigrant counterparts.

23.2 MILLION

Estimated Eligible Immigrant Voters as of 2020

According to data from the Pew Research Center, there are nearly **45 million foreign-born (or first-generation) immigrants in the United States**. Of this group, nearly half are naturalized citizens, and another 27% are lawful permanent residents who may pursue citizenship through naturalization after meeting certain requirements. Voter eligibility of immigrants in the United States has grown from 12% in 2000 to 23% in 2020. One in ten eligible voters today is an immigrant, and their U.S.-born children and families make these communities an even bigger segment of the electorate. As these communities grow, so should their representation, but many barriers prevent these voters from participating fully in our democracy.

U.S.-born voters have a higher turnout rate than foreign-born voters



**data based on 2016 presidential election (source: Pew Research Center)*

Nonprofits have an important opportunity to improve voter turnout among immigrant communities they may serve. Relying on trust, respect, and shared languages and beliefs, staff at organizations can change attitudes about voting and help these communities see the importance and benefits of voting. We asked several organizations that serve immigrant communities about the voting barriers those they serve face and how their organization has overcome them.

BARRIERS AND STRATEGIES

We spoke with four organizations that serve local immigrant populations, including Caribbean, Chaldean, and Chinese communities in Michigan, and Hispanic communities in Pennsylvania. The insights and suggestions in this report may not apply to every community, nor will they address the differences that often exist between first- and second- generation immigrants. However, for organizations looking to engage voters from immigrant communities, these barriers and strategies serve as a starting point.

Lack of Visibility

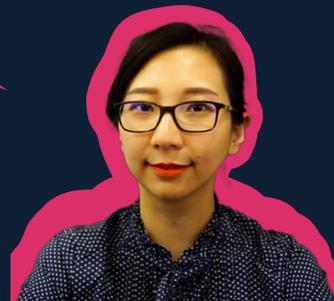
Many immigrants rarely see elected officials or people in positions of power who share their countries of origin, languages, or cultural traditions. They may not see their networks as a source of political power, and candidates and policymakers may overlook immigrant communities and the issues that matter most to them.

Emphasize community power instead of messages about individual rights or duties.

Integrate voting into cultural events to strengthen pride and sense of unity in their identity. Be visible yourself as a role model of individual empowerment and cultural pride and representation.

"If we don't register to vote, who is going to represent the Asian Americans' best interest? We need to get our voices out and we need to let people hear us."

Peggy Du
Association of Chinese Americans



If you're not a member of the community but still want to engage these communities, you can start by attending events and building relationships.

"Do your research, build trust, build understanding, build empathy to let folks know that, 'Yes, I cannot walk in your shoes, but if I take mine off and put your shoes on, I can feel what you feel.'"

Sophia Chue
Caribbean Community Service Center



Language Barriers

As of 2018, just over half of immigrants aged 5 or older were proficient English speakers. For non-English speakers, especially senior citizens, in-language assistance is the only way to ensure the voter registration process is completed. Voters who prefer to read or communicate in languages other than English benefit from translated resources and information. Providing in-language or bilingual assistance to voters is especially helpful for building confidence in navigating the unfamiliar voting process.

Ensure that materials are translated accurately, reflect the true meaning you're attempting to convey, and will resonate with speakers of that language. Whenever possible, have translated text reviewed by a native speaker who understands the context of the message. Consider using simple, universally understood graphics to emphasize your meaning.

"Language barriers are always a factor in services. At HDC we offered forms in Spanish when available since that is the second most common language in our apartment communities."

Jennifer Santiago, HDC MidAtlantic

Take into account the channel or platform you will use to transmit the message. Facebook or email may be your primary modes of communication, but if the people you're trying to reach are on WhatsApp and WeChat, then you should use those channels.

Unfamiliarity with or Distrust in the Process

For immigrants and families whose country of origin does not have a cultural history of voting and democracy, the voting process can seem complicated and meaningless. These voters may have concerns about corruption or extremism. They may also be skeptical of candidates or campaigns that drop in to win over their vote, but do not listen to their concerns or work to improve conditions for their community.

Provide clear and unbiased information for voters without emphasizing a particular candidate or issue. Invite elected officials or candidates to talk about what they are doing and how they would support your community so people can see how voting would improve their own lives.

"They are not familiar with this process and even think their vote doesn't count. It's not powerful, no impact—but that's not true. So our staff very patiently explains to them why it is important and what it means."

Peggy Du, Association of Chinese Americans

Trust and patience are the starting point for conversations about the importance of voting and the steps to cast a ballot. Be prepared to walk voters through each step of the process, from voter registration to casting a ballot. For some potential voters you will encounter, becoming a citizen is the first step they need to take on that journey.

“We offer instruction and preparation for the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) naturalization interview through a 10-week U.S. Naturalization Course. Once an individual obtains U.S. Citizenship, we will assist them through the voter registration process.”

Stacy Bahri
Chaldean Community Foundation



Ineligibility to Vote

It is impossible to tell if an adult is eligible to vote just by looking at them, so **don't hesitate to offer voter registration and education opportunities to everyone who walks through your doors.**

“The conversation will start like, ‘do you know if you are an eligible voter or have registered for voting yet?’ We’ll still give them the registration form to show their friends who are trying to become voters; they can come to our center, we can help them with the in-language service, and we can help them with the whole process and explain if they have any questions. The conversation doesn’t end when we know someone is not eligible.”

Peggy Du, Association of Chinese Americans

Still engage with people who may not be eligible to vote, including non-citizens and their children. Even if individuals cannot vote themselves, they can still be involved in the civic process by supporting and encouraging others to vote.

“Citizenship and voting ties back into the children that we’re raising, right? So even if you are talking to folks that can never become citizens, they can still engage and encourage others to become citizens to vote.”

Sophia Chue, Caribbean Community Service Center



MEET: CHALDEAN COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

The Chaldean Community Foundation (CCF) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization located in Southeast Michigan that serves new American families including refugees and immigrants that live in Michigan. In 2022, the CCF served nearly 40,000 individuals from 48 different countries of origin. The programs at the Chaldean Community Foundation provide social, educational, and family development opportunities to the many individuals seeking service. Case Work, Advocacy, Career Services, Workforce Development, and Client-Centered Planning for long-term success and self-sufficiency are key to our work and that success. Chaldeans are Eastern-rite Catholic people indigenous to Iraq and their history spans over 5,500 years.

Stacy Bahri, Strategic Initiatives Manager, answered a few questions for us.

Q: Why is engaging Chaldean voters important? Do members of the community feel like they are represented in Michigan?

It is important to engage Chaldean voters to get out and vote on issues that matter to them and their family and participate in the decisions that shape the future of our community. Michigan is home to 160,000+ Chaldeans mainly residing in Macomb and Oakland Counties. We understand the importance of having representation and a voice in the community. Our hope is that in the future we will have more community members become politically involved and hold elected positions.

Q: What does voter engagement look like at Chaldean Community Foundation? Where have you found success?

We hold voting drives at our local parishes, including community events and forums at our facility in Sterling Heights. The CCF offers the service of registering individuals to vote in our office daily. Our most effective and meaningful activities have been celebrating those that have recently become U.S. citizens. The CCF hosts an annual Citizenship Celebration for our New Americans. We invite the City of Sterling Heights clerk's office and the mayor to attend. The tabulator, booth, and sample ballots that the clerk's office provides are always helpful in educating and familiarizing individuals with the voting experience so that they know what to expect when they go out to the polls.

Q: Is language access a barrier to voting?

Language access is a barrier to voting and it is important for those who do not speak English as their first language to have access to voting information in the language they understand. The community CCF serves is primarily made up of new Americans that came to the United States within the last decade. Many are learning how to speak English, develop resumes, prepare for job interviews, navigate school systems, and learn new skills. In fewer than its first five years of operation, CCF learned that often clients did not have equal accessibility to advocates compared to others in times of need due to language and literacy barriers.



MEET: ASSOCIATION OF CHINESE AMERICANS

The Association of Chinese Americans (ACA) has served the Metro Detroit community for more than 50 years. Through its three service centers and year-round programming focused on youth, seniors, and low-income individuals and families, ACA reaches over 5,000 people each year. Their mission is to promote and enhance community health, security, and cultural awareness while advancing the social, educational, political, and economic well-being of Asian-Pacific Americans in the United States.

We spoke with Peggy Du, Executive Director, and Emma Yin, Program Manager, about their voter outreach efforts.

Q: What does voter engagement look like at the Association of Chinese Americans?

Peggy: We are a grassroots organization, so here we provide a daily service and we help Asian American people to register to vote and explain that our voice being heard is very important. We were locally established in 1972. That means we've been serving the community for more than 50 years. It makes us a very trustworthy organization. So people think of this like their second home.

Emma: We have social workers for daily service and also we have some special events, like last year we had a Healthy Gardening Fair with 500 people, and we have a golf outing, a summer camp, school field trips, and the annual gala. During every special event, we will put our voter pledge card on the information display, and for the registration table we have an employee available to explain and talk to the client or participant.

Q: Tell us more about the role and importance of trust.

Emma: The social workers here are very experienced with talking to clients and helping seniors. They use their nice way of talking to explain voter registration in Chinese. They don't feel pushed. For me, if you are pushy, I will say no. But if you are very nice to me, maybe I can stay here to listen more. Maybe if I listen more I can say yes.

Q: How do you educate people about voting?

Peggy: It's not about being political, we don't guide them whom to vote for, but we want them to get engaged. We explain how it benefits them for the Asian community to be united. We give them an education opportunity because this doesn't happen in China or most of the Asian countries. So they are not familiar with this process. We want to let the younger generations and the people who just became eligible know this is different, this is your right.

Emma: Some of our clients are Chinese seniors; they don't understand English very well. So if we provide the Chinese language service to them to explain, to teach them, to guide them step-by-step, that's very helpful to them. We also use WeChat, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. So we will post every day and put everything about our information, activities, or events. We have more than 1,500 friends in WeChat.



MEET: CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY SERVICE CENTER

The Caribbean Community Service Center supports, empowers, and advocates for a beneficial, welcoming, and inclusive environment to Caribbean nationals as they adapt to life in the United States. By fostering strategic alliances with similar organizations, Caribbean Community Service Center works to provide programs to connect community members to services, professional development opportunities, sports, arts, cultural development, and community advocacy in hopes of helping to build individual social and economic resiliency. More than 19,000 Caribbean people currently live in Michigan, coming from 32 different countries with shared cultural traits.

We spoke with Sophia Chue, founder of Caribbean Community Service Center.

Q: How did you get started with voter engagement? What barriers are you trying to address?

I started pushing for voting in our community in 2014. We're using different strategies because we have to pivot as our community pivots, right? I make sure that I'm out there learning, bringing the information in. There is a lack of knowledge. Our community silos ourselves and we're not as engaged in finding out about elected officials because we don't think our voice matters. Until myself and a couple other community members started actually bringing elected officials or folks that were running into our space, nobody really paid attention to us.

Q: How else does that lack of visibility and information play out?

A lot of our people, although they've been here for a long time, are very skeptical about becoming citizens. Our elders, in their seventies or sixties, raising children or grandchildren, but they are not citizens. It's a fear factor for them. You need to break the myths about what citizenship is and what it isn't. We worked with the International Institute's citizenship program. I encourage people to get up, be a part of it, and remind them that once you become a citizen, you need to register to vote.

Q: How about people who may not ever be eligible to vote?

Let them know that even if you are not a citizen and you cannot become a citizen—because there are a lot of undocumented people here—they should still be a part of that conversation and hear it. Because they can encourage their friends to vote, they can encourage their children to vote, and they can encourage people at work or other places that 'although I can't vote, you can vote for me.'

Q: How are you able to break through and have your message heard?

I code switch a lot, but I ensure that the Caribbean side of me comes out. I use my accent, I use the flare that I have as a Caribbean woman. There are people that I don't even know are Caribbean, who see me in that space and they say, yes, she is there. I know I can do it. Yes, she is there. I know I'm represented.