

Citizenship and Civic Engagement Among New Americans: Arab, Asian, and Latino Americans During a Shifting Political Landscape

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This policy paper examines civic engagement among new Americans, focusing on factors that influence the sense of belonging and political participation, particularly among recently naturalized Asian Americans, Latinos, and Arab Americans. The study, conducted by the Center for Race, Immigration, Citizenship, and Equality (RICE) at University of California College of the Law, San Francisco (UC Law SF) in collaboration with the New Americans Campaign (NAC) at Immigrant Legal Resource Center, reveals three key findings:

- 1. “American-ness” Viewed as Identity and Belonging: For new Americans, identification with being “American” turns on their sense of belonging, not merely on formal citizenship. The sense of belonging is facilitated by perceiving America as a multicultural society that welcomes immigrant integration.*
- 2. Community Participation Impacts Subsequent Civic Engagement: Civic engagement for new Americans begins in local community groups, which are often ethnic-specific or religious. These bonds positively impact the development of a national identity and motivate naturalization.*
- 3. Civic Engagement Can be Informal or Institutional: New Americans participate in society in various ways. A majority engaged in non-institutional forms of participation and, contrary to conventional wisdom, even more people voted.*

Altogether, these key findings carry significant implications for researchers, policymakers, and community organizations. To promote civic engagement for new Americans, they suggest a need for programs that emphasize particularized cultural belonging, in addition to celebrating a unified national identity. These particularized programs must consider barriers to national citizenship and civic participation such as language, religion, racial identification, and pre-migration experiences with government. At bottom, more must be done to support naturalized citizens’ strong desire for belonging and civic involvement in America.

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I. PURPOSE OF STUDY

This Report is a collaboration between the Center for Race, Immigration, Citizenship, and Equality (RICE) at the University of California College of the Law, San Francisco (UC Law SF, formerly Hastings), and the New Americans Campaign (NAC) at the Immigrant Legal Resource Center. It seeks to better understand the individual factors, institutional considerations, and demographic characteristics impacting civic engagement among new Americans—specifically Latinos, Asian Americans, and Arab Americans.¹ We parse through new Americans’ understanding of what it means to be “American” and how their sense of belonging and identification is associated with subsequent activities. Of particular interest is their choice to pursue formal citizenship through naturalization and to subsequently engage in institutional politics such as voting. We also identify specific policy issues that matter to new Americans.

The findings from this study can be used to help immigrant-serving community organizations and policymakers by providing suggestions on how to support new American communities, strengthen voluntary associations, and catalyze their civic engagement. It will also augment research on racial minorities and their civic participation in America.

II. TERMS AND DEFINITIONS: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND NEW AMERICANS

Studies of new Americans and civic engagement often begin by considering how immigrants undergo a process of integration and naturalization in order to become new Americans.² In the formal sense, becoming a new American means acquiring the legal status of citizenship that entitles one to certain rights, including positive rights to voting, family sponsorship, territorial security, and participation in everyday life.³ These rights can also be expressed in negative liberties: freedom from discrimination, threats of immigration enforcement, and barriers to participation in everyday life.⁴

But the civic engagement of new Americans encompasses more than rights. It also entails a personal identification with an American social, economic, and political community. To analyze civic engagement of new Americans,

1. “New Americans” is used throughout this Paper to refer to naturalized United States citizens. Many terminologies can be used to refer to ethnic sub-groups in America. For this Paper, we use Latinx interchangeably with Latino and Hispanic to refer to new Americans from South American and Central American countries. Asian Americans is used to refer to new Americans from East Asian and South Asia countries. Arab American is used interchangeably with Muslim American and refers to Middle Eastern and North African countries.

2. See, e.g., IRENE BLOEMRAAD, *BECOMING A CITIZEN: INCORPORATING IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA* 6 (2006).

3. J.G.A. POCKOCK, *The Ideal of Citizenship Since Classical Times*, in *THE CITIZENSHIP DEBATES: A READER* 33 (Cershon Shafir ed., 1998); RICHARD BELLAMY, *CITIZENSHIP: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION* 1 (2008).

4. MING H. CHEN, *PURSUING CITIZENSHIP IN THE ENFORCEMENT ERA* 33 (2020); SOFYA APTEKAR, *THE ROAD TO CITIZENSHIP: WHAT NATURALIZATION MEANS FOR IMMIGRANTS AND THE UNITED STATES* 4 (2015).

sociologists focus on their sense of individual belonging in America,⁵ including national and local communities.⁶ Meanwhile, political scientists focus on membership in the political community. They measure policy activity in both institutional politics—voting, campaigning, or holding elected office—and in non-institutional forms of community engagement such as letter writing, attending community meetings, marching in protests, signing petitions, and joining voluntary organizations.⁷

Our study focuses on new Americans who migrated from Asian, Latinx, and Arab countries and then subsequently naturalized within the United States. We describe their civic engagement in terms of their personal identification as Americans, community ties, and political activities. A particularly salient feature of civic engagement is their membership in voluntary organizations, such as the NAC partner organizations from which we recruited interviewees for the study.⁸

III. METHODOLOGY

Our research design was developed in collaboration with NAC and RICE and approved by the UC Law SF Institutional Review Board. It consisted of in-depth interviews with new Americans about their identity, community ties, and civic engagement as naturalized citizens.

A. OUTREACH AND SAMPLING THROUGH PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

The research team developed a list of NAC partner organizations nationwide who were willing to serve as liaisons to potential interview subjects. These voluntary organizations assist immigrants with naturalization or work with recently naturalized citizens. Some NAC partners contacted prospective interview subjects before they were referred to the researchers. Others provided a list of prospective interviewees for the researchers to contact directly. The advantage of this outreach strategy was to broker trust with interview

5. BLOEMRAAD, *supra* note 2, at 15.

6. For research on Latino American and Asian American involvement in community organizations preceding political institutions, see, for example, Matt A. Barreto & José A. Muñoz, *Re-Examining the "Politics of In-Between": Political Participation Among Mexican Immigrants in the United States*, 25 HISP. J. BEHAV. SCI. 427, 430 (2003); MICHAEL JONES-CORREA, BETWEEN TWO NATIONS: THE POLITICAL PREDICAMENT OF LATINOS IN NEW YORK CITY 35 (1998); JANELLE S. WONG, DEMOCRACY'S PROMISE: IMMIGRANTS & AMERICAN CIVIC INSTITUTIONS 3 (2006); JANELLE S. WONG, S. KARTHICK RAMAKRISHNAN, TAEKU LEE & JANE JUNN, ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: EMERGING CONSTITUENTS AND THEIR POLITICAL IDENTITIES 31 (2011).

7. See generally TAEKU LEE, KARTHICK RAMAKRISHNAN & RICARDO RAMÍREZ, TRANSFORMING POLITICS, TRANSFORMING AMERICA: THE POLITICAL AND CIVIC INCORPORATION OF IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES 35 (2006); MATT A. BARRETO & GARY M. SEGURA, LATINO AMERICA: HOW AMERICA'S MOST DYNAMIC POPULATION IS POISED TO TRANSFORM THE POLITICS OF THE NATION 23 (2014); Youssef Chouhoud, Dana Karam & Matt Barreto, *American Muslim Political Participation: Between Diversity & Cohesion*, 12 POL. & RELIGION 736, 738 (2019).

8. See *infra* Part VII; see also SIDNEY VERBA, KAY LEHMAN SCHOLZMAN & HENRY E. BRADY, VOICE AND EQUALITY: CIVIC VOLUNTARISM IN AMERICAN POLITICS 271 (1995).

participants and improve response rates. While the resulting sample is not statistically representative, the sample is drawn is racially, ethnically, religiously, and geographically diverse and displays variation across variables of interest.

B. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH NEW AMERICANS

A team of researchers proficient in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Korean contacted eighty-two naturalized citizens and received twenty-one responses (25.6% response rate). Interviewees were limited to naturalized citizens who are: (1) over eighteen years old, (2) within ten years of having naturalized (2013 to 2024), and (3) proficient in English. Two interviewees preferred to be interviewed in their native language, despite their English proficiency. Interviewees were selected across different geographic locations in the United States and represented a diverse set of racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds.

Interview questions were developed in collaboration with NAC and RICE. These questions were informed by research on citizenship and civic engagement in new American communities, with an emphasis on Asian Americans, Latinos, and Arab Americans. The interviews consisted of both open-ended questions and closed-ended responses. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, following the conversational flow to address issues rather than adhering to exact wording or strict sequencing of questions. Researchers used the questions as prompts to elicit discussion relevant to: legal status at time of migration; personal identification and community ties; naturalization process; economic engagement; political engagement; civil rights enforcement; and information acquisition.⁹ Interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes and were conducted over telephone calls, Zoom, and the online messaging platform WhatsApp. In compliance with our IRB protocol, interviewees indicated informed consent for the interview, recording, and transcription. Interviewees were offered a twenty-dollar gift card for retail or restaurants in appreciation for their time.

9. See *infra* Part VIII for the full list of questions.

C. CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEW SAMPLE

Geography. Our interviewees were sampled from ten states across the United States. The data is grouped by the four census regions.¹⁰

Table 1: Interviewee's geographic location by region

Region	Number	Percent
West	6	28.6%
Midwest	4	19.0%
South	7	33.3%
Northeast	4	19.0%

Age and gender. Interviewees were asked about their age and gender. Age was estimated based on the year of birth interviewees provided. The minimum age of participation was eighteen years of age; there was no maximum age limit. The mean age of interviewees was thirty-eight. Gender was not a sampling criteria during recruitment, but disaggregation of the data show a 42.9% and 57.1% ratio of male to female participants.

Table 2: Age and gender of interviewees

Age	Both sexes		Male		Female	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
All ages	21	100.0%	9	42.9%	12	57.1%
Under 5 years	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%
5 to 9 years	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%
10 to 14 years	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%
15 to 19 years	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%
20 to 24 years	3	14.3%	0	0%	3	14.3%
25 to 29 years	1	4.8%	1	4.8%	0.0	0.0%
30 to 34 years	3	14.3%	2	9.5%	1	4.8%

10. *Geographic Levels*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU (Oct. 8, 2021), <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/economic-census/guidance-geographies/levels.html>.

35 to 39 years	4	19.0%	2	9.5%	2	9.5%
40 to 44 years	4	19.0%	2	9.5%	2	9.5%
45 to 49 years	4	19.0%	1	4.8%	3	14.3%
50 to 54 years	1	4.8%	1	4.8%	0.0	0.0%
55 to 59 years	1	4.8%	1	4.8%	0.0	0.0%
60 to 64 years	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%
65 to 69 years	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%
70 to 74 years	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%
75 to 79 years	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%
80 to 84 years	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%
85 years and over	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%	0.0	0.0%

Education. Interviewees were asked about their highest level of education, beginning with primary school and topping out at graduate school. Eighty-one percent of interviewees reported having higher education beyond high school.

Table 3: Highest level of education per interviewee

Highest Level of Education	Number	Percent
Elementary/Primary school	1	4.8%
Middle school/Secondary school	0	0.0%
High school	3	14.3%
Some college courses	6	28.6%
College degree	5	28.6%
Post-graduate studies	6	23.8%

Occupation. Interviewees were asked whether they worked outside the home. Eighty-one percent of interviewees were employed, while the rest were unemployed, seeking employment, retired or did not work outside the house.

Table 4: Employment status of interviewees

Currently Working?	Number	Percent
Yes	17	81.0%
No (caretaking or informal work inside the home)	0	0.0%
Unemployed and/or seeking employment	4	19.0%
Retired	0	0.0%
Declined to answer	0	0.0%

Language. Interviews were primarily conducted in English, but interviewees could indicate if they preferred to interview in another language. We conducted one interview in Spanish and one interview in Korean.

Table 5: Number of interviews conducted in English and other languages

Language of Interview	Number	Percent
English	19	90.4%
Spanish	1	4.8%
Korean	1	4.8%

Race/Ethnicity. Interviewees were asked to self-identify by race or ethnicity. Their descriptions were then grouped as Asian, Latinx / Latino / Hispanic, Middle Eastern / Arab, or Black / African / Caribbean. Less than five percent (4.8%) of interviewees identified as American without naming another race or ethnicity.

Table 6: Race/Ethnicity of interviewees

Race/Ethnicity	Number	Percent
Asian	7	33.3%
Latinx, Latino, Hispanic	6	28.6%
Middle Eastern, Arab	5	23.8%
Black, African, Caribbean	3	14.3%

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

Our interviews with new Americans focused on three themes: (1) cultural identity and sense of belonging as an American, (2) community ties in America, and (3) civic engagement and political participation in America. First, we found that new Americans view their identity in terms of both rights and belonging in a community. Second, we found that New Americans build ties and participate in racial, ethnic, and religious community organizations in addition to national organizations. Third, we found that new Americans demonstrate civic engagement through institutional and noninstitutional politics at the local, state, and national level. Across race and ethnicities, all interviewees believed civic engagement and voting were important; more new Americans voted than participated in non-institutional forms of politics, though there was variation.¹¹

A. “AMERICAN-NESS” VIEWED AS IDENTITY AND BELONGING

1. Connection to a Multiracial America

For purposes of our study, becoming a new American means acquiring the legal status of formal citizenship in the United States through the process of naturalization.¹² When asked if interviewees felt connected or disconnected to the United States after migrating, eighty-one percent of interviewees responded that they felt connected to the United States. Within this majority group, most cited the acquisition of rights as a reason for becoming a citizen. Nineteen percent of the interviewees in this group spoke of acquiring rights, opportunities, and freedoms in the United States citizen while also describing a lack of these same rights, opportunities, and freedoms in their home countries. One individual specified that they felt connected to the United States because of the respect that they received from others after acquiring United States citizenship.

For example, one person mentioned being able to freely travel to countries they would not have been able to visit without obtaining a United States passport. This newfound access made them proud to be United States citizens.

I feel good because ... you feel like you have a power when you travel outside [the United States], but especially in Middle Eastern countries ... You feel like you have a power, you are more respected ... They welcome you more ... with an American passport.¹³

11. See, e.g., Louis DeSipio, *Making Good Citizens or Good Citizens? Naturalization as a Predictor of Organizational Electoral Behavior Among Latino Immigrants*, 18 HISP. J. BEHAV. SCI. 194, 204 (1996) (finding naturalized Latino citizens participate in voting less than non-institutional behavior, except Cubans); cf. WONG ET AL., *supra* note 6 (explaining that naturalized Asian Americans with home country ties exhibit higher levels of protest activity than voting, though the gap between protest activity and voting narrows over time).

12. See POCOCK, *supra* note 3; BELLAMY, *supra* note 3.

13. Interview with Y.N. (July 1, 2024).

Nineteen percent of interviewees who felt connected to the United States indicated that they felt welcomed in America regardless of their racial and ethnic background. In the United States, these interviewees felt that they could be themselves without worrying about discrimination.

There is a lot of diversity out here that makes it easier for you to mingle. There is openness, you know, amongst the local communities. So, I would say, yeah, it was something that made me more comfortable, rather than being in a place where you find yourself as an outsider. So, when I came in, I had friends here. And I worked in an environment [that] was pretty diverse. So, things were pretty welcoming for me in that way. You know, I didn't have any of those negative ... experiences that would have made me uncomfortable in the new environment.¹⁴

Other interviewees specifically mentioned that the racially and culturally diverse population in the United States is what made them feel welcomed and respected.

Eighteen percent of interviewees mentioned that their feeling of connection to their community was due to their upbringing in schools and other institutions within the United States. These individuals also mentioned that they formed a lot of memories in the United States.

Sixty-two percent of the interviewees mentioned that they felt disconnected from the United States due to language barriers and cultural differences. In addition to posing practical barriers, language became a proxy for American intolerance of other cultures. One interviewee specified that he struggled not with the language barrier *per se*, but instead he had struggled because other Americans had negative responses to his foreign accent or perceived it as a lack of English language skills.¹⁵ Another interviewee echoed a similar sentiment:

I would catch a few words ... and look it up later ... but you would always get this feeling of being less ... [It is] discrimination like, "[s]he's an immigrant. She just came to the U.S."¹⁶

Ninety-five percent of those who felt disconnected from the United States mentioned that they developed a stronger sense of connection over time. This sense of emergent belonging enabled them to integrate into a local community or adapt to life in the broader United States. Only fifteen percent of the interviewees mentioned that they felt completely disconnected from the United States and did not feel more connected to either local or national community at any point after living in the United States.

14. Interview with J.K. (July 2, 2024).

15. Interview with M.M. (July 7, 2024).

16. Interview with K.V. (July 22, 2024).

2. Substantive Versus Formal Citizenship

Interviewees were asked whether they felt “American” and what parts of being an “American” were important to them. Fifty-seven percent stated that they did feel “American.” Twenty-four percent were unsure if they felt “American,” and nineteen percent did not feel “American.” Among those who said they feel “American,” several features were commonly identified as being important. Fifty-seven percent of the interviewees mentioned the formal rights and freedoms associated with naturalized citizenship. Some of these interviewees used broad terms such as “freedom” or “rights,” whereas others referred to specific rights such as the freedom of speech or religion. These interviewees mentioned that they felt like the United States was a safe space and that they had a voice in their community, where they did not previously. Forty-three percent of the interviewees mentioned that they gained access to expanded opportunities once they became a citizen, including economic opportunities. Nineteen percent of interviewees mentioned racial diversity, acceptance and feeling a sense of belonging in the United States.

Fourteen percent of interviewees who did not feel “American” characterized their citizenship status as merely the final step in their process of living permanently in the United States. They did not associate their identity or culture with being “American.” Nine percent of interviewees said their home country was a large part of their identity and culture. Another nine percent of interviewees said they felt discriminated against as minorities and that they lacked the opportunities of white citizens. One respondent explained:

I am still a minority in the U.S. I am a woman of color. I do not agree with politics. I feel disadvantaged as a minority. I have an accent when I speak English. I still feel that society is against me. There are many disadvantages for minorities, even though there’s opportunities...and some advantages. And even where I don’t feel connected, it’s where I am now ... so I’m American.¹⁷

Additionally, thirty-three percent of interviewees responded with “sort of” or “no” when asked if they felt “American.” There was a strong gender difference: eighty-six percent of those not feeling fully American were female. Based on the study, it is not clear why there was a gender difference, but one explanation could be that there is less integration for female new Americans who take up traditional roles within the household and have limited interaction outside the home with a broader American society.

Another noteworthy correlation is the extent to which education affected feeling American. All of the interviewees with at least a college education felt “American,” whereas thirty-three percent of the non-college-educated interviewees said they felt “sort of” American or did not feel American. Higher education seems to be a strong socializing institution in the United States.

17. Interview with D.P. (July 22, 2024).

Nearly half (48%) of the interviewees expressed ambivalence or conflicting emotions about their connection to America. For example, one interviewee said they felt disconnected and connected to the United States at the same time. The interviewee had many formative experiences in the United States, leading to a sense of connection. At the same time, they migrated to the United States as a child and felt somewhat disconnected from others who did not share this experience. As a result, they felt a partial connection with America but not a full connection.

In conclusion, interviewees' sense of belonging and "American" identity varies according to demographic characteristics. The interviewees who felt most connected to the United States and most positively about being American were male, educated, or from culturally diverse places in America.

B. COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IMPACTS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

1. Community Groups: Racial, Ethnic, and Religious

When asked whether they were part of any communities, interviewees associated most strongly with ethnic, gender, religious, or immigration-specific communities. For example, interviewees responded that they were part of the Haitian community, the Syrian student community, the LGBTQIA+ community, and the immigrant community, even after they naturalized. One interviewee mentioned attending the Greater Houston Burmese Christian Fellowship, where Burmese immigrants, regardless of religion, "... are always welcome to go and share food or worship."¹⁸ This suggests that new Americans participate in community groups associated with their distinctive identities, beliefs, and cultural practices. This pattern is especially prominent among Arab Americans who experienced discrimination for being, or perceived as being, Muslim.

Some interviewees described ties to schools, workplaces, and voluntary associations that are not ethnic-specific in the sense of the Chinatown Community Development Center or Proyecto Immigrante. Twenty-four percent of interviewees responded that they were active in communities that were not associated with a particular ethnicity or cultural trait; instead, they participated in organizations that are part of mainstream society such as school, churches, or recreational activities. Nine percent responded that they were active in workplace-related communities. Nearly half (48%) indicated they were not part of any communities.

These responses highlight that new Americans who develop ties with specific cultural groups in the United States eventually recognize that they are part of a broader community. The boundaries of this community expand during their lives in the United States. One interviewee shared how her sense of

18. Interview with G.H. (July 23, 2024).

community broadened from a culturally-specific group to a cross-cultural group during her time in the United States:

Relig[ion], for my family and I, ... that was our first community. We went to our neighborhood church. You know, we lived a few blocks away, and a lot of people who lived in our neighborhood also came from the same [home] state and city that I was born in. So there was always that sense of community. ... Then as I went through school ... I found [a] student led immigrant activist group ... [B]eing part of that group and being able to finally share my experience of being undocumented while trying to like navigate school and life ... was really important ... So it was another sense of community.¹⁹

Early involvement in communities bound by ethnic and cultural associations lays the foundation for connecting newcomers with cross-cultural communities. They do not permanently isolate newcomers from the rest of the country.

2. Formal Citizenship Requires Connection to a Political Community

Connection to national politics is what motivates many new Americans to apply for formal citizenship in the United States. The more specific reasons for naturalizing are divided into two categories: (1) instrumental reasons connected to formal rights and freedoms, and (2) symbolic or substantive reasons connected to identity and solidarity. Sixty-seven percent of interviewees had instrumental reasons for becoming a United States citizen, such as expressing political views or improving life for their community.

I wanted to vote and voice my opinion to better my community here.²⁰

If I want to be vocal about something, or if I want to share my perspective on something, I do not want my voice to send me back ... because I couldn't have a voice [in El Salvador].²¹

The share who acquired United States citizenship for instrumental reasons is highest for male interviewees: eighty-two percent. Seventy-eight percent of men specified that holding a valid passport that permitted ease of travel was an important benefit of citizenship. For example, an Afghan American said that his ability to travel for work was enhanced by having a United States passport:

My Afghan passport doesn't work in most countries, and it was hard to get a visa ... so I experienced a lot of difficulty: I was stopped a lot, was asked many questions. As soon as possible ... I wanted to apply for an American visa.²²

Some new Americans emphasized the ability to protect themselves from threats to their freedoms as their reason for naturalizing. Scholars call this

19. Interview with S.S. (June 27, 2024).

20. Interview with D.P. (June 22, 2024).

21. Interview with K.V. (June 22, 2024).

22. Interview with O.N. (July 17, 2024).

defensive citizenship.²³ Fifty-seven percent of interviewees felt like permanent residency or being a green card holder would not suffice in guaranteeing their stay in the United States. They became a citizen because it was the only way to feel secure.

I think green card status is not a stable [way] of being here in the United States. Lots of things can change that may make your status here a little bit more vulnerable. So I feel like if you're a citizen, you have more flexibility.²⁴

As an immigrant, you always live in fear ... Even if you have a green card, it's just like not enough. You never know what happens, who's in the office, and what those consequences could be.²⁵

This need for security in the United States can emerge from having an intersectional or marginalized identity elsewhere. For example, a Pakistani American said that he identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community.²⁶ Since he did not feel safe associating with the LGBTQIA+ community in his home country, he felt he would be safer associating with LGBTQIA+ in the United States.²⁷ Female interviewees acknowledged that United States citizenship offered more benefits for themselves and their families than their home countries. For example, one Latina interviewee shared that she could access better health care as a woman in the United States than in her home country. She explained:

After the birth of my son, and then my daughter ... I wanted them to have a better opportunity, and better education, than I had ... [M]y initial thing was to come up here and afford my kids a better opportunity. In fact, coming up here was a blessing to me because I found that I had breast cancer and was able to go through treatment here [instead of there].²⁸

While she did not contemplate health care when she migrated, she found that health care for her specific medical condition was a benefit of citizenship.

3. Barriers to Civic Integration

Even though many interviewees expressed positive sentiments toward America, some described language difficulties, cultural differences, and income inequality as barriers to civic integration. For example, one interviewee described how the inability to speak English made her feel isolated:

So, when I first enrolled [in] middle school, I felt disconnected because I didn't really have the language. I could understand English because we

23. CHEN, *supra* note 4, at 65. The concept is similar to Sofya Aptekar's defensive naturalization. See APTEKAR, *supra* note 4, at 140.

24. Interview with E.B. (July 11, 2024).

25. Interview with S.S. (June 27, 2024).

26. Interview with H.D. (Aug. 10, 2024).

27. Interview with H.D. (Aug. 10, 2024).

28. Interview with A.F. (July 16, 2024).

learned English in the Philippines, but I just couldn't speak it because I grew up in a province ... [that was] not really focused on English. So, I feel disconnected with my [American] classmates. But I was ... so glad that I later met my best friends in middle school, and we're still friends today.²⁹

Interviewees also described difficulties that stem from the high cost of education and their inability to secure good jobs. These barriers posed obstacles in America independent of their citizenship status.

My visa provided a lot of obstacles. I came to the country when I was eight, and went through elementary, middle, and high school. I had a dream to attend college. But when I tried to apply ... It was hard for me to attend because I could not [afford it]. Then I had issues with finding work ... [Eventually], I felt depressed and disconnected because I grew up in the U.S.; my childhood was here. And if I ever went back to Morocco, it would have been difficult because I was not up to date with the education system and ... language [there].³⁰

C. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT CAN BE INFORMAL, BUT MANY VOTE

Becoming a United States citizen creates opportunities for civic engagement.³¹ Americans participate in politics by voting for candidates and issues, whether in local or national elections.³² They may also engage in non-institutional forms of civic participation, such as signing a petition or attending a protest.³³ In our sample, interviewees engaged in a range of political activities.

1. Voting

Most of the interviewees said they are registered to vote in their home state (80.9%), while nineteen percent were unregistered or unsure of their registration status. Nearly all interviewees (95.2%) planned to vote in the 2024 general election.

Twenty-eight percent of all interviewees stated they had not voted before, and the 2024 election would be the first time they would vote. Some of the interviewees reported they asked their friends and neighbors about a candidate and important issues in their community. Others conducted their own research to learn about the electoral process and parties. Our research demonstrates that the complexity of the political process does not necessarily deter voting, but it does increase the effort and investment required.

29. Interview with A.B. (July 3, 2024).

30. Interview with F.H. (July 5, 2024).

31. *See generally* S. KARTHICK RAMAKRISHNAN, DEMOCRACY IN IMMIGRANT AMERICA: CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION (2006) (explaining new American political participation in the United States).

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.*

One interviewee seemed undeterred by his unfamiliarity with United States politics:

I have been interested in the parties because this politics is so very different from India ... This is my first year when I started, you know, getting deep into and understanding [politics].³⁴

Another interviewee seemed stymied by obstacles:

[I]t's so difficult to ... research candidates ... in language that is accessible and easy to understand. You know, okay, what amendments are on my ballot? Do I actually understand—if it's something like taxes—the tax implication? Like, oh my god, what does this mean? I think that's so intimidating for anyone.³⁵

A few interviewees noted that becoming politically engaged took more than acquiring language and civic education. Approximately a quarter (26.8%) of the interviewees came to the United States as refugees, fearing the government in their home country or leaving behind political conflict, including war. Accordingly, it took these interviewees many years to trust the government and become socialized enough to participate in a democratic political system. Nevertheless, a majority of refugees who come to the United States naturalize, and nearly eighty-five percent (83.3%) of the refugee interviewees planned to vote in the upcoming elections. This suggests the interviewed refugees' strong desire to embrace a new national identity, alongside the one they left behind. One interviewee said he values United States citizenship and specifically votes on behalf of those who cannot vote:

It's a right that we should exercise, everybody who can vote ... I see it as my responsibility because other people cannot vote. And I've been there. I've wanted nothing more than for the people that can vote to be a proxy for me.³⁶

Another refugee said, “[i]t is [my] responsibility to pick the candidate who can do better for [my] community and who can do better for the country as well.”³⁷

Interviewees said voting was important regardless of whether you were born in the United States or naturalized. Interviewees noted it does not matter where one is born because the right is the same to everyone else: if you are a citizen, you can vote. When asked about the difference between United States-born and foreign-born citizens, one interviewee said:

I think if you are American, you should be able to vote. So, I think both of them should be able to vote—not only the person that was born here, but also those who [naturalized]. Because some people were probably not born here,

34. Interview with M.M. (July 12, 2024).

35. Interview with A.F. (June 27, 2024).

36. Interview with S.S. (June 27, 2024).

37. Interview with H.A. (June 30, 2024).

but they spend their entire life here ... They're American. They should be allowed to have a say who governs.³⁸

One interviewee stated that foreign-born citizens have an especially important perspective because they can advocate for changes that benefit their community.³⁹ Another interviewee said that it is more important for United States-born citizens to vote than foreign-born citizens because the foreign-born citizen may not have learned about the United States government in school. This interviewee states that it takes more work to understand the political system, even if they learn about it during the naturalization process.⁴⁰

2. Informal Politics, in Addition to Voting

Interviewees were asked about the ways they engage in United States politics, other than voting. They were asked about multiple methods of civic engagement, and whether they participated in the United States, their home country, or both. While nearly all (95.2%) interviewees voted or planned to vote in the 2024 General Election, two thirds (66.7%) also participated in less formal ways such as by holding a leadership position in a community organization.

Table 7: Methods that interviewees participated in soft and non-institutionalized forms of political engagement in both the United States and interviewees' home country

Participation Methods	In U.S.	In Home Country
	Number	Number
Signed a petition	7	1
Attended a rally or demonstration	6	2
Joined a union	3	0
Held a leadership position in a community organization	8	3
Attended a meeting with elected officials	5	3
Ran for elected office	0	0
Contributed money to a political campaign	3	0

Interviewees were asked to compare their participation before and after they naturalized. The data shows that the interviewees engaged in more informal participation before naturalization than after naturalization. It is unclear whether

38. Interview with J.D. (July 8, 2024).

39. Interview with S.S. (June 27, 2024).

40. Interview with Y.N. (June 29, 2024).

their participation level changed or if the form of their participation changed. For example, their civic activity may have been channeled into formal politics after naturalization.

Table 8: Responses to whether the interviewee's participation in Table 7 was done before and/or after naturalization

Participation Methods	Before Naturalizing	After Naturalizing
	Number	Number
Signed a petition	7	2
Attended a rally or demonstration	6	2
Joined a union*	4	1
Held a leadership position in a community organization	7	4
Attended a meeting with elected officials	5	2
Ran for elected office	0	0
Contributed money to a political campaign	3	0

* Naturalization data tally does not match the data from Table 7

3. Policy Issues That Matter

Interviewees were asked about specific policy issues that are important to them. A third (33.3%) listed immigration as a topic of importance. Other issues cumulatively mattered more than immigration, such as safety, gun control, women's rights, taxes, the economy, housing, climate change, healthcare, racial inequality, ethics, and unemployment. There were notable differences in policy concerns among Arab American, Asian American, and Latinx communities.

V. DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS

Our qualitative study found that new Americans value their American identity, even as they hold on to their native cultures. Moreover, they are integrating, participating, and civically engaging in the United States. These findings confirm survey research findings of robust civic engagement among racial minorities within American politics. They challenge conventional perceptions of disinterest and disengagement from new Americans in mainstream society and politics. This Part elaborates on the key findings and explains how they contribute to other research.

A. “AMERICAN-NESS” VIEWED AS BELONGING IN MULTIRACIAL AMERICA

One of the goals of this Paper is to gauge whether naturalized citizens feel “American” once they acquire formal citizenship. Interviewees were asked a range of questions regarding their impressions of the United States: whether they felt “American,” their community ties, and their reasons for applying for naturalized citizenship. As described in Part IV, the data analysis section, interviewees understand that being American encompasses identity and belonging, not only rights. The study’s finding that fifty-seven percent of interviewees felt “American” resonates with survey data.

The percentage of interviewees who feel “American” varies significantly by ethnic subgroup and immigration generation, with more established communities reporting higher levels of belonging. Latinos rank the highest given their multi-generational residence in many parts of the United States. There is some evidence, however, that their sense of foreignness is heightened by non-Latino’s perceptions of their replenishment by subsequent waves of immigration.⁴¹ According to The Asian American Foundation, nearly eighty percent of Asian Americans reported they do not feel they belong in the United States.⁴² Though individual ethnic groups migrated to the United States in different years, the bulk of the East Asian population migrated after passage of the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act in 1965.⁴³ Furthermore, Arab American experiences demonstrate both internal cohesion and a sense of exclusion.⁴⁴ The racial diversity among Muslim Americans, who are closely identified with Arab countries, and the religious diversity among Arab Americans make it difficult to generalize across the group. However, the intense discrimination toward the group following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and consolidation of political opinions during the Iraq War points to greater internal cohesion, and also a more oppositional identity to Americans.⁴⁵

Another explanation for the variation in responses is that belonging depends on the institutional context, or the warmth of the welcome, experienced by new Americans in their region of the United States.⁴⁶ “Diversity” and

41. TOMAS R. JIMÉNEZ, REPLENISHED ETHNICITY: MEXICAN AMERICANS, IMMIGRATION, AND IDENTITY 4 (2009).

42. Press Release, Asian Am. Found., *Annual Survey Reveals 1 in 2 Asian Americans Feel Unsafe; Nearly 80% Do Not Fully Feel They Belong and Are Accepted in the U.S.* (May 2, 2023), <https://www.taaf.org/news/status-index-23-press-release>.

43. DAVID M. REIMERS, STILL THE GOLDEN DOOR: THE THIRD WORLD COMES TO AMERICA 92–122 (1992) (describing new Asian migration to the United States).

44. Youssef Chouhoud, Karam Dana & Matt Barreto, *American Muslim Political Participation: Between Diversity & Cohesion*, 12 POL. & REL. 736, 738 (2019).

45. See generally Ming H. Chen, *Alienated: A Reworking of the Racialization Thesis After September 11*, 18 AM. U. J. GENDER SOC. POL’Y & L. 411 (2009) (discussing the conditions which led to the configuration of Muslim Americans as an out group in U.S. society post 9/11); SAHAR AZIZ, *THE RACIAL MUSLIM: WHEN RACISM QUASHES RELIGIOUS FREEDOM* 107 (2021).

46. See generally ALEJANDRO PORTES & RUBÉN RUMBAUT, *IMMIGRANT AMERICA: A PORTRAIT* (3d ed. 2006).

“respect” were the most frequently mentioned positive attributes of “American-ness.” Interviewees said that a shared sense of culture is the most important aspect of feeling a sense of belonging, whether extended by mainstream America or co-ethnic communities in a geographic area. Speaking to a longstanding debate over cultural particularism or universalism as the key to immigrant integration, cultural particularity seems helpful to our recently naturalized citizens. While the meaning of “American” is contested, our data suggests a multicultural America that respects diversity and particularity broadens avenues for culturally specific groups to integrate into a shared national identity as American.

In contrast, interviewees who felt they did not belong perceived practical barriers, hostility, and discrimination. Some confronted language barriers as non-native English speakers. These barriers and the negative sentiments that accompany them—language difficulties, cultural differences, and perceived discrimination—are well-documented in other research. According to the Pew Research Center, thirty-six percent of Asian Americans and thirty-nine percent of Latinos report having experienced discrimination or unfair treatment because of their race or ethnicity between 2019 and 2021.⁴⁷ Anti-immigrant and especially anti-Asian sentiment worsened during the COVID-19 global pandemic, when hate crimes toward Asians spiked in 2022.⁴⁸ These experiences can significantly impact a sense of belonging and willingness to engage civically. These views have consequences for participation in American life and especially politics.

B. COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION POSITIVELY IMPACTS SUBSEQUENT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Most of our interviewees (81%) felt connected to the United States through organizations and community groups. Their commitments often involve community organizations that are ethnically defined. One might think that cultivating cultural particularism can lead to division. Instead, new Americans seem to be able to find a sense of belonging, feel “American,” and develop a sense of “American-ness” alongside their culturally-specific identities, despite their dual identities as Americans.

S. Karthick Ramakrishnan and Irene Bloemraad’s work on civic and political incorporation argues that ethnic-specific organizations serve as crucial

47. Ana Gonzalez-Barrera & Mark Hugo Lopez, *Before COVID-19, Many Latinos Worried About Their Place in America and Had Experienced Discrimination*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (July 22, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/07/22/before-covid-19-many-latinos-worried-about-their-place-in-america-and-had-experienced-discrimination>.

48. Neil G. Ruiz, Carlyne Im & Ziyao Tian, *Discrimination Experiences Shape Most Asian Americans’ Lives*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (Nov. 30, 2023), <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2023/11/30/discrimination-experiences-shape-most-asian-americans-lives>.

intermediaries for immigrant integration.⁴⁹ This aligns with other research, showing that civil society and non-governmental organizations focused on social and cultural integration build bridges to political integration. Michael Jones-Correa's research on Latino political incorporation demonstrates that immigrants often engage with their communities through ethnic organizations before participating in mainstream institutions.⁵⁰ Similarly, *Democracy's Promise: Immigrants and American Civic Institution* and *Asian American Political Participation* shows that Asian Americans' political participation is frequently channeled through community-based organizations and religious institutions that address specific ethnic needs while connecting members to broader civic institutions.⁵¹ This could be because the skills gained from organizational participation are transferrable, as is the sense of groupness that translates into belonging to a community larger than oneself.

Political integration can also be measured through the decision to acquire naturalized citizenship. When interviewees were asked about their reasons for becoming a United States citizen, their responses broke into instrumental and symbolic categories. The instrumental reasons subdivide into both positive reasons—travel, immigrant rights, economic opportunities, and voting—and negative reasons such as finding safety from anger and discrimination.

(1) Instrumental Reasons

- a. To travel freely
- b. To obtain citizenship rights
- c. To gain access to economic opportunities like financial aid or jobs
- d. To vote
- e. To find safety from danger or discrimination
- f. Green card is not sufficient to ensure security in United States

(2) Symbolic and Substantive Reasons

- a. To express their voice on issues or candidates that harm their community
- b. To gain respect
- c. To feel accepted

Our data demonstrated that gender shapes the motivation for becoming a citizen. Eighty-two percent of male interviewees cited an instrumental or practical reasons for applying for citizenship that could be associated with positive rights. In contrast, women uniformly cited security-related reasons to become a citizen. Only thirty-three percent of the male interviewees mentioned

49. S. KARTHICK RAMAKRISHNAN & IRENE BOLEMRAAD, CIVIC HOPES AND POLITICAL REALITIES: IMMIGRANTS, COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT 14 (2008).

50. JONES-CORREA, *supra* note 6, at 5; *see also* Barreto & Muñoz, *supra* note 6, at 427–47.

51. *See generally* WONG, DEMOCRACY'S PROMISE, *supra* note 6; WONG ET AL., *supra* note 6.

a symbolic reason to apply for citizenship, whereas seventy-five percent of the female interviewees mentioned a symbolic reason to apply for citizenship.⁵² Acknowledging the small sample size and the interaction between gender and other characteristics, male interviewees were drawn more to the material consequences of obtaining citizenship, such as individual rights and economic opportunity, whereas more women focused on belonging and safety for themselves and their families. For example, one female interviewee shared that her parents discouraged her from political engagement before naturalizing:

Because of how vocal I am, or how open I am, [my parents] have always had the fear ... that if you say something you're not supposed to say, you can get in trouble ... [M]y mom would always say, once you become a citizen, you do whatever you want. But right now, please don't ... We had [a] few times whe[n] I was organizing a protest at school ... she was always like, you know, don't do anything.⁵³

Given the importance of naturalization to political integration, community groups should take heed of motivations, perceived barriers, and race and gender-specific patterns of belonging.

C. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IS VARIED: IT CAN BE INFORMAL, BUT MANY VOTE

1. Voting Interest Very High for New Americans

Civic engagement entails identification with the nation as a political identity and activity. Civic engagement can take institutional forms like voting in elections, holding office, or campaigning.⁵⁴ It can also take place in non-institutional forms of community participation such as joining a community group, attending a rally, or participating in local affairs.⁵⁵ One of the biggest surprises in our research is the extent of interest in voting among new Americans. Our interview data suggests that naturalized citizens are *more* interested in electoral politics than anticipated. Nearly everyone (95.2%) voted or planned to vote in the 2024 General Election. Many interviewees said voting gives them a voice and allows them to participate in civic life. Many interviewees additionally expressed that they had already been paying taxes before naturalizing and wanted to be able to contribute positively to America.

52. These findings echo research showing gender-based differences in political participation. For example, Carol Hardy-Fanta finds that Latinas engage in community-based politics focused on family more than electoral politics. See Carol Hardy-Fanta, *Collectivity Versus Hierarchy*, in *LATINA POLITICS, LATINO POLITICS: GENDER, CULTURE, AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN BOSTON* 75, 75–98 (1993).

53. Interview with K.V. (July 22, 2024).

54. See generally ZOLTAN L. HAJNAL, VINCENT L. HUTCHINGS & TAEKU LEE, *RACE AND INEQUALITY IN AMERICAN POLITICS: AN IMPERFECT UNION* (2024) (discussing modes of political and civic engagement among U.S. citizens).

55. *Id.*

How do we understand the disparity? Census data shows that voter turnout rates were higher among United States-born citizens (71%) than naturalized citizens (64%) in the 2020 election, though this gap is narrowing as the naturalized share of the population grows.⁵⁶ Quantitative studies show there is variation among minority groups. Both Asian American and Latino voters have shown record increases in voter registration and turnout in recent cycles.⁵⁷ There may be selection bias skewing toward higher voting levels because we recruited participants through NAC partner organizations that are civically minded and promote voting as one of the benefits of naturalizing. There might also be a positive bias toward self-reporting voting. Nevertheless, this surprising finding is worth investigating further.

2. Informal Politics High for New Americans

Political sociologists who study the political activity of new Americans consider both institutional and non-institutional forms of civic engagement.⁵⁸ A majority (69%) of our interviewees reported that they participated in at least one form of political participation, apart from voting. This is consistent with numerous studies showing that Latino and Asian Americans participate in community groups or ethnic-specific advocacy,⁵⁹ or may not define themselves in partisan terms within mainstream politics.⁶⁰ Longitudinal studies and follow up interviews would help us untangle the relationship between citizenship, civic engagement, and voting.

3. Everyday Policy Issues Matter More Than Immigration

Interviewees listed multiple issues that were important to them in the 2024 election. The research team expected most of our interviewees would list immigration as an important voting issue in light of past studies and the strong emphasis on immigration among presidential candidates. However, only a third (33.3%) of our interviewees listed immigration as a topic of importance. Latinos ranked highest in saying immigration is important (85.7%). This may be because Latinos comprise the largest population of immigrants and many are, or

56. Abby Budiman, Luis Noe-Bustamante & Mark Hugo Lopez, *Naturalized Citizens Make Up Record One-in-Ten U.S. Eligible Voters in 2020*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (Feb. 26, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2020/02/26/naturalized-citizens-make-up-record-one-in-ten-u-s-eligible-voters-in-2020>.

57. See generally Ricardo Ramírez & Janelle Wong, *Nonpartisan Latino and Asian American Contractability and Voter Mobilization in TRANSFORMING POLITICS*, TRANSFORMING AMERICA: THE POLITICAL AND CIVIC INCORPORATION OF IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES, *supra* note 7, at 151, 156–158; BARRETTO & SEGURA, *supra* note 7.

58. See BLOEMRAAD, *supra* note 2.

59. The Immigrant Civic Engagement Survey by the Othering and Belonging Institute (2019) reported that immigrants participate in informal networks rather than formal organizations, particularly among recent arrivals.

60. See generally Zoltan Hajnal & Taeku Lee, *Out of Line: Immigration and Party Identification Among Latinos and Asian Americans*, in TRANSFORMING POLITICS, TRANSFORMING AMERICA: THE POLITICAL AND CIVIC INCORPORATION OF IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES, *supra* note 7, at 129–50.

have ties to, recent immigrants even after they naturalize.⁶¹ Still, surveys in 2020 found that Latino voters ranked jobs and health care above immigration in their policy priorities.⁶² Similarly, our interviews and general surveys found Asian Americans listed health care, the economy, and education as their top concerns.⁶³ Immigration continues to be an important issue in politics, but, based on our study, new Americans are not single-issue voters on immigration.

VI. FURTHER RESEARCH

Qualitative studies provide deep insights into the sentiments of underrepresented groups, but they entail trade-offs. A strength of this study is the shared cultural characteristics and language abilities of our research team that permitted in-language interviews when requested.⁶⁴ The interviewers came from Asian and Latino backgrounds, were immigrants or naturalized citizens, and spoke Chinese, Korean, and Spanish. These shared characteristics helped build rapport in interviewees. Language abilities also improved the quality of responses. Although ninety-five percent of the interviews were conducted in English, about a quarter (28.6%) of the interviews involved researchers rephrasing questions or providing translations into native language. Additionally, five percent of the interviews were conducted in the interviewee's native language to ease discomforts among non-native but bilingual speakers. A lack of language proficiency may have otherwise inhibited these interviewees' ability to feel comfortable or elaborate on responses to complex questions.

However, the small sample size posed limits for our findings. While we aimed for proportional representation across race, ethnicity, and geography, increasing the sample size would yield several benefits. First, more study participants permit observed trends that result from multiple causes and control for some characteristics, while disentangling intersecting factors. For example, the varying responses from female versus male interviewees may be impacted by other factors such as age, ethnicity, background, and education level, in addition to gender. Having more participants would permit stronger cross-group comparisons.⁶⁵ Second, varying the recruitment methods could counter sampling bias resulting from referrals by organizations that helped immigrants

61. Mohamad Moslimani & Jeffrey S. Passel, *What the Data Says about Unauthorized Immigrants in the U.S.*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (July 22, 2024), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/22/what-we-know-about-unauthorized-immigrants-living-in-the-us>.

62. *Latino Voter Engagement and Mobilization in Six States*, LATINO DECISIONS (July 10, 2020), https://latinodecisions.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/VPC_VL-Deck-July-2020-LONG.pdf.

63. 2020 *Asian American Voter Survey (AAVS)*, AAPI DATA (Sep. 1, 2020), <https://aapidata.com/surveys/2020-asian-american-voter-survey-aavs>.

64. See Taeku Lee & Efrén O. Pérez, *The Persistent Connection Between Language-of-Interview & Latino Political Opinion*, 36 POL. BEHAV. 401, 421 (2014).

65. See generally BLOEMRAAD, *supra* note 2 (emphasizing the importance of individual agency and institutional contexts shaping immigrants' civic engagement; for example, as different groups navigate distinct institutional landscapes and historical contexts).

obtain citizenship.⁶⁶ Individuals referred by such organizations presumably have good relations with the organizations, which may not be true of others who were not referred or chose not to participate in interviews. Additionally, positive experiences with those organizations may have inclined participants toward more positive feelings about belonging in America.

Further research could extend the time period of the study and contextualize findings with comparisons to prior shifts in civic engagement for new Americans.⁶⁷ This report covered the time period leading into the 2024 presidential election. Given policy developments such as the late introduction of Kamala Harris, the first Asian and Black female Democratic candidate for president, and the eventual election of incumbent Republican candidate Donald Trump, who campaigned on anti-immigrant and racial exclusion, political sentiments and involvement may have changed in new American communities. Follow-up interviews with original interviewees could capture changes in their political views after the 2024 presidential election. Additional outreach could broaden the sample of interviewee characteristics and facilitate more systematic comparison.

Future research could also delve deeper into two areas of inquiry: (1) perceptions and feelings about civil rights protection and legal mobilization and (2) sources of information about opportunities for civic engagement. The first area is particularly salient given that the immigration orders and raids of the current administration were met with massive protests in Los Angeles that spread to other major American cities.⁶⁸ As demonstrated in our interviews, some interviewees felt pressure not to participate in protests before naturalizing. Thus, research could explore how naturalized citizens' activism and rights mobilization may be chilled in response to immigration restrictions.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

This Paper finds that immigrants' sense of belonging in a multicultural America impacts their sense of a national identity. Culturally specific voluntary organizations—NAC partner organizations such as Asian Community Development Council, for instance—can foster immigrants' community ties and eventual integration into broader society. This integration leads to civic

66. Political scientists describe the concept of social capital and resource models to explain how community organizations incubate trust reciprocity, and civic skills that facilitate civic engagement and can translate into political engagement. *See generally* SIDNEY VERBA, KAY LEHMAN SCHLOZMAN & HENRY E. BRADY, *VOICE AND EQUALITY: CIVIC VOLUNTARISM IN AMERICAN POLITICS* 31 (1995).

67. Janelle S. Wong & Karthick Ramakrishnan, *Asian Americans & the Politics of the Twenty-First Century*, ANN. REV. POL. SCI. (Apr. 11, 2023), <https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annur-ev-polisci-070621-032538> (noting that political context significantly influences immigrants' willingness to engage civically, with restrictive immigration policies potentially suppressing participation).

68. Kerry Breen & Kaia Hubbard, *Why Are People Protesting in Los Angeles? Here Are Key Events Leading up to President Trump's Crackdown*, CBS NEWS (June 10, 2025), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/los-angeles-protests-key-events-trump-crackdown>.

engagement in a variety of forms. Contrary to conventional wisdom, a majority of interviewees engaged in non-institutional or informal civic participation, and an even higher percentage expressed interest in voting. Barriers to political participation, such as language and cultural differences, can be mitigated with help from voluntary organizations.

These findings have significant implications for policymakers and service providers.

1. *Cultural particularity.* Government and voluntary organizations need to offer targeted programs to foster civic engagement among new Americans that emphasize belonging in a multi-cultural society. Government should acknowledge and affirm cultural particularity that maintains a sense of belonging in a close cultural context and broad multicultural America. Barriers to citizenship and civic participation, such as language and cultural differences, can be bridged with help from voluntary organizations.
2. *Community organizations and local government.* New Americans benefit from affiliation with organizations that are not directly associated with institutional politics on a national scale. Community groups can cultivate individual beliefs, skills, and trust that translate into civic engagement. Local government can identify common ground, build social networks, and pool resources that can be leveraged into formal politics. Together, community organizations and local government can sustain civic engagement between election cycles.
3. *Policy priorities.* While immigration is an important issue, it is not the only issue that matters to new Americans. Asian Americans and Latinos care about issues that impact their everyday life, such as health care and the economy. New Americans are also not a monolithic group, and their views shift when immigration issues are more salient in an election.
4. *Trust in government.* State and local governments must engender trust with immigrant, new American, and ethnic communities. It is critical for government agencies to differentiate themselves from federal immigration enforcement so that immigrants and naturalized citizens feel they and their families will be safe utilizing public services.

In closing, new Americans are willing and eager to be civically engaged. The combined efforts of government agencies, voluntary organizations, and researchers can channel new Americans' strong desire for belonging and civic involvement into voting and sustain this desire between elections.

VIII. APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What city and state do you currently live in?
2. When (in what year) were you able to become a U.S. citizen?
3. What country were you born in?
4. What country did you come to the U.S. from?
5. Could you tell me what year you came to the United States?
6. Were you able to come to the U.S. with permission, like a visa or green card, or did you have to come into the U.S. without papers?
7. (If visa) What kind of visa did you have when you came?
8. (If visa) Did you have any other kinds of visas on your path to becoming a U.S. citizen?
9. (If visa) Was there ever a time when your visa expired, and you had to spend some time without permission to be in the U.S.?
10. (If no papers) Can you tell me a little about how you were able to get a visa and green card?
11. (If visa or if no papers) What other kinds of visas or status did you have before getting a green card?
12. (If visa or no papers) What year were you able to get your green card?
13. (If no papers) Can you tell me a little about how you were eventually able to get a visa and green card?
14. (If green card) Can you tell me how you were able to get your green card before getting here?
15. First, can you tell me a little bit about your feelings about the United States before you got here, or when you were first in the U.S.?
16. Sometimes people find that they feel more connected to the United States after spending time here, while other people feel discouraged or disconnected. Can you tell me a little about when you have felt connected or disconnected to the U.S.?
17. Tell me a little about any communities you are part of here in [place]. For example, are you involved in a school or religious community? Do you participate in sports clubs or other social groups?
18. In addition to [referring organization], what other organizations have been important to your experience here in the United States?
19. Do you know when you first became eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship?
20. Elaborate here on knowledge of eligibility
21. When did you first start thinking about applying for citizenship?
22. (If more than 10 years ago): What were some of the reasons you decided to wait to apply?
23. About how many family members did you have in the United States when you went through the naturalization process? We're mostly

interested in close family members like parents, children, husbands and wives, and siblings.

24. About how many of those folks in the U.S. were citizens when you went through your naturalization process?
25. I want to ask a few questions about your decision to become a U.S. citizen. Can you tell me the most important reasons that you made the decision to apply for citizenship?
26. Follow up: what about un-mentioned motivations, e.g., voting, freedom from deportation, family reunification, etc.
27. Who or what organizations were important in your application process?
28. Where else did you go for information about citizenship? For example, friends and family members, social media like Facebook, Instagram, group chats on WeChat or WhatsApp, websites, new organizations, etc.
29. What was the hardest step of becoming a citizen? How did you prepare for it or get through it?
30. Did you take any classes during the application process? For example, civics classes or English classes?
31. At this point in time, do you feel like an "American"?
32. If yes or sort of: what parts of American-ness are especially important to you?
33. If no or sort of: what parts of American-ness feel especially difficult for you?
34. What has been the biggest difference or change for you since becoming a U.S. citizen?
35. Are you registered to vote in [STATE]?
36. Do you plan to vote in the election this fall?
37. What are some of the issues or candidates that are (or might be) important to you for this year's elections?
38. If you have not voted: why not
39. Have you ever voted in an election?
40. In the past, what are some of the most significant issues, community challenges, or candidates that led you to vote?
41. If never voted: why not?
42. Some people think it is important for citizens born in the United States to vote, and other people think it's not important. What is your opinion?
43. Some people think it is important for citizens born OUTSIDE the United States to vote, and other people think it's not important. What is your opinion?
44. In your opinion, how important do you think it is for citizens who were born in the United States to vote?
45. In your opinion, how important do you think it is for people born outside of the united states and who have become citizens to vote in the United States?

46. There are lots of ways to participate in politics in the U.S., and voting is only one of them. Other ways include signing petitions, attending rallies, being a leader in a community organization, and speaking with elected officials. I'm going to ask you if you've ever done any of these things in the United States or in [COUNTRY OF ORIGIN]. (Sign a petition)
47. There are lots of ways to participate in politics in the U.S., and voting is only one of them. Other ways include signing petitions, attending rallies, being a leader in a community organization, and speaking with elected officials. I'm going to ask you if you've ever done any of these things in the United States or in [COUNTRY OF ORIGIN]. (Attend a rally or demonstration)
48. There are lots of ways to participate in politics in the U.S., and voting is only one of them. Other ways include signing petitions, attending rallies, being a leader in a community organization, and speaking with elected officials. I'm going to ask you if you've ever done any of these things in the United States or in [COUNTRY OF ORIGIN]. (Decide to join a union)
49. There are lots of ways to participate in politics in the U.S., and voting is only one of them. Other ways include signing petitions, attending rallies, being a leader in a community organization, and speaking with elected officials. I'm going to ask you if you've ever done any of these things in the United States or in [COUNTRY OF ORIGIN]. (Held a leadership position in a community organization (religious organization, sports club, PTA, etc))
50. There are lots of ways to participate in politics in the U.S., and voting is only one of them. Other ways include signing petitions, attending rallies, being a leader in a community organization, and speaking with elected officials. I'm going to ask you if you've ever done any of these things in the United States or in [COUNTRY OF ORIGIN]. (Attend a meeting with elected officials)
51. There are lots of ways to participate in politics in the U.S., and voting is only one of them. Other ways include signing petitions, attending rallies, being a leader in a community organization, and speaking with elected officials. I'm going to ask you if you've ever done any of these things in the United States or in [COUNTRY OF ORIGIN]. (Run for elected office)
52. There are lots of ways to participate in politics in the U.S., and voting is only one of them. Other ways include signing petitions, attending rallies, being a leader in a community organization, and speaking with elected officials. I'm going to ask you if you've ever done any of these things in the United States or in [COUNTRY OF ORIGIN]. (Contribute money to a political campaign)

53. If you remember, did you do these things in the United States before becoming a citizen, after becoming a citizen, or both before and after becoming a citizen? (Sign a petition)
54. If you remember, did you do these things in the United States before becoming a citizen, after becoming a citizen, or both before and after becoming a citizen? (Attend a rally or demonstration)
55. If you remember, did you do these things in the United States before becoming a citizen, after becoming a citizen, or both before and after becoming a citizen? (Decide to join a union)
56. If you remember, did you do these things in the United States before becoming a citizen, after becoming a citizen, or both before and after becoming a citizen? (Held a leadership position in a community organization (religious organization, sports club, PTA, etc))
57. If you remember, did you do these things in the United States before becoming a citizen, after becoming a citizen, or both before and after becoming a citizen? (Attend a meeting with elected officials)
58. If you remember, did you do these things in the United States before becoming a citizen, after becoming a citizen, or both before and after becoming a citizen? (Run for elected office)
59. If you remember, did you do these things in the United States before becoming a citizen, after becoming a citizen, or both before and after becoming a citizen? (Contribute money to a political campaign)
60. What do you think some of the most important rights that people in the United States have?
61. Was there ever a time when you felt like these rights or other civil rights were protected?
62. Was there ever a time when you felt like these rights or other civil rights were NOT protected?
63. Sometimes when someone's rights are not respected or protected, they consider filing a formal complaint. Other times, people decide not to take any formal action. Was there ever a time when you considered filing or actually filed a formal complaint about your workplace, your school, or the school your children attend(ed)?
64. If considered filing but ultimately didn't: What were some of the reasons that you decided not to file the complaint?
65. In your experience, what are the most trustworthy ways to learn about what is happening in [City] and [State]
66. In your experience, what are the most trustworthy ways to learn about what is happening nationally, in the U.S.?
67. In your experience, what are the most trustworthy ways to learn about what is happening in [home country].
68. Would you say that you feel more interested, equally interested, or less interested in politics in the U.S., since becoming a citizen?

69. Would you say that you feel more interested, equally interested, or less interested in politics in [HOME COUNTRY], since becoming a citizen?
70. What year were you born?
71. How would you describe your race and/or ethnicity?
72. What religion, if any, would you describe yourself as?
73. Could you share your gender identity with me? For example, do you identify as female or male, or transgender or binary?
74. How would you describe your marital status? For example, married, single, divorced...
75. Do you have children?
76. How many of your children are under 18 years old?
77. How many of your children were born in the U.S.? // are U.S. citizens?
78. What is the highest level of education you were able to finish?
79. Are you currently working?
80. What is your occupation?
81. To the best of your knowledge, would you say your yearly household income is...
 1. Under \$25k
 2. Between \$26 and \$35k
 3. Between \$36 and \$45k
 4. Between \$46 and \$55k
 5. Between \$56 and \$65k
 6. Between \$66 and \$75k
 7. Above \$76k
82. Do you have a U.S. passport?
83. Do you have a passport for your home country or another country?
84. Do you have any last thoughts on citizenship, rights, or participating in politics that I might not have thought to ask about?