



# SEATTLE VOTES



**2016 SURVEY RESULTS**

**ASIAN AMERICAN  
COMMUNITY**

## About Seattle Votes

In 2015, the Seattle Immigrant Voting Rights Task Force released a report with recommendations for city and regional governments. One of the recommendations was to collect better quality data about immigrant and refugee voters. In response, the City of Seattle Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs undertook a community-based approach to research.

The result was the Seattle Votes Survey. This paper and electronic formatted survey was a research tool to help the City understand barriers to civic engagement (e.g., naturalization, voter registration, and voting) for immigrant and refugee residents. It was originally offered in 10 languages: Amharic, Arabic, Traditional Chinese, English, Korean, Oromo, Somali, Spanish, Tigrinya, and Vietnamese. Later, paper surveys in Filipino/Tagalog, Indonesian, and Khmer/Cambodian were available thanks to community support. In 2016, the City worked with more than 100 partner organizations to gather responses from 5,566 immigrant and refugee residents on civic engagement, the first such dataset for any city in the U.S. and one of the largest in the country.

We have consolidated the results from respondents who identified themselves as being born in an Asian country. This report presents several highlights from the data, as well as recommendations to help increase civic engagement in this community.

You can see the original English-version of the Seattle Votes Survey at: [www.bit.ly/SV\\_English](http://www.bit.ly/SV_English).

You can see the translated versions of the Seattle Votes Survey at: [www.seattle.gov/SeattleVotes](http://www.seattle.gov/SeattleVotes).

## Asians in Seattle: A Focus on Vietnamese Refugees

Asian American as a term encompasses a wide variety of ethnicities from a massive continent. It generally includes the peoples of several different regions of Asia, primarily East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia (the Indian subcontinent). The population of East Asians and Filipinos in Seattle has a long history, beginning around the mid-1800s. Though each group has their own history, each has been heavily impacted by social prejudices and governmental discrimination, including exclusionary immigration laws and forced wartime incarceration. More recently, the South Asian community in the Seattle area has grown quickly, partly catalyzed by tech companies, including Microsoft and Amazon, which have recruited skilled workers to the region.

Amongst the Asian American diaspora, the Seattle Votes Survey results received the most responses from the Vietnamese community. Their history in Seattle is also a relatively more recent one. In 1954, Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary army defeated the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in Northwest Vietnam. Under a withdrawal agreement, Vietnam was separated into the communist North Vietnam and South Vietnam, which was backed by the U.S. Conflict continued until April 30, 1975, when the capital of the south, Saigon, was captured by forces loyal to North Vietnam. In the final days leading up to this event, virtually all American civilian and military personnel evacuated the city, along with tens of thousands of Vietnamese who had ties to the South Vietnam government and the American military. These first refugees, who were generally well-educated and urban, were transferred to camps in the Philippines and Guam before resettlement in the U.S. Over the course of the next decade, many more Vietnamese fled the country by small fishing boats. More than a quarter of a million of these "boat people" were brought to refugee camps in other Asian countries before arriving in the U.S. Many of these Vietnamese refugees eventually settled in the Seattle area. They have built bustling retail centers in Little Saigon, on the eastern edge of the Chinatown/International District neighborhood, as well as in the Rainier Valley. This large concentration has also triggered protections under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act, which requires King County to provide language assistance to Vietnamese American voters.

While Seattle is home to a large Vietnamese population, other Southeast Asian refugees have also settled in Seattle along similar migration patterns. Cambodia, which saw independence following the defeat of the French, was drawn into the Vietnam War in the early 1970s when the U.S. tried to bomb North Vietnamese and Vietcong supply routes deep into Cambodian territory. The fighting between government troops and the Hanoi-backed Khmer Rouge continued until the Communist takeover in 1975. In the ensuing four-year period, the Khmer Rouge separated families and tortured political prisoners. A million Cambodians were systematically executed, including thousands of educated people and Buddhist monks. A million more died of starvation or disease. Under the Vietnamese, who invaded the country in 1979, the mass executions were halted, but living conditions remained poor. Cambodians, similar to the Vietnamese, came to the U.S. in two waves. The first wave was in 1975, while the second and larger wave came in the early 1980s. Many in the second wave were farmers from small villages with little or no education or knowledge of Western culture. Between 1982 and 1988, about 3,000 Cambodians arrived in Washington state, increasing the total number of Cambodians to 10,000, the majority living in King and Pierce Counties.

As with Cambodia, Laos gained independence following the defeat of the French by the Vietnamese. During the 1960s, the U.S. fought a so-called "Secret War" in Laos to sever the North Vietnamese supply line known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. By 1970, two thirds of the country had been massively bombed, causing widespread environmental destruction and the flight of 600,000 refugees, 20% of the total population of Laos. Immigration of the indigenous lowland Lao closely followed that of the Cambodians, most of them arriving in the U.S. from 1979 to 1982. Laotians number about 7,000 in Washington State. The second wave of refugees from Laos occurred in the early 1980s. This migration of people consisted largely of nomadic hill tribes, particularly the Hmong, who were recruited and trained by the CIA to fight in the "Secret War."

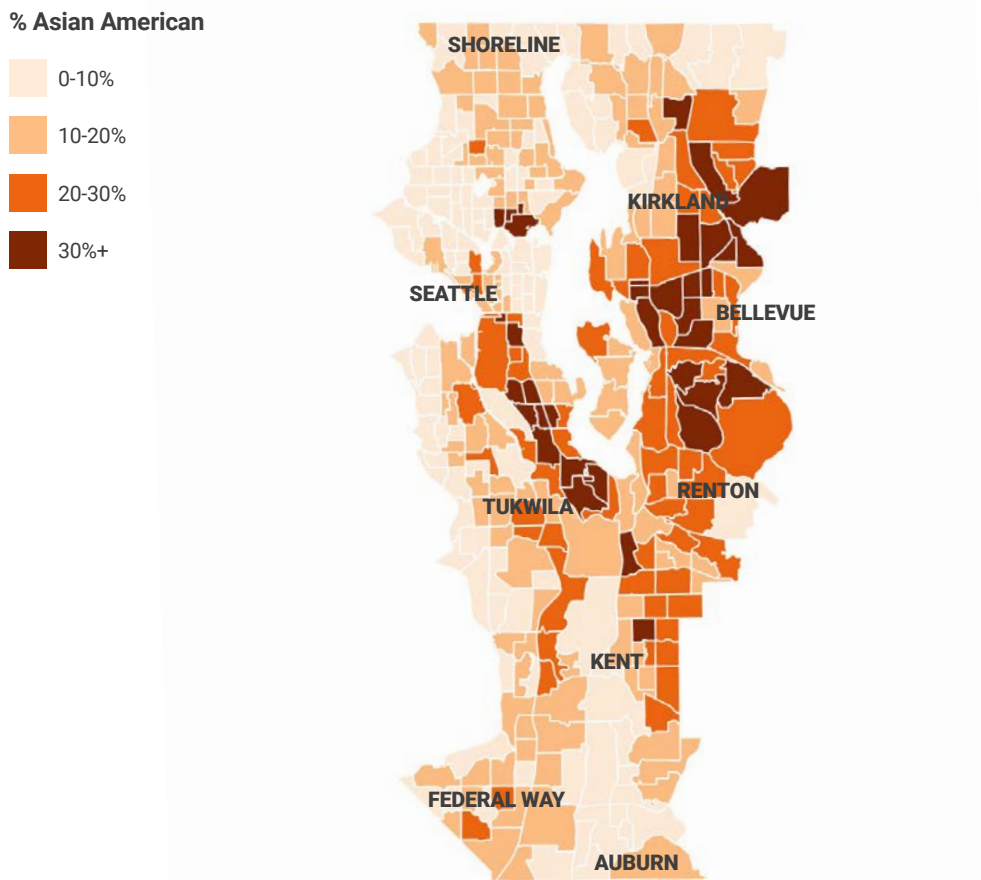
# At-a-Glance

## PLACE OF BIRTH FOR FOREIGN BORN POPULATIONS: 2012-2016

	SEATTLE	KING COUNTY	WASHINGTON
CHINA	19,807	56,214	76,925
VIETNAM	9,895	30,457	54,222
PHILIPPINES	9,619	30,666	64,046
INDIA	6,489	47,556	61,634
KOREA	4,573	20,546	45,427
JAPAN	3,327	9,290	17,585
LAOS	1,645	4,087	6,585
CAMBODIA	1,096	5,551	12,606

Source: US Census, 2012-2016 American Community Survey, Table B05006: Place of Birth for Foreign Born Population in the United States.

## ASIAN AMERICANS IN THE SEATTLE REGION BY CENSUS TRACTS (% OF TOTAL POPULATION)



Source: US Census, 2012-2016 American Community Survey, Table B05006: Place of Birth for Foreign Born Population in the United States.

## Interview with Kim Lundgren

Advocate, Vietnamese Senior Association of Seattle



**What is your migration story?** I came to America [from Vietnam] right after the war ended. I was on the first flight to Guam, where I lived for three and a half years. I decided to stay longer to help other refugees and attended the University of Guam.

In 1978, I moved to Seattle. The reason I wanted to move here is that my younger brother had a friend who went to university here. I also lived in Saudi Arabia for about eight years. My husband worked for the U.S. government was assigned a job there, so I went along. After we came back, I had my own dry cleaning business. It was a big operation that I ran for maybe 10 years. It got too big, so I sold it. I then joined Harborview where I work as a certified interpreter.

**What does participating in our democracy mean to you?** I think with freedom, you can say whatever you want. Let your voice be heard. Back home before 1975, we didn't have freedom. It is good to be

a citizen because you have a right to vote. One vote can make a difference. That is one of the benefits of citizenship.

**What was it like the first time you voted?** I was very excited. I lived very close to the school where I voted. So, I got there early and waited for them to unlock the door.

**How are you involved in your community?** Currently, I run the Vietnamese Senior Association of Seattle. I always bring information to my community. Like the public health department, when they want to provide us information, I always welcome them. During election year, I encourage civic groups to come and register people to vote and educate us. In the past few elections, we have hosted speakers to come and talk to our seniors about their rights to vote, and how they can make a difference. I want them to exercise their rights. It is very important for our community.

# Seattle Votes Survey

## About the Respondents

Over 1,600 Asian Americans completed the Seattle Votes Survey. As the survey was not a random sample, respondents from Vietnam (32%) were slightly overrepresented, followed by China (25%) and the Philippines (20%). The following are additional characteristics of the respondents:

55%

of respondents are women

50%+

were in their 20s (15%), 30s (20%), or 40s (17%)

2/3

arrived in the U.S. in the 1990s (24%), 2000s (24%), or 2010s (27%)

Geographically, about 20% of respondents lived in these three most common ZIP codes:

98104

International District

98108

Southeast Seattle/Tukwila

98118

Southeast Seattle

31%

spoke English as a primary language, followed by Vietnamese (25%) and Chinese (18%)

58%

spoke English either "very well" or "well"

25%+

were referred by either the Filipino Community of Seattle (12%), City of Seattle/Seattle Public Library (9%), or social media (6%)

51%

drive their own car for transportation

57%

were in households earning less than \$65,000 annually

50%

either rented their homes or lived with relatives

52%

have at least a college degree

51%

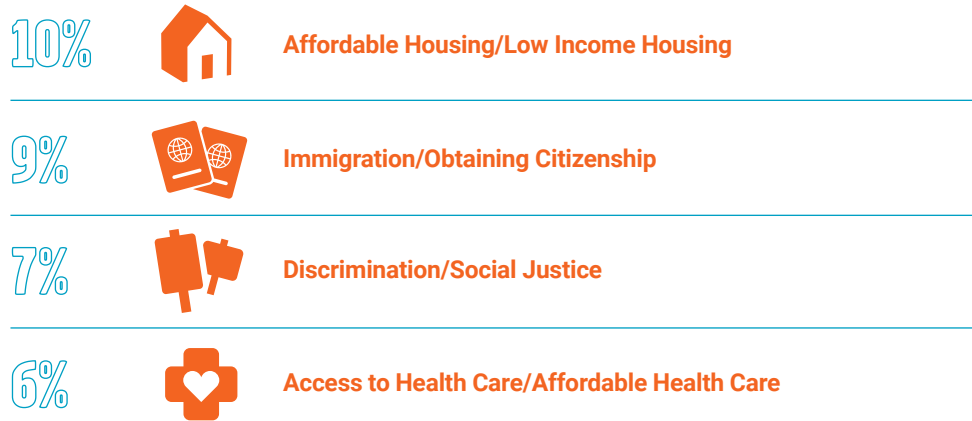
were registered to vote

# Findings

## 1. Affordable housing and immigration policy are top concerns.

When asked to prioritize up to three important policy issues, respondents chose affordable housing/low income housing most often (10%). Close behind were immigration (9%), discrimination (7%), and access to health care (6%). This set of preferences seems to indicate a diverse community with a wide range of concerns, though the high cost of housing is a pressing matter.

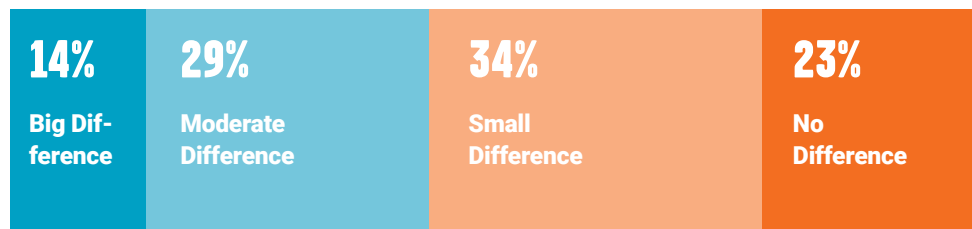
(Q7) What is the most important issue facing your immigrant and refugee community that you think our public officials should address?



## 2. Asian Americans are somewhat pessimistic about their ability to affect change.

A majority (57%) of those surveyed (1,546) thought that they could only make a small or no difference in improving their neighborhood. This may be tied to housing insecurity, given rising costs, which forces residents to move to less expensive neighborhoods.

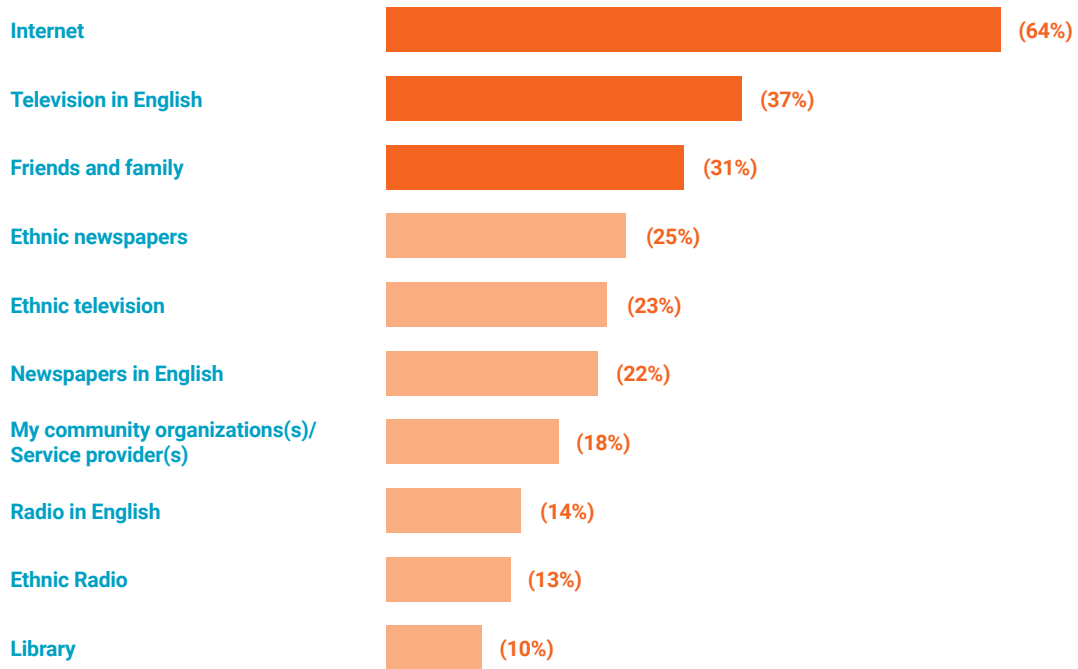
(Q8) Overall, how much of a difference do you think you can have in making your neighborhood a better place to live?



### 3. The internet is, by far, the top source of information on politics.

Almost two-thirds of respondents got their information about elections, issues, and candidates from the internet. “Television in English” (37%) was a distant second, followed by “Friends and family” (31%), “Ethnic newspapers” (25%), and “Ethnic television” (23%). These data suggest that Asian Americans rely heavily on their cell phones to access news stories, read email, and watch videos.

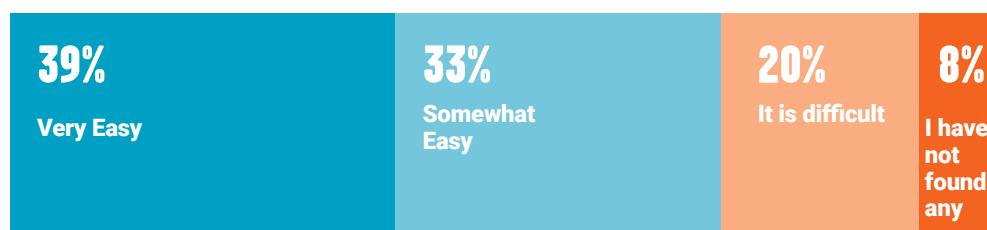
(Q10). If you wanted to find information about elections, issues, and candidates, which of the following would you most likely use?



### 4. Respondents found access to information about elections in their preferred language relatively easy.

Asian American respondents, by a wide margin, did not have significant difficulty in finding linguistically accessible information about elections, with 72% finding it either “very easy” or “somewhat easy”. This is likely, in part, a result of language access requirements under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act in King County that cover Chinese and Vietnamese residents.

(Q11) How easy is it to find information about elections and candidates in your preferred language?





## 5. Asian American respondents are more likely to speak out or donate to causes than others.

About a quarter of Asian Americans surveyed stated that they have signed onto a letter about a social or political issue to express themselves, followed by donated funds (18%) and used social media (16%). This is in contrast to both Latino and East African respondents, who were more likely to attend a child's school-related meeting as the primary outlet for civic engagement.

(Q12) Please tell us if you have done any of the following activities in the past 2 years. Choose all that apply.

I have signed a letter about a social or political issue	24%
I have given money to an organization or candidate	18%
I sent a message on Facebook or other social media about a social or political issue	16%
I have worked on a project or attended a meeting in my neighborhood	15%
I attended a PTA meeting, or other volunteer group at my child's school	14%
I contacted a public official through a letter, email, phone, or in-person	14%
I attended a government or school board meeting in my city	14%
I participated in one or more demonstrations, protests, marches, or rallies	13%
I volunteered for an election activity such as a phone bank or registering people to vote	6%

## 6. Lack of information is a significant barrier to voter registration.

Almost half of those eligible but not registered stated they did not know how to complete the process (48%). This points to a need for local government to do more than just provide translation for voting-related materials. Further, about a quarter of respondents were not interested (20%) or thought voting is a waste of time (4%), a moderately high level of apathy.

(Q14) if you are eligible (U.S. citizen over the age of 18), but not yet registered to vote, what is the main reason you have not registered to vote?

I don't know how/where to register/it's too complicated	48%
I am not interested in voting	20%
I am too busy	14%
Voter registration information is not available in my preferred language	10%
Voting is a waste of time/it doesn't make a difference	4%
I am worried that voting is not safe	4%

**7. Almost half stated they never vote in state and local elections.**

Only 44% stated that they vote in state and local elections either “often” or “sometimes”, while over 56% said “never” or “rarely”. If the question had only queried about local elections, it seems likely that responses for “never” would be even higher. This is a troubling trend, given that local government should be more accessible, particularly as it relates to affordable housing, the top policy concern for Asian American respondents.

(Q18) How often have you voted in state and local elections?

A. Often	28%
B. Sometimes	16%
C. Rarely	11%
D. Never	45%

**8. A majority stated they had not been contacted by a candidate, party, or other organization.**

Fifty-four percent of those surveyed do not recall being contacted and encouraged to vote. This is in contrast to the majority of Asian American respondents who stated they had been contacted. However, the vast majority of respondents (65%) did not answer this question.

(Q19) Have you ever been contacted and encouraged to vote by a candidate, political party, or other organization?



## Recommendations

### 1. Launch a Seattle-based full census count campaign.

The City of Seattle should play an aggressive role in promoting a full census count. Even before the 2016 elections, the U.S. Census Bureau was planning for major changes, largely due to significant budget cuts approved by Congress. This included a heavy emphasis on online data collection processes, a drastic cut in door-to-door enumerators, and new questions on race/ethnicity. Under the new administration, the Census seems to be in disarray, as the long-term director abruptly resigned in mid-2017. Recently, the Justice Department requested the Census Bureau to add a question on citizenship status. Experts believe that such a move, on top of the ongoing anti-immigrant rhetoric, may create a chilling effect on participation. Lower participation rates by immigrants and refugees in Seattle mean both fewer federal resources (an estimated \$12,000 per person per decade in Washington for the last Census), and less political representation as district boundaries will be drawn for city, state, and federal legislative districts in 2021.

### 2. Promote civic education, particularly about role of local government.

Increased civic engagement is predicated on a solid understanding of how government works. However, there are few resources in Seattle that provide such foundational knowledge. The City should invest in basic adult civics education that focuses on the role of local government within our system of federalism. This could include the basics of the City charter, who are the current city officials and how they are elected, and who to call regarding City services. The format should be available in physical and digital formats, ideally in short, engaging videos that are translated into multiple languages. Such a concerted effort could increase voter participation, as 56% of respondents stated they “never” or “rarely” vote in state/local elections.

### 3. Expand partnerships to promote civic engagement.

The role of government in promoting voter registration has increased over the past three decades. With the passage of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, government agencies are required to offer voter registration opportunities when individuals apply for or renew their driver’s licenses or apply for public assistance. More recently, the Seattle Foundation and King County Elections partnered to provide about \$700,000 in grants to community-based organizations to promote voter participation in underrepresented communities. Though this effort should be lauded, more support is needed to overcome linguistic barriers and a distrust of government. For its part, the City of Seattle should co-host ballot parties with immigrant and refugee serving organizations and proactively register people to vote who naturalized with support from city-funded programs.

Though the use of direct mail seems promising, the City could pilot other innovative approaches, such as creating a deputy registrar system to identify and train a cohort of Asian Americans. These volunteers, who are officially recognized by the City, would carry out voter registration drives, inform voters about upcoming elections, and even help with referrals to other City and school district services. This should be part of a long-term relationship building process, and not just a one-time contact. Finally, the City could organize an annual civic engagement summit, in part to communicate past accomplishments and highlight future needs.

#### **4. Research how Asian Americans use the internet to understand public affairs.**

Almost two-thirds of Asian American respondents stated that they were mostly likely to use the internet to find information about elections and candidates. This is almost double the second most common response (television in English) and quite different from Latino and African respondents, who relied on a wider mix of media. Does this mean that Asian Americans scour websites including those from candidate campaigns and newspapers? Or do they rely on social media to learn from their peers and watch streaming video content targeting their communities? For the City of Seattle to best engage the Asian American community and promote civic engagement, it needs to better understand how they use the internet. This could include a follow-up survey and focus groups, as well as demographic data collection from news websites, if such data exists.

#### **5. Research impact of electoral reforms that promote more engagement.**

Elections in the City of Seattle have recently undergone a significant transformation. Before the implementation of the hybrid at-large/district system, Seattle was the largest city with all at-large seats. Further, the City is now the first jurisdiction with Democracy Vouchers, a publicly financed campaign system that provides each registered voter with \$100 to contribute to municipal campaigns. To understand the impact of electoral reforms on immigrant and refugee communities, the City should commission research that includes both quantitative and qualitative analyses. In addition, the City of Seattle should also add other prospective reforms to such a research agenda. For instance, how would turnout change in immigrant and refugee communities if municipal elections were moved to even-numbered years? If there were ranked-choice voting with no municipal primaries? If there were multi-member districts instead of single-member districts? These are reforms that other municipalities have implemented, which show promise in increasing voter participation and are therefore worthy of a deeper dive.

