

# **Seattle Votes Report: Immigrant Civic Engagement in Seattle-King County**



**Seattle**  
Office of Immigrant and  
Refugee Affairs

**Latino**  **Decisions**

## 1. Summary of Findings

The United States is experiencing its "fourth wave" of mass immigration. Changes in immigration law created by the 1965 Immigration Act and changes to policies regarding refugees have opened the door to groups previously excluded by law. While there is considerable debate as to when the fourth wave began, we note significant increases in immigration during the 1980s. Between 1980 and 2015, over 31.8 million immigrants entered the country as lawful permanent residents. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the foreign-born population number is at 40 million persons, or 12.9% of the total U.S. population.

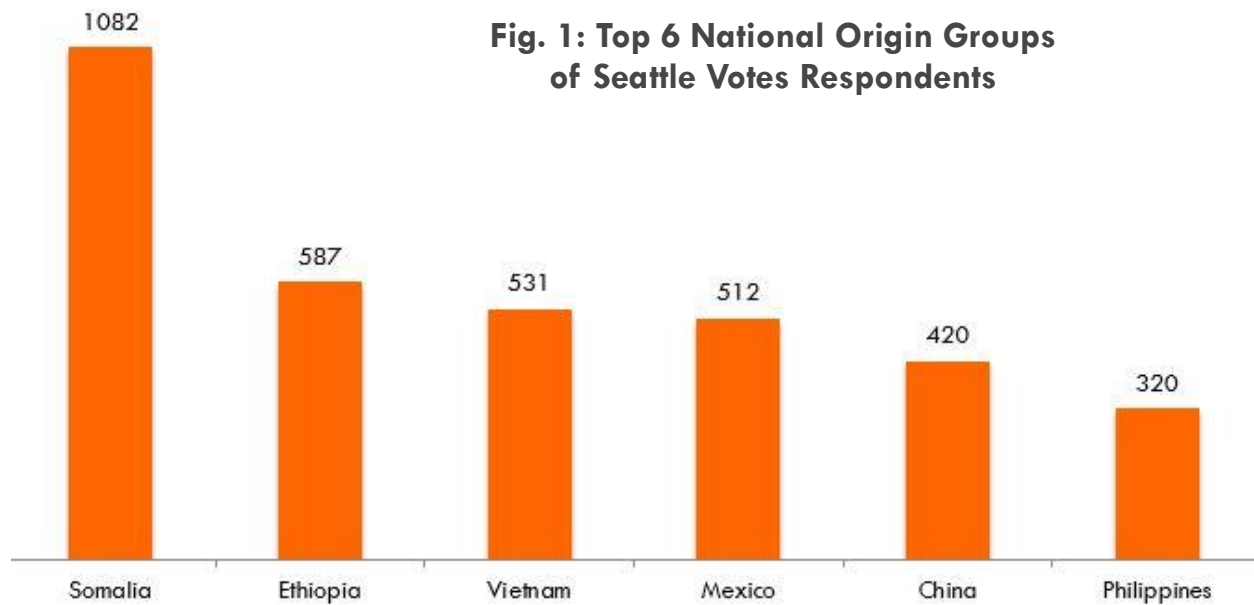
This fourth wave of mass immigration is distinct in that the largest sources of immigration are from Latin America and Asia. However, the fourth wave is also characterized by its diversity given that people are migrating from all parts of the globe. Finally, it is important to note that contemporary immigrants vary in their status from naturalized U.S. citizens to persons who are undocumented/unauthorized<sup>1</sup>.

During periods of increased immigration, the manner by which immigrants are integrated or incorporated into the nation becomes paramount. To address the policy needs of immigrants and to facilitate their civic incorporation, the City of Seattle Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs has commissioned a study in

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, we use the terms "undocumented" and "unauthorized" interchangeably to denote a foreign-born person who is residing in the United States without legal immigration status.

partnership with Latino Decisions to survey the city's foreign-born population. The City of Seattle began outreach in March and finished in mid-June 2016. The survey represents the views of 5,224 respondents. It includes large samples of immigrants from Somalia (1082), Ethiopia (587), Vietnam (531), Mexico (512), China (420), and the Philippines (320).



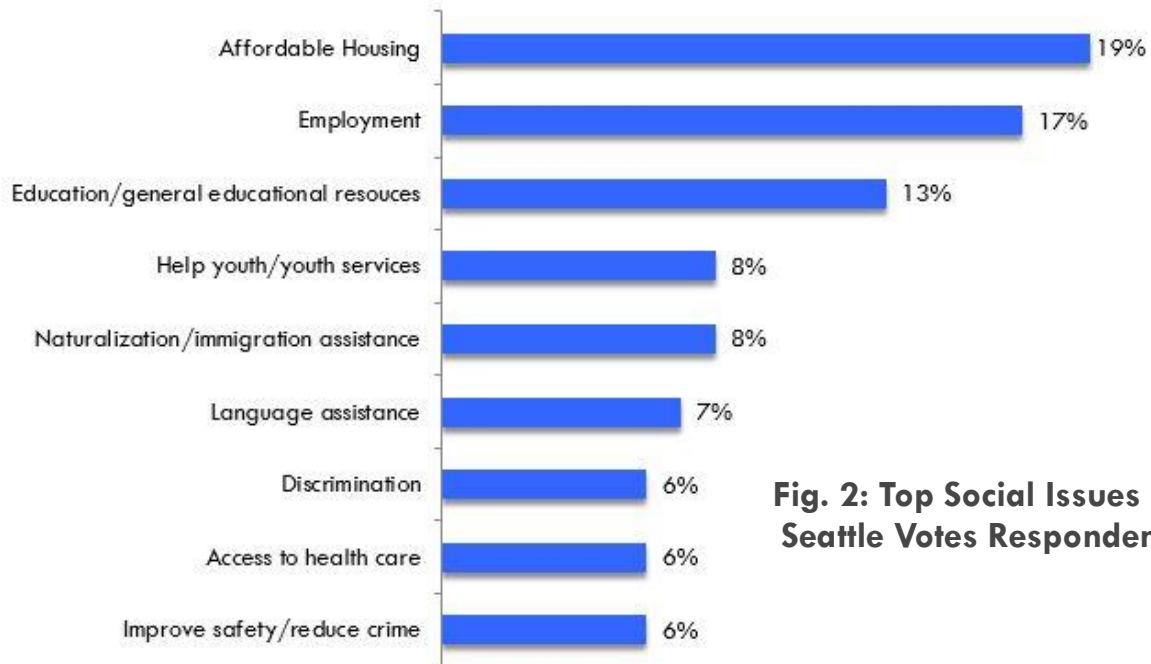
The large sample size allows for separate analysis of these national origin groups. Together these groups represent 66 percent of the survey respondents. The survey (see Appendix A) was administered online or through hard copies distributed by volunteers: 988 respondents or 18.9% completed the survey online, while the remaining 4,236 or 81.1% filled out a hard-copy version of the survey. The survey as administered in 13 different languages<sup>2</sup> This report provides a brief overview of some of the key findings.

## 2. Public Policy Needs

To address the policy needs of immigrants, respondents were asked: *What is the most important issue facing your immigrant and refugee community that you think our public officials should address?* **The top three issues listed were: access to affordable housing (19%); access to jobs (17%); and access to education/educational resources (13%).** Helping young people/providing youth services and assistance with naturalization and immigration services were tied at 8%. Language assistance was an issue for 7% of respondents. Finally, discrimination, access to health care, and crime prevention were tied at 6%.

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<sup>2</sup> The languages were: Amharic, Arabic, Chinese (Traditional), English, Indonesian, Khmer, Korean, Oromo, Somali, Spanish, Tagalog, Tigrinya, and Vietnamese.



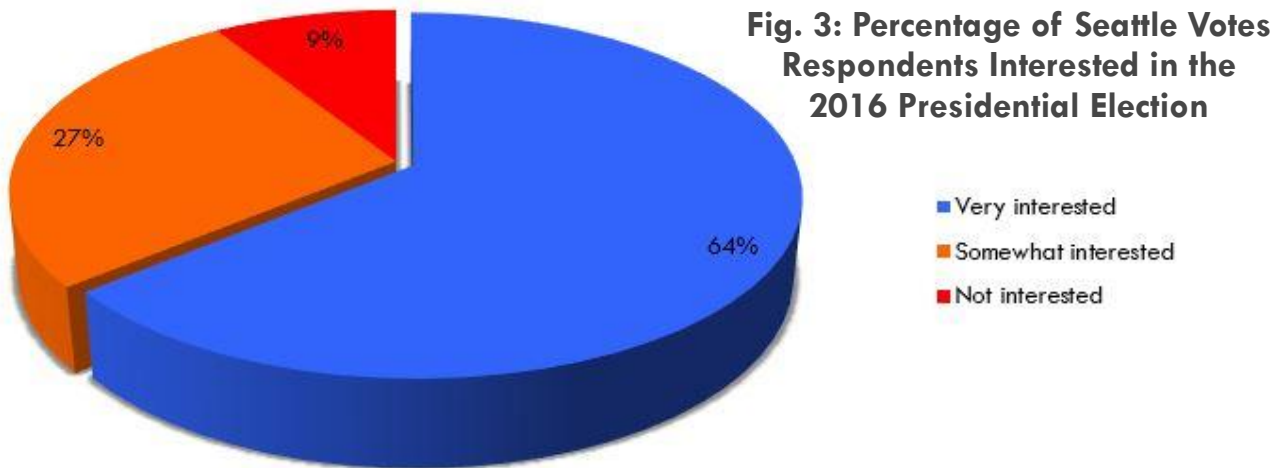
**Fig. 2: Top Social Issues for Seattle Votes Respondents**

The policy needs varied across the top six groups by national origin. For example, **Somalis ranked education (23%) as their top policy issue** while **affordable housing (23%) was the top issue for Ethiopians. Vietnamese respondents listed language help (21%) as their top need. Mexicans ranked difficulty in legal residence/obtaining citizenship (20%) as their priority issue. Improving safety and reducing crime was ranked highest (15%) by Chinese immigrants** while the **number one issue for Filipinos was access to more jobs (19%)**. This variety in priority issues indicates that although the survey can demonstrate the overall policy needs of immigrants and refugees in Seattle, those policy issues are likely to vary across different immigrant and refugee groups.

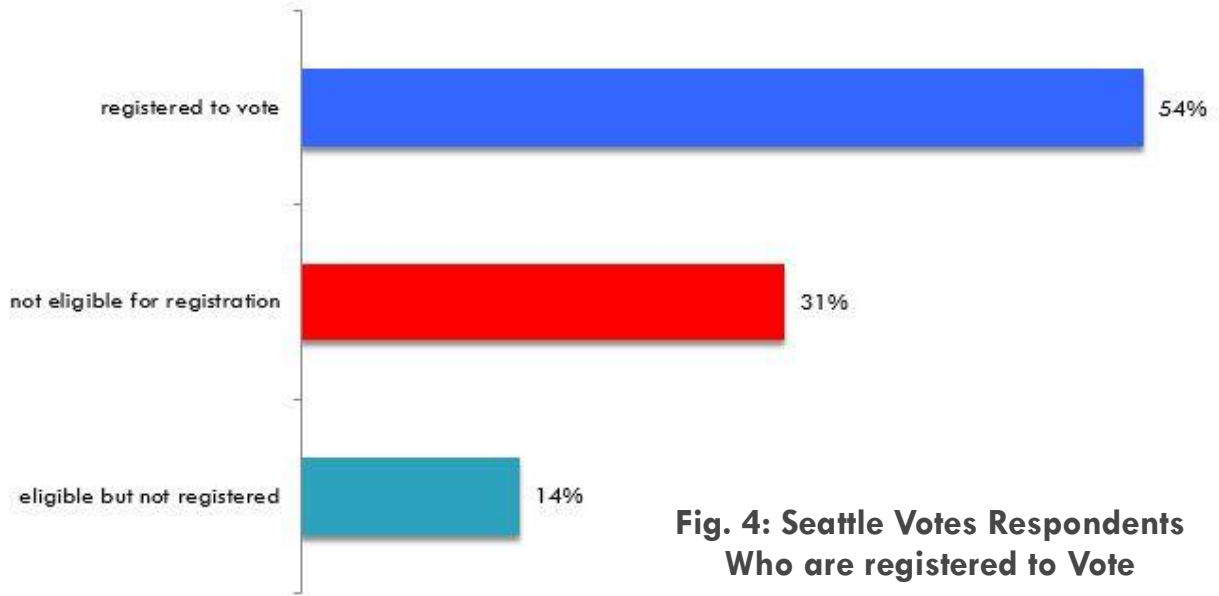
### 3. Civic Engagement

The survey reveals an immigrant and refugee community that is politically interested and engaged, though the levels of interest and engagement vary across different national origin groups. A critical factor that explains differences in levels of civic engagement is relative English language proficiency. However, immigrants who have access to political information from ethnic media appear to be more civically engaged than immigrants who lack this access. We will consider the role of language and ethnic media in the next sections of this report.

**Respondents displayed a high level of interest in the 2016 Presidential Election**, with 64% saying they were very interested in the election, 27% said they were somewhat interested, and only 9% said they were not interested.

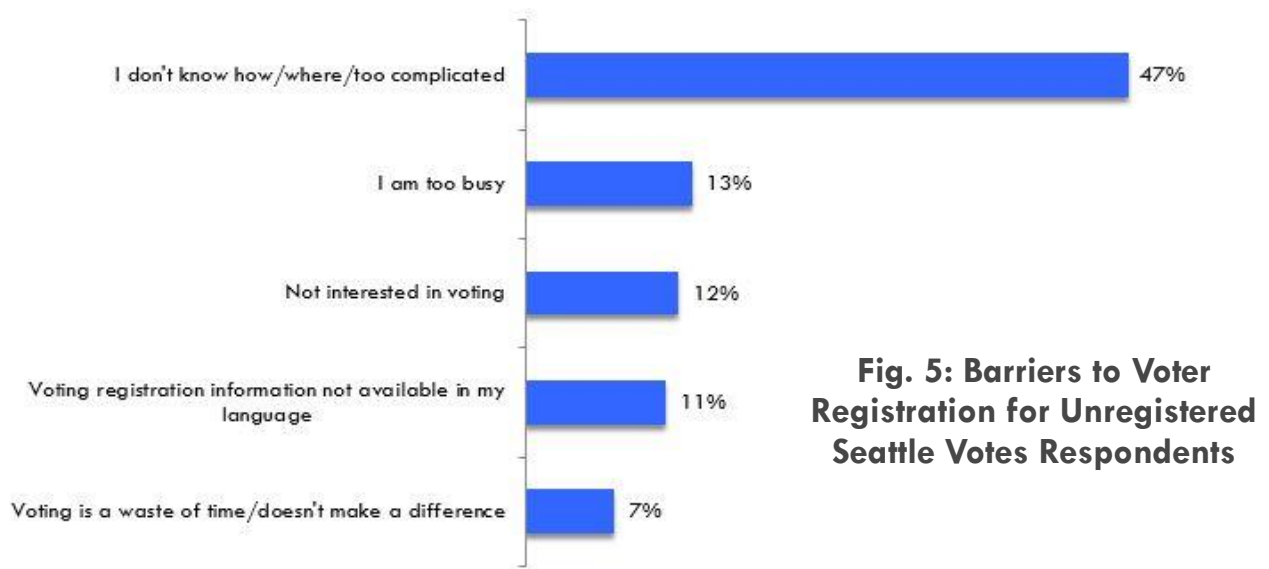


Voter registration is a critical prerequisite to voting, and **only 54 percent of respondents said they were registered to vote.**



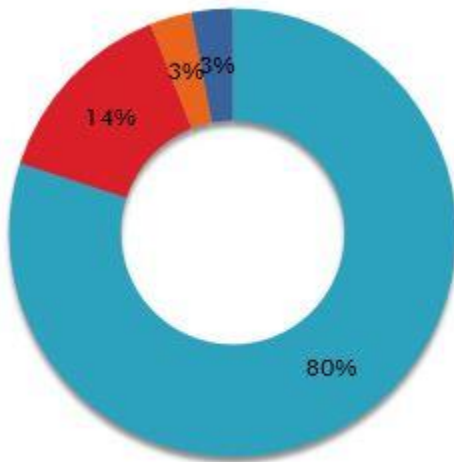
**Fig. 4: Seattle Votes Respondents Who are registered to Vote**

For those who were eligible, when asked why they were not registered, nearly half said they don't know how, where, or that it is too complicated. Voter registration presents an important challenge and opportunity for broader political engagement.



**Fig. 5: Barriers to Voter Registration for Unregistered Seattle Votes Respondents**

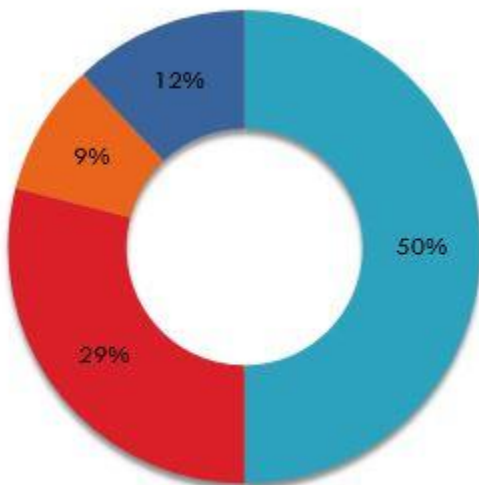
Among respondents that are currently registered to vote, **80% say they were very likely to vote in the 2016 election. However, only 54% of the entire sample reported being registered to vote at the time of the survey.**



**Fig. 6: How Likely Seattle Vote Respondents Will Vote in the 2016 Presidential Election**

- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Not likely at all
- I don't know

Among registered voters, half say they vote often in a state and local election.



**Fig. 7: How Often Seattle Vote Respondents Vote in Elections**

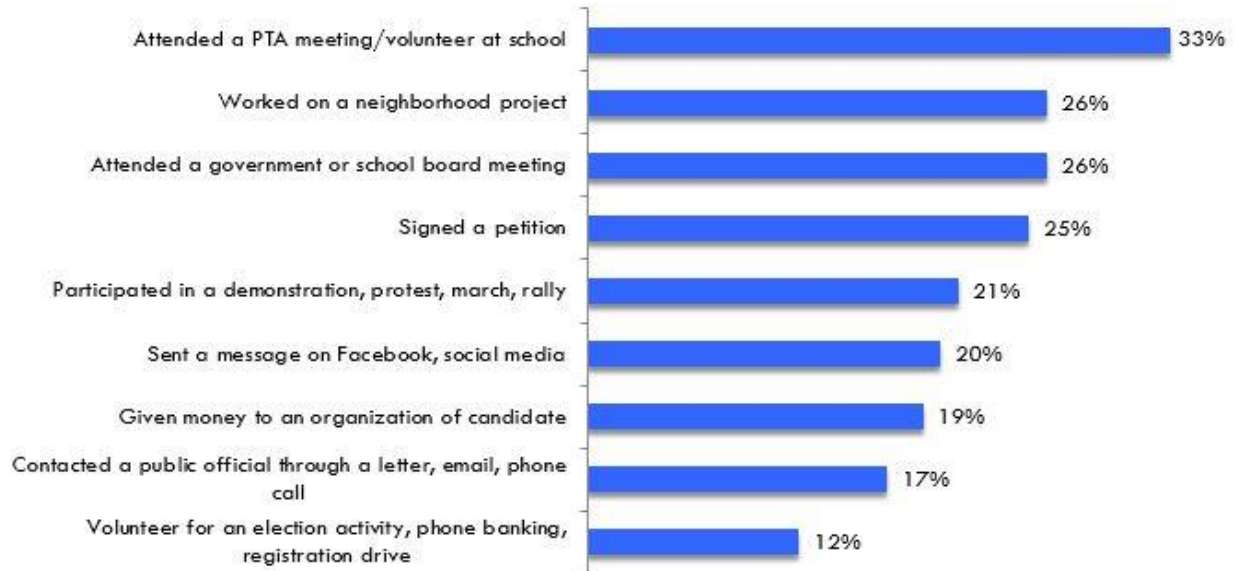
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Voting is not the only avenue for being politically engaged. Respondents were asked if they had engaged in the past two years in nine different types of civic



activities ranging from volunteering at a school to engaging in protests and demonstrations. We find relatively high levels of civic engagement.

**Fig. 8: Activities Seattle Vote Respondents had Engaged in during the Past 2 Years**

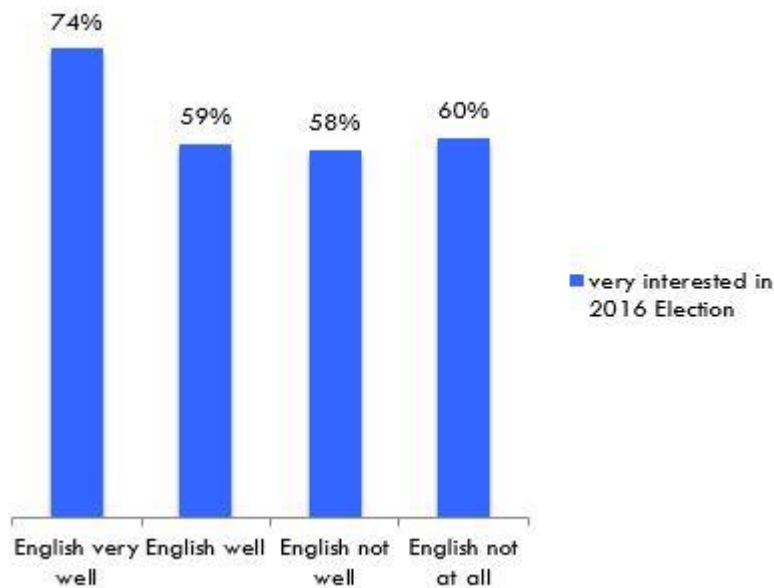


**The most common activity was attending a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meeting/volunteering at school (33%).** A quarter of respondents participated in the following three activities: (1) worked on a neighborhood project; (2) attended a government or school board meeting; and (3) signing a petition. Respondents were engaged with other civic activities at lower levels.

#### 4. The Impact of Limited English Proficiency

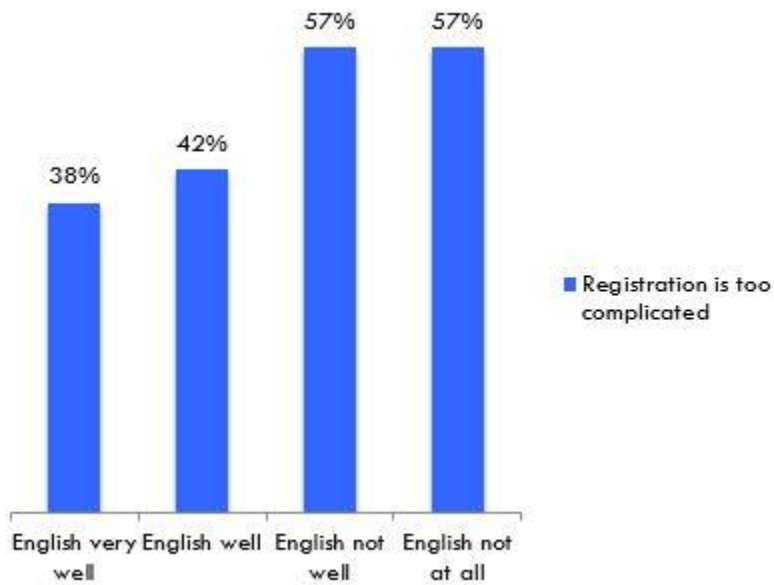
Variations in levels of political interest and political engagement are driven by the degree to which respondents are proficient in the English language, as measured by their ability to speak English. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of respondents who speak English "very well" said they were very interested in the 2016 Presidential Election. **As English proficiency dropped, levels of political interest also dropped by about 14 points.**

**Fig. 9: Political Interest Correlated to English Language Competency of Seattle Vote Respondents**



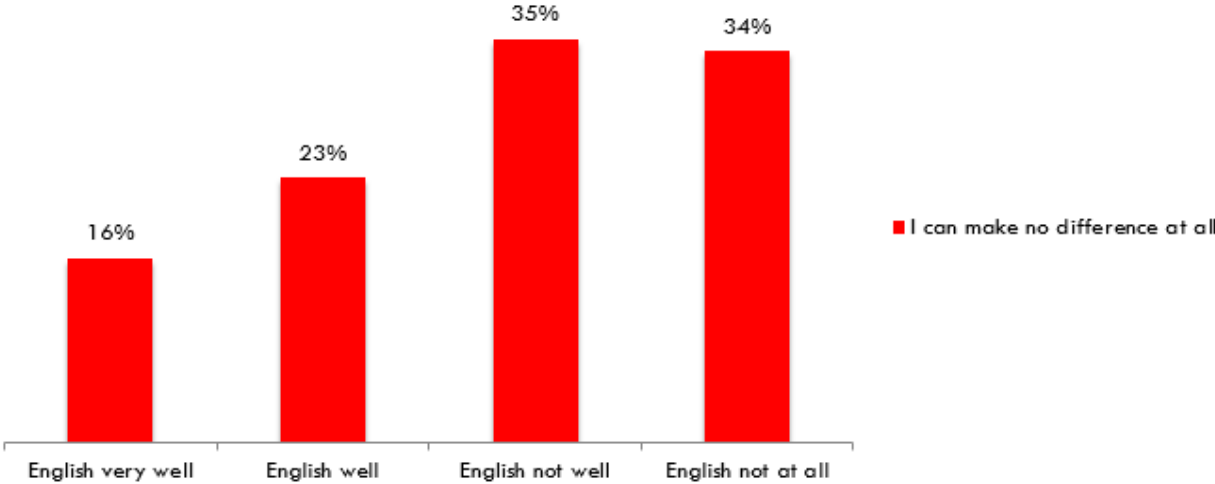
**Over half (57%) of respondents who either speak English "not well" or "not at all" noted that registering to vote was too complicated.** By comparison, among respondents who speak English "very well", only 38% said that registering to vote was too complicated.

**Fig. 10: Voter Registration Perceived as "Too Complicated" Correlated to English Language Competency of Seattle Vote Respondents**



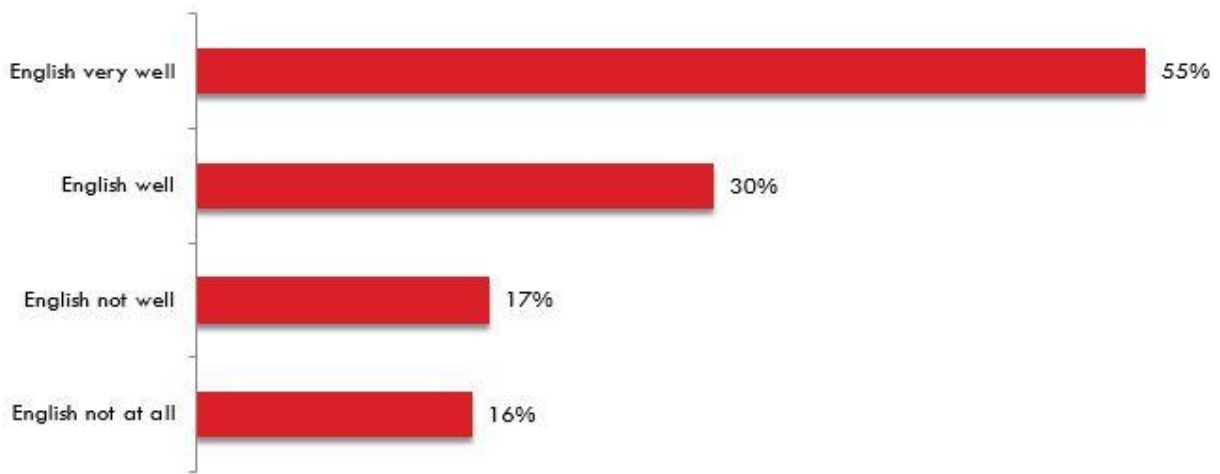
When asked, "How much of a difference do you think you can have in making your neighborhood a better place to live?" proficiency of the English language reduced feelings of powerlessness; there was an 18-point gap between respondents who knew English well and those who did not.

**Fig. 11: Feelings of "Making a Difference" Correlated to English Language Competency of Seattle Vote Respondents**



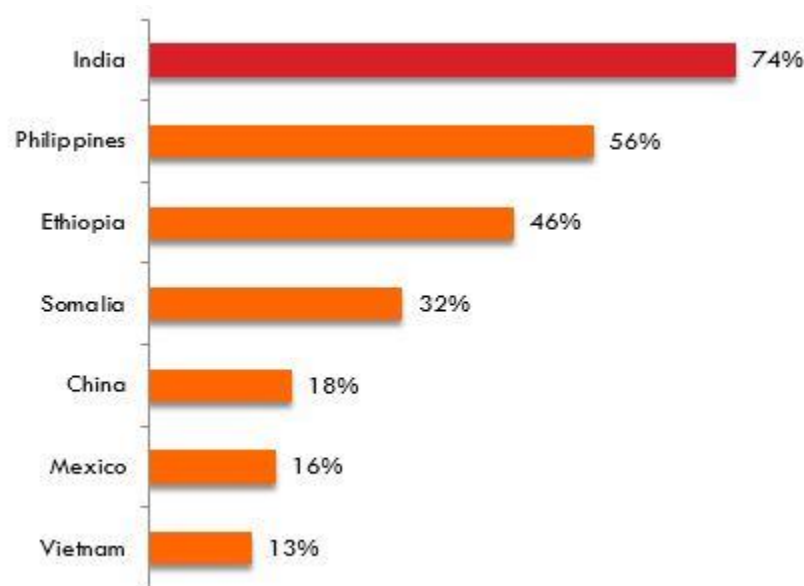
English proficiency increased the likelihood of being mobilized to vote; 55% of respondents who spoke English very well said that they have been contacted and encouraged to vote. By comparison, a mere 16% who said they did "not at all" speak English well were contacted and encouraged to vote.

**Fig. 12: "Yes" Responses to How Often a Candidate, Political Party, or Other Organization Contacted a Seattle Vote Respondent Correlated to English Language Competency**



Clearly, proficiency with the English language is a critical factor shaping levels of political interest and civic engagement. Among the top six national origin groups we sampled, we observed a high degree of variation when it came to proficiency of the English language. **Respondents from the Philippines had the highest rate of speaking English very well (56%), while those from Vietnam had the lowest rate (13%).**

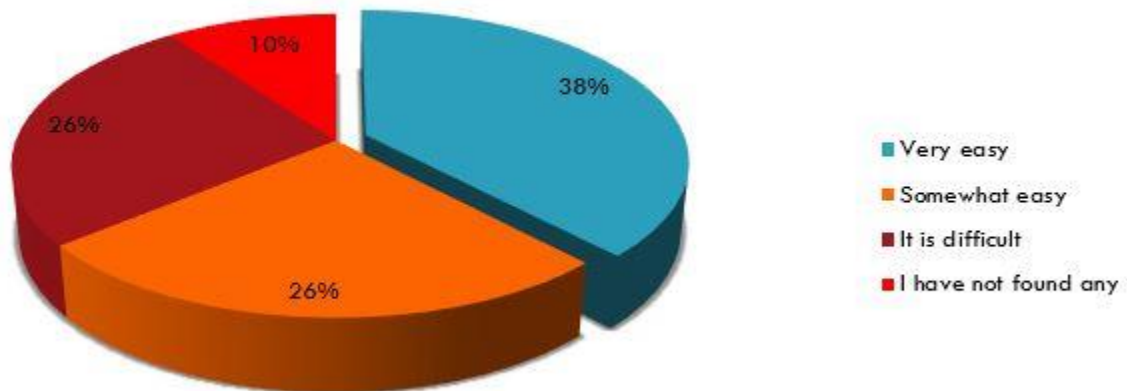
**Fig. 13: Percentage of Top 6 National Origin Groups Who Self-Identified as “Speaking English Very Well”**



## 5. Ethnic Media

English proficiency is an important resource that shapes civic engagement among immigrants and refugees living in Seattle. Nonetheless, having access to political content in ethnic media<sup>3</sup> can help boost levels of political interest, knowledge, and engagement. In the survey, we asked respondents whether it was easy or difficult to find information about the candidates in their preferred language. **Six in ten (62%) of respondents have varying levels of difficulty in finding information about the candidates in their preferred language.**

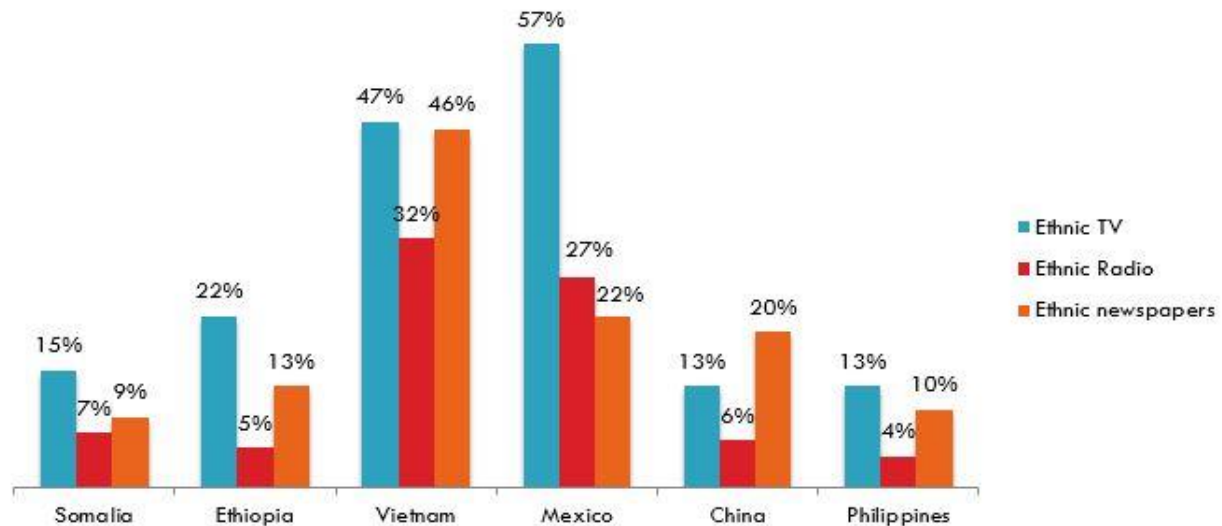
**Fig. 14: Percentage of Respondents Who Identified How Easy it was to Find Information about Elections and Candidates in Their Preferred Language**



<sup>3</sup> We define ethnic media as, "any communications outlet that intentionally produces news stories and other content for a particular ethnic minority group or ethnic minority community."

When examining access to ethnic media, we see significant variations among the six national origin groups.

**Fig. 15: Percentage of Ethnic Media Types Seattle Votes Respondents Were Likely to Use**



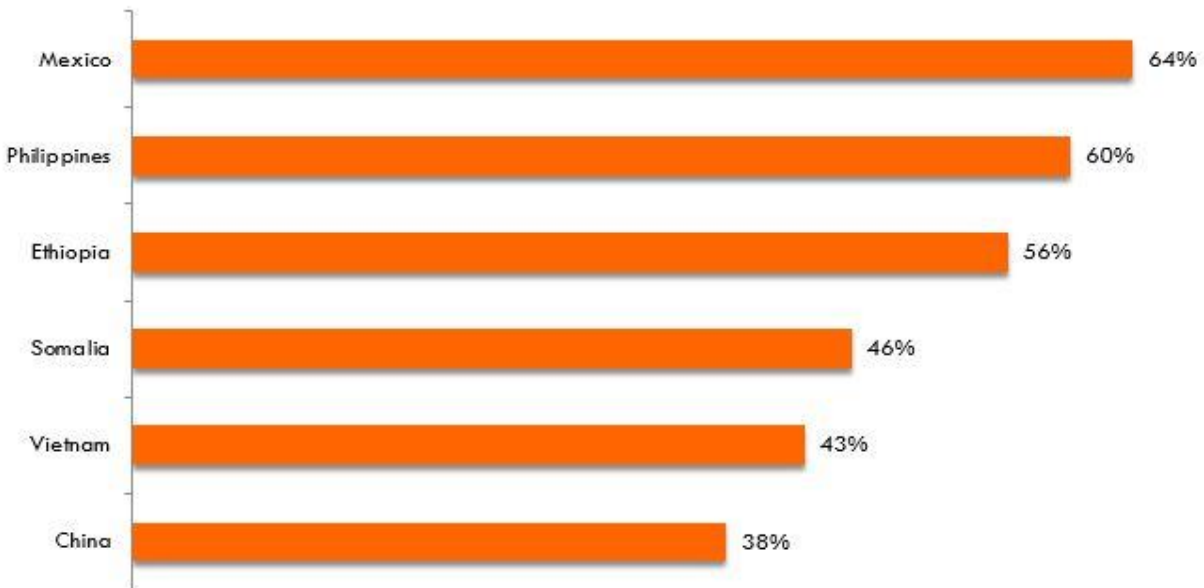
**Respondents from Mexico and Vietnam appear to have the highest levels of access to ethnic media relative to the other groups.** In the case of Vietnamese

respondents, there are similar rates of consumption for ethnic television (47%) and newspapers (46%). For Mexican immigrants, television viewership (57%) surpasses consumption of ethnic radio (27%) and ethnic newspapers (22%). Thus, the outreach strategies employed by the ethnic media should vary depending on the targeted population. For Vietnamese immigrants, political information conveyed through television and newspapers may be equally effective. For Mexican immigrants, television is likely to have a greater impact relative to other sources.



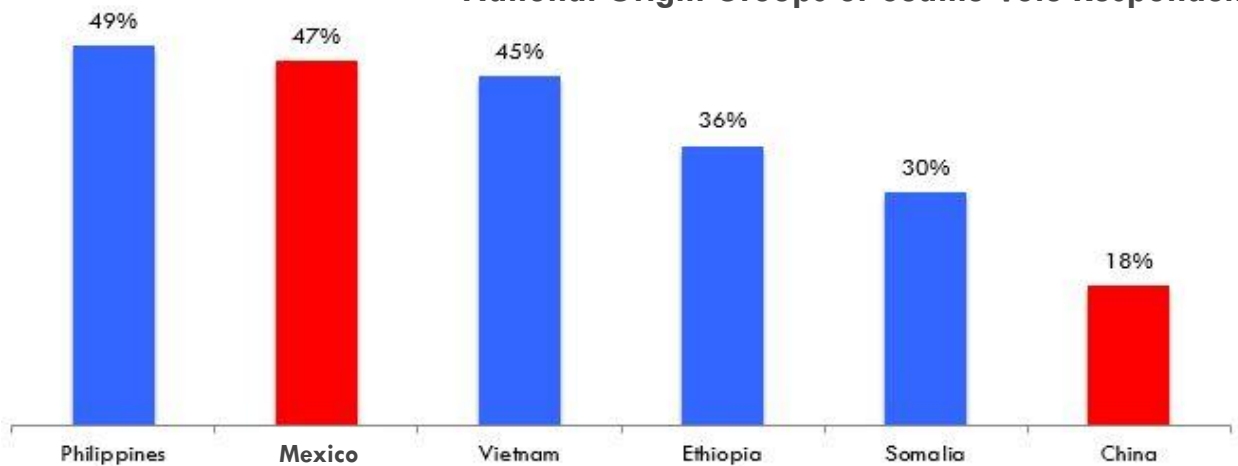
Based on the findings, ethnic media appears to significantly boost civic engagement. Mexican immigrants have one of the lowest rates of persons who speak English very well (see pg 13, fig 13). Yet, they have the highest levels of feelings of community empowerment (see below).

**Fig. 16: Feelings of “Making Your Neighborhood a Better Place to Live” Correlated to Top 6 National Origin Groups of Seattle Vote Respondents**



Mexican immigrants also have one of the highest rates of receiving a get-out-the-vote (GOTV) message.

**Fig. 17: Rates of GOTV Contact Among Top 6 National Origin Groups of Seattle Vote Respondents**



Chinese immigrant respondents are similar to Mexican immigrant respondents in that there were few who spoke English very well. Yet, unlike Mexican immigrants, the Chinese respondents indicate having limited access to ethnic media. Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA) staff found this statistic particularly unusual, as OIRA tracks ethnic media outlets that serve immigrant communities. As of this writing, King County is home to several locally-run outlets: six Chinese-language print newspapers, two radio programs, two television networks, and a countless number of Internet-based news sites located both in mainland China and the U.S., which compared to many other immigrant groups in Seattle is quite a robust media landscape. However, the survey did find depressed levels of civic engagement among this group. OIRA believes further research is needed to determine the factors influencing this paradox.

A perhaps more interesting finding was that immigrants from China have the lowest rates of persons receiving a GOTV message. Campaign managers and political consultants might be overlooking Chinese immigrants in outreach and campaign materials. This oversight might explain the lower civic engagement rates and hence may be a lesson to organizers and campaigners.

## 6. Recommendations

The survey of 5,224 immigrants and refugees living in Seattle-King County allows policymakers and community organizations to develop both targeted and comprehensive strategies to address the policy needs and improve rates of political engagement among these growing populations. This report provides a brief overview of some of the major findings from the study. **First, these respondents have high levels of interest in politics and engagement in other types of civic activities. Second, there are significant variations in levels of interest, voter participation, and civic engagement that are influenced by varying levels of English language proficiency. Finally, access to ethnic media can boost political participation among groups with limited English proficiency.** Given these observations, below we outline some recommendations for broadening rates of political engagement among immigrants and refugees residing in Seattle.

**Only 54% of the sample is registered to vote, thus efforts to increase voter registration should be undertaken.** One-third of the sample indicated they were not eligible for registration, hence programs to provide citizenship and immigration support are critical for some groups. Among the six groups, immigrants from the Philippines have the largest number of persons (56%) who speak English very well. The number of people who speak English very well for the other groups drops dramatically. **Given this fact, civic engagement efforts should be undertaken in the ancestral language for immigrants/refugees from Ethiopia (46% speak**

**English very well), Somalia (32% speak English very well), China (18% speak English very well), Mexico (16% speak English very well), and Vietnam (13% speak English very well).**

**Ethnic media plays an important role in boosting political interest, voting, and civic engagement.** Yet, not all groups have access to ethnic media. According to respondents, immigrants from Mexico and Vietnam are the highest consumers of ethnic media. This presents a challenge to policymakers and community organizations. When developing more inclusive outreach strategies, Spanish and Vietnamese media outlets are available to disseminate that information. For other groups, the lack of access to ethnic media presents an additional barrier when developing an outreach strategy.

The data allows policymakers and community organizations to develop effective outreach strategies by performing a microanalysis of particular immigrant and refugee communities. A next step in the Seattle Votes project will be in-depth case studies for each of the three major groups where local knowledge helps contextualize the survey data.

# Appendix A - Sample of Seattle Votes Survey (English), Side 1



Please take a moment to share with the **City of Seattle Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs** your experience as a U.S. immigrant/refugee resident. Please only fill out this survey if you are a foreign-born resident, you currently live in Seattle-King County, and you are at least 18 years of age. Your answers to this survey will be kept anonymous. Go to [www.seattle.gov/seattlevotes](http://www.seattle.gov/seattlevotes) for more information. Complete the survey by marking the circle like this:  OR



1 / In what country were you born? \_\_\_\_\_

2 / In what year were you born? \_\_\_\_\_

3 / In what year did you move to the United States? \_\_\_\_\_

4 / In what ZIP code do you live? \_\_\_\_\_

5 / What is your preferred language? \_\_\_\_\_

6 / How well would you say you speak English?

Very well                       Not well

Well                                       Not at all

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

\_\_\_\_\_

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

I can make no difference at all                       I can make a moderate difference

I can make a small difference                       I can make a big difference

9 / How interested are you in the presidential election this year?

I am very interested                       I am somewhat interested                       I am not interested

10 / If you wanted to find information about elections, issues, and candidates, which of the following would you most likely use? **Choose all that apply.**

Internet                       Ethnic television                       Friends and family

Television in English                       Ethnic newspapers                       My place of worship

Newspapers in English                       Ethnic radio                       My union or work place

Radio in English                       My community organization(s)/ service provider(s)                       Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Library

11 / How easy is it to find information about elections and candidates in your preferred language?

Very easy                       Somewhat easy                       It is difficult                       I have not found any

12 / 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

I attended a government or school board meeting in my city

I have worked on a project or attended a meeting in my neighborhood

I participated in one or more demonstrations, protests, marches, or rallies

I contacted a public official through a letter, email, phone, or in-person

I sent a message on Facebook or other social media about a social or political issue

I attended a PTA meeting or other volunteer group at my child's school

I have given money to an organization or a candidate

I volunteered for an election activity, such as a phone bank or registering people to vote

13 / Some people are registered to vote, while others are not. Which of the following best describes you?

I am a registered voter                       I am currently not eligible to register to vote

I am eligible to register, but have not registered yet                       Other: \_\_\_\_\_

ENGLISH  
Location/Organization:  
Date administered:  
TO BE FILLED OUT BY ADMINISTRATOR ONLY

## Sample of Seattle Votes Survey (English), Side 2

**14 /** If you are eligible (U.S. citizen over the age of 18), but have not yet registered to vote, what is the main reason you have not registered to vote? **If you are a registered voter, go to question 15.**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="radio"/> I don't know how/I don't know where to register/it's too complicated | <input type="radio"/> I am worried that voting is not safe                                     |
| <input type="radio"/> I am not interested in voting  | <input type="radio"/> I am too busy  |
| <input type="radio"/> Voting is a waste of time/it doesn't make a difference               | <input type="radio"/> Voter registration information is not available in my preferred language |
|  | <input type="radio"/> Other: _____   |

**15 /** Did you vote in the presidential election last November 2012?

- Yes - **go to question 17.**     No     I don't remember

**16 /** If you did not vote in the 2012 presidential election, what was the main reason for not voting in that election? **Please choose only one answer.**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="radio"/> I was not registered                                | <input type="radio"/> I did not know the location of the ballot box/I did not have access to a ballot box |
| <input type="radio"/> I did not have time/I was working                   | <input type="radio"/> I did not receive a ballot  |
| <input type="radio"/> I was not interested in the election                | <input type="radio"/> I tried to vote, but I was told I was not eligible                                  |
| <input type="radio"/> I had a family emergency                            | <input type="radio"/> My vote would not matter  |
| <input type="radio"/> I did not like the candidates                       | <input type="radio"/> I was sick  |
| <input type="radio"/> I was out of town                                   | <input type="radio"/> Voting is too complicated   |
| <input type="radio"/> I forgot about the election                         | <input type="radio"/> Voting materials are not available in my preferred language                         |
| <input type="radio"/> I did not know how to fill out and submit my ballot | <input type="radio"/> Other: _____  |
| <input type="radio"/> I did not have a stamp to mail in my ballot         |   |

**17 /** How likely is it that you will vote in the presidential election this November 2016?

- Very likely     Not likely at all  
 Somewhat likely     I don't know

**18 /** How often have you voted in state and local elections?

- Often     Rarely  
 Sometimes     Never

**19 /** Have you ever been contacted and encouraged to vote by a candidate, political party, or other organization?

- Yes     No     I don't remember

**20 /** What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <input type="radio"/> None                  | <input type="radio"/> High school graduate or GED | <input type="radio"/> College degree                  |
| <input type="radio"/> Eighth grade or below | <input type="radio"/> Some college                | <input type="radio"/> Graduate or professional degree |
| <input type="radio"/> Some high school      |   |   |

**21 /** Do you and your family own the place where you are living now, or do you rent?

- We own our home  
 We rent our home  
 We live with relatives or friends  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**22 /** How many people (adults and children) currently live in your household?

\_\_\_\_\_

**23 /** Gender

- Male     Female  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**24 /** What was your total combined household income in 2015 before taxes?

- Less than \$11,880  
 \$11,881 to \$24,300  
 \$24,301 to \$40,890  
 \$40,891 to \$64,999  
 \$65,000 to \$99,999  
 \$100,000 to \$150,000  
 More than \$150,000  
 I don't know

**25 /** When it comes to getting around the city, which of these statements best describes your situation?

- I usually drive the car that I own  
 I usually drive a car that I borrow  
 I own a car, but I usually take public transportation  
 I don't own a car, so I take public transportation  
 I usually walk  
 I usually use shared transportation, such as a carpool  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_