



SEATTLE VOTES



2016 SURVEY RESULTS

**EAST AFRICAN
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 the countries of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia, (which for the purposes of this report, we refer to as “East Africa”). 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.

You can see the translated versions of the Seattle Votes Survey at: www.seattle.gov/SeattleVotes.

East Africans in Seattle

East Africans in Seattle, though originating from several countries with different histories, share many common experiences. This diverse community consists mainly of immigrants and refugees from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia. They are a relatively new immigrant community in Seattle, first arriving in the 1960s and 1970s, but growing explosively in the 1980s and 1990s. Each national origin group includes a variety of ethnicities and clans, languages, and religious beliefs.

Ethiopians currently make up the largest percentage of the East African population in Seattle. The first Ethiopians came to Seattle as students in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1974, Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown by a military junta known as the Derg, which established a communist government allied with the Soviet Union. Armed conflict with Eritrean fighters, which had begun in the 1960s, combined with the harsh regime imposed by the Derg, and a severe drought that affected Ethiopia in the 1980s increased the number of refugees fleeing the country. In fact, between 1974 to 2009, about 2.5 million Ethiopians left their homeland. After the defeat of the Derg regime, a new government formed in 1991. Conflict with Eritreans formally ended in 1993, when Eritrea received international recognition of independence, though occasional armed conflicts have occurred.

Ethiopians in Seattle represent different ethnicities, religions, and languages. As a whole, Ethiopians are largely Christians (mostly orthodox), but with a substantial Muslim population. Additionally, Ethiopians tend to distinguish between themselves: “old immigrants” who came earlier to Seattle as students and “new immigrants” who have arrived here more recently as refugees.

The recent history of Eritrea is tied to that of Ethiopia, and the immigration story of both groups is similar. Following the defeat of Italy in WWII, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia as an autonomous region. In 1962, Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie annexed Eritrea and dissolved its parliament. This event led to three decades of armed conflict between Eritrean fighters and the Ethiopian military. While the Eritrean population in Washington is the

smallest of the East African communities, it is one of the largest communities in the U.S., representing almost 10% of the Eritrean population in the United States.

As with the first Ethiopians in Seattle, those from Eritrea originally came to the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s as students. The first refugees from Eritrea began to arrive in Seattle in the late 1970s. More arrived in the 1980s after Congress reformed immigration policies, allowing Eritrean refugees in camps in Sudan to emigrate. Most Eritrean refugees came to Seattle between 1989 and 1993.

Somali migration was also heavily determined by armed strife. On July 1, 1960, British Somaliland and the former Italian Somaliland (under British protection since the end of World War II), were united and granted independence, forming Somalia. In 1969, a bloodless coup led to the installation of Major General Siad Barre, who established a dictatorship allied with the Soviet Union. Civil war broke out in the 1980s, which culminated in Barre’s ouster in January 1991. Following this, armed skirmishes among warlords kept the country in chaos, with no central government until 2012. However, as most of the territory of Somalia has been recaptured from insurgents, residents continue to rely on tribal-based local governments and informal customary and religious laws.

As with the early Ethiopian and Eritrean arrivals, most early Somali immigrants in Seattle originally came here as students in the 1980s. The outbreak of civil war in 1991 led to an explosion in the number of refugees. These refugees were joined in 2004 by Somali Bantu. Originally slaves brought to Somalia from Southeast Africa, this group suffered extreme discrimination in that country because of the circumstances under which they came. Fortunately, they have been welcomed by Seattle’s Somali community, who have also put aside the clan distinctions so common in that region.

To learn more about Seattle’s East African community, please see the publication “Voices of Seattle’s East African Communities” released by the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs in 2016.

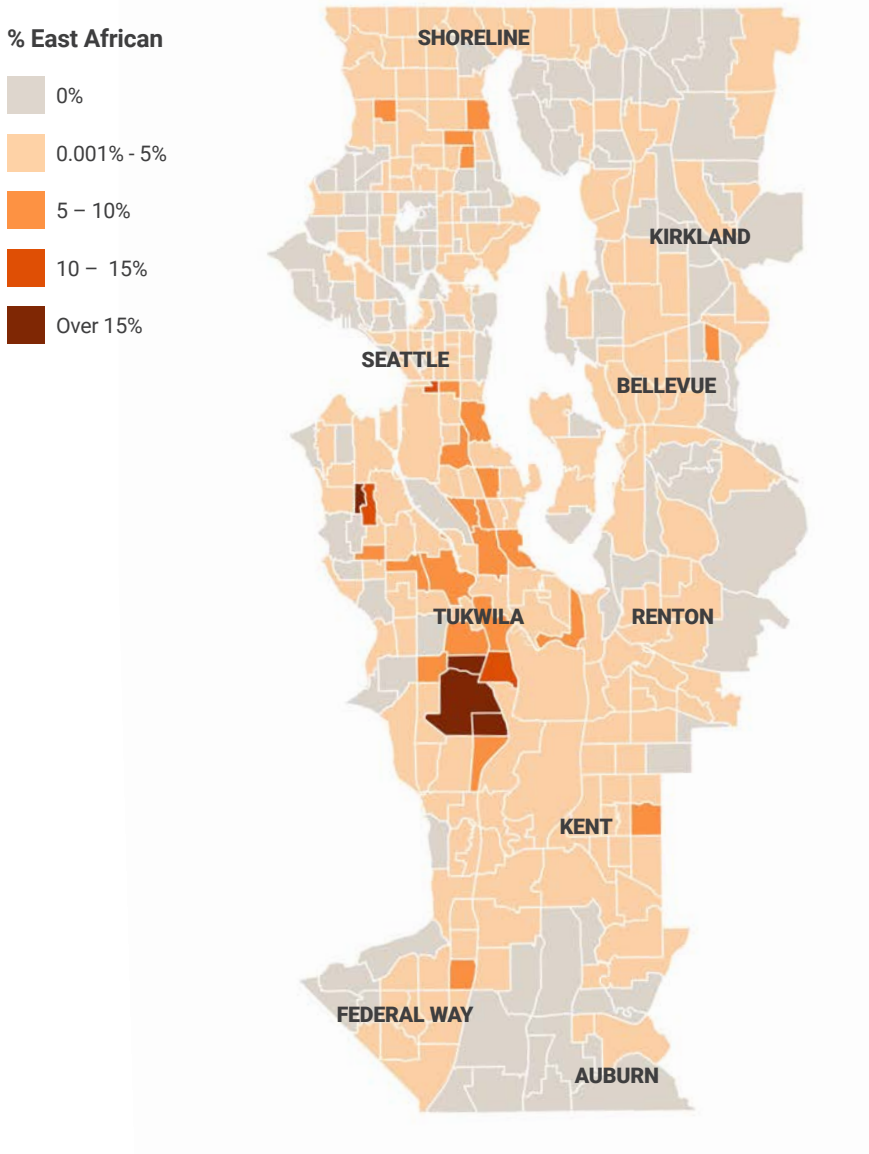
At-a-Glance

PLACE OF BIRTH FOR FOREIGN BORN POPULATIONS: 2012-2016

	SEATTLE	KING COUNTY	WASHINGTON
ETHIOPIA	5,949	12,431	16,450
SOMALIA	2,685	7,110	7,623
ERITREA	1,037	2,023	2,732

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

EAST AFRICANS 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 Tsegaye Gebru

Executive Director, Horn of Africa Services



What is your migration story? I came as a student from Ethiopia. My family is from western Ethiopia, but I grew up in the capital. I remember the first day I arrived in Seattle. Because I had spent some time in Greece before coming to the States, I only had light clothes. It was November and sunny, but I was really cold. There was so much adjustment for me. Language, culture, food, weather. It was hard because everything was different.

How did you get involved in your community? After finishing my studies at Bellevue College, I decided to stay here with my wife and had a family. My career was focused on information technology, but I found time to give back to my community. I saw how people were discriminated against because of their language and accents. Lots of people who are doctors back at home now work as taxi drivers. It really touched my heart. I had an education, but many in my community did not. They needed support. That's why I work with Horn of Africa Services and have been executive director since 2009.

What does participating in our democracy mean to you? Participating is everything. People have the right to express their opinions, but they also need to understand their obligations. Voting is an opportunity for people who are naturalized to elect people to represent them and make sure their voices are heard. I encourage people in my community to get involved at every level. With the school district to help their kids get a good education. With the police to help with safety. With their landlord. With their church. The more we are involved, the more our voices are heard.

Seattle Votes Survey

About the Respondents

Almost 1,800 individuals in the East African community completed the Seattle Votes Survey. The survey was not a random sample, and skews slightly more male (54%) and heavily Somali-born (60%). The following are additional traits of the respondents:

53%

speak Somali as their primary language

87%

rent their homes

53%

have no more than a high school diploma or GED

Most are residents in these three ZIP codes:

98118

Southeast Seattle (33%)

98108

Southeast Seattle (16%)

98188

SeaTac/Tukwila (8%)

71%

are registered to vote

48%

migrated to the U.S. in the 2000s

72%

speak English either "very well" or "well"

60%

are under 40 years old

2/3

drive their own car for transportation

60%

of households earn between \$24,301 and \$64,999 annually

Findings

1. Affordable housing, education, jobs, and helping youth are the top policy concerns.

Given the mix of modest incomes, low rates of homeownership, and a tight rental housing market, it is not surprising that affordable housing topped the list of policy priorities. This combination of factors is a recipe for housing insecurity.

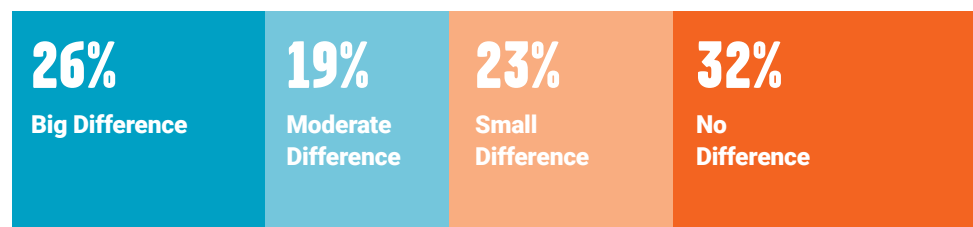
(Q7) What is the most important issue facing your immigrant and refugee community that you think our public officials should address?



2. East African respondents don't feel empowered.

A majority (55%) of those surveyed (1,756) thought that they could only make a small difference or no difference in improving their neighborhood. This is correlated with low participation in state and local elections. Therefore, East Africans are an important community for increased attention on civic engagement.

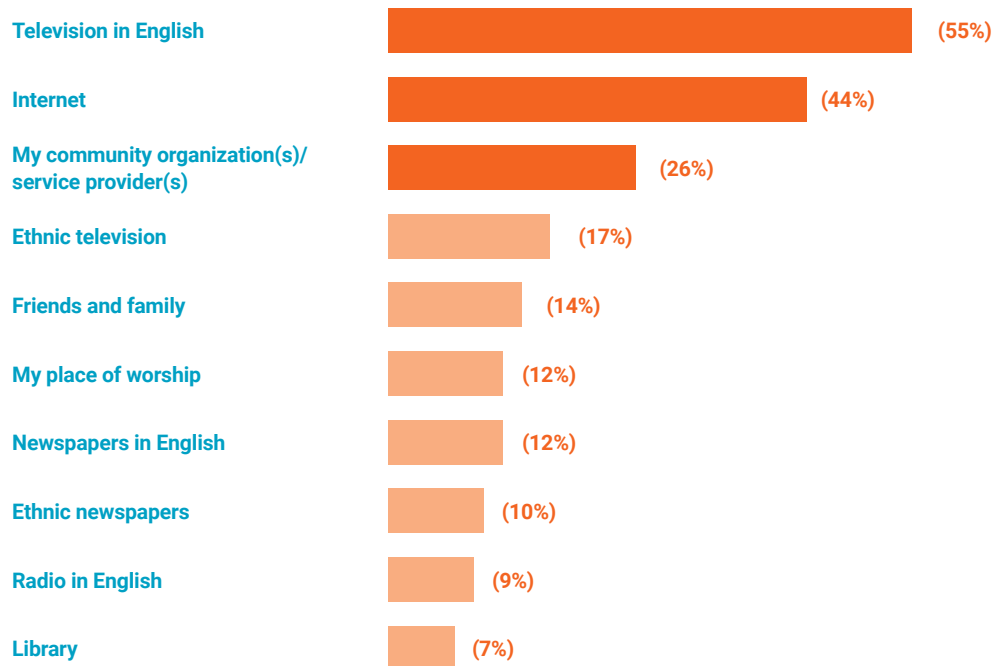
(Q8) Overall, how much of a difference do you think you can have in making your neighborhood a better place to live?



3. English-language television, the internet, and community organizations are the main sources of information about politics.

Given the oral tradition of communication for East Africans and ubiquity of the modern television, it is not surprising that “Television in English” was selected by a majority, over three times more than “Ethnic television”. This may also be indicative of a lack of programming that reaches across a broad set of languages and ethnic groups.

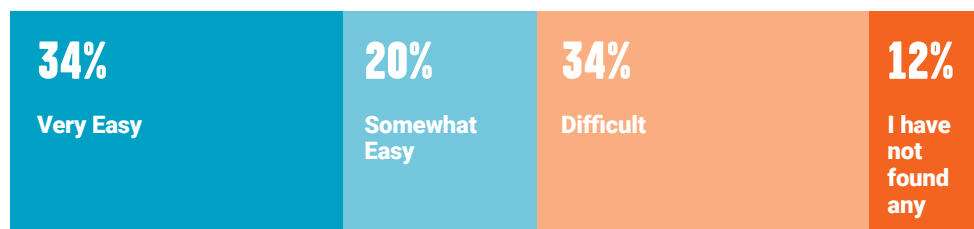
(Q10) If you wanted to find information about elections, issues, and candidates, which of the following would you most likely use?



4. Respondents are split on access to information about elections in preferred language.

Respondents were almost evenly divided on their ability to attain linguistically accessible information about elections, with 54% finding it either “very easy” or “somewhat easy”. Though this may seem high, the respondents also reported a high level of English proficiency.

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



5. Engaging in a child's education is a primary focus for civic engagement.

By a wide margin, attending PTA meetings or otherwise volunteering at a child's school was the most common civic engagement activity for the respondents. This trend matches up with prioritization of education and youth services. More than a fifth stated that they had attended a meeting and/or worked on a neighborhood project. However, when it comes to policy advocacy, only 7% had ever contacted an elected official.

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

I attended a PTA meeting or other volunteer group at my child's school	39%
I attended a government or school board meeting in my city	23%
I have worked on a project or attended a meeting in my neighborhood	21%
I participated in one or more demonstrations, protests, marches, or rallies	15%
I volunteered for an election activity such as a phone bank or registering people to vote	13%
I have signed a letter about a social or political issue	11%
I sent a message on Facebook or other social media about a social or political issue	10%
I have given money to an organization or candidate	8%
I contacted a public official through a letter, email, phone, or in-person	7%

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

More than half (52%) of those eligible, but not registered stated they did not know how to do so. This contrasts sharply with a small percentage (17%) that were either not interested or thought voting was not worth the effort.

(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	52%
Voter registration information is not available in my preferred language	14%
I am too busy	12%
I am not interested in voting	9%
Voting is a waste of time/it doesn't make a difference	8%
I am worried that voting is not safe	3%
Applying now	1%
Registered/soon to register	1%

7. Most East Africans participate at least sometimes in non-federal elections.

Almost 60% stated that they vote in state and local elections either “often” or “sometimes”, while a plurality said “never.” Given the overlap between federal and state elections in even years, responses to this questions would likely be different if it were limited to municipal races in odd years.

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

A. Often	30%
B. Sometimes	28%
C. Rarely	10%
D. Never	31%

8. Few are contacted by political groups or candidates to vote.

Only one-third of those who answered this question said that they have been encouraged to participate in elections. However, the vast majority of respondents (96%) did not respond to 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 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 each of the major East African languages, as well languages from emerging communities. Such a concerted effort could increase voter participation, as over 30% of respondents stated they “never” 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 East African immigrants and refugees. These volunteers, who would be 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. Support the development of more East African ethnic media outlets.

The City of Seattle should continue to invest in the development of ethnic media, particularly in the East African community. The Seattle Department of Neighborhoods worked with several African and Middle Eastern community members to launch the Washington African Media Association (WAMA) in December 2017. The initiative allows for different outlets to share resources and tools so they can continue to inform their communities.

The survey did also reveal that English language television is the most popular source of information about public affairs, as East Africans rely heavily on an oral tradition for communication. This likely means that print media should not be considered a primary way to reach this community. Instead, the City should encourage outlets in audio and video format with training, technical assistance, and grants. As a secondary strategy, the City could also train East African community leaders in how to generate earned media targeting English language television as well as provide an annual briefing for journalists about immigrants and refugees in Seattle and King County.

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 public 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.

