



Brief No. 4:

Fired Up and Ready to Take Action

INTRODUCTION

In September 2020, the Coalition of Asian American Leaders (CAAL) held the fourth session of a series on the state of Asian Minnesotans, during the lead-up to an election that many spoke about as one of the most important elections of their lifetimes. While the 2020 Presidential election was front of mind for many community members, it is important to approach the topic of civic engagement as a process that goes well beyond specific offices.

At the time of this session, the outcome of the election and its impact on our community was far from certain. While the 2016 Presidential election showed itself to be a wake up call to much of the country that would otherwise be comfortable and safe from harmful public policies, the resulting surge in civic engagement must be transitioned from reactive organizing in defense of the most vulnerable members of our community to proactive organizing that centers those who have historically been marginalized.

KEY THEMES

- 1.** Asian American voters, though very diverse, are a growing power and presence in politics.
- 2.** White supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism ingrained within the political system have historically and continue to disenfranchise voters who are from marginalized communities.
- 3.** Growing power means reimagining and rebuilding systems to be more inclusive and democratic, not just putting political candidates we like or who look like us in office.
 - 3a.** This includes reimagining what civic engagement looks like year-round and beyond single election cycles.
 - 3b.** The work of civic engagement also includes developing the ability to hold decision-makers accountable by building power at the community level.
- 4.** Civic engagement is the long-term, continuing responsibility of everyone.

CONTEXT

Asian Americans have both consistently and uniquely been disenfranchised by the American political system from multiple perspectives. From a broad view of Asian Americans as “perpetual outsiders” to the model minority myth, Asian Americans face barriers to full inclusion and participation in a political process built around binary systems (i.e. winners and losers, Republicans and Democrats).

Additionally, white voters as a voting bloc consistently demonstrate their racist and xenophobic values through both active and passive support for exclusionary and harmful policies and policy-makers. While individual white voters may believe in the necessity of a governing body more reflective of the whole populace, the history of the people who actually find their way to public office shows where our country’s values are.

Furthermore, outreach to Asian American communities by political campaigns and candidates remains low, leaving community-based organizations to fill in the voter engagement gap. This is possibly a result of the lack of disaggregated data that lumps Asian American communities together and complicating political narratives around voter blocs and key issues.

The popular zero sum approach to elections is meant to suppress civic engagement for all Americans, inundating us with news coverage of a single office every four years rather than providing nuanced, critical information about many levers of government and how to engage with decision-makers throughout the full system. The savior President narrative creates a national ideal impossible for any individual to live into, feeds into a racist, patriarchal image of power as located in one person and one office, and distracts from the full range of ways communities can build political power. No one political office can destroy the country and no one political office will save the country.

The United States’ political system was not built to include or benefit Black, Indigenous, or People of Color and has historically been used to take power from these communities and/or block access to resources and stability (See SOAM 2 on Immigration and Resistance). Still, community members work year-round, and at all levels, to ensure decision-makers are representative of and responsive to the communities most impacted by policies and decisions, with true attempts at co-governance. For evidence of this, we can look to the local level where community action is visibly and rapidly affecting policy. This has been especially visible in moments of community action since 2014 but should be recognized for the movement it is.

For Asian Americans, our success and survival also rely on our proactive and deep civic engagement at all levels of the electoral and governing process. The Asian American voting bloc has its own, unique needs and has great power when mobilized. This has been demonstrated over and over again in reaction to harmful legislation—imagine what is possible when this voting bloc becomes more proactive.

This does not happen by frantically trying to engage voters in election years, though. In the short term, the 2020 election is an impactful one in Minnesota because all its Congressional seats and the State legislature seats are all up for re-election, meaning that it is a critical leverage point in which participation by voters of color is particularly important. In order to be successful, however, we must think in longer terms and find ways to sustainably engage our communities at all levels. For many communities of color, this also means working together to provide stability to our most vulnerable members to allow the space to engage in and change the system. The good news is that there are many ways to engage in the process.

SUMMARY

To set the stage for the session's speakers, CAAL's Executive and Network Director, Bo Thao-Urabe shared her personal experience of helping her parents navigate systems and learning, through this, the importance of civic engagement and choosing responsive policy makers. While Thao-Urabe's immigrant parents were focused on day-to-day survival for the family, the connection between policy and the family's daily life became clear. Though Thao-Urabe's parents became citizens, they and many like them continue to face barriers to full participation such as language on ballots, confusing voter registration processes, and a lack of navigation resources. These barriers are significant since AAPI people are the fastest growing demographic of voters. Thao-Urabe reminded everyone that voting is an essential part of taking care of ourselves and one another.

“Even though our parents made sacrifices, it’s really important for us to build, and build on those sacrifices because we understand that our power to contribute to changing things and being politically represented is necessary in helping us address our most dire needs but also, in order for us to make real progress towards the dreams that we have for our communities.”

- Bo Thao-Urabe

Reflections from a First-Time Voter

To further ground the session in the lived experiences of communities, CAAL leader Soua Christensen reflected on the importance of voting after seeing her teenage sons become disenfranchised with the process.

Christensen immigrated to the United States about 25 years ago, planting in community and raising a family but not gaining her citizenship immediately. Because of this, she shared that she always felt she was “on the sidelines” of American politics. This manifested in feelings of grief and helplessness as she saw immigration policies created that neither represented her nor served her family and community.

When her sons came of voting age, Christensen was disappointed to learn that they had little interest in voting because they felt like it would not make a difference and the candidates did not appeal to them. As the stakes of national elections become greater, Christensen discussed with her sons that voting is power and, with that power, comes responsibility; we

do not vote for policy makers because of their individual appeal, we vote for them based on what policies they will champion, support, or prevent that will directly affect our entire community. At the same time, individual idealist voters are just that—individuals; it takes everyone to hold our representatives accountable.

Christensen shared, “When I expanded their understanding and connected issues to friends from school, uncles who’d helped raise them, or grandparents who never failed to show up at birthday parties . . . they understood it was not just about them but also about the well-being of the people and community that they love and care for.”

Having only recently gained the ability to vote, Christensen sees the power and responsibility of her role as a voter and the privilege of taking this right for granted. She has activated her loved ones to take part in the process.

AAPI Civic Engagement

EunSook Lee, Executive Director of the AAPI Civic Engagement Fund, shared a series of data points showing the existing and growing power of AAPI people as a voting bloc.

With roughly 22.1 million AAPI-identifying people in the United States, AAPIs represent just over 4% of registered voters, though this number is growing. AAPI voter registration increased 51% between 2008 and 2016 (compared to just 8% overall), indicating a recent surge in civic engagement among AAPIs. AAPI women have a higher voter turnout than men and are more likely to identify as activists or to participate in a protest. 2018 data shows strong engagement with protests by AAPI women as well as lateral mobilization.

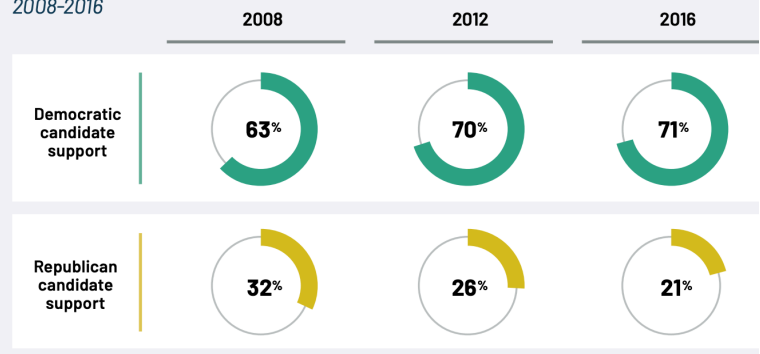
In several geographic areas, AAPIs have reached a critical mass, making up a significant proportion of the national electorate. Minnesota is home to ~320,000 AAPI people with over 155,000 being eligible to vote, which is significant because while Minnesota voter data indicates high voter turnout overall, it decreases across race—further evidence of the entrenched systemic racism that actively disenfranchises voters of color even as public leaders declare racism a public health crisis.

“Women have become the organizers and the protesters in our community.”
- EunSook Lee

The AAPI community is very diverse, making it a unique racial group of voters to track since different ethnic segments of the community are at different stages of rooting, growing, and sustaining. Still, AAPIs are increasingly becoming a voting bloc, growing in number and demonstrating coherence around specific policy perspectives.

AAPI Voter Presidential Choice by Party

2008-2016

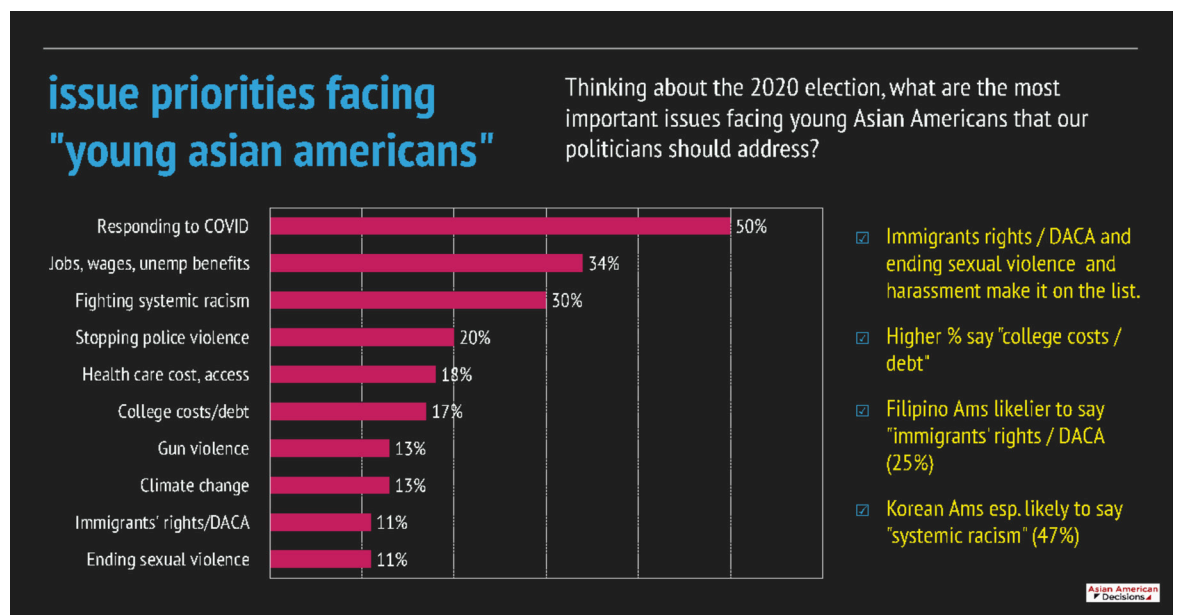
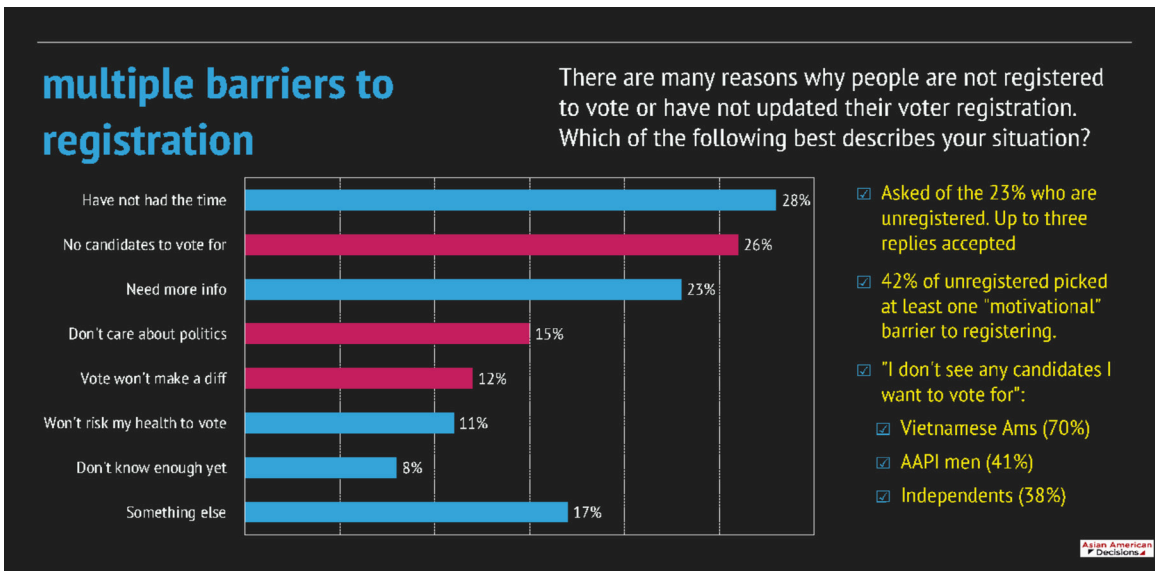


AAPI voters have similar beliefs on both policies and political choices, a key criteria in the development of a voting bloc.

As United States politics become more polarized and the stakes become higher, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of midterm elections (Ex. the 2018 midterm showed a 33% increase in voter turnout). There is hope that the importance of voting throughout the political process (beyond the Presidential election) is being recognized by all Americans, including AAPIs. Simultaneously, efforts to suppress votes of people of color continue, threatening voter turnout and feeding racist narratives that Asian-Americans and immigrants are not interested in voting or that it is up to well intentioned white voters and policy makers to know what is best for these communities.

Important shifts to the national narrative around Asian American voters include disaggregating AAPI voter data by ethnicity and geography as Asian Americans, like all populations, face different issues depending on their history in the country and location.

Yet assessing the issues that are important to Asian American voters, particularly young voters, can provide a glimpse into the electorate as well as important insight into how to engage and mobilize these voters. Asian American voters have growing unity in their perspectives on issues such as immigration, healthcare and racial justice. AAPI Civic Engagement Fund poll data also show strong support for Black Lives Matter among young AAPI people, in line with other polls taken this past summer, indicating strong potential for deeper solidarity.



These opportunities for collaboration and allyship between racialized communities represent a direct threat to the top-down prescriptive approach to policy that has long supported systems of white supremacy as well as the demonstrate growing political power of BIPOC communities if wielded both at the ballot box and in year-round engagement.

From Personal Mission to Commissioner

Commissioner Irene Fernando (Hennepin County District 2) shared her personal story of growing up as the child of immigrant parents and how this instilled the values she leads by.

In particular, Commissioner Fernando lifted up the value of perspective: her mother is a career bedside nurse, which showed the value of close up perspective (i.e. a bedside nurse sees a patient constantly, a doctor sees a patient periodically, hospital managers and board members rarely see patients but make decisions that ultimately impact patients).

Those who are implementing decisions and those impacted by decisions should be the largest voices at the decision-making table but this is often not the case.

Commissioner Fernando's path to public office began through engagement with causes close to her, such as marriage equality and voter ID laws. At the time, she saw this as supporting important causes and did not get involved with political campaigns. In 2016, she looked up who was making decisions around social services and transit and kept encountering the title "County Commissioner." Not knowing what this was at the time, she looked it up and began attending County Commissioner meetings. She quickly realized she brought valuable perspective and ran for a Commissioner seat.

Commissioner Fernando's grassroots background helped her mobilize voter support through non-partisan education and engagement and she won the election, demonstrating the power of sincere and authentic relationships within and to impacted communities. Upon winning her election, she became the first person of color to be elected to the Hennepin County Board of Commissioners (along with Commissioner Angela Conley) and the youngest person to have ever been elected to the Board's 168-year history. Out of all the counties in Minnesota, only two Commissioners identify as Asian American.

"If you are lucky enough to have a political group advocating on your behalf, don't assume that they're smarter than you."

- Commissioner Irene Fernando

Commissioner Fernando finds excitement and possibility in governing because it is a combination of decision making and vision. Governing is strengthened through expanded representation because it opens up the dialogue that informs decision making. Under the current widely accepted model of organizing around governing, a community or interest group presents a desired goal to an elected leader. A more inclusive and representative model would look like an on-going discussion with

What does a County Commissioner do?

Commissioners are elected officials charged with administering the county government. County Commissions are responsible for significant government resources, acting as the executives of the local government by levying local taxes and administering county governmental services such as correctional institutions, courts, public health oversight, property registration, enforcement of building codes, and public works.

Who is my Commissioner?

You can find your commissioner using this [map](#).

long-term goals and strategies and higher engagement and representation of diverse community members. Barriers to access must be eliminated in order for this model to work.

As governments prioritize issues and funding, representation becomes even more critical because diverse stories inform prioritization; without these stories, well-intentioned policy can leave communities out or not work for the communities it is intended for. Commissioner Fernando lifted up the example of funding allocated in Hennepin County for undocumented people being limited because of a lack of representation when funding decisions were made. Additionally, Commissioner Fernando was part of the decision to declare racism a public health crisis in Minnesota. She noted that this was a divided vote and would not have even been considered without the voices of people impacted by racism at the table. In this case, Commissioner Fernando lifted up Commissioner Angela Conley for empowering her to support the declaration, noting that representation means more than just one token person.

Commissioner Fernando called the community to action by uplifting the knowledge and contributions of historically marginalized people. These stories are valuable and help decision makers to be more informed and inclusive. The historical decision making conversation has intentionally excluded the voices of marginalized people. Though work to change this can be difficult, the status quo is not neutral and it is incumbent upon community members to find our places at the decision making table.

Raising Our Voices, Reclaiming Our Bloc

Jae Hyun Shim, Policy Organizer, Reclaim the Block; MPD150 Core Team Member, shared their perspective on the pandemic and protests as a portal to the future. For example, some of the actions and policy work that have happened since May 2020 were originally strategized as potential long-term goals (Ex. The charter commission campaign was a potential goal for 2023; cuts to MPD's budget as drastic as the ones that happened in summer of 2020 were presented as possibilities for 2025). The rolling consequences of the pandemic accelerated public interest in these goals, causing rapid, unexpected progress.

Civic engagement goes far beyond voting and people do not need to be policy makers or experts to engage in their community and affect change. Just as public policy affects everyone, everyone is entitled to a say in how it functions and impacts communities. The racist history of exclusion of Black, Indigenous, Asian and Latinx people from the US political

system has created a narrative that politics is only for some people. This is untrue and is disrupted when ordinary people commit extraordinary everyday action by remaining informed.

MPD150 is an example of what ongoing engagement in change-making and power building looks like beyond electoral politics. In 2016, a local artist noted that the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) would soon be turning 150 years old but was not celebrating this landmark because of public distaste for past and current MPD actions. This inspired the first version of a community report on the MPD in 2017. A second version with over 100 pages of additional content was released in the summer of 2020. This report and other projects have helped to further the public conversation about the role of police in the community, gradually shifting the narrative away from police presence being synonymous with public safety.

MPD150's five essential findings support the need to abolish the MPD rather than reform it:

1. The police were established to protect the interests of the wealthy and racialized violence has always been part of that mission.
2. The police cannot be reformed away from their core function.
3. The police criminalize dark skin and poverty, channeling millions of people into the prison system, depriving them of voting and employment rights, and thereby preserving privileged access to housing, jobs, land, credit, and education for whites.
4. The police militarize and escalate situations that call for social service intervention.
5. There are viable existing and potential alternatives to policing for every area in which police engage.

MPD150's work and protests around Super Bowl LII led to the Reclaim the Block coalition with Black Visions Collective and others. This coalition successfully lobbied city leaders to move \$1.1 million of new funding from MPD's budget to public health and safety initiatives. The second year that Reclaim the Block came together was less successful and the desired divestment from MPD was not carried out. Shim noted that strong coalitions are necessary and possible for future success; they drew connections between issues that are all rooted in systems of oppression and called on participants to come together to imagine a new world.

MPD150 was in the process of sunsetting the organization when MPD murdered George Floyd, necessitating the continuation of the organization as a public interest group since Reclaim the Block and Black Visions were already in place to provide information to newly energized and radicalized Minnesotans.

They were able to help people understand charter commissions and budgets because of past strategy work in these areas and had enough of a track record to be trusted by community leaders. This new platform has given Reclaim the Block both increased accountability to the community and increased opportunities for collaboration and inclusion. Inclusion and sustainability are at the heart of the movement work of Reclaim the Block.

"If the movement isn't big enough to not cannibalize any one of us, then we haven't made it broad enough yet."

- Jae Hyun Shim

A community member once noted that she did not want to be part of any movement that was not big enough for her grandma. The zero sum game approach to US politics combined with capitalism's prioritization of output and productivity over human beings supports toxic work cycles within movement work that can lead to burnout and in-fighting for resources. Since we are all impacted by systems of oppression more than we are not affected, 2020 is the year to reimagine how we interact with each other.

"The things that are scary and big that we couldn't do before, this is the chance for us to do it."

- Jae Hyun Shim

A Movement Big Enough for Our Grandmothers

A 24-hour news cycle, social media, and day-to-day work can make meaningful political reform at a national level feel like an impossible challenge during the best of times, let alone during a pandemic. Still, the challenge must be faced and can be faced.

Oppressive systems persist when we fight each other or compete for resources or the prestige of doing the most. Much like voting, it is important to remember that civic engagement is about our collective community and is an ongoing discussion, not a contest. Once we approach policy reform in proactive ways, we can begin to build rather than react. At some point, everyone will be adversely impacted by non-inclusive policies but we can unite over more than fear. By looking for connections and commonalities across communities, we can move forward.

In the webinar, Ekta Prakash, CEO of CAPI USA, shared examples of current ways to engage at different levels to preserve and improve the US political process. The common thread in all of these is participation; the policies these actions affect will impact everyone, so it is in everyone's best interest to engage.

Voting and completing the census are crucial to the success of our communities in our current representative government in a changing world. While the mechanisms behind them are imperfect (the founders of the United States were unable to imagine a country that could function without chattel slavery; they could not have imagined the country and world as we know it today), they are the current processes through which communities access representation, resources and decision-making power. If we cede these processes and do not see them as an opportunity to win the changes our communities need, others will. Past policy has actively leveraged these tools to silence, erase, and even eradicate Black, Indigenous, Latinx and Asian people; in the face of this history, claiming our power as respective voting blocs shows, in the oppressors' own language, that we are here and we have power.

Important coalitions and networks have formed to build power, including Ignite Minnesota's Asian Power (IMAP), which is led by CAPI and the Asian American Organizing Project. IMAP seeks to organize across languages, communities, and cultures. CAPI is also partnering with Vietnamese Social Services, Karen Organization of Minnesota, Hmong Americans for Justice, Pillsbury United Communities, and Comunidades Organizando el Poder y Accion Latina to build coalitions and understanding within and outside of the Asian community.



In 2020, CAPI USA is leading Get Out The Vote (GOTV) work through phone banking and mailers in languages spoken by voters. While these are showing an increase in participation, it takes everyone to get everyone to the polls. Individuals can help within their own communities as well by volunteering to translate ballots, helping neighbors and community members get to the polls, acting as a voter agent (one person may drop off absentee ballots for up to 3 other individuals), or even canvassing or serving as an election judge.

In many cases, community members are likely already doing at least a few of these actions for family members. Above all, individuals can normalize voting within their communities. Personal connections have more impact than phone calls from strangers so, the more the process of voting is treated as integral to our lives, the more our communities will be represented.

Additionally, we can use our power to create long-lasting positive change by normalizing voting but rejecting the individual contest nature of political office. CAPI's Get Out The Vote work is non-partisan, which places the focus on the process rather than specific candidates or political parties.

This is important since the integrity of and representation within the political process is what is truly at stake; as Commissioner Ferndado points out, policy makers are fallible.

It is important to remember that policy creation does not need to be a fight and those who rely on a fear based or "might makes right" approach have historically had the least to contribute to a sustainable, inclusive society. Just as no individual can destroy our communities alone, no individual can save our communities alone; the tools and support to organize and engage our communities exist in ways that everyone can use them. In doing this work, we must strive to avoid the trap of rebuilding what already exists and rely on stories that give voice and power to the solutions we need, rooted in reimagining a democracy where all communities are visible, included and fully engaged in systemic decisions that impact their lives.

As Asian American voters seek a sense of belonging, we must look to shared values across communities rather than specific political parties.

In this way, we can create a more representative system that provides safety and inclusion for everyone and their grandmother.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

The issues raised during this session persist beyond any single election cycle, as Asian Americans in Minnesota continue to grow as a voting bloc. As we look beyond 2020 and into the future of Asian Americans' year-round political power, the following questions outline critical ongoing topics for further exploration:

- 1.** As Asian Americans become a more identifiable voting bloc, increasingly showing up for one party and aligning on issues, how do we build narratives that recognize these trends while also naming and tackling the diversity and divisions that exist?
 - 1a.** While polls have shown that Asian Americans overwhelmingly acknowledge the discrimination Black people face and support the Black Lives Matter movement, there is also a need to address anti-Blackness, inter-community divisions and lack of solidarity. How do we build on the former while not obscuring or ignoring the latter?
 - 1b.** Similarly, during this election cycle, a growing amount of attention was paid to ethnic specific groups' support for Trump, despite an overall trend of communities voting for the Democratic Party. How can we address and discuss the reasons for right-wing support showing up in communities without fueling an inaccurate picture of all Asian Americans' positions as either conservative or politically uninformed?
 - 1c.** Asian Americans increasingly vote in line with one party, yet this is by no means a guaranteed bloc of support for any candidate, especially without meaningful engagement long before a presidential election year. How can we avoid being taken for granted and move toward real power and influence?
- 2.** As more leaders with deep community roots and connections to organizers run for office and win, what opportunities are opening to reimagine what co-governance with communities could look like?
- 3.** Some systems cannot be immediately dismantled without adverse effects on vulnerable populations. How do we work to reduce the power of these systems while ensuring the safety of our community?
- 4.** How can we meaningfully engage and learn from community members who are often left out of policy decisions (such as elders) and involve them in reimagining and re-creating the truly democratic processes we need?

Summary by Jon F. Jee

REFLECTION

by Ka Ly

The truth is that voting is not that easy. For me, it was not a possibility until last year. I didn't know if this would ever become a reality so when it finally became a reality, I was proud to get out and vote. I quickly found in the process that there was more to it than just casting a ballot. It's intimidating and you're basically responsible for making a big decision that trickles into bigger decisions. I know first hand just how significant a vote is because I spent the majority of my life feeling powerless when policies were created to limit my body, my life, and my future.

I remember not being able to vote on marriage equality. I had to reconcile within myself not being fully out and simultaneously encouraging my Hmong and Asian LGBTQ community to have the audacity to imagine our futures at a time when we were consistently told that we weren't real. I pleaded with all of my family and friends who could to get out and vote because this would actually create a pathway in my life that didn't exist before.

I remember not being able to vote for our first Black president yet still feeling the weight of this triumphant history being made. By the end of President Obama's second term, I was among those critical of his policies, especially around immigration. Then the 2016 elections came. I have never experienced such a level of devastation in what followed. In my immigration journey, I never had real fears of being separated from my family throughout, but this was what our government was doing to immigrant children and families, adoptees, and refugees.

I didn't think things could get more dire but it did. 2020 proved that we needed each other more than ever, in ways I could not have imagined. The spread of COVID-19 and anti-Asian racism escalated and it seemed like everything was getting canceled except crisis and injustice. By spring, George Floyd was murdered and too many more. Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery. Asian Minnesotans were reminded of a long pattern of injustice that took the lives of Philando Castile, Jamar Clark, Chiasher Fong Vue, Jason Yang, and Fong Lee.

After all that we had endured, I thought I was in too much despair to engage. This is where CAAL's State of Asian Minnesotans Fired Up and Ready to Take Action was so timely. It was just the kind of pep rally assembly I needed, bringing critical data, real stories, and bold visions where Asian American voices do make a difference. I didn't know it then but this event would inspire and mark my own kick off, leading me to spend hundreds of hours volunteering in the first presidential election that I could vote in.

I couldn't be idle at the sidelines. Being a queer nonbinary Hmong womxn, I face many exclusions, so it's always been challenging to engage with my community on issues. I'm here because of people who came before me and cared about the promise of possibility for people like me whether they knew me or not. Now it was my turn and I had to make it count.

This meant that I had to become a more informed voter; it was just as important as voting itself. I would cross-check the news I would see on my social media feed for accuracy and bias coverage. I researched candidates in some of the most diverse election races ever. registration and voter rights so that I could help others. I committed to phonebanking every week to engage in real conversations

and I talked to my family and friends. I worked on campaigns to engage Hmong voters. Wherever I put my energy, it was a decision I made with my family, friends, and communities in mind.

Although I thought I was exhausted, getting involved reenergized me instead. It gave me reasons to not give up on conversations and people that I care about. Just like anything new at first, the more practice, the less intimidating it gets, and the more confident we become. The more people I talked to, the less scary it was, and the more confident I felt having conversations with my family and friends. As the election results continue to come, I feel optimistic but know it can't stop there. We need people in office who care about our issues and we can't let them forget that once we elect them. We need our communities to talk to each other more. We are going to need each other to continue building futures that have all of us. For now, I'm taking a breather so that I can engage again.



THE STATE OF
Asian Minnesotans

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