

Benefits and Challenges of Language Access in Voting: Analyzing Testimonies From Asian American Voters in Los Angeles County

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POLICY INITIATIVE

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Center for Asian Americans United for Self Empowerment

Executive Summary

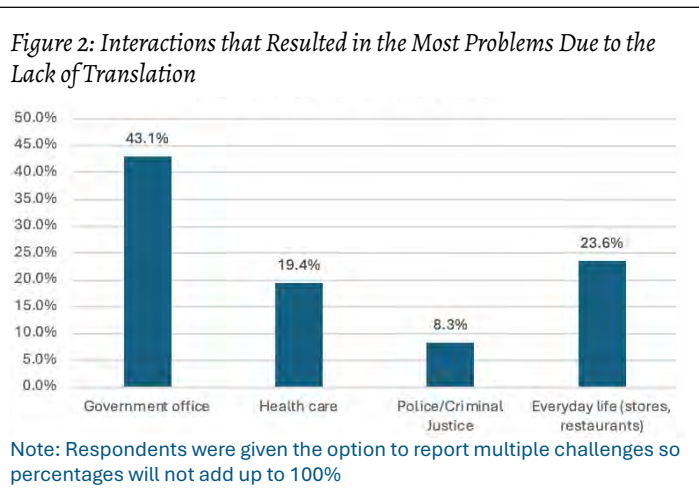
Providing language translation and assistance for voting is critical for properly ensuring that Asian immigrant communities experience equitable access. But this study finds that effective implementation of language access in voting requires more complex efforts beyond simply providing Asian language translations of materials. Respondents reported a belief that the voting process is overall difficult and advantages English dominant speakers. Many Asian American voters are still unaware that translated materials are available. Most strikingly, there appears to be a belief held among many immigrant voters that English ballots are more legitimate compared to translated ballots. Overall we find that generating greater trust and confidence in voting is critical to ensuring more voter participation among immigrant families.

Key Findings

Language Related Challenges Characterize Interactions with Government

Our respondents shared that within Asian American immigrant families, English competency is quite varied with some who have family members who cannot interact at all in English to others who have family members that can speak limited English. Figure 1 (see page 5) shares how respondents defined their family members' English fluency.

As a result, English speaking family members typically assist non-English speaking family members when interacting outside of the home. When respondents were asked what types of interactions they had when language/translation posed the most severe problems, the top most cited was interactions with government offices (see Figure 2). We also note that translation problems in health care contexts was another top reported interaction.



Recognition of the Value of Language Access

Given the challenges Asian American immigrant families face related to language access, we found that Asian American respondents overwhelmingly believed in the importance of language access, especially for voting. For example, a Vietnamese American respondent (age 20) noted:

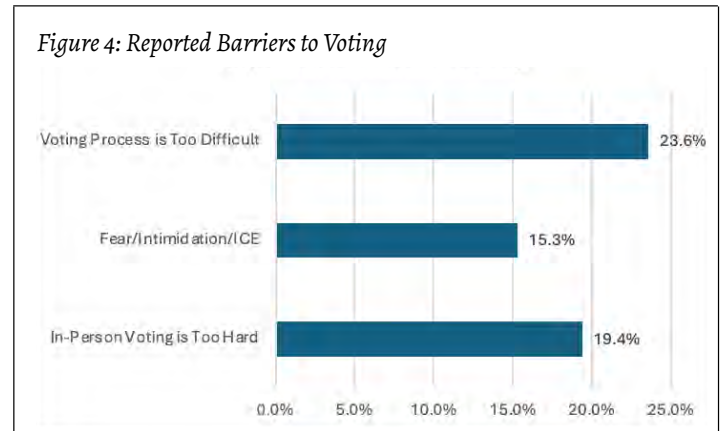
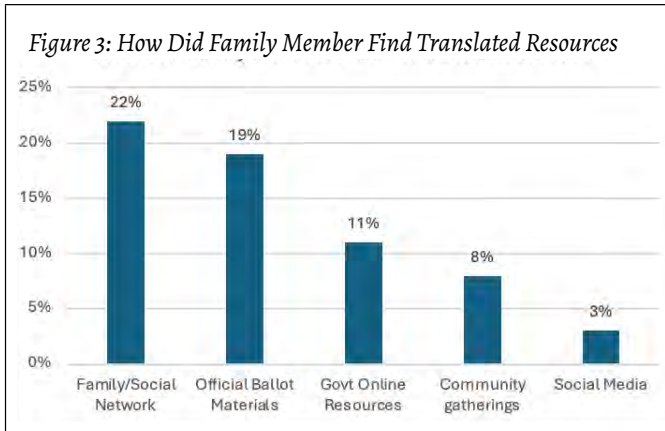
"We should all have the right to understand what's given to us when performing our most American citizenship duties."

Respondents also noted the symbolic gesture of inclusion that language access offers to immigrants:

"You're giving a certain level of dignity to that voter. You're letting them know that we want you to be as informed as possible, and we want to communicate what's on this ballot as clearly as possible... It just would go a long way with making the voter feel comfortable and feel like they matter." (Filipino American, 55)

Many, but not All, Respondents Were Aware that Language Access Resources Exist

Over half of our respondents interviewed (54%) reported that their immigrant family members knew that translated voting resources were available to them. Most of those who knew about translated voting resources learned about these resources from their family and friends although many reported learning about these resources directly from official communications from local government offices (See Figure 3). Yet, the other half of respondents reported that either their family did not know such resources existed or did not know what resources their family knew about. This suggests that further efforts could be made to educate voters about available resources.



Translations Only Solve Part of the Problem: Voting Requires Knowledge and Comfort with Political Issues which Advantage English Dominant Speakers

We asked respondents to share what they saw as the top challenges of voting with some of the top responses related to the difficulty of casting a ballot. Three top reasons were 1) the belief the voting process overall is too complex to understand; 2) the belief that casting an in-person ballot is difficult and 3) fear of intimidation (see Figure 4).

We argue that reason of the voting process being too complex/difficult relates to the challenges many immigrant families face trying to navigate the American voting process and strongly corresponds with language access constraints. Our respondents shared that comfort with voting is not simply a matter of translating documents but also requires a clear understanding of the voting process and the items on the ballot:

“It’s really difficult to get help sometimes when you don’t even know where to start and how to fill out these forms” (Chinese-Vietnamese American, age 23)

“If you’re not comfortable with the language--like you could have all the materials that you need in your own language--but once you reach a polling station where they’re going to interact with you in English, and everything there is in English. I think that might discourage some immigrants.” (Korean American, age 47)

However, it is important to note that many respondents identified barriers to voting related to in-person voting. These answers reflect a strong belief that voting is conducted only in-person. At the same time, perhaps research can be conducted to better understand Asian American families’ awareness and perceived effectiveness of universal vote-by-mail in California.

Perceptions of Fear and Uncertainty Inform Reasons to Cast a Ballot

Another top reported challenge of voting was related to a fear of intimidation. These interviews were conducted in early 2026 during a context when immigration enforcement and policing were at the top of mind. But in addition to concerns related to immigration enforcement and policing, respondents also shared other important reasons for why their families hesitated from voting:

“Just to be not intimidated to vote, because many come from countries that they were oppressed, and they feel like if they vote, they can be retaliated at. They should know that that doesn't happen. That shouldn't happen in this country. That voting is a right that they have particularly if you're a citizen in this country.” (Chinese-Indonesian American, age 56)

“So if we don't understand fully, we don't want to risk our vote to any side.” (Chinese American, age 20)

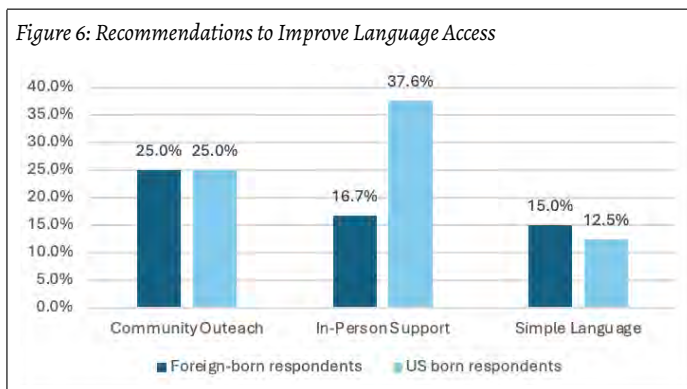
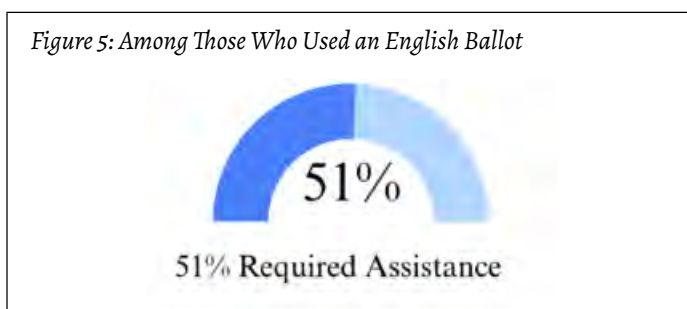
Belief that Translated Ballots are Less Trustworthy Compared to English Language Ballots

One unexpected finding was that many respondents shared that their families preferred to use the English ballots even though they were not confident users of English. But their preference for English ballots was due to a concern that the translated ballots were either not accurate or would be less likely to be counted:

"I think that it would make them a bit wary, on whether the neutrality of the tone is going to be maintained in the translation. (Korean American, age 20)

“But I also wonder how that will be perceived. Will their votes be perceived as legitimate?” (Japanese American, age 56)

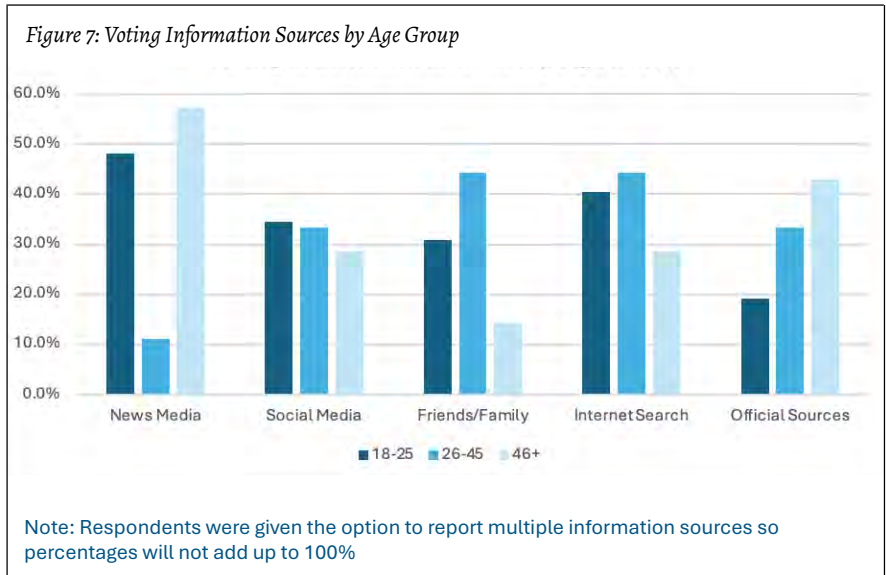
So while we did find that many Asian American families reported preference for using English ballots, this preference hides the fact that most families still need language assistance to vote. 51% of respondents said that family members who used an English ballot still asked for language assistance at home (see Figure 5).



Respondents' Recommendations on How to Improve Language Access for Voting

We asked respondents for their recommendations on how to ease voting and improve language access for Asian American voters. The three most common recommendations were 1) increasing more in-person translation help; 2) increasing more outreach into community spaces and 3) using more simple English in formal documents. Interestingly we found that respondents who were American born were more likely to suggest the need for more in-person translation help. This may speak to their own experiences with their family members given that nearly all respondents shared how their immigrant families rely on one another to understand English communications (see Figure 6).

Since education campaigns were often cited as suggested recommendations, we also learned about the different ways Asian American families obtain information about voting. We found some generational differences (See Figure 7). College aged respondents reported to rely on news sources and internet searches while working age adults were more likely to rely on internet searches and friends and family. Older respondents relied on news and official sources from the Registrar and local officials. This information can be useful when targeting different age groups with voter education campaigns.



Data and Methodology

Findings presented in this report were derived from in-depth interviews with 72 Asian American respondents who were registered voters in Los Angeles County and who were members of immigrant families where at least one family member did not speak English fluently. Respondents conducted a 30-40 minute interview to offer their reflections and testimonies regarding voting and the need for translated materials. Interviews were collected between February and March 2026. Our research team employed a systematic coding analysis of the answers in order to identify shared patterns across respondents.



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The views expressed herein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the University of California, Los Angeles. The authors alone are responsible for the content of this report. Read additional related research briefs here: <https://www.aasc.ucla.edu/aapipolicy/default.aspx> The UCLA Asian American Studies Center (AASC) launched its Asian American & Pacific Islander (AAPI) Policy Initiative in the midst of the pandemic in 2021. We build on our long history as a recognized leader in Asian American Studies with a track record of excellence in applied policy research, publications, and leadership development. The aim of the AAPI Policy Initiative is to support and produce research in collaboration with nonprofit advocacy organizations and policy makers to uplift AAPI perspectives in civic life and public decision-making in California and across the nation. As a nonpartisan research entity housed under AASC, the AAPI Policy Initiative will conduct applied research, develop and disseminate research reports and policy briefs, collaborate with stakeholders in policy formulation, conduct implementation and policy evaluation, and facilitate engagement between stakeholders, policy makers, and government decision-makers.



Figure 1: Definitions of Non-Fluency in English

<h1>Definitions of Non-Fluency in English Include:</h1>	
<p>1) Unable to speak or read English at all; may speak very broken English.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individual would have difficulty getting around and getting what they need (ex: at the grocery store)• Cannot express themselves or engage in basic conversations	<p>2) Communicates in limited English proficiency as a non-native speaker. May mix English with another language, or speak with an accent.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• May be able to read and write, but cannot handle a full conversation in English or understand official documents• Can speak English with family only, but not with anyone else
<p>3) Requires translation help for comprehension, due to struggles with grammar and confidence while speaking English.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limited understanding, but can still comprehend English• Not proficient with academic writing or technical language• May stutter while speaking	<p>4) Can handle daily conversations without problem but struggles with documents, forms, letters, and complex vocabulary.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficult documents include: government letters, medical forms, and legal documents• Struggles with being able to handle the formal aspects of reading and writing English