NNAAC
**NATIONAL NETWORK FOR
ARAB AMERICAN COMMUNITIES**

2024 ARAB AMERICAN VOTING BEHAVIORS REPORT

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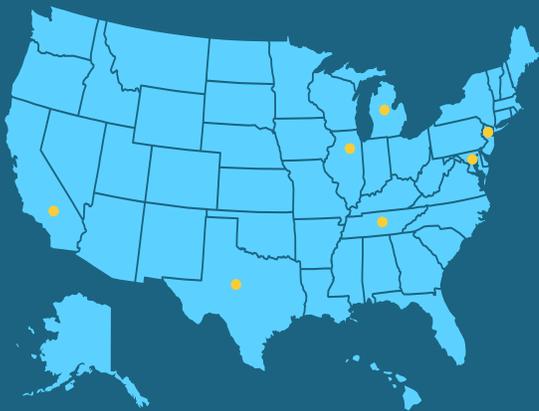
INTRODUCTION

The National Network for Arab American Communities (NNAAC) is a consortium of 36 independent Arab American organizations across the country.

NNAAC works to improve the lives of Arab Americans through many facets, including amplifying their voices and improving representation.

In 2023, 14 NNAAC members across seven states: California, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Tennessee, and Texas, conducted focus groups to better understand voting behavior in the Arab American community.

The purpose of the focus groups is to better understand voting behavior in the Arab American community including the motivations for voting as well as any barriers or frustrations. The findings are to help guide the voter engagement work being conducted at NNAAC organizations and more broadly voter engagement work in Arab American communities.

METHODS

This project engaged 14 NNAAC members across seven states. The NNAAC member organizations included in the project are as follows:

- Arab American Association of New York
- Arab American Civic Council
- Arab American Family Services
- Arab American Heritage Council
- ACCESS
- Access California Services
- ACCESS of Western New York
- Civic Ark
- Culturingua
- Elmahaba Center
- Middle Eastern Immigrant and Refugee Alliance
- Palestinian American Community Center
- Syrian Community Network
- Somali Family Services

Learn more about our NNAAC members.

Thirty-six focus group recordings were included in the analysis. Eleven of those were conducted in **Arabic**, one conducted in **Somali** and the remaining 24 in **English**. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

A thematic analysis was conducted by ACCESS's Office of Evaluation and Learning (OEL). OEL staff facilitated a conversation for the analysis team to identify key takeaways individually on sticky notes and then share these on a large flip chart and have a discussion. The notes and ideas from the discussions were organized into key themes.

36 Focus groups

7 States

3 Languages

DEMOGRAPHICS

330
Participants

22%
Reported
never voting

33%
Reported
always voting

Language spoken by participants
> 188 participants reported speaking both English and Arabic.
> 71 reported speaking Arabic only and 61 English only.

Where participants live
Most participants registered for focus groups with organizations in:
- California (77)
- New York (65)
- Michigan (57)

Nationalities of participants
- Egyptian (57)
- Palestinian (56)
- Lebanese (47)
- Yemeni (37)
- Iraqi (35)
- Somali (33)
- Syrian (24)
- Moroccan (6)
- Libyan (5)
- Jordanian (5)
- Algerian (3)
- Lebanese/Palestinian (3)
- Tunisian (2)
- Other Arab American (19)

Average age
> The average age of participants was 39, with the majority falling in the 24 and under range and the 35 to 44 range.

KEY RESULTS

Language Access is a Barrier to Voting

Language access is a clear barrier to voting. While some materials related to the election and voting process have been made available in Arabic, this is not consistent across places in the U.S. with a large Arab American presence. This includes ballots, signage outside of voting locations, voter information, and information on candidates.

Though ballots are available in Arabic in some locations, the translations are not easily understood and accessible by voters due to the technical terminology. Participants also discussed literacy levels and accessibility for those who speak Arabic as their first language but may not read Arabic —they would need a translator or audible option to understand the ballot.

" *Family and community members with limited education or who recently came to the country will have a hard time understanding the initiatives presented or the programs of the agenda of the candidates."* **– Michigan**

Community Involvement is Important

Participants expressed a desire for more in-person community involvement, but many were unsure of how to get engaged outside of elections, felt frustrated by a lack of impact despite participation.

" *The reason we stay involved is that as a group, our voice would be heard better than individually. And to help one another and provide information that the activists and the community try to pass through to the community. So involvement in the community is very essential."* *- New York*

KEY RESULTS

Information on Candidates

Arab Americans want more information on those running for office. Younger generations turn to social media, while the older generation looks to traditional media. Voter outreach is important to the community, with varying preferences on how that should be done (text messages, phone calls).

> However, the majority considered door-knocking to be uncomfortable and overwhelming and described it as intimidating and invasive.

" Usually if it's mainstream media...you can't really believe much of anything. Especially with a lot of the recent events going on in Palestine. You know, extremely racist, extremely Islamophobic."
– California

Representation and Collective Interests Play a Critical Role in Voting Decisions

Arab Americans want candidates that represent them – both in identity and in interests. They think the path to getting there would be unity and the community turning out to elections.

Many participants felt it was important for Arab Americans to be represented in various areas of society including in politics to make sure their voices are heard and have a representative who will be a voice for the community.

" I'll vote when the candidates don't make me feel like a second class citizen because I'm Arab American."
- New York

KEY RESULTS

Voting Experiences Abroad Influences Some Arab Americans' Voting Tendencies

The lack of hope or trust in the electoral process is often rooted in people's experiences with elections in their countries of origin. Participants mentioned that those elections fail to bring about any real change. Participants expressed that engaging in politics overseas is not safe and often leads to problems, thus they choose not to participate in voting in the U.S.

I always say that we didn't have a good relationship with our government, like in our countries. So people when they come here, they still have all of these like mentality that I want to stay away from anything related to politics." – Illinois

Participants Have Lost Trust in the Media

Arab Americans have lost trust in the media because of how it has portrayed Arab Americans and Arab concerns, such as human rights in Palestine. They also express a lack of trust in the entire system, more commonly among young people.

Participants expressed how the lack of trust and initiative by candidates is the main cause of the lack of awareness among Arab American communities, and how fear is often driven by a lack of trust.

Many were hesitant and unmotivated to vote again after voting for candidates who failed to uphold their promises, work for the community, or achieve anything.

We don't see any difference after the candidates win in the elections, so most Arabs do not vote because candidates do not care about the Arab community. - Illinois

KEY RESULTS

Arab Americans Care Deeply About the Impact of Elections on People Abroad

Not only did participants discuss the lack of direct benefits of elections on the Arab American community, but they also discussed elections in terms of their influence on their home countries, Palestine, and people in the Middle East in general.

Participants expressed frustrations with the negative effects of American politics on the Middle East. Even if they participated in elections, they stated that there would be no change in the U.S. foreign policies. Participants expressed a lack of faith in the American political system and mentioned that regardless of who they voted for, the negative outcomes resulting from U.S. policies on the Middle East are not going to change.

The outcomes of U.S. policies on the Middle East is either leading Arab Americans to vote or creating apathy and frustration.

"I feel like everybody's against us. Why vote?"
– New Jersey

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the conversations we had and findings from these conversations, though are not generalizable to the broader community.

Efforts aimed at increasing civic engagement and voter participation for immigrant communities of Arab and MENA origins must be culturally sensitive to the immigrant experience and understanding of people's backgrounds and past experiences with voting, elections, and politics in general.

Strategies, programs, and materials to reach those communities should be developed and tailored in a way that resonates with the cultural contexts of immigrant communities, and that includes consideration of unique barriers, challenges, knowledge, and perceptions around elections.

- In-person voter engagement and text/phone calls as reminders
- Culturally sensitive civic engagement efforts
- Community education on electoral system and process, election laws, and ways in which their engagement could lead to an impact
- Language access is essential

CONCLUSION

These focus groups played an important role in shedding light on voting barriers within the Arab American community. Engaging diverse groups of Arab American individuals helped us gain an initial understanding of voting behaviors and identify some key recommendations and areas for improvement.

Similar efforts in the future should prioritize identifying target audiences, particularly individuals who have never voted, to ensure that their concerns are adequately voiced.

The insights gained from these focus groups serve as a crucial starting point, however, it is clear that more research and conversations on Arab American civic engagement and voting behaviors are needed, in an aim to gain a deeper understanding of these matters and further inform evidence-based strategies and recommendations.

QUESTIONS?

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