

FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

From Research to Practice, a column dedicated to recognizing successful “bridges” between researchers and practitioners, reports on research with practical implications for youth civic engagement. Additionally, it presents concrete examples of how practitioners have applied this research to encourage the participation of young people in civic and political life.

FOCUS ON ASIAN AMERICAN YOUTH VOTING

In 2000, about 34 percent of Asian American youth turned out to vote. This is slightly higher than the turnout of either Native American or Latino youth, but significantly less than African American and White youth. This year a number of organizations are targeting Asian American youth to get out the vote.

One of the biggest efforts is being led by the coalition Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote 2004 (APIAVote). APIAVote includes over ten national nonpartisan organizations that encourage civic and electoral participation among the Asian and Pacific Islander American community. APIAVote is working in alliance with Greek-lettered societies and the National Asian American Student Conference to train young organizers on campuses and in communities. Janelle Hu, the National Director of APIAVote, says that recruiting enthusiastic youth has been easy this year. “Young people are incredibly energized for this upcoming election...They want to show that Asian Pacific Islander Americans are serious about participating in American democracy.” The experiences of young APIA organizers reinforce CIRCLE findings that peer-to-peer contact is a powerful tool for getting youth to the polls. “Obviously, direct contact is the best method,” says Hu. Like many youth voter mobilization campaigns, APIAVote is looking to college campuses to form the backbone of its organizing campaign. However, in order to utilize the power of direct contact to reach non-college youth, student organizers are also returning to their home communities to reconnect with friends and neighbors who may not be college bound. Organizers are supplementing face-to-face contact with youth-friendly technology like text messages, instant messages, and personalized emails. “APIA youth are really mobilized in online communities,” explains Hu. “They are instant messaging their friends, reminding them to register and to vote.”

Another organization focused on mobilizing Asian youth is South Asian American Voting Youth or SAAVY. SAAVY is entirely youth-run, with a director and board all under the age of 31. Like APIAVote, SAAVY relies on peer contact, training South Asian youth organizers on selected campuses to target young voters in colleges and communities. SAAVY organizers also encourage young people to reach out to their parents and families so that voter outreach can expand in the South Asian community. Taz Ahmed, founder and director of SAAVY, explains that going door-to-door is not always the most effective form of direct contact,

particularly if your target community does not all live in one same area. Instead, she relies on a strategy of outreach to Asian community organizations and campus groups in order to form pan-Asian coalitions. “No one has ever done pan-Asian organizing, and we’re doing it kind of by default, because there aren’t enough [other young Asian organizers] out there,” says Ahmed. The responses she has received from young people have been very positive. “Everyone gets really excited when they see another South Asian sitting at the table...It’s been such an ignored community that when it comes to voter registration, people don’t feel used. They feel excited which helps to overcome any apathy about voting.”

What are the challenges in reaching Asian American youth? In a new CIRCLE Working Paper, Dr. Janelle Wong emphasizes the need to pay attention to differences among Asian American communities, and to plan outreach strategies accordingly. Her study looks at voter outreach efforts in Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Indian, and Japanese American communities. Dr. Wong found that the geographic and political contexts of communities made for distinctions in language preferences and in receptivity to types of contact. She hypothesizes that communities with a strong ethnic identification, including an active ethnic press and strong ethnic community organizations, may be the most responsive to GOTV contact.

However, some challenges do transcend neighborhoods and languages. For example, Janelle Hu emphasizes that in peer-to-peer campaigns targeting Asian American youth, young organizers need to become comfortable with outreach techniques before they start knocking on doors or dialing numbers. “You really need to take time and let them sit down and practice,” says Hu. “It’s the only way they will be empowered when they go out.” ★

For more information on voter outreach to Asian American youth see:

- CIRCLE Working Paper “Getting Out the Vote among Asian American Young People and Adults in Los Angeles County: A Field Experiment” by Dr. Janelle Wong, available at www.civicyouth.org
- APIAVote 2004: www.apia.vote.org, info@apiavote.org
- South Asian American Voting Youth (SAAVY): www.saaavy.org, taz@saaavy.org