



THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
COLLABORATIVE

facilitated by  THE NEW YORK IMMIGRATION COALITION

Engaging Immigrant New York City

Policy Recommendations





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With nearly 40% of New York City's residents being foreign-born and over 60% speaking a language other than English at home, we have the opportunity to fully engage these newcomers from all over the globe – Latin America, Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East - in our civic and electoral processes. ⁱ

New York City houses over 40% of all voters in the state, but with the continued lack of language accessibility, understanding of the electoral process, and challenges regarding accessibility at the polls, New York City's immigrants continue to be civically disengaged and, in turn, unable to fully integrate into the fabric of our city. About 20% or 1,480,072 of all registered voters in New York are "New American"- naturalized citizens or the U.S.-born children of immigrants. ⁱⁱ

Almost every election year in recent history has had dwindling voter turnout rates; the decision of selecting representation is left in the hands of a few rather than the whole. When Immigrant voters do turn out to the polls, they are inhibited by poorly-trained poll workers, difficulty navigating the voting process, and still-extant language barriers.

While New York City has been a leader in engaging its residents civically, we must do more to engage our newest New Yorkers and citizens, and ensure the creation and expansion of programs to holistically integrate all residents to self-determination. Engaging immigrant voters in the electoral process offers a unique opportunity to fundamentally change the dynamics of civic engagement in New York City.

The Civic Engagement Collaborative's *Engaging Immigrant New York City* campaign seeks to increase accessibility of the electoral system by improving access to information, educating and engaging immigrants and all New Yorkers.

Recommendations:

1. Improving and Expanding Language Access in Elections
2. Expansion of Student Voter Registration Day
3. Engaging with Local Communities through Participatory Budgeting

1. Improving and Expanding Language Access in Elections

Language access plans are often poorly implemented in New York City. A recent AALDEF study found that poll workers frustrated, rather than helped, the voting process. ⁱⁱⁱ Poorly translated websites often mislead or confuse voters. AALDEF researchers also found that New York City poll workers denied voters their right to vote by provisional ballot, which is guaranteed under HAVA.

Recommendation: The Civic Engagement Collaborative 2015 Policy Agenda includes expanding language access in elections. The City's Department of Education provides materials for parents in the 9 most common languages, and the Mayor's Office is working to translate voter registration forms into these languages for their agency-based registration efforts. The City Board of Elections and NYC Campaign Finance Board should also provide voter education materials in all nine languages. The languages we recommend all voting materials be translated into are: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian, Spanish and Urdu.

Additionally, the Civic Engagement Collaborative recommends that there be extensive training and administrative improvements to the language access plans around elections. There must be better coordinated translation at poll sites, so that the interpreters of appropriate languages are smartly allocated to communities where those languages are primarily spoken. Our Collaborative will also work to improve poll worker training and administration, to ensure that poll workers are not violating the Voting Rights Act or the Help America Vote Act.

2. Expansion of Student Voter Registration Day

Student Voter Registration Day (SVRD) was created to engage New York City High School students on civic and electoral processes. Launched on March 20, 2015 in 25 High Schools across the five boroughs of NYC, SVRD educated over 10,000 students and registered 2,000 new voters in one day. SVRD is a program urgently needed to combat low youth voting – which was an abysmal 11% in the 2013 NYC Mayoral election (ages 18-29)^{iv} – and tackle voter apathy head on through dialogue and education. SVRD was inclusive to all students, without regard to status, providing information on different immigration services and assistance to students.

Recommendation: The Civic Engagement Collaborative 2015 Policy Agenda includes the expansion of Student Voter Registration Day across all New York City High Schools. SVRD’s pilot success can be seen through the amount of students reach and the number of youth registered to vote. The Civic Engagement Collaborative calls upon the NYC Council and the Department of Education to build upon this year’s success by implementing SVRD on a citywide scale.

3. Engaging with Local Communities through Participatory Budgeting

Participatory Budgeting (PB) has begun to transform New York City and demonstrate reflective democracy. PB is where community members decide how public City funding is allocated. Through PB, community-based consensus and decision-making practices are imperative to the process. This past 2014-2015 PB cycle, 24 NYC Council Districts participated where 51,362 ballots were cast. PB provides all community residents with the ability to engage civically in their neighborhood; 10% of voters were between the ages of 14-18, 20% of ballots were in a language other than English, and nearly 60% identified as people of color.

Recommendation: The New York City Council should continue to explore and expand participatory budgeting as a means to engage more New Yorkers – including immigrant communities – in the decision-making process for spending city taxpayer dollars in local communities. This should involve the active participation and support for community-based organizations to ensure representation of all communities. Additionally, the NYC Council should improve and expand language access in the participatory budgeting process.

ⁱ U.S. Census Bureau, 2009-2013 3-Year American Community Survey

^[1] Immigration Policy Center, “New Americans in New York: The Political and Economic Power of Immigrants, Latinos, and Asians in the Empire State” (Washington, D.C., 2013),

http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/New_American_Electorate_101410.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, “Language Access for Asian Americans Under the Voting Rights Act in the 2012 Elections” (New York, 2012), <http://aaldef.org/AALDEF%20Election%202012%20Interim%20Report.pdf>

^{iv} NYC Votes, New York City Campaign Finance Board, “Student Voter Registration Day Curriculum Guide” (March 2015), <http://www.nycfcfb.info/public/VRC/2015-SVRD-Curriculum.pdf>