

Bilingual Youth Voters: Explorative Interviews

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Project Overview

About

This field study explores the effectiveness of language access programs in reaching bilingual & Limited English Proficient (LEP) communities of San Mateo and Santa Clara County, California. Participants discuss voting experiences, challenges, and aspirations for the next general election.

Tasks & Deliverables

Preliminary Research, Screener Survey, Moderator Guide & Interview Notes, Data Maps, Final Report

Period

4 months

California in 2022

Translated sample ballots, vote info & ballots are available.

VRA Section 203 and Elections Code 14201 govern requirements for California to provide facsimile (sample reference) ballots in other languages. The state recognizes 27 unique languages.

How do I vote in my preferred language?

Voter registration & language preference for mailed information can be requested through the DMV, as well as SOS voter registration services. Online & print materials are available in required languages.

What about San Mateo & Santa Clara counties?

San Mateo County is required to recognize and support 7 non-English languages and, in Santa Clara County, 13 languages.

California goes beyond Section 203

In San Mateo County

- Language Access Advisory Committee seeks to represent 7 languages
- Accessible sample ballot & info book available in 3 languages, includes audio & web version
- Election Day services for 7 languages
- Spanish, Chinese, Filipino, (Burmese, Japanese, Korean, Hindi)

In Santa Clara County

- Outreach & Voter Language Workshops, represents 13 languages
- Website, sample ballot & info book available in 8 languages
- VBM application, Election Day services for 13 languages
- Spanish, Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, (Khmer, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Gujarati, Nepali, Panjabi, Tamil, Telugu)

Participants

Participants

Procedure

- 10 people took our survey and followed up to interview.
- We found first generation, bilingual voters interested in sharing their experiences with voting, civic engagement, and second language usage. All participants were registered to vote.

County of Residence

- 7 San Mateo County
- 3 Santa Clara County (San Jose)

Gender

- 5 Female
- 4 Male
- 1 Non-binary

Age Range

- 6 18-24
- 4 25-30

2nd Language Spoken

- 6 Spanish
- 2 Mandarin (Taiwanese)
- 2 Vietnamese



Who we found

Characteristics

- **Highly educated.** 9 participants are college graduates, or students.
- **Family driven.** 7 participants learned about civic responsibility from a family member. Others mentioned never discussing a vote with family.
- **Community driven.** 6 participants work in a civic role with LEP citizens.
- **Language skilled.** 9 participants use their second language with family and work.

Voting Activity

- **Active voters.** 3 voters are intrinsically motivated to help others vote.
- **Passive voters.** 5 voters rely on motivation from others to vote.
- **Bystanding voters.** 2 voters are concerned with community but are infrequently/not motivated to vote.

What we learned

Family is more influential than friends.

Supportive, dutiful family members drive voting activity for new voters in the family. Encouraging vote activity among distanced friend groups is less effective.

Close-knit family and friend groups can be a forum for connecting with vote measures and actions. Participants in family/friendly, vote-related group activities may inspire accountability for each other's actions.

“When I turned 18, my mom was like, ‘Oh did you register to vote?’ I don’t think I can go around and convince my friends from Los Angeles to vote in their counties.” (03, age 20)

“[My brother’s wife] is all the way in Hawaii.... I could just tell her I did [vote], and not. If she was like, right there, next to me, then I would probably vote.” (08, age 30)

Language builds trust with LEP voters.

Bilingual youth often act as a translator and, in some cases, as a “vote information expert” for LEP family members.

A lot of burden is placed on a translator with limited civics or voter vocabulary, including LEP voters. This requires translated materials to be accessible to both bilingual & LEP voters.

Challenges translating a ballot, in Vietnamese:

“I usually help my parents translate documents and the voter ballot and help them understand what it really means... my father is also not very literate in Vietnamese.” (07, age 18)

“It was difficult translating the word ‘bonds’ [bond issues]. We found the translation [of ballot information] on Google funny, we laughed amongst ourselves... not all of the words made complete sense, and it seemed like there wasn’t a third party there to check the translations.” (10, age 20)

Voter information discourse should be bilingual.

Bilingual & LEP voters learn how to vote from different social media, news, and information sources. Relying solely on printed materials from the elections office is not enough to engage voters.

There should be a medium or forum for both bilingual & LEP voters to get informed on voting in the same experience.

“My cousins and I like to sit around the dinner table and we all bring our information, and just talk about it. We watch videos together... quick little one minute videos and take the time to sit there and compare our ballots. My cousins are really interested in voting, we’ll sit and debate on what to vote. We don’t see it as a right or wrong answer, but we get to sit together and talk about real life things.” (04, age 23)

Outliers

Bystanding voters are less informed about the vote.

They seem reluctant to vote, but care about their community.

Perhaps these potential voters need peer support to make informed decisions or to share political opinions.

“Truthfully, my involvement is lackluster... compared to my colleagues and friends, I’m not very involved [in voting discussions].” (06, age 25)

“I would never know if my vote mattered in the long run. I can’t think of anything where I can say, ‘yeah, I did my part.’” (08, age 30)

Contact communities in spaces that matter.

Suggestions for community outreach include platforming vote information discussions in comfortable spaces.

Participants were all asked to share ideas on how voter information could be better distributed, if available in more languages. Overwhelmingly, suggestions included community fairs and familiar spaces where families and friends meet.

Challenges with canvassing experiences:

“I tried to work for the Census for three weeks... I didn’t like going to a random house, talking to random people.” (02, age 25)

“I think that’s too invasive for some families. Just because ‘Who is this person? I don’t want to answer’ ideas start to come up.” (05, age 28)

Questions to consider

Thoughts that came out of this research include...

How does low literacy in other languages affect interactions with translated materials? How effectively are these voters informed?

How do translation tasks pose other problems for translators, certified vs. non-credentialed translators?

How might an election office distribute voter information out to the public, in other languages, in person? Virtually? On Election Day & at Vote Centers? What seems to be working best?

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