

To: AAPI Progress and Education Fund

From: GBAO

Date: March 4, 2022

Topline Focus Group Findings

Focus Group Composition

Wednesday, February 9, 2022

- **Group 1:** Indian American swing voters (in English)
- **Group 2:** Asian American/Pacific Islander swing voters under 30 (in English)
- **Group 3:** Filipino American swing voters (in English)

Thursday, February 10, 2022

- **Group 4:** Chinese American swing voters (in Mandarin)
- **Group 5:** Korean American swing voters (in Korean)
- **Group 6:** Vietnamese American swing voters (in Vietnamese)

The purpose of these groups was to talk to specific AAPI communities across subethnicities and generations to learn their key issues, sources of news and information, and the impact of mis/disinformation. Qualitative research findings are directional and not projectable onto the population at large. Findings should be validated with survey research.

Each group consisted of 5 to 8 participants, a mix of gender and age, who identified as independents or soft partisans. The group of AAPI voters under 30 was a mix of college students and young professionals. We matched moderator and participant subethnicity where groups were made up of one subethnicity.

Below are some of our key findings from the focus groups.

Information Consumption

Despite strong concerns on issues like the economy and public safety, these swing voters acquire their information on these and other issues passively. They happen on these topics in conversations with friends and family, while browsing social media, or on the internet, following where the algorithm takes them. Few have a concrete list of sources they regularly get their news from or actively seek out news on these topics. Several also admit they only register the news on current affairs and politics during election seasons, when they see a surge in political news, and it is the only time they notice celebrities and other influencers talking about politics.



These voters also actively avoid engagement with others about politics online. They recount witnessing fights on messaging apps and social media over issues and choose not to get involved – avoiding confrontation online and according to one younger voter, not wishing to create a “toxic environment” by posting.

Participants view most news media as biased and seek balanced information. Voters find agreement on there being few news media companies that do not lean one way or the other, and the way to combat that is to watch multiple cable news channels or read different news sites to get a balance of biases. On discussing different reporting on the economy, one Filipino respondent said “One group would be, ‘Oh, it’s the best economy we’ve had. Best jobs market,’ and another group would say, ‘Oh, it’s the worst inflation.’” Knowing facts appear in a variety of sources with different leanings also makes them more credible.

For **consumers of non-English news**, many do not see mainstream in-language sources as partisan or influenced by outside or unknown interests. Instead, these offer perspective that cuts through the noise of mainstream English news and social media.

English news consumers, on the other hand, find it more difficult to make their way through the multitude of available sources – some don’t trust anything. News aggregators are popular among English news consumers as a way to gather information from a multitude of sources.

For **Filipino American participants**, rather than look at news coming from both sides, as in other groups, these voters rejected what they felt were extreme partisan sources like The Drudge Report, Hannity, Mother Jones, and Rachel Maddow.

Some stress that they avoid outlets they see as explicitly left- or right-leaning, like Hannity, Tucker Carlson, or Mother Jones, while others say they don’t stay away from any one source – even if they don’t believe everything at face value – they want exposure to all sides. Some participants also cite consuming news from global sources for added perspective, like Al Jazeera and BBC. Local news is also trusted by some and less likely to be viewed as biased.

YouTube is a widely used news platform for English speaking and in-language participants. Voters in every group, despite age, describe YouTube as a go-to news source but reasons for using it vary. The distrust of mainstream news outlets has pushed some to seek alternative information on YouTube – not necessarily from any one channel but from the platform broadly. Many get pushed to YouTube from a link from a friend or on social media. And some go there to watch local news or news clips from other organizations. Once there, many would be at the mercy of the algorithm, seeing recommended videos pop up, and often jump from one video to the next if the topic interests them.

Many **Vietnamese, Korean, and Mandarin dominant participants** rely on YouTube to get news in their native languages. For Korean speakers, this meant getting international Korean news broadcasts on YouTube and avoiding viral or far right content. Vietnamese YouTube channels were used by older Vietnamese participants, but younger participants felt the news on these channels is biased and sensational. Several Chinese participants reported YouTube as source of a supplementary information to WeChat and Facebook, where one reported seeing a video on Critical Race Theory and another on U.S. propaganda on Uighurs to destabilize China.

Participants report relying on social media for news, but some apps are more discredited than others. Voters across a number of groups recall seeing news on Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and group chats.

Older participants and **Mandarin and Vietnamese speakers** consider Facebook one of the more active mediums for news and information. But participants broadly report being turned off by the conflict between people that takes place on the platform.

Younger participants also mention Twitter and TikTok. While they aren't likely to believe just anything on these platforms since it is often "opinions" and "memes," when information is "trending" they are more likely to pick up on it.

WhatsApp is widely panned for information among **Indian American participants** who say they ignore forwarded messages, which too often include "irresponsible" and "false" information.

Korean American participants say group chats on platforms like KakaoTalk are just for "sharing opinions" and "not a source of news." Some report seeing links to YouTube and radio broadcasts in group chats but they were generally more likely to disregard social media (other than YouTube) for news.

Chinese American participants, however, generally trust their WeChat groups – whether groups focused on life, politics, or even choir. Through these chats they receive news and opinions about a plethora of topics – climate change, politics, the Chinese American community, political candidates, COVID, and more.

Ethnic media takes a number of forms – websites, social media, radio, newspapers – and the credibility of the outlets is evaluated differently within each community.

Chinese American participants: Local Houston-based Southern China Daily News was read by nearly everyone in this group and many sought out information from local Houston, or other Texas groups on WeChat. Many also looked to mainland Chinese news sites and platforms like Apple Daily, Shouhu, Tencent, Sina, Xinhua, and iTalkBB for more information. Some also read U.S.-based World Journal. Falun Gong-backed news outlets like The Epoch Times received more mixed reactions and questions about its credibility.

Korean American participants: Mainstream Korean news is generally credible with this group, like the Korea Times and Korean Daily, as well as Korean news anchors. Korean dominant participants also rely on YouTube to get news about the U.S. in Korean.

Vietnamese American participants: Unlike other groups, participants in this group rely on the radio in addition to internet-based sources. News outlets or groups that cover the local community are widely used and few question their credibility. These include outlets like local Dallas Vietnamese groups on social media and local radio stations like Saigon 900. However, there is a generational divide over Vietnamese

YouTube channels. Older participants watch the programs, but younger participants question their veracity.

Misinformation Impacts

These swing voters find it increasingly difficult to determine what is true or not. These voters admit that the extensive circulation of fake news makes it difficult to determine what is true and not, and that a lot of work is required to figure out what is right. One Filipino American voter described trading facts with a more conservative friend, saying, “I think that’s all you can do, is research it and make a decision.” While many said they fact check questionable information, when pushed for more examples, across the groups most just said they ignore the post or information, tuning in only to news that pertains directly to them. Says one Chinese American voter, “if it isn’t relevant to me, I’m not verifying it.”

Misinformation has eroded trust in elections. News about election and voter fraud and the January 6th Capitol riot is widespread with most of the news coming from online sources like YouTube and other social media, and people recount images of trashed ballots and news about faulty machines and double-counted ballots. However, outlets investigating these claims show that many of the examples brought up by participants have been debunked. Some participants also excused what happened on January 6th as only the actions of the far right. Few participants outright say Biden stole the election, but the extensive amount of information online on the topic and on social media feeds has left most voters with questions about the election and believing there was some amount of fraud, with one Korean American respondent saying “well, I try to watch the news from both sides, but I say, oh, that’s plausible.” Increased concerns of voter fraud could in turn lead to support for policies that suppress voting, including from the AAPI community.

On elections, our **young AAPI group** was more familiar with news around forms of voter suppression than fraud – the USPS being cut off, access to ballots, ballots being thrown away, and evidence that Trump did not win the election.

Indian American participants were most open to the idea of election fraud, with one claiming Trump stole the election, another noting there were discrepancies, and yet another saying Democrats who blamed Trump for stealing the election “turned around and did the exact same thing four years later and stole it back,” and a few questioned who was really behind the January 6th riots.

Misinformation is being used to pit communities against each other. Many note that the pandemic ignited greater racism against Asian Americans – not always against themselves or in Texas, but as a national problem. Participants recall images of Asian people and businesses being attacked because of ignorance and propelled by the names used by Trump and his followers to label the pandemic and misinformation about the virus’ origins.

Despite recognizing this information led to hate against an entire community, older, **non-English dominant Vietnamese and Chinese participants** were susceptible to false reports that African Americans were to blame for the discrimination and violence.

Our **younger AAPI participants** were very discerning and vocal on the issue of racism. **Filipino American participants** were also among the most well attuned to anti-Asian racism and spoke with force about its personal impact, motivations behind it, and culprits.

There is no clear method for evaluating misinformation, or resources to go verify information. There is no through line on how people assess the information they receive. One Indian American respondent said he trusts the Wall Street Journal and other outlets that provide data and statistics. Some mentioned video quality as a barometer to measure information, saying that since a high-quality video would be more expensive to produce, it is less likely to be fake. And a Vietnamese respondent questioned videos that were not translated well. Only one Filipino respondent thought to use snopes.com for fact checking information. Few knew where else they would go besides Google.

In the **Chinese American group**, there was some more consensus about crediting “experts” – whether it be a doctor, police officer, accountant, U.S. general – anyone that would have knowledge on the topic at hand made the information they delivered more credible. Some also said they validate the news they see by assessing how many people believe it is real – if “everybody would talk about it,” or “if there are people who trust it more than 70% or 80%, that support the facts.”

With no definite culprits behind misinformation, anyone who has something to gain from misinformation could be to blame – adding to the difficulty of determining what’s true. Depending on the voter and their political leanings, it could be Republicans or Democrats (lobbyists/special interests also got some nods), or it could be Russia or other countries trying to interfere with U.S. politics.

Family dynamics are key to fighting misinformation – several younger voters report pushing back against misinformation from relatives, while some older voters rely on their own children for perspective. Many reported getting news from family and friends. These voters are more likely to engage their family on political issues than they are to engage others online. For example, in the Vietnamese American group, one participant recalled challenging his grandfather’s untrustworthy news sources (Vietnamese YouTube and radio which are “not reliable”), but two others mentioned relying on their children for a reality check (“If they send me, I do less of a filter. I trust them 70%”).

Though not overtly partisan in conversation, many **younger AAPI participants, particularly those of East Asian descent**, come from politically mixed families. Their parents or grandparents tended to be more conservative (who subscribed to very different information sources), lending opportunity for confrontation and engagement about fake news. However, the more entrenched the family members are on one party’s side, the more reluctant these younger voters are to engage them.

One young AAPI voter shared, “I’m just going to use the election as an example because that’s when, at least, my family was talking about it at its peak, the most, especially for my mom. Everyone in my house had different viewpoints on everything. So when first she would express what she saw or it’s usually I would ask her. I’m like, ‘Hey, where’d you get this information? Are you just aligning with this because of this reason?’”

Political Landscape

Grim mood driven by uncertainty and perceived divisions. These voters are uneasy about the way things are going in the country, using words like “unsettled,” “apprehensive,” “worried,” and “deflated” to describe their outlook. This is linked primarily to economic anxieties and the enduring pandemic, but also divisions they see between the parties.

Participants are ambivalent on the parties, believing neither care much for voters like them. Republicans are seen as divisive, caring for the rich and themselves, and even several respondents across groups call them racist. One Vietnamese respondent says: “I never see the Republican care for me, student, soldier, business owner, none of these three.” But they are aggressive and get things done, standing for economic progress and conservative values. Some mention, however, that Republicans are too extreme on guns, and that they did not handle the pandemic well.

Views towards Democrats are more sympathetic – having performed better during the pandemic and on health care more broadly. Some gave Democrats a small edge over Republicans in caring for voters like them. However, a big share of these Asian American participants sees the party as focusing too much on an impossible equality and the “low-income tax bracket,” often at the expense of other groups. They too are looking out for “not me,” that is, those in the middle class who don’t believe they benefit from Democratic policies. A few are turned off by what they see as the Democratic impulse to rob the wealthy to give to the poor.

Younger respondents across groups were also quick to point out and find agreement on both parties being power hungry, and even corrupt, bought out by lobbyists and susceptible to insider trading.

The economy leads the list of issues these voters care about going into the next election, with pessimism centered on inflation. For most, the economy is the top issue they will vote on in the 2022 election. Voters in each group feel the pain of increased costs of gas and food – several Vietnamese American participants, for example, report that they are driving less. A large number bemoan wages not keeping pace with the cost of living. These voters take this and a very expensive housing market as indicators of a struggling economy, one which has not recovered from the pandemic and has “uncertainty” written all over it. These ‘signs’ accompany other misinformed economic metrics, such as the belief Trump lowered the unemployment rate while Biden has done no such thing. One Korean American voter points to a healthy stock market as evidence of a stable economy, but others are not seeing the same thing.

These **young AAPI voters** share in feeling economic anxiety like most other groups, feeling the impact of low wages and a higher cost of living. However, they prioritize lowering health care costs, eliminating student loans, raising the minimum wage, and lowering the unemployment rate (which is higher among those under 25) as a way to tackle our economic challenges.

Public safety is also a top issue. While these Texas voters express concerns about infrastructure, traffic, and immigration, they are far more worried about high crime rates in many communities, with some respondents, particularly women, describing a fear of going out because of robberies and violent crimes close to home.

The prevalence of guns and potential for gun violence is also scary to voters in all groups, especially in the context of schools – whether the voters have children or not. According to one Indian American voter, “guns are everywhere, and we Asians aren’t really into guns, so we’re scared to see our kids go to school and come back safe every day.”

Several **Vietnamese and Chinese American participants** raise the need to appropriately equip and “reinforce” the police force.

Education is important to many parents in the groups, but specific issues like CRT and affirmative action are not on their radar. Among those that brought up education, they also say they moved to Texas or live in their communities for the good schools and are pleased with the education being provided to their children. The most pressing concern about schools is gun violence. Issues like Critical Race Theory and affirmative action that have made news in other states have not penetrated for these voters, with a few saying that they’ve only heard the terms or only a little about the concept, but didn’t know enough to have their own perspective. Those who had seen information about these issues said they saw it in passing from a friend from another area like California or New York.

Indian American parents in our group discussed education as a very personal issue and being at the top of the list among issues that keep them up at night as they think about the future and their family.

While highly aware of foreign politics, few place it high in term of priorities when evaluating U.S. candidates. Narendra Modi in the Indian American group and Xi Jinping in the Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese groups are polarizing figures. But few say U.S. relations with India and China are a key driver of their vote.