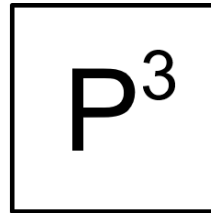


- Urban
- Democracy.
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To the Ballot Box and Beyond

Civic Engagement and Community Organizing in New York City

Findings from the Political Participation Project, November 2019

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Executive Summary

The Political Participation Project (P³) is a collaborative, multi-site ethnographic and interview study. This report presents findings from six months of data collection across three field sites in New York City in collaboration with community-based organizations working to address social, economic, and political inequalities. We follow recent scholarship in suggesting that such community-based organizations may successfully engender multiple forms civic engagement, broadly conceived, which lead to participation across a number of settings within and beyond electoral politics.

Throughout the report we present detailed case studies and close readings of our data, but the main findings can be summarized:

- Study participants often reported skepticism about the efficacy of voting and institutional politics. However, many came to accept voting as a necessary, albeit partial, component in a wider strategy for effecting political and policy changes.
- We find that many of our participants became involved in community organizing *first* and only came to voting later after gaining knowledge about the political process and developing a sense of internal efficacy.
- We observed a number of organizational practices that fostered the development of civic skills among their members. Participants “learned by doing” and carried these skills into other domains of civic life.
- Contrary to conventional models of engagement, study participants were motivated neither by individual interests nor by a generalized civic virtue. Rather, they cited shared identities and community as primary reasons for participating. These identities were often racial and ethnic (i.e. as people of color) or socio-economic (i.e. as renters or working-class people).
- Social networks played a significant role in recruiting and retaining active members. But networks also conveyed meaning and values, like trust and friendship, which provided participants with emotional and social benefits.
- We observe a common set of patterns behind individuals’ civic engagement *despite* substantial heterogeneity in our organizational field sites and interviewees. This suggests that the propensity to participate in politics is not an inherent quality of the individual, fixed in early childhood, but rather a learned disposition that individuals may come to through multiple pathways and at multiple stages in life.

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Introduction

At a focus group interview with local activists in the Hunts Point neighborhood of the South Bronx, the discussion turned to voting and then, inevitably, to politicians— and what they will and will not do to try to win over poor and black voters. Fernanda¹, an African American Bronxite, articulated a common skepticism about voting:

I'm telling you I have not seen any difference in anything and anyone since I was young. I refuse to vote. I think [politicians] are all full of shit.

Fernanda is not alone in her perception, if opinion polls are to be believed. Across the political spectrum, there is wide-held distrust today of politicians, the political system, and democratic institutions. But the problem is more pointed: high levels of inequality and political responsiveness feeds unequal participation, which reinforces the cycle. Recent findings have continued to show that low-income people of color, particularly young people, are less likely to engage in traditionally-defined civic and political activities, such as voting (Hart & Atkins 2002; Cohen & Dawson 1993; Verba et al 1995; White et al. 2000; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady 2012). Levinson (2010) has described this as the “civic empowerment gap.”

It is not just that inequality is bad for democracy in a general sense (Stiglitz 2012), but that a highly unequal democracy makes participation of the less powerful less meaningful. Fernanda might agree with the grim assessment of the eminent

political scientists E.E. Schattschneider, who, already in 1960, warned that, “The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent” (1960:35), to which we might add it is a white, male, and native-born accent at that.

Yet, we also know that people like Fernanda participate in civic and political activities in ways that fly underneath the social scientific radar. Fernanda herself does not fit the image of the disengaged, apathetic, or uninformed voter. She is active in a social justice organization in the Bronx that works on issues ranging from housing conditions to public education. Researchers like Cohen (2007) have suggested that “civic participation” is much higher than estimated when considering broader definitions of engagement. Emerging empirical evidence on these types of organizations suggests that involvement cultivates notions of political resistance and sustains civic and political engagement. (Morrell 2002; Ginwright 2007; Hamilton and Flanagan 2007; Cammarota 2008; Flores-González, Rodríguez, Rodríguez-Muniz 2006) According to Eliasoph (2011), organizations that press for the rights of the excluded “can help disadvantaged people find a public voice. People who participate in these organizations learn to think of themselves as qualified public participants, whose voices are just as important as elites’ and whose ideas might be just as good.” (2011:137)

This study poses the question: How do social justice organizations function as sites for

¹ Following convention, all participants are assigned pseudonyms, and identifying details have been changed.

activating political engagement? From this question, several more follow:

How do social justice organizations enable effective civic engagement in its various forms, including voting, and what lessons can be learned? How do organizations increase participation among members of their communities, retain members, develop leadership, and build civic skills?

What individual and collective meanings are attached to these settings? How do “the political” and “the everyday” intersect and overlap? How are distinctions among social, civic, and political life negotiated in contexts of inequality and marginalization?

This project's central premise is that social justice organizations have successfully engendered the civic involvement of historically marginalized constituencies, despite these groups' typically lower level of participation in electoral politics (Cordero-Guzman et al 2008). Whereas traditional civic and voluntary associations tend to involve constituencies who already display high propensities for political engagement (McFarland & Thomas 2006; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady 2012), social movements and community-based organizations working on social justice issues grow out of and mobilize low income people, people of color, and those living in neighborhoods often overlooked by formal political parties. Although not necessarily focused on electoral politics, social justice organizations can build the civic skills, social capital, and cognitive dispositions that facilitate participation in other domains. Civic socialization and engagement are more likely to occur through participation in activist community-

based organizations. Organizations can accomplish this through what Hahrie Han (2014) calls “transformational organizing,” a strategy for engaging constituents that goes beyond simply raising awareness or turning out voters to instead effect lasting changes in capacities, motivations, and relationships.

The three focal organizations with which we partnered are Housing Organizers for People's Empowerment (HOPE), CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities (CAA AV), and the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE). Although these organizations are quite distinct from one another, they are each in their own way typical of community-based organizations nationwide. One of these organizations, CAAAV, is a multi-issue, community-based non-profit organization with deep roots in New York's Asian communities. By comparison, HOPE is a nascent, member-led tenants' group with financial and organizing support from a non-profit sponsor. Our third case, MORE, is a member-led caucus within the United Federation of Teachers, independent from union staff but connected to a national coalition of similar progressive teachers' groups. Table A1 in the appendix provides more details about each of the three organizations.

These groups therefore represent a range of structures, financial and staff resources, and years of operation. By capturing variation along these dimensions, the three cases allow us to take into consideration the differing capacities and experiences community-organizations bring to

their work.² Our cases also represent a diversity of causes and issues, all of which are important to community-based organizations around the country, including affordable housing, public education, racial equity, and immigrant rights. To bolster our confidence in this regard, we also interviewed several organizers and activists from organizations beyond our three focal cases that work on similar issues.

Low Voter Turnout and Vibrant Social Movements: New York City in Context

As with the United States on the whole, New York City witnessed important changes in the political environment over the course of our research. We began designing our study right before the 2018 midterm elections and concluded data analysis as New Yorkers prepared to vote in the state's 2019 general election, where they decided on several ballot measures designed to increase participation and government accountability. Thus the period of study was bookended by two historic elections. The 2018 midterm elections saw exceptionally high voter turnout (for a midterm), with nearly 40% of New York City's voting-age citizens going to the polls. By comparison, only 20% voted in the 2014 midterms (See Figure A1 in the Appendix). Despite this marked increase over previous midterms, New Yorkers still voted at a lower rate than Americans on the whole. Nationwide, the 2018 election turnout was around 53%, including in major metropolitan areas (U.S. Census Bureau 2018a).

Part of the explanation for the lower turnout in New York City is demographic: New York is home to a larger share of social groups who vote at lower rates than the public at large. For example, while about 58% of whites voted in 2018, a little over half of non-Hispanic blacks and only 40% of Asians and Latinos voted nationwide. Asians and Latinos represent 6% and 18% of the national population, respectively, but 14% and 30% of New York City's population (U.S. Census Bureau 2018b). This suggests that, all else being equal, we should expect New York (and cities with similarly larger shares of non-white people) to have lower voter turnout. Another important factor is nativity. In 2018, 45% of naturalized citizens voted compared to 54% of native born citizens (U.S. Census Bureau 2018a). In New York City, naturalized citizens represent 21% of the total population, a much larger share than the nation as a whole and somewhat larger than other major cities (NYC Opportunity 2018; Current Population Survey 2018).

However, citywide demographics only tell part of the story. There is immense variation among New York City's communities in voter turnout, to say nothing of political participation more broadly. Five out of the 25 neighborhoods that had the highest voter turnout in 2018 are majority black communities (See Figure 1, Page 6). Of the 25 neighborhoods with the *lowest* turnout, 10 were majority white (several of these communities are either Orthodox Jewish enclaves or have a high density of immigrants from the former Soviet Union). Asians and Latinos were

² Observing organizations at different points in the "life course" is especially important because, as Kathleen Blee (2012) notes in her study of 60 activist groups in Pittsburgh,

early decisions have lasting consequences for the trajectory of an organization and its members.

disproportionately likely to live in communities with low voter turnout, pointing to the significance of citizenship status (See Figure A2 in the Appendix). These patterns reaffirm the importance of local context in influencing political behavior. Neighborhoods matter, as do neighborhood institutions like schools, libraries, and community organizations. We adopted this perspective when designing our study, which takes as a starting point the community, broadly defined.

When we look more closely at New York City's heterogeneous communities, we see a very different picture of political participation than that portrayed in aggregate statistics. We see countless community groups engaged in a dizzying array of civic projects, policy campaigns, and grassroots actions. Over the last year alone, social movements and community-based organizations in New York won a historic slate of renter protections, state driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants, and limits to excessively long school suspensions. They blocked plans to displace hundreds of poor and working-class New Yorkers to make way for luxury developments in Chinatown and demanded a public review of rezoning plans in gentrifying Sunset Park. And in September of this year, tens of thousands of New Yorkers from all ages and walks of life took to the streets in the Climate Strike. Many of these climate justice activists came from the same geographic, economic, and ethnic communities with low rates of voter participation.

How can we make sense of the apparent disparity between low participation in elections and what seems to be an upsurge of grassroots politics?

New York City is a crucial case for understanding this puzzle. As one of the most economically unequal regions in the country, with an ever-increasing share of foreign born residents and naturalized citizens, New York today resembles the future of the American cities. Thus, while we are circumspect about the generalizability of the findings in this report, we believe they provide a starting point for further investigations into the connection between community organizing and civic engagement among those groups historically marginalized in American democracy.

Racial/Ethnic Composition for 25 **Top** Voter Turnout Neighborhoods in 2018

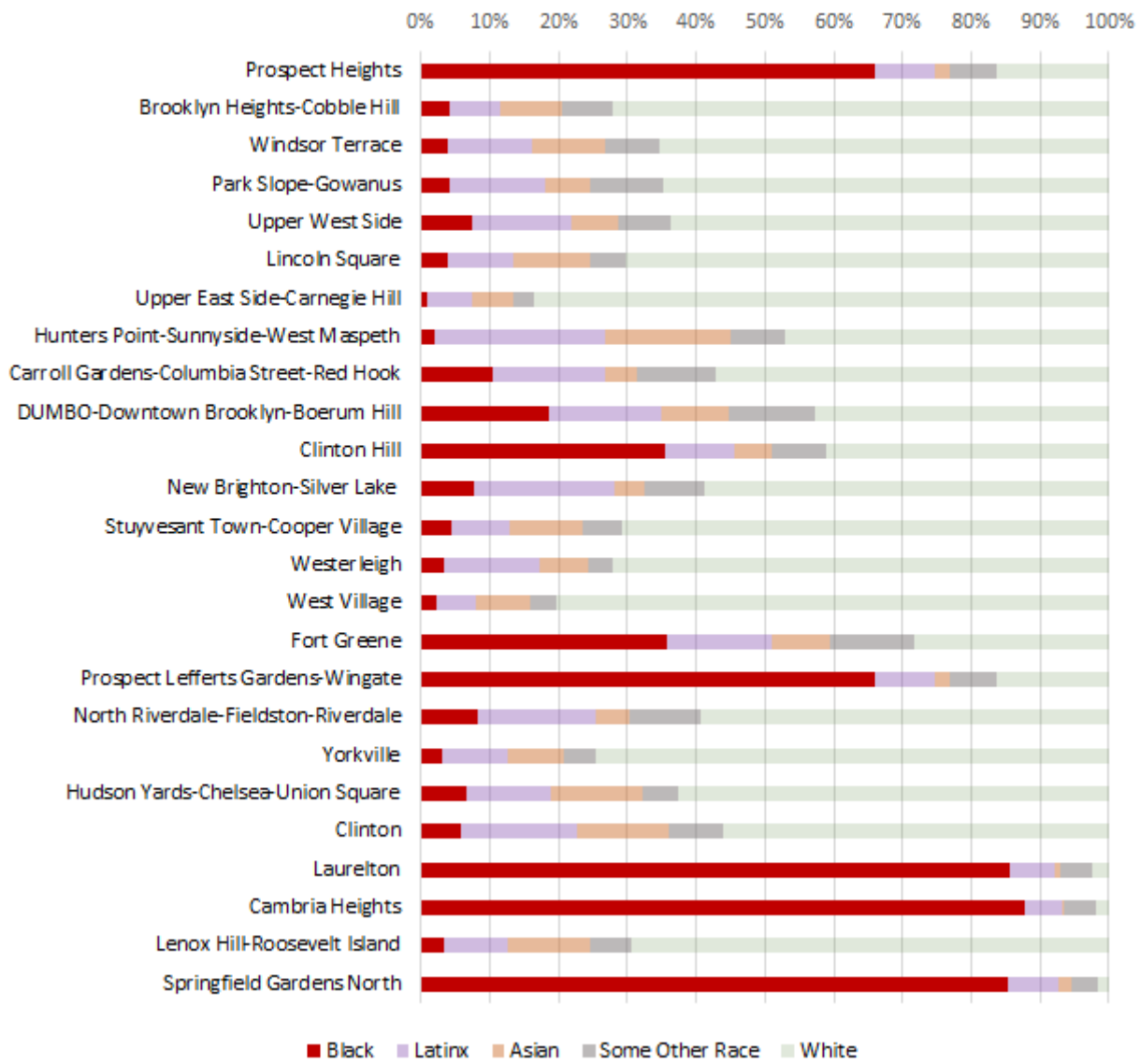


Figure 1: Racial and ethnic composition of neighborhoods in the top 25 of all NYC neighborhoods for voter turnout in 2018 midterm elections. Source: Authors' analysis of NYC Voter Analysis Report, 2018-2019

Scholarly Background and Methodology

Making sense of *who* actually participates in our democratic institutions has been of longstanding concern for social scientists, though in recent times the question has acquired renewed urgency. It is beyond the scope of this brief report to extensively cover the scholarship, but we highlight a few relevant sign-posts.

Political science, for example, has been concerned with the question of *disparities in political participation*. When it comes to voting, the “turnout gap” among socioeconomic classes and racial and ethnic groups has been attributed to a wide array of institutional, demographic, and individual factors (Schlozman, Verba, & Brady 2012; Leighly & Nagler 2014; Cox 2015; Fraga 2016). And of course, as has been documented, the very organization of American elections sets up obstacles to voting (Lijphart 1996), to say nothing of voter suppression measures (Wang 2012). As far as demographics, recent work shows that people of color are more likely to vote when they live in districts where their group makes up a larger share of the population, owing to the larger influence they have on election outcomes and, perhaps, policy (Fraga 2016).

Political psychologists, too, have identified a number of *individual characteristics*, such as personality traits, cognitive processes, skills, and emotions that dispose people to participate more or less in politics. The main upshot of this line of work is unsurprising: people are more likely to participate in politics when they feel motivated and capable of effecting change (Brader & Marcus 2013; Valentino, Gregorowicz, & Groenendyk 2009). But we know much less about where motivations and feelings of efficacy come from or

how people attain them. Studies often treat these as inherent traits of the individual or qualities instilled during childhood and carried through life (McFarland & Thomas 2006; Mondak et al 2010; Holbein 2017). They have less to offer by way of recommendations for how to cultivate the psychological and emotional dispositions to participate in politics over the life course.

Sociologists have approached the question of who participates and why mostly in terms of *collective action*. They find that people are more likely to participate in politics when they are asked to by someone they know (Snow & Soule 2010). Interpersonal networks are important in their own right, but they are also embedded in and reflect communities, organizations, and shared identities that shape people’s decision to participate in politics (Dixon & Roscigno 2003). What counts is how relationships convey meaning—feelings of solidarity and shared fate, political analysis and knowledge, or norms and values.

The line of research closest to our own is a heterogeneous literature centered on civic engagement, participatory politics, and organizations (e.g. Eliasoph 2011; Han 2014; Baiocchi et al 2015; Lichterman & Eliasoph 2014). Although the civic engagement literature has been justly criticized as sometimes overly optimistic (Theiss-Morse & Hibbing 2005; Baiocchi & Ganuza 2016), it has produced an important body of findings that inform the present study design and analysis. This literature shows that civic organizations can, but do not necessarily, encourage active citizenship and political participation. Recent work on voluntary organizations has begun to explore the ways that social justice organizations provide contexts that promote certain kinds of identities and modes of

understanding of the political world (Luhtakallio 2012; Baiocchi et al 2015; Malafia et al 2017).

By observing the emergence of identities and meanings in context, political ethnography can describe and analyze the modes and consequences of participation that surveys and experimental studies miss and effectively trace the transfer of political efficacy toward other political acts, like voting (Auyero 2006; Baiocchi and Connor 2008). The extent and nature of that encouragement depends how organizations cultivate their members' political capacity and identity, how members come to understand themselves as politically efficacious actors, and how groups deal with setbacks as well as victories. As Hahrie Han (2014) finds in her study of mass-membership organizations, member engagement was greater when organizations "provided activists with the technical skills they need to do their work and also the emotional and moral support they needed to make the work meaningful" (106).

Collaborative and Comparative Research: Our Methodology

The Political Participation Project (P³) is a collaborative, multi-site ethnographic and interview study. It is a collaboration among a group of researchers with diverse backgrounds and interests, as well as between researchers and community organizers and activists. The "field sites" are constituted by a set of community-based organizations and their respective communities. P³'s basic goal has been to co-construct a research program with organizers and activists so as to produce useful and applicable lessons, especially with respect to increasing participation among members of their communities, retaining members, developing

leadership, and building civic skills that transfer across multiple contexts.

The process began with a series of conversations with community organizers working on a range of issues, including housing, education, labor, and immigration, about opportunities for collaborative research. In conversations with representatives from nearly a dozen community-based organizations, we asked what questions and issues warrant investigation and how to involve members of the community in the process in a respectful and rewarding way. Out of this period of informal discussions, we developed a research plan with three focal organizations.

We carried out participant observation and semi-structured interviews with participants at each organization, focusing on the participants themselves and their understanding of their own sociopolitical identity. Our selection of the three field sites was based on a "most variance" within a single context strategy: that is, each of our sites includes similar phenomena within the context of one city but they represent wide variation in issue area (e.g. housing, education, or racial equity), modes of organizing, mission, community make-up, and orienting principles. This is sometimes called "purposive sampling." Of course, our case selection also depended on our pre-existing networks in New York City's community organizing environment. Our team relied on relationships with organizers and activists to help make introductions and convey trust to potential partners. In efforts to design and produce research in close dialogue with community-based organizations, these practical considerations represent an important aspect of methodology.

Ethnographic methods, in which a researcher investigates what people say and do in their lived environment, are uniquely suited for explaining political practices, the day-to-day expressions of political life, and the meanings that animate action in civil society (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Auyero 2006; Baiocchi and Connor 2008). As a result of its attention to events as they happen and because it allows for the triangulation of discourse, meaning, and practice, this mode of allows us to describe and analyze the emergence, forms, and consequences of modes of participation that surveys might miss. In other words, we look at democracy, not at the level of the nation-state, but “as people encounter it in their workplaces and schools, in volunteering and mobilizing,” and in how people experience the gap between their ideals and how democracy is actually lived (Polletta 2013:50). Political ethnographers have long used participant observation and semi-structured (rather than formally structured, survey-style) interviews to examine and explain civic practices and meanings. Such methods allow us to observe events through multiple lenses, increasing the reliability of our data and improving our ability to capture social worlds.

Data collection included semi-structured interviews with individuals who occupy various positions within or proximate to these organizations. We spoke with paid staff, board members, member leaders, general membership, and allied activists. Over the course of three months, we interviewed 44 people, with interviews lasting between 50 and 70 minutes. We also spent approximately 50 hours in participant observation at membership meetings, staff planning meetings, recruitment and

outreach events, public demonstrations, tenant association meetings, fundraisers, and reading groups.

After this “open coding” process, we developed a codebook with some 35 concrete themes about forms and extent of political participation, motivations for participation, understandings and knowledge around politics, and individual trajectories that carried them to participation. Each interview was then re-coded twice, once each by two members of the research team, to ensure consistency across coders.

Voting and “Pressuring Your Electeds”: Institutional Engagements

From the outset, this project has been interested in how members of community-based and social justice organizations engage with and view institutional politics. By “institutional politics” we mean those forms of participation that operate inside of the electoral system or through formal government institutions. Voting is the most familiar act falling under this umbrella, but we count a variety of forms of participation as institutional politics: lobbying local and state elected officials, volunteering on electoral campaigns, speaking at community board meetings, and organizing for policy changes in the school system, City Hall, or state legislature. Of course, as our findings affirm, the boundary between institutional politics and other forms of participation is fuzzy (and not a distinction generally used by our study participants). Nonetheless, we follow other scholars in analytically separating these forms of participation from those that happen outside, or that aim to disrupt, the formal political system (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly 2001).

Voting and Electoral Campaigns

We found a diversity of attitudes toward voting among our participants. Some, though far from all, of our participants view voting as inefficacious. They cite historical and ongoing experiences of class and racial disenfranchisement, as well as a sense that elected officials are not responsive or accountable to voters. As one woman in the South Bronx put it, “I’m telling you I have not seen a difference in anything or anyone since I was young. I refuse to vote...It doesn’t make a difference who you vote for. To me it’s always the same thing.” This is a common sentiment among many Americans from all walks of life—why vote when the outcome never seems to change?

Others among our study participants view electoral politics as an essential component of a wider strategy of political action, especially when it comes to city and state government. One organizer describes how campaigns oriented toward institutional politics help encourage community members to become more engaged with and informed about elections, even though the organization’s goal is not necessarily voter turnout. She says, “It’s a tactic. We target elected officials and build relationships with them too. And I think that we encourage voting and... I think that being involved in the campaign and in this kind of work really opened [members’] eyes to voting and to... politics in general.” In fact, we find several cases in which the decision to vote was an *outcome* arising from individuals’ experience with other forms of participation.

For example, David, a middle aged African American man, had never voted before (an admission he described as “really embarrassing” for “a person my age”). As he put it, “I didn’t care, because I thought that our government didn’t

care about us [black people].” And it is likely that David was not alone in this view. When asked whether people in his social network voted, David answered:

I'm not really sure if a lot of my family members and friends ever voted or not voted. But this is the crazy thing about it: in the history of me growing up and dealing with family and friends, growing in the hood, in the ghetto, whatever, I never heard anyone talking about voting. Not that they've never voted, but it just never came up.

David made it more than 40 years without voting or being civically engaged in any form. But, after David’s landlord suddenly raised his rent, he became involved in a local tenants’ organization, and his outlook started to change. David recounts the experience of his first few tenants’ association meetings:

So when I went to this first meeting, and I started to get out of my four walls of this environment and started to hear the systemic issues that were going on with especially black people and with elderly people...These were people of color, all these people of color, and it didn't sit right with me.

After seeing that others like him were experiencing the same issues, David started attending more and more meetings. With the encouragement of organizers, David started meeting with local elected officials and traveling to Albany monthly to lobby for changes to New York State’s rent laws. After his engagement with elected officials and policy-making, David now plans on voting in future elections, as well as learning more about the political system generally. Though he still views voting as only a part of his engagement in the political process, he recognizes it as an important part of being an

activist. He describes his thought process this way:

Put it like this, it's not like I intentionally thought, "Okay, I'm going to get involved with [electoral] politics." To me, I have no choice but to get involved in it...because if I'm going to be an activist, meeting with these politicians... I want to know about the laws, how to make laws, how to do it.

As David's account shows, the decision to vote and become more informed about policy may come later in life and in a roundabout way. David's trajectory into political engagement began with a personal problem—an unreasonable rent hike—that nudged him into collective action and broadened his political horizon. Through helping to establish a new tenants' union in his neighborhood, which would soon become HOPE, David gained an understanding of systemic problems and a sense of efficacy that has transferred into other forms of civic engagement, including voting.

Even among our study participants who described themselves as regular or occasional voters, involvement with community organizing brought greater knowledge and understanding of electoral and institutional politics. Victoria, a retired social worker and naturalized citizen from the West Indies, says she used to vote for any "Tom, Dick, or Harry," whoever the most prominent candidate happened to be. That is until she became involved with HOPE, the tenants' union. Victoria recounts how she asked an organizer for advice on who to vote for in an upcoming election:

[The organizer] said, "I have some pamphlets at home. I'll make some copies and leave them for you. I'm not going to tell you who to vote for, but you read the pamphlets for yourself." I took them and underlined what I felt was important to me and I thought, Oh okay. So

now I know who to vote for. Now I know, without her saying.

None of the organizers in our study endorsed specific candidates, but they did often encourage their community members to seek out information about candidates, to vote in upcoming elections, and, in one case, to run for elected office. A tenant-leader of HOPE, who joined up after her landlord threatened to evict her and her neighbors in order to redevelop their building as condominiums, went from building a tenants' association to running for state office in the space of a couple of years. As she said when announcing her campaign to fellow HOPE members, "We are tenant leaders; now let's become leaders of our community!"

More and more activists are trying to bridge community organizing and electoral politics. A coalition of organizations in the Bronx, including one of our community partners, ran a day-long training for activists interested in running for local office or working on campaigns. The workshops included fundraising, messaging, and field strategy for public offices ranging from community board to city council. Most of the attendees were longtime Bronx residents, by-and-large people of color, and a majority were women. At the end of the training, the attendees were invited to practice their "stump speech." One woman, planning on running for a county judgeship, spoke about how her father's domestic abuse and incarceration had inspired her to become a lawyer. A young man described his family's journey from Honduras to the South Bronx, and his own trajectory from New York City public schools on to college and then to working for city government. In every case, these aspiring civic leaders linked their own personal identity—as the children of immigrants, people of color, women, and Bronxites—to their formation as political actors. But they also cited the

organizations and community groups that had been the conduits for their participation.

Policy Advocacy

Though each of our partner organizations' first priority was building a base among their communities, neighbors, and co-workers, they also had their eyes on policy change in city, state, and (to a lesser extent) federal governments. Our interview participants described current or past experiences advocating for policies around public education, affordable housing, zoning and urban development, family leave, immigrant rights, and police and criminal justice reform. This policy- and movement-oriented work required organizers and activists to engage with elected officials and state agencies directly. But in contrast to the common understanding of lobbying—where experts with close ties to government meet personally with policy-makers—the organizations in our study saw policy advocacy as an extension of their broader collective action strategy. We directly observed or heard accounts in our interviews of a variety of forms of participation oriented toward public policy. These included providing testimony to the City Planning Commission, meeting with local elected officials, letter-writing campaigns and petitions to the mayor and governor, and canvassing neighbors about ballot items to change the city charter.

The scope and scale of policy issues were similarly broad. The progressive caucus of teachers, MORE, successfully mobilized teachers and parents to pressure City Hall to declare December 24th a school holiday. This is a small victory but an important test of MORE's organizing capacity and support among their wider school communities. It also signaled to parents that MORE shared their

day-to-day concerns. On a somewhat larger scale, CAAAV was part of a multi-organization coalition that lobbied the Board of City Planning and testified in front of the state's Supreme Court to halt the development of luxury mega-towers in New York's Lower East Side neighborhood, which would have displaced hundreds of low-income residents. And on perhaps the largest scale, our research coincided with a historic statewide campaign to strengthen, extend, and make permanent a slate of renter protection laws in New York.

In the spring and early summer of 2019, hundreds of tenants from around the state traveled to Albany to lobby their state representatives to sign on to a slate of bills that would make it harder for landlords to raise rents and evict tenants in rent-stabilized housing and would make it possible for counties outside of New York City to pass protections comparable to those in the city. These mobilizations united tenants from the boroughs with communities from upstate cities like Buffalo and Syracuse, as well as rural communities seeking protections for people living in manufactured (i.e. "mobile") homes. This diverse coalition of organizations from around New York, called the Upstate Downstate Housing Alliance, brought our study participants into contact with people from communities much different than their own who nevertheless experienced a common set of issues related to housing affordability and insecurity. This campaign also reinforced the significance of voting for many of our study participants, who recognize that the rent laws' passage depended on the support of lawmakers (Democrats won a majority of seats in the State Senate in 2018). Victoria, the tenant activist, recounted the chant she learned at rallies in Albany, "Remember November," a message to

elected officials not to forget who put them in office.

These are but a few examples of a broader theme in our data: Among those engaged in community organizations, the decision to vote (or not) is not coterminous with engagement with the political process on the whole. Our participants saw institutional and electoral politics as a simultaneously necessary but partial arena for engagement, and they looked at voting not with indifference but with sober skepticism about its efficacy, especially when divorced from other forms of political action. As Victoria's chant—Remember November—illustrates, voting was one tactic, albeit a powerful one, amid a broader set of strategies oriented toward holding lawmakers accountable and winning policy change. But though institutional politics represents the most visible site of participation in our study, it is far from the only way in which our partner organizations engage their communities. As the next section describes, many forms of participation we observed took place outside of institutional politics but were no less critical in building civic skills, motivations, efficacy, and organizational capacity among the communities studied.

Beyond the Ballot: A Diversity of Engagements

Before every meeting, the members of HOPE share a potluck dinner, enjoying food often provided by neighbors who could not make it to the meeting because they work the night shift, are homebound, or have to care for children and grandchildren. Several activist supporters of CAAAV fondly remember being recruited to plan a karaoke night to raise funds for the organization. And in MORE, some twenty

dedicated teachers meet on Saturdays for a reading group where they discuss books about community organizing strategy. These all represent forms of participation quite remote from elections and institutional politics, but that are nonetheless fundamental for building the relationships, skills, and psychological dispositions essential to civic engagement.

This section describes some of the myriad ways our study participants were involved *beyond* the formal political process. Some of these forms of participation are ways individuals interacted with their organizations: helping to raise funds, providing administrative support, taking part in or leading political education, and producing media. Others are forms of collective action that target actors outside of elected office and government agencies: tenants organizing their neighbors to demand better living conditions from their landlord or teachers organizing their co-workers to deal with issues in their school.

For example, we attended a tenants' association meeting in the lobby of a residential building in central Brooklyn where neighbors had gathered to craft a letter to their landlord, collectively signed, reminding him of his legal obligation to maintain the building in good order. Tenants had leaky sinks, no heat, and pests, but they knew that these issues were the landlord's responsibility. The meeting was facilitated by an organizer with HOPE, Joe. After tenants had approved the draft of the letter, they asked Joe, "What happens if the landlord doesn't respond? What next?" Joe turned this question into an opportunity to discuss a strategy of escalation. He encouraged the tenants to suggest their own ideas for what their next move should be. One suggested gathering a group of tenants to visit the landlord's office. Another proposed calling on their local

elected official to put pressure on the landlord. If all else fails, Joe says they can take legal recourse. In the meantime, he encourages tenants to register their complaints with the city by calling 311 and to document any interactions with the landlord or his staff, as recorded violations will help the tenants' case should they go to trial.

The work of community organizing is inevitably educational; participants learn about the law and their legal rights, they discuss channels for making demands or expressing their views, and they practice what political scientists call "civic skills," such as facilitating a meeting and writing letters to authorities (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Some of this political education happens in a structured way. We observed and heard interviewees describe trainings and workshops designed to inform activists about a variety of topics, including school privatization, immigration law, land use regulations, and the history of residential segregation. But much learning happens in an ad hoc way, through experience. One CAAAV member, who had studied criminal justice reform in college, credits her activism around police accountability as an important learning experience:

I always joke that my real education happened when I moved to New York City after college because I didn't learn nearly as much in college about things that I care about...than I have in the past nine years in New York.

David, the tenant-leader from HOPE, describes how he was at first reticent about engaging with elected officials because he lacked professional credentials. He recalls,

I just thought that I needed to have some degree to talk to [lawmakers], but [the organizers] were like, "No, no, no, no. You just speak to what the issues are in your

community, what you've been seeing, what your experiences are now that you've been in a lot of protests, you've been in a lot of tenant associations, you've been doing a lot of leading, so just talk to them about that." And I was like, "Oh, okay. I could do that." That's what led me into getting more and more involved.

For many of our participants, learning-by-doing was an important route to building a sense of efficacy. Rey, a new teacher and member of the MORE caucus, compares her own experience of learning to organize to the approach she takes as a teacher. When other members asked Rey to take on leadership roles in the group, she worried that she did not know enough about the issues or have enough experience. Rey recounts a conversation with a friend who had more activist experience:

I was complaining to him, saying "I don't feel like I know enough. They're asking me to do these things. I don't feel like I'm experienced enough to help out with these things." He said, "Well, if they're organizing you well, they should always be pushing you to just outside your comfort zone." Which really resonated with me, funnily enough, as a teacher, because that's exactly what you should be doing if you're teaching children effectively, is getting them to that point right outside their comfort zone where they're learning.

As Rey's and David's accounts illustrate, individuals not only gained practical civic skills through their organizing activities, they also gained knowledge, confidence, and motivation that can be the foundation for other forms of political participation. These are the underpinnings of internal efficacy, an individual's sense that she can have an effect on politics.

Across all three of our field sites and many interviews, we observed organizers, activists, and community members developing efficacy *together* through forms of collaboration and collective action big and small. Rather than a characteristic some are born with and others without, we found that efficacy was cultivated and developed by attentive organizers, encouraged by supportive peers, and reaffirmed through seeing the results of one's efforts. The next sections look more closely at these relational and motivational dimensions to participation.

Challenging the "Deficit" Narrative: Politicizing Identity and Building Community Power

Our research complicates the conventional wisdom that low income people of color “under-participate” in politics.³ Social markers of difference, such as race, class, and gender, can actually be powerful motivations for political participation. The organizations represented in our study all have a diverse constituency. For example, in housing organizations, there are tenant members with familial experiences with the U.S. deportation system; volunteers who grew up locally in Manhattan's Chinatown; and leaders who grew up in public housing—all bringing their personal history to fight against displacement and gentrification in New York City. Additionally, most of the member leaders in our partner organizations represent low income communities of color and many are women.

³ We recognize that the debate on racial and class disparities in participation is not settled. See, for example, Brady, Schlozman, and Verba (2012), Fraga (2018), and Ray and Whitlock (2019).

⁴ Vincent Chin was murdered in June, 1982 in Detroit by Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz, two white men and laid-off

Our interviews reveal how social identities, such as race and class, are connected to voters' perceptions of themselves as legitimate actors in the political system. For several of our participants, identifying with public role models was an important motivation for action. One tenant-leader with HOPE recalls a chance encounter sharing an elevator with former NYC Mayor David Dinkins:

I just think it was so important for me to come across this man as a black person, [because of] the importance of seeing black people of that status who've accomplished so much...a lot of times, black people don't see representations of themselves, so to see him, it had a profound effect on me.

In another example, Amy, a Chinese American member of CAAAV, mentioned that the media landscape in which she grew up created narratives that people ‘like her’ were apolitical. It wasn't until she watched a documentary on Asian American protests against Vincent Chin's murder⁴ that her perspective changed:

I was like, wow, people who look like me are protesting...just to see all those protests really shifted my view of what a community could look like, especially a community of Asian Americans who look like me.

Later, as Amy got involved with CAAAV, she highlighted how participating in a local Asian American-focused grassroots organization showed her the efficacy of community-powered movements. This represented an important

auto workers. Despite overwhelming evidence the murder was a hate crime, the two men were given a \$3,000 fine and probation. Chin's murder and the subsequent campaigns for justice have enduring significance for Asian American social movements.

turning point from her childhood years growing up in Chinatown. According to Amy:

I just didn't think my community could organize, and I didn't think my community cared enough, and I didn't think my community would be political. There's so many factors in what makes people apathetic, but it is not because we're not able to and that's really what CAAAV has shifted in me.

The politicization of Amy's identity was pivotal in her understanding that she had this capacity, and was a precursor to her becoming deeply politically engaged in the future. Across interviews, we found that when organizations connect individuals' immediate and personal experiences to broader analyses of structural inequality, they are able to activate collective identities that form an important motivation for political participation. While few people expressed that social identities alone explained their engagement, their identities were often an integral aspect in drawing members into organizations, or into social networks that overlapped with civic groups.

As the oldest organization in our study, CAAAV represents an important example of this dynamic. A number of the CAAAV activists we interviewed had prior experience with more narrowly defined ethnic organizations, like a Chinese American student club. But through these forms of cultural affinity groups, activists entered into a network of Asian American activists, leading them eventually to CAAAV. There they gained a more systemic understanding of racial inequality, coming to see their Asian American identity as part of a broader community of people of color in the United States. One volunteer at CAAAV describes how the organization operated as a kind of hub for activists sharing in this identity:

CAAAV continues to be some kind of training ground for Asian Americans, how to get organizing because of the vision we have, and the connections we have to the community and to the broader progressive community.

As an organization that has been in New York City for over 30 years, CAAAV has functioned both as a home and touchpoint for Asian American politics. Former staff organizers and volunteers have gone on to run their own organizations; and one former staff member is currently running for New York City council. CAAAV has also incubated projects that have become self-sufficient organizations—the National Domestic Workers' Alliance, New York Taxi Driver's Alliance, and Mekong NYC—as well as allied with multi-racial coalitions to combat police violence and gentrification. We would overlook these kinds of activities if we only paid attention to aggregate-level statistics on Asians' voter turnout. This observation leads us to go beyond asking whether people participate to asking *why* they participate.

People Who Move You: Relationships as Motivations for Participation

Our interviewees pointed to a number of reasons for why they started participating in politics or community organizations. Some experienced a sudden change in the immediate conditions of their homes, neighborhoods, or workplaces that motivated them to seek out an organization. Others joined organizations for social reasons, to meet new people or feel more connected to their community. And some participants cited more emotional benefits of their participation: a sense of pride, excitement, accomplishment, and purpose. But in all of these cases, no one was motivated for purely individualistic reasons nor

did they act on the basis of a totally generalized altruism, either. Rather, they acted for the good of a relatively bounded collective: their neighbors and co-workers, their community, their racial or ethnic identity group, and for working-class people.

Consistent with sociological research on social movement participants, many people we interviewed got involved in the first instance simply because of a friend invited them. Sam, a young man living in the South Bronx, explains why he started attending meetings with a violence prevention group:

Why did I join? Well I kind of knew everybody I was there with before. They were coming to the places where I hang out with my friends and stopped by, gave us information, talked to us. Checked up on us as well. And where I'm from, there's kids younger than me that are going through [violence], or worse things, so that's me giving back. That's why I joined this organization.

We collected numerous accounts similar to Sam's. People often enter organizations through pre-existing social networks, but it is what happens once they are there that determines the extent of their engagement. An activist with CAAAV describes how she was "invited in" to the organization, asked to take on more and more responsibilities:

The executive director at the time asked me to join the resource development committee. That was my first touchpoint where I felt like I was contributing to the organization. I was invited to a few retreats here and there...I sort of was invited in.

Relationships were not only important for bringing new activists in, they also formed an

important mode of retention and support for members. Mark, a teacher and member of MORE, speaks of the social and emotional benefits he receives from his involvement with the organization:

[One of the] biggest things I get from MORE is a social network. I have met a bunch of folks who I know I can talk to about [issues], whether it's teaching or whether it's just life or often about the union, about left wing politics. So I think that, like one way that I've already had success in MORE...is building a network and just the long term, deep organizing that comes from building relationships.

Organizers also emphasized the importance of building a sense of connection to mobilize people, with trust being a key ingredient in further embedding people into organizations and deepening their participation. Sarah, an organizer with HOPE, emphasized how building trust within an organization was pivotal to the success of collective actions. She said:

It's through building relationships with them but also them with each other. And so, having one on one conversations with people, just doing the little actions and seeing that they worked and everybody did them together and it went well, gives people the trust to take on more... You can't go on rent strike if no-one's talking to each other and if no-one believes that the other people are going to go on rent strike.

Here we see trust as an essential precondition for more intensive, and potentially more costly, forms of participation. Indeed, in the few mentions of civil disobedience in our study, activists discussed a gradual and intentional process of trust-building that organizations

undertook before introducing their members to high-risk activism.

We emphasize relationships, and what they mean for people, as an antidote to the tendency in research on political participation to see motivation as an *individual* quality. On the contrary, our findings confirm the sociological intuition that individuals' ties to others influence their decisions and dispositions. Social networks convey feelings of mutual obligation, solidarity, trust, and belonging that can bring people into civic engagement, sustain that engagement over the long term, and carry it into new settings.

Conclusions

Regularly collected quantitative data on civic engagement *outside* of voting is scarce, especially at the local level. This is despite growing recognition among scholars that non-electoral forms of participation are taking on a more important role in citizens' political lives (Dalton 2008, 2016; Zukin et al 2006). Still, what data do exist show that only a minority of Americans participate in activities like contacting an elected official, attending a political meeting, or taking part in a demonstration. In 2014, fewer than 1 in 5 Americans contacted a politician to express their views and fewer than 1 in 10 attended a political meeting or joined a demonstration (See Figure A3 in the Appendix).

It is clear that the participants in our study are much more civically engaged than the average American. On one hand, this comes as no surprise: our case selection specifically targeted community-based organizations whose mission is to involve members in a variety of political and civic endeavors. But on the other hand, many of our study participants identify with those groups

that aggregate-level statistics have identified as *least* likely to vote. Our findings delve more deeply into this apparent puzzle and add several important qualifiers to the debates on political participation.

First, while scholars sometimes assume that voting and community engagement are essentially synonymous, or at least that one leads to the other in the ladder of engagement. Our evidence is quite clear: Among those engaged in community organizations, the decision to vote (or not) is not coterminous with engagement with the political process on the whole. Our participants saw institutional and electoral politics as a simultaneously necessary but partial arena for engagement, and they looked at voting not with indifference but with sober skepticism about its efficacy, especially when divorced from other forms of political action.

Second, our study finds that the motivation to engage in politics and feelings of political efficacy can come to people at any stage in life, that "turning points" are key, particularly when shepherded by organizations. In fact, political participation often precedes the development of these emotional and psychological dispositions, as people learn through experience and get a "taste" for politics. Nor are these qualities constant over time or from one form of participation to another. The people we spoke with often reported feeling discouraged, unmotivated, or inefficacious, especially when some political activities yielded disappointing results.

Third, our results also depart from the two poles in political science literature, which respectively hold that people engage in politics either on the basis of individual self-interest or on the basis of a generalized altruism. In contrast, we find that

people often come into politics in the first place because of an immediate, personal motive—fixing a leaking ceiling, making friends, or winning a better contract— but though engagement with community-based organizations they develop a sense of collective identity that intensifies and sustains participation over the long run, even after their personal need is satisfied.

Finally, we note the centrality of identity as lightning rod for participation. In their black feminist manifesto, the Combahee River Collective (1977) writes, “The most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity.” The use of ‘our’ referring specifically to the liberation of Black women as necessary to destroy all systems of oppression, the intent of identity politics was to form strategies for dismantling race, gender, and class oppressions. Organizations such as CAAAV, HOPE, and MORE bring this analysis to their work by connecting fights for housing justice to campaigns around immigration justice and police accountability. Grassroots groups organizing at the intersection of racial and economic justice also mobilize beyond individual efficacy but emphasize collective power through strategies such as base-building, creating coalitions and alliances, and developing organizational capacity.

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Appendix

Table A1: The Three Focal Organizations

Organization	Structure	Staff	Years Operating	Issues	Geographic Focus
CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities	Non-profit membership organization	Eight	33	Affordable housing; immigrant rights; youth development	Chinatown (Manhattan); Queensbridge (Queens)
Housing Organizers for People's Empowerment (HOPE)	Member-led initiative with non-profit sponsor	Six staff provided by sponsor org	1	Affordable housing	Brownsville and eastern Crown Heights (Brooklyn)
Movement of Rank and File Educators (MORE)	Member-led caucus inside UFT	None	6	Public education; labor rights	City wide

Figure A1: New York City voter turnout among voting-age citizens by midterm election year. Source: NYC Voter Analysis Report, 2018-2019

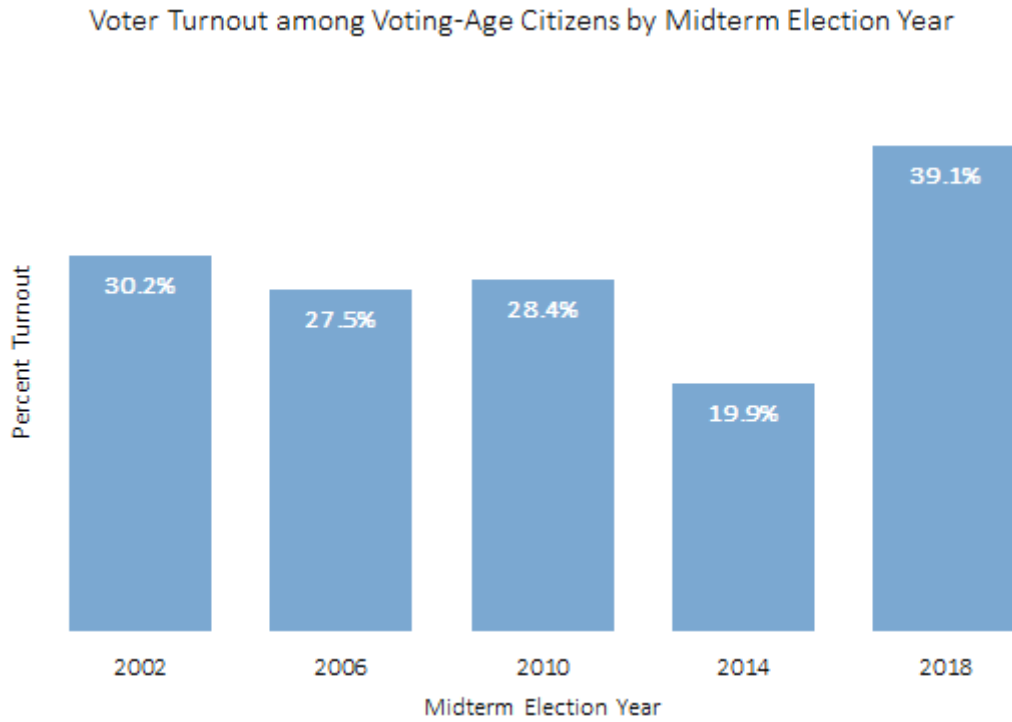


Figure A2: Racial and ethnic composition of neighborhoods in the bottom 25 of all NYC neighborhoods for voter turnout in 2018 midterm elections. Source: Authors' analysis of NYC

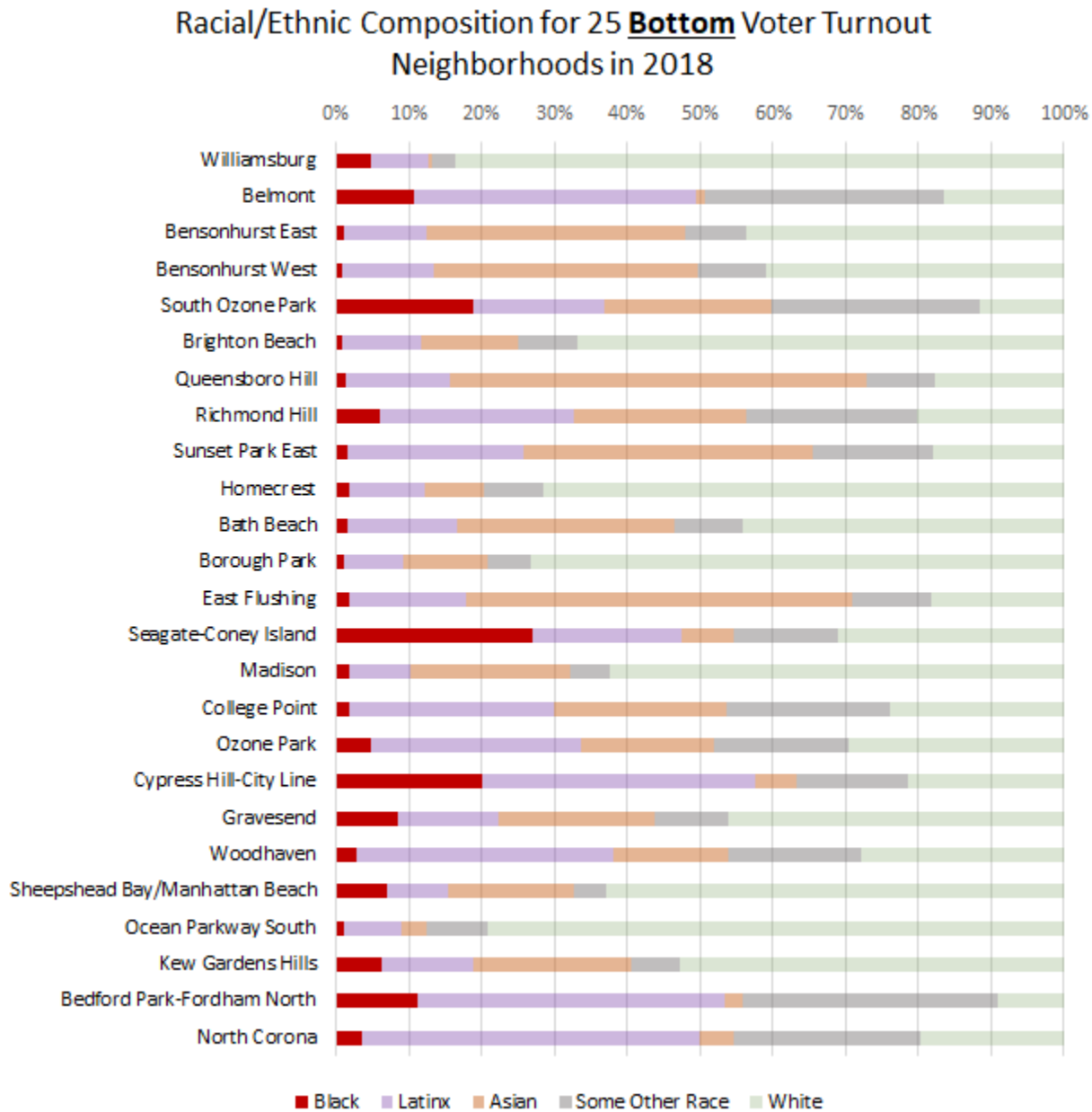


Figure A3: Percent of Americans who took some civic or political action in the last year. Source: Authors' analysis of the 2014 General Social Survey

