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# Enabling the Asian American Electorate: 2003 Voter Registration in Eleven Massachusetts Cities and Towns

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# Enabling the Asian American Electorate

*2003 Voter  
Registration in  
Eleven  
Massachusetts  
Cities and Towns*

**Paul Y. Watanabe  
Michael Liu**

# **Enabling the Asian American Electorate: 2003 Voter Registration in Eleven Massachusetts Cities and Towns**

*Paul Y. Watanabe, University of Massachusetts Boston*

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## **Introduction**

For many in Massachusetts' rapidly growing Asian American community,<sup>1</sup> political participation is a vehicle to expand opportunities. Involvement in the selection of public officials and casting votes on critical issues are important manifestations of civic engagement. This participation, while it may offer opportunities for Asian Americans, also poses some significant challenges. In order to vote, adult residents must be United States citizens by birth or naturalization, but that is not enough. Citizens must also be registered to vote. This report<sup>2</sup> provides the most detailed information on voter registration and Asian Americans in Massachusetts ever assembled. It includes analysis by the Institute for Asian American Studies of recent data<sup>3</sup> from the cities and towns in Massachusetts with more than 4,000 voting age Asian Americans.<sup>4</sup>

The information on voter registration is organized into three parts. The first section includes two different measures of voter registration: 1) the registration rate for Asian Americans of voting age, and 2) the registration rate for Asian Americans of voting age who are citizens. The second section examines the consequences of voter registration rates on actual and potential Asian American electoral influence by looking at: 1) the Asian American share of the voting age population, 2) the Asian American share of voting age citizens, and 3) the Asian American share of registered voters. The final section provides data on the party affiliations of Asian Americans who are registered to vote.

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<sup>1</sup> From 1990 to 2000, the Asian American population in Massachusetts increased by 68% (Census 2000 Summary File 1 and Census 1990 Summary File 1). In reporting Census 2000 data and data derived from Census 2000 in this study, we utilize the "Asian alone" category. Consequently, the most conservative figures for the number of Asian Americans in various population groups are employed in this analysis. By 2025 the number of Asian Americans in Massachusetts is projected to expand to 534,000 from the 2000 total of 238,124 (Census 2000 Summary File 1 and U.S. Census Bureau, Projected State Populations, by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1995-2025).

<sup>2</sup> A preliminary report was issued by the Institute for Asian American Studies in July 2002.

<sup>3</sup> 2003 city and town resident lists are utilized for voter registration information. 2003 population estimates based on adjustments to the Census 2000 information are used for data on voting age populations and adult citizen populations. See the section on methodology for further discussion about how these databases were utilized for this study.

<sup>4</sup> Boston, Brookline, Cambridge, Lowell, Lynn, Malden, Newton, Quincy, Somerville, Waltham, and Worcester.

## I. Asian American Voter Registration Rates

### Rates for the Voting Age Population

The first requirement for those eligible to register to vote is to be at least 18 years of age. Table 1 and figure 1 indicate that for the combined eleven cities and towns, 25.5% (30,703) of Asian Americans of voting age (120,465) were registered to vote.<sup>5</sup> In comparison, for all adults residing in these cities and towns (1,192,856), 62.0% (738,999) were registered to vote which was more than double the rate for Asian Americans.

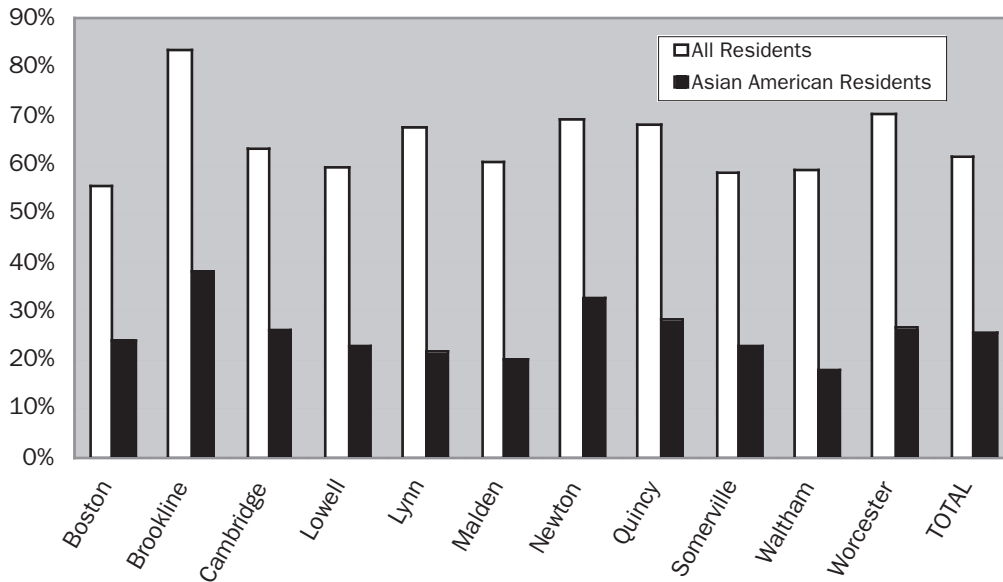
Table 1 and figure 1 also show that the registration rates for Asian Americans of voting age varied considerably by city or town. Brookline, 38.4%, and Newton, 32.8%, stood alone with Asian American registration rates utilizing this measure that were over thirty percent. Quincy, 28.4%, Worcester, 26.7%, and Cambridge, 26.4%, had the next highest Asian American rates. The cities with the lowest rates for Asian Americans were Waltham, 17.9%, Malden, 20.3%, Lynn, 21.7%, Somerville, 23.0%, and Lowell, 23.1%.

**Table 1. Voting Age Population**

	All Residents			Asian American Residents		
	Voting Age Population	Registered Voters	Registration Rate	Voting Age Population	Registered Voters	Registration Rate
Boston	476,235	264,739	55.6%	40,924	9,893	24.2%
Brookline	48,224	40,215	83.4%	6,838	2,623	38.4%
Cambridge	89,406	56,880	63.6%	12,215	3,225	26.4%
Lowell	77,216	46,150	59.8%	12,331	2,846	23.1%
Lynn	66,810	45,217	67.7%	4,158	903	21.7%
Malden	45,715	27,805	60.8%	8,209	1,670	20.3%
Newton	66,314	45,918	69.2%	5,667	1,856	32.8%
Quincy	73,631	50,171	68.1%	13,575	3,853	28.4%
Somerville	66,318	38,927	58.7%	5,007	1,153	23.0%
Waltham	50,396	29,815	59.2%	4,535	811	17.9%
Worcester	132,591	93,162	70.3%	7,006	1,870	26.7%
TOTAL	1,192,856	738,999	62.0%	120,465	30,703	25.5%

<sup>5</sup> Nationally 30.7% of Asian Americans of voting age were registered to vote in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2000).

**Figure 1. Percentage of Voting Age Population Registered to Vote**



### Rates for the Voting Age Citizen Population

A different perspective on Asian American voter registration is gained by examining registration rates for the adults who are citizens. This measure accounts for the requirement that those eligible to register to vote must be U.S. citizens in addition to being at least 18 years old. Citizenship is a particularly important criterion for eligibility to vote and, thus, a major factor with respect to Asian Americans because a significant number of Asian Americans are foreign born. For example, in 2000, 71.8% of Asian Americans residing in Massachusetts were born outside of the United States.<sup>6</sup>

For the eleven combined cities and towns, only 50.0% (60,229) of Asian American adults were citizens compared to 84.1% (1,002,935) of the total population. There was wide variability in Asian American citizenship rates among the eleven cities and towns. For example, Newton, 66.2%, and Quincy, 63.1%, had Asian American citizenship rates greater than 60%. On the other hand, Asian American citizenship rates in Lowell, 29.7%, Worcester, 38.7%, Waltham, 42.5%, and Lynn, 44.3%, were below 45%.<sup>7</sup> For the total population in the individual cities and towns a much higher percentage were citizens compared to Asian Americans. Somerville at 78.9% had the lowest citizenship rate of the eleven cities and towns. Newton had the highest rate at 91.8%.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Census 2000 Summary File 3.

<sup>7</sup> The Asian American citizenship rates for the remaining cities and towns were Boston, 52.8%, Brookline, 53.5%, Cambridge, 51.4%, Malden, 46.1%, and Somerville, 48.8% (Census 2000 Summary File 3).

<sup>8</sup> The citizenship rates for the total population in the remaining cities and towns were Boston, 82.2%, Brookline, 84.8%, Cambridge, 81.5%, Lowell, 81.9%, Lynn, 82.7%, Malden, 82.4%, Quincy, 89.5%, Waltham, 86.5%, and Worcester, 89.5%.

**Table 2. Voting Age Citizen Population**

	All Residents			Asian American Residents		
	Voting Age Citizen Population	Registered Voters	Registration Rate	Voting Age Citizen Population	Registered Voters	Registration Rate
Boston	391,583	264,739	67.6%	21,592	9,893	45.8%
Brookline	40,874	40,215	98.4%	3,661	2,623	71.6%
Cambridge	72,856	56,880	78.1%	6,277	3,225	51.4%
Lowell	63,274	46,150	72.9%	3,667	2,846	77.6%
Lynn	55,236	45,217	81.9%	1,842	903	49.0%
Malden	37,678	27,805	73.8%	3,787	1,670	44.1%
Newton	60,899	45,918	75.4%	3,753	1,856	49.5%
Quincy	65,897	50,171	76.1%	8,570	3,853	45.0%
Somerville	52,342	38,927	74.4%	2,442	1,153	47.2%
Waltham	43,569	29,815	68.4%	1,929	811	42.0%
Worcester	118,727	93,162	78.5%	2,709	1,870	69.0%
TOTAL	1,002,935	738,999	73.7%	60,229	30,703	51.0%

**Figure 2. Percentage of Voting Age Citizen Population Registered to Vote**

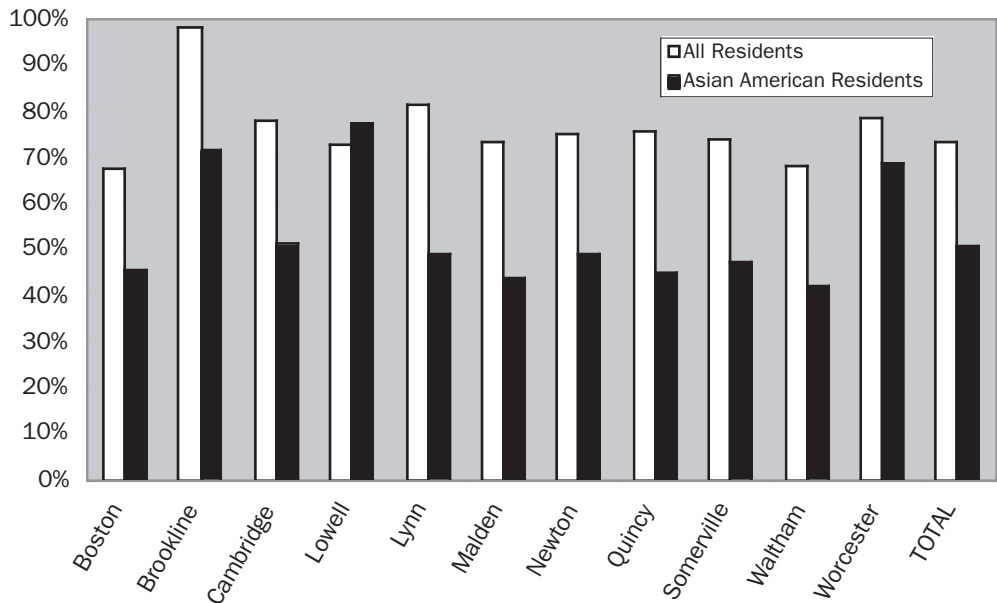


Table 2 and figure 2 report that for the eleven cities and towns combined, 51.0% (30,703) of the Asian Americans who were citizens were registered.<sup>9</sup> Of all residents who were citizens in those cities and towns, 73.7% (738,999) were registered. By removing non-citizens from the voting age population, therefore, the voter registration rate increased somewhat for the total population and doubled for Asian Americans.

The voter registration rates for Asian Americans who were citizens, according to table 2 and figure 2, also varied from one city or town to the next. They ranged from Lowell, 77.6%, and Brookline, 71.6%, with high Asian American registration levels, to Waltham, 42.0%, Malden, 44.1%, and Quincy, 45.0%, with the lowest levels. In comparison, the voter registration rates for the total citizen population were 98.4% in Brookline at the high end and 67.6% in Boston and 68.4% in Waltham at the low end. In other words, the lowest registration rate for citizens as a whole in any town or city was nearly the same as the highest rates for Asian American registration in any town or city.

Clearly, as the first measure of voter registration demonstrates, a major explanation for the relatively low number of registered Asian Americans in most jurisdictions is the large number of Asian Americans who are not citizens. It is also true, however, that, for those Asian Americans who are citizens, in many cases there remains a considerable disparity between their registration rates and those of the general population. It is reasonable to conclude that a mixture of structural, e.g., a high proportion of foreign-born Asian American residents, lower citizenship rates, etc., and individual factors, e.g., difficulties registering, motivation, etc., may account for generally lower Asian American voter registration rates.

## **II. The Asian American Share of Adult Residents, Citizens, and Registered Voters**

### **Share of the Voting Age Population**

By reporting the Asian American portion of the total voting age population, it is possible to provide some indication of the future potential electoral impact of Asian Americans in various jurisdictions. Table 3 and figure 3 indicate that Asian Americans accounted for 10.1% (120,465) of the combined adult residents of the eleven cities and towns.<sup>10</sup> In terms of the total adult population in the individual cities and towns analyzed, Asian Americans constituted the largest share in Quincy, 18.4%, Malden, 18.0%, and Lowell, 16.0%. Even in the cities and towns with the smallest shares, Worcester, 5.3%, Lynn, 6.2%, and Somerville, 7.5%, Asian Americans represented a rapidly growing sector.

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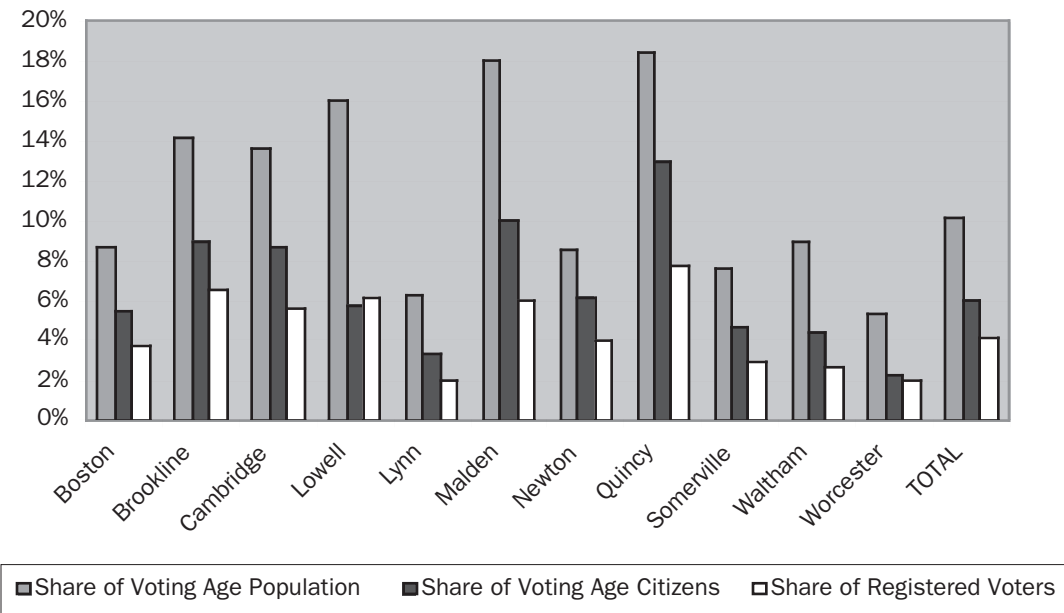
<sup>9</sup> Nationally 52.4% of Asian Americans who were citizens were registered to vote in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Nationally the Asian American share of the total adult population was 3.7% in 2000 (Census 2000 Summary File 1).

**Table 3. Asian American Share of Voting Age Population, Voting Age Citizens, and Registered Voters**

	Voting Age Population		Voting Age Citizens		Registered Voters	
Boston	8.6%	(40,924)	5.5%	(21,592)	3.7%	(9,893)
Brookline	14.2%	(6,838)	9.0%	(3,661)	6.5%	(2,623)
Cambridge	13.7%	(12,215)	8.6%	(6,277)	5.7%	(3,225)
Lowell	16.0%	(12,331)	5.8%	(3,667)	6.2%	(2,846)
Lynn	6.2%	(4,158)	3.3%	(1,842)	2.0%	(903)
Malden	18.0%	(8,209)	10.1%	(3,787)	6.0%	(1,670)
Newton	8.5%	(5,667)	6.2%	(3,753)	4.0%	(1,856)
Quincy	18.4%	(13,575)	13.0%	(8,570)	7.7%	(3,853)
Somerville	7.5%	(5,007)	4.7%	(2,442)	3.0%	(1,153)
Waltham	9.0%	(4,535)	4.4%	(1,929)	2.7%	(811)
Worcester	5.3%	(7,006)	2.3%	(2,709)	2.0%	(1,870)
TOTAL	10.1%	(120,465)	6.0%	(60,229)	4.2%	(30,703)

**Figure 3. Asian American Share of Voting Age Population, Voting Age Citizens, and Registered Voters**





## Share of the Voting Age Citizen Population

Data on the Asian American share of the adult citizen population offer a more immediate perspective on the political potential of Asian Americans. Table 3 and figure 3 report the Asian American share of the voting age citizen population. Asian Americans constituted 6.0% (60,229) of the adult citizenry of the eleven cities and towns.<sup>11</sup> Asian Americans accounted for the highest portions of total adult citizens in Quincy, 13.0%, Malden, 10.1%, and Brookline, 9.0%. Asian Americans in Worcester, 2.3%, and Lynn, 3.3%, comprised the smallest shares of adult citizens. The gap between the 10.1% of the voting age population that Asian Americans constituted and the 6.0% of the voting age citizen population that Asian Americans represented is what we identify as “the voter eligibility gap” (table 4 and figure 4). It reflects the barrier posed by citizenship requirements that limit the ability of Asian Americans to register to vote. While this gap was 4.1% for the combined cities and towns, it was much wider for cities and towns such as Lowell, 10.2%, Malden, 7.9%, Quincy, 5.4%, Brookline, 5.2%, and Cambridge, 5.1%. The gap was narrowest in Newton, 2.3%.

## Share of Registered Voters

Data on the Asian American share of registered voters are also reported in table 3 and figure 3. This information offers a glimpse at the actual magnitude of the Asian American electorate overall and in the individual cities and towns. Of the total registered voters in the eleven cities and towns (738,999), Asian Americans accounted for 4.2% (30,703).<sup>12</sup> As a percentage of registered voters in the eleven cities and towns, Asian Americans represented 7.7% in Quincy, 6.5% in Brookline, 6.2% in Lowell, and 6.0% in Malden at the high end. Asian Americans represented the smallest shares of registered voters in Lynn and Worcester, both at 2.0%, Waltham, 2.7%, and Somerville, 3.0%.

The gap between the 4.2% of registered voters that Asian Americans account for and their 6.0% share of the voting age citizen population is what we call “the voter registration gap” (table 4 and figure 4). This gap represents the distance between those who are fully eligible to register to vote and those who are actually registered. For Asian Americans in the combined cities and towns, the gap, therefore, was 1.8%. The gaps were especially large in Quincy, 5.3%, and Malden, 4.1%. On a more positive note, the Asian American share of registered voters in Lowell was greater by a small margin, 0.4%, than their share of the voting age citizen population. Assuredly a goal for the remaining cities and towns can be to emulate Lowell’s example.

As we have indicated, rapid growth is the foundation for enhanced Asian American political participation and influence. To take full advantage of the growing Asian American presence, however, the voter eligibility and voter registration gaps must be closed or turned around. Two major ways to achieve these objectives are: 1) to increase the naturalization rates of Asian American immigrants and, thereby, close the eligibility gap, and 2) to increase the registration rates of those Asian Americans who are citizens and, thus, address the registration gap. Making con-

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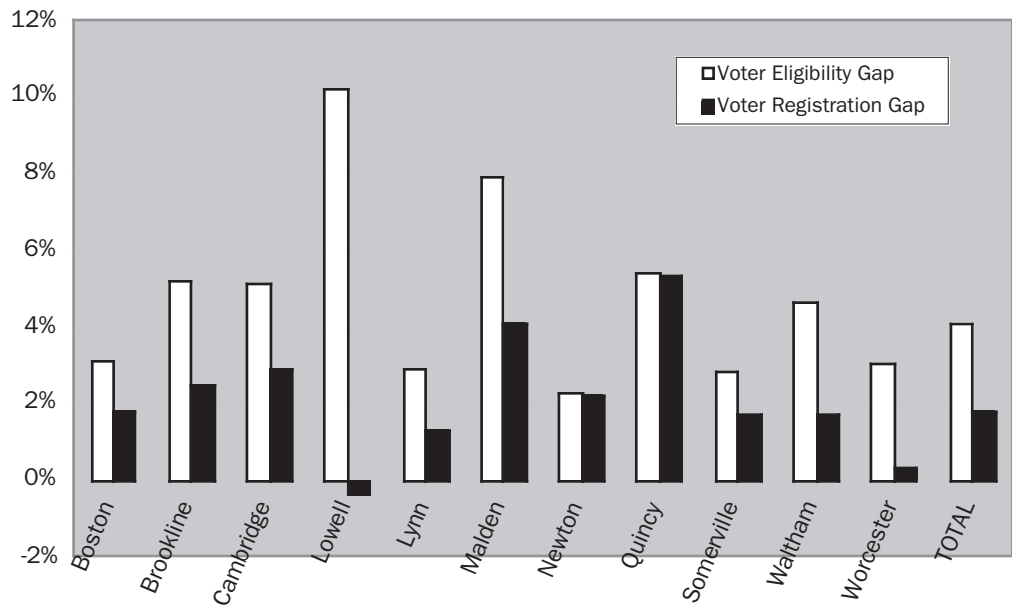
<sup>11</sup> Nationally the Asian American share of the total adult citizen population was 2.5% in 2000. (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Nationally 1.9% of registered voters were Asian American in 2000. (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2000).

**Table 4. Asian American Voter Eligibility and Voter Registration Gaps**

	Voter Eligibility Gap	Voter Registration Gap
Boston	3.1%	1.8%
Brookline	5.2%	2.5%
Cambridge	5.1%	2.9%
Lowell	10.2%	(0.4%)
Lynn	2.9%	1.3%
Malden	7.9%	4.1%
Newton	2.3%	2.2%
Quincy	5.4%	5.3%
Somerville	2.8%	1.7%
Waltham	4.6%	1.7%
Worcester	3.0%	0.3%
TOTAL	4.1%	1.8%

**Figure 4. Asian American Voter Eligibility and Voter Registration Gaps**



siderable progress in increasing naturalization rates is a long and tedious process and a substantial challenge. This is not to say that efforts to ease the citizenship process are not worthwhile. It simply emphasizes the point that it is not likely that the percentage of Asian American adults who are citizens will increase dramatically (and it may in fact decrease) in the near future largely due to the continuing stream of immigrants from Asia. Increasing the registration rates of those who are citizens, however, is a very attainable objective.

### III. Party Affiliation of Asian Americans

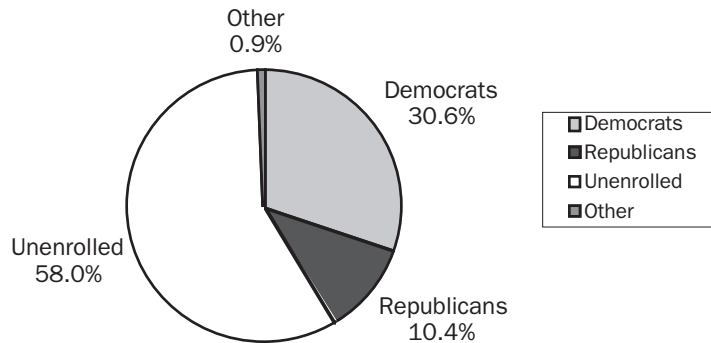
Table 5 and figure 5 and show that 58.0% (17,821), of Asian Americans registered to vote (30,703) in the eleven cities and towns did not designate a specific party affiliation, i.e., they were formally listed as “unenrolled.” Just under one-third, 30.6% (9,392) were enrolled as Democrats, 10.4% (3,200) as Republicans, and 0.9% (290) in other parties. In comparison, as shown in table 6 and figure 6, for the total population in these cities and towns, 39.6% (280,544) were unenrolled, 50.1% (354,708) were Democrats, 9.1% (64,788) were Republicans, and 1.2% (8,220) identified with other parties. In summary this means that for the total of these cities and towns, Asian Americans were more likely to be unenrolled, less enrolled as Democrats, and slightly more enrolled as Republicans compared to the overall population of registered voters.

According to table 5, the cities and towns with the highest percentage of Asian Americans registered who did not designate a party affiliation were Quincy, 68.4%, Newton, 63.5%, Malden, 63.0%, and Waltham, 60.9%. Asian Americans were most heavily registered as Democrats in Cambridge, 41.1%, Somerville, 37.3%, Brookline, 34.7%, and Lynn 32.7%. For Asian Americans registered as Republicans, the leading cities and towns were Worcester, 17.0%, Lynn, 15.7%, Lowell, 14.4%, and Waltham, 11.6%.

**Table 5. Party Affiliation of Asian Americans**

	Democrats		Republicans		Unenrolled		Other		Total Reg
Boston	31.1%	(3,079)	10.3%	(1,017)	57.7%	(5,708)	0.9%	(89)	9,893
Brookline	34.7%	(910)	7.9%	(206)	57.0%	(1,496)	0.4%	(11)	2,623
Cambridge	41.1%	(1,325)	8.8%	(283)	48.8%	(1,573)	1.4%	(44)	3,225
Lowell	30.0%	(855)	14.4%	(411)	54.4%	(1,547)	1.2%	(33)	2,846
Lynn	32.7%	(295)	15.7%	(142)	50.7%	(458)	0.9%	(8)	903
Malden	25.9%	(432)	9.9%	(166)	63.0%	(1,052)	1.2%	(20)	1,670
Newton	26.4%	(490)	9.6%	(178)	63.5%	(1,178)	0.5%	(10)	1,856
Quincy	22.9%	(884)	7.8%	(299)	68.4%	(2,634)	0.9%	(36)	3,853
Somerville	37.3%	(430)	7.5%	(87)	53.3%	(615)	1.8%	(21)	1,153
Waltham	26.9%	(218)	11.6%	(94)	60.9%	(494)	0.6%	(5)	811
Worcester	25.3%	(474)	17.0%	(317)	57.0%	(1,066)	0.7%	(13)	1,870
TOTAL	30.6%	(9,392)	10.4%	(3,200)	58.0%	(17,821)	0.9%	(290)	30,703

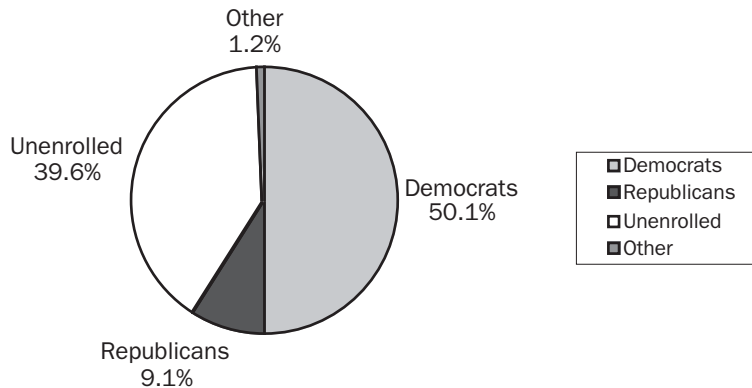
**Figure 5. Party Affiliation for the Combined Asian American Population in the Eleven Cities and Towns**



**Table 6. Party Affiliation of Total Population**

	Democrats	Republicans	Unenrolled	Other	Total Reg
Boston	54.9% (140,036)	8.2% (20,883)	35.7% (90,894)	1.2% (3,033)	254,846
Brookline	45.3% (17,042)	10.4% (3,909)	43.5% (16,367)	0.7% (274)	37,592
Cambridge	59.5% (31,942)	7.0% (3,777)	31.7% (16,995)	1.8% (941)	53,655
Lowell	43.2% (18,695)	10.1% (4,378)	45.5% (19,691)	1.2% (503)	43,267
Lynn	46.2% (20,458)	7.4% (3,285)	45.8% (20,286)	0.6% (285)	44,314
Malden	45.7% (11,943)	7.8% (2,045)	45.6% (11,913)	0.9% (234)	26,135
Newton	47.2% (20,778)	10.4% (4,604)	41.9% (18,454)	0.5% (226)	44,062
Quincy	48.5% (22,442)	12.6% (5,850)	38.0% (17,597)	0.9% (429)	46,318
Somerville	53.4% (20,181)	6.4% (2,402)	37.9% (14,323)	2.3% (869)	37,775
Waltham	36.5% (10,573)	11.4% (3,304)	51.2% (14,836)	1.0% (291)	29,004
Worcester	44.5% (40,618)	11.3% (10,351)	42.9% (39,188)	1.2% (1,135)	91,292
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>50.1% (354,708)</b>	<b>9.1% (64,788)</b>	<b>39.6% (280,544)</b>	<b>1.2% (8,220)</b>	<b>708,260</b>

**Figure 6. Party Affiliation for the Combined Total Population in the Eleven Cities and Towns**



## **Conclusion**

For the vast majority of Americans, the mechanics of enabling them to vote are pretty simple. Most Americans are citizens by birth so when they become eighteen years old the principal remaining hurdle as a preliminary to voting is the registration process. Asian Americans, in contrast, as we have seen in our analysis of eleven cities and towns in Massachusetts, are overwhelmingly foreign born and thus many must navigate the naturalization process. Although many Asian American immigrants do become citizens joining their American born brothers and sisters, the percentage of Asian American adults who are citizens still lags considerably behind that of the general population. This voter eligibility gap must be narrowed.

For Asian American adults who are equipped with citizenship, there still remains, however, much that needs to be done to enable them to vote. The registration hurdle that faces all adult citizens is one that Asian Americans in most jurisdictions clear with less frequency than the overall population. In other words, dealing with the voter eligibility gap is difficult and still not enough. The voter registration gap must be narrowed as well to enable Asian Americans to participate fully in the electoral system.

The potential political impact of any group of course is based on more than numbers. The concentration of Asian Americans of voting age, as adult citizens, and as a share of registered voters help offer some indication of the political weight that Asian Americans can and do possess. Here our data suggests that at least in the cities and towns featured in this report on all of these measures the share of Asian Americans is significant and in most cases growing. The challenge for Asian Americans in these communities and, indeed, for the communities as a whole is to strengthen their opportunities to vote and for full civic engagement.

## **Notes on methodology**

In reporting the number of adults and the adult citizen populations in the eleven cities and towns, we relied on calculations based on 2000 U.S. census data rather than on resident lists. The non-response rate for surveys upon which the resident lists are derived is notoriously high. The figures for the 2003 voting age populations and voting age citizen populations for both the total population and for Asian Americans specifically were derived by estimating the rate of growth from 2000 to 2003 for these groups. These projections were based upon the rates of growth between 1990 and 2000. We then calculated the annual percentage rate of growth in each category. Assuming a uniform rate of growth, we then utilized the annual rate of growth in each category to project an estimated number in 2003 for each of the categories.

In this report, the 2003 resident lists are used only to identify registered voters in the cities and towns and their party affiliations. For the purpose of identifying Asian American registered voters, Asian American resident records were extracted from the city and town resident listings through the identification of Asian surnames. These surnames were checked against an extensive database of Asian surnames compiled by the Institute for Asian Americans Studies from existing Asian names lists and from consultations with expert informants. A proprietary computer program written by the Institute was utilized to automatically extract the records of residents with Asian surnames. Efforts were made to limit racial misidentifications. For example, in the case of surnames

that are common for more than one racial group, such as Lee, Young, and Ray, records were manually inspected for evidence of the likely race of the resident, e.g., first and middle names, other household members, etc. Any names that remained in doubt were not included in the listing of Asian Americans.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **About the Authors**

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**Institute for Asian American Studies  
at the University of Massachusetts Boston**

The Institute for Asian American Studies utilizes resources and expertise from the University and the community to conduct research on Asian Americans; to strengthen and further Asian American involvement in political, economic, social, and cultural life; and to support the development of Asian American studies on campus.

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