Memories and Movement:

An Intergenerational Study of Political Attitudes within New York City's Chinese American Communities

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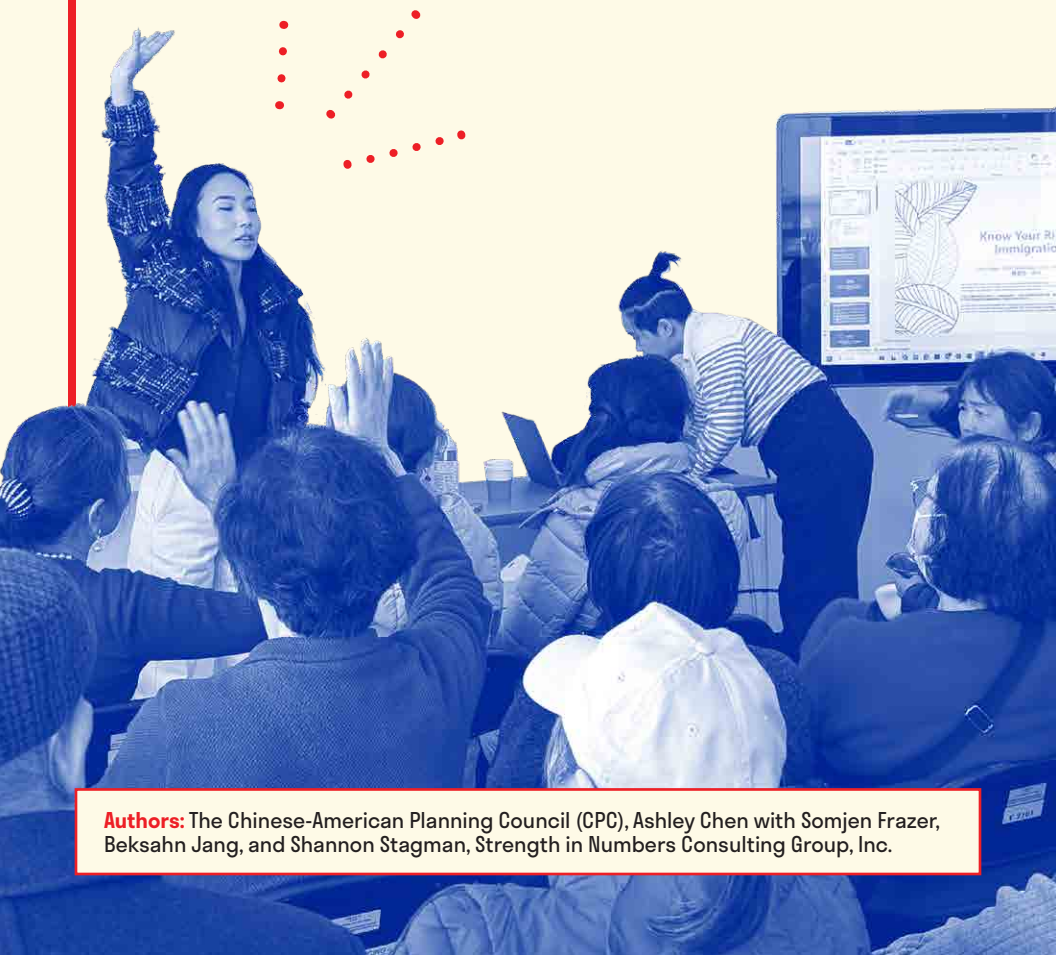

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Executive Summary:

This study by the Chinese-American Planning Council (CPC) and Strength in Numbers Consulting Group (SiNCG) finds that political attitudes among Chinese American immigrant communities are deeply shaped by generational experiences, distinct media ecosystems, and differing definitions of belonging and success in the United States. Older adults tend to ground their views in migration histories that emphasize economic opportunity, stability, and caution toward political confrontation, while a youth more often prioritize civic voice, social justice, and systemic critique, even as they express uncertainty about political efficacy. Despite these differences, both groups share concerns about safety, economic strain, foreign policy, and distrust of political institutions, and both actively engage in political thinking, often in private or community-based settings rather than formal civic spaces. Intergenerational dialogue revealed both tensions and areas of alignment, particularly around economic issues, underscoring that the divide is not rooted in apathy but in differing lived experiences and risk perceptions. The findings highlight the need for culturally competent, bilingual, and community-centered approaches to civic engagement that build trust, expand access, and create structured opportunities for sustained intergenerational dialogue and participation.

Introduction:

In 2025, the Chinese-American Planning Council (CPC) partnered with Strength in Numbers Consulting Group (SiNCG) to more deeply examine and understand political attitudes among Chinese American community members across our three main community sites in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, Chinatown, Manhattan, and Flushing, Queens. The question was not simply who people vote for. It was deeper: how do Chinese immigrant community members shape their political beliefs, why do older adults and youth sometimes see politics so differently, and what happens when they try to talk about it together?

The research began with six separate focus groups: three with older adults and three with youth, before bringing both generations into the same room for intergenerational dialogue. What emerged was not apathy, and not a simple partisan divide. It was something more layered: politics shaped by migration memory, by fear and aspiration, by media ecosystems, and by differing perspectives on safety, fairness, and belonging.

Methodology:

The study consisted of two phases of data collection: 1) six intragenerational focus groups for older adults and youth participants and 2) three intergenerational discussion groups between these groups to practice and develop intergenerational political discourse. A common research practice for focus groups is to keep the participants as demographically homogenous as possible, because introducing elements of diversity can sometimes stifle honest discussion and reflection about sensitive topics. While this study wanted to understand more about the political attitudes for each age affinity group, it also had the dual purpose of promoting dialogue and understanding across different generations. Accordingly, we designed the study to include both a set of intragenerational focus groups for same-generation participants to discuss their perspectives on current politics and a set of discussion sessions to promote open intergenerational dialogue on those topics.

Intragenerational Focus Groups

We conducted a total of six focus groups in the summer of 2025, separated into three groups with older adult participants and three groups with youth participants. CPC recruited participants from a cross-section of our programs, and focus groups were held at CPC locations in Flushing, Sunset Park, and the Lower East Side/Chinatown, with each site hosting one adult and one youth focus group. These sites are located in neighborhoods with some of the largest Chinese American populations and where CPC has the most active community presence. The sampling strategy was intended to elicit varying political perceptions and experiences by generation.

While youth focus groups were conducted in English, older adult focus groups included bilingual facilitation and live interpretation conducted in partnership with Gongming Collective of Language Justice, a group of New York-City based individuals from the Chinese-speaking diaspora who provide interpretation, translation, language capacity development, and community spaces in Chinese languages. Gongming provided Cantonese language support at the Manhattan site and Mandarin language support at the Flushing and Brooklyn sites.

SiNCG developed the focus group protocol (Appendix A), focused on eliciting perspectives on current social and political issues, in partnership with CPC and Gongming. CPC aimed to explore the following research questions:

1. What political issues are most salient for Chinese communities, how are these distinguished from personal or community concerns, and what roles do local and national governments play in addressing them?

2. What do Chinese community members believe the government is responsible for, where do they perceive it is succeeding or failing, and how do partisan perceptions shape these evaluations?

3. How do Chinese and Chinese Americans perceive their political representation, sense of inclusion, and ability to influence political processes and outcomes?

4. What sources, networks, and community spaces shape political information flows, and what skills, resources, and constraints influence political engagement?

5. What formal and informal political practices are Chinese communities engaging in, which forms are preferred or avoided, and how do individuals and communities respond when political issues arise?

All focus groups were recorded and transcribed. For focus groups conducted in Mandarin and Cantonese, interpreters summarized and reported responses to the lead SiNCG researcher in English, and excerpts of interpreters' statements are used in this report to summarize statements from the older adult focus group participants. Notes gathered by CPC staff and interpreters also informed the findings of both youth and older adult focus groups. SiNCG reviewed all summaries and notes and coded transcripts for themes based on the agreed upon set of research questions.

Intergenerational Discussion Groups

Following the initial focus groups, SiNCG and CPC discussed findings and set goals for the next phase of the study to bring together the groups across generations. Three discussion groups were held in fall 2025, with older adults and youth invited to share and discuss the topics of political information and political participation with one another.

We designed the discussion groups with bridging the main research questions aforementioned and the following four research objectives in mind:

- To facilitate intergenerational discourse between Chinese community members given the high variation in political positions across generations within our three main community centers.

- To identify areas of common interest as well as sensitivity or polarization between generations.

- To recognize modes/norms of engagement and discourse and how these may vary by generation.

Discussion groups were held at the same CPC locations in Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan, with Gongming Collective of Language Justice again providing facilitation and interpretation support in Cantonese and Mandarin. The size of discussion groups was typically twice or more the size of focus groups (e.g., 17 discussion group attendees in Brooklyn compared to 5-10 participants in each focus group). Former attendees of focus groups were invited to attend discussion groups and additional attendees were also welcome to join the groups. Attendance was roughly balanced between youth and older adults as well as men and women.

All discussion groups were recorded and transcribed by either SiNCG researchers or Gongming Collective of Language Justice interpretation staff. Gongming interpreters led facilitation of discussion groups while SiNCG staff attended and took observatory notes. CPC, SiNCG, and Gongming staff shared findings after discussion group sessions in debriefing periods. Transcripts from discussion groups draw on statements from English speakers and English translations performed live by Gongming staff. In addition to observatory notes and transcripts, another key source of data was the gallery walk in which attendees wrote responses to questions on their engagement with political information. These responses were also discussed with the group when time permitted. Findings are drawn from all three sources of data.

Findings:

The findings reveal a nuanced generational divide in how immigrant older adults and youth understand politics, belonging, and security in the United States. While both groups expressed deep concern about safety, foreign policy, economic strain, and immigration enforcement, they often differed in how they interpreted these issues and what they believed constituted success in America. These differences did not reflect disengagement or indifference on either side. Rather, they reflected distinct pathways through which political attitudes were formed, integrated, and expressed.

Roots of Political Attitudes

For many older adults, their political attitudes were deeply shaped by experiences in the countries they left behind. Memories of state control, war, instability, or limited opportunity influenced how they interpreted life in the United States. These experiences often fostered an emphasis on economic mobility and social order, as well as caution toward political confrontation. Some older adults spoke carefully about criticizing the U.S. government, expressing a sense that doing so conflicted with the opportunities the country had provided them. One participant described feeling that criticizing the government too strongly felt almost contradictory to the very reason they immigrated. Youth participants recognized this orientation within their families. As one young participant explained:

> "If they were to protest, that would just be going against a government that helped them build a better life... which kind of goes against their entire point of immigrating"

These differing starting points also shaped how participants understood the idea of the "American Dream." Many older adults defined success in America as closely tied to economic opportunity: an "open field," as one youth described their parents' view. Stability, mobility, and the ability to build a life were central measures of achievement.

Youth participants, however, framed the American Dream differently. Rather than primarily emphasizing economic advancement, they often emphasized civic rights and political voice. As one participant described:

> "To me, it's like free speech, liberties... You can speak up to the government. To my parents, it seems more like an opportunity."

Yet youth also expressed a sense that these freedoms felt increasingly fragile. Another participant reflected:

> "They're told America is this free country... but then once they immigrate there, they're met with hate... and told, 'You can't come here.'"

The generational divide, therefore, was not one of hope versus hopelessness. Instead, it reflected different understandings of what it means to succeed and belong: economic mobility for many older adults versus political belonging and civic voice for many youth.

Information Sources and Media Environments

For many older adults, their political attitudes were deeply shaped by experiences in the countries they left behind. Memories of state control, war, instability, or limited opportunity influenced how they interpreted life in the United States. These experiences often fostered an emphasis on economic mobility and social order, as well as caution toward political confrontation. Some older adults spoke carefully about criticizing the U.S. government, expressing a sense that doing so conflicted with the opportunities the country had provided them. One participant described feeling that criticizing the government too strongly felt almost contradictory to the very reason they immigrated. Youth participants recognized this orientation within their families. As one young participant explained:

> "I look at it... read the comments... then scroll."

Across youth participants, high exposure but limited depth of engagement with news was common. Many described encountering a constant stream of information, particularly through social media but feeling uncertain about how to assess its credibility. Awareness of misinformation was widespread, yet this awareness did not necessarily translate into confidence in identifying accuracy. Instead, youth often expressed a sense of skepticism and at times, stress when navigating online content.

Participants highlighted how easily informational content could blur into opinion or misinformation, especially as algorithms surfaced increasingly politicized material. While some youth attempted to verify what they encountered by reviewing multiple sources, this effort was often driven by a fear of being misled rather than confidence in their ability to evaluate information. As one participant expressed, they try to cross-check information because of a "fear of just being misinformed." Others also described a growing sense of fatigue and distrust, particularly around complex or highly contested issues, where conflicting narratives made it difficult to determine what to believe.

Older adults also voiced concerns about misinformation but felt constrained by the limited number of sources accessible in their primary language. As a result, each generation operated within largely separate information ecosystems, shaping not only what information they encountered, but how they evaluated its credibility and ultimately understood political issues.

Development of Political Opinions and Current Attitudes

These different foundations and information environments shaped how each generation interpreted contemporary political issues.

Foreign policy, for example, sparked some of the most emotionally charged conversations across both groups. Among older adults, there was strong agreement that the United States should reduce foreign military involvement. This perspective was rooted not necessarily in abstract geopolitical reasoning but in lived memories of war and instability. Participants referenced multiple international conflicts and repeatedly returned to concerns about escalation and the human costs of war.

Youth participants were equally critical of U.S. intervention abroad, but their framing differed. For many young people, the Israel-Palestine conflict had become a defining political moment. One participant stated bluntly:

> "This is where my tax money should not be going... I shouldn't be supporting a genocide."

Another framed the issue in stark moral terms:

> "What matters now is people, not land... trading lives for land is disgusting."

Both generations rejected the idea of the United States acting as the "world police." However, older adults tended to articulate their concerns through the language of risk and instability, while youth framed their positions through the language of human rights and moral accountability. A similar pattern emerged in discussions of safety. The following is a quote from an interpreter's summary of an older adult's fears rooted in everyday experiences:

> "Even so she is concerned about safety, mostly. She has some examples of for like, when, when she's commuting. She's afraid of people who will, like, push her off the tracks. And also, she saw on the news that someone was shot in the head while commuting."

Youth participants also shared vivid personal experiences. One described witnessing a knife altercation on a subway platform, while another recalled hiding inside a store during a shootout.

Yet youth frequently expanded these personal accounts into broader structural explanations. They discussed gun access, homelessness, media portrayals of crime, and the social pressures of dense urban life. Several of the young participants also expressed particular concern for their parents' vulnerability if an altercation were to happen. One participant explained:

> "I'm worried about my parents... they're not really proficient in English, so if there's ever a conflict, I don't know how to deal with it."

While both generations shared deep concerns about safety, they often differed in how they interpreted its causes. Older adults tended to emphasize regulation, personal responsibility, and moral order. Youth participants more often pointed to systemic factors and social conditions.

Discussions on immigration policy revealed similar philosophical tensions. Many participants believed that immigration enforcement disproportionately targeted Latino communities, which created a perception among some participants that the threat was somewhat distant. However, this sense of distance was uneasy, marked by real examples of Asian communities being targeted by immigration enforcement. During intergenerational discussions, one older adult argued that individuals who follow the law should not fear arrest:

> "If you obey the law, and if you know you are credible and honest that you don't disobey, but you know, like, follow the laws as intended, you know, then how would they even come and arrest you? So you just, you should just follow these virtues, be honest, and then start with yourself, you know, make sure you're, you know, following the laws, then you will be safe"

Youth participants challenged this view by citing examples of wrongful detention and racial profiling. The exchange remained calm, but the divide was evident: stability through compliance versus justice through scrutiny.

Political Risk, Engagement, and Civic Participation

These attitudes ultimately shaped how participants viewed political participation and civic engagement. For many youth, politics was important but felt distant from their immediate lives. One participant explained:

> "I'm not really seeing anything that specifically affects my family immediately."

Within immigrant families, activism was often perceived as carrying significant risk. Public protest, political visibility, or confrontation with authorities could potentially threaten immigration status, educational opportunities, or family stability. One participant reflected on this tension:

> "How would you risk your education... and your visa?"

At the same time, others challenged this logic, arguing that collective inaction could prevent change. As one participant put it:

> "If everybody thinks they're not going to make an impact, nothing's going to happen."

Despite frequently describing themselves as "non-political," both older adults and youth engaged in sustained and nuanced political discussion during the focus groups. Older adults debated one another about immigration enforcement and the construction of new jails. Youth participants argued about the ethics of deportation and competing interpretations of fairness. Political engagement was clearly present; however, it often remained confined to private conversations rather than public civic spaces.

When older adults and youth were brought together in intergenerational dialogue sessions, new patterns emerged. Economic anxiety, particularly concerns about tariffs and trade wars became an unexpected point of alignment. Participants from both generations connected rising costs and pressures on small businesses to global trade policy. One participant summarized this shared perspective by noting that regardless of whether the conflict takes the form of war or a trade war, "the people who suffer are the citizens." Distrust of politicians also crossed generational lines. Many participants expressed frustration at feeling forced to choose between unsatisfactory political options, as well as skepticism that elected officials would prioritize community needs over personal or political interests.

Yet when asked where they felt a sense of agency, participants rarely pointed to electoral politics. Instead, both generations highlighted community-level action. Youth participants discussed volunteering and supporting food pantries, while one older adult described spreading goodness through teaching Tai Chi.

Interaction patterns during these dialogues were themselves revealing. Youth participants often responded directly to older adults' comments, sometimes challenging them openly. Older adults, however, rarely criticized youth publicly. Instead, they directed their responses toward peers. This pattern of restraint did not necessarily signal agreement. Rather, it reflected a broader caution among many older adults, for whom discussing politics openly still carried a sense of risk shaped by past experiences.

Recommendations:

From these findings, we recognize the importance of continuing these conversations by creating spaces for youth and older adults to engage in political dialogue and action. The following recommendations highlight tools that civic engagement leaders, community-based organizations, and government partners should consider in upcoming GOTV efforts and broader civic engagement activities. These approaches build directly on CPC's experience facilitating focus groups and intergenerational discussions across its community sites and reflect key insights from this study on how political attitudes are formed, expressed, and shared across generations.

The following recommendations are tailored to two key audiences: civic engagement leaders and government partners. While both groups play important roles in strengthening civic participation, they engage communities in different ways and therefore require distinct approaches.

Recommendations for Civic Engagement Leaders

- **Ground engagement in culturally resonant practices:** Civic engagement leaders should design programming that begins with culturally familiar entry points such as food, storytelling, and shared community memories. CPC's work demonstrates that these approaches foster trust and create a sense of connection across generations. By anchoring conversations in lived experience, organizations can create safer and more accessible pathways into discussions of current events and civic life.

- **Invest in skilled, bilingual, and culturally competent facilitation:** Effective engagement requires facilitators who can navigate linguistic diversity and generational differences in communication styles. Leaders should prioritize training or bringing in facilitators that are skilled in active listening, conflict navigation, and cultural competency, while ensuring language access through bilingual facilitation and interpretation. As seen in CPC's focus and intergenerational discussion groups, these elements are critical to ensuring meaningful participation, particularly among immigrant older adults.

- **Utilize structured tools to support inclusive dialogue:** Structured engagement methods, such as guided prompts, gallery walks, written reflections, and co-created group norms—can help reduce barriers to participation and shift conversations away from debate toward shared understanding. Incorporating multiple mediums, including art, movement, and storytelling, can further deepen connection, allowing participants to engage in ways that feel authentic and expressive, ultimately leading to richer and more robust discussions.

- **Design phased intergenerational engagement opportunities:**
  Civic engagement efforts should intentionally account for differences in lived experience and communication styles across generations. CPC's phased approach, beginning with intragenerational discussions before moving into intergenerational dialogue helped participants build confidence and articulate their perspectives. Similar models, including small-group or paired exchanges, can support more constructive and less confrontational dialogue.

- **Validate diverse forms of civic participation:**
  Leaders should recognize that civic engagement extends beyond formal political participation. The study shows that both older adults and youth engage in community-based activities such as volunteering and mutual aid, even when they express hesitation toward electoral politics. Bringing programs to those spaces and building on these existing forms of engagement can foster greater trust and sustained participation over time.

Recommendations for Government Partners:

- **Invest in Community-Based Organizations (CBOs):**
  Government partners must allocate meaningful, sustained resources to support CBOs that provide culturally competent and linguistically accessible civic engagement, outreach, and education. These investments should enable CBOs to effectively reach historically disenfranchised communities and should support year-round efforts, not just activities during the election period.

- **Engage communities through trusted, community-based spaces:**
  Government partners should collaborate with community-based organizations to connect with constituents in environments where they already feel comfortable. The findings suggest that individuals are more willing to discuss political issues in familiar, community-centered spaces than in formal political settings. Supporting and participating in these spaces can improve both trust and communication.

- **Utilize structured tools to support inclusive dialogue:**
  Language barriers significantly shape how immigrant communities access information and engage with political processes. There should be investments in translation, interpretation, and culturally relevant outreach strategies to ensure that information about policies, services, and civic opportunities are accessible. This includes engaging with ethnic media and platforms commonly used within the community.

- **Acknowledge and address perceptions of political risk:** Both older adults and youth expressed concerns about the potential risks associated with political participation, including impacts on immigration status, safety, and stability. Government partners should be mindful of these concerns and communicate clearly about rights, protections, and avenues for safe participation. Building trust requires recognizing these fears rather than dismissing them.

- **Connect policy issues to everyday community concerns:** The research shows that participants' own lived experience deeply impacts how they interpret issues such as safety, economic strain, and international conflict. Government partners should frame policies in ways that directly relate to constituents' daily lives. For example, connecting trade policy to small business impacts or public safety measures to neighborhood experiences. This can help demystify political processes and make them feel more relevant and accessible.

- **Create ongoing, two-way channels for community input:** Government partners should move beyond one-time outreach and invest in sustained, two-way communication with constituents. The study highlights a broader distrust of political institutions and a perception that community voices are not adequately heard. Establishing consistent feedback mechanisms through community forums, partnerships with local organizations, or participatory processes can help rebuild trust and ensure that policies are more responsive to community needs.

Conclusion:

The conversations facilitated reveal a divide that is not simply partisan. It is shaped by migration memory versus American-born political socialization; by economic opportunity versus civil liberty as the heart of the American Dream; by regulation versus structural reform as preferred frameworks for problem-solving; and by stability versus justice as guiding principles.

Beneath these differences lies shared ground: a deep commitment to community wellbeing.

Neither generation is disengaged. Both are thoughtful, cautious, and actively navigating political and social risk. The desire for intergenerational dialogue and political dialogue in general is present, but it must begin where trust already exists: through community-based organizations and in spaces where disagreement does not feel dangerous. As this study shows, the divide is not rooted in apathy or a lack of care. Rather, it reflects differences in lived experience and in what each generation feels is most urgent to protect.

For too long, media outlets and elected officials have assumed that Chinese Americans are politically disengaged. This report vehemently challenges that narrative. The conversations documented here demonstrate a clear appetite for civic participation and political discussion. Civic engagement leaders and elected officials should be paying close attention to this rapidly growing electorate, whose voices, concerns, and perspectives will increasingly shape the future.

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Lastly, and most importantly, we thank all CPC staff and community members who made these focus and discussion groups possible. Thank you for your openness and vulnerability.

Design: Stephanie Wu

Appendix A: Focus Group Research Questions

1. **Political issues: key political issues of concern**
    a. What are the political issues of greatest concern for Chinese Americans? How are they distinct as "political" issues rather than personal or community issues?
        i. What is the government responsible for? In what areas is it failing to meet those expectations?
            1. Probe: local government actions and issues.
        ii. What do people consider to be the most important political issues? (relevant for political attitudes domain: Do you feel one political party handles this issue better than the other(s)?)

3. **Political attitudes: perceptions of political representation and inclusion/participation**
    a. How do Chinese Americans feel about their level of political representation by the political parties? What do they feel are the responsibilities of government (or what issues do they feel the government needs to address)? How do they feel about their capacity to be heard and have a political impact?

3. **Political skills, resources, tool kits: the individual and collective skills, know-how, and resources needed to meaningfully engage politically**
    a. What are the key sources of political information and how are community members consuming them? What are the Chinese American-owned sites (digitally or physically) in which political information is shared and discussed? How do people share information with one another in the community?
    b. What resources do Chinese Americans have to engage politically? How do they handle or respond to a political issue when it does arise?
    c. How available are individuals to engage in political activities? (time, money, education)

4. **Political practices: the political and collective practices in which people are currently engaging**
    a. What formal or informal political practices are Chinese Americans engaging in? What are the preferred means of engaging political issues? What are their feelings about engaging in some forms but not others?

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