

Why Vote: A Samoan Perspective

Background: There are about 133,000 Samoans in the US, 49,804 live in California and sixty four percent of those living in California live in Southern California.¹ Their growth rate from 1990 to 2000 ranged from 6% using 2000 single race numbers to 100% using 2000 inclusive numbers. Samoans have larger than average household sizes, 3.5 persons compared to 2.9 persons per household for the state. Twenty six percent live in overcrowded housing and 14% live in severely overcrowded housing² compared to 15% and 9% through out the state respectively. Samoans have below average homeownership rates (34%) compared to the state average of 57% percent.

Research shows that workers with at least a bachelor's degree earn almost twice as much (95%) as high school graduates and high school graduates earn twenty nine (29%) percent more than those with less than a 12th grade education.³ Twenty three percent of Samoans have not completed high school and only 9% have a bachelor's degree or higher.

Samoans as a whole have above average median household incomes because they often have more than two workers per household. However, a better measure of overall well-being is the income available per individual. On this basis Samoans earn \$10,938 per individual, compared to \$22,711 for the state. Samoans also have above average rates of receiving public assistance at 12% compared to 5% average for the State. Using 200% of the poverty rate, which doubles the poverty level to an income of \$34,058 for a family of four, we find that 45% of Samoan families live at or below poverty. In some areas, the number of Samoan families living at or below poverty can be as high as 63%.

The Problem: The Samoan population is growing rapidly across the state and with growth comes challenges and opportunities. Samoans suffer from chronic and pervasive poverty, earn less income, are isolated due to language and cultural barriers, and have limited access to educational, health and economic opportunities. In addition, Samoans suffer severe housing challenges and need assistance in transitioning off public assistance. To complicate matters, only 19% of Samoans are foreign born versus 26% for the state and foreign-born Samoans have a 60% naturalization rate versus 39% for the state. **In essence, we have a group that is "American" yet they exhibit marginal and recent immigrant characteristics.**

The Solutions: In a study conducted by Long Beach ICO⁴ of Samoans living in Long Beach, only a third of them (95) were registered to vote. Of the registered voters, only 9 of them were frequent voters⁵ and 38 infrequent voters. It was found that 51% of the registered voters never

¹ The source for data in this report is the U.S. Bureau of Census including the 2000 Census and 2003 Estimates.

² Overcrowded housing is defined as having more than one person per room. Severely overcrowding is defined as more than 1.5 people per room.

³ Julian R. Betts. 2000. *The Changing Role of Education in the California Labor Market*. See also Public Policy Institute of California - Research Brief, September 2000. *Education and Wages: The Payoff in California*. Available online at (http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/RB_900JBRB.pdf)

⁴ Long Beach Interfaith Community Organizing is a congregation based community organizing

⁵ Frequent voters are those who voted in at least 4 of the last 6 elections. Infrequent votes are those who have voted in at least 1 and up to 3 of the last 6 elections.

bothered to vote⁶ and 5% voted absentee ballot in at least one of these elections. This means that of the 7,200 Samoans living in the city of Long Beach⁷ only 0.0013% of Samoans meaningfully participate in the electoral process. An effective solution calls for engaging the governance mechanism. **Samoans must vote to affect policies that ensure that the challenges facing the community are addressed.**

Why is there little electoral participation in the Samoan community? From conversations with community members, it is clear that most do not consider the US their home. Most are contemplating returning to Samoa someday. So they do not see the need to vote in the US. And voting is not part of their social conversations. This begs the question: What has to happen for Samoans to make the US their home?

One solution lies in a re-examination of the treaties between the US and American Samoa & Manu'a. Under these treaties it is understood that a native Samoan is to be treated as a US Citizens, when residing in the US. Therefore nationals of American Samoa and Manu'a are citizens of the US and afforded every privilege under the US Code, when in the US.

A second solution lies in a close examination of the US Code. The 14th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States defines citizenship as "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside." Title 8 of the US Code section 1401 further defines the following as "**citizens of the United States at birth**":

- Any one born outside the United States, both of whose parents are citizens of the U.S., as long as one parent has lived in the U.S.
- Any one born outside the United States, if one parent is a citizen and lived in the U.S. for at least one year and the other parent is a U.S. national.
- **Any one born in a U.S. possession, if one parent is a citizen and lived in the U.S. for at least one year.**
- **Any one born outside the United States, if one parent is an alien and as long as the other parent is a citizen of the U.S. who lived in the U.S. for at least five years (with military and diplomatic service included in this time).**

So there is strong evidence to support the treatment of US Nationals as US Citizens, allowing participation in the electoral process, with certain minimal resident requirements. **Tafesilafa'i is now encouraging all who were born in American Samoa & Manu'a to register to vote, provide documentary evidence to the voting regulators of their residency and to vote in the next election.**

⁶ Data compiled did not include the special election in November 2005.

⁷ US Census 2000