

Building Civic Infrastructure in the Suburbs: Civic Engagement among Asian American
Community-Based Organizations in Malden

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Chelsey Gao

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Adviser: Laurie Goldman

Reader: Penn Loh

Abstract

While suburbs have traditionally been overlooked as spaces for activism and civic participation, they are increasingly becoming important arenas for civic engagement, particularly among immigrant populations. This thesis examines the ways community-based organizations are strengthening civic infrastructure to foster civic engagement within the growing Asian American immigrant population in the Malden, a suburb of Boston, Massachusetts. Through a qualitative case study incorporating semi-structured interviews and participant observation, this research situates the suburb as a critical site for civic engagement. It highlights the role of ethnopolitical entrepreneurs and the importance of cross-local coordination between urban and suburban organizations as essential components of civic infrastructure. Key findings highlight the reciprocal relationships between urban and suburban groups and the potential of civic space to expand collaboration and networks for engagement. Lastly, this thesis offers considerations for future civic engagement practice in the suburbs.

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Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Table of Figures</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
Research Questions	<i>4</i>
Personal Goals and Interests	<i>5</i>
<i>Literature Review</i>	<i>7</i>
Issues in the Suburbs.....	<i>7</i>
Advocacy and Activism in the Suburbs.....	<i>8</i>
Civic Infrastructure	<i>11</i>
The Role of Community-Based Organizations	<i>13</i>
Conclusion	<i>15</i>
<i>Background and Research Approach: Why Malden?</i>	<i>16</i>
Overview of Malden	<i>16</i>
The “Other Chinatowns”: Malden and Quincy	<i>19</i>
Emergent Issues	<i>20</i>
Organizational Landscape of Malden	<i>21</i>
<i>Methods</i>	<i>26</i>
Introduction	<i>26</i>
Focus Organizations.....	<i>26</i>
Semi-Structured Interviews.....	<i>27</i>
Participant Observation.....	<i>29</i>
Data Analysis	<i>30</i>
<i>Findings: Civic Infrastructure, Engagement, and Collaboration in Malden</i>	<i>32</i>
Overview of Civic Engagement Efforts and Achievements.....	<i>32</i>
Cross-Local Collaboration.....	<i>42</i>
Youth Programming in Parallel.....	<i>45</i>
Challenges of Emerging Civic Infrastructure.....	<i>45</i>
Conclusion	<i>51</i>
<i>Discussion: Lessons Learned from Malden</i>	<i>52</i>
Civic Engagement in the Suburbs.....	<i>52</i>
Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs.....	<i>52</i>

The Role of Community-Based Organizations in Civic Infrastructure	53
Cross-Local Coordination	54
<i>Conclusion and Directions for Further Inquiry and Practice.....</i>	57
Summary of Findings.....	57
The Role of Civic Infrastructure.....	57
Limitations of the Study.....	58
Areas for Further Inquiry	59
Considerations for Civic Engagement Practice.....	61
<i>Appendix.....</i>	64
<i>Bibliography.....</i>	65

Table of Figures

Figure 1: Malden community organization leaders, elected officials, and community members celebrate the signing of the Home Rule petition to win fully transliterated ballots	2
Figure 2: Boston Chinatown residents and CPA members protest the proposal of a 600-car parking garage by Tufts New England Medical Center.....	9
Figure 3: Model documenting the inputs and outputs of Civic Infrastructure.....	12
Figure 4: Map of Malden in proximity to Boston, Chinatown, and public transportation	17
Figure 5: Malden and its proximity to other gateway cities of Massachusetts.....	18
Figure 6: Racial and ethnic changes in Malden’s population from 1990-2016.....	19
Figure 7: Flyers distributed in English and Chinese by CPPA to Malden voters.....	24
Figure 8: Timeline of civic engagement activities in Malden	33
Figure 9: A rendering of ACDC’s first affordable housing project in Malden	34
Figure 10: Malden residents attend the 2023 Mayoral Candidate Forum co-sponsored by ACDC, CPA, GMAACC, and MSAC	35
Figure 11: ACDC A-VOYCE Youth at the Seeds of Change Event with the Mayor of Malden.	36
Figure 12: CPA staff and I engage Malden residents outside the Mystic Valley YMCA for National Voter Registration Day	39
Figure 13: Malden residents participate in CPPA’s mayoral candidate interviews in the Wah Lum Kung Fu School.....	48

Introduction

In 2022, organizations, residents, and elected officials gathered to celebrate the signing of a home rule petition to require the full transliteration of ballots in Chinese in Malden, Massachusetts. In the audience were staff and community members from the organizations who coordinated advocacy in the last two years to help achieve this win for language access. This coalition included a number of organizations across different geographies. At the heart of the fight was the Greater Malden Asian American Community Coalition, an organization founded locally by a group of Malden residents, activists, and leaders. At the regional level, leaders joined from the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA) and the Asian Community Development Corporation. These organizations' work has historically been rooted in Boston Chinatown since the 80s, but has since expanded to meet growing Chinese American needs in Malden. Legal support comprised of both regional advocate Greater Boston Legal Services Asian Outreach Unit (GBLS AOU) and national advocate Asian American Legal Defense Fund (AALDEF). The campaign also found support on the statewide level from advocacy coalitions Massachusetts Voter Table and Asian Pacific Islander Civic Action Network (APIsCAN).

This victory for language justice is a rare example of civic engagement among Asian Americans, especially within a suburban context. The City of Malden is the first city in Massachusetts outside of Boston to have fully transliterated ballots, which means that candidates' names are also required to be translated on ballots. While translation provides the meaning of a word from one language to another, transliteration provides an idea of how a word is pronounced in another language. For Chinese voters, names hold significant meaning and are crucial to full voting access. One Malden resident explained the importance of transliteration during a prior community press conference: "I vote every year. I don't speak English, so when

the candidates' names on the ballot are all in English I need to find someone who speaks English to help me translate. It is a very difficult process. I hope to see transliteration of candidates' names in Chinese so that more Chinese voters are able to vote and that we have more agency in the process to be able to vote on our own.”



Figure 1: Malden community organization leaders, elected officials, and community members celebrate the signing of the Home Rule petition to win fully transliterated ballots (Yang 2022)

Malden is a suburb just outside of Boston that has undergone major demographic change from majority to minority white, with over a quarter of its population comprising of Asian, majority Chinese residents. This follows the trend of the suburbanization of immigrants across the United States (Wilson and Svajlenka 2014). Amid these demographic changes, local governments often lag in providing adequate in-language and culturally competent services and support to serve their increasingly diverse residents. Although it is also understood that there are often inadequate services and other resources in suburbs (Roth et al 2015), we don't know about how suburban residents are organizing and acting to address these issues. In fact, much of the scholarship suggests that civic engagement is largely absent in suburbs with a few exceptions (Dougherty and Leavy 2020; Ward 2019; Lassiter 2006). Even less is known about civic

engagement among growing immigrant communities and how community-based organizations in the suburbs support civic infrastructure and engagement (Carpio et. al 2016; Leitner and Strunk 2014), particularly among Asian immigrants beyond topics of schooling and education (Lung Amam 2023; Liu 2023; Apetkar 2009).

However, the victory that Malden's Asian American community achieved highlights how community-based organizations have been able to mobilize and advocate to build civic infrastructure to increase civic engagement of Asian American residents in a one of the many diversifying suburbs outside of major cities in the US. In addition to winning fully bilingual ballots, community-based organizations have been galvanizing Malden's Asian American community in many ways, from youth organizing to fighting for inclusionary zoning to increase affordable housing.

My thesis seeks to understand the ways that community-based organizations -- both those located in the suburbs and those based in central urban cities -- are creating civic infrastructure to engage immigrant residents in suburban areas using through a critical case study of organizations engaging the growing Asian American population in Malden, Massachusetts, using semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Drawing upon Kaufman et. al's (2022) definition of civic infrastructure, I focus on identifying and deepening understanding of the factors that facilitate civic engagement, which expands beyond electoral activities and includes any activities intended to drive other social change practices.

This case study of Malden is also an opportunity to understand partnerships between suburban community organizations and organizations from nearby cities and the role they play in building civic infrastructure to increase civic engagement for growing immigrant communities in the suburbs. Specifically, this case study highlights the strategies and challenges of these cross-

local and organizational partnerships between community-based organizations to build power among immigrant residents and enact local change.

Research Questions

My research questions are:

- In what ways are community-based organizations in Malden and Boston building civic infrastructure to strengthen collective power and civic engagement for Asian Americans in the suburb of Malden, Massachusetts?
- How is cross-local coordination between community-based organizations in Boston and Malden fortifying or challenging this work, especially in the context of limited organizational capacity?

Personal Goals and Interests

The impetus for and interest in this thesis is shaped by my previous experiences growing up as a second-generation Chinese American in the suburbs of Georgia. Before I moved to the Greater Boston area, I worked as a canvasser with the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF) to lead voter turnout work and support reproductive justice organizing with Asian immigrant women. Most of the Asian immigrant communities we connected with lived in suburbs just outside of Atlanta. This experience sparked my curiosity about how space, community, and civic engagement interacted.

When I began to work at the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA) in Boston, I learned about a powerful model and history of grassroots organizing in the urban context of Boston Chinatown. At the same time, CPA began to expand our work into the more suburban cities of Quincy and Malden, where many recent immigrants began to move due to the rising housing costs in Chinatown and Boston. As I participated in work to register and engage Chinese immigrant voters in these suburbs, I became curious about how CPA's organizing would adapt and change in places that reflected those of immigrant suburbs I had grown up and worked with in Georgia.

My experiences made it clear to me that civic engagement was happening in the suburbs, and that there was much that could be learned and observed about the unique needs and challenges to facilitating this work. In writing this thesis, I hope that my research about the diverse and dynamic civic infrastructure of organizations engaging Asian Americans in Malden will help me learn more about organizing growing immigrant communities outside of Atlanta. As I finish my thesis in the spring of 2025, I also hope that my findings can help strengthen

immigrant organizing and advocacy in the context of a political climate that is increasingly targeting immigrant communities.

Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of existing literature to provide context and background to my research question. I first summarize the emergent issues amidst recent demographic changes in suburban communities. I then review how activism and advocacy has been documented both among immigrant communities and in the suburbs before focusing on how it has been studied within immigrant communities in the suburbs. The second section of this literature review examines the role of community-based organizations within immigrant communities and within civic infrastructure.

Issues in the Suburbs

Suburbs have commonly been perceived as places where middle-class white populations are concentrated, and subsequently, where amenities like better quality schools and housing are found (Lacy 2016). However, recent scholarship has begun to look at the growing phenomenon of the suburbanization of poverty. Between 2000 and 2010, the total number of suburban residents living in extreme poverty neighborhoods grew 41%, whereas this number only grew by 17% in urban cities (Kneebone et. al 2011). Furthermore, the number of evictions in the suburbs has increased over time, even during periods of time where the number of evictions in urban areas stabilized (Rutan 2023).

Racial and ethnic diversity is also changing in the suburbs. Beginning in 2010, immigrants became more likely to live in large, metropolitan suburbs than in urban cities (Singer 2011). Some of this demographic change can be attributed to homeownership and job opportunities (Singer et. al 2008). However, this change can also be due to rising housing costs in urban core cities, as is the case in the Greater Boston area (Menik et. al 2019).

Overall foreign-born residents of America's suburbs experience significantly higher poverty rates than U.S. born residents (Suro et al. 2011). The poorest neighborhoods in the suburbs housed disproportionately more immigrants than the poorest neighborhoods in cities. However, not all immigrant communities experience the same living conditions, and on average, Black and Latin American immigrants face the largest inequalities compared to suburban white residents (Farrell 2016). Income inequality is rising most rapidly among Asians living in the U.S, largely due to different periods of immigration. However, little is known about how this disparity translates in the suburbs. These data indicate changing needs and issues for growing immigrant populations settling and living in the suburbs and among.

Advocacy and Activism in the Suburbs

Although some literature has called attention to growing poverty and lack of affordable housing in suburbs, little is known about how suburban residents coalesce and engage in addressing these issues in their communities. The few studies of suburban civic engagement have predominantly focused on issues of homeowners' rights, particularly those of white, upper middle-class homeowners who have mobilized in opposition to state-sanctioned busing in the 1970s or around environmental conditions (Dougherty and Leavy 2020; Ward 2019; Lassiter 2006). As such, suburbs are understudied as a space for activism especially among immigrant communities and their concerns.

The studies that examine local organizing and activism among immigrants tend to focus on urban core cities, from the immigrant rights movement among Latino communities in Chicago to South Asian taxi drivers' fights to improve working conditions in New York City (Pallares and Flores-González 2010; Fujino 2022). Urban Chinatowns in cities like Manhattan, San Francisco, and Philadelphia for example, have served as an important center for local

community organizing around issues that affect the lives of working-class Asian immigrant residents (Liu 2020; Wong 2019; Liu 2005). In Boston Chinatown, community-based organizations like the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA) organized Asian Americans for decades on campaigns including winning bilingual ballots in Vietnamese and Chinese, blocking the expansion of institutional parking lots in Chinatown, and helping to win in-language job training for hundreds of laid-off garment workers (Liu 2020).



Figure 2: Boston Chinatown residents and CPA members protest the proposal of a 600-car parking garage by Tufts New England Medical Center (Chinese Progressive Association 1993)

A small subset of literature regarding identifies ‘ethnopolitical entrepreneurs’, or leaders in ethnic communities who primarily engage first-generation immigrant community members and the role they play in supporting immigrant civic engagement in the suburbs (Fittante 2021). These individuals use shared heritage to politically incorporate immigrant newcomers. Some of the roles that they play include in-language canvassing, multimedia coverage, and ‘translating’ how the community is impacted by US legislation and policy. The term “ethnopolitical entrepreneurs” has been used to document civic engagement among Armenian immigrants in the suburbs of Glendale, California, but not yet among other immigrant communities or areas.

In a survey of suburban local government responses to growing immigrant communities across the US, a majority of local officials stated that they did not find immigrants to be prominent contributors to civic life (Williamson 2018). Local anti-immigration sentiment and policies, language barriers, immigration status, and lack of reliable public transportation have all been found to be barriers to immigrants' engagement in local politics and issues (Lauby 2019; Singer et. al 2008).

However, recent research has attempted to expand the ways suburban immigrant communities engage politically and civically despite the barriers that limit activism in the ways it has been more traditionally observed and expressed in more urban cities. For example, in suburban California, immigrant restaurant entrepreneurs, workers, and consumers express their belonging in the suburbs through the everyday production and consumption of ethnic food (Lee 2019). For example, studies have shown that suburban Asian Americans who lack formally recognized political authority have mobilized political power and agency to influence school policy on topics such as admission and bilingual education (Apetkar 2009; Lung Amam 2023; Liu 2023). In the suburbs of Atlanta, volunteering within their children's' schools and fighting for educational inclusion empowered Latina mothers against racism and became the impetus to participate in broader community advocacy (Lanari 2021).

Few articles that examine activism among Asian immigrant groups in the suburbs around issues outside of education. Moreover, the literature on Asian immigrants in the suburbs tends to focus on the civic engagement and politics of higher income, working professional Asian Americans (Lai 2010; Lung-Amam 2017), so little is known about activism among lower income Asian immigrants in inner-ring suburbs like Malden, where Asian residents make up 24% of those living in poverty (US Census Bureau).

Civic Infrastructure

Civic infrastructure is a framework used to define the places, policies, programs, and practices that support strong civic engagement in communities. Similar concepts have been studied using other terminology such as ‘social infrastructure’ or ‘social capital’ that share similar outcomes of strengthening individuals’ and communities’ ability to make decisions and solve problems (Colins et. al 2014; Kimmel et. al 2012).

Kaufman and co-authors (2022) define the inputs of civic infrastructure as civic spaces, civic education, and democratic governance (as illustrated in Figure 3). Civic spaces include both physical and virtual spaces where citizens gather to engage in civic discourse or activities. Civic education is defined as the practices and opportunities that give individuals the opportunity to develop and grow their civic knowledge and skills. Lastly, democratic governance is described as the essential elements of democracy, such as respect for human rights and independent, pluralistic media. This framework has been used to measure these inputs across local government and K-12 policies and practices in the US.

The resulting outputs of civic infrastructure are civic literacy (the knowledge and skills necessary to participate effectively in civic life), civic identity (beliefs and dispositions that form personal and group identities related to participation in civic life), and civic engagement (individuals’ participation in civic life— community service, electoral activities, and/or activities intended to drive social change). Kaufman et. al (2022) also hypothesize that inputs and outputs are dynamic and change over time and space in relation to one another and the populations of the community. The authors of this model mention nonprofits and other organizations as part of helping strengthen civic infrastructure, but do not specifically illustrate the role that these organizations play.

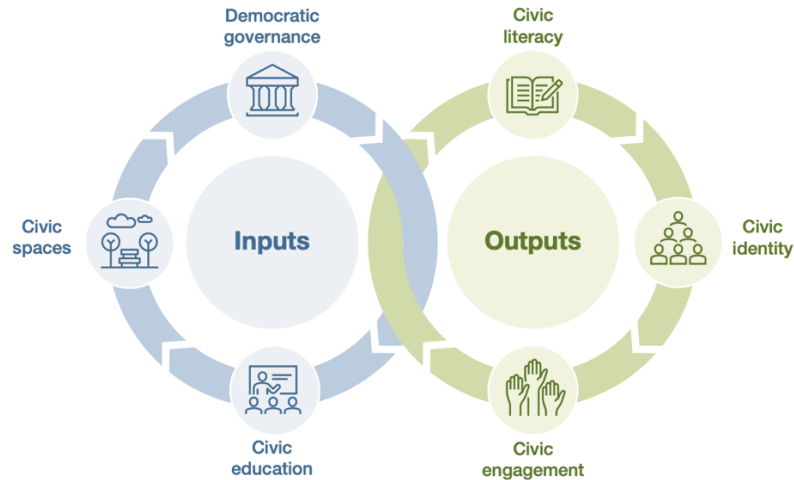


Figure 3: Model documenting the inputs and outputs of Civic Infrastructure (Kaufman et. al 2022)

Recent research on communication infrastructure -- the relationship of community storytelling networks and their impact on civic and community outcomes -- has identified associations between community organizations and levels of civic engagement and participation in community life (Kim and Ball-Rokeach 2006; Ognyanova et al. 2013). What is not yet known is how the role of community-based organizations impact communication infrastructure as part of civic infrastructure.

Existing research on civic infrastructure does not examine what may differ about the way civic infrastructure is built in a suburban versus urban context. Communication infrastructure research, however, has begun to study how different geography impacts civic engagement. Interpersonal conversation for residents in suburban communities, particularly about local politics and community issues, has been found to be associated with comparatively higher rates of civic participation than those in urban and rural communities, (Nah 2021). This suggests the impact civic inputs previously defined by Kaufman et. al (2022) could play in suburban communities.

The Role of Community-Based Organizations

Although the role of community-based organizations in civic infrastructure is understudied, community-based organizations have historically provided opportunities to engage immigrant communities in civic spaces, activities, and education. Ethnic-specific grassroots organizations in both New York and Boston Chinatown, for instance, have helped working-class Chinese immigrant residents develop civic knowledge through workshops, participation in direct action, and policy advocacy to help enact social change. These organizations help establish structures like workers' centers, tenants' associations, and community planning committees to develop leadership and take collective action (Wong 2019; Liu 2020). Multiethnic-based faith organizations have also worked with institutions like churches to incorporate civic and political elements into cultural celebration events to encourage civic engagement (Carpio et. al 2016).

Most literature on the role of community-based organizations in the suburbs focus on defining the lack of immigrant-serving organizations and the limitations of the social safety net for immigrants living in the suburbs (de Graauw et. al 2013; Roth et. al 2015; Guhlincozzi 2023; Allard and Pelletier 2023). Local officials in suburban cities tend to rely on social service organizations in central urban cities due to limited financial resources and therefore provide less support to immigrant-serving organizations within their own cities (De Graauw et. al 2013). This lack of funding makes it difficult for organizations in the suburbs to hire enough staff, especially those who have multilingual capacity, to serve community needs and facilitate programs or spaces for the populations they serve (Roth et. al 2015).

Often, community-based organizations are divided into the categories of social service or social change. While social service organizations tend to focus on providing immediate assistance including accessing public assistance or addressing urgent needs like food, shelter, and

healthcare, social change organizations focus on systems change (Kivel 2000). However, the two categories are not always mutually exclusive. Social service can also be a way for social change organizations can build credibility and experience that will help build strategies for social change (Kivel 2000). For example, in Boston, the Chinese Progressive Association builds relationships with community members through provision of direct services and to better understand the needs of the community. The needs of the community shape CPA's organizing as CPA continues to involve and organize with the members they serve so that they can eventually lead organizing campaigns themselves. This may suggest the role that social service organizations can also play in civic infrastructure.

The role of community-based organizations in the suburbs as political advocates is a relatively understudied topic. In the suburbs of Washington, DC, community-based organizations have helped Latinx immigrant communities and immigrant small business owners engage more equally in local planning and community engagement processes to resist displacement and increased policing (Lung-Amam et. al 2021; Lung Amam 2019). Given that many of the organizations were new to the community and the long-term nature of planning processes, many of these community-based organization needed increased municipal support not only for programs and services, but also for capacity-building and organizing.

In the last decade, a few studies have begun to identify how immigrant-serving organizations in urban cities and in suburban cities work together to organize immigrant communities in the suburbs and build capacity. Leitner and Strunk (2014) describe these partnerships observed in the Washington DC metropolitan area as an "assemblage" of local civic organizations and groups. This assemblage, although sharing a broad common goal, only intermittently and selectively engages in joint collective actions. Organizations within the

assemblage use a diverse set of strategies. These assemblages also include nonhuman actants including public parts, sidewalks, and buildings that house services to support immigrants.

For example, suburban organizations have sought and utilized the advice of central urban city organizers to expand services and suburban advocates led local-level campaigns that were influenced by former partnerships with central city advocates to challenge federal level policies. Similar coordination between central urban and suburban cities has been observed in the suburbs of Southern California, where suburban activists worked with a Los Angeles-based organization to access training and networks that helped them defeat local anti-immigration policy and deploy a grassroots activism model that doubled voter turnout and win a liberal majority within the local City Council (Carpio et. al 2016).

Conclusion

Given the gaps in knowledge that exist regarding the suburbs as a site for advocacy and civic engagement and how community-based organizations build civic infrastructure in the suburbs, especially among Asian immigrants, my thesis examines the ways that community-based organizations in Malden and Boston are building civic infrastructure to strengthen collective power and civic engagement for Asian Americans in the suburb of Malden, Massachusetts and the role of cross-local partnerships within this civic infrastructure.

Background and Research Approach: Why Malden?

To explain my reasoning for choosing Malden for this case study, I provide an overview of Malden's recent demographic changes, local issues, and an overview of the city's organizational landscape. Malden is rapidly diversifying suburb with a large, majority working class Asian American population. Malden is also home to many organizations working across Boston and Malden to support the needs of its growing Asian American population.

Overview of Malden

Malden, Massachusetts is a city located approximately five miles northwest of Boston with a total population of approximately 60,000 residents ("About Malden"). Malden is directly accessible from Boston through the Massachusetts Bay Transport Authority (MBTA) Orange Line subway at the Malden Center and Oak Grove stations. Malden is bordered by the cities and towns of Everett, Revere, Medford, and Melrose ("About Malden").

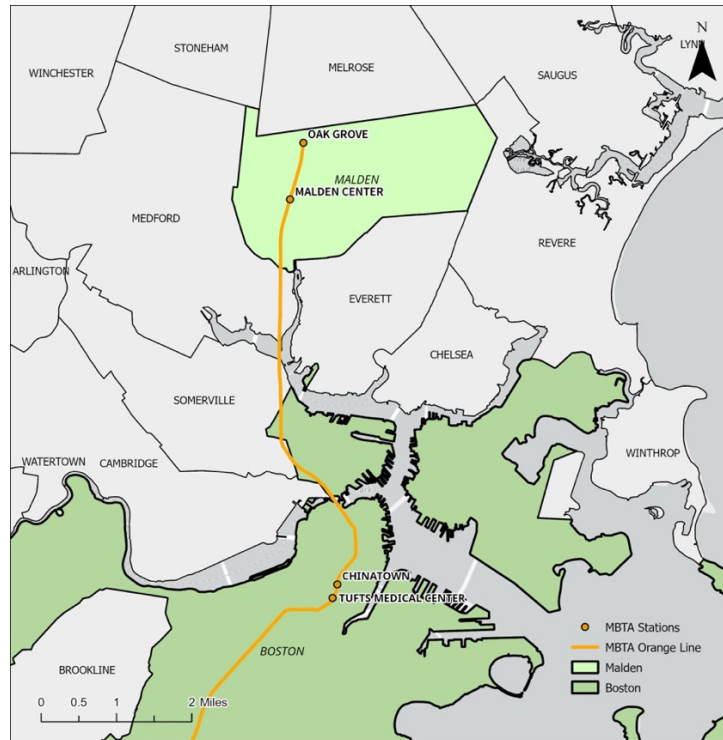


Figure 4: Map of Malden in proximity to Boston, Chinatown, and public transportation (MassGIS, Tufts M Drive)

Malden is one of 26 gateway cities as defined by the State of Massachusetts. A gateway city is defined as a municipality with a population greater than 35,000 and less than 250,000, a median household income below the state average, and a rate of educational attainment of a bachelor’s degree or above that is below the state average (MassGIS Data Hub 2023).

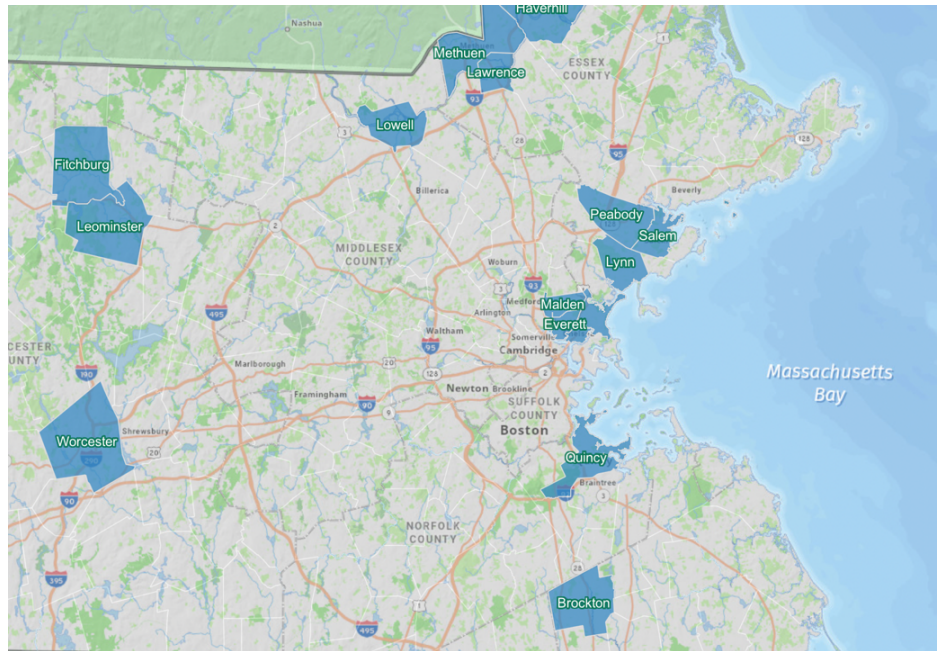


Figure 5: Malden and its proximity to other gateway cities of Massachusetts (MassINC Data Center 2023)

Malden has become increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, following an emergent trend among cities in the Greater Boston area over the last decade. Previously a predominantly white community, Malden is now nearly as diverse as Boston (Edozie et. al 2019). Over 40% of Malden’s total population is born outside of the United States and among all gateway cities in the state, Malden has the third highest immigrant population (US Census 2022). Among the suburbs surrounding Boston, the non-White population grew 245 percent compared to just 64 percent in Boston from 1990 to 2017. Nearly all the Greater Boston area’s population growth has been driven by immigrants of color (Melnik et. al 2017).

Malden has gotten much more diverse since 1990.

Population share by race and ethnicity.

	1990	2016	% change
White	88.0%	48.6%	-45%
Latino	2.6%	9.7%	+268%
African American	4.0%	14.7%	+269%
Asian American	5.2%	23.0%	+343%
Native American	0.1%	0.1%	+6%
Other	0.1%	0.9%	+598%
Multiracial	-	3.1%	-
Total	53804	60732	+13%
Diversity Index	22.1%	67.9%	+207%

Note: Respondents did not have the option of selecting more than one race on the 1990 Census.
Source: U.S. Census 1990, 2012–2016 American Community Survey.

Figure 6: Racial and ethnic changes in Malden’s population from 1990-2016 (Edozie et. al 2019)

The “Other Chinatowns”: Malden and Quincy

The Asian population in Malden has grown the fastest across all racial demographics, which alone doubled from 2000 until 2010. Asian residents are currently 27.5% of Malden’s population, which is the fifth largest Asian resident population in the state (US Census Bureau).

Outside of Boston, both the cities of Quincy and Malden have been colloquially referred to as “the other Chinatowns” (Deng 2019; ActionKid 2023) due to their large Chinese populations. Quincy, which is located on the South Shore of Massachusetts, has often been called a “satellite Chinatown” because it has the largest population of Chinese residents outside of Boston (second highest percentage of Asian Americans of its population in the state) and its commercial Hancock Street is home to a large concentration of Asian restaurants and businesses. Quincy is also home to Asian-serving organizations like Quincy Asian Resources Inc. and a satellite office of the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center, although these organizations are

primarily focused on providing social services. Organizations in Boston like ACDC and CPA, who I will further introduce below, often mentioned both Malden and Quincy in combination when describing expanding their work outside of Chinatown but expressed that there has been relatively slower progress made in Quincy. I initially considered including Quincy as part of this research study but chose to focus on Malden due to my awareness and former experience supporting civic engagement work in Malden, the cross-local partnership between Malden and Boston-based organizations, and limited time and capacity.

Emergent Issues

Malden can be considered an “inner ring suburb”, a term used to define suburbs close to a historic urban city core (Hanlon 2010), due to its proximity to Boston. Previous studies have found that issues of gentrification and displacement are particularly acute in inner ring suburbs and that inner ring suburbs across the US have experienced community disinvestment and rising poverty rates (Lung-Amam et. al 2019).

Although many of Malden’s residents were originally attracted to the city for its more reasonable housing costs, these costs have rapidly increased within the last decade. From 2011-2015, the median cost of rent in Malden was \$1,286. From 2019-2023, the median cost of rent jumped to over \$2,000 (US Census). These changes are largely due to a shortage of affordable housing and increased housing demand as many people are pushed out of Boston due to increasing gentrification. According to the most recent Malden Housing Needs Analysis, most Malden households cannot afford to rent or buy in Malden without becoming cost burdened.

Some conflicts and issues also signal the growing pains of Malden as the city diversifies racially and ethnically. In 2016, a group of Chinese seniors who played ping pong in the Malden Senior Center received complaints of being noisy and disrespectful and eventually had to

relocate their activities. The incident resulted in a series of public meetings and the City contracting a third-party mediator to host several group discussions (Wang 2016). In 2021, a photo surfaced of a City Councilor wearing a Halloween costume mocking Asian women which led to local activists and organizations rallying to demand her resignation (WCVB 2021).

Organizational Landscape of Malden

Malden is home to several social service organizations that help support the needs of its large immigrant populations. Organizations like the Immigrant Learning Center and Action and for Boston Community Development (ABCD) focus on providing direct services including free, year-round ESOL classes, career counseling, legal assistance, and helping lower income residents access public assistance.

A few organizations also focus on direct action and community organizing, mainly in response to housing issues. Mass Senior Action Council (MSAC) is a statewide, grassroots, senior-led organization whose Metro North chapter is based in Malden. MSAC is deeply experienced in winning historic fights regarding housing across the state. For example, in 2009 MSAC helped organize Boston Housing Authority residents to win more than \$100,000 in retroactive funding and their “Expiring Use” campaign which resulted in the passage of legislation to create a process to maintain long-term affordability in private subsidized rental properties at risk of becoming market-rate (Mass Senior Action Council n.d.). MSAC’s work often coordinates across localities. During monthly statewide meetings, chapter presidents and members regularly coordinate and communicate, and local information and issues are shared to inform statewide campaigns.

In response to growing housing costs in the area, MSAC has helped senior tenants living in private and public housing form tenant associations. City Life/Vida Urbana (CLVU), a

grassroots community organization historically focused on issues of housing displacement and tenants' rights protection in the Boston neighborhoods of Jamaica Plain and East Boston, has also organized with tenants in Malden (sometimes in partnership with MSAC) to fight building mismanagement, prevent evictions, and win affordability protections in Malden (Lamb 2022 March 17, Betancourt 2023 September 27).

As a result of the growing Asian immigrant population in Malden, there are a small group of community-based organizations in Malden helping to meet the Asian American community's growing needs.

In 1999, Chinese Culture Connection (CCC) moved from Reading, Massachusetts to Malden. CCC focuses on promoting cultural awareness and cultural education for Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans through programming such as a Chinese language school, a cross-cultural dialogue series for recent immigrants, and citizenship classes.

The Greater Malden Asian American Community Coalition (GMAACC) is another locally founded organization in Malden. In 2018, a small group of Malden residents and leaders established the organization. Although Chinese Cultural Connection had already been providing some services and cultural education for Chinese immigrants in the city, GMAACC had a distinguishably different mission focused on building power. "We needed to be seen, heard, and empowered, and be at the table to make decisions for residents," Mai Du, GMAACC's co-founder explained. Since its founding, GMAACC has worked both to meet community needs and build power. GMAACC coordinates a youth program that focuses on both building political consciousness and community and giving Asian youth spaces to process emotions and external pressures. GMAACC also is home to groups like a ping pong club for Asian American seniors and multi-arts group that support strong social infrastructure.

In the last decade, community-based organizations in Boston's Chinatown have also begun expanding their work into Malden to support the growing Asian American population in the broader Greater Boston area.

The Asian Community Development Corporation (ACDC) was founded in 1987 in Boston's Chinatown, where it has developed dozens of low and mixed-income rental apartments and condos. ACDC established its satellite office in Malden in 2018 largely because of a growing number of residents matching their constituency began living there. ACDC is one of the few active community development corporations (CDC) working in Malden. ACDC has been able to bring their expertise in affordable housing development and helps advocate for and support the housing needs of the city's growing Asian resident population. ACDC also facilitates a year-long youth leadership programs in both Boston and Malden called Asian Voices of Organized Youth for Community Empowerment (A-VOYCE) in Malden.

The Chinese Progressive Association (CPA) is a grassroots organization founded in Boston Chinatown in 1977. CPA focuses on organizing low-income Chinese tenants and workers. CPA began to explore organizing potential in Malden because Chinese immigrants began to settle in Malden in more significant numbers in the last decade. CPA saw more of their members moving to Malden and community members from Malden seeking assistance during drop-in direct service hours largely due to increased housing costs and gentrification in Boston. CPA's civic engagement work in Malden consists of conducting voter registration, doorknocking, and sending in-language mailings to Asian voters about upcoming election dates and ways to vote.

The Chinese Progressive Political Action (CPPA) is a 501(c)(4) organization, which means it can engage in political activities, such as endorsing candidates for elected office.

CPPA's endorses electoral candidates that support the priorities of working class, immigrant communities. In 2022, both CPA and CPPA began sending election mailings and organizing a dedicated canvassing program to increase Asian American voter turnout and power in Malden. A key part of CPPA's campaign endorsement process is the candidate interview, where community members (who are also often CPA members) ask questions to better understand candidates' political stances. These interviews then inform which candidates CPPA choose to endorse and subsequently mobilize their community to vote for. CPPA's core work in Malden has been their voter engagement work, which is comprised of door-to-door canvassing and phone banking to encourage Chinese voters to support their endorsed candidates. CPPA's canvassers are composed of both Malden and Boston residents, primarily knocking on the doors of seniors living in dense, affordable housing complexes in both cities. During the Malden's local elections in 2023, both of CPPA's mayoral and city council endorsements won their races.



Figure 7: Flyers distributed in English and Chinese by CPPA to Malden voters (Chinese Progressive Political Action 2023)

As demonstrated in the chapter, Malden is an inner-ring suburb with changing demographics and an organizational landscape with both Boston and Malden-based community organizations helping to meet new demographic needs. These characteristics make Malden a valuable site for exploring my research questions on civic infrastructure in the suburbs and the role of cross-local relationships.

Methods

Introduction

The following section provides an overview of the methods selected to answer my research questions. The case study was conducted using qualitative methods including participant observation and semi-structured interviews. This case study of Malden captures a snapshot of selected organizations' work in Malden from September 2023 through May 2024.

Focus Organizations

Since my research uses an organizational lens to understand civic infrastructure, I selected a sample of organizations in Malden through snowball sampling during preliminary interviews a few organizations and individuals in Malden for my background research and through internet research identifying co-sponsoring organizations from former civic engagement-related events held in the city, like candidate forums and town halls. During my time supporting civic engagement work in Malden as a Chinese Progressive Association staff member, my observations and informal conversations with residents also informed my selection of organizations.

From this list, I narrowed down the organizations that had engaged Asian American residents in Malden in local issue advocacy or supported programming focused on local social or political issues. Although Chinese Cultural Connection (CCC) had previously co-hosted candidates' forums in the past, the mission of the organization focuses primarily cross-cultural understanding and cultural understanding. CCC's work helps support strong social infrastructure, however Kaufman et. al (2022) chooses not to include this as part of their civic infrastructure

model. Therefore, they are not included in this study. Below is the final list of organizations selected:

- Chinese Progressive Association (CPA)
- Chinese Progressive Political Action (CPPA)
- Asian Community Development Corporation (ACDC)
- Greater Malden Asian American Community Coalition (GMAACC)

I also choose to use the term Asian American in this study. In my preliminary research, most of the organizations I interviewed explicitly use the term ‘Asian American’ to define their served populations, although they acknowledge most of the residents they currently serve and engage are Chinese. The Chinese Progressive Association is the only organization that specifies their target population as Chinese Americans in their mission statement, but their work in Malden has often partnered with other organizations to support the broader Asian American community.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the selected organizations’ program participants, community leaders, and staff. I chose semi-structured interviews as my method because semi-structured interviews allow for open-ended answers for interviewees to share in depth about their own experiences, such as participating in or supporting the selected organization’s activities (Bernard 2017). The semi-structured format works well for organizational staff with limited time and capacity, as well as with residents that I may not have the opportunity to speak with more than once and can only build limited rapport within the given time period.

I interviewed one to two relevant staff and leaders from the selected community-based organizations in Malden as well as organizations who are based in Boston and have expanded

their work to Malden. I selected prospective interviewees based on recommendations from preliminary conversations with staff from the CPA, ACDC, GMAACC, and MSAC. My questions focused on identifying each organization's current work, goals, partnerships with other organizations within and outside of Malden, and the challenges and opportunities they face in meeting their organizational goals and mobilizing and gathering members of Malden's Asian American communities. Some of the questions were modified based on interviews with other staff. I have attached a preliminary list of the interview questions I used for both residents and organizational staff in the Appendix.

Notably, scheduling time to interview each of the staff sometimes took weeks, with many meetings rescheduled due to last minute changes. However, this challenge illustrated the limited staff capacity within organizations. In total, I conducted nine interviews with the following organizations:

- 2 staff members from CPPA
- 1 former/current CPPA canvasser
- 2 (current and former) staff members from CPA
- 2 staff members from ACDC
- 2 staff members from GMAACC

I initially planned to interview several Malden residents who were engaged in each organization's programming and work that I would identify within participant observation spaces. However, even after attempts to advertise through both GMAACC and ACDC youth coordinators, I did not receive any interested participants. I interviewed one Malden resident who worked as canvasser and volunteer for CPA or CPPA during last fall's municipal election.

Through interviews of residents involved in selected organizations' programming, I aimed to learn about their perceptions of each organization's work and their effectiveness and impact regarding the issues that residents are concerned about or affected by. Compensation was offered to residents' interviewees for their time through the form of a \$25 Visa gift card. I obtained funding for this compensation by applying to the UEP Student Fund.

Participant Observation

I conducted participant observation of a few the selected organizations' programs and events. The selection of spaces depended on the following factors: intent to build civic power among Malden's Asian American residents and inter-organizational collaboration.

I previously engaged in participant observation as a staff member of the Chinese Progressive Association from September to November 2023, primarily supporting CPA and CPPA events focused on increasing voter turnout for municipal elections in November 2023, including the Malden Mayoral Candidate Forum, National Voter Registration Day, and canvassing sessions as part of my final project in my Ethnography course. During this time, I aimed to approach participant observation as a "participant activist" (Galemba 2023), observing as both a researcher and activist standing alongside residents. The data I collected focused on examining the ways that organizations like GMAACC, ACDC, and CPA worked together to facilitate and support these events and will be used in my final analysis.

I engaged in additional participant observation to collect data about the nature of other spaces that the selected organizations are facilitating and observe what may not be easily obtained through methods like interviews, such as identifying community leaders within spaces and the ways they might contribute to building power and relationships within them. While conducting participant observation, I captured written field notes focused on the role of the

organization within the space, languages spoken, and notable individuals within the space, using an observation guide which is drafted in the Appendix.

I use the term spaces in a similar context to Kaufman et. al's (2022) defined input of 'civic space' in their framework for defining and measuring civic infrastructure. Examples of civic spaces include town halls and invite-only affinity spaces within larger communities of interest. I initially identified GMAACC's Ping Pong Club has both social and political purposes because it had hosted coffee hours with local State Representatives and voter registration drives, GMAACC staff encouraged me to observe their youth programming instead because they felt it would be an easier space to coordinate access to and provide more relevant data. Therefore, I observed the following spaces:

- ACDC's Asian Voices of Organized Youth for Community Empowerment program weekly meeting
- GMAACC's Youth Organizing Summer Workshop

I observed one session of each of the programs above. Although the observations provided valuable insights into the internal processes, focus issues, and culture of the youth programs, the relevance of the specific details collected was limited in relation to the focus of the study and did not directly contribute to answering my research question.

Data Analysis

To analyze my data, I utilized an approach that was informed by both grounded theory and inquiries from my literature review. Following each interview, I identified a few initial themes that arose upon reviewing my notes. The themes I identified after each interview often led to adjustments in my questions for following interviews to further supplement my initial findings. I also referred to the ideas and findings highlighted in my literature review such as

“ethnopolitical entrepreneurs” as a comparison point to the data I collected. These themes guide the final presentation of my findings in the following chapter.

Findings: Civic Infrastructure, Engagement, and Collaboration in Malden

Overview of Civic Engagement Efforts and Achievements

Malden is home to strong civic engagement among its Asian American community. Organizations in Malden are advocating and addressing several issues including affordable housing, language access and voters' rights, and youth empowerment. In this chapter, I first describe the major accomplishments and initiatives of organizations both independently, in collaboration, and in parallel to one another to increase civic engagement among Malden's Asian American community. I then highlight each organization's contributions to these achievements and illustrate how "ethnopolitical entrepreneurs," from my literature review, contribute to civic infrastructure. Afterwards, I emphasize how organizations have partnered with each other as part of Malden's broader civic infrastructure. Finally, I examine the challenges these organizations and partnerships encountered, and the strategies they used to adapt and overcome them.

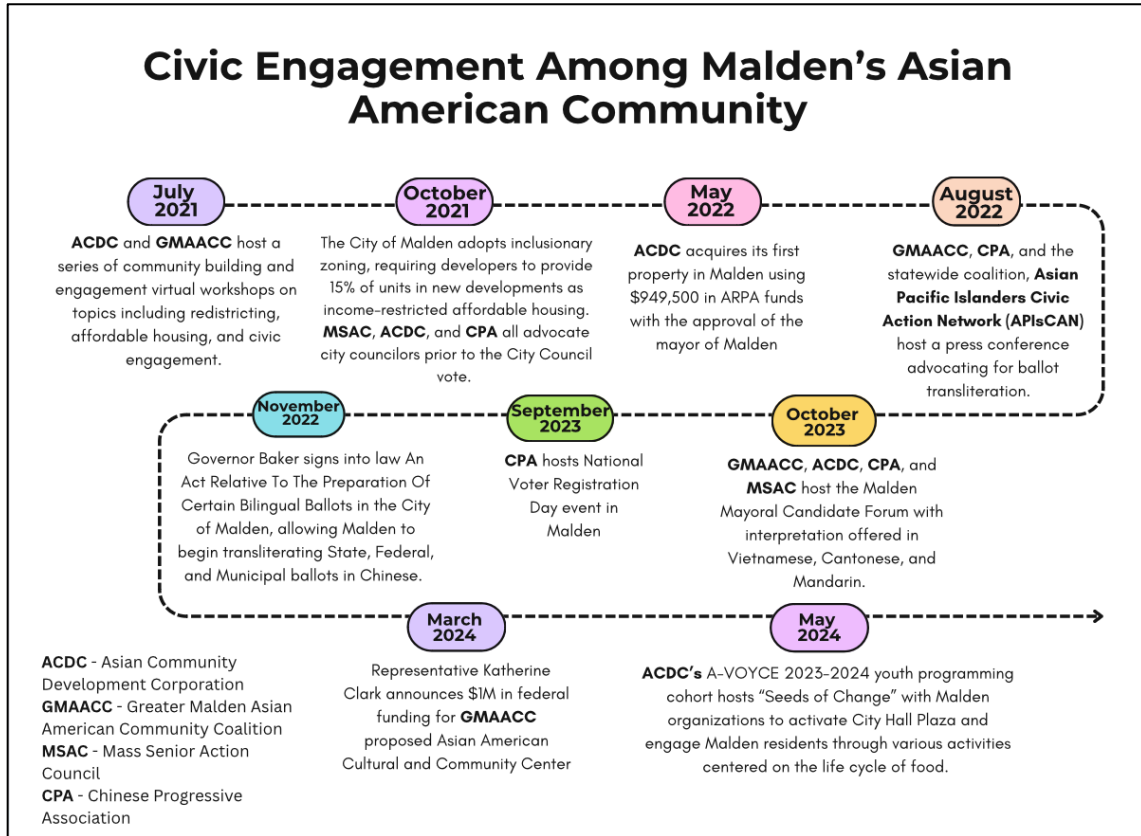


Figure 8: Timeline of civic engagement activities in Malden

The timeline above (Figure 8) is a visual, chronological representation of the ways that organizations have worked to build civic infrastructure to increase civic engagement among Malden’s Asian American community, individually as well as in partnership with others. In this section, I detail the major initiatives and accomplishments achieved in Malden based on issue area before sharing the ways that this work was made possible.

Over the last few years, there has been considerable community engagement in Malden. In 2019, Malden established its first-ever Affordable Housing Trust Fund, which serves as the primary municipal revenue source for affordable housing development activities. ACDC’s Executive Director, Angie Liou, was appointed on the Board of Trustees. In 2021, ACDC and

GMAACC hosted community building and engagement virtual workshops, one of which focused on affordable housing. Later that year, the City of Malden voted to adopt inclusionary zoning, which requires developers to provide 15% of new units in new developments as income-restricted affordable zoning. Prior to this, MSAC, ACDC, and CPA organized to pass the inclusionary zoning policy in the city by mobilizing residents and advocating City Councilors. In May 2022, ACDC acquired their first property in Malden using \$949,500 of federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding approved by the mayor.



Figure 9: A rendering of ACDC's first affordable housing project in Malden (Asian Community Development Corporation n.d.)

In August 2022, GMAACC, CPA, and the statewide AAPI coalition, Asian Pacific Islanders Civic Action Network (APIsCAN) held a press conference with residents and elected officials present to advocate for fully transliterated ballots. Later that fall, the governor signed into law an act granting the City of Malden the ability to create a home rule petition allowing them to fully transliterate state, federal, and municipal ballots.

With local elections that fall, CPA hosted a National Voter Registration Day event to provide voter education and increase voter outreach. CPA, MSAC, ACDC, and GMAAC also co-hosted a Mayoral forum that for the first time ever, included Vietnamese, Cantonese, and

Mandarin interpretation. In October 2023, the Affordable Housing Trust Fund Board awarded its first-ever funding to ACDC to build twenty new affordable units of housing in Malden at 60% Area Median Income (AMI) and below. Notably, more than 100 one hundred residents wrote in favor of the project.



Figure 10: Malden residents attend the 2023 Mayoral Candidate Forum co-sponsored by ACDC, CPA, GMAACC, and MSAC (Chinese Progressive Association 2023)

Most recently, in March 2024, Representative Katherine Clark announced \$1M in federal funding appropriations to support GMAACC with the acquisition and development of an Asian American Cultural and Community Center. During that summer, A-VOYCE youth organized a “Seeds of Change” event in downtown Malden to activate Malden City Hall and engage Malden residents through various activities centered on the life cycle of food.



Figure 11: ACDC A-VOYCE Youth at the Seeds of Change Event with the Mayor of Malden (Matsumoto 2024)

Building Civic Infrastructure Among Boston and Malden-based Organizations

In the following section, I further detail each organizations' efforts and role in building civic infrastructure in Malden. Within each organization, I highlight the role of various elements including ethnopolitical entrepreneurs, resources like local knowledge, and dynamics and relations between organizations that were key to achieving their successes described above.

Greater Malden Asian American Community Coalition (GMAACC)

Despite mainly being volunteer run, GMAACC has helped achieve major wins to support Malden's Asian American community needs within a short period of time. Mai Du, GMAACC's co-founder, attributes this success to the skills and expertise of the board and co-founders of the organization. "In terms of social capital, experience, and skillset, GMAACC had longer than 10 years' of experience," Mai explains. For example, Mai and Diana, who are two of GMAACC's co-founders, had both been former presidents of the YWCA Malden. The YWCA Malden's mission focuses on eliminating racism, empowering women, standing up for social justice,

helping families, and strengthening communities by offering childcare, teen services, financial literacy, and housing program services. This former experience allows both Mai and Diana to be very familiar with the aspects of running a nonprofit organization. Other board members have expertise from their professions including a real estate broker, which has aided their process of finding a permanent physical space for GMAACC's proposed Asian Cultural and Community Center in Malden. Board members are also connected to many Malden Facebook groups that help them keep a pulse on the local issues in the community.

Mai is also a well-established and known figure in the community because she is the founder and owner of the Wah Lum Kung Fu school in Malden. Her role in the community has helped gain the respect and connections to elected officials and build connections to community members whose families took classes at the center. Access to the Wah Lum Kung Fu School as a space also provided GMAACC a location to hold membership events like their annual meeting.

Outside of GMAACC's work, Mai is also a board member of the South Cove Community Health Center, the largest Asian primary care provider in the state. Mai leveraged this connection as a primary advocate for the center to eventually open a new location in Malden, expanding new services for Asian residents and highlighting her role as an advocate for the community.

Asian Community Development Corporation (ACDC)

While ACDC brings expertise about affordable housing into Malden, the knowledge and respect of residents has also been vital to ACDC's work in the city. For example, one Malden resident previously sat on ACDC's board before running for and successfully winning a seat on the Malden City Council. This former board member and now current city councilor shares her

insights about where other city councilors stand on certain issues and suggestions on how to approach them with ACDC's Executive Director, Angie.

Chinese Progressive Association (CPA)

CPA has a small, but well-connected group of staff and volunteers who live in Malden that helped inform their work. In 2023, as a CPA staff member, I helped prepare for a National Voter Registration Day in Malden to help register new voters in advance of the upcoming local elections. Since this was our first time as an organization tabling in the city, I observed how both staff who were Malden residents and staff's relatives living in Malden helped us identify locations of where they had observed or knew there many Chinese residents gathered, including the YMCA foodbank and the local Chinese supermarket. This local knowledge helped improve the efficiency, outreach, and engagement of our work.



Figure 12: CPA staff and I engage Malden residents outside the Mystic Valley YMCA for National Voter Registration Day (Chinese Progressive Association 2023)

Chinese Progressive Political Action (CPPA)

CPPA's work in Malden has found success largely due to the input of its community members and their relationships to both Malden and Boston. When CPPA began canvassing Malden in 2022, they had to navigate and adapt to a new geography. Winnie, CPPA's former Field Director, shared that she would create lists for doorknocking online, the neighborhood would often look completely different in person. Often, housing was much more sprawled, which made locating doors time-consuming. Most canvassers during this time were also traveling from Boston into Malden. "It didn't feel quite right to not have Malden residents leading the work," Winnie reflected.

Ultimately, the local knowledge and relationships that Malden residents held was key to supporting CPPA and CPA's work there. In 2023, Winnie and CPPA's organizer, a Malden resident, worked together to make changes to improve their work. CPPA's organizer played a significant role in these changes by sharing her own local knowledge. For example, her understanding that the highest density of Asian residents in Malden lived mostly in senior housing buildings shaped where CPPA focused its canvassing during the following election cycle. She also worked with CPPA's Steering Committee to help finalize questions for candidate interviews and how her experience taking public transportation between Malden into Boston during her daily work commute shaped the inclusion of a question about what actions the candidates would take to increase the amount of bus shelters in Malden.

In 2023, CPPA hired more canvassers who were Malden residents and possessed a familiarity with the walkability and feasibility of canvassing in different neighborhood. One advantage of hiring more Malden-based canvassers was that they could spend most of their time knocking on doors and having conversations with voters, and less on transportation to Malden. CPPA's organizer was responsible for coordinating the canvassing team in both Boston and Malden. Her background as a current Malden resident and before that, a longtime Chinatown resident was helpful in giving her familiarity with navigating both cities.

CPPA's canvasser team was also comprised of Boston residents. Residents from both cities worked closely together. For example, Malden residents helped orient Boston resident canvassers to neighborhoods in Malden and Boston residents helped orient Malden resident canvassers. Each group of residents shared their local knowledge and familiarity of the cities they live in to make the work possible. One canvasser explained that Boston and Malden's Chinese immigrant residents often already have close social relationships, since many Malden

residents work in Chinatown. In fact, her former co-workers in Chinatown who had worked part-time as CPPA canvassers in previous election cycles encouraged her to work as a canvasser following her retirement. This highlights an additional role that CPPA's Boston-based members played in recruitment and growing the capacity of CPPA's civic engagement work in Malden.

Canvassers played an important role in increasing civic education and use shared language and background to increase civic engagement. For example, CPPA's organizer met a resident in an affordable housing building who despite being a registered voter, didn't vote in the previous election and didn't see the purpose of voting. CPPA's organizer leveraged her shared background as a Chinese immigrant living in Malden to convince him to register to vote. Through her encouragement, he began getting more involved with CPA and CPPA's work in Malden. This community member helped ask questions to candidates during candidate endorsement interviews, and even attended events hosted at CPA's office in Chinatown.

CPPA was also able to include new people into their electoral work, since they had to hire drivers to help drop flyers or mailings at doors in less dense areas. Most of the CPPA's canvassers are primarily Chinese speaking, but the need for drivers gave the opportunity for more English-speaking and bilingual volunteers to become familiar with and find a role within the organization's work.

Mass Senior Action Council (MSAC)

Prior to the pandemic, MSAC hired a Chinese interpreter during their monthly member meetings which allowed them to engage the large population of Chinese seniors living in Malden. During the pandemic, many seniors began to meet within their buildings instead due to safety concerns. At this time, MSAC's former member leader, Mr. Huang, leveraged his shared background and language skills to organize monthly in-language meetings with other Chinese

residents to discuss housing issues in his building. Mr. Huang served as a liaison to bring the issues discussed in these resident meetings to the President of the Metro North Chapter and to the larger monthly membership meetings.

Cross-Local Collaboration

Mai has credited Malden's proximity to Boston is also credited as key to GMAACC's founding and subsequent successes. GMAACC's leadership has cultivated experience working in Boston-based nonprofits that they bring into Malden. For example, Mai looped in previous colleagues she had worked with in Boston to help develop GMAACC's mission and file for 501c(3) status. She also attributes the momentum of recent successes to the environment that organizations in the Greater Boston area have created, "The longstanding work of so many community leaders and organizations – other leaders demanding respect – is why GMAACC has been able to be as effective in a short period of time." She added that the founders of GMAACC intentionally used the term coalition in their name because of this desire to recognize the organizations in Malden before them and their connections to them. Mai added that holding close relationships with other organizations in the Greater Boston area has also been helpful for brainstorming about ways to address shared issues across their organizations. Issues include youth programming staff turnover, which is I further detail in my discussion chapter.

When ACDC and MSAC were advocating to pass inclusionary zoning policy in Malden, CPA's Executive Director, Karen Chen, spoke with City Councilors in support of the policy and directly drew from CPA's experience with the policy in Boston and how it relates to Chinatown. CPA also utilized lessons from the 11-year long struggle to win fully transliterated ballots in Boston. CPA informed Malden community groups and elected officials about how educate the public about transliteration and strategically avoid pushback from the state legislature and public.

It was not only Malden-based organizations that were learning and benefitting from the support of Boston leaders: Boston-based organizations also relied on the knowledge of Malden leaders as they expanded their work into the city.

The Asian Community Development Corporation (ACDC) and GMAACC enjoy a close relationship where GMAACC's local knowledge and connections plays an important role. Angie describes her respect for GMAACC as a "homegrown organization." Mai sits on ACDC's board and is a well-respected community advocate with direct connections to elected officials. Angie describes, "If we or the community needs anything, she has no problem calling the mayor directly." Regarding GMAACC's partnerships with organizations expanding their work to Malden like ACDC, Mai views GMAACC's role as helping to shape new programmatic intentions to ensure that they are respectful and inclusive of the Malden community.

The partnership between GMAACC and ACDC has helped build shared capacity between the two organizations to advocate for shared goals. Angie attributes the community engagement workshops they hosted together as part of the reason they were able to pass inclusionary zoning in Malden. After the workshops, ACDC contacted residents who attended and helped mobilize them to write letters of support for the inclusionary zoning policy. Although it is difficult to determine how critical these letters were to the passage of the policy, Angie notes how surprised the Planning Board was to receive so many letters, especially among Asian residents who typically don't participate in planning processes.

Collaboration with local organizations was a key part of the ACDC's A-VOYCE event. For example, regional organizations including the Mystic River Watershed Association and local organizations like Malden Earth Works and GMAACC tabled about topics of environmental

justice and advocacy. Members and staff from organizations provided additional capacity by volunteering to support tasks like manning the check-in table, set up, and clean up.

CPPA's decision to expand their work into Malden was partially informed by the local knowledge of organizational partner MSAC. MSAC and CPA have previously worked together in Boston on issues and policy campaigns in Boston. CPPA's Executive Director, Karen Chen, considers MSAC to be the most closely aligned in terms of shared values. MSAC shared local knowledge about progressive city councilors and politics with Karen, which helped inform CPPA's decision to endorse in a local candidate race in Malden in 2022. Karen also shared that MSAC's presence in Malden helped to initially "neutralize" conservative voters and helped to create a more conducive political environment for CPPA to engage in when they first began to work there.

The personal connections of its board members also shape collaboration between organizations. Diana, one of GMAACC's cofounders, is a lifelong Malden resident and holds relationships with several members of the Malden-based Mass Senior Action Council Metro North Chapter and their president, Karen Lynch. As a result, GMAACC and MSAC have worked closely together throughout the years including partnering together to co-host every local candidate forum since 2016.

Collaboration with local organizations help provide additional capacity. For example, at ACDC's A-VOYCE Seeds of Change event, regional organizations including the Mystic River Watershed Association and local organizations like Malden Earth Works tabled about topics of environmental justice and advocacy. Members and staff from organizations provided additional capacity by volunteering to support tasks like manning the check-in table, set up, and clean up.

Youth Programming in Parallel

Organizations with similar programming or goals also worked in parallel, rather than in direct collaboration. Both GMAACC and ACDC's programming share a common interest in youth leadership development and involvement in local issues. Neither organization plays a formal mentorship role to the other despite the length of relationship or familiarity with each other. In the past, GMAACC's former youth coordinator described that they had a friendly relationship with ACDC's current Youth Programs Manager and former youth coordinator and that the two would sometimes share about challenges that arose in youth organizing work and how to overcome them. Youth from GMAACC's program volunteered at the ACDC's A-VOYCE Seeds of Change event, however this collaboration was largely because of an overlap in program focus on food justice in both of ACDC and GMAACC's programs cohorts.

Challenges of Emerging Civic Infrastructure

My interviews with organizational staff also revealed several challenges that organizations faced in building civic infrastructure either establishing an organization or expanding services and programming to a new place. These challenges include finding adequate physical space, coordination during collaboration, and staff turnover and capacity. I also highlight how organizations have been addressing challenges.

Physical Space

One of the biggest challenges for both Boston-based and Malden-based organizations has been finding suitable office or event space for their work in the city.

Increasing gentrification and redevelopment pressures in Malden pose a major challenge. Within the last eight years, ACDC changed their satellite Malden office location three times.

Both of the landlords and owners of ACDC's previously rented office spaces decided to redevelop the buildings. CCC was also displaced from their former office space because the landlord decided to sell the building. Finding a permanent physical home for GMAACC's work has also been the priority of Mai because of what she had seen other organizations endure. GMAACC's search to own their space had been a seven-year long struggle before winning recent federal appropriations to open an Asian community center. "Rent keeps going up," she reflected.

Even organizations who have their own office or meeting spaces face conditions that are less than ideal and impact the work. Both Angie and Emma, who previously coordinated ACDC's Malden youth program in their office space, spoke about ongoing landlord troubles and building conditions issues. ACDC's current office space also makes it difficult to expand programming like homeowner counseling and coordinate more than one program at the same time.

Through an MOU with the School Superintendent established early on in their organizational history, GMAACC hosts its youth program at Malden High School. Using this space comes with its own limitations: for example, the school's doors lock at certain hours of the day and GMAACC's youth only have access to the building for a certain number of hours. GMAACC's Youth Coordinator, Annabel, doesn't see the limitations of the space as a problem. She told me: "The place is not the important thing, the people are." Annabel observed that youth feel more comfortable as attendees in the high school because as a program staff, she is entering their space rather than the other way around. Meeting youth where they are helps to shift traditional power dynamics between the organizational staff and youth. Annabel also strives to bring the youth to different spaces to learn about the breadth of organizations and civic activity

in Malden and beyond. As a result, GMAACC's youth programming work also happens outside of the high school. Over the summer, youth visited Malden City Hall to learn about language access and spaces like the Pao Arts Center and Chinese Progressive Association office in Boston Chinatown. This also increases familiarity and builds relationships with different organizations across the civic landscape of the Greater Boston area.

CPPA faced additional challenges as a 501(c)(4) organization when trying to find a physical location in Malden to host their candidate interviews. In previous endorsement processes for Boston elected officials, these interviews were typically hosted in CPA's office in Chinatown. In Malden, CPPA was one of the few, if not only, 501(c)(4) organizations in the area. Other nonprofit organizations were cautious about hosting a political event due to their 501(c)(3) status, which prohibits participation in any campaign activities to support or deny any particular political candidate.

Eventually, Mai offered CPPA to use the Wah Lum Kung Fu School, since it was a privately owned space. Although Mai was happy and willing to lend the space, CPPA still had some initial difficulties with coordination that illuminate the communication and additional capacity important of using other spaces. When CPPA staff arrived to set up the space for candidate interviews, the door was locked and the Wah Lum staff who was onsite in the basement had not been aware CPPA would be using the space. In the end, the CPPA staff were able to reach Mai, who called the individual to let the group in to hold the interview as planned.



Figure 13: Malden residents participate in CPPA's mayoral candidate interviews in the Wah Lum Kung Fu School (Chinese Progressive Political Action 2023)

CPPA's organizer elaborated more on the challenges and importance of having their own physical space. She explained that having their own office in Chinatown often removes an extra step in the planning process when they decide to hold a meeting with their members, which can be helpful given limited staff capacity. If CPPA decides to hold an event in Malden, they require staff, who often who need to be bilingual, to contact partners and search for a space. On the other hand, Irene shared that CPA and CPPA's work has had the opportunity to become more interdependent and build relationships with other organizations and actors in Malden to utilize shared spaces.

Cross-Organizational Coordination

Collaboration between the organizations also presented some initial coordination challenges. Angie of ACDC shared that some previous frictions arose across organizations during the previous co-planning of a candidates' forum, largely due to what they felt was a

difference between the amount of resources certain organizations dedicated to planning an event and the amount of credit or recognition they then received as a listed co-sponsor.

Another obstacle to effective collaboration may stem from differences in the organizations' core constituencies. When CPA held their National Voter Registration Day event in Malden, they coordinated with GMAACC to table at GMAACC's Ping Pong Club. CPA had some difficulty engaging and registering new voters. Irene, CPA's former Interim Organizing Director, observed that GMAACC's membership is differently and more broadly defined than CPA's focus on working-class Chinese immigrants and their families. She suggested that it may be harder to translate one organization's work across different audiences since community members have not necessarily undergone the same organizing pathways. The Ping Pong Club is also a volunteer run space, and Irene elaborated that it requires additional capacity to coordinate with members about other organizations visiting the space and why.

Staff Turnover

Staff and volunteers who hold local knowledge also means that there is an inherent loss of relationships when staff transition out of an organization, and that new staff must often take time to rebuild and become familiar with the local landscape. Annabel, GMAACC's youth coordinator, relocated to Massachusetts prior to beginning in the role. She felt a slight disadvantage when it came to outreach for the program, referencing how the previous GMAACC youth coordinator was a former Malden High School student and as a result, had knowledge about where to put up program flyers and talk to teachers they knew about the program to support outreach.

Relationships and collaboration between organizations also change because of staffing changes. Although ACDC and MSAC previously worked together closely in Malden to advocate

for inclusionary zoning, Angie shared that collaboration between the organizations has ebbed mainly due to staffing turnover. Emma of ACDC also reflected on how difficult it was to maintain previous existing relationships when the former ACDC youth coordinator transitioned out during the pandemic. As a result of this experience, she worked with ACDC to build out a database that stores the contacts from local organizations she has built relationships with over the last three years coordinating ACDC's youth programs in Malden.

New Populations and Demographics

When CPPA expanded their work to Malden, they also had to engage with a new demographic of voters, as there were more homeowners in Malden than their typical base of voters in Boston affordable housing complexes. CPPA utilized the same messaging around supporting progressive politicians to support funding for benefits that low-income voters receive, but Winnie is still unsure how the messaging ultimately landed among voters who were homeowners or more middle-income. CPPA does not have an organizer working in Malden year-round, so it is still difficult to identify what additional day-to-day issues might be more specific to Malden residents to make their messaging and organizing better aligned.

CPPA however was also able to change their strategy to reach a broader set of progressive electoral politics since CPPA is one of the only direct outreach-based c(4) organizations in Malden. In 2023, since there were fewer local competitive races in Boston last fall, CPPA identified an opportunity to endorse and successfully elect a progressive candidate in Ward 5 of Malden even where there is not as significant of a population of Asian American residents. Winnie, CPPA's Field Director at the time, explained that CPPA doesn't typically use the same strategy in Boston because of the presence of other groups who can do outreach to voters in other areas of the city to build progressive electoral power. CPPA ultimately made this

decision because since wards are smaller in Malden, they realized that just targeting Asian voters, who don't make up as large of a majority of voters as in Boston, may not lead to as large of an impact in the election. The different political landscape in Malden allowed for CPPA to broaden their reach to voters outside of the Asian American community.

Conclusion

Community-based organizations in Malden and Boston, including ACDC, CPA, MSAC, and GMAACC, are building civic infrastructure by facilitating programs, events, and creative use of space to increase civic engagement among the Asian American community in Malden. Cross-local collaboration between organizations in both cities has been a key component of this infrastructure. Within these partnerships, Malden-based organizations like GMAACC benefit from the resources and momentum of Boston-based groups expanding into Malden, while the local knowledge and leadership of Malden leaders have been essential in shaping and informing the success of Boston-based groups' work in Malden. Despite various challenges, these organizations have developed adaptive strategies such as reimagining the use of space, expanding inter-organizational networks, and reaching new audiences to continue advancing civic engagement in Malden.

Discussion: Lessons Learned from Malden

This chapter elaborates on the lessons learned from the civic engagement in Malden in relation to my research questions and highlights contributions to the existing literature about civic engagement in the suburbs, civic infrastructure, and cross-local coordination between urban and suburban organizations.

Civic Engagement in the Suburbs

First, my findings in Malden establish the suburbs as a site of civic engagement. Residents in Malden are engaging with a variety of issues on the local level, including affordable housing, voting access, and youth organizing. Civic engagement in Malden is also happening in a variety of ways including through educational programs, housing discussion groups, and door knocking. The kinds of issues that organizations in Malden engaged on were shaped by local community needs as well as by Malden's proximity to Boston. This echoes the idea that the immigrant advocacy landscape constantly evolves in response to connections between localities (Leitner and Strunk 2014). My findings also establish that Asian Americans in the suburbs are engaging on issues beyond education and schooling (Apetkar 2009; Lung Amam 2023). Lastly, my findings highlight that the suburbs are home to civic engagement among a diverse population of Asian Americans, not just among higher-income homeowners (Lai 2010; Lung-Amam 2017). In Malden, organizations engaged and organized Asian American youth and elders in affordable housing buildings.

Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs

This study also identifies "ethnopolitical entrepreneurs" (Fittante 2021) as part of civic infrastructure. Key individuals and residents in Malden like CPPA's organizer, and MSAC's

former member coordinator, leverage their backgrounds in different ways to facilitate civic education among first generation immigrants in Malden. CPPA canvassers and MSAC's member coordinator utilized their backgrounds as first-generation immigrants to help other Chinese immigrants engage in local issues in their native languages. This affirms previous findings that ethnopolitical entrepreneurs use their backgrounds to increase immigrant voting power and its influence on the local political landscape (Fittante 2021).

Other organizational staff and leaders hold important connections to elected officials and community-based organizations in Malden that support their organizations' work. These connections included former experiences with nonprofit organizations, connections to officials like the mayor or city council, and other leaders in Boston and Malden that helped to leverage resources to meet and advocate successfully for Asian American community needs in Malden.

The Role of Community-Based Organizations in Civic Infrastructure

Community-based organizations played significant roles in increasing civic engagement and supporting inputs of civic infrastructure in the suburb of Malden. My findings illustrate the role that organizations contribute to civic infrastructure by creating and facilitated various civic spaces, one of the defined inputs of civic infrastructure defined by Kaufman et. al (2022). Civic spaces in Malden included GMAACC and ACDC's youth programs, senior tenant meetings, and CPPA's canvassing program. Staff from organizations were responsible for finding physical space to host programs and build relationships with other organizational partners. My findings go beyond acknowledging the role of community-based organizations in civic infrastructure in passing and establish the specific role that community-based organizations play in strengthening and building civic infrastructure

Community-based organizations also faced challenges to strengthening civic infrastructure, particularly around the difficulties of finding physical space to conduct their work. Specific to the context of working in inner-ring suburbs, the increasing effects of gentrification spreading from Boston impacted organizations' ability to acquire their own office space as rents increased and landlords decided to redevelop buildings. Organizations often had to strategically leverage other spaces that were often designated for other activities. This use of shared space transformed various places in Malden into spaces for civic engagement, including the Senior Center, Wah Lum Kung Fu School, elderly affordable housing buildings, and Malden High School. An added advantage of using these spaces was that organizations engaged additional and new community members by coming to these community members' spaces rather than the other way around.

Cross-Local Coordination

This study further elaborates on the role of cross-local coordination and partnership between urban and suburban organizations as part of civic infrastructure and civic engagement among immigrant communities (Leitner and Strunk 2014; Carpio et. al 2016). Community-based organizations engaging Asian American residents in Malden operated with separate agendas, strategies, and priorities and only occasionally collaborated on events or campaigns, such as advocating for fully transliterated ballots and co-hosting local electoral candidate forums. The ways that organizations worked together cross-locally and intermittently in Malden affirm Leitner and Strunk's findings about immigrant advocacy "assemblage" in the metro DC area that only collaborate on specific projects (2014).

My findings also identify the specific roles and resources that urban and suburban organizations shared with each other when they collaborate. Rather than the idea that urban

organizations lead suburban organizations (Leitner and Strunk 2014; Carpio et. al 2016), urban and suburban organizations mutually benefitted from working with each other.

My findings also identify the mutually beneficial partnerships between suburban and urban organizations as part of civic infrastructure, which expands previous understandings of how these organizations work together. Previous studies have only documented national organizations' impact on local organizations (Leitner and Strunk 2014) or identified that suburban organizations draw from the resources from urban cities (Carpio et. al 2019). Malden-based organizations benefitted from the history and reputation of Boston-area organizations' advocacy, which built the momentum to push for and win certain policies within a relatively short period of time. Boston-based organizations would use their experience in Boston to support similar policy implementation in Malden. However, the local knowledge of Malden residents, organizations, and leaders also made Boston-based organizations' work more efficient. Malden-based organizations and leaders provided direct connections to elected officials and political insight that shaped Boston-based organizations' approaches to their work in Malden. Boston-based organizations also stated that they found their work in Malden as beneficial to the work they do in Boston, especially since policy issues like affordable housing often played out at a statewide level. Therefore, urban organizations benefit and increasingly need to rely on broader regional power built beyond Boston. Even organizations with similar programming and goals worked in parallel, only collaborating when there were specific shared issues of interest.

My study also identified the relationships between organizations' members across cities as part of civic infrastructure, which has not yet been a focus of prior study. CPPA's canvassing program, which comprised of both Malden and Boston residents, relied on each of the canvassers' familiarity of the places they lived in. Canvassers who lived in Malden helped

navigate Boston-based canvassers when they knocked on doors together and vice-versa. A canvasser and Malden resident shared that many Chinese immigrants who live in Malden work in Chinatown, so have existing relationships. Her former co-workers in Chinatown, for example, encouraged her to canvass with CPPA. Within the organization, canvassers and staff from Malden also played a key role by sharing their knowledge of where larger populations of Asian American residents lived to improve CPPA's door knocking strategy. The local knowledge of residents helped save CPPA additional time and capacity needed to familiarize themselves with the landscape of Malden otherwise. My findings also find that suburban-urban collaboration was often challenging. Sometimes, organizations and leaders faced differences or had some initial challenges to coordination across different memberships and use of community spaces. There was also friction between organizations when collaborating to plan events which arose out of differences surrounding which organizations were credited as co-sponsors and the corresponding contributions each organization provided during the event planning. While these collaborative challenges are common in many settings, especially when capacity varies between volunteer and staff-run organizations, these dynamics have yet to be explored in suburban-urban collaborative contexts.

In conclusion, the themes explored in this chapter expand understandings of the role of cross-local partnerships, ethno-political entrepreneurs, and community-based organizations in civic infrastructure. In the next chapter, I will introduce areas for further inquiry that elaborate on these insights and provide questions and considerations for continued discussion.

Conclusion and Directions for Further Inquiry and Practice

In this section, I outline several areas of additional inquiry raised by my findings that will help further understanding of civic infrastructure among suburbs with growing immigrant populations. Lastly, I will share sets of considerations for various stakeholders supporting civic engagement in the suburbs that are informed by my findings.

Summary of Findings

This thesis examined the ways that community-based organizations built civic infrastructure to empower growing Asian American populations in the suburban city of Malden. My findings demonstrate the suburbs as a site for advocacy, civic engagement, and organizing and among Asian American communities in the suburbs on a variety of different issues, provide insight into factors that support and challenge civic infrastructure in immigrant-dense, inner-ring suburbs, and identify cross-local relationships between urban and suburban organizations as part of civic infrastructure.

The Role of Civic Infrastructure

The civic infrastructure model helped illuminate the many inputs that community-based organizations and their members and staff help provide and facilitate to support the strengthening of civic infrastructure. However, my findings also identify cross-local relationships between urban and suburban organizations, ethnopolitical entrepreneurs, and shared identity as part of civic infrastructure. The nature of relationships and identity within organizations and civic infrastructure in Malden is constantly shifting and evolving, based on factors like current political conditions, capacity, and shared issues.

Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted during a limited period of time, from the fall of 2023 through the summer of 2024. Therefore, the observations and interviews that I conducted only capture a snapshot of these organizations' work and is by no means all-encompassing of the work that they have done in the past and how that work may have evolved since. Some of the staff members I interviewed referenced retroactive work, and some staff who had previously worked on these campaigns or programs had transitioned out of some of the organizations since then, so I was unable to clarify further details.

Another limitation of this study is the limited sample of organizational staff and residents I was able to interview. As a current CPA staff member, I had the least barriers to interviewing and speaking with staff and canvassers. However, ideally interviewing more of GMAACC's board members and program participants like Ping Pong Club members could elaborate my findings about the impacts of these programs and capture additional organizational perspectives. However, despite multiple attempts and with GMAACC being a majority volunteer-run organization, it became difficult to find the right scheduling within the limited time period of my data collection.

I chose to use the term 'Asian American' in this study to match the language used by the organizations I interviewed to describe their membership and population served, like ACDC and GMAACC. However, all the Malden residents I interviewed were Chinese and a majority of the community members' organizations in this study worked with were also Chinese. Therefore, this study may not fully reflect the diversity of the Asian American population in Malden.

Despite the limitations, this study documents important ways community-based organizations support civic infrastructure in Malden. The study also reveals many new areas for

further inquiry to further deepen understanding of how civic infrastructure is being built in the suburbs.

Areas for Further Inquiry

Further Inquiry in Malden

The opening of the new Asian American community and cultural center presents an opportunity to better understand civic infrastructure in places like Malden. Further inquiry regarding how organizing and community building that may result from the opening of this center can help illuminate the role of physical space constraints as a challenge in civic infrastructure. Studying organizations' work that happens because of the center can also help understanding implications for cross-local collaboration and collaboration among local organizations in Malden.

Another area of inquiry is around the additional actors or inputs of civic infrastructure beyond community-based organizations. For example, the Wah Lum Kung Fu School was an important civic space and community center for Malden's Asian American community. Further study could include local businesses and the ways they may contribute to its civic infrastructure.

While both ACDC and GMAACC facilitate advocacy-focused programs for local youth to better understand how to engage with local issues in Malden, I did not have the opportunity to interview any youth program participants for this project. Therefore, I was not able to interpret the programs' impacts from the participants' perspectives. Although existing literature focuses on immigrant parents' engagement with their children's education as a form of advocacy (Lanari 2021), a topic for further inquiry could be how advocacy-focused immigrant youth programs in the suburbs impact the parents and families' engagement in local issues. For example, Mai of GMAACC had mentioned that through GMAACC's youth programming, the organization could

also reach out to youth's families to "get the word out" but the role of youth's families is still unclear. Further research that captures both youth and family's perspectives could further elaborate on the role of these programs within civic infrastructure.

This study finds that Malden and Boston-based community-based organizations' strategies and programming have been strongly influenced by the knowledge and experiences of its Malden residents and Malden-based staff. As Boston-based organizations continue to shape their strategies in Malden, one area for further inquiry is what lessons these organizations learn from operating in Malden and how these lessons may influence their work in Boston, if at all.

Although some board members and staff within organizations in Malden had experience working within Boston-based organizations that influenced their work in Malden, the study did not focus on the shared membership between organizations, although organizational staff did mention that there was likely an overlap between their members. For example, the Mass Senior Action Council Metro North chapter's membership coordinator also works closely with GMAACC at times, but I did not have the chance to interview this community member to explore how their experiences working with one organization might have shaped the other. To explore additional elements of civic infrastructure, another area for further study is how residents in Malden who are involved in multiple organizations within the city share knowledge, impact ease of collaboration, or shape strategy within each organization as part of civic infrastructure.

Lastly, shared identity also arose as a part of civic infrastructure that can be a focus of further inquiry. In inner ring suburbs like Malden, the binary between "suburban" and "urban" is less clearly defined. Many Asian American residents who live in Malden continue to hold social and economic relationships in Boston. In addition to influencing the work of organizations and the issues on which advocate, these connections also impact the formation of civic identity. These

connections aren't just restricted to the suburbs, but to a broader trend of displacement among ethnic enclaves. Although I don't live in Chinatown, I still consider Chinatown a cultural and political home and thus, tied to my own civic identity. This could also be said for the handful of staff and organizations who don't live or have permanent space in Malden but still organize and mobilize its residents. This cross-local aspect of civic identity is another area of inquiry in relation to outputs of civic infrastructure in inner-ring suburbs.

Broader Inquiry Beyond Malden

Malden is its own distinct suburb whose civic infrastructure has been in part shaped by its geographic proximity and relationships to Boston's organizational and advocacy landscape, which opens up broader inquiry for places beyond Malden. Quincy, for example, is another suburb with similar demographics to Malden where Boston Chinatown organizations have also begun expanding their work but has a different political landscape. Studying other suburbs with different characteristics including political environment, proximity to urban cities, and suburbs without public transportation connecting to urban areas (such as between Greater Boston and its inner ring suburbs) can help identify new factors and affirm my findings around civic infrastructure. My findings also point to a need for further research in suburbs in regions that are less hospitable to immigrants.

Considerations for Civic Engagement Practice

The following section provides a set of considerations and questions for different stakeholder groups to consider as they shape strategies for strengthening civic infrastructure and civic engagement in suburban communities. These considerations can be a template for discussions within and among organizations. All considerations stem from my findings and aim to facilitate learning about how my findings might be applied and adapted to other contexts. The

considerations are divided by the types of actors that may be able to support or be part of civic infrastructure for immigrant communities in suburbs: organizations already building civic infrastructure in Malden specifically, organizations in the suburbs, urban organizations expanding the suburbs, and elected officials or planners that can leverage resources to support organizations.

Further Considerations for Organizations in Malden

- Given the vote share of Asian Americans in Malden and Malden's high racial and ethnic diversity, what is the impact of building power and partnerships beyond the Asian American community?
- Consider ways to manage staff transition – particularly among organizational staff that possess key local knowledge that shapes your work in Malden.
- What kinds of additional capacity are needed to better understand different populations of Asian immigrants that live in Malden – e.g., in addition to seniors in affordable housing complexes, among middle-income homeowners?
- How might work in Malden extend to and support the suburbs and cities near them – especially since organizations like GMAACC and MSAC aim to encompass and serve residents beyond Malden? How are decisions made about the work done in these areas?

Considerations for Organizations in the Suburbs

- Identify key issues areas
- Identify knowledge and skills of local residents, organizations, and groups that might be part of initiatives
- Identify areas for capacity building
- Experience of board members, co-founders
 - What experience or skillsets would be important to advance your organization's work? This can be connections with elected officials, experience with applying for and maintaining 501c(3) status, or connections with residents.
- What other policies or programs that support immigrant community needs have succeeded in cities proximate to your suburb?
 - What organizations or individuals can offer suggestions of guidance, as well as resources and partnership opportunities?

Considerations for Urban Organizations Expanding to the Suburbs

- How would expanding efforts to suburbs and other cities further your mission and reach your constituencies – both those displaced and others who are part of your broader community?
- Leveraging local knowledge:
 - What are the ways that your organization can utilize the expertise of residents within the suburb to inform your work and make it more effective? This can be through volunteers, organizational partners, or staff.
 - What ways can your organization retain the local knowledge or relationships built through periods of staff and volunteer transition? (e.g., creating a contact database)
- Opportunities for inter-organizational collaboration
 - If your organization does not yet have infrastructure like a physical office space, are there opportunities to work with other local organizations to use their spaces? How can this be an opportunity to make your work more collaborative?
 - Other spaces, like community centers or schools, can provide unique benefits like higher existing visibility or familiarity among residents.

Considerations for those supporting Community-Based Organizations (City Planning and Community Development Staff, Funders, Elected Officials)

- Consider the value of supporting civic engagement in the suburbs and capacity building to do it.
- Consider specifying more capital funding to support organizations looking to find permanent physical space to support their work in suburbs with growing immigrant populations
- Consider opportunities to establish long-term MOUs with organizations to be able to utilize public buildings, like a local school or community center. Ensure there is regular communication with the organization to understand how use of the space and needs might change over time as programming or work evolves.
- Consider supporting opportunities for learning and collaboration across suburbs and within urban-suburban coalitions to support broader movement building

The questions and considerations in the section are an invitation to generate useful insights for building civic infrastructure in Malden, elsewhere in the Greater Boston area, and among other suburbs. These questions also invite conversations about the role of cross-local partnerships to strengthen movement building for Asian American and immigrant communities more broadly.

Appendix

Interview Questions

1. What does building power mean to your organization?
2. Are there individuals in your organization who play an especially key role in helping connect the needs and issues of first-generation immigrant members of your organization with other organizations and/or political officials? (I.e. individuals who connections in community or language capacity, who can translate needs/issues to political officials that may not otherwise be regularly possible)
3. What tools does your organization use to communicate information and connecting your members? (ie. WeChat, physical mail, email newsletters)
4. What organizations or key partners do you work with in Malden?
5. What kind of resources (physical, fiscal, etc.) would make it easier or more effective for your organization to meet its goals and accomplish its work?

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