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A Closer Look: Asian Americans and the 2008 Election

New Jersey / New York Supplement

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2008 National Asian American Survey (NAAS) is the most comprehensive survey of the political views of Asian Americans to date. The **New Jersey / New York Supplement** to the study reveals that:

- Among Asian Americans in New Jersey, 44 percent can be described as “likely voters” while 42 percent of Asian Americans in New York are “likely voters.”
- Among *citizens* in these two states, 69 percent in New Jersey and 62 percent of citizens in New York are “likely voters.”
- 37 percent of Asian American likely voters in New Jersey support Senator Barack Obama while 18 percent support Senator John McCain.
- Among Asian American likely voters in New York, 42 percent support Obama and 20 percent support McCain.
- More than one-third (37 percent) of Asian American likely voters in New York remain undecided, while nearly half (45 percent) of New Jersey Asian American likely voters were undecided.
- Undecided voters are disproportionately those who are not affiliated with either of the two major parties. Nearly half of all Asian Americans in New Jersey and New York do not consider themselves to be either a Democrat or a Republican.
- Asian Americans in New Jersey and New York lean toward the Democratic Party, but include a large proportion of non-partisans and Independents.
- Asian American Democratic primary voters in 2008 in both states supported Hillary Clinton over Barack Obama by a 3 to 1 margin. Roughly half of former Clinton supporters (46 percent in New Jersey and 50 percent in New York) plan to vote for Obama in November. Ten percent of former Clinton supporters from New Jersey plan to vote for McCain, while 17 percent in New York say they will back the Republican nominee. Nearly half (44 percent) of Clinton primary voters in New Jersey remain undecided, while a third (33 percent) are undecided in New York.
- Among New Jersey Asian American likely voters who supported Bush in 2004, 44 percent plan to vote for McCain in November while 14 percent plan to vote for Obama, and 41 percent remain undecided. Among Kerry supporters in 2004, 54 percent plan to vote for Obama, 3 percent plan to vote for McCain and 43 percent remain undecided.
- Asian American likely voters in New York who supported Bush in 2004 are almost evenly split between the Republican nominee in 2008 (35 percent), and the Democratic candidate (33 percent), while the remaining third are undecided.

- Asian Americans in New York and New Jersey cite the economy and the war in Iraq as the nation's top problems.
- A third of Asian Americans in New Jersey approve of the job Governor Jon Corzine is doing, while 20 percent disapprove, and nearly half (48 percent) said they did not know.
- In the race for the U.S. Senate in New Jersey in 2008, half of Asian Americans did not know who they supported, while a third say they will vote for Lautenberg, and 11 percent for Zimmer.
- Among Asian Americans in new York, nearly two-thirds say they do not know about whether they approve of the job Governor David Paterson is doing, while 28 percent approve, and 7 percent disapprove.

BACKGROUND: ASIAN AMERICANS IN NJ AND NY

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Asian American population has been one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. “In 1960, there were fewer than one million Asian Americans in the U.S., or less than 0.5 percent of the total population.”¹ By 2007, the Asian American population has grown to 14.9 million, approximately five percent of the total population. Moreover, Asian Americans are the second fastest-growing minority group nationally, next to Hispanics.²

Similar to the national trends, the Asian American population in New Jersey has also experienced substantial growth in the past decade. New Jersey has long been a destination for immigrants, but since the 2000 census, the state has seen a 29 percent increase in its Asian American population. As of 2007, the American Community Survey reports that the Asian American population grew to 687,204, making Asian Americans the fastest-growing racial and ethnic group in the state. The Asian American population in New Jersey is approximately eight percent of the state’s population, making New Jersey the state with the third largest proportion of Asian Americans, after Hawaii (56 percent) and California (13 percent).

Heavily concentrated in the central and northern counties of New Jersey, Middlesex County has the largest Asian American population at 150,021 while Bergen and Hudson counties follow at 131,859 and 69,093. There has also been tremendous growth in areas not traditionally associated with the Asian American population, such as Hunterdon and Warren counties.

The Asian American community in New Jersey is diverse in terms of ethnicity and national origin. Approximately thirty-seven percent identify as Indian or South Asian, the largest share of the Asian American community. Nearly twenty percent identify as Chinese, and eighteen percent Filipino, the second and third largest share of the Asian American population in the state of New Jersey. Koreans make up the fourth largest group with 14 percent of the Asian American population.

Although the Asian American population has become a growing force both nationally and locally, Asian Americans remain underrepresented among elected officials. Currently serving in the 110th U.S. Congress there are six Asian Americans: two Asian American senators from Hawaii and four representatives, 1 from Hawaii, 2 from California, and 1 from Oregon. As in national politics, Asian Americans in New Jersey

¹ National Asian American Survey report: <<http://www.naasurvey.com/assets/NAAS-National-report.pdf>>

² Since the 2000 Census, population figures for racial groups have been reported for the groups “alone” and “alone or in combination with one or more other races” to reflect the new “mark one or more” multiracial identifier question. The population figures used here report the number of persons who identify as Asians alone or in combination with one or more other races.

have yet to move into the political arena at a rate matching their population growth. The only two Asian American legislators elected to the New Jersey Legislature are currently serving. They include Senator Kevin O'Toole from District 40 and Assemblyman Upendra Chivukula from District 17. As voters in the 2004 presidential election, 58 percent of the adult (18+) New Jersey Asian American population was able to register.³ Thirty-four percent of them reported voted in the last U.S. Presidential election.

County	2000 Population (x1,000)	2007 Population (x1,000)	Percent⁴ Change (%)
Atlantic	14.5	18.8	+ 30
Bergen	101	131.8	+ 31
Burlington	14.1	20.9	+ 48
Camden	21.5	25.1	+ 17
Cape May	0.9	0.5	- 44
Cumberland	1.8	2.1	+ 17
Essex	33.6	36.8	+ 10
Gloucester	4.6	7.7	+ 67
Hudson	63.4	69.1	+ 9
Hunterdon	2.8	4.8	+ 71
Mercer	19.4	30.6	+ 58
Middlesex	110.8	150	+ 35
Monmouth	27.4	34.7	+ 27
Morris	32.4	43.9	+ 36
Ocean	8	11.4	+ 43
Passaic	21.2	24.9	+ 18
Salem	0.5	0.8	+ 60
Somerset	27.1	42	+ 55
Sussex	2.8	2.8	0
Union	22.6	25.2	+ 12
Warren	1.5	2.9	+ 93

Source: 2007 American Community Survey

In New York, and according to the 2007 American Community Survey, the Asian American population is 1,410,103; approximately 7 percent of the entire state's

³ Current Population Survey estimates

⁴ Percent change computations for New Jersey and New York City were done by the author, not the U.S. Census Bureau.

population. New York City's Asian American population totals 1,016,495, approximately 12 percent of the city's population. The Asian American population in New York City alone captures 72 percent of New York State's total Asian American population.

The Asian American community in New York City is not distributed evenly throughout the five boroughs. Approximately 49 percent of New York City's Asian American population resides in Queens; followed by Kings County (Brooklyn) at 24 percent; New York County (Manhattan) at 18 percent, Bronx County at 5 percent, and Richmond County (Staten Island) at 4 percent.

County	2000 Population (x1,000)	2007 Population (x1,000)	Percent Change (%)
Bronx	49.6	52.3	+ 5
Kings (Brooklyn)	210.5	237.6	+ 13
New York (Manhattan)	159.1	186.6	+ 17
Queens	442.3	502.6	+ 14
Richmond (Staten Island)	28.2	37.4	+ 33

Source: 2007 American Community Survey

As one might expect, Asian Americans in New York are remarkably diverse. The largest Asian group in New York City identifies as Chinese (439,563), which is nearly 45 percent of the city's entire Asian population. Other large Asian groups in New York City are: Indians (236,117), representing 24 percent, and Koreans (83,606) representing approximately nine percent of the Asian American population of New York City. Asians classified as other than the major groups make up another 10 percent of the population (99,390).

Although Asian Americans are a demographic force in New York City, they are still underrepresented in city government. According to the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), there has only been one Asian American elected to city-wide office, John Liu to City Council in 2001.

WHO WILL VOTE?

To describe the Asian American voting electorate in the 2008 NAAS New Jersey and New York supplement, we develop a likely voter model, based on respondents' voter registration status, their past voting record, their level of interest in politics, and their self-reported certainty of voting in the November elections. These, in turn are weighted to reflect known demographic characteristics of the Asian American population in these two locations with a total of 785 New Jersey and New York residents. On these components of our likely voter model, Asian Americans have the following characteristics:

Voter registration:

- 51 percent of Asian Americans in NJ, and 55 percent of Asian Americans in New York are registered to vote.
- Of those not registered to vote at the time they were interviewed, an average of 18 percent reported they intend to register before the November election.

Past voting record:

- 74 percent of currently registered voters in New Jersey reported voting in the 2004 presidential election; 66 percent in New York said they voted in 2004.
- 40 percent of registered voters in New Jersey reported voting in the 2008 primary, while 31 percent of Asian Americans in New York said they voted in the state primary in 2008.

Certainty of voting this November:

- Respondents were asked to rate their chances of voting in November. Tables 1.A. and 1.B. show the responses for the all respondents in New Jersey and New York, for citizens, and for among those who reported voting in the 2004 elections.
- In New Jersey, four in five Asian American citizens state that they are "absolutely certain" they will vote this November. In New York, seven of ten say the same.

Table 1.A. Certainty of Voting by Citizenship and Prior Voting Behavior – New Jersey

	All Respondents	Citizens	Voted in 2004
Absolutely certain	48%	81%	86%
Will probably vote	4	8	5
50-50 chance	6	9	6
Less than 50-50	3	2	3
Not eligible	38	--	--

Question: "I would like you to rate the chances that you will vote in the presidential election in November. Are you absolutely certain to vote, will you probably vote, or is the chance 50-50, or less than that?"

- Among Asian Americans in New Jersey who voted in the 2004 election, 86 percent say they are absolutely certain they will vote in 2008, while 85 percent of Asian American voters in 2004 in New York say the same.

Table 1.B. Certainty of Voting by Citizenship and Prior Voting Behavior – New York

	All Respondents	Citizens	Voted in 2004
Absolutely certain	44%	70%	85%
Will probably vote	10	15	7
50-50 chance	5	7	4
Less than 50-50	4	7	4
Not eligible	38	--	--

Question: "I would like you to rate the chances that you will vote in the presidential election in November. Are you absolutely certain to vote, will you probably vote, or is the chance 50-50, or less than that?"

Political interest:

- 20 percent of Asian American respondents in both states indicated that they were "very interested" in politics.
- 39 percent said they were "interested."
- 24 percent reported being "somewhat interested."
- 16 percent said they were "not at all interested."

These items were used – together with 2004 Current Population Survey⁵ reports on voter turnout in 2004 – to generate the likely voter model. Likely voter models are preferable to self-reports on voter turnout and self-report on one's likelihood of voting in the next election because studies repeatedly show that survey respondents consistently over-report how often they vote.

Based on our likely voter model, 44 percent of Asian American adults in New Jersey and 42 percent in New York will vote in the 2008 elections. Half of Asian Americans in New Jersey are citizens, while 59 percent in New York are citizens. Projected turnout among the citizen population is much higher (69 percent in NJ and 62 percent in NY) as well as the registered voter population (79 percent in NJ and 73 percent in NY).

⁵ Among surveys of voters that show breakdowns by race and ethnicity, the Current Population Survey has the lowest level of over-reporting. For instance, in 2004, the CPS shows that 64% of eligible adult citizens said they voted, compared to a rate of 61% among voting eligible adults as reported in the official vote totals by the Federal Election Commission and corrections made for citizenship and ineligible felons (http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm). By contrast, in the National Election Studies from 2004, 79 percent of respondents claimed to have voted.

Among ethnic subgroups, the highest likely rate of voting among Asian Americans in both New Jersey and New York is among Asian Indians and Koreans, with relatively modest rates of likely voters among Chinese Americans in both states.

HOW WILL ASIAN AMERICANS VOTE?

How are Asian Americans in New Jersey and New York likely to vote in the coming 2008 presidential elections? The results from the 2008 NAAS NJ / NY Supplement show two salient features (see Tables 2.A. and 2.B.):

- Asian American likely voters in both states favor Barack Obama over John McCain by a wide margin of 37 percent to 18 percent in New Jersey and 42 percent to 20 percent in New York.
- A very large proportion of Asian American likely voters (45 percent in New Jersey and 37 percent in New York) remain undecided.

These patterns are roughly the same when we look beyond likely voters to all Asian American citizens in those states.

Table 2.A. Vote Preference for President - NJ

	Likely Voters	Citizens
McCain	18%	17%
Obama	37	38
Other	0	0
Undecided	45	45

Question: "Do you plan to vote for John McCain the Republican, or Barack Obama, the Democrat, or another candidate for President of the United States, or are you unsure at this point in time?"

Table 2.B. Vote Preference for President - NY

	Likely Voters	Citizens
McCain	20%	18%
Obama	42	42
Other	1	1
Undecided	37	39

Question: "Do you plan to vote for John McCain the Republican, or Barack Obama, the Democrat, or another candidate for President of the United States, or are you unsure at this point in time?"

Voter Preferences by Partisanship

The expected vote choice of Asian Americans, not surprisingly, varies strongly by partisanship. Tables 3.A. and 3.B. show the relationship Asian Americans have to political parties in four categories: (1) self-identified Democrats; (2) self-identified Republicans; (3) self-identified Independents; (4) "non-partisans." Non-partisans are those individuals who indicate that they simply do not think in partisan terms or that they do not know how to answer to the question.

The results from Tables 3.A. and 3.B. show that:

- Among Democrats, Asian American likely voters in New Jersey and New York overwhelmingly support Barack Obama over John McCain (65 percent to 3 percent in NJ and 59 percent to 9 percent in NY).
- This partisan preference is similarly strong among Republican likely voters, who prefer John McCain over Barack Obama (63 percent to 11 percent in NJ and 80 percent to 7 percent in NY).
- The proportion of undecided voters is smaller among self-reported partisans than it is among Independents (more than half of whom are undecided) and non-partisans (70 and 56 percent undecided in NJ and NY respectively).

Table 3.A. Voter Preferences - Likely Voters by Party Identification in NJ

	All Likely Voters	Democrats	Republican	Independent	Non-partisans
McCain	18%	3%	63%	22%	14%
Obama	37	65	11	32	12
Other	0	0	0	3	0
Undecided	45	32	26	54	70

Question: "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, some other party, or do you not think in these terms?"

Table 3.B. Voter Preferences - Likely Voters by Party Identification in NY

	All Likely Voters	Democrats	Republican	Independent	Non-partisans
McCain	20%	9%	80%	18%	6%
Obama	42	59	7	32	38
Other	1	0	0	0	0
Undecided	37	32	13	50	56

Question: "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, some other party, or do you not think in these terms?"

Tables 3.A. and 3.B. showed that well over half of Asian American likely voters in New Jersey and New York who are non-partisan and independent were undecided about their choice for President. This segment of the electorate is pivotal because a majority of Asian American voters are either Independents or non-partisans. Among all Asian Americans interviewed in New Jersey, 32 percent said they were non-partisan, and an additional 10 percent call themselves Independents. A slightly higher proportion of Asian Americans in New York said they were non-partisan (36%), with the same proportion of Independents. Among those who affiliate with one of the two major parties, Asian Americans in both NJ and NY are more Democratic, with one-third in both states saying they identify with the Democratic party. Twenty-six percent and 21 percent in NJ and NY respectively say they are affiliated with the Republican party.

Voter Preferences by Past Voting

In addition to partisanship, another key indicator of likely vote choice is one's previous votes. In Table 4.A. we show Asian American voters' preferences in New Jersey, broken down by how respondents reported voting in the 2004 presidential election between incumbent President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry, and how they reported voting in the 2008 state primaries. Thirty-seven percent of Asian Americans in NJ reported voting for Bush in 2004, while 58 percent said they voted for Kerry. Among Bush voters in 2004, 44 percent say they plan to vote for McCain in 2008. In contrast, 54% of Kerry voters in 2004 will vote for Obama. In the 2008 primaries, 59 percent of Asian American voters in New Jersey say they voted for Hillary Clinton, 17 percent for Obama, and 10 percent for McCain. Among Clinton primary supporters, less than half (46 percent) say they will vote for Obama, while almost as many remain undecided (44 percent).

Table 4.A. Voter Preferences by 2004 Vote and 2008 Primary Vote - NJ

	All Likely Voters	2004 Bush	2004 Kerry	2008 Clinton	2008 Obama	2008 McCain
McCain	18%	44%	3%	10%	0%	78%
Obama	37	14	54	46	77	0
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0
Undecided	45	41	43	44	23	22

Questions: "Who did you vote for President in the 2004 election? Was it George W. Bush, John Kerry, or someone else?" "Which presidential candidate did you vote for in your state's primary or caucus?"

Comparable data for Asian American voters in New York is shown in Table 4.B. Forty percent of voters report casting their ballot in 2004 for Bush, while 49 percent say they voted for Kerry. Asian American voters in New York who supported Bush in 2004 are

only slightly more likely to support McCain in 2008, and a third of these voters are either planning to support Obama or remain undecided. Among Kerry voters in 2004 in New York, 60 percent say they will vote for the Democratic candidate, 15 percent for McCain, and a quarter remain undecided. Differences between voters categorized by primary vote are more stark. More than half of New York Asian American voters report casting a primary vote for Hillary Clinton (56 percent), 17 percent for Obama, and 10 percent for McCain. Among Clinton supporters, half say they will now support Obama, while a third remain undecided. All Obama primary voters remain supportive of Obama, and the same is true among McCain primary voters.

Table 4.B. Voter Preferences by 2004 Vote and 2008 Primary Vote - NY

	All Likely Voters	2004 Bush	2004 Kerry	2008 Clinton	2008 Obama	2008 McCain
McCain	20%	35%	15%	17%	0%	100%
Obama	42	33	60	50	100	0
Other	1	0	2	0	0	0
Undecided	37	33	23	33	0	0

Questions: "Who did you vote for President in the 2004 election? Was it George W. Bush, John Kerry, or someone else?" "Which presidential candidate did you vote for in your state's primary or caucus?"

BEHIND THE ASIAN AMERICAN VOTE

What is behind the support for Barack Obama and John McCain among Asian American likely voters in New Jersey and New York? This section provides information about issue preferences and the policy agenda among Asian Americans.

The Asian American Policy Agenda

To gauge the Asian American policy agenda, respondents were asked what they felt was "the most important problem facing the United States today." The survey allowed people to give more than one response to the question, and the issues were captured in the order in which respondents mentioned them. (Most other surveys only record the first mention). "The economy" was the most often cited by respondents as the most important problem facing the nation (74 percent in NJ and 62 percent in New York). The war in Iraq followed with 11 percent of Asian Americans in New Jersey mentioning this as the most important problem, and 14 percent among residents of New York.

While most surveys of the "most important problem" only record the first mention made by respondents, such a measure often masks the importance of other issues that also rank high in voters' minds. While the economy still receives the most mentions, over one third or likely voters are concerned about the war in Iraq (33 percent in NJ and 38 percent in New York). Concern about oil prices, jobs and unemployment, and health care all followed the economy and the war as the most important problems facing the nation among Asian Americans in both states.

When asked to evaluate how they were faring financially now compared to a year ago, 14 percent of Asian Americans in New Jersey and 8 percent in New York said they were now "better off," while 35 percent in NJ and 45 percent in NY said they were "worse off." Nearly half (49 percent) in NJ said they were doing "about the same" as last year, and 43 percent in NY also reported there had been no change in their economic well-being.

In terms of policy opinion on the war in Iraq, Asian Americans in New Jersey and New York are strongly in favor of getting U.S. military troops out of Iraq. In New Jersey, 79 percent either agree strongly or agree with the following statement: "The U.S. should get our military troops out of Iraq as soon as possible." Eight percent in NJ are neutral, while 13 percent disagree or strongly disagree with the statement. Among Asian Americans in New York, 75 percent agree strongly or agree that the U.S. should get troops out of Iraq, while 13 percent remain neutral, and 12 percent disagree or disagree strongly.

Finally, Asian Americans in NJ and NY are also strong supporters of government guaranteeing health care for all. In response to the statement: "The federal government should guarantee health care for everyone," 82 percent of New Jersey respondents

either strongly agreed or agreed, while only 7 percent were neutral and 11 percent in disagreed. The sentiment for health care reform was even stronger among Asian American residents of New York, where 89% strongly agree or agree that the federal government should guarantee health care coverage.

Evaluating New Jersey and New York Elected Officials

A third of Asian Americans in New Jersey approve of the job Governor Jon Corzine is doing, while 20 percent disapprove, and nearly half (48 percent) did not know. In the race for the U.S. Senate in New Jersey in 2008, half of Asian Americans did not know who they supported, while a third say they will vote for Lautenberg, and 11 percent for Zimmer.

Among Asian Americans in new York, nearly two-thirds say they do not know about whether they approve of the job Governor David Paterson is doing, while 28 percent are supportive, and 7 percent disapprove.

Perhaps the most striking finding in these data on evaluating elected officials at the state level, is the high degree of uncertainty among Asian Americans in both New Jersey and New York. The relative newness of Asian Americans in both New Jersey and New York, combined with more modest levels of attachment to traditional political parties helps explain the disengagement among Asian Americans to state leaders. At the same time, however, the data also signal the potential importance of Asian American voters to both Republicans and Democrats in these two states.