

# In tight US race, Asian Americans could be kingmakers

By Shaun Tandon (AFP) – 6 days ago

FALLS CHURCH, Virginia — From the stall where he sells newspapers and scarves in the colors of the former South Vietnam, Tony Nguyen has been watching the tight US presidential election play out before his eyes.

Representatives for President Barack Obama and Republican rival Mitt Romney have been frequent visitors to the Vietnamese restaurants and beauty salons here in Washington's Virginia suburbs, seeking what could be critical votes in a neck-and-neck race.

"If the Vietnamese all vote for one candidate, it could make a very big difference in a close state like Virginia," Nguyen said over a table of community newspapers with headlines about the November 6 election.

Often overlooked in past elections, Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial group in the United States. They make up around five percent of the US population but their numbers could surpass winning candidates' margins of victory in battleground states such as Virginia, Nevada, Florida and Colorado.

If trends prevail, Asian Americans will likely boost Obama. He won two-thirds of Asian American votes in 2008, a swift rise from the 32 percent who voted for fellow Democrat Bill Clinton when he was first elected in 1992.

"This is a historic shift. The last time you've seen an immigrant group undergo such a major shift was among Jewish voters between the 1920s and 1940s" when they also rallied behind the Democrats, said Karthick Ramakrishnan, an associate professor at the University of California, Riverside.

Ramakrishnan is co-author of the National Asian American Survey, a poll of 3,034 adults that found that the community tilted heavily toward the Democrats on several key election issues -- women's rights, health care and immigration.

Support varied among ethnic groups. Indian Americans were among the most strongly Democratic, with 58 percent saying they identified or leaned toward the party against a mere seven percent who sided with the Republicans.

Ramakrishnan said that many Asian Americans came of age politically during the Clinton administration, which they recall as a time of prosperity.

Since then, the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and "the increasingly conservative tone on immigration by Republicans has alienated a lot of Asian Americans from the Republicans," he said.

The survey also showed strong support for the Democrats from Americans of Chinese, Hmong, Japanese and Korean heritage. But Republicans enjoyed a slight edge among Filipino Americans, many of whom are devoutly Catholic.

Republicans have traditionally polled well among Vietnamese Americans, whose older generation fondly remembers the party's staunch anti-communism. But the survey said Obama has made strong inroads in the community, perhaps thanks to his health care reform aimed at increasing coverage to the uninsured.

National polls have found that Obama, the nation's first African American president, also enjoys overwhelming support among blacks and Hispanics, helping compensate for Romney's strong advantage among white voters.

Representative Mike Honda, a Democrat of Japanese heritage whose California district has become the first in the US mainland with an Asian majority, has been traveling to key states to encourage Asian Americans to turn out.



Photo 1 of 2



The Asian-American vote could be critical in the neck-and-neck election race (AFP, Shaun Tandon)



### Map



"We've been trying to engage them by visiting their places of work, their malls and everywhere they go and also by hitting the language media," Honda told AFP.

-- Republicans reaching out to Asian Americans --

-----  
In a key challenge, Honda said at least 45 percent of eligible Asian Americans are not registered to vote. He has been recruiting volunteers and lawyers as Asian Americans "tend to be easily intimidated" away from voting.

Honda has highlighted Democratic support for the so-called DREAM bill, which would offer a path to permanent US residency for young undocumented foreigners of good standing, along with the party's broader economic themes.

He also pointed to the tone set by Obama, who appointed a record three Asian Americans to his cabinet. In 2009, Obama encountered intense Republican criticism when he bowed to Japan's Emperor Akihito during a visit to Tokyo.

"In the Asian American community... for the president to bow is a sign of respect; it's not a sign of being diminished," Honda said.

Tone could be a factor in Virginia, where Republican George Allen is seeking to retake a Senate seat he lost by fewer than 10,000 votes in 2006. In his last campaign, his support slipped after he was caught on video taunting a young Indian American campaigner for his opponent with the slur "macaca."

Republicans in Virginia have nonetheless been reaching out to Asian Americans. When Republican Governor Bob McDonnell ran in 2009, he spent two and a half hours mingling at an Asian festival while his Democratic opponent did not show up, recalled Sanjay Puri, chairman of the non-partisan US India Political Action Committee.

Still, Puri doubted that Allen would fare well among Indian Americans in northern Virginia.

"They all remember that comment. Now Senator Allen is in their minds symbolic of the 'macaca moment,'" Puri said.

Romney has tapped Taiwanese-born Elaine Chao, who was labor secretary under president George W. Bush, to make inroads with Asian Americans. Republicans have stressed their support for lower taxes and regulations as a large number of Asian Americans are small business owners.

Despite Indian American support for the Democrats, the community's two most prominent elected officials are both stars in the Republican Party -- Governors Bobby Jindal of Louisiana and Nikki Haley of South Carolina.

A record 30 Asian Americans have run for Congress this year -- 25 of them Democrats -- with a growing number of them in districts without large Asian populations.

One of the most closely watched races is in Illinois where Tammy Duckworth, a Bangkok-born US veteran who was severely wounded in Iraq, is seeking to unseat outspoken Republican Joe Walsh.

In Hawaii, Tulsi Gabbard looks likely to become the first Hindu elected to the US Congress. In New York City, Grace Meng is running to be the first Asian American to represent the metropolis in Congress.

Copyright © 2012 AFP. All rights reserved. [More »](#)

 [Add News to your Google Homepage](#)