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EDITOR'S JOURNAL

AAPI Community Asks: "Why Won't Obama & Romney Talk to Us?"

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As I write this, President Obama and his challenger, former Governor Mitt Romney, are both on the ground in Virginia, campaigning for votes from residents of the Commonwealth. That's not surprising. Virginia is one of the most important of the so-called "battleground states," the hotly contested areas which will determine who will be inaugurated next January.

So why will neither candidate address matters of concern to the AAPI community? It is quite perplexing, when our vote may make the difference on election day.

Virginia, with its 13 electoral votes, is a swing state. Formerly a reliably conservative red state, Virginia has added Democratic blue in recent years by electing two Democratic U.S. Senators and going for Barack Obama over John McCain in 2008. The Republican Party is still strong here, however. Just ask GOP Governor Bob McDonnell or the GOP-controlled legislature. So let's call it purple. And competitive. Despite the president's surge in the polls in late September, the winner in the Old Dominion may be decided by relatively few votes. (Both D.C. and Maryland are expected to go solidly for the president.)

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That's why we are being pounded by incessant TV ads on local TV for both candidates. Four of the top ten TV markets across the country where the campaigns are spending money are aimed at Virginia.

Now we'd like the candidates to put their mouths where their money is.

But you will not find any words from either Barack Obama or Mitt Romney in this edition of *Asian Fortune*.

We have repeatedly asked both campaigns for a few minutes of their candidates' time to discuss issues of interest to our readers. But both campaigns have declined the opportunity to directly connect with Asian Americans, Virginia's most rapidly growing group, and one which is emerging as a critical bloc of voters. Yes, it is the Asian American vote that may well provide the margin of victory in Virginia, which national political analysts call one of the top "must-win" states.

President Obama and Governor Romney: You ignore our community at your political risk.

Two newly released, landmark surveys of Asian American voters offer a detailed look at how important we are across the country, and, especially, in Virginia.

The National Asian American Survey concludes that if Asian Americans in Virginia turn out in numbers similar to 2008, when 136,000 voted, we will provide a 47,000 vote margin for the president. And that is probably more than enough to paint the state bright blue on election day.

But this study, along with the similarly named 2012 National Asian American Survey, also show considerable opportunity for Governor Romney with our community.

Nationally, 43% of likely Asian American voters in late September supported President Obama, while 24% supported Mitt Romney, according to the Ramakrishan/Lee poll. But nearly one-third, 32%, of likely Asian American voters remained undecided, about five times the national average. And a high proportion of Asian Americans are non-partisan. 52% of us are Independent or do not think in terms of party identification.

That means Romney has room to make significant gains with Asian American voters, possibly turning the tide in his direction in Virginia. Both candidates should be battling over our votes.

But they are not. I got the feeling after dozens of conversations and e-mail exchanges with staff members from both campaigns that the Asian American voter is barely on their radar screens, even if our money is. ("They have no hesitation to invite us to fundraisers," one prominent, frustrated lawmaker lamented privately.)

We offered both candidates a golden opportunity: photos and interviews on the cover that hundreds of thousands of people would see in shops, homes,

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the
BAG
save
the
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are using
less disposable bags
than in 2009.

District businesses that
sell food or alcohol
must charge you 5 cents
for each disposable
paper or plastic bag.

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libraries, workplaces, etc. for the entire month of October, when voters are making final choices. The interviews would be posted on-line. We promised the candidates direct access to our readers without the filter of analysis or commentary. We would ask some questions and print their answers, leaving them total control over their message. It would take a few minutes of their schedules.



But the president's team says he "doesn't have time," offering only to provide some pre-digested issue statements. No time? But right about then I noticed the president making time for an interview with a small TV station in downstate Virginia that probably has one-fifth the number of newscast viewers as we have readers.

Governor Romney's camp tried to play hardball, telling me, in effect, that they would schedule an interview only if the president did one first, and they demanded to know exact details of any presidential interactions with us. They also suggested we submit questions in advance before they would "consider" an interview, even though we told them the general areas we wished to cover. Not exactly a profile in courage.

Yes, there has been lower-level, logistical outreach to some area Asian American groups from the presidential campaigns. Occasionally, they will send a surrogate to our events extol the virtues of their candidates. And right at the end of September Governor Romney was preceded at a campaign stop by several Asian American women who were part of a group who made introductory comments. So that's something.

But other groups of voters are being aggressively courted by the candidates personally, and we see a pattern of lack of engagement.

For example, APIAVote hosted a Presidential Town Hall in late July at George Mason University in Fairfax, with invitations extended to both candidates to appear before a large group. But the candidates declined to spend time with our community. Instead, both sent canned, non-event-specific videos. The president appeared in his three-minute presentation for about thirty seconds, shown in brief clips from an old speech. Mr. Romney's video showed more effort, as he addressed the camera for his three minutes. He discussed the Asian American community with a few generalities and then delivered standard stump speech lines. Both videos were slightly patronizing.

The thing is, the issues of most importance to the Asian American and Pacific Islander populations are pretty much the same as the things on most people's minds. We just want to be dealt with as thinking adults. We have mainstream concerns, and a few issues of special interest to us.

According the new polls, the economy and jobs are by far the most important issues to Asian Americans, followed by health care and education. But we're also interested in immigration, The Dream Act, support for minority-owned small businesses, diversity in government and the workplace and in the culture, affirmative action, relations with Asian nations emerging as economic powers, the move to make English an "official" language, the effect of new voter ID laws on minorities, etc. What about nominating an APIA justice to the Supreme Court? You deserve answers.

Maybe if the race tightens up again during October, the candidates will suddenly

discover some previously unappreciated opportunities to interact with Asian American voters and address our issues. Their sizable, well-funded campaign staffs should be able to figure out a few ways to stage some events. And, of course, our November issue will be out six days before the election, so there's still time to schedule interviews to educate and convince voters.


The candidates now need to hear from you, the members of the APIA community. Tell them and their parties that you will not be taken for granted. Email or call them. You must demand of Republican and Democratic candidates for local office, the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate that they pass the word up the chain of command to have the top of their tickets engage with our community.

Let's make this the beginning of a new chapter of the Asian American story in America. Let's take our place at the table where decisions are made, decisions which affect our lives and the lives of our children and families.

You have a voice. Raise it. You have political muscle. Flex it. Democracy needs you.


Dottie Tiejun Li, Editor

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