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Who Is The Asian American Voter?

By: **Rex Feng**, Oct 24, 2008

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New survey gives historic snapshot of community's political sentiments

This month, professors from Rutgers University, the University of



California and the University of Southern California released the results from an ambitious project known as the National Asian American Survey.

The NAAS is the first broad-based Asian American political poll of its kind, drawing data from over 4,000 participants nationwide through interviews conducted in eight Asian languages. The researchers hoped to paint the most accurate portrayal to date of Asian American voters, their party preferences and what issues are important to them as a voting bloc.

The study, conducted in August and September, found that 41 percent of likely Asian American voters indicate favor for Sen. Barack Obama, compared to 24 percent who are likely to support his opponent, Sen. John McCain (*Fig. 1*).

Candidate support within Asian American ethnic subgroups was also analyzed. For example, two-thirds of Vietnamese Americans support Sen. McCain, whereas Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans and Indian Americans support Sen. Obama by more than a 3-1 ratio. Korean Americans and Filipino Americans also show support for Obama over McCain, by a margin of approximately 1.4 to 1.

Researchers say these differences are directly related to party affiliation. Vietnamese Americans aligned themselves with the Republican Party over the Democratic Party by a margin of 2-to-1, while the opposite was found to be true for Indian Americans and Chinese Americans. Overall, 32 percent of all Asian Americans identify themselves as Democrats; 14 percent as Republicans; 19 percent as independents; and 35 percent as nonpartisan (*Fig. 2*).

The lead that Sen. Obama seems to enjoy within the Asian American voting community stands in contrast to the nation's population at large, where poll results over the same period suggested a much closer race. A Gallup national tracking poll, which analyzes information from over 2,500 registered voters on a daily basis, showed both candidates deadlocked at 46 percent as of Sept. 22 of this year.

More recent Gallup polls conducted in mid-October have shown Obama pulling ahead, by as much as 50 percent to McCain's 42 percent. However, this margin is still much smaller than that found by the NAAS results.

In addition, 59 percent of Asian American voters who supported Sen. Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary now plan to vote for Obama, compared to 10 percent of the same group for McCain, according to the NAAS poll.

The wide support for Sen. Obama may stem partially from the issues identified to be most important to the Asian American constituency. Roughly 80 percent of those polled via the NAAS chose the economy as one of the most important problems the nation faces today, followed closely by concerns over the war in Iraq (*Fig. 3*).

“Even as the Iraq war has receded from the headlines as concerns about the economy have become more prominent, the war still plays a powerful role in the Asian American choice for president,” said Jane Junn, a NAAS researcher and associate professor of political science at Rutgers.

In battleground states, Obama leads with 43 percent of Asian Americans indicating support, compared to McCain's 22 percent. Asian Americans have the potential to play a critical role in these arenas, according to the researchers. Asian Americans account for 5 percent or more of the population in states such as Virginia, Nevada and Washington. Even in states such as Colorado, Ohio and Florida, where they are less numerous, Asian Americans may tip the scales in a narrow electoral race.

"If either campaign is looking for a place to get an extra one or two percentage points," said Taeku Lee, an associate professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley, "Asian Americans are not a bad place to get it."

The study also revealed a relatively high percentage of undecided voters in the Asian American polling group: 34 percent compared to 8 percent in the general population (*Fig. 4*).

That such a large proportion of Asian American voters are undecided could make the voting demographic a very attractive campaign target for either candidate, especially in battleground states. Indeed, Sen. Obama has already begun to capitalize on this, issuing an open letter Oct. 16 promising to work with the Asian American and Pacific Islander community to provide better healthcare at a lower cost and with fewer language barriers.

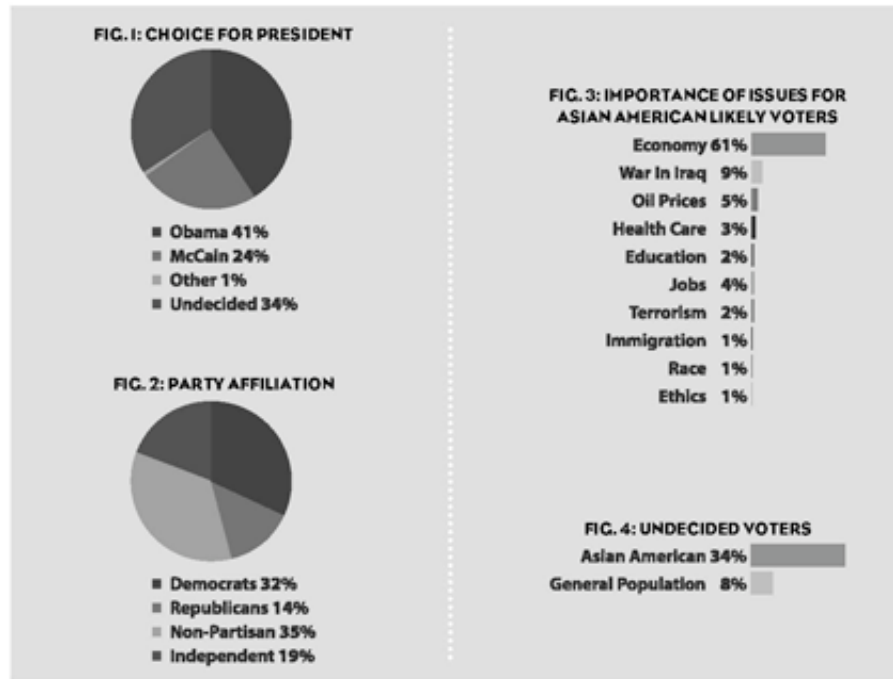
"While we understand that the AAPI constituency is relatively smaller than others, we remind campaigns about the rapid growth of the AAPI population," said EunSook Lee, APIAVote board chair and executive director of the National Korean American Service & Education Consortium. "Most AAPIs are still foreign-born and naturalizing to citizenship at a far higher rate than other immigrant populations. In Southern California alone, NAKASEC registered 10,000 first-time voters, many of them at citizenship naturalization ceremonies."

The ethnic media play a key role in influencing Asian Americans about politics. One-third of Asian Americans in the NAAS poll are informed about politics from Asian-language media and 28 percent said they would use Asian-language ballot materials.

But many Asian Americans may get their information from Asian- and English-language media. A 2005 study by the interTrend Knowledge Center, surveying approximately 1,100 Asian Americans, found that 12 percent of their polling group consumed solely ethnic media and 78 percent consumed both English-language and foreign-language media.

A 2006 report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism revealed that 60 percent of Asian Americans said that English-language media is the most credible and tend to trust English-language media outlets more than those presented in their native languages.

With the NAAS survey, more concrete data has emerged to support Asian Americans' validity as an important voting group. The growing size of the demographic, coupled with its starkly unique political leanings compared to the rest of the nation, has begun to draw unprecedented attention from the candidates and political action groups alike.



Comments

1. American Presidents who are Democrats such as Kennedy, Carter, and Clinton were popular in India, and I think the trend will continue with Obama among the Indian Americans.

–Ansu on Oct 25, 2008

2. The impact of APIs on the election has received scant coverage in the mainstream media, so I applaud your effort to augment this gap.

But as with much that is written about APIs, the study seems to have focused largely on the national picture of APIs, failing to offer meaningful insights on how APIs in battleground states may differ from those in the larger, coastal cities. Also, there seems to be no mention of Pacific Islanders in this analysis (despite the API acronym) - a common oversight in “API” academics and journalism coverage.

First, in cities with a long history of API settlement (e.g., LA, Seattle, NYC, etc.), the largest API sub-populations are of Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese descent. The API demographic makeup is quite different in many battleground states. For example, in my state of Minnesota, we have substantial numbers of Hmong, Vietnamese, and other Southeast Asians, as well as Asian Indians. Most of our APIs have come over the last two decades, many of them as refugees. What are the cultural and generational effects of this on their political and voting preferences?

Second, the political power of APIs differ by geography. Those in many coastal cities have an extensive history of advocacy and political organizing, and have raised awareness about the issues important to APIs in their communities. By contrast, these types of activities are at nascent stages in the battleground states, where APIs have far less political clout, our issues not as well known. In places where the non-API population is 95% or higher, this means that minimal effort (if any) is

devoted to engaging with our API communities.

–Gilberto on Oct 26, 2008

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