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Can Asian Americans Make a Difference at the Ballot Box?

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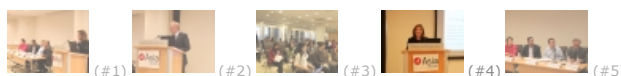
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What does it mean to be Asian American? Can Asian Americans use their growing numbers and political clout to influence elections, from City Hall to the White House?

A panel of Asian-American academics, writers, and activists engaged in a feisty debate over these questions at a panel discussion hosted by ASNC on October 24 in San Francisco. Part of ASNC’s Asian American Now program series, the event was moderated by Sydnie Kohara, a member of ASNC’s advisory board and former CNBC and CBS5 Anchor.

One question in particular provoked spirited debate on the panel: to what extent are Asian Americans a unified voting bloc?

While acknowledging differences between Asian American national groups, Karthick Ramakrishnan, an Associate Professor of Political Science at UC Riverside, said [national survey](http://www.naasurvey.com) (http://www.naasurvey.com) data reveal broad agreement on a number of key issues, such as support for universal health care, environmentalism, and elder care.

But Bill Ong Hing, a Professor of Law at the University of San Francisco, stressed the national origin differences among Asian Americans—challenging the idea that a meaningful Asian American voting bloc exists. “The vast majority of Asian Americans in the U.S. don’t even call themselves Asian Americans,” Hing said. “It’s very difficult to say there’s uniformity.”

There was broad agreement among the panelists, however, that the Obama and Romney campaigns have not done adequate outreach to Asian Americans.

“Both campaigns address the Latino community, but there really has been little targeted effort to reach Asian American communities,” Hing said.

Daphne Kwok, who chairs the Obama administration's Advisory Commission on Asian and Pacific Islanders and is Executive Director of APIs with Disabilities of California, faulted the campaigns for their anti-China rhetoric, arguing that it contributes to anti-Asian sentiment in the United States. "We in the community are on alert because that means the backlash is going to happen," she said.

Panelists accused the American media of fueling that backlash by giving disproportionate attention to fundraising scandals involving Asian Americans.

"There's something about Asian Americans being seen as perpetual foreigners," Ramakrishnan said. When there is a fundraising scandal involving Asian Americans, he added, "that becomes a headline, something that is latched on to."

Ramakrishnan offered one explanation for why major national campaigns do not target Asian Americans: they tend to live on the coasts, not in battleground states.

But the panelists asserted that Asian Americans can play an influential role in elections, sometimes in surprising ways.

Samson Wong, who writes for San Francisco's AsianWeek, said politically active Asian Americans can play a big role in Nevada, which is up for grabs in the presidential race and the focus of a close U.S. Senate contest. He pointed to the growing Asian population in and around Las Vegas, as well as the key role Asians had in Senator Harry Reid's re-election in 2010.

Kwok said that campaigns are still targeting Asians for large contributions and that big donors need to use their influence to push candidates to be responsive to Asian American concerns.

Throughout the discussion, the speakers sought to counter the view that Asian Americans are apathetic or disengaged. "Despite perceptions," Ramakrishnan said, "Asians are more engaged in American politics, even though many are first generation."

By Jameel Naqvi