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Growing Asian-American vote sheds passive past

By JESSE WASHINGTON – 1 hour ago

LORTON, Va. (AP) — For a long time, says Loc Pfeiffer, his fellow Asian-Americans were passive participants in American politics. But things are changing.

"Asians don't like confrontation or being adversarial, but that's politics," says Pfeiffer, a 41-year-old lawyer who was 6 when his parents brought him to America from Vietnam.

"The more we're raised and bred here, the less likely we are to be passive. So much of our culture, it's a very, very obedient culture. ... You don't argue with the government. You don't argue with Big Brother. There's the assumption that you give up all your individual rights for the whole. Which is astounding to me, because I'm American now."

An assertive Asian America matters, especially in places like Virginia and Nevada, swing states where Asians have been growing in numbers and influence.

With a booming population of highly educated, increasingly Americanized voters, this former "silent minority" is entering the most engaged and visible era of its political history.

The number of Asians in the United States has grown 25 percent in the last seven years, to 15 million, said Jane Junn, an associate professor of political science at Rutgers University. Educated people are more likely to vote, and 50 percent of the Asian population has a college degree, compared with 25 percent of the U.S. population, Junn said.

"There comes a point where there's a critical mass," said Junn, whose parents were born in Korea. "When you're only one person out of 100, you're very self-conscious about (becoming politically active). But there is power in numbers."

Asian attitudes toward the two presidential candidates are as varied as the nations stretching from India to Malaysia to Japan, lumped into one racial category by the U.S. Census.

Yet some say Barack Obama's rise from humble origins resonates with many Asians who value education and hard work as the keys to success and have been forced to fit their heritage into an American framework.

In a recent column for the San Francisco Chronicle, writer Jeff Yang was even inspired to riff on President Clinton's honorary black membership and ask if Obama's background — parental academic pressure, struggle for identity, guilt-wielding mother, Harvard education — would make him the first Asian-American president.

"So much of what we deal with is the notion of being outsiders, foreigners, of being outside the social dialogue of the United States," Yang said in an interview. "You look at Obama and those are some of the same aspersions and slanders being cast at him. He's kind of the closest thing we can have legally to an immigrant in the White House. He's somebody who understands this journey that Asian-Americans and other immigrants have made."

Yang added that his Taiwan-born parents, who had never voted for a Democratic presidential candidate, were seriously considering Obama.

News of Yang's Obama proclamation inspired hearty laughter at the gathering of a half-dozen lawyers at the home of 65-year-old Paul Nguyen in Lorton. Although many had voted Republican in the past, all but one planned to vote for Obama.

When Nguyen said Asians had to learn the American political system and form a bloc to demand something in return for their votes, the conversation bubbled over:

"We never ask for anything. We always work for what we get."

"We're too diverse. You can't bring the Filipinos, the Koreans, the Japanese, everybody all together."

"We're still in the infancy of our presence here."

"Now we're more active, more aware. Over the last 10 or 20 years it's happened very slowly."

In the past, Asians were largely overlooked during past presidential campaigns because of their widely varied nationalities and concentration in the reliably Democratic states of California and New York.

Now, both campaigns have national Asian outreach efforts. In Virginia, Obama's campaign is focusing on sending language-specific volunteers to register voters from particular countries. The McCain campaign's priority is securing the support of community leaders from the Korean, Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian and Filipino communities.

Although no Democratic presidential candidate has won Virginia since Lyndon Johnson in 1964, polls show Obama edging ahead. Meanwhile, the state's Asian population has grown from 3.7 percent in 2000 to 4.8 percent in 2006, above the national average of 4.4 percent.

Virginia's Asians are concentrated in the D.C. suburbs, where the Asian population reaches as high as 16 percent in Fairfax County, as well as the Norfolk area, where the naval operations have attracted Filipinos.

There are roughly 300,000 voting-age Asians in Virginia, and about 100,000 registered Asian voters, according to estimates from the Obama and McCain campaigns.

In 2006, after incumbent Republican Sen. George Allen was caught on tape using the slur "macaca" to describe an Indian from the opposing campaign, he lost to Democrat Jim Webb by 7,231 votes out of 2.37 million ballots cast. Seventy-six percent of the Asian vote went against Allen.

In the past, many Asians nationally have leaned Republican because of the party's record of fighting Communism, support for small business owners, and emphasis on personal responsibility and family values.

A Vietnamese group from northern Virginia recently endorsed McCain at a rally attended by about 200 people. Some Asian supporters point to McCain's military service, Vietnam imprisonment, an adopted daughter from Bangladesh, plus his support in the Senate for issues such as free trade and visa waivers.

Tuyet Duong, who has been canvassing undecided Vietnamese voters for the Obama campaign, said many people she talks to are voting based on the candidates' life stories rather than the issues, and the fact that McCain fought in Vietnam strikes a powerful chord.

Yet Asian voters nationwide appear to be favoring Obama, the Democrat, in greater numbers than the 54 percent who voted for Democrat John Kerry in 2004.

This could be explained by President Bush's unpopularity, Obama's recent rise in the polls amid the economic implosion, or the fact that Obama's Senate chief of staff and legislative director are Asian. But it also has something to do with a new generation of Asian-Americans.

Two-thirds of U.S. Asians are foreign-born. Their American-born children are now thriving, many in professions like medicine, law and high-tech industries. English is the first language of this second generation. And they have landed squarely in the Obama sweet spot of young and educated supporters.

"I've lived my life trying to be kind of race-neutral," said Michael Chang, 34, who was born in Washington, D.C. to Korean parents. After his father died when he was 10, Chang's mother sent him to law school and his sister to two doctoral degrees, all on a legal secretary's salary.

Chang, who is married to an Italian immigrant, plans to vote for Obama because he likes his stance on the issues and because he's younger. He also believes that Obama's background, coupled with his rejection of racial rhetoric, makes him more relatable for younger, mainstream Asians.

"I'm proud of my heritage, said Chang, "but I think of myself as American."

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