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Page last updated at 00:33 GMT, Monday, 27 October 2008

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Languages

## Parties chase Asia-Pacific vote



Many potential Filipino voters are still undecided

By Rajesh Mirchandani  
BBC News, Las Vegas

### In the Seafood City supermarket in Las Vegas, Rozita Lee picks up a knobbly green vegetable and waves it at me.

"This is bittermelon, or pariyah as we call it," she says. "You scoop out the insides, fill it with pork hash and steam it. It's really tasty."

In the dozen aisles there is an intoxicating array - salted duck eggs, smelly durian fruits (thankfully frozen) at least 15 types of rice and noodles, and all manner of dried and fresh fish.

This Filipino supermarket opened a year ago. Rozita Lee, a political campaigner, says it is a new resource for one of America's fastest-growing communities.

"We grew from, let's say, 30,000 and now we have almost 90,000 here," she says of Las Vegas's Filipino population.

"I have been here for 29 years so I've seen the growth. It's just amazing. And the Asian Pacific Americans not only have this particular market but they have Chinatown as well."

Known as AAPIs - Asian American and Pacific Islanders - they are a hugely diverse group, immigrants from dozens of countries from the Bay of Bengal to the Pacific Ocean.

And their numbers are growing.

Figures show they made up 4.6% of the US population in 2006. Now

**“ With this group we can turn the tide for one person or the other ”**  
Rozita Lee, political campaigner

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it is estimated at 5%. Only the Latino population is growing faster.

Recent research by four universities indicates that, as a whole, they prefer Democrat Barack Obama to Republican John McCain by 41% to 24%.

But the most significant statistic is that 34% said they were still undecided. In national polls that figure tends to be around 10%.

That means that wandering the aisles of Seafood City are members of the most coveted voting group.

In 2006, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders made up 6.5% of Nevada's population. Now it's estimated to be as much as 10%.

### Tip the balance

In this key battleground, closely contested between Republicans and Democrats, a few thousand votes could carry the state.

And with so many Asian Americans saying they haven't made up their minds yet, voters in Chinatown or Seafood City could tip the balance for Obama or McCain.

"With this group we can turn the tide for one person or the other," says Rozita Lee.

"We have found many, many more AAPIs wanting to register to vote."

She added: "We can swing that vote."

Rozita says it has already happened.

In 1998 Nevada's sitting Democratic Senator Harry Reid retained his seat by just 428 votes or 0.1%.

“ If it comes down to a few voters in Ohio or Nevada, then I think Asian Americans are the quintessential swing vote ”

Janelle Wong, political scientist

He is now the Democratic leader in the Senate.

Rozita Lee says Asian Americans made the difference then and could do so in the presidential election.

And it's not just Nevada. Researchers believe Asian American voters could play pivotal roles in other key election states, such as Colorado, Virginia and Florida.

Taeku Lee, a political scientist at the University of California at Berkeley, says: "Those battleground states in this year's election, a lot of them happen to be the states in which the Asian-American population is growing at an explosive rate."

However, Asian Americans are reluctant voters. The turn-out rate in national elections in 2006 was around 21%, the lowest of any major US ethnic group.

To explain why, experts point to the diversity of Asian American voters.

They also point out that many came to the US as adults, and have not grown up exposed to US politics or with traditional family affiliations.

Researchers say that campaigners have not effectively targeted Asian Americans, and Janelle Wong, a political scientist from the University of Southern California, says candidates should pay more attention.

### Multi-lingual campaign

"You have to do a multi-lingual campaign, you're trying to reach out to a group that has a lot of ideological positions," she said.

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"And it's just not an easy group to mobilise [but] if it comes down to a few voters in Ohio or Nevada, then I think Asian Americans are the quintessential swing vote. They are ripe for mobilisation."

Back at Seafood City, Rozita Lee takes a bottle from a shelf.

Its shape and bright red contents remind me instantly of tomato ketchup.

But this is another Filipino favourite - banana sauce, a sweet condiment eaten with a huge variety of foods.

As America's Asian and Pacific Islander population continues to grow, products like banana sauce or the bright green bittermelon will become more familiar to Americans.

Similarly, Asian American voters are becoming more visible too.

As Rozita Lee says: "Asians and Pacific Islanders are realising that [their] voice needs to be heard and they feel - and we feel - very strongly that this time we will be heard."

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**Are you in the US? Who do you think is winning over Asian American voters? You can send us your views using the form below:**

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