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Asian-American Voters' Political Influence Growing

By Greg Giroux, CQ Staff

Asian-Americans comprise just 5 percent of the U.S. population, but their numbers are rising and they could have a significant impact on the presidential race. They prefer [Barack Obama](#) to [John McCain](#) in the Nov. 4 election, but a large percentage of Asian-Americans remain undecided — including some in a number of closely contested states.

These were among the major findings of the [National Asian American Survey \(NAAS\)](#), which was released Monday by researchers at four universities and which polled more than 4,000 Asian-Americans from August 18 through September 26.

The survey showed that Asian-American voters back Obama over McCain by 41 percent to 24 percent, with 34 percent undecided. The latter figure is exceptionally high in an election in which most national surveys show that less than 10 percent of likely voters are still weighing their presidential choice.

Speaking to reporters in a conference call Monday afternoon, the researchers said that Asian-Americans could be a pivotal voting bloc in presidential battleground states like Colorado, Florida, Minnesota, Nevada, North Carolina and Virginia, where Obama and McCain are polling competitively.

"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," said Taeku Lee, a political scientist at the University of California at Berkeley.

"As we've seen in the past, you can win a very large state by a few thousand votes, and we clearly have many more of those in states like Virginia and Florida," said Karthick Ramakrishnan, a political scientist at the University of California at Riverside.

Janelle Wong, a political scientist at the University of Southern California, said that more Asian-American voters prefer the Democratic Party to the Republican Party because they came of political age during the 1990s, during the Democratic administration of President Bill Clinton.

About half of all Asian-Americans live in California, New York or New Jersey -- all strongly Democratic-leaning states that Obama is expected to win easily.

About four in five Asian-Americans who were surveyed identified the economy as one of the most important problems. Other issues of concern include the Iraq War, oil prices, jobs and unemployment and immigration.

Asked to explain the high proportion of undecided Asian American voters, Wong noted that a majority of Asian-Americans are immigrants.

"Many Asian-Americans emigrated as adults, and have not been exposed to the political system in the same way that many U.S.-born people might be," Wong said. "So we know that they may be just getting to know the political parties and not quite sure what each of the candidates might stand for. They're still making up their mind, which is why we think they could be fertile ground for different messages."

Lee added that the political parties "do not seem to be as solicitous, if you will, of the Asian-American vote as they are of other targeted segments of the electorate." He said that the parties' "microtargeting" efforts — tailoring messages to appeal to specific constituencies — "wind up not targeting Asian-Americans."

"Parties also tend to contact people who have voted in the past. Given a newer voting population, it will take some time for this population to catch up in terms of contact rates," Ramakrishnan said.

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Asian-Americans haven't realized their full voting potential. According to a [June 2008 report from the Census Bureau](#), of the 9.9 million Asians who were of voting age in the November 2006 election, 6.6 million were citizens, 3.2 million were registered to vote and just 2.1 million actually voted. Asian-Americans have lower rates of voter registration and participation than non-Hispanic whites and blacks.

The survey also found wide variances in partisan affiliation by national origin. Asian Indians, Japanese-Americans and Korean-Americans are strongly Democratic, while Vietnamese-Americans are more friendly to the Republicans.

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