

# The Seattle Times

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## Editorials / Opinion

Originally published October 4, 2012 at 3:57 PM | Page modified October 5, 2012 at 9:11 AM

### Op-ed: Asian Americans could be the ultimate swing vote

This could be the first year Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders swing the race for the White House, writes guest columnist Richard Lui.

By Richard Lui

Special to The Times



THIS could be the first year Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders swing the race for the White House. They have reached tipping-point population levels in battleground states.

The same is true for close state elections, especially in Washington, where Asian Americans represent 7.5 percent of the state's population. The race for governor between Rob McKenna and Jay Inslee could be a tight one decided by a small voting bloc.

Shrewd political candidates would reach out to this group nationally and locally. A relatively minor investment could pay large dividends.

Former adviser to George H.W. Bush Joe Watkins said, "Asian Americans like everyone else just want to be considered Americans, and when candidates reach out to them as such, as American voters, I think they're thrilled by that."

Just look at the opportunity in the battleground states in the presidential race between President Obama and Republican candidate Mitt Romney. In Florida, Asian Americans are 3 percent of the population, according to the Asian American Center for Advancing Justice — small, but Obama won the state by 2.5 percent in 2008. In Nevada, they are 9 percent of the population; Obama won that state by 12.4 percent in the last election. In

Virginia, where they are 7 percent; Obama won by 6.3 percent four years ago.

Another way to look at it is to total the popular margin of victory Obama had in 2008 in the nine NBC News battleground states. That's almost 1.6 million votes. The Asian-American population in those states in 2010 was 2.3 million. After removing children under age 18, about 25 percent of the population, the number of Asian Americans in those states are greater than President Obama's margin

of victory in 2008 in these crucial states.

Though 100 percent turnout and voting unanimity is highly unlikely, Virginia and North Carolina still represent an opportunity. When Virginia swung blue in 2008, Republican candidates hadn't lost Virginia since Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964.

In North Carolina, up until 2008, only one in the previous 10 elections was won by Democrats. President Obama won by 14,000 votes last election in North Carolina. Swing states like these could have outcomes where smaller voting blocs of Asian Americans could tilt the outcome.

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders this year are more than four times more likely to be undecided than the average voter, according to a study by the National Asian American Survey. Sixty two percent of them voted for President Obama in 2008. But since then, the economy has faltered.

In the presidential race, the outreach has not matched the potential payoff. At APIAVote's Presidential Town Hall in Fairfax, Va., in July, neither candidate showed up, sending videos instead. The Romney campaign had bumper stickers in several different Asian languages. The Obama campaign didn't have a table.

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are not afraid to use their economic muscle. Despite being half to a third the size of other minority groups, the 2010 consumer and business spending power of Asian Americans was some \$1.2 trillion, equal to African Americans and just trailing Latinos.

Asian Americans donated to political campaigns at the highest rate last election, at 13 percent, which equaled political giving from white donors. This was higher than donations from African Americans (8 percent) and Latino Americans (5 percent). Asian Americans so far this cycle have donated at 11 percent.

There are also challenges for candidates reaching out to Asian Americans. This group is complex when compared with other constituencies, with 49 different countries of origin, representing more than 100 languages. And the community leaders don't always coordinate well, given their varied backgrounds and histories.

But if Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders can mobilize, they could become 2012's ultimate swing vote.

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