

Asian-American voters show growing clout, leftward turn

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Posted:

MercuryNews.com

A historic Latino turnout helped turn America's electoral tide toward the re-election of President Barack Obama, but Republicans also have another fast-growing group of voters to worry about in future elections: Asian-Americans.

Exit polls are showing at least 70 percent of Asian-American voters chose Obama, a sign that the nation's fastest-growing and most politically undecided electorate is leaning increasingly Democratic.

Two decades ago, Asian-Americans reported voting Republican by a nearly 2-to-1 margin, said UC Berkeley political scientist Taeku Lee.

What is driving the leftward turn of a group that is, on average, more affluent than the average American? Not partisanship, say researchers, who find that Asian voters are the most likely to eschew party affiliation and vote on the specific issues that matter most to them.

"Issues drive Asian-American voting behavior," said demographer Daniel Ichinose of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California. "Asian-Americans care about health care reform. They care about comprehensive immigration reform. These are issues that the Democrats have done a better job of addressing."

Asian-American voters saw big differences between Mitt Romney and Obama on education, health care, gender and the budget deficit, and favored Obama on most of those issues, according to a pre-election survey of 3,000 voters conducted by Lee and other California researchers.

"The budget deficit was the only major electoral issue on which more Asian-Americans liked Romney's position than liked Obama's," Lee said. He noted, however, that they had trouble with the Republicans' cuts-only approach to the deficit.

Asian-Americans are a powerful voting bloc in solidly Democratic California, where their share of the statewide electorate nearly doubled to 11 or 12 percent since the last presidential election, according to exit polls. In the Bay Area and Southern California, local candidates ignore Asian-American voter concerns at their peril, Ichinose said.

They are a smaller, largely overlooked share of the national electorate -- just 3 percent -- but that is quickly changing as the country's demographics begin to look more like California's. One challenge for both parties has been Asian diversity in language, religion and socioeconomics, with some ethnic groups more likely to favor one party over another.

Lee's survey found Vietnamese voter sentiment shifted toward Obama, though most still identify with the Republican Party. Filipinos shifted more toward Romney.

But two of the largest groups of Asian-American voters -- Chinese-Americans and Indian-Americans -- are now unmistakably Democratic.

In a sign of their growing political presence, Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders this week won historic levels of political representation.

The California Legislature appeared poised to see its first Filipino lawmaker, Rob Bonta, an Alameda councilman who was winning a close race against Democrat Abel Guillen, according to the latest voting results Thursday.

Congress also gained a trio of firsts. Hawaiians elected the first Asian woman to the Senate, Democrat Mazie Hirono, who will also be the first Buddhist senator.

Riverside County's Mark Takano will be the first gay Asian-American to serve in the House. Joining him will be the first Pacific Islander woman, who is also the first practicing Hindu, from Hawaii, and the first Thai American, from Illinois.

In the Sacramento suburbs, Indian-American physician Ami Bera, a Democrat, was winning by 1,779 votes Friday against incumbent U.S. Rep. Dan Lungren, R-Gold River.

If elected, Bera would be the third Indian-American ever elected to Congress, and the first from California since Imperial County's Dalip Singh Saund in 1957.