

Obama leads McCain among Asian-Americans, but one-third are undecided

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Asian-American voters support Barack Obama over John McCain by a substantial margin, but as many as a third are still undecided and could have an impact on the race in swing states, says the largest survey of Asian ethnic groups conducted this year.

The study, conducted by four universities and released Monday, found that 41 percent of Asian-Americans support Obama and 24 percent McCain, with 34 percent undecided. In breakdowns by country of origin, all groups favored Obama except Vietnamese, a traditionally Republican community that backs McCain over Obama 51 percent to 24 percent.

Asian-Americans "are the quintessential swing vote, and a large chunk of them have not made up their minds," said Karthick Ramakrishnan, who studies immigration at the University of California-Riverside.

Because two-thirds of Asian-American voters plan to vote next month, and so many are undecided, they could play an important role in close battleground states such as Virginia, Florida and Nevada, the researchers said. Most national surveys show less than 10 percent of all voters are undecided.

Rep. Mike Honda, a San Jose Democrat who is Japanese-American, said the Democratic Party and the Obama campaign are trying to reach more Asian-American voters.

"We're working with community groups, getting materials out in seven languages, and we hope to get some radio and TV" in battleground states, said Honda, a Democratic National Committee vice chairman who is planning trips to Florida and Virginia.

After a recent influx in Santa Clara County, Asian-Americans make up 30 percent of the county's population. They have long had an impact in the Bay Area and the state, but their clout is smaller in many other states.

Asian-Americans tend not to be as politically involved as other ethnic groups, the survey showed. Party identification is low: 32 percent identify with the Democratic Party, 14 percent with the Republican Party, 19 percent were independent and 35 percent described themselves as non-partisan.

Obama is doing well among most Asian ethnic groups. Japanese and Indian-Americans strongly favor Obama, and he has a lead among Chinese, Filipino and Korean voters.

But many Asians are still undecided, including 43 percent of Chinese-Americans.

Obama owes his support to several factors, researchers said: The economy is by far the dominant issue, which has helped Democrats; many Asian-Americans supported Bill Clinton; and most who backed Hillary Clinton in the primaries have shifted to Obama.

"Many Asians started voting in the 1990s and tend to lean Democratic because of President Clinton," said Janelle Wong of the University of Southern California.

Wong said the undecided number is high because many recent immigrants "are not experienced in the political system, and are just getting to know it."

While Latinos can be reached in English and Spanish, Asian-Americans are a more diverse and multi-lingual group, and "they aren't targeted as much as other voters," said Taeku Lee of the University of California-Berkeley.

James Lai, a University of Santa Clara professor who studies demographics, said "neither party has done a particularly good job at outreach, and Asian-American groups feel kind of slighted."

Four foundations and think tanks funded the survey, conducted by researchers for UC-Riverside, University of Southern California, UC-Berkeley and Rutgers in New Jersey.

A breakdown of data from the survey for several states including California will be released next week. According to a Field Poll last month, 45 percent of Asian-Americans in California backed Obama, 35 percent supported McCain and 17 percent were undecided.

After Latinos, Asian-Americans are the fastest-growing group in the United States, constituting about 5 percent of the population. The researchers said Asian-Americans make up about 5 percent of the vote in two battleground states, Virginia and Nevada.

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