

Survey: Asian-Americans overwhelmingly against outlawing gay marriage

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Asian-Americans in California overwhelmingly oppose a ballot measure that would ban gay marriage in the state, according to a groundbreaking survey released Wednesday.

The poll found that 57 percent of Asian-Americans likely to vote in the Nov. 4 election oppose Proposition 8, which would reverse May's California Supreme Court ruling that gave gay and lesbian couples the right to marry. Only 32 percent planned to vote yes. Eleven percent were undecided.

Nearly 1,900 Asian-Americans in the state were interviewed by telephone in eight languages from Aug. 18 to Sept. 26. The survey was the largest scientific poll of Asian-American voters ever done — both nationally and in California.

"This is a really significant poll," said Mark DiCamillo, director of the San Francisco-based Field Poll, who noted that few pollsters can afford to do interviews in so many languages. "I'm sure I'll keep a copy of it for the next five years."

The California survey was part of a groundbreaking national poll released last week by researchers at the University of California-Berkeley, UC-Riverside, the University of Southern California and Rutgers University. The data released Wednesday was strictly from California, where one-third of all Asian-Americans live.

The National Asian American Survey, which cost about \$300,000 and was funded by several foundations, also showed that Asian-Americans support Democrat Barack Obama over Republican candidate John McCain by a substantial margin. Nationally, Obama was backed by 41 percent of Asian-American voters and McCain was supported by 24 percent, with 34 percent undecided. In California, the figures were almost identical: 42 percent for Obama, 24 percent for McCain and 33 percent undecided.

In some ways, the lopsided opinion of Proposition 8 was surprising because many Asian-Americans have traditionally been less tolerant of homosexuality. One big reason: Many emigrated from countries where homosexuality is less tolerated.

Although Asian literature is sprinkled with centuries-old allusions to men having sex with men, or women having sex with women, many Asian societies tend to ignore homosexuality or even deny that it exists — although those attitudes are beginning to change in countries undergoing rapid Westernization such as Vietnam and China.

Experts in Asian-American voting trends attribute the unfavorable opinion of Proposition 8 to the ability of gay-marriage proponents to frame it as a major civil rights issue.

Many Asian-Americans have faced discrimination and even, in the case of Japanese-Americans during World War II, been thrown into internment camps. And in the first half of the 20th century many Asian-Americans were subjected to laws that banned them from marrying whites, noted Janelle Wong, a member of the survey's research team who teaches at the University of Southern California.

As a result, many Asian-Americans tend to be more sensitive than other Americans to laws that exclude certain groups, said Karthick Ramakrishnan of UC-Riverside, also a member of the research team.

"In the '80s and '90s," most Asian-Americans considered homosexuality "more of an issue of fundamental morality," Ramakrishnan said.

Many opponents of Proposition 8 — the only California ballot measure included in the voter survey — say the results don't surprise

them.

"If there is one community that is extraordinarily sensitive to the dangers of the government treating one group differently than another, it would be the Asian-American community," said Steve Smith, manager of the statewide campaign opposing Proposition 8.

In September 2007, proponents of same-sex marriage point out, a coalition of more than 60 Asian-American organizations filed a legal brief in California in support of marriage rights for gay and lesbian couples.

Bill Tam of San Francisco, a Chinese-American who is leading the outreach effort in the Asian-American community to pass Proposition 8, conceded that proponents face a tough battle convincing many Asian-Americans to vote for the measure.

Gay marriage supporters "have very cleverly portrayed homosexuals as a kind of minority," Tam said. "They've been very effective in portraying it as a civil rights issue, and this is very much a concern for us."

Pollsters say Proposition 8 will probably go down to the wire after trailing in the polls most of the summer. So Asian-Americans, who represent 9 percent of California voters, could end up deciding the measure.

Proposition 8 supporters began an intense advertising TV and radio campaign at the end of September. Among other things, the ads maintain that allowing gays to legally marry will result in schools teaching children about same-sex marriage.

Both sides say they intend to step up advertising in Asian-American media during the final weeks of the campaign.

"We hope to convince Asian-Americans that gay marriage will encourage more children to experiment with the gay lifestyle and that the lifestyle comes with all kinds of disease," Tam said.

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- Sixty-seven percent of Asian-American citizens in California are "likely voters." Japanese-American citizens are the most likely to vote (81 percent), followed by Koreans (73 percent), Filipinos (70 percent), Indians (68 percent), Vietnamese (67 percent) and Chinese (62 percent).
- In the California presidential primary, Democratic Asian-American voters supported Hillary Clinton over Barack Obama by a small margin. Sixty-two percent of former Clinton supporters plan to vote for Obama. Eight percent of them plan to vote for McCain; 26 percent are undecided.
- Preferences for the presidential candidates vary widely by national origin. Support for McCain is highest among Vietnamese likely voters, with 53 percent planning to vote for the Republican candidate. In contrast, a majority of Indians (62 percent) and Japanese-Americans (53 percent) plan to vote for Obama. Chinese and Filipino likely voters favor Obama over McCain, but a large share remain undecided. Korean likely voters favor Obama (34 percent) only slightly over McCain (31 percent).
- Almost half of Asian-American citizens in California say they depend primarily on Asian-language television and newspapers to stay informed on politics.
- Asian-American participation in the politics of their home countries is not a deterrent to involvement in U.S. politics. Indeed, those involved in politics in their homelands are more likely to vote in the United States than those who do not (65 percent vs. 50).
- Because of higher citizenship rates among Asian-Americans in California, the proportion of likely voters among all Asian-American adults is higher in the state (50 percent) than in the rest of the country (43 percent.)

* Overall margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.3 percentage points. Some numbers don't add up to 100 percent because of rounding.

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