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Undecided Asian-Americans Prove to be Powerful Voting Bloc

Long an ignored slice of the electorate, Asian-Americans are increasingly flexing their political muscles this year, as candidates and constituents.

by **Shane Goldmacher**

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OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY PETE SOUZA

Asian occasion: Obama speaks to an increasingly powerful demographic in May.

FALLS CHURCH, Va.—The silken scarves that Ben and Josh Romney wore as they toured a suburban shopping mall of Vietnamese businesses this month were bright yellow, with thin red stripes. They weren't fashion statements; they were political accessories. As the Romneys pitched their father's presidential bid, the scarves epitomized the kind of granular attention to detail that campaigns now pay to Asian-American voters: The vibrant colors identified their opposition to Vietnamese communism and their support for the local Vietnamese-American community.

Asian-Americans constitute only about 6 percent of Virginia's population, but they have become a coveted constituency in a state at the center of the battle for the presidency and the Senate. And the Eden Center shopping mall in the Washington suburbs has become something of a ground zero in the battle for their votes.

Two of the Romney brothers stopped by this month. So did

volunteers for President Obama's campaign, which organized a voter-registration drive during the mall's recent Moon Festival. Republican Senate candidate George Allen made a whistle-stop in September, and his wife, Susan, toured several Eden Center businesses over the summer. Democratic Senate candidate [Tim Kaine](#) whirled through for an economic roundtable earlier in the year. "They're all coming down to our community," says Hung Hoang, a 48-year-old barber who has worked in the mall for two decades. "More, more, more than before."

Blame [Bob McDonnell](#), at least in part. During his 2009 campaign for governor, the Republican made an unprecedented push for these voters, airing Asian-language television and radio ads and stuffing mailboxes with literature in Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Tagalog, a Filipino language. McDonnell spun through the Eden Center no less than three times. Ultimately, he flipped the state's most Asian-American-heavy precincts en route to a rare Republican win in Fairfax County, home of the Eden Center and the epicenter of Virginia's Asian-American population. In one of those precincts, where more than 45 percent of voters have Asian ancestry, Obama won with 63 percent; McDonnell got 52 percent there, a *National Journal* analysis showed. The lesson: With a bit of effort, the Asian-American vote could be had by either political party.

Long an ignored slice of the electorate, Asian-Americans are increasingly flexing their political muscles this year, as candidates and as constituents. Asians, not Hispanics, were America's fastest-growing minority group in the last decade, and many now live far beyond the traditional enclaves of [California](#) and [Hawaii](#). As a result, they are being courted and catered to in key battlegrounds such as [Nevada](#) and Virginia. Asian-Americans hold the governorships in the seemingly unlikely states of [Louisiana](#) and [South Carolina](#). They are running for Congress in record numbers in 2012.

And, demographers and political strategists agree, it's just the beginning.

DEMOGRAPHY AS DESTINY

"We've got to *get* communicating," says Shawn Steel, a Republican National Committee member and an outspoken evangelist about the importance of the Asian-American vote. He talks in the urgency of now, even if he's speaking about a slow-moving demographic trend that has been decades in the making. In 1965, the year America last rewrote its immigration rules, Asian-Americans were less than 1 percent of the population. Today, that figure is nearing 6 percent and spiraling upward. The number of Asian-Americans jumped from 11.9 million in 2000 to 17.3 million in 2010, a 46 percent growth rate that outpaced even that of Hispanics, according

to the Census Bureau. “I’m *on fire* about this,” Steel says.

A former chairman of the California Republican Party, he knows what it’s like to miss a demographic wave. As the Latino population swelled in California, it turned Ronald Reagan’s state into a Democratic stronghold. If Republicans were swept away by the Latino wave, Steel reckons, they’d better not miss the coming Asian-American one. “We’ve got to get on it,” he says, “and we’re running out of time.”

The Latino population wave, of course, has long since surged past California and other border states to far-off places like [Iowa](#), [North Carolina](#), and [Utah](#). The breadth of the diaspora is one reason that Latinos are now so politically powerful: The Hispanic vote is a potential difference-maker almost everywhere.

Asian-Americans are following a similar trajectory, only a few decades behind. Every state saw its Asian and Pacific Islander population jump by at least 30 percent between 2000 and 2010 (except Hawaii, which was already majority Asian-American). The Asian population surged by 71 percent in Virginia, 95 percent in [Arizona](#), 85 percent in North Carolina, and 116 percent in Nevada, according to census figures.

Thank an influx of Asian immigrants. Despite the nation’s focus on Latino immigration, Asians actually outnumbered Hispanics in 2010, according to the most recent data available from the Pew Research Center—a reversal of past trends. Nearly two-thirds of Asian-Americans are foreign-born.

Because there were so few Asians to begin with, the rapid growth rate can be misleading in some places. But not everywhere: In Nevada, for instance, Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders now make up about 9 percent of the population—more than the state’s much-discussed Mormon community.

It’s one of the reasons that Senate Majority Leader [Harry Reid](#) hosted a get-out-the-vote rally with Filipino boxing sensation Manny Pacquiao in Nevada two years ago. And why this year’s Senate combatants there, GOP incumbent [Dean Heller](#) and Democratic challenger [Shelley Berkley](#), have clashed over who would better represent Filipino veterans. In Clark County, home to Las Vegas and most of the state’s population, ballots will be available for the first time in three languages: English, Spanish, and Tagalog.

Three converging trends have magnified the importance of the Asian-American vote, says Bill Wong, a Democratic political strategist in California. The first is rapid population growth. The second is that political campaigns can be won and lost on a razor’s edge. The third is that Asians are swing voters. “We’re large enough

to be relevant, and the margins are small enough to make it matter,” he says. Or, as Mee Moua, president of the Asian American Justice Center and a former [Minnesota](#) state lawmaker, likes to say, “Those who ignore us do so at their own peril.”

The GOP is learning to play this game. Govs. [Bobby Jindal](#) of Louisiana and [Nikki Haley](#) of South Carolina, both Indian-American, are considered among the party’s brightest rising stars. And one of Mitt Romney’s top policy advisers, Lanhee Chen, is Taiwanese-American.

Still, there have been hiccups. Earlier this year, the Republican National Committee accidentally featured a stock photo of Asian kids on a website for Latino outreach. And GOP Senate candidate [Pete Hoekstra](#) of [Michigan](#) was widely criticized for an ad that featured an Asian woman riding a bike through rice paddies and speaking in broken English about how Democratic Sen. Debbie Stabenow shipped money and jobs to China. “Your economy get very weak. Ours get very good,” says the Asian actress in the ad, who later apologized for playing into stereotypes.

As TV ads set to ominous music hammer China as the enemy of American jobs, Steel—whose wife of 30 years, Michelle Steel, is Korean-American and an elected California tax board member—frets over the “cluelessness of Republican consultants who refuse to expand their minds” and grasp the importance of outreach to Asian-Americans. “For Democrats, this comes natural,” Steel says. “Give them a new community and they’re all over it. They’ve done this for 150 years, ever since Tammany Hall welcomed the Irish.”

UP FOR GRABS

Every year, the United States becomes less and less white. In the 2012 election, GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney could win a record share of the white vote—as much as 60 percent—and still lose. Already, African-Americans are solidly in the Democratic coalition, and each cycle seems to move the Latino vote further in that direction. Asian-Americans have been following them steadily into the Democratic Party (in presidential politics) for two decades. In 1992, Bill Clinton garnered only 31 percent of the Asian-American vote. By 2008, Barack Obama had doubled that mark, pulling a high of 62 percent. In every presidential race in between, exit polls showed Democrats steadily increasing their vote share.

But the Asian-American political story isn’t fully written just yet. Studies show, and political strategists on both sides of the aisle agree, that the community remains persuadable by either party. The National Asian American Survey showed that 32 percent of likely voters in this group were still up for grabs in September—at a time when most surveys found only 5 to 10 percent of the total electorate still undecided. (The survey, which conducted more than 3,000

interviews in 11 Asian languages in August and early September, found that Obama led Romney 43 percent to 24 percent.) “There is all this talk about how everyone has made up their minds. That’s absolutely not true for Asian-Americans,” says Karthick Ramakrishnan, the survey’s director and a professor at the University of California (Riverside).

Yet both parties do a relatively poor job of reaching out to them. A sizable majority of Asian-Americans said in a different poll this spring that neither political party had contacted them in the past two years. The survey, conducted by Democratic pollster Celinda Lake, even over-sampled the swing states of Florida, Nevada, and Virginia. Still, among self-identified partisans, only 23 percent of Asian Democrats and 17 percent of Asian Republicans said they had been contacted this cycle. “That’s lower than we’ve seen for other populations,” Lake says.

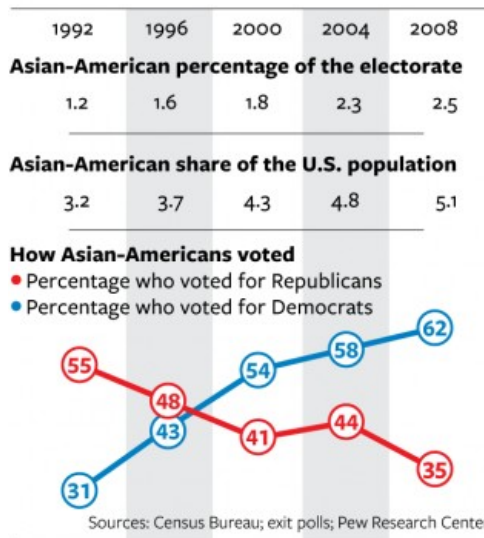
Among coveted independents, nearly 60 percent of Asian-Americans said they’d heard nothing from either major political party. This is what drives Shawn Steel bonkers. “You’re going to melt TV sets all over America with your ads,” he says of the presidential contest, yet “there is still a fresh opportunity to go after Asian-American voters.”

Of course, one of the first rules about the Asian-American vote is that there is no such thing as the Asian-American vote. It is a self-serving construct that community leaders adopted decades ago to inflate their overall numbers. Asian-Americans aren’t monolithic; they are splintered among distinctive ethnic groups, each with its own social, cultural, and political history. Unlike Latinos, most of whom hail from Spanish-speaking countries, Asian-Americans have no common language. “We aggregated ourselves for political leverage,” says Rep. Mike Honda, a Japanese-American and the only member of Congress to have been interned during World War II. “In the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s, you needed numbers. You go against the Latinos and African-Americans—our numbers were pretty small.”

“Asian-American” is “a meaningless term,” says Darry Sragow, a Democratic strategist based in Los Angeles. When he convenes

The Asian-American Electorate

The percentage of Asian-Americans voting for the Democratic Party has doubled since 1992.



focus groups, Sragow says, he segregates by ethnicity. “There are Vietnamese, Filipino, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and more.” Otherwise the results are all but useless for targeting voters. “They each come with attitudes from the countries they emigrate from,” he says. Phil Cox, McDonnell’s campaign manager, calls this “the most important lesson that our campaign learned early on” in targeting Asian voters.

Americans of Chinese descent are the country’s most populous Asian-American group (23 percent), followed by those with ties to the Philippines (20 percent), India (18 percent), Vietnam (10 percent), Korea (10 percent), and Japan (8 percent), according to the Pew Research Center. The Japanese and Filipino populations live overwhelmingly in the West. The Indian population is almost evenly spread across the country. Nearly half of Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese residents are in the West, but one-third of Vietnamese residents are in the South. Chinese and Koreans are far more concentrated in the Northeast.

Their political leanings fall on a continuum. On the left, Indian-Americans are now stalwarts of the Democratic Party. Half identified as Democrats in the national survey, while only 3 percent said they were Republicans. Ramakrishnan says that the Indian-American community turned more Democratic after 9/11, when they became targets of racial profiling at a time of GOP rule. They are also, among Asian ethnic groups, the most educated (70 percent have a bachelor’s degree or more, according to Pew) and the least Christian (only 18 percent)—factors that favor the Democrats in the broader electorate.

The Vietnamese-American story, on the other hand, “is very similar to that of Cuban-Americans,” Ramakrishnan says. “Both are intensely anticommunist. Both thought of the Democratic Party as soft on communism.” A plurality of Filipinos (27 percent) and Vietnamese voters (20 percent) identified with the Republican Party. Among Asian-American ethnic groups, Filipinos are the most overwhelming Christian (89 percent, according to Pew), with almost two-thirds of the population belonging to the Catholic Church.

Politically, other Asian ethnicities tend to fall somewhere in between. The common thread across all groups is a relatively weak tie to political parties: 58 percent of Chinese-Americans identify themselves as independent, as do 64 percent of Vietnamese-Americans. Like most Americans this cycle, Asians care most about the economy (55 percent of likely voters), unemployment (13 percent), and health care and education (4 percent each).

Honda, who has traveled the country as vice chair of the Democratic National Committee since 2005, says there is no secret ingredient to wooing Asian-American voters—other than simply

talking to them. “They’re not as married to the party as they are to the issues,” Honda says. “They’re out there to be courted. If you talk to them, they generally will move with you.”

THE GOLDEN STATE

No state offers a better window into the country’s increasingly Asian-American future than California, where the Latino boom has obscured other trends. In 1990, registered Asian-American voters in the state amounted to just 3 percent of the electorate and numbered only 400,000, says Mark DiCamillo, director of California’s Field Poll. (To put that in perspective, there are currently more Asian-American *residents* in Virginia than there were registered Asian *voters* in California 20 years ago.)

But California’s Asian-American population has mushroomed. By 2012, 1.4 million registered Asian-American voters lived there, representing 8 percent of the electorate. In fact, Asian-American and Latino voters account for 90 percent of all new voters added to California’s rolls in the past two decades, DiCamillo says—a trend that will continue into the foreseeable future.

As demography reshaped California’s electorate, the state’s top labor leaders began an ambitious program leading up to the 2010 gubernatorial election: a massive study to identify the state’s most politically persuadable people—the swingiest swing voters. What was most surprising was how many were Asian-American: 400,000 out of 2 million, or roughly 20 percent—more than double their share of the electorate. What the study meant is that those Asian-Americans who vote have a disproportionate effect on elections. “It was certainly an eye-opener for us,” says Steve Smith, communications director for the California Labor Federation.

The group designed an Asian-language outreach program with a six-figure budget and papered voters with mailers in three languages on behalf of Democrat Jerry Brown. His opponent, GOP billionaire [Meg Whitman](#), took to the airwaves in Cantonese *and* Mandarin. It was a preview of what future campaigns could hold.

In the end, Asian-American voters did swing. Brown won 57 percent of their votes, according to exit polls—a sharp reversal from four years earlier, when Republican Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) had carried 62 percent. Though both Brown and Schwarzenegger won in routs, Asian-Americans were the only ethnic group that flipped partisan allegiance. “If the Asian vote goes for a candidate statewide,” Smith sums up, “there’s a very good chance that candidate wins the race.”

Today, the California state controller, the attorney general, and the mayors of Oakland and San Francisco are Asian-Americans. In 2012, three new Asian-American candidates are running for the

House from the Golden State with a legitimate shot to win: Ricky Gill, a 25-year-old GOP wunderkind challenging Democratic Rep. [Jerry McNerney](#); [Ami Bera](#), a Democratic challenger to Rep. [Dan Lungren](#); and Mark Takano, who is running in an open Southern California seat. “Ten years ago, we had trouble trying to get people to run,” says Wong, the Democratic strategist. “Now we’ve got people lining up.”

Ed Lee, the San Francisco mayor who won by fending off four other Asian-American candidates, sees a generational shift. “A couple of generations before, it was, ‘Let’s not deal with politics. It’s dirty. You got to compromise too much,’” he says. The community now realizes that “if you don’t have the seat at the table, you’re probably going to be on the menu.”

CATCHING FIRE

It’s not just happening in California, of course. In 2012, a record number of Asian-Americans have run for Congress, including 25 challengers—triple the number who ran in 2008 or 2010, according to the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies. Many are poised to break new ground. In Hawaii, the only state with a majority Asian-American population, Democratic Rep. [Mazie Hirono](#) is likely to be the first Asian-American woman elected to the U.S. Senate. In [New York](#), Democrat Grace Meng has the inside track to become the first Asian-American to represent the state in Congress. Same for Democrat Tammy Duckworth in [Illinois](#).

Currently, only eight Asian-Americans are in the House and two in the Senate (both from Hawaii). “It’s about time we had more members of Congress,” says Duckworth, an Army veteran who lost her legs in the Iraq War and had a speaking slot at this year’s Democratic convention. “It opens the door in other Asians’ minds.”

At the presidential level, the real campaign focus and cash this year went to better-established voter-outreach programs. Obama and Romney have submitted to Univision interrogations about Latino issues and cut numerous Spanish-language ads. (*Somos una nación de inmigrantes*, Craig Romney says in one.) Amid a billion-dollar political advertising spree, almost no money will be spent on Asian TV.

But pols are beginning to recognize the changing future. In Virginia, Republicans are hoping to follow the inroads that McDonnell made into the Asian-American community. Cox, McDonnell’s campaign manager, says that his team viewed the Asian-American vote as essential from the start of the 2009 race. “Every single time he was in Northern Virginia, which was multiple times a week, there was an event with the Asian community,” Cox recalls. And at stops with Vietnamese voters, McDonnell wore a yellow-and-red scarf draped around his neck.

In a state where Asian-Americans accounted for nearly one in four new residents in the last decade, despite being only a fraction of the population, every major 2012 campaign has made a play for their votes—leafleting at Asian festivals, attending Indian fairs, and churning out plenty of bilingual literature. At one sleepy park barbecue this spring sponsored by a local Chinese-American GOP club, George Allen and his wife lingered for more than an hour, shaking the hands of every attendee and asking them to volunteer.

Making an effort matters, especially in a community that has long been ignored. “It definitely makes an impact, because it shows they’re trying,” says Jonathan Duong, a 21-year-old who works in the Eden Center mall and plans to vote for Romney.

Mindy Tran, who runs a skin-care and cosmetics shop in the mall, remembers the yellow-and-red scarves the Romney boys wore. The pattern “has a lot of meaning to us,” she says. “Look,” she points to a flag nestled on the top shelf of her store, almost touching the ceiling. “There’s one up there.”

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