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Asian-Americans could impact presidential race



NBC's Richard Lui takes a look at how the Asian-American vote is affecting the 2012 presidential campaign.

By NBC's Richard Lui

There are plenty of different voter groups for campaigns to court during this presidential election and, this year, Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders could impact the outcome in a significant way. In what has been a tight race, a relatively minor investment in these voters could pay large dividends for President Barack Obama and Republican nominee Mitt Romney.

There are three characteristics to consider about this slice of the electorate:

Swing State Population Levels

First, Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders have reached tipping-point population levels in battleground states.

For example, in Florida, Asian-Americans (single and mixed race) are 3 percent of the population, according to the [Asian American Center for Advancing Justice](#) -- small, but Obama won the state by just 2.5 percentage points in 2008. In Nevada, Asian-Americans are 9 percent of the population; Obama won by 12.4 percentage points. And in Virginia, where they are 7 percent; Obama won by 6.3 percentage points.

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 the age 18, or about 25 percent of the population, the number of Asian-Americans in those states is greater than Obama's 2008 margin of victory in these crucial states.

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Though 100 percent turnout and voting unanimity is highly unlikely, Virginia and North Carolina epitomize the opportunity. Until Virginia swung blue in 2008, Republican candidates hadn't lost the state since Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964. In North Carolina, up until 2008, Democrats had won only one in the previous 10 elections; Obama eked out a win by only 14,000 votes. In cases like these, smaller voting blocks, like Asian-Americans tilt the outcome

Undecideds

A second characteristic to consider: Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders this year are over four times more likely to be undecided than the average voter, according to the [National Asian American Survey](#). Jon Stewart from "The Daily Show" joked, after all the press and debate to date, you'd have to basically live in a cave not to have been able to make a choice by now. So is it that Asian-Americans are four times more aloof when it comes to politics? Though they do register to vote at a lower rate than average, 2012 is different.

Video: [Obama surrogate answers town hall questions from Asian-American voters](#)

Sixty-two percent of them voted for Obama four years ago. But this year, the economy continues to be the biggest issue in the campaign and Asian Americans who own businesses are considering their options.

Democrat Hareesh Bhungalia is undecided. "You have one candidate who wants to raise taxes, which I think is appropriate – I think that that's necessary in order for us to get back on track. And then we've got one candidate talking about cutting government spending. I think that you have to do both," Bhungalia said.

Immigration reform is the other top issue Bhungalia cares about. It's been delayed. Like him, [three out of four](#) Asian-American adults were born in a foreign country and are watching the debate on immigration.

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The outreach to voters like Bhungalia has not matched the potential payoff. A recent [study](#) by APIAVote in association with Lake Research Partners found 23 percent of Asian-Americans had been contacted by the Democratic Party, and 17 percent by the Republican Party, in the last two years. Some community leaders believe both Obama and Romney could do more. Mee Moua of the Asian American Center for Advancing Justice in Washington, D.C. says Asian-Americans need to be considered.

“As we head toward election day, candidates and political parties will step up their voter engagement efforts,” said Moua. “Those who want to succeed will recognize the importance of the Asian-American voter. Those who ignore us, do so at their own peril.”

At APIAVote’s Presidential [Town Hall](#) in Fairfax, Va., in July, neither candidate showed up, sending videos and surrogates instead. The Romney campaign had bumper stickers in several different Asian languages, and both [Obama](#) and [Romney](#) have Asian-American outreach information on their campaign websites.

[Obama’s message to Asian-American voters](#)

[Romney’s message to Asian-American voters](#)

Donation Rates

A third consideration: Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders are not afraid to use their economic muscle. (Despite being half to a third the size, the group’s combined [consumer](#) and [business](#) spending power of almost \$1.2 trillion equals African-Americans and just trails Latinos.) They equaled whites for the highest rate of donation to political campaigns in the last election: [13](#) percent. This was higher than African-Americans (8 percent) and Latino-Americans (5 percent). As the economy faltered, Asian-Americans so far this cycle have donated at 11 percent.

These characteristics might be attractive to candidates, but there are challenges. This group is complex: representing 49 different countries of origin and more than 100 languages. And the community leaders don’t always coordinate well given their varied backgrounds and histories.

Video: [Romney surrogate answers town hall questions from Asian-American voters](#)

Joe Watkins, who was an aide to President George H.W. Bush, says there is one common denominator: “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.”

After the landmark 2008 election, enthusiasm has ebbed. Voter ID and registration law battles across the country have cast concerns. And in places like Florida, early registration levels are less than half what they were four years ago. With such serious questions about turnout, Asian-American and Pacific Islanders could be 2012’s ultimate swing vote.