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Some NJ immigrant voters remain undecided

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NEWARK, N.J.

Immigration reform may have been a toxic issue on the campaign trail, but many immigrant voters are still weighing where the candidates stand on the issue and how effectively they've reached out to their communities.

Although New Jersey leans Democratic, several immigrant groups represent a high percentage of undecided voters. And Hispanic voters here _ including both immigrants and nonimmigrants _ represent a wide variety of political opinions, from the Republican-leaning Cuban stronghold of Union City to large numbers of Latinos who supported Democrat Hillary Clinton in the presidential primaries.

However, polls show New Jersey's 1.4 million Hispanics _ 588,000 of whom are registered to vote _ largely mirror the state's Democratic leanings.

Although the Pew survey finds that more than three-quarters of Hispanics nationwide who supported Clinton in the primaries now say they are inclined to vote for Obama, some Hispanic leaders in the Garden State say enthusiasm for Clinton has not automatically translated into a vote for Obama.

"Hillary and her husband, (former President) Bill Clinton, had a great relationship with Latinos for years, especially in New Jersey," said Romi Herrera, a one-time Clinton supporter who sees some undecided Hispanics leaning toward McCain. "Obama doesn't have that, and hasn't been working on it, especially in New Jersey."

Herrera discounted racism as a factor influencing the Hispanic vote, saying concerns about the economy and McCain's very public support for immigration reform, combined with a lack of the kind of overt ethnically tailored campaign appeals that resonate with many Hispanics, are leaving many voters undecided.

"We have a woman, an African American, and a pro-immigrant Republican candidate, these are all unique factors, so the Latino voter has to really think hard about this," Herrera said.

"And the Latino community is not a monolith, we have very different ways of thinking about things," he added. "Not everyone has the same education levels, some are from Socialist-leaning countries, some are conservative. We have different cultures, it's really complex, so I don't think we'll act as one voice."

Samer Khalaf, co-chair of the New Jersey Arab-American Democratic Caucus and an alternate convention delegate for Obama, said a similar divide is taking place among Arab-Americans, many of whom are socially and religiously conservative but highly concerned about civil rights.

"Nationwide, we've always been very entrepreneurial, so we vote business and economic issues," Khalaf said. "And a lot of our community is very conservative, both Christian and Muslim, so they tend to vote Republican."

Khalaf said the tide of support for George W. Bush among Arab-Americans during his first run for office shifted dramatically due to his support for The Patriot Act, the use of secret evidence in trials, and other issues that disproportionately impacted the Arab-American community.

"If they're going to vote foreign policy and civil rights, they'll vote Democrat," Khalaf said of Arab-Americans. "Take those two issues out of the picture, and they'll fall back on social issues and economics, and they'll vote Republican."

There is also enduring support for perpetual presidential candidate Ralph Nader. The son of Lebanese immigrants, Nader has long been a favorite of Arab-Americans.

A recent nationwide survey of Asian-American voters found they have one of the highest percentages of undecided voters of any immigrant group.

Jane Junn, an associate professor of political science at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University who worked on the survey, said 34 percent of Asian-Americans nationwide remain undecided, a much higher rate than the national average.

Junn said Asian-American voters in New Jersey favor Obama 37 percent over McCain's 18 percent, but 45 percent of those who are likely voters are undecided.

"What that means is both political parties have a tremendous possibility to bring them in," Junn said.

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