



In the Spotlight: Asian Americans on the Political Stage

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It's election time again and the stakes are high as to who will be the nation's next president. And with all the political activity on the national and local level, the timing couldn't be better for the unveiling of two reports on the political preferences and emerging influence of Asian Pacific Americans (APAs).

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Apparently, if we flex our muscles right, we'll no longer get the proverbial sand kicked in our faces.

"I'm so glad there are studies. Often times we are not included in many polls, and there is polling every day tracking the Latino and Black demographic, but rarely are they tracking Asian Americans," said Vida Benavides, executive director of the Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote. APIA Vote is a national nonpartisan nonprofit organization that encourages and promotes civic participation of APAs.

"Without data, without numbers, it's truly hard to be part of the overall electoral equation," she added.

The first study is by Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc. (LEAP) — a national nonprofit based in Los Angeles — titled "The State of Asian America: Trajectory of Civic and Political Engagement." And the other report is the 2008 National Asian American Survey (NAAS), a multiethnic, multilingual survey of more than 4,000 Asian Americans likely to vote in the election. Conducted from Aug. 18 to Sept. 26, it is the most comprehensive survey to date of the political views of Asian Americans, with interviews conducted in English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Tagalog and Vietnamese.

According to the NAAS study, the APA numbers are starting to really matter as a voting bloc.

Since 1980, the Asian American population has more than tripled from 3.5 million to 14.1 million in 2005, signifying an increase from 1.5 percent of the nation's population to 4.8 percent. Over the next quarter century, from 2005 to 2030, the U.S. Census Bureau projects that the number of Asian Americans will nearly double to 27.4 million, comprising 7.3 percent of all Americans.

"Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have grown increasingly involved in politics and civic engagement, and will play a key role in this historic presidential election," said Rep. Mike Honda (D-San Jose), chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC) in a statement. "Whether they are young or more senior, immigrants or U.S. born, on the East Coast, West Coast, or in key states in our heartland, Asian American and Pacific Islander voters are a force to be reckoned with. I am thrilled that LEAP has issued this report. Greater awareness about our community's engagement strengthens our voice in this election and for many cycles to come."

According to the LEAP study, 61 percent of Asian Americans are foreign-born, the highest rate of any minority group in America. And challenges to voting consisted of three barriers — nationalization, registration and turnout — although APAs nationalize at the highest rate of any of the immigrant populations at 57 percent.

Ethnic group differences in voting participation showed up among Asian Americans of the first two immigration generations in 2004. The Japanese ethnic sub-group has the lowest percentage of foreign-born individuals, as the majority of this group was born in the U.S. since the 1940 Census. The Korean ethnic sub-group has the highest. The share of citizenship acquired through naturalization is also lowest among the Japanese and highest among Koreans in America.

Correspondingly, in the NAAS study Japanese American citizens are the most likely to vote at 82 percent followed by the other ethnic sub-groups, which tends to point out the unique nativity status of Japanese Americans as well as possible generational differences in political acculturation and engagement amongst the different Asian communities. Newer immigrants have more barriers to engagement.

In general, APA voter turnout has been lower than other ethnic groups such as Black and Latino, but in the 2004 presidential election their voting percentages at 37 percent were more comparable with Latino voter turnout at 32 percent. This has been attributed to the high growth of the APA community.

"My partner and I often talk about the similarities of Latino and Asian voters, as they are both immigrant groups and show generational differences in terms of political and civic participation," said Stephanie Ong Stillman, partner in Hope Road Consulting, Inc., a political consulting group that has run local candidate and ballot initiative campaigns.

The LEAP study found that the likelihood of volunteering increases by over 70 percent from the first immigrant

generation to the third generation and beyond.

"They [Asian and Latino voters] share many similar concerns such as immigration, health and education," said Ong Stillman. "The difference is the priority that they give these concerns."

One of the major blocks cited by both Benavides and Ong Stillman is that political campaigns do not do enough outreach in-language, and according to Benavides, 35 percent of APAs are linguistically isolated.

Yet, one-third of Asian American citizens get political information from Asian-language television and newspapers, according to the NAAS survey, and about one in five get political information from Asian-language radio and Internet sources.


Coincidentally, more than 30 percent of APAs are undecided between Barack Obama and John McCain for president and 35 percent identify as non-partisan.

"How much are these candidates and parties investing in communicating to our constituents?" asked Benavides. "Are they buying enough [print and radio] ads, are they canvassing APA neighborhoods? Are they door knocking, are they doing phone banking in-language? If they are truly doing that, then they are doing all things necessary to court the Asian vote."

For more information on these organizations and the studies, visit their Websites at www.leap.org, www.naasurvey.com and www.apivote.org.

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