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Asian Americans in New Jersey seen favoring Obama in recent Rutgers-Eagleton poll

BY ERICA HARBATKIN • STAFF WRITER • OCTOBER 14, 2008

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RUTGERS — While nearly half of Asian Americans in New York and New Jersey do not identify with either major political party, Democrat Barack Obama holds a considerable lead in the region among likely Asian American voters, according to a Rutgers-Eagleton poll released yesterday.

Nearly half of Asian American likely voters in New Jersey remain undecided — significantly more than the general population, where undecided voters make up about 8 percent of the electorate in national polls conducted since the conventions.

Asian American likely voters in New Jersey favor Obama over Republican John McCain, 37 percent to 18 percent, while 45 percent are undecided. In New Jersey's Senate race, Democratic incumbent Frank Lautenberg holds a 33 percent to 11 percent lead over Republican challenger Dick Zimmer, while half remain undecided.

The poll's faculty coordinator, Jane Junn, attributes the number of undecided voters to the high rate of immigrants among the Asian American population.

"When you say 'Democrat' or 'Republican' to a person who is foreign-born, they may sort of know what you're talking about, but not really, because they don't affiliate with parties to the same degree as the general population," Junn said, noting that 8 in 10 Asian adults in the United States are immigrants. "It's very difficult for people who were raised in another country to come to the United States and all of a sudden have a political position on something."

The poll was conducted in eight different languages, with surveys translated into each language and native speakers conducting interviews. The process was complex and expensive, making this type of survey unprecedented — and Asian voter preferences something of a mystery.

"We don't know how the Asian vote affected previous races because we never had any data on it," Junn said, adding that recent demographic surge among Asians in New Jersey makes the demographic a new force in elections.

But the Asian American population turns out to vote at a higher rate than the country as a whole, making the demographic a potentially key — and often overlooked — contingent.

In New Jersey, 69 percent of Asian American citizens are considered likely voters.

And while many remain undecided on their presidential pick, their priorities indicate a preference for the Democrat, the poll shows.

The economy was cited as the "most important problem facing the United States today" by 74 percent of Asian American likely voters in New Jersey, and national polls have consistently found that voters who say the economy is the most important issue tend to favor Obama.

"When you look at the people who have decided who they're going for, there's a big gap for Barack Obama," said Junn, an associate professor of political science at Rutgers. "And while Asian American likely

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voters are still undecided about who they're going with, when you look at the issues and their policy positions they look a lot more like Democrats."

Asians constitute 7.4 percent of New Jersey's population, according to 2006 data from the U.S. Census' American Community Survey, the most recent data available. Asians constitute 4.4 percent of the national population.

The New Jersey survey is a component of the National Asian American Survey, a joint project by Rutgers, the University of Southern California, University of California-Berkeley and University of California-Riverside.

National results were released Oct. 6 and California-specific results are slated for release today.

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