

Asians urged to pick a party

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Pick a political party, any party.

That is the plea from at least one area Asian-American leader to the 1.3million Asians living in Los Angeles County.

According to a new study from USC and UC Riverside, a third of California's Asian Americans do not choose party affiliation compared to 20 percent of voters statewide.

And some political leaders think the reluctance to choose quiets the voice of Asian Americans in political races.

"I think that when Asian American voters check the box 'decline to state', they lose their power," Assemblyman Mike Eng, D-El Monte said. "I love it when Asian Americans choose one party because they become more effective in their impact."

The study released last week surveyed about 1,900 Asian American likely voters.

If Asians choose political parties, they could play a major role in politics for years to come, as researchers expect more than half of that population to be likely voters.

"At the very local levels having a large proportion does make a difference," USC political science professor Janelle Wong said. "(Political officials) are just starting to pay attention."

Wong and her research partner Karthick Ramakrishnan found that most Asian Americans are Democrats, but what interested researchers most was that 34 percent of voters have not chosen a party.

Chinese Americans were especially reluctant to affiliate, with four out of 10 deciding not to pick a side.

Asian Americans often come to America from countries where the government is corrupt and can't be trusted, Eng said. Due to past experiences, they don't want to participate in American politics. And they are ignored by national party machines, Eng said.

"I would tend to urge those who are 'decline to state' to join a party, and if they don't like that party they can always switch," Eng said. "But I think they disenfranchise themselves if they decline to state."

Chinese tradition cautions against extreme positions, so many Chinese Americans may be reluctant to align with either party, said Wen Chang, a Republican on the Diamond Bar City Council.

"Almost all the (Chinese) philosophers, Confucius and many others, they taught one thing: moderation," he said.

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Chang's belief in a small, responsible government attracted him to the Republican party, he said.

Still, his first instinct is to find middle ground.

"The more I get involved in politics, the more strongly I feel about this idea of being in the middle of the bell curve and trying to do what is right for the most people," he said.

Given time, more Asians assimilate and pick a party, he said.

Researchers agreed.

"People aren't really sure what the parties are about," Wong said.

As Asian Americans begin to relate more to the American political process, voter turnout should increase, she said.

Wong said community-organizing groups focused on Asian Americans are growing, fashioning themselves after Latino and African American groups.

That could lead to more Asian American officials garnering support and becoming more competitive across the state, Wong said.

Statewide, there are 14 elected officials of Asian decent, the highest in the history of California, Eng said. That number is still low in comparison to the Asian population, which is about 12 percent of the state.

Like most of the general population, a large majority of Asian Americans - 76 percent - say the economy is the most important issue.

Getting the chance to make a living in a fair, well-defined system is what Asians are hoping for when they move to the United States, Chang said.

The ideas United States stands for: hard work, transparency in government and self sufficiency, are very attractive to Asians, he said.

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