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The Pulse: Asian American vote could be a wake-up call to the GOP

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Much is still being analyzed regarding the voting demographics for the presidential election. Some seem easily explained.

For example, the monolithic vote for Barack Obama among African Americans. His 93 percent support among blacks is no doubt attributable, in part, to his own race, and would explain why Mitt Romney received not a single vote in 59 Philadelphia divisions.

And, given the GOP primary climate, it's not hard to understand why 71 percent of Hispanics voted against Romney, who ran as a severely conservative candidate on immigration. That was what the primary process demanded.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry was roundly criticized after saying during an Orlando debate: "If you say that we should not educate children who have come into our state for no reason than they've been brought there, by no fault of their own, I don't think you have a heart." Newt Gingrich incurred the same wrath when he advocated a "path to legality" for illegal immigrants who have lived in the United States for 25 years or more, and who had established family and community ties.

Romney, on the other hand, praised Arizona's controversial immigration law as a "model for the country" during a debate in that state earlier this year. Referring to the Obama administration's challenges to the law, Romney said he would "drop those lawsuits on Day One."

Harder to comprehend, however, is the Asian vote, which, according to polls conducted by Edison Research for the National Election Pool, went 73 percent for Obama.

This bodes poorly for the GOP long-term because Asians - not Hispanics - are now the fastest-growing group in the United States, according to a report this month from the Asian American Center for Advancing Justice based on Census Bureau data. The Asian American population grew 46 percent between 2000 and 2010 and now composes 5 percent of the U.S. population. Their dispersion has political ramifications. Asians had been concentrated in California, Hawaii, and New York, but their fastest growth came in Nevada, Arizona, North Carolina, Georgia, and New Hampshire, a group that includes three of this year's nine swing states.

Why did Asians break for Obama in such large numbers?

"Economic growth and jobs, those are the most important issues for Asian Americans, just as they are for everyone else," said Karthick Ramakrishnan, director of the National Asian American Survey (www.naasurvey.com) and an associate professor at the University of California, Riverside. "And then health care and education."

"On health care, in particular, we found strong levels of support for universal health care when we asked Asian Americans in 2008, and strong support for the Affordable Care Act in 2012," Ramakrishnan told me. "This was the case even for groups like Vietnamese, who traditionally have leaned Republican but who were now saying that they are more likely to vote for Obama than Romney."

Ramakrishnan also says that Obama benefited from the way Asian Americans perceive the role of government.

"They prefer more government services rather than cutting taxes to cut government services," he said. "We just released a report this week that is very relevant to the fiscal cliff, and we find that two-thirds of Asian Americans support raising taxes on high earners, and the amount is about the same even when you look at Asian Americans who make a lot of

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money.

"We looked at Asian Americans who make over \$250,000; 62 percent of them support raising taxes on that category. So they are absolutely willing to pay higher taxes when it means providing more . . . government services."

On education, Ramakrishnan said Asian Americans largely "support increasing federal spending. One of the biggest concerns that Asian Americans have that we found in our survey was the issue of college affordability and college debt. This is an issue where the Obama administration has tried to do a significant amount in terms of taking out the middle man when it comes to college lending and trying to put some downward pressure on cost increases in colleges."

Ramakrishnan says he does not believe Asian Americans are ideologically driven on social issues.

"You have certain groups with large Catholic populations, like Vietnamese and Filipinos, who hold fairly conservative opinions on issues like abortion," he said. "Still, we see no evidence that social issues mattered much for the Asian American vote."

His advice for the GOP?

"To tone down the cultural stuff. Rick Santorum cannot be the public face of the Republican Party because you have a lot of non-Christians in the Asian American and Pacific Islander population who don't see themselves as being welcome in the Republican Party. The Republican Party needs to become a big-tent party and it risks losing out on this fast growing population if it doesn't do that."

Good advice, and not only on reaching out to Asian Americans.

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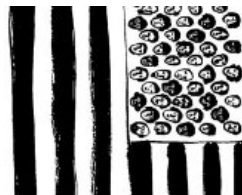
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