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Rep. John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove, left, talks Sunday with Tom Bhe, vice president of public relations for the Asian Pacific Islander American Public Affairs Association, which sponsored the forum at Sacramento State.

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Influence of Asian American, Pacific Islander voters grows

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When officials of the Asian Pacific Islander American Public Affairs Association learned that nearly all the candidates invited to this year's voter education forum had agreed to attend, they chalked it up to more than just the longstanding tradition of the event.

They credited the growing influence of voters from the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities.

"Just more and more people take notice that this is a group of voters, I don't know if swing voters is the right word, but that can really make or break" a campaign, said Amy Tong, an APAPA vice chair and organizer of this year's event.

The forum, now in its 11th year, featured candidates running in some of the state's most hotly contested legislative and congressional races.

Rivals from the Sacramento-area seats, including GOP Rep. Dan Lungren and Democrat Ami Bera in the 7th Congressional District and Democrat Ken Cooley and Republican Peter Tateishi in the 8th Assembly District, shared the stage Sunday afternoon to field questions on the economy, immigration and education.

Many candidates sought to tailor their pitch to the several hundred voters from the various ethnic communities in the audience at the California State University, Sacramento, Student Union.

Bera, San Joaquin County Republican Ricky Gill, who is running in the 9th Congressional District, and 9th Assembly District rivals Richard Pan, a Democratic assemblyman, and Tony Amador, a Republican from Lodi, all spoke of their parents' stories of immigrating to the United States.

"I myself am the product of Asian American parents and the American dream," said Gill, whose parents were raised in India and Africa.

Lungren, fielding a question on high unemployment among communities of color, touted his policies aimed at supporting the growing number of minority small-business owners. He cited legislation targeting the financial impact of lawsuits filed under the Americans With Disabilities Act, saying he hears

from minority owners in his district that they are "overwhelmingly hit" by such litigation.

Democratic Rep. John Garamendi drew loud applause for supporting the proposed federal DREAM Act, which seeks to put many undocumented young people on a path to lawful permanent residency.

The focus on Asian Americans and other minority voting blocs is in part a result of demographic shifts in both the state's population and its voter rolls.

Field Poll Director Mark DiCamillo, whose organization has increased efforts to survey ethnic voting groups in recent years, said minority voters have accounted for more than 90 percent of California's voter registration growth over the last 22 years. The share of Asian American voters has jumped from 3 percent to 8 percent of the electorate.

That number is likely higher in many of the Sacramento-area races. An analysis by the political firm Redistricting Partners estimates that Asian Americans make up 8 percent or more of the voting-age population in all the districts represented at the forum.

"There's an enormous political power among this incredibly diverse and very important part of our society and our economy," said Garamendi, who participated in the forum alongside GOP challenger Kim Vann.

The cultural and ideological diversity of the Asian American voting bloc can present both an opportunity and a challenge for campaigns. A report released by the National Asian American Survey last week showed high rates of both nonpartisan and undecided voters who are Asian Americans, one of the nation's fastest-growing demographic groups.

"They're the ones that are mostly independent voters," Tong said. "They're really more interested in voting the issues they care about, not the party line."

"I think people are finally starting to realize that if they start to organize, they are a vocal minority," Tateishi said. "A group that can be activated, Republican or Democrat, but they do need to be activated to show up and vote."

Beyond their time onstage, the candidates, elected officials and representatives of November proposition campaigns attending the forum sought to expand their reach with the various groups represented. Staff passed out campaign literature and tried to recruit new volunteers. The politicians chatted with voters in the Student Union and gave interviews with journalists from ethnic media outlets.

Some attending the event also focused on winning Asian American and Pacific Islander support for the presidential campaign. Harold Fong, a member of the Sacramento County Democratic Party's central committee, said he is encouraging local residents to make calls to swing state voters in support of President Barack Obama, citing significant Asian American populations in Colorado, Nevada and Virginia.

"There's a good chance that we'll make a difference there," he said.











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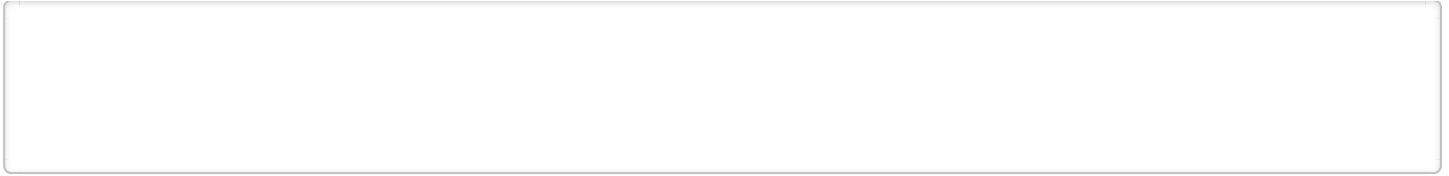
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