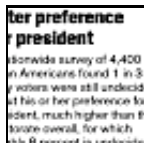


A third of Asian American vote still undecided

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(10-15) 18:48 PDT -- Almost one third of the fast-growing Asian American electorate remains undecided in choosing a presidential candidate, placing the group among the key independent voters coveted by both the McCain and Obama campaigns, according to a new national survey.

In California, where their voting strength is greatest, Asian Americans line up almost 2-to-1 against Proposition 8, a hotly contested measure that would change the Constitution to bar marriage for gay and lesbian couples, researchers found in the California portion of the National Asian American Survey, released Wednesday.

"Asian Americans are the quintessential swing voter group," said S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, a political science professor at UC Riverside and a co-author of the study, which he called the first true national survey of Asians on voting. "Nationally, the undecided vote is 8 to 10 percent. For Asian Americans it's very, very high: 30 percent."

The country's 15 million Asian Americans make up 5 percent of the U.S. population and about 3 percent of the national electorate. One in 3 Asians lives in California, where their numbers amount to almost 12 percent of eligible voters.

Elsewhere in the country, Asian Americans are concentrated in a handful of states, a few of which are closely fought battlegrounds in the presidential race. Asian Americans represent 5 percent of the electorate in Nevada and Washington, more than 3 percent in Virginia and 2 percent in Florida and Minnesota, according to census data.

They're still a sliver of the whole electorate, but in a race where a couple of percentage points one way or the other could make the difference, the high rate of undecided voters could be a gold mine for the presidential candidates. But researchers found that Asian Americans were less likely than other voters to be contacted by the campaigns.

"Among undecided likely Asian American voters, only 27 percent had been contacted," compared with 43 percent of all voters, said Taeku Lee, a UC Berkeley political scientist who also worked on the survey.

Most Asian American voters are naturalized citizens and many of them prefer to get election information

in their first language, which could be Cantonese, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Korean or some other Asian language.

The survey found that 4 in 10 Asian voters in California made use of Asian-language television to get their political information, either alone or in combination with English-language media.

"There hasn't been the kind of outreach there has been for other populations, like Latinos," said Ramakrishnan. "The biggest reason is that it's too expensive to do it in different languages."

Instead, scholars say, grassroots groups with roots in Asian communities are best positioned to engage Asian voters and educate them about the political process.

Political campaigns are beginning to acknowledge the importance of Asian voters, said Vida Benavides, director of APIA Vote, which works to mobilize Asian and Pacific Islander voters.

"When we register Asian Americans there's a high percentage that turn out. It's up to the campaigns to reach out."

In San Francisco, nonprofit groups like Chinese for Affirmative Action have been working to register immigrant voters and educate them about local candidates and issues.

"A huge part of our strategy is working with Asian ethnic media to inform limited- English-proficient voters about what the issues are," said Christina Wong, the group's director of community initiatives.

Wong said she had observed the presidential campaigns courting second- and third-generation Asian Americans, for whom English is their first language.

One such voter is 19-year-old Christian Dolores, a political science major at UC Berkeley and the son of Filipino immigrants. He registered to vote for the first time this year and said he has been approached by both the college Republicans and Democrats. He has not affiliated himself with either group.

"This is my first election, and I wanted to just go out and scope which party platform would be good before I commit to a party," said Dolores, adding that he has not yet decided how he'll vote.

In California, 6 in 10 likely Asian voters oppose Prop. 8, the survey found.

"Asian Americans as a whole are not supportive of same-sex marriage, but they tend to resist a change to the constitution," said survey co-author Janelle Wong, a professor of political science at the University of Southern California.

With Asian American voters representing an increasing share of the electorate, especially in California, research into their political attitudes is essential, said Assemblyman Mike Eng, D-Monterey Park (Los Angeles County) at a press conference in Los Angeles announcing the survey results Wednesday.

"The Asian American population is no longer just an asterisk which says 'fastest-growing segment of the population,' " said Eng. "Today, you will see that Asian Americans are no longer a sleeping giant. They have already gotten up, brushed their teeth, put their clothes on, and they're heading to Starbucks for Internet access."

See the survey

The National Asian American Survey can be found at www.naasurvey.com

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/10/16/BARK13HLQ8.DTL>

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