



The Star-Ledger

With eyes on economy, Asian-Americans like Obama, survey finds

Wednesday, October 15, 2008

BY RUDY LARINI

Star-Ledger Staff

For Anthony George, the key issue in the presidential election is the economy and that's why he's voting for Barack Obama.

"I talk to many people and most of them are supporting Obama," said George, an Asian-Indian who manages the Saravanaa Bhavan Indian Restaurant on Oak Tree Road in Edison. "The big thing is the economy and I like what Obama is saying. McCain was in the military and he was in Vietnam, but this (the economy) is not a good situation for him."

Down the road, Atul Soni, the manager of an electronics store, said he also is "100 percent for Obama."

"It has to be an intelligent person, not some foolish guy who doesn't know what he's talking about," Soni said in explaining his support for the Democrat.

"All these businesses are hurting," he said as he surveyed his empty store and the near-empty parking lot outside. "Where are all the people? People aren't spending any money."

George and Soni underscore the results of a survey released yesterday that shows Asian-Americans in the New York metropolitan area support Obama by a wide margin over his Republican rival, Sen. John McCain.

The survey, by the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll, is a supplement to the 2008 National Asian-American Survey, which was the first comprehensive national study of Asian-American political preferences.

"There has never been a national study of Asian-Americans in the United States," said Jane Junn, Eagleton's faculty director and co-director of the national study.

The poll results show Obama enjoys the support of more than twice as many Asian-Americans as McCain in both New Jersey and New York.

Among likely Asian-American voters, the poll found that in New Jersey, 37 percent prefer Obama versus 18 percent for McCain; in New York, 42 percent of the Asian-Americans polled favor Obama to 20 percent for McCain.

The poll also found that McCain's greatest support comes from Vietnamese voters, the poll found.

Junn attributed that to residual resentment of the Democrats' role during a good part of the Vietnam War and the anti-Communist feeling that drove the war effort. McCain spent 5 1/2 years in a North Vietnamese prisoner of war camp.

A large percentage of Asian-Americans remain undecided, the poll found. Forty-five percent of likely voters in New Jersey and 37 percent in New York have yet to make up their minds, compared with 34 percent

nationally, the poll found.

The undecided Asian-Americans were disproportionately those who said they are not affiliated with either political party. Nearly half of those surveyed in New York and New Jersey do not consider themselves either a Democrat or a Republican, the poll found.

The poll showed that Asian-Americans supported Hillary Clinton by a 3-to-1 plurality in the June primary, with roughly half the Clinton supporters -- 46 percent in New Jersey and 50 percent in New York -- planning to stick with the Democrat Obama next month. Just 10 percent of the Clinton voters in New Jersey and 17 percent in New York said they plan to vote for McCain.

The economy was overwhelmingly the most important issue in the campaign, cited by more than six in 10 likely voters, while none of the other issues, including the war in Iraq, health care and education, commanded double-digit numbers.

The results did not surprise some leaders in the Asian-American community.

"They seem correct, especially the part where they are uncommitted. I know a lot of Asian-Americans who are holding off. People are undecided," said Seema Singh, president of the Asian-American Chamber of Commerce.

"It is common to find a preference for Democrats (among Asian-Americans), so I am not surprised by these results," said Maneesha Kelkar, director of the South Asian women's organization, Manavi.

She also said the high number of undecided voters "completely makes sense to me."

"They're telling you they don't have a very clarified notion of their political identities," she said.

Qudsia Raja, New Jersey outreach coordinator for South Asian Americans Leading Together, called the survey "a ground-breaking report."

"The Asian-American community has not been a community people have focused on," she said. "There should be a concerted effort to gauge every large community."

Junn said Asian-Americans are among the fastest growing groups in the United States. There are some 15 million Asian-Americans in the country today, representing 5 percent of the population, compared with fewer than a million in 1960, Junn said.

The national survey of almost 5,000 Asian-Americans was conducted over six weeks in August and September in eight languages. The Eagleton supplement surveyed 785 residents of New Jersey and New York.

The full national survey and supplemental report on New Jersey and New York can be found online at <http://www.naasurvey.com>.

©2008 Star Ledger

© 2008 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.