

GOP sees need to woo Asian-American voters

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(Photo: J. Scott Applewhite, AP)

Republicans admit they have a problem with Hispanic voters. They have an even bigger problem with Asian Americans — a group that was a majority GOP voting bloc less than 20 years ago.

Three-quarters of Asian Americans went for President Obama in 2012, more than any other group except black voters. The GOP is pursuing Asian Americans as part of the same \$10 million outreach program to talk to Hispanic voters, conceived after the party's 2012 losses and just getting underway. GOP leaders say a return to success with Asian-American voters lies in better engagement. This week, GOP chair Reince Priebus announced the first two staffers hired for field operations and communication in the Asian-American community.

Asian Americans are affluent, educated and family-oriented, surveys show — just the kind of folks GOP leaders say should be natural Republicans. Even better, they don't strongly identify as Democrats, according to exit polls, even if they vote that way.

"It sounds like they're persuadable," says Karthick Ramakrishnan, a University of California-Riverside political scientist and director of the National Asian-American Survey. "But it also means they're paying a lot of attention to issues."

That may be the GOP's challenge. A party that is focused on limiting government and cutting taxes is pursuing a voting group that, opinion surveys show, favors an active government and says the rich should pay higher taxes. As the GOP wrestles with immigration policy, most Asian Americans favor a path to citizenship.

"Is it issues or outreach that will garner the Asian-American vote? That is the question," says Glenn Magpantay of the Asian-American Legal Defense Fund, which conducted exit polls in November among Asian-American voters in 14 states.

According to the National Asian-American Survey, 67% of Asian-American voters favor raising taxes on the wealthy to cut the deficit; they want more spending on health care (46% compared with 41% of the general public) and less spending on defense (only 21% want to increase defense spending compared with 31% overall.)

"They understand what power lies with government in terms of people's everyday lives," says Janelle Wong, a political scientist and director of Asian-American Studies at the University of Maryland. "They're not afraid of the social safety net,"

Republican leaders including Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., have reached the conclusion that immigration is a "threshold issue" among Hispanic voters — if Republicans are perceived to be anti-immigration, none of their messages will get through. Among Asian Americans, support for a path to citizenship for immigrants has increased from 32% in 2008 to 58% now, according to the national survey. Two-thirds of Asian-Americans were born overseas.

"The whole discussion with the Latino community has just gotten a lot more coverage. People don't realize these are also our stories," says Christine Chen of APIA Vote, a non-partisan group that encourages civic engagement among Asian Americans.

Texas GOP chair Steve Munisteri says he's not convinced there are policy differences between Republicans and Asian-American voters — but says Republicans haven't really tried to find out.

"The party as a whole has ignored two communities almost completely, Asian Americans and African Americans," he says. "Until we go into those communities and try to sell our platform and sell our candidates, we can't jump to the conclusion that it's a policy issue."

Former California Republican chairman Ron Nehring says the GOP will lose Western states such as California and Nevada forever if it does not appeal to Asian-American and Hispanic voters. "The single biggest change that has to happen among Republican elected officials is that they need to step up and take responsibility for working to win a majority of the Latino, Asian and African-American vote in their districts," he says. "Right now, that is not happening."

The Congress that came to Washington in January included a record number of Asian Americans. None of them was Republican. Of the 50 congressional districts with the highest percentage of Asian-American residents, only nine are held by the GOP. Of five Republican-held congressional districts where AALDEF conducted exit polling in 2012, only one, Virginia's Scott Rigell, was elected with a majority of the Asian-American vote.

Rep. Ed Royce, whose Southern California district has the highest percentage of Asian Americans of any Republican's, says Republicans have not emphasized education, an issue important to Asian Americans, in the past two elections. He also blames the GOP for letting wither a base of support

built up under President Ronald Reagan. "A tremendous amount of focus, both from the top of the ticket and the party, was devoted to that type of outreach. We need to relearn that lesson, of that type of campaign and that type of ongoing sustained effort. The (Asian-American) community won't understand our positions unless we're out there on a regular basis."

In Texas, Munisteri has the state party send out lists of Asian-American community events to county parties and elected officials – with a directive to show up. That doesn't mean just sending a staffer, Munisteri says. "It's interpreted as being disrespectful if a Republican candidate doesn't show up for a candidate forum and the Democratic candidate does."

In Sugar Land, outside Houston, the candidate is Rep. Pete Olson. His district is 17% Asian American. Last year, he won re-election comfortably with 64% of the vote — but not with a majority of Asian Americans. AALDEF's exit poll shows he captured 34% of Asian-American votes.

"It's not the (amount of) support I'd like," Olson says. He has dined with the Indian consul in Houston, gotten county Republicans to put up booths at Asian-American events, and last month, he went to an Indian Holi festival and got covered in colored powder used to celebrate spring. "Engage, engage, engage," he says. "If we don't, George W. Bush will be the last Republican president ever elected in America