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Asian Americans: Untapped Voters in Close Election

by Nicole Raz

Wita Sholhead moved to the US about 14 years ago from Jakarta, Indonesia and was granted citizenship last year. She is excited to vote in her first U.S. election, but is struggling to identify with a political party, she said.

There are less than two weeks until Election Day and Sholhead is still undecided between President Barack Obama and Republican challenger Mitt Romney.

“This is really new for me,” Sholhead said. “Both sides, they have pluses and minuses. Like, when the Republicans say something they’re not totally wrong, but they are not right 100 percent either. The same with the other party.”

Sholhead said her indecision was not due to a lack of information. Information about candidates was accessible online and on television, and she said others share their opinions with her.

She was not alone in her indecision so close to Election Day. One in every three likely Asian-American voters was still undecided in the weeks before the election, according to the [National Asian American Survey](#) (pdf).

The NAAS was first published Sept. 25 and revised on Oct. 8. Approaching November, the number of undecided likely Asian American voters is still the same, Taeku Lee, who conducted the NAAS with Karthick Ramakrishnan, said.

An Overlooked Population

Asian-Americans are predominately a first generation immigrant population, Ramakrishnan said. They are also the fastest growing immigrant group, according to a 2012 Pew Research Center [Report](#) (pdf).

About 430,000 Asian immigrants came into the U.S. in 2010, about 36 percent of all new immigrants, according to the Pew Report.

“Given their immigrant background, it takes them a while to get used to the U.S. political system and to see where they fit in,” Ramakrishnan said.

Lee said many Asian-American voters may be undecided because it may be difficult for immigrants to get used to how political parties compete with each other; elections are candidate oriented rather than state oriented and very much influenced by money.

They also have been largely ignored by political parties, when “parties themselves play a big role in being able to define” voter affiliation, Lee said.

As election day approached, 45 percent of likely voters, or just over two out of every five people, had been personally contacted by either Romney’s or Obama’s campaign, according to an ABC News-Washington Post poll (pdf). Meanwhile, 19 percent of Asian American voters, or just under one person out of every five, say they have been contacted by either party or candidate, Lee said.

“For a lot of mistaken reasons parties don’t see Asian-Americans as being a good place to mobilize voters from,” Lee said. “Some of that, I think, plays into stereotypes about Asian Americans: potentially not being interested in politics, and being more interested in the politics of their home country.”

Mobilizing Asian-American Voters

Over half of Asian-Americans, 51 percent, follow political news related to their home country, and 47 percent follow U.S. foreign policy toward their home country, according to the NAAS.

“But,” Ramakrishnan said, “We find that people who are paying attention to politics in their homeland and on U.S. foreign policy are actually more likely to be engaged in U.S. politics as well.”

Although Asian-Americans may be following politics, they have historically held a low voter turnout. In 2008, the national voter turnout was around 60 percent, while while Asian-American voter turnout was about 47 percent, according to the Pew Research Center.

Melissa Michelson, co-author of the book, “Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns,” said that Asian-American voter turnout could double if campaigns did more Asian-American outreach.

Michelson conducted a study and found that Asian-American low voter turnout is not due to a lack of information. Mailing information about voting and ballot issues in different Asian languages did not raise voter turnout, she said.

“But you could have a very short, content-free conversation on the phone where you simply ask them to vote and that got them out the door,” she said.

A two-round phone bank would do the trick.

“If you called folks three weeks before and asked if they planned to vote and did a follow up call the day before the election,” Michelson said, “You could increase turnout by double digits.”

Battleground Votes

If Asian-Americans get out the door this election, they could have a large impact on the election, Lee said. Over the past 10 years, there has been an increase of Asian-American residents in Virginia, North Carolina and Nevada—this year’s battleground states.

While there is a lot of uncertainty leading up to the election, Lee predicts that 70 percent of the Asian-American vote will be for President Obama. Asian American likely voters align with Obama on every issue except the budget deficit, Lee said.

“Obama seems to be clearly ahead in the minds of Asian-American voters, even those who say they are undecided about who they’re going to vote,” he said.

This may even be true for Sholhead, who said she can relate more to the Democratic political agenda and finds it hard to relate to the Republican Party.

“Republicans in my opinion are like people who make more than 1 million dollars.”

Despite her indecision, Sholhead says she is going to choose a party and she will vote.

Lee predicts that Asian-American voters will account for up to four percent of voters in battleground states, which is “a lot of territory for the candidates and parties to fight over,” he said.

While there is room for improvement in Asian-American voter outreach, many non-partisan efforts are working to improve voter turnout. The organization called Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote has registered 15,000 Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in 14 states since September.

Christine Chen, the executive director of APIA Vote, said she will be doing a two-round phone bank.

“We will be following up with each of them to make sure that they were properly registered, and they know which ID is needed in their state, and whether or not they need any language assistance,” she said.

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