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NEWS

Minority votes to play pivotal role

by Jessi Polsky and Cassie Kornblau

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While “Joe the Plumber” represents the necessity of appealing to the middle-class, minority voters don’t need a symbolic moniker to prove their importance to both the Republican and Democratic nominees.

The 2004 presidential election saw a record number of voters; 64 percent of Americans cast their ballots four years ago. However, minority turnout was much lower — with only 47 percent of Hispanics, 60 percent of blacks and 44 percent of Asians voting in the contest between President George W. Bush and Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass..

University of Wisconsin School of Journalism and Mass Communication professor Jim Danky said the minority vote could make a difference Tuesday.

“When I look at various polls ... I look at those numbers state by state, and I think you see some fairly small percentage leads,” Danky said. “I think it is close enough that yes, [Obama’s] campaign is counting on minority participation in significant numbers and that they probably do need it.”

Political science professor Barry Burden echoed Danky’s sentiments, saying there hasn’t been a Democratic presidential candidate who has won the majority of the white vote in many years.

“African-Americans are a huge part of this,” Danky said. “Without African-Americans, Democrats don’t win elections. Period.”

According to political science professor Kathy Cramer Walsh, blacks have voted overwhelmingly Democratic since the New Deal. But because of the appeal of Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama, racial minorities will probably turn out in higher numbers.

Others, like some Latinos who are socially conservative, will likely vote for Republican nominee John McCain, Danky said.

In addition, Cramer Walsh said Obama has gone into both urban and rural areas to develop relationships with people and attend listening sessions.

“Tapping into institutions in urban areas like churches and so on is historically a very successful way of mobilizing minorities,” Cramer Walsh said.

However, for some Americans, voting can be surprisingly challenging.

Centro Hispano of Dane County Director Kent Craig said what prohibits Latinos from voting is language and transportation barriers as well as inflexible work schedules and child care needs.

Despite the voting difficulties many minorities face, Danky said if they feel the need to vote and a

connection to the decisions of the candidates, they will participate.

According to the National Asian American Survey — the first nationwide political opinion poll of Asian-Americans — 34 percent of all likely Asian-American voters remain undecided between the two presidential candidates. Thus, Asian-Americans — numbering 7.2 million eligible voters in 2006 — have the potential to influence highly contested states such as Nevada, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Ohio.

To target the campaign towards minority groups like Latinos, Danky said both parties are advertising within that community using combinations of Latino radio stations and Spanish language newspapers.

“I would think any candidate in a close state — let’s say North Carolina — would use the black press,” Danky said. “You want to take advantage of that. You wouldn’t campaign in Florida and not use the Cuban press in Miami.”

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