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Asian-American Voters Could Hold the White House Key



Rhodes Cook is a veteran Washington political analyst who tracks national elections and voting trends and publishes a bimonthly political newsletter. [Click here](#) for Mr. Cook's full bio.

If the country is to elect its first minority president next month, it will be with the ballots of the nation's minority voters.

For Democrats, this is nothing new. **John Kerry**, the party's nominee in 2004, lost the white vote by a margin of more than 15 million. But he carried the three leading minority groups – African Americans, Hispanics and Asian Americans – by a combined margin of about 12.5 million votes, even though the three groups together cast only one in every five presidential ballots.

This time, however, **Barack Obama** appears to be doing better on both counts, cutting Democratic losses among white voters while increasing the party's advantage among minorities.

Sen. Kerry dropped the white vote to President **George W. Bush** by roughly 15 percentage points. A recent aggregated Gallup Poll for the week of Oct. 6-12 found Sen. Obama down among whites by just four points.

So too among fellow African Americans, Sen. Obama is running better than Mr. Kerry. While the Massachusetts senator routed Mr. Bush by 88% to 11% among African Americans, the recent Gallup Poll found Sen. Obama with a nearly unanimous 91% to 3% advantage over Republican hopeful **John McCain**.

Regaining Ground Among Hispanics

Sen. Obama is also regaining ground among Hispanics that Democrats had lost in 2004. Then, Mr. Bush was able to capitalize on his long, assiduous courtship of Hispanics, dating back to his early political career in Texas. He ended up capturing roughly 40% of the Hispanic vote, a record for a GOP presidential candidate.

But since then, the Republican Party's stormy involvement with stricter immigration laws, primarily aimed at curbing illegal migration from Latin America, has cost the party and

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Sen. McCain dearly. GOP support from Hispanics dropped to 30% in the 2006 midterm elections, a level that the Arizona senator is struggling to maintain this time. And that in spite of his public support for immigration legislation less draconian than policies favored by many in his party.

However, it appears the Republicans could make inroads with one minority group: Asian Americans. To be sure, it's a fairly small group. While African Americans cast 12% of the presidential ballots in 2004 and Hispanics, 6%, Asian Americans accounted for just 2%. But in 2008, it could be an important 2%.

According to **Paul Ong**, a professor of Asian American Studies at UCLA, "Asian Americans are today's sleeping giant." They are steadily growing in numbers and have been in both camps in recent years, breaking narrowly for the Republican presidential ticket in the 1990s, before trending toward the Democrats this decade.

Taking Time to Decide

But Asian Americans are clearly not as firmly in the Democratic column as are African Americans and even Hispanics. An academic study of the Asian-American vote released recently found Sen. Obama leading Sen. McCain by about 15 points among this group, but with fully one-third still undecided.

Their fluidity is understandable. Most Asian Americans are immigrants, encompassing many different cultures, religions and languages. In 2004, barely one-third of them were registered to vote, a level comparable to Hispanics. And the diversity of Asian Americans makes them difficult, if not impossible, to reach as a voting bloc.

Each party, though, has its beachhead in the Asian-American community. For Republicans, it is the Vietnamese. For the Democrats, Japanese and Asian Indians are particularly sympathetic. But there are significant numbers of Asian Americans of all ethnicities that are open to partisan persuasion. And while many of them reside in California and Hawaii, their numbers are growing in the major population centers of contested states such as Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, Virginia and Washington.

The largest jurisdiction in Virginia, Fairfax County, is 13% Asian American (according to the 2000 census). In the most populous counties in New Jersey (suburban Bergen) and Washington (Seattle-based King), 11% of the population is Asian American. Meanwhile, Ramsey County, Minn., which includes the state capital of St. Paul, is 9% Asian American, while in Nevada's fast-growing Clark County (Las Vegas), the figure is 5%.

In short, the Asian American vote next month could be critical in tipping one or more of the battleground states to the Democrats or the Republicans. "If either campaign is looking for a place to get an extra one or two percentage points," says **Taeku Lee**, an associate professor of political science at the University of California-Berkeley, "Asian Americans are not a bad place to get it."

(Note: 2004 racial data is based on general election exit polls published in the New York Times, Nov. 7, 2004.)

Columnists

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Peter Brown, assistant director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, specializes in polling of electoral battleground states, including Ohio and Florida.

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Gerald F. Seib, executive Washington editor of The Wall Street Journal, has been involved in covering every presidential election since 1980 and writes the weekly Capital Journal column for the Journal.

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Steven Waldman, president and editor-in-chief of Beliefnet.com, and previously national editor of U.S. News & World Report, is a nationally recognized expert on religion, spirituality and the politics surrounding social issues.

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Katherine Rizzo is Inside Congress editor of Congressional Quarterly, supervising coverage of congressional leaders; she's also a former writer for the Associated Press.

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Rhodes Cook is a veteran Washington political analyst and writer who tracks national elections and voting trends and publishes a bimonthly political newsletter.

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