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Voter Profile: Korean Americans

This Asian community is typically nonpartisan but could favor Obama.

Wednesday, October 22, 2008

Six or seven months ago, Andrew Ko was fed up with state of the country and wanted to take action.

So the 37-year-old, who had not been politically active, revived the Korean American Democrats of Virginia, soon becoming an executive officer in the organization. Ko also started volunteering for Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama and working for the Virginia "Korean Americans for Change" campaign.

"I just told myself I have got to do something - for my children and my parents and my grandmother," said the Ashburn resident who was born in the United States and attended Winston Churchill High School in Potomac, Md.

Ko's newfound interest in politics could be part of a wider trend.

According to the National Asian American Survey taken in August and September, 71 percent of the Korean community with U.S. citizenship intends to vote Nov. 4. Eleven percent reported giving donations to candidates, political organizations or campaigns.

"Many Koreans are paying closer attention to the election," said At-large School Board member Ilryong Moon, a Korean American and the only Asian American holding elected office in Northern Virginia.

Asian Americans in Virginia could make a difference in a tight presidential or congressional race.

According to the 2006 U.S. Census data, the commonwealth's population is 4.8 percent Asian, the eighth highest concentration found in any state in the country.

"The Asian American and Pacific Islander community has the potential to be the swing vote in a place like Virginia," said Betsy Kim, national director for the Obama campaign's Asian American and Pacific Islander vote efforts. Kim works out of the Obama's branch office in the City of Falls Church.

Most of the commonwealth's Asian community is located in Northern Virginia. Jurisdictions like Arlington County (8.9 percent), the City of Alexandria (5.3 percent) and Loudoun County (13.1 percent) boast a disproportionately large number of Asian residents. The Asian community is also the largest racial minority in Virginia's most populous locality, Fairfax County.

At 15.8 Percent of the total population, Asian residents are more highly concentrated in Fairfax County than California (12 percent) or New York City (nine percent). Fairfax County's Korean community is particularly robust.

Koreans account for about 23.6 percent of Fairfax's Asian overall population, more than twice the community's level of saturation at the national level.



Photo by Robbie Hammer/The Connection
At-large school board member Ilryong Moon is a Korean American.

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In 2000, Fairfax County was home to the seventh largest Korean community in the country. At least five areas in Fairfax — Annandale (24), Burke (29), Centreville (56), West Springfield (86) and Chantilly (99) — ranked among the top 100 American "places" in number of Korean residents, according to the Center for Korean American and Korean Studies at California State University in Los Angeles.

The Korean community's dominant status in Fairfax is unusual. Koreans only make up 10 percent of the country's Asian community overall and even localities with larger Korean populations than Fairfax's, like Los Angeles, tend to have other, bigger Asian subgroup populations, like Chinese or Asian Indians.

Possibly because of its size, Fairfax County's Korean population enjoys a significant amount of political leverage and clout. Politicians from the county, state and federal government level all reach out to the Korean community regularly.

"When I was Providence supervisor, one out of every five of my constituents was an Asian American and the Korean Americans were the biggest of that group. Over the years, our relationship has deepened," said Fairfax County chairman Gerry Connolly (D).

Connolly, who is running for U.S. Congress, attended services at the Korean Central Presbyterian Church in Centreville and Korean Community Services Center Annual Gala Oct. 19.

Fairfax's Korean population also enjoys some attention because it has traditionally been unaffiliated with a political party, said U.S. Rep. Tom Davis (R-11), who worked with Korean and Korean Americans over the past 20 years.

"Koreans are not more Democratic or more Republican. They are not in the pocket of either party. They are a swing group and politicians don't take them for granted," said Davis.

A recent poll verified what Davis said. The National Asian Americans Survey, released in October, reported that approximately 38 percent of Korean voters identified as Democrats and 18 percent identified as Republicans but a larger portion of the community — 44 percent in the poll — identified as an independent or nonpartisan.

Davis, who is stepping down in January after almost 30 years as an elected official in Fairfax County, said the key to getting support from the Korean American community is communication. The congressman regularly held press conferences exclusively with the Korean media and tried to appear on Korean radio talk shows monthly.

"I attended a lot of their events, and 80 percent of success is showing up, but I was also 100 percent on point with their issues," he said.

Davis pushed for legislation that directly impacted the Korean American community, including getting South Korea admitted into the U.S. Visa Waiver Program. By early next year, visitors from South Korea to the United States will be able to visit the country for up to 90 days without a visa and the same for U.S. citizens visiting South Korea, he said.

Davis was also one of the chief sponsors of the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement, which is strongly supported by the Korean American community. The Republican also got bills declaring Korean American Day and honoring Korean immigration passed and has led several congressional delegations on trips to Korea.

Recently, the Korean government honored his work by awarding Davis the Asian country's highest honor for a civilian.

The community also has a close relationship with Democratic elected officials in the area.

A number of local Democrats, particularly Connolly, received campaign

donations from organizations affiliated with the local Korean American community.

State Sen. Chap Petersen (D-35) said support from the Korean community helped him beat Davis' wife, former state Sen. Jeannemarie Devolites Davis, and win his state senate seat in the 2007 election.

"They are pretty independent. ... I wouldn't assume they are Democrats or Republicans," said Petersen, who added that he was chosen as "Man of the Year," by the Korean American Association of Greater Washington D.C.

Petersen's wife Sharon was born in South Korea and his in-laws are Korean immigrants who live in Fairfax County. The senator has represented "several hundred Korean businesses and people" as a lawyer based out of the City of Fairfax.

"I've had a good relationship with the community. With my wife's family being very active in their church and community, there was a group of people I knew right off the bat," said Petersen, who speaks some Korean after taking language classes.

According to Petersen, Connolly and others, the Korean community is particularly focused on taxes and policies that could impact small businesses.

About 14.2 percent of Koreans in the Washington D.C. area — more than double any other local ethnic group — were self-employed and using family labor to help support their business in 2000, according to a report by the Center for Korean American and Korean Studies.

Since so many Koreans own their own business, the community has pushed for streamlined county licensing and permitting processes, and wants to make sure they will be able to access their lines of credit during the current economic downturn, said Connolly.

The Korean community is also focused on finding more support for education — at the primary, secondary, undergraduate and graduate level.

"By and large, [Korean families] come to Fairfax County to put their kids in public schools and a disproportionate amount of them attend our higher education universities," said Petersen.

Even if they are not partisan, many local Korean Americans appear to be supporting Obama in the upcoming presidential election, though a recent national poll showed a high percentage of Korean American voters were still undecided.

According to the National Asian American Survey, Korean voters who had made up their minds favored Obama 36 percent to 27 percent. But about 38 percent of Koreans polled were still uncommitted heading into the last month of the election, compared to just the eight percent of the general electorate.

Still, Korean Daily political reporter Albert Hong said local Korean voters favor Obama over McCain.

"Koreans like Obama over McCain. Most Korean people say they want change," said Hong, who reports on local, national and international politics from his Fairfax office.

Moon and Ko agreed with Hong, saying the Korean community favored Obama by at least a two to one margin. Some of Obama's policies are more in tune with the Korean community's concerns, they said.

Many Koreans who own small businesses are worried about the rising costs of health care. Many do not have health insurance because, as a small business owner, they cannot afford it.

"These are mom and pop shops with all hands on deck. These working

families, some of them are first generation and they can't afford it. ... If a mother or a father has an extended illness, it can cause the whole family to go bankrupt," said Ko.

Hong also said that the anti-immigration stance adopted by some factions of the Republican Party has made the Korean community uncomfortable.

"Of course, they agree that America has to have a strong policy for illegal immigrants but Prince William County has a strict policy for even legal immigrants," said Hong.

Davis agreed, saying the harsh stance adopted by some Republicans on immigration issues could alienate the Korean community. But a large portion of Korean American culture and values aligns well with the Republican Party platform, he said.

Korean Americans place a strong emphasis on family and are more likely to attend church. As small business owners, they have an entrepreneurial spirit and have gotten ahead without the benefit of affirmative action, he said.

"Some immigrant groups consider themselves victims," but the Korean community does not, said Davis.



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