

Asian American voters' influence grows

Drew Joseph

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Republicans have been rallying around a drive to adopt positions that appeal to Latinos since their defeat in this month's presidential contest. But the GOP is also having problems attracting the votes of an even faster growing group: Asian Americans.

Exit poll data show that 73 percent of Asian American voters nationwide supported President Obama on Nov. 6, while GOP challenger Mitt Romney received 26 percent of the vote. In 2008, Obama carried 62 percent of the Asian American vote, while his opponent, Sen. John McCain of Arizona, got 35 percent.

In California, 79 percent of Asian American voters selected Obama and 21 percent backed Romney. That is a larger spread than in 2008, when 64 percent of Asian Americans in the state voted for Obama and 35 percent voted for McCain.

Nationally, 71 percent of Hispanic voters supported Obama this year.

The strong Asian American support for Obama reflects a quiet transition, as the issues that matter most to these voters have shifted from foreign policy to health care and education, analysts say. In 1992, for example, Bill Clinton received less than a third of Asian Americans' votes.

'Dramatic trend'

"It's a continuation of a pretty dramatic trend over the last 20 years," said Taeku Lee, a professor of political science and law at UC Berkeley.

Lee said there have been push and pull forces at work, changing Asian American sentiments. Republicans were pushing away these voters with rhetoric perceived as exclusionary of immigrants and non-Christians, while Democrats were drawing in Asian American voters by focusing on health care and education. Surveys have also found Asian Americans prefer a larger government that provides more services.

In addition, Lee said, symbolic moves by the Obama administration - like appointing a number of Asian American Cabinet secretaries - are a sign of Democratic outreach to Asian American communities.

In recent years, Democrats have done a better job of connecting with Asian American voters while the GOP has overlooked the growing minority, Republicans and Democrats said.

"I think we're paying more attention to them, a lot more attention and time to them," said Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, the former chairman of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus.

Attracting Asian American voters is not a lost cause for Republicans. A National Asian American Survey report released in October on Asian American voters in California found that 43 percent supported Obama, 21 percent favored Romney and about a third were undecided - figures similar to those from the group's national survey of Asian American voters released in September.

Both surveys found that just over 50 percent of Asian Americans did not identify as either Democrats or Republicans.

In neighboring Nevada - a swing state blanketed by both campaigns - only 50 percent of Asian Americans supported Obama, while 47 percent favored Romney.

GOP reaching out

Republican Michelle Steel - who was born in Korea, raised in Japan and is now the vice chairwoman of the California Board of Equalization - campaigned in Nevada for Romney and said the better result there among Asian Americans was "the only positive thing I got out of the election cycle."

"When we reach out to Asian Americans, it's possible to get more Asian American votes," said Steel, whose husband, Shawn Steel, is the former chairman of the California Republican Party.

She said Asian Americans, many of whom are small-business owners and who emphasize family values, should be drawn to Republican policies but Democrats have excelled at expressing their message and grassroots campaigning.

A Pew Research Center survey released in June found that the number of Asian immigrants coming to the United States had overtaken the number of Hispanic immigrants, and that 74 percent of adult Asian Americans were born abroad.

That means that despite Asian Americans' low voter turnout, they stand to be an increasingly significant part of the electorate. In 2008, Asian American voters nationally accounted for 2 percent of the electorate, compared with 3 percent this year. In California, their share rose from 6 to 11 percent in the past two presidential elections.

At the same time, more Asian Americans are seeking office, and one group that has received notice is Indian Americans. Republican Govs. Bobby Jindal of Louisiana and Nikki Haley of South Carolina are seen as up-and-comers in the national GOP.

In California, congressional candidates included Republican Ricky Gill, who lost to incumbent Democratic Rep. Jerry McNerney, and Ami Bera, a Democrat who beat longtime GOP Rep. Dan Lundgren.

"I see the passion and interest for public service and public policy a lot more with the second generation," said Anu Natarajan, vice mayor of Fremont and a first-generation Indian American.

She said the increasing number of Indian Americans running for office shows that they "have arrived." Running for office is just something people do as Americans, she said.

"It's becoming mainstream," she said. "It's being part of the whole. It gives that sense of belonging."

Expect to see more Asian Americans running for office: According to Pew, the median age of second-generation Asian Americans is 17.

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