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(October 23, 2008)

Undecided Asian voters play key role in US election

WASHINGTON (AFP) - Minority Asians may be the biggest group of undecided voters in the upcoming US presidential and congressional elections and will play a key role in the outcome of the ballot, officials say.

With the current economic troubles their top concern, many of the seven million eligible Asian American voters are likely to choose Democratic presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama, and are clamoring to send more of their representatives to Congress and state legislatures, the officials said.

Among those who have made up their mind ahead of the November 4 elections, 41 percent are likely to vote for Obama and 24 percent for Republican Senator John McCain, polls showed.

Obama, who spent part of his childhood in Asia, has sent a personal message to the voters, saying he considered himself "an honorary" member of the community.

"I was born in Hawaii, a majority Asian American state, where I spent much of my childhood, and I've lived in Indonesia ... I had college roommates who were Indian and Pakistani," he said in a "blueprint for the change we need" for the 13 million strong community.

"My sister is half Indonesian, and she is married to a Chinese Canadian," he added.

McCain also has powerful Asian connections, including having served in

the Vietnam War and having an adopted 17-year-old Bangladeshi daughter.

And many Asian-Americans are attracted by his immigration reforms and bipartisanship.

The 71-year-old Vietnam War hero enjoys two-thirds of Vietnamese Americans' support, according to polls.

Despite the two candidates' strong lobbying efforts, 34 percent of all likely Asian American voters remain undecided on who to send to the White House, compared to about eight percent among the general population, a recent national survey revealed.

"With such a high proportion of undecided voters, Asian Americans are a critical source of potential votes for either candidate in the final weeks of the campaign," said Karthick Ramakrishnan from the **University of California, Riverside**, among four universities that conducted the poll.

Also, the number of eligible Asian American voters have exceeded the margin of victory in about 50 congressional races, said Naomi Tacuyan, deputy director of the APIAVote, a group campaigning for greater community participation in electoral and public policy processes.

Asian Americans are contesting 11 seats for the House of Representatives, including six seats they currently hold.

The top five states where Asian Americans reside are California, New York, Texas, Hawaii and New Jersey, and all, with the exception of Hawaii, are significant in the elections.

But recent studies show the community can also be a "deciding factor" in states such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, Washington, Virginia, Nevada and Minnesota, Tacuyan said.

About 80 percent of potential Asian American voters list the struggling economy as one of the most important problems the nation faces, followed by the Iraq war, according to the survey by the universities.

On both issues, there are "strongly divided opinions" between Obama and McCain supporters, said the poll which covered the six largest ethnic subgroups: Indians, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans and Vietnamese.

"No matter what boat you came over on, we're all in the same boat now," said Toby Chaudhuri, an Indian American Democratic strategist.

"Asian Americans are increasingly worried about their economic future and like most people across the country, believe McCain's policies could create a depression," he said.

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