



October 23, 2012

Economy Overshadows Debate on Sino-US Relations

by Kate Woodsome



Sino-American relations loom large over the U.S. presidency, but both the candidates vying for the White House and Chinese-American voters spent the final presidential debate focused more on domestic economic concerns than on China's rise.

With polls showing a close race after months of campaigning, the presidential election is expected to be decided by voters in just several states. One of the key barometers is the central U.S. state of Ohio, where Deborah Wang, a supporter of

President Barack Obama, joined a debate watching party at Asian Services in Action, an immigrant advocacy group she works with in Cleveland.

"You know what surprised me? For a second there, I actually felt Romney was making a lot more sense at least when he started out saying China wants stability in the world," said Wang. "They don't want war. They want a stable market to which they can export their products. I was nodding my head. I was like yup, that's definitely what China wants."

Wang, a Chinese-American, is among the increasingly important electorate of Asian-Americans - one of the fastest growing populations in the United States and, according to a [new survey \(PDF\)](#), one of the most undecided voting blocs in the country.

Karthick Ramakrishnan, who helped conduct the National Asian American Survey, says these voters could make a difference in the November election.

"We found in our most recent data that we collected through the middle of October, more than a quarter of Asian American voters were undecided," noted Ramakrishnan. "That's about three times higher than the national average."

He says those who have decided tend to favor the Democratic Party over the Republican Party.

Social issues and the economy help inform the votes, he says, but political rhetoric does, too.

"There is a lot of concern in the Asian American community in terms of how U.S. foreign policy is being talked about," Ramakrishnan added. "Is it being talked about in a nuanced and complicated way? Or is it being used in a shorthand way that might inflame tensions, not just toward China, but towards Chinese-Americans."

Obama's rival, Governor Mitt Romney, has drawn controversy for one of his key policy differences with the president, pressuring China to raise the value of its currency.

"That's why on day one I will label them a currency manipulator which allows us to apply tariffs where they're taking jobs," said Romney.

Wang says China is an easy target for the campaigns because most Americans don't understand the situation in China, and they are frustrated with the economy at home.

"It's very, very easy to point to an external target and blame it on that and just say I'm going to stand up to this big mean nasty foreign power and somehow this is going to ameliorate them. I think it's disingenuous," Wang added.

Another Chinese-American voter, Raymond Lee, takes a different approach, saying economic issues are more important than foreign policy. The Ohio resident says he supports Mitt Romney because he understands the challenges faced by U.S. businesses.

"Similar to Mitt, or Governor Romney, I've seen a lot of different situations advising clients, advising business," said Lee. "I had to live through making payroll ... We worry about day to day struggles of government regulation. We live with it right now."

Lee, the chief executive officer of a juice company, started humbly, growing up in a poor neighborhood where he says he suffered discrimination from both blacks and whites because he was Asian.

Lee says he worries more about creating jobs and lowering the U.S. debt than foreign policy or how Asian-Americans are perceived. Lee opposes some Obama-administration programs that offer social and education assistance, which Lee says people should find a way to pay for themselves, like he did.

"[Obama] talks about supporting today's youth and today's youth is going to have to figure a way to pay back all this debt," Lee noted. "That's the legacy that's going to be left behind."

During the debate, the president argued that over the long term, the United States must invest at home in order to compete with China.

"If we don't have the best education system in the world, if we don't continue to put money into research and technology that will allow us to - to create great businesses here in the United States, that's how we lose the competition," Obama said.

The answer was typical of several in Monday night's debate, where questions on foreign policy instead prompted answers on domestic economic plans. That reflects what surveys say are the primary economic concerns of Asian-Americans and all other American voters.

Watch entire 3rd presidential debate