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Asian Americans Feeling the Power

Ethnic Groups See Opportunity to Affect Outcome of Presidential Race in Va.

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Asian American voters in Virginia, highly organized and registered in record numbers, have become energized by the presidential race and the role they see themselves playing in this tightly contested state.

"This is the first time I've seen multiethnic coalitions forming around an election. The margin is razor-thin in Virginia, so we could still be a swing vote," said Nguyen Dinh Thang, executive director of SOS Boat People, a nonprofit group in Falls Church and a center for get-out-the-vote efforts, including phone banks and weekend canvassing. "Asian Americans realize this election is their opportunity to really get noticed."

According to leaders of the large, affluent communities of Korean Americans, Vietnamese Americans and Indian Americans in Northern Virginia, sentiment among those groups favors Democratic Sen. [Barack Obama](#) (Ill.), although Republican Sen. [John McCain](#) (Ariz.) enjoys a core of loyal support among older Asian refugees who suffered at the hands of communist regimes.

There are more than 160,000 Asian American citizens of voting age in the state, and an aggressive registration drive is adding several thousand voters. Partisan activists and public interest groups said Asian Americans could play as important a role in this national election as they did in the 2006 Senate race in Virginia, when they helped [Democrat James Webb](#), a Vietnam war veteran, defeat incumbent [George Allen](#).

"Our community once shunned politics, but now the younger generation is very involved," said Il Ryong Moon, a Korean American lawyer and Democratic politician in [Fairfax County](#), who remarked that many Asian Americans feel that Obama will "open the door" to minorities. "Virginia could be the state that decides this presidential election, and Asian voters here could determine its fate."

In Virginia and many other states, considerable attention has focused on the potential impact of African American and Hispanic voters on a historic and divisive presidential contest that includes the first-ever African American nominee and second female vice presidential nominee by a major party. Both groups are expected to favor Obama.

The nation's fast-growing Asian American population of nearly 15 million has been often overlooked as a political factor, even though in some states a higher percentage of Asians than Hispanics are U.S. citizens who can legally vote. Asian American voters also have a track record of high turnout in elections.

In Virginia, for example, the Hispanic populace, at more than 250,000, outnumbers Asian Americans. But most Hispanic residents are relative newcomers and a minority are U.S. citizens. By contrast, more than half of Asian American residents in the state are U.S. citizens of voting age. African Americans are by far Virginia's largest minority group. In 2006, blacks accounted for 19.9 percent of the state population; Hispanics, 6.3 percent; and Asian Americans, 4.8 percent.

A report released this month by the National Asian American Survey showed that Asian Americans across

the country favor Obama over McCain but that more than one-third are undecided, which could make them a critical factor in several states.

In Virginia, older refugees from communist countries admire McCain for his conduct as a prisoner of war and his later efforts to help restore relations with Vietnam. On Friday, a group of Vietnamese professionals held a fundraiser in Fairfax for [Rep. Frank R. Wolf \(R-Va.\)](#), a longtime advocate of human rights in Asia.

Many older Korean Americans, especially Christians and small-business owners, also are drawn to Republican Party values. Today, Northern Virginia's Korean American community is divided, in part along generational lines, and there were reports of shouting matches between Obama and McCain supporters at a recent Korean festival.

Jin A. Jin, a [GOP](#) activist in Centreville, has worked tirelessly for McCain, and her three daughters have been operating a weekend lemonade stand to raise money for him. Like many other Asian Americans, however, she described herself as an independent who chooses candidates on the basis of their records.

"I don't always vote for Republicans, but in this case, I like McCain," she said, listing his Christian faith, concern for education and experiences in Vietnam as the main reasons. Then, echoing comments made by numerous Democrats, she added: "This election is really about our country, not the candidates. Virginia is a battlefield state, so if we vote, we can make the whole nation look at us. This is a place where immigrants can really shine."

Perhaps the most-organized Asian voters in Virginia are the Indian Americans, a highly educated and entrepreneurial group. They tend to vote Democratic, although they have applauded the Bush administration's warm relations and recent nuclear technology agreement with India. Some of their leaders are active in [Democratic Party](#) politics, raising substantial funds for local and state candidates. Many initially supported [Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton \(D-N.Y.\)](#) and have now switched their allegiance to Obama.

Anish Chopra, a longtime Democratic activist who is the state's secretary of technology, said the community has evolved politically in recent years and felt empowered by Webb's victory. He said about 80 percent of Asian Americans who voted in that race, or about 50,000 people, supported Webb, far more than Webb's 7,200-vote margin over Allen.

Other Indian Americans said one incident during that race served as a wake-up call to Asian voters. Shekhar Narasimhan, 55, an investment banker from [Dunn Loring](#) and a Democratic Party activist, recalled a campaign appearance in which Allen referred to his son, then a volunteer for Webb, as "macaca." The controversial remark was widely interpreted as referring to him as a monkey.

"That incident made us all start to think," said Narasimhan, who is involved in the combined statewide campaign for Obama, Democratic Senate candidate [Mark R. Warner](#) and other candidates. "It really helped rally Asians to that election. Now, we have a new generation that is incredibly motivated. They are out there every weekend. I am astonished, thrilled and proud."

Community leaders said many first-generation Asian Americans, who came here as refugees or economic immigrants in the 1960s and 1970s and are now reaching retirement age, have tended to be business-oriented, insular and focused on issues in their homelands. Second-generation professionals and their college-age children tend to be more liberal, engaged in domestic issues and eager to join forces with

people from other backgrounds.

On a Saturday before the Oct. 6 Virginia registration deadline, several dozen students and other volunteers gathered at SOS Boat People, where they were given computerized lists of Asian American citizens and [MapQuest](#) directions to their homes. They knocked on about 200 doors and managed to find 50 eligible voters to help register.

In follow-up interviews, the new voters expressed mixed opinions of the candidates -- some praising Obama's inclusiveness, others saying they admired McCain's courage as a POW -- but they all expressed strong feelings of patriotic duty to participate in the election.

One Vietnamese American in his 80s, who recently moved to Fairfax from out of state, showed copies of several long letters he sent to election officials, trying to change his registration address. A Chinese American neighbor, who recently relocated from Pittsburgh, worried that his voter card would not arrive in time for him to cast an absentee ballot before leaving on a trip.

"I became a citizen eight years ago, and I feel I have an important responsibility to select the next president," said Chu Wang, 45, a financial analyst.

"This election is much more important than the last one, because of the financial crisis and the war in Iraq," he added. "Whoever wins, immigrants need to let everyone hear their voice. It is our right."

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