

# The Untapped Political Power of Asian Americans



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## Takeaways

- Asian American political participation lags other racial and ethnic groups.
- Neither the Democratic nor Republican Parties consistently target Asian American voters.
- Nearly half of Asian Americans are political Independents.
- Asian Americans do not hold ideologically-driven political views.
- The “Asian American” label masks internal diversity in experiences and beliefs.

In the span of twenty years, the Asian American presidential vote went from solidly Republican to a Democratic lock. Republican President H.W. Bush won the Asian vote by 24 points in 1992. Democratic President Obama won the Asian vote by 47 points in 2012. Of the 19 states with Asian populations greater than 3.5%, Obama won 16 of them in 2012. Among the 15 states with Asian populations less than 2%, Romney took 13.

The collapse in Asian American support for Republican presidential candidates astounded commentators on the Right, many of whom assumed that Asian Americans were obviously, even naturally, Republican voters. As Charles Murray wrote in 2012:

*It's not just that the income, occupations, and marital status of Asians should push them toward the right. Everyday observation of Asians around the world reveal them to be conspicuously entrepreneurial, industrious, family-oriented, and self-reliant. If you're looking for a natural Republican constituency, Asians should define "natural."*<sup>1</sup>

For those on the Right, Asian American support for Democrats is a paradox. But, as we demonstrate below, a variety of elements—including changes within the Asian American population and political push and pull factors—have driven Asian American voters to support Democrats in recent presidential elections and make them a relatively unpredictable factor in future races. Drawing upon survey data, we conclude that Asian Americans represent a swath of untapped political power—and courting them can pave the way to victory in both local and national elections.

## **Reason #1**

### **Asian Americans political participation lags other groups**

## **because many are new to the partisan political process.**

Between 1960 and 2010, the Asian American population increased from one million to seventeen million.<sup>2</sup> That figure is projected to double by 2060.<sup>3</sup> The Census Bureau estimates that they are the fastest growing racial or ethnic group in the United States. Despite these soaring growth rates, Asian Americans are among the least politically engaged ethnic or racial group in the country, with political participation rates lagging whites, blacks, and Hispanics.

Consider this: In 2012, only 47% of Asian Americans voted in the presidential election—compared to 66% of black voters, 64% of non-Hispanic white voters, and 48% of Hispanic voters.<sup>4</sup> And fewer Asian Americans are registered to vote (56%) than Hispanics (59%), blacks (73%), or non-Hispanic whites (73%).<sup>5</sup>

Low rates of Asian American electoral participation may be the result of less experience with partisan politics as a community. Three-quarters (74%) of Asian Americans are foreign-born, compared to 16% of the general public.<sup>6</sup> In the 2008 National Asian American Survey, 79% of recent Asian immigrants said they were politically Independent or uncommitted. But among those who had been in the U.S. for 25 or more years, that figure fell to 48%.<sup>7</sup>

The high proportion of foreign-born Asian Americans has contributed to less inclusion in the political system. Over time we would expect participation to increase as Asian Americans assimilate into the political process. But right now, this lack of experience might make these relative newcomers more open to political overtures from candidates of both parties than those who have long been part of the process.

## **Reason #2**

**Neither the Democratic nor Republican Parties consistently target Asian American voters.**

Asian Americans comprise 5% or more of the eligible adult voting-age population in 7 states, 73 counties, and 103 Congressional districts.<sup>8</sup> Yet they are much less likely to be contacted by political parties than other voters. Only 31% of Asian Americans (including voters and nonvoters) reported being contacted by candidates, parties, or election-related groups in 2012.<sup>9</sup> By comparison, among all Americans who voted in 2012, more than half (53%) reported being contacted by campaigns, candidates, or other groups.<sup>10</sup> In another 2012 survey, 52% of Asians said they had not been contacted by Democrats and 64% said they hadn't been contacted by Republicans within the past 2 years. And even among those who were self-described Independents—the very folks often targeted as swing voters by both sides—the number saying they had not been contacted was close to 6 in 10 for both parties.<sup>11</sup>

After 2012, the Republican Party's post-election analysis found that they needed to make strides in outreach to nonwhites, including Asian Americans. Yet, neither party has made major improvements in their outreach. In a 2014 exit poll conducted by Asian American Decisions, 42% of Asian American voters said they were contacted by a political party or community organization.<sup>12</sup> Another Asian American survey from APIA Vote and Asian Americans Advancing Justice in October of 2014 found that two-thirds of registered voters had not been contacted by Democrats and three-quarters had not been contacted by Republicans.<sup>13</sup> While Asian Americans were a central part of Democratic victories and Republican losses in 2012, they remain under-valued in partisan electoral outreach.

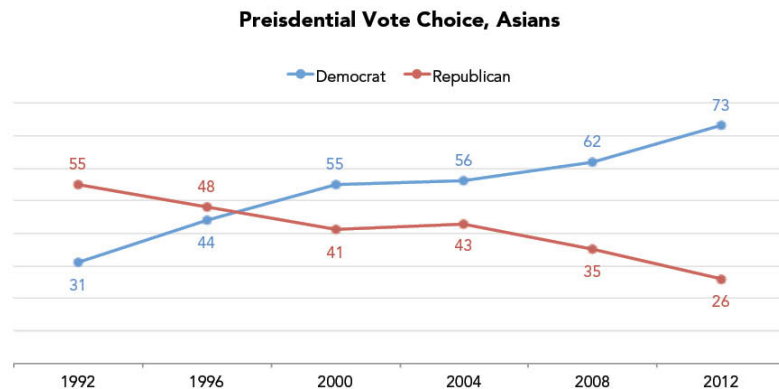
## **Reason #3**

### **Partisan attachment is thin and uneven among Asian Americans.**

Given the lopsided margins that President Obama won among Asian voters in 2012 (beating Gov. Romney by 47 points), one might expect these voters to overwhelmingly

identify as Democrats. Yet survey research doesn't bear this out. Survey data demonstrates that nearly half (47%) of Asian Americans say they are politically Independent or don't think in those terms.<sup>14</sup> While they supported both candidate and President Obama in 2008 and 2012, they have not cemented as strong Democratic partisans, their political connections are relatively new and evolving, and their loyalty to Democrats should not be assumed.

Asian American voters flipped from supporting Republicans to Democrats in the 1990s and early 2000s. This shift in voting patterns may be partially due to Democrats intentionally wooing Asian voters. The booming economy of the 1990s, coupled with the Democratic Party's adoption of a pro-business identity during the Clinton years, has also been credited with drawing Asian support.<sup>15</sup> Yet even among presidential voters, surging support for Democratic candidates has not turned into partisan identification.



Source: National Exit Polls

Although comparable presidential exit poll data for 2012 is not available, prior surveys demonstrate that partisan identification among Asian Americans is divided, with a sizeable share of Independents. And Asian Americans are more likely to identify as Independents than the general public. In 1992, Asian voters were evenly split between the two parties, with a plurality identifying as an Independent. By 2000, Asians had shifted slightly towards the Democratic Party, with about three in ten identifying as a Republican and the same proportion as an Independent. Since then, the number of self-identified Democrats has fluctuated, but

Asians have largely tilted towards the Democratic Party, with a margin ranging from 3 to 15 points. The share of Republicans had hovered around three in ten, before falling to one-quarter in 2008. The proportion of Asians who are Independent has been stable, at about 35%, since 2004.

Party Identification in Presidential Exit Polls

	Democrat		Republican		Independent/Other	
	All	Asian	All	Asian	All	Asian
1992	38%	32%	35%	33%	27%	35%
1996	39%	34%	35%	39%	26%	27%
2000	39%	42%	35%	29%	27%	29%
2004	37%	34%	37%	31%	26%	36%
2008	39%	40%	32%	25%	28%	35%

Source: National Exit Polls

The shift in support towards Democrats can be explained through a combination of push and pull factors. One major component is that they are pushed away from Republicans by policies and rhetoric that foster feelings of social isolation on issues pertaining to identity and nationalism, such as immigration, which is especially crucial for a population with a high percentage of foreign born members.

The anti-immigrant fervor associated with Republicans in the 1990s particularly impacted the Asian community, as their blanket banishment from legal immigration loomed large in the group's collective memory.<sup>16</sup> And current Republican intransigence on this issue inhibits their ability to connect with many Asian Americans. Of the approximately 11.2 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S., nearly 1.3 million (or 11%) are Asians (by comparison, Asians compose 5.3% of the U.S. population).<sup>17</sup> And approximately 1.8 million (out of 4.3 million) of the backlog of immigrants waiting for years (sometimes decades) for family visas are among Asians.<sup>18</sup> These facts on the ground affect Asian American political attitudes. For example, 58% of Asian Americans agree that undocumented immigrants should have the opportunity to become U.S. citizens—up 26 points from 2008. Only 26% oppose citizenship and 16% are neutral.<sup>19</sup> In a 2013 survey, 72% of Asian Americans supported a pathway to citizenship if undocumented immigrants met certain requirements.<sup>20</sup> And 22% of Asians say that family visa backlogs are a very serious

problem for them or their family directly, with another 16% saying they are a fairly serious problem. Less than half (46%) responded that family visa backlogs were not a serious problem for them or their family. <sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Republican policies in the 2000s, especially opposition to healthcare reform and ending the Iraq War, pushed Asian voters away from the party. <sup>22</sup> And the emphasis on Christianity and Christian values, which has come to guide social conservatism within the Republican Party over the past few decades, has less appeal to Asian Americans than with the general public. Only 42% of Asians identify as Christian, and 39% say religion is very important to their life. By contrast, 75% of the U.S. general public is Christian, and 58% say religion is very important in their life. <sup>23</sup>

But if you look beyond the presidential races, Asian voters have supported both Democratic and Republican candidates in recent elections. In 2008, Asian voters in Virginia supported President Obama. In one precinct where 45% of voters are of Asian heritage, the President won 63% of the vote. But in 2009, Virginia Republican gubernatorial candidate Bob McDonnell courted the Asian community heavily and won 52% of the vote in the same district. <sup>24</sup> In California, Republican Governor Schwarzenegger garnered 62% of the Asian vote in 2006. <sup>25</sup> Four years later, Democratic Governor Jerry Brown won 57% of the Asian vote. <sup>26</sup> At the state level, Republican governors have successfully appealed to Asian voters.

According to the 2014 exit polls, Asian Americans actually supported Republicans on the House generic ballot over Democrats by one point (50% to 49%). This figure should be treated with some caution as another survey of just Asian Americans with a larger sample found that they supported Democrats 66% to 34%. <sup>27</sup> Still, even with the numbers more favorable to Democrats, Asian American support is lower than in 2012. Taken together, these data demonstrate that this

group is not solidly aligned with either camp and remain swing voters.

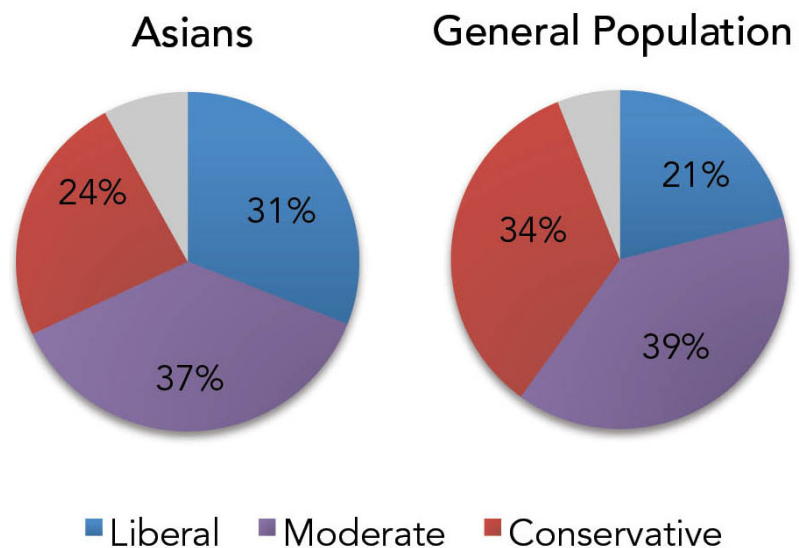
## Reason #4

### Asian Americans do not hold ideologically-driven political beliefs.

As we noted above, Asian American support for Democratic presidential candidates has skyrocketed over the past two decades. But we should be cautious about interpreting what that means. Thus far, data suggest that Asian Americans are not ideologically liberal—making their attachment to the Democratic Party tenuous.

In the 2008 National Asian American Survey, 21% identified as liberal, 15% as conservative, and 33% as moderate, while 31% did not identify with any of these choices.<sup>28</sup> Nearly two-thirds of Asians essentially opted out of the liberal-conservative dichotomy that has come to dominate much of partisan politics. In a 2012 Pew survey, a plurality (37%) identified as a moderate with another 8% (voluntarily) opting out.<sup>29</sup> About one-quarter (24%) identified as conservative and 31% as liberal.

### Asian Ideology 2011



Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press



It's not just the label. Asian American political values differ by issue and subgroup. By 19 points (55% to 36%), Asians prefer a bigger government providing more services over a smaller government providing fewer services—a near reversal of views among the general U.S. public. However, native born Asian Americans are split (44% to 48%) on this issue.<sup>30</sup>

Rather than being driven by philosophical agreement with liberalism, Asian American views appear more correlated with group experiences. For example, 69% of Vietnamese Americans support a bigger government providing more services. By contrast, only 49% of Indian Americans agree.<sup>31</sup> This gap could be explained by the fact that Vietnamese Americans are more likely to have received government assistance based on their refugee status than other groups. Between 1975 and 1986, the U.S. government spent approximately \$5 billion on refugee assistance programs.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, recent increases in the Indian American population are attributed to the increase in H-1B visas, which are awarded to immigrants with specialized skills, training, or knowledge. Indian Americans received about 54% of H-1B visas in 2008.<sup>33</sup>

Indian Americans are 10 points less likely than Asian Americans overall to support a bigger government providing more services (+9 for Indian Americans compared to +19 for Asian Americans).<sup>34</sup> Their higher skill set and income may explain their lower levels of support. Seventy percent of Indian Americans have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 49% of Asian Americans overall and 28% of the total U.S. And median household income is \$88,000 for Indian Americans, topping Asian Americans (\$66,000) and the general U.S. population (\$49,800).<sup>35</sup>

More broadly, Asian Americans display optimism about individual efficacy in America. Fully 69% of Asian Americans believe that people who work hard can get ahead—compared to 58% of the general population.<sup>36</sup> Asian Americans aren't locked in ideologically nor do they fit the existing party splits on every issue. And a one-size-fits-all approach to engaging

Asian Americans voters will miss important distinctions within the community.

## **Reason #5**

### **The “Asian American” label masks internal diversity in experiences and beliefs.**

While we tend to speak of “Asian Americans” as a monolithic cultural identity group, they represent 19 different countries. The Asian identity is in fact largely ascribed by outsiders. Fewer than twenty percent of Asian Americans self-identify as “Asian” or “Asian American.”<sup>37</sup> Rather, they are much more likely to identify based on their ancestral country of origin or simply call themselves Americans. By considering all Asians to be of one mind, politicians, political parties, and prognosticators mask their diverse experiences, languages, and traditions. And they fail to consider the implications of the immigrant experience and integration into the U.S. that have resulted in divergent outlooks within the community.

While the Asian American label does encapsulate some shared experiences (e.g., immigration status) and general commonalities, such as boasting higher average levels of education and the highest percentage of foreign-born group members of any major racial or ethnic group in the country, these common elements should not mask important distinctions.<sup>38</sup> The largest subgroups, based on ancestors’ homes, are Chinese (excluding Taiwanese) at 22% of the Asian American population, Filipinos at 20%, Indian Americans at 18%, Vietnamese and Koreans with 10% a piece, and Japanese at 8%. Other Asian heritages comprise 2% of the Asian American population or less.<sup>39</sup> It’s not surprising, then, that only 19% identify as “Asian” or “Asian American,” with the bulk (62%) identifying based on their ancestor’s country of birth (i.e. Chinese American), and another 14% simply as American. There are also variations based on country of birth, whereby 69% of those who are foreign-born identify primarily with their birth country and only 43% of

native-(U.S.) born Asians identify with their familial country of origin. <sup>40</sup>

Asian Americans tend to be stereotyped as highly educated, and data indicates there is some truth to that assumption. Nearly half (49%) hold a Bachelor's degree or higher—far outstripping any other racial or ethnic group in our country, as well as the national average (28%). <sup>41</sup> When comparing solely recent immigrants, 61% of recent Asian immigrants ages 25–64 have a high school degree, fully twice as many as the 30% among recent non-Asian immigrants. <sup>42</sup> And 65% of recent Asian immigrants 18 and older have some college experience, compared to 58% for white, 38% for black, and 16% for Hispanic recent immigrants. <sup>43</sup>

But educational attainment varies widely by ancestral country. The groups with the highest proportion of Bachelor's degrees (or professional degrees) are Taiwanese Americans (73%) and Indian Americans (68%). Conversely, the lowest levels of education are found in the Hmong (14%), Cambodian (14%), and Laotian (12%) American communities—who, along with sizeable numbers of Vietnamese Americans, came to the U.S. primarily as refugees. <sup>44</sup>

The diversity among Asian Americans isn't only demographic. Surveys demonstrate different views on key issues between subgroups and show divergent rates of partisanship. On social issues, Christian Asian Americans display more conservative views. Among Filipino Americans, 89% are Christian, including 65% who are Catholic. And 70% of Korean Americans are Christian, including 61% who are Protestant. <sup>45</sup> Half of each group thinks abortion should be illegal in all or most cases—14 points higher than Asian Americans as a whole. <sup>46</sup>

Both of these groups differ from Asian Americans writ large on ideology. One-third of Filipino Americans and Korean Americans describe themselves as ideologically conservative, nine points higher than among all Asian Americans. Given the higher portion of Christians among this group, that is unsurprising. There are partisan differences as well. By 20

points, Vietnamese Americans are less likely to identify as Democrats than Korean Americans.<sup>47</sup>

These widely divergent experiences and backgrounds necessitate a sophisticated and disaggregated outreach approach from political parties and candidates—not simply one-note appeals to some pan-Asian identity.

## Conclusion

Asian American participation in civic life lags other groups and their ties to political parties are thin. While they have supported Democrats in the past two presidential elections by wide margins, their experiences and issue positions don't align perfectly with an ideologically liberal or conservative political agenda. Asian American diversity and distinct experiences are often overlooked and not well understood in national political debates. This untapped source of power is open to appeals from both parties.

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