

## OPINION

# Getting Out the Asian-Pacific-American Vote

## The Value in the Unpredictable

BY JAMES G. GIMPEL AND WENDY K. TAM CHO

For all the talk about Hispanic mobilization in this election year, the Asian-Pacific-American (APA) population largely has been overlooked and unstudied. The potential implications of this oversight are not trivial.

While less numerous than Hispanics, the APA population is the fastest growing minority group in the country, and it is an important presence in a number of states. Not only California and Hawaii, but also Arizona, Nevada, Alaska, Utah and Washington, in the West; Missouri and Illinois in the Midwest; New Jersey, Maryland, New York and Massachusetts in the Northeast; and Texas and Virginia in the South.

Not all of these states are major battlegrounds, but Nevada, Missouri, Arizona and Washington certainly fit the bill, while New Jersey and Virginia could easily heat up by October. APA voters are most consequential in areas where elections are closely decided, such as Oregon, Wisconsin, New Hampshire and Florida (with 111,000 registered APA voters). Presidential bids aside, the APA population is of consequence to innumerable down ballot races around the nation.

### California is not the APA Nation

The dominant image of APAs has been and continues to be California-centric, based on research of the Golden State's 2 million APA voters. Only 40

percent of the nation's eligible APA voters live in California, (11 percent reside in Hawaii), and the other 49 percent live elsewhere.

Parties and candidates are wrong to assume that APAs in California are representative of those in the rest of the nation. California APAs have been influenced by the unique history and context of their experience in that state, so they are not representative of all APAs. A large proportion of California's APAs live in the left-leaning San Francisco Bay area and have inevitably been influenced by the particular tone and tenor of political life there.

Similarly, the occasional poll out of New York City exhibiting a highly Democratic bias in the APA population should not surprise us. APAs are no different than other voters whose views are shaped by a combination of individual characteristics and local political context.

We would never deny the importance of the APA population in the Bay area. At the same time, we have no reason to expect that the APA diaspora would remain politically unaltered as it moves into other areas of the country, in places as diverse as Las Vegas, St. Louis, Houston or Tampa.

From a campaign standpoint, the desirability of a target group may not be its predictability, but the very opposite: its malleability. Many surveys show that APA voters are more likely to call them-

selves ideologically moderate than Hispanics.

Our study of a large sampling of locations excluding California shows that 26 percent of Asian Indians, 31 percent of Chinese-Americans, 20 percent of Japanese-Americans and 24 percent of Korean-Americans were registered as independent or unaffiliated. By comparison, only about 18 percent of remaining registered voters were enrolled as independent or unaffiliated.

Most studies underestimate just how much they may swing because these studies are based mainly on Californians.

Even the California research, however, suggests important fluctuations. In 1988 and 1992, California statistics indicated that APAs supported George H. W. Bush. In 1996 and 2000, they threw their support to the Democratic candidates, but only narrowly. Unfortunately, we know almost nothing about how the APA population voted in battleground states because their numbers, while politically consequential, are still too small to be reliably captured in exit polling.

### New Findings for APA GOTV

Our new research has found that at many locations outside California, the APA population thinks and acts differently. For the past eight months, we have studied Chinese, Korean, Asian Indian and Japanese registered voters in both battleground and non-battleground states. We have selected locations in the cities, suburbs and smaller towns.

California is a distinctive, perhaps exceptional, political setting, where

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## CONSULTANTS' CORNER

APAs have had a distinctive socialization experience that promotes high levels of participation. Outside of California, though, all bets are off. The link between Asian ethnicity and political identity is less reliable and predictable.

In California, candidates and parties work to mobilize APAs, not elsewhere. Because of smaller numbers, candidates question the amount of effort that should be expended toward corralling this group. At least one related study indicates that APAs in Chicago register in sizable numbers, but remain ignored by urban political party machinery.

Sometimes they are ignored because they are either new to the areas where they have settled, or because local political officials ignorantly assume that they are "foreigners" and therefore cannot vote. Despite this stereotype, many are born in America, and even among those who are not, foreign-born Asians naturalize in substantially higher proportions than immigrants from Mexico and Central America.

### A Heterogeneous Group

We cannot obtain a complete grasp of Asian Americans political inclinations by looking to prominent political organizations that usually represent and serve elite interests in Washington. There is no substitute for a candidate pounding the pavement in local APA neighborhoods in an effort to understand the issues that matter most to them. No bullet summary from some slick lobbying operation should be trusted to speak for every locale.

Part of APAs' political unpredictability is rooted in varying levels of income and education. The annual median income of APA households is \$52,635, the highest of any ethnic group. Forty-seven percent of APAs over 25 have a bachelor's degree or higher, the highest proportion of college graduates of any race or ethnic group. An astonishing 16 percent of APAs over 25 have an advanced degree, compared with a much lower 9 percent

for the entire population. At the same time, there are legions of APAs who struggle financially and do not occupy the lofty rungs of the well-educated.

Complicating the picture a bit more, the United States is home to several large ethnic groups and numerous smaller ones. The largest APA groups are from China, the Philippines and India, which is still classified under Asian-Pacific-American. Locally the picture is far more variable, with pockets of Koreans, Cambodians, Japanese, Laotians, Thai and Malaysians stirred

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into the mix. At the same time, these various subgroups, when found living in proximity to one another, resemble much more of a mixed salad than a melting pot. The groups maintain distinctive social networks and do not blend together.

So in what sense can we call APAs a group at all? Is it more of a help or a hindrance to think of them as a bloc? Perhaps it makes the most sense to think of them as local blocs or local communities, but not as a nationally cohesive group that can be characterized as a monolithic voting bloc.

A handful of issues are important to many APAs, though they are not universally shared. Some of these matters could be construed as traditional immigrant and minority concerns, such as immigration preferences, employment discrimination, hate crimes legislation, voting rights and government benefits.

The large proportion of middle income and professional APAs are not as likely to share an interest in social welfare policy as Hispanics or APAs who are on the lower economic rungs. And even a majority of California's APA vot-

ers favored keeping immigration levels the same, while only 25 percent favored increasing them, according to exit polls from November 2000.

Notably, some agenda items appear directly contrary to the aims of other minority groups, including the elimination of quotas or ceilings limiting the number of APAs at universities, and proposals to eliminate standardized testing for admission to college, which APAs believe could lead to discrimination against them. These concerns have mainly come up in California and Texas.

### Summing Up: Looking Ahead

Here are some tips for reaching this crucial voting bloc:

- Local ethnic media is a good start for reaching newer groups with fresh immigrant roots. Many APA communities rely on ethnically oriented media, particularly community newspapers. Some of these media are in Asian languages, so a facility with a willingness to communicate in multiple languages is important.
- For APAs in locations where their roots run deep, campaigns may not have to do anything special beyond making contact.
- Don't assume that APAs are all foreigners with foreign interests distinct from the rest of the local population.

Candidates who gloss over the APAs are making a couple of bad assumptions: that they aren't important to the outcome, and that the opposition is also ignoring them. Either one of these suppositions could determine whether they will be toasting victory or ruing defeat in November.

At present, neither presidential campaign appears to have this diverse bloc of voters sewn up as we move closer to the party conventions. Clearly if this election is remotely close to being as hard-fought as the previous one, the party that respects APA voters enough to approach them in their local contexts, could be securing some decisive Electoral votes. **CHE**