

## Florida's Asian- American Voters: Will They Make a Difference in November 2016?

By Lynne Holt  
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In 2012, Florida's voters chose Barak Obama over Mitt Romney by only 73,189 votes, less than 1% of all votes cast for president. Consequently, all of Florida's 29 electoral votes were assigned to the Democratic Party and were counted toward the number needed for the President to claim a second term in office. The presidential race in 2016 is shaping up to be a close race in which only a few states will influence the result. Political pundits would be wise to pay attention to the relatively small number of Asian-American voters in Florida and in other closely contested states. Their votes may just determine the outcome.

Asian-Americans have received relatively little attention in the 2016 presidential election, both in the nation as a whole and in Florida. Compared to African-Americans and Hispanics, they account for a small number and percentage of the overall population in states that have been historically classified as "swing" states. The largest populations of Asian-Americans reside in states such as California, New York, and New Jersey which predictably trend toward Democratic Party candidates in presidential general elections. However, the Asian-American demographic should garner more attention in the November 2016 election and in future elections because it is the fastest growing ethnic group in the country. Between 2000 and 2010, the Asian-American population grew from 10.2 million to 14.7 million in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> In Florida the number increased from 266,256 to 454,821.<sup>2</sup> In terms of percentages, the Asia-American population grew by almost 71% in Florida from 2000-2010 and 43% in the U.S. The estimated number of Florida's Asian-Americans is 544,068 or 2. 7% of Florida's overall population of almost 20.3 million, based on the most recent American Community Survey 2015 estimate. In the nation as a whole the percentage was a much higher 5. 4%, or over 17 million of the total U.S. population of over 321.4 million.<sup>3</sup>

The distribution of Asian-Americans is not uniform across Florida, as reflected in Table 1. Orange and Broward counties have roughly the same number of Asian -Americans, followed by Hillsborough, Duval, and Miami-Dade. Only Alachua County exceeds the national average of 5.6% Asian-Americans as a percentage of total population, perhaps in large part due to the presence of University of Florida and the County's large medical complex.

**Table 1**  
**Asian Alone Population, by Select Florida County**  
**(Arranged by number of Asians)**

County	Total	Asian-American	% Asian
Orange	1,288,126	68,409	5.3
Broward	1,896,425	67,759	3.6
Hillsborough	1,349,050	52,592	3.9
Duval	913,010	43,063	4.6
Miami-Dade	2,693,117	42,970	1.6

<sup>1</sup> Stefan Rayer, "Asians in Florida," Bureau of Economic and Business Research, University of Florida, August 27, 2014, <http://www.bebr.ufl.edu/population/website-article/asians-florida>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

Palm Beach	1,422,789	36,883	2.6
Pinellas	949,827	32,986	3.5
Seminole	449,144	19,083	4.2
Alachua	259,964	16,280	6.3
Brevard	568,088	12,952	2.3
Pasco	497,909	12,256	2.5
Lee	701,982	11,120	1.6
Polk	650,092	11,084	1.7

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey, 1- Year.

Asian-Americans come from different countries of origin with their own cultures, languages, and religions. The U.S. Census defines “Asian” as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam. It includes people who indicate their race as "Asian Indian," "Chinese," "Filipino," "Korean," "Japanese," "Vietnamese," and "Other Asian" or provide other detailed Asian responses.”<sup>4</sup> As with all ethnic or racial information in the U.S. Census, respondents to Census questions self-identify.

Florida differs from the United States as a whole in terms of its Asian-American population in that non-Taiwanese Chinese comprise the largest ethnic group within the Asian-American population, whereas in Florida, Asian-Indians comprise the largest ethnic group, with the Filipino population reported as the second largest. In recent years in Florida the percentage of Asian-Indians has declined slightly while that of non-Taiwanese Chinese has increased slightly.

As is the case with other populations such as Puerto Ricans and Cubans, the ethnic groups that comprise Florida’s Asian-American community tend to be more concentrated in some counties than in others. For example, Duval has a sizeable Filipino population, Orange has a large Vietnamese population, while Broward’s largest Asian-American population is Indian and Miami-Dade’s is Chinese.

### **Asian- American Voter Demographics in the U.S. and Florida**

Eligible voters must be U.S. citizens who are 18 years and older. Voting-age data for Florida and counties are available from the U.S. Census through the 2010-2014 American Community Survey. Approximately 71% of Florida’s total population are of voting age and are also citizens, resulting in an estimated eligible voter pool of almost 13.7 million. Of the state’s total number of eligible voters, a much smaller percentage of Florida’s Asian- American population was eligible to vote, an estimated 269,015 or almost 2% of the state’s total estimated voter population.<sup>5</sup> The question is: what can we say about this population of eligible voters and will they actually vote in November?

Not much research has been conducted on Asian-American eligible voters, particularly in states like Florida with small concentrations of such voters. In part, this population tends to be heterogeneous and a large number live in states such as California, New York, and New Jersey which are not considered swing states. Nonetheless, Census data and survey findings by Pew Research Center and the organization, Asian

<sup>4</sup> For the racial classification definition used by the Census Bureau, see Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity, Federal Register Notice, October 30, 1997, [https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/fedreg\\_1997standards](https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/fedreg_1997standards).

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census, Voting Age Population by Citizen and Race, 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5 Year Estimates.

and Pacific Islander American Vote (APIA), may provide some insights regarding what to expect in terms of this group of voters and the potential barriers to their civic participation. From these surveys and Census data, we know that Asian-Americans constitute the fastest growing racial/ethnic group of voters; they have increasingly embraced the Democratic Party; and they lag behind other racial/ethnic groups in terms of voter turnout. Certain socio-economic characteristics may make them more inclined to vote for the Democratic Party nominee in this election. Below is a summary of some of the most prominent features of this eligible voter population.

- A. **Fast growing voter base.** Nationwide the number of Asian-American eligible voters is projected to increase by 16% from 8 million in 2012 to 9.2 million in 2016. The 16% increase would be slightly less than that of Hispanics (17%) but far greater than that of African Americans (6%). By contrast, whites only accounted for 2% of the growth rate of the total number of white voters. Since 2012, most of the increase in Asian-American eligible voters has come from naturalizations, the legal process by which immigrants to the U.S. can become U.S. citizens.<sup>6</sup>

Florida, like the nation as a whole, witnessed a rapid growth in the percentage of eligible Asian-American voters in recent years. The Asian-American eligible voter population increased in Florida by 25% from 2008 to 2012 compared with a growth rate of 6.7% in the eligible voter base statewide.<sup>7</sup>

- B. **Trending toward the Democratic Party.** Asian-Americans have tended to vote nationwide for Democratic Party candidates for president in recent years. That was not always the case, however. In 1992, exit polls showed that Asian-Americans were evenly divided in their identification with the Democratic and Republican parties. Beginning in 2000, they began to shift more to the Democratic Party. Table 2 below shows the shift over time:<sup>8</sup>

**Table 2**  
**Party Identification in National Presidential Exit Polls 1992-2008**  
**Asian-American Voters**

<b>Election Year</b>	<b>Democrat</b>	<b>Republican</b>	<b>Independent/Other</b>
1992	32%	33%	35%
1996	34%	39%	27%
2000	42%	29%	29%
2004	34%	31%	36%
2008	40%	25%	35%

Source: Third Way, January 2015

No comparable national exit poll was conducted for the 2012 presidential election but other national data show that Asian-American voters' identification with the Democratic Party was even

<sup>6</sup> Pew Research Center, "2016 Electorate will be the Most Diverse in U.S. History," February 3, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/03/2016-election-will-be-the-most-diverse-in-u-s-history/>.

<sup>7</sup> APIAVote (Florida), April 19, 2016, at <http://www.apiavote.org/sites/apiavote/files/Archive/FL2016.pdf>. APIAVote bases its estimates on a broader data set which includes Asian Alone or in combination and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander Alone or in combination.

<sup>8</sup> Michelle Diggles, "The Untapped Political Power of Asian Americans," Third Way, January 8, 2015, <http://www.thirdway.org/report/the-untapped-political-power-of-asian-americans>.

greater in 2012 than in 2008, with 77% indicating they had voted for Barak Obama and 21% reporting they had voted for Mitt Romney in the 2012 election.<sup>9</sup>

As noted above, the Asian-American population is a multi-ethnic population and there is considerable variability among ethnicities in terms of their partisan support. For example, voters of Vietnamese ethnicity voted in a larger percentage for Mitt Romney than for Barak Obama but Asian-Indians and Chinese were much more supportive of Obama than Romney in 2012, with over 80% of voters in those two ethnic groups supporting Obama. Voters of Filipino ethnicity were less inclined to vote for Obama than those of Chinese and Indian origin, with two-thirds of Filipino-American voters supporting Obama and one-third voting for Romney.<sup>10</sup>

Candidate support does not necessarily translate into party affiliations. Although over three-fourth of Asian-Americans voted to re-elect President Obama in 2012, a large segment of the Asian-American population nationwide has not identified with either political party. Of those Asian-American registered voters polled by APIA in spring 2016, 47% identified as Democrats, 15% as Republicans, and 37% with neither party. Vietnamese, males, foreign born, and respondents 18 to 34 years old were most likely to say that they did not identify with either major party.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of favorability, Asian-American registered voters rated the Democratic Party more positively (64%) than the Republican Party (31%) and there were more favorable ratings for the Democratic Party in 2016 than in 2014 (55%).<sup>12</sup> In short, the trend toward supporting the Democratic Party has increased over time.

- C. **Socio-economic Profile.** Asian-Americans on average have a higher median household income (\$66,000) and higher education level (49% with a bachelor's degree) than the U.S. population as a whole of whom 28% had obtained a bachelor's degree and which had a median household income of almost \$50,000 in 2010.<sup>13</sup> In terms of average income, there is considerable variability among the Asian-American ethnic groups, with Asian-Indian and Chinese households earning more on average than Vietnamese and Korean households. Asian-American households tend to be larger on average than those of the U.S. population and household wealth (all assets) is greater on average for Asian-Americans than for the U.S. population as a whole.<sup>14</sup>
- D. **Policy Issues of Importance.** Asian-Americans tend to consider education as very important. In the 2016 spring survey by APIA asking registered Asian-American voters to rank 13 election-related issues in terms of importance, education was ranked as being 'extremely important' by the highest percentage of registered voters (48%), slightly more important overall than jobs and the economy which usually receives top billing among U.S. voters in opinion polls. Younger and

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<sup>9</sup> The Asian American League and Education Fund, "The Asian American Vote: A Report on the Multilingual Exit Poll from the 2012 Presidential Election," December 18, 2015, <http://aaldef.org/AALDEF%20Asian%20American%20Exit%20Poll%20Presentation%202012.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> APIAVote and Asian American Advancing Justice, "Inclusion, Not Exclusion: Spring 2016 Asian American Voter Survey," Table 17, May 22, 2016, <http://www.apivote.org/sites/apivote/files/Inclusion-2016-AAVS-final.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Table 2.

<sup>13</sup> Based on 2010 data. Pew Research Center, "The Rise of Asian Americans," April 4, 2013, updated, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/06/19/the-rise-of-asian-americans/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

working-age Asian-Americans considered jobs and the economy to be roughly as important as education, whereas seniors, 65 years old and older, considered the threat of terrorist attacks to be the single most important election-related issue.<sup>15</sup>

Immigration reform ranked last among the 13 issues in the APIA survey. Nonetheless, nearly three-fourth of Asian-American adults surveyed were born outside the U.S. and almost 60% still have family in their countries of origin. Perhaps because of those factors they are also sensitive to anti-immigration rhetoric, and the youngest age cohort (18-34 years old) seemed most sensitive to the growing hostility toward immigrants as a very-important election issue.<sup>16</sup>

To probe whether anti-immigration rhetoric would affect votes, APIA asked in its 2016 survey: “If a political candidate expressed strongly anti-immigrant views, but you agreed with him or her on other issues, would you still vote for that candidate, or would you vote for someone else?” The survey found that 40% of Asian-American registered voters would switch their support. Korean respondents (50%) were particularly predisposed to that response. Moreover, younger Asian-Americans (51%) felt more strongly about rejecting a candidate with anti-immigrant views than older voters.<sup>17</sup>

- E. **Relatively Low Voter Turnout.** Despite their relatively greater affluence and level of education, Asian-American voter turnout lags behind that of other populations in presidential elections.<sup>18</sup> Table 3 presents the percentage of Asian-Americans, compared to other populations who voted in the 2012 presidential election:<sup>19</sup>

**Table 3**  
**Voter Participation and Turnout by Ethnicity/Race, 2012 Presidential Election**

	<b>Non-Hispanic White</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Asian-American</b>
<b>Voted (among adult citizens)</b>	64%	48%	66%	47%
<b>Registered to Vote (among adult citizens)</b>	73%	59%	73%	56%

<sup>15</sup> APIAVote and Asian American Advancing Justice, “Inclusion, Not Exclusion: Spring 2016 Asian American Voter Survey,” Table 12

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., Table 10. According to the report, this same level of negativity was expressed in 2014, when 41% of respondents who were asked the same question indicated they would vote for someone else.

<sup>18</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, non-voters in the general population tend to be less affluent and educated than likely voters. See Pew Research Center, “Nonvoters: Who They Are, What They Think,” November 1, 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/11/01/nonvoters-who-they-are-what-they-think>.

<sup>19</sup> Karthick Ramakrishnan and Farah Z. Ahmad, “State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Series A Multifaceted Portrait of a Growing Population,” Center for American Progress, September 2014, <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/AAPISReport-comp.pdf>.

<b>Voted (among registered voters)</b>	87%	82%	91%	84%
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Source: Center for American Progress, September 2014

This under-representation is likely due to the relative large percentage of Asian-Americans who are foreign-born and therefore have had less exposure to the U.S. political process. Clearly, a significant step in engaging Asian-Americans in the political process is through voter registration because 84% of Asian-American registered voters cast a ballot in the 2012 presidential election. It remains to be seen if future presidential elections will succeed in improving the registration rate and voter-turnout of Asian-Americans.

### **Looking Toward the Futures/Challenges Ahead**

Immigration from the Chinese and Indians now outpaces Mexican newcomers in most parts of the U.S. According to an analysis by the Wall Street Journal, there were 31 states with more immigrants coming from China than from Mexico in 2014.<sup>20</sup> Politicians may be wise to pay attention to this demographic change and what it portends for the future.

In terms of sheer numbers Asian-American voters do not carry the same heft at the moment as African-American and Latino voters. Nonetheless, U.S. Census projections show that the population could increase from 5.4% of total eligible voters in 2015 to as much as 6.9% of the nation’s voter-age population by 2030 and 9.4% by 2060, making this population a formidable political constituency.<sup>21</sup> While the percentage of Asian-America voters in 2030 and 2060 will likely be lower for Florida than the national average (assuming current population growth trends persist) the growth rate in Florida could still be a determining factor for election outcomes in close presidential races in the state as a proportionately larger segment of the Asian-American population joins the eligible voter pool by 2065.

Yet, several challenges exist in any strategic efforts to increase their political power, as summarized below. Crafting a strategic approach to civically engaging Asian-Americans is difficult for several reasons related to understanding their attitudes, overcoming language barriers, and being sensitive to varying cultural mores.

For starters, developing reliable survey instruments is often a precondition for understanding attitudes. Because the Asian-American population is small relative to other ethnic groups, it is difficult to poll them with any precision in surveys of the U.S. adult population. For example, the Pew Research Center typically conducts surveys of at least 1,000 adult respondents. If the survey is perfectly representative, it would have only 54 Asians, a sample too small to provide a reliable assessment of their perspectives and attitudes.<sup>22</sup>

Related to that challenge is the matter of English proficiency. Over a third of Asian-Americans are not proficient in English. Translation is a barrier, both in terms of polls and outreach, because each ethnic group speaks a different language. But language is not the only challenge. Another is the sensitivity and

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<sup>20</sup> Janet Adamy and Paul Overberg, ‘Immigration Flow Shows a Shift,’ The Wall Street Journal, September 7, 2016, A4.

<sup>21</sup> Pew Research Center, ‘The Challenges of Polling Asian Americans.’

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

nuances of the language used in surveys and outreach efforts and how they will be understood by the various ethnicities.<sup>23</sup>

Asian-Americans tend to be relatively recent immigrants. Asian-Americans have a higher percentage of foreign-born residents from that demographic, 66% in 2015, compared to 35% Hispanic, 9% black, and 4% white.<sup>24</sup> The proportion of foreign-born Asian-Americans was slightly less (63%) in Florida than the percentage for the nation as a whole.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps because of a combination in many states of relatively small numbers and language-related issues, outreach to Asian-Americans who are eligible to vote appears to be less than optimal. APIA's 2016 Spring Survey attempted to capture the degree to which Asian-Americans feel politically engaged by asking whether they were contacted by the Democratic Party, Republican Party, or community organizations "in the past year: a great deal, some, a little, or not at all." The majority of respondents reported that neither major political party nor any community organization contacted them. The Democratic Party reportedly contacted more respondents (33%) than the Republican Party (23%) and community organizations (25%) indicating there is more work to be done.

What are the ongoing outreach plans for the 2016 presidential election? According to one news story, Hillary Clinton's campaign involves courting Asian-American voters in three states, Nevada, Virginia, and Pennsylvania.<sup>26</sup> In Florida, the National Committee of Asian-American Republicans, which lists five chapters in Florida on its website (<http://www.asian.gop/chapters>) reports participation in activities to defeat Hillary Clinton. The Trump Campaign also formed an Asian Pacific American Advisory Committee with representatives from Florida. Democrats also have representation through organizations such as Duval County's Asian American Democratic Alliance. Moreover, the nonpartisan organization, the Asian American Federation of Florida has as its espoused goal to increase the voter registration of Asian-Americans.<sup>27</sup>

These and other organizations have their work cut out for them. Asian-Americans may feel disengaged from the political process. Specifically, 62% of respondents to the APIA 2016 Spring Survey agreed with the statement: "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on." Over half agreed with the statement "Public officials don't care much what people like me think."<sup>28</sup>

A multi-pronged approach to change the attitudes of disaffected Asian-Americans will be required because much depends on whether or not Asian-Americans are recent immigrants, are proficient in

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Anna Brown, "U.S. Immigrant Population Projected to Rise, Even as Share Falls Among Hispanics, Asians," Pew Research Center, March 9, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/09/u-s-immigrant-population-projected-to-rise-even-as-share-falls-among-hispanics-asians/>.

<sup>25</sup> 2015 American Community Survey 1-Year. Asian-Americans accounted for 2.7% of Florida's estimated total population and only an estimated 1% were native.

<sup>26</sup> Luciana Lopez, "Clinton Ramps Up Asian Outreach in Three Closely Fought States," Reuters, August 25, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-clinton-asians-idUSKCN110256>. See also Jeremy W. Peters, "Donald Trump is seen as Helping Push Asian-Americans onto Democratic Arms," The New York Times, October 1, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/us/politics/trump-asian-american-voters.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/us/politics/trump-asian-american-voters.html?_r=0), and Michelle Hackman and Dante Chinni, "Parties Boost Asian-American Outreach," The Wall Street Journal, A4.

<sup>27</sup> Frank Torres, "Asian American Community Town Hall Signals Group's Growing Influence in Orlando," The Orlando Political Observer, August 12, 2016, <http://orlando-politics.com/tag/asian-american-federation-of-florida/>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

English, identify with American culture, and rely on ethnic or mainstream media to get their information. For example, Vietnamese and, to a lesser extent, Chinese- Americans, at one end of the spectrum, use extensively all forms of Asian media (TV, newspaper, and Internet) to get their information, whereas Asian-Indians rely very little on those sources and largely on mainstream sources.<sup>29</sup>

Exposure to role models from one's ethnic background may also encourage civic engagement. At the national level that presents a challenge because Asian-Americans hold by one count only 2.4% of congressional seats in the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress and only 2% of state legislative seats.<sup>30</sup> However, there are other role models: Two current governors, Nikki Haley (South Carolina) and David Ige (Hawaii), are Asian-American.

Finally, nurturing voter participation is a long-term process and one that involves careful thought to both the method and content of engagement. According to a recent Wall Street Journal article, the Republican Party has an opportunity to appeal to Asian-Americans since they are not strongly tied to any political party and almost half of the respondents to the APIA Spring Survey consider themselves "moderate."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the article pointed to a strong entrepreneurial spirit on the part of Asian-Americans that appears to be aligned to Republican Party policies.<sup>32</sup> However, the anti-immigrant rhetoric of Donald Trump has proven to be unpopular with the majority of Asian- American eligible voters. In the shorter term, it remains to be seen whether Asian-Americans will help decide the November 2016 election in Florida and elsewhere. In the longer term, the more important question may be whether Asian-Americans will continue to shed support for Republican candidates in future presidential elections as the Party offers a shrinking tent for diverse ethnic groups.

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<sup>29</sup> APIAVote and Asian American Advancing Justice, "Inclusion, Not Exclusion: Spring 2016 Asian American Voter Survey," Table 8, a-c.

<sup>30</sup> The Economist, "The Model Minority is Losing Patience," October 3, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Gerald F. Seib, "Asian-Americans' Overlooked Election Effect," The Wall Street Journal, August 23, 2016, A4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.