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Atlantic County politicians court Asian-American vote

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A burgeoning Asian-American community is slowly changing the political landscape in Atlantic County.

Candidates running for U.S. Congress, county sheriff and freeholder, and municipal offices have been paying attention. Many of them made appearances last week at an Indian dinner in Galloway and an Eid-al-Fitr celebration in Atlantic City, organized by the Bangladesh Association of South Jersey.

While Asian-Americans are very diverse, culturally and ethnically, they represent a desirable voting block because many are politically unaffiliated and, among voters, tend to have a high turnout rate, said Jane Junn, a professor at Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics, who is Korean American.

Junn said Asian Americans are in a position similar to Hispanic Americans in the 1990s - and the Asian community is growing.

"It's maturing politically," Junn said. "Not only are the people who came 15, 10 years ago have acculturated to American politics and culture, their children, in college and about to go to college, are voters."

Asian Americans are the fastest growing minority group in New Jersey. The Garden State has 687,204 Asian Americans, the nation's third-highest *proportion* of Asian Americans (including people of mixed Asian descent) about 8 percent of the population of the state, according to *the U.S. Census Bureau's 2007 American Community Survey*.

Almost half of Asian Americans are also undecided voters: The National Asian American Survey, released last month, found 45 percent of Asian American voters in New Jersey are undecided, 38 percent support Obama and 17 percent support McCain. The national survey questioned 5,100 people in English and seven Asian languages.

Sensitive to these linguistic issues, McCain supporters have a Web site translated into Vietnamese, while Obama supporters posted online fliers translated into 14 languages, such as Arabic, Chinese and Hindi.

Local movers, shakers

Local Asian Americans have also taken initiative.

Mohammed Z. Islam is an enthusiastic Democrat. The Atlantic City accountant has volunteered with the local party since 1990. He believes Barack Obama will change Washington and improve the economy.

Islam, along with other Bangladeshi and South Asian organizers, registered more than 50 new voters. They have also been reminding people to go to the polls.

In contrast, Pravin Khatiwala, a hotel company owner from Ventnor, is registered as an independent, but has been a political volunteer since 1998 for mostly Republican candidates. Khatiwala supports John McCain and the local Republican party "because they run government like a business," and believes they can create more jobs and wealth.

Khatiwala and another hotel businessman, Basant Gupta, registered about 40 new voters within the Indian

American community.

Asian American links

Biographical information about the candidates may appeal to the candidates:

Republican John McCain's experience fighting communists during the Vietnam War could attract some voters. McCain's family also adopted a daughter from Bangladesh, Bridget McCain, who has appeared on the campaign trail. Democrat Barack Obama was raised in Hawaii and Indonesia, and his Asian American half-sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng, is campaigning on his behalf.

Courtship in Atlantic

Both the Atlantic County Democratic and Republican parties have reached out to the different Asian American communities by attending events and through volunteers.

At the Bangladeshi celebration, of more more than 200 people, Lorenzo Langford, a former Atlantic City mayor and Democrat running for office, said he's established a rapport with Asian Americans and held coffee gatherings with the Chinese, Bangladeshi, Korean, Vietnamese and Pakistani communities.

At the Indian dinner, U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo, R-2nd, said he worked to improve relations between India and America, and sheriff candidate Frank Balles, a Pleasantville police officer, said there needs to be more Asian Americans in law enforcement.

In northern New Jersey, there are Asian Americans in office - with Assemblyman Upendra Chivukula, D-Middlesex, Somerset, who is Indian American, and state Senator Kevin O'Toole, R-Essex, who is part Korean - and in central New Jersey, with Mayors Jun Choi, of Edison, who is Korean American, and Cecilia Xie Birge, of Montgomery Township, who was born in China.

In Atlantic County, Democrats hit a political record this year with 12 Asian Americans serving as party committeemen out of 269 elected members. The Atlantic County Republican party has one Asian American committeeman.

Even independent politicians are also reaching out to Asian American voters.

Joseph Polillo, who is running for Atlantic City mayor, held fundraisers at Filipino and Vietnamese restaurants and distributed fliers in Bengali and Vietnamese.

Tien Nhan, a Galloway construction contractor, helped Polillo by handing out fliers and talking to residents. Nhan, who grew up in Atlantic City and is Vietnamese American, said he's witnessed the Asian American population grow and seen more politicians show up at community functions.

Still, Nhan believes Asian Americans get overlooked, and they need to become more active.

"They should step up and get to know the politicians, so they can get to know us better," Nhan said. "That would make us part of the community, instead of hiding, or not speak(ing) up."

E-mail Michelle Lee:

MLee@pressofac.com

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