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Asian Americans strong environmentalists, poll finds

by Ngoc Nguyen

New America Media

Asian-American voters in California care about the environment and could swing votes on environmental measures, a new poll has found, bucking conventional wisdom.

The groundbreaking multilingual poll, released in early May, surveyed 1,002 Asian-American voters on their views about environmental issues and compared results to a poll of 564 state voters. Interviews were conducted with Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese and Asian Indian voters.

"Asian Americans should be paid attention to," said James Lau, executive director of the California League of Conservation Voters Education Fund, which commissioned the poll. "They are supportive of a lot of environmental issues."

Asian Americans made up about 10 percent of California voters in the 2008 elections. If tapped by environmental activists, this fast-growing voting bloc could be a powerful swing vote on environmental policy legislation, advocates say.

Environmental issues are extremely or very important to them personally, said 74 percent of respondents, compared to 66 percent of state voters.

Eighty-three percent of Asian Americans describe themselves as "environmentalists," while 52 percent of all California voters consider themselves environmentalists. That number was even higher for Chinese Americans, with 96 percent calling themselves environmentalists.

"No one's really talked to Asians in this large of a sample size," said Roger Kim, executive director of Asian Pacific Environmental Network, a Richmond-based advocacy group. "The poll found they have a

strong affinity to support environmental measures.?

Seventy-one percent of those polled said they view environmental regulations as beneficial and protective of health, air and water, while just 12 percent viewed environmental laws as bad for business.

The top three environmental issues among Asian-American voters are global warming, water shortages and dependence on foreign oil.

The interviews with voters were conducted in English, Korean, Chinese and Vietnamese, with more than three-fourths of Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese respondents opting for in-language polling.

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Paul Ong, a professor of public affairs at UCLA who participated in focus groups related to the poll, said translation of words such as "environmentalist" and "environmentalism" was an important consideration.

"The word does not translate very easily into Asian languages, due to the cultural context of the term," he said. "Translating the term environment too narrowly as "your immediate surroundings" yields narrow answers."

Nadia Kim, a sociology professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles who reviewed the Korean translation of the poll, said an environmentalist was described as a "protector of nature."

In addition to general and open-ended questions, Kim said, the poll asked specific questions that made clear to people what it means to protect the environment (recycling, donating money, or local cleanups) and what is the best way to achieve change (policy change, local actions).

Lau said his organization plans to analyze the poll results for a generational breakdown in the coming weeks. "It is broken out by how long they've lived here," Lau said. "It will be interesting to see where it falls along generational lines."

The high level of preference for interviews in Cantonese, Vietnamese and Korean suggests that respondents are more likely to be immigrants than U.S.-born, Ong said. He noted that Asian Americans view global warming through both a local and global lens, where concerns touch on environmental degradation in their hometowns and home countries.

Kim said Korean Americans' perceptions of air quality in Los Angeles were impacted by their experience of pollution in their home country.

"Rapid development in [South] Korea has led to acid rain," she said. "Korean Americans who go back to visit are told to put up umbrellas and take measures to protect themselves against it."

Disasters in other parts of the world may also be playing a role in getting Koreans interested in the environment, she said. "As people hear about Katrina, acid rain, the tsunami, they have to see there's something larger affecting the small."

Ngoc Nguyen is environmental editor for New America Media.

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