

Asian vote holds key for Obama

With the presidential election set to be decided in a few swing states, mobilising ethnic groups' support has taken on a new importance. Greg Torode Updated on Oct 14, 2008 Asian-Americans could be about to swing a US presidential election for the first time. Given their traditional role as perennial bridesmaids in US politics, that might seem like a bold statement. But it is a fact not lost on either the campaign of Republican John McCain or, in particular, that of Democratic rival Barack Obama in what is already shaping up as an unusually important and historic election.

Conventional polling wisdom puts Senator Obama close to securing enough electoral college votes to win on November 4.

The well-funded and organised Obama machine is now making ground on Senator McCain in traditional Republican strongholds, as well as battleground states like Virginia, Ohio, Florida and New Hampshire. If any of these fall to Senator Obama, the first black American presidential nominee, it would be enough to give him the White House.

When you consider that the population of Asian-Americans in many of these states, including Virginia, Florida and Nevada, has more than doubled in the past two decades, it is clear they could have an impact in any tight races.

"I've been actively involved in every election since 1972 and, let me tell you, I have never seen anything quite like this," said Robert Gee, a well-connected third-generation Chinese-American.

"I have never seen this level of enthusiasm to go after Asian-American voters ... this could have a real impact for the first time; it really is quite incredible."

Mr Gee was an assistant energy secretary in the second Clinton administration and is a member of the Committee of 100, a non-partisan grouping of influential Chinese-Americans. He is campaigning for Senator Obama in Virginia. "The Obama campaign has clearly learned something from the Republicans in recent elections," Mr Gee said. "It is no secret that Obama is microtargeting undecided voters ... with technology like e-mail and the internet and SMS, it is amazing what you can achieve with specific groups. It is enabling ethnic targeting and participation in a way you couldn't even imagine before."

Virginia is a particularly fascinating case study on the Asian-American front.

Bordering Washington, it is known as a traditional southern state with a decidedly Republican bent; the modern Democratic Party has not carried the state in a presidential election since John F. Kennedy's victory in 1960.

The fact that Senator Obama is in with a chance in Virginia speaks volumes about not just his organisation and appeal, but the state of the US economy and the legacy of eight controversial years of Republican rule.

The south of the state has tobacco plantations, mountains and coast, including the huge naval bases and shipbuilding yards of Chesapeake Bay. In the north, the spacious, comfortable

Virginian suburbs outside Washington house key elements of the US military-industrial complex - the Pentagon, the CIA and the many firms that service them. The state is also home to a significant hi-tech corridor.

Chinese, Koreans, Vietnamese and South Asians, among other groups, have firmly established themselves in the area in recent decades, drawn by good jobs, good schools and its reputation as a good place to run a small enterprise. All up, the Asian-American population accounts for an estimated 5.5 per cent of Virginia's 7.6 million people - a higher rate than the national figure, which a 2006 census put at just under 5 per cent.

As the state moves into battleground status, both candidates are desperately seeking its 13 electoral college votes. Senator Obama staged a key rally on its Atlantic seaboard at Newport News the weekend before last. Senator McCain and his deputy, Sarah Palin, were due to speak at Virginia Beach overnight (HK time).

Less visibly, campaign workers have been setting up offices across the state. Some are geared to targeting specific groups, whether it be the Filipino naval stewards and their families in Norfolk, or the estimated 100,000 Vietnamese, many of them linked to the former southern elite in that country who followed their US patrons home after the fall of Saigon in 1975.

Senator McCain's campaign workers warn of an uphill battle in the state, one that mirrors their candidate's struggle on the national stage. "We are doing our best, but we are getting the sense that we are being outgunned among Asians in Virginia," said one McCain activist.

"We know Obama has been registering a great many new and undecided voters. But we'll be fighting until the last day, and there is still plenty of time left."

The strength of Senator McCain, a prisoner of war in Hanoi, lies with the Vietnamese community. Some voters, particularly younger ones, admire the political courage he displayed in putting old enmities aside to push for normalisation of US-Vietnamese relations in the 1990s.

Older soldiers and retired intelligence officers, far more hostile towards ties with modern Vietnam, gather to sip coffee in the Vietnamese cafes of Fairfax County, and talk of his inner strength in standing up to communist torturers in the notorious Hanoi "Hilton" jail.

"He's a stand-up guy ... he really deserves our support," said Nguyen Van Truc, a former officer in the defeated South Vietnamese army.

The Democratic campaigners, however, are buoyed by the nail-biting victory two years ago of James Webb, another Vietnam war veteran. Senator Webb defeated Republican incumbent George Allen by just 7,000 votes.

"It is entirely possible that the Asian-American vote changed that election," said Mr Gee. "We know they came out in large numbers for Webb."

There was certainly a marked energy surrounding the Obama campaign's office in Falls Church, northern Virginia, 10 days ago.

Out-of-town Asian-American activists joined locals in staging a last-ditch voter registration drive, going door to door and delivering fliers in various languages, from Putonghua and Hindi to Laotian.

"You could say there is something in the air this election," said Chinese-American campaigner Betty Lee Hawks, a retired civil servant. "I've never seen such a buzz ... it would be just amazing if Obama takes Virginia."

Echoing Mr Gee, the 59-year-old Ms Lee Hawks said she had noticed a gradual shift in Asian-American politics. New immigrants tended to be apolitical. If they did vote, it was traditionally Republican, reflecting the strong anti-communist sympathies of refugees.

Over time, a newer generation has been drawn to the Democratic credo of opportunity, education, health care and civil rights. The shift was first apparent in Bill Clinton's upset victory over George Bush Snr, in 1992.

"You can see it among voters in Virginia, and you can see it beyond, too ... and this is one election where it might finally make a difference," said Ms Lee Hawks.

The shift is borne out in a groundbreaking national survey of Asian-American voters released in Washington last week.

Non-partisan and involving researchers from four leading universities on both coasts, the National Asian-American Survey interviewed 4,000 likely Asian voters, utilising their native languages. It is considered the most extensive survey of Asia-American political opinion ever undertaken.

It shows that 41 per cent are likely to favour Senator Obama, while 24 per cent favour Senator McCain, a trend that is even more pronounced in battleground states.

Overall, 32 per cent of all Asian-Americans class themselves as Democrats compared with 14 per cent who claim to be Republicans.

Significantly, however, it highlights the very high proportion of undecided voters. Some 34 per cent of ethnic Asian voters have yet to make up their minds on either candidate - the figure is just 8 per cent among voters nationally.

It also highlights the lack of cohesion among the Asian community, which has long lacked any sense of itself as a bloc and is clouded by internal suspicions and even hostility between some ethnic groups.

While Chinese and Indian voters favour the Democrats two to one, the reverse ratio is true for the Vietnamese.

Survey spokeswoman Janelle Wong, a political scientist at the University of Southern California, said she had yet to be convinced that either campaign had done enough to seriously target the Asian community.

"That significant number of undecided voters just shows the opportunity that is out there to lift the participation of Asian Americans," Professor Wong said.

"Maybe this year could really be different, but I do worry that we will see the community marginalised again in terms of their potential role and interests."

For activists in Virginia, however, this year could be their year.