

## Getting a read on the Pa. Asian vote; Conclusion? It's tough to categorize

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### Body

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#### ABSTRACT

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ANUP PATEL wishes more of his customers wore face masks and thinks if President Donald Trump set a better example, they would. Still, Patel 49, who owns gas stations and convenience stores across Luzerne County, is leaning toward voting for Trump.

"I'm coming from a business perspective," said Patel, who arrived in the U.S. from India in the '80s. "Business has been real good for us in the last three years."

Naimah Hares, the daughter of Bangladeshi immigrants, is reluctantly backing Joe Biden. She preferred Bernie Sanders, whose calls for free college tuition during the Democratic primary resonated with her. Hares, 26, a para legal, was only able to attend the University of Pennsylvania because she got a full scholarship.

And Rui Chang Zeng, a home health-care worker living in Northeast Philadelphia's burgeoning Chinese community, isn't yet sure who to choose. Biden seems a bit better than Trump she said through an interpreter but she's worried the information she gets through Chinese-language news sources isn't always accurate. "Which one is better?" she asked.

In Pennsylvania - home to more than 250,000 Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) voters - there's no such thing as the Asian vote. In the last 20 years, the number of AAPI voters nationwide more than doubled making it the fastest growing racial group in the electorate, according to the Pew Research Center.

It's also one that defies categorization: A host of factors beyond one's country of origin - including religion, caste, generation, and region in one's native country - affect voting patterns. So do characteristics that are harder to pin down, such as the manner in which an immigrant came to the U.S. and what one's relationship is to their home country.

AAPIs make up just 4% of Pennsylvania's electorate. But "in a time when elections are won by even less than 1%, it's significant," said Neil Makhija, executive director of IMPACT. The group encourages Indian Americans to run for office and has spent \$1.3 million on campaigns and voter outreach efforts in Pennsylvania in 2020.

In a national survey last month of 1,500 AAPI voters, 54% said they planned to vote for Biden, compared to 30% for Trump. But a closer look at different communities reveals widespread differences.

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Some disavow Trump for his racist policies like the 2017 executive order that banned citizens of seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the U.S. They say he's stoked racism and anti-Asian sentiment across the country, including with his frequent labeling of the coronavirus as "the China virus."

"He's publicly and intentionally instigating the hatred," said Qunbin Xiong, alab medicine specialist who lives in Bryn Mawr and runs the Main Line Chinese Cultural Center.

In Philadelphia, Nancy Nguyen, a longtime Vietnamese community leader, was arrested after protesting at the home of Tony Pham, Trump's Immigration and Customs Enforcement director. The Trump administration, Nguyen said, was using Pham's status as a Vietnamese refugee as a "cover for... human rights abuses."

"So I joined a protest to reclaim that narrative," she wrote in The Inquirer this month. "You don't get to use the stories of my community as a cover for violence."

And in Hellam, a suburb of York, Yadu Banjara, a Nepali American engineer, said the president's denigration of immigrants as "illegals" living off the government is dangerous.

"We are not here just to get government handouts," said Banjara, 48. "Everyone in the community is working very hard and paying their taxes."

Others say they haven't experienced discrimination under Trump and that it's Democrats who have sowed division.

"We will not let liberals divide the country," said Aaron Bashir, a Pakistani American and the Republican nominee for a state House seat in Northeast Philadelphia. Bashir, 40, fled Pakistan because he was persecuted in the predominantly Muslim country for his Christian faith. He supports Trump because he believes the president defends Christian values, such as opposition to abortion.

Some say the selection of U.S. Sen. Kamala Harris, (D-Calif.), as Biden's running mate will increase AAPI's political engagement because of her Indian heritage. But many voters prioritized Harris' views and party affiliation over her background.

Hares, the Bangladeshi American Penn graduate, said she never imagined she'd see someone of South Asian descent running for vice president in her lifetime. But representation alone isn't enough: She questioned how Harris handled certain wrongful conviction cases when she was San Francisco District Attorney.

Because she works in the legal profession, she said, "I weigh these things highly."

Patel, the Indian American business owner in Luzerne County, said he's more concerned about how a leader would engage with India's government. "Even if people live here, they still care about India," he said. Trump appears to have a good relationship with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who Patel supports - another reason he's leaning Trump.

There's also the fact that many first-generation immigrants don't see themselves as part of a wider Asian American community, so a Chinese or Filipino immigrant wouldn't necessarily identify with Harris. Sexism and anti-Blackness in Asian American communities also influence how AAPI voters view Harris, who is Black.

For example, although Vietnamese Americans have experienced the uptick in anti-Asian racism around the country, "most don't identify the kind [of discrimination] they experience with the kind African Americans are facing," said Anh Nguyen, program coordinator at Vietlead, a Vietnamese community and activism organization in Philadelphia.

Despite a growing number of registered AAPI voters, these communities experience significant barriers to voting.

In 2016, 49% of AAPIs turned out to vote, a rate lower than Black (59%) and white (65%) voters. Turnout varied widely between different ethnic groups, according to an analysis of the census by AAPI Data: 62% of Indians and Japanese voted, compared to 41% of Chinese.

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The biggest obstacle to voter participation in Philadelphia's Chinese American community has been language barriers, said Mingchu "Pearl" Huynh, founder of the Northeast Philadelphia Chinese Association. Chinese immigrants are usually intimidated by in-person voting due to a lack of interpreters they trust. But this year, she said, the availability of mail ballots has made access easier.

"Now they don't need a booth or an interpreter - volunteers or family can explain it to them at home. This time it will be more easy," Huynh said.

But given that poorer voters are disproportionately likely to vote in person, it's significant that 14% of AAPIs in Pennsylvania live in poverty.

The pandemic made voter outreach efforts more difficult this year. The nonprofit advocacy group Asian Americans United has sent volunteers decked out in face masks and shields to bubble tea shops and food-distribution events to register voters. They've also been setting up tables outside early voting locations in Northeast Philadelphia to help Chinese voters in their native language. But the group has only registered 160 voters this year - half as many as in 2016, said civic engagement coordinator Wei Chen.

"People don't know how to use apps [like Rock the Vote] to register, and many, like my parents, fear trying, concerned with making a mistake and that they will be punished by the government," Chen said. "And for in-person registration, people fear touching each other."

Philadelphia's voter registration materials do include forms available in Chinese, Vietnamese, and Spanish - but it's hard to find those forms in the first place. The website's Resource Center directions only use English to label the document links.

Some don't vote because they don't think it will make a difference.

Abu Ahmin Rahman, a Bangladeshi immigrant and longtime political organizer in Delaware County, said when he was campaigning for Hillary Clinton in 2016, many asked him: "Why waste your time? You know this country. Whoever wins, it doesn't matter."

Rahman said that's changed this year.

For those who do register, Chen and Huynh said, an appreciation of even having the right to vote is a key driving force - not anti-Asian racism, how the U.S. has managed the pandemic, or economic issues.

"People say they love this country and are loyal to it because it gave them so much opportunity," Chen said.

This resonates with Zu-Feng Frank Xu, a Chester County Democrat who's gotten involved in several Chinese Americans for Biden groups on the Chinese messaging app WeChat.

Xu, 58, got choked up as he recalled how his life changed after he saw the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 on TV while in France getting his doctoral degree. After that, he decided to move to the U.S., where he built a career in research for chemical corporations such as National Starch and DuPont, and raised three daughters with his wife.

"All this," he said, "because of America."

- Staff writer Jonathan Tamari contributed to this article.

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