

California Republicans seek new blood

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Republicans are hoping that a bitter education fight in California will convince Asian-Americans to give the party another chance.

In California last month, a vocal segment of the state's Asian community made **a rare showing** of political strength, teaming with conservative activists to block a proposed constitutional amendment that would bring affirmative action back to public universities.

Republicans — desperate for anything to both help their standing in California and bring more diversity to a party that has struggled with minority voters — are moving to capitalize on the themes of education, preferential treatment and personal responsibility to a woo skeptical voters in a fast growing demographic group.

“This is a turning point for the Republican Party to really share their values with Asian-Americans,” said Peter Kuo, a Taiwan-born GOP candidate running for state Senate.

(Also on [POLITICO: Full education policy coverage](#))

“It showed in a very short period of time how this issue could galvanize this community,” said Young Kim, a Korean-American state assembly candidate. “This has proven that when there is an issue, they can be a force to be reckoned with.”

Community activists, nonprofit groups and thousands of rank-and-file voters all mobilized swiftly and furiously against a proposed repeal of the Golden State’s longstanding ban on racial preferences in public college admissions. Many called it un-meritocratic and worried it would amount to reverse discrimination against their children.

The pan-Asian community makes up 14 percent of the state’s population but is 38 percent of University of California undergrads. The UC system admits 73 percent of Asian applicants from the state — compared to 63 percent of all in-state applicants.

The state Republican Party quickly moved to capitalize on the discontent — dispatching top state officials and party leaders to community events and using the opportunity to for outreach, messaging and fundraising.

Anti-affirmative action groups like the Chinese-American Institute for Empowerment hosted top state Republicans at community events in both English and Mandarin — where the state GOP leaders came out hard against the bill, urging opponents in the community to fight it tooth and nail. A Chinese-American Institute event conducted in both Mandarin and English featured the top two Republicans in the state legislature, Bob Huff and Connie Conway, [according to the Mercury News](#).

([PHOTOS: Senators up for election in 2014](#))

Community and nonprofit groups like the 80-20 Initiative, the Silicon Valley Chinese Association, United Asian American for Activism, the Backbone Foundation, the Civil Rights WeChat Group, San Diego Asian American for Equality and others all also mobilized against the proposal — sometimes going so far as to ask supporters to change their party registrations to prove a point.

“To scare the Democratic Party, we should register as Republicans. If 10,000 more [Asian-Americans] register as Republicans than Democrats before June 3, both parties will compete to serve our rightful interests,” S.B. Woo, president of the 80-20 Initiative PAC and a former Democratic lieutenant governor of Delaware, wrote to opponents of the affirmative action bill.

Republicans see the fight as an opportunity to reintroduce their party to many in the Asian community — and an opportunity to showcase the number of Asian-American candidates that are running under the GOP’s banner on the statewide ballot in 2014.

“We just have to show the face of the Republican Party — such as myself,” said Kim, the state assembly candidate.

The Republican Party has made major strides in having candidates that “reflect the values of the community,” Kim said. “We may not have done a good job in the past. But we recognize that we need to do more.”

That’s an uphill battle for a party that holds no major state offices in California, and is badly trailing the Democratic Party in membership and voter registration numbers.

“I think Republicans are grasping at straws here,” said Tenoch Flores, communications director for the state Democratic Party. “That’s to be expected for a party whose registration stands at 29 percent and dropping.”

“Asian-Americans are a strong part of our Democratic and progressive coalition,” Flores said. “This is a group that has overwhelmingly voted Democrat.”

President Barack Obama [won the Asian-American vote convincingly](#) in both 2008 and 2012, but it wasn’t so long ago that the community was a competitive and swing group of voters that was more than inclined to back GOP candidates. In the 1992 and 1996 elections, Republicans George H.W. Bush and Bob Dole won majorities of the Asian-American vote.

But by 2012, Mitt Romney captured just 26 percent nationwide — with the overwhelming number of voters backing Obama. Obama’s sky-high support among Asian voters eclipsed even his groundswell of support among other key demographic groups like Hispanics and female voters.

There are some exceptions. Vietnamese Americans have long been much more Republican. A [2008 survey](#) found that 45 percent of the Vietnamese American community identified as Republican, while only 29 percent identified as a Democrat. The same survey showed majorities of Indian, Filipino, Japanese and Korean Americans identified as Democrats. A plurality — 46 percent — of Chinese Americans identify as independents, while 41 percent identify as Democrats.

The Republican National Committee also has invested resources in the state — where the white population [lost the demographic majority in 2013](#). The RNC has three California-based staffers working on outreach to Asian-American voters and other groups. And at RNC headquarters at Capitol Hill, two other staffers work exclusively on Asian-American issues.

The proposal to repeal Prop 209 and roll back the ban on affirmative action passed easily through the Democrat-controlled California Senate in late January. But state Democrats [were taken aback](#) by the swift reaction from a normally loyal constituency of voters.

But though Asian-Americans are the fastest growing immigrant group in America, most have remained on the margins of American political life.

Asian-Americans — a diverse and broad community that includes dozens of individual ethnic groups — comprise only 4 percent of the electorate. And survey after survey has shown that Asian-Americans are less likely than their white, black, and Hispanic neighbors to vote. A 2012 Pew study found that Asian-Americans were 17 percent less likely than the generation population to vote in the 2008 election.

Still, Asian communities are fast-growing segments in key states like California, Texas, Florida, Virginia and New York. They also have higher levels of educational attainment and household affluence — typical measures of GOP voting patterns. And [Pew found](#) in 2012 that Asian-Americans had surpassed Latinos as the fastest growing immigrant community.

But other say that the Asian-American community's opposition to affirmative action is loud, but not very deep.

“The Asian-American community is much more diverse than the mainstream media has acknowledged. Among the broader Asian-American and Pacific Islander community, there is an understanding that many from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds continue to face deep and pervasive institutional discrimination,” said Vincent Pan, executive director of the group Chinese for Affirmative Action.

More than 60 percent of Asian-Americans voted against the affirmative action ban in 1996, [according to exit polls](#). Another 2012 survey showed 76 percent support for the broad concept of [affirmative action](#) in the Asian-American community.

An RNC official said the national party did not participate in the affirmative action fight. The national party — which has been trying to rebrand and attract more nonwhite voters — did not want to participate in a controversial fight.

“We want to empower Asian-Americans, Latinos, African-Americans to get the best education,” said RNC official Jason Chung, who works on Asian-American outreach issues for the party.