How Will California's Asian Americans Vote in November?

MILAN VAISHNAV AND NITYA LABH

INTRODUCTION

By 2060, Asian Americans are projected to be the United States' largest immigrant group, with their numbers estimated to surpass 46 million, or more than 10 percent of the total U.S. population. Asian Americans are already the fastest-growing racial/ethnic demographic in the country, with their size nearly doubling between 2000 and 2019. And the community is steadily translating this demographic growth into increased political influence. According to the political data firm TargetSmart, Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) voter turnout in 2020 battleground states increased more than that of any other minority group.

This community's growing demographic strength and corresponding increase in political visibility are occurring amid significant churning in America. Consider three recent developments. First, the coronavirus pandemic has triggered a worrying spike in hate crimes directed toward people of Asian heritage in many parts of the United States. Second, while Asian Americans have historically been supporters of the Democratic Party, recent evidence suggests that areas with the greatest concentration of Asian residents have seen significant

vote swings toward the Republican Party. Third, the U.S. foreign policy establishment's growing preoccupation with the China threat, and its efforts to build firmer partnerships with many of China's neighbors, have introduced a new layer of complexity in the building of Asian American civic and political coalitions.

Nowhere is the demographic significance of Asian Americans more readily apparent than in California, the most populous state in the union. AAPI residents comprise roughly 15.5 percent of California's population, or 6 million people. According to 2020 U.S. Census data, California's AAPI population grew by 25 percent in the past decade, faster than any other ethnic group in the state.

This is the first in a series of articles that will explore the political and social preferences of Asian Americans in the Golden State. These articles draw on a new online survey of 1,000 California-based Asian Americans conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in partnership with the data and analytics firm YouGov. The sample includes respondents from twenty-one Asian ethnic origin groups but excludes Native Hawaiian and

Pacific Islanders. Due to its narrow political focus, the analyses reported here draw on a subsample of 927 respondents who are U.S. citizens. Specifically, this article examines the political preferences of California's Asian Americans on the eve of the 2022 midterm elections. It explores their ideological and partisan leanings, voting preferences in the November election, approval of key national and state leaders, and views about the 2024 presidential race.

Future pieces in this series will explore other topics of relevance to the Asian American community in California, such as policy priorities, identity and discrimination, foreign policy, and civic and political engagement.

SURVEY DESIGN

The data analyzed here are based on an original online survey of 927 California-based Asian American citizens designed by scholars at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and conducted by polling firm YouGov between September 9 and September 26, 2022. The overall sample contains 1,000 respondents, but this article focuses on the subset of U.S. citizens in the sample since its primary objective is to shed light on the 2022 midterm election.

YouGov recruited respondents from its proprietary panel of nearly 2 million U.S. residents. Only adult respondents (ages eighteen and above) who are full-time residents of California and who belong to one of twenty-one Asian national origin groups were eligible to participate in the survey.[1] These twenty-one ethnic subgroups account for 97.4 percent of the Asian American and Pacific Islander population in California, according to 2020 U.S. Census data.[2] The survey did not include respondents who principally identify as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. The survey was fielded in English (see next section for additional discussion).

YouGov employs a sophisticated sample-matching procedure to ensure that the respondent pool, to the

greatest extent possible, is representative of the Asian American community in California, using data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey as a target sample frame. All the analyses in this study employ sampling weights to ensure representativeness. The overall margin of error for the U.S. citizen subsample is +/- 3 percent. This margin of error is calculated at the 95 percent confidence interval.

The survey instrument contains an extensive range of questions organized across six modules: basic demographics, identity and discrimination, politics, policy preferences, foreign policy, and civic and political life. Respondents were allowed to skip questions except for important demographic questions that determined the nature of other survey items.

Strengths and Limitations

As related research has shown, surveys of Asian Americans have to contend with several thorny methodological challenges. While their numbers have increased, Asian Americans are still a distinct minority—even in California—making it difficult to recruit sufficiently large samples for survey estimation.

One of the major benefits of working with an extensive survey panel, such as the one maintained by YouGov, is that it provides access to large sample sizes that allow researchers to make reliable estimates about even relatively small populations of interest. However, online panels have a significant drawback: most online survey panels are conducted in English; only around seven in ten eligible Asian-origin voters report that they only speak English at home or speak the language "very well."

Therefore, the results of this survey cannot mechanically be extrapolated to the Asian American community in California at large. For instance, this survey's sample includes a larger share of U.S. citizens than California's Asian American population as a whole. Rather, it is best to treat these survey findings as representative of the views of English-proficient Californians of Asian origin.

Despite this caveat, this survey serves as an important barometer given that, in the years to come, the characteristics of the Asian American population will increasingly resemble those of the sample studied here.

POLITICAL PREFERENCES

Party Identification

Consistent with other surveys of the Asian American population at large, the survey finds that a plurality—48 percent—of Asian Americans in California identify with the Democratic Party (see figure 1). In contrast, only 17 percent of respondents identify with the Republican Party, while more than one quarter (27 percent) identify as independents. A total of 7 percent of the sample are not sure about their partisan affiliation, while 1 percent identify with another, smaller political party.

These numbers are not dissimilar from the findings of the 2022 Asian American Voter Survey (AAVS), which was conducted between April and June of this year.

The AAVS found that 44 percent of Asian Americans nationwide identify as Democrats, 19 percent identify as Republicans, 35 percent report they are independents, and 2 percent don't know.

The intensity of partisan identification is also illuminating. Specifically, 21 percent of respondents in the Carnegie survey identify as "strong" Democrats, 27 percent identify as "not very strong" Democrats, and 8 percent report they "lean" Democratic. On the other end of the political spectrum, only 7 percent identify as "strong Republicans," while 11 percent identify as "not very strong" Republicans and 3 percent "lean" Republican.

There is notable variation in respondents' reported party identification along several key demographic indicators. U.S.-born respondents are much more likely to identify as Democrats (55 percent) and are much less likely to identify as Republicans than their foreign-born counterparts (38 percent). With respect to ethnicity, Japanese respondents are the most likely to identify as Democrats (66 percent) followed most closely by

Figure 1. Partisan Identity

Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a...?

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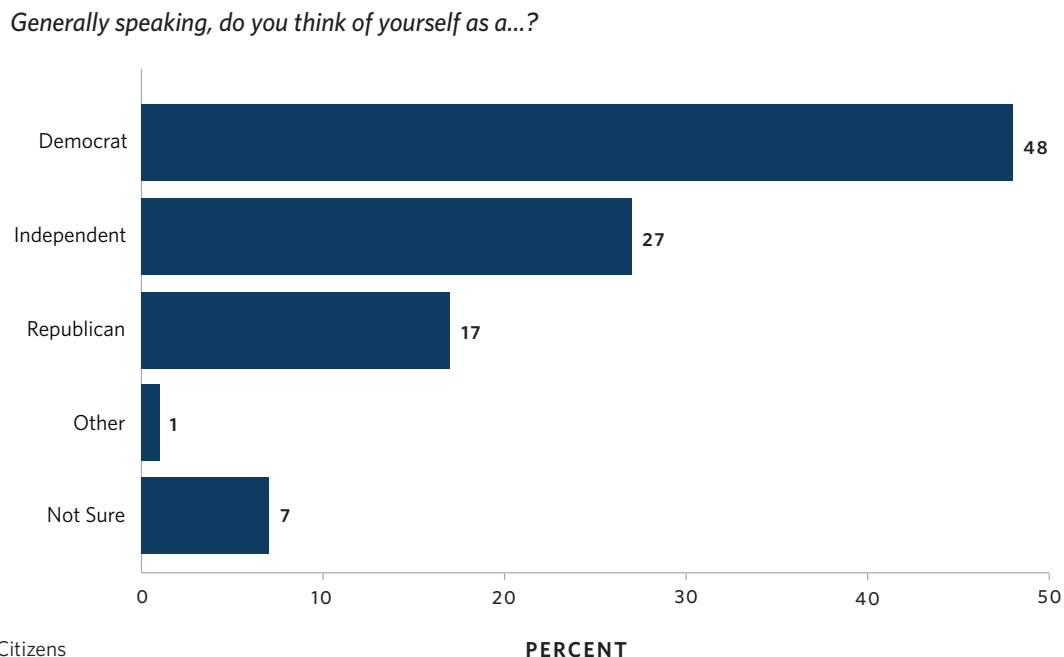
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Indian participants (57 percent). Meanwhile, Korean respondents (26 percent), Vietnamese participants (24 percent), and those belonging to smaller ethnic groups (28 percent) are the most likely to report identifying as Republicans.

Age also presents an interesting picture. As one might expect, a near majority of respondents aged eighteen to twenty-nine report identifying with the Democrats (50 percent), but the same is also true of those over the age of fifty. The biggest difference between the two groups is the share of respondents who are unsure about where they stand; respondents in the younger category are five times more likely to be unsure of their partisan affiliation when compared to the oldest respondents. A plurality of respondents between the ages of thirty and forty-nine also favor Democrats (45 percent), but this age group also has a much larger share that identifies

as independents (nearly one-third as opposed to one-quarter for the other two age categories).

Finally, there is a discernible gender skew in the data: 53 percent of female respondents report identifying as Democrats compared to 44 percent of males.

Political Ideology

The survey asks respondents to place themselves on a standard, seven-point ideological scale derived from the American National Election Studies (ANES) survey methodology—ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative.

In response to survey questions on ideology, there is a well-known tendency for respondents to select the centrist position (identifying themselves as moderate).
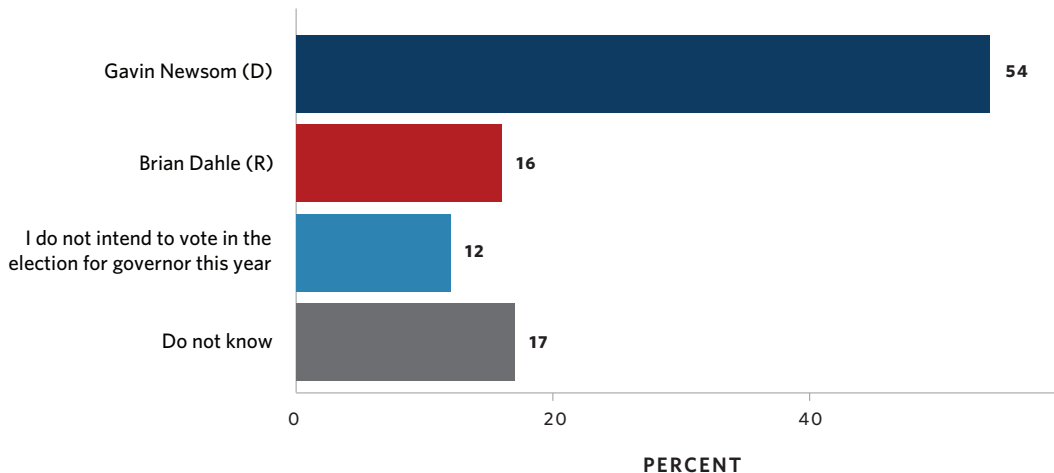
Figure 2. Political Ideology

Where would you place yourself on this scale, from extremely liberal to extremely conservative?
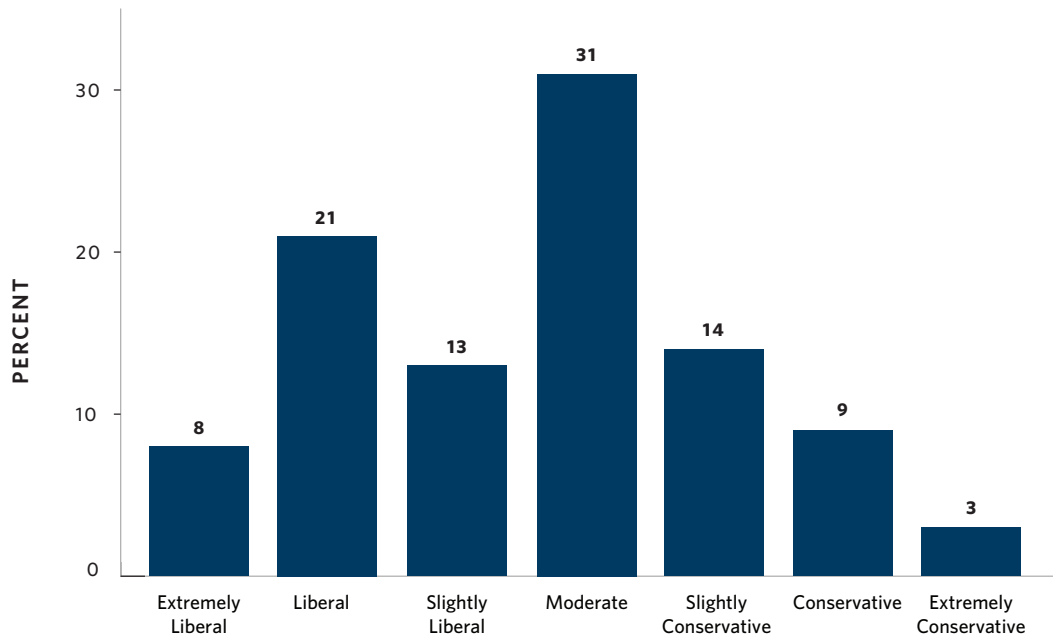
N=927 U.S. Citizens

Figure 3. California Gubernatorial Vote Choice

Whom do you intend to vote for in California's governor race?

N=927 U.S. Citizens

Note: Figure excludes respondents who intend to vote for a third-party candidate

For respondents who selected this option (or who said they have not thought much about this issue), the survey further asked whether, if forced to choose, they would consider themselves to be liberal or conservative. For the purposes of this study, responses from these two questions were combined to array respondents on a single ideological spectrum.

The survey shows a modest leftward skew on this standard left-right ideological spectrum (see figure 2). A total of 42 percent of respondents identify as belonging to the liberal end of the spectrum, while 26 percent place themselves on the conservative end. Nearly one-third of respondents (31 percent), despite being prompted to choose a side, identify as moderate.[3]

Midterm Vote Choice

In line with their partisan identification and ideological self-placement, Asian Americans in California overwhelmingly intend to vote for Democrats this November (see figure 3). A 54-percent share of respondents plan to vote for Gavin Newsom, the Democratic governor, who is seeking his second full term in office. Brian Dahle, the Republican challenger,
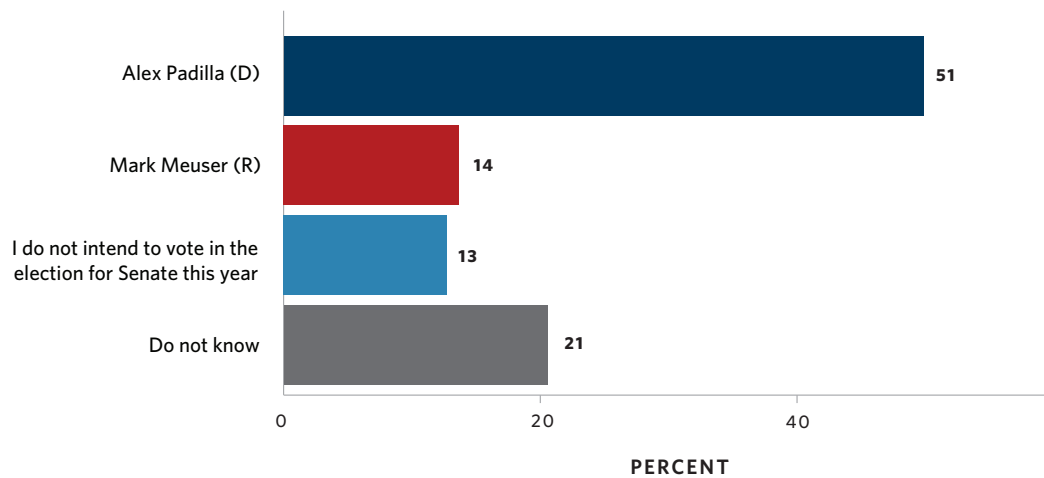
lags far behind with 16 percent of the vote. Meanwhile, 12 percent of respondents do not intend to vote, despite being eligible to do so, while 17 percent are still undecided.

As for the state's Senate race, 51 percent of respondents indicate that they intend to vote for the incumbent Democrat, U.S. Senator Alex Padilla. Padilla is seeking his first full term in the Senate, after being appointed by Newsom to Vice President Kamala Harris's former seat (see figure 4). A very small minority—just 14 percent—intend to vote for Padilla's Republican opponent, Mark Meuser. Another 13 percent of respondents do not intend to vote, while one in five (21 percent) are still undecided.

Finally, the survey asks respondents which party's candidate they intend to support in their local U.S. House of Representatives race (see figure 5). Slightly more than half plan to back the Democratic Party's candidate, while 19 percent intend to vote for the Republican candidate. Almost one-third of respondents either do not know (16 percent) or do not plan to vote (13 percent).

Figure 4. U.S. Senate Vote Choice

Whom do you intend to vote for in California's U.S. Senate race?

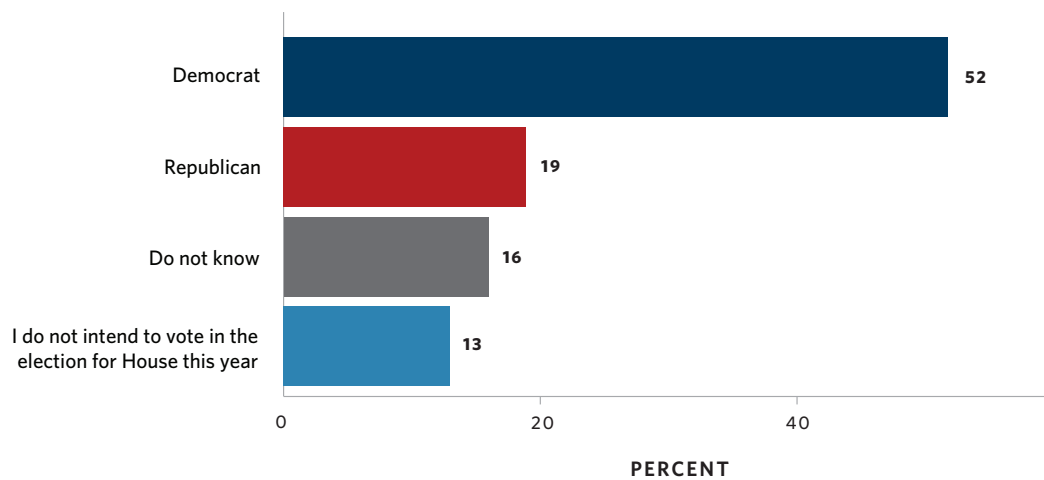|	
Alex Padilla (D)	51
Mark Meuser (R)	14
I do not intend to vote in the election for Senate this year	13
Do not know	21

PERCENT

N=927 U.S. Citizens

Note: Figure excludes respondents who intend to vote for a third-party candidate

Figure 5. U.S. House of Representatives Vote Choice

Which party do you intend to vote for in the race for the U.S. House of Representatives?

Democrat	52
Republican	19
Do not know	16
I do not intend to vote in the election for House this year	13

PERCENT

N=927 U.S. Citizens

Note: Figure excludes respondents who intend to vote for a third-party candidate

In sum, a majority of respondents indicate that they plan to vote for candidates associated with the Democratic Party in this November's gubernatorial, Senate, and U.S. House elections.

The responses of Asian Americans in California roughly mirror the preferences of the Asian American community as a whole. According to the AAVS survey, 54 percent of Asian American respondents nationwide indicated they would vote for a Democrat in the November House and Senate elections, while between 25 and 27 percent indicated they would vote for a Republican candidate.

Animating Issues

While a future article in this series will delve into the policy preferences of Asian Americans in California, it is

Figure 6. Top Issues in the 2022 Election

Which of the following is the most important issue for you personally?

N=927 U.S. Citizens

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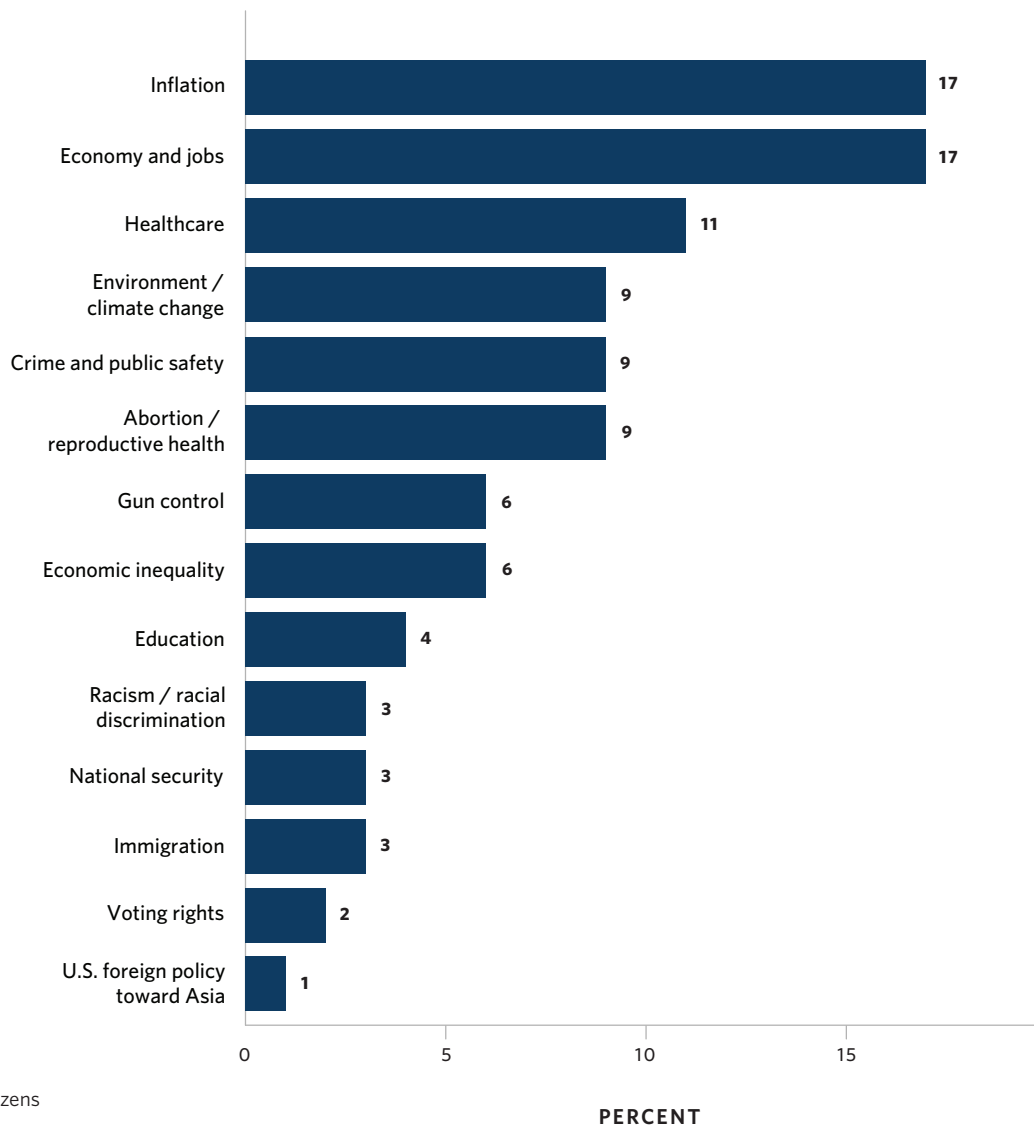
worth highlighting here the issues animating the coming midterm election. The survey asks all respondents which issue is the most important for them personally as they cast their ballots in the November election. Respondents were asked to choose one of fourteen issue areas, and their responses suggest that the economy is very much a top priority (see figure 6).

Inflation and the economy (and jobs) were the most popular responses, each named as the top issue by 17 percent of respondents. Meanwhile, 11 percent identified healthcare as the most important issue, while 9 percent chose each of the following: environment/climate change, crime and public safety, and abortion/reproductive health. Questions related to foreign policy appear less salient: just 3 percent and 1 percent, respectively, identify national security and U.S. foreign policy toward Asia as their top issue this November.[4]

ASSESSMENT OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership Approval

The survey asks respondents how satisfied they are with the performances of Newson as California's governor and U.S. President Joe Biden—both Democrats. A total of 59 percent of respondents either "strongly" or "somewhat" approve of Newsom's job as governor, while 29 percent either "strongly" or "somewhat" disapprove of his performance (see figure 7). Of the remaining respondents, 12 percent of respondents report they do not know how well Newsom is doing.

How do Newsom's ratings among Asian Americans compare to the sentiments of voters statewide? A September 2022 survey by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) found that 52 percent of adult
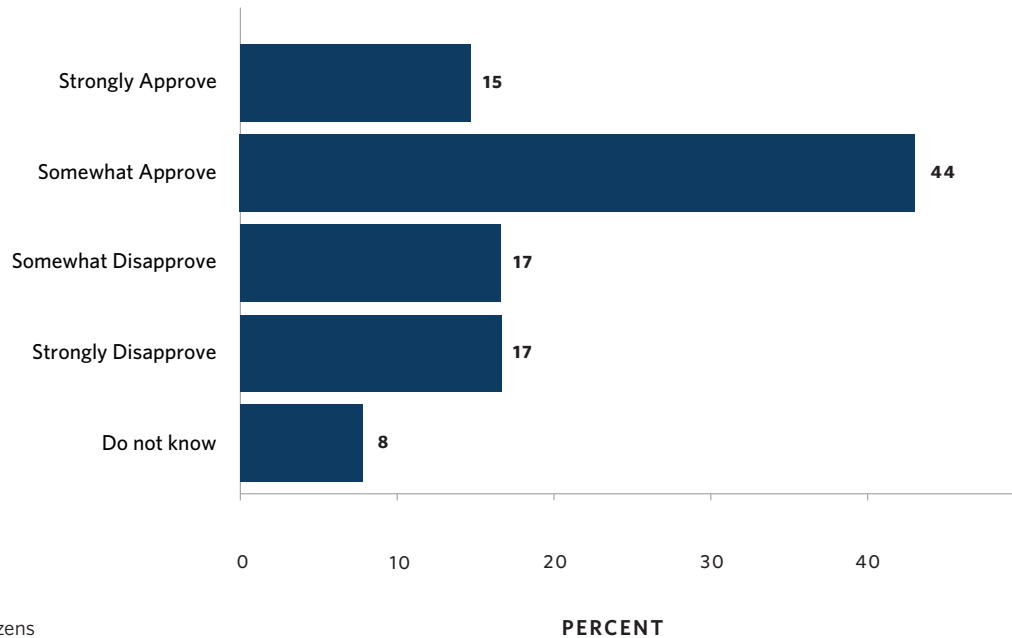
Figure 7. Newsom's Job Approval

Do you approve of the way Gavin Newsom is handling his job as governor?

N=927 U.S. Citizens
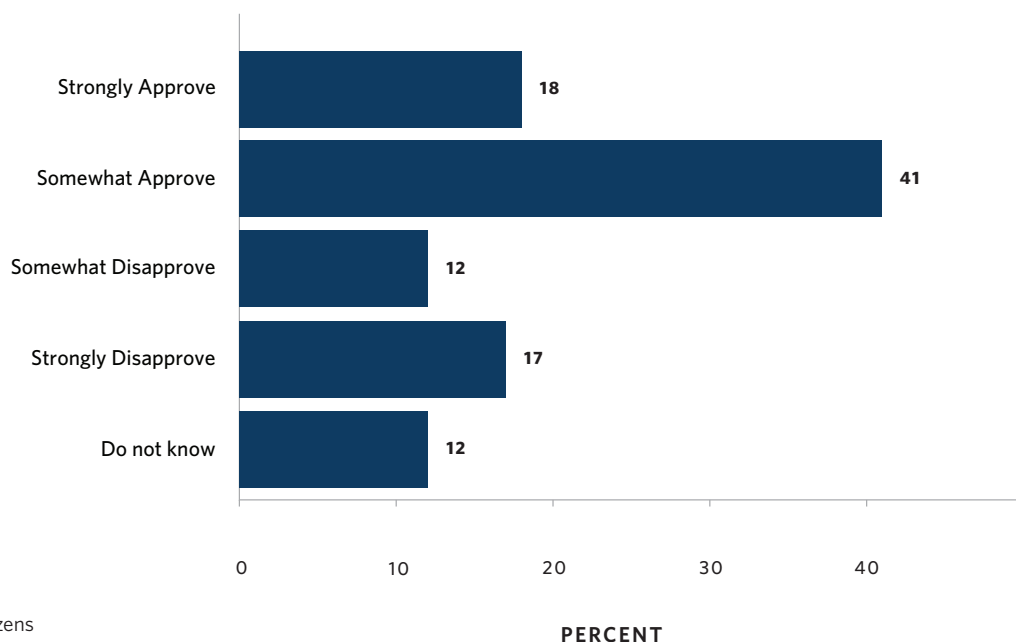
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Figure 8. Biden's Job Approval

Do you approve of the way Joe Biden is handling his job as president?

N=927 U.S. Citizens

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respondents approved of Newsom, with 35 percent disapproving, and 13 percent unsure. Asian Americans' views of Newsom are not too different compared to those of Californians as a whole.[5]

The numbers for Biden are broadly similar to those Newsom enjoys (see figure 8). A 59-percent share approve of Biden's performance as president, while 34 percent disapprove and 8 percent are not sure of their opinion.[6] The same September 2022 PPIC survey found that Biden's approval rate was 53 percent and his disapproval rate was 42 percent among all Californians (with 4 percent unsure).

Feeling Thermometer

One of the classic methods of measuring how individuals assess political figures is through a feeling thermometer—a method popularized by the ANES project—whereby respondents are asked to rate political parties or individual leaders on a scale from zero to one hundred. Ratings between zero and forty-nine mean that respondents maintain an unfavorable and cold impression of the person or group, a rating of fifty means that respondents are indifferent, and ratings between fifty-one and one hundred mean that respondents feel favorable and warm toward them.

Biden earns an average rating of fifty-four, placing him in favorable territory, and Newsom's rating is virtually identical (see figure 9). However, Harris lags slightly behind the two men with a forty-nine rating, just barely in unfavorable territory. Former president Donald Trump receives a very low rating—a twenty-five on the hundred-point scale. It is interesting to note that respondents also rate the Democratic Party with a fifty-five, similar to the ratings they give Biden and Newsom. In contrast, survey respondents give the Republican Party a rating of thirty-three—an unfavorable rating, but one higher than Trump's.

Figure 9. Assessment of Key Leaders and Parties

What are you feelings toward the following political leaders and organizations?
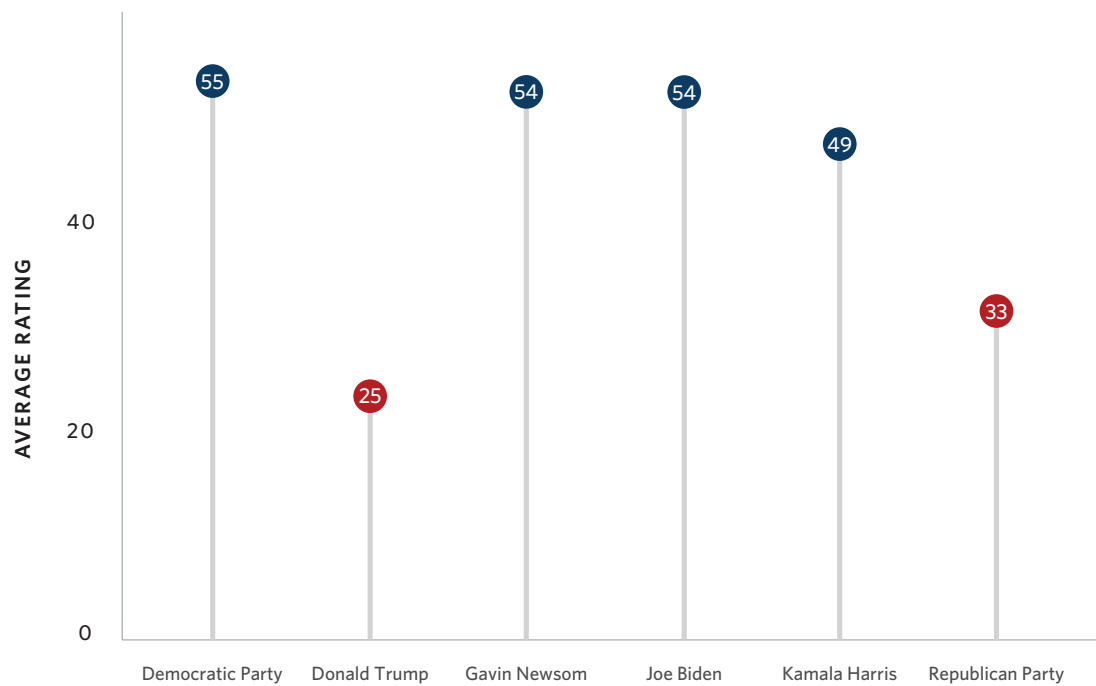
N=922–925 U.S. Citizens

LEADERS AND ORGANIZATIONS

THE 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The survey also probes Asian Americans' views on the coming 2024 presidential election. Though preelection jockeying is well underway, more robust campaigning for 2024 will kick off as soon as the midterm elections conclude. Due to the uncertainty about which candidates will actually appear on the November 2024 ballot, the survey begins by asking respondents which party's candidate they would likely support.

If the election were held today, a slim majority of respondents (51 percent) report they would vote for the Democratic candidate (see figure 10). Meanwhile, 17 percent intend to vote for the Republican candidate, and another 3 percent plan to vote for a third-party candidate. At this early stage, 21 percent of the sample is still undecided, with another 8 percent indicating they do not intend to vote in the next presidential election.

Views of the 2024 election vary in important ways within the Asian American community in California. Table 1 looks at how voting intentions vary with important demographic indicators, such as gender, age, place of birth, education, income, and ethnic identity.

With regards to gender, women are slightly more inclined than men to support the Democratic Party in 2024 and less favorable toward the Republicans, but a larger share are also undecided. Contrary to expectation, it is not the youngest respondents (aged eighteen to twenty-nine) that are the most supportive of the Democratic candidate in 2024, but those aged fifty and above. U.S.-born respondents are more inclined to support the Democratic nominee in 2024 than their foreign-born

Figure 10. Presidential Vote Choice (2024 Election)

If the election were held today, would you...?

N=927 U.S. Citizens

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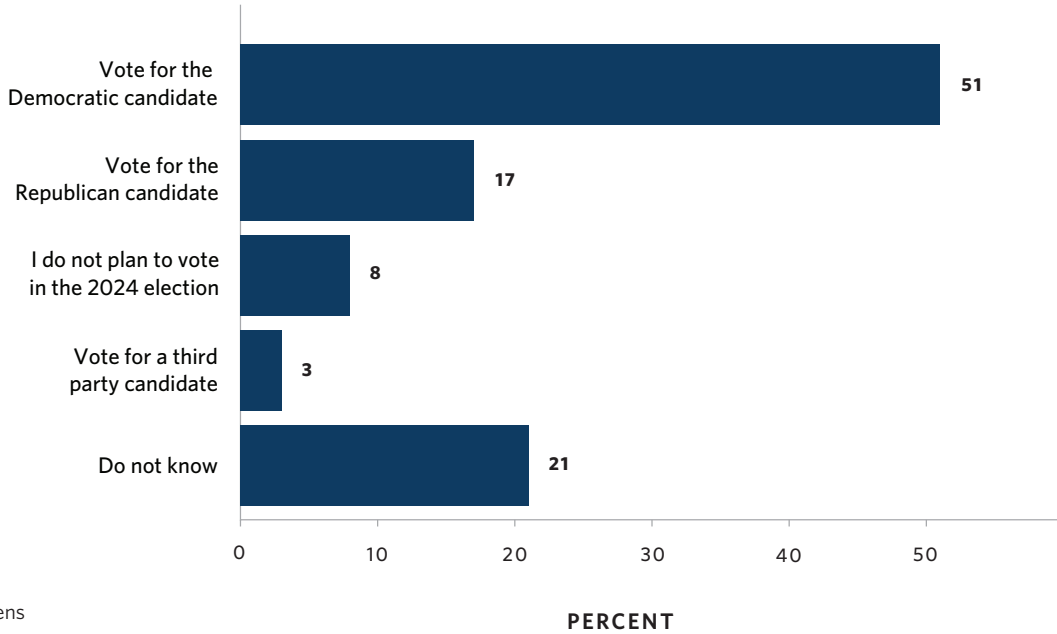
Table 1. Demographics and Presidential Vote Choice (2024 Election)

|	Democratic voters	Republican voters	Undecided voters
GENDER			
Male	49	22	15
Female	52	13	25
AGE			
18-29	51	16	18
30-49	43	19	22
50+	56	16	20
PLACE OF BIRTH			
U.S.-born	54	14	18
Foreign-born	45	23	24
EDUCATION			
College-educated	57	19	17
No college	44	16	25
ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME			
Below $50,000	47	13	25
$50,000-$100,000	47	27	17
Above $100,000	61	17	16
ETHNICITY			
Chinese	52	18	18
Filipino	45	16	20
Indian	55	15	28
Japanese	70	15	9
Korean	46	27	18
Vietnamese	46	16	25
Other	42	19	29

counterparts by roughly a ten-percentage-point margin (54 to 45 percent). College-educated respondents and those in the highest income bracket (those who report an annual household income above $100,000) are also the most supportive of the Democrats.

Ethnicity is perhaps the source of greatest variation. The gap between Japanese support of the Democratic candidate in 2024 and that espoused by a wide range of respondents from smaller ethnic groups is 28 percentage points. In some cases, the share of undecided voters is quite high—almost three in ten Indians and those belonging to other smaller ethnic groups report being undecided about which way they will vote in the next presidential election.

How do the topline numbers for the 2024 election track with how respondents voted in the 2020 presidential contest? One can examine this by isolating the 737 survey respondents who voted in the 2020 contest and are eligible to vote in 2024 (see figure 11). In 2020, 76 percent of respondents voted for Biden, 22 percent backed Trump, and 2 percent voted for third-party candidates. Looking ahead at 2024, 59 percent of respondents indicate that they will support the Democratic nominee, while 20 percent report they plan to support the Republican candidate, and 3 percent will vote for another candidate. The big shift between 2020 and today is that 18 percent of respondents are not sure how they will vote in the 2024 presidential election, which explains nearly all of the decline in Democratic support. This suggests that,

Figure 11. Presidential Vote Choice (2020 Versus 2024)

*How does voter choice compare in 2020 versus 2024?*
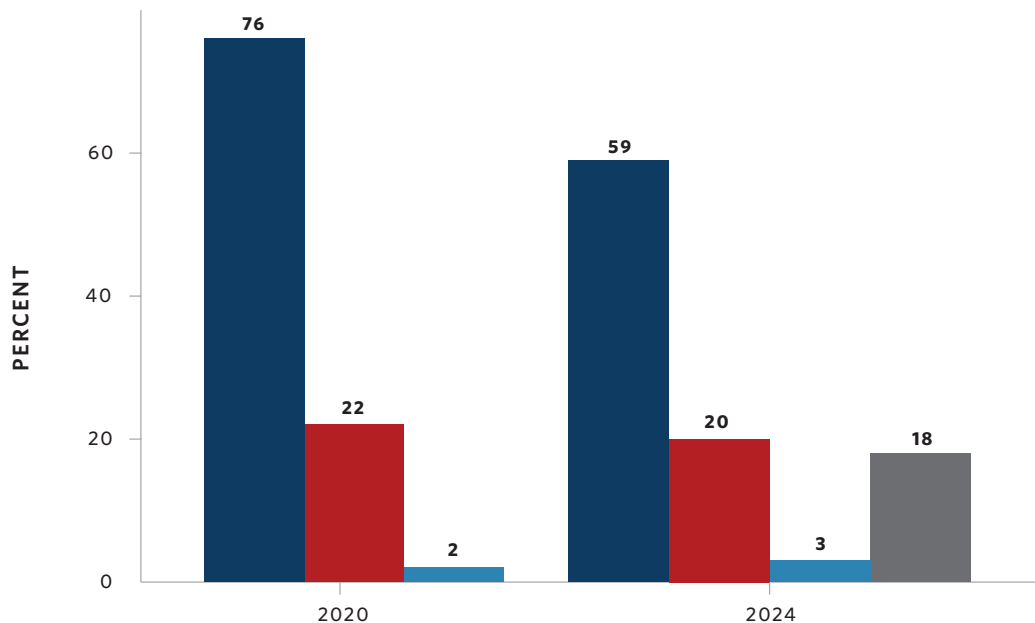
N=737 U.S. Citizens

Note: Figure includes respondents who voted in 2020 and indicated they would vote in the 2024 election. Figure excludes respondents who did not recall their prior voting behavior.

Figure 12. Support for Democratic Alternatives (2024 Election)

Other than Biden, which of the following would be your most preferred candidate?
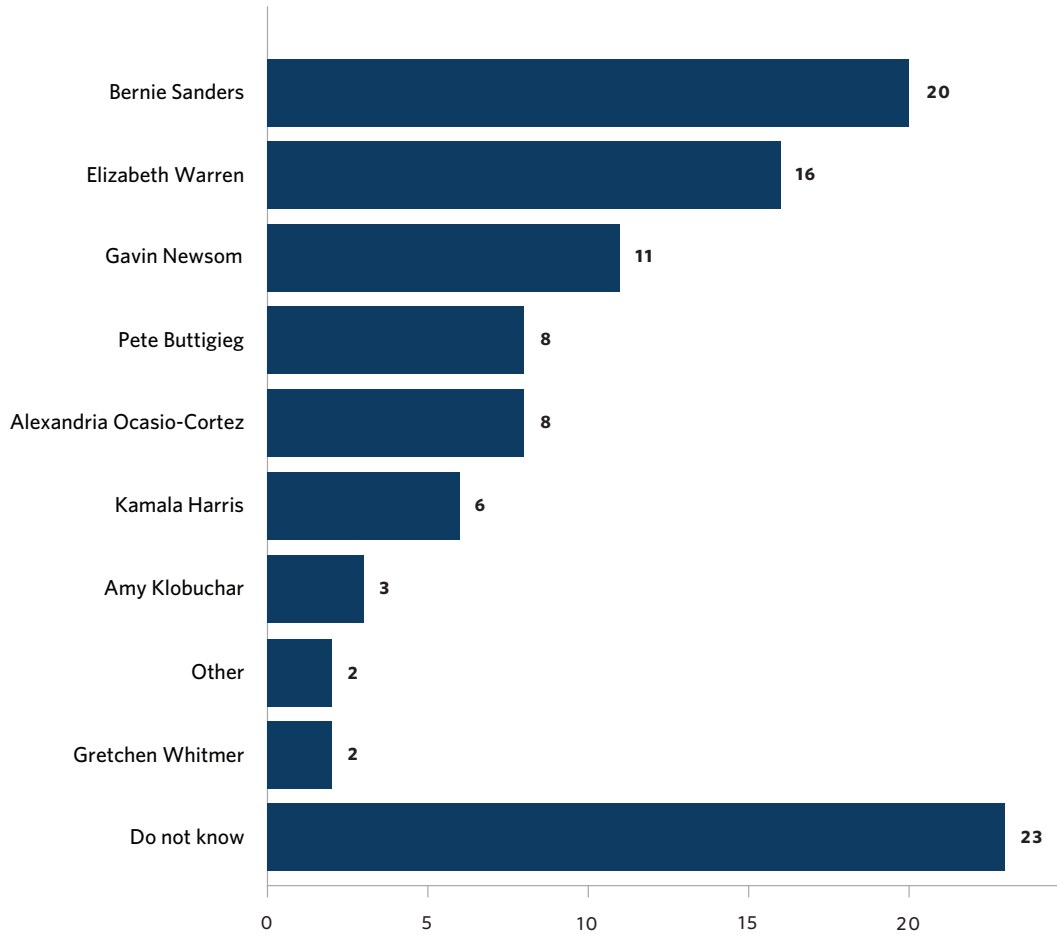
N=180 U.S. Citizens

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while respondents continue to back the Democrats in large numbers, there is a fair amount of uncertainty about their 2024 election choices.

This uncertainty comes into stark relief when one probes respondent views on candidate choice in 2024. Of respondents who plan to vote for the Democratic candidate in 2024, two-thirds (64 percent) voice support for Biden, while just over one-third (36 percent) would like to see a change at the top of the ticket. For those who indicate they would like to see a Democrat *other than Biden* as the candidate in 2024 (180 respondents), no candidate appears to be the clear favorite (see figure 12). A plurality of 20 percent would like to see Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders emerge as the candidate, 16 percent prefer Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, and 11 percent prefer Newsom. Only 6 percent indicate that Harris would be their preferred candidate, and another 23 percent are not sure.

For those who indicate that they would vote for the Republican candidate (182 respondents), Trump is the most popular choice at 36 percent (see figure 13). Florida Governor Ron DeSantis (with 15 percent) and former vice president Mike Pence (13 percent) lag behind, with 12 percent of respondents unsure.

Views on Harris

Given Harris's deep California connections, the survey asks whether respondents would support her as the Democratic presidential nominee in the 2024 general election (see figure 14). Of the total citizen sample, 42 percent indicate they would support her, while 37 percent say they would not. A sizable share, 21 percent of all respondents, are unsure how they would vote if Harris were the nominee. These numbers suggest that Harris is badly underperforming the generic ballot which, as reported above, saw a 51–17 percent Democratic advantage over the Republicans.

On the question of Harris's nomination, there is interesting variation among ethnic subgroups. Indian-origin (52 percent) and Japanese-origin (51 percent) respondents express the greatest degree of support for Harris if she were the 2024 Democratic nominee. A plurality of Chinese (42 percent) and Filipino (45 percent) respondents are more favorable than not. However, a greater share of Korean, Vietnamese, and respondents from smaller ethnic groups are more likely to oppose her nomination, with only 33 to 35 percent of respondents from these groups inclined to support a Harris nomination.

Among respondents willing to support Harris as the nominee in 2024, it is not Harris herself, but rather her status as the Democratic nominee that most attracts supporters: 32 percent of respondents to this question say they would support whoever the Democratic nominee is, whether that be Harris or someone else (see figure 15). Another 20 percent indicate they would support her because they would like to see a president with Harris's personal background (as someone who is African American, Asian American, Indian American, and a woman). Meanwhile, 15 percent report they would support Harris due to her experience, 13 percent value

Figure 14. Support for Harris (2024 Election)

If Kamala Harris were the Democratic presidential nominee in the 2024 general election, would you be inclined to support her?
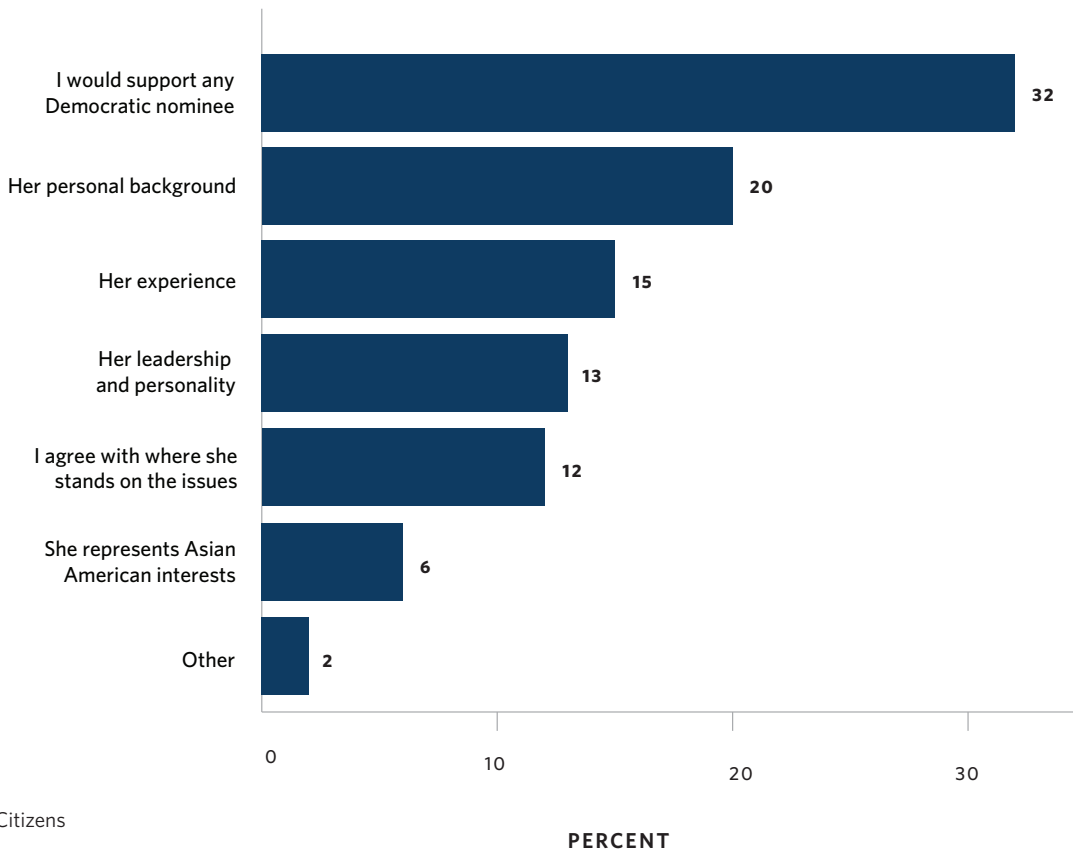
Yes — 42
No — 37
Do not know — 21
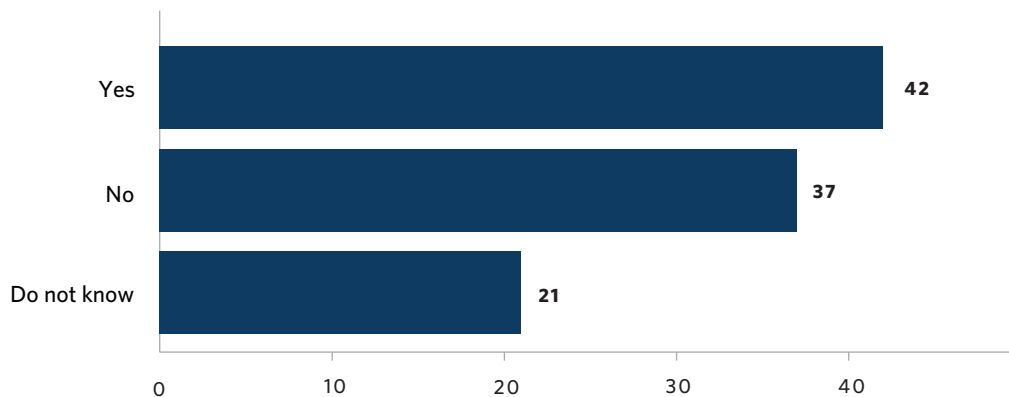
PERCENT

N=927 U.S. Citizens

Figure 15. Sources of Support for Harris

Which of the following best describes why you would support Kamala Harris?

I would support any Democratic nominee — 32
Her personal background — 20
Her experience — 15
Her leadership and personality — 13
I agree with where she stands on the issues — 12
She represents Asian American interests — 6
Other — 2

N=377 U.S. Citizens

PERCENT

her leadership and personality, and 12 percent agree with where Harris stands on the issues. Only 6 percent responded that Harris represents Asian American interests, and 2 percent specify another reason.

Among those who would not support Harris in 2024, the most popular response for their reasoning—selected by 30 percent of respondents—is that "Harris does not have the leadership or personality needed to serve as president," as the survey item put it (see figure 16). Another 20 percent report that they disagree with where Harris stands on the issues, and 18 percent do not think she has the requisite experience to serve as president. In addition, 11 percent would not support any Democratic nominee, 9 percent believe she does not represent Asian American interests, and 7 percent report she places too much emphasis on her personal identity. A total of 5 percent provide another reason for not supporting her.

CONCLUSION

Headed into the 2022 midterm election, English-proficient Asian Americans in California appear to be strongly behind the Democratic Party. This community

Figure 16. Sources of Opposition for Harris

Which of the following best describes why you would not support Kamala Harris?

Category	Percent
Inadequate leadership and personality	30
I disagree with where Harris stands on the issues	20
Insufficient experience	18
I would not support any Democratic nominee	11
She does not represent Asian American interests	9
She places too much emphasis on her personal identity	7
Other	5

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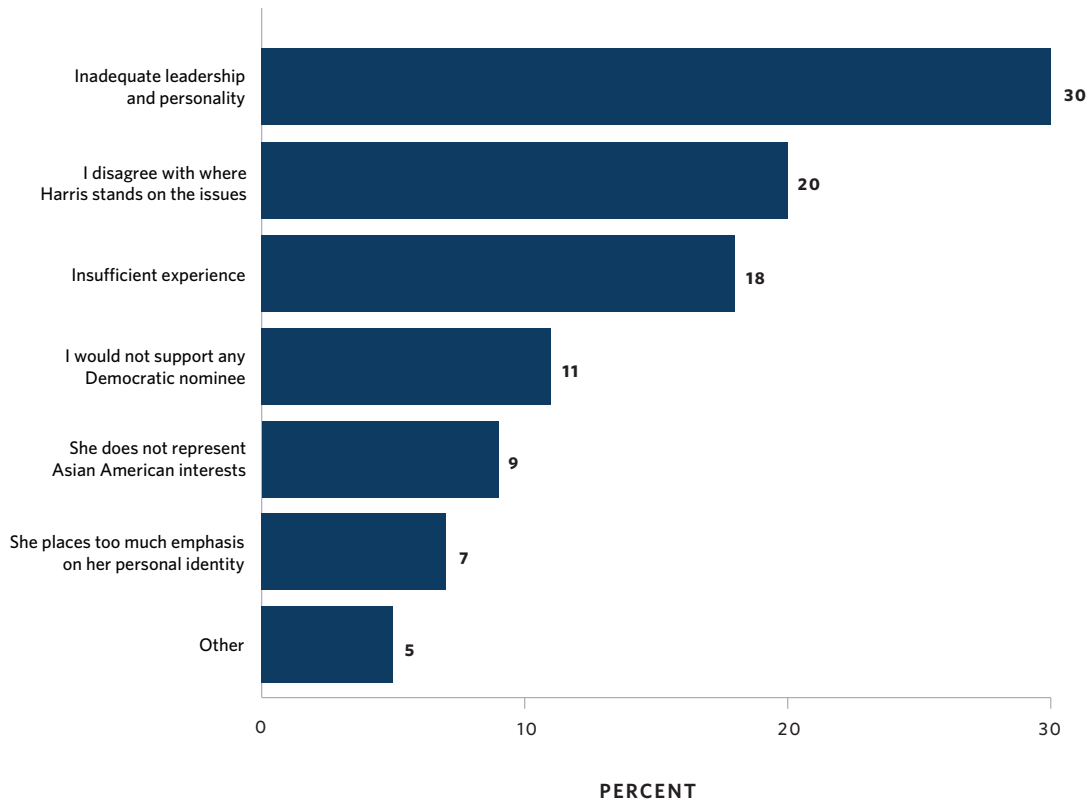
N=327 U.S. Citizens

is hardly a monolith, however. There is significant variation according to age, gender, place of birth, and ethnic origin. Nevertheless, a majority of respondents intends to vote for Democratic candidates down the ballot—for the governor's office, U.S. Senate, and the U.S. House of Representatives.

Despite these topline results, continued uncertainty of the future of the party is also evident in respondents' views. On the one hand, Biden's approval ratings among Asian Americans are much higher than among the general public, at least based on recent nationwide polls. On the other hand, respondents are not wholly convinced he should be the Democratic nominee in

2024. While a slim majority of respondents intend to vote for the Democratic presidential candidate in 2024, more than one-third of respondents would prefer to see someone other than Biden at the top of the ticket.

Even so, respondents are divided over who should take his place. Biden's most obvious successor, Harris, provokes mixed reactions among respondents. While a plurality report they would support her if she were the nominee, nearly one-third of those respondents would support whomever the nominee turns out to be. Their support appears to be expressed not for Harris individually, but for the Democrats as a party.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

1 The included ethnic subgroups are as follows: Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Malaysian, Mongolian, Nepali, Pakistani, Singaporean, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, Thai, and Vietnamese.

2 This percentage was calculated from population numbers from 2020 America Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau.

3 A 2020 survey of Indian Americans conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Johns Hopkins-SAIS, and the University of Pennsylvania—in partnership with YouGov—demonstrates a similar distribution. In that study, 47 percent of respondents classified themselves on the liberal end of the spectrum, 23 percent identified as conservative, and 29 percent classified themselves as moderate.

4 A September 2022 Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) survey of 1,700 adult Californians found that jobs, inflation, and the economy were, taken together, respondents' number one concern.

5 This same PPIC survey reported that 55 percent of Asian Americans approved of Newsom's job with 19 percent disapproving and 25 percent not expressing an opinion.

6 Among PPIC respondents who identify as Asian American, 58 percent approve of Biden's performance, 37 percent disapprove, and 5 percent hold no opinion.

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