

The importance of being Indian in America

While many Indian Americans are campaigning vigorously for Democratic nominee Joe Biden, several others are making strenuous efforts to keep Donald Trump in the White House. **Sriram Lakshman** reports on the issues and aspirations of a politically charged community

Tens of millions of Americans have voted already and many more are expected to vote on November 3, Election Day. The levels of political polarisation are high in the country and presidential candidates on both sides have called this the most consequential election in recent times.

Indian Americans, of whom there are 4.16 million (and just over 2.6 million U.S. citizens), comprise less than 1% of registered voters, but the group has gained prominence in the list of priorities of both the Donald Trump and Joe Biden campaigns as well as in “down ballot” contests.

“There are both push and pull factors at play. Both presidential campaigns are actively courting the Indian American vote, which is creating greater awareness. But there is also increased bottom-up mobilisation due to growing political socialisation, campaign giving and interest group formation,” says Milan Vaishnav, who directs the South Asia program at the Carnegie Endowment and has co-authored the Indian American Attitudes Survey (IAAS) 2020.

In conversations and public events, it is clear that neither side is coy about getting to the crux of the matter: the number of Indian American voters in some battleground states such as Florida, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin exceeds the 2016 presidential victory margin in those states. These voters could – at least in theory – be key to winning the presidency.

Determination on both sides

The community is seeing unprecedented levels of political engagement and mobilisation at all levels: more candidates, more voter outreach, more fundraising. A part of this is a reflection of what is happening across the board in the U.S., but a part is unique to the community.

“I call it coming of age,” says Shekar Narasimhan, a Democrat, and Chairman and Founder of the AAPI Victory Fund, a “Super PAC”, a type of Political Action Committee or PAC that spends money independently of a campaign but can receive unlimited contributions from individuals and organisations.

“...Young people growing up in this country, getting to vote..., 70% of the Indians who’ve come to this country have come since 2000. Most of them... have gotten citizenship,” he says. “But the second thing is Trump. I view Trump as the best organiser for our community,” Narasimhan says, referring to Trump as “blatantly anti-immigrant.”

If getting Trump out of the White House is a motivating factor for Indians on the Democratic side of the aisle, keeping him there for a second term is motivating a smaller but no less determined group of Indian Americans on the Republican side.

Some 72% of registered voters are expected to vote for Democratic candidate Joe Biden and 22% for incumbent President Donald Trump, as per the IAAS.

The available data from voter surveys suggest that while Indian Americans are significantly with the Democratic Party, there is evidence of some shift towards the Republican Party since 2016, the year of Trump’s election.

Close to 60 Indian American candidates are running for state legislatures or the U.S. Congress or are on the presidential ticket according to a partial list obtained from the Indian American Impact Fund, a PAC. There are many more running for office at the local level and some who did not make it past the primary stage.

A total of 158 Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPPI) candidates are running for state legislatures, a record. Some 21% of these are South Asians, 75% are Democrats and 25% are Republicans, as per AAPPI Data, a data and policy research organisation.

‘2016 changed everything’

At their home in Malvern, in Chester, a county just west of Philadelphia, which Hillary Clinton won in 2016, an Indian American couple in their sixties, Jayashree and K.S. Bhaskar, spent the evening on Thursday making telephone calls to voters asking them if they have a plan to vote or if they’ve voted already.

Jayashree is from Bengaluru and Bhaskar spent his early years in Chennai, Mumbai and Delhi. They moved to the States in the 1980s and became American citizens in the 1990s. They have always been politically active, Jayashree says, canvassing for candidates and so forth. “But 2016 changed everything,” she says. “We decided we needed to do a little bit more than sitting on the sidelines and lamenting about the course the country is taking.”

Bhaskar ran and won an election at the municipal level. They volunteer with They See Blue (a play on *Desi Blue*) a group of Democrats that works informally (and therefore not bound by campaign financing laws that apply to non-profits) to get out the vote.

Volunteer groups that coordinate



Supporters watch a video of U.S. President Donald Trump while waiting in the rain for his arrival at a campaign rally in Lansing, Michigan. (Below): A supporter of U.S. Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden attends a drive-in campaign event in Bristol, Pennsylvania. *AFP, REUTERS



with the official campaign and groups that work independently of it (including for legal reasons) are active across several states.

“In so many cases, our communities have been so historically cut off from the political process for language barrier reasons, for cultural reasons,” says Mohan Seshadri, whose parents came to the U.S. from India.

Seshadri, who is in his twenties, is Political Director of the Asian Pacific Islander Political Alliance – an organisation that works independently of the Biden campaign but supports the Biden candidacy.

His organisation’s outreach has been in several Asian languages. They just completed a six figure digital ad buy in English, Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese with ads on Facebook, Hulu and so forth, Seshadri says. They also have a direct mail campaign – sending messages in support of the Biden-Harris ticket and also other candidates (“down ballot”) in the state of Pennsylvania, where Seshadri lives.

While most Indian immigrants to the U.S. are conversant in English, language is nevertheless important to campaigning, especially for non-Indian Asian communities.

This isn’t lost on candidates either. “We are running a campaign in 27 languages to meet voters where they are at. Inclusion is at the core of this campaign, and we are excited to bring that to Congress,” Sri Preston Kulkarni, who is running for the U.S. Congress from Texas, told *The Hindu* via email.

This year, as in India, there is a lot of misinformation around the elections, often transmitted via WhatsApp, Jayashree says. “The common theme is ‘Don’t vote for Biden or Kamala because they’re anti-India...they’re pro-Pakistan, anti-India,’” Jayashree says. *The Hindu* got access to a few of these posts.

Groups like ‘Desis United’, which is part of a PAC, seek to counter misinformation campaigns or negative ads with their own messaging. “Someone who looks like us on a presidential ticket... that’s crazy!” one woman says in a video “Our Community’s Candidate” about Kamala Harris. The video, most of which has Hindi narration set to Indian music, says don’t vote for someone just because they are Indian (at this point one sees images of Republican politicians Bobby Jindal, Nikki Haley and Ajit Pai) but vote for them because they stand for values: education, family (a photo of Harris and her grandparents in traditional Indian attire is shown at this

point), nonviolence. Biden-Harris policies flash across the screen as does Harris’s mother Shyamala Gopalan saying, “A culture that worships goddesses produces strong women.”

The IAAS finding on the Harris nomination is that while it may not change a large number of votes (since most Indian Americans already vote Democrat), it has led to higher levels of enthusiasm for the Democratic ticket.

The candidates themselves have actively courted the Indian American and the Hindu American community, participating in Independence Day commemorations around August 15, sending messages around Hindu festivals – presumably in response to criticisms that the candidates were not doing enough to recognise Hindu Americans.

Democratic party donor and fundraiser Frank Islam who is originally from Azamgarh, in Uttar Pradesh, says the view that a Biden presidency is bad for India and Trump presidency is good for it, is not based on facts.

“He [Mr.Trump] has criticised India and mocked [Prime Minister] Narendra Modi himself multiple times. If you recall, he strongly criticised India in both his debates with Biden, each time clubbing New Delhi with Moscow and Beijing,” he says.

Biden has sought to burnish his own India credentials talking about his role, as a Senator, in finalising the U.S. India Civil Nuclear Deal and declaring that under his presidency the U.S. would stand with India against terror and Chinese threats.

Most of the campaigning on the Democratic side has been virtual this year. The tone is set at the top. Biden and Trump have very different approaches to the pandemic. Trump has said the country is “rounding the turn,” is not enthusiastic about mask wearing and social distancing, and is conducting large rallies across the country.

Biden holds drive-in rallies or virtual events and has promoted mask wearing. The candidates also differ in their positions on when and how to open up the economy. In addition to running largely on his economic record, Trump has

cited depression, job loss, suicide and abuse among reasons he wants the country to open fast.

Republicans have been knocking on doors as part of their campaign – a million doors a week in their estimation. Democrats have only more recently engaged in this form of campaigning.

“In my experience, many Indian-Americans won’t open their doors to strangers as it is, so I can’t imagine that door-to-door campaigning during a pandemic is going to have a significant impact on which presidential candidate our community votes for,” says Chavi Khanna Koneru, a lawyer who runs a community organisation, North Carolina Asian Americans Together in Action.

Support for Trump

Heading the Trump campaign’s outreach is Co-chair of Trump Victory Indian-American Finance Committee, Al Mason. Mason, an Indian American, is the man behind an ad the Trump campaign released this summer featuring clips of Modi and Trump at their joint rallies in Houston and Ahmedabad. This ad, which targets Indian American voters, features Trump telling a crowd: “America loves India, America respects India...”

Mason says he has surveyed the voting preferences of over 10,000 people. “According to my research – take it to the bank – I have everything documented – 50% of Indian Americans who have never been Republicans are moving over, or rather had moved over to President Trump,” he says. “So anyone speaking otherwise is speaking nonsense,” he told *The Hindu*, which followed up with a Trump campaign official to get the survey report and data from Mason. The response said 6,000-7,000 Indian Americans in each of five battleground states were spoken to. A published report with sampling methods, size and margin of error was not provided.

Mason says there was a “slight pause” in this movement towards the Republican Party when Harris’s candidacy was announced. “But then again, it shifted back to Trump,” he says.

Indian American voters, as per Mason, were moving to Trump for six reasons. These include the sense that Trump has respect for India and for Modi and treated him as an equal, as well as a sense that Trump has “elevated India’s stature on the world stage.”

Another factor, Mason says, was Trump not criticising Modi on the Kashmir issue [the dilution of Article 370 in August 2019], when India’s policies were criticised by other governments.

“The only man who had the guts to stand with Modi that time was Trump,” he says, citing specifically the ‘Howdy, Modi!’ rally for both politicians in Houston, Texas, held weeks after the legislative changes in Jammu and Kashmir.

“President Trump went to the ‘Howdy, Modi!’ event in Houston and never once injected himself into the Kashmir issue...Kashmir is a very emotional topic for every Indian American,” he says.

Mason also cited the China factor – that Trump is seen as standing together with India and against China. “Since yesterday [Tuesday] night, there has been so much excitement within the Indian American community that Mike Pompeo could make such a statement,” Mason says, referring to the Secretary of State’s statement that India was not alone in facing challenges as they arise.

When asked how he could be canvassing voters’ opinions in real time to know this, Mason says, “I have the biggest organisation. I have people everywhere in the Battleground States, I have at least 3,000 groups which keep commenting ... views... telephone conversations.”

Ranking of issues

Mason’s views are shared by Trump donor and venture capitalist Sridhar Chityala. In an email to *The Hindu*, Chityala cites the six factors he believes are driving an alleged movement of voters from the Biden to the Trump camp. Trump’s economic record is one among them. “Will defend against China” is also on the list. Later Chityala added BECA (the geospatial information sharing treaty India and U.S. signed this week) and the Quad (the India-U.S.-Australia-Japan grouping for cooperation in the Indo Pacific) as factors in favour of Trump. Chityala says lists like his form the basis of the Trump campaign’s outreach. “Perfect messaging,” he calls it. This explains the number of impressions for the Modi-Trump ad, he says.

The President’s son, Donald Trump Jr., who campaigns for his father also recently brought up the China issue while engaging with Indian Americans. In October, at a community event in Long Island, the younger Trump talked about how the Modi-Trump relationship hoped to bring Indians and Americans and the China threat. “We have to understand the threat of China and no one knows that probably better than Indian-Americans,” he said, as per a report by the Press Trust of India.

The IAAS, however, paints a different picture. In a ranking of issues that influenced their vote choice, “the economy” came first most often. Then health-

care, racism, taxes, corruption, immigration. U.S. India-relations ranked 11 out of 12 issues (“sexism” was the lowest priority issue, in relative terms). So while the economy factor (which is cited by Mason and Chityala as favouring Trump) is the highest ranking issue, the U.S.-India relationship does not rank high as per the data.

The survey also finds that those who identify as Republicans are primarily motivated by economic policy differences with the Democrats and that Indian Americans, mostly, refrain from identifying with the GOP because it is seen as being intolerant of minorities and “overly influenced by Christian evangelicalism.”

Niraj Antani, a two-term Ohio state lawmaker seeking a third term, says the fact that he has won two elections suggests this perception as well as a view that the GOP is anti-immigrant is “unfortunate” and one he hopes to change.

He also draws a distinction between illegal migration and legal migration, which the Republican Party generally supports.

However Trump has cracked down on the latter as well, issuing executive orders this year to suspend the skilled worker H1-B program and new immigrant visas in addition to his administration taking a number of steps making it harder for people to migrate legally to the U.S.

Antani does not agree with the decision to suspend H1-B and other visas and says it was “not correct.”

“You have to look at policies holistically,” he says, adding Trump was good on 90% of the issues for “our community.” Antani cites the Trump-Modi relationship, Trump’s “neutrality” on the dilution of Article 370 and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, as well as Biden’s positions against these.

“The CAA is a law of India. If Indians opposed Modi’s policies, he wouldn’t have been re-elected,” Antani says when asked about equating an opposition to a specific law to opposition to a country as a whole.

An Indian American electoral advisor to a Republican candidate running for public office says that the Trump campaign has been “lacking in direct and effective” communication to the Indian Americans.

Antani has a different view. “You can always do more, but I think they’ve done a lot that they haven’t done before,” he says, citing, among other things, an event by former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley held last weekend and the Trump-Modi advertisement.

He agrees that since most Indian Americans are Democrats, there is more outreach activity on their side but this year has by far seen the most activity from a presidential campaign towards getting the Indian American vote.

Regardless of what the outcomes of Tuesday’s elections are, there is a sense that Indian Americans – who have already established themselves in fields like medicine, academia, and business – have now arrived on the American political landscape.

