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Indian American voters are shaping the U.S. presidential race



Mona Singh (center), chair of the North Carolina chapter of They See Blue, talks to people about voting at the Oct. 12 Diwali festival in Cary, N.C. The Democratic organization is conducting what it believes to be the largest South Asian-to-South Asian canvassing effort in the state.

Cornell Watson/Special to the Chronicle

Every Sunday afternoon since August, Sikh American activist Mona Singh convenes up to two dozen volunteers to knock on undecided voters' doors in the suburbs of Raleigh, N.C., for what organizers say is the largest ever South Asian-to-South Asian canvassing effort in the battleground state.

So large, in fact, that Singh, chair of the North Carolina chapter of They See Blue, a Democratic voter mobilization effort founded by four Silicon Valley engineers, is barely keeping up with the demand.

"My biggest problem today is the number of people who call me, message me, text me about wanting to volunteer," she said.

Singh's team of mostly liberal Indian American volunteers believe South Asian American voters could be the key to determining whether the U.S. elects its first Indian American president in Kamala Harris, or its first Indian American second lady in Usha Vance, wife of Ohio Sen. J.D. Vance, Donald Trump's running mate.

Perhaps no Asian community is poised to have a bigger Election Day impact than Indian Americans, the largest Asian subgroup in swing states, and one of the fastest-growing and financially influential immigrant groups in the U.S. According to AAPI Data, a political research organization, approximately 2.1 million Indian Americans are eligible to vote. A historic 71% voted in 2020.



The bag of They See Blue North Carolina chapter chair Mona Singh sits near a yard sign for Vice President Kamala Harris ahead of a voter outreach event at an Oct. 12 Diwali celebration in Cary, N.C.

Cornell Watson/Special to the Chronicle

Vice President Harris — whose late mother was born in present-day Chennai — is polling better among Indian American voters than President Joe Biden did in 2020 or this year before exiting the race. A September AAPI Data survey showed her support at 69% compared to 25% for former President Trump.

If the numbers hold, they would represent a setback from eight years ago, when the National Asian American Survey found that 77% of Indian Americans voted for Hillary Clinton, compared to 16% for Trump.

“When it comes to India, you see a lot of disagreement,” said Sangay Mishra, an associate professor focused on South Asian American political attitudes at Drew University in New Jersey. “If you’re Muslim, Christian or Sikh, you’re thinking very differently about India.”

For the broadly diverse Indian American populace — two-thirds of whom are immigrants, nearly 1 million of whom reside in California — the American presidential election is animating competing narratives about the Indian government, the reach of caste oppression and the source of bias in the U.S.

As Harris and Trump jockey for any advantage in a toss-up race, Indian Americans are making the case that all politics are global.

Diverse disagreement

When Harris hosted Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a 2023 State Department luncheon in Washington, D.C., the vice president spoke warmly of her childhood trips to India with her mother and sister, and of the grandfather who instilled in her an appreciation of equal rights, “regardless of one’s belief or caste.”

The remark was as pointed as Harris got beside a leader whose Hindu nationalist government has been accused by the State Department, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch of persecuting critics and failing to protect religious and ethnic minorities from violence.

For activists within those minority Indian communities — including Sikh, Muslim, Christian and Dalit groups — Harris is susceptible to the influence of big Hindu donors, but more appealing than Trump, who has boasted of his friendship with Modi and recently praised Modi for being “a total killer.”

“I look at it as a choice between authoritarianism or corruption, but Kamala is someone who can be influenced,” said Thenmozhi Soundararajan, a Dalit rights activist and executive director of Equality Labs, an Oakland-based organization working to end caste discrimination and gender-based violence.

Hindu American activists, including those with fundraising connections, are trying to push Harris in the opposite direction.

Ramesh Kapur is a longtime Democratic fundraiser in Massachusetts who personally lobbied California Gov. Gavin Newsom to veto a landmark caste discrimination bill last year.

President of the nonprofit US-India Security Council, which advocates for closer ties between the nations, Kapur said he's been privately lobbying Democrats to moderate their stance on India since 2015, when then-President Barack Obama publicly admonished India to remain a secular democracy.

"Eighty percent of the population is Hindu in India," Kapur said. "You cannot say it is a secular country."



Vice President Kamala Harris greets Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with President Joe Biden on the south lawn of the White House during a 2023 visit. Harris, whose mother was born in India, would be the first Indian American president if she wins election in November.

The Washington Post/The Washington Post via Getty Images

Kapur believes Harris has absorbed that message, evidenced by her accepting her nomination during a Democratic National Convention that featured [its first on-stage Hindu prayer](#), the result of four years of advocacy, he said.

“If you feel that a party is against your religion, you’ll go to the devil,” he said, referring to Hindu Americans supporting Trump.

Another Harris fundraiser and someone who [has expressed support for Modi, Ajay Bhutoria](#), said the U.S. needs India as an economic and geopolitical ally.

“Both democracies need each other to counterbalance China and keep democracies flying high in the world,” said Bhutoria, a Fremont information technology executive who serves on the Harris Victory Fund’s national finance committee.

Progressive Indian American activists — who represent minorities within a minority — said they are concerned about Harris’ silence on [Hindu nationalism in India](#), caste discrimination and Israel’s actions in Gaza, but believe she may be more likely to listen to their interests than Trump.

“I see the Trump administration pandering to white Christian nationalism,” said Rev. [Neil Christie](#), a progressive United Methodist Christian who leads the Washington, D.C.-based Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations.

The executive director of the Indian American Muslim Council, Rasheed Ahmed, said he hopes Harris wins. However, he said, “Her current silence on India and her current position and support of the genocide in Gaza is problematic.”

Meanwhile, tensions between Canada and India have escalated over the alleged assassination of a Sikh activist in 2023. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [named India’s top diplomat as a person of interest](#) in the alleged killing, and expelled him from the country along with five other diplomats. The Indian government has denied Trudeau’s claims and expelled a Canadian diplomat.

The Indian government's alleged plots in Canada, New York and Northern California to kill Sikh activists, who have been organizing for a homeland in Punjab from abroad, is a big concern for Amar Shergill, chair emeritus for the Progressive Caucus of the California Democratic Party and an executive committee member for the Sacramento Sikh Gurdwara.

In August, an unknown person shot at Sikh activists near Sacramento, which Shergill and others in the community fear is the work of the Indian government.

"What we're asking for the Harris campaign to do is to be clear that they support the current Department of Justice indictment of Indian government agents that were attempting to murder Sikhs in America because of their political views," Shergill said.

Meanwhile some Hindu American organizations are alleging the same thing about the Sikh community.

In written testimony to a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on hate crimes in September, the Hindu American Foundation accused "pro-Khalistan activists" of anti-Hindu harassment and intimidation, crimes that the organization says may be unreported.

At least four Hindu temples in the Bay Area and Sacramento were vandalized with anti-India graffiti between December and January. In September, a Sacramento Hindu temple was vandalized with anti-Hindu and anti-Modi messages, prompting a hate crime investigation.

The emotionally charged debate about safety has created an opening for Trump.



Usha Vance and husband J.D. Vance, an Ohio senator and Republican candidate for vice president, arrive for an Oct. 16 campaign event in Williamsport, Pa. Usha Vance would be the first Indian American second lady if former President Donald Trump wins election in November.

Matt Rourke/AP

Pressure from the left and right

Utsav Sanduja, a self-identified MAGA Republican and Hindu American activist in Virginia, is voting for the first time in an American election this year, having recently become a citizen after immigrating from Canada. A former executive at Gab, a right-wing social media platform, Sanduja founded Hindus for America First, a pro-Trump political action committee that has yet to raise any money, according to Federal Election Commission filings.

“When I look at the vast majority of Hinduphobic sentiment, statements and policies, they tend to come from Democrats,” Sanduja said.

“Hinduphobia” is a controversial term as Modi’s critics say it is used to shut down dissent of his government.

Sanduja said he sees Trump as more supportive of Hindus, citing comments Trump made in 2022 pledging to build a “Hindu Holocaust memorial” in D.C.

For Sanduja, Democratic policies, including the caste discrimination bill, insult the Hindu religion.

“We have a VP who is of Hindu heritage who’s not once said anything about persecuted Hindus,” Sanduja said. “It’s a huge problem for us.”

On other domestic issues, the Indian American community largely sides with Harris.



Mona Singh, left, leaves the Diwali celebration to begin canvassing voters in Cary, N.C. Singh, alongside a team of volunteer South Asian Americans, are determined to help elect the nation’s first Indian American woman president.

Cornell Watson/Special to the Chronicle

Of particular importance to Indian American voters is passing national legislation to ensure abortion is legal in almost all cases, addressing the effects of climate change and strict gun laws, an [AAPI Data survey shows](#). More than three quarters of respondents supported those policies, which Harris has campaigned on.

Immigration — addressing long [green card wait times](#) as well as making it easier to obtain [H-1B work visas](#) — is also a top priority for Indian Americans. In a seeming bid to court these voters, Trump, along with promising [mass deportations](#), has made vague proposals to [grant green cards](#) to international students, while Harris said she [supports](#) an “earned pathway to citizenship for hardworking people.”

A Los Angeles Times [analysis](#) found South Asian donors gave almost \$2.4 million to Harris’ campaign within 10 days of Biden’s endorsement.

Progressive South Asian groups say the prospect of electing the first Indian American woman president has supercharged their ground game.

Chintan Patel, executive director of the political advocacy nonprofit Indian American Impact, said his team is on track to reach 156,000 South Asian voters through phone banking, mail and door-knocking operations.

Since June, Vidya Pradhan, a Palo Alto volunteer for They See Blue, has packed and shipped more than 1,000 boxes containing 200,000 postcards to volunteers writing pro-Harris messages. Organizers say the postcards were mailed to every known South Asian household in the seven battleground states.

Pradhan said she has developed tennis elbow from all the folding, packing and lifting, but has yet to see a doctor.

“Because they’ll say to rest it, and I can’t rest yet,” she said. “We have a candidate in place. We have a fighting chance now.”

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Ko Lyn joined the San Francisco Chronicle in 2024 to cover Asian American and Pacific Islander communities from the Indianapolis Star, where she had covered city government and housing since 2021. She got her start at The New Haven Independent covering criminal justice and the pandemic and has reported for the Jakarta Post and VICE News. Her work on the Indiana jail deaths crisis, evictions, substandard housing conditions and other reporting has been recognized by the IRE Awards, Goldsmith Prize, and the Connecticut and Indiana Societies for Professional Journalists. She graduated from Yale College as a Yale Journalism Initiative scholar with a philosophy major.



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Olivia Cruz Mayeda is a California Local News Fellow covering Asian American communities for the Chronicle. Before joining the Chronicle, Cruz Mayeda was an arts and culture reporter at KQED, where she wrote, directed and produced the six-episode docu-series “Deep Down.” She has a bachelor’s degree in history from Brown University and is a fifth-generation resident of the Bay Area.

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