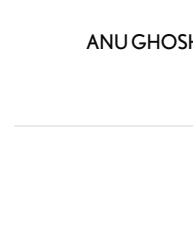


LEAD STORIES

How South Asian Grassroots Groups are Mobilizing Voters in Georgia Runoff Elections

DECEMBER 14, 2020

They See Blue, South Asians for Biden, Asian American Advocacy Fund and Hindu Americans for Biden, are some of the groups working to deliver the Senate seats to the Democrats.



ANUGHOSH

When Joe Biden won Georgia a few weeks ago, it voted for a Democratic presidential candidate for the first time since 1992. As the political post-mortem on Biden's razor-thin winning margin continues, a small but powerful new force has clearly emerged: the Asian American voters. Turning out in record numbers in the November elections, they helped deliver a victory to Biden.

Now with two crucial U.S. Senate races to be decided on Jan 5, both parties are racing to connect with newly engaged Asian voters who could make the difference in the race between Sen. David Perdue (R) and Jon Ossoff (D), as well as between Sen. Kelly Loeffler (R) and the Rev. Raphael Warnock (D). The emergence of Asian Americans as a powerful political force in the state is viewed as a potential bright spot for Democrats who are counting on a repeat of that momentum to help flip control of the Senate.

According to the Pew Research Center, the number of Asian Americans nationally has doubled between 2000 and 2020. "The Asian American vote is really important in a close election. In the general election, in some states, the increase in the Asian American vote exceeded Biden's margin of victory," says California-based Rajiv Bhateja, one of the founders of They See Blue, a grassroots mobilization group.

Speaking to why the Asian American vote has suddenly becoming critical, California-based Sangeeta Ramakrishnan, an engineer by training and a first-generation immigrant who came to the U.S. at the age 21, and is now part of the leadership team at They See Blue, says, "The Asian American population continues to grow. The South Asian population is one of the largest groups among this population. Our number analysis that we did prior to the general elections found there are more than one million South Asian voters in swing states. We know in 2016 Trump won by a narrow margin of about 77,000 votes across 3 states — Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan. And the South Asian voting population in those states exceeded that margin. Because the elections were lost by such a small margin, it became obvious to campaigns that they had to go after every small group. People usually start a conversation with me by saying that 'we are such a small population. Do you think your work will really make a difference?' I then have to remind them that elections are won and lost by .1 or .2 percentage points, so any group that is half a percent is huge."

This is especially true in Georgia. There are currently about 238,000 registered eligible voters in Georgia who identify as Asian American or Pacific Islander (AAPI). More than 185,000 voted in 2020. And that's around a 91 percent increase compared to 2016, according to Asian American Advocacy Fund data. According to a survey by AAPI, about 2.5 percent of Georgia's voters were Asian-American this year, up from 1.6 percent in 2016.

Aisha Yaqoob Mahmood, executive director of the Asian American Advocacy Fund speaking to MSNBC's Joshua Johnson says, "Credit for the 2020 Democratic success in Georgia goes to the AAPI community along with our multilingual, multiracial, multi-generational coalition that we have built with other black and brown voters in this state. We would not have been able to achieve the wins we did at the local, state or national level if it wasn't for our communities in Ga."

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But the Asian-American community is composed of dozens of unique groups — all with different issues and voting preferences — and one of the largest is the South Asian community, representing nearly 100,000 across the state. It includes naturalized citizens originally from India, Bhutan, Nepal, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago. While most of them live in the Atlanta metropolitan area, sizable numbers also live in Savannah, Macon, and in the southwestern part of the state.

Speaking directly to this issue is Joy Kirpalani, co-state director of South Asians for Biden. "The South Asian vote has always been important, but I think the South Asians in the past, in general, have not been involved in the politics of things. They just want to work on improving their own lives and that of their families. But all of a sudden, I feel, in this election, it became all the more glaring, because their livelihoods, their futures and their children's futures were threatened. All of a sudden, it was a wake-up call for people. As a result, more and more people came out to vote and got involved. We are such a critical voting bloc. It is imperative to get engaged."

A deeper dive into the issues that really resonate with the South Asian community reveals some interesting insights.

Mahmoud notes that "immigration is top of mind for many in the community, especially increased access to family-based immigration, providing pathways to citizenship for our undocumented people. But here in Georgia, we focus so much on issues that relate to our community at the local level. This year I think a lot of folks are forgetting that we have a race for Public Service Commission, on the ballot, on Jan 5. So, for example, we will be making sure that our voters are receiving a fair deal when it comes to their power bill. I think, frankly, folks are tired of hearing only about issues at the national level. So, we will get to focus on those issues that impact people's wallets and their families, right here in Georgia."

Jobs, education, healthcare and inclusion are other hot-button topics for the Asian American community. "Hindus in Georgia should ensure that their Senators will fight for inclusion and pluralism, and not those who seek to return the state to its darker days of racism and xenophobia," says Hindu Americans for Biden co-chair Sohini Sircar. "It's not just jobs or the economy," says Mahmood, adding, "it's a lot of the same issues that impact other communities of color — healthcare, education and making sure our kids can go back to school safely."

Of course, reaching these voters and encouraging them to turn out and vote is easier said than done. AAPI data notes that the South Asian population in Georgia is mixed economically. Many are doctors, engineers and other upper-income professionals, but others own or work in restaurants, gas stations, mobile phone franchises and laundromats. And language barriers are still a reality for many. Within AAPI communities in Georgia, 80 percent speak a language other than English at home. Of that 80 percent, an estimated 43 percent speak English less than "very well." And the data shows that there is lower turnout for voters with limited English proficiency.

Grassroots organizations have been working hard to counter that. Ramakrishnan says, "The biggest value in phone banking targeted at a particular community is that sense of connection we bring. When a Gujarati speaking volunteer happens to speak to a Gujarati speaking voter, they are able to have a more in-depth conversation — a conversation which may have ended quickly without the language and cultural affinity. The shared language gives us the extra five minutes to talk to people. Our focus is on leveraging the cultural connection to drive out the vote."

They See Blue Activism

Focused on growing chapters in swing states and leading phone banking efforts for voter outreach, Ramakrishnan says, "There are many groups on the ground in Georgia, not just ones targeted at South Asians. There's Fair Fight that really helped move the needle in the 2020 elections," continuing, "They See Blue has been on the ground the longest. Our GA chapter started in Sept 2019, the first chapter outside of the founding Silicon Valley chapter and kicked off activities in February with Stacy Abrams headlining the event. Candidate Ossoff attended as the primaries weren't done yet. The volunteers had been activists even prior to They See Blue, but some have been engaged in the 2017 Ossoff campaign, but they didn't have a formal group. They were just passionate individuals coming together for a campaign and then dispersing. What they liked about working with They See Blue is having a framework of a grassroots group that they could be a part of and continue to build and mobilize voters from one election to another. Otherwise too much effort was wasted in reorganizing and regrouping people after each election. The biggest value of They See Blue is that it made political activism accessible, made it bite-sized and easy to consume. We reduced the barriers for those who wanted to get politically involved."

To this Kirpalani adds, "Also, vote by mail has been great because it takes away the excuse of not wanting to go to the polling stations. It's easy when something comes to your house, you make your choices, sign, stamp and mail it out."

Kirpalani also points out that South Asian for Biden alone have four phone banks going a week, for two hours a day. "Our phone banking is going through the roof," says a pleased Kirpalani, who had volunteers from out of state join the phone banks in GA. Text-banking and post-carding are some of the other strategies that groups like South Asians for Biden are implementing.

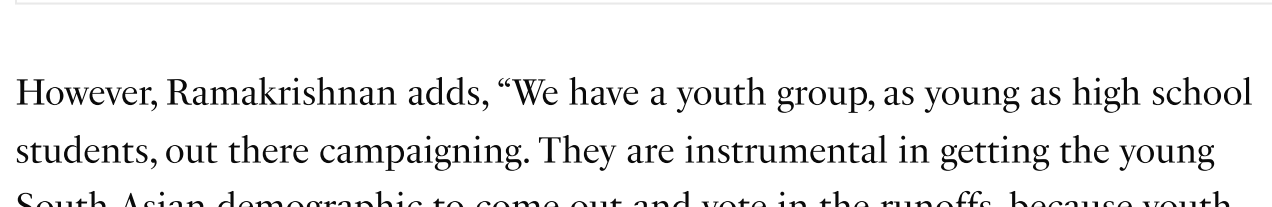
Ramakrishnan also points out that one advantage with phone banking is the number of volunteers that turn up to call fellow South Asians. "In 2016, Pre-Covid when I was campaigning, I wanted to go out to Nevada to canvas. But I always worried that if I showed up and knocked on someone's door as a brown person, an immigrant, a woman of color with my accent, how would I be welcomed and perceived? Would it be good for my safety? I was concerned that with the rise of xenophobia that Trump was whipping up, even before the election of 2016, I was worried that I may trigger a reaction. But when I realized that I could knock on South Asian doors, that concern was lifted."

Soujini Kumar, from South Asians for Biden, Georgia chapter, part of a grassroots national coalition active in 20 states, tells me that after the 2020 elections, all the national chapters pivoted and are now focused on the monumental Georgia Senate races. "We have been focusing on getting South Asians specific lists from the campaigns for the purpose of phone banking, text banking and postcard writing."

Another strategy that South Asian for Biden are using is "relationship training." Kirpalani says, "We are trying to see if we can get our own network within GA to go out there and deliver a poignant message that convinces their own personal circle — friends and families — on casting their vote." All this has resulted in more volunteers in the fold. So, who are these intrepid volunteers in Georgia?

Kumar says, "There is a broader AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander groups), but in Georgia I would say the AAPI is made up of the various ethnic groups — so we have the South Asians — Desis for Biden, Chinese Americans for Biden, Vietnamese Americans for Biden — and I would say by and large, unlike myself (she chuckles) it was more youthful!"

She is quick to point out, "Not high schoolers or teenagers, but people in their 30s, 40s and 50s were the driving force. A lot of suburban mothers from the Johns Creek area (northern suburb in Atlanta, North Fulton County), from Duluth (another northern suburb of Atlanta and part of Gwinnett county, Georgia's second-most populous county and the one with the largest Asian-American population) made up the demographics of the campaigners," adding, "I saw a lot of moms! And it is the Indian Americans that make up the bulk of the South Asian population in Georgia. We are not talking so much about Bangladeshis or really any other community — but the Indian Americans driven by tech and by the suburbs of metro Atlanta."



Consequential Lieutenant: Aruna Miller Sworn in a Maryland's First Asian and First Indian American Lt. Governor

However, Ramakrishnan adds, "We have a youth group, as young as high school students, out there campaigning. They are instrumental in getting the young South Asian demographic to come out and vote in the runoffs, because youth turnout has always been a challenge in general."

First-Time Voters

Ramakrishnan further points out that "The challenge with young first-time voters, who just voted in November, is to keep them engaged till the runoffs and ensure they turn up for Ossoff and Warnock." To reach this demographic various well-targeted and well-positioned commercials and bits on social media have gained traction amongst the youth. "It's not a very narrow demographic," says Ramakrishnan adding with a laugh, "our members range from Gen Z to millennials, Gen Xers, baby boomers — first and second-generation. Both sexes are represented. People from different religions, who speak different languages, different national origins, are all a part of it too. It is a big tent approach. I think it's going to take everybody involved to make this happen!"

Kirpalani adds, "The young people are bringing out the older people to vote, which has been brilliant. It's the 18-year-olds and 30-year-olds that are bringing new ideas and technology into play. I find that the younger South Asians tend to be more progressive and liberal. And in the pandemic when the older generation don't want to canvas, it's the youngsters that are going door-to-door. Groups like ours have done what we needed to do — educate people and inform them about the difference their vote can make."

As to why the Republican candidates are not finding favor with Indian American voters, a joint press release between Hindu Americans for Biden and South Asians for Biden that alleged that the Republican candidates — Senators David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler — made numerous racist and xenophobic remarks over the past few months, may be the answer. The press release made it clear that their (Republican) agenda would not fit with the aspirations of Hindus and other South Asians. "Perdue, for example, feigned ignorance at the correct pronunciation of Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris's name, despite serving as Senate colleagues over the past 4 years," the statement said.

Ramakrishnan also points out that the kids of immigrants who came to the US 20 years ago are now eligible to vote, and they tend to vote Democrat. "Groups like Desis United have made ads in various swing states in 2020 — a novel concept targeted at 'desis' in order to encourage them to vote for Biden-Harris. And of course, having Kamala Harris on the ticket has definitely energized enthusiasm amongst the community."

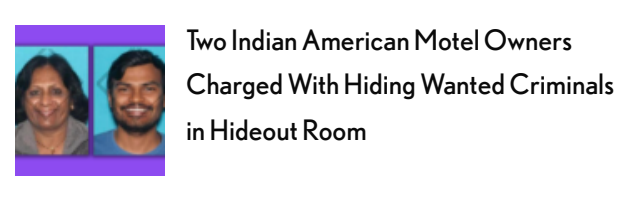
"Whether you live in Augusta, Avondale, Alma, or Athens, the Hindu American vote is going to be a force in the new Georgia. This is our community's chance to tell the GOP emphatically that we're not going back to the Old Dixie and the divisiveness of the Trump-Perdue-Loeffler agenda," said Hindu Americans for Biden co-chair Murali Balaji.

Kirpalani, who is growing more and more alarmed by the "thuggery" of the Trump administration, which she calls a "stripping down of our democracy and values" adds, "Trump has brought out so much of the ugliness associated with white supremacy and the racism that has come out. Many Indian Americans like me feel threatened. I am afraid for my children to go out. I tell my son every day, who is slightly darker than my daughter, his one responsibility is to come home alive. I never thought I'd have to say that to my children, but we have come to that stage in life. While the ugliness existed prior to this administration it existed on the quiet. Now people feel free to manifest and demonstrate their racist natures. The Georgia Asians I think are collectively threatened and now want to get engaged to make a difference."

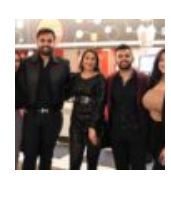
With Biden-Harris having won Georgia, a hopeful Ramakrishnan says that "it has given us a shot of energy. If Biden-Harris hadn't won and we had still gone to the runoffs, the mood would have been very different." Kirpalani is confident Warnock will win and believes Ossoff is the "wild-card." "If we get people to vote for Warnock, there is no question, they will vote for Ossoff and therefore, in my opinion, he will win by default!"

However, Bhateja is not quick to jump to jubilation. "Runoffs races typically do not favor Democrats, so we have our work cut out for us," he says with determination. With early voting in Georgia starting Dec. 14 and control of the upper chamber hanging in balance, Bhateja has aptly summed up the mood with his cautious optimism.

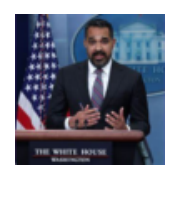
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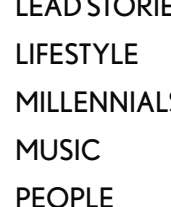
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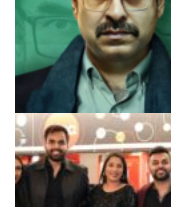
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Anu Ghosh immigrated to the U.S. from India in 1999. Back in India she was a journalist for the Times of India in Pune for 8 years and a graduate from The Symbiosis Institute of Journalism and Communication. In the U.S., she obtained her Masters and PhD in Communications from The Ohio State University. Go Buckeyes! She has been involved in education for the last 15 years, as a professor at Oldenborge University and then Georgia State University. She currently teaches Special Education at Oak Grove Elementary. She is also a mom to two precocious girls ages 11 and 6.