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## Synopsis

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ET Bureau

Nov 02, 2020, 11:39:51 PM IST

NEW DELHI: Healthcare and the state of the US economy are dominating mindshare of most Indian American voters, though concern around foreign policy is making a subtle difference, particularly in the way Indian American men are voting, experts said.

Heading up to US presidential election day on Tuesday (November 3), both Democrats as well as Republicans had intensified their outreach, particularly in "battleground States" in the last leg of the campaign.

Support groups for Democratic presidential and vice-presidential nominees Joe Biden and Kamala Harris – such as 'Hindus with Biden' and 'They See Blue', apart from Chitthi Brigade, a sisterhood group dedicated to Harris – have focussed on reaching out to diverse groups using Bollywood mishmashes, poetry, jingles, videos and virtual campaigns in many Indian languages.

On the other side, 'Indian Voices for Trump' and 'Hindus for Trump', among the biggest support groups for US President Donald Trump, have made Trump's chemistry with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Biden-Harris' criticism of India's stand on Article 370 and the Citizenship Amendment Act as the focal points of their campaign.

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Foreign policy, although not a priority in this election, is making a subtle difference because many Indian American men are likely to prefer a strong, muscular presence both domestically and internationally, according to Karthick Ramakrishnan, an American political scientist and currently professor of public policy and political science at the University of California.

"Our survey projected that Trump might get up to 30% of the Indian American vote, which is a big increase. It is unlikely it will go beyond that. Where Trump is getting a lot of support is from Indian Americans who are Republicans. Where Trump is heavily losing is among those who don't identify as Republicans or Democrats," Ramakrishnan told ET.

The Modi-Trump factor will only make a marginal difference, as domestic issues such as economy, job creation and healthcare have been the most prominent issues for the community. "We saw this in 2016, too, that Indians are most liberal when it comes to health insurance and that is hurting Trump who is eliminating the healthcare Act. Indian Americans are also strongly in favour of gun control," he said.

While the Trump campaign has conducted high-profile events and an intensive social media campaign around the elections, Biden and Harris have reached out to a lot of Indian communities. "Trump did make gains among Indian American men, particularly middle-aged men as opposed to women. His handling of Covid-19 might reduce his support in the community because he continued to treat the pandemic in a cavalier fashion. We are seeing a record-high turnout in many States. Usually, high-turn means more young voters which is likely to benefit Biden-Harris," Ramakrishnan added.

This is the first time ever that the Indian community is coming forward in big numbers to publicly show their engagement in US elections, said California-based Ajay Bhutoria, who serves on the national finance committee of Biden for President 2020 and is on the Biden campaign's Asian-American Pacific Islander (AAP) national leadership council.

"Indo-Americans are the crucial margin of victory in Michigan, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Florida, Wisconsin, and Nevada," Bhutoria said, adding that the attempt this time was to ensure maximum mobilisation of Indo-Americans to vote in these States.

He said Indian languages, culture and music – from Lagaan's 'Chale Chalo' to Biden ki Jeet ho, Trump ki Haar ho', and running campaigns like 'America ka neta kaisa ho,' and 'Jaago, America' – were lavishly used in his outreach efforts.

"Earlier, parties would say South Asians don't vote, but there was no attempt to connect to them. This time, all our campaigns in 14 Indian languages drove home the same message – that while we are going through the worst phase of economy and small businesses have shut down, hate crimes and racial discrimination have increased and Trump has even suspended H1-B visas. Trade deals have not taken off and Green Card backlogs are increasing," he said.

Mrinalini Kumari, co-chair of the Indian Voices for Trump, however dismissed surveys predicting an edge for Biden-Harris, saying that the "shy or embarrassed" voter is going to be the silver bullet for Trump.

The working-class population of the Asian community, and those running small businesses among the community remember that President Trump had always supported India and even stood up to China, she said, adding that the new rules for H1-B visas will protect Indian workers from being exploited.

"He cuts our taxes. He got therapeutics at this level in a pandemic. People had money to survive even during Covid-19 and they can see through the pretence of the Democrats," Kumari added.

Ohio Republican Niraj Antani told ET that Indian American voters have the capacity to influence the results, particularly in states like Florida and Michigan.

Trump and Modi's relationship has been definitely on the minds of the Hindu community. "Never before has a US President stood with the Indian PM in the US. The Kashmir issue is very important to Indian Americans. The Democrats have been against India's abrogation of (Article) 370, much to the chagrin of Indian Americans. Our community tends to be democratic. However, the President is making gains within the community," Antani said.

The Hindu American Political Action Committee, Americans for Hindus, Hindus for Republicans and Hindus for Trump and associations with connections to the Sangh Parivar are also actively engaging with both parties, while making clear that "there can be no compromise on matters of Kashmir or national security."

They had also reached out to a number of linguistic bodies, such as Tamil Sangams and Marathi mandals to garner support for Trump, rallying behind the theme, 'In India's interest, for America's welfare.'

The campaign picked up momentum after Harris' candidature and a number of online events were organized to "show how the Democrats have no plan to counter Islamic radicalism and will counter India's moves to safeguard its borders," a volunteer said.

Biden has made a strong pitch to obtain support from the Indian American community, assuring that if elected India and the United States would work closely against international terror and promote stability "where neither China nor any other country threatens its neighbours."

"The Obama-Biden years were some of the best we've ever had between our two countries. A Biden-Harris Administration will build on that great progress and do even more. We can and should be natural allies," Biden said recently in an Op-Ed for IndiaWest, an Indian American media platform.

"We'll open markets and grow the middle class in both the United States and India, and confront other international challenges together, like climate change, global health, transnational terrorism and nuclear proliferation," Biden wrote.

As per most surveys, more than 70% of eligible Indian American voters are expected to vote for the Democrats, even as support for Trump has increased from among the community.

Bhutoria said Biden had engaged with the Hindu community by sending out comprehensive answers to a questionnaire sent by the Hindu American PAC wherein the Democrat presidential candidate had said he would take effective steps to address bullying of Hindu children in schools, protect Hindu places of worship, help Indian small businesses recover from the slowing economy and work with India to control Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. On the other hand, Trump did not even bother to answer the questions. "That shows how much he cares for the community," he said.

Many domestic issues, including national security, human rights, race relations, using science to fight Covid-19 and climate change, deficit spending, the environment, healthcare, the economy, unemployment, education and trade wars have influenced voters from the community, said Rajat Srivastava, one of the founders of the South Asian American political grass-roots group, They See Blue (to pun with Desi Blue), which is focussed on mobilizing South Asians to elect Democratic candidates in swing states.

The volunteer-driven group was set up as "secular and inclusive" of all South Asians including from the Indian diaspora, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and others, he said.

"Most of the folks that are very loud on social media, are not citizens or even live in the US. There is some alignment among older naturalized Indian men with Hindutva and the perception that since Trump is against Muslims, he is good. In fact, Trump has been inimical towards India in trade, immigration and UN Security Council membership. Trump is not a reliable ally. We will be surprised if anywhere greater than 25% of the South Asian Indian voters consider non-US issues as the driving decision factor," he told ET.

Srivastava added that while Chinese incursions, national security, Kashmir and the larger issue of radicalism, particularly in some Muslim communities, did not feature in the decision criteria of most Americans this time, some of them are relevant to Indian Americans.

"Unfortunately, the greatest terror attacks are now inflicted by white supremacists in the US. The one major distinguishing feature of this election has more to do with character and the conscience of the nation. There are so many respected, senior Republicans who have endorsed Joe Biden," he said.