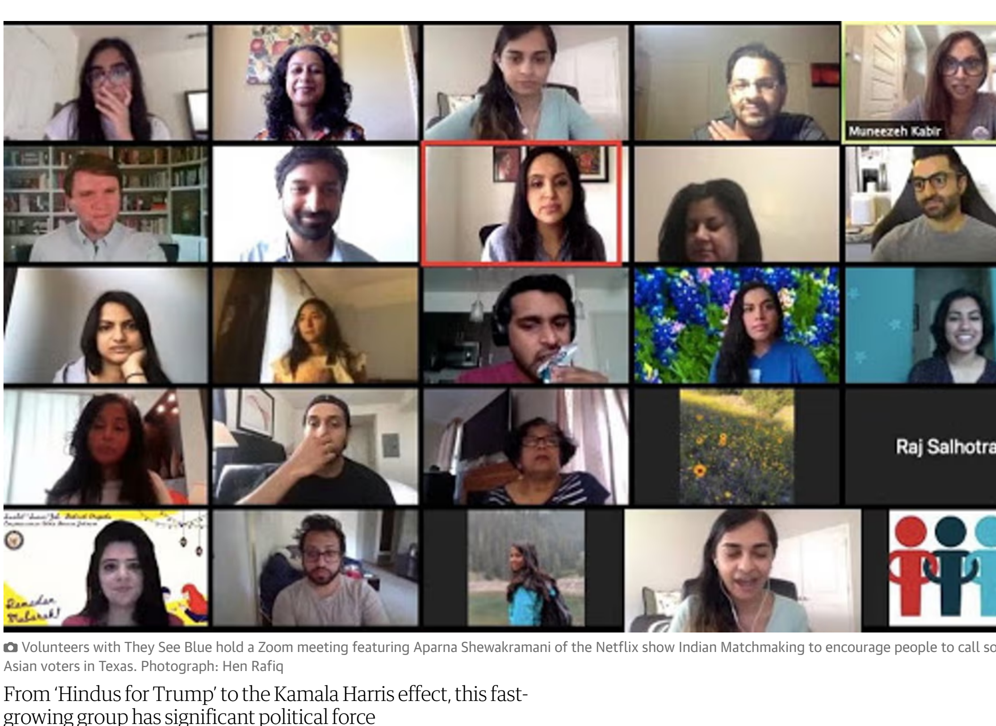
Print subscriptions | Sign in | Search jobs | Search | US edition

Support the Guardian
Fund independent journalism with $5 per month
Support us

US elections 2020

'A political awakening': how south Asians could tilt key US elections

Sonia Paul
Thu 3 Sep 2020 14.12 EDT



Volunteers with They See Blue hold a Zoom meeting featuring Aparna Shewakramani of the Netflix show Indian Matchmaking to encourage people to call south Asian voters in Texas. Photograph: Hen Rafiq

From 'Hindus for Trump' to the Kamala Harris effect, this fast-growing group has significant political force

This article was published in collaboration with the Juggernaut

Around 2016, Aamina Ahmed found herself wondering why, for all the talk about getting out to vote, no one had been canvassing in her neighborhood in Canton, Michigan.

Canton is a township between Detroit and Ann Arbor with a growing south Asian population. Ahmed, who is Pakistani American and works and volunteers for several civic engagement organizations, started to speak up about the absence of activity at local candidate forums. Intrigued, a worker at a voter outreach organization went back to their colleagues to inquire if they had visited these neighborhoods. It turned out that the field workers had skipped visiting voters with names they felt they couldn't pronounce.

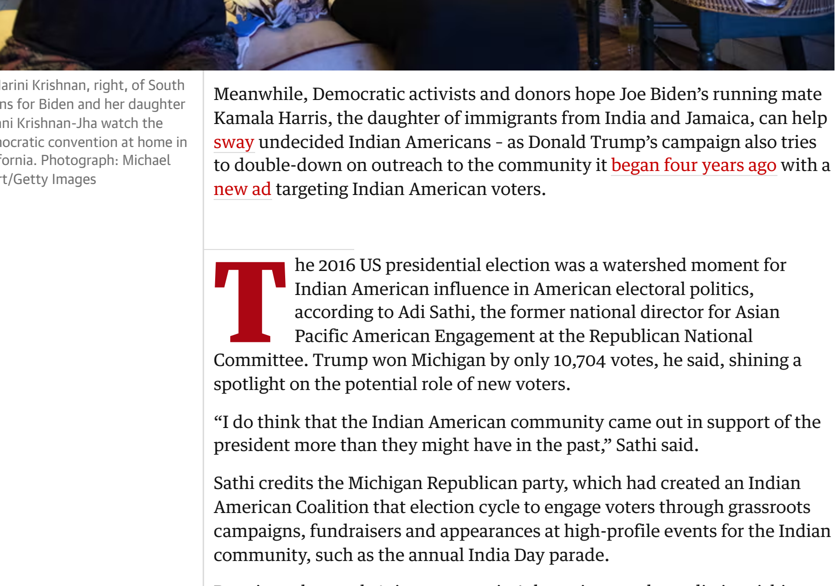
Trump views India as another state to turn red on his 2020 campaign trail
Read more

"They were viewing it as, 'Well, we don't want to offend the person by mispronouncing their name versus you are actually excluding them from the opportunity to participate in democracy," Ahmed said.

Such is the kind of story that turns up when probing why south Asian Americans, who historically have high voter turnout rates and lean toward the Democratic party, might not cast their vote. Coupled with voter suppression tactics and difficulty understanding the complex US political process, targeted outreach has lagged, and some south Asians face issues related to language access and gender inclusion. These factors are hindering a burgeoning American political awakening, according to more than a dozen community organizers, researchers and political campaigners.

But it would be a mistake to overlook the south Asian community's political significance. Growing numbers among multiple south Asian communities underscore their strength within the Asian American demographic, the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the US electorate.

The south Asian American population - those who trace their ancestry to the southern region of Asia - grew by 43% from 2011 to 5.7 million people in 2018, according to the American Community Survey, while the total US population grew by only 4.7% during that same time period. And about 2 million Indian Americans, the second largest immigrant group in the country, are eligible to vote in the US, according to Devesh Kapur, professor of south Asian studies at Johns Hopkins University and co-author of The Other One Percent: Indians in America.



Harini Krishnan, right, of South Asians for Biden and her daughter Janani Krishnan-Jha watch the Democratic convention at home in California. Photograph: Michael Short/Getty Images

Meanwhile, Democratic activists and donors hope Joe Biden's running mate Kamala Harris, the daughter of immigrants from India and Jamaica, can help sway undecided Indian Americans - as Donald Trump's campaign also tries to double-down on outreach to the community it began four years ago with a new ad targeting Indian American voters.

The 2016 US presidential election was a watershed moment for Indian American influence in American electoral politics, according to Adi Sathi, the former national director for Asian Pacific American Engagement at the Republican National Committee. Trump won Michigan by only 10,704 votes, he said, shining a spotlight on the potential role of new voters.

"I do think that the Indian American community came out in support of the president more than they might have in the past," Sathi said.

Sathi credits the Michigan Republican party, which had created an Indian American Coalition that election cycle to engage voters through grassroots campaigns, fundraisers and appearances at high-profile events for the Indian community, such as the annual India Day parade.

But given the south Asian community's booming numbers, distinguishing how different south Asians - not just Indian Americans - vote bears significance. The 2016 Post-Election National Asian American survey shows that Bangladeshi and Pakistani Americans were much more inclined to Hillary Clinton than Indian Americans: 90% of Bangladeshi Americans and 88% of Pakistani Americans voted for Clinton compared with 77% of Indian Americans.

It's also important to look at where voters live - for example, according to data from 2018, of the estimated 2 million Indian American voters in the US, about 500,000 live in battleground states. With razor-thin margins in these regions, voter mobilization within the south Asian community could have the greatest impact in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Texas and Wisconsin, said Karthick Ramakrishnan, a political scientist at University of California Riverside and founder of AAPI Data.

Volunteers for Long Island south Asian congressional candidate Shaniyat Chowdhury hand out gyros outside the legally mandated distance from a polling site in June. Photograph: Raihan Faroqui

Constituencies with significant south Asian American populations, including Democratic strongholds in California, New Jersey and Illinois, and purple regions in Texas like the Houston suburbs, are also increasingly attracting the attention of grassroots organizers trying to capture south Asian votes.

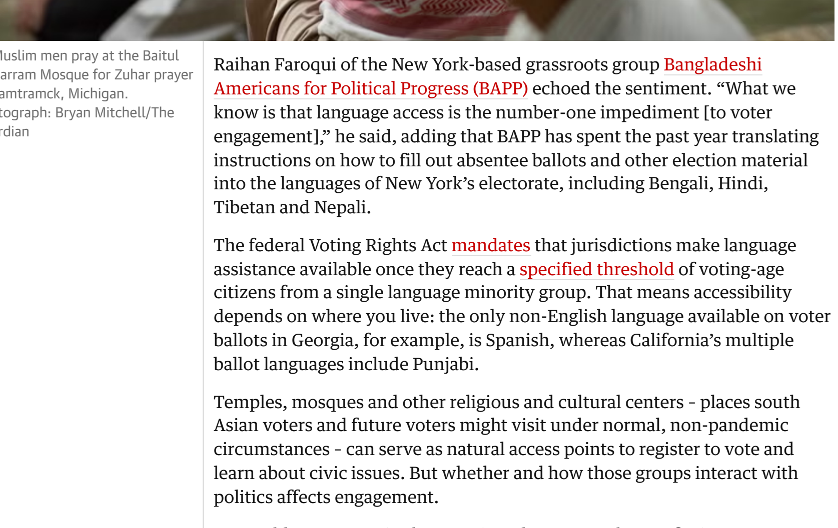
Outreach is essential to bringing these communities into the fold, particularly since people tend to become politicized during their high school and college years, and most south Asians immigrate to the US after obtaining their college degrees, said Ramakrishnan.

"If many of these south Asians found their political awakening in south Asia, it might not always translate that well into US politics. So there's a new kind of socialization that needs to happen," he said.

Executing effective outreach among south Asians relies on knowing the nuances of these communities. According to the 2018 Population Survey, for example, the median household income for Indian US citizens in Michigan is $100,559; for Bangladeshi US citizens, it's $57,605. Indian Americans tend to have high English proficiency levels, which correlates with slightly higher voter turnout of 89% among those who are registered (v 87% for the US total). In contrast, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Americans turn out at slightly lower levels, at 86% and 83% among registered voters, respectively.

Even for Bangladeshi Americans who can speak and read English, not being able to read a voter ballot in Bengali is challenging, said Fatema Haque of the Michigan non-profit Rising Voices of Asian American Families.

"Most folks are working-class," she said, referring to Bangladeshi communities in the Detroit and Hamtramck areas. The border between the two cities is known as "Banglatown" because it's home to one of the largest Bangladeshi populations in the US. "For many years [in Michigan], there wasn't a ballot in Bengali."



Muslim men pray at the Baitul Mukarram Mosque for Zuhar prayer in Hamtramck, Michigan. Photograph: Bryan Mitchell/The Guardian

Raihan Faroqui of the New York-based grassroots group Bangladeshi Americans for Political Progress (BAPP) echoed the sentiment. "What we know is that language access is the number-one impediment [to voter engagement]," he said, adding that BAPP has spent the past year translating instructions on how to fill out absentee ballots and other election material into the languages of New York's electorate, including Bengali, Hindi, Tibetan and Nepali.

The federal Voting Rights Act mandates that jurisdictions make language assistance available once they reach a specified threshold of voting-age citizens from a single language minority group. That means accessibility depends on where you live: the only non-English language available on voter ballots in Georgia, for example, is Spanish, whereas California's multiple ballot languages include Punjabi.

Temples, mosques and other religious and cultural centers - places south Asian voters and future voters might visit under normal, non-pandemic circumstances - can serve as natural access points to register to vote and learn about civic issues. But whether and how those groups interact with politics affects engagement.

Some older mosques in the Detroit and Hamtramck area, for instance, are gender-segregated according to different times of the day but still mostly attract men, Haque said. And it was only this year - before Covid-19 broke out - that some Hindu temples finally welcomed on-site voter registration, said Ratna Rao of the Michigan-based group Samosa, or South Asians of Michigan Organizing for Serious Action. The temples would insist that they don't get involved in politics even though voter registration is a non-partisan activity. "I mean, you couldn't get through to them," Rao said.

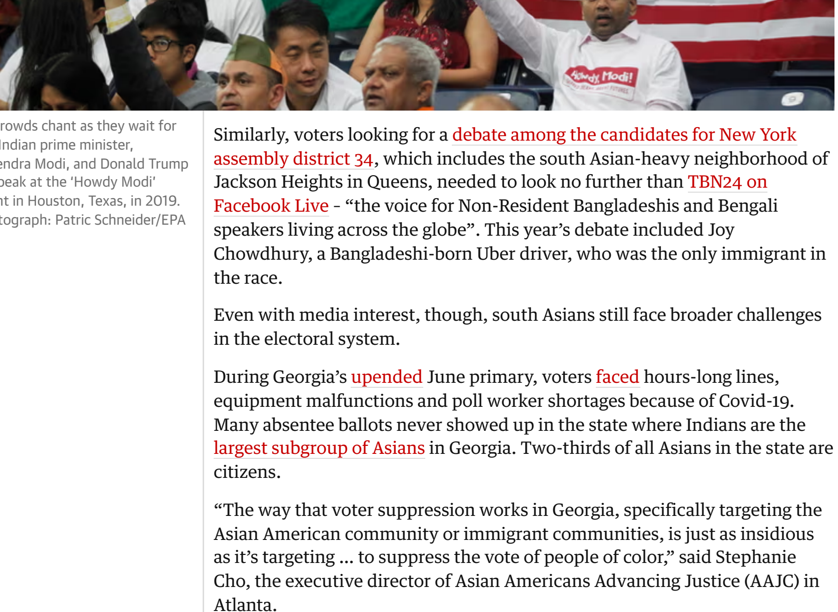
Rao also found a certain detachment when knocking on the doors of upper-middle-class Indian immigrant enclaves. Often, a child would answer the door - "Mom, the voting auntie is here!" they would call out. But the family would be hesitant to engage, even with another south Asian. "They will say, 'Oh, I can't talk to you about that because that's my husband's job,'" Rao said.

Sunil Mehta, co-founder of They See Blue, a nationwide grassroots campaign focused on mobilizing south Asian Americans to elect Democratic candidates, also observes a cultural divide.

"Many south Asians have not yet detached themselves from south Asian politics," he said.

As Trump tries to capitalize on this through events targeting the Indian American community, like Howdy! Modi, where he appeared alongside the Indian prime minister and his cheering fans in Houston last September, or 'Hindus for Trump' in New Jersey, Mehta believes reaching south Asian voters where they are is key.

In the 2018 midterm elections, for example, his organization invested in spots on Radio Punjab in California's Central Valley, a stronghold for the state's Punjabi Indian population. Every day for two weeks before the election, listeners, including an audience of tens of thousands of Indian truck drivers, could hear upwards of six spots about voting.



Crowds chant as they wait for the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, and Donald Trump to speak at the 'Howdy Modi' event in Houston, Texas, in 2019. Photograph: Patric Schneider/EPA

Similarly, voters looking for a debate among the candidates for New York assembly district 34, which includes the south Asian-heavy neighborhood of Jackson Heights in Queens, needed to look no further than TBN24 on Facebook Live - "the voice for Non-Resident Bangladeshis and Bengali speakers living across the globe". This year's debate included Joy Chowdhury, a Bangladeshi-born Uber driver, who was the only immigrant in the race.

Even with media interest, though, south Asians still face broader challenges in the electoral system.

During Georgia's upended June primary, voters faced hours-long lines, equipment malfunctions and poll worker shortages because of Covid-19. Many absentee ballots never showed up in the state where Indians are the largest subgroup of Asians in Georgia. Two-thirds of all Asians in the state are citizens.

"The way that voter suppression works in Georgia, specifically targeting the Asian American community or immigrant communities, is just as insidious as it's targeting ... to suppress the vote of people of color," said Stephanie Cho, the executive director of Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC) in Atlanta.

When Cho's group received tips from two different Asian Americans that issues were arising at a Georgia high school in North Fulton - a historically Republican, affluent, white area with high numbers of Indians and Koreans - she went to monitor the situation. She took notice of the poll manager, an older white woman.

"I just observed the way she talked to people. And it was really different, how she talked to white voters versus this one Indian couple, because they were just asking questions about this form that they needed to sign," said Cho.

Later that night, after Fulton county had delayed the polls' closing time to 9pm, it took a white man to convince the poll manager that that was the case, even though an election monitor from AAJC - a south Asian American - had also been trying to tell her the same thing.

$0 contributions | $1,500,000 our goal

I hope you appreciated this article. Before you move on, I wanted to ask if you would consider supporting the Guardian's journalism as we prepare for one of the most consequential news cycles of our lifetimes. **We need your help to raise $1.5m to fund our reporting in 2024.**

From Elon Musk to the Murdochs, a small number of billionaire owners have a powerful hold on so much of the information that reaches the public about what's happening in the world. The Guardian is different. We have no billionaire owner or shareholders to consider. Our journalism is produced to serve the public interest - not profit motives.

And we avoid the trap that befalls much US media - the tendency, born of a desire to please all sides, to engage in false equivalence in the name of neutrality. While fairness guides everything we do, we know there is a right and a wrong position in the fight against racism and for reproductive justice. When we report on issues like the climate crisis, we're not afraid to name who is responsible. And as a global news organization, we're able to provide a fresh, outsider perspective on US politics - one so often missing from the insular American media bubble.

Around the world, readers can access the Guardian's paywall-free journalism because of our unique reader-supported model. That's because of people like you. Our readers keep us independent, beholden to no outside influence and accessible to everyone - whether they can afford to pay for news, or not.

If you can, please consider supporting us with a year-end gift from $1. Thank you.

Betsy Reed
Editor, Guardian US

One-time | Monthly | Annual
$5 per month | $7 per month | Other
Continue | Remind me on New Years Eve
VISA PayPal

Explore more on these topics
US elections 2020 | US politics | Republicans | Democrats | Donald Trump | Joe Biden | Race | features

Reuse this content

Most viewed

Your privacy

California residents have certain rights with regard to the sale of personal information to third parties. Guardian News and Media and our partners use information collected through cookies or in other forms to improve experience on our site and pages, analyze how it is used and show personalized advertising.

At any point, you can opt out of the sale of all of your personal information by pressing

Do not sell my personal information

You can find out more in our privacy policy and cookie policy, and manage your choices by going to 'California resident – Do Not Sell' at the bottom of any page.