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Grieder: Asian-American voters in Texas could play pivotal role in 2020

By Erica Grieder
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Voters line up outside the polling place in the Metropolitan Multi-Service Center to vote on the final day of early voting before the Super Tuesday primary election Friday, Feb. 28, 2020, in Houston. Brett Coomer, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

It's now less than two months until Election Day, and the coronavirus pandemic has upended traditional campaigning.

So the young Texans who volunteer with the state chapter of They See Blue, a progressive national organization focused on voters of South Asian descent, are focusing on new tactics as they pursue a mission of registering, persuading and mobilizing such voters.

They're phone-banking for two hours on Saturday mornings, each week featuring a candidate for the Texas House, as well as a local celebrity — a recent example was Aparna Shewakramani, a Houston attorney who stars in the new Netflix show "Indian Matchmaking." They're sending mail-in ballots to voters who are eligible for them, as well as registering voters who may have sat on the sidelines in previous cycles. And they're creating content, tailored for specific South Asian communities — blog posts, op-eds and memes.

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"The memes are so much fun," said Ali Hasanali, an attorney and member of the TSB TX Core Team, adding that they're also a crucial way to reach millennial and Generation Z voters.

Many of the challenges facing these organizers are the same encountered by anyone who attempts to mobilize voters in Texas, a state with historically low electoral participation compared with the nation writ large — or reliable swing states.

"We have to do education here in Texas because of the voter suppression efforts," said Hasanali. "For example, we have to educate voters that there is no straight-ticket voting this year; we have to educate them on ballots by mail."

But interest in this year's election is high, he continued, among South Asian voters and Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Texans more generally.

"In 2018 we caught them off guard, because Republicans didn't expect Democrats to go after South Asian voters so hard," Hasanali explained.

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No one did. AAPI voters are the fastest-growing segment of the electorate, but they remain a small minority. This year, according to an analysis by the Pew Research Center, they will make up nearly 5 percent of the nation's voters; the figure is a bit higher in Texas, according to AAPI Data. And historically, at least, they've been politically divided, with older AAPI voters from most sub-communities often favoring Republicans.

But the election of President Donald Trump has changed that, perhaps permanently: In the 2018 midterms, AAPI voters favored Democrats by staggering margins. And in Texas, at least, the 2018 midterm were a wake-up call for both parties. In a battleground state, you have to look for "every nook and cranny of voters," said Varun Nikore, the president of the AAPI Victory Fund, a nationwide super PAC. And Texas, he reckons, currently qualifies.

"I think this election will prove that it's a swing state," Nikore told me last week. "Obviously, there's no way to know until it happens, but ...after the 20th poll that says Biden and Trump are in the margin of error? Maybe you want to believe the polls."

The left-leaning AAPI Victory Fund is investing accordingly. The PAC last month announced that it's committing \$1 million to boost AAPI turnout in Texas this cycle.

Republicans — many of whom recognize a need to diversify their electoral coalition as well as to keep Democrats at bay in the Lone Star State — are also likely to step up their efforts with AAPI voters this cycle, with groups such as the Texas Asian Republican Assembly and the relatively new Indo-American Conservatives of Texas on the scene. And Trump, in his bid for re-election, has sought to make hay of his relationship with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with whom he appeared onstage at last year's "Howdy, Modi!" event in Houston.

Nikore explained that the challenges of mobilizing these voters are considerable but that the effort can pay significant dividends.

"You don't see sort of an organized ecosystem for AAPIs," Nikore told me. "We tend to be fragmented by our core ethnicity — the Chinese groups will organize, the Indian and South Asian groups will organize. That makes it hard, frankly, for progressive investors or campaign types."

And organizers with experience in AAPI communities say the most effective form of outreach, for these voters, is highly specialized.

"When you're dealing with a community that is 65 percent first-generation American, you can see how sending the right individual to the right household would make the difference, right?" Nikore said. "Having that cultural understanding of the voter could be the difference between a persuasive message and someone who wants to slam the door in your face."

But Trump, he continued, has created an opportunity for progressives to build relationships with AAPI voters that may last well past this election cycle.

"It's essentially the chickens coming home to roost for Republicans," Nikore said. "They said for a long time, 'AAPIs are our natural allies. They're fiscally conservative, they're socially conservative, they're natural for our party.' But they drove them away with the rhetoric and the extremism."

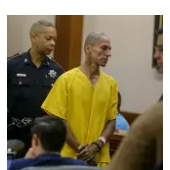
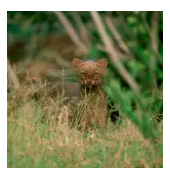



In a state as competitive as Texas, the results of that alienation could prove decisive.

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