



Kamala Harris about to speak at a Desis Decide event this year.

Courtesy of Rajiv Bhateja



WORDS BY **SHAWN CHITNIS**

Less than two months before Election Day, with both presidential campaigns eager to get beyond a virtual tie—especially among battleground states—one result is almost certain. The United States will have a South Asian woman in the White House. But community leaders say the prospect of “Kamala Auntie” becoming the first woman president, or “Usha Didi” making her own history as the first Asian Second Lady should come down to the issues well before anyone looks to simply celebrate identity.

Politicos from both parties who are working to turn out more South Asian Americans in the 2024 election agree that their community is a voting bloc growing fast in numbers. They argue that local- and state-level races as well as the electoral votes of a state could flip from one party to the other simply by courting and winning the South Asian vote.

“The thing is if the South Asian community actually voted, he would have won,” says Priti Pandya-Patel, referring to Jack Ciattarelli, the GOP candidate in New Jersey’s 2021 gubernatorial race.

Pandya-Patel, who is co-chair of the New Jersey Republican Party’s South Asian Coalition, helped Ciattarelli connect with South Asian voters during the campaign, but says not enough of those community members voted in that election, which Ciattarelli lost by a narrow margin.



Some South Asian voters are rallying for GOP candidate Curtis Bashaw in this year's U.S. Senate race.

Courtesy of Priti Pandya-Patel

It's an argument that South Asian leaders on the other side of the country—and political aisle—agree on while working to elect candidates in the Democratic Party. They See Blue started in 2018, trying to flip seats in California from red to blue. The organization will once again work to get a Democrat in the White House in November.

“We said, ‘You know, we should mobilize the South Asian community. Nobody’s really doing that in a serious way,’” explains Rajiv Bhateja, one of the organization’s co-founders.

Bhateja estimates that about 20 percent of eligible South Asian Americans in the United States are not voting and some of those who do vote could be persuaded to change their party affiliation or political leanings. A 2023 [report](#) from the Pew Research Center shows that white voters are more consistent compared to Black, Hispanic, and Asian voters. The national average was 37 percent for the 2018, 2020, and 2022 elections. Of the white Americans who were eligible to vote in all three, 43 percent did, 33 percent participated in one or two, while 24 percent didn’t vote in any, according to Pew. All communities of color lagged, with only 21 percent of Asian Americans voting in all three elections.

“I think it makes a big difference,” Pandya-Patel says, reflecting on the 2024 primary and current state of the general election. “When you see people that look like you and from the same background, it definitely makes a difference to people.”



Priti Pandya-Patel (left) is co-chair of the New Jersey Republican Party's South Asian Coalition.

Courtesy of Priti Pandya-Patel

For her, that is part of the pride she has in seeing former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley and businessman Vivek Ramaswamy as presidential candidates on the GOP stage earlier this year. Pandya-Patel even acknowledges she can be proud of Vice President Kamala Harris's candidacy for possibly leading to the first woman president. She sees her responsibility as getting more people engaged and voting, while her goal is to convince them the Republican Party has their best interests.

"He made such a big difference when he was president for the short time that he was president," she says of former President Donald Trump. "He made stronger relationships worldwide...We were so safe, there was nobody in the world that was even going to think about doing any kind of war when he was president."

Part of her argument for Trump is the relationship he has with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Pandya-Patel says Trump was good for India and that is important to the diaspora now in the United States.

But Bhateja says it isn't about representation at the highest level for his organization and the push they're making to South Asian voters in the weeks ahead.



The winner of this year's presidential election could be side that pulls the South Asian vote.

Courtesy of Rajiv Bhateja

“She’s a prosecutor. She’s got a great background. She’s served in government in many different roles, so she understands the issues,” he says of Harris and her campaign with running mate Gov. Tim Walz. “They have a positive uplifting message for what the future is going to look like. You know, they care about the issues that we care about. They care about inflation. They care about, you know, jobs.”

Visibility still matters though. Members of They See Blue have shared their individual excitement at the prospect of having a South Asian American become president. For Pandya-Patel, there can also be joy in the arrival of Usha Vance on the national stage, wife of Sen. J.D. Vance, the GOP vice presidential nominee.

“I really talked about why it’s important to go and vote. Number one, to be able to have your voice heard as the South Asian community,” she says of her start in politics almost a decade before this election.

Republicans and Democrats both see major issues like health care and immigration as areas to win over the South Asian vote with the belief that their party has the policies most in line with this community—a group of voters that represents several ethnicities including Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, and Afghan.

“I think there’s a lot of commonality across those communities. I mean, these borders that are drawn in Southern Asia are fairly arbitrary,” Bhateja says.

After the first and possibly only debate between Harris and Trump on Tuesday, the race remains extremely close. The effort to flip even one of the many battleground states could come down to the mobilization of South Asian voters.



WORDS BY **SHAWN CHITNIS**

Shawn Chitnis (He/Him) is a journalist based in Washington state. Born and raised in the Seattle area, he has spent more than 15 years reporting for TV stations in his home state, Denver, and the Bay Area. The son of South Asian immigrants, he loves covering a variety of topics including politics, business, education, and the arts. He promises to have great restaurant recommendations in any of the cities he has lived in. Connect with him on [Instagram](#) / [X](#) / [Facebook](#): @shawnychitnis.

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