

Biden was losing Asian American voters. Will they support Harris?

Asian American voters say they're excited about the possibility of seeing someone who shares their background potentially lead the country. But they have some reservations, too.



— Vice President Kamala Harris speaks at the University of Maryland in College Park on June 24. Kevin Dietsch / Getty Images

By Sakshi Venkatraman and Kimmy Yam

Swati Joshi, a 60-year-old Democratic voter in Dallas, says she'd love to have a president who shares a name with her grandmother: Kamala.

As voters take in President Joe Biden's exit from the presidential race on Sunday, Joshi is part of a growing Asian American electorate that is now looking ahead to what a Kamala Harris presidency would mean for the country – and for them.

Joshi, who is Indian American, said she is throwing all her support behind Harris and hopes the country is on the precipice of a historic first. "I think it's a giant step for not only women, but also South Asians," she said.

Asian American voters say they're excited about the possibility of seeing someone who shares their background lead the country. But they have some reservations too.

Before he dropped out, Biden was slipping among Asian American voters: [From 2020 to 2024](#), he lost 8 points in that demographic.

Questions remain about how Harris will perform given [low popularity ratings](#), if donors who had given up on Biden will come back around to fund her campaign and if she can bring in Black and Latino voters, [which Biden was also bleeding](#).

If Harris becomes the Democratic nominee, she will be the first Black woman and the first South Asian American to lead a major party's presidential ticket. And if she's elected, Harris would be the first woman, the first South Asian American and the first Black woman to hold the nation's highest office.

Others still wonder if the U.S. is ready to elect a woman of color to the White House.

With Biden's allies now rallying around her and major Asian American groups lending her their endorsement, experts say the nomination "is hers to lose."



— Alexis Lee, a 26-year-old New Jersey voter, feels Harris has struggled with visibility in the past few years. *Courtesy Alexis Lee*

Sara Sadhwani, a senior researcher at the civic research organization AAPI Data, said that although Harris' run comes at a time of chaos, it's still a "monumental moment."

"This is absolutely historic, not just for the Asian American community, but for the future multiracial America that we are barreling towards," Sadhwani said.

Forty-four percent of Asian Americans have a favorable impression of Harris, compared to 34% for former President Donald Trump, according to a [survey of Asian American voters](#) released in July.

NBC News polling showed she fared similarly with the general population, at [45% favorability](#). She trails Trump by two points, which is within the margin of error, according to the poll.

Asian American support for Harris has dipped slightly over the past two years.

Can Harris capture Asian America?

Harris' likely ascension to Democratic nominee coincides with an increasingly political Asian America, which was catalyzed by Trump's presidency and the rise of anti-Asian hate amid the Covid pandemic, Sadhwani said. And, she said, it's likely Harris will both mobilize and benefit from that demographic.

Harris' biracial story has been a prominent talking point in her past campaigns for California state attorney and president, and during her time as vice president.

The Asian American population has more than doubled in the last 20 years, Census data shows – and the electorate has boomed in tandem. Sixty two percent of Asian voters [favor the Democratic Party](#), according to a Pew Research Center report. Their numbers can't be underestimated, especially in purple states, many experts say.

“The increase in turnout of the AAPI community between 2016 and 2020 accounted for the margin of Biden's victory,” Tom Bonier, the CEO of the Democratic political data analysis firm TargetSmart, [told NBC News in August](#).

Neither Biden nor Harris' team responded to a request for comment.

Harris' background has the potential to bring in a large, multiracial coalition of voters in a way that other candidates might not be able to, said Pawan Dhingra, a professor of American studies at Amherst College. And her age, race and gender also makes her a more distinct antithesis to Trump.

“Her biography is one that really does help us appreciate what a multiracial coalition of Americans can become,” he said. “She can help reframe what the Indian or Asian American story is.”

Since her first presidential bid in 2020, Harris has been very vocal about her Indian American identity. She often talks about her mother, Shyamala Gopalan, who immigrated to the U.S. at 19 and met her father while protesting for civil rights in the 1960s.

Her maternal grandfather, who was active in India's movement for independence from British colonization, was one of her first political inspirations, she says.

“My mother – when she arrived in the United States, she automatically, given who my grandfather was and about the fight for independence in India ... took to the streets to march for civil rights in her sari,” Harris said at a conference in May hosted by the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies. “That’s how she met my father. And all of that has had a profound influence.”

Her roots tell the story, not just of Asian American success in the U.S., Dhingra said, but of Asian Americans working with other minority groups to effect change. In the coming months, he hopes she draws upon those sentiments and speaks to the power of togetherness.

Indian immigrant Suresh Kalyanaraman, 55, moved to the U.S. in 1990. The Virginia resident was first galvanized into U.S. politics with former President Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign and has voted blue ever since. But he says he has a renewed fire this time around because he believes democracy is at stake.

Kalyanaraman said he likes Harris and will rally behind her, but he wants Democrats to weigh their options and give potential nominees a chance to debate. As a technologist, he wants a president who respects science, education, health care and the environment.



— Suresh Kalyanaraman, a Democratic voter in Virginia, has a renewed fire this election season because he believes democracy is at stake.

Courtesy Suresh Kalyanaraman

“This is just like what we all felt when Barack Obama won in 2008,” he said. “We are all thinking that our sons and daughters can all become president of the United States one day.”

It’s an election many in the community feel will be one of the most consequential of their lifetime.

“So many Asian Americans have told me that they have only gotten involved in politics – they left their day jobs as engineers, as stay-at-home moms, as tech professionals – after the election of Donald Trump, because they felt the need to ... as Americans, to get involved and to ensure that their communities know what’s at stake,” Sadhwani said.

Campaign will be an uphill battle

Though Harris is slated for a historic campaign, it won’t come without its own immense challenges. Sadhwani pointed out that the vice president has struggled with visibility during the Biden administration.

Alexis Lee, a 26-year-old Korean American who votes in New Jersey, echoed that sentiment. She said she was at church when she heard the news about Biden stepping away from the race, and realized she needed to read up on Harris’ record while in office.

“What a lot of my friends were talking about was, ‘What has she done in the past couple years as vice president?’” Lee said.

Lee said that she's hoping the campaign will address her concerns including Harris' previous record as prosecutor and her stances on climate change and immigration. Still, Lee said, she's staying optimistic, given Harris' record on abortion rights.

Harris faces tight deadline to shape her campaign and ticket

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It also remains to be seen if donors and voters who backed away from Biden will come back to Harris with the same enthusiasm, Dhingra said.

“They may want to rally behind her just to kind of end the debate and move forward against Trump. But that doesn't mean they're really excited by her,” he said.





— Swati Joshi, a Democratic voter in Texas, says she would be proud to have a fellow South Asian American woman in office. *Courtesy Swati Joshi*

Early indications point to donors being back, though, with [tens of millions of dollars](#) in grassroots donations pouring in since the news broke, according to online donation processor ActBlue.

Harris' team is already drawing on her years spent as a prosecutor, placing her in contrast to Trump, who is a convicted felon. But some younger progressives active in social justice circles criticize her tough-on-crime record as district attorney of San Francisco and attorney general of California.

During her first presidential campaign in 2019, Harris said her knowledge of the criminal justice system, both from the inside and the outside, would ultimately aid her in dismantling mass incarceration.

“I became a prosecutor because I wanted to make sure there were safe communities, and also because I wanted to reform a system that I knew was broken and often was informed by racial bias,” she said in a [2019 interview](#) with MSNBC's Al Sharpton.

Harris has been a vocal proponent of abortion access, especially since the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022. She [visited a Planned Parenthood clinic](#) in Minnesota earlier this year, and she's believed to be the first president or vice president to do so. It's an issue that could help bring female voters to Harris' side, Dhingra said.

Joshi, a resident of Texas where abortion access has been all but eliminated, says she thinks Harris is the right person to speak to concerned women facing restrictive laws. But **Joshi** worries, too, that a broader U.S. electorate will struggle to accept her.

“There’s still a lot of misogyny and racism out there,” she said.

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Sakshi Venkatraman

Sakshi Venkatraman is a reporter for NBC Asian America.

Kimmy Yam

Kimmy Yam is a reporter for NBC Asian America.
