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Opinion: Opinion | Indian Americans Cheer Kamala Harris, But Can She Shift Their Votes?

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Democratic organisers are inundated with Indian American youth "coming out of the woodwork" to support [Kamala Harris](#). Rajeev Bhateja, co-founder of the group They See Blue, which mobilises South Asian American voters, points to a spike in volunteer signups to canvas for the

Democratic Presidential nominee. "High school and college students are reaching out. It's way more than even Obama, Biden and Clinton years," he says.

The leader of They See Blue's youth chapter, Akash Borde, observed that the tide turned when President Joe Biden stepped out of the race. "Kamala's nomination after Biden decided not to rerun raised a lot more excitement among my peers," he says. "With the media narratives around Biden's age and foreign policy issues, we were struggling to bring young people in. Now, my phone is blowing away. The momentum is unprecedented in the South Asian community," says Harini Krishnan, Co-director of the group South Asians for Harris.

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Hundreds of volunteers across the country have been knocking on doors, running phone banks, and writing postcards to bring out voters for Harris. It's not only her shared heritage but also her "better speeches" compared to Biden that make her resonate with Indian-American supporters. Young voters find her campaign "uplifting", with "hope and positivity" for a "bright" White House amidst the "doom and gloom" that Donald Trump's rhetoric represents for many.

Biden's Campaign "Lacked Urgency"

A July 2024 voter survey has shown Asian-American support for Biden has declined since 2020. His 15-point margin this year contrasts with the nearly 30-point edge he held over Trump during the last Presidential election cycle. The campaign, some say, lacked the "urgency" seen in 2020. "A complacency had set in. Kamala jumping into this race has transformed the landscape," says Krishnan.

According to Sangay Mishra, the author of the book *Desis Divided: The Political Lives of South Asian Americans* and Associate Professor of Political Science at Drew University, there is palpable change among people who were feeling hesitant after Biden's performance in the debate. "They are much more connected now. The broader trend seems that at the minimum, we will see the kind of support for Harris that we saw for Biden in 2020, probably even more," he says. That may not be entirely off the mark given the robust mobilisation for Harris: crowded rallies, young supporters offering free catchy videos on social media, a 9,000-strong 'South Asian Women for Harris' fundraiser followed by the formation of South Asian Men for Harris (the campaign raised \$36 million within 24 hours after she picked Governor Tim Walz to be her vice-presidential candidate), merchandise fashioned around the viral meme 'Lotus for POTUS'.

Wooing Loyal Republicans Won't Be Easy

Yet, for all the enthusiasm, shared roots haven't been enough to convert many Republican supporters. Sure, Harris's Indian-American identity does strike a chord with the community, but it may not translate to votes beyond her party.

According to a census survey, Indian Americans are the largest population among Asian Americans in the US. Their votes are critical in narrowly fought elections. But they're not a monolithic voter bloc. Except for a small group, 'Haley Supporters for Harris', which staunchly backed Republican Nikki Haley during her Presidential primary and continues to hold an anti-Trump stance (despite Haley having endorsed Donald Trump), other Republican supporters have largely not switched to Harris.

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"One hundred per cent I support President Trump! I am not voting for Kamala Harris," says Florida-based hotelier Danny Gaekwad, who has raised funds for all Republican presidential candidates since George W. Bush. Issues that matter to him are border security, legal immigration, less government and lower taxes. Gaekwad thinks mere 'home country' affinity shouldn't shape the electoral decisions of immigrant voters. Local issues must define people's choices, he says. "Indians have this habit of finding links in common with prominent Indian Americans, seeking common relatives, uncles, aunties, ancestral villages! What kind of an obsession is that!"

Similarly, Republican fundraiser Pravina Kakodkar hopes that Trump will, as he promised, "drain the swamp in DC". She says, "We need a person who will shake Washington DC. It's become this exclusive class of people who are very disconnected from the rest of the country. I want this smashed, and only Donald Trump has the capacity to do that." Kakodkar's children, on the other hand, are Democrat supporters.

On Being Indian Enough

Some Republicans believe that Harris downplays her Indian identity - something Trump has also commented on. "Kamala Harris has always projected herself as a black woman. I have never heard her say once that she's Indian," says Gaekwad. In her autobiography though, Harris has spoken openly about her Indian roots, her Indian grandparents and growing up biracial in California.

Then there are others who feel that Harris didn't do enough for the community as Vice-President. California-based independent voter Pushpita Prasad, an advocate for the rights of Hindus, acknowledges

that Harris's background does create a "certain strong pull of representation", but issues are a priority, she stresses. "It's ironic that the situation of Indian Americans in terms of the immigration process and visas has become so bad. We've had a South Asian person in the office during which we have seen attacks on Hindu temples in the US, even in her home state of California. I really wish for Vice President Harris to condemn those temple attacks and to condemn the violence happening against Bangladeshi Hindus."

The Israel-Gaza Blot On Democrats

There are also Indian Americans who find themselves being single-issue voters in this presidential election. They don't support Trump and his far-right 'Project 2025' agenda, but, at the same time, view America's handling of the [Israel-Palestine](#) conflict as a stain on the Biden-Harris administration. Zainab Hakim, who stands strongly for US divestment from Israel, was at a recent Harris rally in Detroit with a group of protesters, seeking accountability and demanding a ceasefire. But Harris responded to Hakim's slogans by saying that they should let her speak unless they wanted "Donald Trump to win".

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Referring to the incident, Hakim says, "She's saying, 'I'm absolutely better than this guy', even while continuing to fund a genocide. She has been the Vice-President for three years. We are set on not voting for somebody that will continue to allow the genocide." For Hakim and others like her, Harris's gender and race credentials mean little against such discontents. "I think it doesn't mean anything for somebody to be a woman, or a black woman or an Indian American in power if they're

continuing to sanction the murder of people abroad," says Hakim, who has been at the forefront of student protests at the University of Michigan.

Experts note that the Israel-Gaza conflict continues to be a concern among some communities. "There is a lot of pushback among younger people within the Indian American community also. Numerous campuses have South Asian American students who were involved in protests, Muslims particularly," says Mishra.

Can Kamala Create History?

Indian Americans do not vote as a bloc; a range of opinions shape their choices. Even so, an AAPI Data survey from July 2024 shows that the majority of them - 55 % - identified as or leaned towards the Democratic Party, while 26% identified or leaned Republican. This is significant because in many of America's battleground states where no single party dominates, the Presidential elections come down to the wire. In the last few election cycles, narrow victory margins in such states have made the Asian-American vote critical, and this is why Indian-Americans are being courted by both parties this time.

Harris will thus have to pull in the undecided and independent voters to come out on top. If she wins this November, she will be the first woman, the first Black woman and the first South Asian American to hold America's highest office. A large section of Indian American voters naturally wish to play a part in creating this history.

(Savita Patel is a San Francisco Bay Area-based journalist and producer. She reports on the Indian diaspora, India-US ties, geopolitics, technology, public health, and the environment. She tweets at @SsavitaPatel.)

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