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Did Indian Americans mobilize the margin of victory in the Georgia Senate runoff?



SUNITA SOHRABJI

Hundreds of Indian American volunteers converged on Georgia last month, knocking on doors, sending out hand-written postcards, phone-banking and driving voters to the polls to gain a narrow victory for Democrats in the Dec. 6 Senate runoff.

The key race handed Democrats a 51-49 majority in the Senate. Democrats lost the House in the mid-term election Nov. 7, but by just 10 seats, a much-smaller margin than the earlier predicted "red wave." Indian American political leaders predicted that Democrats would continue to wield majority power in the Senate despite the defection of former Democrat Krysten Sinema on Dec. 9.

"The South Asian American vote and our grassroots efforts were absolutely the margin of victory in this race," Harini Krishnan, chair of the community organizing committee at South Asians For America, told New India Abroad. "So many great nominations and legislation have been stalled over the past few years. Democrats finally have the upper hand again."

The runoff pitted incumbent Democrat Rev. Raphael Warnock against Trump-backed Republican Herschel Walker, a former football star. Neither candidate cleared the threshold for victory on Election night

Nov. 8, thus the race for the seat went to a runoff. Walker conceded Dec. 8 evening, after the race was first called by MSNBC. Warnock held the slimmest of leads at that point, with just 55,000 votes ahead of Walker.

The race finished with Warnock capturing more than 1.8 million votes to Walker's 1.7 million. Georgia voters turned out in record numbers for the runoff, including many who had not voted in the midterm.

The website Open Secrets reported the Georgia Senate race was the most expensive contest of the 2022 midterms, with more than \$380.7 million spent on the two candidates.

According to preliminary data, 83 percent of Indian Americans and 96 percent of Bangladeshi Americans voted for Warnock, said Krishnan, who spoke to this publication a day after attending a holiday party at the home of Vice President Kamala Harris.

"Georgia is an extremely competitive state, and we have over 100,000 South Asians and 250,000 Asian Americans," Neel Makhlaja, executive director of Indian American Impact, told NBC News ahead of the runoff. "We have been the margin in the past and we can easily be the margin again."

SAFA's organizing efforts included 10,000 calls to voters, 7,500 texts to voters, 2,500 doors knocked, and 2,000 postcards to voters. Neha Dawan, national director and co-founder of SAFA said the organization has been



"laser-focused on building a national movement. This was clearly visible with the impact we had on the ground in Georgia," she said.

Sonju Kumar, SAFA Board Co-Chair and a Georgia-based AAPI leader, noted that South Asian Americans from around the U.S. volunteered on the phone banks. "They were always eager to hear what was happening on the ground here," she said.

Krishnan believes Democrats will gain a lot of compromise from anti-Trump Republicans. She noted the "Respect for Marriage" act, a landmark bill protecting same-sex marriage, which passed through the House Dec. 8 with massive support from both sides of the aisle. The Indian American



parties. Many candidates came to all three," said Jalajam with a laugh. "They really want to understand our culture."

"We definitely made a difference this time as well. Our volunteers shepherded people to the polls on Election day," she said.

"They See Blue co-founder Rajiv Bhateja said his organization sent out 16,000 hand-written post cards to Georgia voters, targeting Independents as well. The post cards were made in several South Asian languages. They See Blue also phone-banked, canvassed door to door and put out radio ads. "We believe that the relational component — someone from your own community — is very important for results," he said.

Ahead of the 2024 Presidential election cycle, Jalajam wants to engage even more Indian American voters. A lot of new citizens don't understand the voting system, she said. "A lot of education needs to happen."

Shekar Narasimhan, Chairman and Founder of the AAPI Victory Fund noted that during the final days before the runoff, six AAPI members of Congress, including Indian American Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi, D-Illinois, and Pramila Jayapal, D-Washington, canvassed door to door in Gwynette County, home to the largest percentage of AAPIs in Georgia.

"Gwynette was where we had the largest impact. AAPIs significantly contributed to the margin of victory,"

he said, noting that his team turned out thousands of new voters who had not voted in the mid-term.

"The demography is changing. The Black vote is critical, but its not the only way you win," said Narasimhan. "We intended to tell our community: 'Sen. Warnock sees you. He's paying attention to you.'"

On Sunday, Dec. 4, two days before the run-off, Narasimhan and thousands of volunteers gathered at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, where the late Martin Luther King Jr., and his father, served as pastors. Warnock has served as the pastor of the historic church since 2005.

"Warnock asked us all to pray together. He is very focused on inclusivity and our community felt included," said Narasimhan.

Walker gathered scant support from the Indian American community, except for massive support from Nikki Haley, former South Carolina governor and former US Ambassador to the United Nations. In a speech that drew wide criticism, Haley said Warnock should "be deported," in retaliation for the "mess" at US borders.

"Legal immigrants are more patriotic than the leftists these days. They knew they worked to come into America, and they love America. They want the laws followed in America, so the only person we need to make sure we deport is Warnock," said Haley, the daughter of immigrants from India.

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