



SONYA MEHTA

Politics

## South Asian Voters Are the Target of They See Blue, a Grassroots Organization

“There’s a feedback loop where if you don’t see yourself represented in politics, you are less likely to get involved.”

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More than **5 million** South Asians — those with roots in the Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Indian, Indo-Fijian, Indo-Caribbean, Maldivian, Nepali, Pakistani and Sri Lankan communities — live in America, and many **live in battleground states** that could determine the outcome of the 2020 election.

Historically, South Asians **trend** toward voting Democrat and turn out to vote in high numbers. The Democratic vice-presidential nomination of Senator Kamala Harris, the daughter of Jamaican and Indian immigrants, has undoubtedly been a **boon for South Asian representation in American politics**.

However, an increasingly vocal minority of South Asian voters **support Trump**. Last year, an event called “**Howdy Modi**” attracted a crowd of 50,000 in Houston to witness Trump holding hands with India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi (whose party has **promoted virulent Islamophobia**). Still, other South Asians remain apathetic and are less likely to get involved in political activism.

The 2016 election spurred many Americans to go beyond simply voting, including **Sunil Mehta**, an Indian immigrant who has worked in Silicon Valley for more than 30 years. In 2018, Mehta co-founded **They See Blue** (TSB), a grassroots organization focused on mobilizing South Asian voters to flip congressional seats from Republican to Democratic control. The group’s name is a clever play on the word “*Desi*” (pronounced “THEY-see”), a term used to describe the South Asian community and diaspora.

Starting with the 2018 California midterm elections, TSB activated first-time voters and helped **flip** two House seats held by Republicans for generations. Since then, TSB has **grown** to more than 3,000 members nationally, representing the diverse nationalities, religions, languages, class backgrounds, and age demographics within the South Asian–American community.

*Teen Vogue* caught up with Sonya Mehta, the national director of TSB’s Youth Leadership Council, and Sunil’s daughter, to discuss what the organization is focusing on in the lead-up to November.

***TV:* Why is it important to organize the South Asian vote, especially for this election?**

**Sonya Mehta:** It’s important to galvanize left-leaning South Asian–Americans to not just vote Democratic up and down the ballot, but also run for elected office, step into leadership within the Democratic party, and help shape the narrative by vocally participating in the conversation.

TSB is also working in battleground states where there are lower rates of progressive voter engagement, like Florida, Texas, and Michigan. The first TSB chapter created outside of California was actually in Georgia, a key state. We are growing the electorate as well as engaging young voters and voters of color in these areas to ensure a “blue wave” across the Senate, House, and White House.

***TV:* Are the voting habits of South Asian–Americans overgeneralized given that there is a lot of diversity within this community?**

**SM:** For generations, the South Asian–American community has quietly voted Democrat. In contrast, a small but vocal minority of (mostly) Indian Trump supporters have monopolized the conversation using fear, hate, and misinformation as their key tactics. They are right-wing nationalists who believe that Trump is best for India.

The Howdy Modi event was the most visible example of this. But a lot of their influence actually happens in **WhatsApp** and Facebook groups. They design memes and graphics to look like facts, but they’re actually disseminating false, Islamophobic and racist messaging to position Trump as the “India first” candidate. It’s much easier to incite people to action using inflammatory rhetoric than the actual truth.

***TV:* What is something more people need to understand about South Asian–Americans?**

**SM:** South Asians are a diverse tapestry of cultures, nationalities, languages, religions, class backgrounds, and experiences, with some important threads that bind us together. The biggest being how we’re all perceived as “foreigners” by white America because of our brown skin, especially in a post-9/11 world that has seen a **rise in Islamophobic hate crimes** against brown people of all faiths. Trump’s presidency and his supporters seek to divide us. But it’s important to stand together in support of our own community and also our Black, Latinx, and Indigenous brothers and sisters.

***TV:* Which issues resonate most with South Asian–American voters?**

**SM:** The same as those that resonate with most of the country: the handling of the pandemic, implications on public health, and the economy. We care deeply about health care, immigration, education, and the climate crisis.

There is a small, more conservative subset of recent immigrants from India who are single-issue voters based on which candidate they perceive are better for India/U.S. relations and specifically immigration from India.

Sunil and Sonya Mehta of TSB

***TV:* What are the biggest challenges you’ve encountered when organizing South Asian–American voters?**

**SM:** There’s a feedback loop where if you don’t see yourself represented in politics, you are less likely to get involved, and the cycle continues. For many South Asians who are new to political organizing, TSB has been the first time they’ve found a political home where they can find camaraderie among people from a shared background who are similarly concerned about the direction the nation is headed in.

We’re also fighting the same voter-suppression tactics that are being used against all communities of color. For example, some states are **placing limitations on having voter-registration drives** at naturalization ceremonies, in an effort to keep recent immigrants out of the process.

***TV:* Are there generational differences between old and young South Asians?**

**SM:** Similar to the broader electorate, older South Asians are typically more moderate, while younger South Asians have a more progressive bent and intersectional analysis of the issues. The amount of intergenerational bridging we’ve seen in the last year has been incredible, specifically around the ways we’re now discussing issues of race. Our older members are now speaking and writing about the fact that our South Asian success stories **ride on the legacies** of the civil rights movement. They are talking about the **responsibility we have to show up** not just for our community, but for all communities who have experienced systemic oppression and marginalization.

***TV:* You specifically work with South Asian–American youth. What matters to them?**

**SM:** South Asian youth are overwhelmingly progressive. They care deeply about issues like climate change, public health, housing, criminal justice, the gender pay gap, immigration, education, and the social safety net. They also have a sharp wit and primarily connect with one another via social media — we [even] started an Instagram account called **Mirchi Memes for Leftist Teens**. In general, they are not super excited about [Joe] Biden, but they understand the existential threat that the Trump regime poses to our country and recognize the need to show up in this election.

***TV:* What advice do you have for young people looking to organize politically in their area?**

**SM:** Think about your own circles of influence. In a world with so much misinformation and heightened anxiety, people are mistrustful of the world at large, but our small circles of influence have become that much more important. Have conversations outside of your comfort zone and push yourself to learn, grow, and widen your perspective. Bring others along with you. Our democracy relies on all of us being active, engaged citizens. By getting involved, we’re creating a government that reflects our nation in all of its diversity.

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