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## South Asians rally behind Harris: 'It's like a tidal wave'

BY YASH ROY - 08/07/24 5:31 PM ET

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In the days before [President Biden](#) dropped out of the presidential race, a poll from Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote (APIAVote) showed a 19 percent drop in support for him among South Asian Americans. Now, with an Indian American at the top of the Democratic presidential ticket, the phones of South Asian organizers “have not stopped ringing.”

“We’ve been inundated with interest that I have never seen before,” said Neha Dewan, the founder of South Asians for Biden in 2020. “Our phones have not stopped ringing. We have received hundreds of messages, and it’s just overwhelming.”

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According to Anurima Bhargava, the founder and director of Anthem of Us and one of the organizers of a “South Asian Women for Harris” Zoom call, it had been a “tough year” to get people excited to turn out and vote for Biden.

That all changed once Vice President Harris started running for president.

“I think for, for young and old, it’s been a tough year to try and get people really energized. And I think what we’ve seen in the last two weeks is a real space for hope on multiple fronts,” Bhargava said.

In a span of two weeks, South Asian organizers have hosted dozens of events across the country, including phone banking, door-knocking and letter-writing in [support of Harris](#). In the first few days after Harris [launched her candidacy](#), both South Asian men and women hosted Zoom calls with tens of thousands of people in attendance.

“We’ve already launched a Pennsylvania phone bank that’s coming up this weekend that has nearly 300 phone bank and volunteer sign-ups,” Chintan Patel, the executive director of Indian American Impact, said. “The energy has been phenomenal.”

South Asians have also been happy to see a multiethnic coalition form around Harris.

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“I actually didn’t think that people would react to Kamala the way they have. I mean, especially men, white men,” said Dibya Sarkar, a leader of They See Blue, a South Asian group that works to drive out the vote in battleground states. “So that’s actually really, really, really surprised me in a good way, and I’m really glad.”

Former [President Trump](#) has ramped up racial attacks on Harris, including a new line about the vice president [attempting to hide](#) her Black identity.

“We see you, Donald, for the racist xenophobe that you are, trying to pit one community against another with your divisive garbage,” Harini Krishnan, one of the co-directors of South Asians for Harris, told The Hill. “[Kamala Harris](#) is a Black woman, a South Asian American woman and has spoken repeatedly with pride about both of her heritage and roots and represents all our communities in everything she is.”

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“Trump has been part of a concerted effort to either erase race or use race to divide America. Yesterday, he tried and failed once again,” Bhargava added. “Vice President Kamala Harris, and all of us in America, are so much more than the limits he imagines.”

## Why do South Asian voters matter?

According to the 2020 census, there are about 6.5 million South Asians in the U.S.

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AAPJ Victory Fund co-founder Shekar Narasimhan estimated there are about 750,000 Indian American voters in swing states Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia and Wisconsin.

In Michigan and Georgia, there are more eligible South Asian voters than the margin of victories in the last election. In Pennsylvania, there are 85,000 eligible South Asian voters — Biden won the state by 80,555 votes in 2020, according to an [August report from AAPJ Data](#).

Close to 40 percent of those voters have never cast a ballot, Narasimhan added.

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“What you saw in that poll was a lot of apathy,” he told The Hill about the APIAVote poll showing the dip in support for Biden. “The switchover at the top of the ticket, obviously, it’s a plus.”

“I think the question is, how do we ensure that for all that group that was apathetic or unenthusiastic or had sort of not paid attention that we do bring attention to this race and to make sure that people know that somebody who looks, who thinks like us, who ... is a first-generation immigrant, is on the ticket,” Narasimhan said. “That’s the effort that’s going on, and it’s very organic, and it’s completely spectacular what’s happening.”

Most of these organizing groups did not exist before Trump won the presidency, but in less than a decade, they have built themselves up for a moment like this.

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According to Patel, South Asian organizers “were ready to hit the ground running.”

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involved in politics, more involved in the donor community and building some of that.”

Organizers and political strategists believe the best way to continue building on Harris’s momentum in the community and across the country is to focus on how her identity helps her understand the struggles of common Americans.

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## Life story is a powerful tool

While many South Asian political organizers value her heritage identity, they do not want Harris to focus her campaign on just that.

“We have to reintroduce her as the person that she is, this multidimensional American with this origin story, and how she understands your problems in your life situation,” Narasimhan said. “How are we going to make life better for Americans, including you? But the origin story is what I think will resonate.”

Pawan Dhingra, a South Asian studies professor at Amherst University, said Harris “needs to do more to bring this support to the ballot box.”

“She can talk about the issues that people care about, not as in a general policy way, but also lean into them in terms of how as, you know, an immigrant, a child, a child of immigrants, as an Indian American, how those issues matter to her.”

## **Energized youth voters, people concerned about Gaza**

South Asians and young people of color have been at the forefront of organizing related to the Israel-Palestine conflict, according to Sree Sreenivasan, the former president of the South Asian Journalists Association, who also helped organize the “South Asian Men for Harris” Zoom call.

“An area of particular importance for South Asians is the war in Gaza, and what’s happening with the genocide in Gaza,” said Palak Sheth, an organizer of the “South Asian Women for Harris” call and co-founder of Post March Salon.

According to Nikil Saval, the first South Asian elected to serve as a state senator in Pennsylvania, there was “diminished support” among South Asians concerned about Biden’s policies in Gaza.

“I think one of the strongest sentiments we heard from the folks joining and participating via the chat is that they want to see what she’s going to do about this. Because none of us feel comfortable and somewhat helpless about the genocide,” Sheth added.

Harris has not explicitly staked out a different position on the Israel-Hamas war compared to Biden’s strong support for Israel, including the continued supply of arms to Israel.

However, during a press meeting after speaking with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, she raised concerns about the scale of civilian death in Gaza and has appeared to be more empathetic to the Palestinian plight than Biden.

“What has happened in Gaza over the past nine months is devastating,” Harris said after the July meeting with Netanyahu. “The images of dead children and desperate hungry people fleeing for safety, sometimes displaced for the second, third or fourth time. We cannot look away in the face of these tragedies. We cannot allow ourselves to become numb to the suffering, and I will not be silent.”

“I have no illusions that she’s going to be able to say much necessarily, but I do think that it’s an issue that she has already shared a few sentiments on that feels slightly different

According to Dewan, the youth team within South Asians for Biden was having a “difficult time” getting young voters engaged because of apathy tied to the war in Gaza and Biden being an incumbent.

That’s changed since Harris took over as nominee.

“The reaction that we have gotten from the youth team is unbelievable. People who were never interested and hadn’t voted are suddenly coming out of the woodwork and saying how can we get involved,” Dewan told The Hill.

“There’s definitely been a shift because the biggest concern brought to us from youth organizers was that they didn’t like Biden administration policy on the war in Gaza,” said Bejay Chakrabarty, a youth organizer with South Asians for Harris. “More people are coming in now.”

“It feels like she is much more willing to listen to us,” he added.

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