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'Namaste Aunty': US Congress at Stake, Desi Americans Key to Tight Midterm Races

Indian Americans are the second largest immigrant community in the US, making them a strong voting bloc.

SAVITA PATELUpdated: **08 Nov 2022, 8:27 PM IST**Join Us
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Locked in a tight battle to control the [United States \(US\)](#) Congress, Democrats and Republicans continue to believe

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the table mantra. Hence the votes

in the poll numbers from Georgia, Pennsylvania, Nevada, and Arizona.

In a sharply polarised country, where many candidates scrape through by margins of a few thousand votes, a couple of surprises in the 2022 Midterm elections can win control for either party, and Indian American votes are key to winning some close contests.

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'They See Blue'

Indian Americans are the second largest immigrant community in the US and the second fastest to gain citizenship, making them a 1.9 million strong voting bloc. About one million of these voters are in swing states.



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influential there too," says Rajiv Bhateja, Co-Founder of They See Blue (a play on the words Desi Blue), a grassroots organisation whose mission is to mobilise Americans of South Asian origin to vote for Democrats.

"We look at two factors – how close the race is and the level of South Asian voters in that district. We have identified 15-16 races where we have more leverage," Bhateja says.

"Elaine Luria's race in Virginia is a tight race with a few thousand South Asians who can make a difference; Pennsylvania race between Susan Wild and Lisa Scheller; and another one in California District 27 whose many Sikh voters can make a difference between Christie Smith and Mike Garcia."

Rajiv Bhateja, They See Blue

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Mobilisation of Desi American voters in Bucks County, Pennsylvania

Photo Courtesy: Twitter/DrSeemaKazmi

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They See Blue was founded over a cup of tea in a Silicon Valley backyard – an idea of courageous resistance in response to the shocking 2016 [Hillary Clinton](#) defeat.

“From four people in 2018, we went from one chapter to 25 chapters today with 6000 members and thousands of volunteers - I am giving you rough numbers,” says Bhateja, adding that They See Blue also partners with other independent Indian American organisations like IA Impact, AAPI Victory Fund, and other Asian American community groups.

Leveraging Shared Cultural Identity for Outreach

As the level of attention being paid to these communities became crucial, campaigns realised the efficacy of culture for desis.



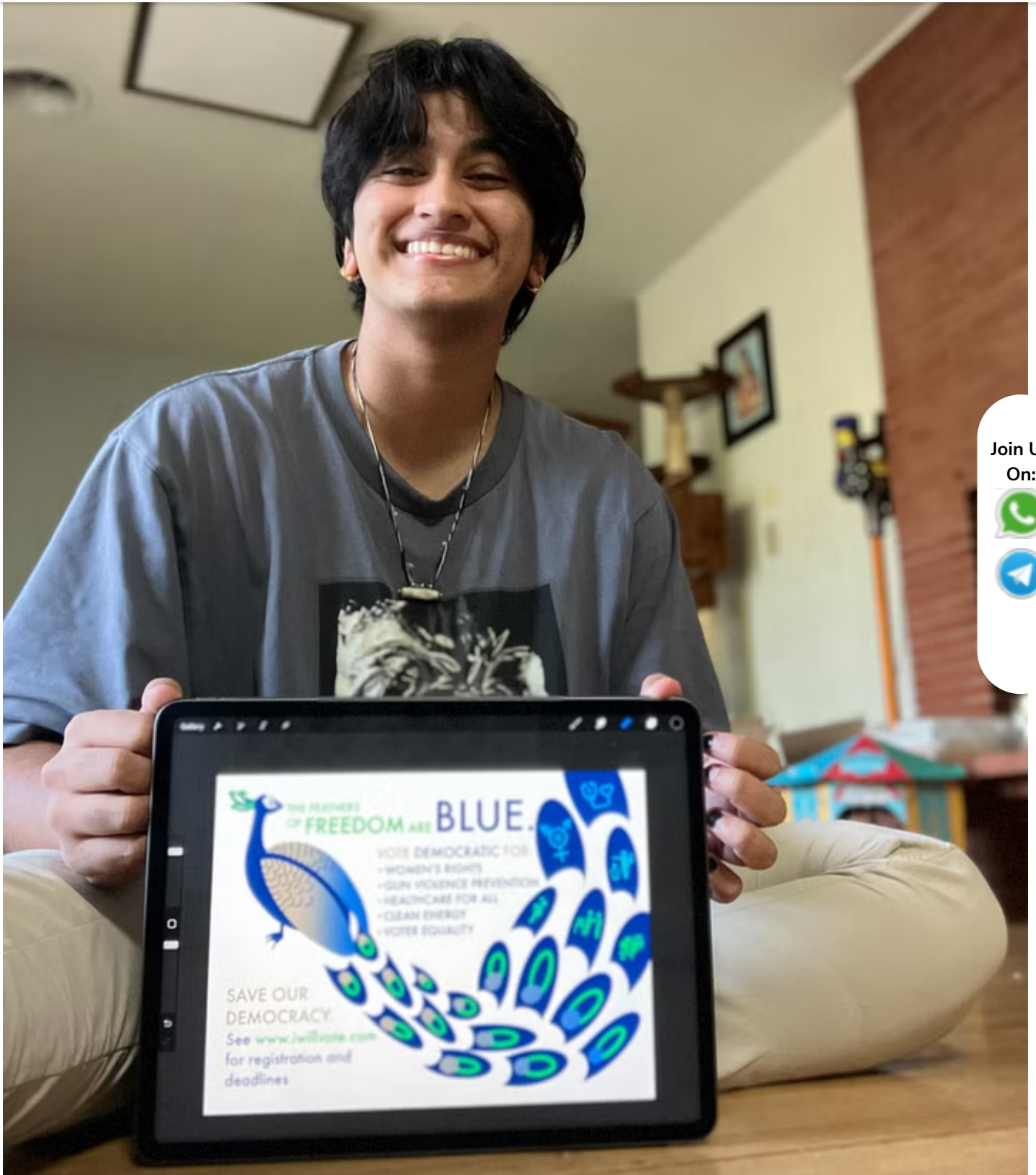
Democrat – are leveraging personal connections and a shared cultural identity, canvassing across the country.

Young Vasudha Ramamurthy volunteered to design a They See Blue postcard, ‘amplifying South Asian heritage’ being handwritten and mailed by volunteers urging desis to vote.

The Palo Alto, California based college student says, “In these midterms I am doing part as everyone else hopefully does, is to vote. I tend to vote for Democratic candidates. My mom has volunteered to register people to vote. The other part is advocating with They See Blue to design a postcard, for which I wanted to find something that appeals to all south Asian groups because they are so ethnically diverse - the blue theme and peacock fits well within that.”

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Vasudha Ramamurthy with a pos



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ers to vote for Democratic Party.

In New Jersey, a meeting of Asian American Republican Coalition attracted hundreds of supporters. Hemant Bhatt, a prominent Indian American Republican of New Jersey who co-founded the group, says, “There are hundreds more like me who want to be involved. The tremendous response is like a movement. We want to educate the community on civic engagement.”

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Indian American community is among the most educated and wealthiest immigrant groups in the country. Their potential as organisers and donors is well recognised.

Danny Gaekwad, a prominent Florida real estate developer and hotelier, is a supporter of Republican Governor Ron DeSantis in the upcoming election. Gaekwad's clout among





Danny Gaekwad, a prominent Florida real estate developer and hotelier, with Republican Governor Ron DeSantis

Photo Courtesy: Danny Gaekwad

“Ron DeSantis never had that many ‘likes’ for any social media post. I did the largest hard money fundraiser event in the state of Florida – four to five times anyone else I raised. The governor came to my house and his wife will be at my hotel for soft money events,” says Gaekwad, who also believes in supporting Indian American candidates across party lines.

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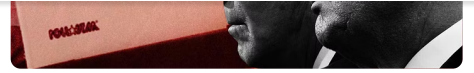


"We can't be sidekicks anymore; we must be mainstream. My standard is that you must come to Ocala, like jab tak aap hamare gaon nahi aayenge hum aapko vote nahi denge (until you come to us, we won't vote for you)."

Danny Gaekwad

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Desis on the Ballot

The focus in Midterms 2022 hence has not been on desis only as voters and organisers.

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An increasing number of Indian Americans are on the ballot.

California's 17th district, which is the heart of Silicon Valley, sees two Indian Americans facing each other again – incumbent Member of the US House of Representatives Democrat [Ro Khanna](#), and opponent Republican Ritesh Tandon.





Democrat incumbent Ro Khanna is up against Republican Ritesh Tandon in California's 1st district

Photo Courtesy: Twitter/NVDems

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All the four Indian American Congress members are up for re-election, including [Pramila Jayapal](#), a US representative from Washington's 7th congressional district since 2017.

In a promising race, Michigan Democrat Shri Thanedar is poised to become the fifth Indian American in the US House.

Sandeep Srivastava, a Democrat, is also a candidate for US Congress from Texas' District 3, a suburban area north of Dallas.

“History has been created in Tex
primary and run for US Congress



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American to win a Democratic
any Southern state We have 18-

Democrat organisations like IA Impact and AAPI Victory endorse, groom and raise funds for candidates including Asian American contenders. Their community events in this election cycle were popularised by celebrity attendees including Mina Harris, Padma Lakshmi, and Pramila Jayapal.

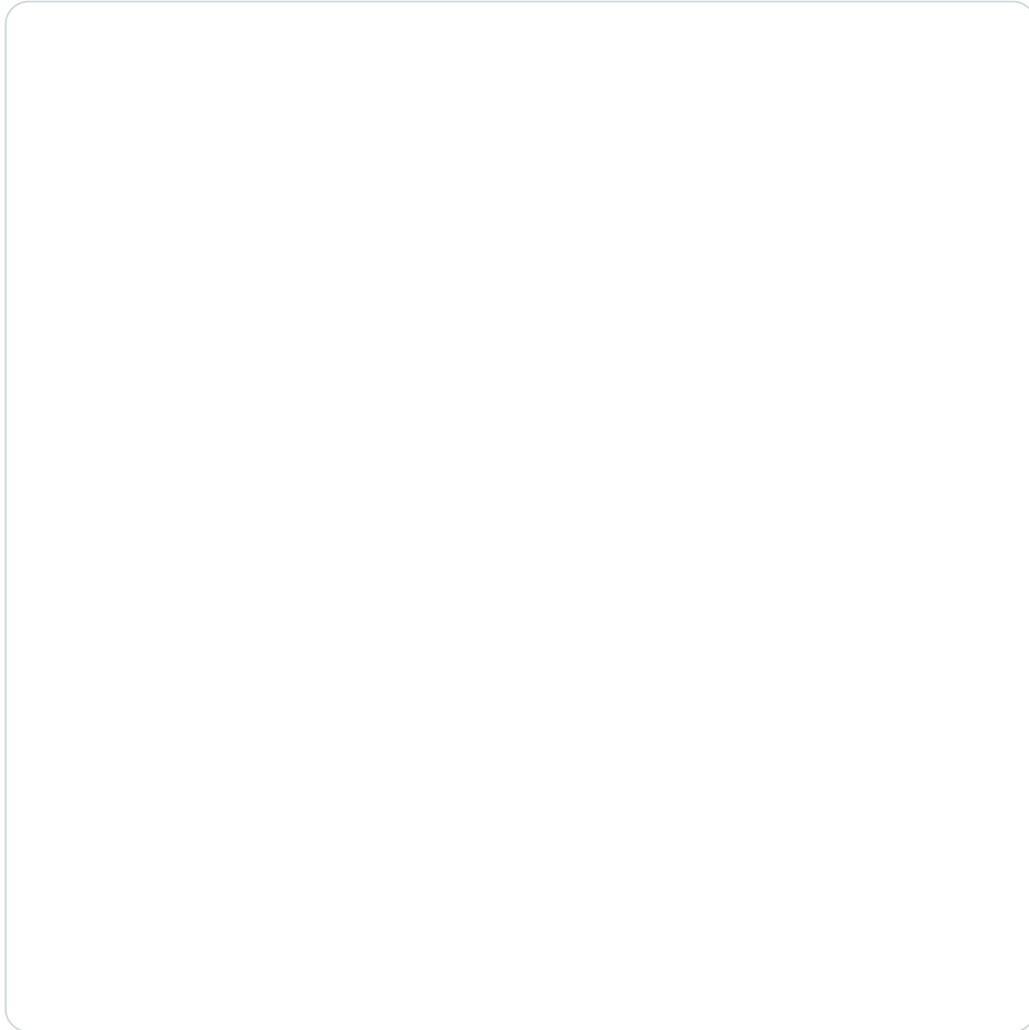
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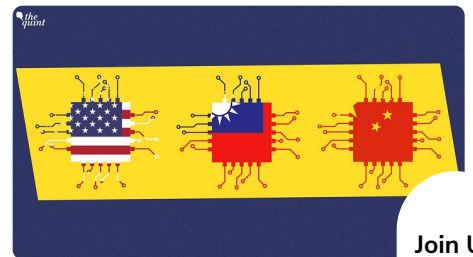
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entire country.”

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From Healthcare to Immigration Reform, What Matters to Desi Americans

The candidates and campaigns target the same community but the issues they raise different depending on the party they represent.

Sandeep Srivastava says he is fighting for diversity, security, and fair immigration policies, “The polarisation, white supremacy resurfacing, gun violence in Texas, voter suppression, country-caps for Green Cards – they want us to live here and pay taxes, then they must give us power too. We must stand up and work,” he says.

Democratic desis are highlighting issues that resonate with desi elders and youth.

“Five key themes we talk about are women's rights, gun violence prevention, clean energy, and voter equality including access to the



Democrat campaigner and a distinguished reproductive rights' leader, Indian American Mini Timmaraju, President of NARAL Pro-Choice America, previously Hillary for America's National Women's Vote Director, is out on the road, actively advocating for numerous pro-choice candidates to support reproductive rights, which is in on the ballot in many areas.

However, Republican desis disagree.

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Hemant Bhatt, a Republican, says, "Abortion rights is not a real issue in these elections. *Baat tab ho jab pehle table pe khana ho logon ke paas* (This is an issue when you have food on the table). I have been in the country since 2001 and never seen such a depressive atmosphere in this country. On way to polling booths, voters should stop at a gas station to fill up and based on that decide who to vote for – the inflation is so high!"



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Hemant Bhatt, a prominent Indian American Republican of New Jersey, who co-founded Asian American Republican Coalition

Photo Courtesy: Hemant Bhatt

Hopeful that Republicans are going to “take over” the Senate and the House, he says, “US oil reserves meant for emergencies are being depleted. *Ukraine ko help karne mein problem nahi hai, lekin war avoid kiya jaata sakta tha* (No issue in support to Ukraine but the war could have been avoided). These are mistakes of the current administration. America was on top, but in these two 2 years, *America khadde mein chala gaya hai* (America is in now a pit). *Logon ko frustration hai, logon ne mind bana liya hai* (People are frustrated and they have made up their mind).”

Concern for their ‘homeland’ India and the long wait to get US visas are



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travel visa for US! Chinese get a visa in five days. He refuses to appoint an ambassador to the largest democracy in the world. But 85 percent Indians are with Democrats, and I wish them nothing but good luck!”

Danny Gaekwad

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Acknowledging the challenge, Rajiv Bhateja says, “We are feeling the headwinds. The trend is that the midterm tide is against the White House generally. We are trying our best to stand our ground and if things go our way, we will get the House and the Senate.”

The midterms don't have the fervour of a presidential election, but a lot is at stake for the President's agenda, including having an impact on the 2024

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Irrespective of which way the US Senate and House tilt, desi civic engagement is significantly energised. The number of Indian Americans working at the grassroots level to get elected - as mayors, judges, treasurers, district attorneys, sheriffs, school board trustees, and other grassroots positions - across USA is unprecedented.

No one has been able to keep a count of how many desis are on the ballot in 2022.

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

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