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## The Indian factor

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New York, October 17, 2008

With the meltdown on Wall Street and financial markets in the doldrums, with billions of dollars feeding an unending war, and housing and employment stagnant, the upcoming American presidential election pits two very different world-views against each other.

For voters, it is a tough choice, between change and continuity, a choice between two very different leaders—Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain. The 2.6 million-strong Indian-American community seems to be voting in line with the mainstream.

A new study released in Washington D.C. suggests that Indian-Americans are indeed leaning towards Obama, and that their votes could be the pivotal swing that decides the outcome of the race.

According to the 2008 National Asian American Survey (NAAS), conducted by researchers in four American universities, 41 per cent of Asian-Americans are likely to vote for Obama, while 24 per cent support McCain.

In battleground states, Obama leads with 43 per cent of the Asian-Americans supporting him and 22 per cent favouring McCain. The key component is the 34 per cent undecided Asian-American voters, a hefty number compared to the 8 per cent in the general electorate.

Karthick Ramakrishnan, an associate professor of political science at UC Riverside and one of the researchers of the study, points out that with such a high proportion of undecided voters, Asian-Americans are a critical source of potential votes.

After the Latinos, Asian-Americans are the fastest-growing population in the US, making up 5 per cent of the US population today. Among Asian-Americans, those of Indian origin constitute 0.9 per cent of the total, followed by the Chinese with 1.2 per cent.

According to the NAAS study, Asian-Americans will play an important role in battleground states such as Virginia, Nevada and Washington, where they account for five per cent or more of the population. Even in states such as Colorado, Ohio and Florida, where they are less numerous, Asian-Americans may provide the cutting edge of victory.

The survey indicates that Indian-American voters are even more pro-Obama: 53 per cent of the Indian-Americans surveyed favour Obama with just 13 per cent rooting for McCain. These figures are not surprising as Indian-Americans have generally tended to vote for Democrats, and as the second generation has come of age, the community is playing an ever-increasing role in civic life.

"It's a much more layered community, much more diverse," says Dr Madhulika Khandelwal, director of the Asian American Center at Queens College, New York. "The change has happened because new organisations with many younger people have come up.

The younger generation is pushing the envelope and there is a new maturing of the community." The NAAS study says the majority of Asian-Americans who voted in the primaries supported Hillary Clinton over Obama by nearly 2 to 1, but Clinton supporters now overwhelmingly plan to vote for Obama.

"I think the Indian-Americans are strongly behind Obama," says Subodh Chandra, an Obama delegate who has served as Cleveland law director and was a candidate for attorney general of Ohio.

"People feel very strongly that the economy is in tatters, that America's standing throughout the world, including South Asia, has diminished and only someone with Obama's intellect and vision can redeem the situation."

Both parties enjoy strong contingents of Indian-American donors and fundraisers. As the business coalitions coordinator, K.V. Kumar of Arizona is the highest-ranking Indian in the McCain campaign.

Powerful Republicans have come together in the Indian-American Republican Council (IARC) which is chaired by Dr Raghavendra Vijayanagar, and there are newer organisations like Indians for McCain, founded by Kishan Putta.

Many Indian-Americans are appreciative of the Bush administration for the civilian nuclear deal. Dino Teppara, spokesperson for the IARC, says: "Senator McCain and Congressional Republicans were solidly behind the US-India civilian nuclear agreement."

He adds, "While the Democrats smear India with their claims on outsourcing, the facts are different. With investments and acquisitions in the US, India has actually insourced more jobs here, than what has been outsourced."

Piyush Agrawal, president of Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin, and his son Akhil who raised over \$100,000 for McCain, are both considered "friends and family" for their level of financial support.

Agrawal says taxation and immigration are important issues: "The people who produce wealth, like H1-B holders, are being denied entry, while people who create a drain on the country are being welcomed. What kind of policy is that?"

The Obama campaign has Indian-American staffers at every level-paid field organisers and communication people, veterans from several states and countless volunteers. Obama's Asian American Pacific Islander Leadership Council includes Preeta Bansal, Rajen Anand, Vinod Khosla and Swadesh Chatterjee.

Obama has raised a record-breaking \$400 million during this campaign, but this amazing success story includes big donors as well as many first-time donors who contributed only five dollars.

Bansal, who is the former solicitor general of New York and was a special counsel in the Clinton White House and the Justice Department, is a senior policy adviser to Obama.

Hrishi Karthikeyan, one of the cofounders of South Asians for Obama, says there is less emphasis on raising funds and more on encouraging the Indian-American community to get involved in the political process.

Jay Chaudhuri, president of the Indian American Leadership Initiative, a Democrat-affiliated and progressive organisation, says that the Obama campaign has ignited involvement among people who have never been involved in the political process before.

Recently, author Suketu Mehta along with Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Akhil Sharma, Kiran Desai and Manil Suri did a successful fundraiser for Obama which attracted 500 South Asians.

Mehta is amazed by their level of energy and says, "People are personally invested in this election in a way I haven't seen in any election in my time in America. It is an important election that will decide not just our fate but in many ways that of the world too." Americans of Indian origin watch with bated breath the US election as does most of the world.

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