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Obama Wins! Largest Indian American Turnout Ever, Report Pollsters

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indiawest.com

November 06, 2008 03:35:00 PM

Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama was elected the first African American president in U.S. history Nov. 4, after capturing early wins in key battleground states.

In a race predicted to have the largest Indian American turnout ever, Obama won several key states over Republican candidate Sen. John McCain early election night, including the battleground states of Pennsylvania and Ohio, which had backed every winning White House candidate since 1964. Obama's fellow Democrats scooped up seats for a majority in the Senate.



"This is a moment of pure joy for me," Anthoni Patel, co-founder of South Asians for Obama, San Francisco, told India-West from Toledo, Ohio, where she had spent election day getting out the vote.

"This vote demonstrates the best part of the United States, where people of a variety of different backgrounds came together and dedicated so much of their time to a movement to change the country, and in the process, have irrevocably changed the world," she said.

A poll released Nov. 4 by the Washington, D.C.-based organization Bridging Nations predicted 81 percent of Indian Americans would vote for Obama (see separate story). Earlier this month, the

National Asian American Survey forecasted that 67 percent of Indian American citizens were likely to vote in the 2008 election, the highest turnout of any thus far.

"When we did our survey, we found that Indian American turnout would be much higher than 2004," Karthick Ramakrishnan, one of the authors of the report, told India-West, adding that the "likely voter" model used by the survey looked at whether the respondent was registered, had voted in the primaries, and how definitively they spoke about voting.

"Having a non-white candidate in the race really boosted South Asian turnout," said Ramakrishnan, adding that numbers have been going up steadily as a larger percentage of the community become citizens and as the second generation becomes eligible to vote.

"Moving forward, the Republican Party must make inroads into the Asian and Latino populations if they hope to succeed in the future," said Ramakrishnan, adding that Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal is poised to remake the white, "old-boy network" image of the party.

Anil Babbar, co-founder of South Asians for Obama in San Francisco, told India-West that South Asian participation in the campaign had been phenomenal. "We finally have a candidate that's resonated with a lot of people, and that's why we've seen a record turnout this time," he said from a victory party at the Mezzanine Bar in San Francisco.

Obama supporter Subodh Chandra, a former candidate for the attorney general candidate of Ohio, told India-West late Nov. 4 that Obama "from the beginning, presented a clear, post-partisan message beyond the traditional 'blue state/red state' divide."

"His vision is of a country in which all of our talents are welcome, and we all have responsibilities to make our country better," said Chandra, a former law officer for the city of Cleveland, Ohio.

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Chandra spent election day in Cleveland distributing food and beverages to voters waiting in long lines at polling places, and said he was on his way to victory parties hosted by the Democratic Party and the local chapter of the NAACP.

"McCain's fear mongering, pandering to the wingnuts in his party and the abandonment of his earlier principles did not work," said Chandra, adding: "The vast majority of Americans rejected his claim that Barack is some sort of inexperienced celebrity terrorist-sympathizing socialist," he said.

In Texas, Jaya Vrudhula and her husband Rai, an election judge, also spent the day at the polls. Jaya Vrudhula told India-West she kicked off her day early morning doing a puja for Obama. "I see the honesty in his face," she told India-West. "His message from the start has been "it's not white America, it's not black America, it's America for all of us who have made this country our home," she said.

Minnesota state Senator Satveer Chaudhary, speaking to India-West while attending a victory party Nov. 4, said Obama won his state because "he was steady, yet inspiring, consistent, inclusive and motivating. You can't substitute anything for that, he said, adding that McCain was the inverse, with his "shaky pick for a vice president and his impulsive decision-making in the economic crisis."

Suresh Kumar, founder of South Asians for McCain, told India-West the McCain campaign did "a terrible job of reaching out to the Indian American community. There was nothing forthcoming from them, no support from the campaign for us," he said.

"McCain did not communicate his message effectively to minorities," who turned out in record numbers this year, said Kumar, adding that the campaign did not do an effective job of reaching out to younger voters.

Kishan Putta, founder of Indians for McCain, said his candidate lost the election because the Republican Party was a huge liability this year. "It wouldn't have mattered who ran or how they handled their campaign," he said.

Putta, who worked on McCain's campaign until June of this year, when he founded his organization, said McCain's campaign "definitely had more Indian American support for a Republican candidate than ever before in U.S. history."

McCain was a candidate that defied the "old boy/blue blood" image, which has made Indian Americans stay away from the Republican Party in past elections, said Putta, adding that he will keep the momentum of the campaign going by forming coalitions with other groups to mobilize the Indian American community to further activism.

"Indian American Republicans are smart, ambitious people who are gathering some real-world experience right now. Give us a few more years and you'll see a lot more of us in politics," added Putta.

Devesh Khatu spent election eve campaigning against California's Proposition 8, which would add an amendment to the California constitution banning gay marriages. Khatu and other South Asian Americans, dressed in kurtas, passed out flyers at the BART station in Fremont, Calif., a mecca for Indian American commuters. "Our biggest response was no response," Khatu told India-West, adding: "We did not pursue it. Our main focus was to get the message out."

The Mumbai-born Khatu, who is gay, said the issue was a very personal one for him. "At some point, I would like to have the ability to marry someone. Californians will have done the right thing by rejecting Proposition 8."

Earlier this week, Navya Shastra, an international Hindu reform organization, urged California voters to reject the hotly-contested proposition, noting that Hinduism has "never classified homosexuality as a sin against God. In fact, there is ample evidence that alternative lifestyles have been accepted throughout Hindu history," said the organization in a press release.

Results of California's 14 proposition races were unavailable at press time.

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