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Indian Americans Play Increasingly Pivotal Role in US Elections

By Subhash Vohra
Washington
17 October 2008

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AP Photo

Senators Barack Obama (l) and John McCain debating at Hofstra University in New York, 15 Oct 2008

Americans of varied ethnic backgrounds play an increasingly pivotal role in their local and national elections. And a new survey (10/6 National Asian American Survey conducted by researchers at Rutgers, Cal-Berkely, Cal-Riverside and USoCal) shows a sizeable portion of Asia-American voters remain undecided about the presidential race. It's a development that could set the stage Asian Americans to play a pivotal role in the outcome of the election.

Ethnic Indian-Americans are among the largest segments of that group. As the 2008 U.S. Presidential campaign heats up, Indian Americans are becoming more involved

At the beginning of the 20th century, only about four thousand Indian immigrants lived in the United States. But in the last few decades, hundreds of thousands of Indian citizens have immigrated to the United States. U.S. residents of Indiandescent now number more than 2.5 million out of a total U.S. population of approximately 300 million.

Indian Americans are among the most highly educated among America's ethnic groups. They have been successful in business, medicine, and in dozens of other fields. One recent survey found that one-third of the engineers in California's (high-tech region known as) Silicon Valley is of Indian decent. Now, more and more Indian Americans are engaged and involved in U.S. political process, too.

Bobby Jindal made history last year by becoming the first Indian American Governor, winning nearly 90-percent of



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the vote in the state of Louisiana. Several Indian Americans are members of state assemblies in Maryland, New Jersey, Iowa and Minnesota.

Indian Americans have also played a role in the 2008 Presidential campaign between Democratic nominee Senator Barack Obama and Republican nominee Senator John McCain. Prominent Indian Americans were appointed to the Republican Convention Board, and some to the influential Democratic Campaign Committee.

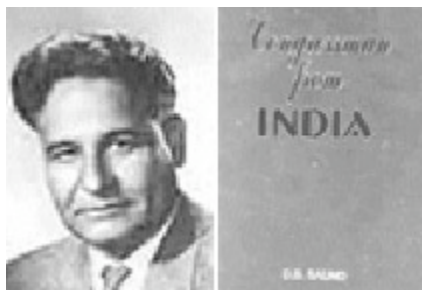


Republican Bobby Jindal made history becoming the first Indian American Governor in Louisiana

According to a recent study, 60 % of Indian Americans are registered Democrats and this well-educated, affluent immigrant group largely voted Democratic Party in the last Presidential Election. Kumar Narayan is an active member of the Indian-Americans for Obama Campaign in Seattle, Washington. He says Indian American voters see themselves more closely aligned with Democrats on a range of economic, cultural and international issues, and that they see Barack Obama best choice to re-establish the nation's standing in the world.

"Lots of people, who have been principally against the Iraq War, have been supporting Mr. Obama on issues. Senator Obama provided a more mature voice that has a vision of taking US away from being unilateral in its decisions. I feel that the world is interconnected, that it is more global. The approach of the Bush administration of last 8 years is of making unilateral decisions, carrying the notion of manifest destiny to its absurd and dangerous limits, and it was not the right thing to do."

Note: *(Originally a 19th century political defining US certainty to expand across the North American continent, today "Manifest Destiny" defines the belief that it America's mission to promote democracy throughout the world).*



The first Indian American to be elected to the House of Representatives was Dilip Singh Saund in 1956 from California. He was among the early Indian migrants to the American West Coast

However, the midterm elections showed that President Bush's pro-India policies, and especially the completion of the U.S.-India Civilian Nuclear Agreement, have swung a bigger share of the Indian-American community's vote to the Republicans. Dr. Piyush C. Agrawal is a prominent Indian American who was invited to attend the Republic convention as Special Invitees of the campaign on behalf of Senator & Mrs. McCain under "Friends & Family" program.

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He says it's the Republican Party that can assure economic growth, and that Senator John McClain has solid ideas to deal with the economic crisis. "Democratic Party is known usually to raise the taxes, and the Republican Party is against the taxes and is also very sensible on the expenditure side," says Mr. Agrawal. "Less government and less taxes do provide a growth in the economy. We Indians are more business-oriented people. That is why philosophically it suits us much more to be on the Republican side."

But Kumar Narayanan says Indian Americans, like other minorities, feel more comfortable under the umbrella of the Democratic Party and see Senator Obama as someone who represents their interests. "I think for Indians and especially immigrants, coming into this country, you sense that the Democratic Party has always portrayed an image of being more tolerant of diverse views, supporting the cause of immigrants, making sure that immigrants get the same rights. Whether it is the legal system or health-care system, they get the same rights and privileges as citizens of this country."

But Piyush Agarwal says fundamental issues are involved in the 2008 presidential contest, and that Senator McCain has more constructive positions than his opponent. "As far as Mr. Obama is concerned, he is intellectual, a brilliant young man and belonging to a minority. This is very dear to us," says Mr. Agrawal. "But the issue is: Mr. Obama represents what? And what he represents is Democratic Party philosophy, which doesn't suit me. He says he is going to reduce taxes for 95% of the people. Who are (is) going to pay? Does it mean that people who are hard working, work 24 hours a day and make money, should be punished because they are contributing to the society, as well as 60% of taxes to the country. So, if he chokes the very source which runs the government, this is a very questionable kind of approach."

Republican, Democrat or Independent, Indian Americans in all walks of life say they have faith in an American system that affords the opportunity to succeed to people of all backgrounds. The achievement of someone like Louisiana's Governor Bobby Jindal symbolizes that potential. In a VOA interview following his election victory, he paid tribute to the country that gave him that opportunity.

"I think it is absolutely the strength of America. This is a country of opportunities where people are judged on their ability and their performance. I think that is very important. What makes the American system so successful is the fact that immigrants and their children born here can get ahead, can do very well, just do hard work.

With education and income levels topping those of all ethnic groups in the United States, Indian-Americans have certainly done well in their adopted land. And one manifestation of their further integration into the American society is the increasing role

they have in the American political system.

This edition of International Press Club was written by Subhash Vohra and voiced by Steve Ember

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