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Asian immigrants ought to be ideal Republican voters, so what makes them lean Democratic?

Tanika Raychaudhuri's research suggests that Asian American communities, including Indian-Americans, tend to pick up political preferences from their peers.

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South Asians for Biden/Facebook

Asian Americans, including the small but influential Indian-American population, ought to make a good fit for the Republican party, not least because they tend to prefer conservative family values and generally have a higher socio-economic status than the average American. Yet they tend to side overwhelmingly with the Democrats, as polling ahead of the US election on November 3 also forecasts for this year.

Why is that?

It may be explained in part by how Asian Americans pick up political preferences in the first place. Research by Princeton University's Tanika Raychaudhuri in 2018, titled 'the social roots of Asian American partisan attitudes', noted that unlike other American communities, who get their politics from their parents, immigrants tend to get socialised into political preferences by their peers.

As part of her research on the political socialisation of immigrant groups in the US, the 28-year-old found that while Indian Americans tend to side with the Democratic party, there are differences across generations in terms of reasons for Democratic support.

In an interview with *Scroll.in*, the New Jersey-based Raychaudhuri talked about the importance of Indian-American voters, how they get their partisan views, intergenerational differences in voting behaviour and more.

Americans traditionally get their voting behaviour or party identification from their parents, but your study finds a difference in how immigrants – specifically, Asian Americans – get their politics. Could you elaborate on that and touch open the intergenerational differences in party identification?

In the American context, one of the standard explanations for how people develop their political views – and support for particular political parties – is through their family. There's an intergenerational inheritance of partisan views and there's a transmission of likes and dislikes for a party, maybe more so than actual ideological views. Along with other scholars, I have argued that this kind of theoretical approach doesn't work too well for immigrant groups.

First of all, the parents of first-generation immigrants often don't have political views in the American context. It doesn't necessarily mean that they're not learning about politics from their parents, but simply that they're not necessarily going to translate the political views that their parents pass on to them as their own.

Asian Americans, in particular, are primarily an immigrant constituency – about 75% of Asian-American adults are immigrants. Moreover, the vast majority of the rest of the group are children of immigrants. For these children of immigrants, there's often a pattern where they might talk about politics with their parents, but what I found in a lot of interviews that I conducted is that the children of immigrants are also talking less about American politics with their parents, and they are not inheriting partisan views in that same way.

In the sort of void of parental-partisan transmission, Asian Americans are very open to the political views that are expressed around them in the local context by their peers.

Why are these behaviours leading to support for the Democratic Party?

One reason that this might lead to Democratic rather than Republican support is that Asian Americans are primarily settling in very liberal cities on the East and West coasts that tend to have Democratic support. Even the ones who settle in more mixed-partisan areas, like Houston – where I did some of that field research – Asian Americans tend to mostly interact with peers who are more liberal.

Some studies also argue that this support tends to stem from their experiences of racial discrimination in the United States. Right now we're living through this heightened moment of partisan polarisation across issues of race and immigration. So by this account, and given that the parties are becoming increasingly polarised on immigration, with Democrats supporting it, and Republicans against it, and Democrats being seen as sort of this coalition of minorities – Republicans are kind of pushing away Asian Americans while Democrats are pulling them in.

Also, I think for South Asian Americans, there's some possibility that the support is coming from their experiences of discrimination – particularly for Muslim immigrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

What about the intergenerational differences?

I did find some important differences across generations in terms of reasons for Democratic support. Asian Americans across the board, whether they are immigrants or the children of immigrants, are supporting Democrats. But the kind of justifications that they gave qualitatively in interviews might differ a bit.

The first generation would mostly talk about the Democratic Party as the more sensible one. They might even say that they like some aspects of conservative ideology, but in the current moment, the Republican Party is too extreme, so they've gotten kind of pushed away.

I found that more second-generation Asian Americans were discussing the inclusivity factor of the Democratic Party, which made it very appealing for them. I think at this moment, there is definitely a lot of potential for changing public opinion among American adults, probably on the issues of racial justice, especially against the backdrop of the broader political moment.

What is the importance of Indian-American voters in the present moment?

The Indian American voter is becoming increasingly important. There are two ways to think about the importance of voters: in numerical terms – growth perspective – and also in terms of the value of diversity in an electorate. So first, in terms of numerical status, the Indian -American community is growing really fast. And while both the Indian-American and Asian-American communities have grown really fast in the last 20 years, there hasn't been that much research on their views. There's also not been that much focus on mobilising these groups by the political parties – that's been changing a bit.

I know that Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton did have some specific campaign initiatives targeted at Asian-American voters. With each election, such targeting is becoming more sophisticated.

Also, I think that in general, Indian-American voters are important to focus on and study because they are representing an important demographic change in America, which is becoming a lot more racially diverse. So this community is increasingly going to have an impact on elections. It's great that there will be – or I hope that there will be – more of a focus on how they vote.

A recent survey found that U.S.-born Indian American citizens tilt left compared to foreign-born citizens, and while both of these groups favour the Democratic Party, the naturalized citizens are more muted – there are lower rates of voter turnout and weaker partisan identification. Could you speak to that?

It might be the case that the children of immigrants and second-generation Indian Americans are more politically involved because they grew up in the United States. For Asian Americans as a whole, I did find that their experiences in college of interacting with diverse peer groups increased the likelihood of their participating in political campaigns or voting. So it might be the case that these types of experiences – of growing up in the US, coming of age and being a young adult around the time of elections, interacting with peers who care about those issues – would lead to more political involvement.

There also might be some element of fear of controversy of getting too politically involved, especially for recent immigrants. But I think that there is also increasing political involvement among first-generation immigrants in the US, so among the second generation. But I would not be surprised to see increased participation and non-voting political activities among immigrants.

Will Kamala Harris’s vice-presidential nomination give a boost to the voter turnout?

In the study of race and ethnic politics, there’s a lot of evidence that descriptive representation – having a political candidate who looks like you or is of the same ethnic background – is highly mobilising. It makes people feel like they’re represented in politics and it makes them more likely to turn out to vote and feel more political advocacy. So I think that this may be the case among Indian Americans this time.

I know that for me personally, it’s really inspiring to see an Indian-American woman run for the second-highest political office in the United States, and I would expect to see a significant increase in the mobilisation of Indian Americans in this election cycle with Kamala Harris’s selection.

I know that Indian Americans are a very small ethnic group in the US – they make up about 1% of the population – but I still think that it is a sizable group and can have an impact on the elections.