

ISAS Special Report

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US Presidential Election and the Indian Diaspora

Amitendu Palit and Taisha Grace Antony¹

On 11 October 2016, ISAS hosted a panel discussion of distinguished speakers on the theme, 'US Presidential Elections and the Indian Diaspora'. The forthcoming Presidential elections in the US are witnessing intensive debates on the role and impact of immigrants. Indians form a sizeable part of the immigrant population in the US, and over time, they have not only expanded in size and socio-economic status, but have also become increasingly visible actors and stakeholders in US domestic politics. The Indian diaspora has also been a major strategic factor in shaping the current trajectory of US-India bilateral relations. The ISAS panel discussion covered a wide range of topics in the context of the Presidential elections and the Indian community in the US, including its political and social behaviour, economic mobility, and engagement with US domestic institutions. The discussion also covered the issues in the immigration debate and the prospects of new policies influencing future skilled Indian migration to the US.

Moderated by Dr Amitendu Palit, Senior Research Fellow at ISAS, the panel consisted of former US Ambassador to the Asian Development Bank, Ambassador Curtis S Chin, Professor Sanjoy Chakravorty of the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Temple University, USA, Consulting

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Editor at Business Standard, India, Mr Subhomoy Bhattacharjee, Founder and CEO of ApKar Consulting Pte. Ltd, Mr Sanjiv Aiyar, and former managing director and global strategist at Deutsche Bank, Mr Sanjeev Sanyal.

In his opening remarks, ISAS Chairman Ambassador Gopinath Pillai lamented the change in the tone and tenor of the electoral discourse in the US, with personalities and slander becoming more prominent at the expense of critical issues. Pointing out that the prospects of the South Asian diaspora in the US will be determined by the US immigration and visa policies, he emphasised that the reason behind ISAS organising a panel discussion on the US presidential elections and the Indian diaspora was the sheer size of the Indian segment of the South Asian diaspora in the US. He also highlighted the importance that ISAS attaches to the study of the South Asian diaspora through its signature initiatives of the South Asian Diaspora Conventions (SADCs).

Key Issues and Reflections:

Ambassador Curtis S Chin

- Politicians are largely preoccupied with voter turnout and fund-raising. Electoral issues therefore tend to reflect what voters ideally want and are looking for. In this respect, the Indian diaspora becomes important for electoral candidates if Indians have sizable presence in their district or state.
- Asian Americans in the US have been mostly concerned with the economy and issues relating to terrorism, and the order of importance is the economy, terrorism and access to healthcare.
- Most Asian Americans, including Indian Americans, support Democrats. However, in the opinion of the co-authors of this Special Report, the Republican Presidential nominee Donald Trump's appearance at the Republican Hindu Coalition's Victims of Terror charity concert in New Jersey on 15 October 2016 (a few days after the ISAS-organised panel discussion) marked an interesting dynamic in the election, given that Donald Trump declared that, irrespective of the electoral outcome, he would continue to be involved with the Republican Hindu coalition, modelled after the Republican Jewish coalition, at the state and local level.

Professor Sanjoy Chakravorty

- About half of the immigrant Indians in the US migrated during the last 15 years. The ethnic predominance among the immigrant Indians is shifting more towards the Telugu- and Tamil-diaspora due to greater absorption in the IT industry in Silicon Valley and the evolution of the H-1B visa, compared with the Gujaratis or Punjabis in the past. However, only a small section of the immigrants – only the citizens – will actually vote.
- Indians are the fastest growing immigrant population in the US. Last year, they overtook the Mexicans in terms of a single year entrance into the US. While the group does not have a significant political say, its influence is slowly increasing over the years, as the diaspora is making its mark through high educational achievement.
- In the current political context, particularly from the perspective of immigrant groups in the US, Republicans have problems in attracting political support due to their anti-immigration policies and the influence of evangelical Christianity.

Mr Subhomoy Bhattacharjee

- Engaging with the diaspora needs to be understood as a business issue, which the current election does not seem to have appreciated. Asia, particularly India and China, are not junior partners in the 21st century.
- The feedback from the Diaspora is important in terms of conveying signals and impressions to political establishments in Asian capitals like New Delhi. This influences the strategic outlook of political establishments in India in their interface with developed countries including the US. These impressions spill over to decisions that countries like India take on major issues like US corporate investments in India.

Mr Sanjiv Ayer

- Historically, US Presidential elections, regardless of the changes in the political landscape in the country, haven't had significant impact on the prospects of Indians moving into the US, since meritocracy has always prevailed.
- Outsourcing is a sensitive topic in the US domestic political discourse and Indians are identified with outsourcing. Indians have consciously maintained a somewhat low profile for avoiding any blowback from the politics of outsourcing.
- The Indian diaspora in the US has had considerable influence over India's policies with respect to the US, particularly with the advent of the new Indian government. Within the

US, the Indian diaspora has a special place, given its contribution to the growth of the Silicon Valley and its relatively high level of average educational qualifications.

- It is important to note that the geographical composition of the Indian diaspora is changing along with a shift in its focus from the US to Asia. But rapid progress in technology might make parts of the diaspora in countries like US and Singapore less significant in local job markets over time, unless they display readiness to change focus and skill-sets.

Mr Sanjeev Sanyal

- The Indian diaspora was more politically active before India's Independence. The greater passiveness post-Independence has led to more contemporary diasporic political actors deliberately downplaying their Indian identities. This is, however, changing since the last five years with the Indian diaspora becoming conscious of its identity, shared interests and economic clout. The initiatives of the Modi government have been important in this regard.
- The gradual shift towards the Conservatives among Indian diaspora in the UK might be noted among the diaspora in the US too over time. While the shrill evangelism of the Republicans might be keeping the Indians away, this might well change over time with moderation in Republican posture and greater convergence of economic interests.
- The expanding numbers and specific concentrations of the Indian diaspora might result in their playing much bigger roles in future US elections.

The discussion that followed highlighted the following issues.

- The importance of the electoral topic of immigration in the US and its impact on the Indian diaspora.
- Comparison of the Indian and Chinese Diasporas in the US and the relatively better performance of the Indians in the private sector in the US.
- Relative political preferences of Indian Americans and Chinese Americans and their roles and influence in US politics.
- Impact of a Democrat-controlled US Congress on the Indian diaspora in the US.
- With long-term party identifications melting in American voting behaviour, how 'American' is the Indian diaspora in America?
- The numbers of the Indian diaspora are small in 'swing' states like Florida and Ohio. Therefore their votes might not make a decisive impact on electoral outcomes. In contrast,

in various lobbies in Washington the Indian diaspora can make its presence felt through its financial muscle.

- Why is Christianity a turnoff in this election?
- When one looks at a big country like the US which has people from all over the world coming and settling, the perception about these immigrant populations from the original population's point of view gets influenced by their respective country's leadership. Has PM Modi's becoming Prime Minister of India made a difference to the perceptions about Indian diaspora in the eyes of the original citizens in the US?

Delivering the concluding remarks, Professor Subrata K Mitra, ISAS Director and Visiting Research Professor, thanked the panellists and participants, and highlighted the importance of Singapore as a knowledge economy and home to the Indian diaspora and the relevance of the discussion for this city-state. He pointed out that the current US Presidential election is challenging the plurality of the American society and questioning the basis of the Diaspora. Many of the issues raised during the campaign are going to persist even after the elections are over, and will continue to have relevance for Indian and South Asian Diasporas in all parts of the world.

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