

Indian American voters caught between Hillary and Obama

Indian American voters are split between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, the two Democrats in the presidential nomination race, as 22 American states prepare for crucial primary elections Tuesday.

The dilemma is best expressed by Nazish Agha, a 34-year-old New York corporate lawyer who wants to see a woman become the US president but is also attracted to a black American.

'Being a woman I will like to see a woman in the White House. But coming from a minority Asian community, Obama, who does not have a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) name, also appeals to me,' Agha told IANS.

The US-born Agha, whose family is from Lucknow, said younger and liberal Indian Americans are supporting Obama while the older ones are with Clinton.

She pointed out that ethnic Indians traditionally may support the Democratic party because of its social policies such as on immigration but even Republicans see the value of professionals coming in on H1B visas, a category that interests Indians.

Unlike Agha, Madhu Mittal, 36, has decided to vote for Obama although she admires Clinton too.

'Obama has a vision and also the daring to make a change - doing something good for the US and the world,' says Mittal, who runs a garment sourcing company with her father in Long Island.

For many Indian Americans, she concedes, it is a tough call choosing between Clinton and Obama.

'The Clintons have had close ties with India and the Indian community here, particularly Punjabis. The fact is, many may admire Obama more but they will vote for Hillary because they have invested in her campaign.

'Most of them in any case are older people, who will benefit from her policies on healthcare and social security,' Mittal argues.

Mittal has high regard for Bill Clinton. She argues that the Monica Lewinsky scandal was blown up to tarnish the then president's image by the tobacco lobby after his many steps that hurt tobacco manufacturers.

She, however, is worried whether a woman or a black candidate will eventually be voted president. 'Lots of Americans want their president to be not only a WASP but also a male and a six-footer to boot.'

Going by these criteria, only Republican Mitt Romney comes close from those left in the field. And even he is not a Protestant - he is a Mormon.

A. Rizvi, a 42-year-old entrepreneur of New Jersey, will vote for Obama because 'you think he knows you. He has seen poverty and he knows the Third World'.

He admires Obama's stand against outsourcing as an example of his honesty and forthrightness. 'A president has to first think of his own country.'

Rizvi rejects Hillary because, according to him, people already have seen the Clintons. 'Bill Clinton was not that sharp a president,' he says.

He also does not like Hillary's entry into the presidential race after saying for years that she was not interested.

On the west coast, in California, Sanjay Jayaswal, 39, finds both Obama and Clinton fit for his vote. But he is saved the trouble of choosing because he did not register in time as a voter.

'I never voted in the last four elections but felt like doing so this time because of the catastrophic direction the country has taken under President George Bush,' says Jayaswal, an engineer with the Marriott hotel group.

But he is undecided in which party he should enrol.

'Had John Edwards, a super wealthy attorney showing concern for the poor, won the Democrat ticket, I would have liked to support John McCain,' he said. Edwards has withdrawn from the race while McCain is the Republican frontrunner.

In Silicon Valley, Indian American outsourcing companies are looking for a business friendly candidate.

Ravi Thummarukudy, vice president of GDA Technologies, says on a blog: 'I think the subject of outsourcing is of great relevance for this election and as an entrepreneur and a manager of an outsourcing company, I'll be looking carefully at the candidates.'

McCain and Hillary have spoken in favour of letting the global economy dictate the flow of jobs and business. Obama, however, has suggested taxing companies that ship American jobs overseas.

Traditionally, Indian Americans tend to be more liberal and vote overwhelmingly for Democrats.

Polls before the last presidential election in 2004 showed them favouring Democratic candidate John Kerry over Republican Bush by a 53-14 percent margin with 30 percent undecided then.

But as the community becomes more established and prosperous, the Republican party, which favours lower taxes, is making inroads in the community.

Various groups like the Indian American Center for Political Awareness have been trying to get the community more actively involved in the political process. Republican Congressman Bobby Jindal's election as Louisiana governor has left people wondering if an Indian American can one day become the US president.

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