

It is a trend that is reversing fast. Young Indian Americans today want to assert themselves by taking on the mantle of getting 'down and dirty' in the fields of civics and politics of the country. For proof, just look at their swelling numbers ■ SAM RAO

Politics, Here We Come!

MOHAMMED JAFFER/SNAPSINDIA

POLITICS is no longer a dirty word—at least to the Indian-Americans raised in the US, although in many cases, the first generation immigrant community still harbors deep suspicions about a career in politics and politicians in general, perhaps a throwback of being raised in India.

In the US, which has seen waves of Indian migrations for over 100 years, despite the Indian American being one of the wealthiest professional immigrant communities, the community's representation in the political arena is woefully short.

Following Census 2000, the current total Indian-American population has been pegged at between 1.5 million to 2 million. The counties with most Indian-Americans are Queens, NY followed by Santa Clara County, CA, Los Angeles County, CA, Alameda County, CA.

While with individual efforts some have led the charge, like Dilip Singh Saund, elected as Congressman in California in 1956, and more recently Bobby Jindal in Louisiana in 2004, only a handful of the likes of Assembly member Upendra Chivukala (D-NJ), Assembly member Kurmar Barve (D-MD), State Senator Satveer Choudhary (D-MN) and Assembly member Swati Dandekar (D-IA) have made headway in national elective office, although several have been elected to local offices and appointed to local bodies as well.

Now the trend seems to be reversing. Not to be outdone, younger Indian-Americans have started to assert themselves taking on the mantle of getting "down and dirty" in the field of civics and politics of the country.

"This is a reflection of the community maturing itself and many deciding to set roots firmly down in the US soil as their 'first' country," says Ramesh Kapur, perhaps one of the most well known fundraisers and political activists amongst the Indian American community. Kapur has been at it since 1983, when he first got involved in the Presidential campaign of Mike Dukakis. He says, "Early on, we were involved in local politics (only) and nothing was organized. As soon as some people started looking at the financial clout of Indian Americans and in feedback from a few Congressmen, slowly people started getting together. So groups like IAFPE, IACPE and local chapters of Indian Americans were formed."



Desi Congressional interns at the Capitol Hill (from left) Swati Sharma, Aneri Patel, Amit Patel, Ajaita Shah, Hirsh Sandesara, Tanya Sehgal, Nisha Jain on Capitol Hill;

With an increasing number of high-school and college-bound students, many have decided to intern and learn the ropes of the political machinery

In a testament to bipartisanship, Kapur, who is a member of the Democratic National Committee and also the Chair of the Indian-American Leadership Council, praises Rep. Piyush "Bobby" Jindal, a Republican, for having shown the way to the community by getting elected in Louisiana—a conservative, Southern State. "This has demonstrated that the US is willing to elect the right candidate and is a major boost to our Indian-American community especially the youth."

With opportunities for all ages in a participatory democracy, young Indian Americans have increasingly taken to internships and assumed staff positions for US legislators as well.

Like Rohit Mahajan, the current Press Secretary for Congressman Joseph Crowley (D NY), representing Bronx and Queens, NY. Mahan, armed with a major in English and a one-year teaching stint in Hungary, interned as a press aide for Senator Barbara Boxer (D CA), on his return to the US.

Mahajan says, "I was not very interested in politics during college."

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