

## India-born entrepreneurs empower US voters

**Shukoor Ahmed** ran for a seat in the Maryland House of Delegates in 1998, after coming to America a decade earlier from Hyderabad, India. Campaigning door-to-door, he was surprised so many voters did not know who represented them! After his race ended slightly short of victory, he took advantage of his Master's degree in Computer Technology and Political Science to build StateDemocracy.org, a website he launched in 2001 to connect citizens and lawmakers. His website's motto encapsulated its mission:

*“Delivering Democracy to Your Desktop!”*

**Frank Islam** similarly came to America to study, earning B.S. and M.S. Degrees in Computer Science. He too became a citizen and eventually founded QSS, Inc., a technology firm he recently sold to Perot Systems for \$250 million. He won numerous awards for leadership and established a personal foundation supporting educational, cultural and artistic causes worldwide. (See details at [www.ffislam.com](http://www.ffislam.com)).



Last month, Shukoor Ahmed handed over to Frank Islam the gavel as the new Chairman of the *StateDemocracy Foundation*, the nonprofit operator of the StateDemocracy.org website. Over its seven years, nearly 500,000 people have visited StateDemocracy.org. It remains the only One-Stop portal where Americans living anywhere can connect with all their state and federal lawmakers.



Earlier this year, the Foundation launched another website, LobbyDelegates.com, that enabled rank-and-file Democrats to lobby “Super Delegates” -- the 800 top party officials who held the deciding votes in the very close Presidential primary between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Some 30,000 users lobbied Super Delegates to support their preferred candidate via this one-of-a-kind service, before Obama was finally nominated on August 28.

The StateDemocracy.org portal is now playing a key role in empowering voters to participate in America's dramatic General Elections on November 4. It offers citizens free online access to: (1) voter registration, (2) absentee ballots and (3) a polling place locator. These tools all work for any jurisdiction in the nation. The site also offers widgets that can be installed on other civic websites for use by their visitors. Even facebook.com offers these tools for its users to add to their own Profile page, to facilitate voting among their visiting friends.

As he takes charge amid America's historic election, Mr. Islam has embraced the opportunity to give back to his adopted nation by using Internet technology to expand civic engagement. He noted that in October alone, users of StateDemocracy.org doubled compared to the previous nine months, largely due to demand for absentee ballots -- yet

another sign of the record-breaking U.S. voter turnout expected this year. Mr. Islam hopes to use the entrepreneurial skills that brought him so much business success to similarly boost the *Foundation* to its next level. His goals as Chairman include recruitment to diversify the Board's expertise, methodical strategic planning, greater grant funding and expanded partnerships with kindred organizations.

Shukoor Ahmed, who will remain on the Foundation's Board, was recognized last month for the web technology firm he founded, *V-Empower, Inc.* It was named as the 7th fastest growing technology firm in the Washington, DC area last year. *V-Empower* builds websites for political candidates and organizations in the U.S., and increasingly in other nations as well.

Not one to forget his homeland, Mr. Ahmed also created a similar website for citizens in India -- [IndiaDemocracy.org](http://IndiaDemocracy.org) -- which has attracted nearly 50,000 users since it was launched in December 2002. It remains India's only civic networking portal, empowering users to contact their lawmakers, as well as share news, photos, videos and blogs about politics in India.

Both of these sons of India can claim to be carrying on the legacy to the wider world of renowned Indian mathematician **Aryabhata**, who is credited with inventing the concept of "zero" -- the very foundation for all computer programming. So, it is only fitting that two natives of India, the world's largest democracy, are dedicated to using the power of technology to strengthen civic participation in the world's oldest democracy, the United States of America.

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