

Wealthy Indian-Americans backing Barack Obama in US elections

America's presidential elections, right now, are all about Republican presidential hopefuls fighting it out to for the right to challenge Barack Obama in November.

But most of the energy and passion and campaign money of the ethnic group that has the highest median income in the US are directed towards the Democratic president. Obama is the hot favourite with the wealthy and influential Indian-American community.

Obama is expected to face a tough re-election battle in November. However, among Indian-American voters he holds a clear advantage, interviews with a cross-section of the community, including Democratic and Republican operatives and activists, show. Indian-Americans may make up only about 1% of the US population, but their wealth matters.

A review of campaign finance data compiled by the [Center for Responsive Politics](#) reveals that at least seven Indian-Americans are among the 350 top Obama supporters who each helped raise a minimum of \$50,000 (Rs 26 lakh) in the current election cycle. These seven individuals raised between \$850,000 and \$2 million. One of them is Frank Islam, a Washington area businessman who has given some \$350,000 to various candidates and campaigns.

Islam, who runs an investment firm, said he is as enthusiastic about Obama as he was in 2008. "I give money because I strongly believe we must elect representatives who can rejuvenate the middle class and who can reignite manufacturing sectors and unleash the potential for small businesses and entrepreneurs," said Islam, who emigrated from India in the 1960s.

Just Like 2008

The current favourite among Republican candidates, [Mitt Romney](#), co-founder of private equity firm Bain Capital, has been excoriating Obama for the latter's "poor handling" of the economy. This doesn't necessarily play with Indian-Americans.

Sunny Wycliffe, an Indian-American community leader in the Washington area and long-time Democratic supporter, said the sour economy hasn't tempered his backing for the president. And he believes many of his friends within the community, who supported Obama during his historic 2008 run, will vote for the president again.

"People see what is happening," Wycliffe said. "The economy is slowly getting better. The president has eliminated Osama bin Laden and he has also pulled out troops from Iraq, as promised."

Though there have been quite a few setbacks in the India-US relations lately, including the failure of the Americans to win an Indian contract for multirole combat aircraft and the troubles that Indian software companies are facing with visas, they do not seem to have any significant bearing on the community's support. Likewise, outsourcing, a potent issue in 2004 and, to some extent, in 2008, has not emerged as a big campaign theme so far.

There are a number of reasons Obama still holds substantial support among Indian-Americans. Historically, like many immigrant groups, Indian-Americans have been voting more Democratic than Republican even though the two highest-ranking elected officials to date from within the community, Governors Bobby Jindal of Louisiana and Nikki Haley of South Carolina, are both Republicans.

Romney's Error

Even some Republicans agree that it is an uphill battle for the party's nominee against the incumbent president despite his troubles on the economic front.

Puneet Ahluwalia is chairman of the Indian [American Republican Committee](#) in Fairfax, Virginia and affiliated to the campaign of Republican candidate, Newt Gingrich. He argues that Obama has a disadvantage with the Indian-American business community. A sizeable section of the community is employed in IT, whose performance is connected to the overall economic health. Since a substantial number of Indian-Americans also earn well over \$200,000, for them issues such as tax cuts are important, he said.

"They are seeing more [economic] success in India than here, but at the emotional level, the community tends to connect with Obama," Ahluwalia said.

The fact that no Republican candidate has made any strong efforts to woo the community may have worked in Obama's favour until now. So far all Republicans have been mostly focusing on the party's traditional constituencies: social conservatives, evangelical Christians and libertarians. "Romney has only viewed the community in financial terms," said Ahluwalia.

Dems Have Brains

Another reason for the poor showing by Republican candidates, said Ahluwalia, is Romney and other Republicans have historically failed to tap the "intellectual capital" of the community. Democrats have done a better job of that in recent years.

Several Indian Americans are currently serving or have served in the administration, including Rajiv Shah, the administrator of the US Agency for International Development, Aneesh Chopra, the chief technology officer of the [United States](#), and Neal Katyal, the former acting solicitor general of the United States.

Neera Tanden, the president of the Center for American Progress, served as domestic policy director for the Obama campaign. Hillary Clinton, the secretary of state and former first lady who unsuccessfully challenged Obama for the Democratic nomination in 2008, also had several Indian Americans in her inner circle and campaign. Tanden was a policy director for Clinton's campaign before joining Obama.