

For Modi, Houston guaranteed a huge turnout of Indian Americans. Trump may need them to win Texas in 2020

Indian Americans are perhaps not more than 4,00,000 in number, but if Texas becomes a “swing” or “battleground” state, ready for a political flip, even such small numbers might ultimately matter.

[Ashutosh Varshney](#)



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with US President Donald Trump at the “Howdy Modi: Shared Dreams, Bright Futures” event at NRG Stadium on September 22, 2019. (AP)

That Prime Minister [Narendra Modi's](#) rally in Houston, Texas, was a grand spectacle is beyond doubt. But grandeur aside, there are some questions that require fuller answers.

The first question is: Why Houston? Beyond New York, the larger San Francisco area (including Silicon Valley) and Chicago, Houston, along with Dallas, has among the largest communities of Indian Americans. Modi has already held rallies in New York and San Francisco. Houston or Chicago were the logical next sites.

A significantly more important question is: Why did President Donald Trump participate? It is, of course, not entirely unusual for foreign leaders to stage diaspora rallies. Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric notwithstanding, the US is a country of immigrants. Diasporas in the US, especially Irish, Mexican and Jewish, have been mobilised by visiting dignitaries. But the presence of a US president in, and his address to, a diasporic rally is certainly rare, if not a first-time occurrence.

What could Trump's motivation be? A penchant for spectacle, any spectacle, is his barely disguised trait. It is not uncommon for him, even as President, to be seen in the company of sports, music, film and television stars, nor is the idea of repeatedly locking horns with them, especially on Twitter, ever too far from the presidential attention. He is irresistibly drawn to that which is spectacular, magnificent or gorgeous.

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But this explanation won't do. As Devesh Kapur, professor at Johns Hopkins University and an authority on the subject, tells us, Indian Americans are only one per cent of the US population. And they are roughly the same proportion of the electorate, too. It is also estimated that roughly 75 per cent of Indian Americans vote for the Democratic party. Even if a substantial proportion of

them rushed towards the Republican camp in 2020, it would still not be a large enough clientele for a US president, seeking re-election, to qualify as a great spectacle. The overall numbers are meagre.

But electoral demography is never simply about aggregate statistics. It is also about how those numbers are geographically distributed, and what that distribution politically means. The US presidential election is not decided by popular vote. In 2016, Trump was over three million votes behind Hillary Clinton, and in 2000, George W Bush over half a million votes behind Al Gore. US presidents are chosen on the basis of an electoral college, which does not have a one-to-one-relationship with the population. The college has 538 electors/votes, of which 270 must be won. In 2020, six of the largest states in the electoral college will be: California (55), Texas (38), New York (29), Florida (29), Illinois (20), Pennsylvania (20). Of these six, three — California, New York and Illinois — have been consistently democratic in recent years. Trump carried Texas, Florida and Pennsylvania in 2016, and needs to carry them again.

This leads to questions about the state-level significance of the Houston rally. Winning Texas, the second-largest state in the electoral college, is critical to Trump's 2020 chances, especially as it is unclear which way Florida and Pennsylvania might go. In contrast, California and New York are expected to remain firmly Democratic. If Republicans lose Texas, smaller states may not be able to make up the loss.

Texas, which has been solidly Republican for long and never elected a Democratic presidential candidate since Jimmy Carter in 1976, has of late been displaying signs of turning "purple", somewhere between "red" (Republican) and "blue" (Democratic). Obama lost Texas by 16 percentage points in 2012, but Clinton in 2016 narrowed the Republican victory to nine per cent. The results of the 2018 mid-term elections further hinted that a

new trend might be emerging. The Senate race was won by Ted Cruz, an incumbent Republican who also spoke at the Modi rally, by a narrow margin. Besides, Democrats flipped two Texas seats in the US House of Representatives, 18 seats in the state House and two seats in the state Senate.

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Why is this happening and how might Indian Americans fit into the emerging political calculus? In 2000, Whites constituted 53 per cent of the state, and people of colour 47 per cent. By now, these proportions have dramatically changed, as Whites have become a minority. In 2018, the population of Texas was 28.7 million. Whites were 41.5 per cent of the total, Hispanics were only slightly behind at 39.7 per cent, blacks 11.8 per cent and Asians 4.8 per cent. People of colour thus formed 58.5 per cent of the state.

It is also known that people of colour have predominantly leaned towards the Democratic party and Whites largely towards the Republicans. Statistical analysis by Juan Carlos Huerta, a Texas politics expert, shows that in 2017, among people of colour, 68 per cent identified with Democrats, a share that has been roughly stable since 2009, whereas not more than a third of Whites had Democratic leanings in 2009 and 2013. This started changing by

2017, as younger White support for Democrats increased. Generally speaking, and certainly in recent years, compared to older Whites, younger White vote for Democratic party has tended to be higher.

Thus, because the non-White population has grown rapidly and the new White migration into Texas has principally been of the younger cohorts, Republicans are beginning to look vulnerable in a state that they took for granted. Indian Americans are perhaps not more than 4,00,000 in number, but if Texas becomes a “swing” or “battleground” state, ready for a political flip, even such small numbers might ultimately matter.

In sum, Modi chose Houston because a huge Indian American participation was guaranteed. And Trump participated because Indian Americans might heavily matter in the state of Texas in 2020.

This article first appeared in the print edition on October 5, 2019 under the title 'Revisiting Howdy, Modi'. The writer is director, Center for Contemporary South Asia, Sol Goldman Professor of International Studies and Social Sciences, Professor of Political Science, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University



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