

The black part of Kamala Harris's identity is bound to be bigger, but the Indian part will not be suppressed

The logic of demography and identity, an inescapable part of democratic politics, shows why the Kamala Harris candidacy is generating excitement. It is aimed at a multiracial America. It is a 21st century American reality Trump is trying to suppress.

[Ashutosh Varshney](#)

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For America's mass politics, Harris is primarily black and only secondarily something else.

"You have been such a regular customer, so I hope you won't mind my question. I know white and I know black — what are you?" Thus spoke my dry cleaner in South Bend, Indiana, in 2000. A small town brought to national attention this year by Pete Buttigieg, the town's former mayor who ran the Democratic presidential primary with distinction, losing finally to Joe Biden, South Bend also houses the University of Notre Dame, a great educational treasure of America's Irish Catholic community. I taught there for two years, 1999-2001.

The dry cleaner's comment was not offensive or prejudiced — it simply embodied conventional wisdom and reflected curiosity. The colour of my skin did not align with her pre-existing understanding of America's great racial binary. Historically, one could either be black or white, but the space in the middle was virtually non-existent in the US. It is this middle space —

neither black, nor white — which acquires significance in light of [Kamala Harris](#)'s vice presidential nomination, although it should also be clear that it cannot compete with the historical charge of black identity, which Harris also simultaneously represents.

In 1790, after independence, the US was roughly 80.7 per cent white and 19.3 per cent black. In 1960, the proportions were 88.6 per cent and 10.5 per cent respectively. After the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924, white Europeans were practically the only immigrants into the US (with some Latinos counted as white). Between 1880 and 1960, the Asian proportion of America remained below 0.3 per cent. That is why, once the indigenous Americans were reduced to statistical insignificance, US history for a long time did not have a third race. The Hispanics, now 18 per cent of the country, arrived mostly after the mid-1960s.

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How many of the Asians were Indian? In "The Other One Percent", Sanjoy Chakravorty, Devesh Kapur and Nirvikar Singh note that in 1940, there were only 2,405 Indians in the US, and although by 1960, when Kamala Harris's mother came from Delhi to Berkeley, the numbers had climbed, there were still only 12,296 Indians in the US. It is after the 1965 immigration reform, which abrogated national quotas, that the non-white immigration rose rapidly. Indian Americans today number about 4 million, a remarkable increase over 1960, but that is still only a little over 1 per cent of the US.

Because their numbers were small and their employment heavily skewed towards the educated and skilled professions, Indians have been invisible in America's mass politics. Engineers, scientists, doctors, business executives and professors, Indians have been present in the middle and upper echelons

of America's biggest cities, but not in smaller towns like South Bend. The largest concentrations have been in the metropolitan regions of New York, Chicago, Washington, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Dallas-Houston and Philadelphia. Average Americans in small towns have little direct experience of Indians. Almost certainly, the rise of Kamala Harris will make Indians more visible in America's public life. But how that will happen is complicated, and needs to be understood in its complexity.

For America's mass politics, Harris is primarily black and only secondarily something else. At one level, this is quite a paradox. Harris rarely talks about her father, a black immigrant from Jamaica and a former professor of economics. She often speaks of the strong influence of her Indian mother, who raised her as a single mom after the marriage broke down. But it is noteworthy that in addition to giving her daughter a sense of India, the mother also emphasised Harris's black roots, making it clear that the US would primarily view Kamala as a black woman. Such mixed upbringing was easy in a multi-racial California, but much tougher in a predominantly white Montreal, where the mother accepted a job. Harris lived in Canada for five years, completing her high school education there.

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In a move whose wisdom and significance are unmistakable, Kamala went for her BA to Howard University, a black college established after the abolition of slavery in the 1860s. What better way to explore her black identity than being in a historic black college, surrounded by black co-students in a hugely formative period of one's life! In part inherited from her father, Kamala's black identity was thus also socially constructed.

If one has both black and Indian ancestries, as Harris does, the former was always going to play a bigger role in American politics. The black community is 12 times larger, it has a longer and poignant history, and after the Black Lives Matter movement, its political significance has gone up significantly.

Equally important, research shows that younger Americans are much more racially tolerant than their parents were. As [Barack Obama](#) put it, the multi-racial character of protests after the killing of George Floyd in late May was qualitatively different from the overwhelmingly black civil rights movement of the 1960s. Picking a Harris thus sends a message to the black community that its voice is being heard, but many non-black Americans can also readily vote for such a ticket. Her background as a lawyer and her prosecutorial acumen also attract many.

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That, however, does not mean that the Indian ancestry of Harris is politically irrelevant. America's president is elected by an electoral college, not by the popular vote. The college can make some small communities electorally critical in the so-called swing states, which often decide the presidency. In 2016, compared to Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton polled 3 millions votes more, but she did not win the college. In the three swing states that accounted for Trump's victory — Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin — Indian votes can be hugely important this November, as the Democratic party has already conceded. Clinton lost Pennsylvania by roughly 42,000 votes, Michigan by 11,000, and Wisconsin by 26,000. Pennsylvania has over 1,05,000 Indians, Michigan nearly 1,00,000, and Wisconsin over 25,000. Florida is also expected to be in play. Trump won it by about 1,19,000 votes and over 1,30,000 Indians live there. (The number of Indian voters could be lower.)

In short, the black part of Harris's identity is bound to be bigger, but the Indian part will not be suppressed. The logic of demography and identity, an inescapable part of democratic politics, shows why the Harris candidacy is generating excitement. It is aimed at a multiracial America. It is a 21st century American reality Trump is trying to suppress.

This article first appeared in the print edition on August 20, 2020 under the title 'An American Kamala'. The writer is Sol Goldman Professor of International Studies and Professor of Political Science at Brown University.

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