Varun Nikore

Mon, 11/22 9:12AM • 32:26

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

aapi, aapi community, country, people, community, georgia, election, voters, voting, victory, states, pandemic, impact, serve, americans, terms, day, government, politics, hope

SPEAKERS

Varun Nikore, Omkari Williams

Varun Nikore 00:00
What we experienced from 2016 to 2020 was the greatest increase of voting participation by any one community in the history of our country.

Omkari Williams 00:31
Hello, and welcome to Stepping Into Truth, the podcast where we take on the issues of race, gender, and social justice. I'm your host Omkari Williams, and I'm very happy that you're here with me today. Hosting this podcast means that I am privileged to speak with people who are out in the world, making a difference with their day jobs, their art, their programs and their activism. And I love doing this. If you would like to support me in this work, you can do so by becoming a member of my Patreon community, you can go to patreon.com/omkariwilliams and sign up. There's also a link on my website omkariwilliams.com.

Omkari Williams 01:08
My guest today, Varun Nikore, has for more than 30 years been involved in national state and local politics as a campaign strategist, fundraiser and policy advisor and AAPI leader. In 1998 he was appointed to serve in the Clinton administration. He is the founder and past president of the Indian American Leadership Initiative, which is the largest Indian American network of Democrats in the United States. In 2008. Varun served as a transportation policy adviser for President Obama under Obama for America. He is the current president of AAPI Victory Fund and executive director of AAPI Victory Alliance, and it is my great pleasure to welcome Varun to the podcast Hi Varun, how are you today?

Varun Nikore 01:55
I'm great. Omkari. How are you doing?

Omkari Williams 01:56
I am doing really well. I've been looking forward to this conversation. So thank you so much for joining me. I want to jump in with this. I think a lot of people are unaware of the history of hate that has been directed at AAPI people in the United States for generations. They think it started with COVID. And that is not the

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case. So would you talk about the history of hatred towards Asian American Pacific Islanders that exists so that we have a context for this conversation?

Varun Nikore 02:28
Yeah, great question. I think that's fantastic context, because there is this large sort of unknown about the AAPI community in general, I would say that this hate has been around not only for our community, it's been around for any sort of non white person in this country since they've arrived, essentially. But for us, specifically, I would say was shortly after a large migration of Chinese from, you know, the in the late 1800s, essentially, which led to sort of later Chinese Exclusion Act. And then after that, we saw waves of Japanese coming to Hawaii, and also to the mainland and California. We know their sordid history just in terms of the internment during World War II. And then probably the biggest pocket of AAPIs coming into this country was in the late 60s and early 70s, when John F. Kennedy basically said that he needed scientists, engineers, and doctors to help America be competitive against the Russians. And that's when my family came in the late 60s, and shortly after I was born.

Omkari Williams 03:38
So that gives us some idea that, you know, this is not a new thing. This is not all at the doorstep of the hateful rhetoric that Donald Trump and other people in the GOP were spreading in the last year and a half or so. So I'd like for you to talk about some of the impacts of this rhetoric, especially recently on your community, and how the AAPI community has responded to this abuse.

Varun Nikore 04:07
I think we're still trying to figure out the exact impacts we're sort of, you know, there's this duality, if you will, in that we come from cultures where this sort of thing is not talked about very publicly, we're forced to repress in many respects, we're not really supposed to talk about mental health even. And while that is definitely changing with the younger generations, we still have a long way to go before this mental health and emotional health is really kind of reconciled within our community. Where it's it's not a abnormal thing to discuss, it's a more normal thing. But because of that, obviously, it's had effects on our health.

Varun Nikore 04:46
The flip side of that is many governments don't really track things related to disaggregated AAPI's. And by that, I mean, even in states or in the federal government, oftentimes where we try to track information and data and research, we might just ask for Asian American or AAPI. But that doesn't really do us any good, because, for example, it might look like the AAPI community is extremely wealthy if you take averages, or median averages into account. But we know that certain sub ethnicities, from Southeast Asia particularly and some from the Pacific Islands, actually have a higher degree of poverty than, you know, the average American. And so it's only through disaggregated data, will we truly find out which communities to serve and how government can serve those communities.

Omkari Williams 05:46
That actually leads me to a question that I've been thinking a lot about, which is, I'm going to shift gears into sort of talking about the politics of all of this. And the AAPI community has very specific issues in

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terms of the ballot box and access to the ballot box, partly because of the way those communities tend to, to live. Would you talk a little bit about some of the specific obstacles to the ballot box that AAPI people have encountered in the last, since they got here really,

Varun Nikore 06:22
I would say the number one barrier is because our community tends to be between 65% of first generation American, we come from countries, some of us where English is not spoken equally with maybe our native tongue, that it's the language barriers, I would say that are often the biggest barriers on the front end, and more as of late in this last election, because what we witnessed, and this is this gets to your earlier question about what we decided to do as AAPI's during the extreme rhetoric during the Trump years was we got activated, we got organized. We participated civically, like we have not in the history of our origins in this country, the late 1800s.

Varun Nikore 07:13
And by that, I mean, what we experienced from 2016 to 2020, was the greatest increase of voting participation by any one community in the history of our country. We went from under voting in national elections by 15 to 17 percentage points to close to parity in one four year campaign cycle. And like I said, this has never happened before in our country. And it was already a historic election. It was a once in 100 year election, the increase in overall turnout in this country was 12%, which represented that 100%, sorry, that 100 year record. And yet our community increased our vote by 47%. So almost four times what we had experienced overall in this country. So there's something happening, and it's too soon to tell how long it will last or where it will go. But we are in the very early and nascent days of an AAPI movement. And there's many other indicators. I'm happy to dive in deep, but I wanted to make sure we got to a lot of your questions, I'm sure.

Omkari Williams 08:23
No, this is good, because a lot of my listeners know that I used to live in Georgia. And the impact of the AAPI community on the Georgia Senate elections was enormous, we would not have been able to win those two seats and hold the Senate had it not been for the AAPI community in Georgia. And if you would talk about what made that happen and how now that Trump has gone, I hope forever, you can sustain that level of engagement. How do you hope to sustain that level of engagement, not only in Georgia, but across the country?

Varun Nikore 09:00
Yeah, first and foremost, what we saw in Georgia was a very active, progressive establishment that got started, even before Stacey Abrams, frankly, started organizing, and she deserves so much credit. But there's a lot of on the ground organizers who were started to work over the last 10 plus years. And it's really Stacey Abrams that kind of gave that more of a shot in the arm, if you will. But what we saw specifically, not only in the presidential election in Georgia, and also the two Senate runoffs were once again, an increase in the AAPI vote.

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Varun Nikore 09:35
That was unprecedented. It was like a 200% increase from 2016 to 2020, both in the general election for Joe Biden and then also the two Senate runoffs. And we know that Georgia was won by Joe Biden by approximately 16,000 votes. And our increase in voting from 2016 to 2020 was 64-65,000 votes approximately. So we've gotten credit by some analysts for being not only responsible for the victory in Georgia, but similarly for the responsible for the victory in Arizona. And I mean, it wasn't all us. It was massive organizing in the Black community, Latino community, and progressives and Democrats all over right. And we would not have been able to achieve that victory hadn't it been for everyone.

Varun Nikore 10:26
But that being said, we typically don't see in elections, a massive increase along the lines of 47%, nationally, 200% in one state. And so that's why I think some folks are giving us a little bit more credit, but we're certainly not resting on those laurels. Because we know in Georgia, and nationally, there will be many, many big fights ahead. And frankly, we saw what happened in Georgia after those elections with the very, very onerous voting restrictions that were put in place by Georgia Republicans that were essentially copied and cookie cuttered across the nation.

Omkari Williams 11:05
Yeah, I wanted to ask you about those because those are going to disproportionately impact already marginalized communities. And would you talk about some of the parts of those legislations that you're most concerned about? And how you are looking to address that with given the fact that you probably aren't going to be able to get these laws thrown out anytime soon?

Varun Nikore 11:29
Yeah, well, and when you say marginalized, let's maybe carve that up a little bit, right. The marginalized are newer voters, they are poor voters, they are people of color who may not be regular voters, and thus don't know the system. And many of the onerous laws or specific regulations that were put in place, were directly confronting some of the most robust ways that a lot of voters, newer voters in Georgia took advantage of. You know, drop off ballot boxes, in certain cases 24 hour polling locations, right. And so they saw what happened in the AAPI community. They also saw the ways that all Democrats and progressives in Georgia and you know, in the South and the Sunbelt, took advantage of, in this sort of atypical election, because of the pandemic. It necessitated that, and so I think we are in the early days, unfortunately, unless we can turn it around in a lot of state legislatures, we're in the early days of a trend of onerous voting rights. That's why we're hoping that and are aggressively asking our community to lobby our legislators to overturn these laws through the passage of some form. I mean, I've lost track of where we are today, HR 1, S 1, John Lewis Voting Rights Act, Manchin's latest take on this. You know, we need to get it addressed in a wholesale way on the national level. Otherwise, I think, in many respects, we're somewhat doomed to be much more creative than we were in this last election to try to get marginal voters to come out.

Omkari Williams 13:14
Yes. And you know, it's so frustrating, because we are a country that, in theory is about the democratic process, and we are watching it be eroded in front of our eyes, and it's so disheartening. And I do kind of

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wonder how you carry on with the work that you're doing in the face of these obstacles. It's sort of like you get a win, and then you know, one win, and then the next thing, you know, 15 rights have been just ripped out from under you. How do you and your team keep going? Because it cannot be easy.

Varun Nikore 13:51
Well, we are motivated, obviously, by great leaders in this country, the Stacey Abrams, the Howard Deans, many others who showed us the path, you know, and there are multiple, multiple paths to victory. But they've showed us their leadership in the face of insurmountable odds, Martin Luther King, a lot of leaders in the Black civil rights movement and give AAPI leaders a lot of inspiration. But here, I think we can take some lessons from the past. And that is, we don't know how long the struggle will be. But we know that this will be a struggle for the long term. And much like after the Civil War ended, and Blacks in this country were voting at record numbers. After that, before the Confederate States and the Democrats have passed a put in Jim Crow laws all over this country. We were able to whittle away over time.

Varun Nikore 14:50
But here is I think, an advantage that we have in the present day, and why we might not have to wait 100 years between the end of the Civil War in the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and that is the instantaneous nature of information. A lot of the Jim Crow laws were passed in the middle of the night, and were passed without public recognition. And today, we have instantaneous access to information. And I'm also really inspired by the fact that younger voters in this last election, participated at record levels as well. And the youth surveys that I've seen lately, Washington Post, and other organizations have sponsored many of these that show that they are as engaged as ever, but most importantly, they are as optimistic as ever, in the face of these insurmountable global challenges that we're facing like climate, and to a degree in our country, the prolific nature where we hand out guns in our country left and right. And so if the youth of today can remain optimistic, then I will remain optimistic because they are, in fact, our future and the largest voting bloc in this country.

Omkari Williams 16:16
Yeah, it's very interesting to me that you mentioned that because I've been thinking so much about how we are putting enormous burden on the youth of today to address problems that we seem to just keep pushing down the road, and that they are as determined and as resilient as they are gives me a lot of hope. It also makes me feel deeply guilty. It's like, we really should have done a better job for you. I'm so sorry, you know, but here we are, and they are doing amazing work. And I mean, I know a lot of the young people I met in Georgia, were so active in making what happened in the last election possible. And I'm deeply grateful for their work.

Omkari Williams 16:58
And I was actually in a conversation with a friend in Savannah. And she mentioned that Savannah is taking in 200. I think it was 200 or 250, Afghan refugee families in the coming months. And I was astonished partly because of Savannah, where are you going to put them it's a small city. But I was so pleased to hear that because Savannah is an enormously welcoming city. And it will be a great place for these people to start new lives. But I wanted to ask you, so we had the events that unfolded in August in Afghanistan as we

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withdrew from the country, and all these people were trying to get out. And it was very painful to witness. And many of those people who are leaving, as I said, are going to be resettling here in the United States in places that are could not be more different from their home country. What does the AAPI community and I know, I'm speaking broadly here, what do you want to see happen with respect to those newcomers to this country?

Varun Nikore 18:01
Well, I think our government owes the greatest respect and gratitude towards these new Americans, first and foremost, right. And they can show their gratitude by ensuring that they have the adequate support mechanisms and access to government services. You know, first and foremost, and not many people, I think, really sort of recognize that Afghanistan is part or Afghan Americans are part of the AAPI umbrella. Right? We didn't come up with this term, it spans from West Asia, modern, you know, day Iran all the way to the Pacific Islands and Hawaii. So it is a broad cross section of the origins of 4 billion people in this globe.

Varun Nikore 18:05
And what's inspiring to me is the way that Vietnamese Americans in this country, given the fact that many of them were displaced refugees from their country have opened their arms to the Afghan community in this country is truly, truly inspiring. And I think we can all sort of learn a lesson from that. And of course, I think that what we can do also as Americans is be as welcoming as possible. There was some unfortunate comments by some legislators in Montana, you might have seen recently that were not as welcoming. I believe it was only 30 or 40 people that somehow would displace and overturn, you know, quote, unquote, Montana values, right? Code words, like we hear all the time. And so we can push back on that and we can welcome them and make sure that we lobby our government to do as much as we can for these incoming Americans.

Omkari Williams 19:47
You mentioned something that I think is really important, which is the AAPI community is not a monolith. It is, I mean, when you're talking about 4 billion people, you're talking about almost half the people on the planet and the diversity of that community must make it really challenging for you to do your work. So would you talk about some of the challenges of just sort of trying to address the needs of such an enormously diverse community?

Varun Nikore 20:14
It is in politics, I believe, the most complex politics in the country. And oftentimes, I think, mistakenly, I would say that we're more complex than the Latino community. But I think I've been schooled and, and educated frankly, and that is very much complex politics, too, as we're dealing with the many nations of Latin America. But one of the things that I think makes the organizing, I would say, and politicking in our community extremely complex is the fact that we're not bound by a common language in there's 20 plus major languages and hundreds of regional languages and dialects. And because we are predominantly first generation American, it makes it hard to communicate with these sets of voters in elections.

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Varun Nikore 21:08
And so one of the things that we have to do is this complex matrix, when we go into a race or a state or congressional district, we need to look at what's the ethnic composition, we need to determine are these predominantly first generation, let's say Korean Americans, or are they third generation Chinese Americans? That will determine how we message. Are we going to message in language? Are we going to message using, you know, in the case of let's just say, a third or fourth generation, AAPI American, that messaging may be more mainstream progressive messaging, right. We tend to lose a foothold on our home countries value system over time. And so we need to know that, but a lot of the times we're stuck. And their hurdles are that our voter files don't have that granular data that we need. So we waste inordinate amount of time and money, trying to clean up voter files largely on a piecemeal basis. because how else are we going to know how we can use our money most efficiently if unless we know who we're talking to. And because we don't often have that data, that critical, granular information that we need to message, we waste months on end in a 18 Month campaign cycle, for example, in trying to determine who our voters are.

Omkari Williams 22:40
That feels really frustrating, because I mean, I know election cycles feel eternal from this vantage point, because it seems like they never ever stop. But when you're actually talking about an election cycle, it is a really finite amount of time, and you're trying to reach as many people as you can and to have the language and information be an obstacle to being able to communicate with people and find out what their needs are and find out what they want to do is really, I can only imagine how frustrating that must be. So let me ask you this. So in the context of that part of the problem for the AAPI community is they are underrepresented in government. And you sort of spoke to part of the reason that's the case, because it is an enormously diverse group. But looking at it broadly, the point of representation is to have people in positions of power to have decision makers understand the issues that their constituencies are facing. What are some of the broader goals that you have at AAPI Victory Alliance in terms of getting your message to legislators and getting them to take action on your priorities? And what are some of your top priorities?

Varun Nikore 23:55
Yeah, that's a great segue into something that we recently launched in order to know more about our own community. And there's a lot of information that we just don't know. And I think a lot of that information we don't know, was sort of made clear, unfortunately, by the pandemic, and the COVID health care disparities that existed in our country, largely because our state governments don't keep track of our community at all, in many cases. So we recently launched about four months ago, the first ever AAPI Think Tank.

Varun Nikore 24:29
And for those that don't understand the true reasons of and for a think tank in general, is mainly that a think tanks help us uncover gaps in our knowledge base in critical areas that we need to know for our communities specifically, and of course, I mentioned health care and COVID in the pandemic. And so our think tank, for example, can create policy papers that could get turned into legislation with our advocacy

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organization. And we've got several 1000, followers of the AAPI Victory Alliance. And when needed, we turn those followers into armchair activists, much like the Indivisible model, where we get them to advocate. And in the case of this think tank, when it really starts moving in the early part of next year, as the generator of this advocacy organization, we will get them to lobby their Congress members in their state legislators to ensure that we have more pro AAPI policies being you know, moved in various legislatures.

Varun Nikore 25:41
So that's the real origin. And the purpose of why we need something like this, we are probably the most understudied demographic in the country, which is somewhat contradictory given the fact that, you know, we've been in this country for so long, and it was way before the the migration of Chinese Americans in the late 1800s. We've literally been in this country since the revolution, granted in small numbers, but we need to close that knowledge gap that we have about AAPI's, because if we can serve the AAPI community better in this country, we will have a healthier country, we will have a country where all of those underserved are participating civically, in our process, and that can only lead to better outcomes for all Americans, when one community is not left behind.

Omkari Williams 26:37
Approximately how many people who identify as AAPI are in this country?

Varun Nikore 26:44
So we are growing at a little less than a million a year. And we're currently at 24 million. According to the latest census, the two fastest growing parts of the census, the demographic groups as part of the census are AAPI's and mixed race, you might have seen and so yeah, and I think to where we are moving in this country, where we are migrating and settling are in the fastest growing states in this country. So the reason that Arizona and Texas and Georgia and Florida and North Carolina are the fastest growing states in this country are because AAPI's are either number one or number two fastest migrating to those states. And so it not only leads to a lot of questions in terms of how do those state governments serve the needs of this fast growing community. But electorally, it leads us to much of what we saw in Georgia, potentially, you know, we flipped Arizona and Georgia in this last election. But could Texas be next? Could North Carolina be next, Florida, even the perpetual Charlie Brown, you know, take the football from Charlie Brown state, right? And I lived through that, as a former Al Gore alum, I still have that scar tissue. But I think that at least North Carolina or Texas, or Florida are probably in the cards for the next election, even while we serve to protect the gain that we had in Arizona and Georgia.

Omkari Williams 28:21
That's really interesting, because those states are so critical in our elections, especially in the presidential election, because of the very deeply outdated electoral college system, I wish it would just go away and die. But if you were able to actually mobilize voters, AAPI voters in those states, the impact would be immense. So it makes sense in a way when you see the legislation that's being put in place to try and buffer from people actually being able to fully participate in this democracy. It is a bunch of people trying

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desperately to hold on to the power that they have accrued over all this time. And I sincerely hope that you are able to ruin their day.

Varun Nikore 29:09
We're very much working on it.

Omkari Williams 29:11
Thank you. I appreciate that. We're almost out of time. And I want to ask you to give our listeners three action steps that they could take in order to make a difference in just expanding our understanding of the AAPI community expanding, you know, supporting you and what you're doing anything like that. Three simple things.

Varun Nikore 29:32
Thank you for that opportunity. So number one is follow us on our website so you can get our weekly newsletters. We don't inundate folks, that website is www.AAPIvictoryalliance.com. Number two, we have a donate button. And so feel free to donate $1 or $100 or more. And number three, each week we have a different Call to Action. This week, it is on the nomination of Dilawar Syed to be Deputy Administrator at the Small Business Administration. He has been blocked by Republicans, they have not showed up to their committee hearing for the last three meetings, which means they not only do not vote on Dilawar, they also don't do any committee work, which in this day of the pandemic, and the ramifications, economically, that we're still dealing with, and the host of small businesses that have just been decimated. This is absolutely atrocious. So those three things follow us, donate, and get activated by listening and following our calls to action every week.

Omkari Williams 30:43
I love that. I think it's really important that we start making activism a regular part of our lives. And even if it's one action a week, that makes a difference. And it shifts our experience of ourselves in our experience of our potential power in the world to shift things. And then collectively, we have so much power and I really appreciate it when people set it up to make it easy for people to do things like that. This has been such an interesting conversation. I am so glad that we got an opportunity to speak because there was a lot I didn't know and you know, I'm doing my research, I learned some but in speaking with you, I learned a great deal more. So thank you so much Varun I really appreciate it.

Varun Nikore 31:26
Omkari,thank you so much. This has been such a delightful chat and hope to do it again sometime.

Omkari Williams 31:31
Absolutely. As is often said, The world is getting smaller. Issues that impact one community have ripples and intersections that impact us all. Understanding the concerns and challenges of one group gives us insight into our own challenges, our privilege, and where we have the potential to make an impact. We can listen to the stories of others and then choose an action that we can take to bring more justice to the

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world. Thank you so much for listening. I'll be back with another episode of Stepping Into Truth very soon. And until then, remember, that change starts with story. So keep sharing yours

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