

Silent Minority

By: Farheen Raza

"There's no such thing as a vote that doesn't matter," an impassioned statement made by Barack Obama, urging everybody everywhere to vote. And yet, election after election I see the number of eligible voters who voted hover at barely 30%. It's disheartening, when I see that figure and wonder why people don't vote? It is just so easy, it should be an automatic action. Around election season if you go online, you will see the posts and updates plastered all over social media. The "I voted" stickers displayed prominently and proudly. Almost everyone highlights how easy it was, how the process took all of 5 minutes. And yet, people just cannot spare those few minutes. If you only knew the years of blood, sweat, and tears that were spent by countless people to earn your right to vote.

It started with a young country that was under the rule of a king thousands of miles away, in which men rose up and fought for independence. This evolved into strong women taking to the streets to also be included in this basic Democratic process. It was finalized when Black people demanded that all minorities be included, have an equal voice and be allowed to vote. It was only in 1965, after the Voting Rights act was passed into law that many were actually able to vote, which includes myself and everyone I know.

There are many communities that are behind in voting, where people who can vote, choose not to exercise this basic civic duty. And none more so than the Southeast Asians. Many Southeast Asians have immigrated from countries which do not have a fair election process. They come here, work diligently, pay taxes, contribute to society and are part of the American fabric.

Yet they don't participate in having their voices heard, especially when they are given this opportunity to have their vote decide the outcome of an election. This really gets me annoyed, we are living in this amazing country, where we have so many freedoms. Rights are taken for granted here, many of which are impossible abroad. This basic simple civic right, the right to have our opinion matter is ignored time after time. But it is curious as to why Southeast Asians have such difficulty in rocking the vote. Especially since it is easy and they see so many peers voting.

In an effort to address this phenomena I reached out to those making a difference in the ground game here in Dallas. I am an immigrant as well but I came to America when I was four years old, this is the only home I have ever known. American born or raised Southeast Asians do vote, they are more engaged and aware in politics. But a large number of immigrated Asians do not vote, even though they are citizens and can vote. I had to find people who had immigrated here at a later age, who had seen how the politics of their

homeland was and how they were making a noted effort to cause change.

I spoke with Imtiaz Rahi, the President of the Texas APPAC (American Pakistani Public Affairs Committee), an organization whose core mission is to encourage participation of Pakistani

Americans in politics and socio-economic efforts. I also contacted Shaheen Salam, who is the co-chair of the Plano Multi Cultural Outreach Roundtable. Her organization was instrumental in arranging voter registration and education events throughout Collin County.

In their respective areas they are leading multiple efforts to educate, encourage and engage the Southeast Asian voter to go out there and let their voices be heard. I wanted to present them with some questions in an effort to understand why they thought Southeast Asians were lagging.

According to Rahi, Asians live very isolated lives and choose to stay within their comfort zones and in general avoid mainstream American communities. The idea that voting does not affect their day to day lives is a constant argument against participating.

In a sense I agree with this viewpoint, because many of the Southeast Asian communities are afraid to assimilate because they fear they will be distanced from their traditions and values. Americans are seen as the 'other,' and Asians would prefer to be away from that.

But why the perpetual disenchantment that elections do not matter? Countries in south Asia for the most part, have governments that are perceived as



corrupt and ineffective. Elections are perceived to be rigged in favour of the rich and powerful which has solidified the thought that it does not matter however you vote, that money and power talk. But here, surely Asians must feel different, so I asked Salam this question.

"Unfair elections have lead to disenchantment with the whole process...their vote will not count because of political rigging. [And now here] in the US two elections have gone against the will of the people. George Bush Jr was elected by the Supreme Courts decision...losing the popular vote. Hilary Clinton lost because of foreign intervention despite winning the popular vote. Asians have lost confidence in the election process...see it to be no different from the elections in the countries they have left"

As stated by Rahi and Salam, the most common reasons given by Southeast Asians for not voting echo and imitate the very same reasons given for not voting in their



respective countries of origin. "Why vote when my vote doesn't count...my life doesn't change because of elections...Life goes on despite whoever is in office...this isn't really our country" All reasons that solidify this feeling of disconnect from mainstream Americana. This overprotective need of Southeast Asians to cocoon themselves within their community, especially in their religious organizations, is largely due to cultural barriers. Not partaking in civic duties falls under this disconnect.

I believe in most of the communities women are discouraged from voting, [because they are not allowed to have a voice], says Rahi. According to Salam, Another barrier is that many Asians feel they can not vote for a candidate who is of a different religion or has a foreign policy outlook that is not in line with their beliefs.

So what can we do? How do we remove these misconceptions and get Asians excited to vote? It has come to light that Southeast Asians are a major minority that can help decide the election. Increasingly more politicians are giving attention to Asian communities, and making an effort to be more inclusive. How do we educate and encourage the Asian voters to exercise their right? It is a

civic obligation, says Salam, it is up to religious organizations to make sure to constantly stress the right to vote in their speeches and sermons. The more they highlight voting as community leaders, the more likely it is people will vote. Organizing voter registration drives is another key way to highlight and normalize voting.

Look I hear it all the time, the excuses and deflections. There is much debate over the two party system being unfair and affecting elections and dividing the nation also that the electoral college is not the best way to decide elections, because it may not fall in line with the popular vote. But those are the current systems in place, unless we have a major change to the constitution which can happen, but until it does this is the way. I see why the disillusionment is prevalent, after the last election I am also wary.

I am a Southeast Asian American woman, don't I deserve to have my voice count? Does that mean I make a huff and sit it out? Never vote again because I don't get my way? Of course not! I first registered to

vote 18 years ago, and have not missed an election since, more often than not the outcome is not what I desire. But I return to those polls each time and make sure my vote, my choice is tabulated.

Each of us who is eligible to vote, needs to make sure we spread the word. That we are proud voters and that you should be one too. We have to post about upcoming elections, share articles about the candidates, notify dates and locations for voting. Educate and encourage your community members. Even if you simply offer to drive someone to go vote, you are partaking in history. The spirits of the many men and women who sacrificed their lives so that we can vote would be proud.

A firm belief I have is that if you want to complain and grouse about any current elected official or the government, make sure you have earned the right to complain. By not voting, not giving up 5 minutes to cast a ballot, you have given up any right to complain, you are part of the problem. The outcome is always up to chance, our job is to participate. I leave you with the wise words of Thomas Jefferson, "We do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority that participate."