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Indians, The New Jews

*Jews have never made it to the very top
in the US and the UK. Why do Indians?*

Carl Yonker

The late Joe Lieberman was the first American Jew to have run on the national ticket of a major political party.

In 2000, he was Al Gore's vice presidential candidate. They won the popular vote by more than half a million ballots. They would have also won the electoral vote had the Supreme Court allowed Florida's ballots to be properly counted.

Lieberman died last March. One of the last interviews he gave in his life was with our Center. He spoke passionately against a second Trump term and expressed grave concerns about the rise of antisemitism in America. He related that, at the time, he interpreted the 2000 election results as proof that being Jewish no longer prevented politicians from rising all the way to the top, but that he was no longer confident that was the case in today's America.

Out of context, Lieberman added: “There have been prolific attacks on Asian people for no reason other than that they were identified as Asian by their faces. And yeah, look, the Asians are the new Jews. If you go to college graduations in America today – I went to my granddaughters’ last year at Emory, there are more Kims than Cohens graduating. And I suppose that could arouse jealousy, too, but we should stand with them as they stand with us.”

According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2021, there were approximately 4.2 million Indian Americans, making up about 1.3% of the total US population. This is double the number of Indian Americans than in 2000. In contrast, the Jewish population of the United States as of 2021 was estimated to be 7.5 million, making up 2.4% of the total population.

Lieberman did not live to see the dramatic development of the 2024 presidential race. If she beats Trump, Vice President Kamala Harris, the daughter of a university professor who migrated to America from India and a black father, will become not only the first woman and first woman of color but also the first person of Indian descent to hold that office. As the presumptive nominee, her running mate may be the Jewish governor from Pennsylvania, Josh Shapiro.

Among those who challenged Trump for the Republican nomination were two Indian Americans – former UN Ambassador and South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley and business entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy.

The wife of Trump’s vice-presidential nominee J.D. Vance, Ushu, is an Indian American and practicing Hindu.

A decade ago, there was only one Indian American member of the House of Representatives and less than ten serving in state legislatures, while none had served in the Senate or run for president, although former Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal sought the Republican nomination in 2016. Now, there are five Indian Americans in Congress, and more than 40 serve in state legislatures.

Jews, who comprise less than 3% of the electorate in America, constitute 6.2% of the members of Congress. The Jewish imprint in American politics, as well as in science, technology, art, media, and economics, has been enormous and is likely to remain so in the next decades.

The rise of Harris and other politicians of Indian descent suggests that, for the first time, Jews have a serious contender for the title of the most integrated and influential minority group in America.

The United Kingdom is an even more glaring example.

According to the UK’s 2021 census, there were approximately 1.4 million people of Indian descent in the UK, making up about 2.5% of the population, compared to 287,360 Jews, or 0.5% of the total population.

Rishi Sunak, whose parents migrated to the Kingdom from India, was one of the youngest British prime ministers. His spell in power was short, but few analysts will argue that the crushing defeat of the conservatives was his doing. His Indian descent did not impede his rise, and played no role in his fall.

The 2024 elections saw a record 26 Indian-origin MPs elected to the House of Commons, reflecting the community's growing political engagement and influence, up from 15 in the previous government (8 from Labour and 7 Conservatives). The three main political parties fielded more Indian-origin candidates than before as well.

Thirteen Jewish MPs (12 Labour, 1 Conservative) were elected in 2024. Five Jewish Conservatives lost or did not run to retain their seats. Given that the Indian electorate is five times larger than the Jewish one, Jewish representation in parliament is still higher. Yet despite their long roots in Britain and many achievements, no Jew has ever been elected prime minister in Britain. Disraeli, born to a Jewish family, was converted to Anglicanism by his father at the age of 12.

Why are people of Indian extraction doing all of a sudden so well in American and British politics alike?

One reason is that their relative strengths resemble those of the Jewish minorities in the two countries. First and foremost, putting education first.

According to the Pew Research Center, in 2021, 43% of Indian Americans held a post-graduate degree compared to 21% nationally. Consequently, Indian Americans have the highest median household income among ethnic groups in the US. In the UK, too, people of Indian extraction score high on income and education.

Indians, like the emancipated, enlightened segment of the Jewish population, have demonstrated a remarkable ability and desire to integrate into the majority societies without challenging their norms and practices, while at the same time shone as innovators and entrepreneurs.

Yet there are also core differences between Indians and Jews in the US and the UK. These provide possible explanations why Indians, who are more recent newcomers, have climbed all the way to the top, while Jews, whose roots are deeper, have not.

[that, other than sheer luck, as both Sunak and Harris are to an extent children of circumstance – Sunak, of the Truss fiasco, and Harris, of Biden's poor health].

Indians in the US and the UK, unlike Jews, are seen as a minority of color. Yet, because of their impressive achievements relative to other minorities of color, they reassure the majorities that their societies are not structurally biased and that all minorities have a fair chance to succeed. Thus, they allow voters to champion – or convince themselves that they are championing – the causes of equality and diversity without putting in doubt the foundations of their societies at large.

Indians in America and the United Kingdom, unlike Jews, are an ethnic minority but not a religious minority. A majority are Hindu, but a minority are Christians of different denominations.

The election of Jews to the highest posts releases the demons of antisemitism and, as such, forces even the societies that have been friendliest to deal with uneasy chapters from their pasts and reflect on the endurance and intensification of Jew-hatred in the present.

Finally, while Jews lean heavily to one side of the political map in both the United States (Democrats) and the UK (Labour), people of Indian extraction are almost evenly split politically in the two countries, meaning that they have a shot in different political climates and cycles.

Does any of this actually matter?

To a point. An American Jewish President or Vice President, or a British Jewish Prime Minister, would be a symbolic milestone. Yet in the United States, as in the United Kingdom, the most vital thing for Jews is for democracy and civil liberties to prevail.

Which is why a Harris victory is what most American Jews will yearn for and vote for.

Her husband, who celebrated his Bar Mitzvah at Temple Shalom in Aberdeen Township, New Jersey, already promised to place a Mezuzah on the doors of the White House if the first First Gentleman ever will happen to be a Jewish First Gentleman.

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