

“Always Faithful? Examining the Role of Military Status in Racial Evaluations of South Asian Candidates”

Shyam K. Sriram (shyam@umail.ucsb.edu)
Department of Political Science
University of California, Santa Barbara

Neil Visalvanich (neil.visalvanich@durham.ac.uk)
School of Government and International Affairs
Durham University

Research on minority candidates have focused on black and Latino candidates. More recent research has found that East Asian candidates may benefit from positive stereotyping (Visalvanich, 2017), but there has been scant work done on South Asian candidates in America. In this paper, we examine this under explored topic with a survey experiment that asks its respondents to evaluate a political candidate and randomizes whether a respondent gets a biography featuring a Hindu-American, a Muslim-American, or a white candidate (control). In addition, we vary whether the candidate is a former member of the US Armed Forces to see if military status has any effect on potential stereotypes of South Asians as dangerous or disloyal to America, especially Muslim candidates. Our study not only represents the first look at South Asian candidates in America, but also the first to examine whether candidate qualities that cue patriotism can allay any potential fears of South Asian candidates.

Introduction

When Piyush “Bobby” Jindal ran for governor of Louisiana in 2003, it represented the first time any Indian American had sought the top executive office of a state. Despite being a devout Catholic, Jindal lost that election, due in part to ads that made issue of his cultural and ethnic heritage. Jindal was subsequently elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, becoming the first South Asian elected to Congress since Dalip Singh Saund in 1955. Jindal finally made it to the governor’s mansion in 2007 and was considered an early hopeful in 2016 for President of the United States.

Jindal’s success is part of a larger trend of Asian Americans seeking political representation at both the state and federal levels. While the success of East Asian American candidates has been documented (Visalvanich 2017), less attention has been paid to the plight of South Asian American candidates. Nevertheless, Indian American candidates have been seeking office at an increased rate along with their Asian Pacific American counterparts. Jindal’s election was followed by further success of Indian Americans winning the governor’s seat in South Carolina (Nikki Haley) and several seats in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The impetus for this project came from the 2008 congressional campaign of Ashwin Madia. The race for the open seat in Minnesota’s third congressional district pitted Republican Erik Paulsen against Democrat Madia. At the center of the campaign was Madia, an Indian American lawyer and captain in the United States Marine Corps¹. Madia’s ethnicity and military service – he served in Iraq - were deemed by many to be a winning combination and most polls before the election had Paulsen only two percentage points ahead of Madia. However, a month before the election, a television attack ad started to air nationally with footage of Madia that had

¹ The USMC motto is “Semper Fidelis” (“Always Faithful”)

been edited so that his skin tone appeared darker. Although many decried the campaign tactic, its effect was felt almost immediately, and Madia lost by almost eight percentage points, which was a sizable drop from expectations (Weaver 2012).

We argue that Indian American candidates face a unique set of challenges to elective office in the United States. While racial stereotyping affects most Asian Pacific American candidates, we believe that it does so differently for each group; in particular, South Asian Americans, Muslim or not, are often confused with Arabs, Persians, and other similarly disliked communities, particularly in the post-9/11 racial landscape. Sikhs often receive the worst stereotyping with many in the public confusing their turbans with those of the Taliban (Hart Research). **In this paper, we present the research design for an original survey experiment specifically on Indian American candidates for Congress.** We want to examine the potential difference in public support based on the candidate's religion, as well as military background. Salaita (2005) has argued that in the post-9/11 age of terrorism, Muslim Americans have been made to make overt displays of "imperative patriotism" to prove their loyalty to America. We test whether a military background has any effect in allaying concerns about loyalty to the United States.

We are interested in three questions. First, how do voters evaluate South Asian American candidates in comparison to whites with similar (if not identical) qualifications? Second, what about voter perceptions of candidates with military experience versus none? Third, are voters less likely to support [vote for] darker-complected South Asian American candidates?² It stands to reason that, given preexisting stereotypes has an influence on candidate evaluations, South Asians will be subject to their own distinct racial-political stereotyping.

² The skin-complexion treatment will be included in a later study.

Literature Review

Research on minority candidates has found that, in the absence of contrary information, white voters impute group-based stereotypes onto minority candidates (Terkildsen 1993; McDermott, 1998; Sigelman et al. 1995). Much of this literature has focused on examining black and Latino candidates and have found that conservative white voters penalize black and Latino candidates by attributing racial-political attributes onto black and Latino Democrats (Visalvanich 2016; Sigelman et al. 1995; McDermott 1998). Black and Latino candidates are seen as more left-leaning and less competent than their white counterparts, especially if they are Democrats, although these group-based stereotypes can be mitigated by party identification and politicians crafting their own personal brands (Huffmon, Knotts, and McKee 2016).

More recent work has found that racial stereotyping has more nuanced effects on minority candidate evaluation and is not always a negative. Work on East Asian candidates by Visalvanich (2017) has found that certain minority traits can lead to positive evaluations, especially among East Asian candidates. Contrary to their black and Latino counterparts, East Asian candidates are viewed as more ideologically moderate and more competent, which is in keeping with their group-based stereotype as “model-minorities” (Chou and Feagin, 2008; Bobo 2001). This leads to East Asian candidates being evaluated on par with white candidates, and in some instances, more favorably than white candidates with similar qualities (Visalvanich 2017).

Despite the rising visibility and success of South Asian Americans in the political and public spheres, there is still a paucity of literature on *how* voters gauge the electability of viable candidates or evaluate federal appointees from this ethnic minority. According to Sriram and grindlife (2016),

“South Asian Americans are currently experiencing what can only be described as a tipping point in American politics. There are several high-ranking Indian Americans who

have been elected or appointed at the state and federal levels including Governor Namrata "Nikki" Haley (R-South Carolina); Attorney General Kamala Harris (D-California); Congressman Amirish "Ami" Bera (D-California 7th District); U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy; Preet Bharara (U.S. District Attorney); Kumar Barve (Maryland House of Delegates); Neel Kashari, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis; Judge Sabita Singh (Massachusetts District Circuit Court); Aneesh Chopra, the first Chief Technology Officer of the U.S.; and Neal Katyal, former U.S. Deputy Solicitor General."³

Although the significance of skin tone, as well as its manipulation, have been proved to have a significant effect on voter perceptions of candidates (Ahuja 2016, Weaver 2012, Iyengar et al. 2010, Leigh and Susilo 2009, Caruso et al. 2009, Terkildsen 1993), there is little we know about voter attitudes towards South Asian American candidates (and, as a result, an infinitesimal amount on Indian Americans). In perhaps the most thorough examination of the socioeconomic, educational, and business successes of the Indian American community, Chakravorty et al. (2016)'s latest effort only briefly mentions successful political campaigns at the congressional and state level, but no discussion of campaign strategies and voter behavior.

Recent works that offered a more focused analysis of South Asian American politics include Mishra (2016) who offers an intersectional understanding of political mobilization; Sriram and grindlife's (2017) examination of non-ethnic nicknames as a deracialization strategy, and Sriram's (2016) study of South Asian American support for fictional candidates. The focus of the Sriram (2016) project was on the unique electoral success of Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard (D-Hawaii), who is half-White and half-Samoan, but Hindu; using an experimental design and an online survey, the author examined how South Asian American voters evaluated one of three fictional, female candidates: Hindu/White; Hindu/ Indian American; and Muslim/

³ Haley is now the United States Ambassador to the United Nations and Harris the junior U.S. Senator for California. Further, Rohit "Ro" Khanna, Raja Krishnamoorthi, and Pramila Jayapal were all elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from California, Illinois, and Washington respectively.

Indian American. Survey participants were more likely to vote for the Hindu/Indian American candidate and believed she was more representative of the South Asian community.

Research Design

Table 1: Experimental Conditions

<u>CONDITIONS</u>	<u>RESPONDENTS</u>
White Non-Military	200
White Military	200
Hindu Non-Military	200
Hindu Military	200
Muslim Non-Military	200
Muslim Military	200
	Total = 1,200

In order to examine how voters respond to South Asian candidates of different religious and military backgrounds, our plan is to implement a survey experiment administered through Amazon Mechanical-Turk (mTurk). Mechanical Turk is a website where requesters publish tasks (HITs or Human Intelligence Tasks) and provide payment to those who choose to participate. Those who request a task can limit the availability of the task to respondents who have certain characteristics such as age or location. Recruitment through Mechanical Turk is similar to other web-based approaches such as YouGov that maintain panels of participants and invite them to participate in studies in exchange for a payment or other incentive. Previous research has shown that samples collected from Mechanical Turk are more representative of the U.S. population than undergraduate samples or samples populated from those who respond to web advertisements (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz, 2012), and that studies using samples collected from Mechanical Turk replicate important findings in psychology (Buhrmester, Kwang and Gosling, 2011).

Through mTurk we will implement a survey experiment that presents respondents with a biography of a fictional candidate for political office. Afterwards, the respondent is asked to evaluate the candidate. We randomly vary the biographies in following ways: we vary whether the candidate is white, Islamic South Asian, and Hindu South Asian, and we vary whether the candidate has served in the US military. This represents a 3x2 factorial design. The experimental conditions are shown in Table 1 along with projected number of respondents per condition. Each respondent will be randomly assigned into each treatment condition. Each condition will feature a candidate biography accompanied by a picture of the candidate. The 6 biographies presented will be essentially identical but will vary on whether they emphasize a military background or not. In addition, in order to cue race, the picture of the candidate will also be randomly assigned. Finally, to cue religion, the name of the candidate will vary. The white candidate will be given the name “Liam Davis,” the Hindu candidate will be given the name “Prasad Pandya,” and the Muslim candidate will be given the name “Ahmed Ali.” The Hindu and Muslim names were selected based on relative popularity of those names within the United States.

Biography Text - Non-military

<Liam Davis>/<Ahmed Ali>/<Prasad Pandya>, 43, has dedicated his life to serving our community and fighting for our most vulnerable residents. Liam and his family place a high priority on the value of education. He earned a scholarship to the University of [x] and after graduating from college, he attended law school at American University, and now runs his own successful law firm. He lives with his wife and children in [town]
 <Liam>/<Ahmed>/<Prasad> believes in strengthening the middle class and when in office, he will be committed to making government more efficient, rebuilding our roads and infrastructure, and improving our schools.

Note: Text in <> represents randomly assigned elements.

The text of the biography was written to resemble common biographical texts on candidate websites. The text provides a basic personal background of the candidate as well as a policy

statement about the candidate's priorities should he be elected. Since we are interested in examining the independent effect of race on candidate assessment, the policy statement was written to be ideologically neutral as to not contaminate the treatment with overt ideological cues.

Biography Text - Military

<Liam Davis>/<Ahmed Ali>/<Prasad Pandya>, 43, has dedicated his life to serving our community and fighting for its residents. Liam and his family place a high priority on the value of education. He earned a scholarship to the University of [x] and after graduating from college, he attended law school at American University and then became an officer in the U.S. Marine Corps. He served with distinction in Iraq, and retired after six years of active duty at the rank of captain. He now runs his own successful local law firm.

<Liam>/<Ahmed>/<Prasad> believes in strengthening the middle class and when in office, he will be committed to making government more efficient, rebuilding our roads and infrastructure, and improving our schools.

Note: Text in <> represents randomly assigned elements.

As with the text of the non-military biography, it was written to resemble common biographical texts that candidates provide to voters, and mirror the biography of Captain Ashwin Madia. The text of this biography features a candidate with a military background, but is otherwise identical to the non-military biography. After being presented with the candidate biography, respondents will be asked a series of questions assessing the candidate. Respondents will be asked if they believe the candidate is qualified to run for office, asked to assess the candidate's patriotism, and asked if they would vote for that candidate.

In addition, the respondent will be asked where they think the candidate might stand, in favor or in opposition, on a series of political issues, including funding for veterans, greater involvement in the fight against ISIS, and affirmative action. These questions are meant to serve as a manipulation check on whether the respondents are receiving the military and the racial/religious treatments. In addition to these questions, respondents will also be asked a series of personal questions about their political leanings and demographic background. Respondents

will be asked their age, their level of educational attainment, their racial and ethnic background, their income level, their partisan orientation (Republican or Democrat), their ideological orientation (liberal to conservative), as well as a series of racial resentment questions (Kinder and Sanders 1996).

Conclusion

The purpose of this brief paper was to present our research query and tentative research design to explore an unexplored area at the intersection of voting behavior, minority politics, and ethnic cues: public evaluation of a fictional, Hindu/ Muslim Indian American candidate for Congress. What makes our study even more unique is that we are also examining voter support for candidates with military service, as well as how voters might evaluate a South Asian American candidate who is also a military veteran. While this study was inspired by the failed candidacy of Ashwin Madia in 2008, we believe that our research query is a strong one, and a valuable contribution to not only Asian Pacific American politics, but to the broader studies of campaigning, elections, voting, and public opinion.

REFERENCES

- Ahuja, Amit, Susan L. Ostermann, and Aashish Mehta. 2016. "Is Only Fair Lovely in Indian Politics? Consequences of Skin Color in a Survey Experiment in Delhi." *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 227-252
- Berinsky, Adam J., Gregory A. Huber and Gabriel S. Lenz. 2012. "Evaluating Online Labor Markets for Experimental Research: Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk." *Political Analysis*, 20 (3): 351 – 368.
- Bobo, Lawrence. 2001. "Racial Attitudes and Relations at the Close of the Twentieth Century." In *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences*, ed. Neil Smelser, William Julius Wilson and Faith Mitchell. Vol. 1 National Academies Press.
- Buhrmester, Michael, Tracy Kwang and Samuel D. Gosling. 2011. "Amazon's Mechanical Turk: A New Source of Inexpensive, yet High-Quality Data?" *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6(1) :3–5.
- Caruso, Eugene M., Nicole L. Mead, and Emily Balcetis. 2009. "Political Partisanship Influences Perception of Biracial Candidates' Skin Tone." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106 (48): 20168-20173.
- Chakravorty, Sanjoy, Devesh Kapur, and Nirvikar Singh. 2016. *The Other One Percent: Indians in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chou, Rosalind S. and Joe R. Feagin. 2008. *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism*. Paradigm Publishers.
- DeNavas-Walt, Carmen, Margaret E. Richardson and Melissa A. Stringfellow. 2010. "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2009." *U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports* (60-238).
- Huffmon, Scott H., H. Gibbs Knotts and Seth C. McKee. 2016. "Similarities and Differences in Support of Minority and White Republican Candidates." *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* FirstView:1–26.
- Iyengar, Shanto, Kyu S. Hahn, Solomon Messing, and Jeremy N. Bailenson. 2010. "Do Explicit Racial Cues Influence Candidate Preference? The Case of Skin Complexion in the 2008 Campaign." Presented at the *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*, Washington, D.C
- Kinder, Donald R. and Lynn M. Sanders. 1996. *Divided by Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Leigh, Andrew, and Tirta Susilo. 2009. "Is Voting Skin-Deep? Estimating the Effect of Candidate Ballot Photographs on Election Outcomes." *Journal of Economic Psychology* 30 (1): 61-70.

McDermott, Monika. 1998. "Race and Gender Cues in Low-Information Elections." *Political Research Quarterly* 51(4): 895–918.

Mishra, Sangay K. 2016. *Desis Divided: The Political Lives of South Asian Americans*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.

Salaita, Steven. 2005. "Ethnic Identity and Imperative Patriotism: Arab Americans Before and After 9/11." *College Literature* 32(2):146–168.

Sigelman, Carol K., Lee Sigelman, Barbara J. Walkosz and Michael Nitz. 1995. "Black Candidates, White Voters: Understanding Racial Bias in Political Perceptions." *American Journal of Political Science* 39(1):243–265.

Sikhism in the United States: What Americans Know and Need to Know. 2015. Technical report Hart Research Associates.

Sriram, Shyam Krishnan and stonegarden grindlife. 2017. "The Politics of Deracialization: South Asian American Candidates, Nicknames, and Campaign Strategies." *South Asian Diaspora*, 9(1): 17 – 31.

- 2016. "Tipping the Scales of Justice Srikanth Srinivasan." *India West*, 2 March: http://www.indiawest.com/blogs/tipping-the-scales-of-justice-srikantsrinivasan/article_1a54b350-df4e-11e5-8e13-cb3c6a340af4.html

Sriram, Shyam K. 2016. "A Tulsi by Any Other Name: Evaluating South Asian American Support for a Hindu Member of Congress." In *Minority Women in U.S. Politics*, eds. Nadia E. Brown and Sarah A. Gershon. New York: Routledge.

Terkildsen, N., 1993. When White Voters Evaluate Black Candidates: The Processing Implications of Candidate Skin Color, Prejudice, and Self-Monitoring. *American Journal of Political Science*, 37 (4): 1032-1053.

Visalvanich, Neil. 2017. "Asian Candidates in America: The Surprising Effects of Positive Racial Stereotyping." *Political Research Quarterly* 70(1):68–81.

- 2016. "When Does Race Matter? Exploring White Responses to Minority Congressional Candidates." *Politics, Groups, and Identities*. Forthcoming.

Weaver, Vesla M. 2012. "The Electoral Consequences of Skin Color: The "Hidden" Side of Race in Politics." *Political Behavior* 34(1): 159-192.