# A QUALITATIVE FOUNDATION: EXPLORING POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG ASIAN INDIANS IN CALIFORNIA

Mufaddal Taher Ezzy
B.A., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2003

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF PUBLIC POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION

at

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

FALL
2007

A QUALITATIVE FOUNDATION: EXPLORING POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG ASIAN INDIANS IN CALIFORNIA

A Thesis

by

Mufaddal Taher Ezzy

Approved by:

_____, Committee Chair
Dr. Mary Kirlin

_____, Second Reader
Dr. Edward Lascher

Date: _____

Student: Mufaddal Taher Ezzy

I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this thesis is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the thesis.

_____ _____

Dr. Robert Wassmer, Chair — Date

Department of Public Policy and Administration

Abstract

of

A QUALITATIVE FOUNDATION: EXPLORING POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG ASIAN INDIANS IN CALIFORNIA

by

Mufaddal Taher Ezzy

A significant gap exists in existing literature regarding the political engagement of Asian-Indians in California. While a great deal of research focuses on questions regarding political engagement among various other ethnic groups, little is known about the political behaviors of Asian-Indians. This thesis employs eight, in-depth qualitative interviews to provide a foundation for thinking more deeply about political engagement among Asian-Indians in California. The respondents reflect a diverse group of Asian-Indians currently living in the state. The study highlights two core conclusions based on the qualitative interviews. First, that perhaps religious and community institutions of the Asian-Indian respondents play the role of government in their lives, and thus, contributing to a lack of political engagement. Second, that perhaps a perception of having "achieved" the American Dream among the group of Asian-Indian respondents drives disinterest and disengagement in government and politics.

_____, Committee Chair
Dr. Mary Kirlin

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I should begin by thanking the Asian-Indian community for not only being a great subject of inquiry for purposes of this study, but more importantly for being the primary driver of my interest in California government, politics, and public policy.

Of course I thank my family—my wife Jumana, my parents, and siblings. Their understanding and support of my passion for learning made it possible for me to complete this project while holding a full-time, often all-consuming job.

The project would also have never been possible without the dedication and commitment of my primary advisor Dr. Mary Kirlin. Crucial was her great expertise, her willingness to read lengthy drafts, and her frank, timely feedback.

My second reader, Dr. Ted Lascher also played a major role in making this project possible. He was essential in bringing my ideas down to earth and helping me develop a study that was not only "manageable" but also "thought provoking."

I also want to acknowledge the great work of all the faculty and staff within the Public Policy and Administration program at CSU Sacramento as this thesis is the culmination of my Master's in Public Policy and Administration. The classes and other academic endeavors I engaged in throughout my time in the program will be of great service to the people of the State of California.

Perhaps most importantly, I want to thank my baby boy Hamza, whose arrival into this world served as unparalleled motivation to get this project finished.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF TABLES

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

***"Voice and equality are central to democratic participation. In a meaningful democracy, the people's voice must be clear and loud—clear so that policymakers understand citizen concerns and loud so that they have an incentive to pay attention to what is said. Since democracy implies not only governmental responsiveness to citizen interests but also equal consideration of the interests of each citizen, democratic participation must also be equal."*** (Verba, Lehman Schlozman, and Brady, 1995, p. 1)

Over the course of the last 100-years, California's population has grown at a rate higher than any other developed part of the world. Since 1960, California's population has nearly doubled. Perhaps more remarkable is the highly diverse nature of California's population growth. Just 30-years ago, 80-percent of Californians were non-Hispanic white. Yet, in the year 2000, no particular race or ethnic group represented a majority of the state's population (Johnson, 2003).

For the next few years, California's high rate of population growth will likely continue. By the year 2010, California's population will reach nearly 40-million, increasing by an additional five-million from the year 2000. Similar to the growth trends of the past 30-years, the highest level of growth will be among Latino and Asian communities. Moreover, the population of non-Hispanic whites is projected to grow slowly or even decline (Johnson, 2003).

In this context, as California policy-makers work to ensure the highest quality of life for all Californians, determining "who" California is and what exactly it needs will be an increasingly challenging task. Policy-makers and government officials will have to pay close attention to the increasingly diverse and rapidly changing needs and desires of their respective constituencies. A failure to do so could not only create severely

misguided policy decisions, but could also hold negative political consequences for officials seeking to maintain incumbency.

Understanding the nature of the public's voice—who speaks up, why, when, and how loudly—is vital for policy-makers seeking to do the "right" thing. This voice of the people gives policy-makers and government officials vital information about the needs and desires of the communities they serve. Thus, policy-makers and government officials should be interested in making sure that as many Californians as possible have their voice heard in the clearest, loudest way possible.

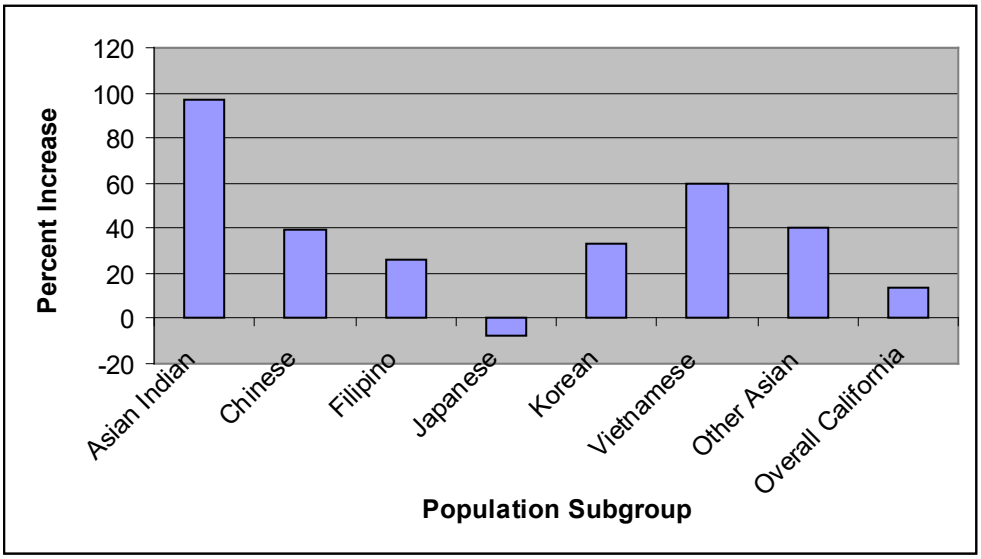
Yet, do all Californians show equal levels of political engagement? Do they equally articulate their needs and desires to policy-makers and government officials? According to one of the most important works on voluntary civic and political participation published in the last 15-years, *Voice and Equality* by Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady (1995), "the public's voice is often loud, sometimes clear, but rarely equal." That is, the voices of some individuals and communities are more likely to be heard and understood by policy-makers. It is reasonable to assume that those who are heard and understood are more likely to have their needs and desires addressed by government.

As California's population continues to grow, and continues to increase in its level of diversity, whose voices are heard and whose are not, and why? Such political and civic engagement questions have been the topic of much research and study in the context of non-Hispanic whites, the Latino community, and the African American community. However, research about the political engagement of Asians is quite sparse.

To the extent it exists, the work tends to focus broadly on "Asians" and fails to account for the highly diverse nature of the Asian community. One of the few existing studies on the Asian community's political engagement warned that generalizing the community's political behaviors is risky. The study explicitly acknowledged that the Asian community is so diverse, in flux, and dispersed that making generalizations based on the existing research is not only problematic, but potentially of no use. However, the study also noted that such a gap in the existing literature presents important opportunities for researchers looking to employ an approach that is more sensitive to the multi-faceted, diverse nature of Asians in California (Lien, Collet, Wong, Ramakrishnan, 2001). Thus, this thesis focuses on the economically and socially significant Asian-Indian community of California.

Tracing their pre-immigration heritage to the country of India, Asian-Indians represent a significant component of the growth in the Asian population seen throughout California. According to US Census data, the number of Asian-Indians in California nearly doubled over the course of the 10-years between 1990 and 2000. This rate of growth among the Asian-Indian population was nearly seven times higher than the overall rate of population growth seen in California during the same ten-year period. This increase in the Asian-Indian population far exceeded the rate of growth seen among any other Asian sub-group (US Census, 2000).

**Figure 1.1 Asian Subgroup and California Population Growth (1990-2000)**




Asian-Indians have a great deal of cultural, social, and economic impact on California. Various religions, languages, and ethnicities among the community contribute to the overall diversity and brilliance of California society. Asian-Indians also play a major role in helping California's economy remain robust and competitive. A brief look at the community's role in merely one sector of California's economy—the high tech industry—provides some clues as to what Asian-Indians mean to California.

According to a 1999 study by the Public Policy Institute of California, of 11,443 Silicon Valley high-tech companies started between 1980 and 1998, Asian-Indian entrepreneurs started about 774 companies, approximately seven percent of the total number of companies. They collectively employed nearly 17,000 individuals and had total sales equaling $3.6 billion. The 1999 study also found that the "long-distance social

and economic linkages" fostered by Asian Indians contribute just as significantly to California's economic success as job and wealth creation do. That is, Asian-Indians have helped California gain a competitive edge in the global marketplace with their language skills, cultural proficiencies, and international financial mobility (Saxenian, 1999).

More simply, the growing Asian-Indian population means a great deal to California and its future. Yet, is this segment of California's rapidly growing, highly diverse population politically and civically engaged? Does the Asian-Indian community have a political voice with which it informs policy-makers and government officials about its needs? If so, how do Asian-Indians express their political voice? Perhaps most significantly, what are likely drivers of political engagement among the Asian Indian community? What makes it more or less likely that an Asian-Indian individual will engage in the political process? Per the existing research, we simply do not know.

This thesis relies on existing research in creating a qualitative foundation for beginning to develop comprehensive answers to such questions. In this work, I use valuable tools identified by existing research to better understand and analyze distinct, yet very telling political behaviors of a small, diverse group of Asian-Indians residing in California. The study does not seek to develop broad generalizations about the political behaviors of the Asian-Indian community in California. Rather, the goal of the work is to highlight what specific drivers of political participation identified in the existing literature mean for a certain group of Asian-Indians. I must be explicit from the onset that the findings are not absolute and proven truths about the political engagement of the Asian-Indian community. However, the findings and conclusions do serve as an important

qualitative foundation upon which to base future study aimed at more conclusively identifying factors that influence political engagement among Asian-Indians in California.

# Chapter 2

## THE LITERATURE ON POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND THE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT OF ASIAN INDIANS

Existing literature already explores many fundamental questions about political participation. Scholars have developed a relatively well-accepted definition of political participation and have done considerable work to identify the types of factors that influence the extent to which individuals participate politically. Though lacking comprehensive focus on Asian-Indians, the existing body of literature provides valuable tools that can help researchers to explore and understand the political behaviors of the Asian-Indian community.

In this literature review, I focus first on what political participation means—how existing literature defines it and what scholars have accepted as "types" of political participation. I highlight the relative consensus in the literature on the broader notion of political participation and discuss both electoral types of participation as well as non-electoral types of participation. I then discuss the many factors that scholars have found to influence participation. That is, what makes it more or less likely that someone will participate politically? Finally, I provide a critique of the existing literature in the context of how it has dealt with questions regarding political participation among Asians, and Asian-Indians most specifically.

## Broad Ways of Defining Political Engagement

Political participation is voluntary activity intended to influence government action—either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies (Verba, Lehman Schlozman, Brady, 1995). More recently, scholars have defined political participation as voluntary activities or actions undertaken by individuals in an effort to influence the political process. These actions are typically carried out in one of two realms: in the realm of electoral politics and in non-electoral realms where government policies are formulated, administrated, or enforced (Ramakrishnan and Baldassare, 2004).

Earlier and more recent definitions are relatively similar in how they broadly define political participation or engagement. Both definitions characterize political participation as a voluntary act—one that individuals do at their own free will. They are activities for which individuals typically do not receive any significant monetary compensation. Both characterizations posit that the intent of such activities is to influence government or public policy, whether directly or indirectly through a host of methods highlighted later in this section.

## Voting and Direct Electoral Political Participation

Voting is among the most fundamental and most widely accepted modes of political participation (Hugo Lopez, Levine, Both, Kiesa, Kirby, Marcelo, 2006; Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001; Lien, Collet, Wong, Ramakrishnan, 2001; Ramakrishnan and Baldassare, 2004; Tolbert and McNeal, 2003; Verba, Scholzman, Brady, 1995).

However, while voting itself is an important type of political participation, registering to vote is also a significant type of political participation—an act that however indirect, implicitly indicates the intent of an individual to influence politics and government (Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001). Financial contributions to political campaigns, causes, and organizations are also widely accepted as a type of political participation (Hugo Lopez, Levine, Both, Kiesa, Kirby, Marcelo, 2006; Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001; Lien, Collet, Wong, Ramakrishnan, 2001; Ramakrishnan and Baldassare, 2004; Tolbert and McNeal, 2003; Verba, Scholzman, Brady, 1995).

Working with political parties is also a recognized type of political participation (Ramakrishnan and Baldassare, 2004; Verba, Lehman Schlozman, Brady, 1995). However, some scholars have focused more specifically on the notion of volunteering time with political parties rather than broadly looking at the notion of "work" with political parties (Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001). The key distinction between these two definitions is whether an individual financially supports the party and its activities with donations. For example, is the individual writing a check to the party or taking time out of his or her day to walk precincts, print flyers, or make phone calls? One school of thought has taken the idea of work with political parties a step further and has asserted that mere identification with a political party—or partisanship—is also a significant type of political participation (Lien, Collet, Wong, Ramakrishnan, 2001). Implicit in the difference between "working for a political party" versus "identifying with a political party" is a distinction that suggests mere identification with a particular party, even if the individual gives no money or time to the party, is a form of political participation.

**Non-electoral Political Participation**

Contacting elected officials or government offices has been identified as a type of political participation (Hugo Lopez, Levine, Both, Kiesa, Kirby, Marcelo, 2006; Tolbert and McNeal, 2003; Verba, Scholzman, Brady, 1995). However, scholars have focused on different methods by which individuals make such contact with officials. Some have focused on the phoning of officials (Lien, Collet, Wong, Ramakrishnan, 2001) while others have focused on writing to officials (Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001; Ramakrishnan and Baldassare, 2004). While there is a slight distinction between phoning and writing government officials appearing in the existing literature, a justification for why an individual scholar may have used one or the other is unclear. That is, why do some look at phoning while others look at writing? The existing literature does not provide an explicit answer.

Attendance at political rallies has also been deemed a significant type of political participation (Hugo Lopez, Levine, Both, Kiesa, Kirby, Marcelo, 2006; Ramakrishnan and Baldassare, 2004; Tolbert and McNeal, 2003). However, some scholars have chosen to make a distinction between attending rallies and participating in protests. The notion of protest could be viewed as a way of expressing discontent over a given issue or policy, while attending a rally may be viewed to have more positive connotations—showing up to support an issue or cause rather than protesting it for example. As such, some have instead chosen to include attendance or participation in protests or demonstrations, as opposed to attending rallies into their definition of political participation (Lien, Collet, Wong, Ramakrishnan, 2001; Verba, Lehman Schlozman, Brady, 1995).

More recent studies suggest that boycotting or even "buycotting" perhaps, are important types of political participation. Boycotting is a refusal to purchase products because of individual sentiments about the conditions under which products are produced or because the producing company's conduct is disliked. Buycotting on the other hand is choosing to purchase products or services from a company because of a preference for the social and political values of the company (Hugo Lopez, Levine, Both, Kiesa, Kirby, Marcelo, 2006).

Some have viewed the expression of individual preferences or opinions in a political context as an important type of political participation. Here, the signing of petitions has been deemed a significant type of political participation (Hugo Lopez, Levine, Both, Kiesa, Kirby, Marcelo, 2006; Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001; Lien, Collet, Wong, Ramakrishnan, 2001; Ramakrishnan and Baldassare, 2004; Tolbert and McNeal, 2003; Verba, Scholzman, Brady, 1995). Some have suggested that posting a sign or wearing a button to express such personal views on a particular issue also qualifies as a type of political participation (Hugo Lopez, Levine, Both, Kiesa, Kirby, Marcelo, 2006; Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001).

Scholars have also asserted that contacting the media, through letters to the editor or opinion statements for example, is a significant form of political participation. (Hugo Lopez, Levine, Both, Kiesa, Kirby, Marcelo, 2006; Lien, Collet, Wong, Ramakrishnan, 2001). However, others have explicitly challenged the significance of contacting the media, and have excluded such activity from their definition (Verba, Lehman Schlozman, Brady, 1995). The exclusion of contacting the media has been on the premise that the

"target audience" for the contact with media is not the elected official or government. Rather, the target audience tends to be the public and thus, according to Verba, Lehman Schlozman, and Brady (1995), contacting media is not a type of political participation.

Previous studies have also accepted individual work with the broader community to solve a common problem as an important form of political participation (Hugo Lopez, Levine, Both, Kiesa, Kirby, Marcelo, 2006; Lien, Collet, Wong, Ramakrishnan, 2001; Verba, Lehman Schlozman, Brady, 1995). Scholars have also suggested that serving without pay on local elected and appointed boards—like a part-time City Council, or a local Library Commission—are important types of political participation (Verba, Lehman Schlozman, Brady, 1995). Attending local community meetings, perhaps a school board or planning commission meeting for example, is also considered by some to be a type of political participation (Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001; Ramakrishnan and Baldassare, 2004;).

## Table 2.1 Types of Participation Accepted in Existing Literature

| **Electoral** | **Non-Electoral** |
|---|---|
| Voting | Contacting government officials |
| Registering to vote | Attending political rallies |
| Financial contributions to campaigns or organizations | Attending political protests |
| Working with political parties | Signing petitions |
| | Posting a sign |
| | Wearing a button |
| | Working with community to solve a problem |
| | Attending community meetings |
| | Serving on boards or commissions |

**What Scholars Say Influences Political Participation**

Among the most consistent findings in the existing literature is that socioeconomic status (SES) has a strong, positive correlation with propensities for political participation (Verba, Scholzman, Brady, 1995). That is, individuals with high levels of income and education are typically more likely to demonstrate greater levels of political engagement. However, many researchers have argued that while SES is an important predictor of political participation, it only tells one part of a more complex story regarding political participation. Recent studies have demonstrated a need for more focus on causal factors—why people do or do not participate—in new discussions about political participation (Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001).

Existing literature has demonstrated a relative consensus on what political participation means. We see a great deal of agreement on the vast majority of "acts" that may be considered types of political participation. However, beyond understanding that SES is correlated with higher propensities for being politically engaged, what actually drives individuals to engage in the political process? Why does a person give time or money to a political candidate or cause? Why does an individual go to the polls and cast a vote on Election Day? Given national trends indicating low levels of political engagement among Americans, perhaps more appropriately, why is it that people do not engage in the political process?

Until about 15-years ago, research models exploring political participation relied primarily on the SES model. Studies tended to rely heavily upon how income, education, and closely related factors affected the likelihood that an individual would politically

participate. Yet, while important for understanding the nature of who is likely to vote, make political contributions, or otherwise engage politically, the SES model is simply inadequate in explaining "why" particular trends of political participation exist. In that context, a relatively clear, somewhat recent paradigm shift from solely an SES based research model to a broader, more comprehensive model seeking to draw more causal relationships appears in the existing literature.

Perhaps one of the most significant works that looks beyond SES as bearing some influence over political participation is the landmark work of Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman,and Henry Brady in their book, *Voice and Equality* (1995). Specifically, these authors contend that while SES bears some impact on political participation, it is an individual's acquisition of civic skills through associational relationships—churches and other organizations for example—that in large part explains why an individual politically participates (Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001). Verba, Lehman Schlozman, and Brady (1995) posit that participation is about resources and the "civic skills" to make effective use of those resources. Not just financial and educational resources, but important civic and political resources acquired from community institutions such as family, work, organizational affiliations, churches, and the like.

The findings of *Voice and Equality* (Verba et al 1995) suggest that civic skills, political interest, beliefs about individual efficacy in the political process, and connections to social networks have a substantial impact on political participation. The authors contend that financial and civic resources acquired through education, a commitment to the workforce, the types of jobs one holds, the kinds of churches one

attends, and the types and level of engagement one displays in charitable and social activities, can influence the likelihood that an individual participates in the political process (Verba, Lehman Schlozman, Brady, 1995).

Lien, Collet, Wong, Ramakrishnan (2001), suggest a broad, and comprehensive set of twenty variables including: income, education, gender, nativity, age, residential mobility (homeownership/renting), martial status, work status, connection with a church, connection with a political party, connection with a union, connection with "other groups that enhance participation or awareness," media coverage of particular political issues, events, or elections, certainty of outcome, issue salience, significance of office, English language skills, citizenship status, immigration generation, and length of stay in the United States. These factors are all deemed by a recent study (Lien, Collet, Wong, Ramakrishnan, 2001) to bear some level of impact on political participation.

Geron, de la Cruz, Saito, Singh (2001) suggest that community level service organizations that deal with domestic violence, hate crimes, and immigrant rights issues have been significant drivers of political participation. They also suggest that "mainstream" opposition to efforts to build or develop cultural or religious centers can drive political participation. They also note that political mobilization is more likely when ethnic enclaves are at risk or when issues pertinent to ethnic homelands are at stake.

Jones-Correa and Leal (2001) look for the relationship between religion and political participation. In particular, they explore whether denominational differences among Latinos influence political participation and mobilization. They argue that while in fact denominational differences had little to do with political participation, the

associational relationships with the church more broadly can be significant drivers of political participation. The church becomes a conduit for political information and recruitment—thus influencing political participation.

Baldassare and Ramakrishnan (2004) explore the impact of eight demographic—mainly socio-economic—factors on political participation among varied ethnic groups. Specifically, they explore the impact of age, income, work status, education, homeownership, years at residence, gender, and if children are present at home on political participation. In this study, Baldassare and Ramakrishnan (2004) revert mainly to the standard SES model to explore political participation. The justification for this study's reversion to just the SES model is unclear. However, it does focus specifically upon the differences in political participation rates seen amongst various ethnic groups in California—a comparative feature not found in previous studies. Overall, the study finds that the set of socio-economic factors explored tend to have a positive impact on propensities for political participation.

Tam Cho (2003) suggests that "the contexts" in which individuals find themselves influence their political activity. Specifically, Tam Cho argues that the notion of spatial dependence—where one lives, whom they associate with, and what one's community looks like all contribute to the development of context for a particular individual or community. Tam Cho (2003) focuses specifically on financial contributions as a mode of political participation and suggests that among Asian-Americans, a diffusion of information and political interest through social networks, or context, has an impact on financial contributions made for political purposes.

**Political Participation among Asian Indians**

A noticeable gap regarding the Asian-Indian community exists in the various seminal works that comprise the existing literature. While some studies have attempted to focus on Asians, they have generally failed to be sensitive to the diversity of the Asian community. Beyond one case study (Geron, de la Cruz, Saito, Singh 2001), comprehensive focus on the increasingly significant Asian-Indian community and its political participation—or its political voice—remains largely unexplored.

The work of Verba, Lehman Schlozman, and Brady (1995) is quite useful as it lays out a precious framework for analyzing political participation that goes well beyond the traditional SES model. The work provides a great deal of insight into how various associational relationships—which often times may have specific ethnic implications (most, though not all Latinos tend to affiliate with the Catholic church, for example)—impact political participation. Through its established theoretical framework, the work of Verba, Lehman Schlozman, and Brady (1995) analyzes specific drivers of political participation among the African-American and Latino communities. However, the work does not include Asians in the analysis.

Lien, Collet, Wong, Ramakrishnan (2001) employ much of the work of Verba, Lehman Schlozman, Brady (1995) and study various SES and non-SES factors in the context of Asian-Americans. Their work finds that a lack of voting may be linked to three separate, sequential institutional barriers—challenges in getting naturalized, challenges in getting registered to vote, and specific challenges in getting out to the polls. They contend that language issues, lack of familiarity with the US system, social

discrimination, and other challenges for working class immigrants contribute to the three separate institutional barriers, thus fostering some level of political disengagement.

Lien, Collet, Wong, and Ramakrishnan (2001) posit that traditional factors such as income, age, length of residence, and gender may also be insignificant in explaining political participation amongst Asian Americans. The authors in fact suggest that political context—the ethnicity of candidates and the efforts of community-based organizations—may foster political awareness, interest, and linkages that could influence political participation more significantly. Yet, the authors also caution that generalizing about the Asian Americans and their political participation is precarious. Specifically, the warning is in an explicit acknowledgement by the authors that the Asian American community is highly diverse and in flux and that, the existing research falls critically short in its sensitivity to diversity of the Asian American community.

Geron, de la Cruz, Saito, Singh (2001), take a case study approach and explore specific political mobilization seen among the South Asian community in the context of a 1998 cab-driver strike in New York. As a case study, the work focuses on one particular event and provides some clues as to the drivers of political participation among South Asians—and Asian Indians. Nevertheless, it leaves much opportunity for additional research on the topic. In fact, the study observes that the South Asian community is notably diverse even within itself and suggests that the study is only one part of a much more complex puzzle regarding political participation among South Asians.

Geron, de la Cruz, Saito, Singh (2001) further suggest that first-generation South Asians have not entered the US political process in substantial numbers and that the

community's focus has tended to be on individual professional and financial establishment rather than on political issues. However, the authors do posit that increasing numbers of South Asians are running for office and working within government and political institutions. They also find that political mobilization within the community tends to occur when ethnic, cultural, or religious heritages are threatened. Beyond these suggestions, the study does not offer a great deal more on the topic.

Tam Cho (2003) focuses specifically on financial contributions as a mode of political participation and suggests that among Asian-Americans, a diffusion of information and political interest through social networks, or context, has an impact on financial contributions made for political purposes. However, the study explicitly operationalizes "Asian" as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese. The author does make an explicit acknowledgement of controversies surrounding use of the term "Asian" as an umbrella category and specifically mentions the limitations of the study in that regard.

Baldassare and Ramakrishnan (2004) explore the impact of eight specific demographic factors on political participation among varied ethnic groups. In this study, based specifically on California's population, Baldassare and Ramakrishnan (2004) employ a basic SES model and do separate Asian Americans into a separate category for comparative analysis with Latinos, African Americans, and non-Hispanic whites. Yet, their category of Asian Americans is also broad, and the extent to which Asian-Indians are included in the definition is unclear.

## Table 2.2 Factors Deemed to Influence Participation among Individuals

| Socioeconomic | Demographic | Other |
|---|---|---|
| Income | Age | Individual political interest |
| Education | Religion | Perception of individual efficacy |
| Occupation | Ethnicity | Overall civic skills |
| Employment status | Generation | Association with political parties or partisanship |
| Residential mobility | Citizenship | Association with religious institutions |
| | Presence of dependents | Association with ethnic community |
| | | English language proficiency |
| | | Spatial dependence or context |
| | | Issue saliency and relevance |
| | | Characteristics of political candidates |

Overall, a great deal of research has been done on questions regarding the political engagement of Americans in broad terms. However, in the context of Asian-Indians, the research is certainly sparse and in many ways inadequate. While an overall consensus tends to appear in the literature about how researchers shall best define political participation and engagement, the factors that drive that engagement certainly continue to be explored and better understood over time. Particularly in the context of a community like Asian-Indians—a group whose political engagement remains largely unexplored—an exploration of variables that relies on both SES and other more causal factors perhaps may provide important information about why Asian-Indians do or do not engage in the political process.

# Chapter 3

## A QUALITATIVE METHOD FOR EXPLORING POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

During the initial design phases of this study, I began with a proposal that employed a quantitative methodology. That design was about conclusively determining whether or not factors deemed by existing literature to impact political participation were significant in the context of the overall Asian-Indian community. However, it became quite clear that such a methodology was inappropriate for the level and type of inquiry I sought to engage in.

Time and financial constraints aside, the quantitative methodology appeared to "miss the mark" in terms of the specific point of this study. Quantitative methods are powerful tools for testing a specific hypothesis about how a set of variables relate to one another. Such methods can clearly illustrate those relationships, gauge the strength and direction of those relationships, and help demonstrate how well those observed relationships within the sample mirror what is likely to be the case in the broader population.

This project is not about developing broad, statistically sound generalizations about factors that influence political participation. It is about using the individual experiences of people to tell a thought provoking, plausible story about political participation among Asian-Indians. The study is not aimed at proving relationships or characterizing any of the findings as truth. To the contrary, the explicit thrust of the project is about helping highlight what the various factors identified in the existing literature mean for a small group of Asian-Indians. The findings of the study are

intended to serve as a foundation from which to develop hypotheses about political participation among Asian-Indians. Eventually perhaps, such hypotheses could be the basis for broader, more comprehensive, quantitative studies on the topic.

Thus, a qualitative methodology was used for this study. The qualitative approach allowed me to conduct in-depth interviews with a small group of individuals—features that not only met the demands of my resource constraints, but also catered more directly to the academic goals of the project. The qualitative methodology allowed me to engage the existing literature regarding political participation and develop the types of insights I was looking for. Specifically, by setting up a less-structured, more open-ended set of questions, I was able to allow individuals to illustrate how the widely accepted factors that influence political participation resonated with them. I was able to glean more complex and complete feedback from the individuals—feedback that was guided by the topic at hand, yet induced by the flexibility for participants to respond with candid personal views and emotions.

The initial goal was to conduct semi-structured interviews with fifteen Asian-Indian individuals from across the state. Twenty-five individuals were solicited to participate in the study, yet only eight individuals actually responded—a response rate of thirty-two percent. The low-level of response may be linked to respondents being unable to dedicate the amount of time needed to engage in the qualitative interviews. Though a large sample size and perfect randomization were not necessary in the context of the qualitative approach, as explained below, perhaps a few more individuals being available to participate in the study would have lent greater reliability to the study. Yet, the goal

was certainly to speak with a demographically diverse group of individuals within the Asian-Indian community. It was an explicit goal to gather information from individuals of differing genders, religious backgrounds, occupations, and generations.

Potential participants were identified through references from within California's Asian-Indian community. I approached Asian-Indian community organizations, local elected officials, religious institutions (Gurdwaras, Mosques, Temples), among others to gain access to individuals willing to be interviewed. Once given a reference, I contacted the potential respondents via email and telephone and provided additional information about their role in the study. To formalize their participation, I provided each respondent a consent form they were required to sign.

The interviews were conducted over the telephone, at times and on days mutually agreeable to the respondent and me. I chose telephone interviews over in-person interviews for a few different reasons. Time and resource constraints made it very difficult to have face-to-face meetings with each individual. The telephone interviews also maintained an extra-level of anonymity for the respondent. Additionally, the telephone interviews provided a great deal of flexibility and convenience for both the respondent and me.

However, conducting telephone interviews came with its own set of drawbacks. One obvious drawback was an inability to read non-verbal cues (facial expressions, body-language, and the like). The telephone interviews also may have perhaps negatively impacted my ability to establish the highest degree of rapport with each respondent. In all, the eight interviews totaled approximately 12.5 hours of conversation over the course

of a two-week period. Respondents were given anonymity, demographic and other non-identifying information notwithstanding. The interviews were not tape recorded but I took copious notes as respondents spoke and typed them up immediately following each interview.

**Design of the Survey**

My critique of the existing literature has been in part about a lack of focus and sensitivity towards the diverse nature of California's Asian population. More specifically, it has been about a lack of focus on the Asian-Indian population. However, the intent of the critique is not to draw into question the tools or instruments used in existing literature to obtain information regarding political engagement. While I am critical of the gap in the existing literature as it relates to Asians and Asian-Indians, I do not challenge the surveys or other instruments used in previous studies. Indeed, much of the existing literature provides a host of valuable tools by which researchers may better understand the political engagement of communities like Asian-Indians in California. As such, I rely heavily upon methods used in the existing literature to highlight and better understand political participation among Asian-Indians.

Perhaps the most important set of tools for conducting such research are those found in the seminal work of Verba, Lehman Schlozman, and Brady in their book, *Voice and Equality* (1995). As discussed in the literature review section of this paper, while including SES variables in their model, Verba, Lehman Schlozman, and Brady go further and include a variety of other variables that provide much greater explanatory strength to

research models that seek to draw more causal conclusions about drivers of political participation. The Verba, Lehman Schlozman, and Brady model, though over 10-years old, remains one of the most cutting-edge frameworks for analyzing political participation through a lens other than SES.

Thus, the survey used for my study was in large part based on the work of Verba, Lehman Schlozman, and Brady and the survey they developed and implemented for *Voice and Equality* (1995). Yet, while serving as a great foundation for the survey used for my project, the *Voice and Equality* survey instrument does fail to include some variables that perhaps may be significant in the context of political participation among Asian-Indians. Studies conducted after *Voice and Equality* have suggested some additional, important factors for researchers to consider when exploring questions about political participation among the Asians, and perhaps Asian-Indians as well.

A more comprehensive discussion of these post-*Voice and Equality* studies exists in the literature review section of this paper. Below is a summary table identifying factors included in the *Voice and Equality* survey instrument. The table also denotes the specific factors added to my particular survey that may perhaps bear some special significance for Asian-Indians and their individual levels of political engagement.

## Table 3.1 Inventory of Factors Potentially Significant for Asian-Indians

| Socioeconomic | Demographic | Other |
|---|---|---|
| Income | Age | Individual political interest |
| Education | Religion | Perception of individual efficacy |
| Occupation | Ethnicity** | Overall civic skills |
| Employment status | Generation** | Association with political parties or partisanship |
| Residential mobility | Citizenship** | Association with religious institutions |
| | Presence of dependents** | Association with Asian-Indian community** |
| | | English language proficiency** |
| | | Spatial dependence or context** |
| | | Issue saliency and relevance** |
| | | Ethnic characteristics of political candidates** |

**Factors not included in the *Voice and Equality* survey instrument

My own instrument (which follows the body of this thesis as Appendix A) includes many components of the Verba, Lehman Schlozman, and Brady (1995) instrument. However, my survey instrument also incorporates questions that attempt to gauge the impact of the host of other factors not included in the Voice and Equality (1995) instrument. That is, how do factors identified in post-Voice and Equality (1995) studies impact political participation among the group of Asian-Indians interviewed for this particular project?

As indicated previously, many factors may bear some influence over propensities for political engagement among Asian-Indians. Could a difference in where individuals come from in India, perhaps due to specific, ethnic experiences with politics or government influence the likelihood that one engages politically in the US? Could immigrant generation and citizenship—whether or not one is born in the US or in India, or whether one holds US citizenship have some impact on how one views themselves in the US, and thus, influence whether or not one gets involved in the political process?

Could various contextual factors like the salience of an issue and its relevance to the Asian-Indian community bear some impact on whether or not Asian-Indians engage politically? Moreover, might one be more likely to get involved in the political process if the ethnic characteristics of a particular candidate reflect those of their own? I address all such questions in my study.

In terms of data obtained from the surveys, I carefully reviewed and analyzed each set of responses along four different lines. The fist included the demographic characteristics of each individual. The second was the level of political engagement each individual demonstrated. The third was how factors deemed in existing literature to bear impact on political engagement influenced the respondent's level of engagement. Finally, I considered factors not identified in the existing literature that appeared to bear some influence on the individual's political participation.

Who were the individuals interviewed? Did they participate in the political process? To the extent they did, what form did their participation take? What appeared to influence whether or not they engaged politically? Were there factors influencing their level and type of political engagement that existing literature fails to consider? These questions reflect guiding principles used to review, analyze, and understand the information provided by each respondent.

# Chapter 4

# RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

## Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Eight Asian-Indians currently living in California were interviewed for this study. The gender distribution was perfectly even, with an equal number of male and female respondents. The age distribution went from 24-years of age to 63-years of age, reflecting a relatively good mix of younger, middle-aged, and older Asian-Indians. The geographic distribution of the participants was also even, with an equal number of respondents currently living in Southern and Northern California. The immigrants (those born outside the US) certainly tended to be older. The three individuals born in the US were the youngest of the eight respondents and were all under 30-years of age.

## Table 4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents, 2007

| Gender | Occupation | Income | Age | Religion | Born | Education | Location |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | Business | Above $80,000 | 37 | Hindu | India | Bachelor's Degree | Southern California |
| Male | Engineer | Above $80,000 | 27 | Sikh | US | Master's Degree | Southern California |
| Male | Engineer | Between $40,000 and $80,000 | 25 | Catholic | US | Bachelor's Degree | Southern California |
| Male | Engineer | Above $80,000 | 63 | Muslim | India | Master's Degree | Northern California |
| Female | Business | Between $40,000 and $80,000 | 44 | Sikh | India | Bachelor and Professional Cert. | Northern California |
| Female | Student | Supported by family | 24 | Hindu | US | Bachelor's Degree | Southern California |
| Female | Architect | Above $80,000 | 45 | Hindu | India | Master's Degree | Northern California |
| Female | Health Professional | Above $80,000 | 33 | Muslim | England | Bachelor and Professional Cert. | Northern California |

In terms of religion, one of the respondents was Catholic, three were Hindu, two were Sikh, and two were Muslim. A good mix of religious backgrounds was perceived to be important among the participants mainly because of India's tremendous overall religious diversity. Perhaps religion-specific experiences, both in India and in the United States, may help in explaining political engagement among the group of respondents.

The group also represented a variety of ethnicities from within India. When asked to describe their ethnicity, the respondents typically described the state in India to which they traced their heritage or the metropolitan area closest to their place of origin in India. Two of the respondents, both Sikhs, reported tracing their heritage to Punjab, a state in the northwestern part of India, geographically close to Pakistan and Afghanistan. One respondent, a Catholic, traced his heritage to Goa, the smallest Indian state located on the west coast of India. One respondent traced his heritage to Rajasthan, a state also in the northwestern part of India. Rajasthan is the largest Indian state in terms of its geographic area and encompasses a large desert and mountain range. One respondent traced her heritage to Delhi, the second largest metropolitan area in India. Delhi is located in the northern part of India and houses New Delhi, India's capital. One respondent was from Mumbai, India's largest metropolitan area. Mumbai lies on the west coast of India in the state of Maharastra. One respondent traced her original ethnic heritage to Gujrat, though her father and mother were raised in East Africa, prior to their immigration to England where she was born and raised. Gujrat is one of India's most industrialized states, also located on the western coast of India. Additionally, one respondent was from Bangalore, a large city in the Southern part of India often called India's "Silicon Valley." Certainly

lacking in the sample were individuals tracing their heritage to central and eastern parts of India.

The group was quite homogenous in terms of socio-economic status. The eight respondents were middle to upper class in terms of their annual gross household income. All held at least a bachelor's degree, reflecting a relatively high level of education among the group. Additionally, the respondents were all either salaried professionals, business owners, or students pursuing post-graduate degrees. According to the Indian Embassy (2007), these socio-economic characteristics are quite reflective of the broader Asian-Indian population in the US. Nonetheless, a more socio-economically diverse group of individuals would have lent additional reliability to the study.

## Levels and Types of Political Engagement

Beyond registering to vote and casting a vote on Election Day, the group in general terms was not very politically engaged. For those who were not eligible to register or vote—two of the respondents—political engagement was practically non-existent. Three of the respondents—certainly the minority—demonstrated engagement that went beyond registering to vote and voting. One of the three was highly engaged politically, but the other two demonstrated only minimal engagement beyond voting. The one highly engaged individual was a Hindu woman, born in India.

According to the work of Verba, Lehman Schlozman, and Brady (1995) the majority of the respondents whose political participation did not go beyond voting were similar to the broader American public in terms of their participatory habits. That is,

while there are many ways to engage in the political process beyond simply voting, the typical American does not demonstrate political engagement beyond voting (Verba, Lehman Schlozman, Brady, 1995). Moreover, the one respondent who was significantly more politically engaged than the rest of the group displayed a level of engagement that far exceeds the level of engagement demonstrated by the typical American (Verba, Lehman Schlozman, Brady, 1995)

Almost all respondents who were United States citizens and eligible to register were in fact registered to vote. When asked about the most recent elections in which they voted, respondents typically reported having voted in the November 2006 Gubernatorial Election and the November 2004 Presidential Election. California's 2005 Special Election, the 2006 Primary Election, and the 2004 Primary Election typically were not mentioned. When asked to characterize their voting habits, all respondents eligible to vote said they voted either "often" or "sometimes."

All but one of the eight respondents reported identifying with a specific political party. While individuals were not asked to name the party with which they identified, the respondents who identified with a party reported identifying relatively strongly with the party. Yet, they reported being quite comfortable deviating from the party if its position on a given issue did not align with their core beliefs. Moreover, other than the one respondent who demonstrated high levels of political engagement, the respondents typically indicated actually having voted differently from the party's position on issues in the past. The one individual who demonstrated high levels of political engagement certainly identified more strongly with her party and reported "never" deviating from the

party on issues. The one individual who did not identify with a party was born in India, currently not a US citizen and thus, not eligible to register or vote.

Only the respondent demonstrating high levels of political engagement reported having volunteered time or given money to a political campaign, related organizations, and candidates running for office. She reported that over the course of the past year she had often spent 20 to 30 hours per week volunteering with political campaigns. She also reported having donated significant amounts of money to political campaigns. The rest of the respondents indicated no such activity.

Seven of the eight respondents had never served in a voluntary capacity on any sort of official governmental board or council. The one individual who was highly engaged did actually serve on a local governmental board or council at the time of the interview. One other respondent had attended a meeting of a local planning commission and reported it was in the context of an issue having to do with his place of worship. This individual was a Muslim male born in India.

All but one of the respondents reported they had never contacted an elected official in the US via telephone, in writing, or in person. The one individual who reported having been in contact with an elected official in the US reported it was in the context of assistance she needed from her local Congressman in obtaining a visa for her father-in-law to visit the US. One individual reported having made contact with a host of elected officials in India, on an issue that had to do with his family's property there.

Three of the respondents reported having signed or circulated a petition that was political in nature. Of the three individuals who reported having signed a petition, one

mentioned it was outside a local grocery store on an issue he could not recall. Another mentioned he signed petitions when he was an undergraduate student in the US. He reported that the petitions he had signed expressed opposition to the war in Iraq and dealt with environmental concerns about the development of the university campus in the city in which it was located. The third individual, the one most politically engaged among the group of respondents, reported having signed petitions on a variety of issues, including issues dealing with "equality" and "social justice."

Only one of the individuals reported having ever attended any rallies or protests. The one individual who had attended a protest reported having done so when he was an undergraduate student at a major California university. He reported the protest being in opposition to the war in Iraq. This respondent was the same respondent who reported having signed petitions as an undergraduate student and was not the individual who demonstrated high levels of political engagement.

**Factors Influencing Participation**

- Socio-economic factors:

In the context of the group of individuals interviewed for purposes of this study, high socio-economic status did not guarantee high levels of political engagement. On the one hand, the group was relatively diverse in many respects, yet similar in terms of its socio-economic composition—the individuals all had relatively high socioeconomic status. They were typically earning relatively high incomes, were quite educated, working in professional fields, and owned their current place of residence rather than

renting. Yet, other than one person who demonstrated high levels of political engagement—somewhat of an anomaly within the group—the group overall did not engage in the political process beyond registering to vote and actually casting a vote. As echoed previously in this section, perhaps the observed low-levels of engagement among the group are not that different from trends seen among typical Americans.

- Demographic factors:

Age did not seem to bear much influence over political participation among the group of respondents as the lack of political participation cut across all ages. Of the three individuals who demonstrated a higher levels of political participation relative to the rest of the group—one being highly engaged—one respondent was young, the other middle aged, and the third older. The sample reflected a group of respondents that spanned the ages but not politically engaged. Perhaps more significantly, those who did demonstrate higher degrees of engagement did not fall into one particular age group.

Religion did appear to bear some influence on propensities for political participation. Though none of the respondents demonstrated much political engagement, all of the respondents did report religion as "a reason to be involved in the political process" during the interviews. All respondents suggested that if there was a political issue that impacted either their place of worship, their ability to practice their faith, or perceptions about their religion, they would be more likely to get involved politically.

Muslim respondents articulated religion as increasing propensity for political participation most passionately. In particular, the two Muslim respondents suggested that

post-9/11 perceptions of Muslims, shifts in public policy, and current "political rhetoric" involving Muslims all had certainly raised their levels of political awareness and concern. However, these individuals suggested that while post-9/11 issues had raised awareness and concern, they continued to be disengaged politically largely because of a lack of time and understanding of the political process.

Ethnicity as reported and described by the respondents did not appear to bear much influence over political participation. The lack of political engagement cut across the range of ethnicities within the group of respondents. Additionally, the presence of dependents did not appear to bear much influence over political participation among the group. The group of respondents included both types of individuals—those with dependents and those without. The trends of political engagement seen among the group cut across those with dependents and those without.

Citizenship appeared to have some level of impact on political participation. As discussed earlier, the group was a mix of US citizens and permanent residents. Certainly in terms of voter registration and the actual act of voting, citizenship did matter. Without being a citizen, you simply cannot register or cast a vote. However, permanent residents reported that a lack of citizenship not only kept them from voting, but reported that it contributed to their lack of political interest while fostering a sense of political inefficacy.

In particular, the permanent residents reported that because they could not vote, they did not feel they could make much impact on government or politics, and thus, felt like political engagement was inconsequential. One respondent holding permanent resident status suggested that just because she was not a citizen did not mean she was not

a contributing, important part of American society worthy of the privilege to vote. However, for those who did report being US citizens, citizenship did not appear to bear any impact on their political participation beyond their registering and casting a vote. That is, those respondents who reported being citizens were typically registered to vote and generally did cast a vote on Election Day, but did not demonstrate much other political engagement. The one individual who demonstrated high levels of political engagement was a citizen. However, suggesting a strong causal relationship between citizenship and the individual's high level of political engagement is somewhat difficult to justify. The three individuals who demonstrated higher levels of engagement were certainly all US citizens but even among them was a stark variance in the degree of reported political engagement.

Generation also appeared to bear some impact on political participation, but in the context of other variables explored as part of the study. While the group typically demonstrated low levels of political engagement, the immigrant generation indicated being more likely to participate in the political process if an Asian-Indian candidate were running for office. Those born in the US indicated that the ethnicity of candidates made no difference to them and did not bear much impact on whether or not they were engaged in the political process.

- Other Factors:

Individual political interest appeared to bear a great deal of impact on political participation among the respondents. The respondents typically reported being quite disinterested in the political process and reported quite consistently that because they were disinterested, they were not engaged politically. When probed during the interviews about their lack of interest in the process, the respondents typically suggested that a lack of time contributed to their ability to educate themselves on the process and learn about ways to become involved. The respondents suggested that their time was typically spent on family, friends, and work—leaving little time in the day for focus on political issues and activities. Respondents typically suggested the highest priorities in their lives were time with their families, engagement with their religious institutions, and progress towards financial success. More than one respondent indicated a high level of satisfaction and comfort in life and thus, a disinterest in government, public policy, and politics. The one respondent who was highly engaged reported being a "political junkie" from a young age, even when in India. She reported a great deal of interest in the political process and government because it is "intriguing and exciting," she mentioned during the interview.

Perception of political efficacy also appeared to bear significant impact on political participation as reported by the group of respondents. The individuals typically reported perceiving themselves being unable to have much impact on government or public policy. Thus, most individuals reported being disinterested and disengaged from the political process. Three of the four individuals born in India reported their perceived lack of political efficacy—or an inability to influence government, politics, or public

policy—as rooted in their experience growing up in India, where government was perceived to be corrupt and disconnected from the average individual. Moreover, the one individual who was highly engaged in the political process reported her family and friends in India being quite involved in social and political issues and thus, she felt not only a stake in the process but that she could in fact make a difference. In this context, it is reasonable to suggest that perhaps political experiences in India play a role in influencing the level of political participation among the Asian-Indian immigrants within the group of respondents.

The group reflected a mix of individuals in terms of their levels of civic engagement—some who demonstrated high levels of civic engagement and others who did not. Other than the one individual who was highly engaged politically, those with higher levels of civic engagement demonstrated such engagement though involvement in their religious communities. Three of the eight individuals reported having served in official capacities in their respective religious organizations, by bearing specific organizational offices, organizing events, and facilitating interaction between their religious community and the broader community in which they live. All of the respondents also reported donating financial resources to their respective religious institutions on a voluntary basis. Two of the higher income respondents reported donating a great deal of their annual income to their religious institutions. The rest of the respondents typically donated a token amount each time they visited their place of worship for services. The one individual who was highly politically engaged reported being quite detached from her formal religious institution and related organizations.

Additionally, while only three of the eight individuals served in official capacities within their respective religious institutions, five of the eight individuals reported being "very closely connected" to their religious institutions. This sense of connectedness was less about actual attendance at services and more about the meaning and role religion played in their lives. Three of the eight respondents reported attending religious services quite often, ranging from "three to four times a week" to "every morning before work." The other four respondents reported attending services sometimes, ranging from "three to four times a month" to "once a month." Despite the variance seen in attendance at religious services, all respondents described religion as playing a major role in their life. One respondent specifically indicated that the level of connectedness to religion "is not judged by the number of services one attends." In this context, all respondents reported religion being a reason to get involved in the political process—not so much because of the civic skills and resources acquired through the institution, but more because of a desire to preserve and protect the integrity of their faith.

Association with a political party and partisanship did not seem to bear much impact on political participation beyond the act of registering to vote and casting a vote at the polls. As discussed earlier in this section, respondents who were US citizens were typically registered and voted. These same individuals tended to identify relatively strongly with particular political parties, yet reported deviating from the party's position with great comfort when the need arose. Additionally the "affiliation" with a political party typically did not go beyond some level of ideological agreement with the particular party. That is, individuals who identified with a party simply identified with a party and

perhaps cast votes with the party, but did not donate money, time, or other resources to parties. And, the lack of political engagement beyond registering to vote and casting a vote cut across both those who identified with a political party and those who did not.

However, the one individual who demonstrated high levels of political engagement did in fact identify quite strongly with a political party. She reported never deviating from the party's position on a given issue. Unclear about her partisanship was the extent to which it drove her to be more politically engaged. That is, was it because she was highly partisan that she was engaged politically? Or, was her partisanship and her political engagement related in the opposite way? Was it because she was engaged in the political process that she was highly partisan? Information obtained during the interview with this respondent did not provide a clear answer to these questions.

Association with the Asian-Indian community did not appear to increase propensity for political participation. The group of respondents typically reported a high level of association with the broader Asian-Indian community, with most reporting that upwards of fifty-percent of their non-work related time being spent with other Asian-Indians. In that context, the group of individuals closely affiliated with the Asian-Indian community, but did not demonstrate much political engagement.

English language proficiency also did not appear to increase propensities for political participation among the group. All of the individuals in the group were typically educated in English—both those born in the US and England and those born in India. The majority of the group demonstrated relatively high levels of English language proficiency, and therefore lack of English language skills cannot explain low levels of

political engagement. Moreover, a high level of English language proficiency was also found among the individual who was highly politically active.

Issue saliency and relevancy appeared to bear a great deal of impact on political engagement among the group of respondents, while spatial dependence and context—where an individual lives, whom they associate with—appeared to matter a lot less. Respondents typically reported that how important they felt an issue was or how relevant they felt it was to their individual lives mattered in terms their political engagement. They typically reported that if an issue was important and they felt it had an impact on their lives, they would be much more likely to get involved in the political process.

When probed for additional feedback on what made an issue important or perhaps examples of "important" issues, respondents had a few, relatively consistent thoughts. They typically indicated issues perceived to have significance in terms of their ability to realize the "American Dream"—educational opportunity, financial prosperity, a high standard of living, and relative social mobility—as issues that would perhaps increase their levels of political engagement. Specific issues consistently mentioned were education and the US economy. Immigrant respondents typically characterized educational opportunities and the US economy as reasons they came to the US. Those born in the US suggested that educational opportunities and the health of the US economy had significant implications for their own, personal abilities to succeed. As discussed earlier in this chapter, religion was certainly an issue that was consistently raised as a reason to be politically engaged. Respondents were concerned about issues that affect their place of worship, their ability to practice their faith, or perceptions about

their religion. And, as discussed previously, this was particularly of consequence for Muslim respondents.

# Chapter 5

# FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

It would be irresponsible to fail to remind the reader at the onset of this section that the intent of this study was not to develop broad, conclusive generalizations about factors that may have an impact on political engagement among Asian-Indians in California. Rather, the qualitative project was intended to serve as a foundation for beginning to think more deeply about the very complex set of factors that may bear some impact on political engagement among the community.

The idea was not to end by characterizing the findings and conclusions as absolute, proven truths. To the contrary, the findings and conclusions serve as critical questions and insights about potential factors that influence political participation among Asian-Indians. Perhaps the findings and conclusions may inform further, more in-depth studies on the topic. To the extent the reader bears in mind these general qualifications, the findings and conclusions may be of significant use in understanding political participation among Asian-Indians.

Additionally, it would be unfair to characterize the relatively low-levels of political engagement seen among the majority of the respondents as unique to the Asian-Indians who participated in this study. To the contrary, these low-levels of political engagement are in many ways reflective of the broader American population. Moreover, to say that the one individual in the group who demonstrated higher levels of political engagement is somehow more reflective of the broader American population would be quite unreasonable as well. In fact, the high levels of engagement she demonstrated were

not only unique in the context of the overall group of respondents interviewed for this study. In many ways, her higher levels of engagement went far beyond that of the typical American as well.

However, while the levels of political engagement demonstrated by the individual respondents may not be all that different from what may be expected among the broader American population, perhaps the drivers of political engagement—and political disengagement for that matter—may display some characteristics unique to the Asian-Indians interviewed for purposes of this study? That is, while low-levels of engagement among the majority of respondents may mirror that of the broader American—and California—population, may there be something distinctive to the Asian-Indian heritage of each respondent that has something to do with why they do or do not engage in the political process?

FINDING #1

**Though reflecting relatively high socio-economic status, the group of respondents was relatively disengaged in the political process.**

As discussed at length in the literature review chapter, among the most consistent and widely accepted factors believed to increase propensities for political participation is higher socio-economic status. The higher one's income and education levels, the higher the likelihood that the individual will be engaged politically.

However, in the context of the eight individuals interviewed for purposes of this study, high socio-economic status did not appear to be sufficient to ensure political participation. All of the respondents had at least a Bachelor's degree and were either

working as salaried professionals or pursuing post-graduate degrees. All of the individuals also reported relatively high annual household incomes, with the lowest reported income being between $40,000 and $80,000 a year.

In a state like California, such a household income could mean less buying power to the household than might be the case in another, less expensive state. Nonetheless, an income of between $40,000 to $80,000 still is a middle class income, and combined with high levels of education and full-time professional employment, perhaps constitute a household with relatively high socio-economic status.

In that context, it is of great interest, and perhaps of great consequence that among this well educated, middle to upper income group of salaried professionals, political engagement was lacking in most respects. That is, while existing research suggests that among the most important factors for determining propensities for political participation is socio-economic status, why might relatively high socio-economic status be associated with the group of Asian-Indian respondents who demonstrated very low levels of political engagement?

FINDING #2

**Though reflecting a high level of civic engagement within their respective religious and ethnic communities, the group of respondents was relatively disengaged in the political process.**

Existing research suggests that high levels of civic engagement and strong associational relationships with organizations such as religious institutions increase the likelihood that individuals will be engaged politically. The resources one acquires

through such engagement and associational relationships provide a foundation from which individuals will be more likely to engage in the political process.

Among the group of respondents, there was a high level of civic engagement in the context of affiliations with religious institutions. One respondent specifically mentioned serving in official, leadership capacities within his respective religious institution for over 25-years and reported having engaged in many civic activities during the course of that time. Another respondent reported having served not as an office-bearing official within the religious institution, but as an organizer of official community events and service projects that reached out into the broader community in which she lived. That is, the service projects—like annual canned food drives and organized volunteer work at local food banks—went far beyond just benefiting and requiring interaction with her temple.

Another respondent reported that throughout her time in England, and also after having moved to the US, she was highly involved with her religious institutions in various civic capacities. She served not only as office-holder for a number of internal organizations but worked to organize events and special community service projects as well.

In addition to high levels of civic engagement, the associational relationships demonstrated by all of the respondents with their respective religious institutions were quite strong. Most of the respondents, as described in the previous chapter, were typically moderately to highly engaged in their religious institutions.

However, despite these high levels of civic engagement, the respondents demonstrated very low levels of political engagement. Again, it may be of significance that such individuals, who per the existing literature should be highly likely to be engaged in the political process, were in fact quite politically disengaged.

FINDING #3

**Issues that impeded an ability to experience the "American Dream" were reported as factors that could increase political engagement by the group of respondents.**

When probed about specific issues that "mattered" to them, respondents typically spoke of issues that had to do with their ability to "realize the American Dream," as characterized by one respondent. Immigrants typically spoke of the US economy and educational opportunities as reasons for coming to the US in the first place. It was a vision of an American Dream that included better educational opportunity, financial prosperity, a higher standard of living, and relative social mobility that brought them to this country they reported. Those born in the US also expressed similar visions of an American Dream. Those born in the US articulated that educational opportunities and the overall health of the US economy had significant implications for their own, personal abilities to succeed.

An additional aspect of the American Dream for the eight respondents was an ability to practice and maintain the integrity of their faith. As discussed in the previous chapter, they reported that issues having to do with their place of worship, their ability to practice their faith, or perceptions about their religion, they would be more likely to become engaged in the political process.

These sentiments were certainly tempered with a perceived lack of political efficacy and overall lack of interest in politics. The perceived lack of efficacy among the non-US citizens stemmed from an inability to vote, which in turn, fostered a lack of interest in politics. For other respondents the perceived lack of political efficacy was rooted in pre-immigration experiences in India. Specifically, as reported by respondents, perceived corruption in Indian government rendered involvement in government and politics by the average individual quite futile.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Could the religious and community institutions of the Asian-Indian respondents be playing the role of government in their lives, and thus, contributing to a lack of political engagement?

The majority of the respondents was highly connected to and demonstrated strong associational relationships with their respective religious institutions. Regardless of specific religion—whether the individual was Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, or Catholic—religion certainly played a large role in the lives of each respondent. It is important to note in the context of this conclusion that the one individual who demonstrated high levels of political engagement did not report being as connected to religious institutions as compared to the rest of the respondents.

Additionally, all but one—the individual most politically engaged—of the respondents demonstrated a high level of connectedness to the broader Asian-Indian community. In particular, the respondents typically reported spending at least fifty-percent of their non-work, leisure time with other Asian-Indians who were similar to

them in age, religious background, and ethnicity. The group of respondents typically indicated in this context that friends and social circles were comprised of other Asian-Indians—including those from their religious communities and family. The respondents typically characterized these relationships as very strong throughout the course of the interviews. The one respondent who was highly engaged in the political process reported the least amount of non-work, leisure time with other Asian-Indians. In particular, while the typical response among the group was fifty-percent or more, the highly engaged individual reported spending only about thirty-percent of her free time with other Asian-Indians. It is reasonable to say that the individual most politically engaged spent the least amount of her leisure time with other Asian-Indians.

Additionally, the group of respondents, as discussed in various places throughout this study, were of relatively high socio-economic status. That is, they were typically well-educated, employed as salaried professionals, pursuing post-graduate degrees, and typically earning relatively high annual household incomes. Each of the respondents suggested they donated some amount of money to their religious institutions—some indicating a significant portion of their annual income went to the religious institution while others reported only donating token amounts.

Clearly, the group of respondents who were less politically engaged—seven of the eight respondents—demonstrated a greater level of "stake" and connectedness to their community institutions, like religion and the broader Asian-Indian community, than they did in the context of their "stake" in government and politics. Could it be the case that among this group of respondents, the role of the religious and community institutions

filled the role of government in their lives? That is, could perhaps community and religious institutions be internally providing the types of services provided by government? As the Asian-Indian community grows and perhaps becomes increasingly diverse in terms of the strength of its religious and community institutions over time begin to show an increased interaction with government and thus, perhaps higher levels of engagement among the group of respondents?

**Could a perception of having "achieved" the American Dream among the Asian-Indian respondents be a reason to be disinterested and disengaged in government and politics?**

Each of the respondents interviewed for purposes of this study were of relatively high socio-economic status—they had high levels of education, were typically salaried professionals, and were earning moderate to high annual household incomes. However, the group of individuals, though according to existing research should perhaps have had a relatively high propensity for being engaged in the political process demonstrated very little political engagement. For US citizens eligible to register and vote, political participation did not mean more than voting "sometimes" to "often" on Election Day. For those who were permanent US residents and unable to register or vote, political participation was fairly non-existent.

When probed during the interviews for feedback on what perhaps may contribute to their lack of engagement, respondents typically referred to a lack of political interest, a perception of a lack of political efficacy, a lack of time for engagement, and a focus on family, religion, and overall financial success. As more than one respondent

characterized it, “I’m relatively happy and do not have a gripe or problem with government.”

In this context, the respondents typically suggested a high level of comfort in America. That is, a comfort in their ability to achieve the American Dream—a comfort in their ability to access education, financial prosperity, social mobility, and an ability to practice their faith. It was consistently reported by respondents that perceived impediments in their ability to achieve any of those aspects of their American Dream would increase the likelihood of becoming politically engaged.

Thus, could it be the case that the group of Asian-Indians interviewed for purposes of this study failed to be politically engaged because of a perceived lack of need—a relative satisfaction and comfort with their lives in the US that fostered disengagement with the political process? Could perhaps perceived or real disruptions in this sense of comfort about the ability to achieve or having achieved the American Dream perhaps increase propensities for political participation the group of respondents?

# APPENDIX

Page

# APPENDIX A

## QUALITATIVE SURVEY INSTRUMENT

**Background and Introduction:**

Thanks so much for taking time out of your day to talk with me. I really do appreciate it.

As you know, I'm currently a graduate student at California State University, Sacramento. For purposes of my Master's thesis project, I am conducting a study about political participation among South Asians.

Our conversation will be used only for purposes of my thesis project. I will not tape record it and will simply take notes. If you would like to remain anonymous, that's completely fine.

Some of the questions I'll be asking will be quite structured and specific. Others will be very open-ended, through which I'll be looking to learn about your personal perspectives.

Please feel comfortable being candid, and don't worry about coming up with answers you may think I want to hear. There is no "right" or "wrong" answer.

If you need clarification on any of the questions, please feel free to ask. Also, if there's a question you don't feel comfortable answering, don't hesitate to pass.

The interview should take about 30-45 minutes. Have you any questions for me before we begin?

**Basic information about the respondent:**

I'll begin by asking you some basic questions about yourself. These questions allow me to make sure that I get a broad sample of people. The information will be used for purposes of the study, but you will remain completely anonymous. If you are not comfortable answering any of these just let me know.

AGE:

Tell me about your age. I'll give you some ranges. Are you between 18 and 34 years old? Between 35 and 54 years old? Or above 55 years of age?

EDUCATION:

What is the highest grade of regular school (elementary, middle, high) that you have completed? Have you earned a high school diploma? Also, tell me if you've attended any college at all, regardless of whether or not you received a degree. If you have any college degrees, could you tell me what they are? Did you receive this education in the

United States or in another country? Additionally, did you receive your education primarily in English or in another language?

INCOME:

Tell me about your annual gross household income. I'll give you some ranges. Less than $40,000 per year? Between $40,000 and $80,000 per year? Or above $80,000 per year?

WORK STATUS and JOB LEVEL:

I'd like to know about your occupation. Are you currently working full-time for pay, working part-time for pay, going to school, a homemaker, or doing something else? What kind of work do you normally do? What is your work called?

FAMILY:

Tell me a little bit about your family. Are you single, married, widowed, divorced, or separated? How many children do you have living at home with you? What is the age of the youngest child living at home with you?

COMMUNITY ROOTS/RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY:

How long have you lived in your present city or town? Where you live now, do you or your family own your place or rent?

CITIZENSHIP:

Were you born in the United States? If not, are you an American citizen?

ETHNICITY:

Tell me about your Indian background. Do the extent you have a sense of this history, to exactly where in India would you trace your heritage?

RELGIOUS ACTIVITY AND AFFILIATION:

What is your religious preference? How often do you attend religious services? Do you belong to a temple, mosque, church, or other religious institution? When you attend services, do you normally attend at the same place of worship?

Have you been an active member of your religious community—have you served on a committee, been tasked with special projects, or organized meetings? In the past five-years, have you served on a board or held an official position?

In your best estimate, how much money would you say you annually donate to your religious institution? About how many hours of your time do you give to the institution, not including the time you spend in services? What would be helpful is if you could break down your contributions so that I can get a sense of how much you give because of requirements as part of the faith versus what you give without it being required or expected as part of the faith.

BROADER OPPORTUNITIES FOR BACKGROUND INFORMATION:
Tell me about where you grew up and went to school. Was it common for people around you to be concerned about current events and politics? Ask respondent to expand on why they think it was the way it was…

Were you personally concerned about current events and politics when you were growing up and in school? Were you involved in any sort of student government or other activities (to the extent such opportunities were available) when you were in school or college?
Think back to when you were about 16-years old. Do you recall family or friends talking about political issues? Tell me they talked about politics a lot, a little, or none at all.

Additionally, I'd like to know a little bit about the social environment in which you typically find yourself. Approximately what percent of your non-work related, personal and leisure time is spent with other Asian-Indians?

**Information from respondent about political participation:**

VOTING:
Are you registered to vote? If so, when was the last time you voted? If you were to characterize your voting habits over the last few years, would you say you vote often, sometimes, or never?

CAMPAIGN WORK:
Looking back on the past five-years, have you worked as a volunteer—for no or little token pay—for a candidate running for national, state, or local office? Could you quantify in hours, days, or weeks, the amount of time you have spent working on such campaigns? Ask respondent to comment on why or why not.

CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS:
Again, looking back on the past five-years, have you contributed any money—to an individual candidate, a particular party, a political action committee, or any other organization that supported candidates running for office? Thinking back on the largest contribution you made, about how much would you say you contributed? Ask respondent to comment on why or why not.

COMMUNITY ACTIVITY:
Let's talk a little bit about your role in your community. In the past five-years, have you served in a voluntary capacity—that is, for no pay, or little token pay—on any official governmental board or council that deals with community problems and issues, such as a

city council, school board, planning commission, etc? If so, what kind of a board or council was it? What was its main focus?

Rather than serving on one, have you attended a meeting of such an official board or council in the past five-years? Do you attend regularly or once in a while? Are there particular issues that draw your attention to and attendance at such meetings?

Aside from such "official" meetings, have you gotten together informally with or worked with others in your neighborhood to solve some community problem? Would you be willing to share what problem you were working to solve? If yes, ask respondent to comment on why.

CONTACTING:
Now let's discuss contacts you may have made with government officials. In addition to contacts you have made as part of your regular job, have you contacted any government officials or their staffs, either via telephone or letter? Ask respondent to comment on why or why not.

PROTESTING:
In the past five-years, have you taken part in a protest, march, demonstration, or boycott (other than a strike against your employer)? When did you take part in this action? How much impact do you think you made? If you feel comfortable, might you be willing to share what the issue at hand was?

PARTISANSHIP:
Do you identify with a political party? I do not need to know which party—simply whether or not you identify with one. How strongly would you say you identify with this particular party?

PETITIONS:
Have you ever circulated a petition that was political in nature? Separate from whether or not you circulated one, have you ever signed such a petition?

**Broader, more open-ended questions about political participation:**

INDIVIDUAL POLITICAL INTEREST:
Thinking about your local community, how interested are you in local community politics and local community affairs? How interested are you in national politics and national affairs? What about international politics or international affairs? Are there issues that you feel are more important than others? Ask respondent to expand.

PERCEPTION OF INDIVIDUAL POLITICAL EFFICACY:

If you had a complaint about a local government activity and took that complaint to a member of the local council, do you think that person would pay a lot of attention? Some attention? Very little attention? What about at the state and federal levels? How much influence do you feel you can have over government? Ask respondent to expand.

**For respondents that appear to be politically active:**
Thinking about your political activities, take a moment to reflect back on why you decided to get involved (political contribution, campaign work, serving on local body, etc). Tell me about why you decided to get involved.

**For respondents that appear to be politically inactive:**
Thinking about your political activities, take a moment to reflect back on why you decided to get involved or not (political contribution, campaign work, serving on local body, etc). Tell me about why or why you didn't get involved.

# REFERENCES

Bimber, B. (2001). Information and political engagement in America: The search for effects of information technology at the individual level. *Political Research Quarterly, 54*(1), 53-67.

Geron, K., de la Cruz, E., Saito, L., Singh, J. (2001). Asian Pacific Americans' social movements and interest groups. *Political Science and Politics, 34*(3), 618-624.

Hochschild, J. (1981). *What's fair: American beliefs about distributive justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hugo Lopez, M., Levine, P., Both, D., Kiesa, A., Kirby, E., Marcelo., K. (2006). *The 2006 civic and political health of the nation: A detailed look at how youth participate in politics and communities*. Retrieved October 30, 2007, from University of Maryland, Center for Research and Information on Civic Learning and Engagement Web Site:http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/2006_CPHS_ Report_update.pdf

Johnson, H. (2003, December 5). *California's demographic future*. Paper presented at Congressional California Delegation Retreat, Rancho Mirage, CA. Retrieved July 1, 2007, from http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/op/OP_1203HJOP.pdf

Jones-Correa, M., Leal, D. (2001). Political participation: Does religion matter? *Political Research Quarterly, 54*(4), 751-770.

Leighly, J. (1995). Attitudes, opportunities, and incentives: A field essay on political participation. *Political Science Quarterly, 48*(1), 181-209.

Lien, P., Collet, C., Wong, J., Ramakrishan, K. (2001). Asian-Pacific American public

opinion and political participation. *Political Science and Politics, 34*(3), 625-630.

Public Policy Institute of California. (1999). *Silicon Valley's new immigrant entrepreneurs*. Retrieved August 3, 2007, from http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_699ASR.pdf

Public Policy Institute of California (2004). *The ties that bind: Changing demographics and civic engagement in California*. Retrieved May 8, 2007, from http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_404KRR.pdf

Tam Cho, W. (2003). Contagion effects and ethnic contribution networks. *American Journal of Political Science, 47*(2), 368-387.

Tolbert, C., McNeal, R. (2003). Unraveling the effects of the internet on political participation? *Political Research Quarterly, 56*(2), 175-185

Verba, S., Lehman Schlozman, K., Brady, H. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wong, J. (2000). The effects of age and political exposure on the development of party identification among Asian American and Latino immigrants in the United States. *Political Behavior, 22*(4), 341-371.