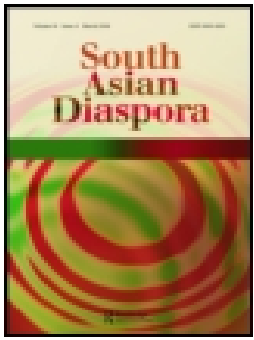


2106

## "The Politics of Deracialization: South Asian American Candidates, Nicknames, and Campaign Strategies"

Shyam Sriram, *Butler University*  
stonegarden grindlife



## The politics of deracialisation: South Asian American candidates, nicknames, and campaign strategies

Shyam Krishnan Sriram & Stonegarden Grindlife

To cite this article: Shyam Krishnan Sriram & Stonegarden Grindlife (2016): The politics of deracialisation: South Asian American candidates, nicknames, and campaign strategies, South Asian Diaspora, DOI: [10.1080/19438192.2016.1199503](https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2016.1199503)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2016.1199503>



Published online: 13 Jul 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## The politics of deracialisation: South Asian American candidates, nicknames, and campaign strategies

Shyam Krishnan Sriram<sup>a</sup>  and Stonegarden Grindlife<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Political Science, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, USA; <sup>b</sup>Department of Political Science, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the deracialisation strategies of South Asian American candidates for elected office. We argue that there is a distinct pattern among these candidates in terms of the type of representation they embody, as well as their personal choices including using non-ethnic nicknames in their campaign materials. These nicknames assist voters, especially in low-information elections, by signalling the ethnicity of candidates – or the lack thereof. Using data collected by the authors from 1956 to the present – the first such attempt to create a national database of South Asian American candidates – we employ a logistic regression to examine the effect of using a non-ethnic nickname on the likelihood of attaining electoral success. Our findings suggest that candidates who used a non-ethnic nickname were at least 25% more likely to win an election. This effect increased as we moved from local to federal contests.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 March 2015  
Accepted 21 March 2016

### KEYWORDS

South Asian American;  
Indian-American; diaspora;  
America; USA; campaigns;  
elections

### Introduction: negotiating South Asian American political identity

Over 15 years ago, Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth (1998) aptly titled their edited volume on South Asians in America, ‘A Part, Yet Apart’. This terse, four-word description of the South Asian American community, immigrant and native-born, aptly describes the unique characteristics of this small, but growing demographic in the United States whose ethnic heritage ranges from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, to Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives. Since the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965, this community has grown exponentially, with rough estimates based on the 2010 U.S. Census at a current population of just over 3.5 million. The population change between 2000 and 2010 has been huge: 70% change for Indians, 132.6% for Pakistanis, 202.9% for Bangladeshis, and a staggering 7000% increase for Bhutanese immigrants, primarily due to their status as refugees (Hoeffel et al. 2012, 15).

The phrase ‘South Asian’, according to Jain (2011, 1), describes ‘a dynamic “imagined community” of multifarious peoples connected – as conditionally and as meaningfully as any other imagined community – to the Indian subcontinent, in symbolic ways as well as in relation to capital, technology, and movement back and forth’. Indeed, the movement of South Asian people due to British and American economic and political forces is nothing

new; in their recent work, Bald et al. (2013) emphasise that South Asian migration has always been, and will continue to be, a product of the 'shifting imperialisms and neoliberal globalization' (7). Koshy (2008, 3) goes a step further and dubs this a 'neo-diaspora [which] locates the South Asian diaspora's origins in the modern period and highlights its embeddedness in the three major world-historical forces that have shaped global modernity: capitalism, colonialism, and nationalism'.

While economics might explain the movement of diasporas, it is the invention – and reinvention – of ways of life that are, in essence, the 'meat and potatoes' of what it takes to become an immigrant. For Jacobsen and Kumar,

These new ways of doing things and making adjustments has to do with the fact that they [immigrants] define everything around the dominant local social group within which they function. Therefore, by default and by necessity they are forced to define themselves vis à vis the dominant group. (2004, 498)

In the same vein, Muhammad (2001, 304) suggests that while being 'South Asian' is a vague identity for many newcomers to the United States, 'in the subcontinent, this concept only includes the definition of a given geographic entity whereas in the diaspora it also embraces the communal aspect, implying the erasing of the borders resulting from Partition'.

So much of immigrant integration and adaptation is, in essence, an attempt at negotiating the complex politics, symbols, values, and cultural traditions that are part of the political culture of every nation (Purkayastha 2005; Joshi 2006). For South Asian Americans, this negotiation has taken place in waves, much of it a product of legal and political boundaries. Bald et al. (2013) delineate South Asian American history by three eras or realignments: 1917–1924, post-1965, and post-9/11. Accordingly,

The first marks the era during which a series of U.S. laws and court decisions resulted in the barring of South Asians from entry to the United States and defined them as racially ineligible for citizenship; the second marks the moment that the United States 'reopened' its doors for the immigration and naturalization of a large but select sector of highly educated and highly skilled South Asian migrants; and the last marks the contemporary 'War on Terror' in which South Asian and Muslim immigrants were singled out for surveillance, incarceration, and deportation. (Bald et al. 2013, 3–4)

If, as Jain (2011, 1) argues, South Asians in the United States are now at a position of contributing 'to American traditions of narrating the nation', the question is then about what direction this narration will take. We argue that the time has come for the South Asian American political narrative. As early as 1999, *Amerasia* dedicated an entire issue of their journal to 'Satyagraha in America: The Political Culture of South Asian Americans'. One of the articles in that edition was on the unique story of Ram Uppuluri, the half-Indian, half-Japanese man who unsuccessfully ran for Congress as a Democrat to represent the Third Congressional District of Tennessee. At the time of Uppuluri's 1994 congressional bid, only one South Asian American had ever been elected to federal office – Dalip Singh Saund in 1956, who became California's representative to the 29th District. Saund's election was also historic in that he was the first Asian American ever elected to Congress (Aoki and Takeda 2008). Srikanth ([1999] 2000) notes that Uppuluri's decision to run for office came at a time of increased political participation by Indian Americans in particular, but South Asian Americans more broadly. By the late 1990s, two

Indian Americans would win successful re-election campaigns at the state office – Minnesota's Satveer Chaudhary and Maryland's Kumar Barve – while a third, Peter Mathews would lose his third bid for the 38th Congressional District for California.

Yet since the late 1990s, a number of South Asian Americans who have run for office, and been successful. Three more members of this community would join Saund in the U.S. House of Representatives – Piyush 'Bobby' Jindal (R-LA) in 2004, Hansen Clarke (D-MI) in 2010, and Amirish 'Ami' Bera (D-CA) most recently in 2012. That year alone, six Indian Americans ran for Congress with the only success in Bera, a Unitarian Universalist physician who converted from Hinduism. In 2014, two Indian Americans, Vanila Singh and Rohit 'Ro' Khanna would both challenge the incumbent representative, Mike Honda, for California's 17th Congressional District seat; while Singh did not make out of the primaries and Khanna lost in the general election, the race was historic because it was the first time two Asian Americans challenged each other in a congressional race in the U.S. mainland, that too in the only Asian-majority congressional district outside of Hawaii (Sriram et al. 2014).

Jindal would go on in 2008 to become the Governor of Louisiana, the first South Asian American to hold a gubernatorial spot; he would be followed in 2011 by Namrata 'Nikki' Haley (nee Randhawa), an Indian-American of Punjabi Sikh descent, who became only the second South Asian American to become governor, this time for the State of South Carolina (Gottipati 2012). The election of 2012 would also go down in history for another reason – the election of the first Hindu to Congress, albeit not a South Asian American candidate. Rather, Tulsi Gabbard is of Samoan and White ancestry, but is a practising Hindu, with strong ties to the Indian and Indian-American communities (Sriram 2016).

What are the politics of South Asian Americans? While this larger question represents an extremely broad thought, the focus of this paper is specifically not on *why* these candidates run for political office, but *how*. We know precious little about the political behaviour of South Asian Americans, particularly at the state and local behaviour. We argue that there is a distinct pattern among these candidates in terms of the type of representation they embody, as well as their personal choices including using non-ethnic nicknames. These nicknames assist voters, especially in low-information elections, by signalling the ethnicity of candidates – or the lack thereof.<sup>1</sup> We suggest this is a deliberate electoral strategy by candidates in order to appeal to more than just voters of South Asian descent. As a point of reference, several of the candidates mentioned thus far – Khanna, Bera, Jindal, and Haley – all use non-ethnic nicknames.

Our data were derived from the South Asian American Political Database (SAAPAD), which the authors created to facilitate the research agenda for this paper and for future projects. The database represents the first ever attempt to document the South Asian American political experience by collecting information on all candidates for office from this community who are running at the local, state, and federal levels. By culling information from the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies' Political Database, the National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac and other sources, we have a rich set of experiences to draw from.

The inspiration for this paper came from an unlikely event – a visit around election time in 2009 to the Islamic Cultural Center, a mosque in Des Plaines, Illinois. One of the authors discovered campaign materials for local candidates including one for a

Republican judge, Kay Steffen, for Cook County's 13th Subcircuit. He noticed immediately that the candidate 'looked' Indian, but her name was listed as Ketki 'Kay' Steffen – not a very 'Indian-sounding' name. Nothing on the flyer indicated her ethnicity or heritage, except for a reference to a domestic violence organisation for South Asian women – 'Apna Ghar' (Hindi for 'our house') – that most voters would not be able to discern. This led to further questions of how many other *desi*<sup>2</sup> candidates used the same techniques.

### What's in a name? The strategy of deracialisation

In making an argument for the political salience of adopting nicknames, we are explicitly situating the research question in the historic trauma of racialisation that has been an underpinning of the South Asian experience in diaspora. According to Joshi (2006), 'it is the very historical ambiguity of Indian Americans as a "racial" group that makes them such a good example of how race is a social construction' (92). In other words, South Asian immigrants, particularly from India, have often perplexed those who sought to position these new arrivals into some rigid racial or ethnic category. Between the Barred Zone Act (1917), *United States v. Thind* (1923), the National Origins Act (1924), and the Luce-Cellar Act (1946), the United States created a historic precedent on the racial and ethnic exclusion of South Asian Americans that would not be abrogated till 1965 (Joshi 2006).

That the discrimination felt by South Asian Americans is something felt more broadly by Asian Pacific Americans is an important feature of America's 'excluded history'; not only do Asian Pacific Americans continue to battle the deleterious dual myths of the model minority *and* the perpetual foreigner, but the history of Asian Pacific Americans is often excluded from the popular history of the United States. In a damning verdict of their racial and ethnic exclusion, their inability to be recognised as loyal to the United States is precisely due to the fact that they are not viewed as Americans, even as their historic achievements and successes are usually left out of most textbooks and historical accounts (Liu, Geron, and Lai 2008; Aoki and Takeda 2008).

While Rana (2013) points to 9/11 as the beginning of the most *recent* episode of racial injustice faced by South Asian Americans, particularly Muslim Americans, he cautions that racialisation has been an historic component for many migrants from the subcontinent. The attacks of 11th September 2001, allowed for the routinisation of 'racial violence ... for a broad group of South Asians, Arabs, and Muslims. The incorporation of everyday racism, although not necessarily new, heightened the Muslim body as a visible object of racial containment' (Rana 2013, 325). Using Bald et al.'s (2013) neoliberal framework, Rana (2013) argues that South Asian immigrants, particularly Pakistani Muslims, became an excuse for the U.S. sovereign to engage in a show of Foucauldian bio-power, that is, who is expendable, especially in an economic and labour sense? Borrowing from Mbembe (2003), Rana (2013) states that the U.S. government engaged in the 'necropolitics of migration', where economic value shrinks in the eye of the storm of 'state-endorsed racism ... that attributes negative moral values to them [Pakistani Americans] such that their removal remains unremarkable' (342).

The political science literature is abundant concerning the appeal that race and ethnicity have as cues for voters. While some voters are able to distinguish traits between

candidates based on their own knowledge, other voters may be more heavily influenced by how others vote, as well as stereotypes (Terkildsen 1993). As the amount of information declines, gender, race, and ethnic cues become even more salient (McDermott 1998). While incumbent candidates are able to utilise their name recognition and party labels to attract voters, the same cannot be said for challengers (Mitchell 1991). This is especially true in local- and state-level elections where press coverage may be limited and candidates may be non-partisan. At these levels voters may be overwhelmed with the sheer number of candidates, positions, and referenda (Matson and Fine 2006). In such situations, voters may not only gravitate to candidates of their own ethnicity based on name recognition (Matson and Fine 2006), but may also vote depending on the stereotype they have of the candidate based on his or her ethnicity. White voters may even take into account skin pigmentation, particularly for African-American candidates, and evaluate lighter-skinned candidates more favourably than their darker-skinned counterparts (Terkildsen 1993). Manzano and Sanchez suggest however that while a 'Latino sounding' name may appeal to Latino voters, qualifications also matter and there is something even deeper at stake. According to the authors,

It is not race or ethnicity per se but rather associated group consciousness and ethnic attachments that shape political attitudes and decisions. Ethnic identity becomes politicized for Latinos and African-Americans as a function of minority group consciousness, wherein an individual is aware of the minority group's disadvantaged socioeconomic condition and out-group status in the United States. (Manzano and Sanchez 2010, 569)

The question of low versus high information is important. But the question of *why* minority candidates must even make the choice of deracialising themselves and their campaigns is important as well. According to Juenke and Sampaio (2010) all candidates in the United States have had to contend with the best way to market themselves during an election. Unfortunately minority candidates are often forced to make an 'additional tactical decision: whether to make their racial/ethnic background a central component of their campaigns' (43). The authors also contend that partisan effects have a role in the process as well, but not in the way that many imagine. According to them,

The expectation here is that party cues minimize the effect of racial and ethnic voting but may not mitigate the need for a deracialized campaign, as Democratic minority candidates must further de-emphasize their race and ethnicity to attract moderate and conservative voters. (Juenke and Sampaio 2010, 45–46)

This question is also important in light of the literature on racial signalling. Sigelman et al. (1995), for example, provide eight possible theories to explain how White voters evaluate Black candidates ranging from 'simple racism' to 'positive prejudice' and conclude that a candidate's race or ethnicity has an effect on voter choice only in conjunction with the candidate's policy positions. Bertrand, Chugh, and Mullainathan (2005), on the other hand, argue that while we focus on conscious discrimination, there is also a tendency for people to engage in 'implicit discrimination' which is 'unintentional and outside of the discriminator's awareness' (94). More recently, McIlwain and Caliendo (2011) expanded the work of Mendelberg (2001) to look closely at the use of race in advertising and campaign appeals and determined that racial cues cause 'potential priming effects of implicit communication' (2011, 49) while a survey of over 4000 state legislators revealed that elected officials are acutely aware of constituents' names and respond differently to

different racial cues from certain names (Butler and Broockman 2011). All this research points to the powerful influence that race has on our thinking and all theories might offer evidence as to why minority candidates may choose to deracialise their campaigns.

Although their focus was on how voters perceive male versus female candidates, the work of Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) provides a theoretical argument as to how voters cast their ballots based on self-adopted or peer-supported stereotypes of particular groups. They argue that some citizens may cast their ballots based on belief stereotypes (ideologies they perceive to be held by a member of a particular group), or trait stereotypes (ideologies they perceive based on the physical or emotional stereotypes of a group).

But what if candidates *do not* want voters to gravitate towards them because of recognition of stereotypes or ethnic-sounding names? What if the strategy, in the words of Mendelberg (2001, 11) is one of a lack of an ‘implicitly racial appeal ... a recognizable – if subtle – racial reference’? Instead, what if the goal of candidates is to remove traces of their ethnic heritage or ancestry from their names and campaign materials in order to create a more deracialised campaign?<sup>3</sup> The reasons for doing so are many, but the primary argument could be that such a campaign would yield greater support from voters outside of a particular community, consequently result in better and more diverse coalitions of support, and ultimately victory.

Tehrani’s (2009) seminal work on the historic exclusion of people of Middle Eastern descent in America lends a lot of support to this argument. He describes four ‘axes of covering’ that are heavily prevalent in the Arab and Persian communities – ‘association, appearance, affiliation and activism’ – and suggests that those Americans of Middle Eastern descent that ‘perform’ whiteness better are in turn perceived more as ‘white’. According to Tehranian (2009, 80),

Throughout the Middle Eastern community, the manipulation of appearance also emerges as a quintessential form of covering. Middle Eastern women frequently dye their hair blond or wear colored contact lenses to downplay their more ‘ethnic’ features. Middle Eastern men will go by the name ‘Mike’ for Mansour, ‘Mory’ for Morteza, ‘Al’ for Ali and ‘Moe’ for Mohamed. Such tactics may appear petty and even futile, but they can be surprisingly effective.

In his work on Asian, African, and Middle Eastern immigrants in Sweden, Khosravi (2012) described a unique Swedish law that allows people to only choose an existing surname if the applicant can prove a common lineage to that family over the past century; in other words, the government regulates who uses what name. In order to get around this, recent Muslim immigrants have chosen new, more Swedish-sounding names, to de-emphasise ethnic and religious origin, particularly in an anti-immigrant climate. In his analysis of applications for name changes, he determined that the top five reasons for the change in name as noted by applicants were: ‘Name is difficult to pronounce’, ‘Desire to disassociate from Islam and Arabs’, ‘Name causes discomfort or offence’, ‘Discrimination’, and ‘Desire for European/ Swedish name’ (Khosravi 2012, 71). Khosravi (2012) references several studies that prove that Swedes with Muslim/Arab names are not only less likely to be called back for interviews, but also less likely to be hired, and in some cases, even earn less than Swedes with Christian names. As such, Muslims use name-changing as ‘a strategy to cope with and manage stigmatization and discrimination. To change one’s name to a Swedish-sounding one can be a strategy for “covering” and “passing”’ (Khosravi 2012, 66).

The vast majority of the literature has focused on deracialisation among Latino and African-American candidates. One of the contributions of this paper is to jumpstart the conversation on this particular electoral ‘strategy’ among Asian Pacific American candidates. Lai et al. (2001) argued that most Asian Pacific American candidates represent constituencies that are *not* Asian-majorities – especially at the federal and state levels – and that candidates must then focus their campaign strategies on having more ‘crossover’ or ‘mainstream’ appeal. Nonetheless they did not suggest this was a feature of deracialisation.

According to Austin and Middleton (2004, 283), ‘Candidates “deracialize” their campaigns by de-emphasizing racially divisive issues in an attempt to garner crossover support from voters of other races while also receiving the lion’s share of support from voters of the candidate’s racial group.’ The authors suggest that the campaigns of three Mexican-American mayoral candidates – Federico Pena (Denver), Ed Garza (San Antonio), and Henry Cisneros (San Antonio) – were all successful because of deracialised campaigns. All three ‘downplayed their Mexican-American heritage, and avoided discussions of “Mexican issues” such as immigration and bilingual education’ (Austin and Middleton 2004, 285). Deracialisation can also be viewed from the perspective of political rhetoric and from this lens, it is just another type of campaign strategy. According to Stuckey, Curry, and Barnes,

We argue that there are certain moments when candidates may be able to transcend traditional constraints on their candidacies – that a certain kind of candidate, making certain kinds of appeals in a certain kind of context is able to set aside his or her identity as a ‘minority candidate’ and attain mainstream status. (2010, 415)

Two other prominent Mexican-American candidates downplayed their heritage and community’s issues, which lead to electoral success, were brothers John and Ken Salazar, who mounted Congressional campaigns (one for the U.S. House, for the U.S. Senate) at the same time. For Juenke and Sampaio (2010) the key to the Salazars’ combined success was simple: deracialisation. Both employed a sort of ‘selective descriptive representation’ by emphasising their agricultural backgrounds over their ethnic heritage. They identified as farmers first and Mexican-Americans second.

Wright (1995) focused on the deracialisation strategies of Black candidates. Before 1989, Black mayoral candidates were mostly elected solely by Black voters. That year, however, Black mayors were elected in five cities – New York, New Haven, Seattle, Cleveland, and Durham – and L. Douglas Wilder became the first Black governor of Virginia, due to the success of deracialised campaigns that appealed to Black, White and other minority voters. According to Wright (1995), ‘By stressing a deracialized platform, Black candidates put forth a nonthreatening political image by pledging to White voters that they would not give preference to the interests of Black citizens’ (751). She contrasts these electoral successes with the campaign failures of two African-American politicians who did not win: 1985 mayoral candidate Darryl Owens and 1990 congressional candidate Al Brown. She suggests that it was not just the lack of a deracialised strategy that hurt both men, but low Black and other minority voter turnout. Thus deracialisation may work because it leads to inter-racial support and coalitions (Wright 1995).

Deracialisation, however, is not without its detractors and one of the biggest is Collett (2008), whose seminal piece on ‘toggling’ challenges the contemporary perspective of deracialisation by minority candidates. ‘Toggling’ offers candidates the ability to present

multiple campaign messages to attain in- and out-group support through a balance of broad and narrow electoral appeals based on racial and ethnic cues. It works, according to the author, because it forces us to move past deracialisation or thinking 'about race and ethnicity in campaigns as zero-sum, one where minority candidates must choose between mobilizing his/her racial/ethnic base by fanning racial flames or reaching out for potential crossover votes by asphyxiating them' (Collet 2008, 711–712). However, we believe that while toggling is a viable, broader electoral strategy, it does not fit our discussion on the deliberate and strategic use of removing a 'difficult' and 'foreign' ethnic name and replacing it with one that is 'easy' and 'American'.

## Methodology

Since no database exists regarding South Asian American candidates and elected officials, the authors built one from scratch. Using the South Asian ethnic surname lists developed by Sriram et al. (2014), we employed multiple, Web-based searches of specific terminology including 'Indian-American candidate', 'Pakistani-American candidate', 'Bangladeshi-American candidate', 'South Asian American candidate', etc., as well as a state-by-state Google search of candidates. Several websites listed multiple candidates, but frequently this information had to be checked and double-checked for authenticity and clarification (e.g. conflicting or missing information on partisanship, place of birth, birth name).<sup>4</sup> We also searched for South Asian ethnic surnames in the online Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies' Political Database,<sup>5</sup> as well as several volumes of the National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac.<sup>6</sup>

Having scoured these sources we ended up with 193 unique candidates,<sup>7</sup> 58 of whom campaigned using a non-ethnic nickname (30%). These candidates were converted into 325 data points with each of these cases represented a candidate–election pairing. Our cases span from 1956 up to 2014; of these, however, 301 occurred after 2000 (approximately 93%), so our data are heavily weighted to recent political activity by these candidates. Of the 325 pairings, 177 represented local office seekers; 105 were for state-level positions; and 43 were federal. The data also contain a demographically diverse selection of South Asian American candidates representing 29 states; several faiths (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, etc.); and countries of origin (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, etc.).<sup>8</sup>

## Model specification

Our dichotomous dependent variable was based on the electoral success of a South Asian American candidate (win – 1; loss – 0). The variables we collected encompassed standard details such as sex, partisanship, profession, and success in the election at hand. All of our variables, explanatory and response variables alike, with the exception of a timing variable of the year of the election, were coded as simple binaries. Among these variables were the following:

- (a) Nickname: Captured whether the candidate used a nickname in their professional and campaign presentation of their self. An example would be Saghir Tahir, a six-term member of New Hampshire's House of Representatives who goes by the nickname 'Saggy'. [Coded 1 if candidate uses a nickname, 0 otherwise].

- (b) Political Appointment/High Profile Position: Captured whether the candidate held a prior political appointment or served in the political machinery. Such appointments and positions could include anything from Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services to working as the Chief of Staff for a U.S. House Member.
- (c) Electoral Campaign Level: This accounted for whether the race was at the Federal, State, or Local level. Level of the campaign was coded as three separate binaries; one for each level. Any race at a sub-State level was coded as Local.
- (d) Prior Campaign Experience: This was another variable attempting to get at candidate quality. It was coded as 0 if this was the first race that we could determine the candidate had run in and 1 otherwise.
- (e) Partisanship: This was coded as Republican (1) or Democrat (0).
- (f) Gender: This was coded as female (1) or not (0).

## Findings and discussion

Our preliminary results are encouraging for future research on the issue of South Asian American candidates. We found multiple statistically and substantively significant relationships between our explanatory variables and the dependent variable of whether the candidate won or lost their race. After thinning our variables out to those we had consistent enough data on, we settled on the following explanatory factors: candidate's use of a nickname; whether they were Female or Male; whether they were a Republican or Democrat; whether they were running at the Local, State, or Federal level; whether they held a significant Prior Position to running for office; whether they had prior Campaign Experience; and finally, the year of the election. For our purposes we only focused on the candidates who ran as a Republican or Democrat. This forced us to drop nine cases where the candidate ran under a third-party banner or we could not determine the partisanship of the candidate at all. As the data we were able to collect was more reliably available in more recent years we focused on cases from 2000 forward. This afforded us over 90% of our original cases to work with. There was a fairly high negative correlation between our local and state race coding that caused us to have to break a general model including dummy variables for each level of election out into individual models with a dummy for Federal, State, and Local races. In doing this, our number of cases remained constant. However, for example, our level of office variable in the Local model allowed us to contrast between local and non-local elections. Similar contrasts are made in our State and Federal models.

All of the models employ simple binomial logit to capture the probability that the candidate won her or his race. To account for relationships between our explanatory variables and the probability of electoral success we used the standard method of holding each of the explanatory variables but the variable of interest at their mean. We then moved this isolated variable over its range of values. As all but one of our variables in the models were simple binaries the values of interest for the variable were primarily 0 or 1. With the timing variable we used the year of the election.

As seen in [Table A1](#), when we controlled for whether the candidate was running for a local office or not, we found that their using a nickname accounted for a 17% increase in electoral success while running as a Republican was tied to a 22% decrease in winning. Running in a local race increased the probability of victory by 41%. There may be some

logic to this as even low-quality candidates should have both descriptive representational and name advantages at the Local level that they do not have as they move up to State and Federal races. People in a city council or a school board district are more likely to actually know the candidate. This form of knowing is distinguished from the lesser *knowing of* the candidate, which increases when dealing with larger and more physically dissipated potential constituents at higher levels of office seeking. If the candidate had prior campaign experience they achieved a 32% bump in victory probability. This may again feed back into having developed name recognition and personal ties that are reinforced when dealing with a local constituency.

When we control for state office seeking nickname usage, running as a Republican, and prior campaign experience remain statistically significant. However, with this control we found that as time went on the likelihood of electoral success declined. The substantive effect of this relationship was not particularly strong at a little under 2% decrease in electoral success as each year went by. South Asian candidates appear to take a 31% hit on victory probability when running as Republicans. Prior campaign experience is still positively related to campaign success and remained consistent at a 32% increase in electoral success. Nickname usage effects dropped off a bit with a 14% greater probability of victory.

At the Federal level of office seeking South Asian Americans are more disadvantaged as Republicans than at the State level. Republicans were 33% less likely to win. Running at the Federal level generally was a major issue for South Asians. They were 55% less likely to win there than at the State or Local levels. This may be the result of any number of disadvantages of not having enough of a personal connection with potential constituents, in being known of abstractly but not truly known personally, that benefits in a converse manner at the local level.

Benefits of running in a prior campaign for office were decreased to a 28% bump in success when seeking Federal office. This decrease in payoff for having prior campaign experience is understandable. The higher the office you seek, the more likely you should be to run into other quality candidates which have the benefit of their own campaign experiences. At the highest level of office seeking nickname usage remains both substantively and significantly salient. Where other beneficial factors have tailed off and deleterious factors have grown stronger in Federal races, South Asian American candidates that used a nickname in their campaigns were 15% more likely to win than those who did not.

Some consideration was made for our small number of federal cases and how rare success was for SAA candidates. Over 50% of the winners in this subset of our 1954–2014 data could be accounted for by two candidates: Dalip Singh Saund and Bobby Jindhal. As such it could be argued that our federal findings may be more reflective of special circumstances of these candidates, such as their rhetorical style or charisma, than any systematic nickname, partisan, or other effects. To account for this we ran our model again on the sub-federal candidate–election cases for the same 2000 forward time frame.

In [Table A2](#) we see that the statistical significance and direction of our coefficients remain consistent in absence of the federal cases. Running as a Republican remained a barrier to SAA candidates, where such candidates were 26% less likely to win. Candidates for state office were 30% less successful than those for local office, while prior campaign experience increases success by 27%. In the sub-federal model we found that the nickname usage was tied to a 15% increase in election success.

Overall the consistent variables across all levels of races were the party of the candidate, whether they had prior campaign experience, and finally whether or not they used a

nickname. More generally candidates were highly disadvantaged at the Federal level and similarly highly advantaged in Local races.

As nickname usage appears consistently strong both statistically and substantively in all levels of races for South Asian American candidates, we attempted to flip the models to test for what might encourage such a tactic in campaigns. What we found was not particularly informative. In brief, none of the variables we ran for probability of using a nickname met the 0.05 threshold. Only being a Republican approached this desired cut-off. Across all levels of races each of this variable individually for a 13–14% increase in probability of nickname usage while the statistical significance hovered between 0.07 and 0.09. Ultimately we leave more precise testing for factors encouraging the use of a nickname to future models. Our measures of fit for predicting nickname usage were extremely low and may have been a result of the data being in its early stages of development.

## Conclusion

South Asian Americans have become one of the most vital, public, and influential demographics in the United States. While there have been many visible success stories, particularly in politics, there has been a dearth of research till now on the political experiences and campaign strategies of South Asian American candidates for office. Our focus from the onset of this project was to ameliorate the discussion on this particular topic by attempting something that had yet to be done in the political science literature. In this paper we began creating a novel dataset from 1956 to 2014 of all South Asian American candidates to have ever run for office in the United States. We then examined the data to determine what patterns and qualifications, if any, were more likely to translate into electoral success for these candidates. Among our multiple statistically and substantively significant findings was a strong positive relationship between nickname usage and electoral success. We also find evidence suggesting that South Asian American Candidates are heavily disadvantaged the higher the level of office that they seek. This paper adds to the burgeoning literature on the unique electoral politics of South Asian Americans and provides substantial evidence for arguments supporting deracialisation strategies, as well as the commonly accepted belief that as much as name recognition is important, prior political experience also matters. This is particularly the case in lower office elections.

We accept that one of the biggest challenges to our methodology may have been the manner in which we collected the names of candidates. In situations where it was not clear through self-identification or media coverage what the ethnicity of a particular candidate was, or their religious preferences, we inferred that information from the candidates' names based on the recent work of Sriram et al. (2014) on Asian surnames. Additionally, in a future project, we plan on expanding SAAPAD by including more federal candidates by conducting an ethnic surname search of Federal Elections Commission (FEC) candidate filings.

This paper has been concerned with matters that have for the most part been neglected by scholars: the idea of a South Asian American political identity, its feasibility as the platform for representation strategies by candidates, and the campaign strategies of South Asian American candidates. Nicknames tell only part of the story, and more work must be done to examine the broader use of deracialising strategies among South Asian American candidates including their life story narratives, as well as model minority constructs. As Khagram, Desai and Varughese succinctly put it, 'The politics of Asian Indians in the United States is basically uncharted territory' (2001, 259).

## Notes

1. It should be noted that South Asian American politicians are not the only ones to use nicknames and that candidates from all backgrounds and ethnicities have used nicknames during their political careers (e.g. Newton Leroy 'Newt' Gingrich). However, we could not identify any literature that looked at the political effectiveness of using nicknames, which will perhaps provide the basis for a future paper.
2. The word "desi" comes from Sanskrit and means "from the country" or "of the country." It's used by South Asian immigrants to refer to someone or something from the Indian subcontinent and its diaspora. The word implies shared values and bonds' (Kurwa 2008).
3. Deracialization is not to be confused with what Hayano (1981) and more recently Aoki (2013) have termed 'disidentification' or the calculated move by a specific ethnic group to 'discourage identification' with another ethnic group.
4. BallotPedia, Google, the Indian American Leadership Initiative (IALI), LinkedIn, 'News India Times', 'Non Resident Indian (NRI) Internet', 'Sepia Mutiny', the United States India Political Action Committee (USINPAC), and Wikipedia.
5. <http://apaics.org/resources/political-database/>
6. Nakanishi and Lai (2014–2015); Nakanishi (2011–2012); Nakanishi (2007–2008); Nakanishi (2003–2004); Nakanishi and LaForteza (1984); and Nakanishi (1978, 1979, 1980, 1982).
7. Seventy-seven per cent of the candidates ran as Democrats.
8. Our database also included 10 candidates who were biracial or for whom their ethnicity and religious preferences were unknown or unclear. The particular politics of multiracial Asian Americans is a specific topic that we could not address in this paper, but are working on a future project solely on that issue.

## Acknowledgements

A previous version of this article was presented at the 2013 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association. The authors acknowledge the assistance and support of Rosalee Clawson, Pei-te Lien, Rudy Busto, and the anonymous reviewers.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

**Shyam Krishnan Sriram** is a doctoral student in the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, USA.

**Stonegarden Grindlife** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA.

## ORCID

Shyam Krishnan Sriram  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2164-3550>

## References

- Aoki, Andrew. 2013. "Come Together' Assessing the Meaning of Asian American Panethnicity in American Politics." Presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.
- Aoki, Andrew, and Okiyoshi Takeda. 2008. *Asian American Politics*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

- Austin, Sharon Wright, and Richard T. Middleton. 2004. "The Limitations of the Deracialization Concept in the 2001 Los Angeles Mayoral Election." *Political Research Quarterly* 57 (2): 283–293.
- Bald, Vivek, Miabi Chatterji, Sujani Reddy, and Manu Vimalassery. 2013. *The Sun Never Sets: South Asian Migrants in an Age of U.S. Power*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bertrand, Marianne, Dolly Chugh, and Sendhil Mullainathan. 2005. "Implicit Discrimination." *American Economic Review* 95 (2): 94–98.
- Butler, Daniel M., and David E. Broockman. 2011. "Do Politicians Racially Discriminate Against Constituents? A Field Experiment on State Legislators." *American Journal of Political Science* 55 (3): 463–477.
- Collett, Christian. 2008. "Minority Candidates, Alternative Media, and Multiethnic America: Deracialization or Toggling?" *Perspectives on Politics* 6 (4): 707–728.
- Gottipati, Sruthi. 2012. "For Indian-American Candidates, a Disappointing Election Day." *India Ink (The New York Times)*, November 8. Accessed July 17, 2013. <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/08/for-indian-american-candidates-a-disappointing-election-day/>.
- Hayano, David M. 1981. "Ethnic Identification and Disidentification: Japanese American Views of Chinese Americans." *Ethnic Groups* 3 (2): 151–171.
- Hoeffel, Elizabeth M., Sonya Rastogi, Myoung Ouk Kim, and Hasan Shahid. 2012. "The Asian Population: 2010." U.S. Census Bureau, March. Accessed December 23, 2015. <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-11.pdf>.
- Huddy, Leonie, and Nayda Terkildsen. 1993. "Gender Stereotypes and the Perception of Male and Female Candidates." *American Journal of Political Science* 37 (1): 119–147.
- Jacobsen, Knut A., and P. Pratap Kumar. 2004. "Introduction." In *South Asians in the Diaspora: Histories and Religious Traditions*, edited by Knut A. Jacobsen and P. Pratap Kumar, ix–xxiv. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.
- Jain, Anupama. 2011. *How to Be South Asian in America: Narratives of Ambivalence and Belonging*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Joshi, Khyati Y. 2006. *New Roots in America's Sacred Ground: Religion: Race, Ethnicity in Indian America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Juenke, Eric Gonzalez, and Anna Christina Sampaio. 2010. "Deracialization and Latino Politics: The Case of the Salazar Brothers in Colorado." *Political Research Quarterly* 63 (1): 43–54.
- Khagram, Sanjeev, Manish Desai, and Jason Varughese. 2001. "Seen, Rich, but Unheard? The Politics of Asian Indians in the United States." In *Asian Americans and Politics: Perspectives, Experiences, Prospects*, edited by Gordon H. Chang, 258–284. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.
- Khosravi, Shahram. 2012. "White Masks/Muslims Names: Immigration and Name-Changing in Sweden." *Race & Class* 53 (3): 65–80.
- Koshy, Susan. 2008. "Introduction." In *Transnational South Asians: The Making of a Neo-Diaspora*, edited by Susan Koshy and R. Radhakrishnan, 1–39. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kurwa, Nishat. 2008. "Urban Desi: A Genre on the Rise." *National Public Radio*, October 15. Accessed July 31, 2013. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=95739927>.
- Lai, James S., Wendy K. Tam Cho, James P. Kim, and Okiyoshi Takeda. 2001. "Asian Pacific-American Campaigns, Elections and Elected Officials." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34 (3): 611–617.
- Liu, Michael, Kim Geron, and Tracy A. M. Lai. 2008. *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism: Community, Vision, and Power*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Manzano, Sylvia, and Gabriel R. Sanchez. 2010. "Take One for the Team? Limits of Shared Ethnicity and Candidate Preferences." *Political Research Quarterly* 63 (3): 568–580.
- Matson, Marsha, and Terri Susan Fine. 2006. "Gender, Ethnicity and Ballot Information: Ballot Cues in Low-Information Elections." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 6 (1): 49–72.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2003. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15 (1): 11–40.
- McDermott, Monika L. 1998. "Race and Gender Cues in Low-Information Elections." *Political Research Quarterly* 51 (4): 895–918.
- McIlwain, Charlton, and Stephen M. Caliendo. 2011. *Race Appeal: How Candidates Invoke Race in U.S. Political Campaigns*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Mendelberg, Tali. 2001. *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Mitchell, Cleta Deatherage. 1991. "Limiting Congressional Terms: A Return to Democracy." *Journal of Law and Politics* 7: 722–745.
- Muhammad, Aminah T. 2001. "Relationship Between Muslims and Hindus in the United States: *Mlecchas Versus Kafirs?*." In *Community, Empire, and Migration: South Asians in Diaspora*, edited by Crispin Bates, 286–308. London: Palgrave.
- Nakanishi, Don T. 1978. *The National Asian-American Roster: 1978*. Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center.
- Nakanishi, Don T. 1979. *The National Asian-American Roster: 1979*. Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center.
- Nakanishi, Don T. 1980. *The National Asian-American Roster: 1980*. Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center.
- Nakanishi, Don T. 1982. *The National Asian-American Roster: 1982*. Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center.
- Nakanishi, Don T. 2003–2004. *The National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*. Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center.
- Nakanishi, Don T. 2007–2008. *The National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*. Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center.
- Nakanishi, Don T. 2011–2012. *The National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*. Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center.
- Nakanishi, Don T., and Bernie C. LaForteza. 1984. *The National Asian Pacific American Roster*. Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center.
- Nakanishi, Don T., and James S. Lai. 2014–2015. *The National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*. Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center.
- Purkayastha, Bandana. 2005. *Negotiating Ethnicity: Second-Generation South Asian Americans Traverse a Transnational World*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Rana, Junaid. 2013. "Tracing the Muslim Body: Race, U.S. Deportation, and Pakistani Return Migration." In *The Sun Never Sets: South Asian Migrants in an Age of U.S. Power*, edited by Vivek Bald, Miabi Chatterji, Sujani Reddy, and Manu Vimalassery, 325–349. New York: New York University Press.
- Shankar, Lavina Dhingra, and Rajni Shankar. 1998. "Closing the Gap: South Asians Challenge Asian American Studies." In *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*, edited by Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth, 1–24. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Sigelman, Carol K., Lee Sigelman, Barbara J. Walkosz, and Michael Nitz. 1995. "Black Candidates, White Voters: Understanding Racial Bias in Political Perceptions." *American Journal of Political Science* 39 (1): 243–265.
- Srikanth, Rajini. [1999] 2000. "Identity and Admission in the Political Game: The Indian American Community Signs Up." *Amerasia* 25 (3): 59–80.
- Sriram, Shyam K. 2016. "A Tulsi by Any Other Name: An Analysis of South Asian American Support for a Hindu Congressional Candidate." In *Distinct Identities: Minority Women in U.S. Politics*, edited by Nadia E. Brown and Sarah Allen Gershon, 116–133. New York: Routledge (Forthcoming).
- Sriram, Shyam, James Lai, Shaanika Subramanyam, and Stonegarden Grindlife. 2014. "Honda and Khanna Go to White Castle: An Analysis of Campaign Contributions and Media Framing in a California Congressional Race." Presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in Washington, D.C.
- Stuckey, Mary E., Kristina E. Curry, and Andrew D. Barnes. 2010. "Bringing Candidates in from the Cold: Mainstreaming Minority Candidates, 1960 and 2008." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40 (3): 414–430.
- Tehrani, John. 2009. *Whitewashed: America's Invisible Middle Eastern Identity*. New York: New York University Press.
- Terkildsen, Nadia. 1993. "When White Voters Evaluate Black Candidates: The Processing Implications of Candidate Skin Color, Prejudice and Self-Monitoring." *American Journal of Political Science* 37 (4): 1032–1053.
- Wright, Sharon D. 1995. "Electoral and Biracial Coalition: Possible Election Strategy for African-American Candidates in Louisville, Kentucky." *Journal of Black Studies* 25 (6): 749–758.

Appendix

Table A1. Electoral success by level of office sought.

	Local	State	Federal
<b>Candidate demographic variables</b>			
Used nickname	0.766* (0.320)	0.627* (0.298)	0.674* (0.317500)
Female	0.548 (0.369)	0.513 (0.345)	0.250 (0.354)
Republican	−0.920* (0.363)	−1.277*** (0.343)	−1.393*** (0.359)
<b>Level of office</b>			
Local	1.85*** (0.298)	—	—
State	—	−0.817** (0.293)	—
Federal	—	—	−2.621*** (0.544)
<b>Candidate quality variables</b>			
Prior position	−0.148 (0.541)	−0.540 (0.486)	0.204 (0.573)
Prior campaign experience	1.52*** (0.305)	1.472*** (0.286)	1.237*** (0.292)
<b>Timing variables</b>			
Year	−0.060 (0.040)	−0.075* (0.038)	−0.014 (0.039)
Constant	119.98 (79.970)	150.58* (75.87)	28.470 (78.230)
<i>N</i>	301	301	301
AIC	326	361	335
Pseudo <i>R</i> -square	0.361	0.239	0.329

\*\*\**p* < 0.01.

\*\**p* < 0.05.

\**p* < 0.1.

Table A2. Electoral success at state or local level.

<b>Candidate demographic variables</b>	
Used nickname	0.796* (0.353)
Female	0.477 (0.385)
Republican	−1.169** (0.400)
<b>Level of office</b>	
State	−1.396*** (0.322)
<b>Candidate quality variables</b>	
Prior position	−0.441 (0.668)
Prior campaign experience	1.432*** (0.329)
<b>Timing variables</b>	
Year	−0.020 (0.043)
Constant	40.594
<i>N</i>	261
AIC	284
Pseudo <i>R</i> -square	0.279

\*\*\**p* < 0.01.

\*\**p* < 0.05.

\**p* < 0.1.