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DEPAUL UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF LAW

Center for Public Interest Law

SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: OPPORTUNITY FOR IMPACT

PRIYANG BAXI & AMI GANDHI¹

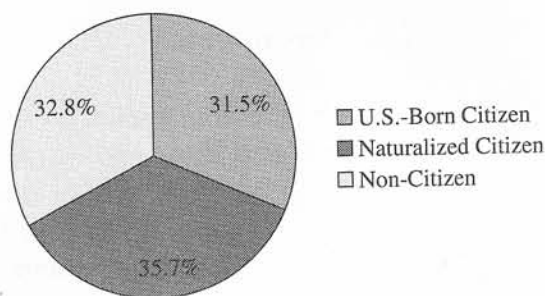
I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the most rapidly growing racial groups in Illinois and the country, South Asian Americans are increasingly interested in having a voice – from voting on Hindi ballots for the first time in the 2012 elections to speaking out on hate crimes, immigration, health care, economic conditions, and other issues that affect their daily lives. South Asian Americans and other immigrant and minority communities make a positive impact on their neighborhoods, their government, and society at large, and they have the potential to make an even greater impact. In order to leverage that potential, it is crucial to consider the characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of this community. This

¹ Priyang Baxi earned his B.S. degree with Honors in Brain Behavior and Cognitive Science from the University of Michigan (2011). He is a Director's Scholar at University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health and expects to graduate from the Master of Public Health (M.P.H.) program in Health Policy and Administration in May of 2013. Ami Gandhi has served as the executive director of South Asian American Policy & Research Institute (SAAPRI) since 2011. SAAPRI (<http://www.saapri.org>) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization established in 2001 to improve the lives of South Asian Americans in the Chicago area, by using research to formulate equitable and socially responsible public policy. Ami earned her J.D. from The George Washington University Law School (2004) and her B.A. in psychology and cognitive science from Indiana University (2001). The authors thank contributing author Payal Shah, Esq. for her important assistance in the writing of this article. The authors also thank Maimoona Pootawala, Raja Krishnamoorthi, Jagriti Chander, Anil Mehta and other community members who graciously shared their stories and perspectives.

article discusses South Asian Americans' opportunity for impact by addressing the following topics: (1) the demographic characteristics of South Asian Americans in Illinois; (2) the community's access to the polls; (3) stories from community members on the front lines – including voters, poll workers, and a candidate; (4) insights revealed through exit polling; and (5) barriers to civic participation that must be overcome.

CITIZENSHIP STATUS, ILLINOIS 2010



II. DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

There are over 242,000 South Asian Americans in Illinois, including people of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, and Nepali descent, as well as other smaller populations.² Since 2000, South Asians have grown by over 55% in Illinois, a notably higher growth rate than Asian Americans overall or other racial minority groups.³

² U.S. Census Bureau, *U.S. Census 2010*, available at <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>. South Asian American Policy and Research Institute (SAAPRI) and Asian American Institute (AAI) will soon be publishing a full demographic report of South Asian Americans in Illinois, including further details on the demographic characteristics discussed in this article. The forthcoming publication will be made available at SAAPRI's website, <http://www.saapri.org>.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, *U.S. Census 2010 & U.S. Census 2000*, available at <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

Approximately 67% of South Asian Americans in Illinois are United States citizens⁴, as captured in Graph 1 herein. This estimate includes both South Asian Americans born in the United States and those born abroad who became naturalized citizens. Non-citizens include legal permanent residents, visa holders, and those who are undocumented.

Socioeconomic disparities affect South Asian Americans in Illinois, especially particular subgroups, reflecting a diverse population that defies the “model minority” myth. There are many disadvantaged segments among South Asian Americans who would benefit from policy reform and advocacy efforts. For example, limited English proficiency is a growing concern for South Asian Americans, and it serves as a barrier to voting and civic engagement, as well as access to quality health care, education, and social services.

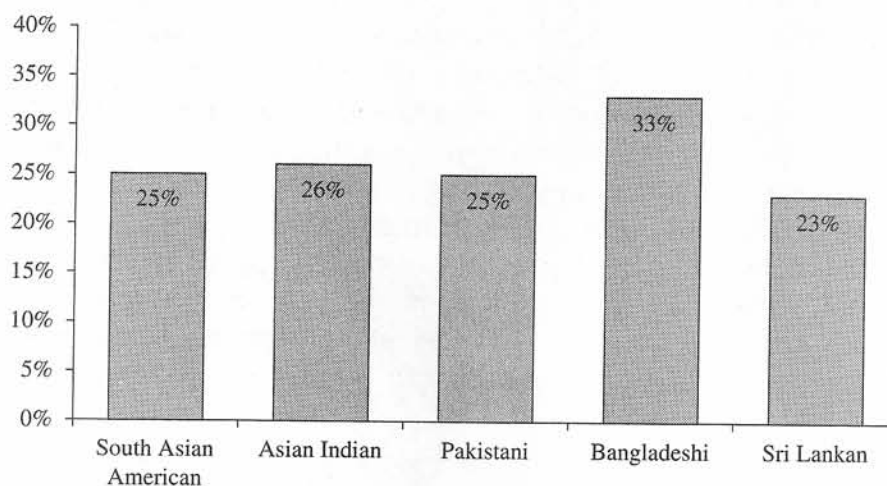
In Illinois, about a quarter of South Asian Americans speak English less than “very well,” as shown in Graph 2 herein.⁵ About 85% of the South Asian American population in Illinois speaks a language other than English at home, including people who are bilingual or multilingual as well as people with limited English proficiency.⁶ As discussed further below in Section III of this article, because of the high number of limited English proficient Indian Americans who are eligible to vote, the City of Chicago and suburban Cook County election boards are now legally required to provide language assistance in Hindi, Gujarati, and Urdu.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *2006-2010 American Community Survey*, available at <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

PERCENTAGE THAT SPEAKS ENGLISH LESS THAN "VERY WELL" FOR POPULATION 5 YEARS AND OVER, ILLINOIS 2006-2010



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2010 American Community Survey

As of 2010, the second-largest group of immigrants to the Midwest came from India, second only to Mexico.⁷ South Asian Americans enter the country through both employment-based and family-based channels. The South Asian American population is diverse, including high-skilled workers and lower-skilled workers; people who integrate successfully and people who suffer unfair burdens of prejudice and backlogs; and established and rising entrepreneurs as well as undocumented workers.

The recent growth of Asian Americans in the greater Chicago area has been fueled by the increasing numbers of South Asian immigrants coming to the city, with South Asians as the fastest

⁷ TASK FORCE ON IMMIGRATION AND U.S. ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS, U.S. ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS AT RISK: A MIDWEST CALL TO ACTION ON IMMIGRATION REFORM (2013) 42-44, available at <http://midwestimmigration.org/the-report>.

growing Asian American ethnic group.⁸ Indian Americans are by far the largest subgroup of Asian Americans in Illinois, with South Asian Americans representing an even higher number when counted together.⁹ South Asian Americans represent about 36% of the state's Asian American population and 2% of the state's overall population. Particular counties, towns, and neighborhoods have even higher concentrations.¹⁰ As will be detailed in a forthcoming demographic report by South Asian American Policy and Research Institute (SAAPRI) and Asian American Institute (AAI), there are now notable percentages of South Asian Americans in several voting districts in Illinois, including districts at the ward, state House, state Senate, and federal Congressional level.¹¹

As the South Asian American population continues to grow rapidly, decision-makers should consider perspectives from this community, especially when formulating and implementing policies that impact immigrants and minorities. At the same time, it is crucial for South Asian Americans – including the growing contingent with limited English proficiency – to find avenues to voice their opinions about issues of concern. One such avenue is voting.¹²

⁸ ASIAN AMERICAN CENTER FOR JUSTICE, *A COMMUNITY OF CONTRASTS 10* (2012), available at http://www.advancingjustice.org/pdf/Community_of_Contrasts_Midwest_2012.pdf

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, *U.S. Census 2010 & U.S. Census 2000*, available at <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

¹⁰ *Id.* SAAPRI and AAI will soon be publishing a full demographic report of South Asian Americans in Illinois, including further details on the demographic characteristics discussed in this article. The forthcoming publication will be made available at SAAPRI's website, <http://www.saapri.org>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Susie An, *Asian American voter turnout expected to increase this year*, WBEZ, Nov. 5, 2012, available at <http://www.wbez.org/news/asian-american-voter-turnout-expected-increase-year-103665>.

III. ACCESS TO POLLS

a. Legally Mandated Language Assistance

Historically, racial and language minorities in the United States have not enjoyed the full and fair right to vote. Congress has found that “language minorities have been effectively excluded from participation in the electoral process” because of discrimination and unequal educational opportunities.¹³ As this type of exclusion violates the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, federal law protects the voting rights of citizens who are not proficient in English.¹⁴ Specifically, Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act provides resources to voters with limited English proficiency, by requiring certain jurisdictions to provide oral and written language assistance at the polls.¹⁵

Because of the dramatic growth in the Chicago area of the South Asian Americans who are eligible to vote but who have limited English proficiency, Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act now covers Indian Americans in the city of Chicago and suburban Cook County.¹⁶ During the primary and general elections in 2012, the Cook County Clerk’s office and the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners provided all ballots, printed instructions, and other written materials in Hindi and also provided oral assistance in Hindi, Gujarati, and Urdu. SAAPRI and other organizations and individuals advised the local election boards during their implementation of this new lan-

¹³ See 42 U.S.C. § 1973aa-1a(a).

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ See 42 U.S.C. § 1973aa-1a(b) – (d).

¹⁶ See 42 U.S.C. § 1973aa-1a(a); Voting Rights Act Amendments of 2006, Determinations Under Section 203, 76 Fed. Reg. 63602 (Oct. 13, 2011), cited in http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/vot/sec_203/activ_203.php (U.S. Department of Justice discussion of Covered Jurisdictions under language minority provisions of the federal Voting Rights Act). For several years, Section 203 has required assistance in Spanish and Chinese at Chicago area polls.

guage assistance.¹⁷ This new assistance, and similar assistance in parts of New York, California, and Michigan, marked the first time in history that the federal Voting Rights Act mandated assistance in any languages spoken in South Asian communities.¹⁸

“Voter turnout is high in many parts of India, and many Indian Americans are interested in voicing their opinion here in the United States,” explained Jagriti Chander, an entrepreneur who helped implement Hindi language assistance in the city of Chicago.¹⁹ After hearing about the new legal requirement for assistance to Indian American voters, attorney Payal Shah volunteered by helping with Gujarati translation in the City of Chicago and also worked at the polls in suburban Cook County during the 2012 primary election.²⁰ Ms. Shah stated, “Seeing the impact of Spanish language assistance has shown me how our community could also benefit from language assistance in voting – from better understanding a local referendum on the ballot to receiving help with using voting machines.”²¹

However, implementation of language assistance is not a simple task for a linguistically diverse group such as Indian Americans, and effective implementation requires input from the community and strategic use of resources. Anil Mehta is a professional who has taken the time to work at the polls for several elections over the years; he speaks English, Gujarati, and Hindi, and he worked in suburban Cook County during the 2012 pri-

¹⁷ See Press Release, Chicago Board of Election Commissioners, Asian Indian Voters to Receive Language Assistance in Chicago (Feb. 21, 2012), available at http://www.chicagoelections.com/dm/news_releases/document_3909.pdf.

¹⁸ See Richard Springer, *3 Counties Must Provide Voting Help to Asian Indians*, IndiaWest.com, Oct. 20, 2011, available at <http://newamericamedia.org/2011/10/3-counties-must-provide-voting-help-to-asian-indians.php>.

¹⁹ ASIAN AMERICAN CENTER FOR JUSTICE, A COMMUNITY OF CONTRASTS 10 (2012), available at http://www.advancingjustice.org/pdf/Community_of_Contrasts_Midwest_2012.pdf

²⁰ Interview with Payal Shah, Member of South Asian American Community in Illinois (May 22, 2013).

²¹ *Id.*

mary election.²² Mr. Mehta pointed out the importance of effectively notifying the community about the language assistance. He stated, “once South Asian voters know that there are multilingual resources available, they will be encouraged to vote. It is important for the election boards to attend key events at community institutions in order to reach the masses.”²³

Language assistance at the polls gives South Asian American voters a greater opportunity for impact. When voters with limited English proficiency receive such language assistance, they are more likely to vote.

b. Stories from South Asian American Voters

Voting Experience of a Non-English speaking South Asian American²⁴



²² Interview with Anil Mehta, Member of South Asian American Community in Illinois (May 22, 2013).

²³ Pamela Constable, *Indian Americans entering politics after years of keeping low profile*, WASHINGTON POST, Sept. 5, 2012, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/indian-americans-entering-politics-after-building-behind-scenes-clout/2012/09/05/ebd44e20-ee18-11e1-b0eb-dac6b50187ad_story.html.

²⁴ Telephone Interview with Maimoona Putawala, Member of South Asian American Community in Chicago (Feb. 14, 2013).

Mrs. Maimoona Putawala immigrated to the United States from India 22 years ago and speaks the South Asian languages of Urdu and Gujarati. Since she became a United States citizen about three years ago, she has voted in every election despite her inability to communicate in English. When asked why she voted in the November 2012 elections, Ms. Putawala stated, "I am a citizen. I have a duty to vote. I have the right to vote." She declared she was comfortable with the entire process of voting from registration to actually voting in the polling place because she was assisted with transportation and language assistance by SAAPRI staff and volunteers. Even though "it was a little cold," she was not at all nervous because of SAAPRI's assistance. She mentioned that all her family members are United States citizens and vote. She believes that community members should participate in elections because voting leads to important benefits including free bus passes and Medicare. In her opinion, the American voting system is excellent, as she has witnessed cheating and physical fighting occurring in Indian elections.

My First U.S. Voting Experience: "I am very excited to be a first time voter"²⁵

A first time South Asian American voter was also interviewed and preferred to remain anonymous. The participant moved to the United States in 2005 and became a citizen in 2010. Her mother tongue is Hindi, but she is also proficient in English. When asked why she voted in the past election, she declared, "I've never disregarded my duty; it's every citizen's duty to vote." She stated that she has voted in every election in her former country of residence. Issues of importance to her include the economy, safety and security for minorities, and discrimination against minorities. She believes that all her friends

²⁵ Telephone Interview with Anonymous Interviewee, Member of South Asian American Community in Chicago (Feb. 18, 2013).

and family members vote. In her opinion, the American voting system is simple and organized compared to other countries. She concluded the interview stating, "Every vote counts" and that "I am happy to have been able to cast a vote and fulfill my duty as a citizen of the U.S."

IV. PERSPECTIVES FROM A CANDIDATE

As stated by Toby Chaudhuri, a political strategist in Washington,

There's no question, the Indian American political tiger has sprung. It is no longer just about writing checks to gain access. We realize we need to use politics to gain a say in government. Our numbers are swelling at a time of enormous change in American society, and we have a new generation that is ready to run.²⁶

South Asian Americans are at a historically important juncture nationally and locally, possessing ambition to increase their influence in government and politics. In Illinois, no South Asian Americans or other Asian Americans have ever served in the state legislature. South Asian Americans are eager to see members of their own community become actively involved in all forms of civic engagement, including exercising their right to vote and serving in elected office. The article next considers the perspective of one such community member, Raja Krishnamoorthi, who has served in various public positions and has run for office at the state and federal level.

²⁶ Pamela Constable, *Indian Americans entering politics after years of keeping low profile*, Washington Post, Sept. 5, 2012, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/indian-americans-entering-politics-after-building-behind-scenes-clout/2012/09/05/ebd44e20-ee18-11e1-b0eb-dac6b50187ad_story.html.

*Perspectives From a South Asian American Community
Leader and Candidate*²⁷

Raja Krishnamoorthi's interest in politics began in 1992 when he was a student at Princeton University, stuffing envelopes and canvassing for votes for presidential candidate Bill Clinton. Progressively becoming more involved, he worked for the Bill Bradley National Advance Staff in 1999 while in law school and then with Barack Obama's 2000 Congressional campaign and 2004 Senate campaign. After working on Barack Obama's 2004 Senate campaign, he "wasn't sure whether people would accept someone with an interesting name and diverse background." He states that, as he thought about it more and more, it became clear to him that he wanted to run for office. He ran for Illinois Comptroller in 2010.

Mr. Krishnamoorthi ran for office in the 8th Congressional District of Illinois in the 2012 primary election but did not advance to the general election. "If you look at my recent election experience, there was tremendous potential for South Asian participation, but that potential did not become a reality. And it's something that we have to keep working on, and it's an unfinished agenda item [to get] our voter registration up," he stated. He explained various strategies for encouraging South Asian Americans to participate and to vote, including non-partisan engagement of community organizations, such as temples, mosques, and senior centers, which can become hubs for voter registration and mobilization.

Mr. Krishnamoorthi explained that South Asian Americans need to practice "civic hygiene," which he compared to the habit of brushing their teeth daily. He stated, "These are practices that you just do. And generation after generation should just keep doing it. . . Everyone is busy, but if you carve out a little bit of time to take care of your civic hygiene, it will feel good, and

²⁷ Telephone Interview with Raja Krishnamoorthi, Member of South Asian American Community in Illinois (Mar. 10, 2013).

you will help your family and community immeasurably.” Community leaders, youth, and others in the South Asian American community can play a role in persuading their circles to keep up with these practices. Other ways that South Asian Americans can be active in political and civic life include running for office, volunteering, serving in government roles, working on policy issues and applying one’s skills and interests in a way that motivates them to be involved.

When asked why is it important for South Asian Americans to participate in elections and civic life, he stated:

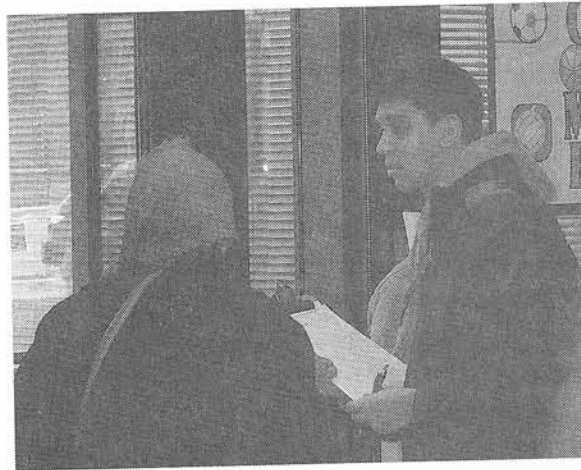
It’s incredibly important because it boils down to whether they want their voices to be heard or counted. . . If they are happy with the way it is and to delegate their decision-making power to everyone else, then maybe you just sit it out and let everyone else decide your destiny. But I would suggest A) it’s your duty to get involved and in your community as an American; and B) if you don’t make these decisions and exercise your vote and ability to participate to have your voice heard, then others will decide for you. When you’re not contributing your voice to the discussions then your interests get marginalized. It’s going to be the people that are at the table [that will be heard].

Mr. Krishnamoorthi provided the example of the Latino community. He explained that Latino Americans came out in record numbers in the recent election and their votes made the difference in the election of the President and other officials. As a result, their number one issue of immigration has made it to the top of the agenda for elected officials of all stripes. If South Asian Americans participate and come out in record numbers, their agenda items – such as H1 visas, quotas for immigrants from South Asian countries, and other immigration reform issues – can be treated more seriously as well. “That’s my

bet,” he explained. “But. . .we won’t know until they show up and start participating.”

Mr. Krishnamoorti’s remarks demonstrate that more information is needed about the issues of concern to South Asian American voters. SAAPRI’s recent exit polling efforts reveal important insights about the issues that motivate South Asian Americans to vote and the barriers that prevent more community members from voting.

V. EXIT POLLING



SAAPRI and AAI conducted in-person exit polling research in the Chicago area during the 2012 general elections to learn about the opinions and experiences of Asian American and South Asian American voters.²⁸

Nearly 800 Asian American voters responded to the surveys, and over a quarter of them were South Asian American, namely Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Sri Lankan. Questionnaires

²⁸ SAAPRI and AAI will soon be publishing a full report regarding exit polling of Asian American voters in 2012, including further details on the data discussed in this article. The forthcoming publication will be made available at SAAPRI’s website, <http://www.saapri.org>.

were available in Hindi and other Asian languages, and many volunteers and staff administering the questionnaires were bilingual. About 80% of the South Asian American respondents were foreign-born and stated that English was not their first language.

Among South Asian American respondents, over 20% reported that they understand English less than very well, but *only about 7%* used a translated ballot or bilingual poll worker. This data reflects notable language access barriers faced by South Asian American voters in Illinois and the need for more assistance and awareness about available resources.

Of the voters surveyed, most voted for Democrats, but most voters named substantive issues rather than parties as their top priorities when choosing a candidate. When asked about what factors were most important when selecting a candidate, South Asian American voters primarily listed economy or jobs, health-care, and personal characteristics – including, ethics, trust, integrity, morals, and other similar characteristics. Many respondents self-reported that they “always vote.” Many are civically engaged in other ways, including working with other people to deal with some issue facing their community, contacting a government official to express their views on public issues, and giving money to a candidate or party.

When listing reasons why their family and friends do not vote, exit polling respondents mentioned that these individuals are not citizens, not interested, or not registered to vote; other factors included limited English ability and lack of transportation. These responses identify some of the obstacles faced by immigrant voters. SAAPRI recently undertook another community-based research project to study barriers to civic engagement by South Asian Americans in Illinois, revealing insights about the effect of corruption on civic engagement.

VI. BARRIERS TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: CORRUPTION IN ILLINOIS POLITICS

In 2012, SAAPRI and political science researcher, Maya Pillai, conducted a pilot study regarding South Asian Americans' views on ethics and corruption in Illinois politics.²⁹ The backdrop for our pilot study was several high profile scandals that involved local South Asian Americans. South Asian Americans played a part in corruption scandals and the context of machine politics in Illinois, which, for many years, has provided immigrants and minorities to an opportunity for advancement that they otherwise may have difficulty attaining.³⁰ While some South Asian American community members have used their connections – or social capital – for negative and corrupt purposes, the pilot study suggests that social capital can instead be deployed for constructive goals such as civic engagement and ethical governance. Analyzing examples of corruption as well as attitudes of South Asian Americans in Illinois, the pilot study concludes that ethnic networks in Illinois can be used for good.³¹

Nearly all the respondents to the pilot study's survey thought that corruption is a general problem in Illinois, with more than three-fourths of the respondents seeing corruption as a problem in the South Asian American community. The data shows that South Asian Americans are most disturbed and affected by corruption within their ethnic network, giving them a personal stake in detecting corruption and advancing ethics. One community member noted, "If I would like to enter political office. . ., I do not want my reputation to be tainted because of a

²⁹ Maya Pillai & South Asian American Policy and Research Institute, *Social Capital in Illinois: Potential & Pitfalls*, Proceedings Paper for "What's in the Water in Illinois?" Ethics & Reform Symposium by Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University, available at http://www.paulsimoninstitute.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=589:ethics-and-reform-symposium.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

reputation of corruption associated with South Asian Americans.” Another person stated, “When an ‘ethnic person’ is guilty of such behavior, we are all automatically associated to that person because of our perceived ethnicity and race. . . .”³²

The research showed a balance between assimilation and ties to ethnic heritage. More than half (60%) of the respondents considered themselves South Asian American, with a large majority (93%) of the respondents stating that their ethnic identity was important to them. Most respondents (69%) stated that most (25% to 75%) of the people in their network are either South Asian or South Asian American. That said, most respondents also said that they had been in the United States for many years and had ties to the U.S. Interestingly, more than three-fourths of the respondents ranked “South Asian American heritage” as *last* in desired qualities in a political candidate, prioritizing instead “ethical character”, followed closely by “responsiveness to community concerns”. This suggests that the community could be well poised for deeper civic engagement and anti-corruption efforts.³³

Community members who responded to the survey showed an interest in spreading the trend of civic and political participation. Additionally, when asked if they can play a role in discouraging corruption among their family and community, almost three-quarters of the respondents said “yes.” Respondents suggested programs to combat corruption such as education and discussion about transparency and ethics, opportunities for community input, and trainings and forums hosted by SAAPRI. One individual stated, “I would want to ‘do something about [corruption],’ but I don’t know where to start or what I’d be capable of accomplishing. . . .I think this is where the ‘power in numbers’ would apply where communities could organize to condemn these behaviors.”³⁴

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

The study concludes that government reform efforts should draw upon social capital among South Asian Americans and other immigrant and minority communities to overcome the history of corruption in Illinois. As the study notes, “strategically engaging the diversity of Illinois’s population could help transform the current liability of machine politics into a culture of ethical practice that is an asset to the state.”³⁵

VII. CONCLUSION

The large number of South Asian American eligible voters in Illinois indicates the great potential for political empowerment, but it also indicates the need for civic engagement. It is crucial for SAAPRI and other organizations, researchers, and community members to raise the visibility of civic participation opportunities and tackle barriers facing South Asian Americans. Civic engagement provides South Asian Americans with an avenue to have a greater impact on our community and our society at large.

³⁵ *Id.*