

The Impact of Indian-Americans in a Georgia Congressional District

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Minority politics play a crucial role in U.S. elections and representation, and the politics of Georgia and the South provide an excellent example of the impact of minority groups. The trend of the Democratic Party towards forming biracial coalitions over the past half-century, the emphasis on the creation of majority-minority districts, and the continuing emergence of influential political interest organizations among minority groups indicate the diversity of paths through which minority groups have made their political presence known. Indian-Americans as a politically active minority group have emerged later than other minority groups in Georgia, with many steps left to be made before Indian-Americans become politically influential at a level proportional to their resources and means. However, the group has been making significant strides over the previous two decades, most notably in the support given by the Indian-American community to current Congresswoman Denise Majette of the 4th district in Georgia. Congresswoman Majette overcame the incumbent Cynthia McKinney to win the Democratic primary and follow through by beating out the Republican opponent. Indian-Americans, whether or not determining the outcome of the election, contributed significantly and in a manner that demonstrated a more effective political mobilization and unity than had been shown in the past in Georgia. An analysis of the role of Indian-Americans in Congresswoman Majette's election offers an insight into the maturation of this ethnic group's role in politics in Georgia and also points out areas in which Indian-Americans could improve and become more efficient in advocating their community's interests.

Problems that block political activism among Indian-Americans today go back to the traditional mindset and perceptions of politics held by first-generation members of the community. A motivation common to most Indian immigrants in coming to the U.S. involves the seeking out of economic opportunity; very few of these individuals intend to influence the political system but rather focus their efforts on their specific trade or business as it stands within the system. Others seek educational opportunity, and in this case first-generation Indian-Americans devote most of their time to academic pursuits in hopes of increasing their attractiveness in the job market. A large portion of this group may also intend to eventually return to India or settle outside of the U.S.; whether or not such an intent is actualized, this sentiment produces an even further lack of interest in politics as feelings of transience and impermanence make activism seem not worth the resources and time expended. Yet another problem relating directly to first-generation Indian-Americans involves citizenship; a significant part of the community only has short term plans and objectives in the U.S., not feeling a need to apply for citizenship or seek naturalization, and consequently not being able to voice their concerns through the vote. Rather than looking for other methods and activities through which to exercise political influence, such as volunteerism and financial contributions, these individuals see political involvement as futile when they do not even have the ability to vote in elections and do not bother to engage in other activities. The experience with politics that many first-generation immigrants from India possess also often takes the form of negative dealings with corrupt rural or state governments, depending upon the region of India from which the individual emigrated. Also, many Indian-Americans lack education and lack mentorship on a local level to counteract this ignorance (Contractor and Parekh, 2002).

All of these factors combine to hinder political participation by Indian-Americans and generate negative perceptions concerning political action, especially within first generation members of the minority group.

Other characteristics of the Indian-American population also hinder political activism. The small size of this minority group makes it rather difficult to use the strength of the vote to sway any single election (Parekh, 2003). Due to the small numbers compared to other minority groups such as African-Americans or Jews, Indian-Americans do not have the same influence as a voting bloc in elections, and comparatively it seems ineffective to unite and vote as a community. The voting bloc method is hindered by the lack of registered voters within the Indian-American community; nationally, only thirty percent of Indian immigrants are registered (Contractor & Parekh, 2002). Also, unity of the vote becomes a question itself, as the approximately one hundred Indian-American interest organizations in Georgia requires an extensive effort to network and combine the groups' resources. Certain groups do work well together and their cooperation enhances political influence (Desijournal, 2003); however, the divisions between other groups dilute Indian-American influence and sometimes make collaboration impossible. A prime example of such lack of cooperation, at least in political activism, can be seen in the interaction between all-inclusive organizations such as the Indian American Cultural Association (IACA) and more specific organizations such as Pujari or the Gujarati Samaj of Atlanta. These latter, more specific groups single out a specific cultural subgroup, depending on the region of origin in India and thus shared cultural and religious practices. Some of these specific organizations do network with the more inclusive organizations, but unfortunately in

many cases such networking remains limited to cooperation on very broad seminars or large festivals. Members of Pujari interested in political activism may miss opportunities offered by the IACA due to a lack of communication between the two organizations. On an individual level, division also comes about due to a lack of a support structure for political action; the former president of the IACA and a key player in the Majette election, Ani Agnihotri, notes that previously Indian-Americans conducted political action in a “very disconnected way . . . never leveraging on our mutual contacts” and thus not reinforcing the efforts of the community (Agnihotri, 2003). Furthermore, in a path-dependent fashion, Indian-American youths run the risk of lacking a significant education on relevant political issues, especially on the local level, due to the lack of understanding and the lack of a desire to understand within first-generation parents perpetuated to their children unless there is some type of intervention through schools or organizations. Indian-American interest groups now combat ignorance and lack of knowledge of political issues in Georgia and elsewhere throughout the nation (www.iacfp.org, 2003), but less attention paid to local politics and more of a focus only on national politics often results. This problem has shown itself in the ambitions of some Indian-American candidates for Congressional office without accompaniment by prior grassroots experience, suggesting that despite the large strides made in education on political issues there remains a deficiency in understanding a more basic level of political activism that must be tackled before larger steps can be taken (Desijournal, 2003). Indian-American political activism has thus faced these dilemmas in its continuing process to develop into an important representative force of the minority community.

In the face of all of these obstacles, this minority group's participation in the political process has manifested itself in Georgia, albeit less successfully, prior to the campaign of Congresswoman Majette. In order to understand the advances made by the Indian-American community in exercising its influence in this election, earlier work and past approaches to politics in Georgia need to be examined. Financial contributions in Georgia put forth by Indian-American donors demonstrate a well-intended form of political participation that did not have positive results due to a lack of political strategy or awareness of the effects. Funds from Indian-American community members for Georgia campaigns, prior to the turn of the century, went to members of the Georgia Congressional delegation without regards to their stance on issues important to the community. Narender Reddy, head of Indian American Forum for Political Education, remarks that "at one time, out of the eleven member Congressional delegation from Georgia, eight were consistently voting against Indian-American and India's interests," adding that many prominent Indian-American donors contributed to the same Congressmen that voted against the minority community's interests (Parekh, 2002). Thus, the larger part of the Georgia Congressional delegation received monetary support from Indian-Americans with no reason to be held accountable to their interests since the contributors did not do so themselves. Disunity among Indian-American support in Georgia also plagued the community; such support has been described as that coming from "a handful of concerned individuals doing what they could in their individual capacities" rather than a united front or a cooperative venture (Contractor and Parekh, 2002). Such disunity hindered the ability to mobilize voters or volunteers behind any one candidate or representative. Consequently, although these efforts were being made by the

newly political Georgia Indian-American community, changes still needed to occur before the group matured into a politically potent force.

The Indian-American community also implemented some successful actions and developed positive trends prior to Congresswoman Majette's campaign, which fed into the success of this particular venture into Georgia politics, further amplified by its victory. Due to a lack of a proper model to follow for themselves, Indian-Americans have frequently turned to the Jewish-American lobby for guidance as well as for support in political issues. At a national level, leaders of Indian-American communities have come together with Jewish organization leaders to collaborate on different projects and issues (Fingerhut, 2002). Beginning with foreign policy – with the relationship of support over this particular issue strengthened ever since the terrorist attacks of September 11th – the Indian-American and Jewish interest groups have grown closer and many Indian-Americans have benefited from the experiences and interactions with Jewish political organizations such as the American Jewish Committee (AJC). The AJC's support has even extended as far as providing training sessions for grass-roots efforts by Indian-Americans in recent years. Kumar P. Barve, majority leader of the House of Delegates, suggests that "Indian-Americans see the American Jewish community as a yardstick against which to compare themselves" (Cooperman, 2003). The Indian-American community in Georgia and in the Fourth District also extended their connections to the Jewish community, fostering a greater level of success in Majette's election. Another key feature of Indian-American politics in Georgia prior to the Fourth District election is the emergence of various structured interest groups and organizations to empower the minority community in political endeavors. Organizations

such as IAFPE and the Georgia Indo American Chamber of Commerce (GIACC) complement and feed off of national organizations such as the Indian American Center for Political Awareness (IACPA) and the National Federation of Indian-American Associations (NFIA). These groups demonstrate the emerging presence of a unified Indian-American response, both on the national level and the state and local levels in Georgia, meant to combat the fledgling disunity of the group and seeking to educate and align communities to support common interests (Parekh, 2002). These qualities of Indian-American political participation in Georgia were built upon and reinforced to bring about the success of Indian-American interests and Congresswoman Denise Majette in the 2002 elections.

The contest between Denise Majette, a local African-American judge, and Cynthia McKinney, the incumbent who possessed anti-India views, began to play out among these conditions in the Indian-American community which makes up a small yet significant part of the Georgia fourth district's constituency. Both of these African-American women competed in a black-majority district based in DeKalb County, where African-Americans make up 50.2 percent of the voting age citizenry and the district is considered safely Democratic. Thus, the true contest remained in the Democratic primary; Denise Majette, having won the primary election, continued to beat the Republican candidate Cynthia Van Auken with seventy-seven percent of the vote (Barone, 2003). Former Congresswoman McKinney antagonized Indian-American interests, despite appeals to the contrary by community leaders, and thus prominent Indian-Americans of the fourth district were spurred on to communicate with then Judge Majette. After ascertaining that Majette would indeed support Indian-American interests

in Congress and would be open to communication concerning such interests, the grassroots efforts by Indian-Americans moved to support her with as much strength as it could muster. Early support through fundraising, volunteering, and other visible means of aid came from this minority community. This support preceded the arrival of other interest groups and contributors to the scene, including the Jewish groups backing Majette and Arab and Muslim groups backing McKinney (Rajghatta, 2002). With the help of a crossover Republican vote in the primary (Desijournal, 2002), Majette succeeded in securing 58.3 percent of the vote, McKinney only receiving 41.7 percent (Barone, 2003). Indian-Americans in the end succeeded in raising twenty thousand dollars for Majette's primary election (Rajan, 2002) and around sixty thousand dollars for the entire election (Parekh, 2002). Through each step of the process, the Indian-American community demonstrated advances in their approach to campaigns and political involvement that community leaders hope to use as a model for future grassroots campaigns in Georgia and the rest of the South where significantly large Indian-American populations exist.

The identification of a conflict of interest with former Congresswoman McKinney provided the first step in a potent response by the Indian-American community. Unlike early donors in the history of Georgia politics who would contribute funds to a campaign without a proper investigation of the congressional record of the candidate, members of the fourth district identified problems with McKinney's stance and actions, attempted to engage her, and then pursued a relationship with a more favorable candidate when negotiations were deemed impossible. This complex approach presented a departure from less strategic means of political support enacted in the past. The former Congresswoman continued to make remarks against India that were inflammatory and

believed to be completely inappropriate by Indian-Americans. “The Indian government is responsible for terrorism against its own people. It engineered the massacre of bus passengers in Kashmir and the blowing up of a passenger airliner” is one of her most severe and provocative remarks (www.ilw.com, 2003). Her comments received a response by the Indian ambassador at the time, who replied to her that parts of her accusations were “not factually correct” and that the accusations of terrorism were “patently untrue and without any basis. I would urge you not to accept unverified reports from dubious organizations and [urge you instead to] draw your conclusions from independent and objective sources” (Mansingh, 2001). Other speeches made by McKinney suggested that President Bush had ignored warnings of the September 11th attacks in support of the arms industry, offending an even greater portion of the public and her constituency (www.ilw.com, 2003). Among the ranks of other anti-Indian politicians such as Dan Burton of Indiana (Dutt, 2003) and Robert Torricelli of New Jersey, McKinney consistently voted in favor of legislation against India. Despite all of these indications that McKinney acted firmly on the side of anti-Indian interests, the Indian-American community of the fourth district according to community leader Narsi Narasimhan attempted to “engage Representative Cynthia McKinney and educate her about why India and USA make natural allies” (www.desijournal.com, 2003). When it became evident that the former Congresswoman would not change her opinions on India, the Indian-American community took early action in sponsoring her opponent, Denise Majette.

The early, organized action taken by community leaders marked the most important part of the Indian-American connection to Congresswoman Majette’s

campaign. Although McKinney obviously served as an antagonist to Indian and Indian-American concerns, the community approached Judge Majette carefully and made sure that this McKinney opponent would prove supportive and open to the community whereas the incumbent had not (Parekh, 2003). Salim Jetha, a successful businessman, R. C. Patel, an influential in the business community, Ani Agnihotri, the former president of the IACA, and Dr. Narsi Narasimhan, a politically active member of the fourth district, represented Indian-American voters through a series of events and interactions with candidate Majette through which she convinced the group that she would present them with a “smart, viable and strong candidate” (www.desijournal.com, 2003). The first meeting took place between a dozen or so of these prominent Indian-American businessmen, media representatives, and politically active individuals and then Judge Majette and some of her campaign staff at a local Holiday Inn (Parekh, 2003). Following this meeting, Indian-Americans became one of the first groups to support the candidate; this early action proved helpful on both sides by providing Majette with early support prior to the arrival of other volunteers and financial contributors to the scene and by allowing Georgian Indian-Americans to become visible and respected through their unified backing of the candidate. The community leaders brought together their organizations and their contacts to implement action early on in the process. Agnihotri notes his involvement bringing the support of the Georgia Indian American Political Action Committee (GIAPAC) with which he is associated as an example (Agnihotri, 2003). As reported by one of the leaders of Majette support, the visible backing of the candidate before the impact of Jewish money on poll numbers made the Indian-American effort noticeable before it could be swallowed up by supporters with greater means and

resources (www.ilw.com, 2003). Consequently, early and organized action became an important part of Indian-American involvement in this election to be emulated in similar future endeavors.

Fundraising initiated by Indian-Americans marked the centerpiece of the efforts made to support Congresswoman Majette. In total, Majette raised \$1,935,723 by the end of the election. Around eighty percent of this amount came from individual contributors, but seventeen percent came from PAC's and three percent came from self-financing. In contrast, McKinney only raised \$953,621 (www.opensecrets.org, 2003). Jewish donors accounted for a large part of Majette's contributions, but Indian-Americans also contributed early with twenty thousand dollars raised in the primary and sixty thousand overall. Dr. Narasimhan commented that most Indian-American individuals contributed approximately \$250, and that most of the financial support from the minority group came from Atlanta rather than out-of-state unlike that of the Jewish supporters (www.desijournal.com, 2003). Several supporters provided more in direct monetary contribution and also used their resources to attract more money to the campaign, such as Salim Jetha and R.C. Patel. Parthiv Parekh, editor of the Indian-interest Khabar magazine, noted that these fundraisers proved "more than the typical photo-op fundraiser" often organized by business members to place their name in the spotlight rather than advance any political goals (Parekh, 2003). Another important aspect of fundraising includes the cooperation with Jewish groups on fundraisers. The phono-thon run by Jewish and Indian-American supporters provides an example of the combination of resources to generate more funding for the Majette campaign (www.ilw.com, 2003). The cooperation between the two groups seemed mainly financial, as the two groups

according to a student campaign worker Harin Contractor “took . . . business connections and social connections and made them political,” fostering the generation of funds from the fourth district constituency (Cooperman, 2003). Collaboration with other groups on fundraising extended to other organizations as well; leaders of the Indian-American effort reported their efforts to get support from various other organizations in the community as well as to secure direction and guidance for their own endeavors (Agnihotri, 2003).

Thus, although Indian-Americans only raised around two percent of Majette’s total funds for the campaign, they successfully made an impact early on in the process and by cooperating with other contributors. This quality of the campaign marked a significant improvement from earlier fundraising that lacked direction, unity, or coordination with other groups in the community, signaling important progress in the political means and awareness of the Indian-American population in Georgia.

For this election, mobilizing the Indian-American community also served to make this event a model for future political involvement. Besides working together to organize fundraisers, volunteers came out in new force and unity to back Denise Majette’s campaign. An important volunteer role included bringing together the various Indian-American associations that played a part in the fourth district to accomplish the campaign and fundraising goals in this election (www.desijournal.com, 2003). Volunteers also aided in getting out the message through grassroots, word-of-mouth campaigns in the district (Parekh, 2002). Several volunteers took roles in the campaign that lasted as full-week activities, showing that Indian-Americans were willing to invest more of themselves and their time in such an important election to their community (www.ilw.com, 2003). Mobilizing the vote also occurred in an effective fashion during

the Majette primary election. Congresswoman Majette herself remarked that “the leaders were quite successful in mobilizing the community . . . they were organized, and used technology efficiently to harness grassroots support” (Parekh, 2002). The most prominent example of this voter mobilization can be seen in Dr. Narasimhan and his co-volunteers e-mailing out information to 3,400 Indian-Americans in the district, including information about McKinney’s most controversial remarks, presenting Denise Majette as a positive alternative to the incumbent, and urging support in the campaign from the community (Rajan, 2002). This informational campaign began early on in the process, with hopes that the message would spread to the larger Indian-American community of 8,000 living in the district (Dutt, 2003). Such a extensive grassroots campaign within the Indian-American community marked the change in the group’s approach to achieving political goals, adding to it the base of grassroots efforts that many members of the community often overlooked or did not understand in their attempts to exert political influence.

The efforts of the Indian-American community have consequently led to a maturation of politics previously unseen within this specific minority group in Georgia, and the advances made in the election continue to build as Indian-Americans overcome the problems and hindrances to political action and awareness that previously dominated the community. The supporters of Majette have not ceased to interact with her and have not let up on their goals as a community, different from the nature of short-term and oscillating support of the past. Continuing communication with Majette and inviting her and other politicians such as governor Sonny Perdue to community events such as the Festival of India (Hentschel, 2003) and the Indian-American beauty pageant

(www.ilw.com, 2003) marked the dedication to hold representatives and politicians responsible following support. The problem of not holding politicians responsible has, in the past, been a hallmark of Indian-American participation; Contractor and Parekh note in their article in a metaphor relating political accountability to purchasing merchandise at the store that rather than “receiving the merchandise on government checkouts . . . the Indian community like many others have cared less and walked out” (Contractor & Parekh, 2002). The Majette election has shown a turnaround from this previous quality of Indian-American political participation. Jeannie Layson, a staff worker in Majette’s office, has said that Congresswoman Majette honors her commitment to the Indian-American community in her district in various ways. Majette has planned to visit India with a congressional delegation in the spring of 2004, in order to understand the “cultural, political, and economic landscape” of the old country of so many of her constituents, and she intends to explore trade issues during her trip. This activity among others shows the continuing relationship between Majette and the Indian-Americans of her constituency, suggesting that the political awareness and efforts of the community has not subsided or disappeared by any means since the election (Layson, 2003). As former IACA president Mr. Agnihotri remarks, the fourth district campaign “established a framework from which to run future elections” (Agnihotri, 2003) and the community continues to use the lessons learned and advances made through this campaign to further political awareness and activities.

Other elections and political situations in Georgia and in the South reflect a changing Indian-American role in political action. Indian-Americans supporting Sonny Perdue in his campaign for governorship have been appointed to positions such as the

Georgia Regional Transportation Authority and various other state-wide committees (Contractor, 2003). As in the case of Shi Shailendra, who raised two hundred thousand dollars for Governor Roy Barnes and received an appointment to the same Transportation Authority board, and similarly in the case of the Perdue supporters, following up campaign support with an active role in an office or position shows the longer term dedication to political action by Indian-Americans not previously expressed (Parekh, 2002). Also, political organizations have increased their activities and involvement in a variety of fashions in Georgia. Dr. Narasimhan, who launched the GIAPAC, continues to use it and expand it as a platform for disseminating information among the Indian-American community, stimulating grassroots efforts, and raising funds for political actions. The Georgia Chapter of IAFPE also has expanded its efforts to get the community involved in politics and is complemented by the Democratic equivalent, the Indo American Democrats of Georgia (Parekh, 2002). As previously noted, through communication and education of representatives, eight of the eleven Congressmen from Georgia now vote along Indian and Indian-American interests, and credit is claimed by these various active political organizations. Georgia's politics continue to demonstrate an expansion of awareness and action by Indian-Americans that has not ended with the successful Majette campaign, but rather has continued off of the momentum from that particular project.

Other elections show a potential for even further Indian-American political activism in the South. The loss of former Representative Earl Hilliard in Alabama to Artur Davis in the primary despite his incumbency shared some of the same qualities of the primary involving Majette. Hilliard voted against Indian interests as did McKinney,

although he did not become such a controversial figure in doing so. However, his work and opinions for Middle Eastern interests and Palestinians eventually appeared to become one-sided to Jewish contributors, who sent their full backing with his opponent Davis (“Hilliard Says . . .”, 2002). In this situation, Indian-Americans in Alabama could also have exercised a political presence, but nothing significant occurred in terms of a response to Hilliard with regards to Indian issues. A Davis staff member, Daryl Perkins, notes that although a significant Indian-American population exists in the district and there has been interaction between Davis staff with the community at a minimal level, the campaign noted nothing notable in terms of support from that community prior to the election (Perkins, 2003). The similarity of the situation to the fourth district election suggests that the model for action and awareness used in support of Majette could be implemented in Davis’ district to mobilize Indian-American support there. Also, the Louisiana race for the governorships marks a very notable election involving Indian-American interests. Bobby Jindal, running against Democrat Kathleen Blanco, demonstrated the viability of a Indian-American candidate even in the South for such a high-profile position as governor. His support came in large part from Indian-Americans who contributed thirty to forty percent of his campaign’s finances (Contractor, 2003). Despite his loss, Jindal’s election demonstrated that nationally, regionally, and at the state level, Indian-Americans in cooperation with their allies and associated organizations can take political participation realistically to high-level, nationally important seats. Consequently, the South demonstrates even further potential to realize Indian-American political strength and presents instances through which the lessons of the 2002 fourth district election of Georgia can be implemented in other locations.

The developments and advances evidenced in the Indian-American community's political efforts in Majette's election and in other endeavors throughout Georgia and the South show that this minority community is indeed expanding its influence and gaining more experience and efficacy. Although progress must continue, Indian-Americans are proceeding in the right direction to overcome the barriers to political participation that have existed due to their history and the nature of the community. The community now begins to realize its political potential in proportion to its means; for a group with a median household income ranking higher than that of any other ethnicity in the U.S., that potential is high despite the smaller numbers in population. Majette's election and the work and lessons associated with it provides a model for future activism. It represents a positive step for Indian-Americans in Georgia and in the South. If the community continues to foster this growth in political participation and understanding, then its interests will be better served and the Indian-Americans population will realize that their role in politics is important and goes beyond merely the voting strength of its members.

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