

THE POLITICAL BEHAVIOR OF INDIAN AMERICAN WOMEN: GENDERED AND GENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON RACE, IMMIGRATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

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On its face, the Indian American¹ community's journey from being ostracized as an "undesirable alien, as a lesser breed, or a benighted heathen"² to being heralded as ambassadors of democracy and role models for minority achievement³ seemingly justifies their celebration as torch bearers of the American dream. Since first arriving on the shores of United States, Indian Americans have tirelessly battled to overcome immigration, naturalization, employment and miscegenation. Correspondingly, they have

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¹ For the purposes of this article, the term "Indian American" will be adopted when referring to resident aliens and citizens of Indian descent. Others have employed "South Asian," *see, e.g.,* PEI-TE LIEN ET AL., *THE POLITICS OF ASIAN AMERICANS* (2004); or "Asian Indian American," *see, e.g.,* Sanjeev Khagram et al., *Seen, Rich, But Unheard? The Politics of Asian Indians in the United States*, in *ASIAN AMERICANS AND POLITICS: PERSPECTIVES, EXPERIENCES, PROSPECTS* (Gordon Chang ed., 2001).

² Francis C. Assisi, *Fear and Loathing: Hinduphobia in America* (Apr. 27, 2005), http://www.christianaggression.org/item_display.php?id=1114640680&type=articles.

³ Jason Richwine, *Indian Americans: The New Model Minority*, *FORBES*, Feb. 24, 2009, *available at* http://www.forbes.com/2009/02/24/bobby-jindal-indian-americans-opinions-contributors_immigrants_minority.html.

become the “fastest growing” and “wealthiest minority” in America.⁴ Yet, the story does not end there.

Behind the scenes of narratives about model minorities breaking down cultural and institutional barriers is another story—the story of multiple generations of Indian women who have arrived in cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago and New York to support their professional husbands. Many of these women are less educated than their husbands and are thrust into a culture that is unfamiliar to them. Once here, they have to navigate their children through the unfamiliar American educational system, set up a household and become integrated into their neighborhoods, participate in potlucks and block parties. Added to these responsibilities is the expectation that they will fulfill their roles as new citizens and participate in the political arena, in most cases, as first-time voters. How these women learn to navigate this new political landscape without the counsel of their mothers, daughters or peers is the driving question of this Article.

This Article proposes to study the political involvement of Indian Americans, and specifically Indian women, who are exposed to democratic government institutions that demand participation from citizens. The path toward political involvement can be complex for those who are unfamiliar. The puzzle that Indian women present to political behaviorists is that, given their socio-economic status and high degree of education, one would assume that Indian American women would lean toward the Republican party. After all, research on particular immigrant communities suggest that high levels of economic prosperity result in a conservative political identification.⁵ And yet, paradoxically, Indian American women present an opposite scenario—where high socio-economic levels produce a stable Democratic identification. Why? The main goal of this Article is to develop an answer to the question of why Indian American women do not affiliate according to traditional models of political identification and what this means for current theories on political behavior.

I. METHODOLOGY

This Article will incorporate a combination of interpretive methods to examine the socializing experiences of the Indian American women. An

⁴ Gitika Ahuja, *Indian-Americans Watch as Bush Visits Their Native Land*, ABC NEWS, Mar. 1, 2006, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=1673762&page=1>.

⁵ See, e.g., B. E. Cain, D. R. Kiewiet, et al., *The Acquisition of Partisanship by Latinos and Asian Americans*, 35 AM. J. OF POL. SCI. 390, 390–422 (1991).

examination of political learning and political incorporation necessarily involves an in-depth analysis of the community that draws from the personal experiences of Indian Americans. Consequently, this section analyzes focus groups that the Authors conducted to examine how Indian American women develop a political identity in this country. The interpretive analysis will be a multifaceted process: Due to the variance in terms of clustering and geography of the Indian community, focus groups were conducted in four different areas around the country, spread in terms of population clusters (large vs. small) and geography (North, South, West, Midwest). The sites for the focus groups include San Jose/San Francisco, Los Angeles, Dallas, Atlanta, New York/New Jersey, Chicago and St. Louis. This spread controls for external "noise" associated with extraneous geographic variance.

Participant selection in the focus groups was completed by community representatives at each site. These representatives were charged with selecting a diverse array of Indian Americans, both male and female, based on the following variables: gender, religion, profession, education, length of stay, socio-economic status, Indian region of origin, linguistic background and caste. Because of the breadth of diversity within India, it was important to ensure that individuals who represented the majority of Indian states, linguistic regions, castes and religious beliefs were selected. Of course, a sample population can merely attempt to approximate the larger body from which it is drawn. Finally, the nature of the questions being asked in the surveys and focus groups required that all participants be U.S. citizens.

To attain a degree of uniformity among the focus groups, in addition to interviews, all of the participants completed a written survey.⁶ Together, the surveys and focus groups worked in concert to respond to any potential gaps that either research tool, taken alone, may possess. For example, whereas focus groups provided an opportunity for group-based responses, in which individuals were able to build off the experiences of others in responding to questions, surveys provided a private, more anonymous forum during which sensitive questions may be addressed.

Post-focus group survey results reflected a community that is characterized by a puzzling trend witnessed among a large number of other Asian groups: the Indian Americans surveyed, and women in particular,

⁶ The survey was divided into the following four sections: Basic Profile and Immigration Experience, Identity and Race, Political Learning and Political Participation. Each section was distributed prior to the focus group session that dealt with each of the aforementioned themes.

consistently shy away from the Republican establishment and instead affiliate with Democrats or Independents. Given that conventional wisdom would suggest otherwise, the paradoxical partisan behavior of this community points to the guiding puzzle of this paper: Why do Indian American women go blue?

II. A PROFILE OF THE INDIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Who are Indian Americans? To what extent and in what ways are they becoming politically and socially incorporated? From the perspectives of both their historical entry into the United States and their corresponding economic success, Indian Americans constitute a population and an electorate that is historically, socially, racially, culturally, politically and ideologically distinct from both the majority white and each of the major non-white populations. Indian Americans have a very different history than most immigrants, and from most people of color in American history. For the most part, Indians' history of becoming American cannot be explained by forced entry. While Indians began immigrating to the United States in the early 19th century, ninety-five percent of the current population entered the U.S. post-1965.⁷ This latter group, with few exceptions, entered as medical doctors, engineers, scientists and businessmen and women, satisfying professional and technical requirements that were imposed on all immigrants by the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965.⁸ The majority of Indians entering the United States after the 1965 Immigration Act represented the socially and economically privileged segments of Indian society.⁹ They did not immigrate to the United States to escape economic and political oppression, but rather to further establish financial security. The professional status of the newly immigrating Indians prevented this group from suffering the same types of persistent income inequality and de facto social segregation experienced by other non-white minorities, on account of past and present prejudice and legalized discrimination.¹⁰ Instead, they almost immediately began to enjoy considerable levels of socio-economic success with high incomes and

⁷ Monica Boyd, *The Changing Nature of Central and Southeast Asian Immigration to the United States: 1961-1972*, 8 INT'L MIGRATION REV. 507 (1974).

⁸ Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, Pub. L. No. 89-236, 79 Stat. 911 (1965).

⁹ See generally Boyd, *supra* note 7.

¹⁰ LIEN ET AL., *supra* note 1.

educational achievement upon entering the United States.¹¹ These economic and social factors have created a very distinct experience for Indians in terms of racial patterning after incorporation into society.

And yet, merely examining the racial and socio-economic dimensions of this community provides an incomplete perspective. One area in which research has been woefully scant is regarding the question of how gender interacts with income and education level to impact political behavior within immigrant communities. While there is some literature that examines the role of women in politics,¹² there are few studies on immigrant women and their political participation.¹³ This Article attempts to fill the void in the existing literature by addressing the political behavior of Indian American women. This question becomes particularly interesting because it addresses how traditional gender roles within Indian households have been impacted and sometimes upset by the larger racial and socio-economic contexts within which they have been forced to be redrawn. Drawing from extensive focus group and survey-based research conducted in ten metropolitan centers across the U.S., this study will specifically examine the interplay between gender and politics, in terms of political learning and behavior within the context of the immigration experiences of Indian American women.

The complicated nature of the Indian American population gives us a unique opportunity to pose questions with broad ramifications for American politics along multiple important dimensions, including immigration, race, ethnicity, etc. A focus on the contours, sources and impacts of the social and political identities, orientations and participation of Asian Indian women presents unique opportunities to advance understandings of the dynamics of the interplay of these factors in structuring the adaptation and incorporation of immigrants at large.

A. Profile of Indian American Women

The prevailing wisdom in political science literature would suggest that this unique profile of Indian American women would directly translate into high levels of political participation and conservative partisan

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² M. MARGARET CONWAY, GERTRUDE A. STEUERNAGEL & DAVID AHERN, *WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION* (1997).

¹³ See CAROL HARDY-FANTA, *LATINA POLITICS, LATINO POLITICS* (1993) for an examination of Latina politics in Boston.

affiliation.¹⁴ And yet, the predictive power of the socio-economic model of participation that has long held true in political science no longer holds up. Indian American women affiliate in significant numbers with the Democratic Party, and focus group interview data highlights this paradox.¹⁵ For example, a housewife in San Jose, California had the following comment:

[S]ome of the gay issues and stuff, you know, I would not, coming from the background that I have, I would be totally anti-gay marriage or something, but I do see that there is a system that is a partnership where there are benefits like Medical benefits. So I do see the logic in a gay marriage which previously I would have never agreed to or imagined to myself.

B. Acquisition of Partisanship: Reasoning Why “Indian Americans Go Blue?”

Indian Americans are entrepreneurial, hard-working, striving, traditionalist, family-oriented, religious, assimilationist, patriotic—what could be better? And what are their issues? Tax reform and regulation, particularly as they affect small businesses; free trade, which includes a robust defense of outsourcing; and perhaps more than anything else, tort reform—Indian Americans are a community of doctors, not plaintiffs’ attorneys, and their political activity has been fueled by a desire to rein in medical liability. Affirmative action is an issue too, for as Michael Barone points out, many Indian Americans had nasty experiences with preferential policy back in their homeland. This community as a whole—to indulge in some stereotyping—is exceptionally merit-minded. . . . This is the type of thinking that should have Republicans licking their chops.¹⁶

The statement above, taken from a *National Review* article on the Indian American community, reflects an assumption that is shared by many politicians, journalists and political scientists alike: As a socially conservative and highly economically successful community that would

¹⁴ SIDNEY VERBA, KAY LEHAMN SCHOLZMAN & HENRY BRADY, VOICE AND EQUALITY (1995).

¹⁵ All quotes from focus group participants come from focus group interviews, data on file with the authors.

¹⁶ Jay Nordlinger, *Pioneers! Rangers! Indians!*, NAT’L REV., Dec. 27, 2004, at 38–40.

benefit from fiscal conservative policy, Indian Americans are the ideal membership bloc for the Republican Party. And yet, as Table 1.1 illustrates, the community is instead characterized by a puzzling trend that is witnessed among a large number of other Asian groups: Indian Americans consistently shy away from the Republican establishment and instead affiliate with Democrats or Independents.

Table 1.1: Percentage Distribution of Partisanship by Ethnic Origin

All Asians	Democrat 36(41)	Independent 13(12)	Republican 16(20)	Nonidentifier 35(27)
Chinese	32(38)	3(2)	9(14)	56(47)
Korean	43(47)	12(9)	22(35)	23(9)
Vietnamese	12(15)	15(13)	16(17)	58(56)
Japanese	40(42)	20(22)	12(16)	28(20)
Filipino	40(46)	14(12)	23(25)	23(18)
South Asian¹⁷	44(57)	23(18)	16(20)	16(6)

Source: *Pilot National Asian American Political Survey (PNAAPS) 2000-2001*¹⁸ *Note: Entries in parentheses are figures among voters in the 2000 Elections.

What explains this strong affiliation to the Democratic Party? In answering this question, we have the unique opportunity to explore several important facets of the relationship between Indian American politics and the American party system, including the acquisition, direction, strength, and potential consequences of party identification for Indian Americans. The importance of studying partisanship is recognized by Campbell, who contends that “[p]arty identification is an attachment to a party that helps the citizen locate him/herself and others on the political landscape.”¹⁹ In particular, by studying this process, we are able to gain insight into the introductory stages of political behavior.

¹⁷ Pei-te Lien et al., *Asian Pacific-American Public Opinion and Political Participation*, 34 PS: POL. SCI. & POL. 625 (2001) (South Asian is defined as Asian Indian/Pakistani Americans).

¹⁸ PEI-TE LIEN, INTER-UNIVERSITY CONSORTIUM FOR POLITICAL & SOCIAL RESEARCH, *PILOT NATIONAL ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICAL SURVEY (PNAAPS), 2000-2001* (2001).

¹⁹ J.E. Campbell et al., *Partisanship and Voting*, in *RESEARCH IN MICROPOLITICS* 100 (Samuel Long ed., 1986).

C. Predicting Party Choice

As a population that is predominantly foreign-born and that includes many new arrivals, Indian Americans' identification with major political parties can be viewed as part of the process of adaptation to American institutions, society and culture. The two-party system, with nearly all levels of government run by individuals who belong to either major political party, is a unique feature to American democracy. The two major American parties serve as a crucial link between the general population and the government by helping recruit candidates for office, organizing campaigns and the vote, mobilizing participation and turnout and controlling legislative and executive actions.²⁰ It is not surprising, therefore, that partisan loyalties are found to influence political participation, issue beliefs, candidate choice and policy preferences. And yet, despite the degree of influence that political parties possess over American democracy, membership in these parties is free, open and voluntary. So what drives individuals to associate with any one party?

Traditional accounts concerned with the acquisition of partisanship suggest that this process can be influenced by a set of factors related to individual acculturation, political socialization, experiences with the U.S. racial hierarchy, and ethnic identity.²¹ Theories of party identification also point to a number of factors, such as childhood socialization,²² age, length of exposure or length of stay for immigrants²³ and economic advancement,²⁴ as possible determinants of partisan orientation. Additionally, the acquisition of political partisanship may be a function of

²⁰ See generally LIEN ET AL., *supra* note 1.

²¹ *Id.*

²² ANGUS CAMPBELL ET AL., *THE AMERICAN VOTER* (1960); MORRIS FIORINA, *RETROSPECTIVE VOTING IN AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTIONS* (1981).

²³ Philip E. Converse & R. E. Pierce, *Measuring Partisanship*, 11 POL. METH. 143, 143-66 (1987); Norman H. Nie et al., *Political Participation and the Life Cycle*, 6 COMP. POL. 319-40 (1974); Philip E. Converse, *The Dynamics of Party Support: Cohort-Analyzing Party Identification*, 72 AM. POL. SCI. ASS'N. REV. 1401, 1401-05 (1978); Jerome H. Black et al., *Age, Resistance, and Political Learning in a New Environment: The Case of Canadian Immigrants*, 20 COMP. POL. 72, 72-84 (1987); Janelle S. Wong, *The New Dynamics of Immigrants' Political Incorporation* (2001) (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Dept. of Political Science, Yale University) (on file with author).

²⁴ Bruce E. Cain et al., *The Acquisition of Partisanship by Latinos and Asian Americans*, 35 AM. J. POL. SCI. 390, 390-422 (1991).

the mobilization or activation of the targeted public by political parties, candidates or community leaders.²⁵ Specifically relating to the experiences of immigrant communities in the United States, scholars have identified three hypotheses to predict and explain the partisan attachment of various groups: *minority group* hypothesis, *economic advancement* hypothesis and *religious commitment* hypothesis.²⁶ The “minority group status” hypothesis argues that, based on the assumption that the Democratic Party has the image of being more supportive of policies that favor minorities and other disadvantaged groups, the longer the stay of an immigrant in the U.S., the more likely he or she is to be Democratic. Furthermore, support for the Democratic Party is not confined to personal experiences with discrimination or lack of opportunity, but rather every instance of personally experienced discrimination is augmented by knowledge of a friend, neighbor or relative who has received unfair treatment.²⁷

The “economic advancement” hypothesis suggests that as the material well being of immigrants improves, then so does their support of the Republican Party. As rational actors, socio-economically successful immigrants benefit from conservative fiscal policies that are offered by the Republican Party.²⁸ Similarly, a natural corollary to this relationship is the expected positive association of language proficiency and educational achievement with support of the Republican Party. Therefore, the richer, more educated and more fluent in English, the more likely an immigrant is to associate with the Republican Party.

Finally, the “religious commitment” hypothesis suggests that those with high levels of religious commitment are more likely to vote Republican than those with lower levels of religious commitment. Geoffrey Layman builds on existing theories that account for the historic differences in the partisan affiliations of mainline Protestants, Catholics and Jews and discovers a “new religious cleavage” based on the strength of religious

²⁵ STEVEN J. ROSENSTONE & JOHN MARK HANSEN, *MOBILIZATION, PARTICIPATION, AND DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* (1993); GORDON CHANG, *ASIAN AMERICANS AND POLITICS: PERSPECTIVES, EXPERIENCES, PROSPECTS*, (2001); Wong, *supra* note 23.

²⁶ Cain et al., *supra* note 24, at 390–422; Lyman A. Kellstedt & John C. Green, *Knowing God's Many People: Denominational Preferences and Political Behavior*, in *REDISCOVERING THE RELIGIOUS FACTOR IN AMERICAN POLITICS* (D.C. Leege & L.A. Kellstedt eds., 1993); WARREN E. MILLER & J. MERROLL SHANKS, *THE NEW AMERICAN VOTER* (1996); LIEN ET AL., *supra* note 1.

²⁷ Cain et al., *supra* note 24, at 390–422.

²⁸ *Id.*

commitment and the orthodoxy of religious beliefs and affiliation.²⁹ In other words, the stronger the role that religion plays in an individual's identity, the more likely he or she is to associate with the Republican Party.³⁰ Conversely, Layman finds support for the tendency of individuals who are weakly affiliated or non-affiliated with religious denominations to share highly liberal moral and political outlooks.³¹

For most Asian groups, these hypotheses have been fair predictors of partisan choice and the strength of these affiliations. Pei-te Lien et al. found that, at the aggregate level, those who experienced minority group-based discrimination tend to identify more with the Democratic than the Republican Party.³² Conversely, evidence for the economic advancement hypothesis seems to exist among the more successful Asian groups. Even though association with the Democratic Party tends to dominate at all levels, Asian respondents at higher income and educational levels tend to register higher percentage shares of Republican affiliation than those at the lowest income levels.³³ Finally, strong support for the religious commitment hypothesis appears to exist among Asian groups, and in particular among Koreans, Japanese and Filipinos. Religiosity is a strong predictor of Republican partisanship among Asian groups.³⁴

In applying these hypotheses to the Indian American community in particular, it becomes obvious that a number of cross-pressures are at work in explaining the contours of the community's partisan affiliations. The Authors' research suggests that experiences of discrimination that the community has faced would suggest a heavy Democratic tendency among Indian Americans. Conversely, given their tremendous economic and educational achievement, the economic advancement thesis would appear to suggest Republican leanings. Finally, the emerging role that religion plays in the community's identity would predict a Republican partisanship. The

²⁹ Kellstedt & Green, *supra* note 26.

³⁰ Geoffrey C. Layman, *Religion and Political Behavior in the United States: The Impact of Beliefs, Affiliations, and Commitment From 1980 to 1994*, 61 PUB. OPINION Q. 288, 288-316 (1997).

³¹ JAMES DAVISON HUNTER, *CULTURE WARS: THE STRUGGLE TO DEFINE AMERICA* (1991); Kellstedt & Green, *supra* note 26; Miller & Shanks, *supra* note 26.

³² LIEN ET AL., *supra* note 1.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

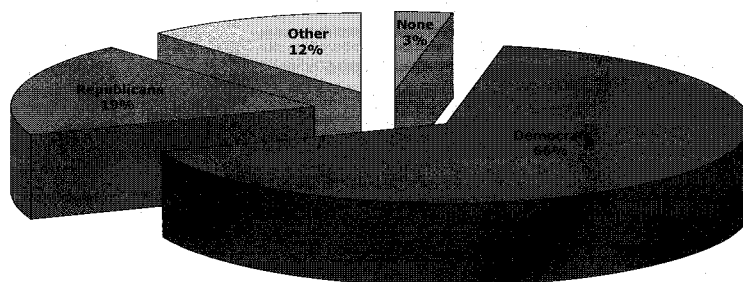
following section explores each of these factors in an attempt to understand the sources and contours of partisan affiliation for Indian American women.

III. EXPLAINING INDIAN AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

A. Indian American Political Party Membership

Survey research on the Indian American community and figures from the 2000 Presidential Election³⁵ indicate both that Indian Americans side heavily with the Democratic Party and that members of this group are becoming increasingly more polarized between the two major political parties, with a decreasing percentage of the population either identifying as Independents or with no party. Data from the focus groups and surveys conducted as part of this study are consistent with these external findings, as Figure 1.1³⁶ highlights.

Figure 1.1: Self-Identified Partisan Affiliation by Survey Respondents³⁷



As the figure above highlights, the survey results suggest a strong connection between Indian Americans and the Democratic Party. Interestingly, among Indian American women, affiliation to the Democratic Party is even stronger. Figure 1.2 below, which represents the partisan self-

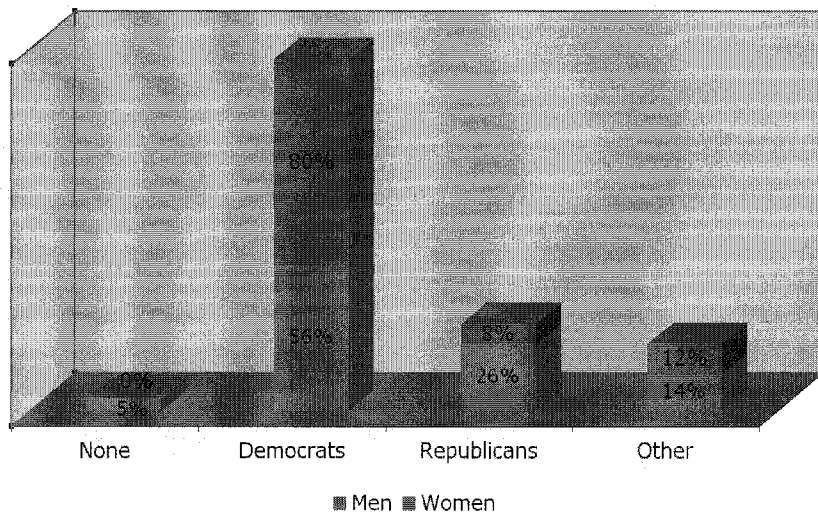
³⁵ See, e.g., *supra* tbl. 1.1; *supra* note 23.

³⁶ See *infra* fig. 1.1. Survey respondents were asked: *Which party do you most closely associate with: Democrats, Republicans or other?*

³⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all tables and figures in this article are compiled from the results of the survey research that we conducted in conjunction with the focus groups.

identification of survey respondents, indicates that a startling eighty percent of women are Democrats, whereas only eight percent affiliate with the Republican Party. Compared to their male counterparts, in particular, this is a staggering endorsement of a political party that would not necessarily represent the social or fiscal policies of this voting bloc.

Figure 1.2: Percentage Distribution of Partisanship by Gender
Which party do you most closely associate?

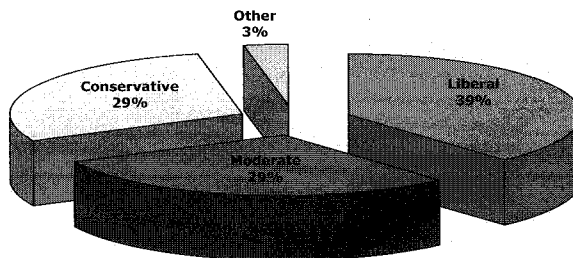


Additionally, the Democratic leanings of the Indian American community are reinforced by data in campaign finance literature which indicate that Indians have increasingly contributed more money to the Democratic Party since 1980, culminating in a two-to-one margin in contributions to the two parties during the 2000 election cycle.³⁸

It is interesting to compare respondents' party choice with their ideological self-assessment in terms of how liberal or conservative they consider themselves. Figure 1.3 presents the survey respondents' self-identification in terms of ideology when asked the question: "How would you describe your views on most political matters?"

³⁸ Wendy K. Tam Cho & Suneet P. Lad, *Subcontinental Divide: Asian Indians and Asian American Politics*, 32 AM. POL. RES. 239, 239-63 (2004).

Figure 1.3: Ideological Self-Assessment by Indian American Survey Respondents



Slightly fewer than forty percent of respondents view themselves as liberal or very liberal as compared to the thirty percent of respondents who self-identify on the other extreme of the ideological spectrum. The ideological self-assessment of respondents partially helps account for the party choice of the community. Interestingly, it appears that the attachment of Indian Americans to the Democratic Party is disproportionate to their own value-set. Whereas less than half the respondents fall into the liberal category, sixty-six percent identify with the Democrats. Similarly, while close to one-third of the respondents are self-professed social conservatives, less than one-fifth of all respondents nonetheless identify with Republicans. The data appear to suggest that despite personal beliefs, the majority of the community avoids identifying with the Republican Party.

These findings are not altogether at odds with extant research on ideology and political party choice. Adam J. Schiffer suggests that often “the ideological label belonging to a large portion of self-identified conservative Democrats appears to be merely symbolic, rather than reflective of an underlying ideology.”³⁹ Similarly, a mismatch in ideological leanings and party choice appears to exist among Indian Americans. The coming pages should shed some light onto the origins of the apparent “symbolic” attachment among Indian Americans, and specifically Indian American women, to the Democratic Party.

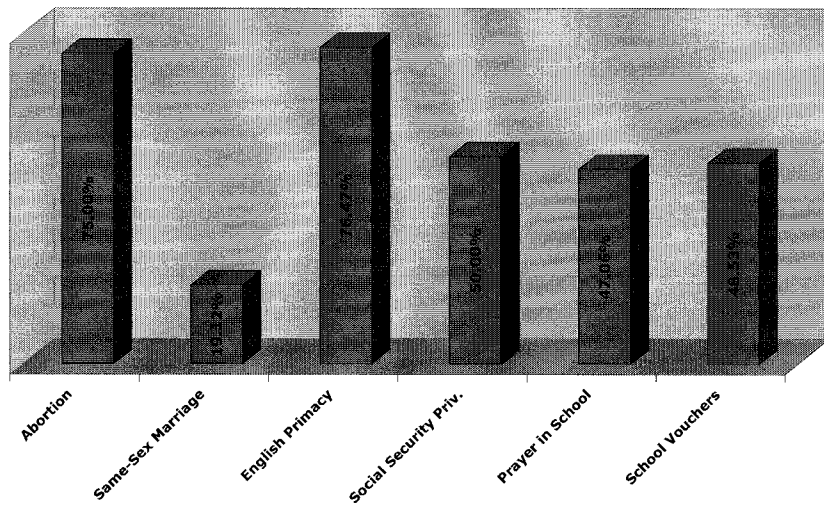
Following the lead of a number of other studies that measure party identification,⁴⁰ here the Authors have attempted to delineate party choice

³⁹ Adam J. Schiffer, *I'm Not That Liberal: Explaining Conservative Democratic Identification*, 22 *POL. BEHAV.* 293, 306 (2000).

⁴⁰ See Campbell et al., *supra* note 19; Philip E. Converse & R. E. Pierce, *Measuring Partisanship*, 11 *POL. METHODOLOGY* 143, 143–66 (1987); Donald Philip Green & Bradley Palmquist, *Of Artifacts and Partisan Instability*, 34 *AM. J. POL. SCI.* 872, 872–902

based on focus group and survey respondents' views concerning a number of policy issues. In part, this provides an opportunity to determine whether Democratic attachment among Indian Americans is grounded in any substantive political views.

Figure 1.4: Percent of Survey Respondents Who Supported Following:



When asked to indicate their policy preferences for each of the issues displayed above, Figure 1.4 indicates that no obvious ideological pattern emerges from the respondents' policy views. While an overwhelming majority of respondents favors certain liberal programs, such as a woman's right to choose, social service programs enjoy less support among the community. One possible explanation for the non-uniform ideological views of the community is the influence that homeland policies have on respondents' views of social programs in the United States. Based on focus group discussions surrounding these issues, homeland politics seems to have some influence in the formation of political opinions in the United States. For example, one respondent had the following to say about abortion, "For abortions, should government funds be used for abortions, that is the question we need to ask. No government money should be used

(1990); Warren E. Miller, *Party Identification, Realignment, and Party Voting: Back to the Basics*, 85 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 557, 557–68 (1991); Andre Blais et al., *Measuring Party Identification: Britain, Canada and the United States*, 23 POL. BEHAV. 5, 5–22 (2001); LIEN ET AL., *supra* note 1.

against abortions. *Hum Dho, Hamara Dho*.⁴¹ This was our policy. India believes in family planning.” This relationship is consistent with existing scholarship on the subject which finds that homeland politics influence political decision-making of expatriates in their new environments.⁴² For example, as homosexuality was illegal in India until recently,⁴³ one would expect Indian immigrants to be against same-sex policies in the United States.

One last point worth noting about Figure 1.4 is the strong support among respondents for English primacy laws. This issue was catapulted to the national stage in the 1980’s and served as a divisive issue within and between various immigrant groups. Most notably, Indian Americans differed with a majority of their Asian immigrant peers in voicing strong support for an “English-only” law.⁴⁴ In part, the existing high level of English proficiency that characterizes Indian Americans contrasts with other Asian groups. Among focus group participants, those who were vocal about the issue strongly supported such a policy because it would highlight the “Americanness” of the community. As Figure 1.4 illustrates, standard ideological predictors appear to be unable to fully capture the partisan leanings of Indian Americans. The community proves to be more conservative than its party affiliation would suggest. Consequently, support for Schiffer’s theory seems to exist, suggesting that India American party choice is potentially driven more by symbolic reasons rather than substantive ones. Therefore, to test the origins of this potentially symbolic partisanship, the following two figures build on the political learning literature by examining whether certain socializing agents and policy concerns act as potential stimulants for partisan choice. Focus group participants were posed with a series of questions related to partisanship to gauge the impact of the following variables on the development of partisan affiliations: ideology, mobilization, family socialization and issue-salience.

⁴¹ “Hum Dho, Hamara Dho” was a popular Indian political slogan used in the 1970s and 1980s to encourage individuals to take responsibility for their families. Translated literally, the phrase means: “We two, our two.”

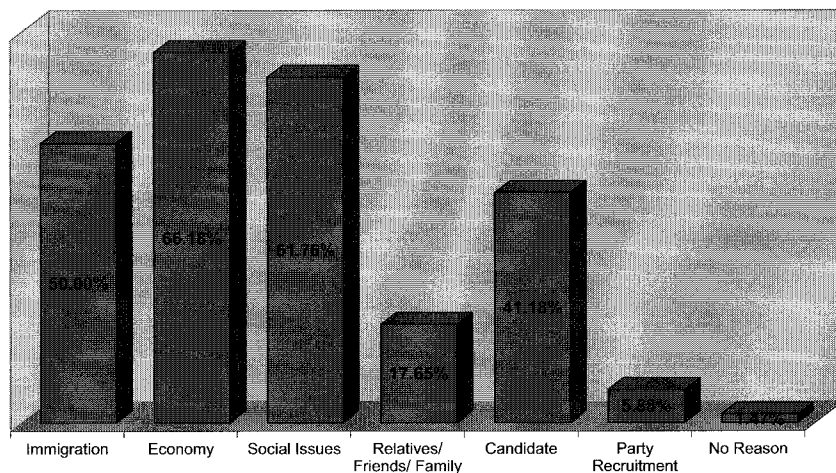
⁴² Pei-te Lien, et al., *Asian Pacific-American Public Opinion and Political Participation*, 34 PS: POL. SCI. & POL. 625, 625-630 (2001); LIEN ET AL., *supra* note 1.

⁴³ Heather Timmons & Hari Kumar, *Indian Court Overturns Gay Sex Ban*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 17, 2010, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/03/world/asia/03india.html>.

⁴⁴ Pei-te Lien et al., *supra* note 42 (Defining South Asians as Asian Indian/Pakistani Americans).

Figure 1.5 depicts the importance that Indian American respondents place on a number of traditional factors in making decisions about party choice, including family members, party mobilization and policy issues related to the economy and immigration.

Figure 1.5: Percent Respondents Who Identify Following As Reason for Party Choice⁴⁵



As one would expect, the economy, social values and immigration policy stand out as the most important factors that drive party choice among Indian Americans. These results are consistent with both extant theories and partisan stimuli for other Asian and immigrant groups.⁴⁶ Interestingly, forty-one percent of respondents also suggest that individual candidates influence voting behavior and party choice. This statistic is explained when one considers that thirty percent of the community does not immediately

⁴⁵ Survey respondents were asked:

How did you decide to affiliate with the [Republican/ Democratic] Party?

Was Partisan choice based on party's view on Immigration? Economy? Social issues like abortion, school prayer, etc.?

Or, was party choice driven by relatives, friends, family views on the party? A particular candidate? Party recruitment? No reason.

⁴⁶ LIEN ET AL., *supra* note 1.

affiliate with any one political party. Similarly, it vocalizes the sentiments of a number of focus group participants who shy away from party identification and instead vote on a candidate-by-candidate basis. A female consultant from Chicago articulates the nonpartisan line of reasoning:

To date, my way of voting is candidate based. It is not based on the party but rather on who has a better combination of economics and ideology. Tolerance is the main thing. Whichever candidate supports tolerance, color blind/gender blind/race/blind, that's the one I choose. Party affiliation is bad because if you have an extreme candidate he may swing the whole party. So I have voted both Republican and Democrat over the years.

In general, the results indicate that participants who identify as independents avoid partisan affiliation because they are disillusioned with the political parties in terms of their effectiveness to satisfy community needs. A Chicago businessman represents this non-partisan mentality:

Liberalism is something hard to pinpoint. You can't draw a line between conservative or liberal and it is hard to decipher how politicians really are. The parties make no sense in this country. The ideological debates in each party's platform are completely inconsistent. For example, Republicans believe in "life" and are against abortion. But then they kill the environment. It just doesn't make sense at all. And Democrats are basically Republicans but except that Republicans shed the pretense.

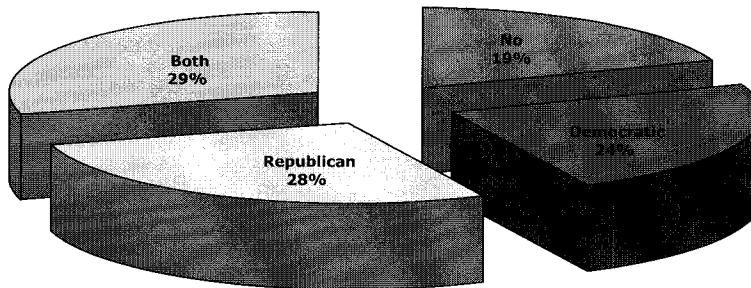
Finally, focus group and survey results indicate that party recruitment is not an influential stimulant for partisan affiliation. This is in contrast to theoretical observations found in the literature on party choice, where strategic mobilization by political parties is said to have been both historically and presently important in driving party choice especially for racial and ethnic minorities.⁴⁷ Leighley's analysis, for example, suggests that being mobilized is a significant and positive predictor of partisanship and overall participation levels among both Blacks and Latinos, even when socio-economic resources, partisanship and other potential influences on participation are taken into account.⁴⁸ In contrast, however, as Figure 1.6

⁴⁷ STEVEN J. ROSENSTONE & JOHN MARK HANSEN, *MOBILIZATION, PARTICIPATION, AND DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* (1993); JAN E. LEIGHLEY, *STRENGTH IN NUMBERS? THE POLITICAL MOBILIZATION OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC MINORITIES* (2001); LIEN ET AL., *supra* note 1.

⁴⁸ LEIGHLEY, *supra* note 47.

suggests, more Indians appear to associate with Democrats despite more recruitment activity by the Republican Party.

Figure 1.6: Self-Reported Contact by Political Parties



Given these findings, it appears that reasonable support for the minority group status theory exists. Support for this hypothesis is provided by the following representative sample of statements from the focus groups. A Dallas physician stated, "I think the Democratic Party appeals to Indians so much because they are more tolerant of minorities. We feel secure and safe with this party." A comment from a Los Angeles professional mirrors this point: "I believe in the Democrats' principles. They are more for fairness, poor people and social values." The notion that Indians feel "safe" and at ease with the Democratic Party points to the underpinnings of the minority status hypothesis and the origins of Indian American symbolic party attachment. As Indians continue to face discrimination from the external society, they seek out a political establishment that will provide some protection from this external racism. To explain the perception among minorities that Democrats protect minority rights, a financial planner in New Jersey reasoned that many Indian Americans entered the United States during the Civil Rights movement and witnessed first hand the support that Democrats provided to African Americans. He argued that this might have helped shape the Democratic leanings of the Indian American community.

B. A "Minority Among Minorities"

The most important finding of this section is the inapplicability of the religious commitment hypothesis to the partisan choices of Indian Americans. According to the theory, increasing religious identity is directly related to association with the Republican Party. While true for Latinos and

a number of Asian groups,⁴⁹ for Indian Americans, however, this trend is somewhat more complex: while religious identity is becoming stronger for members of the community, Hinduism is seen as a “minority” religion in the context of the current relationship between U.S. politicians and Christianity. Indians are stressing their Hindu identity to combat discrimination and create a non-economic identity for their community. Faced with the perceived increase in ties between Republicans and Christian beliefs, however, Indians who would otherwise associate with the Republican Party are turning to Democrats instead. As a Los Angeles accountant stated, “Republicans are against Hinduism and I cannot support them.” An Atlanta real estate agent also articulated this type of reasoning:

So I am truly Republican. I am against big government. I am pretty socially conservative. I believe in the right to guns. I am against abortion and gay marriage because I think they are unnatural. But I almost always vote Democratic because I don't believe that religion should be brought into the political foray. If there were no religion, I would be Republican. But Republicans bring religion into their political platform. They associate too closely with the Christians and therefore I do not support any Republican candidates. That is the only reason.

Similarly, a female community activist and professor of medicine from Atlanta had the following to say:

I think that even though most Indians are Democrats, we are still fiscal conservatives. Socially, there is the perception that Republicans are White Anglo Protestants and that is what scares our people. We don't want to be grouped into that religion. Socially we may or may not be liberal, but fiscally we are conservative. Still we feel like there is no place for us in the Republican Party. So I guess I am leaning to the Democratic side because overall, religious freedom is my most important attribute.

Another participant in the Atlanta focus group added to the above comment by stating, “There are some who have shifted to the right if you will but many of these people are coming because of the extreme affiliation of religion in the Republican Party.” In other words, even those Indian Americans who affiliated with the Republican Party in the past are switching to the Democratic ticket because of the issue of religion. A St. Louis teacher articulated the most extreme version of this viewpoint, “Bush

⁴⁹ Cain et al., *supra* note 24, at 390–422.

is hurting Indians because he is supporting missionaries which is driving away Indians.”

According to participants, perceptions of religious isolationism are amplified by the media’s portrayal of politicians’ ties with Christianity. As a result, Indians who are not particularly religious are being driven toward supporting their Hindu identity as they feel threatened by the majority community. This finding is particularly interesting because of the unique position in which it places Indians, in contrast to other Asian groups and other minority and mainstream communities alike. Despite shared histories of immigration and discrimination, the religion factor is working to separate Indians from all other groups. In a way, Indians are becoming a minority among minorities and perceive Democrats as the less threatening of the two parties with respect to their religious beliefs.

The religious explanation for the partisanship paradox is interesting for a number of reasons. First, the relationship between religious observance and partisanship appears to be unique to Indian Americans in contrast to other minority groups who share a common religious language. Second, religion appears to play the strongest role in driving partisan choice, even when other variables such as socio-economic factors impact the day-to-day operations of the community. The community has attempted to realign its identity from an ascriptive to economic dimension, shying away from being identified as a “minority.” This dynamic changes when religion comes into focus, however, as Indians appeal to the Democratic Party to protect their rights as a religious minority. Finally, the policy implications of this religious dynamic are interesting. As Indian Americans continue to grow in size and political strength, the Republican Party may have an opportunity to attract large numbers of this community by modifying its image as religiously exclusive.

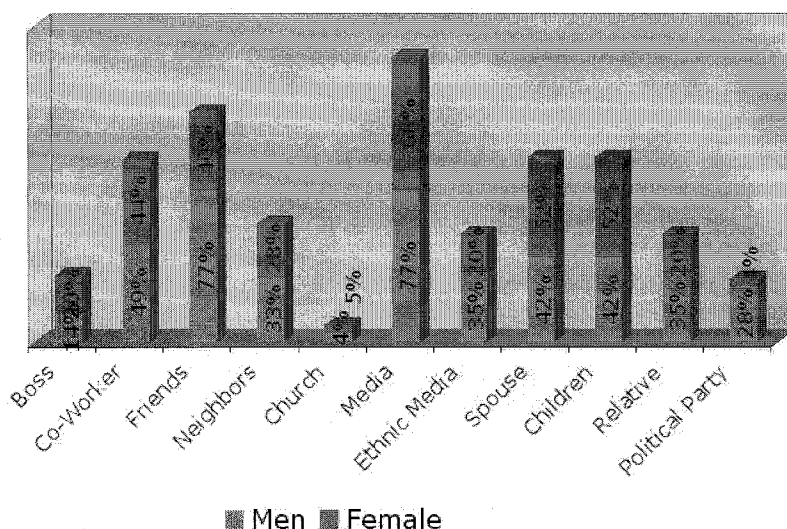
One final point that merits attention is the on-going strength of partisan affiliations once they are made by an individual. Lien focuses on the question of strength of party ties for the obvious reason of discovering whether Asian groups are swing voters.⁵⁰ Consistent with her preliminary findings on the matter, Indian Americans appear to be moderately attached in their party choices, irrespective of the actual party with which they associate. Only thirty-two percent of respondents claim to be strongly attached to their party choice. Indians are not driven to the Democratic or Republican Party by strong ideological beliefs; instead, given their conservative social and fiscal leanings, they are a potentially ideal swing-voter bloc. As one focus group participant stated, “party choice is strictly driven by survival tactics.” Finally, it is important to understand the

⁵⁰ See LIEN ET AL., *supra* note 1.

political stimuli that influence partisan affiliation. Among respondents, the family serves as one of the strongest determinants of political learning.

Figure 1.7: Influences on Political Learning Among Female Respondents

Have any of the following helped you learn about American politics?



C. Family

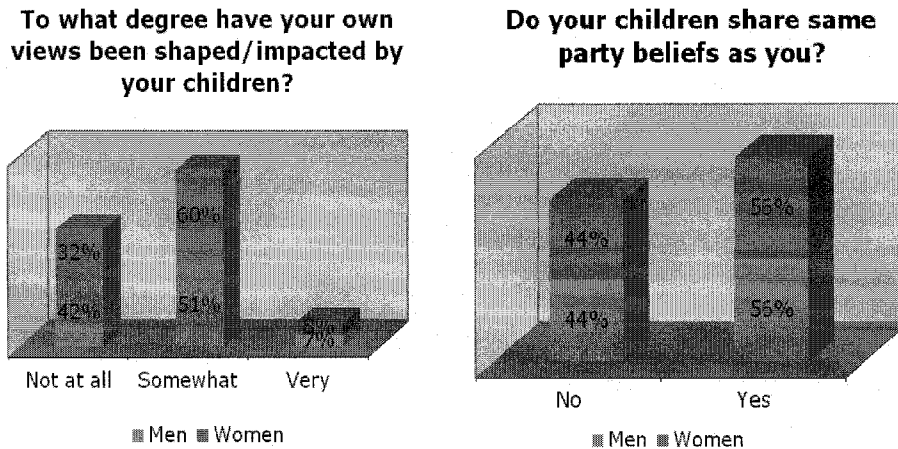
The family setting is identified as one of the main sources for political learning and interest among non-immigrant communities.⁵¹ Studies have primarily highlighted the parent-child dynamic, suggesting that parents are responsible for imputing political beliefs in their children from an early age. This dynamic becomes more complex for immigrant families because parents are learning about their host's political structure at the same time as their children. In many cases, a spouse can also be a primary source for political learning and/or partisan affiliation. Our purpose in this section is to tease out the family dynamic in the context of immigrant families. What is the nature of political learning within immigrant families? What is

⁵¹ M. MARGARET CONWAY, POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE UNITED STATES (2000).

the direction of political learning? How frequent are political discussions among parents and children? What role in particular does the family have in influencing political learning among Indian American women?

Among all respondents, a majority (fifty-nine percent) identified their families as the main source for political information and discussion, whereas forty-one percent sought political information elsewhere. Within the context of family, fifty-four percent of respondents identified their children and spouses as sources for political information and only twenty-nine percent looked to their relatives for political learning. Figure 1.7 above depicts this same information broken up by gender. Here we see that the media, one's spouse and children are the three main sources for political learning. Indeed more than half of female respondents (fifty-two percent) indicated that their husbands and children were the primary stimuli for learning about the American political system, whereas their male counterparts shared this view in smaller numbers.

Looking closer, most respondents believed that while they were partially responsible for shaping their children's views, a clear majority believed that their own views were shaped either moderately or greatly by their children. Figure 1.8 highlights this bi-directional relationship and the different roles family played in influencing political views between both genders. Whereas sixty-eight percent of women suggested that their children either "somewhat" or "greatly" impacted their views, a little more than half (fifty-seven percent) of male respondents had the same perspective. Conversely, female respondents found that they had less of a direct impact on the political views of their children than their male counterparts with less than half of women believing that they had a "somewhat" or strong impact on their children's. In contrast, sixty-six percent of men believed that they influenced the views of their children.

Figure 1.8: Self-Reported Parent-Child Politicizing Dynamic⁵²

Participants from the focus groups explained that their children were principally involved in “liberalizing” their own ideological views. Among others, adults identified issues related to gay marriage, environmental protection and abortion as key sources of debate and learning. A housewife and mother of two in San Jose had this to say:

I am not entirely influenced by my daughter. I make my own decisions. But she has opened me in some ways of thinking. She sees the world differently from me. So in a discussion I do see her point of view which I wouldn't have seen before. In that way I like talking to them. Like some of the gay issues and stuff, you know, I would not, coming from the background that I have, I would be totally anti-gay marriage or something, but I do see that there is a system that is a partnership where there are benefits like Medical benefits. So I do see the logic in a gay marriage which previously I would have never agreed to or imagined to myself.

As this participant vocalized, a number of respondents claimed that political discussions with their children provided important opportunities to learn about the political system and formulate political attitudes in line with their own cultural and economic views. None of the participants admitted that their children directly shaped their own political views; instead, they suggested that the family context provided an ideal setting to flesh out

⁵² Respondents were asked: *To what degree do you think your own political views have been shaped/impacted by the views of your children? Greatly? Somewhat? Not at all?*

larger political concepts and to indirectly formulate political opinions. A New Jersey professor states, “[Politics] is the only heart to heart discussion we have. We learn from one another. Talking to children about their political views helps solidify my own views.”

These findings seem to offer support for the reverse-politicization hypothesis that was offered at the beginning of this section. As such, the data appear to be in line with a new wave of political learning scholars who propose the existence of a “trickle-up” influence of children on the civic/political education of their parents.⁵³ McDevitt and Chaffee suggest that adolescents are not merely receptive to civil and political development, but that they also possess the power to transform patterns of family socialization in ways that are beneficial to themselves and their parents.⁵⁴ According to the authors, once stimulated by exogenous forces like the school, child-initiated discussion about politics can prompt a parent to strengthen her own political and civic competence.⁵⁵ While McDevitt and Chaffee limit their discussion to a non-immigrant family context, the findings of this section suggest that the “tickle-up” hypothesis can also be applied to immigrant American-Indian families as well.

Reflecting on why most respondents (fifty-six percent) believed that their political views differed from their children, participants suggested that while their own influence in the formation of political attitudes among the second generation was nominal, most Indian youth looked outside the family context for political information. More than sixty percent of respondents identified schools, friends and the media as important sources for political learning among their children. While these results do not indicate whether Indian American youth *actually* look to these external sources for political learning, these perceptions highlight the degree to which respondents discount their own role in the politicization of the second generation and, alternatively, the extent to which they value the externally reinforced political views of their children. A San Francisco woman stated, “My kids are now changing my political views about the country. They are. The kids are changing our political opinions. They are a lot more involved in the community, politics, environment and a lot more effective than we are.” Similarly, a pharmacist in Chicago commented that

⁵³ Michael McDevitt & Steven Chaffee, *From Top-Down to Trickle-Up Influence: Revisiting Assumptions About the Family in Political Socialization*, 19 POL. COMM. 281, 281–301 (2002).

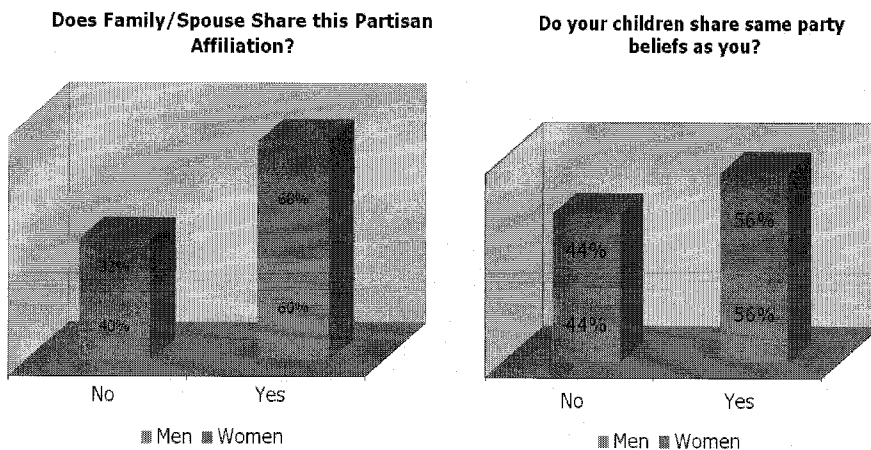
⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.*

he values his children's political views because, "Their exposure is greater than ours. Our society is limited but they interact with anybody and everybody at school and in the office. So their views are much more informed than ours. Their versions are much more logical."

In addition to political learning, it is also interesting to examine how the liberalizing impact of the children/parent dynamic translates into actual party choice. After establishing their own party affiliations, respondents were asked whether they believed that their family and/or spouse shared their party choice. Additionally, later in the survey, respondents were asked more specifically whether their children shared their party beliefs. Figure 1.9 below highlights the results of these questions. More than sixty-eight percent of women and sixty percent of men stated that their families and/or spouses shared their party choice. Similarly fifty-six percent of both men and women believed that their children shared their party beliefs.

Figure 1.9: Party Affiliation with Spouse and Children



As this data suggest, Indian adult political learning occurs mainly within the context of the immediate family, and despite perceived ideological and political differences between parents and children, frequent political discussions take place within immigrant Indian households. This could be for a number of reasons, including the non-threatening nature of the home setting for immigrants. Especially noteworthy is the "trickle-up" influence that children appear to have on their immigrant parents. Finally, it is interesting to note that party choice, independent of ideology, is shared among spouses and children. Evidence for each of these claims is stronger

among female respondents when compared to their male counterparts. And indeed when one looks at Figure 1.7,⁵⁶ men are more likely to look to friends, co-workers and the media for political information.

IV. CONCLUSION: RECONCILING THEORY AND REALITY

So what do these results suggest in terms of how Indian American women choose political parties? Data from the focus groups and surveys indicate that the direction of party choice is primarily guided by nonmaterial goals rather than economic concerns. In other words, party attachment is more symbolic than substantively driven. More than any other theory, strong evidence exists concerning the influence of the religious identity on party choice for the Indian American community. Religion appears to overpower other competing partisan stimulants, including political mobilization, socio-economic interests and social conservatism.

One of the most surprising findings of this Article, then, is the lack of support for the economic advancement theory. Whereas Indian Americans choose to self-identify in terms of their economic success, their primary concern is religious representation. Of course, while most Indians are not orthodox Hindus, they view religion as a significant part of their identity and, therefore, use this dimension as a decisive benchmark for party choice. For obvious reasons, the implications of this are important for both political parties who may be able to sway partisanship decisions based on strategic representation of the religion factor.

Finally, the influence of family, and of children in particular, on the political learning and partisan affiliation of Indian American women is an important discovery that suggests that many politicizing stimuli may in fact indirectly originate on college campuses rather than traditional settings like the workplace. Compared to their immigrant male peers, women are more likely to look to their families or their children for cues when learning about the political system or making informed political decisions.

⁵⁶ See *supra* fig. 1.7