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Organizational Life and Political Incorporation of Two Asian Immigrant Groups: A Case Study

Sofya Aptekar

PhD Candidate, Sociology, Princeton University

Abstract

Civil society is the foundation of a healthy democracy but its immigrant element has received little attention. This paper is a case study of immigrant organizations of highly-skilled Asian Indians and Chinese immigrants in a suburban town of Edison, New Jersey. I find that civic participation of Asian Indian immigrants spills over into political incorporation while Chinese immigrant organizations remain marginalized. I argue the local processes of racialization are central in explaining differences in political incorporation of immigrants. In the local context, the Chinese are seen as successful but conformist model minorities and Asian Indians as invaders and troublemakers. The racialization of Asian Indians has resulted in more political activity and higher levels of political visibility of their organizations. The results highlight shortcomings of current assimilation theories, which give little space to civic and political incorporation and view human capital in an unqualifiedly positive light.

Keywords

immigrants; Asian Americans; suburbs; political participation; racialization; model minority

Civil society – individuals acting in a sphere outside the family and the state in a way that contributes to the collective life of the community – is the foundation of a healthy democracy. By participating in civic associations, citizens gain valuable skills, exposure, and connections that can lead to robust political involvement (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995). Yet civil society may be in decline in United States, severing political machinery from its grassroots base (Putnam 2000). Although the decline of civil society is disputed (e.g. Ladd 1999), little attention has been paid to the section that is composed of immigrant organizations, and it is not clear what effect these organizations have on the political involvement of their members and American democracy as a whole. In fact, determinants of political incorporation have not received as much attention from sociological theories of integration as have social and economic outcomes (Bloemraad 2007). What accounts for differences in political incorporation among organizations of different immigrant groups?

This paper is a case study of immigrant organizations in a suburban town, Edison, New Jersey. While much of the existing work on immigrant organizations and civic engagement focuses on large, traditional gateway cities (Kasinitz 1992; Bloemraad 2006), immigrants in the United States increasingly settle in suburbs and destinations new to immigration (Singer 2004). Moreover, a smaller suburb provides an opportunity for a rich mapping of organizational and political structure.

The immigrant population of Edison is composed of highly skilled Asian Indians and Chinese who are wealthier and more educated than their white neighbours, but whose organizations are only beginning to exert influence with the local political elites. Comparing the two immigrant communities, I find that Asian Indian organizations have gained more visibility for themselves and are able to exert more influence on local policies than their Chinese counterparts, although residents of Chinese ancestry hold an advantage in socioeconomic status, citizenship rates, and length of stay in the US. This paper traces the factors that account for this difference, with particular attention to local processes of racialization that lead to reactive formation and mobilization among Asian Indians but leave Chinese immigrants marginalized. Thus, high levels of human resources are associated with different outcomes in political incorporation as the effect of civic participation is filtered through racial hierarchies.

Background

Edison is a former industrial centre that has transitioned to an economy of informatics, finance, and pharmaceuticals. It is a prosperous suburb with slightly over 100,000 residents, located near New York City. White ethnics are collectively the largest group of residents but the Asian population sextupled between 1980 and 1990; by 2006, over 35,000 residents of Edison were Asian, with approximately 22,000 of Asian Indian and 8,000 of Chinese, Taiwanese, or Hong Kong descent. Most Asian Indians in central New Jersey have immigrated in the past ten years, but the local Chinese population includes a large proportion of people who came in the 1980s and early 1990s, as well as a non-trivial number of pre-1975 arrivals and second generation immigrants (US Census Bureau 2006).

Today, Edison has one of the highest concentrations of Asian Indians in the United States, as well as the state's largest Chinese population (Sahn 2004). But because many Asian residents are not citizens, Asians comprise only 15 per cent of those eligible to vote in the town. Thus, the two Asian immigrant groups might be overlooked by the Democratic Party, the dominant local party machine, which faces little competition.

Asian residents are the wealthiest group in Edison, with median household income \$16,000 higher than that of non-Hispanic whites (US Census Bureau 2000). Table 1 presents descriptive characteristics for people of Asian Indian and Chinese ancestry in a three-county area that includes Edison¹, with native-born non-Hispanic whites as a comparison group. People of Chinese ancestry have higher median household income than Asian Indians, a difference of some \$14,000. This difference is reflected in the educational attainment of the two groups, which is consistent with their immigration trajectories as professionals and advanced students.

Asian Indian and Chinese immigrants come from ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse nations. The majority of local Asian Indians is highly educated Hindus from the state of Gujarat. The Chinese are more diverse, with longer-term residents hailing from Taiwan (32 per cent of Chinese immigrants) and Hong Kong (8 per cent), and a more recent influx of mainland Chinese (60 per cent; US Census Bureau 2006). Whether or not immigrants self-identify using national origins, that identification is more than a one-sided process, with the local and national context influencing the construction of categories and meanings attached to them (Statham 1999). In this analysis, I am mindful of this dynamic process, using the terms Asian Indian and Chinese while remaining cognizant of the diversity such labels may conceal and addressing intra-group differences when relevant.

¹The sample size is too small to examine Edison or Middlesex County alone.

Socially, economically, and geographically, the large Asian population has left a definite mark on Edison, which boasts both a Little India and a Chinatown. Edison is commonly known as the capital of Indo-America and draws visitors from the entire Northeast. Little India took over an economically moribund white area to become a thriving business district that brings considerable tax revenue (Trivedi 1997). This transition has not been without vandalism, name-calling, and complaints of foreign invasion. The Chinatown area is far less developed and concentrated than Little India and lacks its shopping frenzy.

The political opportunity structure in Edison features a de facto one-party system and a powerful Democratic organization. Research has shown that marginal political players, such as immigrants, have difficulty breaking into politics under such conditions (Erie 1988; Jones-Correa 1998). Political machines are primarily interested in maintaining their established core constituencies and can afford to ignore new populations. In fact, the seven-seat town council has had only one Asian Indian member and no Chinese members in recent history².

Although Asian Indians and Chinese residents are underrepresented, Edison does have an Asian mayor, Jun Choi, a Korean American whose candidacy gained nationwide attention after radio personalities made racist remarks about him (Bodas and Miller 2005). While on the surface, this might seem like evidence of Asian American political integration, Choi is a second generation Korean and, as I show below, is not really an insider or a representative of the Asian community in Edison. Developments that are more significant in terms of immigrant political incorporation are the recent formation of the Indo-American Caucus within the Edison Democratic Organization, co-founded by two members of local Asian Indian organizations (Jha 2007), and the appointment of two Asian Indians to the executive committee of the Democratic Party (Caiazza 2007). Thus, Asian Indian immigrants – but not Chinese immigrants – are starting to surmount the entry costs and obstacles to local politics and to make inroads into the power structure.

Yet Edison is distinguished by a tense relationship between the Asian Indian population and the police, suggesting that incorporation is not occurring without tensions. In addition to police harassment and bribery in the business district (Staff 1997), there have been major incidents of police brutality against Asian Indian residents, incidents that involved alleged beatings as well as defamation of the Indian flag and were followed by demonstrations and counter-demonstrations (Barca 2005; Bodas 2006). Notably, the rancor and unease seem to have bypassed the Chinese residents of the town. I argue that these differences are indicative of the divergent ways in which the racialization of these two groups is influencing their political incorporation.

Human capital, race, and immigrant political incorporation

Sociological theories of immigrant incorporation focus on social and economic aspects of the process more than the civic or political sphere (Bloemraad 2007). Determinants of socioeconomic incorporation include mode of incorporation into the host society, human capital, and external obstacles such as racial discrimination (Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Alba and Nee 2003). Accordingly, professional and entrepreneurial immigrants, like the Asians in Edison, are expected to become successfully incorporated. These theories are less useful for understanding civic and political incorporation, and it is uncertain what effect human capital has on political incorporation on the level of organizations. On the one hand, highly skilled immigrants are thought to become part of mainstream civic and political institutions, while

²By comparison, in a somewhat larger California city of Sunnyvale, which is 24 per cent Asian, there were two (out of seven) Chinese council members and no Asian Indian council members (Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008b).

those who lack human capital organize along ethnic lines, often in the process of reactive formation to a hostile context of reception (Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Portes and Rumbaut 1996). On the other hand, ethnicity may be a salient organizational principle for the highly skilled as well, with resources and knowledge making their organizations more effective (Parenti 1967).

In any case, civic participation has been tied to political participation through skills, connections, and exposure that people develop by being involved in organizations, either immigrant or mainstream (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995; Cordero-Guzman 2005). For instance, Fennema and Tillie (1999) demonstrated a positive correlation between the extent of civic community and levels of political participation in Amsterdam among four immigrant groups. However, there is strong evidence that the relationship between civic and political incorporation is complicated by factors such as political opportunity structure and ties to mainstream society. Jacobs et al (2004) compare Turks and Moroccans in Brussels, finding that weak organizational life among the Moroccans did not prevent them from becoming more politically involved than the Turks, whose extensive organizational life did not translate into links with majority organizations. Odmalm (2004) provides a dramatic example of a stifling political opportunity structure in Sweden, where mobilization along ethnic or racial lines is not seen as legitimate and is severely limited. In contrast, minority groups in the US and UK often become politically mobilized in reaction to hostile contexts of reception they encounter, and this mobilization can lead to their integration (Modood 2007).

Cultural contexts further complicate the connection between civic and political incorporation. In addition to political opportunity structures, immigrant mobilization may depend on how immigrant groups are defined locally (Giugni and Passy 2004). In the US, race often plays a crucial role in shared cultural understandings of immigrant groups – such as the Asian immigrants in Edison – and their expected roles in civic and political life. Racialization is a process by which racial meanings come to be attached to groups and relationships that did not previously contain them (Omi and Winant 1986). The racialization experienced by Asian Americans involves the model minority myth, which connects being Asian to success, intelligence, hard work, conformity and self-sufficiency, obscures economic diversity among Asians and can create false consciousness among Asian Americans themselves (Hurh and Kim 1989; Wong et al. 1998). Asian Indians are phenotypically distinct from the stereotyped image of Asians in the US and their racial identity has long been ambiguous (Kibria 1998). It is likely that the racialization processes complicate the connection between civic and political participation for Asian Indians and the Chinese in Edison. In all, it is difficult to predict the degree of political incorporation of Asian immigrants in Edison due to the ambiguity surrounding the effects of their human capital, as well as the uncertainty in the effects of racialization.

Concepts and questions

Much of the literature on civic and political participation among immigrants is focused on individual-level determinants and effects of participation. Here, I examine involvement at the organizational level. I am interested in whether civic activity of organizations translates into political incorporation and the differences in political incorporation of Asian Indian and Chinese organizations in Edison. My conceptualization of political participation on the organizational level differs from the customary individual measures, such as voting and running for office, and includes attendance at local government meetings, writing and circulation of letters to officials, participation in rallies, sponsorship of registration and get-out-the-vote drives, and contact with local officials. I also consider whether a leader or a member of an organization holds a local government position.

In looking at the relationship between civic involvement and political incorporation of immigrants, I use the conceptual framework of visibility and influence developed by Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad (2008a). This framework attempts to capture dimensions of organizational activity that are richer than more common measures, such as the number of members in an organization or the resources it possesses, which are often unreliable or missing in standard US datasets of non-profit organizations.³ Two key concepts in this framework are presence and weight. I break down civic participation into civic presence and civic weight. Civic presence refers to the visibility of the organization among the general population and local media, an organization's network of connections to other organizations, and its legitimacy, measured through its longevity and its official tax status. Civic weight measures the ability of an organization to influence resource flows to other organizations and lead collaborative projects, advancing its interests in the civic realm.

Similarly, I break down the dependent variable, political incorporation of organizations, into political presence and political weight. Political presence describes the visibility of the organization among government officials, its connections to officials, its connections to other organizations for political activities, and its perceived role in the local government. The concept of political weight refers to actual activities of organizations rather than perception of them, such as having their interests represented in the local government and influencing the flow of power (not just resources) to other organizations. I examine differences in political presence and weight of Asian Indian and Chinese organizations and attempt to account for these differences.

Data and methods

My analysis draws on interview data collected in 2006 and 2007. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of elected and appointed officials in the town and county (eight interviews), including the mayor and two of seven council members. These interviews helped to establish the degree to which immigrant organizations in Edison had political presence and weight in the minds of local decision makers. Informants were asked to name prominent local organizations; to describe civic participation levels of Asian Indian and Chinese residents and their organizations; and to comment on involvement of immigrants in general, on immigration as a local political issue, and on racial and ethnic tensions. One additional informant was the president of a local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, an expert on racial relations in the area.

I also interviewed the leaders of fourteen Asian Indian and nine Chinese organizations⁴. These interviews provided information about civic and political presence and weight from the perspective of immigrant organizations. The target population comprised of all Asian Indian and Chinese non-profit organizations in Edison. I determined the universe of organizations using several methods: directories of registered non-profits, interviews with government informants, snowball sample with leaders of immigrant and mainstream organizations, and searches of local media and online ethnic directories. While conceptually, the distinction between mainstream and immigrant organizations can be problematic, in this

³In the United States, residents can form associations without registering them with local or national authorities. Groups wishing to access tax exempt status can file with the Internal Revenue Service for 501(c)(3) status as a legal charity. Many statistical studies of nonprofit organizations in the United States use the IRS database, but this creates an undercount of small organizations that have not sought this status and/or do not have more than \$25,000 in revenues, the minimum amount required for mandatory filing.

⁴The ratio of immigrant organizations to immigrant population in this paper (7.7 per 10,000) is comparable to those in other US locations, such as Sunnyvale, California (8.1 per 10,000, Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008b), and Boston (4.8 per 10,000, Bloemraad 2006). The numbers may be higher in Western Europe because government funding leads to the formation of more organizations and because there are more accurate sources of data available (30-50 per 10,000 in Amsterdam, Vermeulen 2005).

particular context of segregated organizations, such labels are highly resonant with government officials and members of various organizations alike (see also Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008b).

Interviews were attempted with leaders of the entire universe of Asian Indian and Chinese organizations, and the resulting twenty-three interviews represent 66 per cent of the total. Notably, many of the organizations not interviewed were small charitable funds or foundations, sometimes run by a single family. Given information that I obtained about non-responding organizations, I have confidence that they were not major players in the local civic sphere. Interviews with leaders helped determine the resources available to the organizations and the extent of connections to other organizations. A series of questions explored relationships between organizations and government officials, which supplemented the data on political presence and weight of the organizations obtained from government officials themselves.

Asian Organizations in Edison

Interviews with government officials revealed that Asian organizations tend to have low political visibility. As shown in Table 2, most of the twenty-two mentions of Asian organizations occurred after informants were explicitly prompted to think of Asian organizations. Moreover, fully half of these instances referred to just two organizations: BAPS (Hindu) Temple and Hua Xia Chinese School. Officials were less likely to recall Chinese organizations without explicit prompting than they were to recall Asian Indian organizations without prompting. In contrast, fifty-one distinct white mainstream organizations were mentioned. Although some white officials expressed disbelief that I would ask about names of Asian organizations, local officials' ignorance is certainly not due to a dearth of such organizations in Edison.

Asian Indian Organizations

Asian Indians have formed many non-profit organizations in the Edison area. The majority are cultural and religious. There are also business organizations, advocacy organizations, professional organizations, and a cricket club. Table 3 summarizes political activities in which Asian Indian organizations are engaged.

The BAPS Temple is the Asian organization mentioned most often by local officials and seems to have high levels of political presence. This large and resource-rich temple of a Hindu sect serves as a community centre and engages in charitable activity in India and New Jersey. BAPS has civic weight because it is able to channel the resources of other organizations in disaster-relief efforts. Government officials are quick to mention it as a source of volunteers, an example of charitable work, or an exotic religious site. Although the temple claims to shun politics, it engages in some political activity such as voting drives. In addition, BAPS has a link to the town government in the person of Parag Patel, a former council member and a co-founder of the Indo-American Caucus in the local Democratic organization. This is one of several organizations that engage in political activities despite purportedly eschewing politics; Bloemraad (2006) has shown that such activities provide the seeds for immigrant political incorporation.

The Indo-American Cultural Society was not mentioned by government officials at all, yet it is highly doubtful that they are not familiar with it. They may not mention it because it opens the door to uncomfortable conversations about racially-tinged violence and ethnic tensions. For one, the town lost a major lawsuit over constitutional rights to this organization in the early 1990s, when the society fought against discriminatory regulation of its enormous Navrati festival. The leader of the organization, Pradip Kothari, calls himself 'the AI

Sharpton of the Asian Indians⁵ and is at the forefront in confronting the town over alleged cases of discrimination and violence against Asian Indians. He is the Asian Indian leader who sits down with the mayor to negotiate solutions to these confrontations (Din 2006). The group has received extensive media coverage, including in national newspapers (Goodnough 1995). As I argue below, the Cultural Society has played a crucial role in political incorporation of Asian Indians in Edison.

The one truly local of the various business organizations is the Indian Business Association (IBA), representing the businesses of Little India. Two other organizations operate on the state level, with a degree of influence. IBA has some civic presence and weight within the Asian Indian community – sponsoring cultural events, for instance – and some political presence in the town. It has some weight with town officials, maintaining regular contact with the mayor to deal with issues such as traffic congestion and unfair ticketing in Little India. The president of IBA was also appointed to a community relations board created following the latest police brutality scandal. The business leaders get the ear of the local government partly by avoiding confrontation:

We come here to make our life, build our career, educate our kids, make some money, and have a good life. We don't come here to fight. We want to keep that goal and try to work around the situation to make sure we don't create more enemies than necessary. (Leader of IBA, interview)

Despite this position, a significant fact about this business organization is that it used to be incorporated within the confrontational Indo-American Cultural Society until the conflict over police brutality escalated. IBA may have changed its strategies for getting the ear of the local elites but its leaders march alongside their peers from the more activist organizations in demonstrations defending the rights of Indians in Edison.

Although the Indo-American Cultural Society has assumed a role of an advocacy organization, other cultural organizations in Edison remain firmly rooted in cultural and educational activity. Despite this, and similar to the BAPS Temple, regular activities of these organizations have led them to the political sphere. One example of this spillover from associational life to political activity is the Edison Cricket Club: Edison's cricketers have written letters to officials, went door-to-door with petitions, and met with the mayor in their attempt to get a home field. On the other hand, organizations such as the Central Jersey Indian Cultural Association have more limited civic and political presence and weight outside the Asian Indian community, despite large number of members.

There are also organizations which engage in advocacy as their explicit purpose. South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow (SAALT) is a largely second-generation, Washington-based advocacy organization that has recently started outreach efforts in Edison. Its local base remains minimal but it is considered a player in local politics, with officials enlisting the help of a SAALT representative during the police brutality controversies. Another advocacy organization is a South Asian women's shelter, which struggles to raise resources and combat community hostility.

In all, I find that a number of Asian Indian organizations have civic presence and civic weight, and a few have political presence and political weight. Most organizations are not explicitly politically oriented but many nevertheless find themselves involved in political activities.

⁵Al Sharpton is a prominent and incendiary African American activist.

Chinese organizations

Chinese residents are fewer in number in Edison than Asian Indian residents, and Chinese organizations are fewer and less diverse in type (see Table 4). The central organizations of the Chinese community in Edison are the Chinese culture schools. Hua Xia Chinese School, the Asian organization most likely to be mentioned by government officials, serves the growing immigrant population from mainland China. With almost a thousand students, the school has significant civic weight in the Chinese community, controlling resources of other organizations. It is also the organization most mentioned by local Edison officials. A different set of five Chinese culture schools serves Chinese immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong. These are part of the Chinese American Cultural Association, a large local umbrella organization that also runs dance, music, and other cultural groups. This organization is facing a demographic challenge: with the decline in immigration from Taiwan and Hong Kong, enrolment in these schools is on a steady decline.

The Asian Cultural Center runs a variety of cultural events and publishes a Chinese-language newspaper. While it has participated in national-level political events, there is no involvement on the local level. Edison also has a Chinese business organization but, unlike its Asian Indian counterpart, it does not engage in any political activities. A state-wide organization of computer professionals has many members in Edison, but its focus is not on the local level. There is also a state-wide branch the Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA), a national advocacy group that works with second and higher generations of Chinese Americans and whose role is distant from the life of the first generation immigrant community in Edison.

Although the influence of Asian Indian organizations on the town is limited, the Chinese organizations in Edison have even less political weight. Hua Xia Chinese School, which is mentioned by most town officials, is also the only Chinese organization they are able to name. The chairman of the school recently completed his second and final term on the Edison school board. Through this individual, the school had been able to influence school district policy, but its political weight in the town was low because the board of education is an autonomous body that has few ties to the council or the mayor.

Other Chinese organizations in Edison are almost entirely without political presence and weight. Despite the fact that Edison has the largest Chinese population of any community in New Jersey, Chinese organizations are essentially invisible to government officials. One could say that the Chinese themselves are invisible: 'But it's not a big population in the county yet. Not much Chinese,' I was told by the freeholder director, the top official of Middlesex County. Those officials who did recognize that there was a large Chinese population saw the Chinese community as more insular than the Asian Indians, and as uninvolved in civic activities outside of education: 'They [Chinese residents] are not necessarily taking a leadership role in the community. They like to stay behind the scene, maybe it's the Confucian way of doing things.' (Mayor of Edison, interview)

It is noteworthy that no Asian organizations come close to the deep interrelationships between some of the prominent mainstream organizations and the local government (Aptekar, 2008). For instance, a large proportion of council members belong to the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal organization. Nevertheless, in a comparison between two immigrant groups, Chinese organizations engage in fewer political activities and have less political presence and weight than do Asian Indian organizations.

Discussion

Viewed through the weight and presence framework (Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008a, Table 5), the evidence suggests that civic presence and weight among immigrants do translate into political presence and weight but, in this particular case, more so for Asian Indians than for the Chinese. What accounts for this difference?

Both Asian Indians and Chinese in Edison have very high levels of socioeconomic status, although the Chinese are even more advantaged than the Asian Indians (see Table 1). To revisit the ambivalent effect of human capital on political organizing, it is clear from the Edison data that high levels of education have not resulted in incorporation into the mainstream organizational life (Aptekar, 2008) but are rather associated with formation of a robust immigrant civic sphere. In that respect, Chinese organizations may have more resources at their disposal because of the advantage they hold over Asian Indians in income. However, differences in human capital and resources – an area where the Chinese hold an advantage over Asian Indians – cannot explain the greater political incorporation of Asian Indian organizations.

At the same time, political stratification in Edison is not due to the apolitical orientation of immigrant organizations themselves. While it may be true that, as one Asian Indian leader put it, politics is ‘a personal thing, people don’t discuss it and it’s not on our agenda,’ even organizations that would like to stay out of politics still need to interact with the local government. Cultural organizations need permits for their parades, enrichment schools rent space from the town, and religious organizations negotiate parking regulations. It is noteworthy that some of the confrontations between the Asian Indian community and the town took place precisely at such intersections between ethnic cultural activity and local governance. For instance, the Asian Indian men who accused white police officers of brutality were setting up for India Day Parade.

Part of the explanation for the difference in political presence and weight of Asian Indian and Chinese immigrant organizations may lie in differences in population size, higher level of differentiation in the Chinese community between various origin groups, and English language fluency and experience with democracy among Asian Indians. However, there is more to the story than that. Chinese immigrants in Edison are widely perceived by officials and leaders I interviewed as insular and more interested in education than politics. This is consistent with their being categorized as a model minority, part of the racialization of Asian immigrants and their descendants in the United States. In this way, Asian American organizations that deal with civil rights, mental health and poverty lack civic and political visibility because these issues are dissonant with dominant perceptions of model minorities. It is telling that the one Chinese immigrant who was recruited to run for an elected office ran for school board. The model minority label attached to the Chinese can make their political efforts invisible or anomalous and stifles outreach to them by political leadership. At the same time, it may also limit their own goals and aspirations in terms of political involvement.

But what about the Asian Indians – does the label of model minority not apply to them as well? I have mentioned earlier that Asian Indians face particular ambiguity in the United States: although they conform to the stereotype in their socioeconomic success, Asian Indians are phenotypically distinct from what is perceived to be Asian (Kibria 1998). A sense of ambiguity and uncertainty is pervasive in racialization of Asian Indians in Edison:

...Anytime the police officers... talk to mainstream American people, including African American and Latinos, they show some respect to them... They fear bad

publicity. But we are not African Americans and we are not Latinos, we are *in between*.' (interview with Asian Indian leader)

In my interviews with white officials and leaders, it became clear that most have a mental hierarchy of different Asian groups, thinking of East Asians as the quintessential Asians and Asian Indians as something else; permutations of the phrase 'Asians and Indians' abound. Furthermore, Asian Indians are actually seen as invaders and foreigners, particularly in respect to the distinctive character and busy bustle of Little India as compared to the more placid stretch that comprises the local Chinatown (Din 2007). A mayoral candidate gave voice to this attitude during his campaign: 'We are losing a sense of Edison' (Miller and Gerszberg 2005) and, more recently: 'I think there's ... thought of 'they're taking over and I'm being pushed out of my community' (Miller 2006)

Racial tensions in Edison are tensions between whites and Asian Indians: '[Racial tensions] are out there, definitely. There's certainly some anti-Indian stuff out there. I think more than maybe the other groups... I don't know if the Chinese get the same level resentment, that's not my sense' (appointed town official, interview). In the local context, it is Asian Indians who are more visibly victims of racialized violence. In the 1990s, 'dot buster' gangs⁶ attacked Indian residents in New Jersey; these violent hate crimes are quite fresh in people's memories. The alleged cases of police harassment of businesses, hate crimes, police brutality, and racial profiling are all against Asian Indians: '...I get Asian Indians, who – it's funny – they get stopped sometimes [by police] and they say: "They think we are black, that's why they stopped us." You have to remind them that <laughs> colour is colour.' (Interview with leader of local NAACP branch)

Indeed, colour is colour and Asian Indians, with their dark skin, are racialized in a very different way than the light-skinned Chinese and other East Asians. Without the model minority myth, organizations of Asian Indians are more likely to be perceived by local political elites as going beyond culture and religion. And if they are already seen as adversarial invaders, rather than as self-sufficient conformers, Asian Indians have less to lose when deciding to make demands, protest their treatment, and engage in politics.

The hostile reception that Asian Indians encounter from some native-born white residents and leaders has led to reactive mobilization among this group. At the forefront of this development is Indo-American Cultural Association, whose express purpose is to 'take a stand on injustice and fight bigotry.' But, as I have shown, other Asian Indian organizations are engaging in the political sphere as well, looking to have their needs met and establishing connections with government officials and inroads into the Democratic party machine.

The fact that civic participation is being translated into political incorporation in the context of hostility between the minority group and the mainstream can seem paradoxical. But many immigrant groups in the United States have seen mobilization along ethnic lines turn into entry into political stakeholding (Glazer and Moynihan 1963, Portes and Rumbaut 1996). In the post-civil rights era, this process is aided by multiculturalism, which characterizes the American political sphere in the sense that group identities, particularly those based on ethnic and racial categories, are treated as legitimate sources of political mobilization (Modood 2007). In Edison, the periodically inflamed conflict between the white mainstream and Asian Indians forces local officials to work on resolving it, especially when intra-party fragmentation places a premium on immigrant votes.

⁶The 'dot' refers to the bindi, a decoration Hindu women wear on their foreheads.

In the case of Chinese organizations, civic presence and weight is only minimally translated into political weight. Thus, we see that immigrant civic participation *can* lead to political incorporation but it is filtered by the racialization processes in the local context. These racialization processes – Chinese as model minorities and Asian Indians as adversarial invaders – help explain the difference between political incorporation and political marginalization.

One final point to address is Edison's Asian mayor. Can the election of this Korean-American be taken as a sign of Asian immigrant political incorporation? I would argue that the election of Mayor Choi has had limited effect on Asian immigrants and their organizations. Mayor Choi is neither Asian Indian nor Chinese nor really an immigrant in the sense of most Asian adults in Edison. He was brought to the US as a toddler, does not speak Korean, and stresses his American upbringing. Although Asian Indian leaders initially supported Choi and thought of him as a fellow Asian who would represent their interests, his actions during the police brutality scandals have disappointed many. The Chinese also do not necessarily see Choi as one of their own. In fact, a large group of Chinese leaders endorsed Choi's white opponent, emphasizing that Choi's Asian identity made no difference (Van Develde 2005). Thus, this is certainly not as simple as an Asian mayor representing Asian residents. Whether the case of Mayor Choi points to a future retreat in ethnic organizing among children of immigrants in Edison remains to be seen. As things stand now, Asian immigrants have created a separate civic sphere that leads to a seat at the table for some but not others.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to account for differences between immigrant groups in the extent to which civic involvement is translated into political incorporation. In the suburban town of Edison, the civic participation of Asian Indian immigrants spills over into political incorporation while Chinese immigrant organizations remain marginalized. I argue that a crucial ingredient in the explanation is the differential process of racialization that is encountered by the two groups. The model minority myth leads to a stereotype of Chinese immigrants as successful but conformist and risk-averse, which reduces outreach to them by local elites and limits their own political efforts. However, the model minority myth is not the dominant way of viewing Asian Indians, who are seen as invaders and troublemakers and whose conflicts with the town become racialized as a problem of whites versus a racial minority. Reacting to this sentiment, Asian Indians become more likely to form organizations that engage in ethnic advocacy, reinforcing ethnicity and the sense of common group membership. The greater degree of engagement and mobilization in turn forces local political elites to grapple with Asian Indians' demands and organizations while they largely ignore the Chinese, whom they see as quiet and insular.

The significance of race is a constant in the assimilation literature (Portes and Rumbaut 1996; 2001; Alba and Nee 2003) and this paper underlines the importance of examining processes of racialization in order to understand and predict political incorporation of immigrant groups. It complements work of European scholars who have found that cultural factors, such as dominant citizenship regimes, influence immigrant mobilization and that immigrant civic participation can link variably to political involvement for different immigrant groups in the same city (Giugni and Passy 2004; Jacobs et al 2004). The case of Edison also supports the connection between reactive formation and political action (Glazer and Moynihan 1963) – a connection that holds true despite the fact that the minority in question has a higher socioeconomic status than the majority. At the same time, I show that high levels of human capital are not always associated with political incorporation. In fact, the situation of the Chinese in Edison indicates that, in some cases, there may even be a

tension between socioeconomic success and political incorporation. This provides a counterpoint to current assimilation theories, which view human capital – and thus, the trajectory of professional immigrants – in an unqualifiedly positive light (Portes and Rumbaut 1996; 2001; Alba and Nee 2003), and highlights the imperative of including the civic and political in our models of immigrant incorporation. Finally, the study of immigrant organizations contributes to understanding of the American civic sphere and its relationship to a vibrant democracy.

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Table 1

Characteristics of persons of Asian Indian and Chinese ancestry (foreign- and native-born), and native-born non-Hispanic whites in Middlesex *, Somerset, and Hunterdon Counties, New Jersey

	Asian Indians	Chinese	Native-born non-Hispanic Whites
Mean age	33	33	40
Median household income	\$101,867	\$116,128	\$92,200
Per cent under 200% poverty level	6.3	6.6	9.2
Education (25+)			
Per cent less than h.s. or GED	6.6	6.4	7.4
Per cent high school diploma	3.4	7.1	28.7
Per cent some college	8.8	12.9	22.7
Per cent Bachelor's degree	41.3	24.4	25.6
Per cent Master's degree	31.2	34.4	10.7
Per cent professional or PhD	8.8	14.8	4.9
Place of birth (18+)			
Per cent born in India/China	92.2	81.2	--
Per cent born in NY/NJ	1.4	9.0	82.1
Citizenship status (18+)			
Per cent not citizens	55.5	29.3	--
Per cent naturalized citizens	41.4	57.4	--
Per cent citizens by birth	3.1	13.4	100
Per cent speak English not well or not at all (18+)	7.3	17.4	0

Source: US Census Bureau (2006)

* Edison is located in Middlesex County

Table 2

Government officials' recall of Asian organizations.

Official	Mainstream orgs	Asian Indian orgs		Chinese orgs		
		Not prompted [*]	Prompted [^]	Not prompted	Prompted	Other ethnic orgs
Mayor	9	4	0	0	1	2
Council member 1	7	0	1	0	0	0
Council member 2	13	0	1	0	1	0
Board of Ed member	3	1	0	2	0	0
Director of Health and Human Services	19	1	0	2	0	1
Freeholder	6	0	1	0	1	1
Administrator, Adult Protective Services	11	0	1	0	0	1
Coordinator, Cultural and Heritage Committee	7	1	0	0	4	5

^{*} Officials were asked to name prominent organizations, but not Asian Indian or Chinese organizations specifically.

[^] Later in the interview, officials were asked to name Asian Indian or Chinese organizations.

Table 3

Political activities of Asian Indian organizations in the sample.

Organization	Attend meetings	Write letters to officials	Petitions/campaigns	Rallies/demonstrations	Voting drives, etc	Talk to reporters	Meet with officials	Officials attend events	Officials contact org	Org leader in govt
BAPS Temple					X			X		'03-'07 town council
Jain Temple								X		
Indo-American Cultural Society	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Central Jersey Indian Cultural Association					X			X		
Art of Living								X		
Carnatic Music Association										
Balabharati Cultural Center								X		
Cricket Club		X	X				X			
South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	
South Asian Women's Shelter*			X	X			X			
Asian Indian Chamber of Commerce					X		X			'02-'07 state ratepayer advocate
Asian American Retailers Association					X		X		X	
Association of Indian Pharmaceutical Scientists										
Indian Business Association	X				X	X	X			'06-now town board

* Name changed by request.

Table 4

Political activities of Chinese organizations in the sample.

Organization	Attend meetings	Write letters to officials	Petitions/ campaigns	Rallies/ demonstrations	Voting drives, etc	Talk to reporters	Meet with officials	Officials attend events	Officials contact org	Org leader in govt
Hua Xia Chinese School					X			X		'01-'07 school board
Chinese Chorus										
Chinese American Cultural Association					X			X		
Chinese Dance Ensemble										
Asian Cultural Center						X				
Wang Da Chung Puppet Group										
Chinese American Chamber of Commerce										
Chinese Computer Professionals			X		X	X	X			
Organization of Chinese Americans		X	X		X	X		X		

Civic and political presence and weight among Asian Indian and Chinese organizations in Edison, New Jersey

Table 5

	Definition	Asian Indian	Chinese
Civic presence	Visibility among general population, mainstream media		
	Connections with other orgs	Medium/High	Low/Medium
Civic weight	Ability to advance interests		
	Ability to control resource flow to other orgs		
	Ability to shape projects involving other orgs	Medium	Medium
Political presence	Visibility among government officials		
	Connections with officials		
	Connections to other orgs in political activities		
	Perceived as having a role in local governance	Medium	Low
Political weight	Ability to have interests represented in government		
	Ability to influence flow of power to other orgs	Low/Medium	Low

Framework developed by Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad (2008a)