



**SOCIAL CAPITOL IN ILLINOIS:
POTENTIAL AND PITFALLS**

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September 2012

Paper Originally Prepared for the

Ethics and Reform Symposium on Illinois Government

September 27-28, 2012 - Union League Club, Chicago, Illinois

Sponsored by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute, SIUC, the Joyce Foundation, and

the Union League Club of Chicago

Abstract

The following paper traces the rise of machine politics in Illinois and the role of “social capital”: a force that is not inherently good or bad but can be used towards either end. The paper demonstrates how Illinois has historically enjoyed vast amounts of social capital, but that it has been negatively applied towards individualistic ends, resulting in corruption. The paper suggests the potential to deploy such social capital for constructive goals such as civic engagement and ethical governance. The paper proposes that reform efforts in Illinois should focus on ethnic networks because of the abundance of social capital available. Using a case study and community-based research on South Asian Americans, the paper reveals insights about this community’s views and experiences relating to civic participation. The paper concludes that government reform efforts in Illinois should utilize social capital among South Asian Americans and other immigrant and minority groups.

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South Asian American Policy & Research Institute (SAAPRI) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization established in 2001 to improve the lives of South Asian Americans in the Chicago area, by using research to formulate equitable and socially responsible public policy. Additional information is available at <http://www.saapri.org> or by contacting saapri@saapri.org

The authors thank the following organizations and individuals for their valuable support and insights for this project: The Paul Simon Public Policy Institute; SAAPRI Executive Director Ami Gandhi and SAAPRI Founders Ann Kalayil, K. Sujata, and Padma Rangaswamy; Professor Dick Simpson of University of Illinois at Chicago; Brian Gladstein and Whitney Woodward of Illinois Campaign for Political Reform; and the many community members who participated in the survey.

Social Capitol in Illinois: Potential and Pitfalls

By: Maya Pillai

I. Introduction

As residents of Illinois, we know that our state is both reputed and infamous for its political history. Along with being a key site of the civil rights movement and home to respected leaders, we are also known for our uncomfortably close relative, corruption. With the latest reports showcasing Illinois as the third most corrupt state (SJ-R.com, 2012) and Chicago as 'the most corrupt city in America' (Huffington Post, 2012), we are eager for change, but we have struggled with finding meaningful and effective ways to achieve reform. The following paper proposes that civic engagement and reform efforts should focus on utilizing social capital. In particular, the paper portrays how South Asian Americans, along with other immigrant and minority groups, are uniquely positioned to help move our society towards ethical governance by using such social capital for good.

The paper first traces the rise of machine politics in Illinois followed closely by a culture of corruption; the paper then illustrates how this machine power is better seen as social capital that can be applied towards both positive and negative ends. The paper then demonstrates how the Illinois political system has often been mining such social capital negatively, but there are indeed examples of the constructive use of social capital. The paper goes on to demonstrate why using social capital constructively is necessary to overcome Illinois' history of corruption. Finally, this paper explains that ethnic networks – in particular, the South Asian American community – are a useful place to focus efforts for the constructive use of social capital toward a culture of ethical

governance. The paper also reveals new insights about South Asian Americans' attitudes and experiences, particularly with regard to civic participation.

II. Corruption: Negative Use of Social Capital

In order to explore how networks of friends and family members can be used to promote ethical governance, we must first acknowledge the negative uses of social capital that have indeed led to corruption.

A. Why is Illinois so corrupt?

As there have been numerous instances of public corruption by government leaders and those who interface with the government, we are faced with the essential question expressed by one headline on the day that Governor Rod Blagojevich was arrested: "Why is Illinois so Corrupt?" (POLITICO, 2008) A common answer offered is that the culture of machine politics in Illinois gave rise to the culture of corruption. As Professor Dick Simpson of the University of Illinois at Chicago has said, "we have had machine politics since the Great Chicago Fire of 1871...Machine politics breeds corruption inevitably." (CBS Local, 2012) But what is machine politics, how did it develop and how did it give rise to the culture of corruption in Illinois?

One theory is that as waves of immigrants such as the Irish, German, Jewish and other groups arrived in Chicago, they were faced with social exclusion that made it hard to obtain any opportunities for advancement. In order to break into the system, a machine developed where networks of friends and family would call upon local officials to help these new citizens find housing and jobs, and this responsiveness would be

repaid at the ballot box (Gradel, Simpson and Zimelis, 2009). The culture of machine politics thus began to thrive and, soon, other groups such as businessmen also began to use the machine for personal benefit; examples include paying bribes within their networks to make it more likely that they could win large contracts from the government (Gradel, Simpson and Zimelis, 2009).. As a result, machine politics gradually gave rise to a culture of corruption, staining Illinois' political practice today.

B. How has Illinois' social capital been mined negatively?

As explained above, machine politics and corruption relied upon networks of friends and family. The machine in Illinois is a form of "social capital," which means that it is a "web of cooperative relationships between citizens that facilitate resolution of collection action problems" (Janjuha-Jivraj, 2003). Such capital arising from networks has been mined for personal benefit, such that the, "right 'connections' allow certain persons to gain access to profitable public contracts and bypass regulations binding on others (Portes, 2000)." This practice is evident in Illinois politics today, through nepotism as well as bribery and kickbacks given to personal networks, which might lead to individual benefit but also leads to losses and costs for the entire community.

Simpson discusses nepotism and bribery as a significant problem in Chicago and many suburbs, where public officials use their position to help friends and family. Simpson illustrates this through several examples, including that of Mayor Stevens of Rosemont (who served as mayor for over forty years), wherein many contracts were assigned to those connected to the Mayor through family or business (Sterrett, Zmuda, Gradel and Simpson, 2012). Another example that demonstrates how social capital has

been used for personal benefit is the Blagojevich scandal that involved an American of South Asian descent, Raghuveer Nayak, who had served as a fundraiser for United States Representative Jesse Jackson, Jr. and Governor Rod Blagojevich. The incident made several headlines for their alleged joint attempt to profit from the sale of President Obama's former Senate seat. As one headline in TIME magazine stated, "What's a little Senate seat bribery between friends?"(Suddath, 2008), which illustrates how social capital arising from personal networks seems to have been mined negatively for individual benefit rather than collective good.

Nayak's story seems to parallel those of the immigrants of 19th century Chicago and illustrates the different ways in which social capital can be used. As part of the South Asian American immigrant community, Nayak started out in a similar position to the early immigrants such as the Irish and the Germans, as he was excluded from societal opportunities due to racism and near-poverty (*Chicago Tribune*, 2012). However, he created and then used a personal network of friends and family, enabling him to overcome obstacles and launch a number of medical clinics. While this initially helped him break into the system, it appears that he continued to leverage this social capital to his individual benefit. Nayak has been accused of bribing doctors to send patients to his surgery centers (*Chicago Tribune*, 2012) and of laundering money from his surgi-center business through a friend in return for cash (*Sun-Times*, 2012). The case against Nayak is still pending.

The stories of South Asian Americans implicated in bribery and kickback schemes in Illinois demonstrate the multiple ways in which the social capital of personal networks can be used. At times, personal networks are helpful and even necessary,

while at other times, they can be harmful to the public at large. In that sense, such social capital only becomes an asset to the political system when it is applied to work for collective benefit.

C. Is machine politics a liability for Illinois?

It seems natural to conclude that Illinois' biggest liability is the machine politics culture, where people use personal networks to obtain opportunities – but consider the contrary. Instead of seeing the machine as inherently bad, we can see it as simply a neutral force, neither good nor bad; it is only a tool that is being used to achieve particular ends. The machine's power has thus far been put to work for personal benefit in Illinois, but it is equally capable of working for the collective good. Illinois has vast amounts of social capital that can also be mined toward more constructive ends that can benefit the political system as a whole; social capital can be applied to clean, efficient governance.

III. Civic Engagement: Constructive Use of Social Capital

A. How can social capital be used constructively?

If the machine's efficiency in Illinois can be used constructively, too, then the question arises: how can Illinois best mine social capital for collective good? Academics explain that the social capital present in community networks can be used to discourage certain harmful behaviors through “pressure on members within a group for socially responsible behavior” (Janjuha-Jivraj, 2003). Seen in this light, the social capital of

networks can serve as a community asset that has potential to, “lead to better governance and more effective policies.” (Portes, 2000)

Several practical examples illustrate how the social capital available in networks can be used for the common good. The most telling example is the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh that works with small village communities to overcome poverty. In this model, villagers are part of a cooperative network working together to obtain low-interest loans. Even though the villagers have low incomes, the bank enjoys high repayment rates; this is achieved through peer pressure on each member within the group, making it socially uncomfortable to default on loans and, therefore, the villagers avoid defaulting. The model is successful because of the power derived from close connections within the network, and this has inspired many development agencies such as the World Bank to support such models for community work in general (Rankin, 2011).

Even in the U.S., the power from such communal networks has been used constructively to support new immigrant entrepreneurs. Saxenian documents how ethnic networks in the Silicon Valley have, “created a rich fabric of professional and associational activities that facilitate immigrant job search, information exchange, access to capital and managerial know how, and the creation of shared ethnic identities.” (Saxenian, 2000) The example of Silicon Valley clearly shows how the social capital of ethnic networks can be used successfully to benefit whole communities.

In Chicago, too, we have an example of the constructive use of social capital in the affirmative action public contracting programs dedicated to Minority-Owned Businesses (MBE) and Woman-Owned Businesses (WBE). The programs were initially

started by state and local governments to, “remedy ongoing discrimination and the effects of past discrimination against women and minority groups, so as not to be a passive participant in such discrimination” (Gradel and Simpson, 2011).¹ The programs have facilitated the development of a network that serves as an important resource for women and minorities. It is thus clear that social capital can indeed be used constructively too, but is it an important enough avenue to pursue in government reform?

B. Why is it necessary that government reform efforts in Illinois pursue the constructive uses of social capital?

Given that the culture of corruption in Illinois is deep-rooted and is powered by social capital, any attempt to convert it from a liability to an asset requires bottom-up reconstruction. As stated by former U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald, “we’re not going to end corruption in Illinois by arrests and indictments alone” (POLITICO 2008). Tapping into societal networks is a vital start in our efforts toward a more ethical culture in politics.

Current reform measures focus on the enactment and enforcement of laws. Recommendations by the Illinois Reform Commission and Chicago Mayor Emanuel’s Ethics Reform Task Force propose a variety of laws, regulations, and programs to increase ethical behavior by government personnel (Gradel, Simpson and Kelly, 2010). While these proposals are promising and necessary, in order to create an ethical

¹ Although this network has also been used for corruption, it was initially launched to benefit the community, and it is still a necessary tool for leveling the playing field for women and minority business owners.

culture, it is also crucial to increase positive civic engagement among members of the public who interface with the government.

Several critics have explained why legal reforms alone are insufficient to combat corruption. For example, the State Integrity Investigation expressed that legal reforms may be, “cosmetic facelifts that conceal a host of ethical loopholes” (Vinicky, n.d). Others suggest that too many regulations hinder good governance, as this constrains decision-makers’ judgment and causes delays (Anachiarico and Jacobs, 1996). The *Chicago Tribune* (2012) article also explains that law is simply a tool, and that ultimately it is only political will and interest that can successfully combat corruption.

As Simpson stated, “no one pretends...that the changes that have been made thus far are sufficient to root out corruption or to change the ‘culture of corruption’ which has gripped the state and our local governments for nearly a century and a half” (Gradel and Simpson, 2011). Many experts acknowledge that we have far to go to change the culture of corruption and that law alone is not a sufficient solution. Therefore, we should turn to the constructive use of social capital to complement current reform efforts and help weed out the cultural roots of corruption.

C. In using social networks to combat corruption, where do we start?

Given that Illinois has a rich supply of social capital, and that we only need to apply its power towards constructive uses, then ethnic networks offer a promising place to begin. As discussed above, the culture of corruption arose from such networks, making it a natural place to look for solutions. Additionally, scholarly work on social capital describes ethnic networks as a resource that can help the public at large. For

example, the World Bank states that, “whether it is immigration, microenterprise development, tribal nepotism or racial conflict, ethnic ties are a clear example of how actors who share common values and culture can band together for mutual benefit” (Rankin, 2011).

In Illinois, there is an already existing and abundant supply of such capital in ethnic networks. Studies reveal that, in 2009, immigrants were 13.5% of the Illinois population and that this community is larger today in numbers than at any point in the state’s history (Hall and Lubotsky, 2011). Illinois has a steadily growing immigrant population whose ethnic networks are a social asset with much positive potential to work for collective benefit.

The South Asian American community, including people of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan descent, presents a particularly strong case to deepen civic engagement efforts by drawing upon social networks. Since 2000, South Asian Americans have grown by over 55% in Illinois (SAAPRI, 2012 b.)², with Illinois being one of the top states in the country in terms of South Asian American population and growth (SAALT, 2012).

Even aside from this growth, the community is also at a historically important juncture, possessing both eagerness and ambition to increase their influence in government and politics. In 2011, Ameya Pawar became the first South Asian American and the first Asian American member of the Chicago City Council. In Skokie, Niles Township, and York Township, South Asian Americans have been elected to local office, and several South Asian American judges have been elected and appointed to

² SAAPRI will soon be publishing an updated demographic profile of South Asian Americans in Illinois with additional demographic data.

the Cook County Courts. In the March 2012 primary election, South Asian Americans ran for office in three of the eighteen federal Congressional seats in Illinois.

As Toby Chaudhuri, 35, a political strategist in Washington stated, “there’s no question, the Indian American political tiger has sprung. It is no longer just about writing checks to gain access. We realize we need to use politics to gain a say in government. Our numbers are swelling at a time of enormous change in American society, and we have a new generation that is ready to run” (*Washington Post*, 2012).

South Asian Americans are eager to see members of their own community become actively involved in all forms of civic engagement, including exercising their right to vote and serving in elected office. And as discussed further below, community members are anxious for all government officials – regardless of race – to show more accountability and effectively address the community’s needs. These dynamics likely exist in other minority and immigrant groups as well, and exploring the positive use of South Asian Americans’ social networks will hopefully benefit other communities and the public at large. Thus, both the demographics and the growing political ambitions of South Asian Americans in Illinois make this community ripe for analysis as a group with high social capital that can be used to increase clean, ethical governance.

IV. Civic Engagement in South Asian American Community

A. South Asian Americans’ Attitudes on Civic Engagement

In order to lay the groundwork for deeper civic engagement in South Asian American networks, it is important to assess the community’s attitudes toward and

experiences with civic and political participation. Such research, in combination with SAAPRI's exit polling research during the 2012 elections, provides insights and helps to determine if this particular ethnic community is ready and willing to engage. As explained below, the initial research reveals that social capital in this community can be used for the group's collective benefit in pursuing government reform. In other words, the survey results suggest that investing in civic engagement in the South Asian American community in Illinois is a worthwhile strategy to promote ethical engagement with government.

To begin understanding South Asian American social capital and the community's attitudes towards Illinois politics and corruption, the authors used an anonymous online survey as an initial heuristic study – in other words, we assessed the views of a small group within the community to start formulating ideas about how social capital can be used to increase positive, constructive civic engagement among South Asian Americans. The online survey (SAAPRI, 2012 a.) was distributed among key community networks and had 57 completed responses from South Asian Americans in Illinois, including people of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent. The survey results are not conclusive, but they do suggest possibilities for future research on how social capital drawn from networks can be used to support ethical governance.

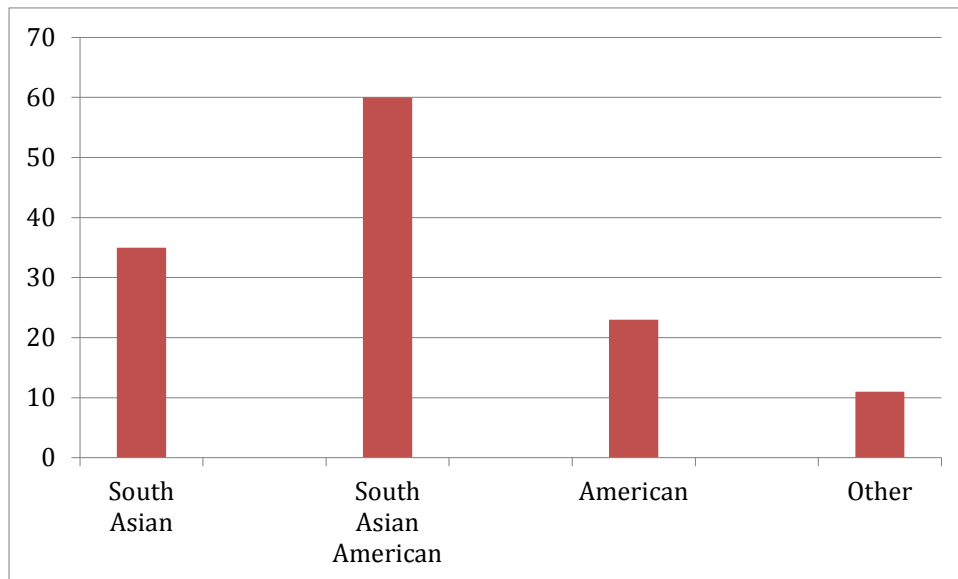
It should be noted that this particular sample of respondents is a subset of a diverse, heterogeneous community. Generally speaking, the survey respondents were well educated, of working-age, proficient in English and had access to and were familiar with computers and the Internet. For example, the survey reveals that nearly all (96%) of the respondents had a college degree, and 78% of the respondents had an advanced

degree. Interestingly, about 74% of the respondents were female. These findings may reveal insights about South Asian American community leaders who have the tools to influence their networks for the group's collective benefit. However, we recognize that there are many members of the South Asian American community who face educational, linguistic, economic, and other barriers, and we hope that future research can target a broader segment of the South Asian American population (SAAPRI, 2012 b.).

B. Survey Findings: South Asian American Identity

The survey results reveal many noteworthy findings that support the community's readiness as a partner for reform efforts. The results demonstrate that ethnic group identification is an important part of the self-perception of the members of the South Asian American community. For example, the majority (74%) of the respondents were either born in the U.S. or arrived more than three decades earlier, suggesting strong ties to the U.S., but only 23% of the respondents identify themselves as purely American, independent of any ethnic association. More than half (60%) of the respondents consider themselves South Asian American, with a large majority (93%) of the respondents stating that their identity was important to them.

Table 1: Perceived Identity of Respondents (answers expressed as percentage)

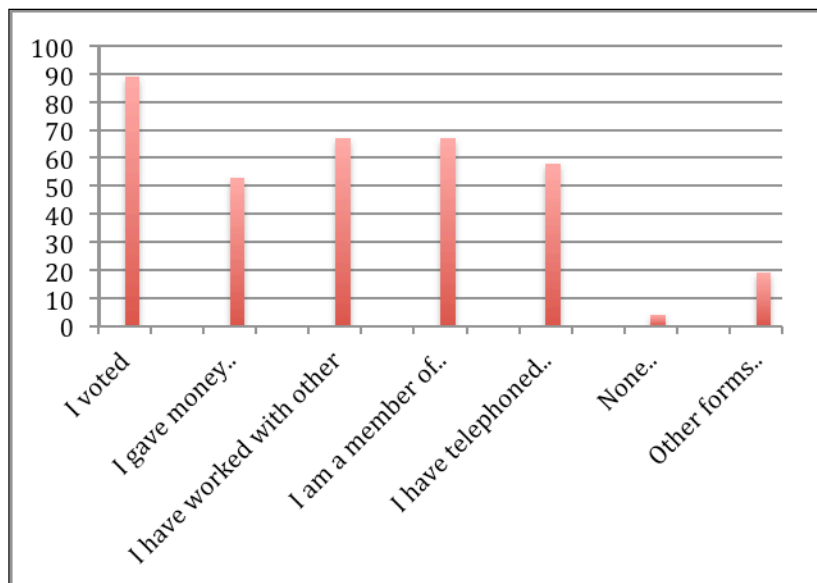


This balance between assimilation and ties to ethnic heritage is also evident by the fact that more than half of the respondents (69%) stated that a quarter to three-fourths (25% to 75%) of the people in their network are either South Asian or South Asian American. The *Washington Post's* article illustrates this balance of identity in citing Chopra, running for Lieutenant Governor in Virginia, who describes his generation of Indian Americans as “balanc[ing] assimilation with cultural identity, so we can add to the mosaic that makes this country great” (*Washington Post*, 2012). The strong South Asian American identity demonstrates the potential reach of such leaders; they can potentially impact not just their own ethnic community but also reach across ethnic lines to benefit others.

C. Survey Findings: Civic and Political Participation

The survey also indicates that there are at least some South Asian Americans who are politically active and ambitious, looking to extend their influence and have their voices heard by government leaders. The survey responses do indeed reflect a community which is both politically active and exercises civic participation in a variety of ways. For example, looking at the table below, a large percentage of the respondent sample (89%) voted and more than half of the respondents stated that they are politically active in other ways including: giving money to candidates to run for political office (53%), working with people in the community to deal with a political issue (67%), are members of a community organization (67%) or expressed their views to a government official on a public issue (58%).³

Table 2: Civic and Political Participation of Respondents



³ Some questions regarding civic and political participation were modeled after research currently being conducted by American National Election Studies. Additional information is available at <http://www.electionstudies.org>.

The above data suggest that at least this subset of the South Asian American community is active in civic and political participation, wishing to voice their community's concerns.

D. Survey Findings: Political Leadership Preferences

How does the South Asian Americans' concern for their community affect their choice of political leadership? Interestingly, more than three fourths of the respondents (88%) ranked "South Asian American heritage" as last in desired qualities in a political candidate prioritizing, instead, "ethical character" (ranked first by 49% of the respondents), followed closely by "responsiveness to community concerns" (ranked second by 46% of the respondents).

Table 3: Desired Characteristics in a Political Candidate

| Rank | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|--------------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| Responsiveness to community concerns | 46% | 46% | 9% |
| South Asian American heritage | 5% | 7% | 88% |
| Ethical character | 49% | 47% | 4% |

Consider also, as described in more detail below, that nearly all the respondents (96%) think corruption is a general problem in Illinois, with a little more than three-fourths (78%) of the respondents seeing it as also a problem in the South Asian American community. The survey data suggest that the respondents value ethical character and are concerned about corruption as civically conscious members of American society, indicating that the community could be well poised for deeper civic engagement and anti-corruption efforts.

E. Survey Findings: Understanding of Corruption

A commonly discussed topic among South Asian Americans is whether community members possess a mainstream understanding of ethics in politics, which would affect the strategies that should be used to increase positive forms of civic engagement. In this study, when respondents were asked to define what corruption meant to them, nearly half (42%) of them emphasized personal benefit in their definitions, illustrated through words such as, “individualism,” “nepotism” among others. More than half of the respondents (56%) emphasized dishonesty and an abuse of power and position of some sort, illustrated by words such as, “misuse of power,” “illegal,” “bribes,” “cutting corners,” and “dishonesty.” The responses suggest that community members are likely to be in agreement with mainstream definitions of corruption in Illinois, and the responses also show that members value community welfare and condemn abuse of power for personal benefit. This understanding of corruption and ethics can serve as an asset when collaborating with South Asian Americans on civic engagement and anti-corruption measures.

F. Survey Findings: Impact of Network Ties

The survey also tested the strength of network ties and its impact on feelings about corruption. The survey revealed, in rank order, that more than half of the respondents (68%) stated that they would be most disturbed to find corrupt practices within their immediate network, followed next in rank by a government official (28%).

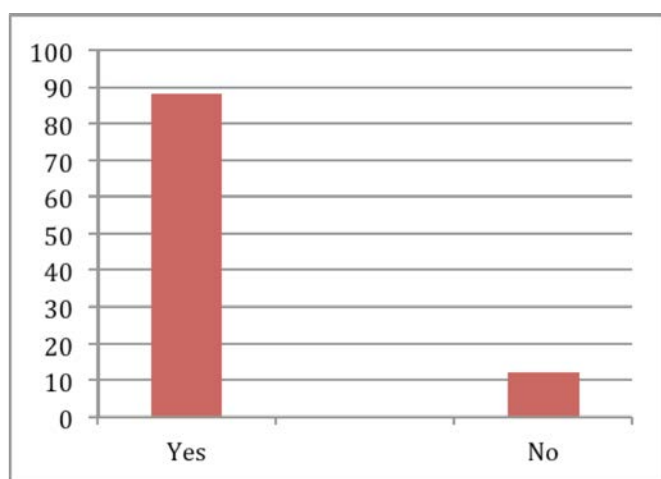
Table 4: Where Respondents Would Be Most Disturbed to Find Corruption

| Rank | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Immediate family or friends | 68% | 18% | 4% | 0 | 11% |
| Distant relatives or acquaintances | 2% | 37% | 33% | 18% | 11% |
| Someone in the South Asian American community | 2% | 14% | 39% | 35% | 11% |
| Any Illinois resident | 0 | 11% | 7% | 33% | 49% |
| Government official | 28% | 21% | 18% | 14% | 19% |

This shows that respondents care about ethics in their immediate network of family and friends, first and foremost, but their interest in government is more than their interest in distant relatives, acquaintances, or any Illinois resident. The data suggest that individual community leaders themselves should be partners in anti-corruption efforts, given their concern for and their impact on immediate personal and professional networks.

This recommendation is also supported by the result that the majority of the respondents have a personal stake in detecting corruption. The results revealed that more than three-fourths of them (88%) feel that a reputation of corruption associated with South Asian Americans will personally affect them.

Table 5: Whether Respondents Think That a Reputation of Corruption Associated With South Asian Americans Would Affect Them



Looking at the detailed responses to the question, three quarters (75%) of the respondents expressed concerns including, “bad name to the community,” “stereotyping,” “cultural association,” “reputation” and other similar sentiments. One member of the community voiced their concern about stereotyping by saying, “when an ‘ethnic person’ is guilty of such behavior, we are all automatically associated to that person because of our perceived ethnicity and race...” and another said, “it would make working in business situations with non-South Asians very difficult, because they may approach working with you with same negative preconceived notions,” expressing worry over the generation of stereotypes. Another community member worried that, “If I would

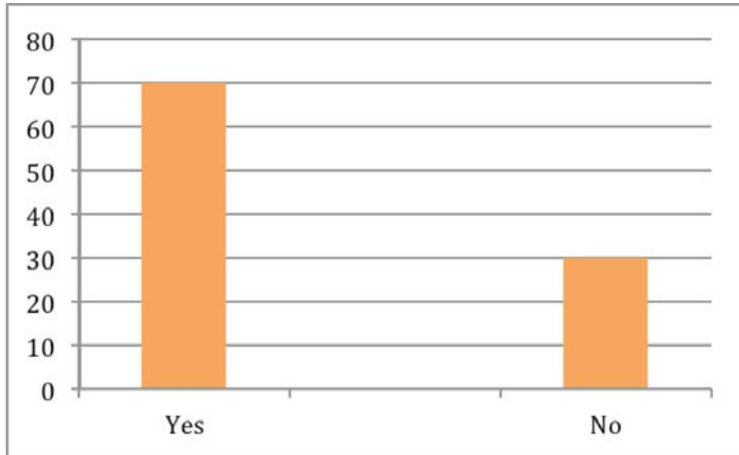
like to enter political office or law, I do not want my reputation to be tainted because of a reputation of corruption associated with South Asian Americans.” Respondents felt that a harmed reputation due to association and the negative work of stereotypes would negatively impact their personal and professional aspirations.

These stereotypes harm a minority community that already faces being misunderstood and marginalized, for example due to the “model minority myth.” The survey responses reflect a group of South Asian Americans who are sensitively aware that corruption in the community would work against their ambitions and aspirations. This research indicates that the community is particularly eager to counter these stereotypes of being corrupt, thus suggesting that South Asian Americans can play a key role in civic engagement and anti-corruption measures for Illinois’ collective benefit.

G. Survey Findings: Community Actions to Combat Corruption

If the social capital arising from the South Asian American network is to be mined constructively, where should policymakers begin? The survey responses reveal that more than three-fourths of the respondents (86%) stated that they would feel either bothered or ashamed if they were to find out that someone in the South Asian American community was corrupt. When asked if they can play a role in discouraging corruption among their family and community, almost three-quarters of the respondents (70%) said “yes.” Their ideas provide numerous ideas for future research and community engagement.

Table 6: Whether Respondents Think That They Can Play a Role in Discouraging Corruption



Respondents listed several potential actions that they can take to discourage corruption, including, “education and civic engagement,” “transparency and participatory decision-making,” “discussion,” as well as others such as, “lead by example and vocalize my views on corruption,” and “disapproval [sic].”

For those who did not think that they could play a role in discouraging corruption, their responses showed that they perceive the problem is too big for them to handle. As one person said, “I would want to ‘do something about it,’ but I don’t know where to start or what I’d be capable of accomplishing. It doesn’t mean I wouldn’t try, but I do feel that if I tried to address the corruption, I may have little impact. I think this is where the ‘power in numbers’ would apply where communities could organize to condemn these behaviors. If it’s government officials, we would need to vote them out; there is just little transparency and little communication on who is and isn’t corrupt.” A few people noted that they believe nobody will listen to them. “I don’t think I have enough clout for people to listen to my point of view.” Still others think that the basic understanding of corruption

does not exist, (in contrast to the findings cited earlier on the respondents' understanding of corruption), for example saying, "...no one ever admits they are fundraising to get contracts for example, or they want their child to get a job...No one thinks they are corrupt. They think they are helping their child, or a friend." The respondent also noted, "An organization like SAAPRI can host a forum about corruption, but otherwise, it is hard to discourage individuals."

V. Conclusion

This initial research suggests that the South Asian American community in Illinois is highly concerned about addressing corruption in Illinois. Individuals acting alone may not be able to effectively curb corruption, but there is high potential for the underlying social capital in the South Asian American network to be used constructively towards the collective goal of ethical governance in Illinois. Reform measures that engage community members, such as ethics training or civic education, should involve the leaders of such ethnic communities, for they are already keen to promote a positive image of the community in their personal and professional networks, with the potential for such effects to ripple through the broader population.

On the underbelly of both corruption and ethical governance lies a common force, the social capital inherent in networks, which we must collectively decide how we wish to deploy. This paper illustrates the potential for positive use of social capital through a single case study of South Asian Americans in Illinois, revealing the community's attitudes as well as its potential. The compelling findings from this initial research shows the need for additional exploration of the role of social capital in this

and other ethnic networks such as the Asian American, Latino, or African American communities. Strategically engaging the diversity of Illinois' population could help transform the current liability of machine politics into a culture of ethical practice that is an asset to the state.

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