

**Religion and the US Congressional Races:
The Influence and Presence of Christian Privilege throughout Congressional Candidacies**

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ABSTRACT

It can be argued that the United States was built upon a Christian Protestant foundation. For example, the work of Donald Lutz found that the founders cited the Bible “far more than any other book article or pamphlet... more than all enlightenment authors combined.” (Lutz) As the discussion about the separation between church and state developed, a provision intended to protect minority religions, so did the underlying privileges dedicated to Christian populations. Today, as people are increasingly choosing to have no religious affiliation, 88% of Congress members identify as Christian. This is disproportionate to the Christian population of the United States, which is only 63%. (Mitchell) Thus, the Christian population is overrepresented in Congress which can result in amplifying their interests more so than non-Christians. Studying how religious privileging functions in our society today can create a foundation for understanding “how Protestant Christianity interacts with Whiteness and national identity and the ways religious groups are admitted to or denied access to citizenship, housing, schooling, legal protections, and political representation.” (Joshi, 12) This paper poses the question: Given the longstanding prominence of the Christian-Protestant religion within the United States, how does religious affiliation influence the electoral success of US members of Congress and can these patterns be linked to the role of religious privilege in the US? To interrogate these questions, I use literary analysis to establish how religious privilege can be seen in America and incorporate previous research. I then analyze data regarding the congressional voting districts and donors of seven successful Indian-American congressional candidates. To get a better sense of the nuances involved in campaigns, the project moves forth to conduct a comparison between two of the seven candidates, determining if and how religion has played a role in the outcomes of their election. Results provide insight into Christian privilege and what influences non-Christian candidates' chances for success.

INTRODUCTION

The separation between Church and State has been a core value since this nation was founded, framed in the Constitution under the Free Exercise Clause and the Establishment Clause. However, upon a deeper analysis of the United States' history and societal patterns, it can be argued that the United States was built upon a Christian Protestant foundation. Since the 2016 election, we have seen the rapid reemergence of Christian Nationalism throughout the country. This study tries to undercover patterns that can be identified in terms of who is being appointed/elected to our US Congress. Specifically, it focuses on how the Christian-Protestant background that has shaped our nation-state system has created a form of religious privilege, one that allows certain ideologies and people to gain power at an expedited rate when compared to different religious backgrounds. The paper will work to answer the following questions: Given the

longstanding prominence of the Christian-Protestant religion within the United States, how does religious affiliation influence the electoral success of US members of Congress and can these patterns be linked to the role of religious privilege in the US? The literature review begins by chronicling the religious background of America and identifying how the Protestant Christian background plays a role in today's society, especially in terms of religious privilege. After discussing previous work that has been conducted on similar topics, the paper presents data found on the current religious breakdown of the US Congress and goes on to look at donor data and district demographics for seven Indian-American congresspeople. Analysis of these materials points to a threshold effect in which districts with low Christian religiosity were more likely to elect a religious minority candidate to Congress. These introductory findings lead to a second set of data and analysis which presents a comparison between two of the seven candidates, Ami Bera and Ro Khanna. These two candidates are both Democratic Indian-American Congressmen who represent districts in California. The only difference between these two is their election year and their religious identities. The data collected reveals different tactics used to appeal to the public; one candidate downplays their religious identity throughout their campaign while the other candidate frames a part of their platform around it, essentially pointing to patterns that are indicative of religious privilege.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This project will be using interpretive methodology and the analysis will be framed with expected findings as opposed to a hypothesis. The goal is to identify patterns that can reveal how the structural advantage of Christian denominations, relative to other religions, impacts the successes of different religiously-identifying congressional candidates. To control for race, I focus on the campaigns of elected Indian American congresspeople with different religious backgrounds. The other criteria for candidate selection was that they were successful in a congressional election that took place after 2000 to allow for contemporary analysis. Seven candidates met these requirements and also brought forth a variety of religious backgrounds:

- Tulsi Gabbard is Samoan-American but her historic election as the first Hindu congressperson allowed for an exception to the criteria.
- Ro Khanna and Raja Krishnamoorthi are both Hindu
- Bobby Jindal was raised Hindu but converted to Evangelical Christianity.
- Ami Bera was raised Hindu but converted to Unitarianism
- Pramila Jayapal is one of the few congressional candidates who does not align with a religious identity
- Kamala Harris provides an example of someone who has a layered identity and overlapping religious backgrounds.

The analysis will begin with a breakdown of the religious demographics of each district at the time of the candidates' elections; voter percentage and the amount of funding each

candidate raised are used as the primary metrics of electability. Using this data, I identify traceable links between religious identity and electoral success. I then compare two candidates, Ami Bera and Ro Khanna, by looking into the election materials and online media coverage. Sources will include campaign websites, official websites, congressional records, public statements and press releases, and media articles. This analysis shows if and how these candidates framed their religious identities throughout their campaigns.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Developing an understanding of the history of the United States is critical for understanding the ideologies that served as foundations for the development of the government, laws, and social culture of the country. The incorporation of religion in these ideologies can be traced back to colonial America's status as a safe haven where people weren't forced to uniformly follow religion because of government mandates, allowing them to escape religious conviction while continuing to worship God and spread the word of the Church. (Foster) The Constitution works to establish the principles of this nation, and amongst those is the idea of the separation between church and state. The inclusion of the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause in the First Amendment both work to allow citizens to choose the faith they would like to practice without any government intervention or fear of religious persecution. Additionally, it works to prevent the government from declaring an official religion or showing a preference for one religion over another or any religion over secularism. However, upon closer examination, researchers such as Donald Lutz have found that the Bible was referenced and cited more than any other document or source throughout the writing of the Constitution. (Lutz) Although no religious terminology can be found in the Constitution, references to "God" or "the Divine" can be found in every single State constitution, and "Christian" can be found seven times throughout all 50 as well. (Sandstrom) As seen in the 2009 "Bible Bill", representatives have also proposed legislation to recognize the Bible's role in providing a basis for religious freedom and the overall building of the United States. (McGrane) With critical studies of the past, it can be inferred that religion has proven to provide the pillars of morality that this country functions on.

The rise of immigration in America led to the concept of this country becoming a "melting pot" or "salad bowl" that contains people from various backgrounds, ethnicities, and beliefs. The perspective that one chooses to align with, melting pot or salad bowl, is dependent on their own experience as a citizen, however, both versions are representative of the nation's diversity¹. Religious diversity has increased since the laws were initially written, but the lasting effects of the Christian foundation of the country can still be seen today. (Joshi) Among citizens, research has shown that, although they may not realize it, religion, beliefs, and practices have a

¹ The ideas of melting pots and salad bowls are referring to the ways in which various cultures that have come together as a result of immigration in American society. The primary difference is that the melting pot ideology believes that all of these cultures have mixed together to create one unified American identity, whereas the salad bowl ideology believes that although these cultures are found in one place, they still remain separate and unique. Many critiques of the melting bowl ideology state that it privileges assimilation over multiculturalism.

strong correlation with their views on political issues. (Wormald) Surveys measuring public opinion have revealed various prevalent truths about sentiments towards religion around the nation. Even though 28% of Americans believe that religious diversity strengthens Americans, even more people (32%) believe that this diversity is a weakness. (Smith) To some extent, American society simply tolerates religious diversity as opposed to accepting and celebrating it. At its core, America is far from separating church and state and, instead, is unified under a civil religion as a result of the repeated rhetoric claiming that the existence and survival of America are because of a higher being. Furthermore, in times of despair and adversity, American leaders often incorporate vernacular about God's will and mercy in their statements. (Campbell and Putnam) Although there is no defined clarification as to which God is being referenced, when Christian Americans are seeking validation of their privilege, they interpret any reference to religion as theirs and seek further action toward solidifying this belief.

White Christian Americans often depict their beliefs as under attack and, therefore, in need of preservation. They don't recognize how their beliefs are so deeply accepted as the norm; they don't realize that they cannot be overpowered so all they are fighting to preserve is a system of hegemony. This can manifest in various ways, from the daily experiences of Muslims not receiving a day off for Eid, to the biases seen in different verdicts of court cases that accept or reject requests for religious accommodations. (e.g., see also Joshi) As of 2020, surveys have shown that around half of Americans believe that the Bible should have "some" influence on US laws, and over a quarter of Americans take it a step further to state that the Bible should be prioritized over the will of the people. In more extreme measures, it has been found that most U.S. adults, 45%, believe that it was intended for the United States to be a Christian nation and that it still should be today. Moreover, most of the Americans that claim that it should be a Christian nation also define this as a country to be "guided by Christian beliefs and values". 15% of them support the idea of the federal government declaring Christianity as the official religion of the United States and 31% support the federal government no longer enforcing the separation between Church and state. (Smith, et al.)

The most interesting statistic to look at is the fact that non-Christians are more likely than Christians to see the U.S. as a Christian nation. Christianity is so deeply ingrained into the social norm of the country that Christians are less likely to be able to identify how they may be privileged. Non-Christians can identify these differences because they experience American society differently, almost as an outsider. This experience of exclusion is intersectional with race, gender, and ethnicity, however, this leads to the belief that Christian privilege exists and persists. The struggles that the Christian community has faced do not take away from the fact that they are still privileged in American society. (Joshi) For example, Christian communities of color do not experience this privilege to the same extent as White Christians and this is the product of the intersecting identities that exist amongst our population. These identities can not be untangled but, instead, provide layers to the understanding of hierarchies in our society. In Sachi Edward's examination of religious privilege through a social justice lens, she argues that Christian hegemony has led people in the United States to experience religion as a socially constructed

identity shaped by Christian supremacy and dominance. This results in internalized, social, and institutional oppression of the religious minorities in the country. (Edwards) The work of Clark and his co-authors defined Christian supremacy as “an invisible set of unearned and unacknowledged benefits with which Christians in the U.S. walk casually around” (Clark et al., 2002, p. 54 as cited in Edwards), and their proposal was accompanied by a list of privileges that mirrored McIntosh’s list of white privileges from 1988. A few vital examples from this list include:

- It is likely that state and federal holidays coincide with my religious practices, thereby having little to no impact on my job and/or education.
- The elected and appointed officials of my government are probably members of my religious group.
- I can openly display my religious symbol(s) on my person or property without fear of disapproval, violence, and/or vandalism.

(Clark et al., 2002, pp. 54–55 as cited in Edwards) In her study of White Christian privilege, Joshi explains the idea of Christian normativity which makes Christian values the primary basis for our national identity, playing along with these concepts presented by Clark. For example, Christian traditions or depictions of God are more likely to be deemed normal in comparison to traditions or depictions portrayed by minority groups. (Joshi) This creates a sense of otherness and effectively labels minority religious groups as outsiders who aren’t conforming to the national standard. If they don’t follow along with the norm that defines American values, how would they be able to understand what it means to be an American? They do not allow the American identity to be intertwined with other religions as the “Not in my backyard” ideology fuels the resistance against synagogues, mosques, and temples being built in different areas. (Joshi)

In contrast, some scholars have claimed that these patterns are not indicative of systems of privilege. Tom Rosentheil once participated in a conference where he talked about the American experience with secularism, explaining how he believes that the intended goal of the Constitution was to distribute national powers and leave the other various aspects of American life to be up to the states, which included religion. He believes that they did not aim to create a secular government, just one that could not be overtaken by a religious power grab. This sentiment could be supported by the fact that the original constitution did not mention religion other than to prohibit religious testing to avoid discrimination within the government- it did not apply to the citizens and the way that they practiced. (Rosentheil) However, the work of Gillman and Chemerinsky adds that, regardless of this, “In the same way that “All men were created equal” did not prevent whites from infusing white supremacy into American law and culture, the First Amendment did not prevent government invocations of Protestant conceptions of the divine into our government practices...” (Gillman and Chemerinsky) Some critics claim that Christian privilege is simply white privilege because non-white members don’t fit in with White

congregations and still have to face other levels of adversity and oppression. Others claim that acceptance of this ideology overlooks the marginalization of Christians by the media and leads to the erasure of their struggles. (Nelson; Larson and Shady as cited in Edwards) Although these perspectives contain pieces of information that may be true, they fail to look at the bigger picture. Some believe that these claims are made in an effort to fight against their loss of privilege, similar to ways in which people deny white supremacy to maintain their dominant position in society. (Gillman and Chemerinsky) It is important to understand that, even if there is no explicit statement that provides Christians with religious privilege, there are still underlying systems that place religious minorities at a disadvantage. Furthermore, the point of recognizing religious privilege is not to undermine these experiences but simply to promote conversations that can recognize these structural differences.

The feeling of being a part of a dominant religious identity may lead to members self-assuring their superiority and in turn, amplifying social hierarchies in society. Their concept of superiority may be driven by the knowledge that they deserve better because they have been given access to better, as oftentimes social hierarchies allow for the dominant group in the hierarchy to have increased access to symbolic and material forms of social value, including higher education, status, and access to jobs. This cycle continues forward as people continue to claim that their dominant status is a result of divine order when, in reality, it is a product of the socialization of religion allowing for hierarchical processes to be established. (Harvey as cited in Burch-Brown and Baker) Religion has been used to disprove these hierarchies in the past, such as when the Southern Christian Leadership Conference assisted in efforts to mobilize or when leaders referenced religious morality to encourage change and inspire resilience and perseverance during the Civil Rights Movement. However, the more pressing issue is that American society fails to acknowledge the promotion of hierarchies that is rooted in its foundation. (Burch-Brown and Baker) Academia that has focused on studies of Christianity in Western societies has found connections between religion and patterns of prejudice, more specifically that increased religious participation is linked to higher rates of intolerance. Similarly, increased attendance at Church increases the likelihood of prejudice towards non-White communities. (Batson; Altemeyer as cited in Burch-Brown and Baker) While some studies have found that religion can promote some levels of tolerance as well, their conclusions also stated the possible patterns of intolerance. (Galbraith, et al.) These findings are in line with the cycle of Christian privilege and are important in the process of election pattern recognition that will be discussed in later components of this paper.

The reason that religion can have such a strong influence, whether it be in daily social interactions or as a pillar for morality, is because of the sense of purpose and belonging it provides. While guiding people on what is and isn't acceptable or how things *should* be, religion fosters an environment for communal bonding based on similar values and feeds into the patterns of groupthink and social hierarchy. (Burch-Brown and Baker; Schmidt and Miles; Preston, et al.) Religious moral codes go on to influence political behavior from both the government officials' perspective and the voter's perspective. Schmidt and Miles perfectly describe this phenomenon in

their examination of descriptive representation. They show how Congress members and their decisions are more likely to be trusted when the people believe that they hold the same views and mannerisms as them. (Fenno as cited in Schmidt and Miles) They describe how members understand this to mean that they can expect support from people who relate to them, even if they disagree over different subjects, so they are more likely to share and discuss their participation in groups, specifically religious groups, that would be indicative of their commonalities and relatability. Sharing religious identity increases the trust and approval of representatives and, for minority groups, seeing their views represented motivates political participation. The impact of these factors makes it difficult for candidates to be elected without stating their religious affiliation. (Schmidt and Miles) Understanding the importance of representation can reveal the harms of the lack of representation that minority groups face and the study of Christian privilege allows for an understanding of why religious representation is more difficult to obtain for minority religions in the United States.

Previous work that has tried to acknowledge this discrepancy has studied various ways that religion can influence politics, including voting habits amongst both representatives and citizens. Various studies have found that voters are turning to religious opinions to guide their decisions which can even impact partisan voting. (McDermott; Kellstedt and Green as cited in Sriram) Evidence has shown that religion is an important factor when looking at partisanship to the point where religion can accurately indicate party affiliation 78.1% of the time. After controlling for political parties, the religious characteristics of the citizens in the voting district, and other variables, religion is still correlated with how representatives vote in the legislature. However, it is more difficult to predict that behavior unless they are Evangelical. (Guth and Kellestedt) Some studies have explicitly recommended that candidates in religious in-groups (i.e., Mainline Protestant, Evangelical, Catholic, and Jewish²) should highlight this identity when running against members from out-groups because they will be evaluated more positively. The candidate from the religious out-group will have to try and overcome the barriers posed by people's biases, especially the ones of those high in religiosity. (Madrid et al.) Various studies and Gallup polls have further demonstrated the bias against other religious out-groups such as Atheists and Mormons. (Benson et. al; Franks and Scherr; Jones; Campbell and Putnam; Madrid et. al) It has been noted that previous presidents, such as Nixon and Trump, have made attempts to incorporate measures that would appeal to Evangelical populations. (Gillman and Chemerinsky) Other studies have found that labeling a candidate as Evangelical gains more support from Republican voters and their Christian identity deems them as more trustworthy and patriotic than others. (Campbell and Putnam; McDermott as cited in Madrid et. al) When studying voter habits, specifically in terms of the perception of Muslim candidates in comparison to Christian candidates, Braman and Sinno found that the different perceptions result in voter sophistication towards Muslim candidates. For example, prejudice was present in reactions toward the idea of a Muslim attorney general prosecuting a terrorism case. (Sriram) This paper

² Although members of the "In-group" as defined in the Madrid et al. study included Jewish candidates, in this study, the in-group only consists of the different denominations of Christianity.

works to advance the academic conversation revolving around this phenomenon. Looking at the different reactions and levels of support for Congressional candidates that are mostly distinguishable by their religious identity as opposed to their race can allow for a deeper understanding of how religious privilege plays a role in the politics of American society.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER FAITH ON THE HILL STATISTICS AS OF 2023

FIGURE 1

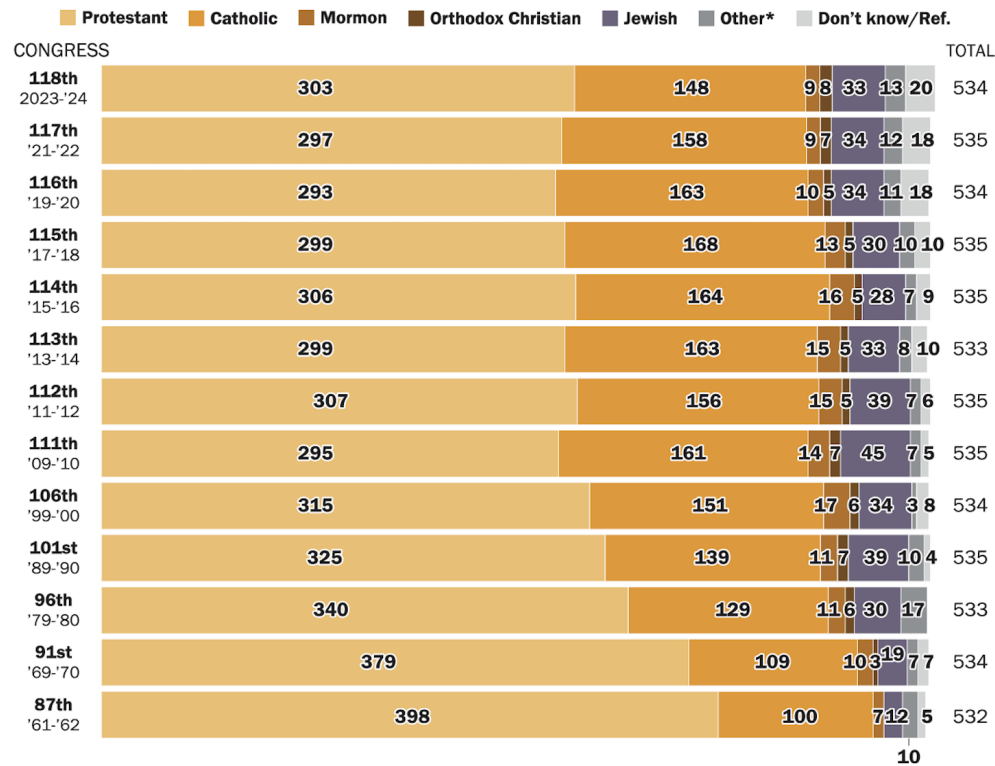
118th U.S. Congress is more Protestant than the general population

Religion	Number in Congress	% of Congress	% of U.S. adults
Christian	469	87.8	63
Protestant	303	56.7	40
Baptist	67	12.5	11
Methodist	31	5.8	4
Anglican/Episcopal	22	4.1	1
Presbyterian	25	4.7	2
Lutheran	22	4.1	3
Congregationalist	3	0.6	<1
Nondenom. Protestant	15	2.8	7
Pentecostal	2	0.4	4
Restorationist	4	0.7	1
Adventist	2	0.4	<1
Reformed	2	0.4	<1
Pietist	1	0.2	<1
Unspecified/other	107	20	6
Catholic	148	27.7	21
Mormon	9	1.7	2
Orthodox Christian	8	1.5	1
Messianic Jewish	1	0.2	<1
Jewish	33	6.2	2
Buddhist	2	0.4	1
Muslim	3	0.6	1
Hindu	2	0.4	1
Unitarian Universalist	3	0.6	<1
Humanist	1	0.2	<1
Unaffiliated	1	0.2	29
Something else	0	0	2
Don't know/refused	<u>20</u>	<u>3.7</u>	<u>2</u>
Total	534	100	100

Note: Figures may not add to 100% or to subtotals due to rounding. General public figures for Protestant subgroups do not sum to total indicated because the figures come from two different sources. One seat was vacant at the beginning of the 118th Congress: Virginia's 4th District, due to the recent death of Rep. Donald McEachin. Source: Figures for Congress based on Pew Research Center analysis of data collected by CQ Roll Call, reflecting voting member of Congress to be sworn in on Jan. 3, 2023. Figures for U.S. adults based on several Center surveys; see "How we did this" for details. "Faith on the Hill: The religious composition of the 118th Congress

FIGURE 2

Changes in the religious makeup of Congress (1961-2023)



* Includes Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Unitarian Universalists, humanists, the unaffiliated and other faiths, including other Christian subgroups. For example, the 118th Congress includes one member who identifies as a Messianic Jew.
 Note: One seat was vacant at the beginning of the 118th Congress: Virginia's 4th District, due to the recent death of Rep. Donald McEachin. Figures for the 117th Congress were updated in this analysis to include one Jewish and three Protestant members of Congress whose races were still undecided at the time of publication of the last "Faith on the Hill" report.
 Source: Pew Research Center analysis of data collected by CQ Roll Call, reflecting voting members of Congress to be sworn in on Jan. 3, 2023.
 "Faith on the Hill: The religious composition of the 118th Congress"
 PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Diamant, Jeff. "Faith on the Hill." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, 3 Jan. 2023, www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/01/03/faith-on-the-hill-2023/.

The data collected for this project began with an analysis of statistical charts reported by the Pew Research Center. Their 2023 'Faith On The Hill' report noted that, for the past few decades, there has been a constant decline in the number of Americans who identify as Christian and a corresponding increase in the number who choose not to affiliate with a religious identity.³ Figure 1 shows that while the Christian population is currently at 63%, they are represented by a Congress that is 88% Christian⁴. Additionally, the numbers reveal that, excluding the Jewish population, all of the non-Christian religious groups are slightly underrepresented. These figures help shape an initial understanding of the patterns that are expected to be revealed through an

³ Nadeem, Reem. "Faith on the Hill." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, 7 Mar. 2023, www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/01/03/faith-on-the-hill-2023/.

⁴ Out of the 534 members, 469 of them identify as Christian. 303 of them are Protestants and 148 are Catholics.

analysis of the seven selected candidates. Below, I provide information about the seven candidates including the religious demographics of their district, donations, and vote tally.

CANDIDATE SPECIFIC DATA

Bobby Jindal

- Profile:
 - R-LA 1st District
 - House of Representatives; 2004-2007
 - Indian American Male
 - Hindu converted to Evangelical Christianity
- Religious demographics in the district during the election

FIGURE 3: Branches of Christianity- 95.1%

Tradition	Sum of Congregations	Sum of Adherents
Catholic	141	420,201
Evangelical Protestant	425	180,323
Mainline Protestant	173	57,698
Orthodox	5	1,286
Other	17	4,084
Grand Total	761	663,592

FIGURE 4: Non-Christian Religions- 4.9%

Religious Bodies	Sum of Congregations	Sum of Adherents
American Sikh Council	1	N/D
Baha'i Faith	4	457
Buddhists	6	N/D
Hindus	3	N/D
Jain	1	N/D
Jewish Congregations	9	13,000
Muslim Estimate	11	7,778
Tao	1	N/D
Unitarian Universalist Assoc.	3	389
Grand Total	39	21,624

“Washington Parish, Louisiana - County Membership Report (2000).” *The Association Of Religion Data Archives*, www.thearda.com/us-religion/census/congregational-membership?+STCOD=22&c=22117&t=0&y=2000&y2=0. Accessed Mar. 2023.

FIGURE 5: Bobby Jindal's 2004 Donor Data

Name	Religion	Received	Spent	Votes (%)	Outside Spendings
Bobby Jindal (R)	Catholic	2,324,701	1,628,022	78.4%	8,324
Roy Armstrong (D)	N/D	N/D	N/D	6.7%	0
Michael Lee Rogers (R)	Christian	26,780	26,465	2.7%	0
Vinny Mendoza (D)	Baptist	N/D	N/D	4.4%	0
Jerry Watts (D)	Baptist	N/D	N/D	3.5%	0
Daniel Zimmerman (D)	N/D	N/D	N/D	4.3%	0

“Louisiana District 01 2004 Race.” *OpenSecrets*, www.opensecrets.org/races/summary?cycle=2004&id=LA01. Accessed Mar. 2023.

Ami Bera

- Profile:
 - D-CA 6th District
 - House of Representatives; 2013-2023
 - Indian American Male
 - Hindu converted to Unitarian
- Religious Demographics in the district during election

FIGURE 6: Branches of Christianity- 92.3%

Tradition	Sum of Congregations	Sum of Adherents
Black Protestant	38	12,585
Catholic	45	229,725
Evangelical Protestant	493	157,621
Mainline Protestant	105	33,989
Orthodox	12	5,675
Other	113	45,708
Grand Total	806	485,303

FIGURE 7: Non-Christian Religions- 7.7%

Religious Bodies	Sum of Congregations	Sum of Adherents
American Sikh Council	1	N/D
Baha'i Faith	8	1,562
Buddhism, Mahayana	25	12,955
Buddhism, Theravada	2	600
Buddhism, Vajrayana	1	63
Conservative Judaism	1	1,312
Hinduism: Hindu Post Renaissance	6	202
Hinduism: Hindu Renaissance	1	85
Hinduism: Indian-American Hindu Temple Associations	4	1,443
Hinduism: Traditional Hindu Temples	2	7,000
Jain	1	N/D
Muslim Estimate	11	12,198
Orthodox Judaism	3	500
Reform Judaism	3	2,762
Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations	1	N/D
Grand Total	70	40,682

“Sacramento County, California - County Membership Report (2010).” *The Association Of Religion Data Archives*, www.thearda.com/us-religion/census/congregational-membership?y=2010&y2=0&t=0&c=06067. Accessed Mar. 2023.

FIGURE 8: Ami Bera’s 2012 Donor Data

Name	Religion	Raised	Spent	Votes (%)	Outside Spendings
Ami Beru (D)	Unitarian	3,632,281.6	3,531,711.1	51.7%	3,632,188
Dan Lungren (R)	Catholic	2,702,536.4	2,716,574.2	48.3%	4,831,396

“Ami Bera.” *Ballotpedia*, ballotpedia.org/Ami_Bera. Accessed Mar. 2023.

“California District 07 2012 Race.” *OpenSecrets*, www.opensecrets.org/races/summary?cycle=2012&id=CA07. Accessed Mar. 2023.

Tulsi Gabbard

- Profile:
 - D-HI 2nd District⁵
 - House of Representatives; 2013-2021
 - Samoan American Woman
 - Hindu
- Religious Demographics in the district during election

FIGURE 9: Branches of Christianity- 81.6%

Tradition	Sum of Congregations	Sum of Adherents
Catholic	54	75,903
Evangelical Protestant	240	37,955
Mainline Protestant	103	12,820
Orthodox	2	40
Other	66	21,122
Grand Total	465	147,840

FIGURE 10: Non-Christian Religions- 18.4%

Religious Bodies	Sum of Congregations	Sum of Adherents
Baha'i Faith	19	459
Buddhism, Mahayana	66	37,317
Buddhism, Theravada	1	267
Buddhism, Vajrayana	5	215
Hinduism: Hindu Post Renaissance	8	430
Hinduism: Hindu Renaissance	2	24
Hinduism: Indian-American Hindu Temple Assoc.	2	500
Muslim Estimate	1	308
Orthodox Judaism	1	60
Grand Total	105	39,580

“Hawaii County, Hawaii - County Membership Report (2010).” *The Association Of Religion Data Archives*, www.thearda.com/us-religion/census/congregational-membership?+STCOD=15&c=15001&t=0&y=2010&y2=0. Accessed 31 May 2023.

⁵ Tulsi Gabbard left the Democratic party in 2022

FIGURE 11: Tulsi Gabbard’s 2012 Donor Data

Name	Religion	Raised	Spent	Votes (%)	Outside Spendings
Tulsi Gabbard (D)	Hindu	1,764,589.91	1,452,206.61	76.8%	596,501
Kawika Crowley (R)	Christian	N/D	N/D	18.6%	0

“Tulsi Gabbard.” *Ballotpedia*, ballotpedia.org/Tulsi_Gabbard. Accessed Mar. 2023.

“Hawaii District 02 2012 Race.” *OpenSecrets*, www.opensecrets.org/races/summary?cycle=2012&id=HI02&spec=N. Accessed Mar. 2023.

Ro Khanna

- Profile:
 - D-CA 17th District
 - House of Representatives; 2017-Current
 - Indian American Male
 - Hindu
- Religious Demographics in the district during election

FIGURE 12: Branches of Christianity- 86.2%

Tradition	Sum of Congregations	Sum of Adherents
Black Protestant	136	48,520
Catholic	109	825,989
Evangelical Protestant	951	282,592
Mainline Protestant	288	59,914
Orthodox	36	25,876
Other	229	82,178
Grand Total	1,749	1,325,069

FIGURE 13: Non-Christian Religions- 13.8%

Religious Bodies	Sum of Congregations	Sum of Adherents
American Ethical Union	1	N/D
American Sikh Council	10	N/D
Baha'i Faith	22	2,490
Buddhism, Mahayana	42	23,480
Buddhism, Theravada	17	11,141
Buddhism, Vajrayana	11	7,845

Chabad Judaism	21	N/D
Conservative Judaism	4	4,879
Hindu Yoga and Meditation	52	25,366
Hindu, Traditional Temples	11	56,676
Independent Judaism	5	825
Jain	1	N/D
Muslim Estimate	55	97,948
Orthodox Judaism	5	2,975
Reconstructionist Judaism	2	233
Reform Judaism	8	11,761
Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations	1	N/D
Unitarian Universalist Assoc.	9	1,343
Vedanta Society	2	N/D
Grand Total	279	246,962

“Santa Clara County, Alameda County, California - County Membership Report (2020).” *The Association Of Religion Data Archives*,
www.thearda.com/us-religion/census/congregational-membership?+STCOD=06&c=06001&t=0&y=2020&y2=0.
 Accessed Mar. 2023.

FIGURE 14: Ro Khanna’s 2016 Donor Data

Name	Religion	Raised	Spent	Votes (%)	Outside Spendings
Ro Khanna (D)	Hindu	3,707,272.31	3,653,849.82	61%	127,088
Mike Honda (D)	Christian	2,964,837.57	2,953,466	39%	528,439

“California District 17 2016 Race.” *OpenSecrets*, www.opensecrets.org/races/summary?cycle=2016&id=CA17. Accessed Mar. 2023.

Raja Krishnamoorthi

- Profile:
 - D-IL 8th District
 - House of Representatives; 2017-Current
 - Indian American Male
 - Hindu
- Religious Demographics in the district during election

FIGURE 15: Branches of Christianity- 90.5%

Tradition	Sum of Congregations	Sum of Adherents
Black Protestant	667	292,027
Catholic	420	2,033,943
Evangelical Protestant	1,839	524,700
Mainline Protestant	720	232,081
Orthodox	82	53,602
Other	301	77,430
Grand Total	3,029	3,213,783

FIGURE 16: Non-Christian Religions- 9.5%

Religious Bodies	Sum of Congregations	Sum of Adherents
American Ethical Union	1	N/D
American Sikh Council	4	N/D
Baha'i Faith	18	3,315
Buddhism, Mahayana	38	21,065
Buddhism, Theravada	14	10,366
Buddhism, Vajrayana	10	3,410
Chabad Judaism	1	N/D
Conservative Judaism	11	11,213
Hindu Yoga and Meditation	32	18,456
Hindu, Traditional Temples	13	17,530
Independent Judaism	6	40
Jain	1	N/D
Muslim Estimate	90	399,617
Orthodox Judaism	41	16,250
Reconstructionist Judaism	4	2,379
Reform Judaism	19	26,020
Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations	1	N/D
Unitarian Universalist Assoc.	14	3,810
Grand Total	318	533,471

“DuPage County, Cook County, Kane County, Idaho - County Membership Report (2020).” *The Association Of Religion Data Archives*, thearda.com/us-religion/census/congregational-membership?y=2020&y2=0&t=0&c=16041. Accessed Mar. 2023.

FIGURE 17: Raja Krishnamoorthi’s 2016 Donor Data

Name	Religion	Raised	Spent	Votes (%)	Outside Spendings
Raja Krishnamoorthi (D)	Hindu	3,562,107.3	2,636,224.59	58.3%	1,167
Peter Dicianni (R)	N/D	273,874.56	273,874.56	41.7%	129

“Illinois District 08 2016 Race.” *OpenSecrets*, www.opensecrets.org/races/summary?cycle=2016&id=IL08. Accessed Mar. 2023.

Kamala Harris

- Profile:
 - D-CA Senator
 - House of Representatives; 2017-2021
 - Black and Indian American Woman
 - Baptist, Grew up in an interfaith Hindu and Christian Household
- Religious Demographics in the district during election

FIGURE 18: Branches of Christianity- 91.7%

Tradition	Sum of Congregations	Sum of Adherents
Black Protestant	1,263	490,397
Catholic	1,291	10,361,743
Evangelical Protestant	12,492	3,554,967
Mainline Protestant	2,770	556,173
Orthodox	326	221,259
Other	3,464	1,256,567
Grand Total	21,606	16,441,106

FIGURE 19: Non-Christian Religions- 8.3%

Religious Bodies	Sum of Congregations	Sum of Adherents
America, Canada, and Europe Region of the Malankara Syriac Knanaya Archdiocese	1	70
American Ethical Union	2	N/D
American Sikh Council	73	N/D
Assoc. of Messianic Congregations	1	N/D

Baha'i Faith	201	31,709
Buddhism, Mahayana	269	175,612
Buddhism, Theravada	132	77,576
Buddhism, Vajrayana	98	58,085
Chabad Judaism	235	N/D
Conservative Judaism	56	37,544
Hindu Yoga and Meditation	279	121,374
Hindu, Traditional Temples	50	117,328
Independent Judaism	16	1,675
Jain	4	N/D
Muslim Estimate	308	504,056
Orthodox Judaism	60	54,145
Reconstructionist Judaism	8	5,609
Reform Judaism	76	87,404
Tao	10	N/D
Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations	6	N/D
Unitarian Universalist Assoc.	68	13214
Vedanta Society	9	N/D
Grand Total	1,962	1,285,401

“California - State Membership Report (2020).” *The Association Of Religion Data Archives*, www.thearda.com/us-religion/census/congregational-membership?+y=2020&t=1&c=06. Accessed Mar. 2023.

FIGURE 20: Kamala Harris’s 2016 Donor Data⁶

Name	Religion	Raised	Spent	Votes (%)	Outside Spendings
Kamala Harris (D)	Baptist	1,507,2254	14,142,821	61.6%	3,319,005
Loretta Sanchez (D)	N/D	4,203,150	4,119,563	38.4%	131,112

“California Senate 2016 Race.” *OpenSecrets*, www.opensecrets.org/races/summary?cycle=2016&id=CAS1. Accessed May 2023.

⁶ There was an extensive list of people who ran in the race, however, they did not receive substantial votes. These are the statistics on the two primary candidates.

Pramila Jayapal

- Profile:
 - D-WA 7th District
 - House of Representatives; 2017-Current
 - Indian American Woman
 - No religious affiliation
- Religious Demographics in the district during election

FIGURE 21: Branches of Christianity- 90.2%

Tradition	Sum of Congregations	Sum of Adherents
Black Protestant	41	18,345
Catholic	85	364,088
Evangelical Protestant	1,039	557,863
Mainline Protestant	350	90,082
Orthodox	39	23,097
Other	268	102,366
Grand Total	1,822	1,155,841

FIGURE 22: Non-Christian Religions- 9.8%

Religious Bodies	Sum of Congregations	Sum of Adherents
American Sikh Council	7	N/D
Baha'i Faith	27	3,931
Buddhism, Mahayana	22	12,810
Buddhism, Theravada	10	6,644
Buddhism, Vajrayana	11	5,250
Chabad Judaism	21	N/D
Conservative Judaism	2	2,932
Hindu Yoga and Meditation	28	9,152
Hindu, Traditional Temples	3	6,731
Independent Judaism	3	300
Muslim Estimate	31	23,541
Orthodox Judaism	10	2,660
Reconstructionist Judaism	1	537
Reform Judaism	7	8,640
Shinto	1	N/D

Tao	1	N/D
Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations	1	N/D
Unitarian Universalist Assoc.	10	3,000
Vedanta Society	1	N/D
Grand Total	197	86,128

“Snohomish County, King County, Washington - County Membership Report (2020).” *The Association Of Religion Data Archives*,
www.thearda.com/us-religion/census/congregational-membership?+STCOD=53&c=53033&t=0&y=2020&y2=0.
 Accessed Mar. 2023.

FIGURE 23: Pramila Jayapal’s 2016 Donor Data

Name	Religion	Raised	Spent	Vote (%)	Outside Spendings
Pramila Jayapal (D)	None	2,987,189.16	2,959,589.82	56%	550,098
Brady Walkinshaw (D)	N/D	1,915,032	1,914,363	44%	353,000

“Washington District 07 2016 Race.” *OpenSecrets*, www.opensecrets.org/races/summary?cycle=2016&id=WA07.
 Accessed Mar. 2023.

This set of data contains two specific elements of each candidate’s election: the religious makeup of their districts and the amount of funding each of the candidates from that election was able to obtain. The religious makeup of the districts is calculated by combining the demographics recorded from each of the counties within that district and it is representative of what the district looked like around the year of the election. This data has been broken down into two figures for each candidate to represent members of Christian denominations in one and members of all other religious groups in the other. The title of each of these figures indicates the percentage of the total population that identifies with a Christian denomination and the remaining that identifies with another religion.⁷ The sum of congregations represents the total number of congregations identifying as that faith and the sum of adherents represents the number of people within those congregations. The percentage was calculated with the total sum of all adherents. This data was used to understand the voter demographics of the candidate’s district and identify any potential patterns amongst the different candidates.

In terms of majority percentage, this data does not reveal any patterns initially because all of the districts had a higher percentage of Christians. However, upon deeper analysis, it provides indications of a potential threshold effect. After Bobby Jindal's district, which was 95% Christian, the highest percentages were within Ami’s, Kamala’s, Raja’s, and Pramila’s districts, which had 92.7%, 91.7%, 90.5%, and 90.2% Christian populations, respectively. Ro Khanna’s

⁷ Some values were missing from the data and it does not include religious nones.

district was 86.2% Christian and Tulsi Gabbard's district had the lowest percentage with 81.6%. A threshold effect would allow for a candidate to be successful simply by being able to appeal to enough voters to receive the most votes as opposed to a majority of the votes.

As of 2004, Bobby Jinal was the first Indian-American to be elected into office after Dalip Singh Saund, a Sikh Indian American, in the 1950s. Bobby Jindal openly identified as a conservative Christian Republican at the time of his election and, seeing as though his district was strongly Christian and Republican, it is possible that, without these identity factors, he would not have been able to achieve success in this election. To expand on this theory, the case of Ami Bera can be examined. Bera was the third Indian American to be elected into Congress, nine years after Jindal. His seat was previously held by a Republican, however, his entrance into office as a Democrat is not fully unprecedented because Bera is known for being more of a centrist. As his district began to lean Blue he emerged as the perfect fit.⁸ His religious identity, Unitarian, falls under a Christian denomination and he was elected in the same year as Tulsi Gabbard, the first Hindu congressperson. Bera's district was very high in Christian religiosity in comparison to Gabbard, repeating patterns seen with Jindal. This suggests that a lower percentage of Christian religiosity within Tulsi Gabbard's district may have allowed her, as a non-Christian figure, to attain office more easily, consequently opening the doors for the other Hindu candidates that followed 4 years later. Gabbard had the advantage of being an AAPI woman in an Asian-majority state⁹ and running in a district where Christian religiosity was relatively low in comparison to others. Jindal, Bera, and Gabbard were both able to obtain the seat in the house with the majority of the votes regardless of the identities that could have triggered voter bias and raised barriers for them. These points – Jinal's historical election, Bera's timely success, and Gabbard's ability to succeed in a less Christian district - can be used to identify a threshold effect that would make it so that the religiosity of the districts determines how and when minority identities are allowed to enter Congress.

Donor data was used as another measure of electability as people give money to – not only those candidates they want to win – but also those they believe have some chance of success. As such, the donor data collected was used to confirm any potential influence that religion may have had on the donations received by each candidate. The data only contains information for the candidates of the general election in which the candidate was successful. This is because once someone has been elected, other factors now allow them to be reelected often referred to as the incumbency advantage.¹⁰ Data from previous elections were not strongly applicable because some candidates were elected in their first race and unsuccessful candidates/elections are not discussed in this study. The data lays out the total amounts received and spent by each candidate and each of these figures is measured in USD. The next two

⁸ Press, Associated. "New Districts Upend California Politics." *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 Feb. 2012, www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203920204577197011851475548.

⁹ "Hawaii Population Characteristics 2012." *Hawaii Census: Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism*, June 2013, census.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Pop_char_hi_2012_final.pdf.

¹⁰ Fourmaies, Alexander, and Andrew B. Hall. "The financial incumbency advantage: Causes and consequences." *The Journal of Politics* 76.3 (2014): 711-724.

columns detail what percent of the vote each candidate received and outside spending. According to OpenSecrets, “The term 'outside spending' refers to political expenditures made by groups or individuals independently of, and not coordinated with, candidates' committees. Groups in this category range from conventional party committees to the more controversial super PACs and 501(c) 'dark money' organizations.” Each winning candidate spent more money than their opponent and, in most cases, the winning candidate received more donations. There are no indicators of religious influence seen in the donation data.

To further streamline the analysis, the second set of data was confined to conducting a comparison between two of the elected officials from this list. The first candidate selected for analysis was Ami Bera. While Bobby Jindal’s Christian conversion posed an interesting case, his election was many years before all of the other candidates, posing limitations on data collection, and he did not have a full campaign because he was elected mid-term to replace Kathleen Blanco after Hurricane Katrina. The goal was to select a second candidate whose selection would complicate the analysis with any uncontrollable and influential factors. Accordingly, Kamala Harris was not looked at because she ran and served in the Senate as opposed to the House of Representatives which was the case with all of the other candidates. House and Senate elections cannot be paralleled equally because of the difference in the responsibilities, term lengths, and requirements for each position. Additionally, Kamala Harris is half Indian and half African American and, although she mainly aligns with her Christian faith due to her upbringing in the church, she has often talked about partaking in Hindu ceremonies in alignment with her Indian roots from her mother’s side of the family.¹¹ Her mixed racial and religious backgrounds¹² added a layer of complexity to the potential comparison. There was not much data about how Pramila Jayapal structured her religious identity, or lack thereof, in her election materials, causing her to be ruled out for the comparison as well. Although Tulsi Gabbard was the first Hindu to be elected into Congress, and serves as the primary example of the suggested threshold effect from the previously discussed data, her Samoan ethnic identity posed the threat of ethnic differences causing complications in the analysis. Furthermore, all three of these candidates identify as female, and, as research has shown in the past, gender identity can have a serious influence on the electoral success of a candidate.¹³

This left Ro Khanna and Raja Krishnamoorthi as the primary candidates for the comparison. Khanna and Krishnamoorthi are both male Hindu Democrats elected in 2016 to represent districts within primarily Democratic states. One important difference between these two was the fact that Raja Krishnamoorthi had a large donor/funding advantage in his race. As

¹¹ Ciliberto, Gina. “Kamala Harris Set to Bring Baptist Faith, Hindu Roots to Historic Role.” *Sojourners*, 13 Nov. 2020, sojo.net/articles/kamala-harris-bring-baptist-faith-hindu-roots-historic-role-vice-presidency.

¹² Sullivan, Kevin. “‘I Am Who I Am’: Kamala Harris, Daughter of Indian and Jamaican Immigrants, Defines Herself Simply as ‘American.’” *The Washington Post*, 11 Aug. 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/i-am-who-i-am-kamala-harris-daughter-of-indian-and-jamaican-immigrants-define-herself-simply-as-american/2019/02/02/0b278536-24b7-11e9-ad53-824486280311_story.html.

¹³ Corbett, Christianne, et al. “Pragmatic Bias Impedes Women’s Access to Political Leadership.” *PNAS*, 1 Feb. 2022, Accessed 2023.

Fulton, Sarah A., and Kostanca Dhima. “The gendered politics of congressional elections.” *Political Behavior* 43 (2021): 1611-1637.

seen in Figure 14, Raja Krishnamoorthi collected over 3.2 million dollars more than his opponent. On the other hand, Figure 11 reveals a mere difference of \$742,474 between Ro Khanna and his opponent. Because of this fact's implications, Ro Khanna was selected as the second candidate in the upcoming comparison.

AMI BERA V. RO KHANNA

Ami Bera and Ro Khanna share key identity traits such as being Indian, Democratic, and U.S. Representatives from the state of California. Ami Bera was elected in 2013, the same year as Tulsi Gabbard the first Hindu representative. Although Bera was raised as a Hindu, he converted to Unitarianism. However, unlike Bobby Jindal, he hasn't publicly shared much as to why and when he chose to do this. In his campaign website's biography page, Bera does not mention his religious identity; instead, he emphasizes his bipartisan efforts, time as a doctor, educator, and identity as a first-generation American who attended public school. The biography on his current official website mentioned that he was Indian American in the very last line, despite him being the longest-serving Indian-American congressman in American history. His campaign platform revolved around common issues, such as health care and women's equality. But, within his platform on national security, he addresses the issue of immigration and goes on to portray himself as a product of the American Dream. He addresses immigration and diversity controversies with the lines "These discriminatory and bigoted attacks, both here at home and abroad, have been carried out with the sole purpose of dividing our country and destroying the melting pot of diversity and opportunity that is the American way."¹⁴ In this way, he tries to present a unified front and appeal to the melting pot ideology regardless of the aforementioned critiques of it.

In comparison, Ro Khanna's campaign website contained more references to his Indian roots, specifically to the fact that his family immigrated here from India and his grandfather was a part of the Gandhian independence movement. Both candidates heavily highlighted their pursuit of the American Dream and credited the advanced opportunities that one has upon immigrating here in their respective biographies. More importantly, in contrast to Bera's website, Khanna has an entire section dedicated to defending the right to practice religion within his civil liberty platform, stating:

"Freedom of religion is a basic founding principle of our nation. Unfortunately, almost every religious group has been the target of discrimination throughout our history. Today, with America more diverse than it has ever been, it is important to recognize that America is home to Christians, Jews, Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other religious groups – and to treat all faiths with equal respect. Most recently, Muslim and Hindu Americans have been subjugated for their religious beliefs and practices. In public schools Hinduism is presented in an overtly negative way and blamed for social evils.

¹⁴ "About Dr. Bera." *Bera for Congress*, 8 Oct. 2022, beraforcongress.com/about-dr-bera/.

This kind of propagation of misinformation and myths is wrong and impacts the self-image of Hindu children. In order to instill a pride of all children in their heritage, I feel strongly that we must have a positive portrayal of Hindu culture and religion that is fact based."¹⁵

Initial analysis of these sites reveals that Khanna has made his identity a larger point of discussion within his campaign materials, making it a central point in his campaign. At the same time, Bera downplays these characteristics and appeals to the idea of a larger American identity. Based on the information about Bera's district turning Blue as he was elected, it can be understood that would be a helpful tactic because it allows him to relate to the residents as a member of the community. Articles discussing his donor tactics¹⁶ reveal that he still works to gain the support of Indian Americans financially, however, his district largely consists of white Americans¹⁷ so presenting himself as a pro-veteran bipartisan leader who is a product of the public school system, a trusted community doctor, and a public educator provides him with wholesome characteristics that attract voters without identity politics. Within the press releases from their terms, both candidates have various statements condemning discrimination based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. Bera's first statement concerning religion was made after the first official Diwali celebration in D.C., sharing optimism about the growth and unification of communities. In addition, two statements were issued regarding a religious accommodation within the Air Force, calling for the Department of Defense to allow patriotic Sikh Americans to serve while in their religious attire or grooming, further ensuring that the military can be inclusive of various faiths and cultures.¹⁸

In contrast, Khanna had many more references to religion throughout his site. Along with a few statements condemning religious attacks and calling for justice¹⁹, he openly discusses his family's practice of Gandhian Hinduism²⁰ and the acceptance that they received from his community after they had first moved in. One story that he repeatedly talks about in various statements goes along the lines of his neighbors being concerned that his family wouldn't participate in the community's Christmas Eve candle-lighting tradition. He shares that his father quickly relieved all of their concerns and they happily participated because Hinduism is a

¹⁵ *Ro Khanna for Congress*, www.rokhanna.com/. Accessed May 2023.

¹⁶ Isenstadt, Alex. "Indian American Pols Rake in Cash." *POLITICO*, 11 Aug. 2011, www.politico.com/story/2011/08/indian-american-pols-rake-in-cash-061048.

¹⁷ "Census Profile: Congressional District 7, CA." *Census Reporter*, censusreporter.org/profiles/50000US0607-congressional-district-7-ca/. Accessed May 2023.

¹⁸ "India Caucus Chair Rep. Ami Bera Calls Army Religious Accommodation Policy Change 'strong Step Forward' for Sikh Americans." *U.S. Representative Ami Bera, M.D.*, 6 Jan. 2017, bera.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=399701.

"Bera Applauds Air Force Decision to Allow Religious Accommodation for Sikh Airman." *U.S. Representative Ami Bera, M.D.*, 7 June 2019, bera.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=399791.

¹⁹ "Statement: Rep. Ro Khanna on Trump's Repackaged Muslim & Refugee Ban." *Congressman Ro Khanna*, 6 Aug. 2020, khanna.house.gov/media/press-releases/statement-rep-ro-khanna-trump-s-repackaged-muslim-refugee-ban-0.

²⁰ "Ro Khanna Reflects on Gandhi's 150th Birthday." *Congressman Ro Khanna*, 3 Oct. 2019, khanna.house.gov/media/editorials/ro-khanna-reflects-gandhi-s-150th-birthday.

pluralistic faith that appreciates all traditions.²¹ This story presents him as an ally, someone who accepts this widely celebrated federal holiday, as opposed to an outsider whose faith creates barriers that would prevent them from celebrating amongst the American community. In another one of these releases, he talks about the 21st-century American identity, acknowledging the diversity of this nation and our value of tradition by using the example of sharing cuisine, dances, and celebrations of Diwali and Eid al-Adha, effectively unifying South Asian experiences with traditional American morals and values. He went on to further this unification of experiences by recalling his time playing touch football with his neighbors and making candy sales for charity. However, at the end of this he shares an experience of discrimination he faced while interning for Robert Kennedy's daughter, writing "Her aide told me to go work on the Hill because I had an aptitude for policy. You cannot ever get elected, her aide said to me in a matter-of-fact tone, given your faith and heritage. I refrained from writing to him when I won, pointing out that while his boss lost her race for Congress, I ended up winning mine by 20 points."²² Breaking down this press release reveals how Khanna effectively communicates the idea that his faith and ethnicity do not alienate him by telling his readers about the shared American experiences that he had in his lifetime and directly disputing beliefs that his faith would prevent him from being an effective congressman. In other pieces, he took more political stances, calling for elected leaders to work with faith leaders to celebrate the role of religion in American life and criticizing religious nationalist efforts to control the dialogue.²³ While he was being interviewed about the role of faith in Anti-War stances, he shared the role of faith and interfaith communities in his district, how Hinduism and its scriptures have shaped his ideologies about these topics, and recalled different social movements that have been grounded in religious ideas, giving the examples of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Rev. Barber, and Abraham Lincoln.²⁴ Again, taking the names of famous American activists and adding in the names of South Asian activists can arguably be a strategic tactic for unifying the two aspects of his identity.

Bera addresses his religious identity in one statement that is found within a congressional record, where he says:

"As someone who was raised in a culturally Hindu household, I was taught by my parents to honor and exhibit this same message of respect and tolerance for all religions and faith traditions. That's why, as an adult, I am part of the Unitarian Universalist tradition, a faith tradition that is rooted with our Founding Fathers and includes John Adams as one of its members, and it's this tradition that was embraced by Swami

²¹ "Trump Is Scaring Indian Americans into Finding Their Political Voice." *Congressman Ro Khanna*, 20 Oct. 2017, khanna.house.gov/media/in-the-news/trump-scaring-indian-americans-finding-their-political-voice.

²² "To Be an American in the 21st Century." *Congressman Ro Khanna*, 27 Aug. 2018, khanna.house.gov/media/editorials/be-american-21st-century.

²³ "Congress Has a Duty to Act on Voting Rights, Inequality Issues Ahead of Midterms." *Congressman Ro Khanna*, 11 Oct. 2022,

khanna.house.gov/media/editorials/congress-has-duty-act-voting-rights-inequality-issues-ahead-midterms

²⁴ "How Faith Fuels the Anti-War Stances of 3 U.S. Representatives." *Congressman Ro Khanna*, 27 Jan. 2020, khanna.house.gov/media/in-the-news/how-faith-fuels-anti-war-stances-3-us-representatives.

Vivekananda. So on this 150th anniversary of his birth, let's celebrate his message of religious freedom and tolerance, and let's remember the core values that our Founding Fathers wrote into our Constitution."²⁵

Creating a connection to one of the Founding Fathers in this expression of faith is interesting and speaks to the expectations that I had for this project. Although Unitarianism isn't a prominent denomination of Christianity, such as Evangelicalism, it is still within the scope of the religious roots upon which the nation was founded. Swami Vivekananda is credited with bringing the teachings of Hinduism to America. So, to address his Hindu roots and come out with what might be the only public statement about his conversion through this forum allows him to appeal to the Hindus within the Indian-American community. In doing so, he maintains that connection and sustains their support while also appealing to the traditional civic religious identities of America as a whole. In another congressional record, we find a record of his one-minute address to the House about the Hobby Lobby Supreme Court case, openly stating that female employees should not be forced to subscribe to the religious views of the CEO.²⁶ Both Bera and Khanna had statements against anti-semitism²⁷ and about the importance of Diwali²⁸. Khanna's records also showed one statement in light of the attacks on Coptic Christians in Egypt²⁹, one recognizing the contributions of Muslims to America³⁰, and one supporting the No Religious Registry Act of 2017, which prohibits the government from establishing or using a religious registry of citizens to prevent religious discrimination and surveillance. Both of their congressional records were indicative of the promotion of religious freedom and provided support for minority religious communities.

²⁵ "Congressional Record." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, May 2023, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/volume-159/issue-77/house-section/article/H3020-3>.

²⁶ "Congressional Record." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 24 May 2023, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/volume-160/issue-42/house-section/article/H2370-8>.

²⁷ "H.Res.1138 - 115th Congress (2017-2018): Condemning the anti-Semitic attack on the building housing three congregations, Tree of Life, Dor Hadash, and New Light, honoring the memory of the victims of the attack, and offering condolences to and expressing support for their families, friends, and community." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 13 November 2018, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-resolution/1138>.

"H.Res.707 - 113th Congress (2013-2014): Condemning all forms of anti-Semitism and rejecting attempts to justify anti-Jewish hatred or violent attacks as an acceptable expression of disapproval or frustration over political events in the Middle East or elsewhere." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 18 September 2014, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-resolution/707>.

²⁸"H.Res.575 - 115th Congress (2017-2018): Recognizing the religious and historical significance of the festival of Diwali." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 29 November 2017, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-resolution/575>.

"H.Res.47 - 113th Congress (2013-2014): Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee, as an entity of the United States Postal Service, should issue a commemorative stamp in honor of the holiday of Diwali." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 25 January 2013, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-resolution/47>.

²⁹H.Res.673 - 115th Congress (2017-2018): Expressing concern over attacks on Coptic Christians in Egypt." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 11 January 2018, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-resolution/673>.

³⁰H.Res.869 - 115th Congress (2017-2018): Recognizing American Muslims' history and contributions to our Nation." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 3 May 2018, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-resolution/869>.

The media record for Congressman Bera has been primarily focused on his entry as the third Indian-American in Congress, navigating how he utilized the support of the surrounding Indian community. Two articles put out by local papers addressing the newfound success of Indian Americans in D.C. mention Bera alongside Kamala Harris, Nikki Haley, and Bobby Jindal. The articles go on to note the respective layers of identity that these candidates have. India Today recognized Jindal and Haley as high-profile examples of the community's success, highlighting that both of them were able to appeal to the "Mother Teresa vote, but Mahatma Gandhi would have voted against them on principle,"³¹ implying that they would not have the support of the democratic Indian-American community with their platforms and identities. Gainesville shared various perspectives in their analysis of the situation, writing:

*"Christianity is a more critical issue for white Republicans than other groups — could a Hindu who worships multiple gods, or a turbaned Sikh who doesn't cut his hair, survive a statewide Republican primary in the Bible Belt? Vidya Pradhan, editor of India Currents magazine, thinks not. Haley and Jindal "were really ambitious about their politics, and they could not do it being Hindu or their old religion," Pradhan said. "I do think it was a political move. They felt that not being a Christian would hurt them." Haley and Jindal declined to be interviewed for this story. But J. Ashwin Madia, a Minnesota Democrat who lost a congressional election in 2008 and is a follower of the Jain religion, says their faith is irrelevant. Harris was raised in a black neighborhood, attended black churches, and graduated from historically black Howard University. She also worshiped in her mother's Hindu temple and has made many visits to her family in India. 'Running for office, you have to simplify or condense or put into pre-existing boxes who you are,' Harris said, 'so people will have a sense of you based on what they easily and quickly identify.'"*³²

The important thing to note from these articles is that when they discuss Jindal and Haley's religious identities, they fail to include Bera even though he is also a convert. This implies that Bera's conversion was not a widespread fact for these writers to pick up on. Perhaps Bera was aware that he would lose some support from the Indian American community if he came forth with his religious identity during the campaign, as he would now be associated with the likes of Jindal and Haley. This could be supported by the fact that the aforementioned statement about his religion was only put out shortly after his election into Congress. Keeping an ambiguous religious identity during his campaign would have ensured that voters from his highly Christian

³¹ "US Elections: Obama Includes Three Indian-Americans in His Re-Election Campaign." *India Today*, 8 Mar. 2012, www.indiatoday.in/magazine/neighbours/story/20120312-us-presidential-elections-obama-includes-three-indian-americans-757556-2012-03-02.

³² Press, The Associated. "Record Number of Indian-Americans Seeking Office." *Gainesville Sun*, 19 June 2010, www.gainesville.com/story/news/nation-world/2010/06/19/record-number-of-indian-americans-seeking-office/31762914007/.

district would still find that his religious beliefs aligned with theirs if they were inclined to check.

Harris talks about simplifying one's identity to make it easier for voters to digest and we can see her apply this in practice as well. Her identity as an African-American Baptist was at the forefront of her campaigns until she went on to be elected Vice President of the United States. Bobby Jindal followed a similar pattern where he did not mention much about his ethnic and religious identity until he submitted his presidential bid. While some articles still claimed that this separation from their Hindu roots was made to avoid Hindu-phobic attacks, such as the ones Tulsi faced during her presidential bid in 2020,³³ there was still a surge in statements explaining their background. This is suggestive that entering higher levels of office might encourage these candidates to delve into the details so that they can present various points of relatability that would appeal to wider audiences.

Most media reports being released around the time of Khanna's election were simply naming him as they mentioned that Congress now contained the highest number of Indian Americans and Hindu Americans in history. One of these articles revisited the topic of Haley and Jindal's renunciation of their Hindu and Sikh faiths, writing:

*"They sensed early on, perhaps, that Hinduism is too misunderstood—too exotic and distorted—to carry the burden of claiming. Tulsi Gabbard is the first Hindu American politician to reach Congress—and in the eyes of many, lay claim to higher office. And so Tulsi Gabbard is finding out—for all Hindu Americans—how arduous the task is in today's America to proclaim her Hindu faith. To walk a lonely, dharmic path that Jindal, Haley, and many others, foreswore."*³⁴

Gabbard and Bera were elected in the same year; if Bera had identified with his Hindu origins more publicly, he wouldn't have had to walk this path alone. Gabbard may have opened the doors for Khanna and Krishnamoorthi; however, Khanna still did his part in disputing negative portrayals of Hinduism in the public sphere during his campaign, calling out a CNN documentary that was released during his campaign in one of his tweets.³⁵ Tulsi Gabbard was the first to take her oath on a copy of the Bhagavad Gita. In contrast, Khanna decided to take his oath on the U.S. Constitution, explaining "I have always believed that Hinduism is a philosophy of life that respects religious pluralism, separation of church and state and civil liberties. So I also believe swearing-in on the Constitution is deeply consistent with my faith, particularly as

³³ Paranjape, Makarand R. "Hinduphobia Makes Kamala Harris' Identity a Liability. so She Is 'black' in US Media." *ThePrint*, 12 Aug. 2020, theprint.in/opinion/being-indian/hinduphobia-kamala-harris-identity-liability-black-us-media/480293/.

³⁴ "When the New Yorker Otherized Tulsi Gabbard's Faith." *Hindu American Foundation*, 22 Apr. 2021, www.hinduamerican.org/blog/when-the-new-yorker-otherized-tulsi-gabbards-faith/.

³⁵ George, Varghese K. "Hindu Groups, Ro Khanna Object to CNN Docu's Negative Portrayal of Religion." *The Hindu*, 29 Nov. 2021, www.thehindu.com/news/international/hindu-groups-ro-khanna-object-to-cnn-docus-negative-portrayal-of-religion/article61808187.ece.

Mahatma Gandhi and my grandfather practiced it.”³⁶ Once again, this proves to be an effective strategy that allows him to align with American values while preserving a positive stance on his identity.

Bera and Khanna both used tactics that allowed them to connect their identities with a larger American ideology. Bera with his mentioning of how his faith related to that of John Adams. Khanna with his repeated efforts at unifying American values, names, and activities with his own identities, idols, and experiences presents himself as belonging to both worlds. Bera takes a more neutral stance in his work, condemning discrimination yet refraining from fully accepting and promoting his identity grandly. Although there is a possibility that Bera may have shied away from discussing his Christian Unitarian identity for the sake of maintaining support from the Indian American community, there is no doubt that other candidates, such as Harris, have used these identities as a source of privilege to help them appeal to other masses that they found more important for their races. Logically, gaining the support of the 63% of Christians in the nation or the 13.6% Black population would serve them better than the 6% of Hindus or 1.35% of Indians. Both of their efforts to appeal to the common American identity, whether that be by incorporating Hindu references into the narrative or by emphasizing American values, shine a light on the unspoken standard that exists for people who want to be elected to represent citizens.

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The project takes an identified form of privilege in the United States and applies it to one of the most essential aspects of our democracy. Congress members are the ones responsible for being an accurate representation of the citizens of this nation so that the legislation that is passed and enforced is in line with what is best for all members of the country. The separation of Church and State has been a large topic of discussion as these lines have started to become blurred with the cases such as *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Inc.*, and the various debates surrounding the boundaries that need to be enforced in terms of incorporation of personal religious views into legislative decisions. Studying Christian privilege puts into perspective how the Christian norm is reflected in the debates surrounding these topics.

There are various opportunities for future research on this topic. Preliminary research on Pramila Jayapal showed that there are a separate set of disadvantages that non-religiously affiliated candidates face, even though the population of atheists and religious nones is continuously growing.³⁷ This may be a result of civic religion and its inherent relationship with traditional American values. As the literature review discussed, American citizens interpret

³⁶ Hinduism Today. “Global Dharma.” *Hinduism Today*, 1 Apr. 2017, www.hinduismtoday.com/magazine/april-may-june-2017/global-dharma-16/.

³⁷ Hecht, Jennifer Michael, et al. “The Last Taboo.” *POLITICO Magazine*, 9 Dec. 2013, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2013/12/the-last-taboo-atheists-politicians-100901/. Kurtzleben, Danielle. “Nonreligious Americans Remain Far Underrepresented in Congress.” *NPR*, 3 Jan. 2017, www.npr.org/2017/01/03/508037656/non-religious-americans-remain-far-underrepresented-in-congress. Smith, David. “‘I Prefer Non-Religious’: Why so Few US Politicians Come out as Atheists.” *The Guardian*, 3 Aug. 2019, www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/03/atheism-us-politics-2020-election-religious-beliefs.

religious morality as a core American value and this leads them to believe that having no religious alignment puts them at odds with the traditional American identity and places doubt on their ability to make decisions that reflect those ideologies. Tulsi Gabbard has also put out various statements calling out the religious discrimination she faced³⁸, effectively resulting in her leaving the democratic party as a whole. There are opportunities to study why she was able to find success as a Samoan Hindu candidate sooner than an Indian Hindu candidate as well. Different factors such as ethnic differences or her background as an Iraqi war veteran could have played a role in this phenomenon. Studying the emerging trend of having candidates, such as Kamala Harris and Bobby Jindal, discuss their identities more in-depth when they are aiming to achieve higher positions in office could also be insightful about patterns of religious privilege. Opening up about their complex backgrounds allows them to relate to a wider selection of citizens. For example, Kamala Harris would be able to tap into the support of the Hindu Indian American community in addition to the Black Baptist community she already appeals to, and having a larger scale of support is vital in nationwide elections. In terms of data collection, the incorporation of printed media could have been helpful because it would provide a holistic understanding of the rhetoric being spread through the different media platforms at the time. Furthermore, a detailed analysis of donor data may help identify support for patterns between religion and support from different communities. For example, one might be able to find that religious organizations may be more inclined to donate to a candidate that identifies with that religion and that may provide them with a larger budget to work with during their campaign.

The limitations of this project are numerous, the most prominent being the fact that the study was only conducted on Indian Americans and the only minority religion studied was Hinduism. Due to the large immigrant population within the Indian American community, candidates have been faced with the issue of backlash based on their stance and involvement in Indian politics. This can be seen in Ro Khanna's case as his current contender, Ritesh Tandon, was promoted to run because supporters were upset about Khanna's statements about Hinduvita and his membership in the Pakistan Caucus.³⁹ The unspoken standard mentioned in the findings may be a result of the influence of race and ethnicity on Congressional elections. It is a large variable that cannot be removed from a study so comparing candidates from different religions who are not of the same race would pose another layer of analysis. Additionally, having a diverse selection of cases would require having a more diverse congress than is the case in the United States. Some identity profiles that could have contributed to this study, such as a Muslim Indian-American, were simply not present among the available members. Another group that was not looked at within this project was the selection of Indian-American candidates who were unsuccessful in their races for Congress. Studying those cases could provide insight into new patterns or provide further support for the ones found in this study.

³⁸ Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D-Hawaii), Opinion Contributor. "Elected Leaders Who Weaponize Religion Are Playing a Dangerous Game." *The Hill*, 8 Jan. 2019, thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/religious-rights/424362-elected-leaders-who-weaponize-religion-are-playing-a/.

³⁹ Paul, Sonia. "How Hindu Nationalism Could Shape the Election." *POLITICO*, 30 Oct. 2020, www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/10/30/hindu-nationalism-election-indian-american-voters-433608.

CONCLUSION

Those limitations acknowledged, this exploratory story is suggestive of several important findings. The threshold effect revealed by the district data collected for the seven cases in this study importantly links lower Christian religiosity with a higher chance of success in an election, implying that lower chances of election may be caused by higher Christian religiosity and its bias against non-Christian religions. Candidates who are already a part of the majority religion do not have to incorporate this understanding into their campaign plan or overcompensate for that aspect of their identity. Representative Bera is a prime example of the lack of compensation, as he was able to maintain his position as the longest-serving Indian American while only having one statement about his religious identity and conversion put out throughout his entire career, a strategic move to preserve Indian voter support while providing a link of relatability for his highly Christian district as well. Directly in contrast, Ro Khanna constantly works to amplify his platform as an activist against anti-Hindu sentiments and unify the different aspects of his identity with the idea of Americanism. Ro Khanna and Tulsi Gabbard have both openly shared accounts of discrimination where they were directly told that their faith doesn't align with the American identity. Even though they were able to make it into Congress anyways, the ability to overlook religion as a barrier to getting elected is not available to most Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, atheists, etc. This analysis allows us to reasonably infer that all of these patterns are linked with Christian privilege.

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