

Immigrant Political Ambition:  
New Americans and the Quest for Political Office

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## **Abstract**

The majority of descriptive representation research has examined the structural barriers to office once minorities declare a candidacy. Far fewer have examined why and when candidates emerge, and none have explicitly examined the perceived barriers that might moderate political ambition among racial minorities and immigrants in America. Using a unique dataset of first- and second-generation immigrant leaders, we explore the perceived barriers to office among these potential candidates. We discover that the traditional barriers to office---professional considerations, finances, networks, inexperience, and gender---moderate political ambition. For these new American leaders, however, additional considerations regarding race, ethnicity, language, and nativity serve to compound existing barriers by further tempering pursuits of political office. We conclude with the implications of our findings for the political inclusion of racial/ethnic minorities and immigrants.

## Introduction

One of the most significant challenges facing the American political system in the 21st century will be adaptation to the steady transformation of the American populace. By 2042, the United States is expected to reach a majority-minority milestone, and this transformation is being fueled by immigration. Between 1990 and 2010, the immigrant population in the US doubled to 40 million. As noted in *From the Community to the Capitol* (Reny and Bhojwani, 2012), 2010 also marked a critical turning point, as immigrants moved from showing their influence primarily at the ballot box to their emergence as candidates for elected office across the country. Indeed, the 2012 Congressional elections included 80 first- and second-generation immigrants from a variety of backgrounds seeking office in 19 states.

Yet the composition of the United States' elected bodies has yet to catch up to the realities of this demographic revolution. Congress continues to be majority non-Hispanic white and the nation's 500,000 state and local offices are estimated to be about 98% white.<sup>1</sup> Foreign-born representatives---first-generation immigrants---are in even shorter supply, comprising less than two percent of Congress but 13% of the population.

Others have written convincingly about the need to remedy this representation gap. For example, descriptive representatives from Latino communities have been shown to decrease political alienation as well as increase feelings of political trust and efficacy (Michelson 2000; Pantoja and Segura 2003), increase interest in political affairs, and increase the likelihood of voting and participating in other civic activities (Barreto, Segura, and Woods 2004; Barreto 2007; Griffin and Newman 2008). Through shared experiences and a deep understanding of community, descriptive representatives are able to identify and advocate for issues of importance to their communities that others may overlook or ignore (Baker and Cook 2005; Hero and Tolbert 1995; Fraga and Lopez 2008; Mansbridge 1999).

Yet the gap remains. Most studies focus on the aggregate demographic, political, and electoral factors that impede minority candidates in their quest for office. More recent scholarship, however, suggests that one of the largest barriers to minority representation is simply a lack of non-white candidates on ballots (Shah 2014). This research shifts our focus to candidate emergence and supply among racial and ethnic minorities (Barreto 2007; Bejarano 2013; Shah 2014; Casellas 2009). If gaps in representation are largely due to lack of minority candidate supply, then understanding the determinants and barriers to political ambition among America's rapidly expanding minority and immigrant populations could not be of more urgent concern.

In this project, we provide one of the first glimpses of the political ambitions of first- and second-generation immigrant leaders and activists. Using a unique dataset collected by the *New Americans Leader Project*, including a qualitative analysis of open-ended essay questions, we examine a question that is of crucial importance for American representative democracy as the United States approaches critical demographic milestones: what are the perceived barriers to elected office among first- and second-generation immigrants? We find that, in many ways, first- and second-generation immigrant leaders face the same perceived challenges and fears as non-immigrant and non-minority leaders---professional, financial, and network issues, inexperience with political campaigns, gender barriers, and fear of failure. An additional narrative emerges from our study, however, one that is deeply interwoven with other barriers---the perceived barriers to elected office posed by minority status based on race, ethnicity, language and citizenship. Quite simply, many of our respondents are acutely aware that being “American,” and particularly part of an elite class of lawmakers and elected officials, is a status historically awarded overwhelmingly to native-born white males. We conclude with the implications of our findings for the political

inclusion of racial/ethnic minorities and immigrants.

### **The Representation Gap**

The vast majority of the research on representative parity, or how closely the makeup of an elected body mirrors that of the population, attribute racial representation gaps to macro-level demographic, political, and electoral hurdles. Building upon a rich body of research that suggests white voters will not vote for racial/ethnic minority candidates, this literature argues that co-racial/ethnic demographics matter. As this co-racial/ethnic population grows and approaches majority status, the probability that a racial or ethnic minority can win an election increases (Branton 2009; Krebs 1999; Meier and Juenke 2005).

However, how this co-racial/ethnic population is aggregated is important too, thus electoral structures matter as well. At-large districts, in which minority candidates must garner significant “cross-over” voters (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1986), are less likely than single-member districts to elect minorities to office (Davidson and Korbel 1981; Engstrom and McDonald 1981; Karnig and Welch 1982). Last, political factors matter. Becoming the “first” minority elected official in a jurisdiction takes more work, and bravery, than running as the tenth. A history of minority elected officials signal an electoral viability that will lower perceived barriers to entry (Marschall, Ruhil, and Shah 2010; Smith, Reingold, and Owens 2012).

While this research is important in advancing our understanding of macro-level barriers, it looks only at the impediments posed to minority candidates who have already decided to run for office, ignoring the important forces that mediate minority candidate supply in the first place (Shah 2014; Juenke 2014; Lawless 2012). What are the individual-level factors that motivate individuals to consider running for office?

## **Nascent Political Ambition**

In 1980, Stone criticized rational choice theories of political ambition for focusing too heavily on structural level factors: “it is myopic if not simplistic to place total emphasis on [structural factors] to the neglect of other social and political factors since human motivations are complex and generally subject to a multiplicity of stimuli” (p. 94). Individual level factors certainly play a role in the decision to run for elected office, including gender, race and/or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family dynamics, cultural factors, professional status and circumstances, external recruitment, and perception of personal efficacy.

Recent work by Lawless (2010, 2012) digs more deeply into how these factors influence a potential run for elected office, particularly among women. Nascent political ambition is an important precursor to an analysis of the macro-level demographic, political, and electoral barriers to office. Potential candidates must decide they are interested in running for office before realizing that structural barriers will play a significant role in the probability of winning a race. While Lawless and Fox (2005, 2008) and Lawless (2010, 2012) have made strong contributions to the field, their work focuses almost primarily on explaining gender gaps in representation, offering little in the way of theorizing on the political ambitions of other minority groups.

Using Lawless and Fox’s research as a guiding framework, in this paper we paint a more comprehensive picture of political ambition among first- and second-generation immigrants, that is both foreign-born individuals and their U.S.-born children. In particular, we demonstrate that many of the usual individual-level predictors of nascent ambition apply to this group, but that ambition among minorities in the United States is complicated and moderated by additional psychological factors. In institutions dominated by white males, minority status---whether language, gender, race/ethnicity, or immigration status---tempers

ambition by depressing feelings of belonging and self-perceived qualifications for office.

We start by reviewing the literature on the most important mediators of nascent ambition. We hypothesize that the compounded minority status of first- and second-generation immigrants influences these mediators both directly and indirectly, creating additional barriers of political ambition.

### *Professional Experiences*

There are certain professional careers that act as springboards into political life, most notably law and business (Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell 2000; Lawless 2012). Indeed, recent work by Carnes (2013) sheds light on how unlikely it is to see working class individuals in elected office. As of January 2014, more than half of all U.S. Congressmen had a net worth of at least a million dollars and more than 50% of each chamber is composed of businessmen or lawyers (Open Secrets 2014; Carnes 2013).

What is it about law and business that primes these professionals to enter politics? Elite professions confer money and networks on individuals, increasing feelings of efficacy and perceived qualifications for office. First, money is one of the most important resources in the American political system. The financial well-being and monied networks associated with professional careers advantages certain potential candidates over others. In 2002, Hogan interviewed state legislative candidates, asking about campaigns and political ambition, and found that resources were the most important factor in their campaigns. And money is even more important as one runs for high-status offices like U.S. Congress or Governor. Lawyers and businessmen, in particular, are both financially well-situated and connected to high-powered, often well-connected, and wealthy networks of other professionals who can easily open the checkbook to donate to political campaigns.

Further, given the proximity of law and business to politics, white-collar

professionals might feel more accomplished in their careers, see themselves as more qualified to run for elected office, exist in social networks where politics is a common topic of conversation, and be more likely to possess civic skills crucial for political participation more generally (Hain and Pierson 1975; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). Simply put, the lack of money or deep-pocketed networks is a serious barrier to office. Campaigning involves significant investments of time, personal financial sacrifice, and fundraising.

Where does this leave racial and ethnic minorities, and particularly, immigrants? When we look broadly at the aggregate immigrant community the results are mixed with the educational attainment and occupations of foreign-born Latinos at the bottom and Asians at the top. For example, nearly 72% of foreign-born Latinos do not have a college education, compared to 30% for whites and 26% for foreign-born Asians. Given America's mix of skilled and unskilled immigrants, the educational distribution of new immigrants has very heavy tails at the upper and lower ends of the distribution. Forty-eight percent of Asians hold professional occupations whereas only 13.7% of Latinos do (compared to 45.8% of whites) (Princeton University 2003).

Given that so few Latinos belong to the professional class, we might assume that more Latinos will enter the pipeline through activist positions than Asians, with money and monied networks being real impediments. Asians, on the other hand, are more likely to be professionals, suggesting that other factors, perhaps not money or networks, could be the largest barriers to office.

In sum, we expect that first- and second-generation immigrants in the U.S., broadly defined, will be less likely to be lawyers and businessmen, than whites or blacks. They will therefore have fewer ties to networks of influence and wealth, perhaps feel less potential political efficacy and less qualified to run for office, and finally, have less wealth to draw

from that will give them the freedom to take a leave from work to run a political campaign.

### *Political Knowledge, Experience, and Attitudes*

As Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) find, all other things being equal, the more civic knowledge citizens possess, the more likely they are to participate in political matters.

Running for office, perhaps the highest form of political participation, is no exception.

Those with little knowledge of the political system will likely not even vote, let alone run for political office.

Similarly, running for office and offering yourself (and often your family) over to the scrutiny of the press, voters, and political opponents can be a frightening and potentially humiliating process. Therefore, experience in politics can go a long way towards lowering perceived barriers to participation. Political attitudes and feelings of belonging or alienation can also affect participation, and ultimately political ambition. Cynicism, powerlessness, distrust, estrangement, and normlessness all depress political participation. Citizens are more likely to run for office and engage with the political system when they trust government and view it as an effective mechanism for change (Hirlinger 1992, Wilson 1991; Conway, Steuernagel, and Ahern 1997; King 1997; Piven and Cloward 1997).

Where does this generally leave first- and second-generation immigrants? In Schildkraut's (2011) focus groups with Latinos, she found an "overwhelming cynicism...displayed when noting how 'the people' in general and immigrants in particular are ignored by politicians," and called for elected officials that tackled not just generic policies like education, crime, or the economy, but immigrant-specific policies "such as earned legalization [and] increased educational opportunities for immigrants, among many other things" (p. 21). For immigrants who are attuned to political matters, and have the strongest sense of perceived group discrimination, this distrust and cynicism might be particularly



acute. But discrimination and disaffection with government can work two ways. It could increase alienation in racial minorities and immigrants (Michelson 2003; Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004; Weitzer and Tuch 2004; Schildkraut 2005) or it could contribute to a greater sense of group consciousness and spur engagement (Masuoka 2006; Sanchez and Masuoka 2006; Dawson 1994). Given the activist backgrounds, non-profit affiliations, and experiences of our sample, we expect that feelings of discrimination and disaffection might spur general participation but temper ambition to run for office.

In sum, while perceived discrimination and distrust may prompt engagement among certain minorities and immigrants, the group consciousness they can engender may not be powerful enough to overcome centuries of white dominance in the political sphere and lack of experience running for office. As we will see in the next section, minority status broadly conceived provides an additional barrier to office that is more difficult to overcome.

### ***“Otherness”: Race/Ethnicity, Immigrant Status, and Gender***

The United States prides itself on its immigrant heritage. Who is welcomed in America, however, has long been conditional on race and ethnicity (Smith 1999; Masuoka and Junn 2013). Throughout history, those who were deemed “White” generally experienced full benefits of inclusion and citizenship, while those who were not faced both *de facto* and *de jure* discrimination at the hands of citizens and the state (Smith 1999; Haney-Lopez 2006). The Civil Rights Act may have ushered in an era of racial liberalism and legal “colorblind” egalitarianism, abolishing formal explicitly discriminatory laws from the books, but the legacy of decades of white supremacy continues to shape social and political life. The powerful and invisible racial hierarchy that has long structured the lives of those classified as “non-white” today still exerts a strong effect on both the psyches and financial, political, and social opportunities of millions of non-white Americans. The collateral effects of this racial

hierarchy can be seen today in racial-group stereotypes, police tactics, incarceration rates, employment rates, and persistent gaps in wealth between whites and non-whites, among many other indicators (Masuoka and Junn 2013).

King and Smith (2005) see political entrepreneurs and the existing institutional orders in which they operate as the key actors shaping political change and, importantly, racial hierarchies (also see HoSang (2010)). According to King and Smith (2005), America's racial coalitions have typically been constructed of two competing "orders", defined as collections of actors, institutions, and organizations. The first, an "anti-transformative" order, defends and upholds existing inequalities and hierarchies, or at the very least, blocks reforms aimed at remedying or reducing existing racial inequalities, and a competing egalitarian "transformative" order, that aims to upend existing hierarchies and compensate for previous injustices.

Non-white immigrant activists are acutely aware of the legacy of American racial politics, their community's location within the American racial hierarchy, and the prevalence of anti-transformative actors serving as elected officials in the United States today (King and Smith 2005). In fact, many immigrant activists today have devoted their lives to fighting for political power and positive change, often within the context of the discriminatory laws being passed by elected officials in their communities, states, and in Washington D.C. (see Campbell (2011) for example).

Further, immigrants in the United States, particularly those of non-Western European ancestry, have been discursively constructed as "others" who don't belong (Higham 1955; King 2010; Huntington 2005; HoSang2010; Santa Ana 2002). Legal and political discourse have established and privileged an "Anglo-Saxon conception of U.S. identity...[that] reconfirmed the problematic place of nonwhites in the U.S. polity's

conception of membership” (King 2010, pg 3). More recent immigrants, Latinos and Asian Americans, in particular, have been triangulated within the American racial order according to two axis of racial positioning---foreigner/outsider and superior/inferior---with white Americans on the top, African Americans on the bottom, and Latinos and Asian Americans in between (Kim1999; Masuoka and Junn 2013). In essence, Asian Americans, and to a lesser extent, Latinos, have been classified as not fully belonging in America, a status only further heightened when language issues arise in public discourse.

It is this acknowledgment of their location within the American racial order, and the restraints posed by this uneasy sense of not belonging, that we hypothesize will reinforce the narrative that weaves throughout new American leaders' perceived barriers to running.

*Elected officials are wealthy white males hostile to my community, not struggling immigrants. How could a Latina with a strong accent ever be elected to office? How could an immigrant be elected when the immigrant community doesn't turn out and vote? How could a Muslim-American community organizer ever compete against established political candidates with money, networks, and influence? If I wasn't born in this country, will they trust that I am a loyal Americans?* Race, ethnicity, and immigrant identity, then, could serve as a powerful mediating barrier to office.

Last, we recognize that gender serves as a strong restraint on political ambition. Lawless's (2012) *Becoming a Candidate*, the authoritative text on gender and political ambition, reveals that gender acts as a strong check on political ambition. From gendered societal expectations, to family responsibilities, to professional circumstances, to strategic gatekeepers, women face many more barriers than men in their quest for political office. She finds, specifically, that men are almost twice as likely to have seriously considered a candidacy than women. Men are more likely to express runs for high-level offices, whilst women are more likely to seek out lower-level offices. Women, therefore, are far less likely

than men to emerge as candidates for elected office. We expect to see the same trend in our data, where gender acts as yet another compounding factor depressing political ambition.

Given both the recent nature of demographic shifts and the small numbers of foreign-born immigrants in office, very little is known about individuals who have expressed at least nascent political ambition and interest in running for office but have not yet declared and self-identify as immigrants. Recognizing the dearth of literature in this area, as well as the limitations of our data, our goal is to explore the characteristics of immigrant leaders in America today, their perceived barriers for office, and provide a strong jumping off point for future research in this area.

### **Data and Methods**

Our survey data comes from the application used by the New American Leaders Project (NALP), the nation's only not-for-profit immigrant candidate development organization. NALP partners with immigrant advocacy groups in several key states--including Arizona, California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Texas, Louisiana, and Washington--to identify and recruit first- and second-generation immigrant organizers and advocates with proven records of leadership for a two-day candidate development training.

The survey is based partially on Jennifer Lawless' and Richard Fox's Citizen Political Ambition Study (CPAS), and includes measures of the potential candidates' political awareness, community involvement, political involvement, political attitudes, issue positions, specific desire to run, racial and ethnic attitudes, and a number of demographic variables. In total, the data includes responses from 210 applications from immigrant leaders and advocates from 13 different trainings in 8 different states, between 2011-2013. Most of the individuals in the sample are first- or second-generation immigrants that have been chosen

and recruited by NALP's partner organizations to participate in a candidate training. They did not necessarily express desires to run for office when they filled out the application, though some did. The individuals that were recruited varied quite extensively depending on the organization doing the outreach. In certain trainings, NALP partnered with community organizing groups and labor unions and thus the recruitment efforts were aimed heavily at a younger, less-professional and more grassroots cohort, though one that was invested in its community and generally politically active. For other trainings, NALP worked with partners to recruit professionals that were not necessarily heavily involved in their communities but well-positioned to run for office given their networks and resources. Thus, our data include a wide spectrum of individuals that displayed a deep commitment to social justice and community improvement.

Given the recruitment model utilized to generate their data, there are number of limitations. First, our sample consists solely of immigrant respondents, hence we do not have a control group to which we can compare our sample, limiting our ability to make causal inferences about the impact of their immigrant or minority status on such predictors of political ambition. Second, Lawless and Fox's survey questions were designed to measure political ambition among primarily white respondents. Following a long tradition of research into minority political engagement, we would ideally like to measure concepts like group consciousness and linked fate--variables that have been linked to African American, Latino, and Asian political participation (Dawson 1994; Sanchez 2006; Sanchez and Masuoka 2010; Masuoka 2006), and would likely be strongly associated with political ambition among our sample.

Little is known about potential immigrant candidates, and thus we leverage a trove of open-ended survey questions for the bulk of our analysis. Open-ended essays provide a

direct look into the mind of the respondent (Repass 1971) and are less likely to prime respondents and bias their answers (Iyengar 1996). In particular, we focus on responses to the question “In 200 words or less, discuss the barriers you feel you will face running for office and how you hope to overcome them.”

We use Python to parse the essays into sentences grouped by respondent, and then split these sentences further into individual words if one sentence has more than one “barrier” in it before hand-coding them for content.<sup>2</sup> Our first pass through the data revealed a fairly long list of 18 barriers. In our second pass we collapsed those into 8 categories that included personal reasons (age, family, work, gender, education, sexual orientation), finances and fundraising (both personal and campaign related), inexperience with campaigning and politics, networks, race or foreign-ness, community, political (issue views), and an “other” category for non-barrier related responses.<sup>3</sup>

## **Results**

We begin by describing the New American Leaders (Table 1). As a point of reference, we also compare the results from our survey with the sample of probable candidates identified by Fox and Lawless (2012). A number of points are noteworthy. First, while the proportion of female respondents is similar, the New American Survey has much more variability in terms of education. Given NALP did not select on all professions that tend to yield the highest proportion of political candidates (law, business, and education) as Lawless did, this is not surprising. Moreover, many of the New American respondents are young (many are college-age), and thus may still pursue a bachelors or graduate degree.

[Table 1 here]

Table 1 does underscore, however, the sample consists primarily of a unique group of young professional and community activist first- and second-generation immigrants who

are deeply involved in their communities. The convenience sample may not be representative of the entire U.S. immigrant population. Yet, like Lawless (2012), we recognize that certain professions will be more likely to serve as springboards into politics, with activism being an incredibly important springboard for immigrants.

Second, we find that the vast majority of New American respondents are Democrats or Independents, supporting research that finds the Democratic Party leading in recruitment of immigrants (Sanchez 2013; Hajnal and Lee 2011). Last, the New Americans Survey respondents are predominantly persons of color. The survey asked more detailed questions about racial and ethnic background, and thus we have more variability in this question. That ninety-three percent of our respondents are non-white provides an interesting comparison with Lawless' sample, which is majority white.

### *Barriers to Office*

Why don't more racial minorities and immigrants run for elected office? What explains lower levels of political ambition? Here we leverage our open-ended essay questions, the aggregate results of which can be found in Table 2. Below, we examine these in more detail.

[Table 2 here]

#### Professional Experiences

We noted above that there are certain professional careers that act as springboards into political life. The majority of lawmakers enter politics either through law or business, careers that confer money, status, networks, and psychological benefits (in the form of self-perceived qualifications) on individuals. In our sample of first- and second-generation immigrant leaders, we see that the lack of money, perceived status, and networks all moderate political ambition, confirming our hypothesis. We also see how race and ethnicity can make seemingly non-racial barriers even more daunting.

First, finances were perceived as a major barrier for the sample, most of whom work for non-profit organizations and the government. We saw two types of financial concerns emerge in the open essays---personal finances and fundraising concerns---which ties into lack of deep-pocketed networks. In Tables 3 and 4 we more explicitly examine the occupations and wealth of the sample.

[Table 3 and 4 here]

As Table 3 illustrates, a large portion of the NALP respondents work in non-profit jobs, a career that appears to foster both strong advocates but could also serve as one of the strongest springboards for immigrants and racial minorities into elected office, despite as we reveal below, the lack of financial resources available for most non-profit employees. In Table 4, we provide the income distribution of the sample of new American leaders. A plurality of the sample make between \$34,000 and \$84,000, compared to Lawless' CPAS sample income mean of almost \$130,000 per year (Lawless 2012, p. 246). Inability to finance a campaign emerged as an important barrier:

“I do not have unlimited dollar amounts to have a strong political campaign.”

“Unfortunately I do not have an expendable bank account.”

“I don't come from a rich background, nor am I CEO of a company.”

One noted that her student loans were financially draining and posed a problem with financing a campaign. In sum, there seems to be a deep understanding of the central role of money in campaigns: “As for financial barriers, politics is money.”

New American leaders also lack attachments to wealthy networks that others might enjoy in high-powered, well-paid industries like law and business. When prompted about barriers to office, many identified the importance of these networks when fundraising for campaigns.

“Unfortunately I do not have family members I can count on for substantial donations.”



“Most politicians are either lawyers, successful business people, have worked in the private sector, or have some other strong professional background.”

Thus far, none of these answers are necessarily unique to racial minorities or to immigrants. White Americans from less prestigious occupations and without expendable funds would similarly see lack of professional networks and funds as very significant barriers to office. Yet, as is the case with all barriers for New American leaders, racial identity does not exist in a vacuum but pervades all seemingly non-racial essay responses.

“I don't like asking for money, especially in a community that is already facing socioeconomic barriers and hardships.”

“[Latinos] may not contribute to the campaign due to their lack of knowledge and what they will gain as a community.”

“ [it]...can be tougher for minority candidates because the income of minorities or persons of color is generally lower than their white counterparts so can be more difficult to obtain the same amount of campaign donations [as] a white candidate.”

We can conclude, then, that new American leaders will, on average, be less likely to be white-collar professionals than white or black Americans. They will therefore have fewer ties to networks of influence and wealth, and have less personal wealth to draw from that will give them the freedom to take a leave from work to run a political campaign. These barriers are compounded by the perceived reality that they will have to fundraise in communities or that are already struggling financially and that participate less often in politics.

#### Political Knowledge, Experience, and Attitudes

Previous research finds immigrants participate less than the average white or native-born Americans (Barreto and Munoz 2003). Yet our sample was drawn from a unique group of new American leaders who are already politically active and experienced. This political activity tends to lead to virtuous cycles. Citizens with high levels of political activism and interest are often most likely to emerge as candidates (Lawless 2012).

How do the New Americans compare with the CPAS respondents? In Table 5 we

examine their political behaviors. Perhaps not surprisingly, the immigrant respondents were not as likely to vote as the citizens taking the CPAS. This is consistent with existing research showing that immigrants participate at equal rates as native citizens in indirect political activities, such as protests, but less than their native citizen counterparts in system directed activities, such as voting (Junn 1999; Barreto and Junn 2003). In direct political activities, the New Americans were quite active. A comparable percentage gave money to a candidate and wrote letters to their newspaper. Given that many of the respondents also belong to community organizations and participate in community organizing activities, the higher percentage of involvement in political process outside of voting is not surprising.

[Table 5 here].

Yet, this increased political participation didn't necessarily translate into self-perceived qualification to become a candidate for elected office, both because of inexperience and race. Inexperience and fear was quite prevalent in the open-ended essays, the third most mentioned barrier in the open-ended essays (11% of all issues). Like finance and professional experience, however, personal inexperience and fear are not unique to immigrants or minorities. Race, however, emerged as a prominent theme compounding the barriers posed by inexperience, as we will see below.

First, basic themes of lack of knowledge about campaign management were common.

“Two things will become a disadvantage for me when I run for office in the future, running a campaign and creating a budget plan.”

“ I have limited experience in the campaign arena.”

Many others were worried about public speaking:

“One barrier is public speaking.

“I could use some tips on public speaking and clearly articulating a message to inspire and encourage action.”

“I am not the best public speaker...giving out speeches is one of my biggest fears.”

In addition, fear of failure was a prominent theme. Running for office requires a great deal of sacrifice and risk--financially, personally, and inter-personally. There is no guarantee that a candidate will win, or that the money they fundraise, particularly from a community without excess resources, can be used for positive political change.

“I would have to overcome my fear of the unknown and failing.”

“Self doubt, fear of trying and not accomplishing my goals. I do believe I can work to change the behaviors of some, but I do understand not all would be convinced of my mission.”

“I am hoping to come to terms with my fear of inadequacy...not being adequate, intelligent, or capable enough for such an opportunity.”

As we see, again, none of these issues are unique to immigrants or minorities. Yet, in the essays, race once again emerged as deeply interwoven with seemingly non-racial barriers. Many tied their fear of losing and inadequacy to the issues of their communities. For instance, many pointed out that Latinos and other racial minorities don't participate at rates comparable to whites or African Americans.

“Latinos are difficult to get out to vote.”

“Most Latinos are not registered, and [my winning] is contingent on the ability to get out the minority vote...it takes a worthy candidate to fire up the Latino base.”

Others perceived future difficulties with cross-racial coalition building, and the political reality of racial bloc voting:

“[There is] generally low Latino and Democratic voter registration and participation, [and the] splitting of the Latino and/or Democratic vote.”

“There may be pushback from the API [Asian Pacific Islander] community about an API Democratic candidate if I were to run, because most API folks in CA are registered Republicans.”

And some feared push back from the established non-immigrant power base:

“I am sure I would face barriers from people who don't want to see the community

empowered.”

Many of the feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure, then, are deeply tied to the realities of being a racial minority and immigrant in America. New American leaders are scared to run because they don't think they can upset the power status quo of white elected officials, they don't feel their immigrant communities will turn out to vote, they fear having to build coalitions of voters from various racial and ethnic groups. Race and ethnicity, again, present condition the barriers to political ambition, neutralizing the ambition of strong potential candidates.

#### Race/Ethnicity

While we have shown how race is deeply entwined with the seemingly non-racial barriers above, race, foreign-ness, and feelings of not belonging emerged more explicitly, too, as the single most common barrier to office expressed in open-ended essays (17% of all expressed barriers). There was a pervasive general perceived feeling that being born in another country severely hindered a candidacy. Being born abroad opens a candidate up to questions of loyalty and belonging. Among this group of highly race-conscious new American leaders, race mattered, and it mattered the most.

Some simply pointed out their foreign birthplace and immigrant status as a barrier in and of itself, or the more straightforward “nationality” and “xenophobia”.

“I was not born in America.”

“My name is not American, I was born in Vietnam.”

“I came from Bangladesh.”

“I am Iranian-American.”

Others more explicitly predicted that they would be more highly scrutinized because of their immigrant status and that their loyalty would be questioned:

“My country of origin [would be a barrier]; with Americans constantly scrutinizing

immigrants and their loyalty to the country I believe that it will be a major issue.”  
“I will have to overcome those who challenge how American I am because I was not born here.”  
“In light of my immigrant background and no matter what my allegiance may be, the fact that I was born a Japanese and not an American citizen is what I would identify to be major barrier in becoming an elected official.”  
“I imagine that my ability to lead and my loyalty to the nation would be questioned by the electorate.”  
“[they] would questions my American-ness.”  
“I think the overall anti-immigrant sentiment is a barrier for many Latino candidates in the U.S.”

Immigrant status is often compounded by perceptions of racial and religious barriers to office. Some simply pointed out their race, ethnicity, or religion, as self-evident barriers:

“I am Arab.”  
“I am Muslim.”  
“I am African-American.”  
“That I am an Asian-American.”

Others highlighted their skin color as the barrier:

“Another problem I face is that I am black, I believe that society has subliminally degraded and marked me down for the color of my skin.”  
“The biggest barrier I will face in AZ...is that I am brown.”  
“As a person of color, I feel like the system is stacked against my people and me through rules that are intended to dis-empower us.”

All of these perceived disqualifications for office are rooted in the idea that, as a candidate, each will be discriminated against and judged merely by the color of their skin and country of their birth. This reality gives white, native born, non-Latino candidates a large perceived advantage.

“I believe that some of the biggest barriers that I will face will be my race just because I am a Latino for many people that automatically puts me in a category that they don't pick from.”  
“I will face the usual barriers that individual deal with such as discrimination, racial tension.”

Others are worried about the “racial slurs and demeaning comments” they would face,

particularly if weren't as confident with their grasp of the English language. As one pointed out:

“The language barrier is my major downfall.”

These perceived barriers of race, ethnicity, and immigration status was confirmed as a major barrier to office in our survey questionnaire as well, with only 6% of the sample agreeing that it is “easy for a foreign-person to be elected to public office,” and 95% agreeing that “discrimination is still a big issue facing racial and ethnic minorities in this country.”

### Gender

Finally, while some researchers have found that Latinas are actually able to successfully leverage both their race and ethnicity and their gender for electoral advantage (see Bejarano 2013), gender still acts as a strong moderating check on political ambition. In many of our open ended essays, respondents would mention the intersection of race and gender as compounding barriers to office, focusing specifically on how they thought they might be treated on the campaign trail.

“Barriers I believe I would face include sexism.”

“Sexual stereotyping.”

“I am a woman and in our society today the media and public discourse is dominated by a voice that vilified and subjugates us.”

“[women tend to] minimize their accomplishments, knowledge, and skills.”

So, while minority women might be more likely to win than their male counterparts if they run, they are not necessarily more likely to enter office, understanding, or at least perceiving, that their qualifications would be questioned merely because of their gender.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

As the nation marches quickly towards its inevitable majority-minority future, questions of gaps in representation only become more urgent. While demographic, political, and

structural factors all play important roles in minority candidate success, some are now focusing on the supply side of minority representation (Shah 2014), suggesting that lack of representational parity is partly due to lack of candidate emergence in minority communities. This begs the question of minorities and political ambition. What do first- and second-generation immigrants perceive as barriers to office?

Our study offers the first glance at perceived barriers to office among new American leaders. We draw attention to the factors that constrain immigrants from seeking a bid for elected office in hopes that non-profits, party organizations, and others will focus more on recruiting, training, mentoring, and fostering leaders that can occupy a strong pipeline of minority candidates and begin closing the representation gap. Using Lawless's study of nascent political ambition as a framework, we find that the traditional barriers to office---lack of professional and political experiences, finances, and monied networks, as well as gender---all contribute to lower self-perceived qualifications for office among both immigrants and non-immigrants. Yet the first- and second-generation immigrants in our sample, the New American leaders, who are highly politically involved, deeply rooted in their communities, and well-positioned to run for office, face the additional psychological barriers posed by their minority statuses, a barrier that is often offered in open-ended essays as self-evident and crippling.

We find that there is a deep understanding among new American leaders of America's racial hierarchies and history. Despite gains, many Latinos and Asian Americans simply do not think that they can be elected to public office because they do not want to fundraise in communities that are already struggling financially, they do not have deep-pocketed friends, neighbors, and colleagues who can help bankroll a campaign, they do not see people like them in office and fear that white voters will not accept them as legitimate

candidates for either being born in another country or for the colors of their skin. Race continues to play an outside role in tempering political ambition among America's minority leaders who are well qualified to run for office and remedy the representation gap.

With the increase in second-generation immigrants, the political opportunities created by redistricting, and the efforts by non-profits and community organizations to engage more immigrant voters and train leaders, the number of individuals from immigrant communities serving elected office is only bound to increase each election cycle. Future research will examine how and when immigrant political activists differ from their native counterparts, and hopefully offer more insights into to political ambition of the New Americans seeking office.



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Tables

**Table 1: Demographic and Political Profile**

Variable	New Americans (n=210)	Candidate Eligibility Pool (Lawless 2012; Table 2.1) (n=3626)
<i>Demographic Characteristics</i>		
Female	52%	46%
Married	42	78
Mean Age (years)	33	48
<i>Education</i>		
No College Degree	26	6
Bachelor's Degree	37	17
Graduate Degree	37	78
<i>Race</i>		
Latino	58	5
Asian/Pacific Islander	17	
Black	11	9
White	7	84
Race – Other	5	
Southeast Asian	4	
American Indian	2	
Arab/Middle Eastern	2	
<i>Immigrant Generation</i>		
First Generation	56	
Second Generation	44	
<i>Party Affiliation</i>		
Democrat	79	60
Independent	15	8
Republican	2	32

**Table 2: Perceived Barriers to Office**

<b>Barrier</b>	<b>Percent of Total</b>
Race/Foreign-ness	17%
Inexperience	16
Personal	15
Financial	11
Network	5
Community	4
Political	4

Note: respondents could and often did list more than one barrier per essay. The table does not add up to 100% because the remaining 28% of the sentences from the essays had nothing to do with barriers and were simply coded as not relevant.

**Table 3: Occupations**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Not-for-profit	46.2%
For-profit business	16
Unemployed	13
Local government	11.1
Self-employed	6.3
State government	3.9
Federal government	2
Homemaker	.5
Other	1

**Table 4: Annual Household Income**

<b>Income</b>	<b>Percent</b>
\$0-\$8,000	6.7%
\$8,001-\$34,000	23
\$34,001-\$84,000	47.4
\$84,001-\$174,000	14.8
\$174,001-\$380,000	2.9
\$380,000 or more	1
Refused	1.4



**Table 5: Political Participation**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>New Americans</b>	<b>CPAS White Respondents (n= 2907)</b>	<b>CPAS Black Respondents (n=335)</b>	<b>CPAS Latino Respondents (n=175)</b>
Voted	74%	97%	97%	96%
Gave Money to Candidate	68	66	74	66
Volunteered for Candidate	64	35	43	32
Contacted Government Official	87	73	77	71
Wrote Letter to Newspaper/Political Actor	40	39	45	30
Attended Political Meeting	69	55	62	51
Served on Community Board	51	60	78	60

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> These figures are based on the authors' calculations using data from NALEO Education Fund's 2011 National Directory of Latino Elected Officials and UCLA's 2011-2012 National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac.

<sup>2</sup> We coded the content of each sentence twice. On the first pass we let the categories emerge naturally and discussed their validity, eventually developing as non-objective framework as possible for content. We then hand coded them again, eventually collapsing our categories into 8 cleaner categories for analysis. We assessed inter-coder reliability using a sample of 10% of the sentences and found that we agreed on 88% of cases, indicating high inter-coder reliability.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the sentence: "The barriers I will likely face as an immigrant policy professional and politician are that: (1) I was not born in America; (2) I do not have unlimited dollar amounts to have a strong political campaign; and (3) I do not have an extensive political network system" would be coded as having three topics---race/foreignness, financial barriers, and lack of networks, and therefore split across three lines to be coded individually.