

Political Efficacy in the Sikh-American Community



How does political efficacy influence voter participation within the Sikh-American community, and what factors contribute to shaping this efficacy?

Introduction

- Sikhism is the 5th largest religion in the world with over 500,000 Sikhs living in the United States alone (Sikh Coalition, 2016).
- There is no recorded reporting on Sikh voter participation and what impacts these patterns within the Sikh community.
- Many are unaware of United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind (1923) which ruled that Sikh Americans could not be granted citizenship (SALDEF, 2023). They were thus barred from voting and having a voice in the country whose food they supplied.
- Sikhism also carries deep sociopolitical roots, with political institutions and social justice being the basis of the religion’s creation and implementation. There is a large belief that the Asian American community displays “political apathy,” however this goes against widespread Sikh belief.
- It is important to note that Dalip Singh Saund became the first Asian, Indian, and Sikh to hold a position in Congress in 1956.
- Sikhs carry a very distinct outward identity and have experienced extreme oppression in India (Sikh Genocide of 1984) while also being the victims of numerous hate-crimes post-9/11, due to their turbans.
- It was seen that those who immigrated to the US were more likely to go out and vote (Lien, 2004). Considering the vast experiences of Indian Americans dependent on religion, I would like to analyze whether or not this is the case for the Sikh population, especially after undergoing a state-sponsored genocide in 1984.
- It is important that the Sikh communities voting trends are documented just as other ethnic and religious groups have been documented.
- Feeling like one is represented is a key factor in how important they feel civic participation is.** The Sikh community is constantly misrepresented and underrepresented and **it is time that the political science field does not undercut the community.**

Methodology

- Nationwide survey**
 - June 2025-August 2025
 - Received IRB approval
 - Spread via personal networks and Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF)
- Questions:**
 - Track age
 - Voter eligibility
 - Whether or not the individual votes
 - Ideological lean
 - Government trust
 - Whether or not the individual feels represented in US politics (including how and why)
 - Education level
 - Socioeconomic class
 - Immigration status
 - Family voting history
 - Co-ethnic mobilization
 - Sikhism based
 - Etc.

Results

- 115** total **Sikh-American respondents** across the country
 - Most from the **midwest**, with around the same number of east coast respondents as west coast respondents.
- 50%** are from the **age group of 18-24**, with the next largest group being those from 25-34
- 74%** of eligible voters **voted in the 2024** election
- Respondents who identify “**a lot**” or “**a great deal**” with Sikhism also tended to **vote at higher rates**, believe **voting is a Sikh obligation**, higher **confidence** in political participation, and **more likely to support Sikh candidates**
- Majority said Sikhs have a duty to vote** because they are Sikh
 - These individuals tended to state that a Sikh had an obligation to vote due to values of **Seva** (selfless service), **Sarbat da bhal**a (welfare of all), **justice and community defense**
- 80%** agreed that we need **more Sikhs in politics**
- 63%** would be more likely to **vote for a Sikh candidate**
- Trust in government** institutions was correlated with **higher voting frequency** and a **greater belief in Sikh political influence**
- Sikhs who tended to **talk about politics** weekly or daily also reported **higher likelihood to vote**
- Nearly **50%** of respondents who answered the question regarding **1984** said it **affected their political beliefs**
 - Same individuals tended to have higher voter turnout, lower trust in government, and express want for more Sikh political representation
- Top issue priorities:** Hate crimes, Discrimination, Immigration, Civil rights, Religious freedom, Foreign policy related to India & Punjab
- One-third** of respondents reported being **immigrants**
 - High voter turnout** (69%), just like US-born (77%), **less trust** in govt.
 - More “**linked fate**” belief, more **supportive of Sikh representation**
 - More likely to cite **immigration** as a key issue

Analysis

- Youth Heavy Sample:** Sikh-American youth express greater political identity, higher mobilization, and much higher support for Sikh political representation
- Sikh-Americans in this sample **exhibit strong civic engagement**, especially youth
 - This directly **opposes stereotypes** of Asian-American “political apathy”
- Sikh identity tends to directly inform political responsibility, creating **identity-driven political efficacy**
- Respondents reported higher trust and turnout intention when representation exists and this supports the **descriptive representation effect**
 - Those with large Sikh populations and more Sikh representation in govt (**CA + NY**) reported higher political efficacy, government trust, belief that Sikhs can influence politics
- More political conversation can lead to higher voter turnout among Sikhs
- Sikhs affected by 1984 experience **collective trauma and heightened vigilance** which leads to a **desire for self-advocacy** and motivates **voter participation**
- Identity-linked** issue bank
- US born Sikhs** tend to have **higher political trust** which stems from the idea that those who have been settled in an area longer, tend to have more trust for its government
- Immigrant respondents showed stronger “**linked fate**,” meaning: “What happens to Sikhs as a group affects me personally.”
 - 1984, post-9/11 hate crimes, discrimination, profiling
 - This **increases political efficacy through group identity**, not institutional trust.
 - Though they have **lower government trust**, ideas of **collective memory** and **group identity** tend to **increase political engagement** and efficacy
- More Sikh representation** in politics could **positively influence Sikh voter turnout** and shape **feelings of political efficacy** among the community

Conclusion

- Sikh-Americans **demonstrate strong political efficacy** and **high voter turnout**, especially when Sikh values and representation are emphasized
- Political efficacy** among Sikh-Americans significantly **boosts voting behavior**
- Efficacy is **shaped by**:
 - Strong Sikh identity and value sets
 - Collective historical memory (1984)
 - Community-based political discussion
 - Exposure to political information
 - Desire for Sikh representation
 - Immigration status
- Representation**, more than any other factor, **increases both efficacy and voter participation.**
- Increased Sikh visibility** in politics could further enhance civic participation

Limitations

- Demographics reached:
 - SALDEF’s network tends to only reach people on the east coast
 - These people tend to already be interested in politics and are higher income and education level
 - Personal network got a majority of the midwest representation
- Overrepresentation of those who are more inclined to be politically active
- Overrepresentation of youth
- Lack of geographic diversity
- Voluntary responses to certain questions

References



Graphics

