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In D.C. region, more immigrants seeking public office

By [Pamela Constable](#), Published: November 3

Their journeys began in places as disparate as Colombia and Pakistan. They arrived in the United States speaking Hindi, Korean or Spanish. They worked their way up through engineering school or accounting jobs, keeping their heads down and their names out of the news.

Now, a small but growing number of foreign-born residents in the greater Washington region — home to more than [1 million immigrants](#) from every corner of the globe — are coming out of their cocoons to enter electoral races and public office.

The trend is especially noticeable in [Northern Virginia](#), where elections will be held Tuesday. The Fairfax County School Board race includes candidates from Korea, India and Ecuador; a Salvadoran immigrant is seeking his third term on the Arlington County Board; and natives of Colombia and Lebanon ran for the Virginia legislature.

“I grew up here, and this is my country,” said Lolita Mancheno Smoak, a business consultant who came from Ecuador as a child and is running for the Fairfax School Board. “When people ask where I’m from, I say Virginia.” Her field is management efficiency, but her passion is to help Hispanic students succeed. “I don’t think of myself as being in politics,” she said. “For me, this is more of a mission.”

Despite their diverse backgrounds and political views — and that they must be U.S. citizens to seek public office — foreign-born politicians often face competing loyalties. Ethnic groups may expect them to champion immigrant causes, and winning election may mean appealing to a broader range of constituents.

Inevitably, in an era of heated national debate over immigration in general and illegal immigration in particular, foreign-born politicians are asked: Whom do you represent? Some, such as Arlington School Board member Emma Violand-Sanchez, have taken up the liberal banner of immigrant rights. Others, such as builder Tito Munoz of Woodbridge, have cast themselves as tea party conservatives.

Most, though, are trying to move past the immigrant label and offer a businesslike mantra of better schools, roads and services to all constituents. One is Nader Baroukh, 39, the part-time Falls Church mayor. A federal government lawyer, he comes from an insular and private group: Jewish exiles from Iran.

“Our parents focused on education and economics. My generation is just starting to break out into public life,” Baroukh said. He has no trace of an accent and calls himself “Nader, as in Ralph,” to make his Persian name easy to pronounce. He said his foreign background rarely comes up in public, except once

when he became exasperated at a city council meeting: “I found myself saying, ‘This is not the democratic way. This is how they would have done it back in Iran.’”

Although many immigrants who reach public office are models of achievement, most admit that, at some point, they have suffered the stigma of heavy accents, the discomfort of making cultural faux pas or the sting of ethnic insults.

[Walter Tejada](#), 53, a Salvadoran immigrant running for reelection after eight years on the Arlington County Board, is a political veteran who can mingle easily at a raucous rally or a formal gala. Yet not long ago, he recounted, he was wearing a tuxedo at a fundraiser when a white woman handed him her empty glass and brushed past, assuming he was a waiter.

Mancheno Smoak recalled that as an ambitious young Latina in a male-dominated field, she faced ethnic put-downs by several jealous bosses. “They said some ugly things, but I never flinched,” she said. During the School Board campaign this year, she said, several people “asked me to my face if I was legal. I thought it was hysterical.”

Asian Americans sometimes face linguistic and cultural obstacles. Ilryong Moon (At Large), 54, a lawyer running for a third term on the Fairfax School Board, laughed heartily during a recent interview when he recalled trying to master the campaign skill of kissing women on the cheek and struggling for years to correctly pronounce the letters R and L.

“As you can probably tell from my heavy accent, I am from Korea,” Moon said as he introduced himself Tuesday at a Chantilly High School student forum. After 12 years on the School Board, he said he has acquired a thick skin and an empathy for families of all ethnic backgrounds.

“When Hispanic parents don’t show up at school meetings, I understand them,” said Moon. “My parents never came to my school, either. They worked too many jobs, they spoke almost no English and they came from a culture where you never approached officials. I may not speak good Spanish, but I get it.”

Despite its large concentration of immigrants, the greater Washington region has produced only a relative handful of foreign-born politicians. Many immigrants here come from poor or war-torn countries with limited resources, poor English skills and years to wait before they can become citizens. Thousands more are illegal immigrants.

Among foreign-born residents who meet the requirements to run for office, most have preferred to remain hunkered down in obscurity, pursuing the American dream of [economic and educational opportunity](#). Some have also been soured on politics by family memories of conflict or repression back home.

A few foreign-born Hispanic politicians have become high-profile liberal Democrats and advocates for immigrant rights. In Arlington, Tejada and Violand-Sanchez have strongly backed in-state college tuition for illegal immigrants and opposed tough police profiling practices against them.

“I spent 30 years in the county schools, trying to help immigrant children from inside the system,” said Violand-Sanchez, who emigrated from Bolivia as a teenager. “Now I am retired, so I can speak out and

try to change the system.” She noted that 24 [anti-immigrant measures](#) were introduced in the Virginia House of Delegates last year. “I am a proud Arlingtonian,” she said, “but not necessarily a proud Virginian.”

Several other Latino politicians have become active Republicans. Munoz, a Colombian-born construction firm owner, made a name during the 2008 presidential campaign as [“Tito the Builder,”](#) a plain-talking and telegenic supporter of the John McCain-Sarah Palin ticket. After his brush with fame, he launched a campaign for the state Senate this summer with a simple message: No to socialism, yes to “individual liberty” and free enterprise.

Munoz lost in the August primary but hosts a Spanish-language radio show. He said he hopes to “reach out to millions of other new Americans” and help draw them into the Republican fold. “If we don’t get immigrants involved in the party, it’s going to become obsolete,” he said.

Immigrants with Middle Eastern and Muslim backgrounds are the newest and fewest to enter politics in the region. They can face a double dose of ethnic and religious antipathy, no matter their political party or views.

[David Ramadan](#), a Lebanon-born jewelry business owner from Loudoun County, is a high-profile Republican activist who worked hard to win party endorsements and gave significant campaign donations to Virginia Republicans, including Gov. Robert F. McDonnell. In August, Ramadan won the primary for the 87th District in the House of Delegates, and he is running in the general election.

Yet Ramadan also has become a target for anti-Muslim groups in Virginia, which have accused him of seeking to bring Islamic Shariah law to the state. Ramadan, who is married to a Christian, has dismissed the attacks as a “fear and smear campaign” aimed at damaging a “solid conservative Republican.”

Shahid Malik, 53, a Pakistani-American business owner running for Fairfax County supervisor, has avoided such controversy with a low-key campaign focused on voters’ practical concerns. When his religion comes up, he mentions a blood bank called Muslims for Life, which he helped establish after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

“I talk about my technical experience, my community service and my four kids who went through the county schools,” said Malik, a soft-spoken man with a background in engineering. “I heard that someone called me ‘that Muslim guy running from that mosque,’ but no one has said anything to my face.” When he knocks on voters’ doors, he said, “most wish me good luck.”

http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/in-dc-region-more-immigrants-pursue-public-office/2011/11/02/gIQAjddnjM_story.html