

Shiva Ayyadurai: The Shock Candidate

The man who claims to have invented email turned from liberal activist at MIT to right-wing candidate against Elizabeth Warren. But what is he really trying to win?

By Kyle Scott Clauss | Boston Magazine | July 2017



Just before dusk on a warm Tuesday in May, V. A. Shiva Ayyadurai parks his red, white, and blue school bus outside the Lexington Community Center and cues up a recording of the Florida State Seminoles' war chant. A banner beaming "Shiva 4 Senate: Be the Light," complete with a torch, is plastered on the side of his vehicle. Neatly dressed in a white shirt with French cuffs and a gold-colored tie, Ayyadurai presses play, flings open the doors, and—to an audience consisting of myself and his three assistants—pumps his fist to the music in the otherwise quiet lot.

This is how the most committed Republican candidate so far for next year's U.S. Senate race against Elizabeth Warren introduces himself before heading inside the building to address a dozen or so Lexington Republicans, who are already munching Pepperidge Farm Sausalitos around a square table on the second floor. At the front of the room, the de facto emcee asks Ayyadurai how to pronounce his last name. "Like, 'I adore you,'" he replies. Then the former MIT lecturer begins his stump speech like a classroom lecture. "I want to start off by asking everyone, how many of us really want to beat Elizabeth Warren?" Every hand in the room shoots up. "Can we use weapons?" shouts the woman sitting next to me, both arms high above her head. "You said *beat* her."

Ayyadurai doesn't flinch—probably because his candidacy is rooted in the same right-wing bluster that's made Breitbart News a household name and catapulted Donald Trump to the White House. An outsider who thinks both major parties cater only to elites and might as well be the same, Ayyadurai is trying to leverage his expertise in math and science—not to mention his greatest claim to fame: inventing email as a 14-year-old—into a winning pitch. He speaks with a Trumpian flair when he tells his origin story of emigrating from India, where he grew up a member of society's lowest caste. Like many right-wing politicians these days, Ayyadurai makes his struggles his supporters' struggles. His audience members may live drastically different lives, but they all suffer under the yoke of the know-it-all liberals in haughty academia, the Hollywood elites, and the dishonest media. Ayyadurai, a college-educated immigrant of color who's pals with Pierce Brosnan and has strutted red carpets on the arm of actress Fran Drescher, wants to be their champion.

As Warren is reliably one of the right's most loathed progressive heroes, Ayyadurai has quickly and improbably become the favored candidate of the ascendant conservative fringe. The same night he announced his intention to run, "new-right" provocateur Mike Cernovich feted him at a post-Conservative Political Action Conference bash outside of Washington, DC, attended by Pizzagate promoter Mike Flynn Jr., son of Donald Trump's ousted national security adviser. Ayyadurai also picked up an early endorsement from former Red Sox pitcher and Breitbart News personality Curt Schilling, who is ideologically in the same camp as the alt-right and had been publicly pondering a Senate run himself. "As of today, from where I sit, you're my choice for Senator of the state of Mass. in 2018 and it's not even close," Schilling tweeted. "#Fauxcahauntas." After a meeting with Ayyadurai, the *Lowell Sun's* traditionally right-leaning editorial board declared him an "accomplished risk taker and problem solver," a fresh upstart who "embodies everything that America offers someone who's willing to work hard to achieve success."

Adding fuel to the fire on the right: the spectacle of a "real" Indian man running against a woman who has claimed Native American ancestry and whom pundits such as Howie Carr have labeled a "fake Indian." Ayyadurai, seemingly in lockstep, has embraced it, too, challenging Warren to a DNA test to determine the "real" Indian.

But who is this man that the right has so enthusiastically brought into the fold?

Even in this moment of populist upheaval, Ayyadurai isn't your typical Republican candidate. A Fulbright scholar, he's studied with Noam Chomsky and, as an MIT student, organized against institutional racism and the apartheid government in South Africa. In a world of professional trolls such as Milo Yiannopoulos and showmen like Alex Jones, Ayyadurai seems almost jarringly earnest. And forget the culture wars: He's less concerned with typical right-wing bugbears such as gender-neutral bathrooms and welfare queens than he is with the military-industrial complex. His most public campaign to date has been a battle with the now-defunct, left-leaning Gawker Media, over articles disputing his claim to the invention of email.

In this era of strange bedfellows, Ayyadurai's chosen enemy seems to account for most of his political appeal. He's waging *caste*—not class—warfare against the liberal academics, the know-it-alls, and the big-party string-pullers, rather than the Wall Street bankers and robber barons that so often draw the ire of Massachusetts' progressives. Warren—a former Harvard Law professor and an outspoken critic of Trump—seems the perfect target. "The hatred and the vitriol against Donald Trump has nothing to do with Donald Trump," Ayyadurai explains. "It has to do with the fact that the academic priesthood lost control of what they call quote-unquote 'ordinary rednecks'—that they're stupid, they don't understand. The fact is, those people actually understand a lot."

Ayyadurai, with his four MIT degrees and Belmont address, believes he can be their man in Washington. Liberals can laugh him off at their own peril. Warren's singular focus on national politics has made her a deeply polarizing figure, as well as a vulnerable one—in a WBUR poll from January, 46 percent of respondents felt that voters ought to "give someone else a chance." A candidate for the Age of Breitbart, loved by the Twitter trolls, and with a preternatural knack for getting under liberals' skin, it's too soon to write Ayyadurai off as a gadfly. He's making the same bet Trump did last election. But is he really going after Warren's seat, or are his plans part of something larger—and far more mischievous?

I'm seated between Ayyadurai and a statuette of his namesake, the dancing Hindu god of creative destruction, on one of the few pieces of furniture inside the Shiva for Senate headquarters in Cambridge. It looks and feels more like a yoga studio than a campaign office, situated in a sleek building on Concord Avenue that counts Democratic Congresswoman Katherine Clark as its ground-floor tenant. Tan and fit, Ayyadurai sits on the opposite end of the leather sofa, turning his unblinking gaze toward me. "Since the day I was born as a low-caste Indian," he tells me, "I've had to fight. So for me, running for this is really not about running against Elizabeth Warren. What I see happening to this country is a neo-caste system."

It's hard to overstate the effect that Ayyadurai's upbringing—at the bottom of the caste system that governs his native India—had on his worldview. One of his earliest memories, he recalls, was when, after playing soccer with a friend in Mumbai, the other boy's mother refused to allow him inside their home. When Ayyadurai asked for a glass of water, he received a markedly shoddier cup. "I went to my mom and I said, 'What is this?'" Ayyadurai says. "And she goes, 'Oh, we're lower caste.'"

Ayyadurai carried his childhood memories with him to America in 1970, when he and his family settled in northern New Jersey. They bounced around school districts, from hardscrabble Paterson to well-heeled Livingston, where Ayyadurai's mother got a job as a statistician at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. It was here as a high schooler, he claims, that he made an early, unprecedented breakthrough.

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Through his mother, Ayyadurai landed a job in the computer services department at the university. The director at the time had been trying to develop an electronic interoffice mail system and he hadn't made much progress, so he brought the teenager onboard to help. For more than two years, Ayyadurai dedicated himself to the project, ultimately writing tens of thousands of lines of code and creating a digital mailbox allowing workers to exchange messages and attachments. He dubbed it EMAIL. Several years later, he received a copyright registration for his creation.

At around the same time, Ayyadurai's interest in activism blossomed. When he arrived at MIT in the early 1980s, it was the start of a particularly turbulent decade for the university. Following the abrupt dismissal of Mary O. Hope, the school's longtime assistant dean for student affairs and an advocate for minority students on campus, just before Thanksgiving 1983, Ayyadurai and fellow student Arnold Contreras were so disgusted with the school that they decided to found an alternative political newspaper called *The Student*. "We talked about every issue," Ayyadurai says, "but we'd always come with this angle that the Democrats and the Republicans were the same party, that you need to build movements."

A prominent member of the MIT Coalition Against Apartheid, Ayyadurai became a fixture at divestment protests. A photo in the April 26, 1985, edition of *The Tech* shows then-President Paul E. Gray, with whom Ayyadurai frequently clashed, jabbing a finger at him on the steps of the student center after Ayyadurai called him a liar. The following year, Ayyadurai and the coalition erected a shantytown on the Kresge Oval, dubbed "Alexandra Township," after a district of Johannesburg, South Africa. Meanwhile, *The Student* called upon "all revolutionary and progressive students" to attend a national demonstration in Washington, DC, against the Botha regime and "make it as militant as possible." Despite Ayyadurai's efforts, a columnist for *The Tech* wrote that "most of the MIT community have only ridicule for *The Student* and those students it represents." On campus, Ayyadurai didn't get along with the other Indian students, whom he felt were always trying to determine his caste. Instead, he says, he preferred the company of "poor whites, poor blacks, poor Hispanics—people who wanted to fight."

And fight he did. Throughout the latter half of the decade, Ayyadurai proposed programs to help women combat sexism on campus ('85), demanded better pay and protections for MIT food-service workers ('86), and protested President Gray's handling of race at the school in '89. In his spare time, he studied the centuries-old roots of the caste system, as well as its return under British rule, with guidance from Noam Chomsky, the world-renowned scholar and theoretical linguist. "We had no formal arrangements," Chomsky tells me via email, "but [we] did have discussions and I read papers of his. He's always struck me as serious and dedicated."

In 1993, Ayyadurai built a successful email-management company called EchoMail. Within a few years he began referring to himself in company media releases as "Dr. Email." But the rabble-rousing streak never faded. At MIT's 2008 commencement, he received his postdoctoral degree in biological engineering and, on his walk back from the podium, held aloft a sign that read, "OUT OF IRAQ." "I wanted to wake people up a bit," he told *The Tech* at the time. "I was upset that no one up there said anything about the fact that we have a war going on." In 2015, he bet Monsanto a \$10 million building he owns that it couldn't prove it had adequate safety standards for its GMO crops. Not surprisingly, the company didn't bite, dismissing Ayyadurai's notion as "uninformed." Then came national politics.

So how, of all people, did Ayyadurai become the darling of the Breitbart set? The candidate blames Jesse Jackson.

In 1984, the civil rights leader and his Rainbow Coalition reawakened the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, only to cede his votes to Walter Mondale, the establishment candidate, at the convention. “That’s when I broke with all Democrats and Republicans, because I realized that the left-wing elements of the Democratic Party, like Jesse Jackson, were basically using the masses,” he says, adding that Bernie Sanders was no different.

Since then, he’s tussled with what he sees as corrupt elites and powerful institutions that seek to stymie the truth. In recent years, his chief war has been over his claim to inventing email, dismissing detractors—and earlier technologists who have been credited with the invention—as agents of either the military-industrial complex or the liberal media.

A week before the 2016 presidential election, for instance, Ayyadurai settled a defamation lawsuit he’d filed against Gawker Media for \$750,000 following a series of stories published on its tech site, Gizmodo, calling him a “fraud” and a “renowned liar,” according to Ayyadurai’s own complaint. (The original articles were removed from the Internet, per settlement terms.) He and his attorney, Charles Harder, have also filed a \$15 million libel suit in Boston against Techdirt and its editor Mike Masnick over 14 stories similarly disputing his claim.

There is still debate over whether Ayyadurai or Ray Tomlinson, a Boston-based U.S. Department of Defense contractor in 1971, was the first to invent a version of today’s email. For many tech historians, who argue that the code for “EMAIL” had little impact on the systems we use today, the Gawker settlement proved nothing. When the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History accepted papers related to his program, it explained that “Ayyadurai’s story reveals a contrasting approach” to the DoD programs of the early 1970s, calling it “a small enterprise, rather than a big enterprise story.” Ayyadurai, for his part, dismisses this argument by claiming that his program was the first real email *system*. His lawsuits, though, provide a window into his worldview. There’s a “deeper narrative” behind the critical articles, he says. “These are white liberals who are saying all these nasty things. They should’ve embraced the fact that an Indian kid in Newark, New Jersey, built email. They have a deep, deep castist model, and they don’t even know this...they don’t even know the level of segregation that they practice.”

All of which might help explain why when Trump was elected in November, Ayyadurai saw it as a “necessary disruption” of a snobbish cadre he calls the “academic priesthood”—the insiders who have long antagonized him—and decided that this was the moment for another political outsider to make a run for office. But can Ayyadurai prevail? It depends on what you think he’s actually trying to win.

If you assume he’s aiming for Warren’s seat, the chances seem pretty slim in a progressive state like ours, despite the more-conservative western regions. But what if the goal also has to do with a longer-range right-wing plan, one that’s potentially more disruptive to the status quo—and more harmful to Warren herself?

So far, Ayyadurai has built a community of followers and supporters, many of the same ilk that helped elect Trump and would want to see him reelected. Increasingly, he’s closed ranks with the leaders of these political misfits, finding allies including Mike Cernovich, a right-wing social media celebrity who made his name through his men’s self-improvement website before tipping into political commentary, lashing out against feminists and promoting conspiracy theories in tweets and videos. “People who meet Shiva are excited,” Cernovich tells me. “He is charismatic and inspirational. He needs to do a video message every day because the more people see him, the more they like him. He’s fearless and committed.” Jeff Giese, one of the minds behind the social media army that helped elect Trump, also cohosted Ayyadurai’s political coming-out party.

Cernovich and Giese both have direct ties to right-wing social media warfare. In 2016, for instance, the two partnered on an operation to spread Breitbart News content and hostile memes on Twitter in an effort to help Trump. Media outlets have also speculated about Ayyadurai’s ties to another Trump supporter and backroom operator, billionaire venture capitalist and techno-libertarian Peter Thiel, who reportedly donated more than \$1 million to Trump’s campaign and later served on the president’s transition team. Famous for investing in Facebook early, Thiel also financed Hulk Hogan’s successful \$31 million defamation lawsuit against Gawker last year. Afterward, Gawker’s founder, Nick Denton, publicly questioned whether Thiel was secretly involved in other lawsuits against his company, including the case filed by Ayyadurai. Was it pure coincidence, Denton wondered, that Hogan and Ayyadurai shared the same attorney?

In response, both Thiel and Ayyadurai have denied knowing each other. Ayyadurai released a statement saying, “If it is Peter Thiel who made that representation possible, I am very grateful. Although I have had no contact whatsoever with Peter Thiel and my attorney has never mentioned him to me, I would certainly like to shake Peter Thiel’s hand.” It’s interesting to note that Thiel has used some of the same quirky verbiage as Ayyadurai, once decrying the system of higher education as a “priestly class of professors that doesn’t do very much work.”

Given Ayyadurai’s association with the Breitbart-Trump set, it’s possible his candidacy is also about undermining the system as we know it—and inflicting damage on Warren for a 2020 presidential run—by testing which messages work on blue-state voters and which narratives stick. If so, he’s not alone. Colin Reed, executive director of the Republican fringe group America Rising, has said his organization is tracking Warren’s public appearances and building a file of opposition research to develop “communications angles to damage her 2020 prospects.... The earlier you start, the more you do when you start, it can be a political death by a thousand cuts.”

As she did during her 2012 race against Scott Brown, Warren is asking her Republican opponents to sign a so-called People’s Pledge, banning spending by outside groups. Without it, Ayyadurai’s campaign would seem a fertile place for right-wing Republican and libertarian donors to park their political cash. The same goes for the rest of the Republican field, including state Representative Geoff Diehl, who backed Trump and has begun attacking Warren. John Kingston, a wealthy businessman and GOP donor, is also seriously considering a run, as is former Navy SEAL Gabriel Gomez. (Ayyadurai has filed a statement of candidacy with the Federal Election Commission, and state nomination papers will be available next February.) “The MassGOP looks forward to vigorously challenging Elizabeth Warren,” party spokesperson Terry McCormack says, “and will continue to make the case that her record of hyper-partisan obstructionism is wrong for Massachusetts.”

Meanwhile, Democratic operatives don’t seem to be taking Ayyadurai’s chances seriously. “Massachusetts has a history of supporting outsiders,” says Joe Caiazzo, a Boston-based Democratic strategist who served as political director for both the Sanders and Hillary Clinton campaigns in Rhode Island. “However, the foundation in the recipe for success is largely rooted in directly speaking to the concerns of its residents. This is a space that is firmly occupied by the senator.” He might be right. Even if Ayyadurai emerges from the primary victorious, he will be tasked with unseating the new face of the national Democratic Party, an incumbent with a formidable knack for fundraising, in one of only two states where not a single county went red in the 2016 presidential election.

Not surprisingly, this only encourages Warren’s opposition. To the delight of the right, Ayyadurai offers a stinging rebuke to the identity politics of the left. His is a rags-to-riches immigrant story, one that Democrats cannot lay claim to. In return, he’s found a constituency that sees him as he sees himself: a brilliant inventor who is being denied rightful credit for one of the most important inventions of the modern era, and a victim of the know-it-all class of insiders. Even better, he’s found believers who are willing to fight alongside him.

Standing in the lobby of the Lexington Community center following Ayyadurai’s speech, I watch the candidate’s smile twist into a mischievous grin as he remembers that an anti-Trump, left-wing group called Minuteman Indivisible is also meeting in the building. I can almost see the gears in his head move at lightning speed. The community center closes in 15 minutes, so he moves to confront his ideological opponents as they exit down the stairwell. Armed with his leaflets, Ayyadurai begins putting them in people’s hands. An older woman wastes little time shredding hers in Ayyadurai’s face, while his assistant follows along with an iPhone camera rolling.

A bell sounds throughout the building and a voice comes over the intercom: *May I have your attention, please. It is now 8:50, and the community center closes promptly at 9. Please wrap up your activity.* In no time, Ayyadurai brings the fight outside.

“I’m the darkie you can’t control!” he cries. “You’re talking to me as though I work for you! You’re talking to me as though I am below you.” Then, shouting over a woman, he starts in on Warren’s Native American ancestry and accuses her of being brainwashed. A bystander, also filming the encounter, grows concerned for the woman’s safety and asks somebody to call Lexington Police, but the two sides soon scatter.

Afterward, two women from Minuteman Indivisible stand in the darkened parking lot, visibly shaken. At the other end, Ayyadurai and his retinue fire up the bus and share a hearty laugh. The candidate is off and running.

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