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How Indian Voters Decide

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Introduction

Milan Vaishnav

In April and May 2024, India held the largest elections in recorded history. Over six weeks and seven separate polling days, nearly 950 million Indians were eligible to cast their votes to determine the composition of the next government and the fate of incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Pre-election surveys indicated that the BJP was headed toward its third consecutive single-party majority in the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament). The BJP's own campaign rhetoric, brimming with confidence that its alliance would win 400 seats (out of 543), further fueled a sense of inevitability. Even exit polls published hours before the counting of votes predicted a BJP landslide.

In the end, the famously fickle Indian electorate bucked these popular expectations. Though the BJP formed the government, and Modi retained his position as prime minister for a third term, the ruling party only emerged victorious due to the support of coalition partners. In the end, the BJP won 240 seats, a sharp decline from the 303 seats it notched in 2019. The BJP's National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners chipped in an additional 53 seats. On the other side of the political spectrum, the Indian National Congress (more simply known as the Congress Party) nearly doubled its seat tally, claiming 99 seats. The broader opposition coalition, known as the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), won 234 seats.

Although the results were a setback for the BJP, the party still represents the strongest “core” party of any Indian governing coalition on record. Subsequent state assembly elections held in the six months after the general election have strengthened the BJP's hand and poured cold water on the opposition's narrative that the BJP's popularity had peaked.

In the weeks and months since the general election, political scientists, election observers, and pundits have tried to pinpoint the reasons behind the surprise verdict. But to understand the shifting sands of Indian politics, the explanation goes beyond any one election.

This was the objective of a Carnegie Endowment initiative, “India Elects 2024,” launched in December 2023. India Elects 2024 spotlighted sober, data-driven research and analysis from the world’s best young India scholars on the diverse drivers animating Indian electoral politics. The initiative took readers beyond the horse race, focusing on deeper questions about India’s political economy.

This compilation presents ten essays published as part of this initiative between December 2023 and September 2024. The essays, written by a diverse set of authors armed with a wide-ranging set of methodological tools, all use unique sources of primary data to uncover the deeper (and often unexpected) drivers of political behavior in India.

For instance, conventional wisdom has long held that ideology holds little salience in the rough-and-tumble arena of Indian politics. Instead, India is considered an exemplar of a classic “patronage democracy,” in which identity and clientelism dictate political choices, as opposed to ideas and values. The essay by Nicolas Haas and Rajeshwari Majumdar offers a useful corrective to the received wisdom; the authors show that not only can ideology in Indian politics be conceptualized and measured, but it can also help explain the BJP’s relative dominance since 2014.

If ideology has been an unspoken driver of political behavior, welfare has been repeatedly cited as a key determinant of voters’ preferences. However, as the essay by Shikhar Singh notes, we know relatively little about how transformative changes in India’s welfare state have tangibly influenced voting behavior. Singh finds that the recent shift toward rule-based selection of welfare beneficiaries has upset the prevailing ethnic-clientelist equilibrium. Yet, this has not necessarily sounded the death knell of identity-based voting. Certain identity groups continue to believe that local politicians from their community are more likely to shower them with state largesse than “outsiders.”

Indian Muslims, who make up roughly 15 percent of the country’s population, constitute one community whose voting preferences were heavily scrutinized in 2024. Muslims have long been viewed as a coherent, almost monolithic voting bloc fundamentally opposed to the Hindu nationalist politics of the BJP. Feyaad Allie’s essay interrogates this assumption and finds that while Muslims do appear to be strategically consolidating their vote behind parties likely to keep the BJP at bay, the political salience of caste within the Muslim community has simultaneously increased. The emergence of these sub-identities has created space for the BJP to make a pitch for Pasmanda (or Other Backward Class) Muslims as part of the party’s efforts to court so-called “backward” voters.

Two essays in this collection examine the role of women, who have become highly sought-after voters in recent years as their political participation has grown. Rithika Kumar finds that, irrespective of the reasons for rising female voter turnout, political parties across the ideological spectrum have made renewed efforts to win their votes. But voting, at the end of the day, is just one element of political participation. Kumar finds that women enjoy much greater autonomy over voting than over other forms of political engagement, such as registering for a voting card or attending a village meeting. However, even when it comes to voting, women exercise much less agency over their decisions than men in their households.

Rhetorically, no party has put women more front and center than the BJP, which has helped reverse the party's traditional gender gap. Anirvan Chowdhury unpacks the ways in which the BJP has made inroads with women voters. He argues that the BJP has successfully incorporated women into political spaces through its emphasis on *seva*—or selfless service. *Seva*, Chowdhury argues, is a gendered norm that characterizes the burdens women assume as part of their everyday household duties. In this context, the BJP's emphasis on *seva* helps to frame politics as role-congruent for Indian women.

Whether they are campaigning on the basis of ideology, welfare, or identity, parties are rapidly changing the methods they use to mobilize voters as access to technology deepens. As Shahana Sheikh argues, while online modes of campaigning are gaining steam, parties have not given up on mass in-person rallies. Sheikh introduces the concept of “content-complementarity,” or the two-way relationship between online and in-person campaigning. Drawing on unique data from surveys and social media usage, she highlights the symbiotic relationship between the two.

To be sure, how much parties themselves matter has long been a subject of debate. Some scholars have argued that the partisan attachments of Indian voters are quite thin compared to the connections between individual candidates and their constituents. Ankita Barthwal and Francesca Refsum Jensenius find, to the contrary, that partisanship in India has not only been high and stable over time, but it has also shaped political behavior in significant ways. One of their innovations is to establish an operational measure of partisanship, which they deploy through surveys to develop an intuitive metric of partisan identification. They find that levels of partisanship in India have stabilized, with potentially positive benefits for trust in parties and politics. However, in many societies, deepening partisanship is also linked to a greater degree of interpersonal animus between groups.

Even as partisanship has taken on a more predictable role in Indian politics, individual candidates are far from irrelevant. But, as Gilles Verniers shows, incumbent candidates in India continue to struggle, defying the popular conception in democracies of an “incumbency advantage.” Although there is significant variation by region and party, Verniers finds that a surprisingly large share of incumbents choose not to stand for reelection. While high turnover has its benefits in bringing in fresh voices, it also limits cumulative legislative experience. The end result is a relatively small professional political class, one that is increasingly dominated by the BJP.

Foreign policy has not traditionally been thought of as a pertinent issue for the average voter in India. Most observers have treated questions of foreign policy and national security as “elite” issues which are of little relevance to the masses when compared to subjects like inflation, jobs, and welfare schemes. Milan Vaishnav and Caroline Mallory argue that Modi’s leadership has helped to bring foreign policy to the general public, with attendant benefits for the ruling party. The authors point to factors like the fragmentation of the international order and the BJP’s unique ideologically driven worldview as catalysts driving this change. However, the domestication of foreign policy is not without its potential challenges, including the risks of overreach and adventurism abroad.

The final essay in this compilation, also by Milan Vaishnav and Caroline Mallory, was published after the election. It places the 2024 verdict within the larger framework of India’s evolving party system. The 2014 election that first brought Modi and the BJP to power heralded the era of a new “fourth party system” in India in which politics was once more dominated by a strong national party. Some observers questioned whether the 2024 result might augur a return to a coalition era like the kind India experienced between 1989 and 2014. Drawing on a wealth of electoral data, the authors argue that while the 2024 verdict represents a curtailing of the BJP’s dominance, many attributes of the new party system persist.

This series would not have been possible without the excellent research and editorial assistance provided by Caroline Mallory. Aislinn Familetti and Annabel Richter of the Carnegie South Asia Program also provided additional support. Special thanks to the Carnegie Communications team, especially Amanda Branom, Alana Brase, Haley Clasen, Anjali Das, Amy Mellon, and Jocelyn Soly.

CHAPTER 1

How Ideology Shapes Indian Politics

Nicholas Haas and Rajeshwari Majumdar

In the 2014 general election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) notched a historic victory, becoming the first party to win an outright majority in India's lower house of Parliament (Lok Sabha) since 1984 and only the second party ever to achieve that distinction, after the Indian National Congress (INC, also known as the Congress Party). In 2019, the BJP repeated this feat, ushering in pronouncements that India was witnessing the dawn of a "[fourth party system](#)," this time with the BJP firmly at the helm. As Indians turn their gaze toward next spring's 2024 polls, there is an ongoing debate about what drives the BJP's success and what, if anything, those factors say about the political landscape in the coming general election.

Scholarly responses to such questions have, historically, made little mention of political ideology. Rather, the dominant political science discourse has long characterized India as a "[patronage democracy](#)" in which political behavior is best understood through the lenses of clientelism and identity-based parochialism. According to [these accounts](#), politicians and their supporters primarily engage in a quid pro quo exchange of votes for expected material benefits; policy is viewed as important only insofar as it alters the perceived likelihood that an individual—or their community—will receive more government resources.

The lack of attention to political ideology contrasts strongly, however, with the recent ubiquity of ideological debates in Indian politics. For instance, the BJP has emphasized and sought to establish ownership over cultural issues, contrasting its Hindu nationalist positions with the so-called secular opposition's policies. The BJP's 2014 election campaign was defined by the idea of radical change. It promised potential voters an efficient, corruption-free government that would deliver on ambitious development projects, generate employment opportunities, strengthen India's position in the world through a more aggressive approach to national security and foreign policy, and—importantly—pave the way for India's "true Hindu identity" to flourish. Since its ascent to power, the BJP has further demonstrated

that its ideological priorities are more than just hollow talk. Especially in the post-2019 era, the BJP has enacted several policies in service of its Hindu nationalist agenda, including the nullification of Article 370 governing the status of Jammu and Kashmir, the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act, and the introduction of several [statutes against religious conversions](#) (popularly termed “love jihad” laws) in states the party governs.

The BJP’s behavior in power suggests that scholars have too quickly dismissed the role of ideology in Indian politics and that, on the contrary, the careful study of political ideology can inform understandings of the political landscape in India today. Inspired by recent work that has [pushed back](#) against traditional narratives and argued that [ideology matters](#) more across a wider [range of contexts](#) than has previously been acknowledged, this article describes a recent study scrutinizing the role of political ideology in India today.

Measuring Political Ideology in India

To test the salience of ideology in contemporary Indian politics, this study followed a three-pronged approach, consisting of a comprehensive online study carried out in 2022, a phone survey with a representative sample of respondents in 2023, and an analysis of representative National Election Studies data (collected in person by the Lokniti Programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies) from three points in time (2009, 2014, and 2019). This article describes results from the online study, which are broadly consistent with findings drawn from the other two samples. Our sample of 2,393 Indian respondents was recruited from market research company Cint’s online panel and was drawn to be representative of the nation on age and gender. To ensure diversity in geography, demographics, and state-level political configurations, we collected data on residents in twelve of India’s largest cities, ranging across all major regions of the country. Data were collected from August to September of 2022.

To investigate ideology in India, the first task is to identify the key issue areas that divide citizens. Divides in Indian society occur along different fault lines than those in high-income, Western countries. Studies of industrialized democracies have [largely](#) conceptualized ideology along a unidimensional scale ranging from left/liberal (favoring social change and the redistribution of wealth) to right/conservative (favoring social stability and the free market). This paradigmatic understanding of political ideology has lent itself to a relatively straightforward measurement of political ideology in many Western democracies, wherein individuals are asked to place themselves on a scale ranging from very left/liberal to very right/conservative.

However, the Indian context would likely render such a conceptualization ineffective. The left-right scale found in many long-standing democracies does not have a ready-made analogue in the Indian context and, hence, many Indian survey respondents might find it difficult to place themselves along a conventional left-right spectrum. On the contrary, a different set of issues has come to define the ideological space in India. There are numerous

explanations for these differences; notably, political scientists Pradeep K. Chhibber and Rahul Verma [reason](#) that the set of issues characterizing the creation of the modern Indian nation-state differ from those in Western Europe (where class-based divisions were dominant). Salient topics may differ in countries like India that are diverse, multiethnic polities. Drawing on this foundational work and more recent political developments, our study identifies three main issue areas around which contemporary Indian political ideology revolves:

1. the role of the state in driving economic and social policy
2. the role of the state in addressing historical inequalities
3. Hindu nationalism

While the first two issue areas were derived largely from the work of Chhibber and Verma, the third was sourced from the authors' understanding of Indian politics today as being largely driven by the BJP, which has firmly staked out its position on the role of religion in society. Finally, to investigate the intuition that ideology in India is not driven by the same types of issues as in Western contexts, the survey probed issues that are *unlikely* to characterize the ideological space in India but that are [often utilized](#) in studies of political ideology in countries like the United States, namely, questions on abortion and military spending.

For each issue, the survey asked respondents the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with an opinion statement associated with that issue. For example, on the issue of the state's role in poverty alleviation—a long-standing debate in Indian politics since independence—the survey presented respondents with the following statement, drawing from historical election polls: “The government should have special schemes to uplift the poor and disadvantaged.” Similarly, regarding the state's role in addressing historical inequalities across caste groups, the survey elicited reactions to the following statement: “There should be reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in schools and universities.”

Taking the aggregate set of responses to several such issue statements, the researchers employed [ideal point estimation](#) to consider whether individuals' issue preferences could be explained by an underlying, latent structure, or “ideology,” and, if so, around which issues ideology was organized and how much explanatory power it possessed. As part of this exercise, the study estimated each individual's relative location, or “ideal point,” in this ideological space. This allows for an examination of how individuals' ideologies correlate with their views and behaviors.

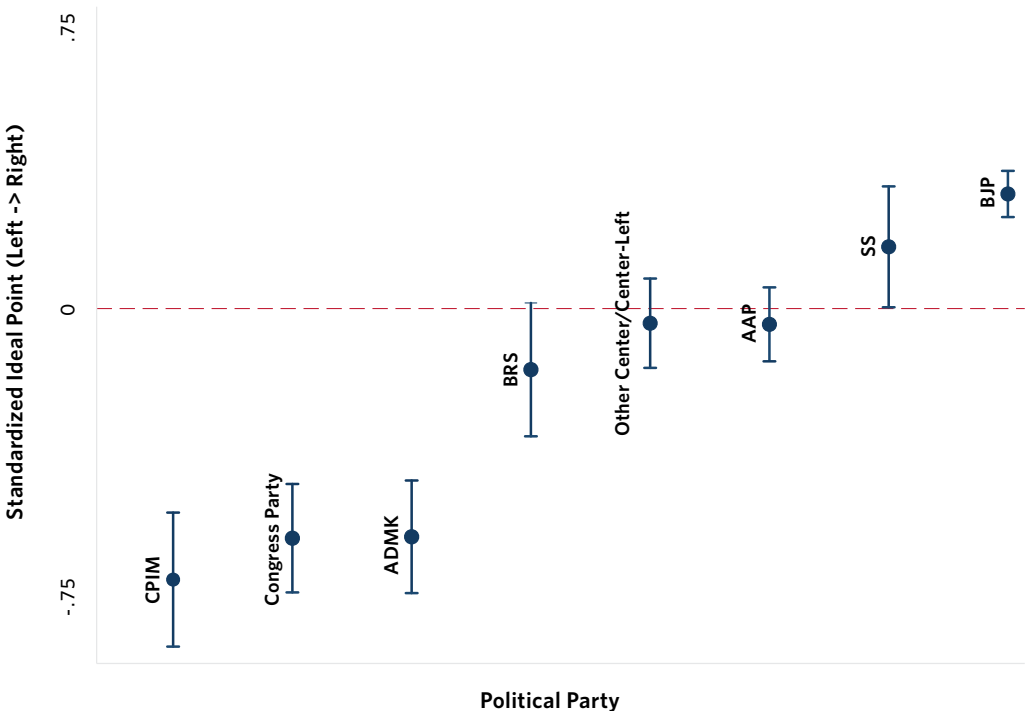
Political Ideology Matters in India

The findings strongly indicate that political ideology does, indeed, matter in India. First, a single ideological dimension can explain a substantial proportion of the variation in individuals' views on issues relating to Hindu nationalism, state intervention, and minority rights.

Second, individuals' estimated ideologies along this single dimension are predictive of their stated partisan affiliations and reported political behaviors in ways that map onto public understandings.

To demonstrate the close association between ideology and partisanship in the data, figure 1 displays average ideal point estimates based on individuals' stated partisan affiliations (elicited earlier in the survey). Individuals who identified with parties that are generally understood to be right-wing, notably the BJP and Shiv Sena, have, on average, ideal points on the opposite end of the spectrum from those who identify with left-wing parties, such as the Communist Party of India. Individuals who identify with parties generally believed to be in the center or center-left of Indian politics consistently fall in the middle of the ideological spectrum as understood through the ideal point estimates. There is a similarly strong association between the strength of an individual's ideology (on either end of the ideological

Figure 1. Ideological Placement by Partisan Affiliation

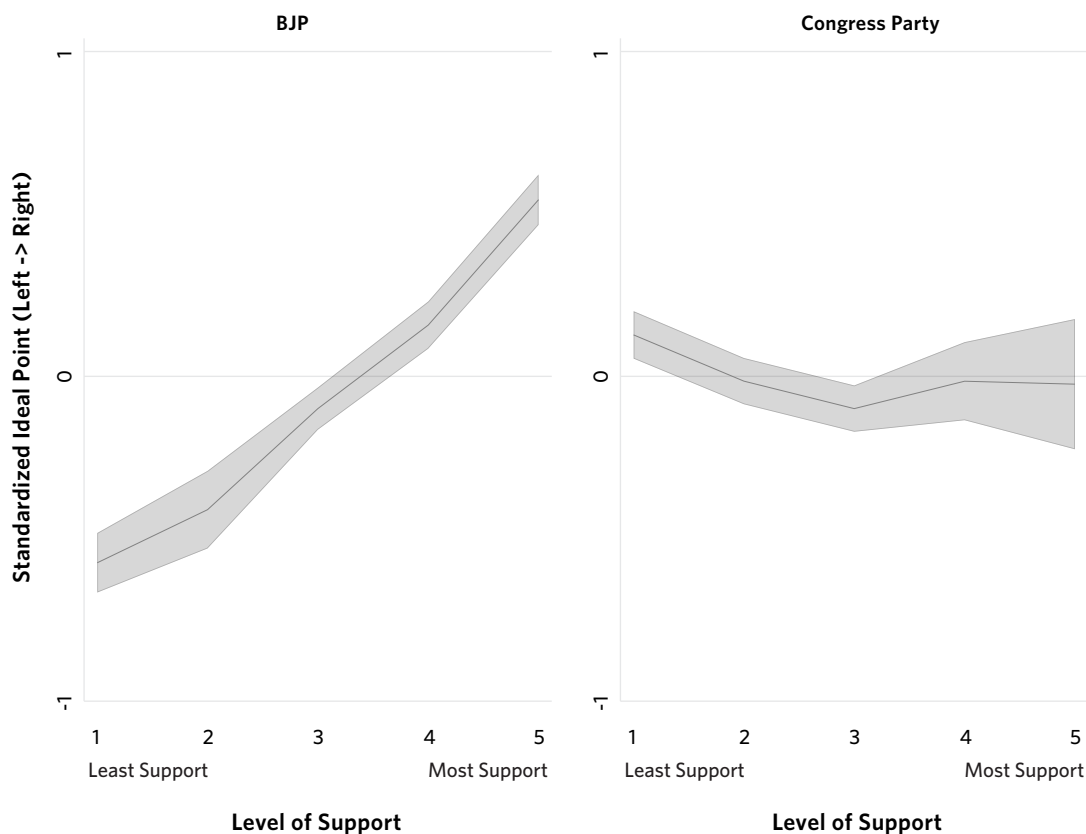


Source: Authors' analyses based on online survey panel, August-September 2022.
 Notes: This figure displays average ideal point estimates, with 95% confidence intervals, by respondents' stated partisan affiliations. It displays all parties for which there are a sufficient number of identifiers (at least N=80) in the sample, and it includes a residual "Other Center/Center Left" category for the remaining parties. Abbreviations stand for the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPIIM); Indian National Congress (Congress Party); All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK); Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS); Aam Aadmi Party (AAP); Shiv Sena (SS); and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Center/center left parties include All India Trinamool Congress, Biju Janata Dal, Bahujan Samaj Party, Janata Dal, Nationalist Congress Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Telugu Desam Party, and Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party.

spectrum) and their reported level of political engagement. Taken together, these results show that individuals' views on the identified issue areas map cleanly onto their preferred political parties and their reported real-world political behavior.

In India's one-party-dominant system, views on the party in power (the BJP) and the issues over which it has long sought to establish ownership (cultural debates over Hindu nationalism) are especially likely to predict an individual's ideological placement. To probe differences across issue areas, individuals' latent ideologies were estimated separately for cultural and noncultural nationalist issues and later standardized to facilitate comparison. Earlier in the survey, individuals were asked to describe their levels of support for both the BJP and the Congress Party. A third finding underlines the BJP's dominance on the national scene: as figure 2 demonstrates, feelings toward the BJP (left panel), but not the Congress Party (right panel), are strongly correlated with an individual's ideological placement.

Figure 2. Predicting Ideological Placement by Feelings Toward BJP and Congress Party

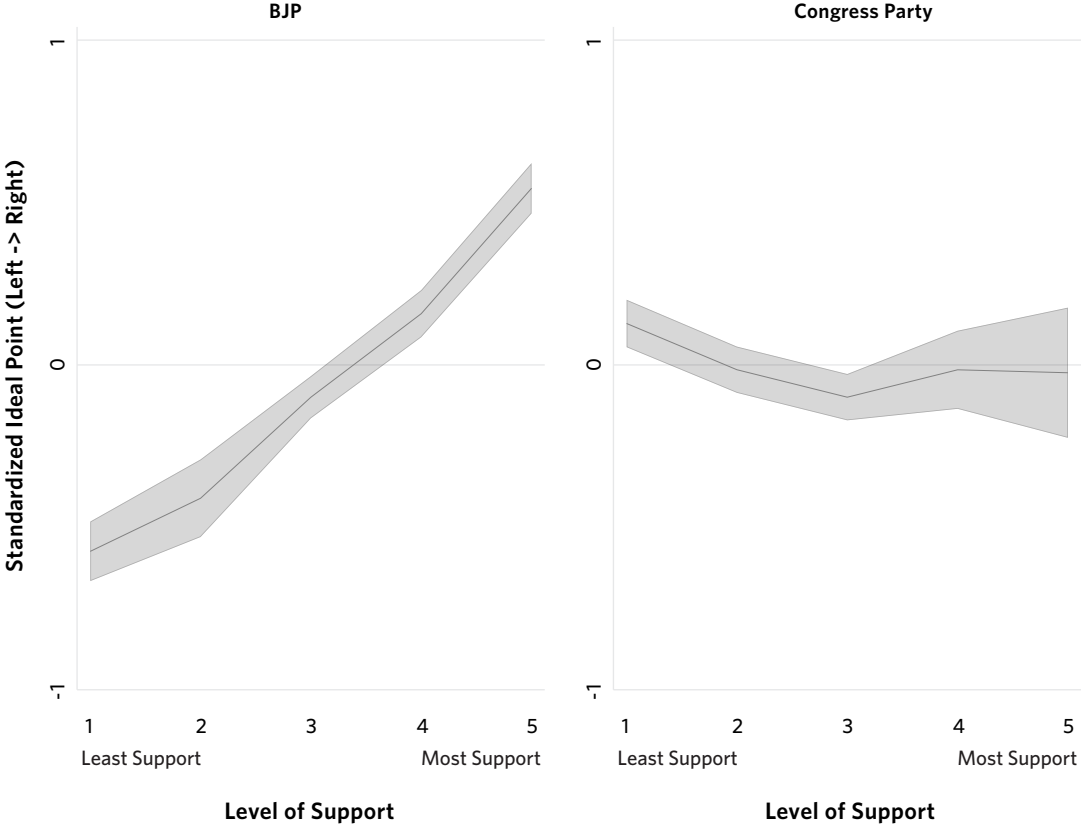


Source: Authors' analyses based on online survey panel, August-September 2022.

Notes: This figure displays individuals' predicted ideal points by their stated level of support for either the BJP (left panel) or the Congress Party (right panel). Support for both parties was elicited on a five-point scale ranging from (1) "extremely low" to (5) "extremely high." The figure includes 95% confidence intervals.

Fourth, as shown in figure 3, it is precisely around cultural, Hindu nationalist issues that feelings toward the BJP are most predictive of ideological placement (top left panel) while noncultural issues are the least predictive (bottom left panel). In a related set of analyses, an endorsement from a BJP politician significantly affected respondents' opinions about cultural issues, but not economic issues; that is, individuals appear to take the BJP's position into account when evaluating statements promoting Hindu nationalism but not as much when evaluating statements related to economic policy. Further, figure 3 shows that feelings toward the Congress Party are not predictive of ideology measured either on cultural (top right panel) or noncultural (bottom right panel) issues.

Figure 3. Predicting Ideological Placement on Cultural and Noncultural Issues by Feelings Toward BJP and Congress



Source: Authors' analyses based on online survey panel, August-September 2022.
 Notes: This figure displays individuals' predicted ideal points by their stated level of support for either the BJP (left panel) or Congress Party (right panel). It displays associations separately for standardized ideal points estimated using cultural (top panel) and noncultural (bottom panel) issues. Support for both parties was elicited on a five-point scale ranging from (1) "extremely low" to (5) "extremely high". The figure includes 95% confidence intervals.

Collectively, these findings indicate that ideology matters in the Indian context and that the BJP—and the issues it emphasizes—have an outsized role in determining ideological structure. How do these findings compare to previous explanations of political behavior in India and around the world? Additional analyses suggest that the relationships between ideology and political behavior detailed above still hold even when accounting for variables capturing traditional explanations of politics in India: namely, individuals' ethnicities (caste category and religion) and their views on patronage politics. Further, the issues commonly used to capture ideological divides in the West (military spending and abortion), as well as the aforementioned standard question that asks individuals to place themselves on a unidimensional left-right scale, do not appear to effectively encapsulate ideological cleavages in the Indian context.¹ These results attest to the explanatory power of political ideology in India while also suggesting that it is structured differently than in other regions.

Assessing Implications for India in 2024 and Beyond

How might these findings shape wider understanding of national political dynamics? First, it would be folly to overlook the central role that political ideology plays in everyday politics. Individuals' views on state intervention, minority rights, and especially Hindu nationalism hold significant relevance for explaining their political behavior and potentially their votes. Second, these findings point toward the possible crystallization of a one-party-dominant system: while feelings toward the BJP are highly predictive of ideology, feelings toward the Congress Party bear comparatively little relevance. Additional analyses suggest that individuals who identify with no political party or who do not report voting are more likely to have left-wing ideologies. This means that the political left in general, and the Congress Party in particular, has not been sufficiently successful in delineating its issue positions or establishing ownership over salient political topics.

India, along with many other nations in the Global South, has long been thought to lack the urban middle class, state capacity, and established party systems to promote policy-driven politics. The results indicate, to the contrary, that ideology matters in contexts such as India, but that the issues around which it is structured—as well as individuals' perceptions of where they stand in relation to it—may differ from those that are prevalent elsewhere. In short, ideas do matter in Indian politics; scholars and policymakers have just been looking in the wrong place.

CHAPTER 2

When Does Welfare Win Votes in India?

Shikhar Singh

Ambitious welfare programs and promises will likely be a central issue in India's 2024 general elections. Over the past decade, there has been a sea change in how governments deliver welfare benefits to citizens. Technological advancements and state capacity improvements have allowed both central and state governments to transfer benefits directly to voters, weakening meddling middlemen. Unlike the discretionary sops of the past, these rule-based direct transfers are supposed to reduce favoritism and corruption. In so doing, they are widely perceived to be popular vote winners. Yet, in actuality, there is [limited hard evidence](#) of "[schemes translating into votes](#)." This uncertainty presents a question: how, if at all, have transformative changes in India's welfare state affected voting behavior?

Transformative Changes and Their Implications

India has experienced at least three interrelated transformations in the functioning of the welfare state: less discretion in the selection of beneficiaries, the direct transfer of benefits, and a proliferation of benefits.

India's impressive [digital public infrastructure](#) allows the government to reduce discretion in beneficiary selection and transfer benefits directly to citizens. The socioeconomic census data and big data triangulated from multiple sources provide the government with granular, household-level information to frame objective rules and criteria. Near-universal biometric identification via the [Aadhaar](#) program allows the government to confirm that the intended recipient of a program is the actual beneficiary. An expansion of mobile banking services has allowed the government to transfer money directly into the accounts of beneficiaries, who can access their funds with the push of a button. The ubiquitous use of mobile phones has unlocked a host of features such as the geotagging of assets and the ability to verify that beneficiaries are using transfers for their intended purposes. All told, the scale of welfare

provision is staggering. There are more than [300 programs](#) delivering benefits to citizens across the country, programs that range from a \$10 cooking gas cylinder to a \$2,000 house. These programs reach nearly 950 million people and have accounted for \$270 billion in government spending since 2017.

The three transformative changes mentioned above—reduced discretion in the selection of beneficiaries, the direct transfer of benefits, and a proliferation of benefits—have important implications for voting behavior.

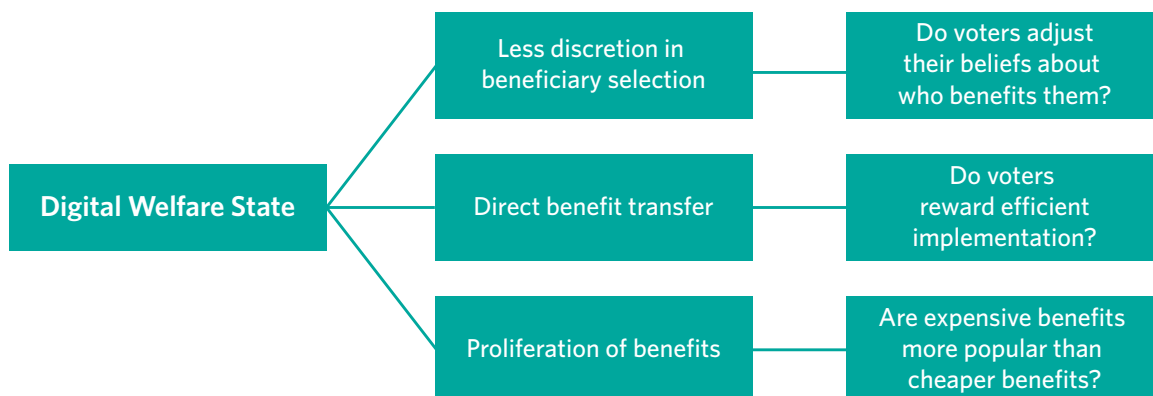
Less discretion implies less favoritism, which potentially undercuts the logic of caste voting. [Conventional wisdom](#) holds that voters prefer a politician from their caste group because they believe the politician is more likely to favor them in the distribution of state largesse. The expectation of preferential access to resources and opportunities—often phrased as *humara hai, humare liye karega* (the politician is one of us and will do something for us)—is at the heart of caste appeals in elections. When middlemen lose their discretion, the logic of caste voting is weakened, at least in theory. In practice, however, do India's voters adjust their beliefs about who benefits them?

The direct transfer of benefits also reduces opportunities for corruption. But corruption is a multifaceted phenomenon; in addition to high-level political corruption, it also includes common citizen malpractices, such as people claiming benefits more often than they are supposed to, ineligible or nonexistent people receiving benefits, and people using welfare money for other purposes. Although high-level corruption is a politically salient issue, it is far from clear whether voters reward transparency measures that hinder their own ability to claim from the state. This leads to a second question: do India's voters reward efficient welfare implementation along with the receipt of benefits? In other words, do they value *process* (how welfare is delivered) independent of *outcomes* (whether a benefit is received)? The answer to this question shows whether politicians, in the long term, have an incentive to change how they deliver welfare.

Finally, the proliferation of benefits brings into focus trade-offs in allocation. For instance, should politicians distribute an expensive benefit to fewer people or a cheaper benefit to more people? Do expensive benefits have a greater impact on voters' preferences than cheap benefits? The answer to this question determines, in part, the politically optimal allocation of resources, which in turn has implications for the kind of redistribution occurring through welfare programs.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the transformation of India's welfare state and the electorally minded questions they raise.

Figure 1. Welfare Transformations and Voter Behavior



Does Welfare Trump Caste?

Historically, India's welfare state has been characterized by ethnic clientelism. Politicians used middlemen to deliver benefits to citizens, and those middlemen favored members of their own ethnic group when distributing benefits. As a result, citizens preferred in-group politicians to out-group politicians. Ethnic or caste voting in this case operated on an instrumental logic: vote your caste and you will get more material benefits.

Rule-based direct transfers reduce middleman discretion and ethnic favoritism. When governments rely on socioeconomic indicators to identify beneficiaries, they end up distributing welfare benefits across caste or ethnic boundaries. As an example, nearly [six out of ten](#) beneficiaries in the [Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin](#), a housing program run by the central government, belong to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, or religious minorities like the Muslim community. In contrast, several earlier housing programs implemented through village *pradhans* or party workers tended to favor kin (co-ethnics) and co-partisans.

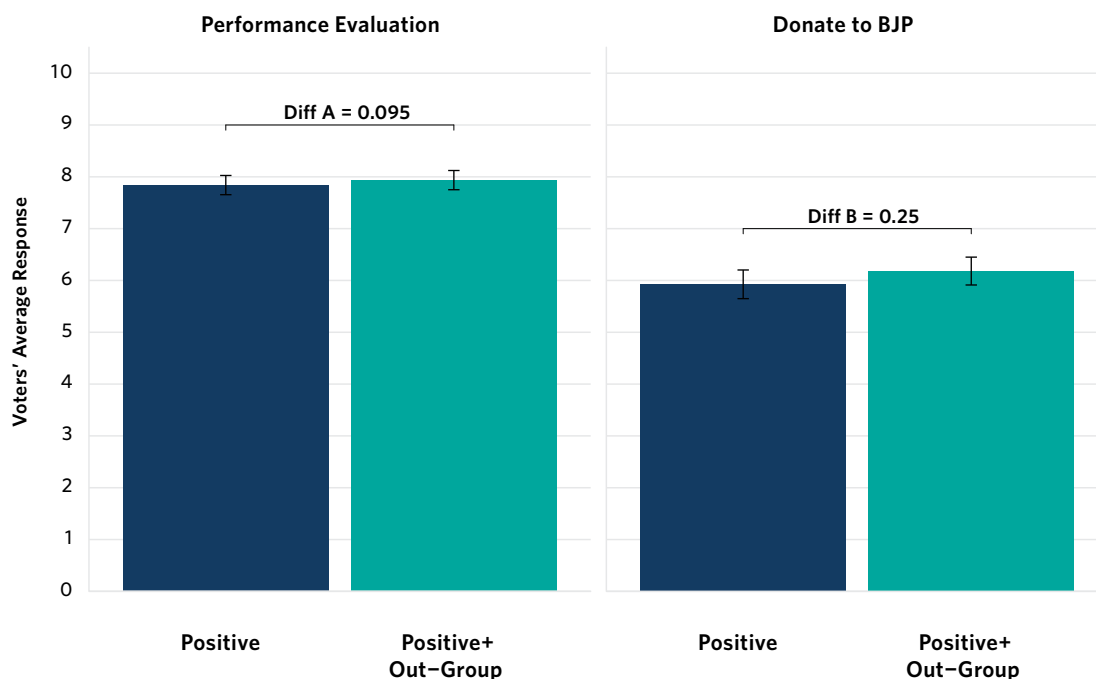
Voters' response to this transformation can be gauged along two lines: in-group backlash and out-group reward. Consider a case in which Party 1 champions the interests of Caste A and Party 2 of Caste B. Party 1 comes to power and implements a welfare program that uses objective rules to select beneficiaries. As a result, the welfare program significantly benefits voters from Caste B. This raises two questions. First, do voters from Caste A (in-group voters) engage in backlash against Party 1 because they expected preferential treatment?

Second, do voters from Caste B (out-group voters) who benefit from the welfare program reward Party 1? These two dynamics—in-group backlash and out-group reward—capture what is at stake politically.

To assess voters’ responses, in April–May 2022 the author interviewed more than 6,000 voters using telephone and online surveys. In addition, in February 2020 the author interviewed 530 Scheduled Caste/Dalit beneficiaries of Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin (the prime minister’s affordable housing scheme) using face-to-face surveys in fifty-seven villages in the state of Bihar.

The findings are striking: upper and dominant caste voters, who for the purposes of this analysis may be regarded as core supporters of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), did not punish the BJP for running welfare programs that substantially benefited Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims. Figure 2 shows the results from a survey experiment that randomly assigned voters to receive information either about how many citizens benefited from a welfare program (“positive” condition) or about the number of beneficiaries from the Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim communities (“positive + out-group” condition).

Figure 2. Core Supporters Do Not Punish Cross-ethnic Distribution



Note: Diff A = 0.095 (s.e. = 0.132, p = 0.474), Diff B = 0.25 (s.e. = 0.196, p = 0.194). Neither Diff A nor Diff B are statistically significant at conventional levels.
 Source: Shikhar Singh, “In-Group Anger or Out-Group Ambivalence? How Voters Perceive Rule-Based Direct Transfers in India,” SocArXiv, March 4, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/nwpqh>.

Figure 2 presents the responses from core supporters, who similarly evaluated the BJP government's performance and made hypothetical donations to the party even when they learned that many welfare program beneficiaries came from Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim communities. In other words, there was no backlash from in-group voters.

Dalits who benefited from the housing program recognized that the BJP had done something for them, expressed gratitude to the party for that benefit, and seemed aware that they received the benefit based on objective rather than discretionary criteria. However, Dalits continued to believe that local politicians from their own community were more likely to benefit them. The instrumental logic of caste voting persisted, particularly at the local level.

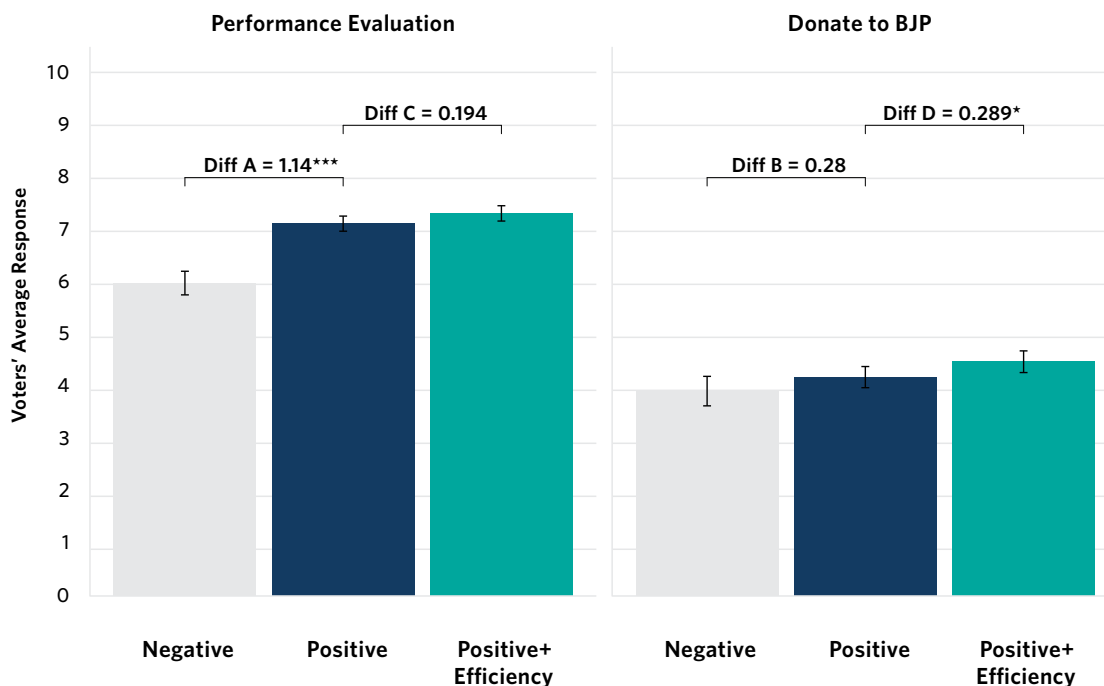
Two substantial implications follow: first, the BJP is not constrained by its traditional support base when it implements welfare and redistributive policies that substantially benefit voters outside of that core; and second, the reputational gains from welfare programs are contained and have not yet weakened the edifice of caste mobilization in politics.

Do Voters Prioritize Process or Outcomes?

A second transformation in welfare delivery is the use of the so-called [JAM trinity](#): [Jan Dhan Yojana](#) bank accounts (intended to universalize consumer banking access), Aadhaar-based biometric authentication (used to verify users' identities), and mobile phone-enabled features (like the geotagging of assets and digital banking services). These technologies reduce the possibility of many of the typical malpractices associated with claim-making. Do voters, who otherwise punish high-level corruption, reward parties for efficient implementation?

To assess this question, the author studied how voters reacted to performance information in survey experiments. These telephone-based and online survey experiments were conducted in twelve different languages using the random digit dialing method, as well as online in Hindi and English. The experiments randomly varied the type of information shared with participants. In the "negative" condition, voters were told about high unemployment, fuel inflation, and income inequality. In the "positive" condition, voters were told about a welfare program and the number of people who benefited from it. A third, "efficiency" condition provided additional information about the use of direct benefit transfer, biometric authentication, and geotagging of assets. After listening to (or reading) the information, participants evaluated the current government's performance on a scale from 0 to 10. They were also asked: if they

Figure 3. Voters Modestly Reward Efficient Implementation



Note: Diff A = 1.14 (s.e. = 0.135, $p < 0.001$), Diff B = 0.28 (s.e. = 0.174, $p = 0.107$), Diff C = 0.194 (s.e. = 0.103, $p = 0.060$), Diff D = 0.289 (s.e. = 0.145, $p = 0.04$). Diff A is significant with greater than 99 percent confidence, and Diff D is significant with 95 percent confidence. Neither Diff B nor Diff C are statistically significant at conventional levels.
 Source: Shikhar Singh, "Do Voters Reward Programmatic Distribution? Evidence from Survey Experiments in India," September 2, 2022, https://shikhar-singh.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/voters_perinfo_09282022.pdf.

hypothetically had to donate 10 rupees to political parties, how much would they give the major parties in their state? (The list always included the BJP.) Figure 3 presents the results from this experiment.

Comparing voters' evaluation of the government in the positive and negative conditions revealed how they rewarded good performance and punished bad performance. The results indicated the government's rating improved by 11.4 percentage points, and hypothetical donations to the ruling party increased by 2.8 percentage points, when voters simply learned about welfare programs.

Similarly, comparing voters' evaluations in the efficiency and positive conditions revealed how much they rewarded implementation. Specifically, the results indicated how much they valued process (how welfare benefits are delivered), once outcomes were fixed (how many

people received that benefit). Voters' evaluation of the government improved modestly by 1.9 percentage points, and donations to the ruling party increased by 2.9 percentage points, when voters learned about transparency measures.

The main takeaway from this analysis is that, to the extent that welfare programs shape voters' preferences, the actual delivery of benefits (outcomes) matters more than efficient implementation (process). For there to be durable change in how welfare benefits are distributed, voters would need to reward efficient implementation more than they currently do.

Do Cheap Benefits Deliver Politically?

Finally, the expansion of welfare programs has meant that governments deliver an increasingly diverse set of benefits to citizens, ranging from homes to home appliances. With the proliferation of benefits comes the question of impact and future allocation: which welfare programs are most politically impactful, and how should future resources be apportioned to different programs?

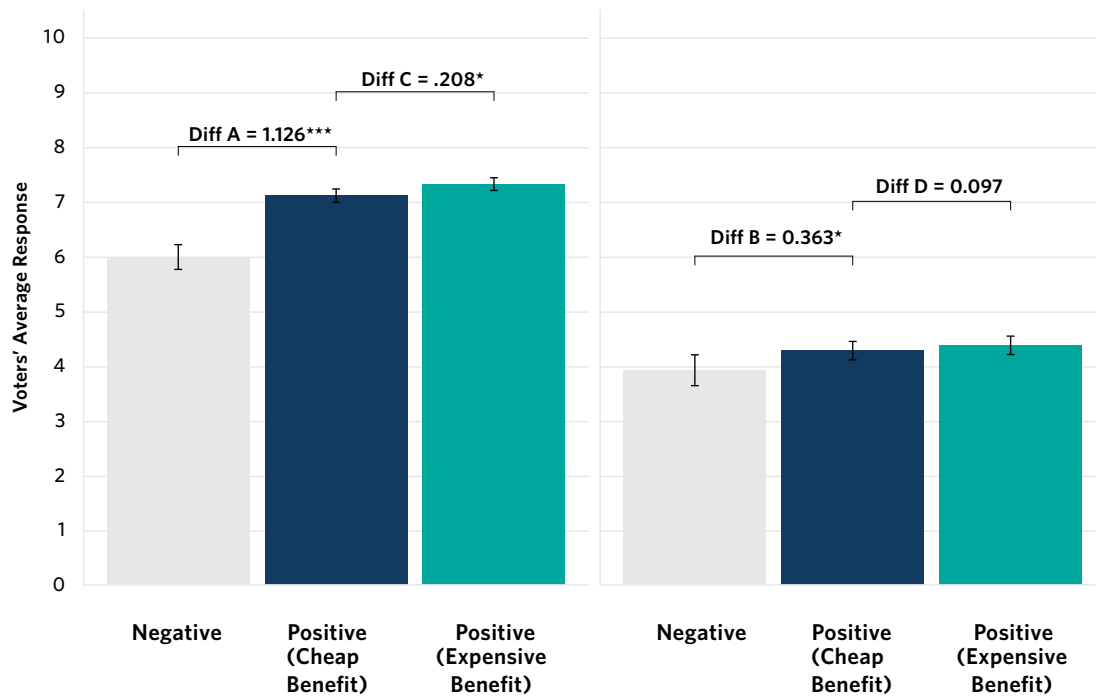
In this context, an interesting question is whether expensive benefits have greater impact on political preferences than cheaper benefits. There is an implicit trade-off in this question: because governments have finite resources, a cheap benefit like a \$10 cooking gas cylinder can be distributed to many more voters than an expensive benefit like a \$2,000 house. But how does the political impact of the two welfare programs compare?

Data from the [National Election Studies 2019](#), conducted by the Lokniti Program of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, provide an interesting answer. In the last parliamentary elections, beneficiaries of the Ujjwala (clean cooking gas) scheme were 4.6 percentage points more likely to report voting for the BJP, 2.7 percentage points more likely to say that the BJP works for the poor, and 4.5 percentage points more satisfied with the central government. In addition, program beneficiaries reported that they were less likely to vote for narrow, caste-based parties and more likely to say the incumbent should be reelected, holding constant other predictors of political preferences.

These results are consistent with anecdotal evidence that Ujjwala was a popular vote winner in those elections. What is striking is that the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin housing program, which involves a considerably more expensive benefit, has [comparable political impact](#). In other words, a relatively inexpensive benefit seems to have as much political impact as an expensive benefit.

Similar evidence emerges in survey experiments that randomly vary information about government performance. Participants were shown either positive or negative information about the government's performance. In the "positive" condition, participants were told

Figure 4. Cheaper Benefits Offer Significant Value for Money



Note: Diff A = 1.126 (s.e. = 0.129, $p < 0.001$), Diff B = 0.363 (s.e. = 0.164, $p = 0.027$), Diff C = 0.208 (s.e. = 0.085, $p = 0.014$), Diff D = 0.097 (s.e. = 0.118, $p = 0.414$). Diff A is significant with greater than 99 percent confidence, and Diff B and Diff C are significant with 95 percent confidence. Diff D is not statistically significant at conventional levels.
 Source: Shikhar Singh, "House Versus Cooking Gas Cylinder: Assessing the Political Impact of Two Benefits," September 2, 2022, https://shikhar-singh.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/House_v_Cylinder_09282022.pdf.

about the government’s welfare programs. A further randomized element varied whether that information was about a cheap or an expensive benefit. In the “negative” condition, participants were told about high unemployment, fuel inflation, and income inequality. The results can be seen in Figure 4.

First, positive information of either kind affected political attitudes and preferences. Compared to participants who received negative information, those that received information about the distribution of a cheap benefit evaluated the government’s performance 11.3 percentage points higher, and hypothetical donations to the ruling party increased by 3.6 percentage points. The effect of information about the expensive benefit was broadly comparable. Compared to participants that received negative information, those that learned of an expensive benefit being distributed evaluated the government’s performance 13.3 percentage points higher and donated 4.6 percentage points more to the ruling party.

Crucially, positive information about the expensive benefit did not have any greater impact. When comparing participants that learned about the distribution of cheap and of expensive benefits, there were only small differences in performance evaluation (2.1 percentage points) and donations to the ruling party (1 percentage point).

Put together, the evidence suggests that relatively inexpensive benefits can have as great a political impact as expensive benefits. This finding has implications for how politicians design redistributive welfare programs. In particular, [recent discussions](#) on “freebies” (*revdis*, in Hindi parlance) have focused on normative aspects, potentially overlooking the electoral logic for distributing certain types of benefits.

The Future of Welfare Politics

The transformative changes in India’s welfare state are impacting voting behavior in nuanced ways, with signs of both change and continuity. Rule-based selection of beneficiaries has produced cross-ethnic distribution at scale, disturbing the prevailing ethnic-clientelistic equilibrium. Despite this trend, the instrumentalist logic of identity voting persists at many levels of electoral competition. Even though direct benefit transfer has potentially improved last-mile delivery, voters appear to privilege outcome over process. Welfare expansion has led to innovative benefits but also to allocation challenges, particularly when voters comparably reward the delivery of inexpensive and expensive benefits. As parties race to the hustings to campaign in the general elections, these findings can shape popular understanding of the electoral payoffs of the “new welfarism.”

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Sanjay Kumar of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) for providing access to the National Election Studies data, Yashwant Deshmukh and Gaura Shukla of the Centre for Voting Opinion and Trends in Election Research (CVoter) for fielding the telephone survey experiments, and Atulesh Shukla for fielding the face-to-face survey.

CHAPTER 3

Mapping Muslim Voting Behavior in India

Feyaad Allie

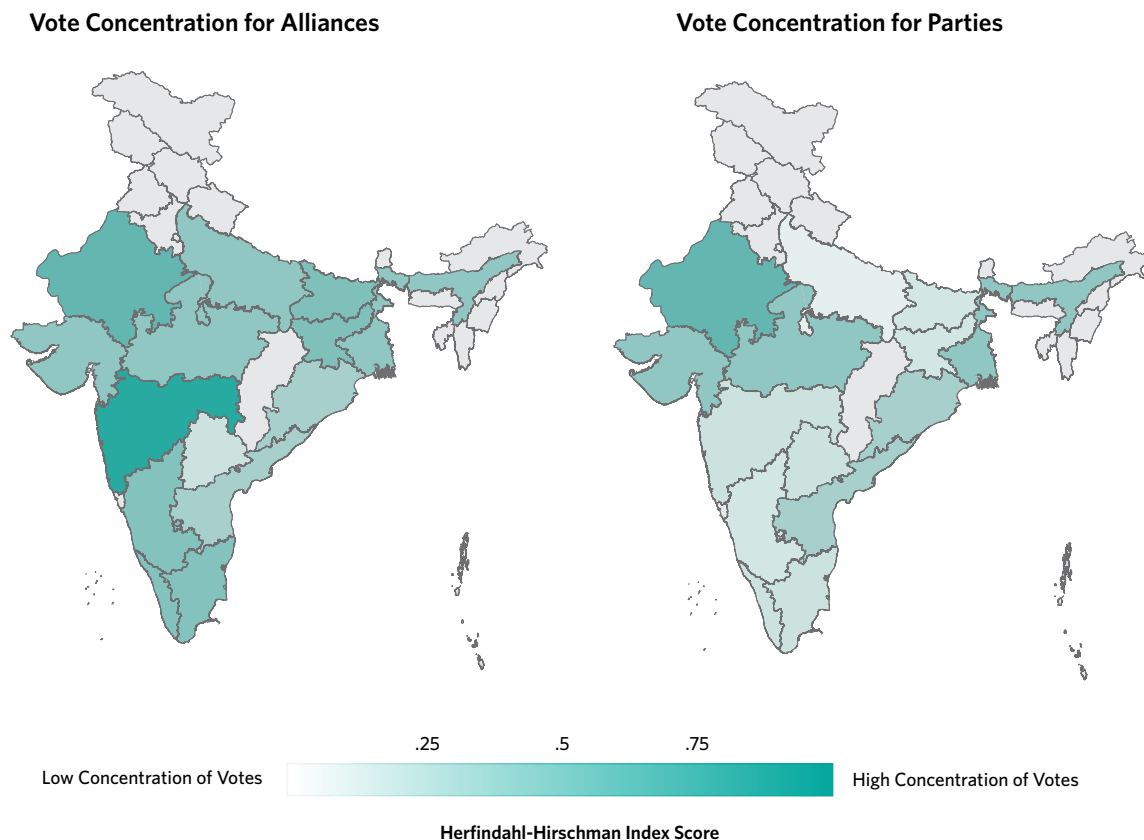
Since the milestone victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2019 general elections, political observers have been closely watching the Muslim minority's response in the electoral arena. Available data suggest that in subsequent state elections, Muslims have largely voted against the BJP and in favor of the leading challenger party. There are several caveats, however. Alongside this consolidation of the Muslim vote, salient social and political differences *within* the Muslim population have simultaneously surfaced. For example, Muslim caste hierarchies and other sub-identities such as sect have become important topics of mainstream political conversations. This fact raises pressing questions for electoral dynamics as the 2024 general election approaches. Should the idea of a coherent Muslim voting bloc be retired? To what extent is caste relevant to the understanding of Muslim voting behavior? Do group-based solidarities around religion and caste exist for Muslims?

A Monolith or a Mosaic?

In popular election analyses, Muslims are often treated as a homogeneous voting bloc. Yet, as Hilal Ahmed's [research](#) points out, Muslims hardly make up a monolithic community that mechanically acts in a coordinated fashion; just like Hindus, Muslims are divided on class, sect, caste, and regional lines—complicating claims that they behave like a uniform vote bank. Prior to 2019, Muslim voting behavior [was significantly fragmented](#), and there were no clear signs of constituency-level coordination behind a single political party. Notably, however, voting behavior has become more complex since the BJP's 2019 victory.

Political scientists typically use a measure known as the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) to examine the level of fractionalization or consolidation that exists in the distribution of votes. An index score close to zero implies that all Muslims voted for different parties, while a score of 1 indicates their support for the same party. An application of the

Figure 1. Concentration of Muslim Votes in the 2019 General Elections



Note: Vote concentration data are missing in states shaded gray.
Source: Estimates of Muslim votes for parties and alliances for each state are from Hilal Ahmed, "Does Muslim Vote Matter? Presence, Representation, and Participation," *Indian Politics & Policy* 3, no.1 (2020): 109-12; and Adnan Farooqui, "Political Representation of a Minority: Muslim Representation in Contemporary India," *India Review* 19, no. 2 (2020): 153-175.

HHI for the 2019 general elections reveals some fractionalization of Muslim votes, despite rising Hindu majoritarianism. In addition, there is considerable variation across states (see figure 1). This fractionalization is marked when looking at Muslim votes both for individual parties and for alliances.

By comparison, studies of Muslim voting in state assembly elections since the 2019 general elections and the ushering in of a [new dominant party system](#) distinctly show some consolidation. Surveys by the Lokniti Programme for Comparative Democracy at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies [show](#) that in the 2020 Bihar elections, about 77 percent of Muslims voted for the Mahagathbandhan (an alliance of parties opposed to the BJP); in

the 2021 West Bengal elections, 75 percent of Muslims voted for the incumbent Trinamool Congress; and in the 2022 Uttar Pradesh elections, 79 percent of Muslims voted for the opposition Samajwadi Party.

A range of factors appear to shape Muslim voting in state and national elections. Some scholars suggest that Muslims vote according to a state's [electoral context](#) (based on how many parties are contesting and who these parties are) or individual [candidate prospects](#) (with Muslims' votes divided in multipolar contests). My [own research](#), which focuses on state assembly elections, argues that Muslim voting behavior is influenced by the presence (or absence) of a coethnic representative. I show that the existence of a Muslim representative can activate internal divisions among Muslims that shape their subsequent voting behavior. These divisions can manifest along sub-identities within the broader Muslim identity.

Caste Within Religion

Despite scholarly inattention, caste remains a relevant sub-identity in the Muslim community. While [observers](#) largely agree that caste among Muslims may not have a religious or ideological underpinning, it manifests socially and occupationally in a [hierarchical form](#) similar to caste in Hindu communities. Muslim caste identity is divided into three categories: Ashraf, Ajlaf, and Arzal. The Ashraf are self-proclaimed descendants of Muslim immigrants who emigrated to the Indian subcontinent from the Middle East and Central Asia; the group includes Sayyids, Shaikhs, Mughals, and Pathans, who all have different hierarchical positions within the category. The Ajlaf and Arzal are primarily Hindus who converted to Islam and correspond to the Hindu equivalents Other Backward Class (OBC) and Dalit subcastes, respectively. Dalit Muslims, however, do not benefit from affirmative action protections that exist for Scheduled Castes under the Constitution of India. Since the 1990s, activists among non-Ashraf Muslims—Ajlaf (OBC) and Arzal (Dalit) Muslims—have sought to mobilize against Ashraf dominance in politics and have begun to refer to themselves collectively as [Pasmanda](#) (a Persian term meaning “those left behind”). Today, “Pasmanda Muslims” is used as an [umbrella term](#) for OBC and Dalit Muslims.

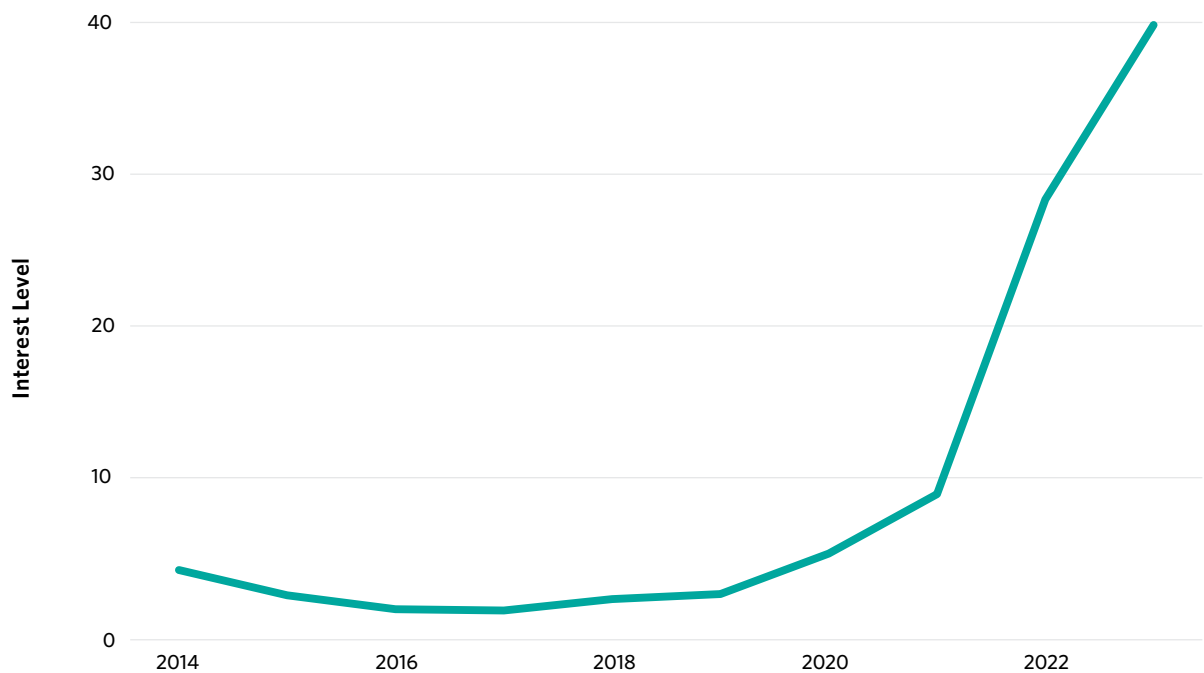
Research reveals that some Muslims still experience practices of [untouchability](#) that are also observed in Hindu communities. For example, during a [survey](#) on caste among Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, some Dalits reported regularly encountering instances of untouchability, such as not being permitted to bury their dead in the same graveyard as upper-caste neighbors or their children being seated separately during meals at school. They also reported facing untouchability in interactions with both upper-caste Muslims and Hindus. Moreover, the survey responses of non-Dalit Muslims indicated that they engage in practices of untouchability to various extents; for example, 21 percent of non-Dalit Muslims reported that they do not visit the homes of Dalit Muslims.

The 2006 [Sachar Committee Report](#) published by India’s Ministry of Minority Affairs is often cited to highlight the educational and economic differences between Muslims and Hindus, but it also examines differences within the Muslim population, specifically along caste lines.² Grouping non-upper-caste Muslims into the OBC Muslim category, the report compares OBC Muslims to General Muslims and OBC Hindus. In the domains of education, employment, and economic status, Muslim OBCs fared poorly relative to both General Muslims and Hindu OBCs. (In the report’s groupings, “General Muslims” are those who fall in the Ashraf category, whereas OBC Muslims include the Ajlaf and Arzal, who constitute the Pasmanda category.)

Politicization of Muslim Caste Identity

In addition to being relevant to the socioeconomic lives of Muslims, caste is increasingly becoming part of conversations on politics and group relations. This is evidenced by, for instance, the sharp rise in Google searches for the term “Pasmanda” in India over the past four years (see figure 2). This rise is most prominent in North India, which has also witnessed the most public mobilization of Pasmanda identity.

Figure 2. Rise in Google Searches for the Term “Pasmanda”



Source: “‘Pasmanda’ Search Term,” Google Trends, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2014-01-01%202023-12-31&geo=IN&q=%22pasmanda%22&hl=en>.

Note: The Google interest level is a daily number indicating search interest relative to the highest interest level for the given time period and location. This figure shows the yearly average of daily interest levels.

In terms of civic life, there is [growing evidence](#) of Muslim caste-based mobilization. For instance, one mobilizing force at the center of the Pasmanda movement is the All-India Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz (AIPMM) organization. The AIPMM, based in Bihar and led by former Rajya Sabha parliamentary member Ali Anwar, has been at the forefront of civic [efforts to advocate](#) for Dalit Muslims (as well as Dalit Christians) to have Scheduled Caste status, which allows for affirmative action in government jobs, education, and politics and legal protection against atrocities.

Over the past several years, political elites have also been expanding their efforts to mobilize Muslims along caste lines. While most of this mobilization is based on the umbrella “Pasmanda” grouping, there is some evidence of mobilization of the Ansari subcaste in Bihar. In the lead-up to the 2020 Bihar state elections, the Ansari Mahapanchayat (AMP) advocacy group was [formed and engaged in grassroots organizing](#) in the central and western parts of the state, arguing specifically for elected representation for Ansaris. However, eventually, the group’s leadership fractured, with top officials throwing their support behind different alliances at the state level.

Perhaps the most prominent attention given to the Pasmanda grouping surprisingly came from the BJP during its 2022 national executive meeting in Telangana’s capital city Hyderabad. In fact, the aforementioned Google Trends for the term Pasmanda reached its ten-year peak in the same month as the event. Despite his party’s Hindu nationalist bona fides, Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged BJP workers to reach out to Pasmanda Muslims. Modi subsequently held several events with notable Pasmanda Muslims later in the year. While these meetings were the party’s first large-scale public outreach effort, it has engaged with Pasmanda Muslims in the past. For instance, sociologist [Khalid Anis Ansari](#) noted that in 2013 in Uttar Pradesh, the BJP formed a “weavers’ cell” to engage some Pasmanda Muslims, and in 2017 in Odisha, the party highlighted the need for Pasmanda Muslims to receive the same benefits as OBCs and even called out Sayyids and Pathans for “usurping welfare measures.”

Nevertheless, the BJP’s explicit outreach in 2022 was not entirely well received. Several Muslim groups warned members of the Pasmanda community to be wary of the party’s outreach. For instance, the AIPMM emphasized that no political party should take the support of Pasmanda Muslims for granted, while the organization’s leader, Anwar, personally [criticized](#) the party’s Pasmanda outreach by underscoring that Pasmanda Muslims have been disproportionately affected during communal attacks. Asaduddin Owaisi, the leader of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen party—which regularly evokes Muslim solidarity—[also lambasted](#) the BJP’s outreach, highlighting that Pasmanda Muslims have been victims of vigilante violence under the current BJP government.

Results of the BJP’s outreach have been mixed. The party [fielded four Pasmanda Muslims](#) in the Delhi Municipal Corporation elections in December 2022, but none of the candidates won and only one came close as a runner-up. However, the results of the May 2023 Uttar Pradesh by-elections in the city of Suar suggest that the party’s efforts [may have gained](#)

[some traction](#). After Abdullah Azam Khan, a representative of Suar on the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly, was [sentenced to prison](#), by-elections were held in the city, where Muslims constitute around [60 percent](#) of the population. The Apna Dal (Sonelal) party, a regional partner of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, fielded a Pasmada Muslim, Shafeek Ahmed Ansari, with the backing of the BJP. Ansari ultimately defeated the opposition Samajwadi Party candidate, with key BJP leaders claiming that Ansari's win was a direct result of the party's efforts to mobilize the Pasmada Muslim vote. However, because it was a Muslim candidate from Apna Dal contesting against a Hindu candidate from the Samajwadi Party, it is hard to discern whether caste or religion played the greater role.

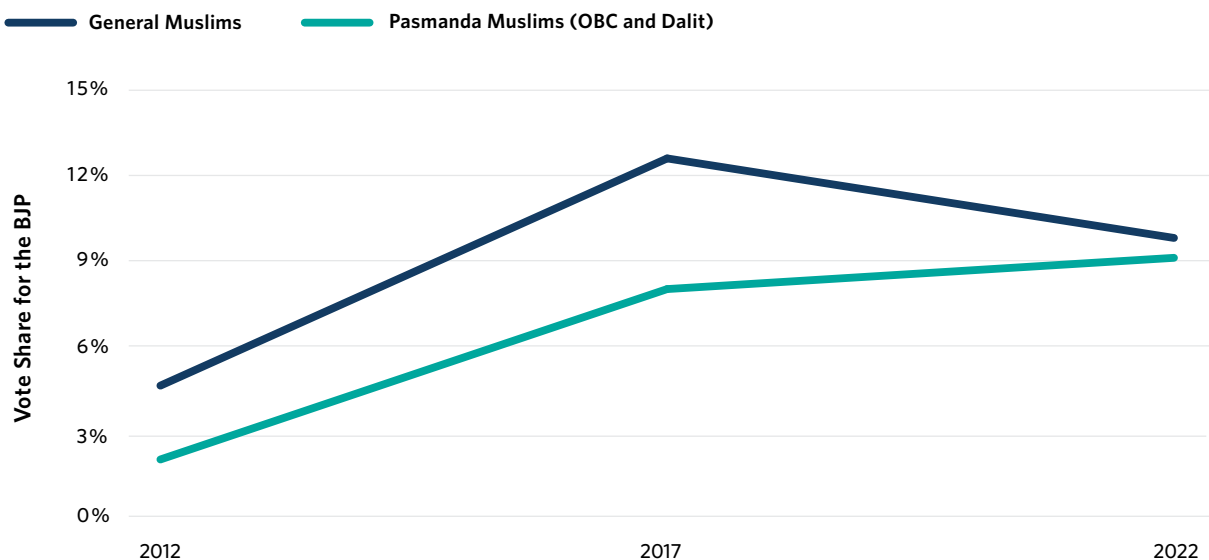
Contours of Pasmada Political Behavior

While Pasmada politics has figured more prominently in mainstream political mobilization in recent years, the community's voting behavior is less clear. Understanding the heterogeneity in political behavior within the Muslim population remains difficult for two reasons. First, most surveys seek to capture a representative sample of India or a particular Indian state, which limits the sample of Muslim respondents. Second, they often do not capture details on Muslim castes. To help address these limitations, I conducted a survey of nearly 2,000 Muslims in Uttar Pradesh in 2022, with a particular focus on the contours of political behavior *within* the Muslim community.³ The survey was also conducted with almost 2,000 Hindus in Uttar Pradesh in 2022 to allow for comparisons across religious groups.

When asked about state elections in Uttar Pradesh in 2012, a small percentage of Muslim voters reported that they voted for the BJP candidate. By 2017, 12.6 percent of General Muslims and 8 percent of Pasmada Muslims reported support for the BJP. Interestingly, by the 2022 state elections BJP support among General Muslims fell to 9.8 percent while support among Pasmada Muslims increased slightly to 9.1 percent (see figure 3). While vote choice in state elections does not automatically translate to behavior in national elections, the BJP's recent inroads with the Pasmada community—along with targeted 2024 election outreach (for example, through enlisting “[Modi Mitrs](#)” or friends of Modi)—suggests that increased Pasmada support for the BJP is entirely possible. But when this outreach occurs alongside efforts to mobilize Hindus on their collective religious identity, voting for the BJP can become a hard sell for Muslims, regardless of caste.

While the wider conversation about caste hierarchies among Muslims suggests that individuals may think of their caste in terms of the broader categories of Pasmada and General, the 2022 survey in Uttar Pradesh—and the aforementioned Ansari-specific mobilization in Bihar—suggest that Muslims may think more in terms of their subcaste. When asked in the survey whether a respondent agreed with the statement, “In an election, it is important for members of the same *jati* [subcaste] to vote for the same party,” 43 percent of General Muslims agreed with the statement, compared to 53 percent of Pasmada Muslims.⁴ This latter percentage is also higher than the share of Hindu respondents who agreed with the statement; 34 percent of General Hindus, 37 percent of Scheduled Caste Hindus, and 41

Figure 3. Reported Vote Share for the BJP in Uttar Pradesh State Elections



Source: Author's survey of 1,948 Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, 2022.

percent of OBC Hindus reported that it was important for members of the same subcaste to vote as a bloc. If the BJP can gain ground with the Pasmanda community, there could be far-reaching consequences given heightened perceptions that caste-based coordination is important. As national elections approach, the extent to which Pasmanda Muslims view the BJP's outreach as sincere (or not) needs to be tracked.

Caste Versus Religion

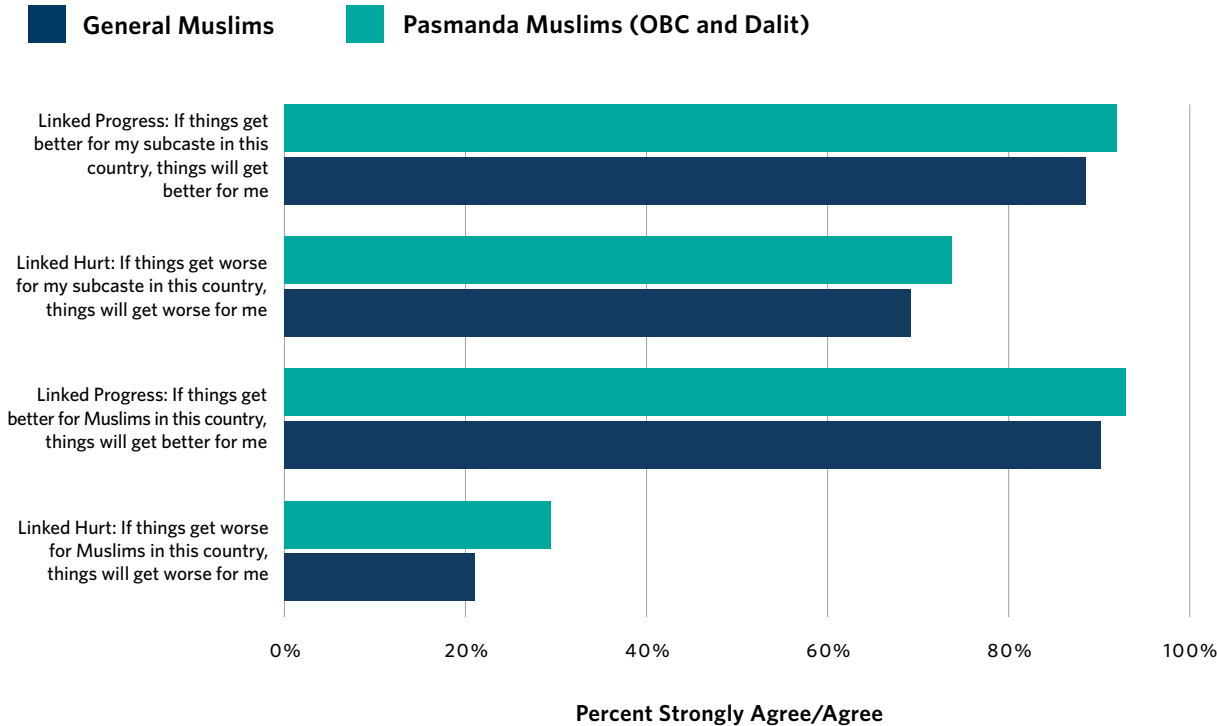
The increased relevance of caste to Indian politics raises questions about how much solidarity Muslims have with members of their superordinate identity (religious group) compared to their subordinate identity (subcaste group). Scholars of race and ethnic politics across contexts often use measures of "linked fate" to understand group-based solidarity and consciousness. These [measures](#) seek to understand how much an individual's well-being is linked to their group's well-being. Adapting survey questions generally used in the American context, the 2022 survey in Uttar Pradesh asked Muslim respondents what better or worse conditions for their subcaste group and their religious group would mean for themselves as individuals (see figure 4).⁵

Muslims generally indicated high levels of linked progress and linked hurt based on their caste identity. Around 90 percent of Muslim respondents perceived that if things got better for their subcaste, things would also get better for them individually. And about 72 percent believed that if things got worse for their subcaste, they would get worse for them, too. By

comparison, Muslims generally indicated high levels of linked progress but quite low levels of linked hurt based on their religious identity. Among all Muslims, caste-based solidarity appeared stronger relative to religion-based solidarity.

Across statements probing both progress and hurt, Pasmada Muslims indicated higher levels of overall linked fate than General Muslims did, suggesting greater group solidarity. While this understanding of solidarity among caste and religious groups is limited to one state, it underscores the need to incorporate various Muslim sub-identities into researchers' mapping of political dynamics. Indeed, sect (another salient sub-identity) has long shaped Muslim political behavior in some parts of India such as Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh. In my survey, Shia Muslims in Lucknow exhibited higher levels of support for the BJP, a pattern also [found](#) in other national-level election surveys. And, at times, members of the Deobandi and Bareilvi sects of Sunni Islam have [placed their weight](#) behind conflicting parties and candidates in both state and national elections. For example, my survey revealed that in state elections in Uttar Pradesh, Bareilvi Muslims have regularly supported the Samajwadi Party at higher rates compared to Deobandi Muslims.

Figure 4. Linked Fate among General Muslims and Pasmada Muslims



Source: Author's survey of 1,948 Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, 2022.

Toward the 2024 Elections

Since the 2019 general elections, Muslims have become more likely to vote in a unified way, but the political salience of caste in the Muslim community appears to have increased at the same time. Thus, in the coming 2024 elections, while it still seems unlikely that Muslims will vote entirely on their caste or sect identity, it is clear that sub-identities will shape both campaigning and voting to some degree. With the BJP's mobilization of Pasmada Muslims gathering steam and with opposition parties plotting countermeasures, it would be unwise for political analysts to limit investigations of caste to the Hindu community alone. If the BJP is even moderately successful in consummating its outreach to Pasmada Muslims, researchers may need to retire the idea of a Muslim voting bloc and pursue a comprehensive, nuanced understanding of how and when sub-identities shape Muslim voting behavior.

CHAPTER 4

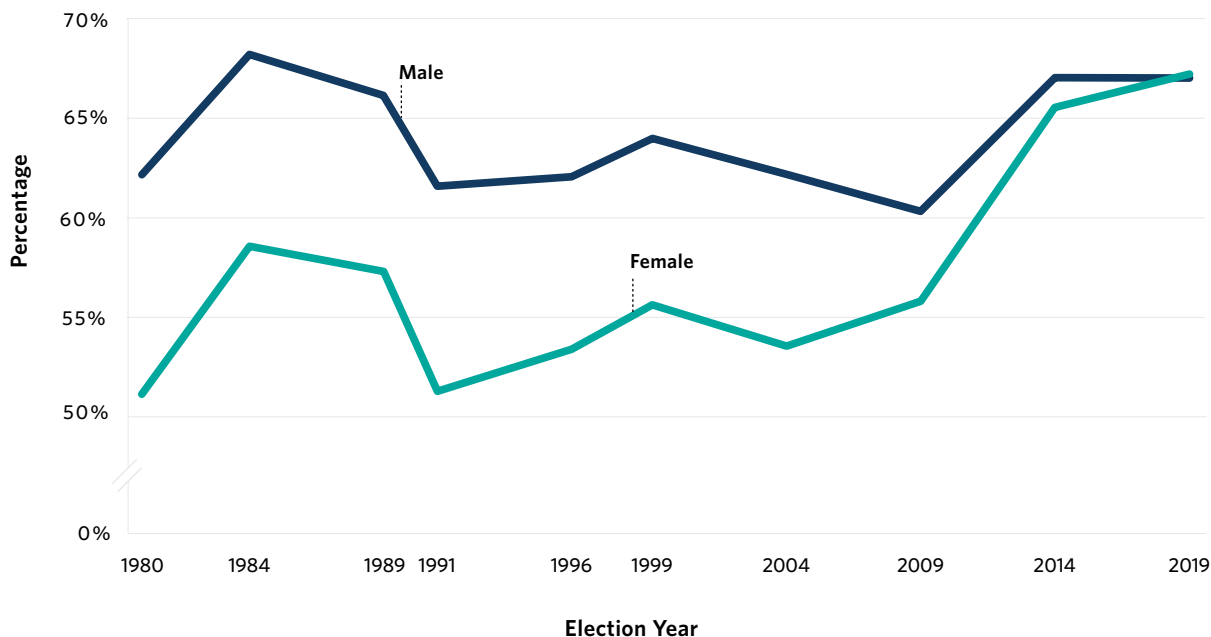
What Lies Behind India's Rising Female Voter Turnout

Rithika Kumar

In India, as in many democracies around the world, there has long been a discernible gender gap in citizens' political participation. For decades, Indian men were significantly more likely to cast their ballots on election day compared to women. It is noteworthy, therefore, that in the country's 2019 general election, the historic gap between male and female turnout came to an end; for the first time on record, women voters turned out to vote at higher rates than men (see figure 1). Predictions for India's upcoming 2024 general election suggest that this trend is likely to continue.

Although the gap between male and female voter turnout in India has been gradually shrinking in recent years, the convergence in electoral participation is nevertheless surprising for multiple reasons. First, as noted by Franziska Roscher, the [increase in female turnout](#) in India is occurring while [female labor force participation](#)—an important driver of women's political participation—[remains low](#) compared to peer economies. Second, national-level data from the [National Election Study](#) (NES), conducted by the Lokniti Program of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, and other smaller studies confirm that women lag men across all measures of nonelectoral political engagement. For instance, data from two separate primary surveys—conducted in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh by political scientists [Soledad Prillaman](#) and [Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner](#), respectively—demonstrate that while the gender gap in voter turnout has closed, gaps are all too visible in other forms of sustained political engagement, such as contacting elected representatives, attending public meetings, and participating in campaign activities. Third, women continue to be underrepresented in India's [national parliament](#) and its [state assemblies](#).

Figure 1. Disappearing Gender Gap in Voter Turnout



Note: Voter turnout is calculated as the number of male/female voters divided by the number of male/female electors. Figure includes data from general elections held between 1980 and 2019. Source: Election Commission of India, <https://eci.gov.in>.

Therefore, the increase in female turnout in what remains a largely male-dominated political arena raises two important questions. Why is women’s turnout rising? And what impact might this have on electoral dynamics as India heads into the 2024 general elections?

Why Is Female Voter Turnout Rising?

The upward trend in female turnout in India is likely a result of several factors, operating both at the individual and institutional level. The self-empowerment hypothesis posits that rising literacy levels and media exposure have increased awareness among women who, in turn, feel more empowered to exercise their political agency. Utilizing survey data from the NES, at least [two studies](#) found a positive correlation between women’s turnout and factors such as political knowledge, literacy, and media exposure. Using data on male and female turnout across state and national elections over five decades, economists [Mudit Kapoor and Shamika Ravi](#) also found evidence in favor of the self-empowerment hypothesis, both in traditionally “backward” and in relatively more developed Indian states. They argue that these trends are likely driven by the “voluntary participation of women voters in elections.”

The self-empowerment hypothesis itself is nested within traditional [resource-based theories of female participation](#) in [electoral and nonelectoral forms of political engagement](#). These theories, originating in the West, argue that as women gain access to material resources thanks to expanded literacy, [financial autonomy \(through participation in the labor force\)](#), and greater information availability, they are likely to increase their political engagement. In other words, advancements in economic development are followed by a rise in female engagement in political arenas.

However, in India, this explanation is complicated by the fact that female turnout rose even [as female labor force participation declined](#). In fact, recent research from both [India](#) and [Pakistan](#) argue that female political engagement in South Asia cannot be understood without examining the role of the household in facilitating female political engagement. While the self-empowerment hypothesis is a good start, it cannot fully explain dramatic rise in turnout.

In contrast, many observers have argued that institutional factors, such as the sustained effort by the Election Commission of India (ECI) to boost women's electoral participation, better explain the rise in female turnout. In 2009, the ECI inaugurated the [Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation](#) program with the goal of increasing voter awareness and improving voter turnout. In fact, a key objective of the program was to increase female turnout and close the voting gender gap. Although a systematic study of the program has not been conducted, the upward trajectory in female turnout clearly begins in 2009 (see figure 1).

Although it is likely that the ECI's efforts have aided women's turnout, it is worth noting that women are underrepresented on the country's electoral rolls. One way of assessing this is to calculate the electoral sex ratio (ESR), which is the ratio of female electors (who are registered to vote and whose names are on the voter rolls) to male electors. While India's national ESR of 948 women per 1,000 men is in line with the underlying skewed adult sex ratio (of 943 women per 1,000 men), multiple constituencies report much lower ESRs, implying that [many women](#) remain [missing](#) from the registration process.

In fact, male migration might help to explain why the voter sex ratio sometimes tilts in favor of women: male migrants are often unable to cast their votes in state and national elections since they are living (often temporarily) away from home. The observed increase in women's turnout could simply reflect this dynamic. However, it is more likely that multiple factors working together are responsible for shifts in electoral participation.

Political Parties Take Notice

Irrespective of the reasons for the surge in female turnout, political parties across the spectrum have taken notice and made serious efforts to attract the female vote. For instance, some observers have argued that an important reason the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won an overwhelming majority in last year's state assembly election in Madhya Pradesh was the popularity of its [Ladali Behna](#) scheme, which promised a 1,000-rupee cash handout to women. Similarly, the BJP central government has implemented schemes like [Ujjwala Yojana](#), which provides subsidized gas cylinders—a clean source of cooking fuel—to women from poor households. Furthermore, in September 2023, Parliament passed a [women's reservation bill](#) that mandates gender quotas in state and national assemblies. When the bill is implemented, one-third of legislative seats will be reserved for women.

Regional parties have also enthusiastically wooed female voters. Eight years before Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government first came to power in 2014, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar of the Janata Dal (United)—known as the JD(U)—increased [gender quotas](#) in local government bodies from 33 to 50 percent. Later, in a bid to improve female enrollment in secondary schools, Kumar introduced a [scheme](#) that granted female students who finished class 8 a cash transfer of 2,000 rupees to purchase bicycles. More famously, in early 2016, Kumar's government instituted a [prohibition](#) against alcohol, formally making Bihar a dry state. The measure fulfilled a promise Kumar made on the campaign trail after being lobbied by women to curb the liberal supply of alcohol in the state.

Similarly billed “pro-women” policies have been enacted in neighboring West Bengal, where Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee of the All India Trinamool Congress has implemented a [bicycle scheme](#) for women and [increased compensation](#) for grassroots female government workers. Of course, it is notable that many of the schemes being touted as “pro-women” are [premised](#) on the idea of women as caregivers preoccupied by domestic responsibilities who supposedly need to be protected. While the causal relationship between women-centric welfare schemes and electoral success is not conclusive, it is clear that political parties are ramping up their outreach to female voters.

Unpacking Female Voter Turnout

The study of gender in politics in India is often limited to evaluating the gender imbalance in voting. While important, this scope is excessively narrow, for at least two reasons. First, political engagement predominantly occurs between elections and is marked by repeated contact with the state given how welfare provisions and government programs are

administered. Moreover, the dearth of granular data on female political engagement means it is difficult to generate larger insights on women as political actors and their underlying motivations.

To overcome these limitations, the author conducted two surveys—in 2022 and 2023—of female citizens in rural Bihar to collect comprehensive data on contextually sensitive measures of female political engagement. The 2022 survey sampled 1,900 women in rural Bihar between January and March and collected data on female political engagement across a range of contextually sensitive measures. The 2023 survey, collected in June that year, randomly sampled a subset of 642 women from the 2022 survey and collected additional data on their perceptions of barriers to female political engagement using a vignette experiment. Data from these surveys, combined with the 2009 and 2014 NES, reveal three key results on female electoral participation.

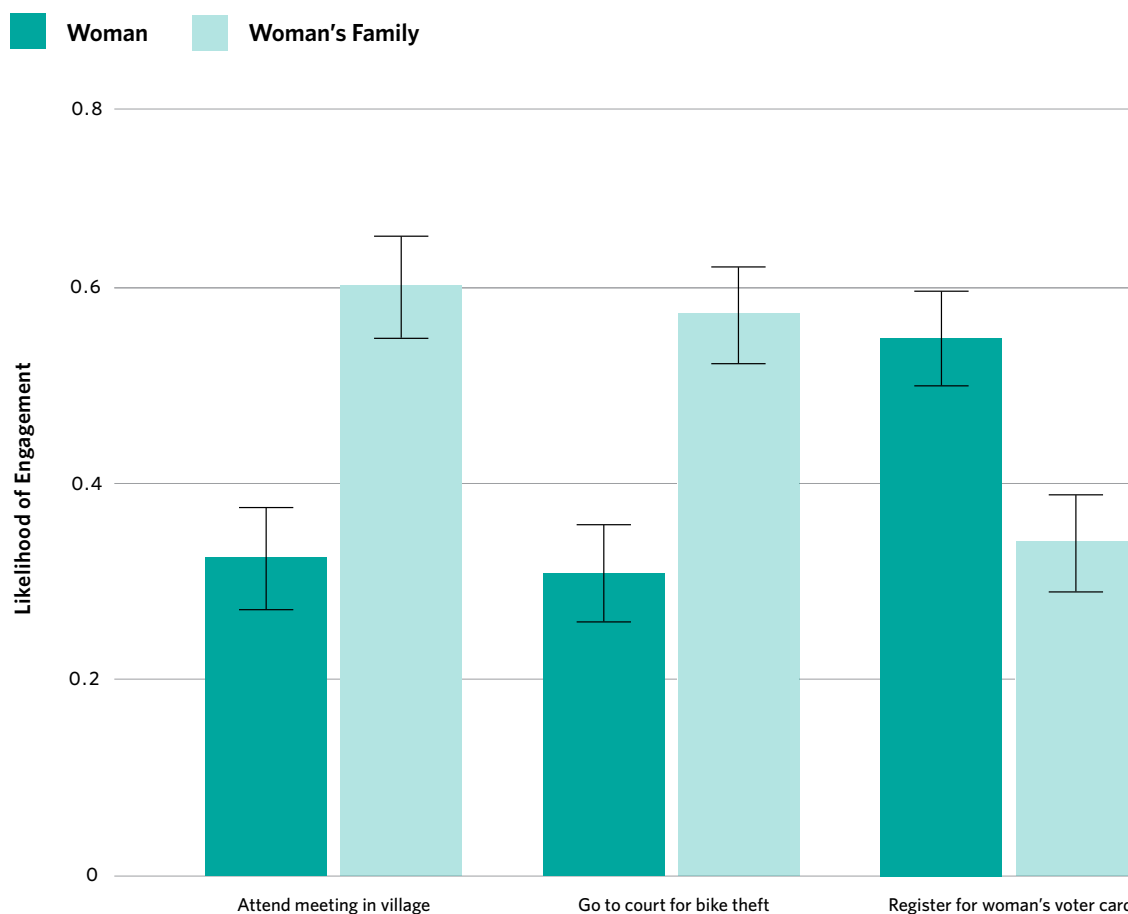
Muted Gatekeeping Norms for Voting-Related Engagement

Restrictions on [women's mobility](#) and public presence, including their [political engagement](#), are quite common within Indian households. In patriarchal contexts characterized by gender-biased norms, a woman's own family members—including her husband or in-laws—might gatekeep or restrict her presence in public spaces as a way to uphold conservative norms that look down upon female presence beyond the household. Therefore, in the presence of their gatekeepers, women might exhibit lower levels of political engagement.

In a face-to-face survey experiment (included within the 2023 survey) in Bihar, respondents were shown a vignette about the household structure of a hypothetical woman living in their neighborhood. The vignette randomly varied the household structure by modifying the presence of gatekeepers within this hypothetical woman's household. Respondents were then asked to identify an individual within the household who was likely to engage in a randomly chosen political engagement activity, such as registering for a voter card, attending a village meeting related to a family dispute, or going to court for a hearing about the theft of a bike from a household. The activities were based on qualitative fieldwork within the community, and they included a range of electoral and nonelectoral repertoires in which citizens are routinely engaged.

Figure 2 presents the likelihood of the hypothetical woman being selected to carry out the specified political engagement activity over other gatekeepers in her household. Averaging across all household scenarios with and without gatekeepers, other family members (such as a woman's husband, her in-laws, or her teenage son) were nearly 25 percent more likely to be selected over the woman featured in the vignette to represent the household at a village meeting or in court.

Figure 2. Women Enjoy Greater Autonomy Over Voting Related Political Engagement



Note: The figure displays responses to the survey question: “Rank the family members based on their likelihood of carrying out this political engagement task.” The error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.
Source: Author’s survey of women in Bihar, 2023.

Interestingly, this finding did not extend to registering a voter card: women were 20 percent more likely than their gatekeepers to register themselves. This finding has two important implications. First, it confirms that gatekeeping severely restricts the ability of women to participate in the political arena as citizens. Second, it suggests that, compared to other forms of engagement, gatekeeping is less pronounced in the case of voting. This is an important finding that suggests that rising female voter turnout has possibly changed gatekeeping norms around electoral participation. Specifically, it implies that gatekeeping norms have a relatively muted effect on electoral participation, compared to their strong effect on other forms of political engagement.

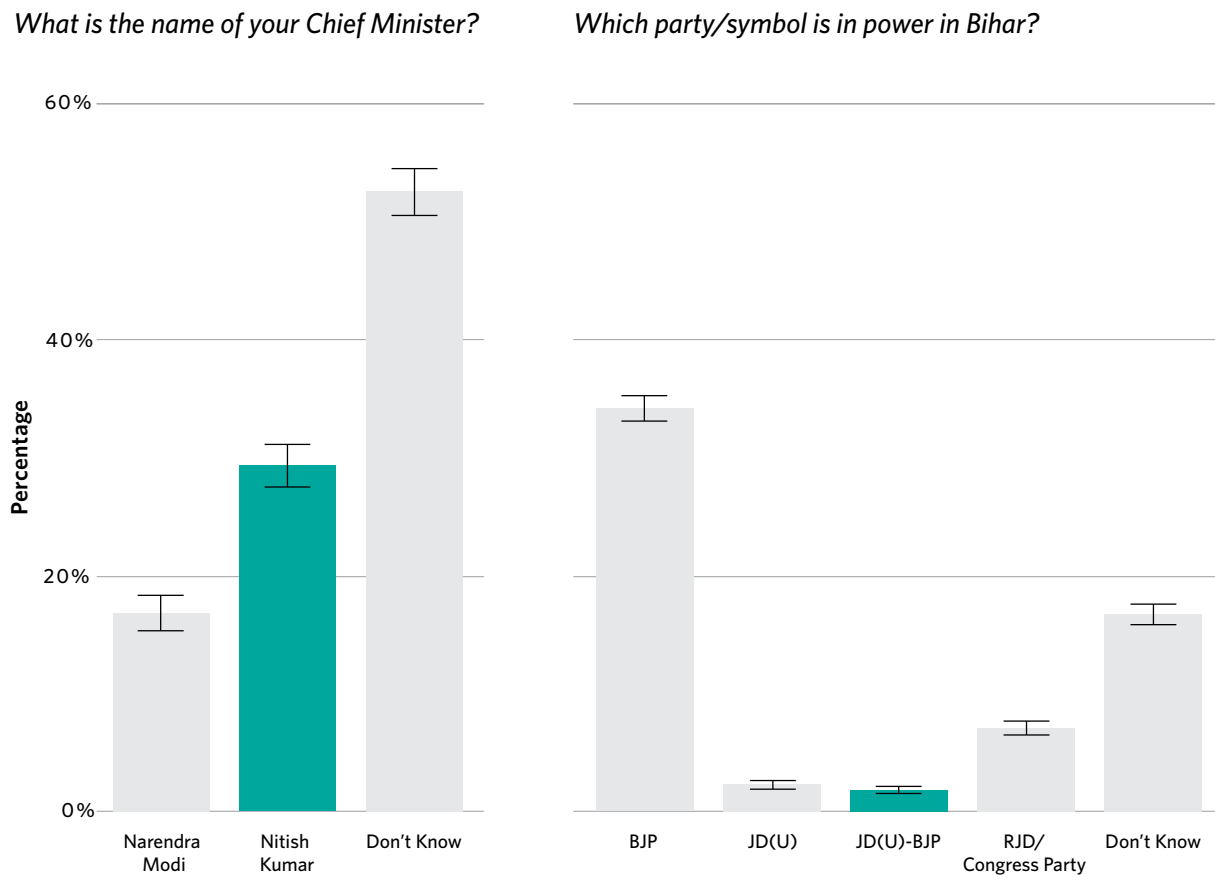
BJP's Electoral Symbol Dominates the Consciousness of Female Voters in Rural Bihar

As discussed earlier, parties across the political spectrum have pursued policies to attract female voters. The BJP's outreach has centered around mobilizing women through [norm-compliant strategies](#) that focus on their care-related responsibilities. In particular, Modi has [exalted](#) himself as the provider for women and their welfare. As the prime minister recently [remarked](#), “When mother and sisters are empowered, then the entire family is empowered. Therefore, the priority of the [government] is the welfare of mothers and sisters.” Fieldwork in northern Bihar revealed that women who might not know the names of their *mukhiya* (village leader) or state chief minister were readily able to identify Modi. While it was harder for them to correctly identify his position, female respondents would regularly say things like “*Modi sarkar hai*” (Modi is the government) or “*Modi Bharat ke malik hai*” (Modi is the leader of India).

The survey also included a battery of questions that attempted to systematically measure the extent of women's political knowledge. For example, one survey question asked women to name their state chief minister. Around 30 percent of respondents were able to correctly identify Nitish Kumar, but over 18 percent incorrectly named Modi as Bihar chief minister (see figure 3). An overwhelming majority of respondents were unable to answer the question. These results suggest that the BJP's Modi-centric marketing strategy is blurring the lines between local and national politics. The BJP's strategy of promoting Modi as the face of the party in both national and state elections is creating a widely-held perception that the prime minister is the key political figure at both the federal and subnational levels.

The BJP's dominance over political discourse was further solidified when female respondents were asked to identify the party in power in Bihar (right-hand panel of figure 3). When asked this question, only 1.6 percent of respondents correctly identified the JD(U)-BJP coalition as being in power. However, almost 35 percent of respondents identified only the BJP or *kamal* (the lotus flower, the BJP's election symbol) as the primary party in power. Despite JD(U) being the regional heavyweight and party of the state chief minister, fewer than 2 percent of respondents correctly identified it as the primary party in power. While these results might not directly answer whether the BJP is disproportionately benefiting from women-centric welfare policies, they signal that—at least in the eyes of women in Bihar—Modi and the BJP's visibility far surpasses that of other local parties active in the state.

Figure 3. Testing the Extent of Women’s Political Knowledge

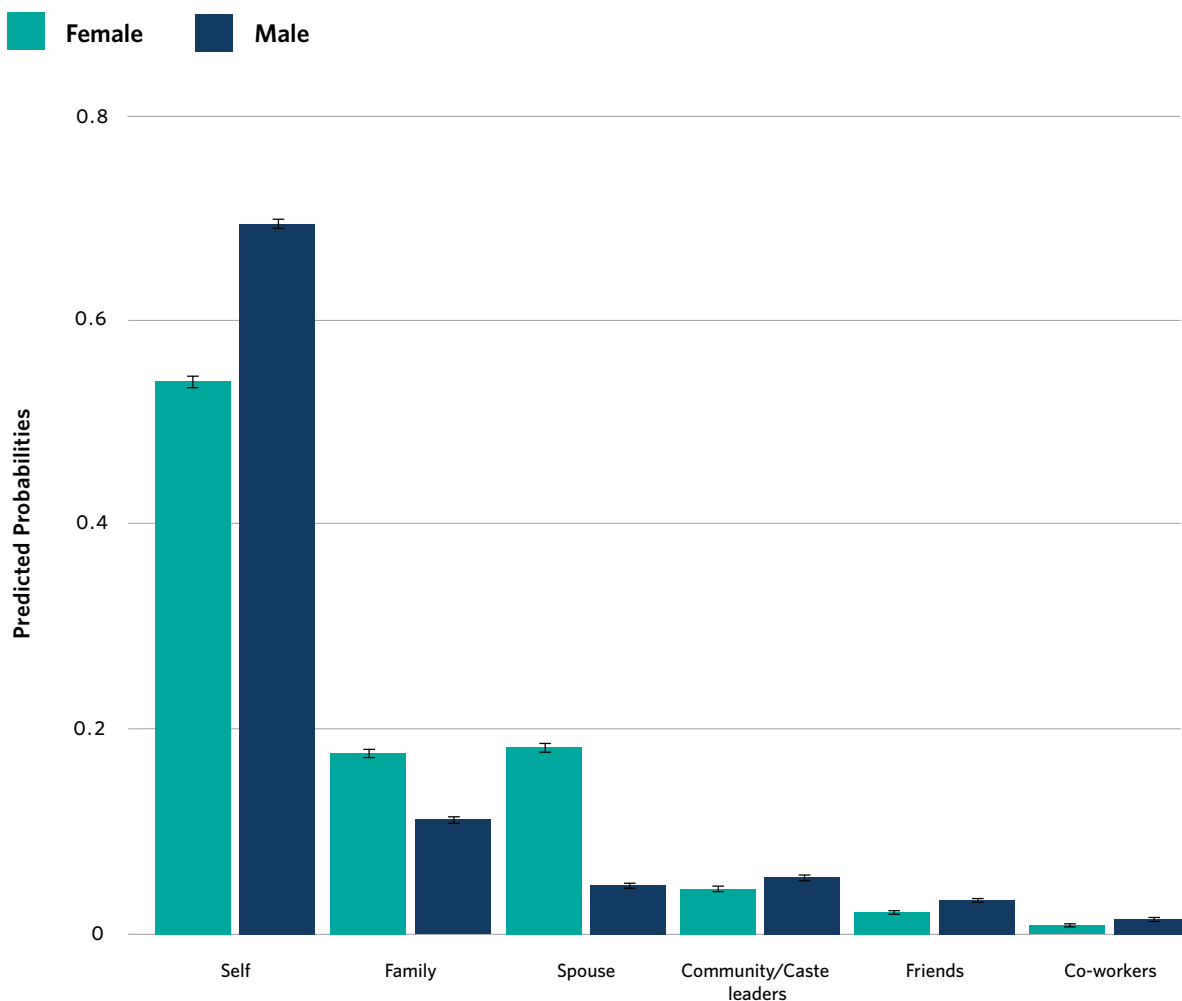


Abbreviations: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Janata Dal United (JD[U]), Indian National Congress (Congress Party), and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD).
 Note: The left panel displays responses to the survey question: “What is the name of your Chief Minister?” The chief minister at the time was Nitish Kumar. The right panel displays responses to the survey question: “Which party/symbol is in power in Bihar?” At the time of the survey, the JD(U) and BJP formed a coalition government in the state. The error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.
 Source: Author’s survey of women in Bihar, 2022 and 2023.

Heterogeneity in Women’s Voting Decisions

While the growth in female turnout is a welcome development, women exercise much less agency than men when it comes to their vote choice. The NES survey asks voters to name who had the most influence on their voting decision. In both 2009 and 2014, roughly 55 percent of women on average reported making the decision themselves compared to 70 percent of men—reflecting a stark gender gap on this measure (see figure 4). Men were more likely to rely on a mix of family and other network members when deciding how to vote. In contrast, women—who typically have smaller social networks—relied more heavily on household members, particularly their spouses, to make this decision. In other words, the household influence on women’s lives extends to the political realm.

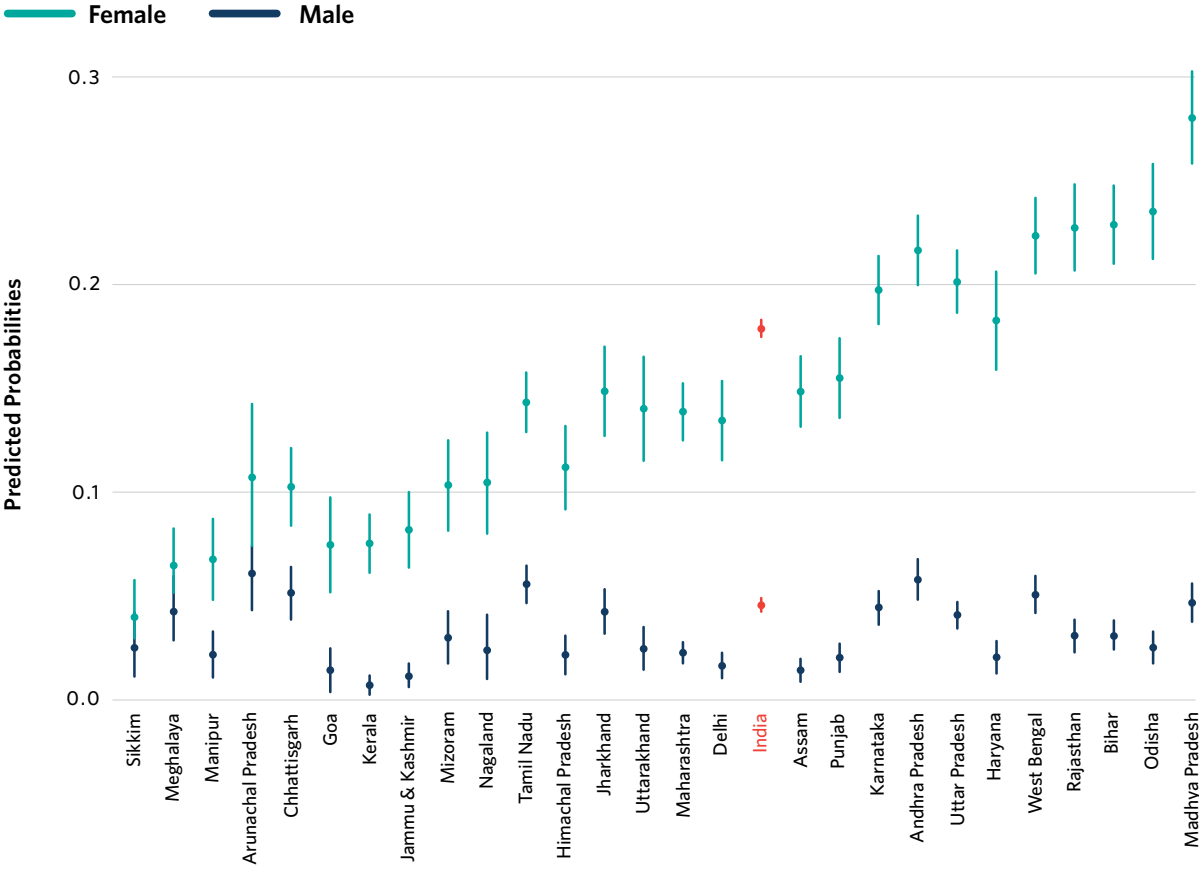
Figure 4. Women Exhibit Less Autonomy Over Voting Decisions



Note: The figure displays responses to the survey question: “Whose opinion has the most influence on your voting decision?” The error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.
Source: National Election Studies, 2009 and 2014, Lokniti Programme for Comparative Democracy at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, accessed at <https://www.lokniti.org/national-election-studies>.

However, this specific measure of female agency—the ability to determine one’s vote choice—demonstrates significant variation across states (see figure 5). Women in the so-called Hindi heartland and in eastern India (in states like Odisha and West Bengal) are more likely to seek their spouse’s opinion. The variation women exhibit on this measure aligns closely with other indicators of female empowerment, such as experience with domestic violence and autonomy in household decisionmaking.

Figure 5. Women’s Voting Autonomy Consistently Lags Men’s



Note: The figure displays the probability respondents seek their spouse’s opinion on voting decisions, disaggregated by gender and state. Source: National Election Study, 2009 and 2014, Lokniti Programme for Comparative Democracy at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, accessed at <https://www.lokniti.org/national-election-studies>.

Looking Ahead at the 2024 Election

Female voters have become a formidable force in Indian elections. Now more than ever, political parties have made women a central preoccupation of both their electoral campaigns as well as their governing strategies once in office. With the eventual implementation of gender quotas in state and national legislatures, gender could become an important identity shaping electoral outcomes.

However, the euphoria over female turnout surpassing male turnout must be placed within a broader social context. Despite rising female voter participation, the number of female candidates fielded by major parties in this year’s election remains low. In 2019, female candidates made up less than one-tenth (8.9 percent) of the overall candidate pool—a record high, but still abysmally low.

Moreover, the rise in female turnout is occurring alongside a declining female labor force participation rate and a persistent gender gap in many other forms of political engagement (including the act of contesting elections as a candidate). According to the author's own survey data, when asked about the key issues facing their village, women identified the dearth of employment opportunities almost as often as the need for clean drinking water—a well-known female-centric public good.

Therefore, parties' discourse on women—on the campaign trail and in the corridors of power—is excessively one-dimensional. It views women as caregivers and individuals who must be provided for. This not only entrenches patriarchal thinking, but it also fails to create a separate identity for women outside the household. For women to participate as equal citizens in society, strategies to improve women's voter turnout must also be accompanied by consistent efforts to improve female autonomy across social, political, and economic arenas.

CHAPTER 5

How the BJP Wins Over Women

Anirvan Chowdhury

India has experienced a decade of political churning with little sign of abating. With the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014, India's conservative movement has found new wind in its sails. This rejuvenation has sparked a wave of cultural revivalism, reshaped party systems, altered caste equations, and prompted a shift toward mercantilist economic ideologies.

Adding to these winds of change, the past decade and a half has witnessed a remarkable increase in women's political participation, which has led to a scramble among political parties to consolidate the "women's vote" with varying degrees of success. This essay reviews India's electoral history through a gendered lens, with a focus on contemporary India and the BJP's persistent efforts to mobilize women. It examines how India's dominant right-of-center ruling party has successfully incorporated women into political spaces by propagating politics through the moral concept of *seva*, or selfless service. This strategy, among others, has, over a relatively short period of time, helped reverse the party's [historical deficit](#) with women.

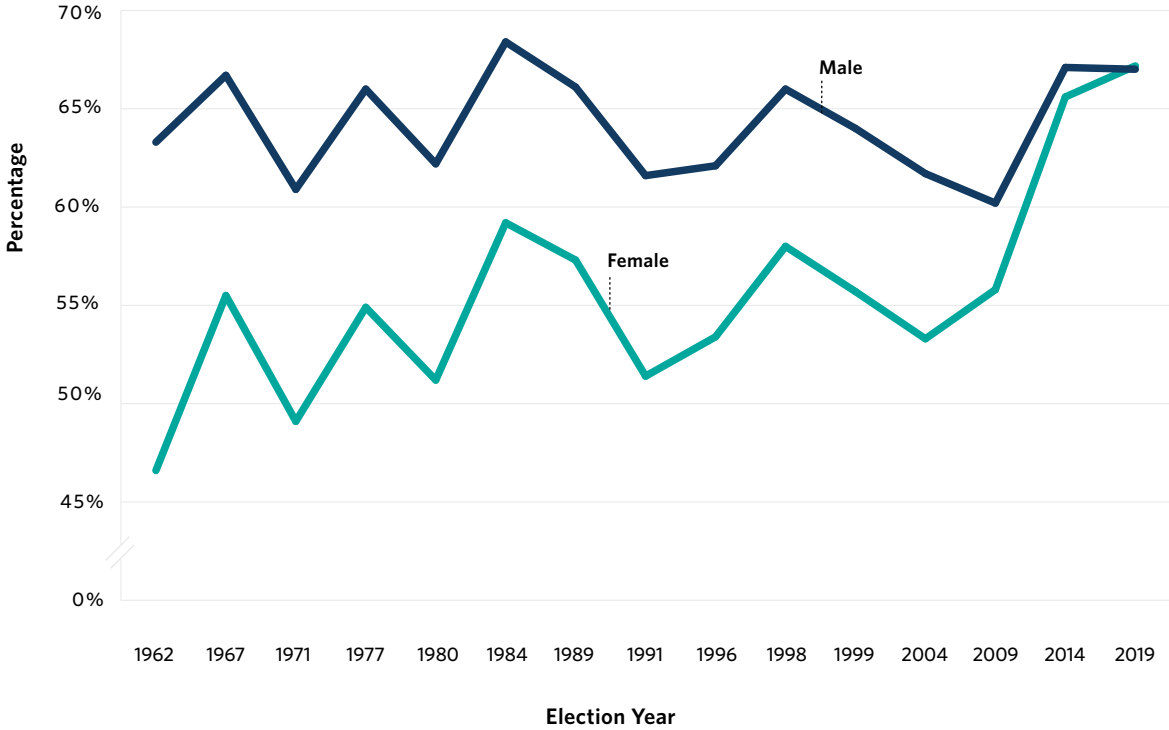
Reversal of Fortune: Women's Political Engagement

Globally, the political sphere has largely been the domain of men, with women trailing in terms of electoral turnout, political candidacy, activism, and engagement. In countries considered "[first-wave democracies](#)" (1828–1926), where democratic expansion led to male but typically not female suffrage, women faced innumerable arduous battles to secure their right to vote; suffrage movements were thus a critical first step in women's mobilization.

In India, in contrast, universal adult franchise was enshrined in the constitution and ensured political equality for women from the moment of the country’s independence in 1947. Yet lived experience has not always measured up to that promised equality. When it came to voting, for instance, women’s turnout was significantly lower than men’s. In the 1962 elections, the first election for which voter data were disaggregated by gender, only 47 percent of eligible women voters cast their ballots, in stark contrast to 63 percent of men (see figure 1). Furthermore, even when women did vote, they were likely to be influenced or even directed by male family members. For instance, in the 1996 national elections, survey data revealed that [86 percent of women heeded their families’ advice](#) when making their polling decisions.

However, there are clear signs of cracks appearing in this historically gendered narrative. As shown in figure 1, historically women’s voter turnout paralleled men’s in its fluctuations, but a divergence occurred in 2009: women’s participation increased even as men’s decreased.

Figure 1. Disappearing Gender Gap in Voter Turnout



Note: Voter turnout is calculated as the number of male/female voters divided by the number of male/female electors. Figure includes data from general elections held between 1962 and 2019. Source: Election Commission of India, <https://eci.gov.in>.

Since then, women have continued to exercise their right to vote in increasing numbers, with the gender gap entirely vanishing in the 2019 general elections. For the first time on record, women's poll participation exceeded men's.

Furthermore, the assumption that women simply vote in tandem with men is also coming under scrutiny. In the 2014 general election, [only 61 percent](#) of women said they followed their family's advice when making their voting decision—a sharp decline from the past. Similarly, in 2021, the author surveyed 1,457 pairs of men and women living in the same household in Rajasthan—often considered among India's most patriarchal states—and found that, although overall levels of support for the BJP and the Indian National Congress (INC, hereafter the Congress Party) were comparable among men and women, there was notable diversity within households. Only 65 percent of women shared the same political allegiance as the men living in their households, indicating significant intrahousehold heterogeneity.⁶

BJP's Emerging Advantage Among Women

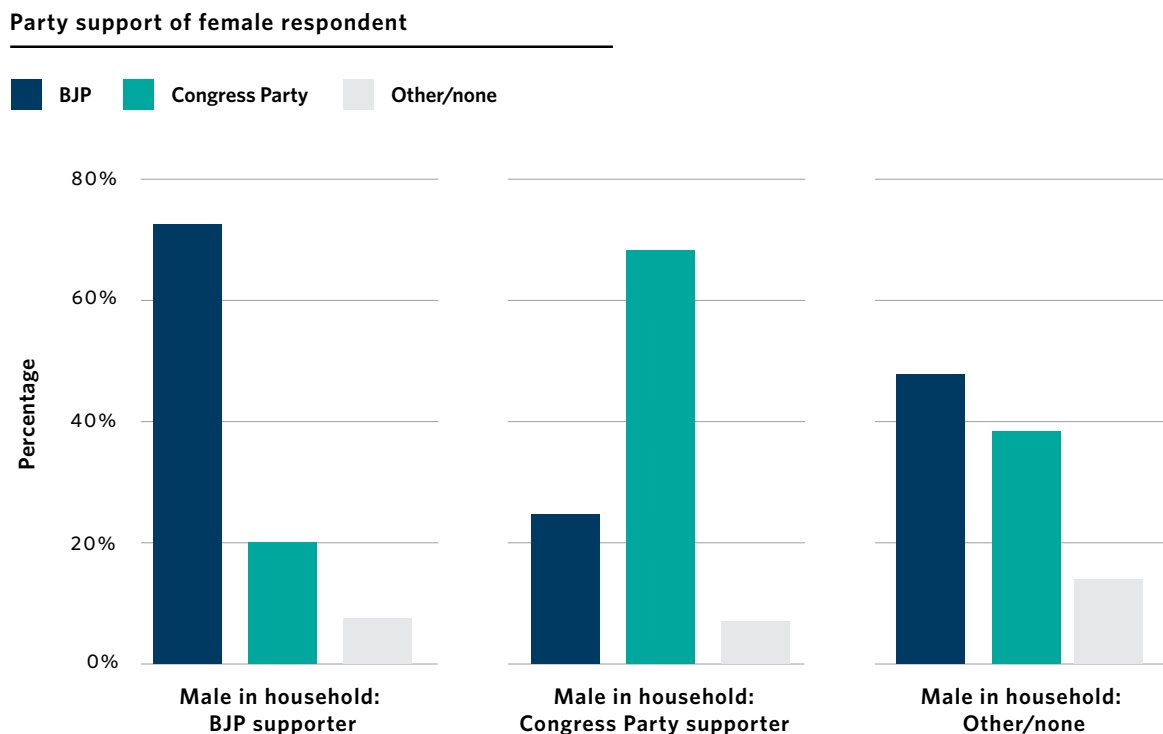
Much of this heightened engagement on the part of women has a partisan tilt. In recent state assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh (2022) and Madhya Pradesh (2023), exit polls conducted by Axis-MyIndia showed that the BJP received a larger share of votes from women than its opponents did.⁷ In Rajasthan, the author's research showed that when women deviated from men in the political realm, women tended to lean toward the BJP.

In BJP-aligned households, 73 percent of women reported that they were also aligned with the BJP. However, in Congress Party-aligned households, only 68 percent of women followed men's political preferences, with 25 percent aligning themselves with the rival BJP instead (see figure 2). Men's ability to consolidate the household vote diminished further when they did not exhibit a clear preference; in these homes, the BJP was again the biggest gainer—with 48 percent of women aligning themselves with the party.

Although the findings were tentative, there are strong indications that women's escalating political assertion poses a challenge for political parties in the Hindi heartland, especially those organized around caste lines. While caste has been the traditional linchpin of the Indian polity, the BJP is attempting to leverage gender as a vertical cleavage to counter traditional caste-based mobilization. Indeed, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's acknowledgment of this strategic approach was evident in a recent [proclamation](#) that for him, rather than traditional caste identities, women constituted one of the “biggest castes” alongside the poor, youth, and farmers.

There are signs that this strategy is paying off. For instance, in the 2020 state assembly elections in Bihar, a staggering 99 of the 125 seats (79 percent) secured by the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) were won in [constituencies](#) where women's voter turnout exceeded men's. The BJP's traction among women was also pronounced in Uttar

Figure 2. Pro-BJP Tilt in Women’s Political Preferences

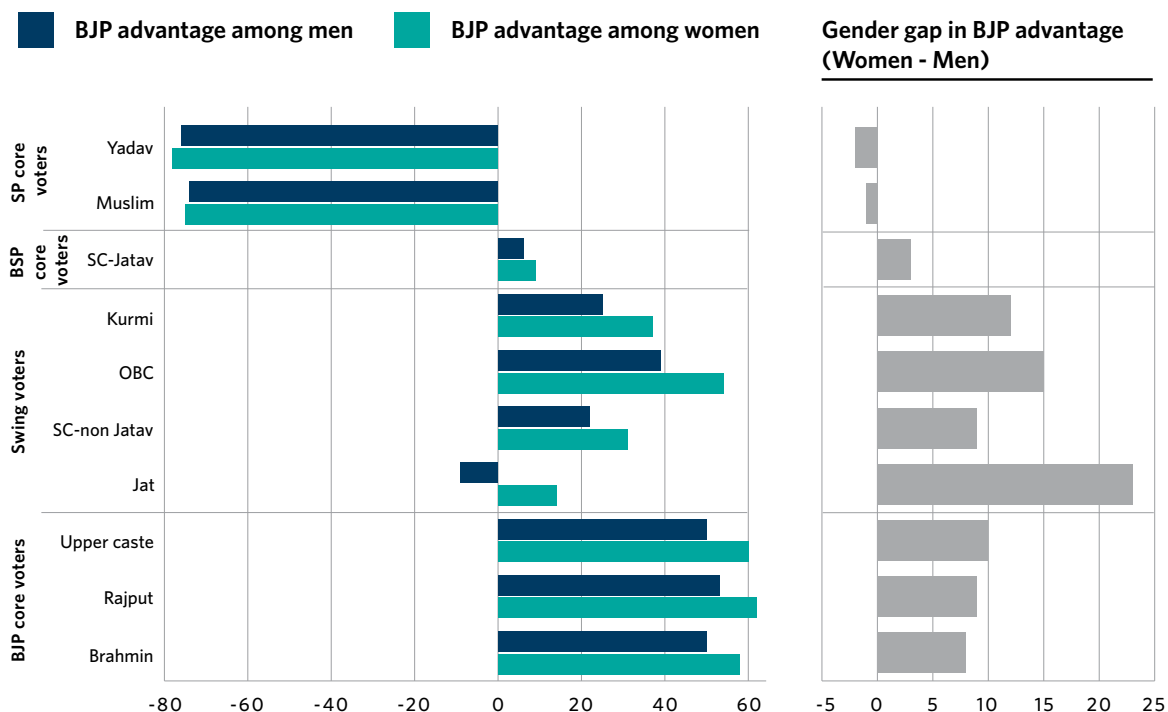


Abbreviations: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Indian National Congress (Congress Party).
Note: The bars represent the share of women who supported a given party under three conditions—when the male respondent supported the BJP, supported the Congress Party, or did not have a clear preference.
Source: Author’s survey of 1,457 households in Rajasthan, 2021.

Pradesh—India’s most populous state—as evidenced by community-specific, gender-disaggregated patterns from exit polls conducted by Axis-MyIndia in that state’s 2022 Legislative Assembly election (see figure 3).

Among upper caste groups, the BJP’s advantage over the Samajwadi Party (SP), the most potent opposition force in Uttar Pradesh, aligns with expectations given that upper castes have long constituted a core element of the BJP’s support base. Here too, the BJP gains more from women than men. Similarly, the BJP’s disadvantage among Muslims and Yadavs—the latter a large backward caste that forms the key base of the SP—is also unsurprising. But what is remarkable is the BJP’s advantage over the SP among women belonging to smaller but electorally significant caste groups—so-called swing voters—such as Jats, Kurmis, non-Yadav Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and non-Jatav Scheduled Castes (SCs). Even among Jatavs, members of the Dalit community who have long supported the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)—another important regional political front that emerged as a response to the hegemony of upper caste groups, the BJP’s core base—the BJP has an advantage over the SP when it comes to women.⁸

Figure 3. BJP's gender advantage over SP in Uttar Pradesh, 2022



Abbreviations: Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Samajwadi Party (SP), Scheduled Caste (SC), Other Backward Classes (OBC).
 Note: The blue bars represent the BJP's advantage over the SP among men, and the teal bars represent the BJP's advantage over the SP among women. The grey bars represent the BJP's gender advantage over the SP, defined as the BJP's advantage among women minus its advantage among men.
 Source: Axis MyIndia Exit Poll results, Uttar Pradesh 2022.

From Turnout to Active Participation: Women Within Political Parties

While the BJP has found some success in its attempts to mobilize women, other parties have not thrown in the towel. The preferred approach of nearly all parties, including the BJP, to solicit the women's vote has largely been through targeted "pro-women" policies. The list of such offerings is long; it includes the Janata Dal (United)'s implementation of [prohibition](#) in Bihar, the All India Trinamool Congress's [Kanyashree](#) conditional cash transfer program, and the BJP's [Ladli Behna](#) unconditional cash transfer (in Madhya Pradesh) and [Ujjwala](#) gas cylinder subsidy (at the national level). Yet there is little evidence about the effectiveness of any one welfare program since competing parties often make similar promises.

Moreover, parties face hurdles in communicating these policy platforms to women because of disparities in political knowledge, networks, and socialization. Bridging this gap necessitates investing in a cadre of activists capable of engaging and mobilizing women through personal contact. While this investment can reap dividends for all parties, it is particularly crucial for parties rooted in social movements like the BJP, whose success relies not only on electoral triumphs but also on [garnering broader support for its cultural and ideological objectives](#).

At the same time, gender mobilization presents a challenge for parties whose organizations are typically populated by male activists. In particular, the sex-segregated nature of social interactions means that male activists are typically restricted to interacting with other men in public spaces or living rooms of homes. Women, on the other hand, as I was told—and observed firsthand—several times, could access the “*chulha*” (private spaces) to speak with women voters. Thus, gender-based outreach requires parties to invest in recruiting women.

Against this backdrop, the BJP’s inextricable association with Hindutva (the common shorthand for Hindu nationalism, literally “Hindu-ness”) is often perceived as a masculine and muscular manifestation of religious nationalism, which may seem at odds with the party’s emerging success in recruiting women. However, the [author’s analysis](#) based on survey data from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies suggests that women’s affinity for the BJP transcends mere voting preferences. Despite Hindutva’s association with masculine imagery, women who support the BJP exhibit levels of engagement in electoral activities comparable to or even surpassing those of women aligned with other political parties. In recent years, this trend has become increasingly pronounced, with the BJP outpacing its rivals in mobilizing female supporters. What, then, can explain the BJP’s seemingly paradoxical success in recruiting women and engaging them in the public sphere?

Domesticating Politics Through Seva

To understand why the BJP successfully mobilizes women voters, one must acknowledge the barriers that women face in entering political life. A critical obstacle is the widespread perception of politics as dirty and immoral, making it particularly unsuitable for women. This perception is ingrained in patriarchal societies, where women are often tasked with upholding family honor and social status. Consequently, any deviation that women pursue from established norms may incur reputational costs for themselves and social costs for their families, prompting household heads to gatekeep women’s political involvement.

But at the same time, when Indians are asked about what politics *should* be, a different narrative emerges—one centering on moral ideals rooted in the concept of *seva*, or selfless service. Here, *seva* not only connotes the material provision of goods and services but also embodies traits that citizens desire in their representatives—being accessible to constituents, empathizing with them, and supporting them in their hour of need. This narrative reverses, even if notionally and momentarily, the lived hierarchy between citizens and politicians.

Drawing on these moral conceptions, the BJP—particularly since Modi’s rise to power in 2014—has strategically framed its political discourse around the principle of *seva*. Modi has appealed to voters’ moral sensibilities, including by pronouncing himself as a *pradhan sevak* (prime servitor), celebrating his birthday through a *seva saptah/pakhwara* (service week/fort-night), and conducting coronavirus relief campaigns under the banner of *seva hi sangathan* (organization is service) and *seva aur samarpan abhiyan* (service and dedication mission). This aligns with the [BJP positioning itself as a social service organization](#) that serves as a crucial interface between state and society.

At the same time, *seva* is also a descriptively gendered norm portraying a hierarchical relationship characterized by women’s caregiving duties within the home. Although *seva* is not innately gendered, women bear a disproportionate share of the physical and emotional labor of caregiving in India, rendering *seva* a feminine-identified trait.⁹ Indeed, an aptitude for service (*seva bhaav*) is often used as an informal gauge of a woman’s character.

And here, the BJP’s emphasis on *seva* frames politics as role-congruent for women. Activists in the BJP Mahila Morcha, the party’s women’s wing, often described their motivations for joining politics in the norm-compliant terms of *seva*, portraying their own engagement and mobilization efforts as social service rather than politics. Their organizational outreach methods—organizing medical camps, blood donation and cleanliness drives, tree planting and wildlife conservation initiatives, religious and cultural celebrations, and cultural and moral education—mirror the *seva* frame. Moreover, these activities are carefully aligned with local cultures and historically revered women figures such as environmentalist [Amrita Devi Bishnoi](#), with the goal of creating an affective connection with communities and helping draw women into the fold. In a survey of 128 women activists in Rajasthan conducted by the author, BJP activists classified 51 percent of events they organized within the *seva* rubric, compared to 37 percent for the Congress Party.

Crucially, this norm-compliant framing helps portray politics as an extension of women’s domestic roles and renders it acceptable to families that might otherwise be opposed to women’s transitions into the public sphere. In a discrete choice experiment conducted in 2021 with 1,457 pairs of women and male gatekeepers in the same household, the author found that women preferred norm-compliant *seva* as a means for political engagement compared to public meetings or norm-undermining protests.

When asked why *seva* was effective, a BJP councillor described how *seva* had helped her bridge the private and public spheres. “Politics,” she said, “is just like what we do at home. Even though men give the money to run the home, it is our hard work and sacrifice that keeps the family together. Now if we speak of politics, men contest elections and pursue higher office, but the *sangathan* (organization) and *samaj* (society) will fall apart were it not for our *seva*.”¹⁰

Simultaneously, women's families and particularly men were also far more accepting of women's political participation when it was framed as *seva*. This was evident not only in the discrete choice experiment, where men were more encouraging of women's political participation when partisan engagement was framed in norm-compliant terms, but also in qualitative interviews, where *seva* was presented as a channel to access the public sphere, a conduit for party recruitment, and a lever to obtain familial acquiescence by downplaying personal ambition.

As one BJP councillor told the author, "I come from a BJP[-aligned] family as does my husband . . . I was interested in politics but got married after college. My in-laws were totally opposed [to me joining politics]. But they did say, 'If you want to do *samaj seva* (social service) that's fine with us.' Then in 1995, we heard that seats would be reserved for women in the municipal elections. And because my *seva* had given me an identity, parties approached me. I knew my family wasn't very interested, so initially I declined. But our Vaidya ji (traditional medical practitioner), who is a family friend, told my husband, 'We always complain there are no good people in politics. Well, now you have an opportunity to change this. If your wife doesn't contest, the wife of some other crooked politician will win, and we will keep complaining.' My husband thought about this for a while and then discussed this with me and his parents. My in-laws respect Vaidya ji, and they also saw I had never been at the forefront of wanting to fight the election myself, so they thought this might, after all, be the right thing to do."¹¹ That men [had stronger preferences about women's participation than women themselves](#) highlights the importance of considering social norms and familial gatekeeping when designing strategies to mobilize women.

The Way Forward

As the significance of women as pivotal political actors grows, political parties are updating their engagement strategies. The BJP's electoral campaign in 2024, for instance, is strategically aiming to integrate itself into preexisting nonpartisan women's mobilization channels, like the self-help group movement, by announcing initiatives such as *lakhpati didi* to encourage women in self-help groups to grow their earnings. But will mobilization necessarily lead to greater agency and representation? Much will depend on women's ability to exercise their voices and advocate for their own interests, not to mention the responsiveness of their representatives. In an initial move toward addressing these concerns, the BJP government passed a [legislation](#) reserving one-third of state and national legislative seats for women, breaking through years of legislative inertia.

Notwithstanding this progress, the BJP's tenure has been marked by contentious policies, including [notifications](#) that married women require their husbands' consent to keep their maiden names and an indefinite delay in the actual implementation of women's reservation across the country's legislatures. The outcome of these developments remains uncertain, but considering how parties should adapt to women's evolving roles—while accounting for domestic and social constraints that inhibit them—is critical for the prospects of political parties going forward.

How Technology Is (and Isn't) Transforming Election Campaigns in India

Shahana Sheikh

India epitomizes the global communication technology revolution. In the early 1990s, there were only an estimated [six landline phones](#) for every 1,000 Indians and the waiting time for a new phone connection was measured not in days or weeks, but months. Today, smartphones—the primary devices Indians use to access the internet and social media—can be purchased over the counter within minutes and their presence is ubiquitous. This transformation is further enabled by the affordability of mobile data in India, which has some of the cheapest rates in the world. By the end of 2022, roughly two-thirds of the Indian population were using smartphones, and by 2026, it is predicted the country will be home to [one billion smartphone users](#). In recent years, India's political parties have increasingly turned to social media and the messaging app WhatsApp in their campaigns, leading observers to characterize the 2019 parliamentary election as “[the WhatsApp election](#).”

However, alongside the proliferation of smartphone usage, which allows for low-cost party-voter communication, India's parties continue to conduct mass in-person campaign rallies during election season. For instance, [prior to India's 2019 national general election](#), the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Indian National Congress's (INC, also known as the Congress Party) Rahul Gandhi each addressed around 140 in-person rallies during the official two-month campaign. These were accompanied by even more rallies featuring other high-level leaders (or “star campaigners,” as they are known in Indian parlance) in the run-up to the April–May general elections.

The ongoing prevalence of mass campaign rallies in the digital age motivates a broader question about the modern campaign in India. Why do in-person mass campaign rallies—which are expensive, labor-intensive, and time-consuming—persist when there are cheaper ways for

parties to conduct more targeted outreach online? More specifically, how are internet-based communication technologies—including social media—shaping party campaigns in India today?

Continued Importance of In-Person Campaigning in India

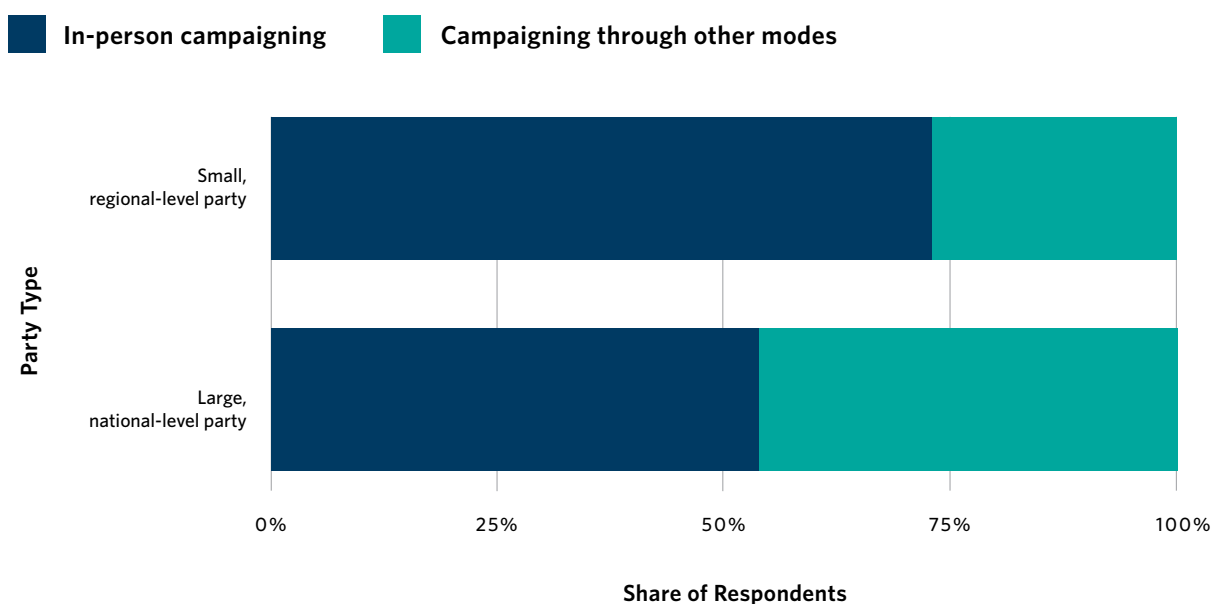
An analysis of parties' self-reported campaign expenditures reveals that, during the [2014](#) and [2019](#) parliamentary elections, both the BJP and the Congress Party spent between one-quarter and one-third of their total campaign expenditure on in-person campaigning, with a substantial share spent on rallies. Nationally representative surveys conducted by the [Lokniti program](#) of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies reveal that during campaigns for the five most recent national parliamentary elections in India—from 1999 to 2019—the share of voters attending election meetings or rallies has remained stable at about 20 percent.

A face-to-face survey conducted by the author with approximately 4,000 voters in Uttar Pradesh (the most populous state in the country) against the backdrop of the 2022 state assembly election revealed that voters consider in-person campaigning to be of high importance for voter outreach. In the survey, each voter was asked to rank the importance of five campaign activities of a party in its voter outreach efforts: door-to-door canvassing, mass campaign rallies, campaigning on social media, party advertisements on TV and radio, and party advertisements on roadside public posters and billboards. As shown in figure 1, for smaller, regional-level parties, 73 percent of surveyed voters considered in-person campaigning—such as door-to-door campaigning and mass campaign rallies—to be the most important campaign activity for voter outreach. Even for large, national-level parties—such as the BJP and the Congress Party—nearly 54 percent of the surveyed voters considered in-person campaigning to be of greatest importance. This suggests that, regardless of the party, voters consider in-person campaigning to be at least as important as campaigning through other modes, such as campaigning on social media, party advertisements in the mass media and on roadside public posters and billboards.

Innovation or Normalization?

[Existing scholarship](#) on how the growing use of the internet will affect party campaign strategy is divided into [two schools of thought](#). The first originates from an optimistic view that posits that the internet can reform politics. It is known as the [innovation hypothesis](#) and holds that as internet use becomes widespread, party campaigns conducted on social media platforms will [substitute](#) for in-person, traditional party campaigns. Proponents of this theory expect digital technologies to [fundamentally upend](#) campaign politics, rendering

Figure 1. Voter Perceptions of the Most Important Party Outreach Activity in Uttar Pradesh, 2022



Note: “In-person campaigning” includes door-to-door canvassing and mass campaign rallies. “Campaigning through other modes” includes campaigning on social media, party advertisements on TV and radio, and party advertisements on roadside public posters and billboards.

Source: Author’s voter survey in Uttar Pradesh, 2022.

physical campaigning obsolete. This prediction, predicated on a logic of technological determinism, implies that a party can potentially run a successful campaign entirely online, without much of a ground presence.

On the other hand, the *normalization hypothesis* asserts that, even as internet use increases, a party’s online campaigns will supplement—rather than replace—traditional, in-person campaign activities. This logic holds that in-person campaigning is expected to *remain central* to party strategy, ultimately resulting in “politics as usual.” In the digital age, physical campaigning will merely be replicated online. This theory suggests that in the future, parties may merely live-stream their in-person campaign events on social media.

However, evidence from recent election campaigns in India does not easily align with either of these hypotheses: online party campaigns have not replaced in-person party campaigns, and traditional, in-person party campaigns are not simply being reproduced on social media platforms.

Content-Complementarity During Party Campaigns in India

In modern Indian political campaigns, parties strategically leverage *content-complementarity*—a two-way relationship between online and in-person campaigning.

For parties, social media creates a perpetual demand for them to produce online content. In-person campaign activities, especially campaign rallies, are a valuable source of content. Scholars have found that rallies achieve a range of purposes, such as solving [asymmetric information within a party](#) and enabling [clientelistic exchanges](#) between [parties and voters](#). In addition, rallies provide parties with online material. This added purpose boosts the importance of rallies today. Moreover, the demand for online content also shapes how parties conduct mass campaign rallies.

In advance of an upcoming rally, a party will broadcast information about it on social media platforms—such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, and WhatsApp—to mobilize lower-level party functionaries and voters.¹² After the rally's conclusion, the party will select specific photographs, speech excerpts, sound bites, and displays of enthusiasm from the rally to share on social media. In an increasingly online world, a party must show voters real-world evidence that it has the support of other voters like them. Voters see [real-world evidence](#) as vital in evaluating a party's fit with their interests. Voters also interpret physical campaigning as indicative of a party's prospects for electoral success.

A party's concurrent use of different campaigning modes extends the rally's shelf life, giving it a pre-life and afterlife on social media. In the digital age, the rally-organizing party can bypass mainstream media, disseminating rally content on social media. For the party that organizes a rally, the benefits of the event are no longer limited to reaching those who physically attend it. Rather, through content circulated on social media, a rally's effects travel to voters' phones transcending the rally's time and place. Content from in-person rallies, when shared on social media, can simultaneously influence voter perceptions of the rally-organizing party and mobilize voters for the party's future rallies.

Content-complementarity manifests most explicitly in content about rally crowds. In the social media era, the size of a rally crowd has taken on a new meaning. Because rally crowds provide ready-made content for parties' online engagement, they are high-stakes endeavors, laden with great risks (if they flop) as well as great rewards (if they succeed). Photographs and videos revealing low turnout are fodder for an opposition party to exploit on social media to mock the rally-organizing party for its apparent lack of support. This can negatively impact voter perceptions about the rally-organizing party and demobilize voters from participating in its campaign.

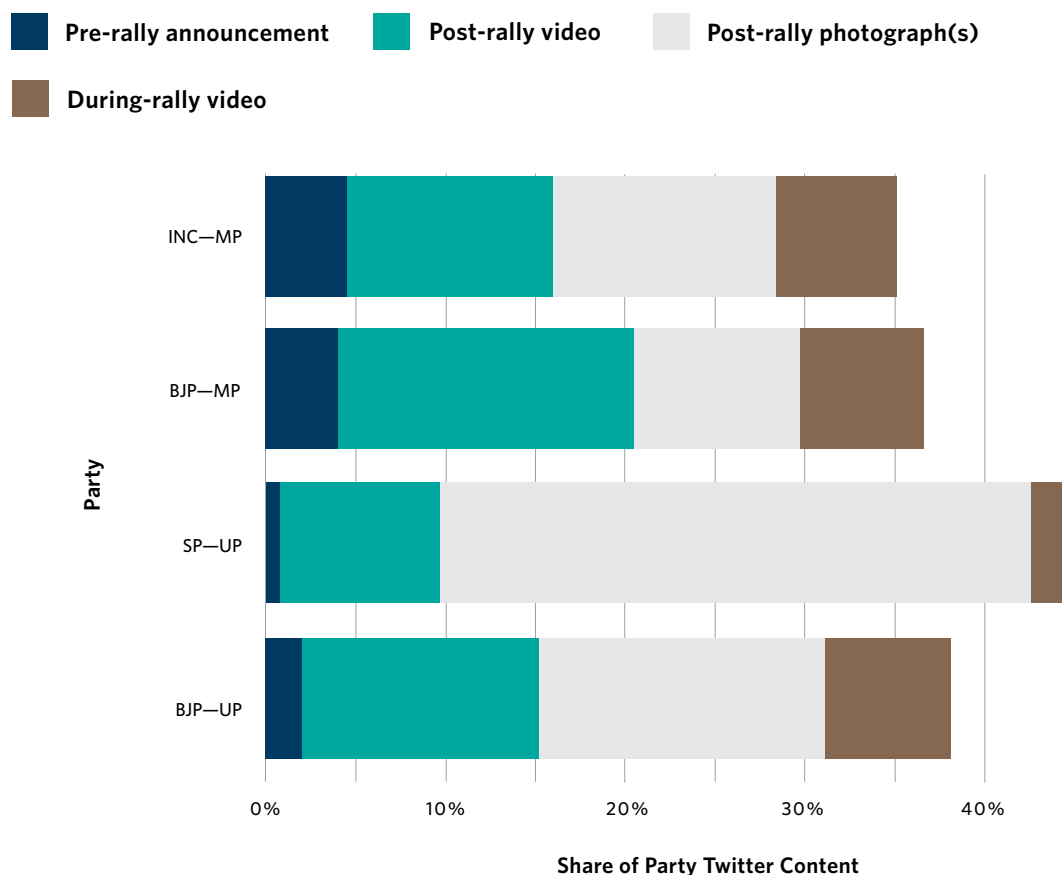
On the other hand, if a large crowd turns out for a rally, the rally-organizing party can boast about the large rally crowd turnout on social media, sharing photographs and video clips. This, in turn, can positively influence voter perceptions about the rally-organizing activity and mobilize voters to participate in its campaign.

Party-Voter Linkages: Evidence From Party Campaigns

To test the parties' use of content-complementarity, the author examined partisan tweets during recent state election campaigns in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. For Uttar Pradesh, the author investigated content on the official Twitter handles of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh (@BJP4UP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) (@samajwadiparty), which were respectively the incumbent and principal challenger in the 2022 state election. A content analysis of nearly 9,300 tweets that appeared from these handles during the campaign period revealed that around 40 percent of partisan tweets included rally content (see figure 2). For both the BJP and the SP, among tweets that contained rally content, at least 75 percent included post-rally content.

For Madhya Pradesh, the author examined content on the official Twitter handles of the state units of the ruling BJP (@BJP4MP) and the opposition Congress Party (@INCMP). A content analysis of around 3,100 tweets that appeared from these handles during the 2023 state election campaign period uncovered a similar pattern. Around 35 percent of tweets contained rally content, and of those, almost 70 percent included post-rally content.

Figure 2. Party Use of Rally Content for Online Engagement on Twitter During Election Campaigns



Abbreviations: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Samajwadi Party (SP), Indian National Congress (INC), Uttar Pradesh (UP), and Madhya Pradesh (MP).

Note: The campaign period is defined as the time from the day the election was announced until the (last) day of voting.

Source: Author's analysis of Twitter data.

A remarkable percentage of partisan Twitter data contained rally content, and a striking proportion of this was post-rally content, which typically consisted of photographs of the rally crowd and the party's campaigner and videos from the campaigner's rally speech.

On Twitter, parties boasted about “historic” crowd sizes at their rallies. For instance, in one tweet, which included an accompanying video with visuals of large rally crowds, [@BJP4UP](#) said: “*jan sailab phir se itihaas likhne jaa raha hai, UP mein phir se kamal khilne jaa raha hai*” (translation: “[this] flood of people is going to write history, the lotus is going to bloom again in UP”).¹³ In another tweet, which included a video with a speech excerpt that referred to the large crowd gathered at the rally site, [@samajwadiparty](#) said: “*aitihasik jansamarthan bata raha hai badlaav hone jaa raha hai*” (translation: “[this] historic people's support is telling us that change is going to happen”).

Party circulation of post-rally content is not limited to Twitter. Among the approximately 400 party functionaries from the BJP and the SP of whom the author conducted a face-to-face survey in Uttar Pradesh in 2022, an overwhelming share (90 percent) said that they posted photographs and/or videos from their party's rallies on WhatsApp and/or Facebook, platforms on which a large share of the Indian electorate is active. Moreover, among the nearly 2,000 respondents surveyed in Uttar Pradesh in 2022 who were smartphone users, 53 percent reported having seen photographs and/or videos of campaign rallies on their phones at least once a day in the lead-up to the state election, suggesting that voters were frequently exposed to online rally content during the campaign. This exposure to rally content has the potential to influence voter perceptions and voter mobilization, especially among smartphone users.

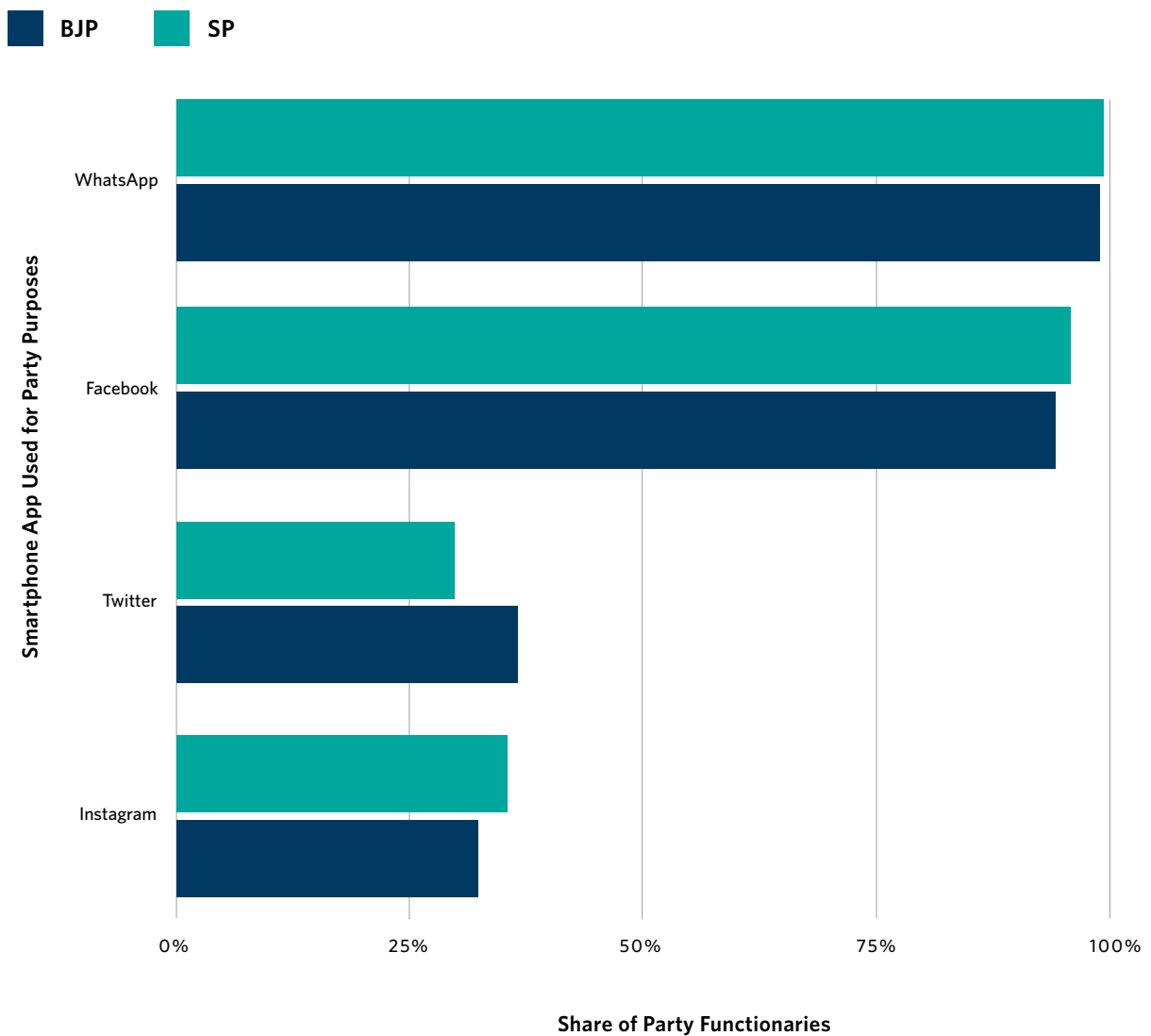
Intra-Party Linkages: Evidence From Party Organization in India

In addition to leveraging content-complementarity for party-voter linkages, parties also utilize this complementarity for building and maintaining intra-party linkages. Each of India's major parties has an organizational vertical—variously referred to as the party's IT and social media cell, department, team, or wing—dedicated to generating and circulating fresh social media content. Content creation and dissemination are among the core functions of these verticals, which operate from a party's top-most level (the national or state level) down to its lowest tier (the polling booth level).

The demand for intra-party online content raises the importance of in-person party events and shapes how they are conducted. Online content associated with in-person party events fosters intra-party online engagement between party elites, party functionaries across hierarchy levels, and grassroots party workers. For instance, after in-person party events, by sharing content from events in which they have participated, party elites and functionaries operating at a party's middle and high levels can cast themselves as role models and attempt to inspire those below them in a party's organizational hierarchy. In turn, lower-level party functionaries and party workers can use social media to signal their ability and loyalty to a party's higher-ups.

To disseminate online content, political parties attempt to establish robust networks online. A survey of party functionaries in Uttar Pradesh found that almost all functionaries of the BJP and the SP made use of smartphone apps for party purposes, especially WhatsApp and Facebook (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Party Functionaries Use of Smartphone Apps for Party Purposes in Uttar Pradesh, 2022



Abbreviations: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Samajwadi Party (SP).
Note: Response to survey question: "Do you use [name of smartphone app] for party purposes?"
Source: Author's survey of party functionaries in Uttar Pradesh, 2022.

Sixty-six percent of surveyed party functionaries said that they had formed new political WhatsApp groups during their party's campaign for the 2022 Uttar Pradesh election. Among those who had formed these groups, roughly 70 percent reported that they had mostly included their party's workers and supporters in these groups, while the remainder reported that they had mostly included voters in these groups. Strikingly, of the party functionaries who had formed WhatsApp groups with voters, around 65 percent said that they obtained voters' phone numbers through door-to-door visits, suggesting another kind of complementarity between a party's in-person and online outreach.

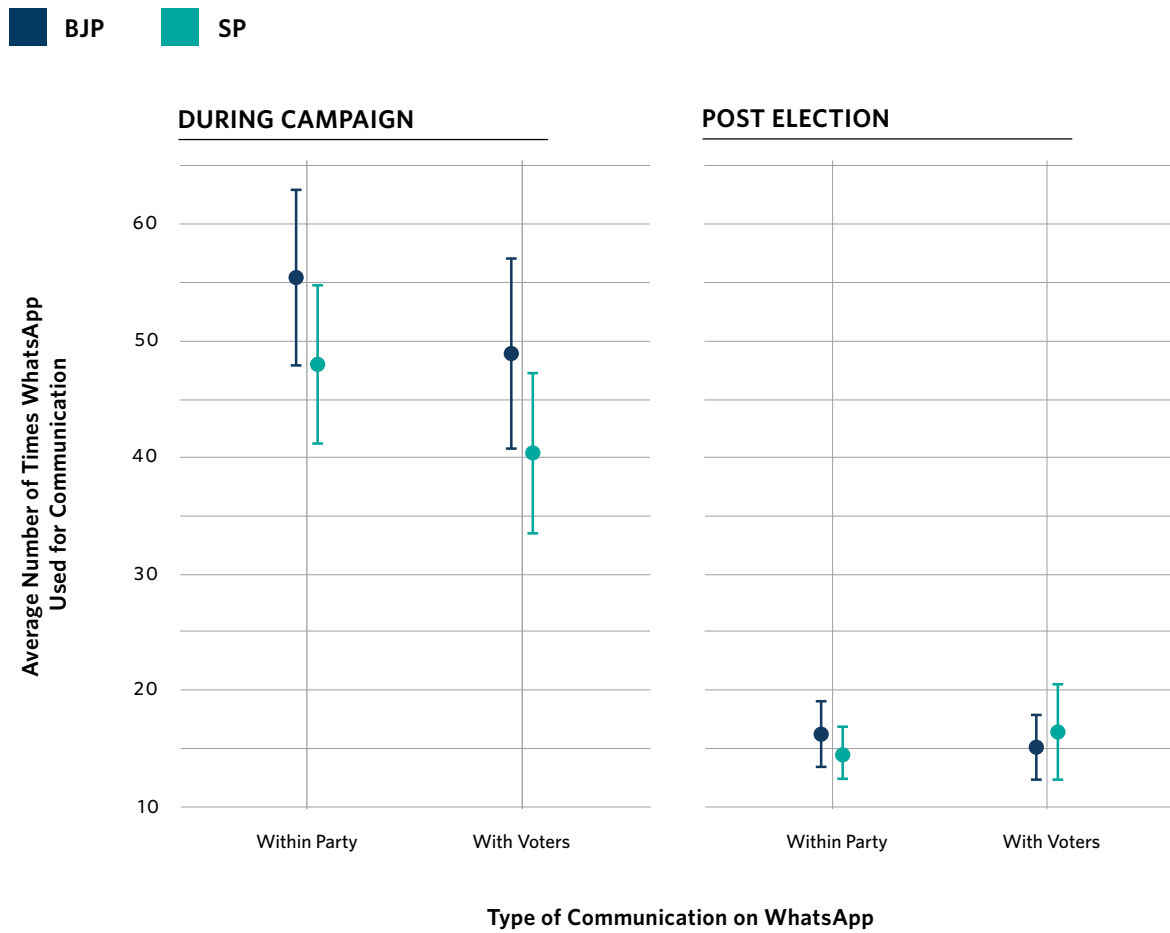
To understand how often party functionaries communicate over WhatsApp for party purposes, the author asked them how many times in a day they used WhatsApp for intra-party communication and how many times for voter communication (see figure 4). On average, during the 2022 state election campaign in Uttar Pradesh, BJP functionaries said that they used WhatsApp to communicate with other party functionaries and workers around fifty-five times a day. For SP functionaries, this number was slightly lower at forty-eight times a day. Both BJP and SP functionaries used WhatsApp to communicate with voters during their campaigns around forty to fifty times a day on average. In the months following the election (when the survey was administered), the average number of times per day these functionaries used WhatsApp for political communication reduced to around fifteen, one-third as much as during the campaign. This implies that even without an upcoming election and associated campaigns, party functionaries used WhatsApp about once every waking hour for intra-party communication and voter communication.

Equipped with organizational resources as well as online networks that span across a party's levels, together with a steady stream of content—a significant share of which is linked with party events—parties engage in continuous messaging on social media. Through messages that they circulate among their functionaries and workers as well as supporters throughout the day, parties periodically reinforce their partisan inclination and keep them in a state of constant mobilization.

Conclusion

Technological change, propelled by the digital revolution, is shaping election campaigns and party organization in India. The BJP has been the leading party in the online space, but other parties are catching up, investing in IT and social media units to build their digital presence. These investments can certainly bear fruit, but party leaders must recognize the limits of online-only campaigns. In the 2024 election—and likely beyond—online campaigning is best utilized as a complement, rather than as a substitute or adjunct, to old-fashioned retail politicking.

Figure 4. Daily Use of WhatsApp by Party Functionaries in Uttar Pradesh, 2022



Abbreviations: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Samajwadi Party (SP).
 Note: Bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. Data is only considered for those party functionaries who reported using WhatsApp fewer than 300 times per day for communication either within their party or with voters, which reduces the sample size by approximately 10 percent.
 Source: Author's survey of party functionaries in Uttar Pradesh, 2022.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Steven Wilkinson, Sarah Khan, Susan Stokes, Milan Vaishnav, and Caroline Mallory for their comments, and Ved Prakash Sharma and the survey team from Across Research and Communications Pvt. Ltd. for their excellent help in fielding the face-to-face surveys.

Partisanship's Striking Resilience in India

Ankita Barthwal and Francesca Refsum Jensenius

Introduction

Elections in India are notable for their volatility: voters' choices are notoriously difficult to predict, with large vote swings from one election to the next. Adding to this uncertainty is the fact that historically, party brands are weak and official party membership is low. It is no wonder then that partisanship has not featured prominently in discussions of contemporary Indian politics. In political science parlance, the term "partisanship" is used to describe the stable and emotional attachment that some voters feel toward political parties. This emotional attachment, which transcends mere support for the party at the ballot, is prevalent among voters in most parts of the world and affects political discourse and behavior in fundamental ways.

For instance, no conversation about elections in the United States can take place without reference to "Democrats" and "Republicans." Indeed, some voters' loyalty to a specific party is seen as so fundamental that it is considered a part of their social identity. In India, the idea of partisanship has received little attention, but similar terms do exist: "Bhajpaai," "Comrade," or "Congressi" are frequently used to describe party loyalists to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Communist Party of India (Marxist), and the Indian National Congress (INC, or Congress Party), respectively. These terms reflect a belief that at least some people have entrenched partisan affiliations.

As Indians head to the polls to select a new parliament in April–June, anecdotal evidence suggests that party loyalty is rising, with an increasing share of voters self-identifying with the ruling [BJP](#) and social media echo chambers polarizing [political debates](#). This article aims to show that, contrary to the received wisdom, partisanship in India not only has been fairly high and stable over time but also has significant effects on the political behavior of ordinary Indians.

Why Partisanship Matters

Measuring partisanship involves asking people about their self-identification into party camps. Hence, the most common survey question to measure such attachment is simply: “Which party do you identify with?” Other times, voters are asked whether there is a party they feel close to or how they feel about different parties. In [some studies](#), researchers have also tried to experimentally tease out the strength of individuals’ partisan attachment. Several decades of research suggest that partisan attachment remains surprisingly stable over time, even when parties or individuals change their policy positions.

These lasting attachments influence several outcomes in the political space. Three in particular are worth mentioning.

First, partisans are believed to be loyal voters, meaning that parties can be reasonably certain that these voters will turn out and support them on the election day. This makes elections more predictable and allows parties and politicians to focus on developing long-term policy platforms rather than spending their energy and resources on short-term, populist measures to sway voters.

Second, partisanship shapes how people understand the political world by serving as a heuristic to interpret political information. People tend to believe that if their party views an issue favorably, then they too should hold a similar view. Therefore, parties play a role in shaping opinions, which can make it easier for voters to follow key debates and hold elected representatives accountable.

Third, partisanship shapes *how* people interpret the information they receive. Those who feel attached to parties are more likely to be biased in favor of whatever the party does. They are more willing to ignore negative information about the party and more likely to pounce on negative information about other parties. This bias, often referred to as motivated reasoning, hampers objective evaluation and can increase hostility between groups. Scholars of partisan polarization are concerned about increasingly siloed camps, arguing that this may further enhance distrust and stymie political deliberation.

Studies from the [United Kingdom](#), [Europe](#), and several [other democratic contexts](#) attest to the global relevance of partisanship. Voters tend to self-sort into party camps even in the presence of more than two parties and in systems with proportional representation. However, all of these polities share one key similarity: the political party system is well-institutionalized. Such parties are stable entities with clearly defined ideological profiles, which helps boost party attachment. Nevertheless, even in less-institutionalized contexts such as [Brazil](#), [Türkiye](#), [Argentina](#), [Mexico](#), and [Taiwan](#), there is a growing belief that partisanship plays an important role in shaping democratic competition.

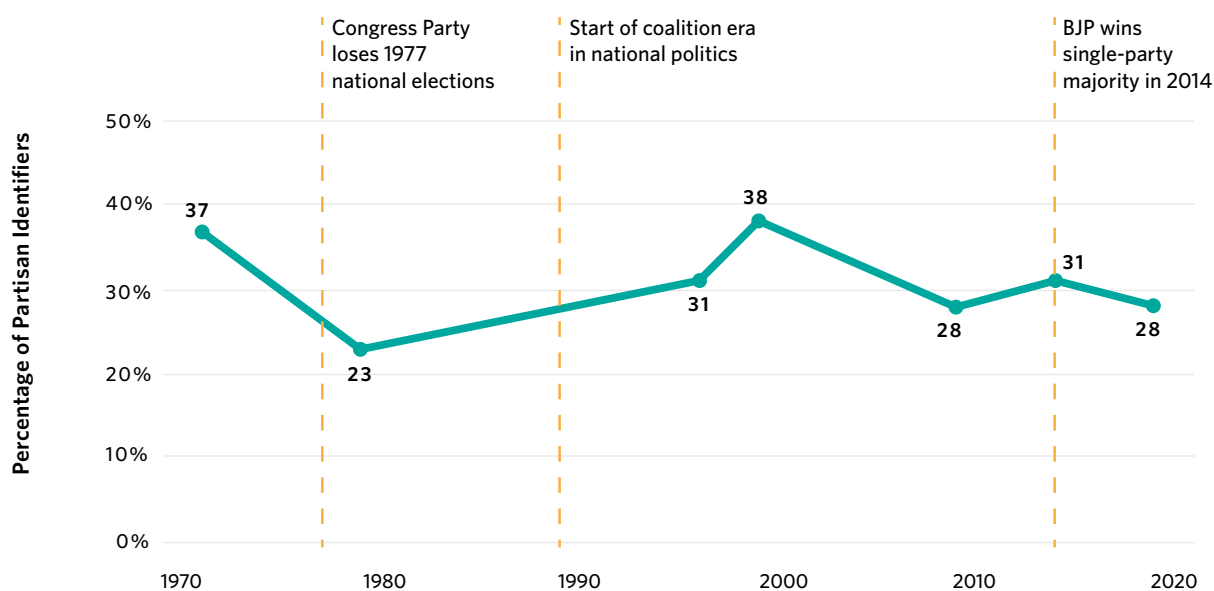
Measuring Partisanship in India

In India, as in other contexts characterized by unstable and unpredictable voting patterns, partisanship may not appear to matter at first glance. Indeed, the very presence of high electoral volatility—a measure of vote swings between parties across elections—seems to suggest that voters do not stay loyal to any one party.

Still, when asked about political preferences, voters often express clear partisan loyalties. In fieldwork in Himachal Pradesh before the 2022 state assembly elections, the authors observed several instances of this. Most memorably, a group of women in the Shimla rural district were keen to discuss their individual party preferences, making sure to highlight how these differed from the rest of their families'. Even after marrying into families with different partisan preferences, these women held onto their own partisan opinions.

Such attitudes were also visible at the aggregate level. Figure 1 tracks the presence of partisanship across India, drawing on various waves of National Election Studies (NES) data. Each election cycle, survey respondents were asked: “Is there any political party you particularly feel close to?”

Figure 1. Levels of Partisanship in India Remain Stable



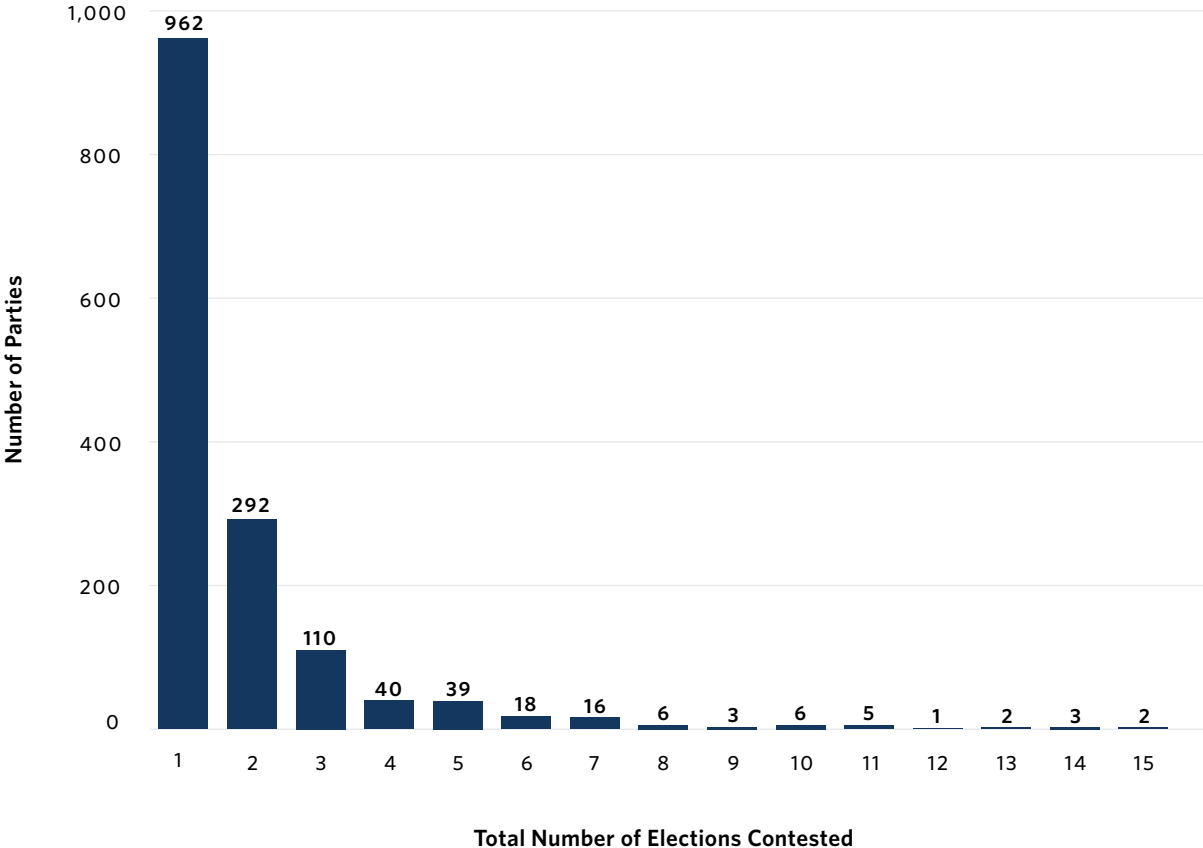
Source: Data are sourced from the NES surveys conducted by the Lokniti Programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies accessed at <https://www.lokniti.org/national-election-studies>.

In India, around 30 percent of survey respondents expressed partisan attachments, lower than comparable large democracies like the United States or United Kingdom but closer to developing contexts like Brazil or Argentina. Nevertheless, what is striking is the relative stability of partisanship despite periods of massive political shifts. In the fifty-year period in question, the Indian political system has moved from single-party dominance under the Congress Party to a more fragmented party system marked by coalition rule and then back to a single-party system dominated by the BJP.

This raises the question: which parties do voters feel especially close to? In India, a huge number of parties contest elections, but few of them survive more than one electoral cycle. As Figure 2 demonstrates, the vast majority of the parties that contested national elections in India between 1962 and 2019 participated in only one general election.

Of course, some parties have exhibited staying power, and many of them have developed unique party brands. Most prominent are the Congress Party and the BJP. NES data from

Figure 2. Few Indian Parties Survive More Than One Election Cycle

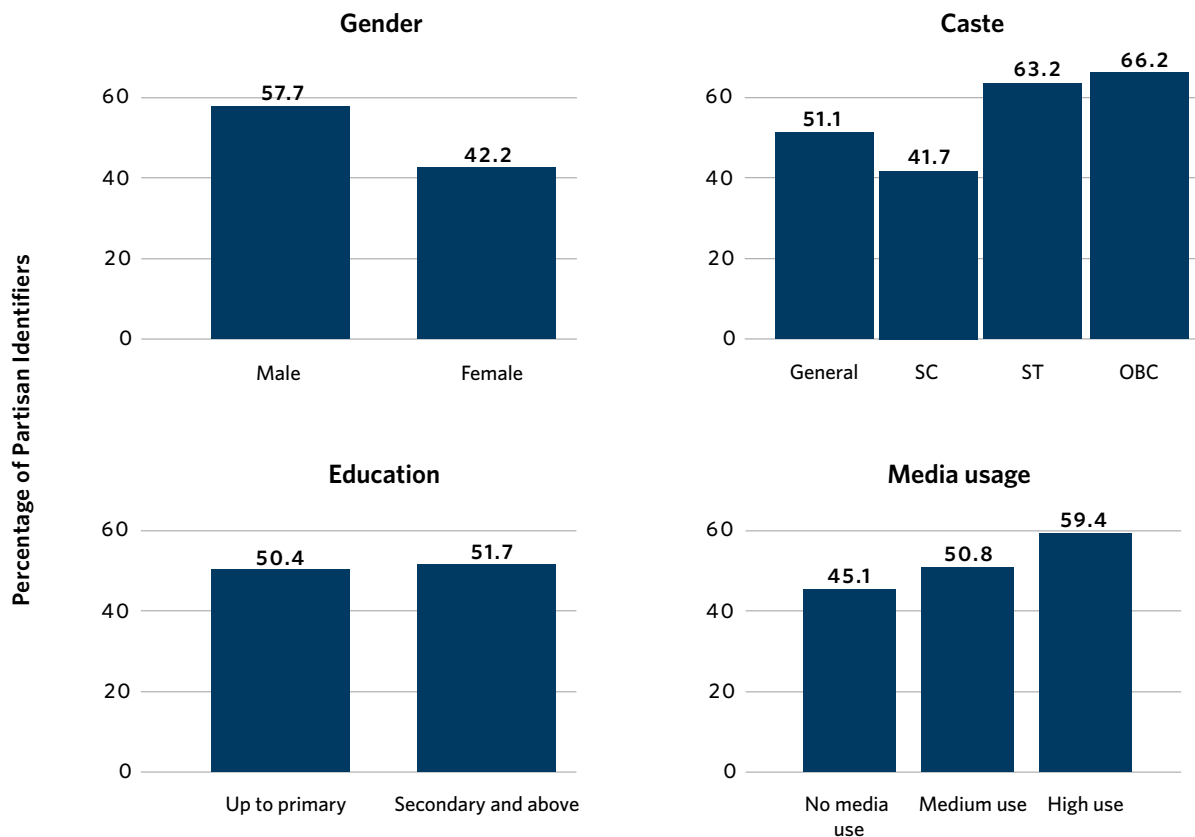


Note: The figure displays the total appearances of all parties since 1962. Source: Authors’ analysis based on data from Ananay Agarwal, Neelesh Agrawal, Saloni Bhogale, et al., “TCPD Indian Elections Data v2.0,” Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University, <https://tcpd.ashoka.edu.in/lok-dhaba>.

2019 indicate that more than half of the self-identified partisans across India report feeling close to either the Congress Party (19.2 percent) or the BJP (41.2 percent). Other parties with footholds in particular states, like the Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, All India Trinamool Congress party, and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), also have partisans, but since their support is regionally concentrated, none of them were named by more than five percent of partisan loyalists at the national level.

Figure 3 looks at how partisanship varies based on a variety of individual-level characteristics, using data from an original field survey the authors conducted in Himachal Pradesh in 2022 in advance of the state assembly elections. In a random sample of 3,200 respondents, the overall level of partisanship was 52 percent. The results showed that women, members of the Scheduled Castes, and those with limited media exposure were less likely to express a partisan attachment. The association between educational attainment and partisanship is not as clear, although respondents with more than a primary education exhibited somewhat higher levels of partisanship than those who were either illiterate or barely attended school.

Figure 3. Individual Characteristics and Partisan Identification



Abbreviations: Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC).
 Note: Survey respondents were asked which party they felt close to: the Congress Party, the BJP or some other party. Respondents were also allowed to say no party. Those who named any party have been classified as partisans.
 Source: Authors' original survey conducted in Himachal Pradesh, November 2022.

How Partisanship Matters

There is compelling evidence that partisanship exists in India, but how might it matter for elections? In line with studies from other parts of the world, survey data indicate that Indian partisans are substantively different from nonpartisan voters in three crucial respects: voting stability, informed political opinions, and biased reasoning.

The first point is related to the stability of voting patterns in Indian general elections. According to [data on voters in the 2019](#) general elections, about 61 percent of partisan voters repeated their vote choice from 2014, compared to 54 percent of nonpartisans, and about 64 percent of the partisans voted for the party they said they felt close to.

It might seem underwhelming that less than two-thirds of partisans eventually voted for the party they identify with, given that many voters regularly proclaim to be party loyalists. However, this number is biased downward because parties do not always field candidates in every electoral constituency in every election cycle. For instance, if a party forms a preelection alliance with another party, the two allies will typically divide the seats they contest in—what is commonly known as a seat-sharing pact. When considering only constituencies where the party in question actually fielded a candidate for reelection, close to 86 percent of respondents supported the party they reported feeling loyal to. This signals a high degree of stability for this particular voter group.

In other parts of the world, partisanship is [associated](#) with more informed political behavior, higher trust in parties, and more belief in the efficacy of the vote—all of which are considered signs of democratic health. There is compelling evidence for the same logic working among Indian partisans. For instance, the authors' survey in Himachal Pradesh revealed that partisans were much more likely to express trust in political parties, far less ambiguous about political choices, and better at deciphering issue ownership among parties. Notably, partisanship is associated with these traits even when education, media exposure, and political interest were held constant.

Although stable partisanship might be a sign of democratic vibrancy, it also has its downsides, namely partisan polarization. Many studies outside of India find that greater consolidation along party lines and a shrinking middle ground are linked to an increase in partisan animus between groups. While there is no systematic data from India on the levels of animosity between supporters of the two main poles in India—the Congress Party and the BJP—there is increasing evidence that party identities have a marked effect on co-partisans' worldview. For instance, a recent [survey](#) of young, urban-dwelling Indians found evidence of substantial co-partisan bias: partisan respondents attached to either the Congress Party or the BJP exhibited little agreement over politically colored issues such as India's G20 presidency or even about supposedly objective issues related to population growth and current economic conditions.

Assessing negative feelings toward another party, commonly called “negative partisanship,” is another way in which researchers detect partisan animus. Typically measured by asking respondents if there is any party that they dislike or would not support, negative partisanship is associated with negative opinions not just about the other party but also about people associated with that party. Our [survey](#) revealed that partisans were indeed more likely to express negative partisanship; compared to nonpartisans, they were twice as likely to name parties they would *never* support. However, disaggregated by partisan identity, the picture is more nuanced. Only 26.4 percent of the BJP partisans and 20.5 percent of Congress Party partisans expressed a strong distaste for other parties. This signals less partisan rigidity than one might expect, indicating that unmitigated political polarization is perhaps not as widespread as commonly believed.

Conclusion

Despite claims to the contrary, partisanship plays a significant role in Indian elections. High levels of electoral volatility and ubiquitous party switching conceal the presence of partisan loyalties among a substantial share of Indian voters. These loyalties are apparent in survey data, interviews with voters, and aggregate election patterns. The stabilization of political competition, featuring a similar set of parties running in election after election, has the potential for further fostering partisanship in India.

Extant data indicate that heightened partisanship can translate into more informed, engaged voters who demand greater accountability from their elected leaders. Fostering such partisanship also has clear advantages for political parties, since partisan voters tend to be steadfast and decisive in their opinions and actions. In the current context, this means that parties that enjoy substantive partisanship, such as the BJP, can be confident of their future prospects.

At the same time, intensely held partisan identities risk hampering deliberative democracy. While parties may seek to stir up partisan emotions in their favor, unchecked bias—particularly during election times—can cloud voter judgements. To translate partisan sentiments into healthy political engagement, India will need to ensure the free flow of reliable political information as well as open political debates in which supporters of competing political camps engage with those espousing alternative viewpoints. By discouraging such engagement, the current political climate runs the risk of creating belligerent camps, thereby undermining the positive potential of partisanship.

CHAPTER 8

Why India's Incumbent Candidates Struggle to Win Elections

Gilles Verniers

In India's ongoing 2024 general elections, more than 8,000 candidates are competing for 543 seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament. Most of these individuals, including those fielded by major parties, are contesting these seats for the first time.

One cornerstone of India's electoral politics is the high turnover of elected representatives in both national and regional elections. Contrary to common practice in most democracies, incumbent candidates in India do not benefit from incumbency advantage; in fact, scholars have long spoken of an "[incumbency disadvantage](#)" in the Indian context.

In 2019, 226 elected members of Parliament (MPs) were incumbents (41 percent), which is a low figure considering that this election saw the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) consolidate the single-party majority it won in 2014, the first in three decades. Only half of the BJP's MPs (154 out of 303, to be exact) were elected in 2014, and 139 of its 149 nonincumbent MPs were elected to Parliament for the first time. Among the 228 elected opposition MPs, only 67 were incumbents, while 132 were first-time MPs. Additional [historical data](#) on individual incumbency coded by the Trivedi Centre for Political Data indicates that this phenomenon is not new. In fact, the share of reelected incumbent MPs was even lower during the first two decades after independence, during the previous era of the Indian National Congress's (hereafter, the Congress Party) dominance.

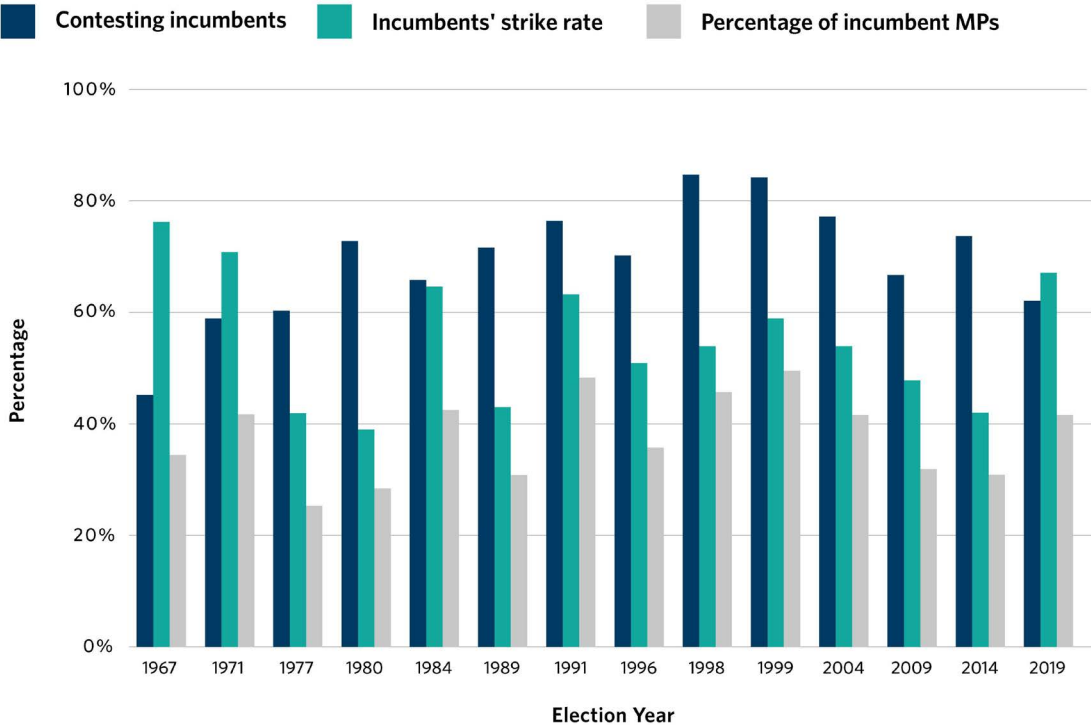
The turnover among India's political class and the declining pool of "stable" political representatives raises important questions about the nature of representation in India and the precise functioning of legislative accountability. This article reviews six decades of data on candidates, nomination patterns, and incumbency to extract broader trends that will not only determine the contours of the 2024 race but also inevitably shape the new Parliament that is formed after June 4.

Dissecting Political Turnover

What explains India’s high rates of political turnover? The following sections utilize data from the Trivedi Centre for Political Data’s Indian Individual Incumbency Dataset, in which a unique identification number was coded for each of the 90,583 candidates who contested general elections in India from 1962 to 2019. This identification number enables the calculation of individual incumbency and career trajectory variables, such as the number of elections contested, terms served, incumbency status, as well as turncoat status of candidates. The data was coded using [Surf](#), an entity mapping and resolution system for Indian names developed by the Trivedi Centre for Political Data’s team.

The first explanation for the high turnover is that not all incumbent MPs rerun in the first place. From 1967 to 2019, fewer than 70 percent of all MPs, on average, reran, and 55 percent of these rerunning MPs got reelected (see figure 1). Therefore, if one does not factor in rerunning rates, the average share of incumbent MPs in the Lok Sabha would stand at a scant 38 percent.¹⁴

Figure 1. Patterns of Incumbency in the Lok Sabha



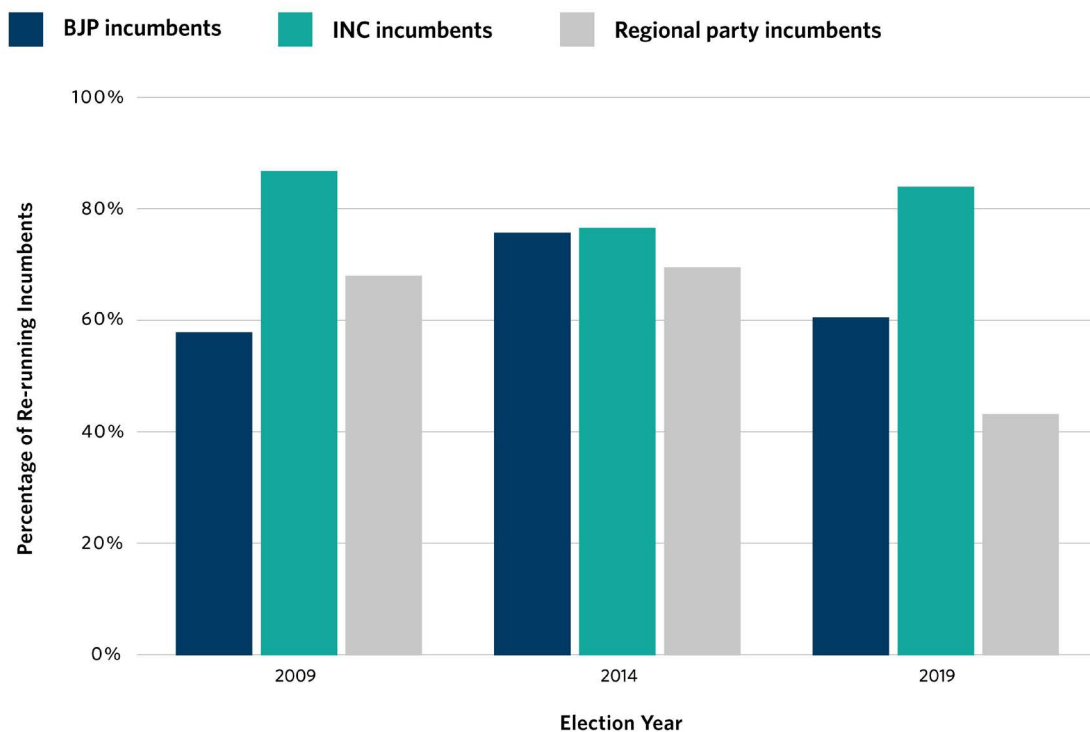
Note: “Contesting incumbents” captures the share of incumbent MPs who stand for reelection. “Incumbents’ strike rate” represents the share of contesting incumbents that win reelection. “Percentage of incumbent MPs” represents the share of incumbent MPs actually reelected.
 Source: Indian Individual Incumbency Dataset, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, <https://lokhaba.ashoka.edu.in/pct/home.html>.

These figures are relatively consistent over time. The share of rerunning MPs tends to increase when general elections are held in close proximity, as in the 1990s when a series of fractious coalition governments failed to complete their full five-year terms in office. In recent years, the share of rerunning MPs has declined further. In 2019, only 67 percent of all incumbent MPs stood for reelection.

The rate of incumbency varies across parties (see figure 2). For example, the Congress Party tends to retain more of its incumbents than the BJP. On the other hand, regional parties' renomination strategies tend to fluctuate. In 2014, the ratio of rerunning incumbents was similar across the two national parties and regional parties. In 2019, by contrast, regional parties discarded a majority of their sitting MPs.

There are also regional variations (see figure 3). Some of the largest states—including Karnataka, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal—exhibit a high rate of rerunning incumbents. However, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana saw very few sitting MPs rerunning in 2019. None of Chhattisgarh's eleven MPs elected in 2019 were incumbents (and ten of them were first-time MPs).

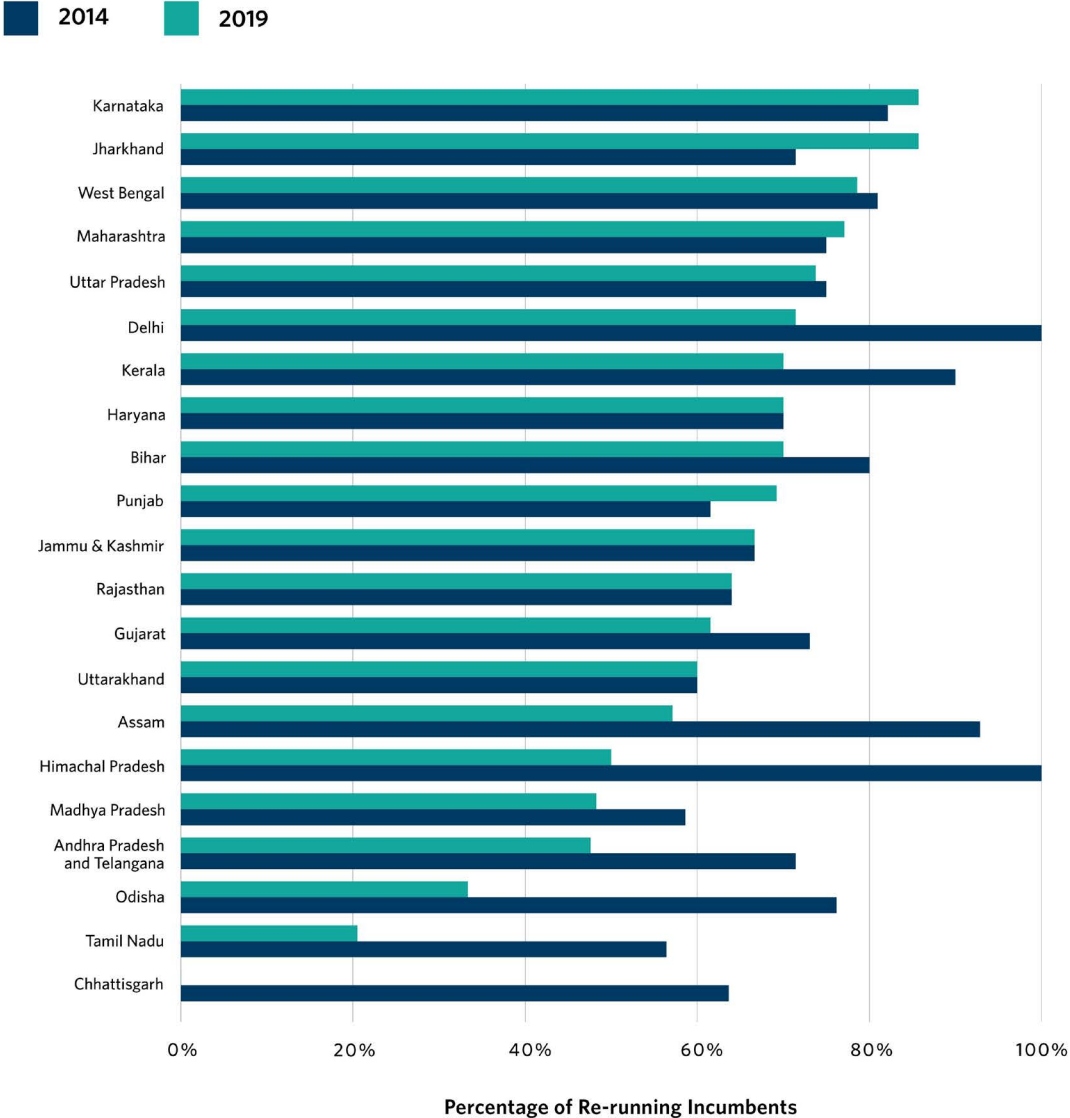
Figure 2. Partisan Variation in Incumbency in the Lok Sabha



Abbreviations: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Indian National Congress (INC).
 Source: Indian Individual Incumbency Dataset, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, <https://lokhaba.ashoka.edu.in/pct/home.html>.

Candidate reshuffling is not a function of electoral competitiveness but of political parties' distinct organizations, cultures, electoral strategies, and recruitment practices. For instance, the BJP in Gujarat—under Narendra Modi's leadership as chief minister prior to his ascension to national politics—used to, as a rule, discard 50 percent of their members of the legislative assembly (MLAs) each election.¹⁵

Figure 3. Regional Variation in Incumbency in the Lok Sabha



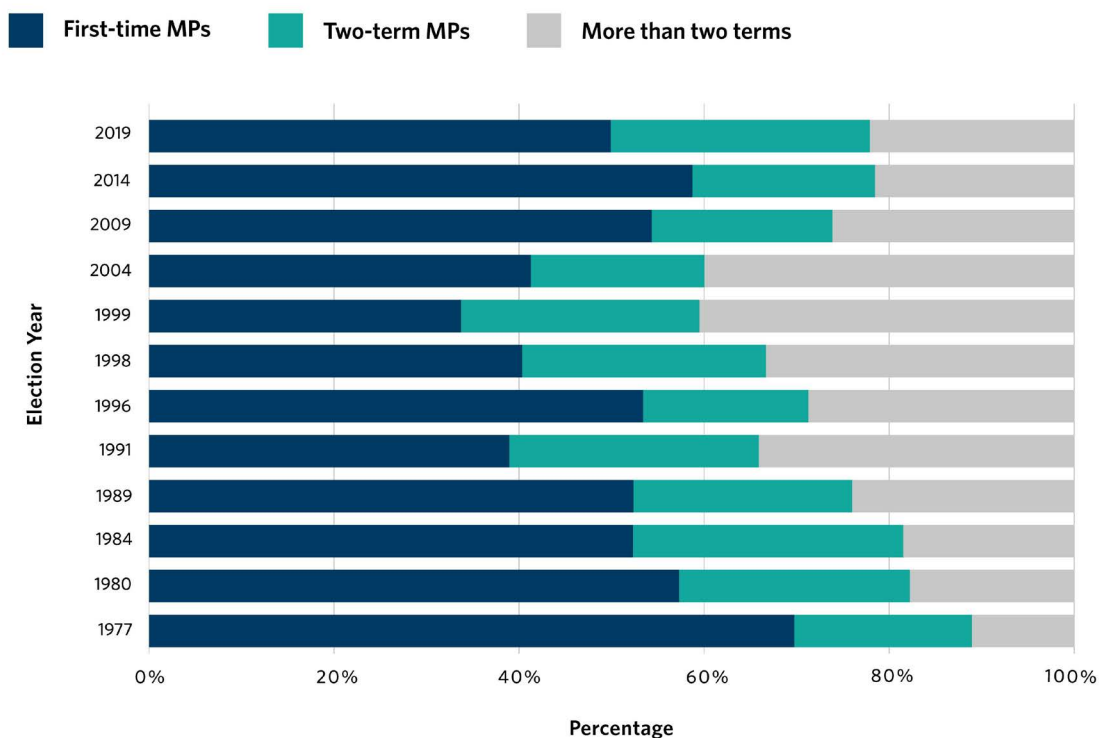
Note: This figure depicts incumbency patterns in select major states of India.
 Source: Indian Individual Incumbency Dataset, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, <https://lokhaba.ashoka.edu.in/pct/home.html>.

Over the last two decades, [research](#) by this author has shown that most political parties tend to recruit candidates from similar sociological pools made of self-funded individuals connected to local business networks. As a result, it is easier to discard sitting MPs when they are recruited from outside party organizations. The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, which recruits its candidates from locally dominant social groups, is a case in point. “Turncoats,” or party switchers, regularly fielded by parties also reinforce the notion that candidates are interchangeable.

An Assembly of Newcomers

As a result of this high turnover, three-quarters of all MPs elected since 1977 have been either first-time or two-term MPs (see figure 4). While a high turnover of representatives may indicate elite circulation, it also greatly limits cumulative legislative experience among parliamentary representatives. In the 17th Lok Sabha, elected in 2019, only 22 percent of MPs were elected for a third term or higher. These experienced MPs were well distributed across parties and across regions.

Figure 4. Number of Terms Served by Lok Sabha MPs



Source: Indian Individual Incumbency Dataset, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, <https://lokhaba.ashoka.edu.in/pct/home.html>.

During Modi's tenure as prime minister, the share of experienced MPs has significantly decreased to levels not seen since the 1970s (when then prime minister Indira Gandhi instituted a twenty-one-month state of emergency). This modern-day decrease is unsurprising given that the BJP won many new seats with new candidates over the past two elections. What is more surprising, however, is how few experienced opposition representatives have survived the BJP's rise. Of the fifty-two Congress Party MPs elected in 2019, only eleven had served in either of the two prior legislatures during the tenure of the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government. Only three—Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, and Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury—have consistently served in the Lok Sabha during the last four terms.

Explanations for India's Political Churn

Why do so few incumbent MPs rerun and get reelected? Three types of explanations account for this phenomenon.

First, political parties have multiple incentives to remove their sitting MPs. For instance, they can field fresh faces as an attempt to buck anti-incumbency. Some parties claim to use the specter of renomination as a reward for high-performing MPs and as a sanction for underperforming MPs. Empirically, however, there is little evidence that performance predicts a legislator's chances of renomination. More importantly, the threat of non-renomination is an effective instrument to generate and maintain party discipline and to punish faction leaders and their affiliates. Parties may also discard sitting MPs because of alliance arrangements with other parties. If two parties join forces to contest an election, they typically form a seat-sharing arrangement that divvies up seats between them to avoid vote fragmentation.

Second, MPs and candidates themselves can also induce turnover. Some MPs may leave their parties and try their luck with a different party affiliation.¹⁶ Other MPs may drop out of the race altogether if they are unable to sustain the cost of remaining in politics or when they find themselves outspent by adversaries. MPs can also choose to shift to a different legislative body, such as a state assembly or the indirectly elected upper house of India's national parliament (the Rajya Sabha). In the run-up to the 2024 general election, twenty-eight seats sat [vacant](#) after officeholders left the lower house for the upper house or passed away so recently that by-elections could not be held on time.

Finally, voters also play a role in ensuring that few sitting MPs get reelected. Across states, the "strike rates" (or the odds of winning reelection) of rerunning MPs are low. In 2009 and 2014, incumbents' strike rate dropped below 50 percent. On average, since 1977, only 55 percent of rerunning incumbent MPs have been reelected. The propensity of voters to reject incumbents manifests the structural discontent that elected representatives face in India. The author's repeated interactions with MPs and their state-level counterparts over the years reveal that MPs are expected to respond to endless demands and requests for assistance

emanating from their constituencies, using limited resources or infrastructure. When considered alongside a high degree of local electoral volatility, such discontent likely accounts for the poor performance of most rerunning MPs.

India's Small Professional Political Class

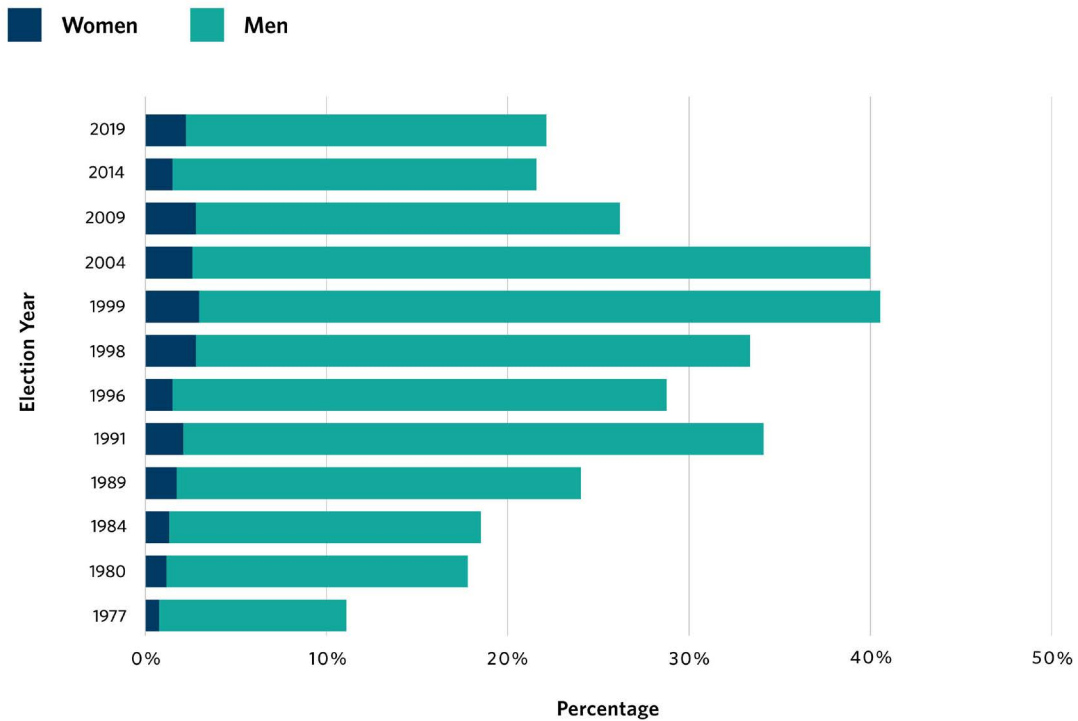
The flip side of the high turnover of elected representatives is the constitution of a small-size class of professional politicians, defined here as the set of MPs who have been elected more than twice in a given legislative body.¹⁷ In India's 17th Lok Sabha, 120 MPs fit this description, a number that has fluctuated over the years (see figure 5). Of those 120 MPs, 69 belong to the BJP, while only 14 belong to the Congress Party. There are only thirty-six regional party MPs who can claim to have significant legislative experience.

More worryingly, there are very few women among this political class. In the 2019 general election, seventy-eight women were elected to the Lok Sabha (the highest number ever), but only twelve were elected for a third term or more. Members of this stable political class tend to be older and are more likely to hail from dynastic political families. Furthermore, they are more likely to belong to the upper or intermediary castes than historically disadvantaged groups. This category of elected representatives includes top party leaders and their family members, as well as members of parties' various high commands. There are only a few representatives whose popularity enables them to weather the electoral misfortunes of their own parties. The small size and enhanced elite profile provide a measure of the degree of concentration of political power in India.¹⁸

The regional distribution of so-called professional politicians has been stable across time. Around 40 percent of these MPs come from the Hindi belt (which includes the states of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttarakhand), 23 percent from the South, 19 percent from the East and the Northeast, and 15 percent from the West. This indicates that the production of this small class of professional politicians is a pan-Indian phenomenon, not specific to any region or any party.

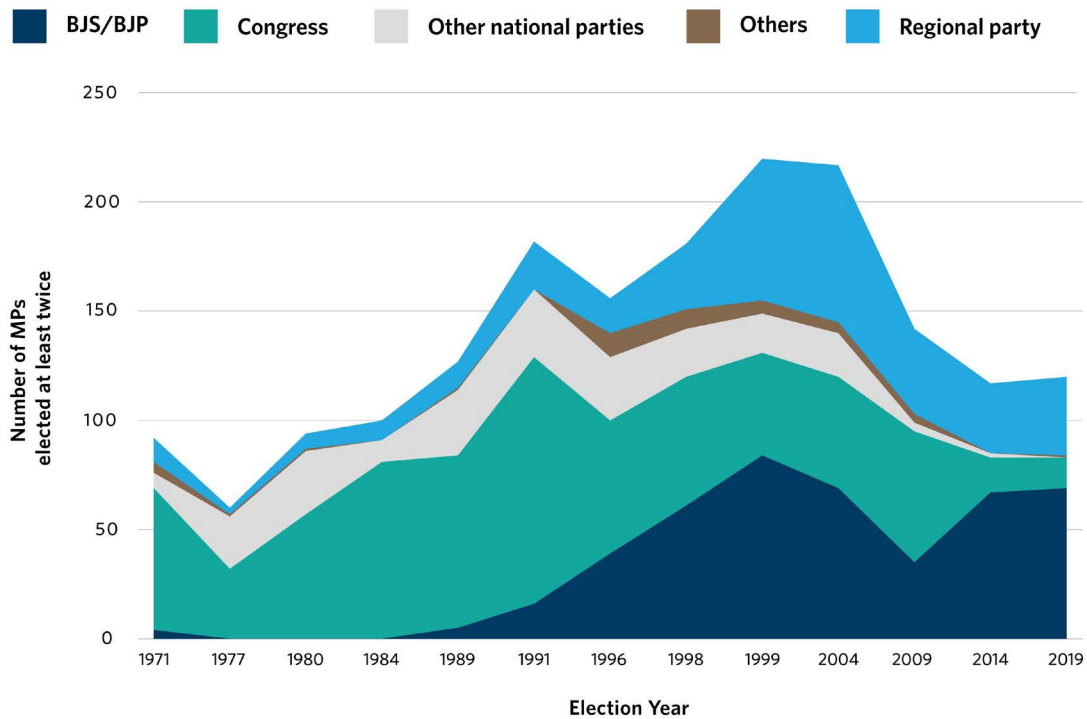
The BJP now makes up more than half of India's stable political class, as defined by those MPs serving two terms of more (see figure 6), a category that the Congress Party dominated until the mid-1990s. Regional parties started contributing to that category of representatives a decade after their emergence phase in the 1990s. Their share of India's professional class has reduced over the last three general elections largely due to the [decline](#) of regional parties in northern India.

Figure 5. Fluctuating Size of India's Stable Political Class in the Lok Sabha



Note: MPs who have been elected to serve more than two terms in the Lok Sabha are classified as belonging to a stable political class.
 Source: Indian Individual Incumbency Dataset, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, <https://lokhaba.ashoka.edu.in/pct/home.html>.

Figure 6. Changing Partisan Composition of India's Stable Political Class in the Lok Sabha



Note: The category of "other national parties" includes the Swatantra Party, the two major communist parties, and various iterations of national socialist formations. MPs who have been elected to serve more than two terms in the Lok Sabha are classified as belonging to a stable political class.

Abbreviations: Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Source: Indian Individual Incumbency Dataset, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, <https://lokhaba.ashoka.edu.in/pct/home.html>.

Implications

Low rates of individual incumbency—and the concentration of power it implies—have wide-ranging implications for the functioning of Parliament, the ability of the institution and its members to act as a check on the executive, the meaning of political representation, and the functioning of India’s democracy at large.

On the one hand, short political careers disincentivize newcomers from investing in the legislative aspects of their job. [As related research](#) shows, elected representatives typically focus instead on [constituency service](#) and on raising the resources necessary to have a career in politics. On the other hand, the combination of high barriers to entry and the high probability of early exit creates incentives for rent-seeking behavior as the costs of campaigning [has exploded](#).

The rapid turnover of elected representatives also means that descriptive representation—the idea that the composition of political representatives should roughly correspond to the composition of their electorate—is detached from the individuals meant to embody it. Descriptive representation is reduced to representatives’ caste or community identities but not to the representatives themselves. Descriptive representation can only be effective when Parliament itself is effective as an institution. The concentration of power within parties, and the executive’s dominance of the legislature, hollows out political representation and limits the ability of legislators to induce change or impact.

The transient character of political careers in India provides context for the poor functioning of the Lok Sabha. Data recently compiled by [PRS Legislative Research](#) show that the annual average sitting days of the Lok Sabha have consistently declined: the most recent session hit a record low, utilizing just 55 percent of allocated time. This report shows that parliamentary committees rarely meet or function and that bills are barely discussed.

Other factors contribute to the marginalization of elected representatives and, by extension, of political representation.

First, parties announce their candidates late in the campaign, sometimes just days before polling. They reshuffle candidates until the last moment, sometimes even between polling phases, preventing voters from thoroughly understanding who is really running for office.

Second, the [anti-defection law](#), by which legislators are [disqualified from Parliament](#) if they vote against their party whip, has also tamed the ability of MPs to enjoy agency as autonomous lawmakers.

Third, the professionalization of campaigns and the rise of political consultants have led to the marginalization of individual candidates and elected representatives. In private interviews, many aspirant candidates and sitting legislators have expressed anguish regarding their exclusion from decisionmaking within their party and within government, more generally.

Finally, the decline of stable political representation resonates with [other findings](#) regarding the sociology of India's political class, which reveal that despite parties' claims of political inclusion, India's political leaders [tend to be homogenous](#) in class terms.

What is striking is the long-standing character of these trends. The hollowing out of political representation in India is not simply a product of recent democratic decline but also a feature of political representation that gets exacerbated under single-party dominance.

Unsurprisingly, individual incumbency is lower during periods of single-party majorities; in fact, it was even lower when the Congress Party was in power in the 1950s and 1960s. Greater political competition and the negotiation of power-sharing arrangements at the federal level tend to bring in more experienced politicians, something that is sorely lacking in the current environment.

In India, Foreign Policy Is on the 2024 Ballot

Milan Vaishnav and Caroline Mallory

Introduction

One of the most obvious yet understudied trends in India over the past decade has been the [emergence of foreign policy](#) as a domestic political issue. In the past, scholars and close observers have viewed foreign policy as principally an elite preoccupation—fodder for cocktail parties, parlor room gossip, and think tank seminars in urban metros like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru. Foreign policy was deemed too complex, too abstract, and too distant from the *aam aadmi* (common man), who was more concerned with meeting basic needs than with the Indian prime minister's equation with their Chinese counterpart or India's status in multilateral forums.

But today, as one surveys the political landscape in India, foreign policy seems to have descended from its rarified perch. Conversations about India's role in the world can be heard on street corners, at the dinner table, and around the proverbial water cooler. While elites might still dominate the production of foreign policy, its consumption has been democratized.

The downward penetration of foreign policy is evident in big ways and small. Campaign posters in cities and towns across the country hail India's presidency of the G20. India's external affairs minister is eagerly sought out by his party's regional bosses to speak to rank-and-file members about India's standing in the world. Even the political opposition has had to sit up and take notice. Although opposition leader Rahul Gandhi's frequent overseas forays might provoke social media derision, his party, the Indian National Congress (hereafter the Congress Party), has recognized that it, too, must articulate the role it envisions for India abroad. Indeed, the party's 2024 general election [manifesto](#) contains multiple pages on foreign policy, defense, and internal security.

As Indian voters prepare to go to the polls in April–June, foreign policy is certain to be a hallmark of the campaign as the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) seeks to use its decade-long track record to consolidate its hold over the electorate. The rising domestic currency of foreign policy must be understood as part and parcel of India’s broader quest to become a key player in an increasingly multipolar world order. The salience of foreign policy to ordinary Indians is driven by a mix of structural geopolitical shifts, the ideological moorings of the ruling BJP, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s unique political credibility. While the available evidence suggests that the elevation of foreign policy is paying rich political dividends, the full range of consequences remains unclear.

Rising Powers and the Quest for Status

In discussions about domestic politics across all parts of the democratic world, social status and the practice of “status-seeking” are increasingly at the heart of political analysis. [Social identity theory](#) holds that an individual’s or group’s assessment of their own self-worth is inextricably linked to how others in society view their group’s status. For instance, the last several decades of India’s political development have been shaped by the so-called [silent revolution](#) of Dalits and backward castes. After independence, these historically disadvantaged groups spent decades fighting for—and eventually winning—greater social, economic, and political representation. Of course, the pursuit from below of a [politics of dignity](#) was met with resistance from those situated higher in the social hierarchy, who were eager to prevent the erosion of their own social status since their preeminence could no longer be taken for granted. The friction that emerged between those seeking to improve their status and those wishing to hold on to their privileged position often resulted in violence, disorder, and a renegotiation of social norms, a process that [continues to unfold](#) today in certain pockets of the country.

In a very different political environment, the United States, appeals to status continue to be a hallmark of domestic political competition. Former president Donald Trump’s surprising election victory in 2016 was powered, at least in part, by rising [status anxiety](#) among the White working class. Many people associated with Trump’s movement have [raised fears](#) about maintaining a supposedly American identity amid a rapidly changing and diversifying population. [Some conservatives](#), in turn, charge liberal progressives with championing the status concerns of racial and ethnic minorities in a manner that borders on reverse discrimination.

Status-seeking behavior has now become entrenched in understanding individuals and groups in domestic politics in diverse polities, but a compelling logic extends these dynamics to states in international relations. Rohan Mukherjee explains that rising powers like India care deeply about their position in the global hierarchy of states. As in domestic affairs, achieving a higher “status” has both instrumental and expressive value. In the world of international relations, states pursue a higher status for themselves to facilitate entry into valued economic networks, key multilateral forums and standard-setting bodies, and

beneficial strategic partnerships. Status can also imbue rising powers with what Mukherjee calls “symbolic equality,” which is manifested through norms, customs, and institutions that treat rising powers as co-equals at the global high table. These states want to be treated with the respect they believe their growing clout accords.

To be sure, India’s quest for status recognition is not novel. Prime ministers from Jawaharlal Nehru to Manmohan Singh have pronounced India’s [civilizational exceptionalism](#) and argued for India’s inclusion in exclusive clubs as befits one of the world’s great powers. But there is a palpable feeling that something qualitatively different is afoot with the Modi government. The present government has expressed not only its desire for India to transition from a “balancing” power into a “[leading](#)” one” but also the idea that this status transition has partly been achieved. To support its claim, it points to the fact that India is currently the world’s fastest-growing major economy, boasts the world’s largest population, and is a much-sought-after partner for both the advanced industrialized world and the Global South.

Previous Indian prime ministers have supported the concept of “polyvocality”—the notion that international order should be shaped by a range of voices representing the interests of both the developed and the developing world. The Modi government has gone even further—arguing for a global order based on the principle of [multipolarity](#) in which India serves as one of the principal poles. This shift in thinking appears to resonate with a wide swath of Indians, who wield aspirations for India domestically that are matched by their desires for the country to project power internationally.

From Elites to the Masses

Scholars have historically conceived of two categories of policy issues in India. As [Ashutosh Varshney](#) famously argued, there has been a traditional separation in India between “elite” issues and “mass” issues.” Elite issues are those that hold little resonance for the common person. Rather, they are discussed, debated, and decided by a small slice of elites who exercise issue ownership and enjoy wide freedom of maneuver. Questions of foreign policy, national defense, and international trade fall into this category. On the opposite end of the spectrum sit “mass” issues that directly affect the average Indian’s daily existence. This category consists of a wide variety of issues such as inflation/price rise, jobs, and welfare distribution.

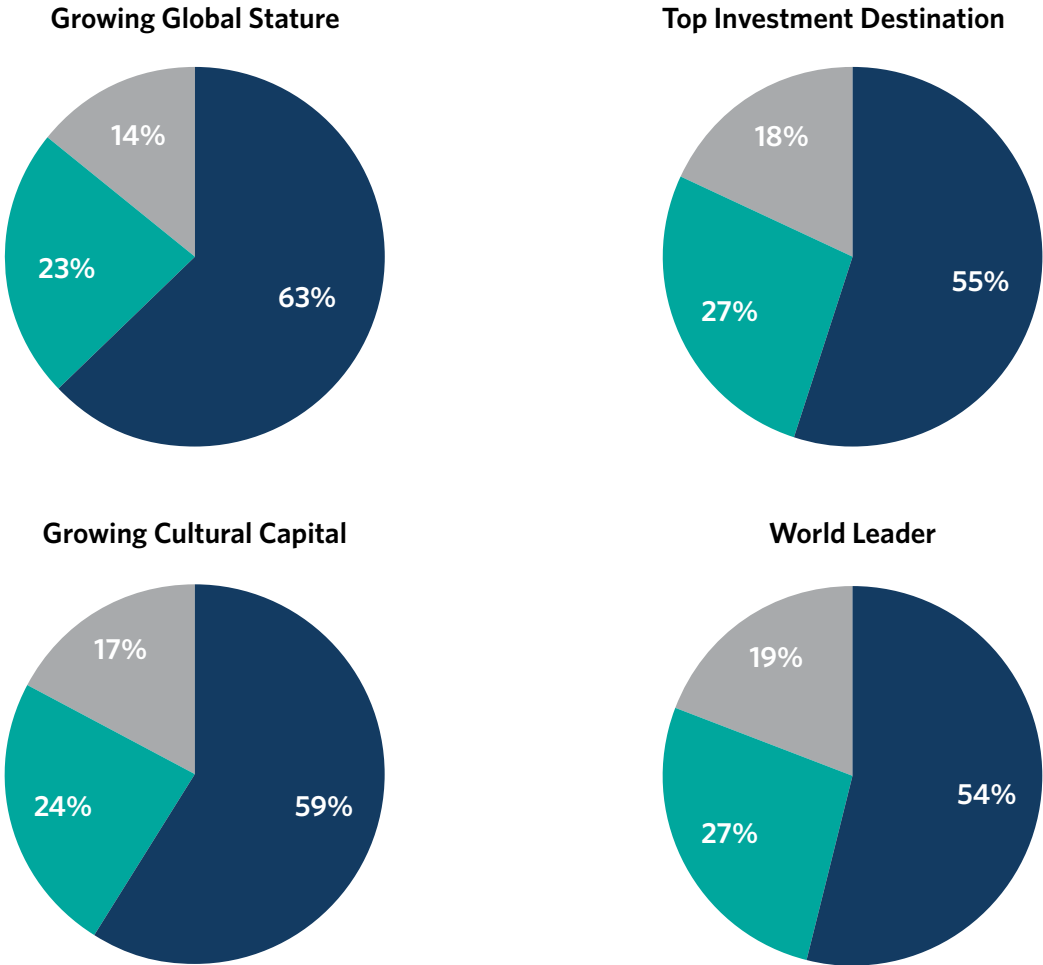
The sharp bifurcation between “elite” and “mass” issues has now broken down. Starting in 2019, Indian voters began to regularly [speak](#) about how Modi had put India on the map, implying that his leadership helped the country leap from backwater to marquee status. As one [expert](#) put it, “The message which has gone out is that India has really emerged very strong in the world. And it’s only because of Modi.” Put another way, there was a widely held belief that India had long been viewed as a big country but not a particularly important one. Today, the sense emanating from many ordinary Indians is that India is seen as both big *and* important.

More systematic evidence also supports this contention. In a May 2023 nationally representative survey of Indians conducted by the Lokniti Programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), in conjunction with NDTV, [63 percent](#) of respondents reported that India’s global status had risen since Modi assumed office in 2014. The same poll found that most Indians believed the country had progressed in furthering its cultural capital, its status as a world leader, and its attraction as a destination for foreign investment during Modi’s tenure (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Indians Are Bullish on India’s Global Status

“Under PM Modi, how do you rate India’s progress on the following issues?”

■ Yes ■ No ■ No Response



Source: “Public Opinion: Nine Years of PM Modi,” NDTV-Lokniti-CSDS Survey, May 2023, <https://www.ndtv.com/9YearsOfPMModi>.

The February 2024 India Today Mood of the Nation poll found that [19 percent](#) of survey respondents believed that Modi would be most remembered for “raising India’s global stature.” This response was second only to the construction of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, a Hindu temple being built on the site of a fifteenth-century Islamic mosque that had been demolished by BJP-affiliated activists in 1992 (selected by a whopping 42 percent of respondents, perhaps an artifact of the timing of the survey as the new temple was inaugurated in January 2024).

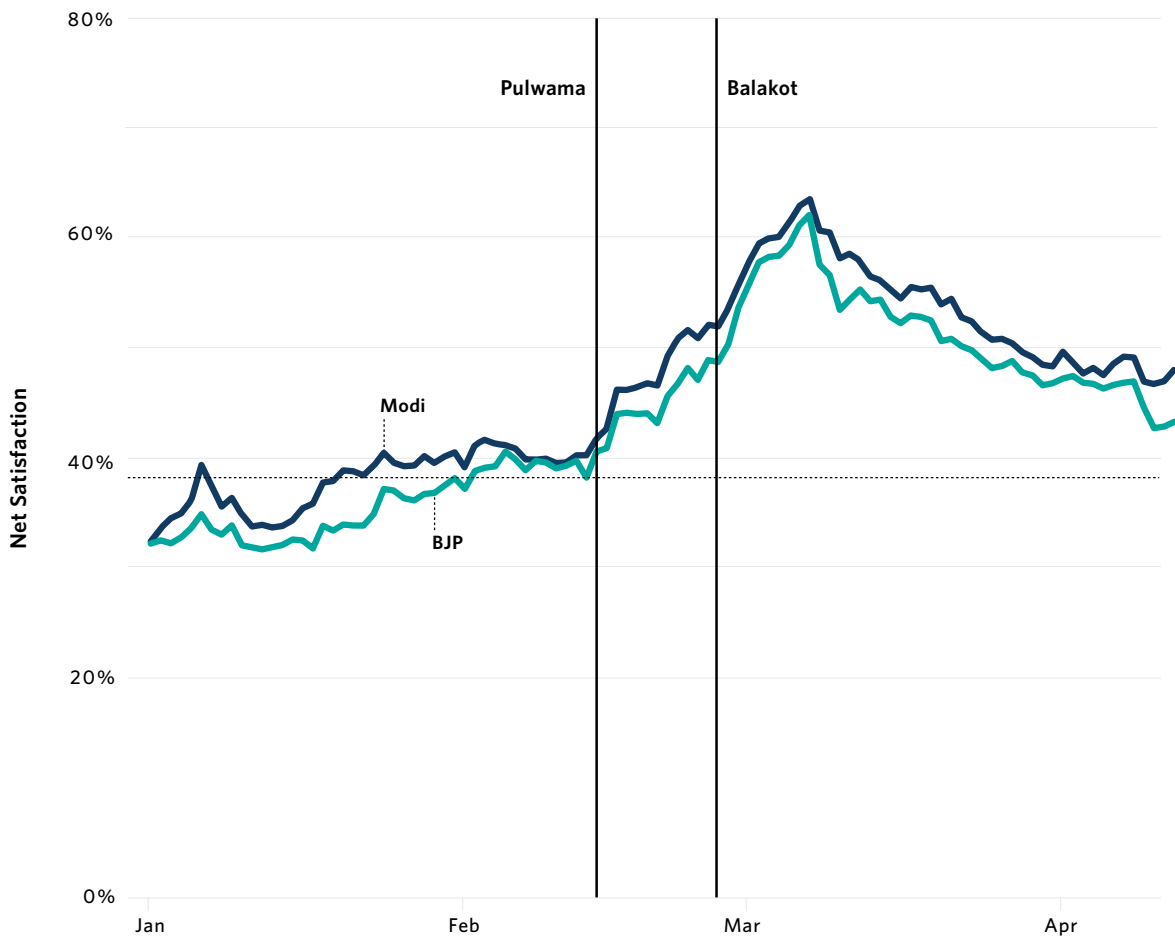
Yet the blurring lines between “elite” and “mass” issues has remained underrecognized, due partly to difficulties of measurement. In a standard public opinion survey like the ones regularly fielded on the eves of elections, it is hard to discern the impact of foreign policy on domestic political choices. In most surveys, voters are presented with a list of issues that shape their vote choice on election day and are asked to select which is the “most important.” It is not surprising that traditionally “mass” issues like development, inflation, or jobs and livelihoods regularly top the list. Indeed, [Lokniti-CSDS](#) national election surveys since 2009 have consistently shown that voters identify economic-related concerns as their foremost preoccupation when voting.

However, this does not mean foreign policy is unimportant domestically. In some instances, foreign policy’s impact can be directly observed. In February 2019, just two months before voting began in the general election, terrorists attacked a convoy of Indian paramilitary forces in Pulwama, Kashmir, kicking off a brief, high-stakes standoff between India and Pakistan. The Pulwama attacks, and the Modi government’s subsequent airstrikes on terror training camps in Balakot, Pakistan, helped create a nationalist fervor that the BJP enthusiastically exploited, a task made easier by jingoistic media and social media echo chambers.

According to [polling data](#) from the Indo-Asian News Service and [CVoter](#), satisfaction with the BJP central government had a 15-percentage-point bump in the weeks following the attacks in Pulwama and Balakot before partially reverting (see figure 2). A [Lokniti-CSDS](#) survey found that roughly 80 percent of voters in the 2019 general election had heard of the Balakot airstrike—46 percent of whom favored Modi’s reelection, compared to 32 percent among those unaware of India’s retaliatory strikes.

However, foreign policy crises like the 2019 Pulwama attacks and the subsequent Balakot retaliation are relatively infrequent, and their timing is unpredictable, meaning that drawing clean inferences based on timely public opinion data may not always be possible. Crises aside, foreign policy is more likely to factor into the intangible “[hawa](#)”—the mythical “wind” or buzz that captures public sentiment around Indian elections. In this way, the perceived gains that an incumbent makes in the foreign policy domain may not necessarily be strongly reflected in polling data compared to known, make-or-break Election Day issues. Nonetheless, such gains can further an impression of achievement for the incumbent, aiding in the creation of a feel-good sentiment as voters cast their ballots. By the same token, perceived foreign policy losses could contribute to a general sentiment of negativity around a ruling party.

Figure 2. The BJP and Modi's Bounce in Popularity After the Pulwama Attacks and Balakot Response



Note: The horizontal dotted line depicts net satisfaction with the BJP as of one day before the Pulwama attacks. The vertical solid lines indicate the days of the Pulwama attack and the subsequent Indian bombing at Balakot, Pakistan. Source: IANS-CVoter tracker polls conducted between January 2019 and the start of the 2019 elections in April. Figure adapted from Jamie Hinton and Milan Vaishnav, "Who Rallies around the Flag? Nationalist Parties, National Security, and the 2019 Indian Election," *American Journal of Political Science* 67, no. 2 (2023): 342-357, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12677>.

Why Is Foreign Policy Emerging Now?

Arguably, there are two sets of factors that explain why foreign policy is emerging as a domestic political issue at this juncture in India's history.

The first set includes structural factors related to the changing nature of international order. For starters, the United States' unipolar moment following the end of the Cold War has arguably come to an end. Hobbled by deep domestic political divisions and reeling from a series of prolonged foreign interventions, America's ability to shape global order is increasingly called into doubt. China, fueled by a booming economy (until recently) and a desire to expand its geopolitical footprint, has emerged as a clear strategic competitor to the once hegemonic United States. Russian revanchism under President Vladimir Putin has also grown, exhibited by its brazen invasion of Ukraine and desire to inflict costs on the Western alliance.

The fragmentation of the international order has created space for India to flex its foreign policy muscles. China's increased assertiveness has become a principal preoccupation of Western leaders who, in turn, have accelerated their courtship of India, which has turned more receptive in the aftermath of Chinese border incursions in 2020. Although India failed to unequivocally condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, its Western partners nevertheless seized the moment to try and wean India off Russian defense imports by casting doubt on Moscow's reliability. Amid this churning, India has [sought to exploit](#) the growing number of cleavages in the international system to pursue its realist interests, skillfully playing adversaries off one another. India's growing economy, increased relevance in multilateral negotiations devoted to tackling global and transnational challenges, and strategic geography have made it an indispensable partner to nearly all the great powers.

But the emergence of foreign policy as a domestic concern goes beyond structure alone. The current government's unique worldview represents a second critical factor. The BJP government has seized upon the foreign policy domain as a crucial pillar of its ambition, striving that India under Modi's leadership reclaim its historical role as a civilizational power. The prime minister has proposed that he and his government are leading India out of "[twelve centuries of slavery](#)" marked by repeated foreign invasions and the ignominy of colonial rule. Instead, this thinking goes, his government is ushering in a new era of "[Amrit Kaal](#)" (a Vedic concept about the gates of pleasure opening to the world). Such grand thinking shows his conviction that India inhabits a geopolitical sweet spot today. As External Affairs Minister [S. Jaishankar](#) has put it, "The world is actually today getting ready for us. It is we who have to make that effort to prepare for a bigger role . . . with a sense of historical and civilizational responsibility."

According to proponents of this view, the Modi government’s ambitious agenda for India stands in sharp contrast to the fecklessness of the opposition. The Congress Party regime of Manmohan Singh was perceived as unwilling to exercise power globally in ways that maximized India’s own interests. Modi himself has explicitly painted this contrast, [denouncing](#) previous Congress Party governments’ exercise of what they called “strategic restraint” in the face of terrorist attacks. As the prime minister recently [remarked](#) at an election rally in Bihar, “Even a small country (Pakistan) which reported a shortage of flour would be bold enough to launch a terrorist attack on us, and the Congress government would just take up the complaint with another country.”

Modi’s unique mix of personal popularity, ambition, and marketing savvy has convinced many Indians that his leadership is an intrinsic part of India’s revival, at home and abroad. And his ability to market his government’s achievements is second to none.

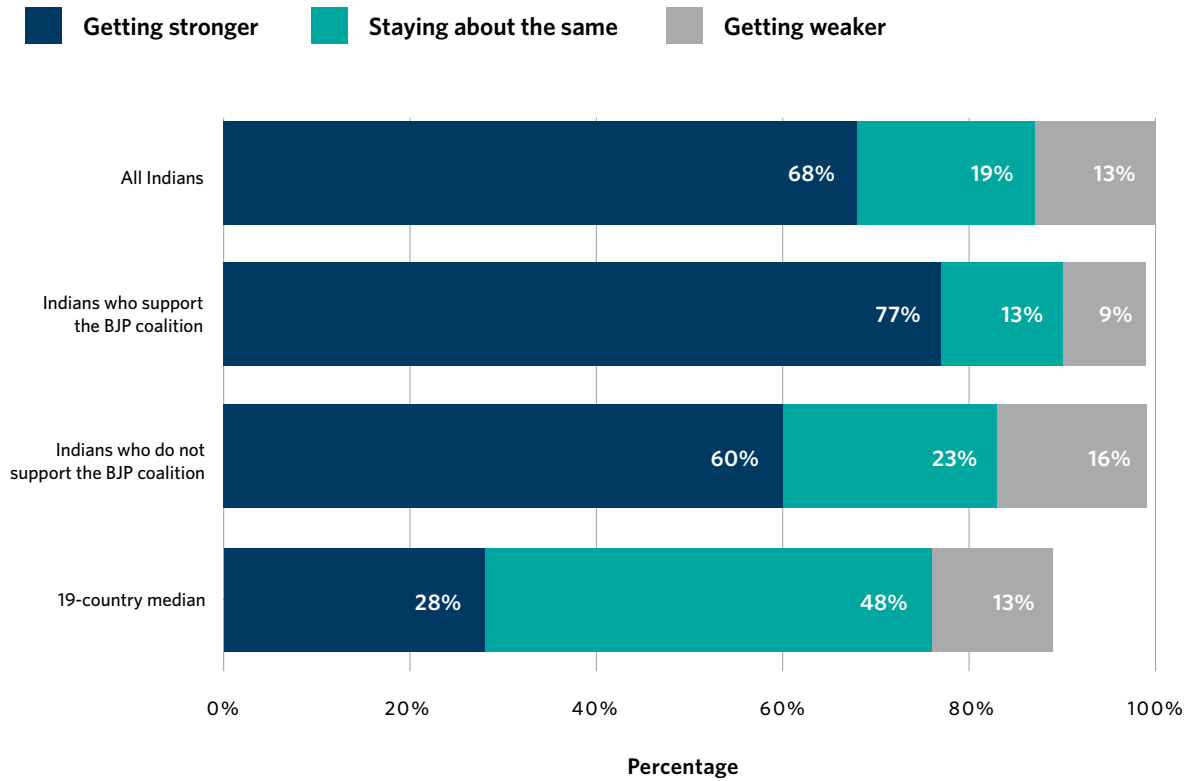
The [frenetic pace of activity](#) around India’s presidency of the G20—consisting of more than 200 events in more than sixty cities—demonstrated the Modi government’s desire to communicate its foreign policy achievements to the masses. India’s G20 logo, which creatively incorporated the BJP’s signature lotus flower, was slapped on everything from major archeological sites to standardized tests. Posters and billboards hailing India’s presidency plastered flyovers, train stations, and major thoroughfares, and many Indians viewed this milestone as a coronation rather than the country’s routine turn assuming an annually rotating leadership position. This physical marketing onslaught was paired with digital mobilization, fueled by deepening smartphone penetration and the plummeting cost of data. “Why shouldn’t G20 be used for domestic politics?” thundered Home Affairs Minister [Amit Shah](#). “If G20 has come to the country during Modiji’s time . . . then Modiji must get credit.”

Reaping Political Rewards

The effort to harness India’s foreign policy status for domestic political purposes is especially noteworthy because of the clear evidence that it has consolidated domestic support for the current government.

According to the 2023 [Pew Global Attitudes Survey](#), nearly seven in ten Indians believed that their country’s global influence was getting stronger (see figure 3). Furthermore, eight in ten Indians had a favorable opinion of Modi’s performance as prime minister (with 55 percent holding a “very favorable” view). Not surprisingly, respondents who were supporters of the ruling BJP alliance were especially bullish on India’s global prospects, with 77 percent reporting the country’s influence as increasing. Even among those who did not support the Modi government, six in ten agreed with the notion that India’s status had risen.

Figure 3. Popular Assessments of India's Growing Influence



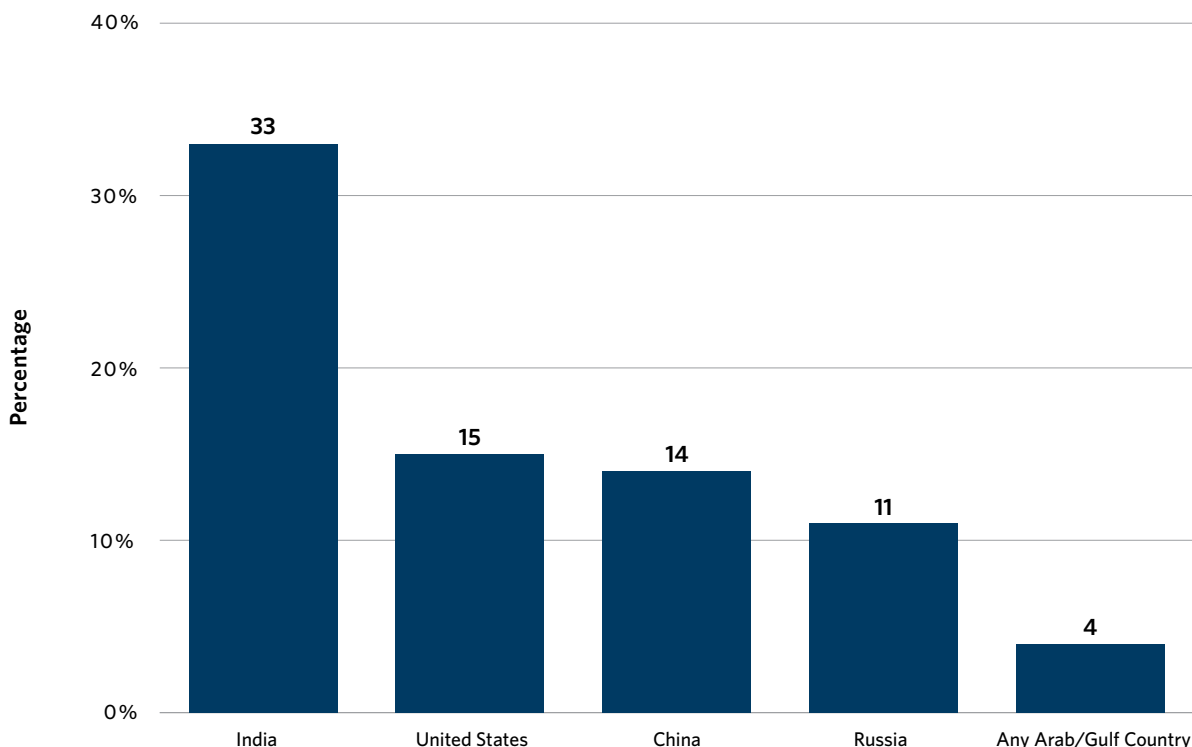
Note: The figure displays the percentage of respondents who said India's influence in the world in recent years had been getting stronger, staying about the same, or getting weaker. The data on India are from spring 2023 and the data from other countries are from spring 2022. Respondents who did not answer are not shown. The nineteen-country median is based on respondents from: Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Poland, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Source: Christine Huang, Moira Fagan, and Sneha Gubbala, "Views of India Lean Positive Across 23 Countries," Pew Research Center, August 29, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/08/29/views-of-india-lean-positive-across-23-countries>.

Indians hold especially positive views about their country's role in their neighborhood. In a nationally representative [2022 survey](#) conducted by CVoter and the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), 33 percent of Indian respondents reported that India wielded the most influence in Asia, with the United States a distant second at fifteen percent and China a hair below at fourteen percent (see figure 4).

Figure 4. Indians Believe India is the Most Influential Country in Asia

Which country has the most influence in Asia?



Note: Respondents who did not answer are not shown.

Source: "How Indians View India and the World," Centre for Policy Research and CVoter Foundation, September 2022, <https://cprindia.org/briefsreports/how-indians-view-india-and-the-world>.

A more recent [domestic survey](#) of young, urban Indians, conducted by YouGov in partnership with CPR and *Mint*, found very high levels of public satisfaction with the Modi government, including on foreign policy matters. For instance, 70 percent of respondents were satisfied with India's conduct as host of the G20, and a roughly equivalent share maintained a favorable view of the government's efforts to protect the country from terrorist attacks. Even on the issue of Chinese incursions along the country's disputed northern border, six in ten respondents were satisfied with the way the government had handled the ongoing dispute.

Interestingly, foreigners were less impressed by India's role in the world and Modi's leadership. The [Pew survey](#) found that, in nineteen countries across the developed and developing world, a median of 28 percent believed India's global influence had grown while 48 percent believed it had stayed the same. Across a smaller sample of a dozen countries, a median of 37 percent held a positive view of Modi (albeit with large numbers expressing no opinion).

Lingering Questions

The newfound domestic resonance of foreign policy is a striking development in a country where such matters were long out of sight and, hence, out of mind for most Indian voters. But the transition of foreign policy from an elite to mass issue also raises pertinent questions about the implications of this development for domestic politics.

The Limits of Accountability

In 2018, scholars [Vipin Narang and Paul Staniland](#) argued that there are certain conditions under which foreign policy might resonate politically in a democracy like India. They posited that two factors play a determining role: clarity of responsibility and issue salience. On the first consideration, the ability of domestic audiences to apply credit or blame to political leaders for the conduct of foreign policy hinges, in part, on their ability to identify a clear chain of responsibility. For instance, when a coalition government is in power, it might be hard for ordinary voters to know which party or leader is responsible for a given policy success or blunder.

In single-party-majority governments, especially those helmed by a charismatic leader who holds a tight grip on the reins of power, voters have a much easier job. But domestic attention is also conditional on a second factor: the nature of the foreign policy issue at hand. The intricacies of a free-trade agreement, for instance, might be less resonant than how a government responds to a terrorist attack. Taking these two dimensions together, foreign policy is expected to have the greatest domestic import when both clarity of responsibility and issue salience are at their highest.

[China's 2020 incursions](#) into India would seem to satisfy both conditions. Chinese forces crossed the Line of Actual Control (LAC) into India, infringing on and ultimately occupying territory previously controlled by India. China's moves were brazen, condemned by India and many of the country's partners, and validated by third-party satellite imagery. And they took place less than a year after the Modi government won reelection with a resounding mandate, increasing the BJP's parliamentary seat tally despite five years of incumbency.

And yet, perhaps surprisingly, the combination of clarity of responsibility and issue salience did not lead to serious democratic accountability. To the contrary, the Modi government does not seem to have paid any domestic cost for a foreign policy setback that occurred on its watch and that remains unresolved today. If the ruling party enjoys the gains accrued from perceived foreign policy successes—such as the hosting of the G20 or the June 2023 White House state dinner in Modi's honor—why does it not suffer any downside from foreign policy losses? This question requires deeper investigation, but, at first glance, there are three potential explanations.

First, popular support for Modi is so considerable that, despite experiencing short-term losses, voters may believe that the prime minister will eventually reverse these setbacks. This argument has an analogy in domestic policy: despite a record of mixed economic growth while in office, [many Indian voters believe](#) that Modi's vision for the country will ultimately result in widespread prosperity, even if the accumulated record to date leaves much to be desired.

A second explanation relates to the information environment. What happens along a contested border that is not clearly demarcated is hard enough for experts to decipher, much less ordinary voters. This murkiness is compounded by the considerable [influence](#) the government wields over the media, opening up the possibility of either killing uncomfortable stories or cowing newsrooms into silence. Added to this is the reality that the ruling party has [prevented](#) an open debate on the border crisis on the floor of Parliament and blocked the opposition (and, by extension, the public) from scrutinizing its record. Indeed, one outspoken BJP member of Parliament [criticized](#) the government for evading an open discussion of the border standoff.

A third explanation could be voters' limited trust in the opposition. Even if the electorate is concerned about India's loss of face vis-a-vis China along the LAC, it is possible that they have little faith that the opposition would do a better job handling the crisis. After all, the border conflict is a long-standing dispute that the Congress Party, in its many decades in power, could not resolve in India's favor. In such circumstances, the incentives to hold the government accountable are muted.

Unintended Electoral Consequences

As the domestic salience of foreign policy increases, a second issue pertains to the unintended consequences of nationalist rallying. Consider again the effects of the Pulwama attacks of 2019. On a national scale, the attacks contributed to a rally-around-the-flag effect that undoubtedly bolstered the BJP's election prospects. The attacks [shifted voters' attention](#) away from quotidian issues like the economy and unemployment—areas where the ruling BJP was on shakier ground—toward issues of national security, where the party's nationalist credentials gave it a sizable issue advantage.

However, while the attacks seemed to fuel a nationalist rallying at a macro level, the BJP faced [greater voter blowback](#) in areas where exposure to the Pulwama losses was greatest (such as the villages and towns the slain soldiers called home). In other words, [greater exposure](#) to losses emanating from this particular security crisis tapered the level of rallying in support of the nationalist incumbent. These setbacks had little impact on the overall outcome because the losses were dispersed and highly localized. However, if the Pulwama casualties had been more widespread, then there could have been a greater backlash against the BJP.

Risks of Foreign Policy Overreach

A third and final question involves the distinct feeling in the corridors of power in New Delhi that, as one reporter summarized, “[the world needs India more than India needs the world](#).” While government officials might not broadcast this from the rooftops, their public and private utterances demonstrate a confidence and self-assurance that aligns with this point of view.

This belief that India’s time has arrived may have encouraged some in government to pursue the targeted assassinations of Sikh separatist leaders [Hardeep Singh Nijjar](#) in Canada, which succeeded, and [Gurpatwant Singh Pannun](#) in the United States, which did not. To be clear, official Indian involvement has only been conjectured in both cases, with the former murder under investigation and the latter the subject of an ongoing criminal prosecution. A [commonly heard refrain](#) in India is that while there is disputed evidence of the Indian government’s role, if it was involved, it would be a sign of the country’s emerging great power status. Such a reaction implies that India would have achieved the impunity to undertake the kinds of covert operations abroad that have previously been the hallmarks of richer, more established powers like Israel, Russia, and the United States.

Domestically, India’s foreign policy adventurism is likely to help, rather than hurt, the ruling party’s popularity. But it is a strategy laden with risks for India’s relations with international partners. While Canada might be too trivial a player to matter, India’s relationship with the United States is of vital importance. While the U.S. administration betrays no desire to allow these incidents to derail a growing strategic partnership, India’s pursuit of risky foreign escapades that play well at home holds the possibility of souring relations abroad. Good politics, in other words, might not always make for good policy.

Acknowledgments

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CHAPTER 10

Is India's Fourth Party System Intact?

Milan Vaishnav and Caroline Mallory

On paper, India's 2024 poll results herald a return to coalition politics—marking a break with the previous decade of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) dominance. For the first time since Narendra Modi catapulted to power in 2014, the BJP is reliant on its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners to stake its claim to power.

The resurgence of the BJP as a dominant party in 2014 and the dramatic expansion of its electoral footprint marked the beginning of a new electoral era known as the “fourth party system.” The first party system, dominated by the Congress Party, was in place from the time of independence until the 1967 elections, when the Congress' grip on power in India's states sharply waned. In the second party system, from 1967 to 1989, the Congress largely retained its controlling position at the center even as its popularity gradually declined. India's third party system, in place from 1989 to 2014, was synonymous with an era of coalition politics and the absence of a core political party around which the party system revolved.

The resurgence of coalition politics in New Delhi and the presence of a stronger political opposition raise the question of whether the 2024 verdict reflects a repudiation of the fourth party system. A dispassionate analysis of newly available data suggests that while the 2024 verdict represents a curtailing of the BJP's dominance, many attributes of the new party system persist.

Presence of a Dominant Party

The 2014 election was historic on several counts: it was the first time a party won a parliamentary majority in three decades, and it was the first time ever a party other than the Congress Party did so. In the 2019 election, the BJP defied challenges of anti-incumbency

and grew its tally further. Against this backdrop, the 2024 general election certainly represents a stunning setback for the party.

On the surface, the decline in the BJP's seat tally from 303 to just 240 alone suggests major cracks in the edifice of the fourth party system. But a closer look at the data suggests that, despite experiencing a setback, the BJP retains its dominant position at the helm of the fourth party system.

For starters, the BJP's vote share declined by less than one percentage point in 2024 relative to 2019 (36.6 versus 37.3 percent). This suggests that, on an all-India level, its popularity has not changed significantly. However, its seat share dropped dramatically, indicating that what has shifted is the regional distribution of that support—with losses in the Hindi heartland largely offset by gains in eastern and southern India. Although the BJP failed to meet both internal and external electoral expectations, ironically it emerged as a truly pan-Indian party for the first time.

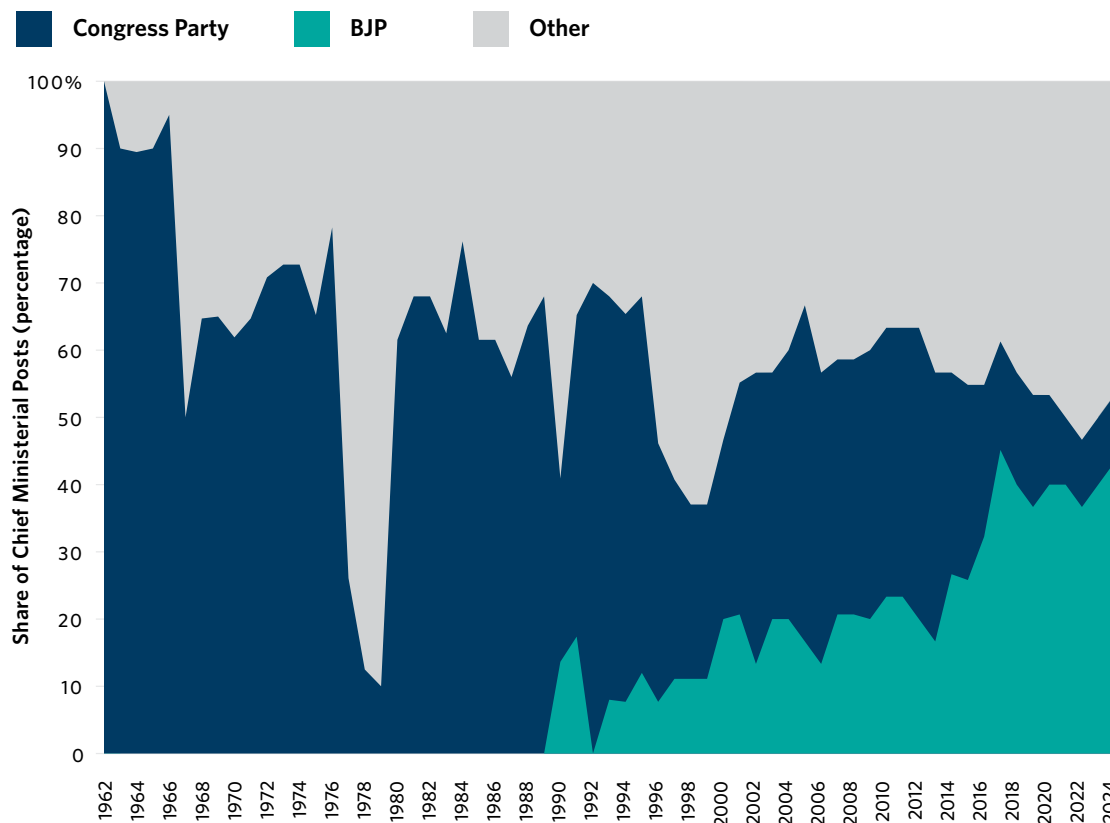
In terms of pan-Indian parties, the BJP has only a single rival: the Congress. In 2024, the Congress' vote share crept up to 21.2 percent, a modest upward swing from the 19.4 percent it enjoyed in 2019. However, the Congress' vote rise looks impressive only in comparison with recent elections; its 2024 share was its third worst performance ever.

The fact that more than two dozen opposition parties, including the Congress, joined hands to form the INDIA alliance is a further testament to the BJP's centrality. One of the tests associated with a system-defining party is the extent to which elections are fought in favor of, or in opposition to, the party with a preponderance of power. By all indications, the BJP retains that designation for now.

Another way of assessing the BJP's centrality is to look beyond the national stage and focus instead on the party's state-level performance. BJP chief ministers are currently in office in thirteen states (occupying 43 percent of all chief ministerial positions) (figure 1). At the start of 2014, the BJP held only 17 percent of all chief ministerial positions. The current BJP share was last matched by the Congress in 2012.

The BJP's control of state governments has meant that its share of members of the legislative assemblies (MLAs) has exhibited a corresponding increase. In 1980, just 4 percent of MLAs across India belonged to the BJP. Today, the BJP's share of MLAs stands at 38 percent—an all-time high.

Figure 1. Share of Chief Ministerial Posts by Party, 1962–2024



Note: This figure depicts the annual number of chief ministerial posts belonging to the Congress Party, BJP, and other parties from 1962 to 2024. The share of states with missing data due to the imposition of Article 356 (President’s Rule) is not shown here. Source: Vaishnav-Ravi-Mallory dataset on Indian chief ministers, 1956–2024.

While the BJP has significantly expanded its footprint at the state level, the party has not achieved state-level dominance by any stretch. In the 66 state assembly elections held since 2014, the BJP has formed the first postelection government in roughly half of all states. And in the 34 cases where it formed the government, it did so with a single-party majority in only half of all instances.

A final indicator of the BJP’s systemic import comes from the Rajya Sabha, whose members are indirectly elected by the state assemblies. 41 percent of Rajya Sabha MPs belong to the BJP—a figure that has remained roughly constant since 2020. After upper house elections in late August 2024, the BJP boasts 96 MPs in the upper house, where the NDA holds a bare majority.

Political Centralization

In 1952, 53 parties fielded parliamentary candidates in the country's inaugural general election. That number surged to 113 in 1989, the year coalition politics came to New Delhi. Since then, the number of parties contesting Indian general elections has grown steadily; in 2024, 744 distinct parties had candidates in the fray.

However, many of these parties had little chance of winning even a single parliamentary seat. For this reason, political scientists prefer to calculate the effective number of parties (ENP), a measure that weighs parties by the number of votes (or seats) they actually earned (figure 2).

Between 1962 and 1989, the ENP for votes remained under 5, ranging from 3.4 in 1977 to 4.7 in 1967 and 1989. During the coalition era, this number grew significantly, peaking at 7.6 in 2009. This period, in retrospect, reflected the high point for party fragmentation. Beginning in 2014, but more substantially five years later, the ENP for votes declined significantly—to 5.4 in 2019. In 2024, this metric hardly budged, exhibiting a value of 5.3.

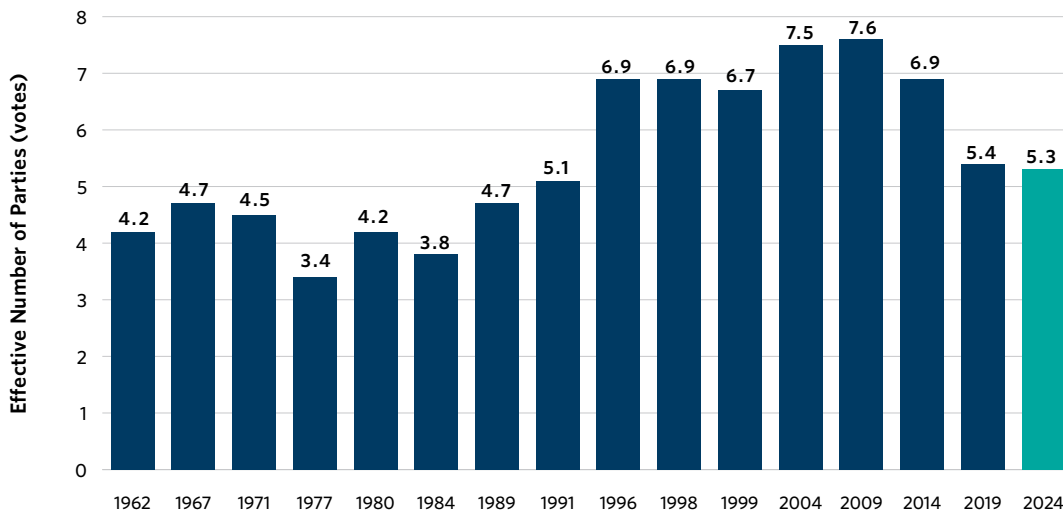
On the metric of ENP for seats, however, there has been some sign of reversal. The ENP for seats grew to 4.2 in 2024, a level comparable to the year 1989. This is a sharp rise from the ENP value of 3.0 five years prior. The divergence between the ENP for votes and seats is likely an artifact of India's first-past-the-post electoral system, in which a small shift in votes can result in a disproportionate change in seats.

Political Competition

The third party system witnessed rising levels of political competition, a trend that firmly reversed post-2014. The 2024 election results suggest a modest shift toward more competitive elections. The simplest way of measuring the degree of competition is to calculate the average margin of victory—or the difference in the vote share of the winner and the runner-up—across parliamentary constituencies (figure 3).

The average margin of victory in an Indian general election peaked at 26.1 percent in 1977—the year that the Congress was defeated after the lifting of emergency rule. After that, it exhibited a considerable decline, plummeting to 9.7 percent in 2009. With the BJP's rise to power in 2014, this trend sharply reversed, with the average margin touching 15.2 percent. By 2019, it had grown to 17.3 percent, signifying that elections had become appreciably *less* competitive in the fourth party system. 2024 marks another partial reversal as the average margin fell to 13.6 percent—a twenty percent decline from 2019 levels.

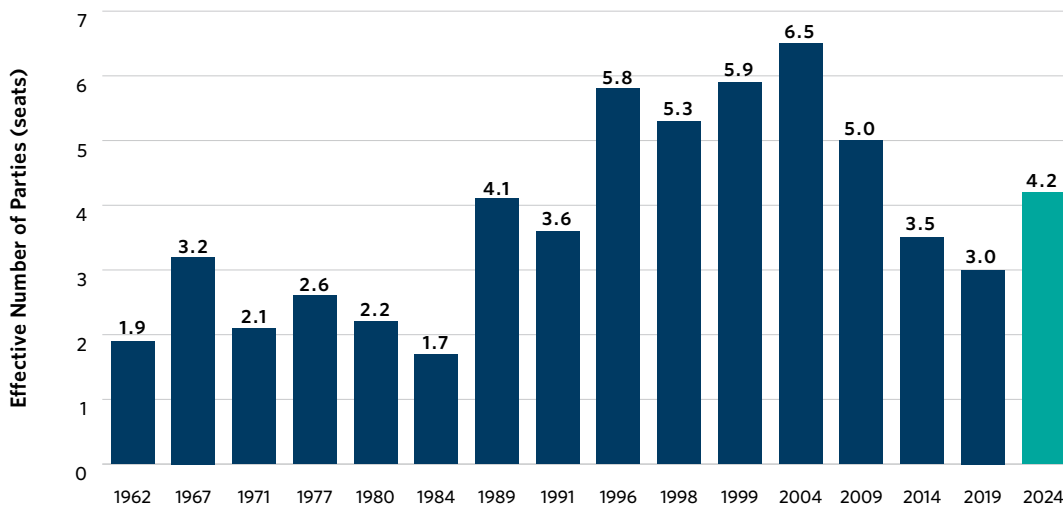
Figure 2. Effective Number of Parties (Votes) in Lok Sabha Elections, 1962-2024



Note: Independent candidates lacking a party affiliation were treated as a single party for the purposes of calculating the effective number of parties (votes).

Source: Authors' analysis of Francesca Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1952-Today," 2024.

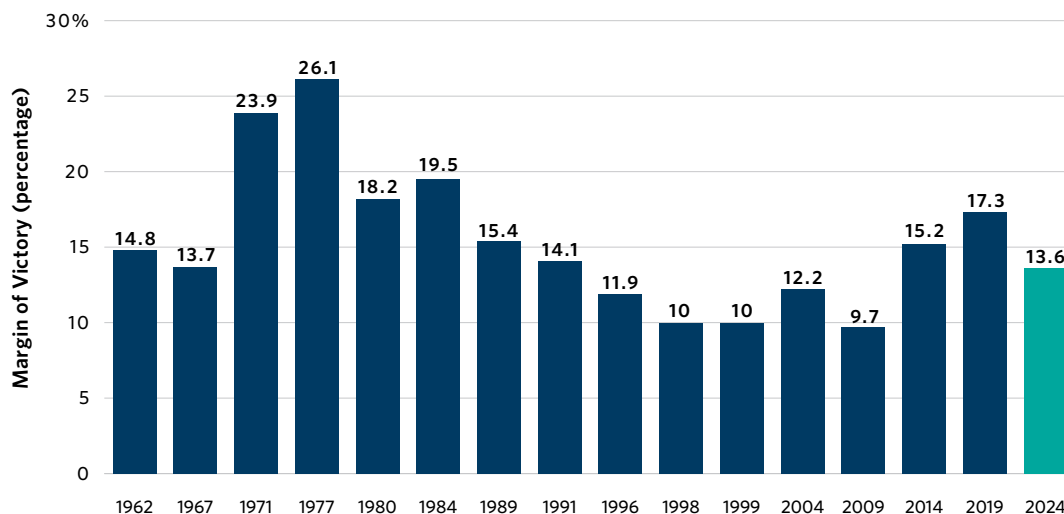
Effective Number of Parties (Seats) in Lok Sabha Elections, 1962-2024



Note: Independent candidates lacking a party affiliation were treated as a single party for the purposes of calculating the effective number of parties (seats).

Source: Authors' analysis of Francesca Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1952-Today," 2024.

Figure 3. Average Margin of Victory in Lok Sabha Elections, 1962-2024



Source: Authors' analysis of Francesca Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1952-Today," 2024.

Nationalization of Electoral Politics

During the coalition era, national elections often resembled an aggregation of state-level verdicts. The 2014 election was a watershed in this regard. A groundswell of support in favor of the Modi-led BJP was felt in diverse pockets of the country. The 2019 election operated with a similar template in that the BJP, especially in the wake of the Pulwama terrorist attacks, successfully whipped up a nationalist fervor in favor of the incumbent.

The dynamics of the 2024 elections surprised many observers because they reverted to the kind of state-by-state contest India experienced before 2014. The BJP's inability to craft a defining election narrative, in conjunction with significant opposition consolidation, helped create the conditions for a more federalized contest. Unlike the prior two elections, there was no discernible national wave in support of one party or leader.

Despite this clear reversion to the pre-2014 era, a few elements of the fourth party system remain unchanged. First, during the coalition era, national elections were predictably influenced by state-level political calendars. The received wisdom held that if a national election were held early on in a state government's tenure, the ruling party in that state would perform well in national elections. Conversely, if a national election were held late in a state government's term, that state ruling party would struggle in the national polls. These "honeymoon" and "anti-incumbency" effects have weakened post-2014.

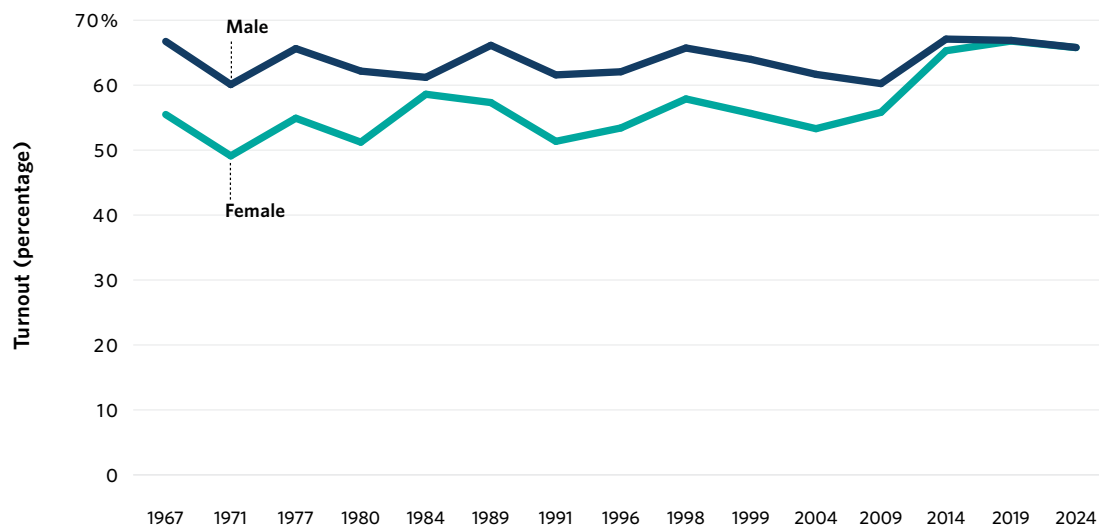
Another aspect of the diminished federal character of elections is the changing balance of power between national and regional parties. Between 1996 and 2014, there was roughly an equal distribution of votes shared by national and regional parties. Barring minor fluctuations, the BJP and Congress collectively earned around 50 percent of the vote, meaning that one in two votes in a general election accrued to a regional party. In 2019, and again in 2024, that roughly equal distribution was disrupted when the BJP won markedly larger vote shares. In 2019, the BJP and Congress collectively won 56.8 percent of the vote, and this vote share divergence grew by an additional percentage point in 2024.

Voter Mobilization in National Elections

In 2014, India saw record-breaking turnout in a general election, at 66.4 percent. This was a significant increase from the 2004 and 2009 elections, when turnout hovered around 58 percent. In 2019, turnout rose even higher, clocking in at 67.7 percent. Much of the commentary during the 2024 elections featured a narrative of sagging voter turnout. While turnout did drop, the decline was modest: overall turnout stood at 65.8 percent.

A second dynamic that came into view during the tail end of the third party system does not pertain to overall turnout levels but to the composition of who comes out to vote (figure 4). In the first several decades after independence, female turnout consistently lagged male turnout by 8 to 12 percentage points. In 2004, the male-female turnout gap stood at 8.4 percent. By 2014, that gap had shrunk to 1.8 percent; by 2019, it virtually disappeared. In 2024, the gender gap in turnout stood at a miniscule 0.02 percent.

Figure 4. Voter Turnout by Gender in Lok Sabha Elections, 1967-2024



Source: Election Commission of India.

Caste and Social Composition of Representation

The fourth party system also coincided with a shift in the social composition of India's elected representatives. In 1989, 47 percent of MPs from the Hindi belt belonged to the upper or intermediate castes, compared to 20 percent from the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category. Over the next several elections, the former dipped to 42 percent in 1999 while the latter grew to 25 percent. This was the first year in which the combined share of OBC and Scheduled Caste (SC) legislators exceeded that of upper caste and intermediate castes, and the gap widened further in 2004. By 2014, the upper/intermediate castes regained the upper hand, once more approaching fifty percent of the total. These dominant communities maintained their representational advantage over lower castes through 2019, albeit with shrinking margins.

2024 witnessed an unprecedented surge in OBC representation, with nearly one in three Hindi belt MPs hailing from this group. In contrast, at 39 percent, the share of upper/intermediate caste MPs from this region was at its lowest level in history. Since 1989, the SC and Scheduled Tribe (ST) share of Hindi belt MPs has remained constant; OBCs, on the other hand, have gained considerable ground. In 2024, Muslim representation stands at 3 percent, half the share seen in 1989.

Conclusion

While coalition governance has returned to New Delhi, the BJP retains a position of national strength. Looking ahead, the future trajectory of India's party system will largely depend on answers to three questions.

First, to what extent has Modi's popularity peaked? Modi's standing is important because public opinion surveys have shown that the prime minister consistently outperforms his party's brand. According to Lokniti-CSDS, 41 percent of Indians polled in 2024 favored Modi as prime minister, down from 47 percent in 2019.

Second, how sustainable is the INDIA alliance? The ability of the coalition to hang together will significantly impact both the format of political competition in key states and the BJP's ability to exploit a divided opposition for electoral gain, something it skillfully accomplished in 2014 and 2019. The degree of opposition unity was significantly higher in 2024 than in the prior two elections.

Finally, to what extent have the views of the median voter shifted in a more conservative direction that provides a sustained electoral advantage to the BJP? Put differently, what if Modi is a lagging, rather than leading, indicator of changing political and social attitudes? If this is correct, it means that the BJP's political dominance could have greater staying power, irrespective of Modi's standing.

For now, in the immediate aftermath of the 2024 result, several aspects of the fourth party system have been called into question. But in large measure, its foundations remain intact.

This chapter is a shortened version of the Carnegie paper "The Resilience of India's Fourth Party System" that was published in the Hindustan Times, reprinted with permission.



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Notes

For complete source notes, please read the original publications at CarnegieEndowment.org.

Chapter 1

- 1 Regarding the former, the study finds that ideal points based on “classically Western” issues (abortion and military spending) do little to differentiate Indian political parties from each other. And, to the extent that they do, differences do not map onto understandings of parties’ or their supporters’ ideological positioning. Regarding the latter, we find that ideological self-placement on a seven-point scale from “left” to “right,” as is often elicited in studies on the West, poorly predicts Indian respondents’ ideal point estimates and levels of political engagement.

Chapter 3

- 2 The Sachar Committee was a high-level committee established in March 2005 by the government of former prime minister Manmohan Singh of the Indian National Congress (also known as the Congress Party). Headed by former chief justice of the Delhi High Court Rajinder Sachar, it was tasked with studying the social, educational, and economic status of India’s Muslim community. The committee submitted its report to Parliament in November 2006.
- 3 This survey was carried out by the author across eighteen districts in eastern, central, and western Uttar Pradesh. The sample included 1,468 Muslims who identified as Pasmada (OBC and Dalit) and 480 who identified as General or Upper Caste. Additionally, the Hindu sample of the survey included 355 Hindus identifying as Upper Caste, 1,180 identifying as OBC, and 389 identifying as from the Scheduled Castes.
- 4 Agreeing with the statement involved saying that the respondent “strongly agreed” or “agreed.”
- 5 The questions on linked progress and linked hurt were adapted from Jae Yeon Kim and Alan N. Yan, “Unbundling Linked Fate: How Respondents Interpret Linked Fate Question,” SocArXiv, Working Paper, November 15, 2021, <http://dx.doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/k6c9x>.

Chapter 5

- 6 The survey was conducted in rural and peri-urban areas of Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Kota districts in Rajasthan. Therefore, it should not be interpreted as representative of these districts or the state as a whole.
- 7 Report on file with the author.
- 8 This finding should be seen as exploratory rather than confirmatory, because little public documentation exists about the sampling protocol and the number of respondents within each caste group.
- 9 The Central Statistical Organization's 2019 [time-use survey](#) shows large gender disparities in time spent on the provision of unpaid caregiving (14 percent for men compared to 27.6 percent for women) and domestic services (26.1 percent for men compared to 81.2 percent for women). During an average week, a woman spends thirty hours on these activities, ten times what a man spends.
- 10 Interview by author in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, November 2019.
- 11 Interview by author in Jaipur, Rajasthan, March 2019.

Chapter 6

- 12 Although Twitter was formally rebranded as X in July 2023, this article refers to the platform as Twitter because the research for this article was undertaken before the name change and because this is the name commonly utilized in India even today.
- 13 The lotus flower is the official party symbol of the BJP.

Chapter 8

- 14 Individual incumbency calculations in this article exclude by-elections. An incumbent candidate is defined as a candidate elected in the previous general election.
- 15 The official reason offered by the BJP was an enhanced version of the “Jack Welch rule,” or the principle that firms should fire 10 percent of their least productive employees each year. For the BJP in Gujarat, discarding half of their sitting MLAs was also a convenient method of minimizing dissent, maintaining party discipline, and dismantling rebellious factions.
- 16 Between 1977 and 2019, 10 percent of major party candidates, on average, have been “turncoats” or have switched parties between elections. Over the last three general elections, the share of turncoat candidates has hovered around 6 percent. Fewer than one-third (27 percent) of turncoats got elected over the same period.
- 17 This rough measure includes not only MPs who have substantial legislative experience but also individuals who have succeeded in retaining their nomination and surmounting anti-incumbency.
- 18 On average, state assemblies have a similar-sized professional political class.



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