

Economic Ideology in Indian Politics: Why Do Elite and Mass Politics Differ?

Studies in Indian Politics
11(2) 274–288, 2023
© 2023 Lokniti, Centre for the
Study of Developing Societies
Article reuse guidelines:
in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india
DOI: 10.1177/23210230231209450
journals.sagepub.com/home/inp



Rahul Verma¹ and Pradeep K. Chhibber²

Abstract

A long line of scholarship has argued that ideological division structures party politics in many parts of the world. In India, however, there is a long-held consensus that the parties do not sort themselves ideologically, especially regarding economic policymaking. The paper analyses National Election Studies data between 1996 and 2019 by Lokniti-CSDS, and shows that voters cluster around the centre-left position on economic issues. Nevertheless, there are discernible ideological differences among the party members. The Bhartiya Janata Party members are more likely to favour privatisation, and members of Left parties prefer labour rights. These ideological differences are also evident in our analysis of the manifestos of political parties since 1952 and an expert survey conducted in 2022. We argue that these elite differences in economic policy do not translate into mass politics because all political parties present the State as the solution to economic deprivation. The rise of welfare populism in Indian politics in the past two decades, we suggest, is a result of centralisation within political parties in which the welfare promises are directly linked to the party leaders.

Keywords

Class divide, economic ideology, elite politics, mass politics, party system, welfare politics

Introduction

Ideological division structures party systems and politics in many parts of the world (Bartels, 2013). In India, however, there is a long-held consensus that the parties do not sort themselves ideologically, especially regarding economic policymaking (Kothari, 1964; Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987; Yadav & Palshikar, 2006).³ Scholars have argued that all parties pursue broadly similar policies, no matter what

¹ Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, India

² Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

³ Reviewing party system change in India, Yadav and Palshikar (2006) make two observations. In the last few decades, the multiplicity of political parties created more options for the electorates on the electoral menu. Yet, the choices available to

Corresponding author:

Rahul Verma, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi 110021, India.

E-mail: rahulverma@cprindia.org

coalition or party comes to power in the centre, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Congress or the Third Front. This absence of parties' distinct policy positions has led to the conclusion that party politics in India is non-ideological. Suri (2013), after a masterful survey of the study of Indian parties, writes, 'the boundaries between parties in terms of broad economic policies are becoming blurred' (p. 233).⁴ The one exception often mentioned is the Left Front, whose position on the State's economic policies differs from the more centrist or centre-right policies adopted by the Congress and the BJP (Mallick, 1994; Rodrigues, 2006).

The rise of the BJP in the past decade compelled a spate of revisionist views on the non-ideological nature of Indian politics. The BJP is considered more inclined towards private businesses and greater infrastructure spending and projects a slightly different worldview vis-à-vis India's welfare state (Sengupta, 2019). In a meeting with the business community in Japan in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi unabashedly proclaimed, 'Being a Gujarati, money is in my blood ... commerce is in my blood.' Although Chhibber and Verma (2018) link the success of the BJP to a long-running ideological conflict in Indian politics, they, too, conclude that the conventional distinction regarding economic ideology—those who favour free markets on the 'right' and those who look for more significant state intervention on the 'left'—has limited resonance among Indian voters.

The Indian political elite are, however, ideologically divided and have distinct positions on economic issues. Party experts, journalists and academics acknowledge these differences. Elite's conflict on political matters in democracies is often manifested in mass attitudes (Zaller, 1992). Why aren't these differences among the Indian political elite found in mass public opinion? We argue that the masses share a common view on the role of the State because many Indian voters depend on the State for their well-being, and those who favour unfettered free markets are too few to constitute a significant catchment for political parties. The centralisation within political parties since the 1990s also created conditions in which leadership appeal got closely tied with welfare promises to distribute state resources for mobilising political support.

In this article, we first present an analysis of public opinion data from National Election Studies (NES) between 1996 and 2019 and show that voters cluster around the centre-left position on economic issues among the voters. Second, using the NES data, we report that party members differ ideologically. As a survey conducted in 2022 also reveals that party experts agree that Indian political parties are ideologically distinct. Finally, we show using data from the party manifestos that the increasing welfare populism, in which most Indian parties are targeting voters through cash handouts, is perhaps a more efficient and scaled-up version of previous policies, seeking to alleviate poverty. This has happened due to the rapid expansion of technology to reach targeted and beneficiaries, and communication techniques that can efficiently link credit of welfare delivery to party leadership (Aiyar, 2019; Sircar, 2020).

Mass Opinions on the Role of the State in the Economy

The debate on economic ideology primarily revolves around the State in opposition to the market, capital in opposition to labour and the interests of the middle classes in opposition to the poor. Although these

citizens remained limited because of the overlapping consensus among parties on various issues. They argue that parties in India increasingly show signs of convergence or a tendency to become like one another.

⁴ For a dissenting note, see Huber and Inglehart (1995). In their assessment of expert opinion on India, the authors find that class and economic conflict structures partisan politics in India. It was the most cited category among the experts, with religion and secularism being the second most cited dimension.

divisions have characterised party politics in many parts of the world, the scholarly consensus has been that these divisions do not similarly resonate in India.

In this section, we analyse survey data from NES between 1996 and 2019 conducted by the Lokniti team—CSDS to understand ideological sorting among Indian voters and party members on economic policies.⁵ We find a clustering of voters around centre-left positions on economic issues, that is, no ideological divide.

We selected nearly identical questions from the NES surveys that capture citizens' perceptions of the role of the State in an economy—for example, whether respondents supported limiting land ownership, privatising state-owned companies and reducing the number of government employees, among others—and have listed them in Appendix A.⁶ This index—the economic ideology scale—was constructed by reordering the questions to represent a standard left-right view on the economy, with voters on the left generally supportive of limiting land ownership and favouring a continued role of the State in the economy.⁷ The data presented in Figures 1A and 1B provide unambiguous support to the prevailing scholarly consensus that voters of different parties and social classes share very similar views on economic issues and generally support centre-left economic positions, that is, they favour statist interventions in the economy. We first computed each variable's mean at zero to calculate the final ideological score in a given election year. We measured the distance of all respondents from the mean on the ideological scale. The zero on this scale denotes the centrist position, negative values indicate the left position and positive values indicate the position of ideological right. The data for each variable in the index were then added to calculate the final position of each respondent on the economic ideology scale.⁸ We find that although the mean value of the Communist party voters in all election years was slightly negative, the mean value of the Congress and the BJP was centred around zero on the economic ideology scale. The BJP and Congress voters were not statistically different on economic issues.

We also computed the ideological scores for different social classes by combining respondents' location (rural or urban) and their occupation and find statistically no difference between them. The opinions of respondents belonging to different economic classes were also clustered around zero. Our analysis of time-series NES data suggests that compared to other questions in the survey instruments, the proportion of respondents expressing no opinion on economic ideology questions is far more significant, that is, fewer voters have information regarding elements that constitute economic ideology. In general, the items related to attitudinal questions (such as political, social and economic attitudes) are likely to receive more no-opinion responses than those related to behavioural aspects (such as exposure to media or religious practice). For example, in NES 2014, the political attitude items received fewer no opinion than those related to social and economic attitudes.⁹ Kailash (2012) provides an insightful analysis of determinants of 'no opinion' in survey

⁵ The final data are weighted by the national electorate's proportion in a state to ensure that the sample is geographically representative. Details on the representativeness and method of data collection are available in the methodological notes published by the Lokniti team.

⁶ Questions from the NES surveys have been reproduced verbatim in Appendix A. We purposely did not include whether foreign companies should be allowed to trade in India in the economic ideology index here or in the analysis of expert perception.

⁷ The appendix also details how we reordered the response categories to map them onto the ideological scale. While reordering the response categories, respondents with 'no opinion' were put in the middle.

⁸ The scale was weighed by the number of questions in the index each year to keep uniformity across years.

⁹ Only 1 in 10 respondents expressed no opinion on political questions in NES 2014, who influenced vote choice (8%) and whether party mattered over candidate (10%). On social attitudes, no opinions were one in every four respondents—Indian over regional pride (23%), caste reservations (25%), government's treatment of minorities (26%) and the will of the majority community should prevail (27%). On the other hand, one in every three respondents expressed no opinion on economic questions—employers taking responsibility for workers (27%), the government should curb workers' strikes (30%), government focusing more on infrastructure than subsidies (31%) and fewer restrictions on foreign companies to invest (34%).

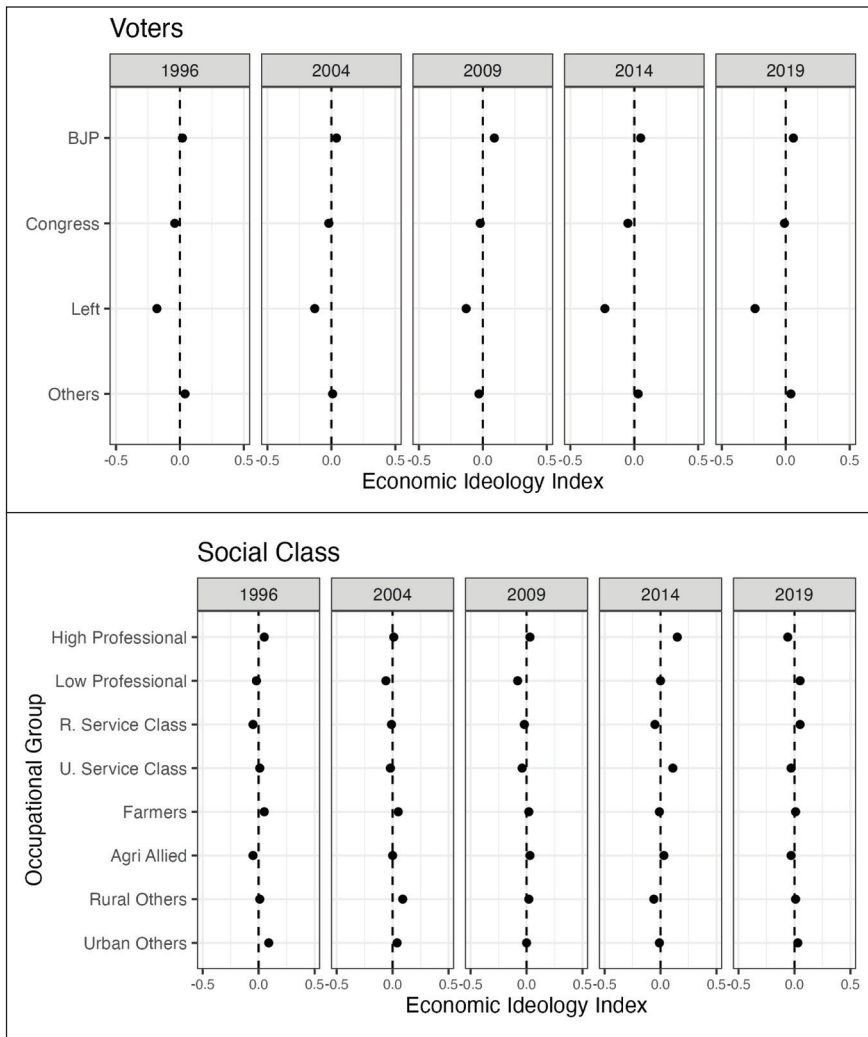


Figure I. Voters and Social Classes in India Share Similar Economic Ideology.

Source: NES 1996–2019, Lokniti-CSDS

responses in using NES 2004 data. However, he only looks at social and political questions, not related to economic issues.

Elite Views on the Role of the State in the Economy

While Indian citizens share common views of the State’s role in the economy, we find discernible differences among the party members on these issues. The NES surveys have consistently asked respondents which party they voted for, whether they identify or feel close to any party and whether they are

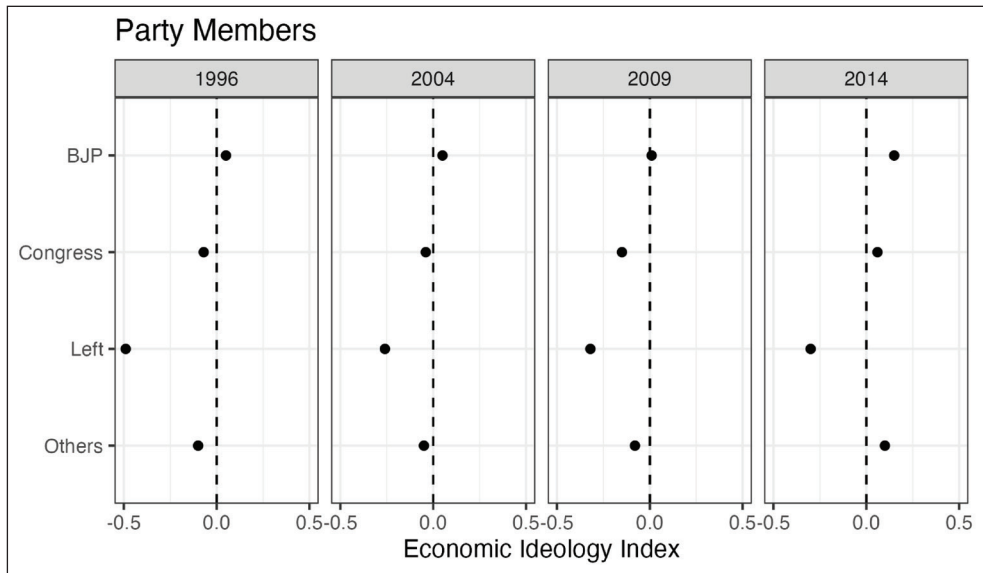


Figure 2. Ideological Divide Among Party Members on Economic Issues.

Source: NES 1996–2014, Lokniti-CSDS.

registered members of any party. Our analysis indicates that since 1999, the proportion of those who identify with a political party and are a member of one has been consistently above 30% and 10%, respectively. Consistent with the literature on ideological contestation in the arena of party politics in Western democracies, the party members in India display a more significant commitment to the party's ideological worldview than the voters. We use the same method outlined above to calculate the ideological mean of members of different parties in Figure 2. We find that the BJP members are more to the economic-right position than the Congress members, and the Communist party members are on the economic-left. This pattern is replicated across election years for which information on the respondent's party membership data was gathered.

Experts—journalists and academics—believe that Indian political parties have distinct ideological positions in a survey of experts conducted in 2022 by the Centre for Policy Research (CPR). In the past few years, studies of political parties globally have relied exceedingly on experts to gather important information on party organisations, electoral strategies, client–patron relationships, and ideological and policy positions (Bakker & Hobolt, 2013). This survey is based on responses from 162 political scientists and journalists across India, who provided information on the ideological position of political parties, degree of regional autonomy, support base, mobilisation strategies and organisational strengths.¹⁰ The data presented in Figure 3 provide unambiguous support that political parties in India differ on economic issues among intellectual elites. These items in the expert survey were placed on a Likert scale of 1–5, with 1 being less likely to support and 5 being highly likely to support. We calculated the mean score of all experts on these items and found that the expert perceptions are consistent with the ideological worldview of these parties. The mean position of the expert's perception of Left parties on the item

¹⁰ For a more detailed note on the survey instrument and methodology, see 'India's Political Parties: A Report Based on a Comprehensive Profile of Parties and a Survey of Experts on State Politics', December 2022.

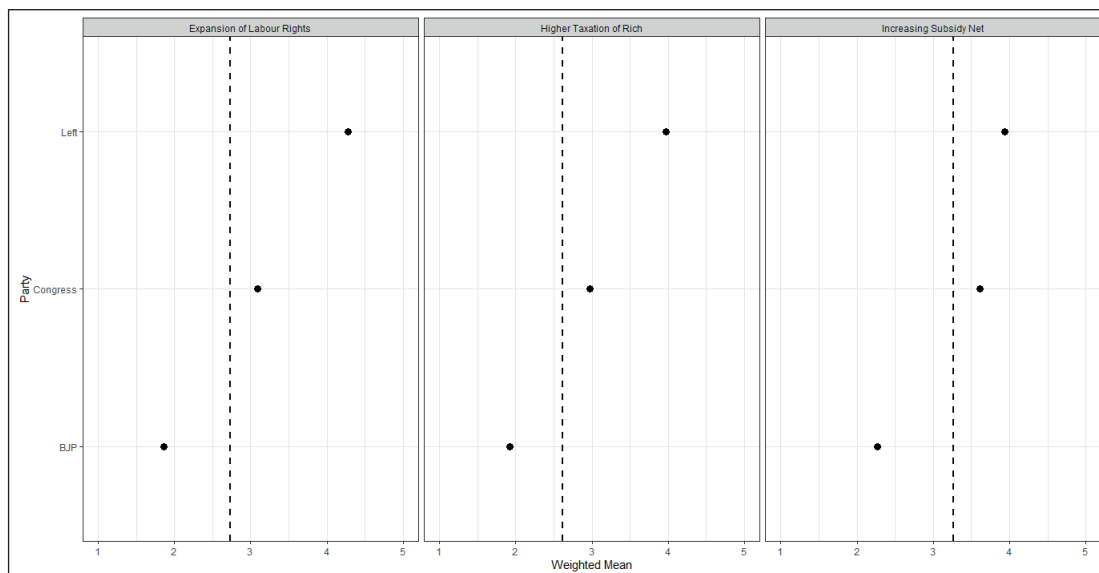


Figure 3. Expert Perception of Party Positions on Economic Ideology.

Source: Political Expert Survey, CPR, 2022.

related to the expansion of labour rights is slightly above 4, of the Congress above 3 and of the BJP below 2. The BJP is less likely to support higher taxation for the rich, the Left parties most likely and the Congress party has a much more centrist position. Similarly, while the difference between the Left parties and the Congress is very little related to increasing subsidy net, the expert's perception of the BJP places the party below its ideological counterparts as less likely to support subsidies.

In contrast to the long-held scholarly consensus that there is no divide in economic ideology in India, the analysis presented above clearly demonstrates that although this assertion is true for mass attitudes, the same cannot be said for the elite segments of the Indian population. Party members and expert perceptions of party positions indicate a clear divide on economic ideology. In the following section, we try to understand the historical reasons why elite differences on economic issues did not become a matter of mass politics.

Why Don't Elite Views Translate into Mass Attitudes?

Weiner (1963) introduced the concepts of elite and mass culture. Both these cultures, Weiner argued, were permeated by a modernising ethos and traditional cultural values. Mass political culture, for Weiner, represented society's attitudes towards governance at the local level, circumscribed largely by ethnic concerns. Elite political culture, on the other hand, is located within the national (and state) capital(s), plugged into globally dominant paradigms of development and generating its discourse mainly in the English language, removed from the vernacular idioms. Varshney (1998) builds on these ideas and suggests that elite politics is typically expressed in debates and struggles within the institutionalised setting of parliament, political parties, bureaucracy and national media, whereas mass politics takes place on streets through large-scale mobilisation in the language and issues that voters associate with. When do

elite and mass politics converge on a particular issue? And when does a particular idea or set of ideas become the ideological basis for a political party or party system in India? Chhibber and Verma (2018) indicate that there must be a coherent intellectual tradition that includes oppositional ideas; the conflict between those ideas must be fairly stable with enough number of voters on both sides for an ideological competition to become viable, and the elite must transmit opposing ideological viewpoints.¹¹

What ideas have had a stable basis of party competition in India thus far? Chhibber and Verma (2018) make several observations in *Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India*. They argue that Indian party politics is deeply ideological, and divisions on the State's appropriate role have influenced the changes in the Indian party system since Independence.¹² The different ideas on whether the State should intervene in social norms and whether it should single out disadvantaged groups for special treatment have long historical lineages. These ideas have intellectual lineages, and different parties have distinct positions on these issues. The conflict on these issues has marked Indian politics since Independence, and the political elite have actively drawn distinctions amongst themselves along these lines. The transition from the Congress-dominant system to a multi-party competition to a party system centred around the BJP is clearly correlated with the ideological positions adopted by the main political parties.

Using NES data, Chhibber and Verma (2018) demonstrate that the BJP succeeded because it consolidated those on the 'right', that is, citizens who do not want the State intervening in social norms, recognising minorities, and who equate democracy with majoritarian values. They also claim that as India's political power shifts to a more conservative and vernacular elite, the debates on social norms and liberal values will remain a contested space. Some of these claims were much more visible after the BJP's second consecutive Lok Sabha victory in 2019. Within six months of coming back to power, the BJP pushed legislation to realise its long-standing projects, such as the removal of Article 370, the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship Amendment Act.

Although social policy seems to have a large impact on Indian politics, why doesn't the classic left-right axis on economic policies have the same influence? We argue that there is indeed a coherent intellectual tradition that underpins parties of the right and the left on economic policy, and the opposition between these ideas has been present since Independence. The Indian political elite transmits not only economic ideas on which they differ but also economic ideas on which they agree. The Indian political elite disagrees on some ideas on the role of the State, such as on how extensive a role should be given to the private sector in the Indian economy and the direct role of the State in manufacturing and services; parties do not disagree on whether the State should make direct provisions for the economically vulnerable. All parties agree that the welfare of the poor is the responsibility of the State.¹³ Either for ideological reasons or because of political pragmatism, as a majority of the Indian population was poor for the first few decades after Independence (a plurality still lives below the poverty line), all political parties remain in accord with the idea that removing poverty is a central mission of the State. The Constituent Assembly Debates provides overwhelming support for the idea that the independent Indian State was to remove the shackles of poverty (Corbridge & Harriss, 2013; Khilnani, 1997). India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, while moving the objective resolution in the Constituent Assembly,

¹¹ Political elites would be interested in transmitting only those ideas that have the support of *enough* people. Suppose a group with a definable interest is too large (especially if the group constitutes a supermajority), no political party in that case will oppose those interests because winning an election without the group's support will be impossible.

¹² See, Chhibber and Verma (2018) for more details on the two ideological axis they argue structured India's post-Independence politics: *politics of statism* and *politics of recognition*.

¹³ One of the most contentious provisions in the drafting of the constitution had been the guarantee of a fundamental right to property. India was one of very few countries to guarantee this right as fundamental, but the provision had been amended several times before being made a statutory right in 1978. For more on this topic, see Merillat (1970).

remarked, 'The first task of this Assembly is to free India through a new constitution to feed the starving people and cloth the naked masses.' That the State had to lift a vast number of poor and illiterate people out of poverty, educate them and generate economic growth formed the basis of Nehruvian political consensus. However, there remained significant differences in the elements and the nature of the Indian economy among certain segments of elites—political, economic and intellectual—which we provide for after demonstrating the differences in mass attitudes and elite perceptions on economic issues.

Economic Ideology in India: A Historical Consensus?

At the time of Independence, as mentioned earlier, the consensus among policymakers was that the Indian State was to be the engine of social and economic development. According to Mozoomdar (1994, p. 99),

Even before the planning system was established, the national government took full control over the industrial sector by legislation, as permitted by the constitution, since it was agreed on all sides that industrialisation would be at the heart of development and the necessary thrust could only be provided by the state operating through the central government.

Without any contestation, the State was able to take such a large part because of its historical role, which had arisen from the movement for Independence. As Chatterjee notes (1994, p. 55),

[T]he emphasis on the nation-state emerged as a result of nationalism, and the economic critique of colonialism ... was the foundation from which a positive content was supplied for the independent national state: the new state represented the only legitimate form of exercise of power because it was a necessary condition for the development of the nation.

State-led industrialisation was necessary for several reasons, particularly for the Indian economy. First, the industry needed large amounts of capital to establish the industrial base required for sustained and diversified growth. These resources could be mobilised only by the State, especially given India's low private saving rate. Second, public investment could more easily create an industrial structure without relying on higher corporate profitability levels, which would have increased income disparity. Third, reliance on public rather than private enterprise would foster growth in the metal, mineral, machine-building and chemical industries. In this way, economic power would not be rooted in industrial houses (Mozoomdar, 1994).

Support for this expansive role of the State came from across the political spectrum. Various groups in India came out with their planning documents. The interests of capital were also closely aligned with those of the State (Chibber, 2006). A group of leading industrialists, which included Sir Purshottamdas Thakurdas, J. R. D. Tata, G. D. Birla, Sir Ardeshir Dalal, Sir Shri Ram, Kasturbhai Lalbhai, A. D. Shroff and John Mathai, published the *Bombay Plan 1944*, which relied on state planning. The 1940s also witnessed the publication of many plan blueprints, including the 'People's Plan' authored by M. N. Roy, which projected a Leftist vision, and *The Gandhian Plan of Economic Development for India*, put forth by Shriman Narayan Agarwal, which visualised a self-sufficient village economy.

Similarly, the leadership of Left parties wanted all-India plans led by a national planning committee. The more centrist Congress Party also viewed planning as 'not only a part of the anticipation of power by the [party's] state leadership' but also 'an anticipation of the concrete forms in which that power

would be exercised within a national state' (Chatterjee, 1994, p. 53). The right-wing forces in the post-Independence period began as fragmented entities and lacked a clear articulation of economic thinking. Traditionally, the right has often been equated in many countries with market capitalism. Still, the dominant faction of the right wing in India showed innate suspicion of both unbridled market economics and socialism. Swapan Dasgupta (2019), now a Rajya Sabha MP representing the BJP, writes,

The Bharatiya Jana Sangh and later the BJP had favoured an approach loosely described as national capitalism. This was personified by its adherence to *swadeshi*, an approach that originated in the freedom movement. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) combined its disavowal of consumerism with a fascination for technology, welfarism, and a strong state. There were, in short, just too many contradictory strands in the thinking on economic policy in the Hindu nationalist camp.

Similarly, the Swatantra Party, while being extremely critical of the Five-Year Plans, wasn't too tied to the principles of *laissez-faire* (Erdman, 1967).¹⁴ In 1960, Rajagopalachari and his colleagues drafted a 21-point manifesto. Detailing why Swatantra had to be formed, they write: 'The party stands for the restriction of state enterprise to heavy industries such as are necessary to supplement private enterprise in that field, such national services as Railways and the starting of new enterprises which are difficult for private initiative.'

Unsurprisingly, during the decades that followed Indian Independence, there was widespread political support for the notion that the State was to be the architect and arbiter of economic development (Chakravarty, 1987; Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987). Thus, the Indian State—for historical reasons associated with the experience of colonialism, the international geopolitical situation, its policymakers' ideological orientation and India's economic realities—was seen as the agent of social and economic transformation. Since India's labour force, apart from agriculture, is small and mainly in the unorganised sector, no political party finds a strategic interest in advocating either an openly pro-labour or an actively pro-capital position. Rudolph and Rudolph (1987, p. 20), in their seminal contribution to the study of the political economy of the Indian State, argue that political parties in India 'do not derive their electoral support or policy agenda from distinct class constituencies or from organised representatives of workers and capital'. They suggest, somewhat prophetically, 'Class politics in India is likely to remain as marginal in the future as it has been in the past.' They also suggest that conflict between capital and labour in India is less likely to become an axis of mobilisation because of a third actor's centrality—the State.

India's political economy further constrained the development of a cleavage on economic left–right. India never had something like the Industrial Revolution of Western Europe that moved a large population segment from agriculture to the manufacturing sector. Thus, the associated activities such as rapid urbanisation, formation of unions to mobilise workers, lobbies to protect the interests of the business sector, middle-class associations, among others, never took off. A majority of Indians remain in rural areas, a plurality still lives off agriculture and the working class is found in the industrial sector's unorganised part.¹⁵ In the organised sector, where one would expect to see a political articulation of the capital–labour divide, few independent trade unions exist. The major trade unions in India are all tied to political parties. The standard capital–labour conflict is also muted because most employment in the

¹⁴ The Swatantra was formed largely in opposition to some of the resolutions passed during the two historic sessions of the Congress party that signalled greater economic statism—the Avadi session of 1955 and the Nagpur session of 1959.

¹⁵ There is very little organised mobilisation of workers in the unorganised sector. Ghani et al. (2014) point out that 99% of businesses and 81% of employees were unorganised as recently as 2005 in the manufacturing sector. Similarly, the unorganised workforce in the services sector ranged from 74% to 90% in 2006 (according to different definitions).

organised sector, especially throughout the 1970s and 1980s, was in the public sector. So, labour's conflict was less with capitalists than with the State. Other factors have militated against the emergence of class conflict as a dominant feature of capital–labour relations. Among these, recruitment in various sectors of the Indian economy, from textiles and automobile manufacturing to pharmaceuticals, was primarily tied to informal networks or villages and ethnicities (Naseemullah, 2017).

Similarly, the divide between urban India and *Bharat* (a euphemism for rural India) has been crucial during specific periods in independent India's history. Still, it did not represent a stable political division. The most potent mobilisation along these lines occurred in the late 1960s and the 1970s. These decades were marked by a tremendous increase in legislators with rural origins and agriculturalist backgrounds, both in the Parliament and in many state assemblies. Many prominent politicians, including Devi Lal, Charan Singh, Sharad Joshi and Narainswamy Naidu, also stressed the need to represent rural interests. Thus, the rural elite gained a share of State power and experienced less need to raise rural concerns as distinct issues. Varshney (1995) argues that rural issues have yet to become a significant political divide in India because every party, to have electoral success, must have a rural vision. Even with increasing urbanisation, virtually no party has yet made efforts to rely on projecting just urban interests.

Most parties in India are also pro-poor. Even though a vast number of Indians have migrated to urban areas and contributed to the urban population's growth, the majority still live in rural areas and many also retain their rural roots or continue to identify with their rural origins. Parties do not differentiate themselves on the rich–poor dimension for a straightforward reason—there are too many poor people in India; a supermajority of the Indian population can be considered poor. This is true that even with a tremendous increase in the size of the middle class in India, and there is a decline in the number of absolute poor.¹⁶ In fact, the proportion of the population that identifies itself as the middle class in the survey has also increased multi-fold.¹⁷ However, given the overwhelming demographic weight of voters in low socio-economic segments, no political party sees any advantage in being associated with merely pro-middle class or pro-urban position—the equivalent of a political suicide. There remains widespread political agreement that the State should act on behalf of the poor and create a policy framework that encourages State aid to people experiencing poverty. Even the so-called right-wing government led by the BJP has made removing poverty a central plank of its political agenda.¹⁸

Welfare Populism: A New Consensus?

Indians are now more educated and exposed to television, newspapers and social media than before.¹⁹ These demographic changes have increased the 'catchment area' for the BJP among its traditional supporters—urban, upper castes, middle classes, educated and greater media exposure. It is not a coincidence that Narendra Modi's rise on the national centre stage coincided with the structural shift with a fall in the ranks of the poor and the rise in the aspirational neo-middle class ranks, creating an audience for

¹⁶ There is a serious debate among scholars about estimating the size of the middle class in India accurately. See, for example, Krishnan and Hatekar (2017) and Aslany (2019).

¹⁷ The Lokniti–CSDS surveys have asked respondents whether they saw themselves as a lower class or middle class. In 1996, only 30% of the respondents self-identified as a middle class, while the proportion identifying themselves as lower class dropped from 62% to 32% in the 2019 survey.

¹⁸ Prime Minister Modi, in his many speeches—especially those delivered from the Red Fort on Independence Day celebrations in 2014 and 2015—highlighted his government's focus on financial inclusion for the poor.

¹⁹ See, Verma (forthcoming) on increase in media exposure using NES data.

the new narrative of empowerment.²⁰ By promising a reformed state that would unleash new entrepreneurial energies without the past cronyism, Modi sought to win over a broad cross-section of society. That corruption scandals tainted the earlier regime helped his cause. His attacks on entrenched lobbyists in Delhi reminded upwardly mobile voters that political forces stood in the way of their aspirations and progress.²¹

What do the changes in India's demographic composition and the rise of the BJP under Modi mean for the divide on economic ideology? Although it is true that the data points in the NES surveys over time are not strictly comparable as the questions asked in different election years are not the same, we do notice that there are now more voters who are rightward leaning on economic issues than the past, and this small section (and growing) of the economic right has mostly supported the BJP in the post-1991 era. In some ways, Narendra Modi, as the chief architect of the BJP's campaign, could be credited with coalescing economic right towards the BJP. In the 2014 NES survey, voters were asked whether it would have made a difference to their vote choice had Modi not been the BJP's prime ministerial candidate. While Modi's candidature made no difference to the vote choice of social and religious conservatives, who were likely to vote for the BJP, Modi drew the economically rightward voters to the BJP (Chhibber & Verma, 2014).

The rightward leaning voters on economic issues still form a minuscule minority, and many more voters continue to rely on the State largesse for their well-being. It is no surprise then that most political parties in India have continued to be welfarist in their orientation. The politics since the rise of the BJP represents a distinctive approach to redistribution and inclusion, which Anand et al. (2020) describe as the 'New Welfarism'.²² It does not prioritise the supply of public goods such as essential health and primary education as governments have done around the world historically. Instead, it has entailed the subsidised public provision of essential goods and services, usually provided by the private sector, such as bank accounts, cooking gas, toilets, electricity, housing and, more recently, water and direct cash. Most political parties in India seem to now mirror this strategy of providing either direct cash handouts or subsidising essential goods and services.

Though parties have stressed welfare since India's first election, the opposition to Nehru's Congress was ideological (Kaviraj 2018). The increasing centralisation within Congress under Indira Gandhi accelerated welfare populism. And this model of combining leadership appeal with promising distribution of state resources during election campaigns got adopted by other parties too. Despite, this the consensus among scholars that differences between political parties are 'far from a real substantial choice' is not borne out by a systematic examination of party documents (including manifestos) (Ahmad, 2014). An analysis of the manifestos of three parties by the Centre for Policy Research (CPR)—the BJP, Congress and the CPI (M)—indicates that although the ideological distance between parties may not be as large on the questions related to economy as it is in West European countries, there is a significant difference among parties on the issues they prioritise and approach they would take to deal with a particular issue.²³ Even though parties share common views on welfare, they emphasise other economic policy elements. The report uses 'word count'—the number of words devoted to an issue in the manifesto—to quantify the proportionate space allocated to each topic. This methodological approach has its limits; the data

²⁰ Kapur et al. (2017) show how India's rising aspirational class has an entirely distinctive worldview.

²¹ The perception that the UPA was favouring religious minorities added wings to Modi's 2014 campaign.

²² The authors suggest possibilities of a rich electoral opportunity in providing tangible goods and services, which are relatively straightforward to deliver, measure and monitor.

²³ The authors of this reports suggest that a party's election manifesto in the Indian case is less about parties conveying their positions to voters than about serving as a handy resource for the party mobilisers on the ground.



Figure 4. Increasing Promise on Welfare by Indian Parties.

Source: India Manifesto Project, 2022.

presented in Figure 4 provide evidence of how India's leading national parties have emphasised different issues in the past 75 years.

The report highlights that the Left parties have consistently taken a pro-intervention in the economic domain. While the relative space allocated to this topic has greatly reduced in the past two decades, still it is much higher than the Congress or the BJP. Both these parties, in that sense, allocated a greater space to free market policies. Labour rights are a constant priority for the Left in every manifesto, and it gets a token mention in the BJP and Congress manifestos. Left parties also talk about land consistently, usually with respect to tenancy reforms. On the other hand, economic goals are prioritised by the BJP significantly.

This can include the reform of the financial sector, banking sector, foreign trade, taxation and fiscal deficit, among others. The Congress also talks about economic goals but not as much as the former, while Left parties barely mention this category (though the 2019 election manifesto was a notable exception). Finally, agriculture and farmers get high importance in all manifestos, with almost one-fifth of space within the economy domain dedicated to this category, but parties highlight very different approaches to tackle this issue. Interestingly, the BJP has dedicated almost half of its space to this category in 2019, which is four times more than that of 2014, suggesting a relation between issue emphasis in manifestos and policy pursuits.

Conclusion

In this article, we revisit the nature of ideological divisions in Indian politics. Using NES data between 1996 and 2019, we find that although Indian voters do not sort themselves ideologically on economic issues, the members of political parties do have distinct preferences. In contrast to the long-held scholarly consensus that there is no divide on economic ideology in India, we demonstrate the elite segments of the Indian population do hold distinct positions on economic issues. Party members, political elites (using election manifestos) and expert perceptions of party positions indicate a clear divide in economic ideology. We also attempt to understand historical reasons why elite differences on economic issues did not become a matter of mass politics. There has been a political consensus since independence on the centrality of the Indian state in the economic realm.

Finally, we note that despite rapid demographic changes in India in the past three decades, the election campaigns in recent years suggest that no political party can turn its back on the extensive welfare state, which is closely tied to electoral mobilisation through leadership appeals. We argue that the demographic features of the Indian population (a large majority is poor, lives in rural areas and off agriculture, and depends on the state for their well-being, among others) will continue to constrain the salience of the economic left-right axis.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to KC Suri, Suhas Palshikar, Siddharth Singh and Pranav Gupta for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of the article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

References

- Ahmad, I. (2014, April 15). Manifestos and Indian elections. *Al-Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/04/manifestos-indian-elections-201441434237199300.html>
- Aiyar, Y. (2019). Modi consolidates power: Leveraging welfare politics. *Journal of Democracy*, 30(4), 78–88.
- Anand, A., Dimble, V., & Subramanian, A. (2020, December 22). New welfarism of the Modi govt represents distinctive approach to redistribution and inclusion. *The Indian Express*. Retrieved October 24, 2023, from <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/national-family-health-survey-new-welfarism-of-indias-right-7114104/>
- Aslany, M. (2019). The Indian middle class, its size, and urban-rural variations. *Contemporary South Asia*, 27(2), 196–213.
- Bakker, R., & Hobolt, S. (2013). Measuring party positions. In G. Evans & N. D. de Graaf (Eds.), *Political choice matters: Explaining the strength of class and religious cleavages in cross-national perspective* (pp. 27–45). Oxford University Press.
- Bartels, L. (2013, August 29–1 September). *Party systems and political change in Europe* [Paper presentation]. The Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago.
- Chakravarty, S. (1987). *Development planning*. Oxford University Press.
- Chatterjee, P. (1994). Development planning and the Indian state. In T. Byres (Ed.), *The state, development planning and liberalization in India*. Oxford University Press.
- Chibber, V. (2006). *Locked in place: State-building and late industrialization in India*. Princeton University Press.
- Chhibber, P. K., & Verma, R. (2014). The BJP's 2014 'Modi Wave': An ideological consolidation of the Right. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 49(39), 50–56.
- Chhibber, P. K., & Verma, R. (2018). *Ideology and identity: The changing party systems of India*. Oxford University Press.
- Corbridge, S., & Harriss, J. (2013). *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu nationalism and popular democracy*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Dasgupta, S. (2019, July 7). How the Indian Right views the economy. *The Mint*.
- Erdman, H. (1967). *The Swatantra Party and Indian conservatism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ghani, E., Kerr, W. R., & O'Connell, S. (2014). Spatial determinants of entrepreneurship in India. *Regional Studies*, 48(6), 1071–1089.
- Huber, J., & Inglehart, R. (1995). Expert interpretations of party space and party locations in 42 societies. *Party Politics*, 1(1), 73–111.
- Kailash, K. K. (2012). The more things change, the more they stay the same in India: The Bahujan and the paradox of the 'Democratic Upsurge'. *Asian Survey*, 52(2), 321–347.
- Kapur, D., Sircar, N., & Vaishnav, M. (2017). The importance of being middle class in India. In A. Harneit-Sievers & D. Danilo Bartelt (Eds.), *The new middle class in India and Brazil—Green perspectives?* Academic Foundation.
- Kaviraj, S. (2018). *The trajectories of the Indian State*. Permanent Black.
- Khilnani, S. (1997). *The Idea of India* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux).
- Kothari, R. (1964). The Congress system in India. *Asian Survey*, 4(12), 1161–1173.
- Krishnan, S., & Hatekar, N. (2017). Rise of the new middle class in India and its changing structure. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 55(22), 40–48.
- Mallick, R. (1994). *Indian communism: Opposition, collaboration and institutionalization*. Oxford University Press.
- Mozoomdar, A. (1994). The rise and decline of development planning in India. In T. Byres (Ed.), *The state and development planning in India* (pp. 73–108). Oxford University Press.
- Naseemullah, A. (2017). *Development after statism: Industrial firms and the political economy of South Asia*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rodrigues, V. (2006). The communist parties in India. In P. R. DeSouza & E. Sridharan (Eds.), *India's political parties* (pp. 199–252). Sage Publications.

- Rudolph, L. I., & Rudolph, S. H. (1987). *In pursuit of Lakshmi: The political economy of the Indian state*. University of Chicago Press.
- Sengupta, H. (2019). The economic mind of Narendra Modi. *ORF Issue Brief No. 318*.
- Sircar, N. (2020). The politics of vishwas: Political mobilization in the 2019 national election. *Contemporary South Asia*, 28(2), 178–194.
- Suri, K. C. (2013). Party system and party politics in India. In K. C. Suri (Ed.), *Indian democracy* (pp. 209–252). Oxford University Press.
- Varshney, A. (1995). *Democracy, development, and the countryside: Urban-rural struggles in India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Varshney, A. (1998). Mass politics or elite politics? India's economic reforms in comparative perspective. *The Journal of Policy Reform*, 2(4), 301–335.
- Verma, R. (Forthcoming). Media exposure and vote choice in Indian elections. In S. Ganguly & E. Sridharan (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of Indian politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Weiner, M. (1963). India's two political cultures. In M. Weiner (Ed.), *Political change in South Asia* (pp. 112–140). Firma K L Mukhopadhaya.
- Yadav, Y., & Palshikar, S. (2006). Party system and electoral politics in the Indian States, 1952–2002: From hegemony to convergence. In P. R. DeSouza & E. Sridharan (Eds.), *India's political parties* (pp. 73–116). Sage Publications.
- Zaller, J. (1992). *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge University Press.

Appendix A: Economic Ideology Index Variables from NES Surveys.

Questions from the NES Surveys	Q. No.	Left				Right
		-2	-1	0	1	2
NES 1996						
Government companies should be given into private hands.	Q34e		Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	
Some people say that the government should pass legislation so that people are not allowed to own and possess a large amount of land and property. Others say that people should be allowed to own as much land and property as they can make/acquire. What would you say?	Q35		Limit Ownership	No Opinion, Other Answers	Do not limit ownership	
NES 2004						
The number of government employees should be reduced as paying their salaries is costly for the country.	Q30b	Fully Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	No Opinion	Somewhat Agree	Fully Agree
The government factories and businesses should be sold/handed over to private companies.	Q30c	Fully Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	No Opinion	Somewhat Agree	Fully Agree
There should be a ban on possessing land and property above a limit.	Q30a	Fully Agree	Somewhat Agree	No Opinion	Somewhat Disagree	Fully Disagree
NES 2009						
(1) It is important that the government should make special schemes to uplift the poor and disadvantaged. (2) Instead of wasting money on such schemes, the government should improve the entire economy.	A6b		Statement 1	No Opinion	Statement 2	
The government factories and businesses should be sold/handed over to private companies.	Q26e	Fully Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	No Opinion	Somewhat Agree	Fully Agree
Government should curb the right of workers and employees to strike.	Q26f	Fully Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	No Opinion	Somewhat Agree	Fully Agree
Some people say that the government should pass legislation so that people are not allowed to own and possess a large amount of land and property. Others say that people should be allowed to own as much land and property as they can	Q27		Limit Ownership	No Opinion, Other Answers	Do not limit ownership	

make/acquire. What would you say?						
The number of government employees should be reduced.	Q26d	Fully Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	No Opinion	Somewhat Agree	Fully Agree
NES 2014						
Government should strongly curb strikes by workers and employees	Q23d	Fully Disagree	Somewhat	DK	Somewhat	Fully Agree
Government should spend more on infrastructure than subsidizing for the poor.	Q23c	Fully Disagree	Somewhat	DK	Somewhat	Fully Agree
NES 2019						
(1) People should look after themselves and be primarily responsible for their own success in life. (2) The government should bear the main responsibility for taking care of the wellbeing of the people			Agree with 2	Can't Say, No Response	Agree with 1	
Some parties have proposed replacing existing government schemes with a basic income paid by government. Would you prefer that, or you think the schemes should continue as they are?			No, schemes should continue	Either way not a problem, No Opinion	Yes, prefer basic income	