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Introduction

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We are privileged to have Neelanjan Sircar and Rahul Verma, two accomplished scholars of Indian politics, as guest editors of this special issue on India's 2024 Parliamentary Election. We believe that a year's span is perfect timing for digesting and analysing a significant electoral mandate. The guest editors must be congratulated for attracting a distinguished group of scholars to reflect on the significant learnings from this momentous election.

It cannot be overemphasized that the 2024 General Elections were historic. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), after two resounding successes in the parliamentary elections of 2014 and 2019, had made loud declarations that the Party was destined to cross 400 seats in the parliament in 2024. It was a widespread concern among the political opposition that such a result would be permanently debilitating for India's democratic trajectory.

The 2019 electoral success of the BJP had emboldened the party to take radical steps in the direction of achieving its Hindu-nationalist majoritarian ideal. After all, about 80 percent of the Indian population is Hindu. The majoritarian project was to consolidate the Hindu vote by treating principal minority population of India, the Muslims, as foreigners threatening India's status as a nation (on majoritarianism, see Levitsky and Ziblatt 2024; Chandra 2024). The special state of Jammu & Kashmir was converted into two union territories, Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh, in October 2019. Consequently, Jammu & Kashmir, the only Muslim majority state in India at the time, lost the normal federal autonomy enjoyed by other Indian states.

Equally significant was the legal sanction given by India's Supreme Court to the construction of a temple dedicated to the popular Hindu deity, Lord Ram, after the demolition of a 16th century mosque, the Babri Masjid, in Ayodhya in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The Ram temple was inaugurated in January 2024, just a few months before the General Elections in April-June 2024 (on Hindu nationalism, see Jaffrelot 2021).

The Indian state's ethnonationalism is bolstered by the urban and rich business classes. The farm legislations (three farm laws) brought in September 2020 were such an attempt by the government to enable big business houses (close to the ruling dispensation) capture India's agricultural market. Legal provisions for

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largescale hoarding, contractual leasing of agrarian land and direct sales to corporations—outside of the state-sponsored minimum support price guarantees followed at the local agrarian markets (*mandi*s)—would have left millions of Indian farmers deeply vulnerable to private capital, especially in the absence of any credible protections. The government withdrew the three farm legislations in December 2021 after a prolonged and historic farmer's movement that braved the COVID pandemic (on the farmers' movement see, Baviskar and Levien 2021).

The 2024 General Election was critical for the resilience and future of India's democracy. A variety of indices such as the V-Dem had described India as an electoral autocracy. Elections in India were only consolidating autocratization. It was evident that India was moving in the direction of "competitive authoritarianism" ever since the BJP came to power in 2014 (Mukherji and Zarhani 2023). While elections were held on a regular basis, the ruling dispensation made it ever more difficult for the political opposition to return to power. The incumbent party consolidated its position in an increasingly autocratic manner, weakening and subjugating regulatory institutions, and capturing public agencies.

From early 2018, the ruling BJP had unusual and privileged access to electoral finance through the electoral bonds scheme, which was declared unconstitutional by India's supreme court in February 2024. This historic decision of the highest court however did not pose any threat to the electoral war chest already in place for the ruling party gearing for the 2024 elections. Moreover, significant political and critical opponents were either incarcerated or threatened with such a possibility through weaponized investigative and law enforcement agencies.

The media came under unusual state control. Civil society organizations that struggled to protect citizens' rights guaranteed in the constitution were fiercely attacked. Individual defenders of a secular constitution were dealt with even more harshly (Mukherji 2024a). The BJP's project was to discipline the polity in a majoritarian direction, while Indian Muslims and other minority groups such as the Christians (for example in Manipur) bore the brunt of BJP's divisive politics. India's minorities were being socialized into submission to Hindu majoritarianism.

Most alarming was, however, the institutional decay of the Election Commission of India (ECI). Its reputation as a powerful and unbiased agency chaperoning India's elections, earned over the years, saw a dramatic reversal. An ECI favouring the ruling dispensation was clear after 2014. Not only did the selection procedure of commissioners unambiguously favour the incumbent party after 2023, the institution also became unusually subservient to the ruling dispensation. The 2024 General Elections witnessed voter repression and visible and condemnable hate speech by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The ECI remained quiet on the highly asymmetrical financial power of the incumbent (owing to the electoral bonds scheme) and was unwilling to take note of significant complaints such as safeguards essential for operating electronic voting machines.

Under these circumstances, the challenge for the political opposition was daunting. Unchecked power would further advance autocratization driven by Hindu majoritarianism. Scholars of comparative politics have argued that increasing repression can solve many coordination problems for the political opposition after the costs of non-cooperation within the political opposition rises (Mukherji 2024b). Rising repression of the civic space and the political opposition inspired the creation of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA). This alliance led by the Indian National Congress (INC) restricted the BJP to 240 seats in the Parliament, 32 short of a simple majority. The BJP would now have to depend on two regional parties—the Telegu Desam Party based in the sub national state of Andhra Pradesh and the Janata Dal United Party which rules Bihar.

This special issue addresses some of the salient questions that arise from the 2024 Indian General Elections. Who voted the BJP and how did its vote share get reduced? Did caste groups, especially the Dalit and the Other Backward Castes matter for the political opposition? Why did the poor not vote for the political opposition as expected? How was the media controlled? Was there a way for the political opposition to slip out of this control and reach out to a large voting bloc? What story do the elections tell regarding the pattern of voter turnout? Were the elections reasonably free and fair compared with the past? How did the political opposition compete with the way in which the ruling party was distributing freebies to garner votes? What is the condition of India's most threatened minority population—the Muslims?

The introduction by the guest editors will provide an enlightening roadmap to the reader to discern the trajectory of India's democracy. It is followed by nine excellent contributions that address the above-mentioned questions based on the learnings from the 2024 General Elections. We thank the guest editors for producing such a timely and well researched account of the 2024 General Elections.

This issue is the third one produced under the guidance of a new editorial team. We are delighted to have such a large and diverse community of distinguished scholars actively associated with the journal. This global scholarly support has emboldened us to plan a three-volume publication in 2025, after a year's experience with a bi-annual publication in 2024.

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Guest Editors' Introduction: What Does the 2024 National Election Reveal About India?

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Abstract

The 2024 Lok Sabha election marked an important moment revealing significant undercurrents shaping the contours of Indian politics. While the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) remained the single largest party, its underwhelming performance against the expectations in the run-up to polls surprised political observers. Naturally, much of the analysis thus far has been to understand the factors that shaped the verdict. This special issue interrogates what the 2024 election tells us beyond the outcome: the shifting salience of social identities; the role of digital media in voter mobilisation and message control; the growing partisan polarisation in Indian politics; intensifying anxieties about the legitimacy of several key institutions; and the concerns over the evolving character of Indian democracy. By shifting the analytical lens from electoral outcomes to broader political dynamics, we suggest that the 2024 Lok Sabha election may be remembered less for who won and more for what it signalled about India's future.

Keywords: Lok Sabha elections in India; Bharatiya Janata Party; Indian National Congress; 2024 Parliamentary Elections; Indian Politics

After the 2024 national election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is once again the single largest party in parliament, winning 240 out of the 543 seats in Lok Sabha. However, to many, even in the BJP, this felt like a loss. After winning 282 seats in 2014 and 303 seats in 2019 to form a single-party majority, the seat tally was certainly lower than before. More than anything, giv-

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en the BJP's triumphalist campaign, in which the BJP claimed that along with allies it would cross 400 seats, this was an underperformance. The analysis after the election gave a dizzying array of explanations for this outcome, from pushback against perceived authoritarian tendencies to youth unemployment.

Indeed, it is true that the BJP performed worse in several former stronghold states like Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. But it is equally true that the BJP made major inroads in South India in alliance (Andhra Pradesh) and outside of alliance (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Telangana), and it finally broke through in Odisha. Unsteady coalitions weakened the BJP's hold over states like Bihar and Maharashtra, and the BJP lost ground to Mamata Banerjee's All India Trinamool Congress in West Bengal. The most accurate analysis of the 2024 election results is that "it is complicated." Outside of television studios, and within the comforts of academic inquiry, we can firmly reject simple, monocausal explanations of the electoral outcome.

The combination of perspective pieces and research articles we offer in this Issue have the benefit of a year of hindsight. While the initial interest of analysts and scholars focused on empirically describing the 2024 electoral outcomes, some distance from the results have allowed us to think about larger theoretical lessons from the 2024 election, avoiding kneejerk reactions. Since the 2024 national election, the BJP and its alliances have won subnational elections in Delhi, Haryana, and Maharashtra—all states in which the BJP was expected to struggle after the 2024 national election. On the other hand, the BJP has had to give in to demands for a "caste census" that will enumerate the jati of Indian households for the first time since 1931, which it had strongly opposed in the run-up to the 2024 election. In many ways, these recent developments follow naturally from the lessons we draw from the 2024 election—from the caste-wise pressures on the BJP's "Hindu vote" coalition to the advantages party continues to enjoy in several domains, such as financial and organizational resources, which gives BJP a tremendous agenda-setting power. In that sense, the BJP remains the central pole of and continues to animate Indian electoral politics in the medium run. In this Issue, we shift the question from, "how does one explain the 2024 national election results" to, "what can the 2024 national election tell us about institutional, electoral and political behavior in India and the future?" We focus on three key areas of inquiry.

First, we ask about the extent to which class, caste and religious identity continues to be relevant for Indian electoral and party behavior. The BJP, and the political construction of Hindu nationalism in general, has sought to downplay caste-wise distinctions in political preferences—seeking to generate a consolidated "Hindu vote" that varies significantly in social and partisan preferences by caste. While caste-wise distinctions in voter preferences may never fully disappear, we can say with a great degree of confidence that the post-2014 era saw the BJP make sig-

nificant inroads into lower caste communities among the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs) (Chhibber and Verma 2019). To what extent are caste-based calculations in the nominations of candidates and the preferences of voters continuing to affect electoral outcomes? There are also concerns that the Hindu nationalist imagination has relegated India's Muslims to second-class citizens in the country (Varshney and Staggs 2024; Jaffrelot and Ahmed 2024; Allie 2025). What can we say about the political and electoral identity of Muslims in India today? In parallel, India has seen extraordinary increases in income inequality and corporate profits (Sircar 2022) and growing worries about joblessness. To what extent do these results reflect class anger and mobilization?

Second, we ask what the 2024 election results tell us about core questions in comparative political behavior. As the world at large, including India, shifts from traditional media to social media for communication and news (Newman et. al. 2024; Verma 2024), what are the impacts on Indian political behavior? Fundamentally, an inquiry into shifting media trends asks how citizens decide on their sources of news and how these sources reach the voter. Of particular interest is not just the extent to which voters are exposed to social media but also how political mobilizers strategically use a combination of traditional campaign strategies and various media types to reach the voter. We also use India as an arena to understand core questions about voting phenomenon, such as, when do voters decide to turn out, and the strength of party attachments in weakly institutionalized party systems. Previous investigations have found higher turnout to be associated with anti-incumbency, but the 2019 election bucked the trend with the BJP's superior mobilization capacity generating an association between higher turnout and BJP vote share (Sircar 2020). With growing frustration with the macroeconomic picture in India, which of these two models would predominate in the 2024 election? India has traditionally been seen as a country with low levels of partisanship and "weak ideological roots" (Mainwaring and Torcal 2006). Does this argument still hold true in light of recent interventions on these questions? (Chhibber and Verma 2018; Auerbach et. al. 2022; Barthwal and Jensenius 2024; Haas and Majumdar 2023). Has a stronger BJP machinery in mobilization and messaging created stronger partisanship among Indian voters? To what extent has the sharpening of ideological divide post-2014 contributed to growing political polarization?

Finally, we ask about the fidelity of Indian democracy. India has been a consistent outlier in the comparative analysis of democracies, as it is by far the poorest and largest of the long-standing democracies. However, there are concerns that the quality of democracy is eroding—what is often called "democratic backsliding." A growing number of people are voicing concerns that state institutions, particularly India's so-called investigative agencies, are being used to intimidate political opposition (Mehra 2024). Jailing of two chief

ministers (in Jharkhand and Delhi), and freezing the Congress Party's bank account (discussed in Milan Vaishnav's piece in this Issue) in the run-up to the election became important mobilizing issues for the opposition. This was also reflected in the pre-poll survey conducted by Lokniti-CSDS in March 2024 in which approximately one-third respondents suggested that agencies like the CBI and ED are being used against the opposition parties as political vendetta, and another one-third said that these agencies are doing their job within the bounds of the law.

To what extent does the perceived intimidation of India's political opposition call into question the quality of India's democracy? Relatedly, to what extent do Indian citizens see the government's use of state power as legitimate? With the perceived bias of state institutions, many citizens and political opposition have begun to wonder if elections in India, conducted by the Election Commission of India (ECI), are fair. More specifically, some have voiced concerns that the electronic voting machines (EVMs) used to conduct elections are being tampered in favor of the BJP. To be clear, we do not believe there is any credible evidence of such tampering, but it is a sign of the extent to which trust between political parties and citizens in the electoral system is broken. In June 2025, Congress' Rahul Gandhi posted on social media, "EVMs in India are a 'black box' and nobody is allowed to scrutinize them. Serious concerns are being raised about transparency in our electoral process. Democracy ends up becoming a sham and prone to fraud when institutions lack accountability." What do these developments tell us about the democratic legitimacy of the ruling government and the electoral process in India?

BJP Rule 2019–2024

BJP's victory in 2019 ushered in a perceptible shift in the pattern of governance in India. With the BJP winning 303 out of 543 seats in the 2019 national election, the most seats won by a single party after 1984 (and the most ever by a party not named the Congress), it was emboldened to unilaterally frame policy without fears of the government collapsing. In this section, we trace some of the key events and theoretical considerations in understanding this more assertive BJP government between 2019 and 2024.

The 2019 sweep for the BJP had surprised political analysts. Certainly, some part of this had to do with the fact that the 2019 election was in the aftermath of a conflict with Pakistan. However, there were other reasons for it as well. The BJP had built a formidable party organization with access to unprecedented financial resources and an extraordinary capacity for mobilization of voters. Despite concerns about India's macroeconomic health—after the demonetization exercise in 2016 created a severe economic shock—voters did not openly exhibit negative attitudes. If anything, the BJP had built a large base of *labharthi* (beneficiary) voters, who were particularly devoted to Prime Minister Modi. Modi aggressively branded his ability to deliver ben-

efits through biometric identification, and to make clear to voters that his benevolence was non-replicable by any other political actor—what one of us elsewhere has called "techno-patrimonialism" (Aiyar and Sircar 2024). However, as Aiyar and Sircar argue in this volume, starting with the 2021 West Bengal election, charismatic state leaders showed that they could replicate the model of "techno-patrimonialism" and put up an electoral challenge to the BJP.

The BJP's welfare state was put to the test in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic. Polls showed that Prime Minister Modi suffered a noticeable dip in popularity in the pandemic due to perceived mishandling of the pandemic with oxygen shortages and unreported deaths (Parkin and Kazmin 2021). In order to assuage the population, the BJP undertook a remarkable program to give free rations to a large portion of the population under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) (Bhattacharya and Sinha Roy 2021), which was hugely popular and consequential in the BJP's victory in the state election of Uttar Pradesh in 2022 (Aiyar 2023). While it was clearly not financially sustainable, it showed how far the welfare state had come that it could implement such a large program without corruption or misallocation getting out of hand.

Soon the wear and tear of the pandemic began to show. India's growth had slowed; there were major concerns about unemployment among the youth, and high levels of rural distress. These concerns about rural distress emanated from a large "farmer's protest" in north India, particularly in parts of Haryana, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh—which began as a protest against controversial amendments to India's agricultural protocols by allowing the entry of corporate actors. The protest morphed into a much larger movement than may initially have been obvious, creating class- and caste-wise frustrations among agricultural communities like the Jats. Nevertheless, this was just one of many protests during this 5-year period. Largescale protests broke out after the government declared changes to citizenship rules under the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) allowing for non-Muslims from certain countries to be fast-tracked for citizenship. Elsewhere, after repeated "leaks" and cancellations to government exams, the youth began to protest. In all cases, the BJP showed an inability to quell the protests (the CAA protests seemingly ended more because of coronavirus than government action).

After the farmers' protest, the government was looking to reinvigorate its "Hindu vote" against the class- and caste-wise distinctions that were starting to show in its electoral coalition. Taking advantage of Supreme Court order to build a Hindu temple to the Lord Ram on a site on which the Babri Masjid once stood (but was demolished by "Hindu activists"), the BJP sought make a big show of Hindu unity. Perhaps if the election had been called right then or even closer to the date of Ram Temple inauguration in January 2024, the BJP would have had a stronger showing. With a particularly assertive version of

the BJP, concerns began to grow about what it would do if it came back to power—and the opposition claimed the BJP would seek to change the Constitution. In an interesting turn of events, the political opposition began to campaign by holding up the Indian Constitution and discussing the threats to it. Voters began to use social media and alternative sources to access information that was not curated by the government.

This is, of course, an ex-post narrative. However, we can now see in the hindsight that there were signs the BJP may struggle in 2024. The following sections discuss how each of the ideas described herein affected the electoral outcomes, and the empirical evidence for it.

Identity and Class

Identity and class-based differentiation in the electorate started to become more pronounced in the lead-up to the election. From the farmer's protests and concerns about changing the Constitution, which particularly concerned OBC and SC voters, to frequent anti-Muslim comments and actions such as selective bulldozing of Muslim settlements, questions of caste and religious identity became more salient in this election. Similarly, record-breaking profits for a handful of corporate actors and perceived growth in wealth inequality began to generate significant class differentiation in voters (Agarwala and Roychowdhury 2024).

These distinctions are also apparent in survey data. In order to understand larger electoral patterns and their theoretical consequences, we turn to the Indian Election Survey 2024 (IES 2024) conducted by Data Action Lab for Emerging Societies (DALES)—a rigorous, post poll survey of over 36,000 voters across 20 states and union territories. The survey had estimated the relative vote shares of the BJP and the Congress Party at a national level nearly correctly (37% for the BJP and 21% for the Congress). For clarity of exposition, we present the data as-is, without any reweighting of the data.

Table 1a: BJP Vote Dynamics by Caste Group

	Scheduled Tribe (ST)	Scheduled Caste (SC)	Other Backward Class (OBC)	General Caste
Left the BJP (Among BJP Voters in 2019) [%]	16.2	21.8	17.2	10.1
Entered BJP (Among Non-BJP Voters in 2019) [%]	11.8	6.7	7.4	8.2
Effective Vote Shift [p.p.]	**0.2**	**-1.8**	**-2.2**	**0.5**

Table 1b: BJP Vote Dynamics by Asset Wealth

	Bottom 20%	2nd Quintile	3rd Quintile	4th Quintile	Top 20%
Left the BJP (Among BJP Voters in 2019)	5.6	6.0	5.2	6.9	6.0
Entered BJP (Among Non-BJP Voters in 2019)	3.7	3.9	5.3	5.5	5.5
Effective Vote Shift	**-1.9**	**-2.1**	**0.1**	**-1.4**	**-0.5**

Given the relative accuracy of the data, we can undertake an analysis of how voter preferences shifted by caste and wealth from 2019 and 2024. Table 1a displays the rate at which voters shifted away from the BJP, switched to the BJP, and the overall vote share change to the BJP by caste group. Consider the third (OBC) column in the table. The first row tells us that among those OBCs that voted for the BJP in 2019, 17.2 percent *left the party* and voted for a party other than the BJP in 2024. The second row tells us that among those OBCs that did not vote for the BJP in 2019, 6.7 percent *entered the party* and voted for the BJP. Finally, the third row tells us that overall, the BJP vote share dropped by 1.8 percentage points (pp) among those OBCs that voted in both 2019 and 2024.

Three key lessons emerge from Table 1a. First, there is greater caste differentiation in support for the BJP as the support among OBCs and SCs dropped by around 2 pp, while there was negligible change among STs and general castes.[1] The vote drops are more severe for the BJP among these groups in states where the BJP fared poorly. In Uttar Pradesh, the BJP lost 8 pp among OBCs and 12 pp among SCs. In Haryana, the BJP lost 7 pp among OBCs and 20 pp among SCs.[2] Second, a noticeably high percentage of previous BJP supporters left the party among OBCs and SCs (more than 17%), reflecting significant anger among these communities. Third, even with significant shares of supporters leaving the BJP among ST and general castes, new supporters offset the losses. By contrast, the BJP did not appeal at a very high rate to those who did not vote for the BJP in the past among OBCs and SCs.

Almost certainly, the growing caste polarization in the electorate reflects events like concerns about the Constitution and agricultural distress. However, the communities among which the BJP seemingly faced larger losses, OBCs and SCs, are also communities that have not traditionally been core BJP voters. Despite the narrative of the BJP representing a "Hindu vote", that does not see caste; the reality is that the BJP has strategically employed caste appeals over the years to construct its now formidable electoral coalition. In this Issue, Gilles Verniers documents the extraordinary increase in OBC members of parliament (MPs) over the past few decades, noting that this is the first time since Independence that the share of upper castes MPs is roughly equivalent to the share of OBC MPs. As Verniers points out, much of this increase has been driven by the dual aims of the BJP and its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to increase the representation of backward castes while maintaining the relative dominance of traditional elites and upper castes (especially in the Hindi Belt). In this election, the INDIA coalition sought to counteract BJP's inroads into "non-dominant" OBC communities by nominating a greater share of candidates from these communities—the survey data above suggests that this strategy may have yielded some success. A stark demonstration of this strategy can be seen in Uttar Pradesh, where the BJP faced heavy

losses in 2024 compared to the 2019 election. As Arvind Kumar shows in his paper, the Samajwadi Party, which has been traditionally associated with the Yadav community, nominated a much higher share of non-Yadav OBCs and most backward castes (MBCs) to counteract the electoral dominance of the BJP among these communities. In this manner, caste-based parties that are traditionally associated with one or two communities are being forced to diversify their nomination patterns.

Table 1b undertakes an analysis of those who left the BJP and entered the BJP by wealth, looking at the data by asset quintile. For instance, 5.2 percent of voters in the third quintile (40–60th percentile of wealth) who voted for the BJP in 2019 *left the party* and voted for a party other than the BJP in 2024. The second row tells us that among those OBCs that did not vote for the BJP in 2019, while 5.3 percent of those who had not voted for the BJP in 2019 *entered the party* and voted for the BJP in 2024. These data show that the BJP lost about 2 pp among the poorest two quintiles, leading to greater class/wealth polarization in the electorate. In particular, it seems that while a similar share of voters left the BJP across asset quintiles, the BJP had a harder time attracting new voters among the poor—likely reflecting macroeconomic frustrations. Indrajit Roy's piece in this volume reflects on the role of class-wise contradictions in the BJP vote.[3] As Roy notes, while the BJP has been the preferred party of the landed/dominant proprietary classes, it understood that it needed to construct a meaningful narrative for weaker/poorer classes to build a large electoral coalition. It thus created a notion of an aspirational "neo-middle class" who have risen from the poorer class. Roy points out that the contradictions in appeasing both the neo-middle class and its traditional dominant class base may have come to the fore in this election. Perhaps this is why we also see a significant decline in vote share among the fourth asset quintile (60–80th percentile of wealth) in the IES 2024 data (see Table 1b).

Since the rise of the BJP in 2014, there have been concerns that the ruling BJP has engaged in anti-Muslim religious chauvinism. For instance, Human Rights Watch (2024) reported that Prime Minister Modi made anti-Muslim remarks in 110 of his 172 speeches in the run-up to the 2024 election, and there have been accusations about selective bulldozing of Muslim settlements (PTI 2022). In the IES 2024 data, 51 percent of respondents explicitly agreed or strongly agreed that the BJP government has victimized Muslims in India, and it was electorally consequential. Among those that did not believe that Muslims had been victimized, the BJP had a 47 percent vote share while the BJP's vote share dropped to just 28 percent among those who believed the BJP has victimized Muslims. Given the sheer scale of concern about Muslim victimization, this is a genuinely socially and politically consequential issue. In an era of increased intimidation of India's Muslim population, Asim Ali's essay analyzes three recent books that shift the framework of Muslims as

passive victims to "active protagonists" by centering Muslim agency. In his essay, he critically engages the following texts: *Another India: The Making of the World's Largest Muslim Minority, 1947–77* by Pratinav Anil; *The Muslim Secular: Parity and the Politics of India's Partition* by Amar Sohal; and *A Brief History of the Present: Muslims in New India* by Hilal Ahmed. In doing so, Ali's essay traces the debates around Muslim identity from the independence of India to the current moment, with significant discussion of the tension between juridical/constitutional mobilization and more "political" forms of mobilization. The essay also encourages scholars to look beyond Euro-centric frameworks and develop alternative theoretical tools to better understand the Muslim experience in India.

Media, Mobilization, and Preference Formation

Over the past decade, one of the major shifts in modes of *doing politics* has been the use of social media and peer-to-peer messaging for organizational coordination and reaching the population. The IES 2024 asked respondents about news sources from various media (with multiple options possible). In Table 2a, we report those who list television (TV) and/or social media as a news source. We have defined those that named any of Twitter (X), WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram or YouTube as social media users. We have also looked at the interaction between the two sources of media in the table. For instance, 41 percent of those aged 18–30 use both TV and social media as news sources, but only 26 percent of those above the age of 30 do so. By contrast, only 16 percent of those aged 18–30 only use TV as a news source, as compared to 31 percent of those above the age of 30 who only use TV as a news source.

Several lessons emerge from this table. First, unlike what is portrayed, most people—and young people in particular—actually make use of multiple sources of news to form their opinions. This echoes work in other contexts like the United States that finds voters have quite diverse media diets (Guess 2021).

Table 2a: News Sources by Age

	TV	Social Media	Social Media and TV	Social Media Only	TV Only
Over 30 Years Old	57	52	26	25	31
18-30 Years Old	57	75	42	34	15

Table 2b: Most Important News Source by Age

	TV	Social Media
Over 30 Years Old	45	26
18-30 Years Old	31	44

Perhaps this is why we find weak relationships between types of media and vote choice. Second, there is still a large reservoir of voters among those above the age of 30 who only use TV as a news source. Insofar as there are fears that the ruling government controls TV media, this is likely to be more impactful for older voters. In the IES 2024, a total of 71 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the "media represents only the views of Modi and BJP." This was also consequential to electoral outcomes; among those who believed the media to be biased towards Prime Minister Modi and the BJP, the BJP had a 30 percent vote share, while it had a 54 percent vote share among those did not agree with the statement. Those who are have limited news sources, TV or social media, and do not perceive media biases are more likely to vote with the ruling party.

Table 2b reports the most important news source for respondents broken down by age category. For, instance, 44 percent of those aged 18–30 see social media as their most important news source, while only 26 percent of those above the age of 30 do so. This disaggregation shows an extraordinary shift from older voters, who disproportionately use TV as their main news source, to younger voters, who disproportionately use social media as their news source. One of us reported from the field where an enthusiastic young man exclaimed, "If the Congress wins, it will be because of (government critic) Dhruv Rathee." While the sentiment may have been overblown, it tapped into a real challenge of media control in the social media era. Younger people show remarkably diverse media diets, and they are able to access media sources that may be critical of the government. This is highly consequential in a time when many voters feel the media is fully under the control of the ruling government.

Amogh Dhar Sharma in his paper traces the changes in media sources over time, using repeated rounds of the National Election Survey by CSDS Lokniti, and the shift towards digital and social media is unmistakable. Sharma highlights that the incorporation of social media into professional campaigns has been a noticeable shift in election-time mobilization. However, using the same data, Sharma highlights the "stickiness" of how voters make up their minds, suggesting a need for nuance in understanding how social media might be affecting political outcomes. Shahana Sheikh's piece more directly looks at how social media has been incorporated into electoral campaigns. She focuses on how social media has affected the function of political organization. The BJP for many years has sought to transform modern campaigning by shifting from more episodic (during the time of election) organizational mobilization to a permanent campaign. (Indeed, Jha [2017] notes this as one of the motivations of the "missed call" campaign to enroll party members soon after the BJP came to power). As Sheikh notes, the advent of social media allowed the party organization to streamline communication, build new wings of the party and keep in constant touch with key actors outside of the party and with

voters. In this way, the proliferation of media needs to be understood for how it has changed the level of persistence with which it is engaging with the population.

During the electoral campaign, there were many questions about whether one would see increased or decreased turnout in the 2024 election. In this volume, Shrimankar and Heath have undertaken the most detailed exposition of turnout trends in national elections to date, analyzing the data from 1962 to present. They find that the extent to which government is "divided" is consequential. When there is alignment between the party at centre and state government (a "double engine *sarkar*" in Indian parlance), then turnout is anti-incumbent. However, when voters cannot easily attribute blame, as in a divided government between state and center, then these dynamics do not hold. They convincingly show that national elections are not just derivative of state elections (as has often been argued in the Indian context), and that partisan character of the government, rather than individual factors, are consequential for turning out to vote. There is evidence from comparative contexts to suggest that voters who deeply identify with a particular party are much more likely to engage in electoral arena, including their greater intensity to turn out to vote. Despite greater fluidity in the political system, and weaker partisanship attachments compared to more mature democracies of global north, this phenomenon holds true in the Indian case as well.

The Quality of Democracy

Since Prime Minister Modi and the BJP came to power in 2014, there have been fears of "democratic backsliding" in India. Several organizations that generate democratic indices, like the V-Dem Institute, expressed these fears; by 2021, it had downgraded India from an "electoral democracy" to an "electoral autocracy." Moreover, in 2024, it further noted that India has been "one of the worst autocratizers lately" across the world. These concerns were very much a part of the electoral campaign, with opposition parties expressing concerns that the BJP would try to change the Constitution if it came back to power; that it had misused state power and state agencies (leading to the freezing of accounts of the Congress, for instance). With general concerns about the quality of institutions, a section of society and political opposition began to claim that the electronic voting machines (EVMs) used to conduct elections had been manipulated.

To test beliefs of democratic fairness among the population, the IES 2024 asked respondents, "Do you believe the EVM electoral process is fair?" Somewhat shockingly, only 62 percent of respondents believe the EVM to be fair, and 22 percent of respondents explicitly thought the system to be unfair (Table 3). Furthermore, beliefs in the fairness of democracy were very strongly correlated to electoral support for the BJP. The BJP had a 44 percent vote share among those that the system to be fair, and just 19 percent among those who though it to be unfair (it also had much

lower vote share, 33 percent, among those who did not answer the question). This confirms the view that the popularity of the ruling government, or lack thereof, was strongly associated with the perception of whether it had governed in a democratically legitimate manner.

Table 3: Fairness of the EVM and BJP Vote Share

	Percentage	BJP Vote Share (%)
EVM is Fair	62	44
EVM is Unfair	22	19
Can't Say	16	33

Milan Vaishnav in his paper describes in detail some of the concerns with the electoral process in India. Since 2017, many have expressed concerns around the manner in which the Election Commission of India (ECI) has altered the timing and phasing of Indian elections, including in the 2019 and 2024 national elections. There are also concerns that ECI has not evenly adjudicated over the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) in India that governs the behavior of parties and candidates in close proximity to the election. Noteworthy examples include provocative statements against the Muslim community by BJP's chief strategist and home minister Amit Shah and Prime Minister Modi going unpunished. Vaishnav also highlights the concerns over political bias in nominations to the ECI, and its contradictory handling of the controversial electoral bond scheme, which allowed for large sums of money to be donated to political parties anonymously. Perhaps the biggest questions around democratic fairness, as we have discussed above, pertain to the use of investigative agencies to harass political opposition, notably leading to the jailing of two chief ministers, Hemant Soren of Jharkhand and Arvind Kejriwal of Delhi, as well as the freezing of the Congress Party's bank accounts. Vaishnav apprehends what our data show. He writes, "Once segments of the citizenry begin to suspect the integrity of elections, this can have deleterious impacts on democracy writ large… [T]he credibility of a referee institution turns on its perceived neutrality. Without the latter, the former is ephemeral."

These observations also leave some notable questions. As Vaishnav also observes, concerns of democratic backsliding and questions about fairness of electoral processes have dogged the current government since it came to power in 2014. Why did it seem to become so consequential in 2024? We must first admit that it is possible that a sweeping victory for the BJP 2019 led to a bit of hubris. That being said, nothing up to a few months before the election suggested that democratic fairness would become an issue in the election. In this volume, Aiyar and Sircar suggest that the timing of these concerns has much to do with the breaking of a "he-

gemonic equilibrium" in which the BJP and Prime Minister Modi used welfare entitlements to smooth out well-known caste and class social contradictions in its Hindu vote base.[4] In line with our earlier discussions, macroeconomic anxieties hit the poorest voters, and OBC and SC voters to a greater extent, leading to tensions in the coalition that couldn't easily be managed by welfare entitlements (in part, because the political opposition has also the developed the capacity to credibly commit to welfare delivery). As these voters began to look elsewhere, concerns about the fairness of elections and whether the opposition could compete on equal footing became more salient. In short, when "times are good" voters may not pay much attention to issues of democratic fairness, it is only when a voter needs choices that it becomes politically and electorally salient.

Concluding Thoughts

A consecutive third-term is historic by any standard. However, the BJP turned in a disappointing performance in the 2024 national election, especially in comparison to the expectations raised. Naturally, much of the focus of the post-election analysis has been on explaining where the vote increased and decreased for the BJP. However, there is much more to be learned from this election.

Today, large swathes of the Indian population get the news from social media sources, which by their very structure cannot be easily controlled by the state or any political entity. How much of this new, more diverse media environment played into the final electoral outcomes? It is hard to come up with any clean empirical relationships between media and how people vote, but, as the articles in this Issue remind us, the penetration of social media is consequential in other ways. It has transformed how party organizations work and how they reach the voter. At a minimum, we can say that this new social media environment has dramatically affected how politics is done.

If the mode of doing politics has been changing, there is a sense in which this election brought old social challenges back to the fore. Since the BJP came to power in 2014 and with the instantiation of Hindu nationalism, there are genuine concerns about the intimidation of Muslims. The impressive victories by the BJP in 2014 and 2019 led many analysts to suggest that the BJP had "solved" its caste problem of reaching out to OBCs and SCs under a larger Hindu identity—sometimes by mobilizing against Muslims explicitly. This election shows us that such declarations may have been pre-mature. There is clear evidence from the IES 2024 that a large share of Indians do feel that Muslims have not been treated fairly with political consequences. If anything, macroeconomic anxieties generated class-wise distinctions that were challenging the BJP to navigate, frustrations that become more apparent when one looks at the electoral results in North India and the overall patterns of turnout.

However, in many ways, for a large number of political observers the "elephant in the room" in this election was the credibility of the democratic process in India. As the pieces in this volume document, there were serious concerns that the State had misused its power against political opposition, and a seemingly incoherent set of parties under the umbrella of the INDIA coalition, managed to mobilize a significant segment of voters on the question of protecting democracy and the Constitution.[5] Moreover, BJP's underwhelming performance, as many commentaries after the results suggested, restored a semblance of power equations within the political system (Mehta 2024).

Since the national election, the BJP has performed quite well in state elections. This shows that the BJP continues to be electorally formidable. However, after the 2024 national election, politics in the country seems to be changing in key ways. The Shiv Sena and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), once the main actors in Maharashtra, have split-up and are shells of their former selves. In Delhi the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which had frustrated the BJP for so long, decisively lost to the BJP. In many electoral campaigns, we are seeing state-level leaders, even for the BJP, taking on a bigger role. There is also a growing chorus asking, "Who will come after Modi?" With growing international challenges, an uneven economy, uncertainties about the legitimacy of the democratic process, and a lack of clear political choices, we see a system in flux. If for no other reason, a deep analysis of this election is important, because it is the only way in which we can make sense of whatever will come next.

Notes

1 According to IES 2024, the BJP had 39 percent vote share among OBCs and 30 percent vote share among SCs (in a retrospective question).

2 We do caution the reader that these numbers are just indicative. The larger survey is meant to be representative at a national level and state-level samples can vary significantly.

3 While he notes the Lokniti-CSDS data finds a slight increase in the support for BJP among the poorest voters, the data is not strictly comparable over time (as the construction of class index varies over time in NES surveys). Nonetheless, whether one believes the Lokniti-CSDS or the IES 2024 data, Roy's observations are consistent with the overall patterns.

4 See Chapter 10 in Chhibber and Verma (2018) for a more detailed exposition of these contradictions in the Hindu Right.

5 As the data indicates these questions about the democratic process persist in the population at large. This is certainly worrying, and something that must be addressed as things move forward.

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Introducción de los editores invitados: ¿Qué revelan las elecciones nacionales de 2024 sobre la India?

Resumen

Las elecciones de la Lok Sabha de 2024 marcaron un momento crucial que reveló importantes corrientes subyacentes que moldearon la política india. Si bien el Partido Bharatiya Janata (BJP) se mantuvo como el partido con mayor participación, su decepcionante desempeño, en comparación con las expectativas, en la previa a las elecciones sorprendió a los observadores políticos. Naturalmente, gran parte del análisis hasta la fecha se ha centrado en comprender los factores que influyeron en el veredicto. Este número especial analiza lo que las elecciones de 2024 nos revelan más allá del resultado: la cambiante relevancia de las identidades sociales; el papel de los medios digitales en la movilización electoral y el control del mensaje; la creciente polarización partidista en la política india; la creciente inquietud sobre la legitimidad de varias instituciones clave; y la preocupación por la evolución de la democracia india. Al centrar la atención en las dinámicas políticas más amplias, desde los resultados electorales hasta las perspectivas analíticas, sugerimos que las elecciones de la Lok Sabha de 2024 podrían ser recordadas menos por sus ganadores y más por lo que señalaron sobre el futuro de la India.

Palabras clave: Elecciones de la Lok Sabha en India; Partido Bharatiya Janata; Congreso Nacional Indio; Elecciones Parlamentarias de 2024; Política india

Tras las elecciones nacionales de 2024, el Partido Bharatiya Janata (BJP) volvió a ser el partido con mayor número de escaños en el parlamento, con 240 de los 543 escaños de la Lok Sabha. Sin embargo, para muchos, incluso dentro del BJP, esto se sintió como una derrota. Tras obtener 282 escaños en 2014 y 303 en 2019 para formar una mayoría unipartidista, el recuento de escaños fue sin duda menor que antes. Sobre todo, dada la campaña triunfalista del BJP, en la que afirmó que, junto con sus aliados, superaría los 400 escaños, este fue un resultado insuficiente. El análisis posterior a las elecciones ofreció una abrumadora variedad de explicaciones para este resultado, desde la resistencia a las percibidas tendencias autoritarias hasta el desempleo juvenil..

De hecho, es cierto que el BJP tuvo un peor desempeño en varios anti-

guos estados bastiones como Haryana, Rajastán y Uttar Pradesh. Pero también es cierto que el BJP logró importantes avances en el sur de la India, tanto dentro de la alianza (Andhra Pradesh) como fuera de ella (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Telangana), y finalmente se impuso en Odisha. Las coaliciones inestables debilitaron su control sobre estados como Bihar y Maharashtra, y el BJP perdió terreno ante el Congreso Trinamool de Toda la India de Mamata Banerjee en Bengala Occidental. El análisis más preciso de los resultados electorales de 2024 es que "son complejos". Fuera de los estudios de televisión, y desde la comodidad de la investigación académica, podemos rechazar firmemente las explicaciones simplistas y monocausales del resultado electoral.

La combinación de artículos de perspectiva e investigación que ofrecemos en este número cuenta con la ventaja de un año de retrospectiva. Si bien el interés inicial de analistas y académicos se centró en describir empíricamente los resultados electorales de 2024, cierta distancia con respecto a los resultados nos ha permitido reflexionar sobre lecciones teóricas más amplias de las elecciones de 2024, evitando reacciones impulsivas. Desde las elecciones nacionales de 2024, el BJP y sus alianzas han ganado elecciones subnacionales en Delhi, Haryana y Maharashtra, estados en los que se preveía que el BJP tendría dificultades después de las elecciones nacionales de 2024. Por otro lado, el BJP ha tenido que ceder ante las demandas de un "censo de castas" que incluya a la jati de los hogares indios por primera vez desde 1931, a lo que se había opuesto firmemente en el período previo a las elecciones de 2024. En muchos sentidos, estos acontecimientos recientes se derivan naturalmente de las lecciones que extraemos de las elecciones de 2024: desde las presiones de casta sobre la coalición del BJP, que promueve el "voto hindú", hasta las ventajas que el partido sigue disfrutando en diversos ámbitos, como los recursos financieros y organizativos, lo que le otorga un enorme poder para definir la agenda. En ese sentido, el BJP sigue siendo el eje central y continúa impulsando la política electoral india a medio plazo. En este número, cambiamos la pregunta de "¿cómo se explican los resultados de las elecciones nacionales de 2024?" a "¿qué nos pueden decir las elecciones nacionales de 2024 sobre el comportamiento institucional, electoral y político en la India y el futuro?". Nos centramos en tres áreas clave de investigación.

En primer lugar, nos preguntamos hasta qué punto la clase, la casta y la identidad religiosa siguen siendo relevantes para el comportamiento electoral y partidista en India. El BJP, y la construcción política del nacionalismo hindú en general, ha buscado minimizar las distinciones de casta en las preferencias políticas, buscando generar un "voto hindú" consolidado que varía significativamente en las preferencias sociales y partidistas según la casta. Si bien las distinciones de casta en las preferencias de los votantes podrían no desaparecer nunca por completo, podemos afirmar con gran certeza que, después de 2014, el BJP logró avances significativos en las comunidades de castas inferiores, entre las Otras Clases

Atrasadas (OBC) y las Castas Registradas (SC) (Chhibber y Verma, 2019). ¿En qué medida los cálculos basados en la casta en las nominaciones de candidatos y las preferencias de los votantes siguen afectando los resultados electorales? También existe la preocupación de que la imaginación nacionalista hindú haya relegado a los musulmanes de la India a ciudadanos de segunda clase (Varshney y Staggs, 2024; Jaffrelot y Ahmed, 2024; Allie, 2025). ¿Qué podemos decir sobre la identidad política y electoral de los musulmanes en la India actual? Paralelamente, la India ha experimentado un aumento extraordinario de la desigualdad de ingresos y las ganancias corporativas (Sircar, 2022), así como una creciente preocupación por el desempleo. ¿En qué medida estos resultados reflejan la indignación y la movilización de clase?

En segundo lugar, nos preguntamos qué nos dicen los resultados de las elecciones de 2024 sobre cuestiones fundamentales del comportamiento político comparativo. A medida que el mundo en general, incluida la India, cambia de los medios tradicionales por las redes sociales para la comunicación y las noticias (Newman et al., 2024; Verma, 2024), ¿cuáles son los impactos en el comportamiento político indio? Fundamentalmente, una investigación sobre las tendencias cambiantes de los medios se pregunta cómo los ciudadanos deciden sus fuentes de noticias y cómo estas fuentes llegan al votante. De particular interés no es solo el grado de exposición de los votantes a las redes sociales, sino también cómo los activistas políticos utilizan estratégicamente una combinación de estrategias de campaña tradicionales y diversos tipos de medios para llegar al votante. También utilizamos la India como escenario para comprender cuestiones fundamentales sobre el fenómeno electoral, como cuándo los votantes deciden votar y la fuerza de los vínculos partidistas en sistemas de partidos poco institucionalizados. Investigaciones previas han encontrado una mayor participación electoral asociada con la oposición al gobierno, pero las elecciones de 2019 rompieron esta tendencia, ya que la mayor capacidad de movilización del BJP generó una asociación entre una mayor participación y su porcentaje de votos (Sircar, 2020). Ante la creciente frustración con el panorama macroeconómico de la India, ¿cuál de estos dos modelos predominaría en las elecciones de 2024? Tradicionalmente, la India se ha considerado un país con bajos niveles de partidismo y una débil base ideológica (Mainwaring y Torcal, 2006). ¿Sigue siendo válido este argumento a la luz de las recientes intervenciones sobre estas cuestiones? (Chhibber y Verma, 2018; Auerbach et al., 2022; Barthwal y Jensenius, 2024; Haas y Majumdar, 2023). ¿Ha fortalecido la maquinaria de movilización y comunicación del BJP un mayor partidismo entre los votantes indios? ¿En qué medida la agudización de la división ideológica después de 2014 ha contribuido a la creciente polarización política?

Finalmente, nos preguntamos sobre la fidelidad de la democracia india. India ha sido un caso atípico constante en el análisis comparativo de las democracias, ya que es, con diferencia, la más pobre y grande de las democra-

cias de larga trayectoria. Sin embargo, existe la preocupación de que la calidad de la democracia se esté erosionando, lo que a menudo se denomina "retroceso democrático". Un número creciente de personas expresa su preocupación por el uso de las instituciones estatales, en particular las llamadas agencias de investigación de la India, para intimidar a la oposición política (Mehra, 2024). El encarcelamiento de dos ministros principales (en Jharkhand y Delhi) y la congelación de la cuenta bancaria del Partido del Congreso (analizada en el artículo de Milan Vaishnav en este número) en el período previo a las elecciones se convirtieron en importantes factores de movilización para la oposición. Esto también se reflejó en la encuesta previa a la votación realizada por Lokniti-CSDS en marzo de 2024 en la que aproximadamente un tercio de los encuestados sugirió que agencias como la CBI y el ED están siendo utilizadas contra los partidos de oposición como venganza política, y otro tercio dijo que estas agencias están haciendo su trabajo dentro de los límites de la ley.

¿Hasta qué punto la percepción de intimidación de la oposición política india pone en tela de juicio la calidad de la democracia india? En relación con esto, ¿hasta qué punto los ciudadanos indios consideran legítimo el uso del poder estatal por parte del gobierno? Ante la percepción de sesgo en las instituciones estatales, muchos ciudadanos y la oposición política han comenzado a preguntarse si las elecciones en India, organizadas por la Comisión Electoral de la India (ECI), son justas. Más concretamente, algunos han expresado su preocupación por la manipulación de las máquinas de votación electrónica (MVE) utilizadas para celebrar las elecciones a favor del BJP. Cabe aclarar que no creemos que existan pruebas creíbles de dicha manipulación, pero sí es una muestra del grado de deterioro de la confianza entre los partidos políticos y los ciudadanos en el sistema electoral. En junio de 2025, Rahul Gandhi, del Congreso, publicó en redes sociales: «Las MVE en India son una 'caja negra' y nadie puede examinarlas. Existe una seria preocupación por la transparencia de nuestro proceso electoral. La democracia se convierte en una farsa y propensa al fraude cuando las instituciones carecen de rendición de cuentas». ¿Qué nos dicen estos acontecimientos sobre la legitimidad democrática del gobierno gobernante y el proceso electoral en la India?

Gobierno del BJP 2019-2024

La victoria del BJP en 2019 marcó el comienzo de un cambio perceptible en el modelo de gobierno de la India. Tras obtener 303 de los 543 escaños en las elecciones nacionales de 2019, el BJP obtuvo la mayor cantidad de escaños desde 1984 (y la mayor cantidad en la historia de un partido distinto del Congreso), se animó a formular políticas unilateralmente sin temor al colapso del gobierno. En esta sección, analizamos algunos de los eventos clave y las consideraciones teóricas para comprender este gobierno más asertivo del BJP entre 2019 y 2024.

La victoria aplastante del BJP en 2019 sorprendió a los analistas políti-

cos. Ciertamente, esto se debió en parte a que las elecciones de 2019 se celebraron tras un conflicto con Pakistán. Sin embargo, también hubo otras razones. El BJP había construido una formidable organización partidaria con acceso a recursos financieros sin precedentes y una extraordinaria capacidad de movilización electoral. A pesar de las preocupaciones sobre la salud macroeconómica de la India —tras la desmonetización de 2016, que generó una grave crisis económica—, los votantes no mostraron abiertamente actitudes negativas. En todo caso, el BJP había construido una amplia base de votantes labharthi (beneficiarios), particularmente fieles al primer ministro Modi. Modi promocionó agresivamente su capacidad para ofrecer beneficios mediante la identificación biométrica y dejó claro a los votantes que su benevolencia no podía ser replicada por ningún otro actor político, lo que uno de nosotros ha llamado «tecnopatrimonialismo» (Aiyar y Sircar, 2024). Sin embargo, como argumentan Aiyar y Sircar en este volumen, a partir de las elecciones de Bengala Occidental de 2021, los líderes estatales carismáticos demostraron que podían replicar el modelo de "tecnopatrimonialismo" y plantear un desafío electoral al BJP.

El estado de bienestar del BJP se puso a prueba tras la pandemia de coronavirus. Las encuestas mostraron que la popularidad del primer ministro Modi se redujo notablemente durante la pandemia debido a la percepción de una mala gestión, con escasez de oxígeno y muertes no reportadas (Parkin y Kazmin, 2021). Para tranquilizar a la población, el BJP implementó un programa excepcional para proporcionar raciones gratuitas a una gran parte de la población bajo el Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) (Bhattacharya y Sinha Roy, 2021), que gozó de gran popularidad y fue crucial para la victoria del BJP en las elecciones estatales de Uttar Pradesh de 2022 (Aiyar, 2023). Si bien era claramente insostenible financieramente, demostró el gran avance del estado de bienestar, capaz de implementar un programa de tal envergadura sin que la corrupción o la mala asignación de fondos se descontrolaran.

Pronto, el desgaste de la pandemia comenzó a notarse. El crecimiento de la India se había desacelerado; existía una gran preocupación por el desempleo juvenil y los altos niveles de pobreza rural. Esta preocupación surgió de una gran protesta campesina en el norte de la India, en particular en zonas de Haryana, Punjab y Uttar Pradesh, que comenzó como una protesta contra las controvertidas enmiendas a los protocolos agrícolas de la India que permitían la entrada de empresas. La protesta se transformó en un movimiento mucho mayor de lo que inicialmente se pudo percibir, generando frustraciones por cuestiones de clase y casta en comunidades agrícolas como los jats. Sin embargo, esta fue solo una de las muchas protestas durante este período de cinco años. Protestas a gran escala estallaron después de que el gobierno anunciara cambios en las normas de ciudadanía bajo la Ley de Enmienda de la Ciudadanía (CAA), que permitía agilizar la obtención de la ciudadanía para los no musulmanes de ciertos países. En otros lugares, tras repetidas filtraciones

y cancelaciones de exámenes oficiales, los jóvenes comenzaron a protestar. En todos los casos, el BJP mostró una incapacidad para sofocar las protestas (las protestas de la CAA aparentemente terminaron más debido al coronavirus que a la acción del gobierno).

Tras la protesta campesina, el gobierno buscaba revitalizar su voto hindú frente a las distinciones de clase y casta que empezaban a manifestarse en su coalición electoral. Aprovechando la orden del Tribunal Supremo de construir un templo hindú al Señor Ram en el lugar donde se alzaba la mezquita Babri (demolida por activistas hindúes), el BJP intentó dar una gran muestra de unidad hindú. Quizás si las elecciones se hubieran convocado en ese momento o incluso más cerca de la fecha de inauguración del Templo de Ram en enero de 2024, el BJP habría obtenido un mejor resultado. Con una versión particularmente asertiva del BJP, comenzó a crecer la preocupación sobre qué haría si volviera al poder, y la oposición afirmó que el BJP intentaría cambiar la Constitución. En un giro interesante, la oposición política comenzó a hacer campaña defendiendo la Constitución india y debatiendo las amenazas que la acechaban. Los votantes comenzaron a utilizar las redes sociales y fuentes alternativas para acceder a información no controlada por el gobierno.

Esta es, por supuesto, una narrativa ex post. Sin embargo, en retrospectiva, podemos ver que hubo indicios de que el BJP podría tener dificultades en 2024. Las siguientes secciones analizan cómo cada una de las ideas descritas aquí afectó los resultados electorales y la evidencia empírica que la respalda.

Identidad y clase

La identidad y la diferenciación clasista en el electorado comenzaron a acentuarse en el período previo a las elecciones. Desde las protestas de los agricultores y la preocupación por la reforma constitucional, que preocupaba especialmente a los votantes de la OBC y la SC, hasta los frecuentes comentarios y acciones antimusulmanas, como la demolición selectiva de asentamientos musulmanes, las cuestiones de casta e identidad religiosa cobraron mayor relevancia en estas elecciones. De igual manera, las ganancias récord de un puñado de empresas y la percepción de un aumento de la desigualdad económica comenzaron a generar una significativa diferenciación clasista en los votantes (Agarwala y Roychowdhury, 2024).

Estas distinciones también son evidentes en los datos de las encuestas. Para comprender los patrones electorales más amplios y sus consecuencias teóricas, recurrimos a la Encuesta Electoral India 2024 (IES 2024), realizada por Data Action Lab for Emerging Societies (DALES), una rigurosa encuesta posterior a las elecciones a más de 36.000 votantes en 20 estados y territorios de la unión. La encuesta había estimado las proporciones relativas de voto del BJP y el Partido del Congreso a nivel nacional casi correctamente (37 % para el BJP y 21 % para el Congreso). Para mayor claridad, presentamos los datos tal cual, sin ninguna ponderación.

Tabla 1a: Dinámica del voto del BJP por grupo de castas

	Scheduled Tribe (ST)	Scheduled Caste (SC)	Other Backward Class (OBC)	General Caste
Left the BJP (Among BJP Voters in 2019) [%]	16.2	21.8	17.2	10.1
Entered BJP (Among Non-BJP Voters in 2019) [%]	11.8	6.7	7.4	8.2
Effective Vote Shift [p.p.]	**0.2**	**-1.8**	**-2.2**	**0.5**

Table 1b: BJP Vote Dynamics by Asset Wealth

	Bottom 20%	2nd Quintile	3rd Quintile	4th Quintile	Top 20%
Left the BJP (Among BJP Voters in 2019)	5.6	6.0	5.2	6.9	6.0
Entered BJP (Among Non-BJP Voters in 2019)	3.7	3.9	5.3	5.5	5.5
Effective Vote Shift	**-1.9**	**-2.1**	**0.1**	**-1.4**	**-0.5**

Dada la relativa precisión de los datos, podemos analizar cómo cambiaron las preferencias de los votantes según la casta y el nivel de riqueza entre 2019 y 2024. La Tabla 1a muestra la tasa de abandono y adhesión de los votantes al BJP, así como la variación general del porcentaje de votos a favor del BJP por grupo de casta. Considere la tercera columna (OBC) de la tabla. La primera fila indica que, entre los OBC que votaron por el BJP en 2019, el 17,2 % abandonó el partido y votó por un partido distinto al BJP en 2024. La segunda fila indica que, entre los OBC que no votaron por el BJP en 2019, el 6,7 % se unió al partido y votó por él. Finalmente, la tercera fila indica que, en general, el porcentaje de votos del BJP disminuyó 1,8 puntos porcentuales (pp) entre los OBC que votaron tanto en 2019 como en 2024.

Tres lecciones clave emergen de la Tabla 1a. Primero, hay una mayor diferenciación de castas en el apoyo al BJP, ya que el apoyo entre los OBC y las SC cayó alrededor de 2 puntos porcentuales, mientras que hubo un cambio insignificante entre las ST y las castas generales. Las caídas de votos son más severas para el BJP entre estos grupos en los estados donde el BJP obtuvo malos resultados. En Uttar Pradesh, el BJP perdió 8 puntos porcentuales entre los OBC y 12 puntos porcentuales entre las SC. En Haryana, el BJP perdió 7 puntos porcentuales entre los OBC y 20 puntos porcentuales entre las SC. Segundo, un porcentaje notablemente alto de antiguos simpatizantes del BJP abandonó el partido entre los OBC y las SC (más del 17%), lo que refleja un enojo significativo entre estas comunidades. Tercero, incluso con proporciones significativas de simpatizantes que abandonan el BJP entre las ST y las castas generales, los nuevos simpatizantes compensaron las pérdidas. Por el contrario, el BJP no atrajo a una tasa muy alta a aquellos que no votaron por el BJP en el pasado entre los OBC y las SC.

Casi con toda seguridad, la creciente polarización de castas en el electorado refleja eventos como las preocupaciones sobre la Constitución y las dificultades agrícolas. Sin embargo, las comunidades donde el BJP aparentemente sufrió mayores pérdidas, las comunidades de castas bajas y las comunidades de castas bajas, también son

comunidades que tradicionalmente no han sido el núcleo de sus votantes. A pesar de la narrativa de que el BJP representa un "voto hindú", que no considera la casta, la realidad es que el BJP ha empleado estratégicamente la cuestión de las castas a lo largo de los años para construir su ahora formidable coalición electoral. En este número, Gilles Verniers documenta el extraordinario aumento de parlamentarios de la comunidad de castas bajas en las últimas décadas, señalando que esta es la primera vez desde la Independencia que la proporción de parlamentarios de castas altas es aproximadamente equivalente a la de parlamentarios de la comunidad de castas bajas. Como señala Verniers, gran parte de este aumento se debe al doble objetivo del BJP y su Alianza Democrática Nacional (NDA) de aumentar la representación de las castas bajas, manteniendo al mismo tiempo el dominio relativo de las élites tradicionales y las castas altas (especialmente en el Cinturón Hindi). En estas elecciones, la coalición INDIA buscó contrarrestar la incursión del BJP en las comunidades OBC "no dominantes" nominando a una mayor proporción de candidatos de estas comunidades. Los datos de la encuesta anterior sugieren que esta estrategia podría haber tenido cierto éxito. Una clara muestra de esta estrategia se puede ver en Uttar Pradesh, donde el BJP sufrió fuertes pérdidas en 2024 en comparación con las elecciones de 2019. Como Arvind Kumar muestra en su artículo, el Partido Samajwadi, tradicionalmente asociado con la comunidad Yadav, nominó a una proporción mucho mayor de OBC no Yadav y de las castas más atrasadas (MBC) para contrarrestar el dominio electoral del BJP entre estas comunidades. De esta manera, los partidos basados en castas, tradicionalmente asociados con una o dos comunidades, se ven obligados a diversificar sus patrones de nominación.

La Tabla 1b realiza un análisis de aquellos que dejaron el BJP y entraron en el BJP por riqueza, mirando los datos por quintil de activos. Por ejemplo, el 5,2 por ciento de los votantes en el tercer quintil (percentil 40-60 de riqueza) que votaron por el BJP en 2019 dejaron el partido y votaron por un partido diferente al BJP en 2024. La segunda fila nos dice que entre aquellos OBC que no votaron por el BJP en 2019, mientras que el 5,3 por ciento de los que no habían votado por el BJP en 2019 entraron al partido y votaron por el BJP en 2024. Estos datos muestran que el BJP perdió alrededor de 2 puntos porcentuales entre los dos quintiles más pobres, lo que llevó a una mayor polarización de clase/riqueza en el electorado. En particular, parece que si bien una proporción similar de votantes abandonó el BJP en todos los quintiles de activos, el BJP tuvo más dificultades para atraer nuevos votantes entre los pobres, probablemente reflejando frustraciones macroeconómicas. El artículo de Indrajit Roy en este volumen reflexiona sobre el papel de las contradicciones de clase en el voto del BJP. Como señala Roy, si bien el BJP ha sido el partido predilecto de las clases terratenientes/propietarias dominantes, comprendió que necesitaba construir una narrativa significativa para las clases más débiles/pobres con el fin de construir una amplia coalición

electoral. Así, creó la noción de una "neoclase media" aspiracional, surgida de las clases más pobres. Roy señala que las contradicciones para apaciguar tanto a la neoclase media como a su base tradicional de clase dominante podrían haber cobrado protagonismo en estas elecciones. Quizás por eso también observamos una disminución significativa en la participación del voto en el cuarto quintil de activos (percentil 60-80 de la riqueza) en los datos del IES 2024 (véase la Tabla 1b).

Desde el ascenso del BJP en 2014, ha existido la preocupación de que el partido gobernante, el BJP, haya incurrido en chovinismo religioso antimusulmán. Por ejemplo, Human Rights Watch (2024) informó que el primer ministro Modi hizo comentarios antimusulmanes en 110 de sus 172 discursos previos a las elecciones de 2024, y ha habido acusaciones de demolición selectiva de asentamientos musulmanes (PTI 2022). En los datos de IES 2024, el 51 % de los encuestados estuvo explícitamente de acuerdo o muy de acuerdo en que el gobierno del BJP ha victimizado a los musulmanes en la India, y que esto tuvo consecuencias electorales. Entre quienes no creían que los musulmanes hubieran sido victimizados, el BJP obtuvo un 47 % de los votos, mientras que su porcentaje se redujo a tan solo el 28 % entre quienes creían que el BJP había victimizado a los musulmanes. Dada la magnitud de la preocupación por la victimización de los musulmanes, este es un problema de auténticas consecuencias sociales y políticas. En una era de creciente intimidación hacia la población musulmana de la India, el ensayo de Asim Ali analiza tres libros recientes que transforman el marco de los musulmanes como víctimas pasivas en "protagonistas activos" al centrarse en la agencia musulmana. En su ensayo, aborda críticamente los siguientes textos: Otra India: La creación de la minoría musulmana más grande del mundo, 1947-1977, de Pratinav Anil; El musulmán secular: Paridad y la política de la partición de la India, de Amar Sohal; y Una breve historia del presente: Musulmanes en la nueva India, de Hilal Ahmed. Al hacerlo, el ensayo de Ali rastrea los debates en torno a la identidad musulmana desde la independencia de la India hasta la actualidad, con un análisis significativo de la tensión entre la movilización jurídica/constitucional y formas de movilización más "políticas". El ensayo también anima a los académicos a mirar más allá de los marcos eurocéntricos y a desarrollar herramientas teóricas alternativas para comprender mejor la experiencia musulmana en la India.

Medios de comunicación, movilización y formación de preferencias

Durante la última década, uno de los principales cambios en los modos de hacer política ha sido el uso de las redes sociales y la mensajería entre pares para la coordinación organizacional y llegar a la población. La IES 2024 preguntó a los encuestados sobre fuentes de noticias de varios medios (con múltiples opciones posibles). En la Tabla 2a, informamos a aquellos que enumeran la televisión (TV) y/o las redes sociales como fuente de noticias.

Hemos definido a aquellos que nombraron Twitter (X), WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram o YouTube como usuarios de redes sociales. También hemos analizado la interacción entre las dos fuentes de medios en la tabla. Por ejemplo, el 41 por ciento de las personas de entre 18 y 30 años usa tanto la televisión como las redes sociales como fuentes de noticias, pero solo el 26 por ciento de los mayores de 30 años lo hace. Por el contrario, solo el 16 por ciento de las personas de entre 18 y 30 años solo usa la televisión como fuente de noticias, en comparación con el 31 por ciento de los mayores de 30 años que solo usan la televisión como fuente de noticias.

Tabla 2a: Fuentes de noticias por edad

	TV	Social Media	Social Media and TV	Social Media Only	TV Only
Over 30 Years Old	57	52	26	25	31
18-30 Years Old	57	75	42	34	15

Tabla 2b: Fuentes de noticias más importantes por edad

	TV	Social Media
Over 30 Years Old	45	26
18-30 Years Old	31	44

De esta tabla se desprenden varias lecciones. En primer lugar, a diferencia de lo que se describe, la mayoría de las personas, y en particular los jóvenes, utilizan múltiples fuentes de noticias para formarse sus opiniones. Esto coincide con el trabajo en otros contextos, como Estados Unidos, que revela que los votantes tienen una dieta mediática bastante diversa (Guess, 2021). Quizás por eso encontramos relaciones débiles entre los tipos de medios y la elección de voto. En segundo lugar, todavía hay una gran reserva de votantes mayores de 30 años que solo utilizan la televisión como fuente de noticias. Dado el temor de que el gobierno controle los medios televisivos, es probable que esto tenga un mayor impacto en los votantes de mayor edad. En la encuesta IES 2024, el 71 % de los encuestados estuvo de acuerdo o muy de acuerdo con la afirmación de que «los medios representan únicamente las opiniones de Modi y el BJP». Esto también influyó en los resultados electorales. Entre quienes creían que los medios de comunicación estaban sesgados hacia el primer ministro Modi y el BJP, este obtuvo un 30% de los votos, mientras que entre quienes no estaban de acuerdo con la declaración obtuvo un 54%. Quienes tienen pocas fuentes de noticias, televisión o redes sociales, y no perciben sesgos mediáticos, son más propensos a votar por el partido gobernante.

La Tabla 2b presenta la fuente de noticias más importante para los encuestados, desglosada por categoría de

edad. Por ejemplo, el 44 % de las personas de entre 18 y 30 años considera las redes sociales su principal fuente de noticias, mientras que solo el 26 % de los mayores de 30 años lo considera así. Esta desagregación muestra un cambio extraordinario desde los votantes de mayor edad, que utilizan desproporcionadamente la televisión como su principal fuente de noticias, hacia los votantes más jóvenes, que utilizan desproporcionadamente las redes sociales como su fuente de noticias. Uno de nosotros informó desde el terreno, donde un joven entusiasta exclamó: «Si el Congreso gana, será gracias a (el crítico del gobierno) Dhruv Rathee». Si bien el sentimiento puede haber sido exagerado, abordó un verdadero desafío del control de los medios en la era de las redes sociales. Los jóvenes muestran una dieta mediática notablemente diversa y pueden acceder a fuentes que pueden ser críticas con el gobierno. Esto es muy importante en un momento en que muchos votantes sienten que los medios están completamente bajo el control del gobierno.

En su artículo, Amogh Dhar Sharma analiza la evolución de los medios de comunicación a lo largo del tiempo, utilizando repetidas rondas de la Encuesta Electoral Nacional del CSDS Lokniti. La transición hacia los medios digitales y sociales es innegable. Sharma destaca que la incorporación de las redes sociales a las campañas profesionales ha supuesto un cambio notable en la movilización electoral. Sin embargo, utilizando los mismos datos, Sharma destaca la rigidez de la forma en que los votantes se forman sus opiniones, lo que sugiere la necesidad de matizar la comprensión de cómo las redes sociales podrían estar afectando los resultados políticos. El artículo de Shahana Sheikh analiza más directamente cómo se han incorporado las redes sociales a las campañas electorales. Se centra en cómo han afectado las redes sociales al funcionamiento de la organización política. Durante muchos años, el BJP ha buscado transformar las campañas modernas, pasando de una movilización organizativa más episódica (durante las elecciones) a una campaña permanente. (De hecho, Jha [2017] señala esto como una de las motivaciones de la campaña de la "llamada perdida" para inscribir a los miembros del partido poco después de que el BJP llegara al poder). Como señala Sheikh, la llegada de las redes sociales permitió a la organización del partido optimizar la comunicación, crear nuevas ramas del partido y mantenerse en contacto constante con actores clave externos al partido y con los votantes. De esta manera, es necesario comprender la proliferación de medios de comunicación por cómo ha cambiado el nivel de persistencia con el que interactúan con la población.

Durante la campaña electoral, surgieron muchas dudas sobre si se observaría un aumento o una disminución de la participación en las elecciones de 2024. En este volumen, Shrimankar y Heath han realizado la exposición más detallada hasta la fecha sobre las tendencias de participación en las elecciones nacionales, analizando los datos desde 1962 hasta la actualidad. Concluyen que el grado de "división" del gobierno es crucial. Cuando

existe una alineación entre el partido de centro y el gobierno estatal (un "sarkar de doble motor" en el lenguaje indio), la participación es contraria al gobierno en el poder. Sin embargo, cuando los votantes no pueden atribuir fácilmente la culpa, como en un gobierno dividido entre el estado y el centro, esta dinámica no se sostiene. Demuestran de forma convincente que las elecciones nacionales no son simplemente derivadas de las elecciones estatales (como se ha argumentado a menudo en el contexto indio), y que el carácter partidista del gobierno, más que los factores individuales, es determinante para la participación electoral. Existe evidencia de contextos comparativos que sugiere que los votantes que se identifican profundamente con un partido en particular son mucho más propensos a participar en el ámbito electoral, incluyendo una mayor intensidad en la participación electoral. A pesar de la mayor fluidez del sistema político y de los vínculos partidistas más débiles en comparación con las democracias más maduras del norte global, este fenómeno también se aplica al caso de la India.

La calidad de la democracia

Desde que el primer ministro Modi y el BJP llegaron al poder en 2014, ha existido el temor de un retroceso democrático en India. Varias organizaciones que generan índices democráticos, como el Instituto V-Dem, expresaron estos temores; para 2021, India había degradado la calificación de "democracia electoral" a "autocracia electoral". Además, en 2024, señaló que India ha sido "uno de los peores autocratizadores del mundo últimamente". Estas preocupaciones estuvieron muy presentes en la campaña electoral, y los partidos de la oposición expresaron su preocupación por que el BJP intentara cambiar la Constitución si regresaba al poder; por haber abusado del poder y de los organismos estatales (lo que llevó, por ejemplo, a la congelación de las cuentas del Congreso). Ante la preocupación generalizada por la calidad de las instituciones, un sector de la sociedad y la oposición política comenzaron a afirmar que las máquinas de votación electrónica (MVE) utilizadas para celebrar las elecciones habían sido manipuladas.

Para evaluar las creencias de justicia democrática entre la población, la IES 2024 preguntó a los encuestados: "¿Cree usted que el proceso electoral de la EVM es justo?". De manera un tanto sorprendente, solo el 62 % de los encuestados cree que la EVM es justa, y el 22 % de los encuestados pensó explícitamente que el sistema es injusto (Tabla 3). Además, las creencias en la justicia de la democracia estaban fuertemente correlacionadas con el apoyo electoral para el BJP. El BJP tuvo una participación de voto del 44 % entre aquellos que pensaban que el sistema era justo, y solo el 19 % entre aquellos que pensaban que era injusto (también tuvo una participación de voto mucho menor, 33 %, entre aquellos que no respondieron a la pregunta). Esto confirma la opinión de que la popularidad del gobierno gobernante, o la falta de ella, estaba fuertemente asociada con la percepción de si había gobernado de manera democráticamente legítima.

Tabla 3: Equidad en la distribución de votos entre EVM y BJP

	Percentage	BJP Vote Share (%)
EVM is Fair	62	44
EVM is Unfair	22	19
Can't Say	16	33

Milan Vaishnav describe en detalle en su artículo algunas de las preocupaciones sobre el proceso electoral en India. Desde 2017, muchos han expresado su preocupación por la forma en que la Comisión Electoral de India (ECI) ha alterado la fecha y la fase de las elecciones indias, incluyendo las elecciones nacionales de 2019 y 2024. También existe la preocupación de que la ECI no haya juzgado de manera equitativa el Código Modelo de Conducta (MCC) en India, que rige el comportamiento de los partidos y candidatos en las proximidades de las elecciones. Ejemplos notables incluyen las declaraciones provocativas contra la comunidad musulmana del principal estratega del BJP y ministro del Interior, Amit Shah, y del primer ministro Modi, que quedaron impunes. Vaishnav también destaca la preocupación por el sesgo político en las nominaciones a la ECI y su gestión contradictoria del controvertido programa de bonos electorales, que permitió la donación anónima de grandes sumas de dinero a partidos políticos. Quizás las mayores interrogantes en torno a la equidad democrática, como ya hemos comentado, se refieren al uso de agencias de investigación para hostigar a la oposición política, lo que condujo, en particular, al encarcelamiento de dos ministros principales, Hemant Soren de Jharkhand y Arvind Kejriwal de Delhi, así como al congelamiento de las cuentas bancarias del Partido del Congreso. Vaishnav comprende lo que muestran nuestros datos. Escribe: «Una vez que segmentos de la ciudadanía empiezan a sospechar de la integridad de las elecciones, esto puede tener consecuencias perjudiciales para la democracia en general... La credibilidad de una institución de arbitraje depende de su aparente neutralidad. Sin esta última, la primera es efímera»

Estas observaciones también plantean algunas preguntas importantes. Como también observa Vaishnav, la preocupación por un retroceso democrático y las dudas sobre la imparcialidad de los procesos electorales han perseguido al gobierno actual desde su llegada al poder en 2014. ¿Por qué pareció cobrar tanta importancia en 2024? Debemos admitir, en primer lugar, que es posible que una victoria aplastante del BJP en 2019 generara cierta arrogancia. Dicho esto, nada hasta unos meses antes de las elecciones sugería que la imparcialidad democrática se convertiría en un problema en las elecciones. En este volumen, Aiyar y Sircar sugieren que el momento en que surgieron estas preocupaciones tiene mucho que ver con la ruptura de un "equilibrio hegemónico" en el que el BJP y el primer ministro Modi utilizaron las prestaciones sociales para suavizar las conoci-

das contradicciones sociales de casta y clase en su base electoral hindú. En consonancia con nuestras discusiones anteriores, las inquietudes macroeconómicas afectaron en mayor medida a los votantes más pobres, y en particular a los votantes de OBC y SC, lo que generó tensiones en la coalición que no se podían gestionar fácilmente mediante prestaciones sociales (en parte, porque la oposición política también ha desarrollado la capacidad de comprometerse con credibilidad a su prestación). A medida que estos votantes comenzaron a buscar alternativas, las preocupaciones sobre la imparcialidad de las elecciones y si la oposición podría competir en igualdad de condiciones se hicieron más evidentes. En resumen, cuando los tiempos son buenos, los votantes pueden no prestar mucha atención a las cuestiones de equidad democrática; solo cuando un votante necesita opciones, estas adquieren relevancia política y electoral.

Conclusiones

Un tercer mandato consecutivo es histórico desde cualquier punto de vista. Sin embargo, el BJP tuvo un desempeño decepcionante en las elecciones nacionales de 2024, especialmente en comparación con las expectativas generadas. Naturalmente, gran parte del análisis postelectoral se ha centrado en explicar dónde aumentó y disminuyó el voto para el BJP. Sin embargo, hay mucho más que aprender de estas elecciones.

Hoy en día, amplios sectores de la población india se informan a través de las redes sociales, que, por su propia estructura, no pueden ser fácilmente controladas por el Estado ni por ninguna entidad política. ¿En qué medida este nuevo y más diverso entorno mediático influyó en los resultados electorales finales? Es difícil establecer relaciones empíricas claras entre los medios y el voto de la gente, pero, como nos recuerdan los artículos de este número, la penetración de las redes sociales tiene consecuencias en otros sentidos. Ha transformado el funcionamiento de las organizaciones partidarias y su forma de llegar al votante. Como mínimo, podemos afirmar que este nuevo entorno mediático ha afectado drásticamente la forma en que se hace política.

Si bien la forma de hacer política ha estado cambiando, en cierto sentido estas elecciones han vuelto a poner de relieve antiguos desafíos sociales. Desde la llegada del BJP al poder en 2014 y con la consolidación del nacionalismo hindú, existe una genuina preocupación por la intimidación a los musulmanes. Las impresionantes victorias del BJP en 2014 y 2019 llevaron a muchos analistas a sugerir que el BJP había "resuelto" su problema de castas al acercarse a los OBC y SC bajo una identidad hindú más amplia, a veces movilizándose explícitamente contra los musulmanes. Estas elecciones nos muestran que tales declaraciones podrían haber sido prematuras. El IES 2024 muestra claramente que una gran parte de los indios siente que los musulmanes no han recibido un trato justo, con consecuencias políticas. En todo caso, las inquietudes macroeconómicas generaron distinciones de clase que dificultaron la gestión

del BJP, frustraciones que se hacen más evidentes al observar los resultados electorales en el norte de la India y los patrones generales de participación.

Sin embargo, en muchos sentidos, para un gran número de observadores políticos, el tema clave en estas elecciones fue la credibilidad del proceso democrático en India. Como documentan los artículos de este volumen, existía una seria preocupación por el abuso de poder del Estado contra la oposición política, y un conjunto aparentemente incoherente de partidos, bajo el paraguas de la coalición INDIA, logró movilizar a un segmento significativo del electorado en torno a la protección de la democracia y la Constitución. Además, el decepcionante desempeño del BJP, como sugirieron muchos comentarios posteriores a los resultados, restableció una aparente igualdad de poder dentro del sistema político (Mehta, 2024).

Desde las elecciones nacionales, el BJP ha obtenido buenos resultados en las elecciones estatales. Esto demuestra que el BJP sigue siendo formidable electoralmente. Sin embargo, tras las elecciones nacionales de 2024, la política nacional parece estar cambiando de forma crucial. El Shiv Sena y el Partido del Congreso Nacionalista (NCP), antaño los principales actores en Maharashtra, se han separado y son solo una sombra de lo que fueron. En Delhi, el Partido Aam Aadmi (AAP), que había frustrado al BJP durante tanto tiempo, perdió de forma decisiva contra este. En muchas campañas electorales, vemos a líderes estatales, incluso del BJP, asumir un papel más importante. También crece la pregunta: "¿Quién vendrá después de Modi?". Con los crecientes desafíos internacionales, una economía desigual, la incertidumbre sobre la legitimidad del proceso democrático y la falta de opciones políticas claras, vemos un sistema en constante cambio. Como mínimo, un análisis profundo de estas elecciones es importante, ya que es la única manera de comprender lo que vendrá después.

特约社论：2024 年全国大选揭示了印度的哪些情况？

摘要

2024年印度人民院选举标志着一个重要时刻，揭示了塑造印度政局的重大暗流。尽管印度人民党(BJP)仍然是最大的政党，但其在选举前的表现却远逊于预期，令政治观察家们感到意外。当然，迄今为止的大部分分析都聚焦于理解这一结果的影响因素。本期特刊探讨了2024年大选除了结果之外所揭示的更多内容：社会身份认同的显著转变；数字媒体在选民动员和信息控制中的作用；印度政坛日益加剧的党派极化；对一些关键制度合法性的担忧日益加剧；以及对印度民主特征演变的担忧。通过将分析视角从选举结果转向更广泛的政治动态，我们认为，2024年人民院选举可能更多地因其对印度未来的预示（而非最终胜出的政党）而被铭记。

关键词：印度人民院选举，印度人民党 ，印度国大党，2024年议会选举，印度政治

2024年全国大选后，印度人民党(BJP)再次成为议会最大党，赢得人民院543个席位中的240个。然而，即使在BJP内部，许多人也觉得这像是一场失败。在2014年赢得282个席位，2019年赢得303个席位，形成单一政党多数之后，今年的席位总数无疑比以前少了。最重要的是，考虑到BJP的必胜主义竞选，BJP声称与盟友一起将获得超过400个席位，这实在是表现不佳。选举后的分析对这一结果给出了令人眼花缭乱的解释，从对“感知的威权主义倾向”的反击到青年失业。

事实上，BJP在哈里亚纳邦、拉贾斯坦邦和北方邦等几个曾经的强势邦都表现不佳。但同样真实的是，人民党在南印度联盟（安得拉邦）和联盟外（喀拉拉邦、泰米尔纳德邦、特伦甘纳邦）都取得了重大进展，并最终在奥里萨邦取得突破。不稳定的联盟削弱了BJP对比哈尔邦和马哈拉施特拉邦的控制，在西孟加拉邦，BJP败给了玛玛塔·班纳吉领导的全印草根国大党。对2024年大选结果最准确的分析是“它很复杂”。在电视演播室之外，在舒适的学术研究中，我们能坚决拒绝对选举结果进行简易的单一原因解释。

我们在本期提供的观点文章和研究文章得益于一年来的回顾。虽然分析师和学者最初的兴趣集中在对2024年大选结果的实证描述上，但“与结果保持一定距离”使我们能够从2024年大选中思考更广泛的理论教训，避免做出下意识的反应。自2024年全国大选以来，BJP及其联盟已在德里、哈里亚纳邦和马哈拉施特拉邦赢得了地方选举——

此前人们预计，在2024年全国大选后，BJP在这些邦将举步维艰。另一方面，BJP不得不屈服于“种姓普查”的要求，这将是自1931年以来首次统计印度家庭的种姓(jati)，在2024年大选前夕，BJP曾强烈反对这项要求。从许多方面来看，这些近期发展都自然而然地延续了我们从2024年大选中汲取的教训——从BJP“印度教选票”联盟面临的种姓压力，到该党在财政和组织资源等多个领域继续享有的优势，这赋予了BJP巨大的议程设置权。从这个意义上讲，从中期来看，BJP仍然是印度选举政治的核心，并将继续推动其发展。本期中，我们将问题从“如何解释2024年全国大选结果”转变为“关于印度及未来的制度行为、选举行为和政治行为，2024年全国大选能告诉我们什么信息？”我们重点关注三个关键研究领域。

首先，我们要探究阶级、种姓和宗教认同在多大程度上继续影响着印度的选举和政党行为。BJP以及印度教民族主义的政治建构，一直试图淡化政治偏好中的种姓差异——试图形成一个统一的“印度教选票”，该选票在不同种姓的社会偏好和党派偏好上存在显著差异。虽然选民偏好中的种姓差异可能永远不会完全消失，但我们可以非常肯定地说，2014年后，BJP在其他落后阶层(OBC)和表列种姓(SC)的低种姓社区中取得了显著进展(Chhibber and Verma 2019)。候选人提名中基于种姓的考量以及选民的偏好在多大程度上继续影响着选举结果？还有人担心，印度民族主义的想象已将印度穆斯林贬低为该国的二等公民(Varshney and Staggs 2024; Jaffrelot and Ahmed 2024; Allie 2025)。我们该如何看待当今印度穆斯林的政治认同和选举身份？与此同时，印度的收入不平等和企业利润急剧上升(Sircar 2022)，失业问题也日益加剧。这些结果在多大程度上反映了阶级愤怒和动员？

其次，我们要探究2024年选举结果揭示的哪些部分有关于比较政治行为中的核心问题。随着包括印度在内的全球从传统媒体转向社交媒体进行传播和获取新闻(Newman et. al. 2024; Verma 2024)，这对印度的政治行为有何影响？从根本上说，对不断变化的媒体趋势的探究在于理解公民如何选择新闻来源，以及这些来源如何传达给选民。尤其值得关注的不仅是选民接触社交媒体的程度，还有政治动员者如何策略性地结合传统竞选策略和各种媒体类型来接触选民。我们还以印度为例，探讨投票现象的核心问题，例如选民何时决定投票，以及在制度化程度较弱的政党体系中，政党归属感的强度如何。此前的调查发现，较高的投票率与反对执政党的呼声相关，但2019年的选举却逆势而上，BJP卓越的动员能力使得较高的投票率与BJP的得票率之间存在关联(Sircar 2020)。随着印度人民对宏观经济形势的日益不满，这两种模式中的哪一种将在2024年的选举中占据主导地位？印度传统上被视为党派主义程度低、“意识形态根基薄弱”的国家(Mainwaring and Torcal 2006)。鉴于近期针对这些问题的干预，这一论点是否仍然成立？(Chhibber and Verma 2018; Auerbach et. al. 2022; Barthwal and Jensenius 2024; Haas and Majumdar 2023)。BJP更强大的动员和信息传递机制是否在印度选民中创造了更强的党派

性？2014年后，意识形态分歧的加剧在多大程度上加剧了政治极化？

最后，我们探讨印度民主的忠诚度。在民主国家的比较分析中，印度一直是个异类，因为它是迄今为止最贫穷、规模最大的民主国家。然而，人们担心民主的质量正在下降——这通常被称为“民主倒退”。越来越多的人表示担忧，即国家机构（尤其是印度所谓的调查机构）正被用来恐吓政治反对派(Mehra 2024)。在选举前夕，两名首席部长（分别在贾坎德邦和德里）被监禁，以及国大党银行账户被冻结（Milan Vaishnav在本期文章中对此进行了讨论），这成为反对派的重要动员议题。2024年3月，Lokniti-CSDS进行的民意调查也反映了这一点。约三分之一的受访者认为，印度中央调查局和印度调查局等机构正被用作政治报复对付反对党，另有三分之一的受访者表示，这些机构是在法律框架内履行职责。

印度政治反对派所遭受的恐吓在多大程度上引发了人们对印度民主质量的质疑？与此相关的是，印度公民在多大程度上认为政府对国家权力的运用是合法的？由于政府机构存在感知偏差，许多公民和政治反对派开始怀疑由印度选举委员会(ECI)主持的印度选举是否公平。更具体地说，一些人担心用于选举的电子投票机(EVM)被篡改，以利于BJP。需要明确的是，我们并不认为存在任何可靠的证据表明存在此类篡改行为，但这体现了选举制度中政党与公民之间信任的破裂程度。2025年6月，国大党议员Rahul Gandhi在社交媒体上发帖称：“印度的电子投票机就像一个‘黑匣子’，无人允许对其进行审查。人们对我们选举过程的透明度提出了严重担忧。当制度缺乏问责时，民主最终会沦为虚伪，并容易滋生欺诈。”对执政政府的民主合法性和印度选举进程而言，这些事态发展究竟揭示了什么？

BJP在2019-2024年的统治

BJP在2019年的胜利，标志着印度治理模式的显著转变。在2019年全国大选中，BJP赢得了543个席位中的303个，这是自1984年以来单个政党赢得的最多席位（也是除国大党之外，其他政党赢得的最多席位），这使得BJP得以大胆地单方面制定政策，而不必担心政府垮台。在本部分中，我们将追溯一些关键事件和理论考量，以理解2019年至2024年间这个更加强势的BJP政府。

BJP在2019年的大获全胜令政治分析人士感到意外。当然，这在一定程度上与“2019年大选是在与巴基斯坦发生冲突之后举行的”有关。然而，还有其他原因。BJP建立了一个强大的政党组织，拥有前所未有的财政资源和非凡的选民动员能力。尽管2016年的废钞行动造成了严重的经济冲击，人们对印度的宏观经济健康状况感到担忧，但选民们并没有公开表现出负面态度。更确切地说，BJP已经积累了庞大的“受益者”(labharthi)选民基础，他们尤其忠于总理莫迪。莫迪极力宣扬其能够通过生物识别技术带来好处，并向选民明确表示，他的仁慈是任何其他政治行动者都无法复制的——我们中的一些人称之为“技术世袭主义”(Aiyar and Sircar 2024)。然而，正如Aiyar和Sircar在本期中所论

证的那样，从2021年西孟加拉邦选举开始，魅力型邦领导人表明他们能复制“技术世袭主义”的模式，并向BJP发起选举挑战。

新冠疫情过后，BJP的福利制度遭遇考验。民调显示，由于人们认为莫迪总理对疫情处理不当，导致氧气短缺和未报告的死亡人数，莫迪的支持率在疫情期间明显下降(Parkin and Kazmin 2021)。为了安抚民众，BJP实施了一项非同寻常的计划，在Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana(PMGKY)下向大部分民众免费发放口粮(Bhattacharya and Sinha Roy 2021)。该计划广受欢迎，并对BJP在2022年北方邦选举中的获胜(Aiyar 2023)起到了至关重要的作用。虽然这显然在财政上不可持续，但它表明了福利制度已经取得的进步程度，能够在不出现腐败或分配不当的情况下实施如此大规模的计划。

很快，疫情的负面影响开始显现。印度的经济增长放缓；大量关切聚焦于青年失业问题以及农村地区的严重贫困。这些对农村贫困的担忧源于印度北部的大规模“农民抗议”，尤其是在哈里亚纳邦、旁遮普邦和北方邦部分地区——这场抗议最初是为了抗议印度农业协议中允许企业进入的争议性修正案。这场抗议演变成了一场比最初显而易见的规模更大的运动，在Jats等农业社区中引发了阶级和种姓方面的不满。然而，这只是这五年期间众多的抗议活动之一。在政府宣布根据《公民身份修正法》(CAA)修改公民身份规则，允许某些国家的非穆斯林快速获得公民身份后，爆发了大规模抗议活动。在其他地方，在反复出现“泄密”和政府考试取消之后，年轻人开始抗议。在所有情况下，BJP都表现出无力平息抗议活动（CAA抗议活动的结束似乎更多是因为新冠病毒，而不是政府的行动）。

农民抗议活动之后，政府试图重振“印度教选票”，以对抗其选举联盟中开始显现的阶级和种姓歧视。BJP利用最高法院的命令，在巴布里清真寺原址（但被“印度教激进分子”拆除）建造一座印度教罗摩神庙，试图大肆宣扬印度教的团结。或许，如果选举在当时或更接近罗摩神庙落成典礼（即2024年1月）的时间举行，BJP的表现会更加强劲。由于BJP的立场尤为强硬，人们开始担心其再次执政后会采取何种行动——反对派声称BJP将试图修改宪法。事态发展出一个有趣的转折：政治反对派开始通过捍卫印度宪法并讨论其面临的威胁来进行竞选。选民开始利用社交媒体和其他渠道获取非政府控制的信息。

当然，这只是一种事后诸葛式的叙事。然而，我们可以看到，有迹象表明BJP在2024年可能举步维艰。以下章节将讨论本文所述的每个观点如何影响选举结果，并提供相应的实证证据。

身份与阶级

在选举前夕，选民中的身份和阶级分化开始愈发明显。从农民的抗议和对修宪的担忧（尤其令其他落后阶层(OBC)和表列种姓(SC)选民担忧），到频频出现的反穆斯林言论和行动，例如选择性拆除穆斯林定居点，种姓和宗教认同问题在本次

选举中愈发凸显。同样，少数企业创纪录的利润以及贫富差距的明显扩大，也开始在选民中造成显著的阶级分化(Agarwala and Roychowdhury 2024)。

这些差异在调查数据中也显而易见。为了理解更广泛的选举模式及其理论结果，我们参考了新兴社会数据行动实验室(DALES)开展的《2024年印度选举调查》(IES 2024)——这是一项严谨的民意调查，调查了20个邦和联邦属地的36,000多名选民。这项调查几乎正确地估算了BJP和国大党在全国范围内的相对得票率（BJP为37%，国大党为21%）。为了清晰阐述，我们按原样呈现数据，未对数据进行任何重新加权。

表 1a: BJP 投票动态（按种姓划分）

	Scheduled Tribe (ST)	Scheduled Caste (SC)	Other Backward Class (OBC)	General Caste
Left the BJP (Among BJP Voters in 2019) [%]	16.2	21.8	17.2	10.1
Entered BJP (Among Non-BJP Voters in 2019) [%]	11.8	6.7	7.4	8.2
Effective Vote Shift [p.p.]	**0.2**	**-1.8**	**-2.2**	**0.5**

表 1b: BJP 投票动态（按资产财富划分）

	Bottom 20%	2nd Quintile	3rd Quintile	4th Quintile	Top 20%
Left the BJP (Among BJP Voters in 2019)	5.6	6.0	5.2	6.9	6.0
Entered BJP (Among Non-BJP Voters in 2019)	3.7	3.9	5.3	5.5	5.5
Effective Vote Shift	**-1.9**	**-2.1**	**0.1**	**-1.4**	**-0.5**

鉴于数据的相对准确性，我们可以分析2019年至2024年期间选民偏好如何按种姓和财富状况进行变化。表1a显示了在种姓群体划分的情况下，选民离开BJP的比例、转向BJP的比例、以及BJP总体得票率变化。请考虑表中的第三列(OBC)。第一行告诉我们，在2019年投票给BJP的OBC中，17.2%的人离开了该党，并在2024年投票给了BJP以外的其他政党。第二行告诉我们，在2019年没有投票给BJP的OBC中，6.7%的人加入了该党并投票给了BJP。最后，第三行告诉我们，总体而言，在2019年和2024年都投票的OBC中，BJP的得票率下降了1.8个百分点(pp)。

表1a揭示了三个关键教训。首先，BJP支持率的种姓差异更大，其他落后阶层(OBC)和表列种姓(SC)的支持率下降了约2个百分点，而部落(ST)和一般种姓的支持率变化不大。在BJP表现不佳的邦，BJP在这些群体中的支持率下降更为严重。在北方邦，BJP在OBC中损失了8个百分点，在SC中损失了12个百分点。在哈里亚纳邦，BJP在OBC中损失了7个百分点，在SC中损失了20个百分点。其次，在OBC和SC中，曾经的BJP支持者中有相当高的比例（超过17%）离开了该党，反映出这些群体内部存在强烈的愤怒情绪。第三，即使ST和一般种姓中有相当一部分支持者离开了BJP，但新支持者的加入弥补了这些损失。相比之下，在OBC和SC中，BJP对过去没有投票给BJP的选民的吸引力并不高。

几乎可以肯定，选民中日益加剧的种姓分化反映了诸如对宪法和农业困境等事件的担忧。然而，对BJP而言似乎损失更多的群体——OBC和SC，也并非在传统上是BJP的核心选民。尽管BJP声称代表“印度教选票”，但这并未体现出种姓；事实上，多年来，BJP一直战略性地利用种姓诉求来构建其如今已十分强大的选举联盟。在本期杂志中，Gilles Verniers记录了过去几十年来OBC议员（MP）的显著增长，并指出这是自印度独立以来，高种姓议员的比例首次与OBC议员的比例大致相当。正如Verniers所指出的，这种增长很大程度上是由BJP及其全国民主联盟（NDA）的双重目标推动的，即增加落后种姓的代表性，同时保持传统精英和高种姓（尤其是在印地语带）的相对主导地位。在本次选举中，印度国家发展包容性联盟（INDIA）试图通过提名更多来自“非主导性的”OBC社区的候选人来抵消BJP对这些社区的侵蚀——上述调查数据表明，这一策略可能取得了一定成效。这一策略在北方邦得到了鲜明的体现，与2019年大选相比，BJP在2024年的选举中损失惨重。正如Arvind Kumar在其论文中所指出的，传统上与亚达夫社区有联系的社会党提名了更高比例的非亚达夫OBC和最落后种姓（MBC），以抵消BJP在这些社区的选举主导地位。如此一来，传统上只与一两个社区有联系的种姓政党被迫对其提名模式进行多样化。

表1b按资产五分位数分析了那些离开BJP以及加入BJP的选民。例如，在2019年投票给BJP的第三五分位数选民（财富占40-60百分位数）中，有5.2%的人在2024年离开了该党，转而支持BJP以外的其他政党。第二行显示，在2019年未投票给BJP的其他落后阶层（OBC）中，有5.3%的选民加入了该党，并在2024年转而支持BJP。这些数据表明，BJP在最贫困的两个五分位数选民中损失了约2个百分点，导致选民阶层/财富分化加剧。具体而言，尽管不同资产阶层的选民离开BJP的比例相似，但BJP在吸引贫困人口新选民方面却面临更多困难——这可能反映了宏观经济的挫败感。Indrajit Roy在本期文章中探讨了阶级矛盾在BJP选票中的作用。正如Roy所指出的，尽管BJP一直是地主/占主导地位的私有制阶级的首选政党，但它明白，需要为弱势/贫困阶层构建一个有意义的叙事，以建立一个庞大的选举联盟。因此，它创造了一个由贫困阶层崛起的、充满抱负的“新中产阶级”的概念。Roy指出，在安抚新中产阶级及其传统主导地位的阶级阵营方面所存在的矛盾，可能在本次选举中凸显出来。或许这就是为什么我们在IES 2024数据中也看到第四个资产五分位数（财富的60-80百分位数）的选票份额显著下降的原因（见表1b）。

自2014年BJP崛起以来，人们一直担心执政的BJP参与了反穆斯林的宗教沙文主义。例如，人权观察组织（2024）报告称，总理莫迪在2024年大选前的172次演讲中，有110次发表了反穆斯林言论，还有人指责莫迪选择性拆除穆斯林定居点（PTI 2022）。IES 2024的数据表明，51%的受访者明确同意或强烈同意BJP政府迫害了印度穆斯林，并且对选举产生了影响。在那些不相信穆斯林受到迫害的人中，BJP获得了47%的选票，而在那些认为BJP迫害了穆斯

林的人中，BJP的选票份额下降到只有28%。鉴于人们对穆斯林受害的担忧程度之高，这是一个真正具有社会和政治后果的问题。在印度穆斯林群体面临日益加剧的恐吓的时代，Asim Ali的文章分析了最近出版的三本著作，这些著作通过强调穆斯林的主体性，将穆斯林从被动受害者的视角转变为“主动主角”。在文章中，他批判性地探讨了以下文本：Pratinav Anil的《另一个印度：世界最大穆斯林少数群体的形成，1947-1977》；Amar Sohal的《穆斯林世俗化：印度分治的平等与政治》；以及Hilal Ahmed的《当代简史：新印度的穆斯林》。Ali的文章追溯了从印度独立至今围绕穆斯林身份认同的争论，并重点探讨了司法/宪法动员与更具“政治性”的动员形式之间的紧张关系。文章还鼓励学者超越欧洲中心主义的框架，开发其他理论工具，以更好地理解穆斯林在印度的经历。

媒体、动员与偏好形成

过去十年，政治运作模式的重大转变之一是利用社交媒体和点对点信息进行组织协调并接触民众。IES 2024调查询问了受访者关于各种媒体的新闻来源（可选多个选项）。在表2a中，我们报告了将电视(TV)和/或社交媒体列为新闻来源的受访者。我们将那些提及Twitter (X)、WhatsApp、Facebook、Instagram或YouTube中的任何一个的受访者列为社交媒体用户。我们还在表中研究了两种媒体来源之间的互动情况。例如，41%的18-30岁受访者同时使用电视和社交媒体作为新闻来源，但30岁以上的受访者中只有26%同时使用电视和社交媒体。相比之下，只有16%的18-30岁受访者只使用电视作为新闻来源，而30岁以上的受访者中只有31%只使用电视作为新闻来源。

表 2a：新闻来源（按年龄划分）

	TV	Social Media	Social Media and TV	Social Media Only	TV Only
Over 30 Years Old	57	52	26	25	31
18-30 Years Old	57	75	42	34	15

表 2b：最重要的新闻来源（按年龄划分）

	TV	Social Media
Over 30 Years Old	45	26
18-30 Years Old	31	44

从这张表格中可以得出几个结论。首先，与表格所示不同，大多数人——尤其是年轻人——实际上会利用多种新闻来源来形成自己的观点。这与美国等其他地区开展的研究结果相呼应，即选民的媒体偏好相当多样化(Guess 2021)。或许这就是为什么我们发现媒体类型与投票选择之间的关联较弱。其次，在30岁以上的选民中，仍有大量选民只使用电视作为新闻来源。由于存在执政政府控制电视媒体的担忧，

这可能会对年长选民产生更大的影响。在2024年的IES调查中，共有71%的受访者同意或强烈同意“媒体只代表莫迪和BJP的观点”这一说法。这也对选举结果产生了影响；在那些认为媒体偏向莫迪总理和BJP的受访者中，BJP获得了30%的选票，而在那些不同意这一说法的受访者中，BJP获得了54%的选票。那些新闻来源有限（电视或社交媒体），并且没有察觉到媒体偏见的人更有可能投票支持执政党。

表2b按年龄段列出了受访者最重要的新闻来源。例如，44%的18-30岁受访者将社交媒体视为最重要的新闻来源，而只有26%的30岁以上受访者也如此认为。这一细分数据显示出一种显著的转变：年长选民主要使用电视作为新闻来源，而年轻选民则主要使用社交媒体作为新闻来源。我们的一位研究人员在现场报道时，听到一位热情的年轻人高呼：“如果国大党获胜，那将是因为（政府批评者）Dhruv Rathee。”虽然这种情绪可能被夸大了，但它触及了社交媒体时代的媒体控制这一真正挑战。年轻人的媒体偏好非常多样化，他们能够接触到可能批评政府的媒体来源。在许多选民认为媒体完全受执政政府控制的时代，这一点至关重要。

Amogh Dhar Sharma在其论文中追踪了媒体来源随时间推移的变化，他使用了CSDS Lokniti进行的多次全国选举调查数据，并指出，向数字媒体和社交媒体的转变显而易见。Sharma强调，社交媒体融入专业竞选活动一事是选举期间动员工作的显著转变。然而，使用同样的数据，Sharma强调了选民决策的“粘性”，这表明在理解社交媒体如何影响政治结果时需要细微性。Shahana Sheikh的文章更直接地探讨了社交媒体是如何被融入竞选活动的。她聚焦于社交媒体如何影响政治组织的运作。多年来，BJP一直致力于改变现代竞选活动，将更具偶发性（例如选举期间）的组织动员转变为永久性的竞选活动。事实上，Jha[2017]指出，这是BJP上台后不久发起“错失号召”运动以招募党员的动机之一。正如Sheikh所指出的，社交媒体的出现使党组织能够简化沟通，建立新的党内机构，并与党外关键力量和选民保持密切联系。因此，我们需要理解媒体的普及如何改变了其与民众互动的持久性。

在竞选期间，人们对2024年大选的投票率是上升还是下降存在诸多疑问。本期文章中，Shrimankar和Heath分析了1962年至今的数据，对全国选举的投票率趋势进行了迄今为止最详细的阐述。他们发现，政府的“分裂”程度至关重要。当中央党派和邦政府结盟（用印度的说法就是“双引擎政府”）时，投票率就会反对现任政府。然而，当选民无法轻易归咎于某个政党时，例如在邦政府和中央政府分裂的情况下，这些动态就不会成立。他们令人信服地表明，全国选举不仅仅是邦选举的衍生品（正如在印度背景下经常被争论的那样），而且政府的党派性质（而不是个人因素）才是影响投票率的重要因素。比较情境的证据表明，对特定政党有强烈认同的选民更有可能参与选举活动，包括他们更积极的投票意愿。尽管与全球北方更成熟的民主国家相比，印度的政治体系流动性更

大，党派归属感也较弱，但这一现象在印度也同样存在。

民主的质量

自2014年莫迪总理和BJP上台以来，就存在印度会出现“民主倒退”的担忧。一些编制民主指数的机构，例如V-Dem研究所，表达了这种担忧；到2021年，该研究所已将印度从“选举民主”降至“选举专制”。此外，在2024年，该研究所进一步指出，印度是“近年来全球最糟糕的专制国家之一”。这些担忧在竞选活动中尤为普遍，反对党表示担心，认为BJP一旦重新掌权就会试图修改宪法；担心其滥用国家权力和国家机构（例如，导致国大党账户被冻结）。由于普遍担心制度质量，部分社会人士和政治反对派开始声称，用于选举的电子投票机（EVM）受到了操纵。

为了检验民众对民主公平性的信念，IES 2024调查询问受访者：“您认为EVM选举程序公平吗？”令人震惊的是，只有62%的受访者认为EVM是公平的，而22%的受访者明确认为该系统不公平（表3）。此外，对民主公平性的信念与对BJP的选举支持率密切相关。在认为EVM公平的受访者中，BJP获得了44%的选票，而在认为EVM不公平的受访者中，只有19%的选票（在未回答此问题的受访者中，BJP的选票比例也低得多，为33%）。这证实了以下观点：执政政府的受欢迎程度与人们对其是否以民主合法方式进行治理的看法密切相关。

表 3: EVM 公平性与 BJP 投票份额

	Percentage	BJP Vote Share (%)
EVM is Fair	62	44
EVM is Unfair	22	19
Can’t Say	16	33

Milan Vaishnav在其论文中详细描述了对印度选举进程的一些担忧。自2017年以来，许多人对印度选举委员会（ECI）改变印度选举时间和阶段的方式表示担忧，包括2019年和2024年全国大选。还有人担心，ECI未能公平地裁决印度的《示范行为准则》（MCC），该准则规范了选举前后各政党和候选人的行为。值得注意的例子包括BJP首席策略师兼内政部长阿米特·沙阿和总理莫迪针对穆斯林社区的挑衅性言论，而他们却没有受到惩罚。Vaishnav还强调了对ECI提名中的政治偏见的担忧，以及其对争议性选举债券计划的矛盾处理，该计划允许匿名向政党捐赠大笔资金。正如我们上文所讨论的，围绕民主公平的最大问题或许在于利用调查机构骚扰政治反对派，这尤其导致了两位首席部长——贾坎德邦的赫曼特·索伦和德里的阿尔温德·科杰里瓦尔——的入狱，以及国大党银行账户的冻结。Vaishnav理解我们的数据所揭示的内容。他写道：“一旦部分公民开始怀疑选举诚信，这可能会对

民主产生广泛的负面影响……裁判机构的可信度取决于其公认的中立性。如果没有后者，前者就是昙花一现。”

这些观察也留下了一些值得关注的问题。正如Vaishnav所观察到的，自2014年BJP执政以来，对民主倒退的担忧以及对选举程序公正性的质疑一直困扰着现任政府。为什么这些问题在2024年似乎变得如此重要？我们必须首先承认，BJP 2019年的压倒性胜利可能导致了一些傲慢。话虽如此，在选举前几个月，没有任何迹象表明民主公平会成为选举中的一个问题。本期文章中，Aiyar和Sircar认为，这些担忧出现的时机与“霸权均衡”的打破有很大关系。在这种均衡中，BJP和莫迪总理利用福利待遇来缓和其印度教选民群体中众所周知的种姓和阶级社会矛盾。正如我们之前的讨论，宏观经济焦虑对最贫困选民、OBC和SC的影响更大，导致联盟内部出现紧张局势，而福利待遇难以轻易解决这些局势（部分原因是政治反对派也具备能力对福利提供作出可信承诺）。随着这些选民开始将目光投向其他方向，对选举公平性以及反对派能否在平等基础上竞争的担忧变得更加突出。简而言之，当“形势好”时，选民可能不会太关注民主公平问题，只有当选民需要选择时，这个问题才会在政治和选举中变得突出。

总结性思考

无论以何种标准衡量，连续进行第三任期都堪称历史性成就。然而，BJP在2024年全国大选中的表现令人失望，尤其与此前的预期相比。自然而然，选举后分析的重点主要在于解释BJP的得票率上升和下降的原因。然而，从这次选举中我们仍然可以学到更多。

如今，印度大量民众通过社交媒体获取新闻，而社交媒体的结构使其难以被国家或任何政治实体轻易控制。这种新的、更加多元化的媒体环境在多大程度上影响了最终的选举结果？很难得出媒体与“民众如何投票”之间的清晰实证关系，但正如本期文章提醒我们的那样，社交媒体的渗透在其他方面也发挥着重要作用。它改变了政党组织的运作方式以及它们如何接触选民。至少，我们可以说，这种新的社交媒体环境极大地影响了政治运作方式。

如果说政治运作模式一直在发生变化，那么这次选举又将一些旧的社会挑战重新推到了风口浪尖。自2014年BJP上台以来，随着印度民族主义的兴起，人们对穆斯林恐吓的担忧油然而生。BJP在2014年和2019年取得的令人瞩目的胜利，让许多分析人士认为，BJP已经“解决”了其种姓问题，即以更广泛的印度教身份接触OBC和SC——有时是通过公开动员反对穆斯林。这次选举表明，这种说法可能为时过早。IES 2024调查的明确证据表明，很大一部分印度人确实认为穆斯林没有得到公平对待，并因此遭遇了政治后果。宏观经济焦虑引发了阶级分化，这对BJP来说是一个挑战，而当我们回顾印度北部的选举结果和整体投票模式时，这种挫败感就变得更加明显。

然而，在很多方面，对许多政治

观察家来说，此次选举中“房间里的大象”则是印度民主进程的可信度。正如本期文章所记录的，关于“政府滥用权力对付政治反对派”一事存在严重担忧，而在印度国家发展包容性联盟的庇护下，一些看似不一致的政党却成功地动员了相当一部分选民，支持他们捍卫民主和宪法。此外，正如选举结果公布后的许多评论所表明的那样，BJP的糟糕表现在政治体系中恢复了某种权力均势的表象(Mehta 2024)。

自全国大选以来，BJP在各邦选举中表现不俗，表明其在选举中依然拥有强大的影响力。然而，2024年全国大选之后，印度政局似乎正在发生重大变化。曾经在马哈拉施特拉邦占据主导地位的湿婆神军党和民族主义大会党(NCP)如今已分道扬镳，只剩下空壳。在德里，长期令BJP感到沮丧的平民党(AAP)最终败给了BJP。在许多竞选活动中，我们看到邦级领导人正在承担起更重要的角色，甚至对BJP来说也是如此。越来越多的人开始质疑：“谁会接替莫迪？”随着国际挑战日益增多、经济不平衡、民主进程合法性存在不确定性、以及缺乏明确的政治选择，我们看到一个正在动荡的系统。即使没有其他原因，对这次选举进行深入分析也很重要，因为这是我们理解接下来将发生的一切的唯一方法。

What Does Voter Turnout Tell Us About Election Outcomes?

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Abstract

The relationship between voter turnout and electoral performance of incumbent parties remains an enduring puzzle in Indian politics. This puzzle is compounded by the complexities of India's multi-level federal structure, where incumbency effects are shaped by both national and local political dynamics. In this paper, we examine how changes in voter turnout impact incumbent parties. Our findings suggest that heightened popular dissatisfaction encourages more voters to participate, often in an effort to displace the ruling party. However, the effect of increased turnout on the incumbent depends significantly on the alignment between the central and the local political leadership. When the Prime Minister's party is also the party of the Chief Minister and the local Member of Parliament (MP), rising turnout tends to be bad news for them. However, Chief Ministers and MPs are spared from the brunt of dissatisfaction with the PM's party so long as they are not co-partisans. These results are consistent with the wider concept of electoral tides and offer insights into two broader debates in Indian politics: whether Lok Sabha elections are first-order or second-order elections (with our results supporting the former), and whether anti-incumbency at the individual level is driven by personal or partisan factors (with our results suggesting a partisan basis).

Keywords: Indian elections; voter turnout; electoral participation; incumbency; political parties in India; Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); INDI-Alliance; Indian National Congress

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¿Qué nos dice la participación electoral sobre los resultados electorales? Participación, Gobierno y Apoyo a Partidos en India, 1960-2024

Resumen

La relación entre la participación y el desempeño electorales de los partidos en el poder sigue siendo un enigma persistente en la política india. Este enigma se ve agravado por las complejidades de la estructura federal multinivel de la India, donde los efectos del gobierno se ven influenciados por la dinámica política nacional y local. En este artículo, examinamos cómo los cambios en la participación electoral impactan a los partidos en el poder. Nuestros hallazgos sugieren que una mayor insatisfacción popular incentiva a más votantes a participar, a menudo con el objetivo de desplazar al partido gobernante. Sin embargo, el efecto de una mayor participación en el partido en el poder depende significativamente de la alineación entre el liderazgo político central y el local. Cuando el partido del Primer Ministro es también el del Ministro Principal y del Diputado local, el aumento de la participación suele ser una mala noticia para ellos. Sin embargo, los Ministros Principales y los Diputados se libran del peso de la insatisfacción con el partido del Primer Ministro siempre que no sean copartidarios. Estos resultados son coherentes con el concepto más amplio de mareas electorales y ofrecen perspectivas sobre dos debates más amplios en la política india: si las elecciones de la Lok Sabha son elecciones de primer o segundo orden (nuestros resultados respaldan las primeras), y si la oposición a los cargos en el poder a nivel individual se debe a factores personales o partidistas (nuestros resultados sugieren una base partidista).

Palabras clave: Elecciones indias; participación electoral; cargos en el poder; partidos políticos en la India; Partido Bharatiya Janata (BJP); INDI-Alliance; Congreso Nacional Indio

关于选举结果，投票率能告诉我们什么？1960年至2024年印度的投票率、在任情况和政党支持

摘要

选民投票率与执政党选举表现之间的关系一直是印度政坛的

一个长期难题。印度多层级联邦结构的复杂性使这一难题更加复杂，其中，在任者效应受国家和地方政治动态的影响。本文将分析投票率变化如何影响执政党。我们的研究结果表明，民众日益增长的不满情绪会鼓励更多选民参与投票，通常是为了取代执政党。然而，投票率的提高对执政党的影响很大程度上取决于中央和地方政治领导层的协调。当总理的政党同时也是首席部长和地方议员的政党时，投票率的上升往往对他们来说是个坏消息。然而，只要首席部长和议员不是同党，他们就不会受到来自“对总理政党的不满情绪”的冲击。这些结果与更广泛的选举潮流概念相符，并为印度政治中的两个更广泛的争论提供了见解，这两个争论分别为：人民院选举是一级选举还是二级选举（我们的结果支持前者），以及个人层面的“反对在任者情绪”是由个人因素还是党派因素驱动（我们的结果支持党派因素）。

关键词：印度选举，投票率，选举参与，在任者，印度政党，印度人民党(BJP)，印度国家发展包容性联盟，印度国民大会党

Introduction

One “known unknown” of the Indian general elections in 2024 was whether citizens would head to the polls. Would complacent—or perhaps jaded—BJP supporters stay at home, secure in the apparent knowledge that their party would comfortably win the election with the Bharatiya Janata Party riding high in the pre-election polls? Or, would the opposition mobilise *en masse* to try and stop a BJP super-majority and the legislative free reign that would grant the party?

In 2024, the overall rate of turnout was 65.8 percent, 1.9 percentage points lower than the high-water mark in 2019, when India recorded its highest level of turnout in a national election since Independence at 67.7 percent. However, in comparative terms, turnout was still high compared to previous elections. Prior to 2014, turnout had never crossed the 65 percent mark. Moreover, Congress' last victory in 2009 was secured on a turnout of just 58 percent. By contrast, each of Modi's three electoral victories have been secured on turnout of over 65 percent—the highest levels ever recorded. Indeed, India once again set a record for the largest exercise in democratic decision making in the world, with over 642 million people turning out at the polls. If there was waning enthusiasm for the BJP, it was not widespread.

Nonetheless, there was much variation by state. In Andhra Pradesh and Assam, turnout surpassed 80 percent. Whereas in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar it was less than 60 percent. Turnout increased by over 10 percentage points

in Jammu and Kashmir, and fell by over 25 points in Nagaland. There was also enormous variation by constituency, with Ongole constituency in Andhra Pradesh reporting a turnout of 88 percent and Srinagar constituency in Jammu and Kashmir reporting a turnout of 38 percent in 2024.

In this article, we examine the link between turnout—specifically turnout change—and electoral outcomes in India, with particular reference to the 2024 elections. Research in India, and comparatively, suggests a number of ways in which turnout may (or may not) be related to election outcomes, and which types of party tend to benefit most from increases (or decreases) in electoral mobilization.

In comparative research, much of the focus on the consequences of (low) turnout is directed at the relationship between turnout and support for left-of-centre parties (or candidates) (Lutz and Marsh 2007; Finseraas and Vernby 2014). In a number of countries, such as the UK, the social groups who are least likely to vote (such as the working class, people with few educational qualifications, and the young) are also the most likely to vote for left wing parties. Thus, it is assumed that if more people voted (and more people from these groups in particular), left-of-centre parties and candidates would fare better in elections than they would otherwise do so. More recently, however, it has also been argued that high turnout may benefit populist parties, who tend to draw their support from sections of society who were previously marginalised from the political system (Leininger and Meijers 2021).

In the Indian context, however, it is not clear whether the same types of parties may benefit for the same reasons. Although there are clear social differences in the support base of political parties, particularly in terms of caste, religion, and language; these differences are not strongly related to turnout (Diwakar 2008). In this respect, other factors may be more relevant. The conventional wisdom in India posits that high turnout tends to be bad news for the incumbent party (see Vaishnav and Guy [2018] for a review). According to this view, an increase in turnout indicates that the electorate is in the mood for a change and so will be more likely to vote against the government. More generally, the link between turnout change and support for incumbents is often ascribed to a competition effect, which arises when there is growing dissatisfaction with the party (or politician) in office, which leads to an increase in voters who seek to replace them turning out at the polls. This is sometimes referred to as an electoral tides effect (Grofman, Owen, and Collet 1999). When participation increases and the electoral tide rises, the incumbent government often gets washed away. While this effect was certainly evident in 2014, when the BJP ousted Congress and swept to power on a record turnout (Heath 2015), it appears to be less true for the 2019 and 2024 elections, which the BJP also won and also witnessed high levels of turnout. Indeed, existing studies have not found much of a link between turnout

(or more specially change in turnout) and support for the incumbent party (Verma 2024). For example, Vaishnav and Guy (2018) analyse 128 legislative assembly elections between 1980 and 2012 in 18 major Indian states and find that there is no statistically significant association between turnout change from one election to the next and electoral support for the incumbent party at the state level.

An alternative perspective posits that rather than signalling a desire for change, high turnout may instead signal an endorsement of the status quo. In the aftermath of the 2019 general election, Sircar (2020) argued that turnout increased most in places where the incumbent BJP had strong prior support because voters were motivated to turn up to the polls as an expression of their trust in the party and its leadership (specifically Modi). Thus, high turnout may also be considered good news for incumbents, and low turnout bad news. Indeed, after the results of the 2024 election, several media commentators were quick to turn to this line of argument, speculating that the decline in turnout was because of anger (or a sense of betrayal) amongst BJP supporters, disillusioned with rising unemployment, inflation and stagnant wages in the run up to the 2024 general election (Ellis-Petersen and Hassan 2024).

Collectively, these studies show that increases in turnout may be associated with a decrease in support for the incumbent, an increase in support for the incumbent, or no change in support for the incumbent at all. These mixed findings suggest that the effect of turnout on incumbent support may be more complex than is often assumed. The reasons for these inconsistent findings are potentially manifold, to do with type of election, period, sample size, and selection. If the impact of turnout on incumbency is context specific, then the results may be sensitive to the context under investigation. We posit that a particular aspect of the political context may therefore moderate the turnout-incumbency link—the political alignment between different levels of government. In examining this possibility, we re-evaluate the conventional wisdom that when participation increases and the electoral tide rises, support for the incumbent is washed away.

Political alignment is an important contextual variable because what incumbency means in the Indian context can take on various forms depending upon the level of government under investigation. Political authority is dispersed across multiple levels of government, and this can make it hard for voters to know which level of government is responsible for policy performance in different domains or who to blame for poor performance (see Heath et al. 2025). High (or low) turnout may therefore signal dissatisfaction with, and a desire for change at, the national level, state level, or even individual Member of Parliament (MP) level, depending upon which level of government voters have in mind. Voters may be dissatisfied with their local MP, while still maintaining *vishwa*s (belief

and trust) in the BJP's central leadership and Prime Minister Modi. The issue of which level of government exerts greatest sway over voters in Lok Sabha elections has long been a topic of controversy (Verma 2012). In a seminal article Yadav and Palshikar (2009) argue that within the framework of multilevel governance, the effective arena of political choice in India is at the State level, and Lok Sabha elections thus take on a "second order" status where outcomes are derived from, or at least are shaped and filtered by State level factors. Therefore, if there is indeed an association between turnout change and anti-incumbency, this may affect either the party in power at the Centre or the party in power in the State. We investigate both of these possibilities. That is, high turnout may signal growing dissatisfaction with either the Chief Minister's (CM's)party or the Prime Minister's (PM's) party. And this dissatisfaction may be compounded by political alignment when the party in question is one and the same. We therefore also examine whether the relationship is moderated by political alignment across the two level of government, that is whether the relationship between turnout change and incumbent support is stronger (or weaker) when the same party is in power at both the Central and the State level.

Finally, there has also been a great deal of attention on the so-called incumbency disadvantage that individual MPs face in India (Uppal 2009; Lee 2020; Jensenius and Suryanarayan 2021; Ravishankar 2009). Whereas in many democracies around the world sitting MPs enjoy an electoral advantage over their competitors, in India it is frequently argued that the reverse pattern holds, and incumbent MPs actually face an electoral disadvantage and are routinely booted out of office. A common explanation for this is that voters in India punish feckless politicians for corruption, failure to deliver basic services, and general bad behaviour. According to this view, anti-incumbency is driven by voter dissatisfaction. In line with the competition effect, we may therefore expect increases in turnout to be associated with party turnover at the local level. However, if it is not sitting MPs but the party of government that voters hold accountable for the delivery of services, then we may expect this dissatisfaction to be channelled against the PM's party.

To explore these issues, in this paper we examine how changes in turnout are related to incumbent performance at the national, state, and constituency level, and how incumbency at the national level is moderated by incumbency at lower levels. In order to examine the extent to which turnout is related to election outcomes, we use election data from 1962 to 2024. We use the Lok Dhaba dataset (Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University, Sonepat, India at: https://lokdhaba.ashoka.edu.in/) that is available from 1962 to 2019, which we merge with the 2024 election data (Bhogale et al. 2019). Our results show that there is some truth to the conventional wisdom, and that when participation increases from one election to the next and the electoral tide rises, support for the incumbent government often gets washed away, par-

ticularly when the governing party is also in power locally and there is a clear target for voters to direct their dissatisfaction. At the state level, we find that high turnout tends to spell bad news for the CM's party only when that party is politically aligned with the party in power at the centre. However, when the CM's party is not the same, as the party in centre, changes in turnout have no bearing on how well the CM's party does in Lok Sabha elections in their respective state. By contrast, high turnout tends to spell bad news for the PM's party regardless of whether that party is also in power at the state level or not.

Similarly, we also find that when turnout increases candidates from the PM's party tend to do worse when they are standing as incumbent MPs than when they are standing as challengers at the constituency level. This implies that high turnout manifests anti-incumbent sentiment when lines of accountability are clear—and a vote against the government can be expressed as a vote against the party in power locally.

Does High Turnout Help or Hurt the National Government?

In 2024, the overall rate of turnout was 65.8 percent, 1.9 percentage points lower than the high-water mark in 2019, when India recorded its highest level of turnout in a national election since Independence at 67.7 percent. After the last two elections, which saw the BJP surge to victory on record turnout levels, this is the first drop in participation from one election to the next since 2004, when turnout fell to just 58 percent and Vajpayee's BJP led government lost, to be replaced by Congress. However, in comparative terms turnout was still high compared to previous elections, and each of Modi's three electoral victories have been secured on turnout of over 65 percent.

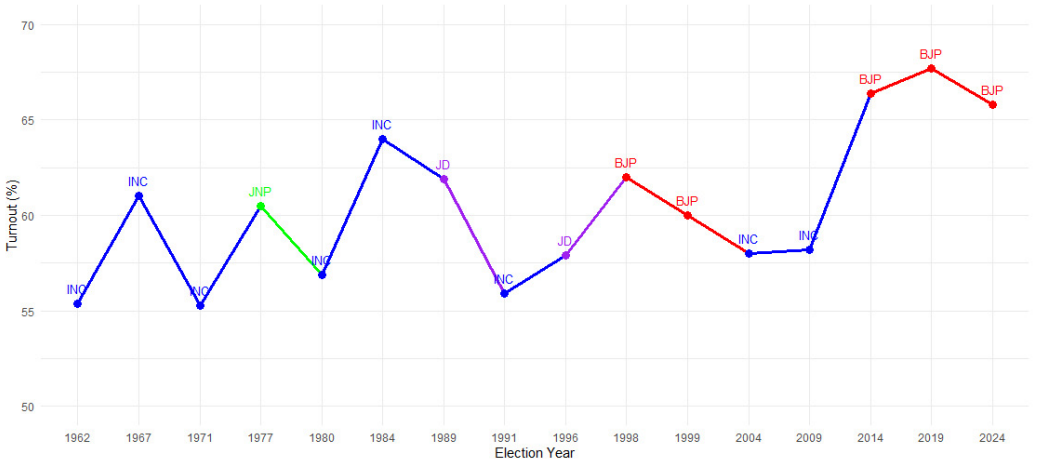

Figure 1: Turnout over time with party of Prime Minister, 1962–2024

Source: Authors; compiled from the Lok Dhaba dataset, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University, Sonepat, India, available at: https://lokdhaba.ashoka.edu.in/

As Figure 1 shows, there is some evidence that *large* changes in turnout tend to be associated with changes in government at the Centre. In the post-Emergency election of 1977, turnout increased by 5.2 points as Congress suffered a heavy defeat and was removed from office for the first time since Independence, with the Janata Alliance sweeping to victory. Similarly in 1998, turnout increased by 4.1 points, as the BJP formed a government at the centre for the first time. And more recently, turnout increased by 8.2 points in 2014, as the BJP defeated Congress.

However, the pattern is far from universal, and there are also cases where turnout has increased a lot without a change of government taking place, such as the 1984 election which took place in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination and led to a Congress landslide. And there are also cases where turnout has declined and there has been a change of government, such as 1991 when turnout declined by 6 points and the minority led Congress government replaced the minority led Janata Dal government.

But overall, since 1962 there have been four elections where turnout has increased by more than 5 percentage points, and on three of these occasions it has spelled bad news for the incumbent PM's party who have been replaced in office. The one exception, in 1984 was perhaps a bit of an anomaly given the unusual situation in which the election took place.

However, even if governments do not change, they may still gain or lose popular support. Figure 2 shows changes in turnout against changes in the vote share of the incumbent PM's party in government since the 1960s. We exclude cases where the PM's party underwent major splits in 1980, 1991, and 1998. Overall, there is a weak neg-

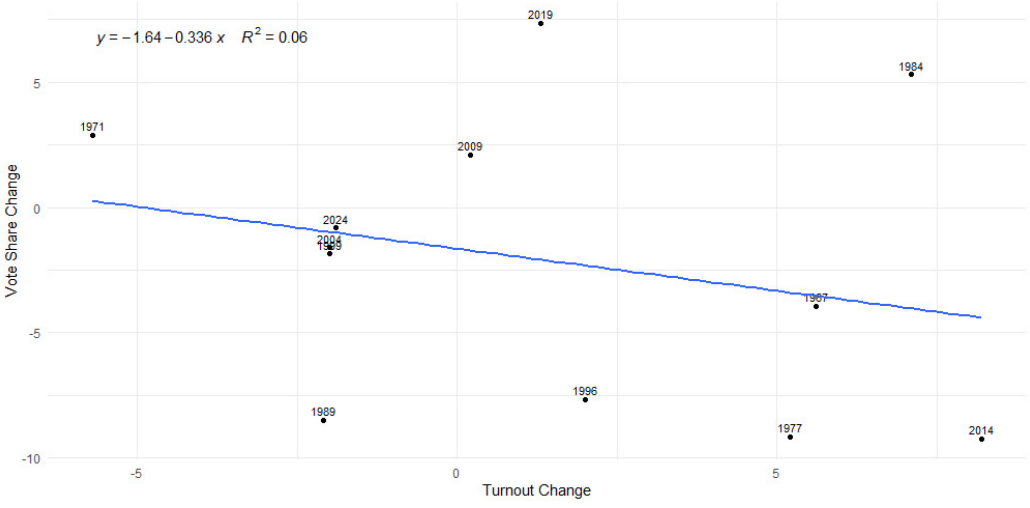

Figure 2: Turnout change and performance of incumbent PM's party at the national level

Source: Authors; compiled from the Lok Dhaba dataset, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University, Sonepat, India, available at: https://lokdhaba.ashoka.edu.in/

ative relationship (r = -0.25) between turnout change and changes in support for the incumbent PM's party, indicating that when turnout goes up support for the government tends to go down. However, the relationship is not statistically significant, partly due to the small number of elections under consideration and partly because the pattern is not particularly uniform.

Nonetheless, we can see that in those elections where turnout increased the most, support for the PM's party tended to decrease (with the exception of 1984). In particular, the elections in 1967, 1977, and 2014 all witnessed large increases in turnout and dramatic swings against the government, which in the case of 1977 and 2014 also led to alternation at the Centre. Similarly, in those elections where turnout decreased the most, support for the PM's party tended to go up somewhat or stay at about the same level. This is particularly the case in 1971. There is therefore something to suggest that the conventional wisdom in India about turnout and anti-incumbency is not entirely without foundation, even if it is not necessarily an iron rule.

Does High Turnout Help or Hurt the State Government in National Elections?

However, as already noted, the desire for change and anti-incumbent sentiment can manifest itself at different levels. We start by considering incumbency at the state level, and whether upturns in turnout are more directed against the CM's party or the PM's party. The left-hand panel of Figure 3 plots the relationship between turnout change and change in support for the incumbent CM's party at the state level.[1] The right-hand panel plots the relationship between turnout

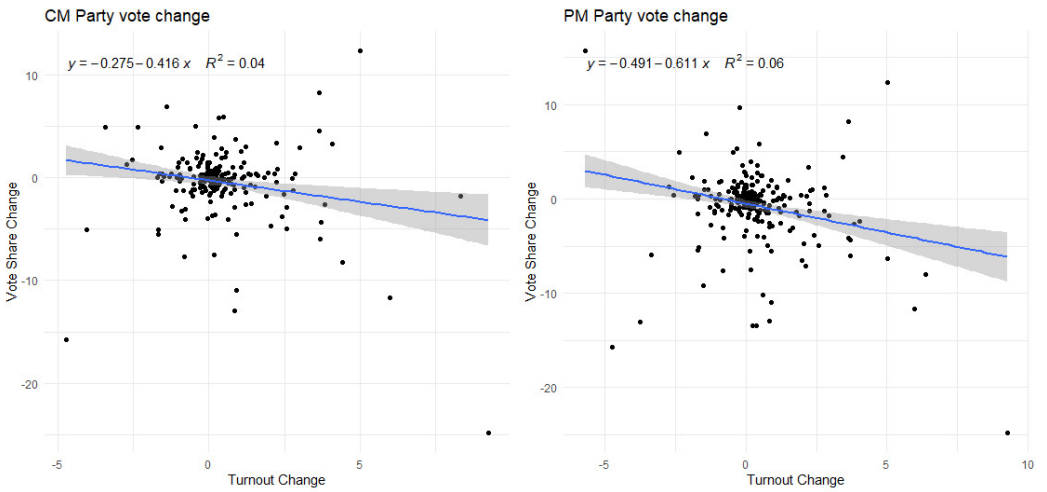

Figure 3: Turnout change and performance of incumbent CM's party and PM's party at state level, 1960–2024

Source: Authors; compiled from the Lok Dhaba dataset, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University, Sonepat, India, available at: https://lokdhaba.ashoka.edu.in/

change and change in support for the incumbent PM's party at the state level.[2] Each dot represents a state-year observation for general elections between 1960 and 2024.

In both the cases, we see a negative and a statistically significant relationship between turnout change and change in support for the incumbent CM and PM's party at the state-level in Lok Sabha elections. On average, a one-percentage point increase in turnout is associated with a 0.4 percentage point decrease in the vote share of the CM's party and a 0.6 percentage point decrease in the vote share of the PM's party. However, there are plenty of cases that deviate from this pattern. Nonetheless, there is certainly little to suggest that increases in turnout help sitting governments.

But how do these two levels of incumbency interact? In addition, what happens when there is political alignment between the party in power at the state level and the party in power at the national level? Is the PM's party more likely to be punished by a rising electoral tide if it is also in power at the state level? Moreover, is the CM's party more likely to be punished by an upsurge in voters at the polls if the party is also in power at the Centre?

In Table 1 we present two sets of models. In models 1-3, our dependent variable is change in support for the CM's party at the state-level in national elections. In model 4-6, our dependent variable is change in support for the PM's party at the state level in national elections. For each model we also consider changes in turnout at the state level; political alignment between the PM's party and CM's party at the state level (that is whether they are the same party or not); and an interaction between turnout change and political alignment between the state and national government.

First, we can see that there is a negative association between turnout change and change in support for the CM's party (model 1) and the PM's party (model 4) at the state level in national elections. However, the impact of turnout change on support for the PM's party is slightly stronger than the impact on support for the CM's party (b=-0.61 vs b=-0.42, respectively). That is high turnout tends to spell worse news for the party in power at the centre than it does for the party in power at the state level. We also see that political alignment between the state and the centre (i.e., CM's party is the same as the PM's party) does not have much of an impact on electoral outcomes. There is some suggestive evidence that the CM's party does somewhat worse in Lok Sabha elections when that party is also in power at the centre (model 2); but there is little to indicate that the PM's party is affected by whether or not it is also in power at the state level (model 5). If anything, this suggests that anti-incumbent sentiment tends to trickle down, and that CMs are more likely to withstand the worst of dissatisfaction with the PM when they are from the same party, than the PM is to bear the brunt of dissatisfaction with the CM.

Table 1: Turnout change and performance of incumbent CM's party and PM's party at state level

	Dependent variable					
	CM party vote change			PM party vote change		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Turnout change (%)	-0.416***	-0.404***	-0.098	-0.611***	-0.634***	-0.659***
	(0.138)	(0.138)	(0.215)	(0.145)	(0.149)	(0.225)
Political alignment		-0.736*	-0.560		-0.128	-0.142
		(0.424)	(0.433)		(0.442)	(0.452)
Turnout change X political alignment			-0.516*			0.045
			(0.279)			(0.301)
Constant	-0.275	0.125	0.039	-0.491**	-0.384	-0.379
	(0.218)	(0.316)	(0.318)	(0.213)	(0.307)	(0.310)
Observations	231	231	231	283	264	264
R^2	0.038	0.051	0.065	0.059	0.066	0.066
Note: *p**p***p<0.01						

Source: Authors; compiled from the Lok Dhaba dataset, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University, Sonepat, India, available at: https://lokdhaba.ashoka.edu.in/

This interpretation is further supported by our final set of models, which specify an interaction between turnout change and political alignment. From model 3, we can see the interaction term is significant and negative on support for the CM's party. This implies that high turnout tends to spell bad news for the CM's party only when that party is politically aligned with the party in power at the centre. However, when the CM's party is not the same as the PM's party, changes in turnout have no bearing on how well the CM's party does in Lok Sabha elections. By contrast, from model 6 we can see that there is no such significant interaction on support for the PM's party. That is, high turnout tends to spell bad news for the PM's party regardless of whether that party is also in power at the state level or not. The findings are graphically illustrated in Figure 4.

Overall then there is some evidence to indicate that an increase in turnout tends to be bad news for the incumbent PM's party. However, there is little evidence to indicate that high turnout signals dissatisfaction with the CM's party in particular, as an increase in turnout only hurts the incumbent CM's party when it is politically aligned

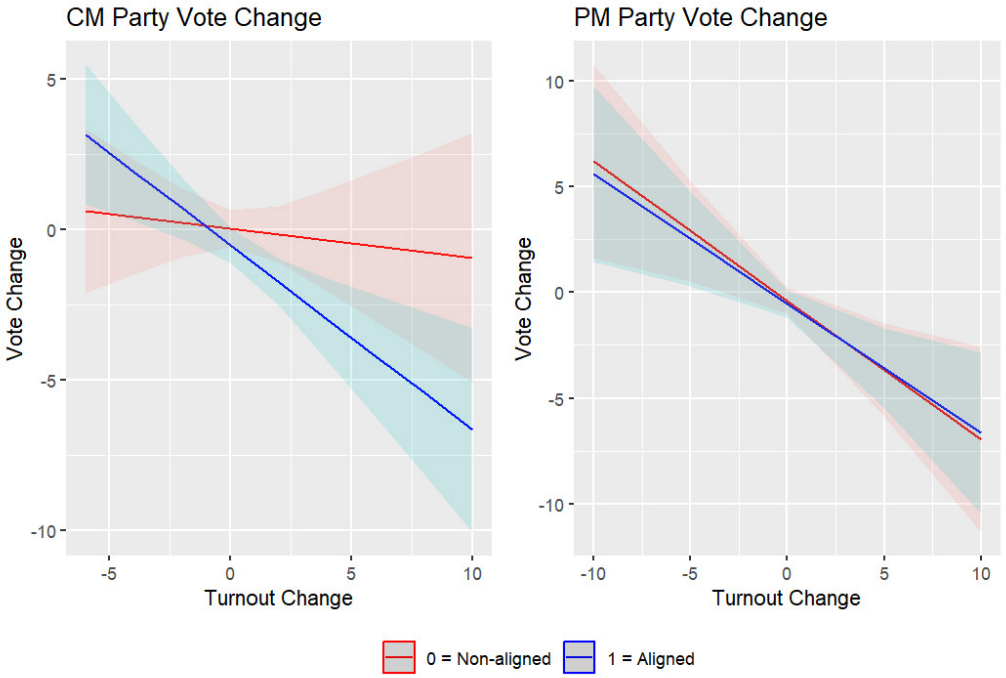

Figure 4: Turnout change, political alignment and support for the CM's party and the PM's at the state level

Source: Authors; compiled from the Lok Dhaba dataset, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University, Sonepat, India, available at: https://lokdhaba.ashoka.edu.in/

with the PM's party. These findings show that we should not take national election outcomes to simply reflect political forces at the state level. Instead, national elections reflect a mood of their own, where voters turn out in greater numbers when they are dissatisfied with the central government. The CM's party faces some collateral damage from this rising electoral tide only when they are aligned with the PM's party at the centre.

Does High Turnout Help or Hurt Sitting MPs?

Next, we turn our attention to incumbency at the lowest level—the parliamentary constituency. Much of the commentary on anti-incumbency in India focusses on the local level and the re-election prospects of sitting MPs. We therefore investigate the extent to which increases in turnout signal dissatisfaction with the local MP's party compared to dissatisfaction with the PM's party. First, we examine the relationship between turnout change and support for the PM's party at the constituency level and whether this relationship is moderated by political alignment with the party in power at the constituency level (that is whether or not the PM's party is also the party of the local MP). Second, we examine whether the relationship between turnout change and support for the incumbent MP's party is moderated by polit-

ical alignment with the party in power at the centre (that is whether the MP's party is also the same as PM's party).

Table 2 presents the results. First, we can see that there is a negative association between turnout change and change in support for the PM's party (model 1) and the sitting MP's party (model 4) at the constituency level. This implies that when more voters turn up at the polls, they tend to be in the mood for change. We can also see that political alignment between the constituency and the centre (i.e., the MP's party is the same as the PM's party) has a strong impact, particularly on support for the PM's party (model 2). That is, candidates from the PM's party tend to do much worse when they are standing as incumbent MPs than when they are standing as challengers at the constituency level. This implies that anti-incumbent sentiment is more pronounced when lines of accountability are clear—and a vote against the government can be expressed as a vote against the party in power locally. From model 3 we can also see the interaction term is significant and negative on changes in support for the PM's party. This implies that high turnout tends to spell worse bad news for the PM's party when it is politically aligned with the party of the local MP. However, from model 6 we can see that there is a significant interaction on support for the MP's party. That is, high turnout tends to spell bad

Table 2: Turnout change and performance of PM's party and incumbent MP's party at the constituency level

	Dependent variable					
	PM party vote change			Incumbent MP party vote change		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Turnout change	-0.212***	-0.230***	-0.104**	-0.175***	-0.172***	0.017
	(0.035)	(0.033)	(0.050)	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.043)
Political alignment		-9.340***	-9.113***		1.428***	1.780***
		(0.480)	(0.484)		(0.424)	(0.427)
Turnout X alignment			-0.220***			-0.359***
			(0.067)			(0.059)
Constant	-0.993***	4.570***	4.418***	-5.479***	-6.257***	-6.476***
	(0.249)	(0.372)	(0.374)	(0.213)	(0.315)	(0.315)
Observations	3,810	3,810	3,810	4,270	4,270	4,270
R^2	0.010	0.099	0.102	0.008	0.011	0.019
Note: *p**p***p<0.01						

Source: Authors; compiled from the Lok Dhaba dataset, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University, Sonepat, India, available at: https://lokdhaba.ashoka.edu.in/

news for the MP's party, but only when it is aligned with the party in power at the centre. However, when the MP is not aligned with the PM's party, changes in turnout have no bearing on how well incumbent MPs do.

The findings are graphically illustrated in Figure 5. The left-hand panel plot shows that when turnout increases the PM party's vote share at the constituency declines more sharply when the party is also locally incumbent (blue shade line) than when they are not (red shade). Similarly, the right-hand plot shows that when turnout increases support for the incumbent MP sharply declines, only when they are politically aligned with the party of the PM. This suggests that the frequently cited "incumbency" disadvantage may be more directed at the party in power nationally than the MP personally, though the way in which voters can punish the PM's party is by voting against their representative at the local level.

Conclusion

One enduring puzzle in Indian politics is to do with whether high turnout helps or hurts incumbent parties. One reason why this puzzle has been so enduring is to do with the complicated nature of incumbency in India's multi-level federal political system.

Overall, our results are consistent with the idea of electoral tides, whereby popular dissatisfaction drives new voters to the polls in order to remove the government from office. Our

Figure 5: Turnout change, political alignment and support for the MP's party and the PM's at the constituency level

Source: Authors; compiled from the Lok Dhaba dataset, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University, Sonepat, India, available at: https://lokdhaba.ashoka.edu.in/

findings also reveal that the extent to which a rising electoral tide washes away the incumbent depends upon which party is in power at the centre and which party is in power locally. When there is clarity of responsibility, and the local MP is from the same party as the Prime Minister, then an increase in turnout tends to spell bad news for the incumbent. While this paper focuses on Lok Sabha elections, future research may examine how changes in voter turnout affect the performance of MLAs in state elections, and whether the structure of political alignments moderates the relationship in the same way as in national elections.

Of course, turnout is only one part of the story. Numerous other factors explain both turnout and incumbents' re-election prospects. It is therefore no surprise that we see many deviations from this general pattern. However, in this paper we are interested in the face validity of the assertion that high turnout equals bad news for incumbents, and the pattern such as it is, presents a consistent picture. Dissatisfaction is directed primarily at the centre. Incumbents at lower levels—whether that be the party of the Chief Minister at the state level or sitting MPs at the constituency level are only swept up in this tide when they are aligned with the ruling party at the centre. One possible extension of our work would be to examine the timing of the general election in relation to the preceding state election. Past research indicates that winning parties in state level elections enjoy a "honeymoon" period in general elections if they are held close together (Ravishankar 2009). However, more research is needed to understand whether this might moderate the relationship between turnout change and incumbent performance in national elections.

The implications of these findings also shed light on two other thorny issues in Indian politics. The first is to do with whether Lok Sabha elections represent first order or second order elections. Our results are consistent with the former. In addition, the second is to do with whether anti-incumbency at the individual level is personal or partisan. Our results are consistent with the latter. For the BJP in 2024, a slight decline in turnout should probably not be interpreted as a cause for concern. The conventional wisdom still holds. If the Congress—or any other party—want to make a serious dent in the BJP's popularity, they should perhaps focus on how they can make a compelling case to the many millions of voters who decided to sit this election out.

Finally, there is a burgeoning literature on rising female turnout with some making the argument that women have emerged as "change agents" (Deshpande 2024; Kumar 2022; Rai 2017). It may be then that there are somewhat different dynamics between male and female turnout and how it relates to anti-incumbency. On the one hand there is some evidence to suggest that women are less likely to vote for the BJP (Deshpande 2024), and so rising female turnout in recent elections may have contributed to an incumbency disadvantage for the BJP. But on the other

hand, gender disparities in vote choice vary enormously by state and so the pattern may not be clear cut. In either case, more research is needed to explore these possibilities in more detail.

Notes

1 We have weighted the vote change and turnout change variables by the number of seats contested by the CM's Party in their respective state for the general election.

2 We have weighted the vote change and turnout change variables by the number of seats contested by the PM's Party in the state.

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Assessing the Integrity of India's 2024 Lok Sabha Elections

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Abstract

Compared to its peers in South Asia and across the developing world, India has an enviable track record of electoral democracy dating back more than seven decades. However, in recent years, there is growing concern that the integrity of electoral processes in India has atrophied. This article reviews emerging threats to electoral integrity, drawing on evidence from the 2024 general election. It focuses on three dimensions of the electoral process: the actions of the Election Commission of India (ECI); the structure of political finance; and the activities of central investigative agencies and how those actions have shaped the electoral playing field. While these issues do not necessarily vitiate the entirety of the election process, they fuel the perception that elections are not as fair as they ought to be.

Keywords: India, elections, Election Commission of India, election integrity, political competition

Evaluación de la integridad de las elecciones Lok Sabha de la India de 2024

Resumen

En comparación con sus pares del sur de Asia y del mundo en desarrollo, India cuenta con un envidiable historial de democracia electoral que se remonta a más de siete décadas. Sin embargo, en los últimos años, existe una creciente preocupación por el deterioro de la integridad de los procesos electorales en India. Este artículo analiza las amenazas emergentes a la integridad electoral, basándose en la evidencia de las elecciones generales de 2024. Se centra en tres dimensiones del proceso electoral: las acciones de la Comisión

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Electoral de la India (ECI); la estructura del financiamiento político; y las actividades de los organismos centrales de investigación y cómo estas acciones han configurado el campo de juego electoral. Si bien estos problemas no necesariamente vician la totalidad del proceso electoral, alimentan la percepción de que las elecciones no son tan justas como deberían ser.

Palabras clave: India, elecciones, Comisión Electoral de la India, integridad electoral, competencia política

评估印度2024年人民院的选举诚信

摘要

与南亚和整个发展中国家的其他国家相比，印度七十多年来选举民主的记录令人羡慕。然而，近年来，人们越来越担心印度选举过程的诚信已经萎缩。本文根据2024年大选的证据，述评了选举诚信遭遇的新兴威胁。本文聚焦于选举过程的三个方面：印度选举委员会(ECI)的行动；印度的政治财政结构；中央调查机构的活动以及这些行动如何影响选举环境。虽然这些问题不一定会损害整个选举过程，但它们加剧了选举不够公平的感知。

关键词：印度，选举，印度选举委员会，选举诚信，政治竞争

Introduction

The 2024 Indian general election was expected to unfold in predictable fashion. Pre-election surveys suggested that the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was on track to secure a third consecutive majority in the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament). The BJP's own rhetoric— *Ab Ki Baar Char Sau Paar* ("this time, 400 seats") was an early campaign slogan— reinforced these lofty expectations.

Although exit polls published on the final day of voting echoed this consensus, the BJP underperformed expectations, winning 240 seats and falling short of a single-party majority. Although the BJP formed the government with the help of its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners, the result was perceived as a setback to the Narendra Modi-led BJP and a fillip for the opposition Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), a grand coalition comprised of more than two dozen opposition parties.

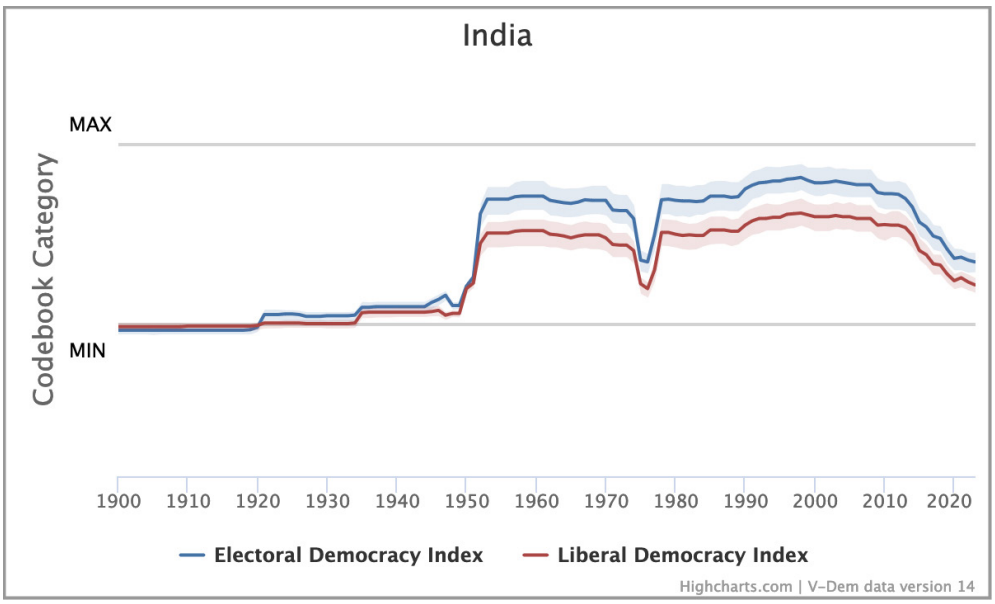
Beyond the electoral surprise itself, India's 18th general election has also been seen as a tonic for Indian de-

mocracy more generally. After a decade of BJP single-party rule, scholars and critics had lamented the weakening of India's liberal commitments, evidenced by a growing concentration of power in the hands of the executive, rising intolerance of dissent, and creeping Hindu majoritarianism (Vaishnav 2025a). In some ways, the surprising election outcome seemed to confirm scholarly assessments that the core infirmities of Indian democracy relate to the period between elections, rather than the electoral processes and procedures themselves (Varshney 2019). According to this view, it is when the electoral spotlight is off that Indian democracy's blemishes appear.

India's commitment to electoral democracy, virtually unbroken since Independence (with the notable exception of the twenty-one-month period of Emergency Rule imposed by former prime minister Indira Gandhi between 1975–77), has distinguished it from many of its postcolonial peers (Varshney 2013). Compared to its neighbors, the quality of India's electoral democracy has been far superior to that of either Bangladesh or Pakistan over the past 75 years.

Furthermore, India's commitment to electoral democracy has consistently outperformed the quality of its liberal democracy, according to the V-Dem Institute's liberal democracy index, which captures perceptions regarding the rule of law, checks and balances, and other institutional guardrails (Coppedge et al. 2024). Figure 1 graphically compares India's score on V-Dem's indices for liberal and electoral democracy over time.

Figure 1. Electoral Democracy and Liberal Democracy in India



Source: Author

However, Figure 1 also demonstrates a visible decline in the quality of India's electoral democracy over the past decade. This erosion is also discernible in a widely cited global dataset on perceptions of electoral integrity, where India's score on an aggregate index of 47 indicators declined from 60 to 55 (on a 0-100 scale) between 2014 and 2019 (Garnett, James, and Caal-Lam 2024). This quantitative decline matches recent qualitative assessments that elections in India have conspicuous flaws, with many of these shortcomings on display in the recently concluded Lok Sabha elections (Yadav 2024a).

This article reviews some of the most serious concerns regarding electoral integrity as seen through the prism of the 2024 general elections. It embraces Dahl's (1972) belief that no large system in the real world is fully democratized; established democracies are "polyarchies," or relatively democratized regimes that provide both political participation and contestation, but which regularly face shortcomings on both. The challenge in all polyarchies is to consistently improve the levels of political participation and contestation.

The article focuses on three dimensions of the electoral process in India. First, it reviews the actions of the Election Commission of India (ECI), India's apex elections management body. Second, it examines the structure of political finance in India, including recent legal and regulatory changes. Third, it examines the activities of central investigative agencies and how those actions have shaped the playing field of electoral politics. It concludes by highlighting other emerging areas of concern—including the delimitation process and the proliferation of candidate eligibility requirements—that are unrelated to the 2024 general election, but which merit careful attention going forward.

Performance of the Election Commission of India

The ECI is one of the world's most powerful elections management bodies.[1] It derives its authority from Article 324 of the Constitution, which gives it the power to supervise, direct, and conduct state and national elections. The ECI's constitutional foundation, coupled with foundational legislative statutes, provide it with a relatively sparse framework for carrying out its mandate (Sridharan and Vaishnav 2017).

However, over the years, the ECI's regulatory footprint has expanded. This expansion has been widely attributed to a series of powerful chief election commissioners (CECs), beginning with the tenure of T.N. Seshan in the early 1990s (Gilmartin 2009). However, the powers of the ECI have arguably been more significantly shaped by changes in the political balance of power. During the era of Congress Party dominance in the first three decades after Independence, the ECI had a reputation for conducting serious elections, but its reach was circumscribed by an overbearing dominant party.

Beginning in the late 1980s, the era of Congress Party dominance gave way to a quarter-century of coalition

politics, with no single party powerful enough to form the government on its own. When coalitions controlled Delhi, political uncertainty grew along with partisan competition at the ballot box. Therefore, it was in everyone's interest to ensure that the electoral playing field was level (Ahuja and Ostermann 2021), a task entrusted to the ECI. In sum, referee institutions could exert greater influence than during the previous era of one-party rule.

With the return of single-party dominance in 2014—this time with the BJP at the helm—questions about the ECI's independence from the executive have again come to the fore (Vaishnav 2025b). In 2024 (and in other recent elections), the timing of elections, the enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), and the appointments process for election commissioners have all attracted controversy. In addition, the ECI has often stumbled in its public communications, inadvertently deepening concern about the body's neutrality.

As one observer warned: "The EC's independence is as much of a fiction as that of the Speaker of Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas. The EC is not an election management body, merely an administrator of elections, as it used to be before Seshan" (Yadav 2024a).

Timing of elections

Prior to the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, some veteran election observers—including former chief election commissioners—questioned the ECI's use of discretion when announcing the timing of state assembly and parliamentary elections. By tradition, the ECI issues a single election announcement when there are multiple state assemblies concluding their term around the same time. This announcement, in turn, triggers the enactment of the MCC, which is intended to place incumbents and challengers on an even playing field by ensuring adherence to an accepted set of electoral norms.

The onset of the MCC is an important milestone because incumbent governments are prohibited from announcing new projects or schemes once the code is in force, preventing any unfair advantage in wooing voters with lucrative promises. The period during which the MCC is operative has come to be known as special "election time" during which the ECI's writ is supreme, and both the executive and the judiciary must defer to it until after elections are completed (Singh and Roy 2019).

In 2017, the ECI broke from established convention by announcing election dates in Himachal Pradesh while staying silent on the polling calendar in Gujarat, even though voting in both states was to take place around the same time. The ECI's stated reason was that the Gujarat government was preoccupied by providing relief to those affected by heavy flooding in the state. However, the delay in Gujarat allowed the BJP-controlled state government to announce several big-ticket welfare schemes without running afoul of the MCC.

In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the ECI announced the dates for that year's poll later than they had in 2014.

Critics noted that the extra time had allowed the Union Cabinet to make as many as thirty decisions on electorally crucial projects before the MCC kicked in. The central government also took advantage of this window to promulgate several ordinances in the two weeks leading up to the election announcement (Kumar 2022).[2]

In 2024, similar concerns were expressed. This time, however, questions swirled around the phase-wise breakup rather than the timing of the polls. Elections to India's parliament (and to state assemblies in several states) proceed in phases to ensure the safety, sanctity, and security of the vote. But some observers and members of the political opposition felt that the phase-wise timetabling of the 2024 elections had as much, if not more, to do with the incumbent BJP's political preferences.

In 2019, the ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD) of Odisha cried foul when the ECI announced simultaneous state and national elections would take place in four phases in the state, a longstanding target for BJP expansion (*The Hindu* 2019). In the past, elections in the state were held in two phases. Multiple phases allow star campaigners from the party, in this case the prime minister and other leading BJP luminaries, to campaign more intensely across the state. The 2024 elections in Odisha also proceeded in four phases. Similarly, the ECI announced seven-phase elections in West Bengal—another priority state for the BJP—both in 2019 and 2024, an increase from the five phases the state experienced in 2014.

The electorally crucial state of Maharashtra went to polls in five phases for the first time in 2024. Between 1962 and 2014, the state had gone to Lok Sabha polls in three phases. The state witnessed a four-phase election in 2019, growing to five in 2024. The opposition argued that the increased number of phases and gaps in between phases was a boon to the BJP, whose resources, organizational strength, and star power gave them an undue advantage (Khapre 2024).

Model code of conduct

The MCC is not a law but a framework of norms that is intended to guide the conduct of parties and candidates in the election fray. The code is a mélange that includes legislative mandates but also incorporates electoral best practices that give the ECI broad remit to enforce electoral ethics (Bhat 2021). The ECI is the sole arbiter of the MCC. If candidates or parties violate elements of the code that involve breaking the law, the ECI can refer those violations to law enforcement authorities. Where the violations are minor or do not imply a legal infraction, the ECI levies its own punishment, typically prohibiting the accused from campaigning for a fixed duration of time.

The ECI has been dogged by accusations of selectively enforcing the MCC. The controversy over its impartiality reached a crescendo in 2019. During that year's general election campaign, the political opposition and civil society observers lodged several formal complaints against Modi and BJP party president Amit Shah for engaging

in inflammatory and divisive rhetoric. After deliberating, the ECI exonerated Modi and Shah of any wrongdoing despite objections from a lone dissenting election commissioner, Ashok Lavasa. Lavasa, having been outvoted 2 to 1, requested that the CEC publicly release his dissenting opinions, a request which was denied.

Soon after the election, Lavasa was subject to thinly veiled retribution. Investigative agencies probed Lavasa for potential corrupt acts during his time in the power ministry and launched investigations into his wife, sister, and son. No wrongdoing was uncovered, and Lavasa was eventually transferred out of the ECI and assigned to a foreign posting (Vaishnav 2025b).

In 2024, multiple complaints were again levied against Modi. In a now infamous campaign rally in Banswara, Rajasthan, Modi made multiple controversial statements, claiming that the Congress Party manifesto pledged to both seize and redistribute the private wealth of Indians and snatch Hindu women's *mangalsutra*s and redistribute them among "infiltrators"—a clear dog whistle referencing the minority Muslim community.

Curiously, the ECI did not directly engage Modi after the incident. Instead, it sent letters to the Congress and BJP party presidents reminding them that their campaigners must adhere to the MCC. After the election, chief election commissioner Rajiv Kumar justified the ECI's decision by saying: "We deliberately decided … that the top two people in both the parties [presumably Modi and the Congress leader Rahul Gandhi] we did not touch. Both party presidents we touched equally" (Tiwari 2024c).

Several civil society groups also highlighted the ECI's flatfooted response to a social media video posted by the BJP's Karnataka unit depicting the Congress as masterminding an anti-Hindu communal conspiracy. The video went viral, but the ECI failed to take any action against the BJP. Eventually, the ECI directed the Karnataka police to remove the video but only after it had been shared nearly 10 million times (Panjiar and Lanka 2024).

In the end, the ECI appears to selectively deploy the MCC to police small infractions of electoral norms and occasional violations of actual law while often ignoring larger issues of national scale. As Yogendra Yadav has noted, "the EC has reduced the MCC into a rule book … full of legal minutiae [which] has led to the mindless pursuit of trivial details" (Yadav 2024b).

Appointments controversy

Article 324 of the Constitution states that the ECI "shall consist of a Chief Election Commissioner [CEC] and such number of other Election Commissioners, if any, as the President may from time to time fix." For the first several decades after independence, the ECI was run by a lone CEC. Since 1993, however, it has functioned as a three-member executive with decisions taken by consensus. The president, on the advice of the Council of Ministers, appoints the CEC and the other two

election commissioners (ECs). By convention, the commissioners are serving or retired civil servants. They serve six-year terms and are subject to a mandatory retirement age of 65. By tradition, when the CEC retires, the next senior-most commissioner replaces them (see Bora 2024 for a detailed survey of the ECI's organization).

As a result, the government of the day has always enjoyed significant autonomy in appointing election commissioners. This is not a new development; the vulnerabilities associated with this selection method are well known. Furthermore, at any point, there is nothing stopping the government from appointing more ECs, "packing" the institution with sympathetic commissioners.

With the return of a dominant party government, critics have argued that a constitutional body like the ECI cannot be left to the whims of the executive. In *Anoop Baranwal v Union of India* (2023), a five-judge Constitution bench of the Supreme Court ordered that ECs would be appointed by the President of India on the advice of a committee consisting of the Prime Minister, the leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha (or the leader of the largest opposition party), and the Chief Justice of India (CJI). This selection panel, which places checks on the executive, mimics the composition of the collegium used to appoint the Director of the Central Bureau of Investigation, among other officials. The bench clarified that this practice would be in place until Parliament passed legislation on the matter.

In December 2023, Parliament passed The Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Bill, 2023. But Parliament's chosen remedy violated a core tenet of the Court's ruling: the act stipulates a selection panel comprising the Prime Minister, leader of the Opposition, and a Union Cabinet Minister (rather than the CJI). This deviation tilted the balance of power back toward the executive. As one constitutional scholar observed, "The problem arises … when the legislation replaces the CJI with another member of the political executive and thus fails the test of institutional independence. This is what the law in question does, by making the executive—a player in the electoral game—empowered to select the referee of the electoral game" (Bhatia 2023). The legislation violated the spirit of the Court's judgement, which was to ensure that the ECI remains an independent body free of executive interference.

The act also made one other crucial change, which has been interpreted as a demotion of the ECI's status. The new legislation pegged the salary, allowances, and service conditions of the CEC and the associate ECs to that of the Cabinet Secretary. The prior 1991 Act outlining the ECs' service conditions set these perks at the level of a Supreme Court judge. The change is subtle but important—a judge's service conditions are not subject to executive discretion but are fixed by an act of Parliament.[3]

Furthermore, the 1991 Act stipulated that while the CEC may

be removed in the same manner as a Supreme Court justice, ECs can be removed upon the recommendation of the CEC. The new act was conspicuously silent on this matter, missing a golden opportunity to fix a lacuna in the earlier legislation. As a result, ECs remain in a significantly more vulnerable position compared to the CEC.[4]

While the Supreme Court was hearing the challenge to the government's right to unilaterally appoint election commissioners in 2022, the government hastily appointed Arun Goel to fill a vacancy as commissioner. As advocate Prashant Bhushan told the court, Goel had applied for voluntary retirement from the Indian Administrative Service on Friday, was appointed as election commissioner on Saturday, and took charge on Monday.[5] As one judge observed in disbelief, Goel's application was submitted, accepted, and the appointment were made all on the same day.

The abrupt move prompted the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR)—a good-government watchdog—to file a petition in the Supreme Court questioning the government's haste. The petition suggested that the Union government and the ECI "have through their acts of omissions and commission participated in a carefully orchestrated 'selection procedure' for their own benefits." The Supreme Court dismissed ADR's petition but took note of the strange circumstances characterizing the government's actions.

In a final bizarre twist, just weeks before the 2024 general election commenced, Goel abruptly resigned, leaving two vacancies in the three-member ECI (Nath, C.G., and Chopra 2024).[6] A search committee was quickly constituted and the same day, the selection committee announced the names of two new commissioners to fill the vacancies. The lone opposition member on the panel (the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha) claimed that he was not given a shortlist in advance and had only received a list of 212 longlisted officers the previous night. Again, the Court refused to intervene, though it noted once more the procedural irregularities associated with the rapid selection of two new ECs (*The Wire* 2024b).

Nominations

Once the 2024 general election was announced and the nominations began, irregularities plagued the process in several parliamentary constituencies.

On April 22, the ECI announced that the BJP candidate had been elected unopposed in the Surat parliamentary constituency in Gujarat, marking the ruling party's first victory in the 2024 general election. The ECI rejected the Congress candidate's nomination papers due to discrepancies in the signatures of the nominee's proposers (Doshi 2024). Once the latter's nomination was rejected, all eight of the remaining candidates in the constituency abruptly withdrew their nominations, leaving the BJP candidate unopposed.

Several of these candidates withdrew under mysterious circumstances, prompting some observers to suspect coercion or foul play (Shih and Gupta

2024). Another theory pointed to the Congress candidate colluding with the BJP to throw the election in their favor.

Regardless of the backstory, it is striking that an election was not held given that, thanks to a 2013 Supreme Court judgment, voters in every election always have the option of voting for "None of the Above" (NOTA).[7] Granting voters the choice of selecting NOTA on Election Day would not have changed the outcome since even if NOTA wins the most votes, it does not trigger a fresh election. Nevertheless, the decision to declare a victor without giving voters any choice appears to violate the spirit of the NOTA option, as previously laid down by the Court.

A similarly baffling turn of events transpired in Indore, Madhya Pradesh. There, the Congress candidate withdrew his nomination at the eleventh hour, joining the BJP soon after. The Congress Party's backup candidate, in turn, was told his nomination papers were rejected because the Congress already had a candidate in the race (even though he had withdrawn). Several other independent candidates soon dropped out of the race, although a few claimed their withdrawals took place without their knowledge and relied on forged signatures (Dasgupta 2024). In Indore, an election was held with NOTA garnering more than 200,000 votes—the largest tally gained by NOTA since it was introduced.

In Modi's own constituency of Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), one media report disclosed that of the 41 individuals who had filed their nomination papers as candidates, 33 of them were rejected. In 2014 and 2019, 42 and 26 candidates contested elections in Varanasi, respectively; in 2024, there were only seven candidates. Several of the rejected candidates alleged that election officials deliberately worked to minimize the number of candidates in the race, including by delaying paperwork review and granting candidates inadequate time for redress (Tiwari 2024a).

Communications

An important dimension of the ECI's credibility, built up over many years, is its level of transparency. On Election Day, the ECI maintains a website where it provides real-time electoral returns. Its website also serves as a repository for historic election data, circulars regulating the conduct of elections, and reports on alleged malpractice and MCC violations.

However, the ECI's commitment to transparency appears to have ebbed. In 2024, a controversy emerged over the accuracy and transparency of voter turnout figures. In past general elections, after each phase of voting is completed, the ECI has released provisional voter turnout data, followed by revised voter turnout data, and finally detailed data on the absolute number of votes cast in each constituency.

In 2024, the ECI deviated from these practices without explanation, resulting in an "inordinate delay" in the release of voter turnout details (Independent Panel for Monitoring Indian Elections 2024b). The ECI released "snapshots" of turnout data shortly af-

ter polling was completed in each phase and then subsequently released revised data, but the latter often showed large discrepancies with the initial turnout data. Compounding the situation, the ECI also delayed its release of constituency-level data on absolute vote counts. Remarking on the controversy, one former CEC said: "The tradition has been to release the absolute number of electors and the absolute number of voters, with percentages of male and female voters and the overall percentage of voters. The Election Commission has a set format to collect this data" (Tiwari 2024b).

ADR filed suit in the Supreme Court asking the ECI to publish turnout data within 48 hours of polling based on information captured in Form 17C, which records voter turnout in every polling station in each constituency. While there was no evidence of fraud, experts (including several former CECs) said transparency was of the highest importance to reassure common citizens that elections were conducted with absolute integrity. The ECI claimed that the election rules only mandate that the body share Form 17C data with the polling agent of a candidate and that it has no obligation to publicly furnish this data, implying it was somehow proprietary information.[8]

The Court declined to intervene, but the ECI soon released data on the absolute numbers of voters in every parliamentary constituency to dispel what it termed "false narratives" about the election (Election Commission of India 2024). However, the body maintained that it faced no statutory requirement to place Form 17C data in the public domain. The entire episode raised questions about the ECI's dedication to transparency and public communications, both of which help project an aura of confidence in the electoral process.

Political Finance

Political finance in India has always been opaque, to put it mildly (Kapur and Vaishnav 2018). Although the Representation of the People Act, 1951 outlines strict limits on the expenditure a candidate can undertake in an election, there are no limits on party expenditure. In fact, party expenditure must only be recorded in a candidate's accounts if party funds are spent directly in service of that candidate. Money that is used to propagate the party program—a broad and vague category—does not count against the candidate expenditure ceiling. Of course, even these well-defined limits are farcical; the average major party candidate routinely spends multiples of the actual legal limit (Sridharan and Vaishnav 2018).

Changes to political finance law

The Modi government has implemented sweeping changes to the political funding landscape in India during its tenure (Vaishnav 2024a). Most consequentially, the government introduced a new political funding modality known as "electoral bonds" in 2018. Electoral bonds were time-limited bearer bonds that associations, companies, and indi-

viduals could purchase from the State Bank of India (SBI) during specified windows and then transfer to the registered bank account of a political party as a "donation." The upshot of this scheme was that neither the donor nor recipient needed to disclose the specific transaction. The only information available in the public domain was the aggregate amount of electoral bonds parties received. However, SBI possessed transaction-level data, which meant the government (as the regulator and majority owner of SBI) also had access to this information. Therefore, electoral bonds created a unique situation of asymmetric transparency.

The bonds scheme was an improvement over the status quo in one regard; companies were incentivized to channel political donations through the formal banking system as opposed to circumventing it. However, the downside was equally clear—the state's express legitimation of opacity in political giving.

The ECI's role on this issue merits special mention because it has repeatedly changed its stance on electoral bonds. Confidential government documents, obtained via Right to Information (RTI) requests, confirm that the ECI was initially skeptical of the bond scheme, believing it could lead to an *increase* rather than decrease in black money in politics, especially if bonds could be routed through shell company intermediaries (Sethi 2019). The ECI went as far as to deem the bond scheme a "retrograde" step in a 2017 letter to the Union government expressing its opposition. Yet, just one year later, then-CEC A. K. Joti publicly proclaimed that the bond scheme was a "step in the right direction" (*Financial Express* 2018). In March 2019, the ECI executed another about-face, arguing the bond scheme was "contrary to the goal of transparency in political finance" in an affidavit filed before the Supreme Court. In 2021, in a hearing on the constitutionality of the scheme, the ECI split the difference, telling the Supreme Court it was not opposed to the bond scheme, but felt the scheme's transparency could be improved (*Supreme Court Observer* 2021). This constantly shifting line runs contrary to the oft-repeated view that the ECI had always been in opposition to the scheme (Vishnoi 2024).

A focus on electoral bonds alone, however, obscures other important changes simultaneously made by the government.

For starters, the government capped cash donations to parties at Rs. 2,000. This was purely symbolic since the threshold for public disclosure of donations, as stipulated under the Income Tax Act, remains at Rs. 20,000. Second, the government eliminated the cap on corporate giving (previously set at 7.5 percent of a company's average net profits over the prior three years), and dropped the requirement that companies disclose details of their political donations on their annual profit and loss accounts.

Third, the government loosened rules on foreign contributions to political parties, which had been strictly prohibited. In 2016, Parliament amended

the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) such that companies previously designated as "foreign" entities were deemed to be Indian firms so long as they adhered to the foreign direct investment norms prescribed for their sector. The move came after the Delhi High Court found the BJP and Congress guilty of accepting foreign contributions (Vaishnav 2024a). This opportunistic measure, supported by both the ruling and principal opposition parties, was not driven by a thoughtful desire to review the definition of foreign ownership, but rather a desire to evade punishment.

Aftermath of electoral bonds

ADR filed a suit in advance of the 2019 general election seeking a stay on the electoral bonds scheme, arguing that it undermined a voter's "right to know" about the sources of party funding. The Court, which had previously supported efforts to improve transparency in elections, refused to intervene, citing the "weighty" nature of the constitutional questions at hand. After years of dithering, the Court unanimously ruled the bonds to be unconstitutional just months before the 2024 general election. In addition, it ordered the ECI and SBI to publish all transaction-level details associated with all bond transactions dating back to the scheme's inception.

Media investigations, published on the eve of elections, revealed interesting insights into the pattern of giving. For instance, several loss-making enterprises donated generously to political parties, raising questions about the integrity of these firms (*The Wire* 2024a). The ability of loss-making companies to purchase bonds was a direct result of the repeal of restrictions tying political giving to a fixed share of a firm's average net profits. Similarly, there were more than three dozen new firms (incorporated in 2018 or later) that purchased a substantial number of electoral bonds within months of their incorporation (Radhakrishnan, Nihalani, and Varghese 2024).

The revelations also provided suggestive evidence of *quid pro quos*. For instance, as many as 30 firms facing investigative probes by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and Income Tax (IT) authorities donated a combined Rs. 355 crores to the BJP (Abraham et al. 2024). These facts cannot conclusively provide a *quid pro quo* relationship, but they are suggestive of a dynamic pattern of investigations and subsequent donations to the ruling party.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to make causal claims about the impact of bonds on the outcome of the 2024 elections. But what one can say with confidence is that the scheme has greatly benefitted the BJP, which had accumulated 55 percent (in value terms) of all bonds issued between 2017–18 and 2022–23. The amount received by the Congress, which garnered the second largest cache of bonds, was around 15 percent of the BJP's total (Sukumar 2024). The Court's inability—or unwillingness—to act expeditiously in the electoral bonds matter further aided the incumbent's quest to enlarge its coffers (Vaishnav 2024b).

Use (and Misuse) of Investigative Agencies

As discussed earlier, there is suggestive evidence pointing to a possible pattern of firms giving to the ruling party as a way of easing ongoing probes by India's investigative agencies. But investigative agencies figured in the 2024 elections in a far more significant way when it came to shaping the electoral playing field.

In India, there is a well-documented history of the executive interfering in the work of nominally independent investigative agencies (Wasan 2024). During the heyday of Congress Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, for instance, agencies like the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) offered little pretence of acting independently of the prime minister's office. Even during the Congress-led coalition government of Manmohan Singh (2004–2014), there was a pattern of using investigative agencies as a cudgel to influence the behavior of smaller political parties (Srivastava 2013).

The BJP, since coming to power in 2014, did not have to invest in new tools of coercion; it relied on the same tools that had been used (and misused) before. However, it arguably politicized investigative agencies to a new level. In 2002, during the tenure of BJP Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, Parliament passed the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). The Act gave the government significant powers to pursue individuals suspected of engaging in money laundering or corruption. Over the years, successive amendments to PMLA have further strengthened the government's hand, leading independent observers to claim that the law has been misused to intimidate and harass political opponents and dissenters.

Over the past decade, there has been a glaring rise in the number of ED cases implicating politicians. From 2014 to September 2024, there was a fourfold rise in ED cases filed against politicians. In 95 percent of these cases, the target was an opposition politician (Tiwary 2022). According to the government's own data, convictions under PMLA are exceedingly rare; in the first 17 years following the law's passage, only 0.5 percent of individuals named in PMLA cases had been successfully convicted (*Hindustan Times* 2022).

In three high-profile instances before the 2024 elections, actions by investigative agencies raised questions about the extent to which their behavior reshaped the electoral playing field in favor of the ruling party.

Hemant Soren

On January 31, Jharkhand chief minister Hemant Soren (of the opposition Jharkhand Mukti Morcha) was forced to resign from his post just prior to his arrest by the ED on money laundering charges filed under Section 19 of PMLA. Since 2022, the ED had been investigating Soren on corruption charges involving allegedly forged documents pertaining to the purchase and sale of tribal land. The ED claimed that Soren did not appear in eight of ten summonses that it issued in connection with the

case and was intentionally undermining their investigation. Soren claimed that his arrest was part of a well-orchestrated conspiracy by the BJP to mire him in a protracted legal conflict. In late June 2024, once the elections had been completed, the Jharkhand High Court granted Soren bail, and he was released five months after his arrest.

Arvind Kejriwal

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal of the opposition Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) was arrested by the ED on March 21 on charges also filed under Section 19 of PMLA and linked to the Delhi liquor scam implicating the AAP-run Delhi government. Kejriwal was the first sitting chief minister to be arrested in the post-Independence era and his arrest followed the arrests of two fellow AAP ministers in the same case. As with the Soren case, the ED alleged that Kejriwal skipped nine summonses it had issued over five months. Kejriwal termed the summonses "illegal" and feared arrest if he made an appearance. In May, Kejriwal was granted interim bail in the middle of the Lok Sabha elections though he was ordered to return to jail prior to the announcement of the election results. After receiving bail, Kejriwal was later arrested by the CBI on the same charges and was granted interim bail in the latter case as well.

Congress Party

A third example pertains to the Congress Party. In February 2024, the party claimed that its bank accounts had been frozen as part of an ongoing dispute with federal income tax authorities. The Congress claimed that tax agencies had levied a $25 million tax demand on the party. A month later, the party revealed it had been asked to pay an additional $218 million in taxes.

Tax authorities claimed the party violated India's tax exemption laws and had consistently refused to comply with official tax notices. The charges stem from a dispute dating back to 2018-19, when authorities claim the Congress Party violated the law by submitting its income tax return late and not accounting for all its stated donations. This led to a protracted battle, resulting in additional tax notices just weeks before polling began for the 2024 general election.

Congress sought legal redress but its pleas challenging the income tax authorities' proceedings were dismissed. It is difficult, if not impossible, for outsiders to judge the guilt or innocence of the accused in a legal dispute. The narrow concern here is that authorities under the control of the central government engaged in behavior that violated the sanctity of free and fair elections. Through selective targeting and deliberate timing, these agencies succeeded in inflicting maximum impact during election season.

Conclusion

Compared to its peers in South Asia and across the developing world, India has an enviable track record of electoral democracy dating back more than seven decades. However, in recent years, a perception has grown that the shine of In-

dia's vaunted electoral machinery has dulled, with the electoral playing field tilting toward the ruling party. As Dahl argued, there are two essential elements of democracy (or "polyarchy"): political contestation and political participation. On the participatory front, there is ample evidence to suggest that India's performance has improved as time has elapsed, judging by voter turnout and the changing demographic composition of the electorate. If there is one thing India's electoral machinery can be proud of, it is the relative ease with which voter registration and participation takes place. In India, the state assumes the burden of ensuring citizens are on the electoral rolls, not the other way around.

However, there are growing concerns that political contestation has not fared as well as participation. Indeed, there are signs that elections are free but not necessarily always fair. Questions about the ECI's impartial functioning, structure of political finance, and misuse of investigative agencies are all grounds for concern. While these issues do not necessarily vitiate the entirety of the election process, they collectively fuel the perception that elections are not as fair as they ought to be. This is where the conceptual binary of "democracy in between elections" and "democracy during elections" breaks down. As this article has demonstrated, shortcomings afflicting the quality of democracy *between* elections can have adverse ramifications for the health of democracy *during* elections (Tushnet 2021).

There are other concerns about the integrity of the electoral process which go beyond the 2024 general elections. These too merit equal attention. For instance, India has developed a system of delimitation (or redistricting of electoral constituencies) that stands out for its technocratic, independent character (Jensenius 2013; Iyer and Reddy 2013). However, in recent years, delimitation processes in two states—Assam and Jammu and Kashmir—have been heavily politicized. For instance, the 2022 Jammu and Kashmir delimitation provided greater representation for Jammu at the expense of the Kashmir Valley, deviating from standard population-based norms (Bhasin 2022). Similarly, some analysts have found that the delimitation process in Assam—completed in 2023—intentionally divided the Bengali-origin Muslim community, minimizing the number of Muslim-majority constituencies and thereby giving the ruling BJP an advantage (Sultana 2023; Zaman 2023).

A second issue pertains to the growing number of Indian states that have instituted eligibility criteria for candidates in local body elections that go well beyond reasonable requirements pertaining to age, residency, and moral probity. Several states have legislated requirements that pertain to personal characteristics such as household size, sanitation facilities, and education qualifications. The courts have largely upheld such requirements, thereby arbitrarily restricting the rules of political selection and narrowing the pool of candidates available to voters (Gupta 2016). Even defenders of the status quo

might agree that perceptions of electoral fairness matter. Once segments of the citizenry begin to suspect the integrity of elections, this can have deleterious impacts on democracy writ large. The ECI's role here is crucial; as Ahuja and Ostermann (2021) point out, the credibility of a referee institution turns on its perceived neutrality. Without the latter, the former is ephemeral.

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Notes

1 In addition to being a constitutional body independent of the executive, the Indian Supreme Court has held that the ECI retains tremendous residual powers in conducting elections where legislation is either silent or ambiguous.

2 Ordinances are executive orders, technically issued by the President, which carry the weight of parliamentary acts. They can only be promulgated when parliament is out of session but must eventually receive parliamentary sanction or they eventually lapse.

3 The Election Commission (Conditions of Service of Election Commissioners and Transaction of Business) Act, 1991.

4 In fairness, the Supreme Court ruled that this would require a constitutional amendment and could not be changed by a simple act of Parliament.

5 Typically, voluntary retirement from the civil service requires a prior notice period of three months. In Goel's case, his resignation was approved in 24 hours.

6 The resignation was only the third ever by an election commissioner in the ECI's history. In a strange final twist in the story, Goel was named India's ambassador to Croatia months after the election concluded, a rare political appointee in India's diplomatic corps.

7 *People's Union for Civil Liberties & Anr v Union of India*.

8 According to an independent election monitoring panel, there were widespread complaints lodged by polling agents of opposition parties that even they were not provided with copies of Form 17C data, despite the ECI's own statement that the body is obligated to share this information with them. See Independent Panel for Monitoring Indian Elections (2024a). For more detail on the controversy over Form 17C data, see Vora (2024).

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Caste, Social Justice, and the Politics of Inclusion in the 2024 Indian General Election

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Abstract

This paper delves into caste as one of the defining issues of the 2024 Indian General Elections, as the two contending alliances—the Indian National Congress (INC)-led Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) and the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA)—made competing claims about their inclusive character. While INDIA foregrounded caste as a central factor in the pursuit of social justice, the NDA's idea of inclusivity focused on political inclusion through the representation and integration of Hindu castes under a common religious and ethnic umbrella. INDIA emulated NDA's strategy of courting non-dominant segments of voters by including a larger number of lower caste candidates on their list while keeping some space for representation of religious minorities. The author argues that if INDIA ended up beating the NDA in the game of inclusion, both alliances' efforts remained limited by longstanding features of Indian electoral politics that go against more substantive forms of political inclusion. The representation of minorities and women within non-NDA parties keeps decreasing, and the data on assets reveals that competitive pressure still pushes political parties to favor independently wealthy candidates.

Keywords: Indian parliamentary elections 2024, political representation, caste, minorities, gender, political parties, inclusion, elitism

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Casta, justicia social y políticas de inclusión en las elecciones generales de la India de 2024

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la cuestión de las castas como uno de los temas definitorios de las elecciones generales de la India de 2024, ya que las dos alianzas contendientes —la Alianza Nacional Inclusiva para el Desarrollo de la India (INDIA), liderada por el Congreso Nacional Indio (INC), y la Alianza Democrática Nacional (NDA), liderada por el BJP— presentaron argumentos contrapuestos sobre su carácter inclusivo. Mientras que INDIA priorizó la cuestión de las castas como un factor central en la búsqueda de la justicia social, la idea de inclusividad de la NDA se centró en la inclusión política mediante la representación e integración de las castas hindúes bajo un paraguas religioso y étnico común. INDIA emuló la estrategia de la NDA de cortejar a segmentos no dominantes de votantes al incluir un mayor número de candidatos de castas inferiores en sus listas, manteniendo al mismo tiempo cierto espacio para la representación de las minorías religiosas. El autor argumenta que, si INDIA terminó venciendo a la NDA en el juego de la inclusión, los esfuerzos de ambas alianzas se vieron limitados por características arraigadas de la política electoral india que se oponen a formas más sustanciales de inclusión política. La representación de minorías y mujeres dentro de partidos no pertenecientes a la NDA sigue disminuyendo, y los datos sobre activos revelan que la presión competitiva aún empuja a los partidos políticos a favorecer a candidatos ricos e independientes.

Palabras clave: Elecciones parlamentarias indias de 2024, representación política, castas, minorías, género, partidos políticos, inclusión, elitismo

2024年印度大选的种姓、社会正义与包容性政治

摘要

本文研究了种姓制度这一2024年印度大选的决定性问题之一，因为两个相互竞争的联盟——印度国民大会党(INC)领导的印度全国发展包容性联盟(INDIA)与人民党领导的全国民主联盟(NDA)——对各自的包容性特征提出了竞争性的主张。尽管INDIA将种姓制度作为追求社会正义的核心因素，但NDA的包容性理念却侧重于通过在一个共同的宗教和族裔保护伞下，以代表和融合印度种姓来实现政治包容。INDIA

效仿了NDA的策略，即通过在其名单中纳入更多低种姓候选人来争取非主流选民群体，同时为宗教少数派的代表保留一些空间。作者论证，如果INDIA最终在包容性博弈中击败NDA，那么两个联盟的努力仍然受到印度选举政治长期特征的限制，这些特征不利于更实质性的政治包容形式。非NDA政党内部少数族裔和妇女的代表性持续下降，并且资产数据显示，竞争压力仍然迫使政党青睐财富独立的候选人。

关键词：2024年印度议会选举，政治代表，种姓，少数群体，性别，政党，包容性，精英主义

Introduction

Caste was one of the defining issues of the 2024 Indian General Election campaign and election. The two contending alliances, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) offered voters two contrasting visions of social justice, inclusion, and the role of caste in fostering them.

The BJP-led NDA campaign, on the one hand, focused on political inclusion through the representation and integration of Hindu castes under a common religious and ethnic umbrella while favoring a welfare regime that targets individuals rather than specific groups. The INDIA alliance, on the other hand, promised similar welfare policies but defined caste as a key instrument of social justice, promising representation and a welfare regime that recognizes the role caste plays in the perpetuation of inequalities.

Since 2014, the BJP has promoted the transformation of India's welfare regime towards a system that targets individuals rather than groups (Aiyar, 2019; Anand, Dimble, & Subramaniam, 2020). At the same time, it sought to shift the focus of welfare policies away from caste, diluting reservation benefits meant for lower castes and backward classes, notably by introducing economic-based quotas that benefit individuals from the general category (Singh, 2023; Verma, 2023). The BJP government also staunchly opposes the conduction of a caste census, a key demand, and component of the opposition's social justice project.

Protecting caste-based reservations and conducting a caste census were two of the main promises made by the opposition. Congress's leading figure, Rahul Gandhi, has been vocal throughout the campaign about the necessity to properly enumerate castes, highlighting the under-representation of lower castes across institutions and various professional domains (*The Hindu*, 2024). During the campaign, the opposition conflated these questions into a matter of protecting the Constitution after a few BJP officials declared that they would use their future two-

thirds majority to amend it (PTI, 2024).

The question of social justice in India is central in regional and national electoral campaigns. Parties make competing claims and promises about welfare and redistribution policies that have become increasingly undifferentiated across parties and states. Welfarism, both as policy and as electoral language, is used as a response to the effects of tepid economic growth, joblessness, and rising inequalities and as compensation for the shortcomings of the state's handling of these challenges (Roy, 2019). Yamini Aiyar has argued that the shift towards this new welfare regime was also used to help political leaders build a personal, direct connection with voters, substituting their own generosity for the state's duty to protect citizens (Aiyar, 2023). Welfarism, she argues, played an important role in cementing the BJP's victory in the 2019 election (Aiyar, 2019).

Since then, other parties have sought to emulate the BJP's brand of welfarism and personalized politics by implementing similarly designed policies in states where they are in power. This competitive welfarism has provided some electoral advantage to the BJP, which disposes of greater resources to pursue this form of politics and can claim intellectual ownership over these kinds of policies. In a one-party dominant system, the party in power often gets to define the grounds on which elections are fought. In such cases, the opposition suffers not only from its fragmentation but also from its inability to differentiate itself from the incumbent. Campaigning on caste enabled the opposition to distinguish itself by producing an alternative welfare and social justice narrative to mobilize voters. While all parties competed on similar ground, they differed in their articulation of caste and welfare.

Beyond its relevance for welfare, caste also serves as a signal of political inclusion. Both alliances claim to represent India's most marginalized communities by displaying the diversity of their candidates' recruitment. Since its rise a decade ago, the BJP has made efforts to shed its image of a party of and for the upper castes by opening its ranks to lower caste representation, to the point that some have claimed—somewhat hastily—that the BJP in Northern India has effectively become an OBC party (Mehta, 2022). This claim has a strong element of exaggeration, as the rise of the BJP in Northern India since 2014 has also meant an overall rise in upper caste representation. Still, the number of BJP representatives coming from non-dominant groups has indeed increased in recent years, if anything, because the BJP has become a bigger party (Verniers & Jaffrelot, 2020).

The focus on inclusion by political parties also stems from political parties' awareness that caste-based electoral behavior in India is generally quite fluid. If the BJP has succeeded in building a strong following among upper caste voters in recent years,[1] the electoral behavior of other groups of castes, notably Dalits and Other Backward Classes, has been more fluctuating,[2] particularly so in 2024.

In 2024, opposition parties have sought to emulate the BJP's electoral strategy by targeting the same historically under-represented groups among Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes. Particularly in Northern India, they have sought to shed the reputation of dominant caste preferentialism that the BJP tagged on them ten years ago by distributing tickets to groups that have recently been leaning towards the BJP.

In this article, I focus on this second aspect of caste politics, assessing both alliances' claims of inclusion by examining caste data collected during the campaign and after the election. I first compare alliances and major parties' nomination strategies. I then focus on the role caste played in the Uttar Pradesh results, which was arguably the biggest upset the BJP faced in this election. I then use this data and case to argue that while the opposition alliance did play the caste card somewhat to its advantage, both alliances' claims of inclusion suffer from a series of essential limitations that correspond to enduring features of politics in India.

Alliances' Caste-based Strategy: The NDA Beat at its Own Game

Regarding representational outcome, the 2024 election has thrown some interesting results. For the first time since Independence, the share of OBC MPs in the Lok Sabha matches the number of upper caste MPs, at roughly 26 percent of the seats each. The share of Intermediary Caste MPs remains stable, and the representation of groups benefiting from mandated representation (SCs and STs).[3] The share of upper-caste MPs has decreased from 28.5 to 25.8 percent.

Table 1. Caste Group and Community Representation in the Lok Sabha (2009–2024)[4]

	2009 (%)	**2014 (%)**	**2019 (%)**	**2024 (%)**
Upper Castes	29.70	28.70	28.50	25.80
Intermediary Castes	13.60	14.70	14.40	14.20
OBCs	21.90	23.20	23.00	25.40
SC	16.40	16.60	15.80	16.20
ST	9.60	8.80	9.00	9.40
Sikhs	1.30	1.30	1.70	1.70
Muslims	5.30	4.20	5.00	4.40
Non-ST Christians	2.20	2.20	2.00	2.20
Other Religious Minorities	0.00	0.20	0.60	0.60
Unidentified	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.20

Source: The Social Profile of the Indian National and Provincial Elected Representatives (SPINPER) project. https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/en/content/sociologie-des-elus-nationaux-et-regionaux-du-raj-l-union-indienne-contemporaine-lia-spinper

Compared to 2019, the variations are modest. There are 15 fewer upper castes MPs in an assembly of 543 members (from 155 MPs to 140 MPs) and only 14 additional OBC members (from 124 MPs to 138 MPs). Most of these shifts occurred in the Hindi Belt and, for the most part, in Uttar Pradesh (See Table 2 and Section 2). There are fewer Muslim MPs (from 27 to 24) and two more Sikh MPs (from 11 to 13). The representation of Christian communities remains stable, accounting for the fact that this category overlaps with several Scheduled Tribes MPs coded as Christians in the data.[5]

However modest, these variations are symbolically significant. While a rise of OBCs has marked national politics since the late 1980s (Jaffrelot, 2003), the upper castes have always remained ahead and represented well above their demographic share (Verniers & Jaffrelot, 2020). The rise of OBCs occurred during a short period, from 1989 to a peak in 2004. After 2004, OBC representation plateaued and only marginally increased in 2014 (see Table 1). The rise of representation of OBCs in 2024 is sharp, even sharper, when one isolates the Hindi Belt, which has been the main battleground for late 20th-century plebeian politics (Jaffrelot & Kumar, 2009).

Table 2. Caste Group and Community Representation in the Hindi Belt (2009–2024)

	2009 (%)	**2014** (%)	**2019** (%)	**2024** (%)
Upper Castes	41.6	42.0	38.9	32.7
Other Backward Classes	20.4	23.5	25.7	31.0
Intermediary Castes	6.2	6.6	6.2	6.6
SC	17.3	17.7	17.3	17.7
ST	9.3	8.0	8.0	8.4
Muslims	4.4	1.8	3.5	3.1
Sikhs	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
Non-ST Christians	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.0
Unidentified	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4

Source: SPINPER project

In 2024, upper caste representation is down to where it was 20 years ago when the BJP lost a national election. However, the gap between upper castes and OBCs was as wide as six points, as Muslims' representation was then on the rise. In 2024, both groups are nearly equivalent in terms of share of representation.

Comparing the Alliances' Nomination Strategies

Variations become more pronounced when we compare alliances' nomination strategies and their outcomes (see Table 3).[6] The NDA nominated more upper-caste candidates than INDIA (31.3 percent against 19.2 percent), slightly fewer OBC candidates (25.3 percent against 26.4 percent), a similar share of intermediary castes' candidates, and non-minority SC and ST candidates. The main difference between the two alliances is the nomination of candidates belonging to religious minorities.

While the NDA continued with its policy and practice of excluding minorities, INDIA distributed 14 percent of its tickets to members of various religious minority groups. NDA parties distributed only four tickets to Muslim candidates (all lost), seven tickets to Sikh candidates, seven to Christian candidates, and three to Buddhist candidates. In contrast, INDIA gave 80 tickets to minority candidates and half to Muslim candidates.

Looking at *jati*-level ticket distribution, one finds other variations and similarities. Within the OBCs, both alliances privileged non-dominant OBC representation over the representation of dominant OBC groups such as Yadavs or Kurmis.[7] Among the upper caste, INDIA nominated much fewer Rajput candidates than the BJP.

From here, three observations can be made. First, Table 3 shows that the BJP repeated the strategy of preferential representation of upper caste and non-dominant backward groups it had adopted in the previous two general elections. One in three NDA candidates belonged to the upper castes, while only one in five INDIA candidates belonged to that category.

Second, INDIA sought to emulate the BJP's strategy of diversifying representation among non-dominant OBCs. These are the groups among whom support for the BJP increased significantly in 2014 and 2019 (Jaffrelot, 2019). These are also the groups that have been historically the most under-represented among Hindus. Even Congress, which in the past has never offered much representation to non-dominant OBCs, opened its ranks to OBC representation in 2024 (see Table 4).

Third, the differences between the two alliances are starker when considering representational outcomes. Upper caste MPs comprise a third of all NDA MPs (33.2 percent), against 13 percent for INDIA. There are no religious minority MPs in the NDA, except the MP from Arunachal West, Mr. Kiren Rijiju. INDIA has a higher share of representation of non-dominant Yadavs OBCs than the BJP (keeping in mind that the BJP has more MPs). These differences hold when we isolate the BJP and Congress within their respective alliances (See Table 4). Upper castes comprise 36.4 percent of all BJP candidates (compared to 34.6 percent in 2019), against 21.2 percent for Congress (which contested fewer seats than in 2019).

Table 3: Caste and Religious Minorities' Representation in the 2024 General Elections (percentage)

	NDA Candidates (%)	**INDIA Candidates (%)**	**NDA MPs (%)**	**INDIA MPs (%)**
Upper Castes	31.1	19.3	33.2	12.9
Brahmins	14.7	9.7	14.7	5.9
Rajputs	6.9	3.0	8.7	1.5
Other UCs	9.7	6.5	9.8	5.4
Intermediary Castes	14.7	13.8	16.1	13.4
Marathas	4.7	4.8	3.5	5.9
Jats	2.6	2.1	2.4	3.5
Lingayats	1.5	1.1	1.0	1.5
Patidars	1.5	1.4	2.4	0.0
Reddys	1.7	2.3	2.1	1.5
Vokkaligas	1.1	1.1	1.7	0.5
Other ICs	1.7	0.7	2.8	0.5
Other Backward Classes	25.3	26.4	26.2	29.7
Yadavs	2.4	4.2	3.1	3.5
Kurmis	2.4	2.7	3.5	3.0
Other OBCs	20.5	19.8	19.6	23.3
Non-minority SC	15.8	17.5	13.3	18.8
Non-minority ST	9.1	8.7	10.5	8.4
Muslims	0.7	7.1	0.0	7.9
Sikhs	1.3	2.8	0.0	3.0
Christians	1.3	3.7	0.0	5.0
Buddhists	0.6	0.5	0.7	0.5
Unidentified	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.5
Grand Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	N= 537	N= 565	N= 286	N= 202

Source: SPINPER project

Table 4: Caste and Religious Minorities Representation by Parties and their partners' candidates

	BJP (%)	**NDA Partners** (%)	**INC** (%)	**INDIA Partners** (%)
Upper Castes	36.4	7.2	21.2	16.7
Other Backward Classes	21.8	41.2	20.6	34.2
Intermediary Castes	11.8	27.8	16.9	9.6
Non-minority SC	16.4	13.4	15.7	20.0
Non-minority ST	10.7	2.1	11.7	4.6
Muslims	0.2	3.1	5.8	8.8
Sikhs	1.6	0.0	2.5	3.3
Christians	0.5	5.2	4.6	2.5
Buddhists	0.7	0.0	0.9	0.0
Unidentified	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	N= 440	N= 97	N= 325	N= 240

Source: SPINPER project

Table 5: Caste and Religious Minorities Representation by Parties and their partners' MPs

	BJP (%)	**NDA Partners** (%)	**INC** (%)	**INDIA Partners** (%)
Upper Castes	37.9	8.7	15.2	10.7
Other Backward Classes	23.3	41.3	14.1	44.7
Intermediary Castes	12.1	37.0	16.2	10.7
Non-minority SC	13.8	10.9	20.2	17.5
Non-minority ST	12.1	2.2	13.1	3.9
Muslims	0.0	0.0	7.1	8.7
Sikhs	0.0	0.0	4.0	1.9
Christians	0.0	0.0	9.1	1.0
Buddhists	0.8	0.0	1.0	0.0
Unidentified	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	N= 240	N= 103	N= 99	N= 46

Source: SPINPER project

Again, these differences are slightly more pronounced among MPs (see Table 5). Upper castes comprise 38 percent of all BJP MPs (compared to 35.9 percent in 2019) and 21.2 percent of all Congress MPs. The OBC representation is equivalent between the two parties. Congress has a higher share of intermediary caste MPs than BJP.

Regarding alliance partners, most of BJP's partners' candidates belong to the OBC and intermediary caste (78.3 percent). Congress' partners also distributed their tickets preferentially to these two groups, which is not surprising given that INDIA is in good part made up of Southern state-based parties that have a history of providing representation to backward groups. The key distinctions between the two are upper caste preferentialism and minority exclusion of the NDA.

As far as political representation is concerned, the BJP has been trying since 2014 to achieve two seemingly contradictory goals: to provide preferential representation to traditional elites while increasing the representation to backward classes. Particularly in Northern India, the BJP seeks to improve the backward classes' representation without diluting the representation of upper castes. Winning large numbers of seats, as it has done in the Hindi belt since 2014, helps the pursuit of these two objectives. So does the exclusion of religious minorities.

On the other side, INDIA chose to increase OBC representation in 2024 by reducing the representation of upper castes, thus maintaining some space for religious minorities. As a result, even though the NDA won far more seats than INDIA, the social composition of the opposition ended up being more diverse and inclusive than the BJP's version of politics of inclusion.

There are, however, important caveats to this assertion. To begin with, the variations observed are primarily limited to one state, Uttar Pradesh, where the BJP faced its most significant upset in 2024. The unexpected performance of the Samajwadi Party, which won 37 seats (Congress won six seats), largely contributed to the variation in OBC representation nationally.

Turn of the Tide in Uttar Pradesh

National elections in India are often won or lost in Uttar Pradesh, a state that sends 80 legislators to the Lok Sabha. In 2014, the BJP won 71 of those 80 seats (73 with its partner, the Apna Dal) and 62 in 2019 (64 with Apna Dal). The BJP has also been in power with a single majority in the state assembly since 2017. In 2024, the BJP and its partners lost thirty of the sixty-four seats they had won five years earlier. They could only win two new seats, in Bijnor and Amroha. The Samajwadi Party—Congress alliance prevailed in that state, winning forty-three seats, including thirty previously held by the BJP and the Apna Dal.

Against the BJP's strategy of nominating non-dominant OBCs and upper caste candidates, the opposition alliance designed a campaign target-

ing all non-upper caste segments of the population, concentrating ticket distribution among those groups. Thus, half of the Samajwadi Party's tickets went to OBC (29) and Jat candidates (2). Sixteen tickets were given to Scheduled Caste candidates, and four were given to Muslim candidates, leaving only 11 seats for upper caste candidates. On the other hand, Congress passed half of its tickets to caste candidates and distributed the remaining eight tickets to a handful of candidates across different groups. This distribution of nominations helped the Samajwadi Party to center its campaign around three broad backward groups—*Picchda*, *Dalit,* and *Alpsankhyak* (lower castes, Dalits, and minorities) —while its partner continued to cater to upper castes representation.

Table 6: Caste and Religious Communities' Representation Among Major Parties' Candidates in Uttar Pradesh, General Elections, 2024

	BJP	**BJP Partners***	**SP**	**INC**
Upper Castes	37		11	9
Brahmins	15		5	4
Rajputs	17		2	2
Other UCs	5		4	3
Intermediary Castes	2	1	2	1
Jats	2	1	2	1
Other Backward Classes	20	4	29	2
Yadavs	1	1	5	
Kurmis	6	1	8	1
Gujjars	2	1	1	
Non-Dominant. OBCs	11	1	15	1
Scheduled Castes	16	1	16	3
Jatav	2		5	1
Pasis	5		7	
Other SCs	9	1	4	2
Muslims			4	2
Total	75	6	62	17

*Note:**BJP partners in Uttar Pradesh include the Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), the Rashtriya Lok Dal and the SBSP.

Source: SPINPER project

Within the backward categories, the Samajwadi Party distributed only five tickets to its core support base: the Yadavs (all of them belonging to the same family), eight tickets to Kurmi candidates, and 16 other tickets to candidates belonging to 11 different backward groups. The SP diversified its candidate recruitment compared to previous years, emulating the BJP's outreach to non-dominant backward groups. It did not, however, replicate the BJP's preference for upper castes representation.

Given the differences in performance between the two alliances, the caste profiles of MPs from Uttar Pradesh are therefore contrasted. A total of 17 of BJP's 33 MPs belong to the upper caste, against only five out of 37 MPs of the Samajwadi Party. Nineteen of the 29 Samajwadi Party OBC candidates won. On the other hand, the nine upper-caste Congress members performed poorly. Only two were elected.

Table 7: Caste and Religious Communities' Representation among Major Parties' MPs in Uttar Pradesh, General Elections, 2024

	BJP	**BJP Partners***	**SP**	**INC**
Upper Castes	17		5	2
Brahmins	7		1	2
Rajputs	9		2	
Other UCs	1		2	1
Intermediary Castes	1	1	1	
Jats	1	1	1	
Other backward Classes	7	2	19	1
Yadavs			5	
Kurmis	3	1	6	
Gujjars	1	1		
Non-Dominant OBCs	3	0	8	1
Scheduled Castes	8		8	2
Jatav	1			1
Pasis	3		5	
Other SCs	4		3	1
Muslims			4	1
Total	33	3	37	6

Note: * BJP partners in Uttar Pradesh include the Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), the Rashtriya Lok Dal and the SBSP.

Source: SPINPER project

Among Scheduled Caste candidates, both alliances privileged the representation of non-Jatav Dalits. Overall, upper caste representation in Uttar Pradesh significantly decreased (see Table 8), while OBC representation surpassed it for the first time.

Table 8: Caste and Communities Representation in Uttar Pradesh – Lok Sabha (2009–2024)

	2009 (%)	**2014** (%)	**2019** (%)	**2024** (%)
UC	43.8	43.8	38.8	31.3
OBC	21.3	27.5	27.5	36.3
IC	2.5	5.0	3.8	3.8
SC	22.5	22.5	21.3	22.5
Muslims	8.8	0.0	7.5	6.3
Christians	1.3	1.3	1.3	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: SPINPER project

This head-counting exercise does not suggest nor demonstrate that the ascriptive identity of candidates necessarily drove party performance or influenced electoral behavior. There is no evidence, for example, that upper caste candidates individually performed any worse than candidates from other groups, both in terms of victory margins and strike rates.[8] There were also 54 seats where alliance candidates from different caste group backgrounds competed against each other to no specific group's advantage. Electoral dynamics in India are more nuanced and complex than parties' recruitment strategies, often based on simplistic notions about caste-based voting. Expectations were defeated in Nagina, for example, where Dalit leader Chandrashekhar Azad won with a large margin against major parties' candidates, banking on the collapse of the BSP and on the inability of both SP and BJP to establish themselves as alternatives to many Dalit voters.

Candidates' Experience

Within the Uttar Pradesh battleground, much has been written about the Faizabad contest, where the Samajwadi Party candidate, Awadhesh Prasad, a Dalit, defeated BJP's incumbent candidate, two-time MP Lallu Singh. Beyond the symbolism of a Dalit challenger defeating an upper caste incumbent in a non-reserved seat, the contest bore added significance as the seat includes the town of Ayodhya, the site of a disputed land where a temple dedicated to Ram was inaugurated five months

earlier (Mashal, Kumar, & Loke, 2024).[9] Even though the outcome of this contest is the product of a complex interlocking of personal, partisan, local, and regional factors, it came to symbolize the confrontation of approaches between the two parties, with the Samajwadi Party reclaiming a plebeian role that the BJP had assumed in that state in recent years.[10] It also helped the Samajwadi Party to display its candidates' political experience.

However, an examination of other candidates suggests that Awadhesh Prasad, a nine-time MLA, six-time minister in four cabinets, founding party member, and a leading figure among the Pasi community, might have been an exception. For instance, 41 out of the Samajwadi Party's 66 candidates contested for the first time in a general election. Only 14 had been elected MLAs before, and only five of them contested as incumbent MLAs. Among the 25 candidates who had contested in a Lok Sabha election before, only six have been elected more than twice. In other words, beyond a nomination strategy skewed toward non-dominant groups, the Samajwadi Party candidates did not have remarkable features, such as extensive political experience, that might account for the party's success.

The turning of the tide in Uttar Pradesh contributed to the overall variation in group representations in the Lok Sabha. In 2024, the share of upper-caste MPs in the Hindi Belt has decreased from 38.9 to 32.7 percent, while the share of OBC MPs has increased from 25.7 to 31 percent. Intermediary Castes and Muslims' representation remains at 6 and 8.4 precent respectively. Within the Hindi belt, the changes come, for the most part, from Uttar Pradesh. Six additional OBC MPs were elected across other Hindi belt states, where the BJP also lost some ground.[11] Across these 10 states, upper-caste representation declined by 15 seats (from 82 to 67).

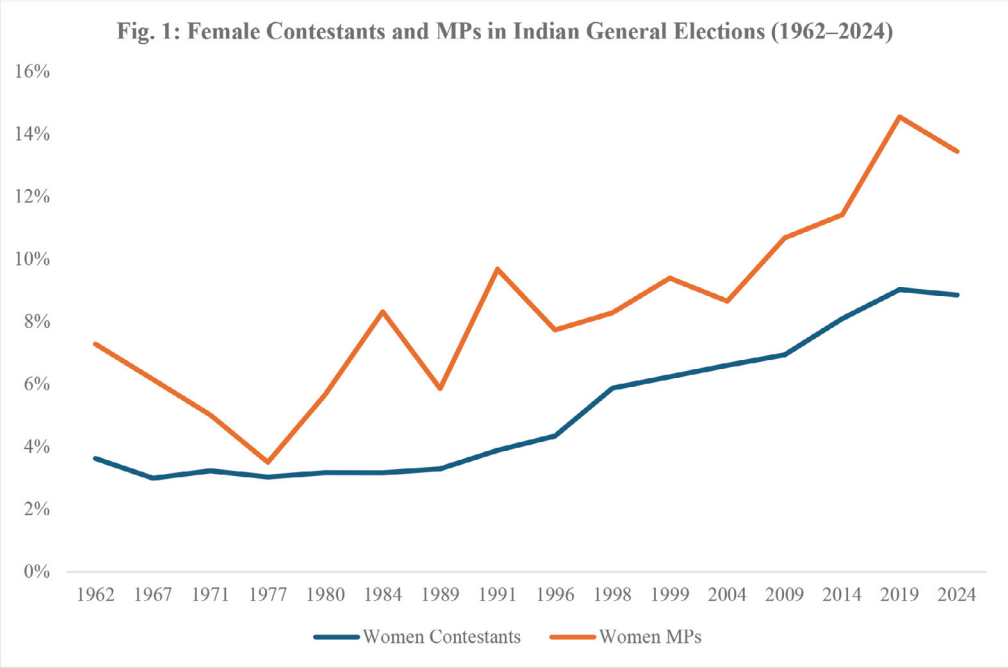
The Limits of Inclusion

The geographical limitation is not the only reason why the claims of inclusion of both alliances ought to be nuanced. There are at least four other significant caveats, including the continuing marginalization of women and Muslims by major parties, the ever-increasing cost of entry to politics—measured by the evolution of candidates' assets—and the fact that in many states, NDA and INDIA candidates' profiles remained undifferentiated.

A Declining Presence of Women in the Lok Sabha

Seventy-three women were elected in the 2024 election, six fewer than in 2019. For the first time since 1996, the share of women candidates and MPs has not increased. More women contested than in 2019 (740 against 727), but so did men.

Women comprised 16 percent of NDA candidates, against 13 percent of INDIA candidates. The ratio of women elected MPs from both alliances is identical. In 2019, women's representation increased due to the decision of two parties — the Trinamool and the



Source: SPINPER project

Table 9: Party-wise Women Nomination and Representation in the 2024 General Election

	Women Candidates	**Percentage of Women Candidates**	**Women MPs**	**Percentage Women MPs**
BJP	69	15.6	30	12.5
BJP Partners	16	15.8	4	8.7
NDA total	85	15.7	34	11.9
INC	41	12.5	13	13.1
INC Partners	35	14.1	11	10.7
INDIA Total	76	13.2	24	11.9
AITC	12	28.6	11	37.9
BJD	7	33.3	0	--
Other Major Non-Aligned Parties	58	8.4	4	33.3

Source: SPINPER project

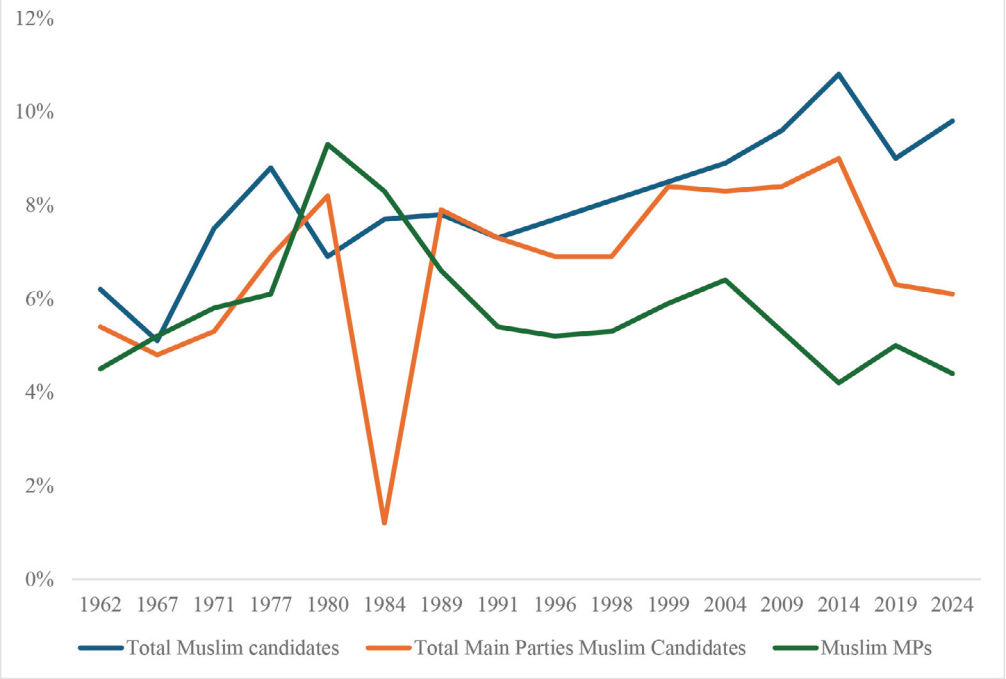
Biju Janata Dal — to allocate 40 percent and 33 percent of their tickets to women candidates (Verniers, Saran, & Sunaad, 2022). While the BJD maintained its commitment in 2024, the Trinamool reduced its number of women candidates. However, 11 women candidates from the Trinamool got elected against none for the BJD, who lost in every seat they contested to the BJP in Odisha.

Nominations are not the only way women find themselves politically marginalized. A majority of the 79 women elected in 2019 either lost or did not contest. There are only 17 women MPs who have been elected more than twice. A total of 44 of the 73 women elected in 2024 have been elected for the first time, indicating that it is tough for women to get nominated and to stay in politics.

Weak Muslims' Representation among Significant Opposition Parties

A similar observation can be made about Muslim representation and minority representation more broadly. While the opposition got a few Muslim candidates elected (21), their nomination rate decreased across parties compared to previous years (see Fig. 2). There are three fewer Muslim MPs in the 2024 Lok Sabha compared' to the previous election.

Fig. 2: Muslims' Nomination and Representation in the Lok Sabha



Source: SPINPER project

Congress and state-based parties drive the decrease in nominations, as the BJP has been consistently excluding Muslims. In 2019, the Congress and other state-based parties distributed respectively 8.3 and 10.3 percent of their tickets to Muslim candidates. In 2024, these numbers decrease to 5.7 and 8.8 percent respectively. Overall, the representation of religious minorities among state-based parties has reduced over the last three elections (see Table 10). More Muslim candidates contested than in 2019, but fewer on major party tickets.

Table 10: Muslims and other religious minorities' representation among major parties

	Religious Groups	**2009**	**2014**	**2019**	**2024**
INC	Muslims	32	33	35	19
	Other Religious Minorities	20	18	22	26
	Total candidates	438	464	421	328
	Percentage Minorities	12	11	14	14
BJP	Muslims	5	7	6	1
	Other Religious Minorities	3	6	8	11
	Total candidates	426	428	436	441
	Percentage Minorities	1.9	3.0	3.2	2.7
State-based Parties	Muslims	207	286	128	113
	Other Religious Minorities	22	47	34	34
	Total candidates	1476	2167	1234	1279
	Percentage Minorities	15.5	15.4	13.1	11.5

Source: SPINPER project

Within alliances, Congress distributed half of all tickets allocated to Muslims by INDIA (19). Only five of Congress' 21 partners included Muslims among their candidates. BJP, as we saw earlier, excluded Muslims from its list and barely offered representation to other religious minority groups. Its partners, too, exclude religious minorities.

State vs. National Trends

So far, I have focused on aggregate representation outcomes and the case of Uttar Pradesh. Comparing INDIA and NDA nomination patterns across states gives us a more precise idea of the differences between the two alliances. Considering 16 significant states, one sees that the skewed representation of the upper castes within the NDA holds

across most states. Barring Haryana, Jharkhand, and West Bengal, upper caste representation is significantly higher within the NDA. In West Bengal, they make 65 percent of their candidates, against 32 percent for INDIA.

Table 11: Caste Groups and Religious Minorities Representation among INDIA and NDA Candidates

	Alliance	**UC**	**OBC**	**IC**	**Religious Minorities**
Andhra Pradesh	INDIA		28.0	32.0	16.0
	NDA	4.0	28.0	48.0	
Assam	INDIA	14.3	21.4		28.6
	NDA	30.8	23.1		7.7
Bihar	INDIA	15.4	53.8		10.3
	NDA	35.3	55.9		2.9
Chhattisgarh	INDIA	8.3	41.7		
	NDA	45.5	9.1		
Delhi	INDIA	57.1	14.3		
	NDA	57.1	14.3	14.3	
Gujarat	INDIA	4.3	39.1	26.1	
	NDA	11.5	34.6	26.9	
Haryana	INDIA	40.0	20.0	20.0	
	NDA	30.0	20.0	30.0	
Jharkhand	INDIA	33.3	25.0		
	NDA	21.4	35.7		
Karnataka	INDIA		20.0	43.3	3.3
	NDA	10.7	17.9	46.4	
Kerala	INDIA	27.5	20.0		42.5
	NDA	40.0	40.0		10.0
Madhya Pradesh	INDIA	33.3	22.2	7.4	
	NDA	34.5	27.6	3.4	
Maharashtra	INDIA	4.2	22.9	50.0	2.1
	NDA	13.5	15.4	46.2	
Rajasthan	INDIA	20.0	16.0	28.0	
	NDA	36.0	8.0	28.0	
Tamil Nadu	INDIA	16.2	56.8	2.7	5.4
	NDA	15.4	61.5		2.6
Uttar Pradesh	INDIA	25.3	39.2	3.8	7.6
	NDA	45.1	29.3	3.7	
West Bengal	INDIA	31.8	4.5		27.3
	NDA	64.3	2.4		2.4

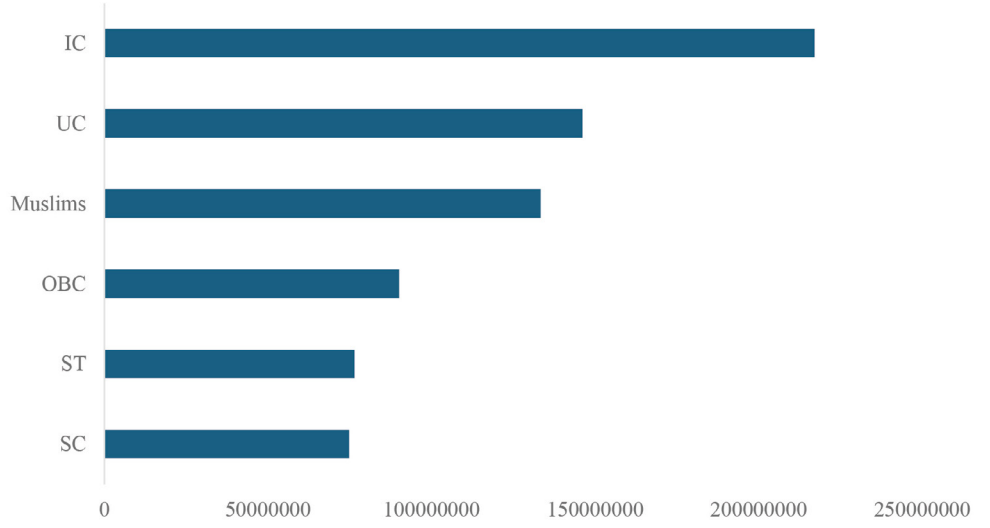
Source: SPINPER project

In states where intermediary castes dominate—Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh—there is much less differentiation between the two alliances. Minority representation in those states tends to be low, even within the opposition alliance. Regarding OBC nominations, the differences between the two alliances are less marked. INDIA nominated more OBC candidates in seven states and a similar share of OBCs in seven other states. In other words, upper caste preference is a national trend for the NDA. Regarding other groups, the differences between the two alliances are less marked, other than for religious minority representation. The two alliances have much less differentiation in states where intermediary castes dominate.

Assets

Finally, the inclusiveness of the new Parliament is mitigated by the enduring elitist character of political recruitment, measured in personal wealth. Assets data provided by the Association for Democratic Reforms reveal that candidates in 2024 were, on average, wealthier than in 2019 (ADR, 2024); 504 of 543 MPs are self-declared crorepatis. Controlling for outliers, MPs declare, on average, 11.7 crore of net assets. There are important variations between caste groups. Intermediary caste MPs are significantly wealthier than all others, followed by Upper Castes and Muslim MPs. OBC, ST, and SC MPs trail behind.

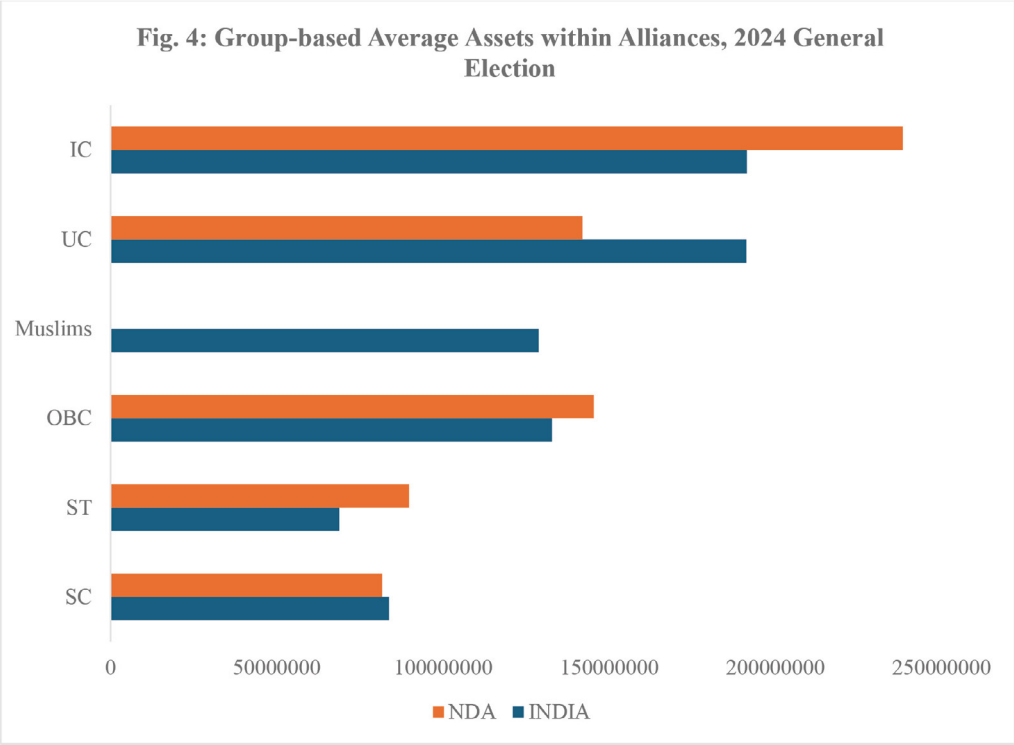
Fig. 3: Group-based MPs' Average of Net Assets, 2024 Lok Sabha



Source: Association for Democratic Reforms (*https://adrindia.org/*)

A simple cross-alliance and cross-parties analysis reveals that these variations hold within the two alliances, which do not differ much from one another. The NDA fielded wealthier intermediary caste candidates than INDIA.

The opposition alliance fielded fewer but richer upper-caste candidates than the NDA. These variations hold when one isolates Congress and BJP within their respective alliances.[12]



Source: Association for Democratic Reforms

Observations

This glance at the caste and community profile of the new Lok Sabha reveals a certain convergence in nomination practices between major parties. BJP, Congress, and their respective allies adopted a similar strategy of courting the more disadvantaged groups within the lower castes.

The two alliances, however, differ in two crucial aspects: upper caste preferentialism and inclusion of religious minorities. The diversification of backward class representation continues and is now embraced by more major parties. The two alliances differ regarding attitudes toward upper caste and religious minorities representation. While they lost the election, the INDIA alliance offered voters a more diverse and inclusive figure than its adversary. The nomination strategy adopted by Congress reveals a desire for transformation within a party that was historically skewed towards traditional elites and dominant groups. The nomination of a Dalit president in 2022, a campaign led by Rahul Gandhi on themes that used to belong to the socialist opposi-

tion to Congress, marks a desire to reinvent the party. These developments mark a significant transformation of India's representational politics, indicating that India is progressing towards a more representative polity.

That said, even the opposition alliance efforts remain limited by longstanding features of electoral politics that go against more meaningful forms and substance of political inclusion. Minority representation within non-NDA parties keeps decreasing, and so does the representation of women. Assets data reveals that competitive pressure still pushes parties to favor independently wealthy candidates. The changes are meaningful but limited to a few North Indian states. Political recruitment patterns in South, East, and Western India remain, by and large, unchanged and skewed towards locally dominant groups. Once again, the story of Uttar Pradesh has been unduly conflated into a national story.

The 2024 Indian general election reminds us that representational outcomes in Indian elections are a function of political parties' recruitment strategies and practices, which may or may not be aligned with the transformations of electoral behavior. Aggregate support numbers obfuscate the depth of variation that exists between and within states. Despite efforts to become more inclusive, elite bias in political recruitment persists.

Ultimately, caste was only one aspect of the 2024 campaign. While elections are fought on many other issues, caste remains central for candidate nomination strategies and as a differentiation tool between parties. The opposition insisted on caste, as the BJP maintains an ambiguous stance towards it. It opposes the use of caste as a policy variable—the caste census is a hot-button issue for its upper caste base—but cannot afford to discard it as a political tool since it also courts the votes of groups that are deeply attached to affirmative action and caste-based forms of social justice. Besides, the BJP now governs in a coalition with partners who do not share its uneasy relationship with caste.

Acknowledgements

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their comments and suggestions. This paper was funded through a grant from the Saxena Centre for Contemporary South Asia at Brown University. The Author declares no competing interest in the paper. Identifying election candidates' caste is a qualitative exercise. All efforts have been made to avoid misidentification through layers of verification, but errors remain possible.

Notes

1 According to the Lokniti 2024 post-poll survey, the all-India vote share of the BJP among Hindu upper caste voters has been 53 percent in 2024 and 2019, and 47 percent in 2014.

2 According to various Lokniti electoral surveys, OBC and Dalit support for the BJP has been increasing from 2014 onwards, with however strong regional variations and strong *jati*-level variations.

3 Intermediary Caste group mostly historically landowning agrarian castes such as Lingayats and Vokkaligas in Karnataka, Reddys, Kammas, and Kapus in Andhra Pradesh, Marathas in Maharashtra, and Jats across North India. Some of these castes are divided into various sub-groups that are at times officially classified in different caste categories, such as Lingayats, Marathas, and Patels. Jats are formally classified as OBCs in some states, like Uttar Pradesh and not in others. They have been classified as Intermediary Castes in the data, given their socio-economic profile.

4 Variations in the data for 2009–2019 come from updating and reducing the number of undefined entries in the data.

5 To address the issue of overlap of categories, MPs have been first sorted by religion and then by caste. Thus, Jat Sikhs have been classified as religious minorities rather than Intermediary Castes. Similarly, ST Christians and ST or SC Buddhist have been classified as religious minorities rather than as SCs or STs. As a result, the SC, ST and IC figures might be slightly under-estimated. This, however, concerns a handful of cases, unlikely to affect the overall interpretation of the data.

6 Alliances here comprise parties that allied either with BJP or Congress and had seat sharing agreements. These include 542 candidates who contested on an NDA ticket and excludes 29 RPI (A) candidates who contested outside seat sharing agreement in states other than Maharashtra. As far as INDIA is concerned, I have included 576 candidates contesting in three sets of seat-sharing agreements: INDIA, INDIA-Left Democratic Front and INDIA-United Democratic from in Kerala. This explains why the total of INDIA candidates (576) exceeds the total number of seats. This list excludes 207 candidates of INDIA-affiliated parties that contested outside seat-sharing agreements in states other than their state of origin. This includes for the most part various left or communist parties, and a few state-based and local parties.

7 Non-dominant OBC is a category more relevant to Northern India, where OBCs have been sorted according to differences in demography, status, and political representa-

tion. Thus, in northern India, dominant OBCs include Yadavs, Kurmis, and Gujjars. This does not preclude the fact that some non-dominant OBC groups may be dominant locally. The category used here is meant to have some transversal validity. Absence of sufficient jati-level data among SC candidates does not allow me to proceed to the same analysis among SC candidates, outside Uttar Pradesh.

8 In fact, BJP's upper caste candidates still had a better strike rate (45 percent) than its OBC and intermediary caste candidates (36 percent).

9 The Faizabad seat has also been a BJP stronghold since the early 1990s. Vinay Katiyar served three times as its MP, in 1991, 1996 and 1998. Lallu Singh was elected twice in 2014 and 2019.

10 For an excellent, detailed account of the Faizabad election, read Ghazala Jamil (2024).

11 The BJP lost 51 seats in the Hindi belt. Twenty-two of these seats were held by upper-caste MPs, against only seven by OBC MPs. Six IC MPs (Jats) also lost their seats. The influx of new non-dominant OBC MPs came mostly from the Samajwadi Party, which barely nominated any Yadav. In total, 29 OBC candidates were elected in Uttar Pradesh, against 22 in 2019.

12 This is not to suggest that there was no financial advantage for NDA candidates, who benefitted from the BJP's stark political funding's advantage. See Association for Democratic Reforms' reports on party funding declarations.

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Crossing Red Lines? The BJP and Democratic Legitimacy in the 2024 Election

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between democratic legitimacy of political parties and their electoral outcomes, to identify *when* concerns over democratic process and norms matter to electoral outcomes. In so doing, this paper seeks to contribute to the burgeoning scholarship on the twin dynamics of democratic erosion and resilience in the contemporary moment. The focus of this paper is on India's 2024 general election, in which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) underperformed relative to expectations. Drawing on original post-poll survey data from the Indian Election Survey, we show that economic grievances and widespread perceptions of everyday authoritarian governance undermined the BJP's democratic legitimacy. As voters began to look outside the BJP, questions about the legitimacy of the election process became more prominent. Drawing on voter perception, we conclude that democratic legitimacy emerged as a significant factor in weakening BJP's electoral dominance.

Keywords: democratic legitimacy, Hindutva, governance, techno-patrimonialism, welfarism, secularism

¿Cruzando las líneas rojas? El BJP y la legitimidad democrática en las elecciones de 2024

Resumen

Este artículo examina la relación entre la legitimidad democrática de los partidos políticos y sus resultados electorales, para iden-

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tificar cuándo las preocupaciones sobre el proceso y las normas democráticas influyen en los resultados electorales. De este modo, este trabajo busca contribuir a la creciente investigación sobre la dinámica paralela de la erosión y la resiliencia democráticas en la actualidad. Este trabajo se centra en las elecciones generales de la India de 2024, en las que el Partido Bharatiya Janata (BJP) obtuvo un rendimiento inferior al esperado. Basándonos en datos originales de la encuesta posterior a las elecciones de la Encuesta Electoral de la India, demostramos que las quejas económicas y la percepción generalizada de un gobierno autoritario cotidiano socavaron la legitimidad democrática del BJP. A medida que los votantes comenzaron a buscar información más allá del BJP, las dudas sobre la legitimidad del proceso electoral se hicieron más evidentes. Basándonos en la percepción de los votantes, concluimos que la legitimidad democrática se convirtió en un factor importante que socavó el dominio electoral del BJP.

Palabras clave: legitimidad democrática, Hindutva, gobernanza, tecnopatrimonialismo, bienestarismo, secularismo

跨越红线？印度人民党与2024年大选的民主合法性

摘要

本文分析了政党的民主合法性与其选举结果之间的关系，以确定“对民主过程和规范的担忧”何时会对选举结果产生影响。为此，本文旨在对“关于当代民主侵蚀与复原力双重动态的新兴学术研究”作贡献。本文聚焦于印度2024年大选，在这次大选中，印度人民党(BJP)的表现低于预期。基于一项来自印度选举调查的原创后民意调查数据，我们发现，经济方面的不满情绪以及对日常威权治理的普遍感知削弱了BJP的民主合法性。随着选民开始将目光投向BJP之外，关于选举过程合法性的质疑也愈发明显。基于选民感知，我们得出结论：民主合法性已成为削弱BJP选举主导地位的重要因素。

关键词：民主合法性，印度教特性，治理，技术家产制，福利主义，世俗主义

Introduction

As the 2024 general elections in India unfolded, a dominant Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) declared "*Abki baar 400 paar*" (this time we will cross 400 seats). The phrase captured India's democratic moment. The election was to be an anointment, not a serious competitive contest. To the careful observer, this was no surprise. Since its rise to dominance in 2014, the BJP has seemingly demonstrated its impatience with liberal democratic norms. Over the years, there have been growing concerns that the government has systematically weaponized investigative agencies, tax laws, sedition laws, anti-terror laws and laws regulating foreign funding for non-profit organizations as a tool to shrink space for political opposition and dissent.

Global indices had captured this perceived turn to authoritarianism, much to the consternation of the BJP. In 2018, for instance, the V-Dem Institute had expressed concerns about democratic backsliding in India, and by 2021, it downgraded India from an "electoral democracy" to an "electoral autocracy"—although concerns about democratic backsliding seemed to have little effect on the electorate with the BJP sweeping the 2019 national election. In 2024, the V-Dem Institute doubled down on these claims, referring to India as "one of the worst autocratizers lately" across the world. However, other features of democratic practice seemed to be intact: voter turnout in elections remained high, even increased in some elections, and India did witness routine transfer of power in states where the BJP lost power. After all, as Ashutosh Varshney has shown, India has always been a democracy with deficits in liberal freedoms, even as these have now widened in the last decade (Varshney 2022). Perhaps this was nothing unusual for Indian democracy and little concern for the electorate?

Yet something shifted in the 2024 parliamentary elections. Despite public declarations of 400 seats, the BJP only secured 240 seats in the 2024 election, worse than the previous two national elections and far short of its lofty aims. Indeed, many commentators, including the authors of this article, claimed that the BJP's worse-than-expected performance was beyond politics-as-usual; it represented anxieties that the government was crossing "democratic red lines" with the electorate. Why did these distinctions emerge in the 2024 election?

More precisely, to what extent do concerns about *democratic legitimacy* of political parties play a role in electoral outcomes and *when* does democratic legitimacy matter for these outcomes? Of course, it is difficult to precisely define a complicated concept like democratic legitimacy. In this piece, we restrict ourselves to two dimensions of the concept: a) the legitimacy attached to an *action* by a government according to accepted democratic principles; and b) whether the *process* of democratic selection is thought to be fair.

Empirically, there is an ambiguous relationship between formal notions of democracy and democratic

legitimacy with the citizen. After the 2020 Presidential Election in the United States, only 21 percent of Republican voters believed that the elections were administered and run somewhat well or very well, despite little evidence that there was formal democratic backsliding (Pew Research Center 2024). At the other extreme, autocrats may engender significant mass support through a party machine that has privileged access to resources that can be distributed to citizens in exchange for votes (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010). Thus, whether or not India has seen significant democratic backsliding need not be consequential to the democratic legitimacy of the BJP government.

To understand when democratic legitimacy matters for electoral outcomes, we describe a model of ethno-nationalist party hegemony in which leaders and parties with authoritarian characteristics can claim democratic legitimacy using a combination of ethnic identity-based appeals and the tactical deployment of welfare benefits. In particular, ethno-nationalist appeals create a sufficiently large identity-based coalition to win elections. However, such ethno-nationalist coalitions are endowed with huge ideological contradictions in terms of economic class and even policy demands (not to mention caste and language in the Indian context). A hegemonic party or leader can then use benefit transfers and the largesse of the state to mollify tensions within the coalition. Hegemonic leaders, then, are able to claim democratic legitimacy through electoral success and excessive distribution of personalized welfare while winnowing away formal democratic protections through ethno-nationalism. On the other hand, if economic benefits cannot sufficiently mollify social contradictions in the electoral coalition, then concerns about democratic legitimacy of the selection process become more pronounced as voters look for political alternatives but find that political opposition cannot compete on an equal footing with the hegemonic incumbent. We argue that these mechanisms were very much at play in the 2024 national election.

We view the rise of the BJP over the last decade as a consequence of an attempt to build a "Hindu vote" by redefining religion in ethnic terms. In fact, a constitutional amendment to change the citizenship rules in India (the Citizenship Amendment Act or CAA) explicitly sought to define Indian citizenship on the basis of Hindu blood. This is a structural shift from a discourse in which "everyone from India is a Hindu" to a very explicit characterization of *who is* and *who is not* a Hindu. In doing so, it makes religious minorities—particularly Muslims—second-class citizens in India (Varshney and Staggs 2024) while seeking to paper over caste and linguistic contradictions among Hindus using the BJP's dominance over state and financial resources. Without caste, linguistic, or ideological distinctions as the basis of politics (only religion-as-ethnicity), welfare benefits can be tactically deployed over a broad swathe of the population to build support across a disparate coalition of voters.

A combination of the BJP's superior mobilization capacity at a national level (Jha 2017) and resource advantages in providing direct benefits to citizens through technological advances have allowed the BJP to centralize political attribution for welfare in Prime Minister Modi (rather than the state)—what we have elsewhere described as "techno-patrimonialism" (Aiyar and Sircar 2024). These techno-patrimonial distinctions were most pronounced in elections up to 2019 and allowed the BJP to win national and state elections in the image of Prime Minister Modi, seen as the person most responsible for delivering welfare benefits to citizens (Sircar 2020).

However, as we show in detail, by 2024 strong, charismatic opposition chief ministers were able to replicate the model of techno-patrimonialism to attenuate structural welfarist advantages for the BJP. In addition, protests against controversial agricultural laws in India by landed agricultural castes in Haryana and Punjab, and repeated cancellations of examinations meant for government job recruitments in Uttar Pradesh, began to eat away at the economic balm of techno-patrimonialism. Without this economic lubricant, the fear that the BJP would use brute majorities and control of the state machinery to alter the Constitution, and everyday manifestations of hegemony, began to catalyze (a loss of democratic legitimacy for the actions of the government). As voters began to look elsewhere, anxieties around the possibility of political opposition and fairness of elections became more prominent (a loss of democratic legitimacy for the selection process)—and voters were forced to grapple with a perceived challenge to a democratic rights culture that had been nurtured since the independence of India.

The next section describes the "hegemonic equilibrium" in which leaders construct electoral coalitions with social contradictions using ethno-nationalist appeals, which are held together by the tactical deployment of state resources. The following one describes how the BJP sought to construct a Hindu vote through a combination of Hindu nationalist rhetoric and technology-enabled welfare, and why this electoral coalition began to fragment in 2024. The subsequent section uses the Indian Election Survey 2024 (IES 2024) to provide detailed quantitative analysis on the negative electoral impacts of perceived authoritarian behavior by the BJP, and the economic tensions in the Hindu vote by the most vulnerable populations. Then, we show how a robust democratic culture, in tandem with voters looking to political opposition, generated concerns about the legitimacy of the democratic process, and the last section concludes the paper.

A Model of Democratic Backsliding, Democratic Legitimacy, and Economic Benefits

Our starting point is a puzzling juxtaposition between erosion of democracy and popularity, i.e., democratic legitimacy in the face of formal democratic breakdown. In this section, we provide a comparative per-

spective—using examples from Hungary and Mexico—to understand the interplay between an electoral coalition built upon ethno-nationalist appeals and the strategic allocation of state resources to maintain the coalition. We argue that this model has great explanatory power for the period of BJP dominance since 2014.

Consider Viktor Orban, who has been the Prime Minister of Hungary since 2010. There are widespread concerns that he presided over significant democratic backsliding, as he changes the "rules of the game" to stymie the opposition (Scheppele 2022). Nonetheless, he remains remarkably popular. In the 2022 national election, Orban and his Fidesz Party garnered 54 percent of the vote, the highest of any party since the fall of communism in the country. While the numbers might be inflated due to autocratic behavior, there is little doubt that Orban remains the preferred leader for a large swathe of the Hungarian population.

Although Hungary is a former communist country, the politics of Orban has blurred the lines between traditional left wing and right-wing (economic) ideologies, with an ethno-nationalist politics built upon strong anti-immigrant attitudes and "traditionalist" Christian values. Orban has used his command over state resources to construct electoral success and mass support over an otherwise unwieldly identity-based coalition. Before the 2022 national election, Orban gave a pension sop, exempted some voters from taxes, and froze food and fuel prices. Elsewhere, he has used government jobs for discretionary employment (Scheppele 2022).

This strategic use of resources of the state to maintain ideologically diverse coalitions is not unique for hegemonic leaders and parties. Indeed, Magaloni (2006) develops a "hegemonic equilibrium" to explain the electoral dominance of the semi-authoritarian Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in Mexico under similar circumstances. In this model, a hegemonic party that weakens and fragments opposition through coercion, with privileged access to state resources and strong organizational capacity, can distribute economic benefits in a manner to construct mass support and claim democratic legitimacy. In such an equilibrium, voters prioritize the stability and regularity of economic benefits from a hegemonic party/leader over the uncertainty of supporting a fragmented opposition.[1] Crucially, this implies that the economic strategies of the hegemonic incumbent are not easily replicable by the political opposition. This hegemonic equilibrium is prone to unravel during periods of economic distress, when the economic and social contradictions of the coalition come to the fore (e.g., the Peso Crisis in Mexico) or when the opposition is capable of replicating the economic strategies of the hegemon.

In practice, large electoral coalitions require an "umbrella"—a narrative or personality that brings them together even if it is not ideologically coherent. Ethno-nationalist appeals are effective in this regard, as they create an emotive

connect between members of the coalition, with the sole aim of economic distribution to mollify class-wise or ideological tensions between members of this identity-based coalition. However, this also has consequences; when the focus of economic policy is maintenance of a disparate political coalition, a country's development growth path often suffers. Hungary, for instance, has seen severe "brain drain," losing more than 3 percent of its population to out-migration (largely skilled) since Orban took office (Grzegorczyk 2024).[2] This is not unlike the challenges India faces, where, according to a recent survey, nearly a quarter of ultra-high net worth individuals (UHNI) have expressed a desire to leave the country (PTI 2025).

One may quibble that this does not constitute "democratic legitimacy," as it may be driven by institutional manipulation. But as long as the voter largely accepts the election results (democratic legitimacy of the selection process) and assents to actions taken by the government in national interest (democratic legitimacy of government action), it cannot be easily empirically distinguished from other abstract notions of democratic legitimacy—and a hegemonic party or leader is certain to claim democratic legitimacy from it. A more fruitful theoretical direction, we argue, is to try to understand when this "equilibrium" of trading state resources for popular consent under an umbrella of ethno-nationalism breaks down, and when concerns about autocratic behavior become politically consequential—as we believe happened in the 2024 Indian election.

Frameworks that theorize the rise and fall of mass support in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian settings provide valuable tools to analyze the BJP's attempt to construct a "Hindu vote" (this is not to say that the Indian system fits any of these definitions cleanly). Indeed, the connection between Hindu nationalism and authoritarian modes of governance, and its connection to economic outcomes, has been the focus of many important analyses (Jaffrelot 2021; Manor 2021; Mukherji and Zarhani 2023; Mukherji 2024). Like Orban, the ethno-nationalism encoded in the BJP's Hindu nationalist politics offered Prime Minister Modi the ideological flexibility to re-brand himself, from a capitalist friendly leader using the "Gujarat Model" in 2014 to a *garibon ka neta* (leader of the poor) by 2017 (Jha 2017) through a series of carefully targeted, technology-enabled direct benefit transfers (DBTs) that helped preserve a formidable bloc of electoral support. By branding this new technology-enabled welfare in the image of the Prime Minister, this politics fostered a neo-patrimonial state in which citizens vote for the leader in exchange for his benevolence—what we have previously termed "techno-patrimonialism." Against this backdrop, we suggest that voters in the BJP's electoral coalition became disenchanted with the BJPs ability to deliver and concluded that political opposition was not able to compete on equal footing with a hegemonic incumbent—leading to weaker-than-expected electoral results for the ruling BJP in tandem with perceived concerns about authoritarian behaviors and an unfair selection process.

Theorizing the Ethno-Nationalist Hindu Vote

The most straightforward definition of the "Hindu vote" is a politics that takes advantage of the numerical majorities of those who identify as Hindu to win elections in India. Undoubtedly, a party like the BJP, which traces its lineage to Hindu nationalist organizations, would be the disproportionate beneficiary of the Hindu vote. However, there is a lot encoded in these simple statements. Hindus are certainly not an undifferentiated religious group. The community has historically been divided by caste and language, among other things. In order to weaken caste and linguistic divisions, an "ethnic" division of Hinduism is constructed so that people may primarily ethnically define themselves as Hindu instead of the aforementioned sub-identities (Sircar 2022). Here we use Kanchan Chandra's definition of ethnicity as a descent-based attribute, i.e., an identity ascribed to a person's parents (Chandra 2006). This ethnicization of Hinduism thus obliges Hindu nationalists to construct distinct histories and mythologies and curate acceptable behaviors to define who is and who is not a Hindu and who has and does not have Hindu blood. It is not hard to see how the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which sought to provide immediate citizenship to non-Muslims immigrating from a prescribed set of countries, is a natural consequence of this ethnicization.

To glue the Hindu vote into a viable electoral coalition, two elements were essential. First, the BJP constructed a welfarist, delivery-oriented politics that sought to build support across Hindu voters and mollify social contradictions. This required using delivery as a mobilizational tool by creating the "*labharthi*" (recipient of benefits) as a political category that the BJP sought to mobilize around the image of Prime Minster Modi. The "*labharthi varg* (recipient class/group)" allowed the BJP to transcend traditional distinctions of caste, linguistic and ethnic identity that undercut a unified "Hindu" political identity. Second, in order to hold this welfare coalition together, the BJP manufactured centralized political power through a carefully crafted direct connect between Prime Minister Modi and the voters. The deification of the prime minister establishes this direct connection and builds moral legitimacy of the leader as the sole patron and provider for society in return for loyalty and trust from the voter. This is, what one of us has theorized as the "politics of *vishwas*"—a politics (of loyalty and trust) built around the persona of the leader who is deified (Sircar 2020). The technological innovation of direct benefit transfers (DBTs) that allows the leader at the top to directly "deliver" benefits into the bank accounts of voters, in tandem with *vishwas* politics, effectively allows the party leader to centralize power instead of having to bargain with local political stalwarts and factions to establish this direct connection. This is what we have elsewhere described as "techno-patrimonialism" (Aiyar and Sircar 2024). Crucially, the element of *vishwas* in constructing a politics of welfare im-

plies that the leader is the only person capable of delivering "universalistic" welfare—that is, the leader's capacity for delivery is non-replicable.

Techno-Patrimonialism and the Labharthi Voter

The Indian State has a checkered history in the realm of social and economic rights of citizens. These had been largely relegated to the periphery until the early 2000s, which witnessed an explosion of social rights—food, work, information, education—backed by legally mandated entitlements. Despite this explosion of rights, actual implementation of these rights-based laws remained half-baked and the social consensus for redistribution remained fragile. The BJP effectively leveraged this fragility to promote an alternative model of welfare based on technology via DBTs, what we described as techno-patrimonialism. This has fundamentally altered the terms of the social contract and accountability structures at the grassroots. The appeal of technology lies in its capacity for dis-intermediation, removing the need to depend on state bureaucracy and local leaders for delivery, while enabling in its place a direct, emotive connection with recipients built around the cult of the party leader—and the use of the image of the benevolent leader to mollify social contradictions in the electoral coalition. The BJP has perfected this model to an art form, but increasingly political parties across all hues have adopted similar welfare models, abandoning the rights project almost as soon as it began.

Embedded in this is a subtle shift in the social contract. Rather than a moral obligation of the State to rights-bearing citizens, welfare in this framing is positioned as a "personal" guarantee of the leader who remains the sole benefactor to the beneficiary or *labharthi*. In a functioning democracy, citizens seek accountability and demand welfare services through local state actors, both politicians and bureaucrats. When welfare delivery is centralized in the personal image of the party leader, not only does this fundamental accountability relationship break down, it legitimizes the authority of leaders to centralize power within their personas and carry out all functions of the state in their name. This is textbook patrimonialism—a system in which core functions of the State (in this case welfare) flow from the personal authority of the leader. In this view, welfare is not a negotiation or a product of accountability but simply a function of what the leader deems best for society. In addition, this patrimonialism structures the political and electoral appeal of the leader to the citizen and voter. This form of welfare is politically framed around "basic needs" that are necessary conditions for the poor to "empower" and free themselves of poverty.

Patrimonial welfarism is not new in India. Several political leaders, most notably Indira Gandhi and Jayalalithaa, very successfully centralized power within their persona and deployed this via welfare. However, two things distinguish the present moment from the past. First, there is increased use of technology in welfare delivery. The deployment of technology as a legitimate tool

of governance predates Modi. Indeed, since liberalization and the emergence of technology as a critical sector of the Indian economy, it has been central to the quest for improving state capacity for the delivery of public goods. Technology with its capacity to bypass layers of the state has dominated debates on state capacity as a tantalizing alternative to the corruption and inefficiency of the Indian administrative state. The Modi era coincided with the evolution of technology tools in the form of Jan-Dhan-Adhaar-mobile (JAM) infrastructure, the groundwork for which had been laid under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime in 2009. What distinguished Modi's deployment of technology was its scale and the carefully manufactured branding machine that effectively leveraged technology's capacity for dis-intermediation to establish a direct emotive connect with welfare recipients at scale—so that welfare became the domain of the leader at the top and not of the bureaucratic state. Crucially, for a large part of the first decade of BJP rule, dis-intermediation was deployed to effectively centralize credit attribution into the BJP and the Prime Minister at the cost of state governments and their chief ministers. This is why we term this form of patrimonialism as techno-patrimonialism.

Second, techno-patrimonialism allowed the construction of a *labharthi varg* (beneficiary class). The *labharthi varg* transcends the traditional logic of political mobilization—caste, class, region—and establishes a grammar of mobilization via the beneficiary. The BJP can then project itself as a "neutral" arbiter of state society relations through the welfare beneficiary that binds citizens together into a common voter category. It also allows gluing the Hindu vote within a new identity—the *labharthi*—and enables the pursuit of new kinds of voters' categories that transcend traditional caste and ethnic fissures. The visible (and extremely successful) mobilization of the "female" voter by the BJP is an example of precisely this strategy.

To maintain and deepen the legitimacy of techno-patrimonialism, the BJP through the national government routinely seeks to remind the citizenry of the "efficiency" gains from these technology tools and associated surveillance. The DBT website, for instance, reports specifically on estimated "gains" from removing ghost beneficiaries and plugging leakages. In addition, tight monitoring via biometric technology, GPS mapping, and data dashboards are regularly publicized as appropriate tools to catch apathy, malfeasance and corruption, particularly on the frontlines of the state. The prime minister's interactions via video conferencing and images of meetings with state bureaucrats and monitoring progress through tools like Pragati are widely publicized. India's technological capabilities are thus intertwined with the task of state building, legitimized as a response to weak state capacity. The political goal is to cast this digitally fueled, "digi-state," as a modern, high capability state that is essential to the aspirational, developed (*viksit*) Bharat promise. Glimpses of this were visible during India's G20 presidency in the positioning of Digital Public Infrastructure as India's model

and as a technology and governance solution for the world (Aiyar 2023). In this framing, technology is presented as a value-neutral instrument that wrests governance from the parochial, patronage-based interests that captured the state.

Together, these reinforce the democratic legitimacy of the BJP and Hindutva because it becomes deeply intertwined with the value proposition of efficiency offered by technology, buttressed by the image of the prime minister as the efficient, credible leader—a provider working tirelessly to deliver to the citizenry. Digital delivery of welfare is at the heart of the project of establishing democratic legitimacy for the BJP.

In this section, we have sketched out how the BJP has carefully constructed its strategy of unifying the Hindu vote and papering over the social contradictions within it. This model is predicated on techno-patrimonialism, which we see as essential to building the democratic legitimacy for a "Hindu" vote. It allows the BJP to construct a narrative of "democratic" governance, in which traditional patronage and discrimination are eliminated. As long as you are a "recipient," welfare benefits are deployed regardless of caste, ethnicity and religion. This is best encapsulated in a remark made by India's foreign minister Dr S Jaishankar while responding to questions on minority rights in 2023: "I defy you to show me discrimination. In fact, the more digital we have become, the more faceless the governance has become. Actually, it's become fairer" (ANI 2023). The *labharthi varg* is thus an important political category that affords legitimacy to the ethno-nationalist project.

Paradigmatic Cases for the Hindu Vote: Assam and Uttar Pradesh

Nowhere has the construction of the Hindu vote been more visible than in the states of Assam and Uttar Pradesh, two states helmed by charismatic chief minsters Himanta Biswa Sarma and Yogi Adityanath, respectively. Notably, both of these chief ministers are regularly associated with anti-Muslim rhetoric and have aggressively employed state police in silencing dissent. The BJP and its allies swept both the 2019 national election and the most recent state elections in each of these states. However, in the 2024 national election, the BJP continued to perform well in Assam while faltering in Uttar Pradesh.[3] Here, we take a close look at how the Hindu vote was constructed in each state in the most recent state elections (2021 in Assam and 2022 in Uttar Pradesh), explain the variation in these two states, and provide important context as to why the BJP Hindu coalition frayed in the 2024 national election, particularly in Uttar Pradesh.

Assam and Uttar Pradesh face a differing set of challenges in building a "unified" Hindu identity. Assam's politics has historically been shaped by ethnic cleavages with a prominent divide between different tribal groups, Assamese and Bengali language, and even reserved land and tea gardens. It also has the highest Muslim population of any state in India, estimated at 34 percent in the 2011 Indian Census, and

a complex partition politics owing to its proximity with Bangladesh. In Assam, the Hindu vote has been constructed by taking advantage of the spatial segregation between Hindu and Muslim populations and building an image of a "foreign" Muslim migrant from Bangladesh. While Uttar Pradesh has a lower but significant Muslim population (19 percent), politics in the state has traditionally revolved around caste competition. The Hindu vote in Uttar Pradesh, thus, has been developed by gluing together caste communities. It is now common to speak of political combinations like "Non-Yadav OBCs" and "Non-Jatav Dalits" as a part of the BJP vote bloc.

In 2016, the first state election after Narendra Modi became Prime Minister, the BJP swept to power in Assam. By the 2021 state election, tribal and linguistic cleavages had all been flattened into a single Hindu-Muslim cleavage in which the vote resembled a "census election" (Ferree 2010), where Hindu-dominated constituencies voted for the BJP and its allies, and Muslim-dominated constituencies voted against these parties. The average margin of victory in the 2021 Assam election was 19 percentage points, and 67 percent of Hindus reported voting for the BJP and its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in a post-poll survey (Palshikar et al. 2021). The spatial segregation of Hindus and Muslims, in which nearly 75 percent of all constituencies reside in a district that is either less than 15 percent Muslim or more than 50 percent Muslim, largely determined electoral outcomes. Districts in which the Muslim population was less than 15 percent, the NDA had a strike rate of 87 percent, and where the Muslim population was more than 50 percent it had a paltry strike rate of 25 percent (Sircar 2022). This was an explicit strategy by the BJP—as the now-chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma sought to mobilize Hindus against an ethnicized "foreign" Muslim from Bangladesh. In the 2021 state election, he declared that the BJP did not need a single vote from "Miya Muslims" (Bengali-speaking Muslims) whom he described as "very, very communal and fundamental" (Saha 2021).

If the state of Assam provides an example of how the BJP can take advantage of the spatial segregation of Hindus and Muslims and the image of a "foreign" Muslim from Bangladesh, then the state of Uttar Pradesh provides an example of how the Hindu vote can be constructed by sewing together disparate caste groups. The popular imagination of the BJP is a party that does not engage in caste arithmetic like other parties. In fieldwork in the 2017 Uttar Pradesh election, for instance, a BJP supporter explained that he doesn't vote for the Samajwadi Party (SP) or the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) because in those parties, *hamari ginti nahi hoti* (our caste group is uncounted) (Sircar et al. 2017). In a state in which the SP and BSP had openly constructed coalitions based on caste arithmetic, the BJP (and later chief minister Yogi Adityanath) positioned itself as constructing an overall Hindu vote, not caste arithmetic. In practice, however, the BJP uses its resource advantage to create alliances

with small, but electorally consequential, caste-based parties and leaders in Uttar Pradesh—chief among these the Apna Dal representing the Kurmi community, the Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP) representing the Rajbhar community, the NISHAD Party representing fishermen and river-related caste groups like the Mallahs and Nishads (Gupta 2021).

Unlike the Hindu-Muslim cleavage that could built around a Bangladeshi migrant "dog-whistle" in Assam, the caste and ethnic-gluing strategy to construct a Hindu vote in Uttar Pradesh (and much of India) is crucially dependent upon the strategic deployment of economic resources. The process began in the 2017 campaign when the BJP won its first full majority in the State. It was in the run up to the election that the BJP strategically unveiled its welfarist techno-patrimonial agenda. This is best illustrated through the launch of the Ujjwala scheme (the provision of gas cylinders to women via DBT). The scheme was launched with much fanfare in 2016 in Balia, Uttar Pradesh by Modi and became a critical campaign issue through the election in early 2017. As Jha (2017) notes, Ujjwala was the first most visible step toward Modi shedding his image of a "Suit-boot" Prime Minister (focused on growth rather than redistribution which was the Modi avatar in the 2014 campaign) to Modi as "Vikas Purush" (focus on redistribution).

By the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the Vikas Purush avatar had become entrenched. In the 2022 Uttar Pradesh state election that took place in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, the BJP used Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's image as a militant Hindu monk to construct and ethno-nationalist bloc, while using the image of Prime Minister Modi as the welfarist provider for the population. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, the BJP government had offered free rations under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY). Ghatak and Kumar (2024) estimated that the government entitlements in post-pandemic drastically reduced poverty rates in India, from 22-25 percent in 2017–2019 to just 8 percent in 2022–2023 using the international poverty line standard of PPP $2.15 consumption per day. While Yogi Adityanath provided the emotive appeal for a Hindu vote, free ration under PMGKAY provided the economic balm to assuage caste-wise and socioeconomic contradictions of the coalition. Indeed, frustrations among the Jat community due to agricultural distress, and young men across Uttar Pradesh due to joblessness and cancelled government exams were already quite apparent in the 2022 Uttar Pradesh election. However, these were papered over through the construction of the *labharthi varg*, the recipient of beneficiaries as an electorally salient mobilizational category. But it was exactly this gluing together of castes with economic entitlements that was most prone to fracture, as economic anxieties grew in the population.

Fraying of the Hindu Vote in the 2024 Election

In run up to the 2024 election, the BJP sought to capitalize on the building of a

Ram temple in Ayodhya (the purported birthplace of the Lord Ram) in Uttar Pradesh—the culmination of a process in which Hindu nationalist forces began agitations and unilaterally demolished the Mughal-era Babri mosque to build a temple in its place. While technically the building of the temple was sanctioned by the Supreme Court, many observers thought the judgment to be a function of the political pressure from the BJP government. The BJP also sought to gain political mileage out of it, with a star-studded consecration ceremony for the temple led by Prime Minister Modi that dominated all Indian media coverage. As the election hung in the balance, Prime Minister Modi's speeches became more aggressive. On April 21, 2024, in Banswara, Rajasthan, (in an oft-cited speech) he professed:

> Earlier, when their (Congress) government was in power, they had said that Muslims have the first right on the country's assets. This means to whom will this property be distributed? It will be distributed among those who have more children. It will be distributed to the infiltrators. (Prabhu 2024)

Beyond the anti-Muslim overtones, this comment is notable in its allusion to economic assets and the competition over resources. It was not just an emotive religious appeal; rather it explicitly laid out an economic logic for why the BJP should be supported over the Congress—the kind of economic logic required to maintain a diverse Hindu coalition. This was, among other things, a response to a longstanding farmer's protest that began to eat away at the government's credibility on handling the economy—especially because the farmer's had effectively painted the BJP government as colluding with powerful capitalist interests in India (Sircar 2021). Moreover, an exam leak in the Uttar Pradesh Police Exam (one of many across India) led to serious protests in February 2024—as much of India's youth still aspire to and depend on government employment (*Hindustan Times* 2024b). In short, by the time the 2024 national election came around, the economic tensions in the Hindu vote were becoming readily apparent, and they were most consequential for less privileged citizens. To be clear, the crux of the problem for the BJP was not just about a weak macroeconomic scenario but also a perception that the party was increasingly representing the interests of more powerful, wealthy and elite people in society (Agarwala and Roychowdhury 2025).

As the election campaign began in earnest, the perceived authoritarian tendencies of the ruling BJP became an electoral issue—leading to a crisis of democratic legitimacy for the actions undertaken by the BJP government. In March 2024, Member of Parliament Ananth Kumar Hegde from Karnataka said what everyone thought the BJP was thinking, "The Constitution has to be amended because Congress [introduced] laws that subjugate the Hindu community. If all this has to change, it cannot be done without a two-thirds majority" (*The Indian Express* 2024). The "anointment" of the BJP in the 2024

and the claim *400 paar* that was initially meant to be a show a strength became a source of consternation. While the high-minded politics of constitutional principles may in normal times have had limited mass impact, reaction to the hubris of the *400 paar* claim was reflected in everyday politics—from citizens increasingly turning to social media to get away from the BJP's traditional media dominance (Aiyar and Sircar 2024; Kumar 2024) to the selective bulldozing of "illegal" Muslim settlements (indeed, Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath wore the nickname "bulldozer baba" as a badge of honor) (PTI 2022).

Perhaps in normal times this would not have been a problem. After all, as we have claimed, even when the government begins to overstep liberal democratic norms, the universalistic appeal of techno-patrimonialism can engender democratic legitimacy. Indeed, the ability to assuage democratic pressures with economic redistribution is discussed widely in the political economy literature (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Slater et al. 2014). But with widespread pessimism about India's economic future and adaptations by leaders of the political opposition to winnow away the structural advantages of the BJP in welfare delivery, the capacity of the BJP to mollify dissent with personalized economic delivery was greatly weakened—and the hegemonic equilibrium began to unravel.

As voters began to look elsewhere, concerns about the fairness of the election process became more prominent. In the run-up to the 2024 national election, the fidelity of electronic voting machines (EVMs) came under heavy scrutiny, with political opposition, at times, accusing the BJP government of tampering the machines to gain an advantage (Kapoor 2024). With voter confidence in the electoral system flagging, the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) filed a lawsuit in the Supreme Court sought 100 percent paper verification of the EVM vote tallies using the voter-verified paper audit trail (VVPAT) machines that print out a slip of paper with the voter's selection in addition to the vote stored in the electronic machine (*Hindustan Times* 2024a). In personal fieldwork, we met many voters—even those supportive of the BJP—who questioned whether EVMs were biased toward the BJP. In our minds, proving that EVMs have been systematically adulterated (which seems unlikely) is beside the point. The fact that such concerns have wide purchase in the population speaks to a lack of legitimacy attached to the democratic selection process. Put another way, when voters do not believe that political opposition can compete on equal footing with the government due to police coercion and institutional biases, then these fears are likely to extend to electoral procedure as well.

Legitimacy of Government Action, Economic Pressures, and the Hindu Vote

In this section, we investigate how the Hindu vote began to fray using survey data. To conduct our analysis, we turn to data from the In-

dian Election Survey 2024 (IES 2024) conducted by the Data Action Lab for Emerging Societies (DALES)—an academically rigorous post-poll of over 36,000 respondents across 20 states and union territories. Perhaps most importantly, the survey was one of the very few, if only, post-polls that generated reported voting outcomes not too different from the actual results (e.g., 37 percent BJP vote share, 21 percent Congress vote share in the selected regions)—and, as such, we do not require significant ex-post weighting as is done by many survey agencies. For transparency, the results in this paper are reported unweighted.

We present the data in three layers. First, we explore how voters perceive the BJP's authoritarian behavior, i.e., the loss of democratic legitimacy of the actions of the government. Second, we demonstrate how this loss of legitimacy intersects with a growing disenchantment with the governments' ability to respond to economic concerns which thus led disenchanted voters (particularly those from more vulnerable populations) to seek alternatives outside the BJP thus breaking down the BJPs social coalition. Third, we show how opposition parties effectively deployed techno-patrimonialism to their electoral advantage thus further undercutting the BJP's capacity to mollify dissent with economic entitlements.

Together, these data allow us to demonstrate the conditions under which the democratic legitimacy attached to government action breaks down. When economic vulnerabilities bring internal contradictions in the social coalition to the fore, authoritarian regimes struggle to undercut these contradictions because it is precisely when economic vulnerabilities sharpen that voters begin to challenge authoritarian behavior.

Perceptions of Authoritarian Behavior

To assess perceptions of authoritarian behavior (i.e., loss of democratic legitimacy of government action), the survey asked respondents to state whether they strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree with the following three statements: (*a*) The BJP will change the constitution if it comes back to power; (*b*) The Muslim community in India has been victimized under the BJP; (*c*) Media represents only the views of Modi and BJP. While the first of these statements sought to understand perceived authoritarian behavior in formal or abstract terms, the latter two statements sought to understand perceived authoritarian behavior in "everyday" terms that would have been directly observed or experienced by voters.

At first glance, the percentage of respondents who perceive authoritarian behavior is quite high. Of those responding to the questions,[4] 68 percent somewhat or strongly agreed the BJP would change the constitution, 65 percent of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that BJP has victimized Muslims, and 71 percent of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed the media only represents the views of BJP/Modi with little variation across caste groups. With such data, we are always con-

cerned about "acquiescence bias"—the idea that respondents will bias towards agreeing with any statement with which they are posed—and thus perception data like this should always be interpreted with caution. Nonetheless, the relationships between perception data and reported vote choice can be meaningful, as they demonstrate the extent to which certain attitudes correlate to behavior at the polling booth (if anything, acquiescence bias attenuates empirical relationships between perceptions and reported vote choice).

Table 1: BJP Vote Share by Perceptions of Authoritarian Behavior over Caste (%)

		General	Other Backward Class (OBC)	Scheduled Caste (SC)	Scheduled Tribe (ST)
BJP Will Change Constitution	Agree	42	36	27	42
	Disagree	44	39	29	47
BJP Has Victimized Muslims	Agree	31	28	21	31
	Disagree	61	52	40	56
Media Control by BJP/Modi	Agree	34	31	21	31
	Disagree	62	52	42	61

Source: compiled by the Authors

Table 1 presents the BJP vote share[5] among those who agree or disagree with each of the perceived authoritarian behaviors described above, broken down by caste group (note that somewhat or strongly agree/disagree have been combined into a single agree/disagree category for ease of exposition). For instance, the BJP has a 28 percent vote share among OBCs who agree that the BJP has victimized Muslims, while it has a 52 percent vote share among OBCs who disagree with the proposition. There are three key takeaways from Table 1. First, while there is a small dip in vote share for those who agreed the BJP would change the Constitution if returned to power, the magnitude is quite small (less than 5 percentage points) as compared to the drop in BJP vote share for those who agreed with everyday perceptions of authoritarian behavior like victimization of Muslims and media control (19-30 percentage points). This is even more surprising given the popular narrative that constitutional concerns generated caste-wise distinctions in the election. Second, there are significant differences in BJP vote share for those who perceive everyday authoritarianism across each of the caste communities, suggesting that it is a more universal effect across the population (perhaps, surprisingly, there is little caste difference even on the question of Constitution, which was thought to be consequential for scheduled caste voters). Third, the BJP vote share among scheduled castes (SCs) is systematically lower than among other social groups irrespective of perceived authoritarian behaviors, suggesting variation in caste-wise party preferences beyond perceptions of authoritarian

behavior. In sum, there is strong evidence that overall perceptions of everyday authoritarian behavior are particularly correlated with BJP's vote share in this election,[6] and that these views are held by a significant proportion of the population (irrespective of acquiescence bias).[7]

Intersection between Economic Failure and Authoritarian Governance

The data demonstrate widespread discontent with the Indian economy, with 85 percent of all respondents agreeing that inequality has risen in India and more than 80 percent of each caste category agreeing that inequality has risen. The BJP had a 34 percent vote share among those who believed inequality had increased, and a 50 percent vote share among those who didn't believe it had increased. To investigate the importance of welfare and economic benefits on maintaining the BJP's coalition, we asked respondents the "biggest achievement" of the BJP government in the previous 5 years over a set of options which were explicitly chosen to be outside of COVID-era entitlements like free ration or identity-based compulsions (which were asked elsewhere). Thus, these options were chosen to reflect broad macro-level performance and challenges on non-episodic or non-ethnic grounds. Tables 2a and 2b report the responses disaggregated over caste and quintile of wealth, respectively.[8] For instance, 36 percent of scheduled caste voters believed that digitization through UPI was the biggest achievement of the BJP over the previous 5 years, and 22 percent of voters in the second quintile (20th-40th percentile) of wealth believed that reduced corruption was the biggest achievement of the BJP in the previous 5 years.

Table 2a: Biggest BJP Achievement over Caste (%)

	Scheduled Tribe (ST)	Scheduled Caste (SC)	Other Backward Class (OBC)	General
PMAY Scheme	21	15	14	12
Ujjwala Scheme	16	17	14	12
Reduced Corruption	18	20	21	21
Spreading Digitisation like UPI	33	36	39	41
Improved Global Reputation	13	11	13	14

Table 2b: Biggest BJP Achievement over Asset Quintile (%)

	Bottom 20%	2nd Quintile	3rd Quintile	4th Quintile	Top 20%
PMAY Scheme	17	15	14	14	11
Ujjwala Scheme	14	18	16	13	10
Reduced Corruption	24	22	19	18	19
Spreading Digitisation like UPI	35	35	40	42	45
Improved Global Reputation	10	11	11	13	16

Source: compiled by the Authors

These data demonstrate the importance of economic distribution to more vulnerable populations. While digitization and UPI are universally seen as the biggest achievement for the BJP, a significantly higher percentage of STs, SCs, and poorer voters name two schemes—Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), a subsidy for building homes, and Ujjwala, a subsidy scheme for liquified petroleum gas (LPG)—as the BJP's biggest achievement. In particular, summing the first two rows in Table 2a, 37 percent of ST and 32 percent of SC respondents chose one of these two schemes as the BJP's biggest achievement, as compared to just 24 percent of general caste voters. In a similar vein, 31 percent and 33 percent of the bottom 2 asset wealth quintiles chose one of these two schemes as the BJP's biggest achievement, as compared to just 21 percent of for wealthiest quintile. Notably, the percentage of respondents who saw UPI and enhanced global image as the BJP's biggest achievement monotonically rose by asset wealth.

To further investigate the caste-wise character of grievances against the BJP, we began with asking respondents if Prime Minister Modi was "a good leader for the country." Despite weakened electoral performance Prime Minister Modi remained popular with the electorate, with 66 percent of respondents reporting him to be a good leader for country. A substantial, but somewhat lesser percentage of respondents (60 percent) reported that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi would make a good leader for the country (not shown in the table). Characterization of Prime Minister Modi's leadership is a strong correlate of BJP support—only 5 percent of those who report him to be a poor leader for the country voted for the BJP. Table 3 reports the primary reason that the respondent felt Modi was a poor leader by caste group (if the respondent believed Prime Minister to be a poor leader for the country). For instance, 18 percent of OBCs who thought Modi was a poor leader for the country perceived that Prime Minister Modi has "only helped the wealthy and not people like me" as the primary reason.

Table 3: Primary Reason Modi is a Poor Leader over Caste (%)

	Scheduled Tribe (ST)	Scheduled Caste (SC)	Other Backward Class (OBC)	General
Cannot Bring Economic Growth or Jobs to India	29	27	23	22
Only Helped the Wealthy and Not People Like Me	25	22	18	15
Corrupt	9	9	5	7
Too Dictatorial	7	10	7	8
Mistreats Muslims in India	22	27	41	41
Misuses CBI/ED/IT to Frighten Opposition	8	6	6	8

Source: compiled by the Authors

There is monotonic relationship between the vulnerability of the caste group and economic grievances. In particular, the percentage of those who per-

ceive that Prime Minister Modi "cannot bring economic growth or jobs to India" or "only helped the wealthy and not people like me" as the primary reason Prime Minister Modi is a poor leader for the country grows as we move from general caste to OBC to SC to ST—and more than 40 percent of each of the OBC, SC, and ST communities state an economic grievance as the primary reason. Notably, SC and ST communities report higher rates of corruption (which plausibly has an economic logic) as the primary grievance. Consistent with the previous data we showed, the perception that Prime Minister Modi "mistreats Muslims in India" is the most universal grievance stated. Taken together, these data corroborate a universal grievance on a perceived authoritarian behavior with regard to religious identity, while displaying significantly higher rates of economic grievance among the most marginalized caste communities. This underscores the economic challenges of maintaining a Hindu vote and the plausible impact of a narrative that painted the Prime Minister as captured by wealthy, corporate interests.

It is perhaps natural that more vulnerable voters would be more concerned about economic entitlements and well-being, but were growing economic grievances consequential for shifting electoral outcomes? We have some circumstantial for such a claim. Over the entire population, 60 percent of respondents believed that increased unemployment was the biggest failure of the BJP government over the past 5 years, but 75 percent of those who switched their votes from BJP 5 years ago to another party in 2024 believed that increased unemployment was the biggest failure of the BJP government. This concern about increased unemployment also generated caste-wise distinctions, as seen in Table 4 that provides the perceived biggest failure of the BJP broken down by caste among the population as a whole and those who switched from BJP in 2019 to another party in 2024.[9] For instance, overall 58 percent of general caste voters felt that "increased unemployment" was the biggest failure of the BJP between 2019 and 2024, and this number jumped to 68 percent of general caste voters who voted for the BJP in 2019 but switched parties in 2024 that felt that "increased unemployment" was the biggest failure of the BJP over that time period.

Table 4: Biggest Failure of BJP over Caste [Overall and Switchers against BJP] (%)

	Scheduled Tribe (ST)		Scheduled Caste (SC)		Other Backward Class (OBC)		General	
	Overall	Switchers	Overall	Switchers	Overall	Switchers	Overall	Switchers
Increased Unemployment	59	62	60	80	61	78	58	68
Citizen Amendment Act (CAA)	13	7	11	6	13	7	15	10
Communalisation/Hurting Religious Harmony	9	6	11	4	11	6	11	6
Hurt Global Reputation	5	5	3	1	2	1	3	2
Increased Corruption	14	22	16	10	13	8	13	14

Source: compiled by the Authors

The top row in Table 4 displays the percentage of voters who felt that increased unemployment was the biggest failure of the BJP government for the overall sample and those who switched away from the BJP, broken down by caste group. In the overall sample, there is little caste differentiation on this perception with 58-61 percent of each caste group viewing increased unemployment as the biggest failure of the BJP government. But when we restrict the sample to those who switched away from the BJP, significant caste distinctions emerge. Nearly 80 percent of SCs and OBCs switching away from the BJP felt that increased unemployment was the biggest failure of the BJP, approximately 20 percentage points higher than in the overall sample for these caste groups. By contrast, less than 70 percent of general caste and ST voters who switched away from the BJP felt increased unemployment was the biggest failure of the BJP. In short, economic grievances are far more pronounced among OBCs and SCs who switched away from the BJP. This is consistent with concerns about the changing face of caste reservation and the farmers' protest, which drew heavily from these communities.

Competitive Welfarism

By 2023, regional parties and the Congress had begun to recognize the tantalizing electoral possibilities of techno-patrimonialism. DBT welfare transfers have now become part and parcel of electoral offerings across all political parties. To give a sense of scale, in 2022–23, State governments were estimated to spend 9 percent of their revenue receipts on these cash transfers (Axis Bank 2024). Going into the 2024 election, competitive "techno-patrimonial" welfarism had emerged as a feature of electoral politics with all political parties offering cash transfer-based guarantees. What had been a structural advantage for the BJP and Prime Minister Modi in the 2019 election saw significant replication by political opposition, notably among strong, charismatic regional leaders who could tap into a form of *vishwas* politics not unlike Narendra Modi. States like West Bengal under Mamata Banerjee and Andhra Pradesh under Jagan Mohan Reddy rapidly built up infrastructure for DBTs branded in the image of their respective chief ministers.

To understand role of political attribution and techno-patrimonialism, we asked respondents: Who of the following do you hold most responsible for delivering these benefits to you? Overall, 49 percent of respondents answering the question attributed welfare benefits to Prime Minister Modi, while 31 percent attributed welfare benefits to their chief minister—with all other attributions, e.g., government officials (8 percent), MLA/MP (6 percent), party workers (4 percent), far less prevalent. Political attribution was strongly associated with vote choice; 52 percent of those who attributed benefits to the Prime Minister voted for the BJP, while only 19 percent of those who attributed benefits to the chief minister voted for the BJP. Naturally, there was very significant variation in response by state. Table 5 displays the relative attribution for welfare benefits for selected states.

We focus on three ideal types to understand the relative attribution between the Chief Minister of the state and the Prime Minister: *a*) double engine *sarkar* (those states in which the chief minister is from the BJP); *b*) strong Congress chief minister (those states with BJP-Congress competition but a strong Congress chief minister over the past 5 years);[10] *c*) strong regional party chief minister (those states where the BJP has never held the chief minister position without alliance and where regional parties are strong). We note that 60 percent of respondents believed it to be desirable to have a double engine *sarkar*. Of those believing it to be desirable, 82 percent believed it would lead to better infrastructure or better welfare delivery.

Table 5: Attribution for Welfare Delivery in Selected States (%)

		Prime Minister	Chief Minister	Government Officials	MLA/MP	Party Workers	Others
Double Engine	Madhya Pradesh	63	24	5	3	4	2
	Uttar Pradesh	76	12	5	2	2	3
Strong Congress CM	Karnataka	18	60	10	4	5	2
	Rajasthan	54	37	2	1	4	3
Strong Regional Party CM	West Bengal	28	57	7	2	5	1
	Andhra Pradesh	27	42	14	10	4	3
	Tamil Nadu	15	55	12	8	8	2

Source: compiled by the Authors

There are three Hindi belt states, where we expect Prime Minister Modi to have the strongest welfarist appeal, presented in the table. Of these, two states, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, fall in the double engine *sarkar* category. And in each of these states, respondents overwhelmingly attribute welfare delivery to Prime Minister Modi, consistent with techno-patrimonialism. In Rajasthan, however, where Ashok Gehlot was a popular chief minister who announced a number of popular DBT schemes, the gap between Prime Minister and Chief Minister is far narrow—just 17 percentage points. In the other state with a strong welfarist Congress chief minister, Karnataka with Siddaramaiah, the voters express much stronger political attribution for the Chief Minister. As we might expect, states with strong regional leaders where techno-patrimonialism could be replicated with charismatic chief ministers, voters overwhelmingly give attribution for welfare delivery to the Chief Minister.

Cash transfers deployed by state chief ministers, which compete with Prime Minister Modi's guarantees, have effectively consolidated political attribution to the chief minister. In West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee launched cash schemes like Kanyashree and Lakshmi Bhandar targeted specifically at women voters, and 57 percent of respondents in the IES survey attributed credit for welfare schemes directly to the Chief Minister. Credit attribution is strongly correlated with voter choice—80 percent of respondents who gave attribution to the Chief Minister voted for the Mamata

Banerjee's Trinamool Congress and 80 percent of those who attributed credit to the Prime Minister voted for the BJP. In Andhra Pradesh, the YSR Congress (YSRCP) led by Chief Minister Jagan Reddy implemented a wide range of cash transfer schemes between 2019–2024. He implemented this through a large network of specifically appointed state government officials, contracted to administer the cash transfer programs (Suri 2024). Most voters interacted with these officials. Credit attribution in this instance was split between the Chief Minister and these government officials, including the Panchayat. Forty-two percent respondents identified the Chief Minister and 30 percent identified those other than the Prime Minister and Chief Minister (with 14 percent identifying government officials) as being most responsible for delivering benefits. National parties have a limited presence in Andhra Pradesh and State politics is dominated by contestation between two regional parties. In this instance voter choices, too, were split. Of those who identified the Chief Minister as being responsible for delivering benefits, 53 percent voted for YSRCP. While 54 percent of those who identified those other than the Prime Minister or Chief Minister voted for the TDP. Crucially, only 9 percent of respondents who attributed credit for welfare schemes to the Prime Minister voted for the BJP but 43 percent voted for the TDP, which was in alliance with the BJP. In this instance, credit attribution was split between the two regional parties and resulted in fragmenting the "welfare" vote moving voters toward the TDP which won the State and National election.

We note that these data do not allow us to understand changes in attribution over time, but even if voters attributed welfare delivery to chief ministers in previous election, the sheer ability to strong chief ministers to replicate the delivery mechanisms of the ruling BJP and Prime Minister Modi undercut the capacity of the BJP to use DBTs to address social contradictions in the Hindu vote. At a minimum, voters understood that welfare delivery was not solely dependent upon the BJP being returned to power.

In sum, regional and Congress leaders who adopted DBTs and adapted political communications to duplicate techno-patrimonialism likely cut into BJP support. Effectively, competitive welfarism in the 2024 election, as our data suggests, presented itself as a powerful strategy to counter the Modi. It intersected with economic anxieties and concerns about authoritarianism to effectively challenge the democratic legitimacy built around Modi's ability to deliver welfare benefits and mobilize the citizenry around an aspirational developed future: *Viksit Bharat*.

A Democratic Culture and Procedural Concerns

Thus far, we have demonstrated widespread perceptions of everyday authoritarian behavior, economic anxieties (particularly among marginalized groups) and a strong association with voting for parties other than the BJP. We have also demonstrat-

ed how competitive welfarism, and the replication of techno-patrimonialism by strong chief ministers, plausibly cut into BJP's vote share. But is it fair to conclude "democratic redlines" were crossed in this instance? After all, this could all plausibly be classified as "anti-incumbency," concerns about liberal democratic norms notwithstanding. In this section, we describe the robustness of "democratic culture" in India as expressed in its constitutional democracy and its limits, and how perceived restrictions on political opposition led to a loss of legitimacy for the electoral process in India.

A Democratic Culture?

As India was setting up its Constituent Assembly, in a bid to make the process more inclusive, the Congress Party sought submissions from the public at large on the concerns to be taken up by the Constituent Assembly. The bevy of demands, from the role of Hindu scripture to linguistic autonomy, that came from groups as particular as the "District Teachers Guild of Vizianagram" was overwhelming (Guha 2008, p. 104). Ramchandra Guha concludes, "These submissions testify to the baffling heterogeneity of India, but also to the precocious existence of a rights culture among Indians." Beyond a preternatural awareness of a rights culture, India, under the stewardship of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, became an "improbable democracy"—by far, the poorest and largest functioning democracy in modern human history. But given that the Indian republic was constructed as a constitutional democracy from an elite-driven process, there were genuine concerns about the extent to which such a democratic rights culture could be engendered in an India riddled with caste and religious hierarchies. The architect of the Indian Constitution, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar gave voice to these apprehensions stating, "Democracy in India [is] only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic" (*Constituent Assembly Debates* Vol. X, p. 484).

These concerns led to genuine attempts to educate the citizenry and inculcate the "liberal democratic culture" enshrined in the Constitution. While Varshney (2012) reminds us that India has lagged behind on liberal democratic norms as compared to a commitment to procedural democracy, the Constitution has provided a vehicle for marginalized groups to fight for their rights (De 2018). In this manner, what began as a document conceived by elites has genuinely given rise to and been forced to respond to a democratic culture. Indeed Varshney (2022) makes the case that the deepening slide in liberal democratic norms in India is on account of the shifting values and norms of the ruling elites. Our data, however, demonstrate the entrenched presence of a democratic culture in the arena of mass politics (see also, Aiyar 2025).

The robustness of Indian democratic culture is amply demonstrated in the IES 2024 data. The survey asked respondents about their preference between two systems: first, a democracy in which a strong leader can make de-

cisions without interference from the parliament or the courts; and second, a democracy in which elected representatives (collectively) decide what becomes law. The vast majority of respondents (75 percent) do prefer a collective, rather than leader-driven, system of governance. The survey also asked respondents to choose why the Constitution is important between three options: *a*) It ensures equality of caste; *b*) It prevents religious discrimination; *c*) It protects fundamental rights. The vast majority of respondents (72 percent) view "fundamental rights" as the main reason the Constitution is important, and, hearteningly, there is little variation in response across caste and religious groups.

Respondents also had a strong understanding of the social protections in the Constitution and right to protest. The vast majority of respondents (79 percent) believe India to be a secular country (as opposed to a Hindu country), and 74 percent of respondents believed that "it [is] the government's responsibility to protect the interests of the minorities" (56 percent agreed and 18 percent strongly agreed with the statement). Between 2019 and 2024, the government saw many popular protests on issues such as the aforementioned Citizenship Amendment Act and proposed farm law designed introduce private actors into agricultural markets. The government and media regularly sought to delegitimize these protests as the work of *andolanjeevi*s (career protestors). However, the IES 2024 found overwhelming support for the farmers' protests; 72 percent of respondents reported that they had heard of the protests, and among them 86 percent supported the protests. Taken together this data conclusively point to the prevalence of a robust liberal democratic culture with sympathies for the most vulnerable populations.

Questioning the Process

If one is to argue that democratic legitimacy played a role in political outcomes, then it is not enough to simply query legitimacy of the actions of the ruling party; one must also ask what citizens felt about the fairness of the democratic process. In the run-up to the 2024 national election, Mukherji (2024) concluded, "It is fair to ask whether the country has given way to competitive authoritarianism, where political parties are allowed to compete for power but are so disadvantaged by the state apparatus that they have no realistic way to win" (Mukherji 2024, p. 20). In other words, as voters became frustrated with the ruling BJP, they naturally looked to political opposition. But given the coercive apparatus of the state, voters would have wondered if they could genuinely express their grievances through supporting political opposition in a fair electoral process.

In India, votes are entered into an electronic voting machine or EVM. On counting day, anywhere from a few days to more than a month after voting day depending on the "phase" in which voters went to the polls, representatives from each party observe the counting. The machine counts (for each polling booth) are counted one-by-one in "rounds" until the entire electoral constituency is counted. Tampering would

be very difficult during the process of counting with each party observing, so many conspiracy theorists have alleged that the machines have been compromised at time of the vote (artificially registering votes for BJP). We would like to state upfront that we do not personally believe these conspiracy theories, as such tampering would be technically very difficult. However, because of the prevalence of the conspiracy theories, whether one believes the EVM is or is not compromised is a very good proxy for whether one believes the selection process is fair.

When we asked whether the "EVM process is fair," only 62 percent of respondents answered in the affirmative. Another 22 percent explicitly said that EVMs are not fair, with 16 percent refusing to answer the question (which is also problematic from the standpoint of democratic legitimacy). The perception of procedural fairness was strongly associated with vote choice. A total of 78 percent of voters who supported the BJP believed the EVM process to be fair and just 11 percent believed it be unfair. By contrast, only 56 percent of those who did not vote for the BJP felt the EVM process was fair, with 28 percent believing it to be unfair. In short, a significant proportion of those who looked to political opposition felt the process was not fair.

Table 6a: Fairness of EVM System over Caste (%)

	Scheduled Tribe (ST)	Scheduled Caste (SC)	Other Backward Class (OBC)	General
Yes	59	58	61	65
No	19	25	23	20
Can't Say	22	17	16	15

Table 6b: Fairness of EVM System over Asset Quintile (%)

	Bottom 20%	2nd Quintile	3rd Quintile	4th Quintile	Top 20%
Yes	57	59	63	63	66
No	22	23	22	23	21
Can't Say	21	18	15	14	13

Source: compiled by the Authors

Tables 6a and 6b show the perception of whether the EVM process fair broken down by caste and asset quintile, respectively. Two key findings emerge from these tables. First, OBCs and SCs are about 4-6 percentage points more likely to say the EVM system is unfair, the same population that showed a predilection toward economic grievances related to switching away from the BJP, while general caste voters are more likely to say the EVM system is fair. Second, the poorer the voter the more likely they are to have no opinion on the fairness of the EVM system, while the wealthier the voter the more likely they are to affirm the EVM system as fair. Taken together, these data suggest a significant percent-

age of people who cannot affirmatively say the EVM system is fair, especially among those who support the political opposition. Moreover, we see the lowest rates of affirming the system as fair (or explicitly characterizing it as unfair) among the most vulnerable populations—precisely the population among which the Hindu vote was fragmenting due to economic grievances.

What about Secularism?

While we have presented evidence that voters expressed concerns about democratic legitimacy and authoritarian behaviors, there is a risk of oversimplification. The fact that democratic legitimacy has become an issue today leaves the unsettling question as to why it didn't become so earlier, not just in the last decade but throughout Indian history which has often seen a deficit in liberal democratic norms. In Sunil Khilnani's long durée analysis, the decoupling of democracy from liberal democratic norms enshrined in the Constitution began to manifest in the wake of the Emergency. He writes, "The single most important consequence of Mrs. Gandhi's actions was manifest by the end of the first decade of her rule … she had transformed the meaning of democracy for both the Indian state and its society, and it now signified, simply, elections" (Khilnani 1997, p. 48). The pressure to develop a form of charismatic leadership and construct large electoral meant that Mrs. Gandhi "flirted with religious sentiments and appeals, hinting that the categories of 'non-Hindu' and 'anti-national' overlapped" (Khilnani 1997, p. 54).

Indira Gandhi's flirtation opened the space for expedient religious "appeasement" within the arena of electoral politics. This provided the platform for the BJP to legitimize Hindutva. However, at the national level, until the rise of the BJP till 2014, Hindutva mobilisation broadly operated within the political limits set by Nehruvian secularism. With Modi's entry into national politics and the decisive mandate earned by the BJP in 2014, the terms of secular politics shifted decisively toward Hindutva's framing of India and specifically Hindu-Muslim relations. Our survey results show how deeply this has penetrated within society.

Although a majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the BJP government had victimized the Muslim community, a nearly identical share agreed with the view that Hindus have historically faced discrimination in India, and 55 percent of respondents agreed that temples should be built in Mathura and Kashi (Varanasi) where mosques are currently standing. These seemingly contradictory responses speak to the lack of depth in the secular imagination of most voters. While the average citizen may have been educated in the abstract principles of India's constitutional democracy, for many voters these abstract principles do not contradict everyday prejudices and discriminations. For this reason, political actors can continue campaign on openly discriminatory practices.

As the campaign wore on, the rhetoric became more and more polarized as the BJP and Prime Minister

Modi grappled with the re-emergence of caste-wise tensions in the Hindu vote and the widespread economic anxieties. Prime Minister Modi openly sought to mobilize the Hindu vote with communal rhetoric, with Human Rights Watch reporting that he made anti-Muslim remarks in 110 of his 172 speeches in the run-up to the 2024 election (Human Rights Watch 2024). But, even as political opposition sought to challenge the perceived authoritarian behaviors of the BJP government, it refused to seriously engage with the omnipresent anti-Muslim rhetoric and India's secular identity, choosing instead to address the issue of Muslim rights within the ambit of a broad "minority" rights framework. Indeed, the share of Muslim candidates fielded by the Congress fell to an all-time low of 6 percent as did the share of Muslim candidates fielded by the Samajwadi Party a key member of the INDIA Alliance (Allie 2025). While voters may have responded to the manner in which political opposition was stymied, they did not fundamentally reject the most problematic aspects of the current political moment.

Concluding Thoughts

The aftermath of the 2024 election has not generated much differentiation in political brands. Virtually every political actor promises lavish DBTs in the run-up to the election, and every party plays the religious game. Perhaps the most egregious of these was a promise by then Chief Minister of Maharashtra to give 2.6 crore women a monthly benefit of INR 1500—projecting to a promise of INR 47,000 crore. It worked, as Eknath Shinde and the National Democratic Alliance under the BJP returned to power with a thumping victory. Elsewhere, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, reeling from jibes that she is anti-Hindu, constructed a big temple to Lord Jagannath in the state (to appeal to Bengalis who often travel to Puri in Odisha). And the BJP, once vociferously opposed to a "caste census" that would enumerate the Indian population by *jati*, caved to political pressure—announcing that a caste census would now be conducted for the first time since 1931. In order to prevent the political embarrassment of caving to pressure, it hid the announcement when India was in the throes of a military conflict with Pakistan. At its core, democracy is supposed to give its citizens choices, but to what extent can we say that Indian citizens have them?

Parties regularly tiptoe around the secular fabric of India and use state resources to maintain electoral coalitions. One way or another, various regional political parties and leaders behave no differently than the hegemonic equilibrium enumerated in this article. And with it, the unease with the economic future of the country, concerns of a lackluster development path, fears that India is not capable of giving its citizens a good life, continue to permeate in society.

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Notes

1 Indeed, the ruling BJP has often promulgated the "TINA factor" (there is no alternative) as a reason to vote for Prime Minister Modi.

2 This has led to austerity measures in the past, reducing the number of places in state-run universities, and requiring students to sign a contract to stay in Hungary (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-19213488).

3 In Assam, the BJP and its allies secured 9 out of 14 Lok Sabha seats in 2019 and 75 out 126 Vidhan Sabha seats in 2021—surprisingly clearcut victories in a state historically riven by many cleavages. In Uttar Pradesh, the BJP and its allies secured 64 out of 80 Lok Sabha seats and 273 out of 403 seats Vidhan Sabha seats in 2022—a monumental electoral success in a traditionally divided state and one in which Yogi Adityanath became the longest ever continuously serving chief minister of the state. In the 2024 national election, however, these states saw markedly different results. In Assam, the BJP and its allies further consolidated the Hindu vote, winning 11 of 14 Lok Sabha seats. However, in Uttar Pradesh the Hindu vote fragmented, with the BJP and its allies winning just 36 of 80 seats—one of the major reasons why the BJP saw a sharp drop in seats from 2019 to 2024.

4 In total, 23 percent of respondents refused to answer the constitutional question, 21 percent refused to answer the Muslim victimization question, and 19 percent refused to answer the question about the media.

5 We had useable vote choices for 84 percent of our respondents.

6 One field-based observation is that many opposed to the BJP's constitutional project did not believe the BJP could so easily change the constitution, while many firmly in the BJP camp believed the BJP would do so to fulfill its aims. In this way, there was a weaker relationship between the perception and BJP vote share.

7 The fact that there are such significant differences in BJP's vote share between those who perceive these authoritarian behaviors and those who do not. Combined with the fact that the overall vote share estimated in the survey is close to the actual outcome, there is strong evidence that (even with moderate levels of acquiescence bias) a significant share of the population truly perceived authoritarian behaviors.

8 In order to calculate wealth, we calculated a two-parameter item response model over a selected set of household assets.

9 In order to make this calculation, we relied on those respondents who reported a vote choice in the Lok Sabha election 5 years ago and in the current Lok Sabha election.

This amounted to 83 percent of people who reported a vote choice in the 2024 election.

10 Ashok Gehlot, Congress chief minister in Rajasthan, lost the election just a few months before the national election. For the better part of the period between 2019–2024, he was the chief minister of the state.

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Chronicles of a Campaign Foretold: Electioneering in the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections

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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of political campaigning in the 2024 Indian General Elections, a pivotal moment that represents both continuity and evolution in electioneering practices in India. Drawing upon longitudinal survey data collected by Lokniti-CSDS, it examines the shifting patterns of voters' exposure to diverse sources of campaign communication and political information. Despite appearances of a lacklustre campaign, the 2024 election marks the maturation of a more professionalized campaigning trend ascendant in India over the last decade. This mode of election campaigns, which first became visible in the run-up to 2014 general elections, is centred on an axis defined by both new content and a new style. Religious polarisation has routinized hate speech to the extent of it appearing banal and taken for granted. This development runs parallel to the BJP's ideological dominance and its central position within a new party system. Digital media toolkits and professional campaign strategists, once novel, have become entrenched features of political campaigns. This paper shows that the rise of specialized campaign professionals necessitates a new research agenda for scholars of Indian politics, one that captures the nuanced, and often hidden, mechanisms by which campaign professionals shape democratic processes and voter engagement within a complex media ecosystem.

Keywords: Indian parliamentary elections 2024, election campaigns, political communication, campaign professionalization, campaign effects, Indian politics

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Crónicas de una Campaña Anunciada: Campañas Electorales en las Elecciones Lok Sabha de 2024

Resumen

Este artículo explora la dinámica de las campañas políticas en las Elecciones Generales de la India de 2024, un momento crucial que representa tanto la continuidad como la evolución de las prácticas electorales en India. Basándose en datos de encuestas longitudinales recopilados por Lokniti-CSDS, examina los patrones cambiantes de exposición de los votantes a diversas fuentes de comunicación de campaña e información política. A pesar de la aparente falta de brillo en la campaña, las elecciones de 2024 marcan la maduración de una tendencia de campañas más profesionalizadas, que ha estado en ascenso en India durante la última década. Este modelo de campañas electorales, que se hizo visible por primera vez en el período previo a las elecciones generales de 2014, se centra en un eje definido tanto por un nuevo contenido como por un nuevo estilo. La polarización religiosa ha convertido el discurso de odio en algo rutinario, hasta el punto de que parece banal y se da por sentado. Este desarrollo corre paralelo al dominio ideológico del BJP y su posición central dentro de un nuevo sistema de partidos. Las herramientas de medios digitales y los estrategas de campaña profesionales, antes novedosos, se han convertido en elementos esenciales de las campañas políticas. Este artículo demuestra que el auge de profesionales de campaña especializados requiere una nueva agenda de investigación para los académicos de la política india, que capture los mecanismos sutiles, y a menudo ocultos, mediante los cuales los profesionales de campaña configuran los procesos democráticos y la participación del electorado dentro de un complejo ecosistema mediático.

Palabras clave: Elecciones parlamentarias indias de 2024, campañas electorales, comunicación política, profesionalización de campañas, efectos de campaña, política india

预言中的竞选纪事：2024年印度人民院选举中的竞选活动

摘要

本文探究了2024年印度大选的政治竞选动态。这一关键时刻既代表了印度竞选实践的延续性，也体现了其演变。本文基

于Lokniti-CSDS收集的纵向调查数据，分析了“选民接触各种竞选传播和政治信息来源”的模式变化。尽管2024年的竞选活动看似乏善可陈，但这场选举标志着过去十年来在印度兴起的更加专业化的竞选趋势的成熟。这种竞选模式在2014年大选前夕首次显现，其核心是新的内容和风格。宗教极化使仇恨言论变得常规化，甚至显得平庸和习以为常。这种发展与印度人民党(BJP)的意识形态主导地位及其在新政党体系中的核心地位是一致的。数字媒体工具包和专业的竞选策略师曾经是新鲜事物，如今已成为政治竞选中根深蒂固的特征。本文表明，专业竞选人员的崛起促使印度政治学者制定新的研究议程，以描述那些微妙且往往隐藏的机制，竞选专业人员通过这些机制在复杂的媒体生态系统中影响民主过程和选民参与。

关键词：2024年印度议会选举，竞选活动，政治传播，竞选活动专业化，活动效果，印度政治

Introduction

Discussions surrounding the 2024 Lok Sabha elections have been marked by contradictory interpretations and polarized viewpoints, as seen in both journalistic reportage and political commentaries. On the one hand, in the weeks leading up to polling some tended to portray the campaign as a largely muted affair, lacking the energy and excitement that defined previous elections (Sharma 2024b; Mehta 2024; Gupta 2024). In some parts of the country, it was noted that there was a marked absence of grassroots enthusiasm and a noticeable decline in the presence of party workers actively canvassing voters (Banerjee 2024; Kapoor 2024). That this was in stark contrast to the fervour of the 2014 and 2019 general elections lent credence to the perception that the 2024 campaign was a largely lacklustre affair.

The 2014 election, after all, had been defined by technological innovation—3D hologram rallies, hashtag wars on Twitter, the famous *chai pe charcha* (discussions over tea) initiative, to name a few. It was also a moment when political consultants like Prashant Kishor first gained prominence, heralding a new era of professionalized campaign management (Sharma 2024a; Sardesai 2014). The 2019 campaign was equally notable for the BJP's advertising blitzkrieg, most notably in the wake of the Balakot airstrikes, when the party's messages saturated everything from street-side hoardings to WhatsApp groups (Jaffrelot and Verniers 2020; Sardesai 2019). The concerted efforts by all parties to expand their digital footprint was a defining feature of that election. In 2024, by contrast, those expecting exciting innovations were left with little more than sporadic stories of AI-enabled deepfake

videos and AI-generated memes circulating on Facebook (Christopher 2024). Arguably, even the slogans of the two leading parties felt recycled and dull imitations of the past. The BJP's "*abki baar 400 par* (this time, cross 400 [seats])" was a straightforward riff on their victorious 2014 rallying cry "*abki baar Modi sarkar* (this time Modi's government)," while Congress's "*haath badlega halaat* (the hand [the voting symbol of INC] will change our conditions)" had echoes of the earlier "*Congress ka haath, aam aadmi ke saath* (Congress' hand with the common man)" line from 2004. Perhaps, this too contributed to the sentiment that this election was a rerun of the past and produced a sense of political fatigue.

Among those who were inclined to see the campaign as lacking dynamism, the most common explanation tended to foreground Narendra Modi's status as the most popular and seemingly unrivalled pan-India leader (Daniyal 2024). His pre-eminence, it was argued, created an air of inevitability around the BJP's victory. This supposedly rendered it unnecessary for the party to engage in an aggressive campaign, all the while demoralizing the opposition from mounting a spirited fight. As a result, for some, the 2024 election became an "unexciting" and "themeless" election, where waiting for the final results seemed analogous to "the anticipation of a one-sided cricket match between two vastly unequal rivals" (Gupta 2024).

On the other hand, despite these perceptions, the campaign was far from inconsequential. At multiple campaign events, Prime Minister Modi appeared to up the ante in his public rallies when he directly drew upon classic Hindutva tropes. In one of his most infamous speeches in Banswara, Rajasthan, Modi referred to Muslims as infiltrators and took a swipe at the community's high fertility rates. This was combined with claims that if Congress were to come to power, it would appropriate the *mangalsutra* (ceremonial necklace) worn by married Hindu women along with their gold jewellery and redistribute it to the minorities. Supplementing the public rallies was a carefully planned social media campaign. A video shared widely through BJP's official social media handles depicted a caricaturized Rahul Gandhi "feeding" a skullcap wearing bird to the detriment of other birds—thereby invoking tropes of Muslim appeasement. The deliberate decision to invoke such overtly communal references and stoke religious sentiments indicate that the party's leadership was not taking its popularity for granted. Furthermore, the unexpected outcome on the result day—with the BJP losing its majority in parliament—suggests that the campaign period was decisive in producing certain last-minute realignments among the electorate. It has been widely reported that the bombastic *abki baar 400 par* slogan backfired insofar as it played a major role in raising fears among lower caste voters that an imminent super-majority in parliament would pave the way for the BJP to dismantle the reservation system through constitutional amendments. The opposition parties, for their part,

certainly made much of this theory in their campaign. Seen in this contrasting light, the campaign period was in fact a decisive battleground after all.

How is it, then, that a campaign which seemed to break many taboos and arguably had a decisive impact on some section of voters was also dubbed lacklustre? This Rashomon-like campaign—at once communally aggressive yet subdued, uninspiring yet pivotal, digitally saturated yet lacking in innovation—belies a deeper reality of a new era of electioneering that has finally matured in India. This phase of election campaigns, which first emerged circa 2013–14, is centred on an axis defined by both new content and a new style. In terms of content, the routinization of hate speech has become a hallmark of this new era, running parallel to the BJP's ideological dominance and its central position within a new party system (Chhibber and Verma 2019; Palshikar 2017). While such rhetoric occasionally grabs headlines (such as in some of Modi's speeches), much of it now flows under the radar, normalized to the point of being banal. In terms of style, the digital media toolkits and professional campaign strategists, once novel, have become entrenched features of political campaigns. Their ubiquity means that their presence is now taken for granted, no longer worthy of special mention. Although opportunities of shock and awe are less frequent, the break from the past is certainly undeniable.

Past and Present: Stabilization of the Trends

The shift to professionalized election campaigns in India marks a break from the past not only when we study campaign communication from the "production" side—viz. how campaigns are produced and which actors produce them—but also when studied from the "consumption" side —viz. people's participation and interest in these campaigns. The data from successive rounds of the National Election Studies (NES) conducted by Lokniti-CSDS, show that the proportion of respondents claiming to have a "great deal" of interest in general election campaigns has increased markedly in the last decade—from merely 9 percent in 2009 to 29 percent in 2024. As I have argued elsewhere (Sharma 2024a), professionalized campaigns are unique not only due to their highly skilled staff, advanced techniques, and specialized division of labour, but also because they create a more dialogic interface with voters and, in many ways, expand their opportunities of participation. Through their capacity to foster greater interactive engagement between voters and politicians, such campaigns stand in contrast to previous styles of electioneering which largely treated voters as passive spectators at rallies and or as readers of printed material.

A more granular picture pertaining to the trends in citizen's participation in specific campaign activities is harder to discern because the wording of the questions and options used in successive NES surveys has changed

over time. However, available data does point towards a certain degree of evolution in how citizens engage with campaigns. In the 1970s, respondents' participation in different types of campaign events ranged from a measly 2 to 5 percent. For instance, only 3 percent of the surveyed voters claimed to have joined a procession or demonstration during the 1971 General Election.[1] By 1999, this figure had climbed to every tenth voter. And now, roughly a quarter of the surveyed voters claimed to have attended an election meeting or rally, while over a tenth have participated in activities such as processions and *nukkad natak* (street theatre), door-to-door canvassing, and distribution of printed publicity material.

It is notable that in the recent 2024 NES, approximately one in every five respondents has claimed to have participated in the campaign process by sending messages associated with a party and/or candidate on social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp.[2] This is a striking development since it suggests that sharing messages on social media is now the single most active form of citizen participation during elections. This shift is no doubt driven by the fact that forwarding social media messages is a relatively low-effort task and can be done easily from the convenience of one's home or workplace.

Looking at these trends in voters' engagement in campaigning is instructive for another reason. Longitudinal data show that it was only in the 2024 elections that uptake of social media among voters had reached a level where parties could gain a clear strategic advantage by dominating conversations on these platforms. In 2014, more than 90 percent of the surveyed voters did not have either a Facebook or a Twitter account (see Table 1). While the number of respondents who had an account on social media platforms increased significantly in 2019, more than half claimed that they did not use the platforms to express political viewpoints, share political content, or access news. This casts doubt on the grand narratives that framed the 2014 and 2019 general elections as the social media or WhatsApp elections respectively—the role of these platforms in being decisive for shaping electoral outcomes was largely overstated (Verma 2024). Given this fact, it is surprising that political parties, particularly the BJP, invested heavily in digital campaigning even when the reach of these platforms was so limited. One explanation for this could be that the BJP (and other early adopters) wanted to secure a first-mover advantage—it was reasonable to assume that those with an active digital presence would be in a pole position to benefit as social media use grew (Verma 2024). Additionally, parties may have realised that India's hybrid media environment allowed for significant crossover between social media and traditional news outlets. Discussions and controversies that originated on platforms like Twitter (now X) and WhatsApp were often picked up by mainstream news media, which amplified their reach and this fed into offline conversations among voters. Such linkages suggest that the investment in digital platforms before 2024 was not solely

about directly reaching voters on social networking platforms itself, but also about shaping the broader media narrative that would ultimately influence public opinion across both online and offline spaces.

Table 1: Social Media Penetration among Indian Electorate

	Facebook		**Twitter**		**WhatsApp**		**Instagram**		**YouTube**	
	2019	**2024**	**2019**	**2024**	**2019**	**2024**	**2019**	**2024**	**2019**	**2024**
Many times a day	13	30	2	6	21	35	5	18	15	32
Once/twice a day	10	12	3.8	10	8	13	4	10	10	15
Rarely/Never	35	27	40	36	32	26	40	36	35	28
No account	34	22	47	35	33	17	44	26	33	17
No response	6	9	7	12	6	9	7	10	7	8

Source: Lokniti-CSDS Post-Poll Survey (2019 and 2024)

By 2024, the picture looks substantially different. That there has been a growing penetration of new media technology in voters' everyday life. What is also significant is that social media is facilitating not just private communication and entertainment, but it has also become one of the primary sources for accessing a range of political material. In 2014, approximately 20 percent of voters reported to have been contacted by a party or a candidate via a phone call, recorded voice message, or an SMS (which, it should be noted, did not even necessitate possessing a smartphone). By 2024, however, almost half of the voters reported to have been contacted by the BJP and the Congress through phone calls, text message, or on WhatsApp and Facebook—a clear indication for the possibilities to craft personalized and narrow-casted messages.

It is important to add two clarifications here. First, Indian voters are not passively being bombarded with political propaganda by parties on the internet; many are also actively seeking out political content online. The percentage of voters using the internet to access news first doubled between 2014 and 2019, and then tripled by 2024 (see Table 2). This surge in the consumption of digital news sources has not come at the cost of the frequency with which TV news is consumed (which has remained steady), but there has been some dip in newspaper readership (Verma 2024).

Secondly, online and offline modes of political communication are complementary and not substitutes (Sheikh 2024). Lokniti-CSDS data makes it clear, techniques like door-to-door canvassing are still a strong element in the repertoire of campaigning in India.[3]

Table 2: Consumption of News Media among the Indian Electorate

		2014	2019	2024
Watch TV news	**Daily**	46	35	42
	Sometimes	25	28	24
	Rarely	12	10	13
	Never	15	25	13
	No response	3	2	5
Read newspapers	**Daily**	25	18	17
	Sometimes	19	16	21
	Rarely	11	11	19
	Never	40	53	29
	No response	5	3	9
Listen to radio news	**Daily**	9	7	7
	Sometimes	12	7	10
	Rarely	15	10	14
	Never	59	72	48
	No response	5	4	14
Access news on the internet[4]	**Daily**	5	10	29
	Sometimes	7	10	18
	Rarely	6	8	12
	Never	72	67	22
	No response	10	5	9

Source: Lokniti-CSDS Post-Poll Survey (2014, 2019, and 2024)

A Paradox and the Lingering Questions

Despite the growing interest of the Indian public in the campaign process and the new channels of political communication, and the massive investment by political parties in professionalized campaigning, thus far scholars have struggled to deduce whether (and how far) such campaigns have a meaningful impact on voter behaviour. Theoretically, one might expect that professionalized campaigns thrive in an environment where a substantial section of the electorate makes its voting decision during the peak of the campaign and in the days leading up to polling (as opposed to having made up their mind well in advance). After all, many political consultants and pollsters of various shades

and hues derive their *raison d'ẽtre* for their alleged ability to help politicians understand the psychology of swing voters and to mobilize them.

However, determining the actual influence of these campaigns in India remains difficult because of limited availability of data and certain methodological challenges (see below). A useful datapoint for this is provided, once again, by the CSDS-Lokniti NES, but here in addition, it is difficult to parse through longitudinal trends cleanly since the wording of the survey questions and the number of options included has changed over time in the survey questionnaires. Nevertheless, Table 3 highlights some noteworthy patterns. Although the proportion of voters who finalize their voting decision on the day or a few days before polling has declined since the 1970s, over the past 15 years—precisely the period when campaigns in India have undergone professionalization—these figures have remained remarkably stable (Sardesai and Mishra 2017). The phase of campaigning has been consequential for no more than 20 percent of the total respondents since 2009. The largest share of the voters (ranging between a quarter and a third) seem to have made up their mind before the campaign even began. This then reveals a strange paradox—even as voters' interest in campaigns has grown over time (especially as facilitated by new media), there has been an absence in the ability of these campaigns to have a discernible impact on voting intentions, as self-reported by voters themselves.

Table 3: Time of Vote Choice in Indian Elections

	1971	**1996**	**1998**	**1999**	**2004**	**2009**	**2014**	**2019**	**2024**
On the day of voting	34	22	17	16	16	15	14	15	14
A day or two before voting[5]	-	35	37	25	16	13	13	14	13
During the campaign	30	-	-	-	15	25	18	18	21
After the announcement of candidates[6]	-	11	12	18	-	-	-	12	21
Before the campaign started[7]	34	24	29	35	50	37	47	36	28

Source: Lokniti-CSDS National Election Study (multiple years)

Indian politicians themselves also frequently express doubts and misgivings about the efficacy of campaign progressions. Having conducted fieldwork across multiple election cycles, it was not uncommon for me to encounter senior party members who, despite being responsible for engaging the services of political consultants, pollsters, and social media influencers, were not

always convinced of the effectiveness and value addition of hiring these actors. Often these campaign professionals were hired simply because of the perception that opposition parties were using their services, and this produced a fear of missing out.

While we need not be entirely pessimistic or dismissive of the impact of campaign professionalization, significant methodological challenges complicate efforts to evaluate the effect of these new modes of campaigning. First, surveys like the Lokniti-CSDS NES depend on voters' self-reported recollection of when they finalized their voting decision. This approach presumes respondents have accurate recall and a clear sense of when their preferences solidified, both of which are far from straightforward. In post-poll surveys, responses may also reflect post-hoc rationalizations in light of the final result. While survey responses premised upon self-reflexivity can provide interesting insights, it would be misleading to try to distil an objective assessment of campaign effects from these subjective measures.

Second, the effects of campaigns manifest not just in who one votes for, but also in their motivation to vote at all. Campaigns can sometimes foster a sense of complacency that dampens the levels of turnout or, conversely, spurs voters to turn out in greater numbers. In such circumstances, we need to measure how campaigns affect the propensity to vote by comparing observed voting behaviour with a counterfactual scenario where such campaign exposure did not exist. Experimental research design attempts to address this by testing how voters respond to "get-out-to-vote" campaigns and other types of targeted messaging. However, the short-term exposure to messages used in these experimental settings differ fundamentally from the prolonged exposure voters experience during election campaigns. Equally, voters tend to react differently to overt and direct campaign communication than to more subtle and covert propaganda that presents itself as part of the ideological common sense (Sharma 2023).

Third, attempting to gauge voters' views on the process runs up against the problem that the boundaries of the campaign period itself are rather ambiguous and not bookended by a clear start or end date. In an era of professionalized campaigning, most parties and many candidates operate in a permanent campaign mode—agenda-setting and controlling the discourse has become an around-the-clock endeavour, largely detached from the electoral calendar. Consequently, two sets of voters may believe that their voting decision was finalized "before the campaign" began, but this may be due to divergent notions of when this campaign period began in the first place.

Fourth, there is an attribution problem—namely, voters' ability to distinguish between campaign communication and non-campaign communication is not always accurate. When reflecting on the period of campaigning, most voters tend to subsume within it only those forms of political communication that are issued by and seem to emanate directly from politi-

cal parties and candidates. Thus, public rallies, election meetings, door-to-door canvassing, leaflets and posters, social media posts from a party or candidate's accounts are all identified as campaign communication. However, as noted by Sircar and Aiyar (2024), in the 2024 Indian general election figures such as social media influencers—who are not officially affiliated with any political party or candidate—exerted considerable sway over digitally connected voters. Popular influencers like Dhruv Rathee and Ranveer Allahbadia ("Beer Biceps") have assumed an overwhelming influence in shaping how some voters consume political news and form their opinions. This is of course connected to a larger trend where social media cells in political parties secretly finance and patronize existing social media influencers to disseminate funny memes, reels, and posts of a political nature (Mollan 2024). These seemingly non-partisan influencers are as much a part of the campaign machinery and shape and influence voter decision during an election cycle, though this is not always clear to voters themselves who may consume them under the guise of "infotainment."

Given the ambiguity surrounding what constitutes a campaign and the increasing tendency of partisan political communication to be hidden and concealed, relying on voters' subjective assessment of campaign will necessarily underestimate the power of professionalized campaign. Voters make their decisions after masticating information gathered from a wide array of sources, many of which do not fit neatly within a monolithic definition of a "campaign." This dispersion of influence complicates any clear attribution of their decision-making to a singular or direct campaign effort.

It is useful to conclude this section by briefly considering how campaign professionals reflect on their impact and efficacy. While in public they often market their services with bold claims of their ability to influence electoral outcomes, in private conversations they tend to be more circumspect and tempered. In my interviews conducted with political consultants, for instance, many express a critical awareness of the limitations inherent in their line of work. They frequently acknowledge the unpredictability of voter behaviour and the myriad factors that ultimately shape electoral verdicts. According to them, their most significant contribution is not necessarily in changing voter preferences, but in enhancing the internal dynamics and operational efficiency of political parties.

Fieldwork conducted with a polling firm during the 2024 general election provides an interesting illustration of this point. During the election, the pollsters in this firm were working with a major political party to assist them in candidate selection and ticket distribution. After undertaking extensive polling and ground-level assessment, they were able to compile a list of the most viable candidates and forward them to the senior party leadership. However, much to their dismay, the decision-making was hindered by intra-party "power dynamics"

and considerations that went beyond mere competitiveness—local factional leaders, political dynastic leaders, and other independently wealthy ticket aspirants exerted considerable pressure over the candidate nominations process and the party leaders often needed to accommodate and assuaged them as well. Announcement of the candidates took place in staggered tranches. According to these pollsters, candidates nominated in the first few rounds were those that they had recommended to the party bosses—they were the clear front-runners, the most "meritorious," and thus most valuable for the party. Whereas those nominated in the final few rounds were the least likely to win since "other" ancillary considerations had entered the picture. Thus, my informants explained that for anyone studying the impact of campaign professionalization, one needed to be privy to such internal dynamics first.

This vignette underscores the importance of re-evaluating how the impact of campaign professionals is measured. Rather than solely focusing on their ability to alter voter preferences, scholars should investigate the subtler, often hidden mechanisms through which these professionals engage with political parties. By mapping out the internal logics of intra-party decision-making, we can better understand how campaign professionals exert influence at the margins. This shift in perspective allows for a more nuanced assessment of their contributions to the electoral process, revealing that their power and influence may be substantial even when it falls short of guaranteeing total victories. The power of campaign professionalization need not be limited to estimating average treatment effects of campaign messages on voter behaviour. There is a need for a broader conversation about the role of campaign professionals within the evolving landscape of Indian politics and its implications for the democratic process.

Conclusion

In light of the foregoing discussion, it would not be unfair to argue that the 2024 general election campaign was "dull" and "boring" for a certain commentariat class within Indian media, but that the electorate at large may not have shared this sentiment widely. While some have rightly decried the lack of novelty in campaign slogans or obvious technological innovations used by parties, longitudinal data, despite all its imperfection, reveals a changing landscape of how the Indian electorate consumes political communication and news. While the changing techniques of electioneering have been mentioned for at least the last decade, it is only by the 2024 general election that we can find that a significant section of the electorate is now clued into the new communication infrastructure. This constitutes a definite crystallization of the trend that began in 2014 and can no longer be treated as a mere flash in the pan. To be sure, this is not a story of older "retail" forms of campaigning being displaced by "new" forms of cyber-politics. Instead, both online and offline channels are actively reshaping one other. Public rallies, door-to-door canvassing, and

social media campaigns co-exist and feed into each other, creating a complex hybrid media environment.

The ways in which these forms of communication are produced and consumed have changed dramatically, with a specialized cadre of professionals now mediating in the interface between voters and politicians, on the one hand, and senior politicians and grassroots party members, on the other. This shift points to an important consideration for scholars of Indian politics—to develop new frameworks and methodological approaches that account for the professionalization of campaigning. Traditional analyses centred around the party systems, voting behaviour, or campaign outcomes must now also consider the role of campaign professionals as intermediaries who not only shape voter perceptions but also influence the internal machinations of political parties themselves. Charting this evolving landscape calls for a research agenda that investigates the expertise, influence, and tactics of these professionals, offering a more holistic understanding of political communication in contemporary India.

Notes

1 For further details, see Lokniti-CSDS 1971 Post-Poll Survey.

2 Lokniti-CSDS 2024 Post-Poll Survey.

3 See, Shivani Choudhary and Ganesh Ramesh Kulkarni, Campaigns play key role in shaping choice. The Hindu. June 07, 2024.

4 There are subtle variations in the wording of this option in the NES survey questionnaires across the years: "Read/watch political material on WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube etc." in 2024, "Read news on internet" in 2019, and "Use internet/ Facebook/twitter [for news]" in 2014.

5 The wording for this option was "a few days before polling" in the 1996 and 1999 NES and as "a few days before voting" in the 1998 NES.

6 The wording for this option was "as soon as the candidates were announced" in the 1996 and 1999 NES and as "when the names of the candidates were announced" in the 1998 NES.

7 The closest analogous counterpart for this option was phrased as "even before announcement of candidates" in the 2024 NES.

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Caste in Candidate Nomination in the 2024 Election

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Abstract

The outcome of the 2024 National General Election brought caste or *jati* back to the centre of electoral analysis in India—an aspect that had receded after the BJP's rise to power in 2014. Based on a critical analysis of opinion articles and the caste background of candidates, with the state of Uttar Pradesh as a case study, this article explores how political commentators used caste as an "equation" in their assessments. It further examines their claims about *jati*-wise nomination strategies of parties through original data on candidates' caste profiles. The caste background of candidates remains a crucial component of the so-called "caste equation" shaping the image and appeal of political parties. Decoding this equation helps reveal the strategies of political mobilisation that parties employ. Each party faces representational limitations, and examining the caste profiles of candidates offers a window into these structural and strategic constraints. Based on these analyses, this article highlights how caste continues to influence electoral strategy, candidate selection, and political narrative in contemporary India.

Keywords: Caste, Caste Equation, Candidate Nomination, Candidate Selection, Indian Democracy, Political Parties, Representation

Casta en la Nominación de Candidatos en las Elecciones de 2024

Resumen

El resultado de las Elecciones Generales Nacionales de 2024 volvió a colocar la casta o jati en el centro del análisis electoral en India, un aspecto que había perdido relevancia tras la llegada al poder del BJP en 2014. Basado en un análisis crítico de artículos de opinión y el contexto de casta de los candidatos, con el estado de Uttar

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Pradesh como caso de estudio, este artículo explora cómo los comentaristas políticos utilizaron la casta como una "ecuación" en sus evaluaciones. Además, examina sus afirmaciones sobre las estrategias de nominación de los partidos basadas en la jati a través de datos originales sobre los perfiles de casta de los candidatos. El contexto de casta de los candidatos sigue siendo un componente crucial de la llamada "ecuación de casta", que configura la imagen y el atractivo de los partidos políticos. Descifrar esta ecuación ayuda a revelar las estrategias de movilización política que emplean los partidos. Cada partido enfrenta limitaciones de representación, y examinar los perfiles de casta de los candidatos ofrece una perspectiva de estas limitaciones estructurales y estratégicas. Con base en estos análisis, este artículo destaca cómo la casta continúa influyendo en la estrategia electoral, la selección de candidatos y la narrativa política en la India contemporánea.

Palabras clave: Casta, Ecuación de Castas, Nominación de Candidatos, Selección de Candidatos, Democracia India, Partidos Políticos, Representación

2024年印度选举候选人提名中的种姓

摘要

2024年印度全国大选的结果使种姓或“迦蒂”(jati)重新成为印度选举分析的核心——这一问题在2014年印度人民党上台后一度淡出分析视野。本文基于对评论文章和候选人种姓背景的批判性分析，以北方邦为例，探讨了政治评论员如何在评估中将种姓作为一种“平衡”(equation)。本文通过候选人种姓档案的原始数据，进一步检验了政治评论员关于政党“迦蒂式”提名策略的说法。候选人的种姓背景仍然是塑造政党形象和吸引力的所谓“种姓平衡”的重要组成部分。解读这一平衡有助于揭示政党所采用的政治动员策略。每个政党都面临着代表性方面的限制，而分析候选人的种姓档案则能为了解这些结构性和战略性制约因素打开窗口。基于这些分析，本文强调了种姓如何持续影响当代印度的选举策略、候选人遴选、以及政治叙事。

关键词：种姓，种姓平衡，候选人提名，候选人选拔，印度民主，政党，代表

Introduction

The return of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) to political power in the 2014 national election sparked contested debate regarding the salience of caste in Indian democracy (Trivedi and Singh, 2021). Some scholars argued that this return signified the declining role of caste in electoral politics (Sridharan, 2014; Desai, 2014; Gupta, 2019), whereas others disagreed (Gurjar, 2019; Jaffrelot and Rizvi, 2019). It has been argued that the BJP's return marked the re-nationalisation of Indian politics (Schakal, Sharma, and Swenden, 2019), contributing to the emergence of the fourth party system (Chhibber and Verma, 2014; Vaishnav and Hintson, 2019) and transforming Indian democracy into a majoritarian ethnic democracy (Jaffrelot and Verniers, 2020; Jaffrelot, 2023). This re-nationalisation is said to have shifted Indian polity from identity-based to issue-based politics (Yadav and Palshikar, 2009). Sircar (2020) and Attri and Jain (2019) find evidence of increasing issue-based voting.

The argument concerning the decline of caste politics relies on two key empirical claims (Kumar, 2024). First, the weakening electoral performance of caste-based political parties—such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Samajwadi Party (SP), Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), and Indian National Lok Dal (INLD)—signalled that voters were casting their votes beyond caste loyalties. Second, since the BJP attracted support across caste groups, caste was presumed to be no longer relevant for explaining vote choice. Historically, the BJP has been viewed as a party of the Brahmin-Bania castes, which belong to the upper strata of Indian society. Due to its perceived favouritism towards upper-caste elites, the party initially struggled to gain support among the poor, who predominantly come from lower castes (Thachil, 2014). However, in recent elections, the party has mobilised voters from across all castes and classes of Indian society. Several scholars have argued that the party achieved this through narratives of Hindu nationalism (Kaul, 2017; Pai and Kumar, 2018; Heath, 2020), development (Verma, 2014; Sarcar, 2020), and populism (Gudavarthy, 2018; Vittorini, 2022; Tillin, 2024).

Nevertheless, the outcome of the 2024 national election reignited debate not only on the prospects of Indian democracy (Vaishnav, 2024) but also on the significance of caste in electoral outcomes (Jaffrelot, 2024). In particular, the result in Uttar Pradesh was surprising, as the BJP not only performed modestly but also lost the Faizabad constituency, where the town of Ayodhya—the epicentre of the Ram *janma bhumi* (birthplace of Ram) movement spearheaded by the Hindu nationalists—is located. Just before the election, the Modi government organised a grand inauguration ceremony for the Ram Temple in January 2024. Many commentators had predicted that this move would be electorally beneficial for the BJP (Palshikar, 2024; Tiwari, 2024). However, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which comprised Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), Apana Dal (S), Nishad

Party, and Suheldeo Rajbhar Bhartiya Samaj Party (SBSP), secured only 36 seats, while the SP-led Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), which comprised Indian National Congress (INC), won 43 seats. This has rekindled discussion on the importance of caste in candidate nomination and electoral outcomes. One factor widely discussed in the media as contributing to the opposition's success was the caste background of the candidates (Tiwari, 2024; Salaria, 2024; De, 2024; Mishra, 2024).

The principal objective of this article is to analyse the renewed debate on the caste background of candidates in the context of the SP alliance's improved performance. On this pretext, I explore how the caste background of candidates is perceived and discussed in shaping electoral outcomes. However, this should not be interpreted as a comprehensive explanation of the election results. I test the claims related to the caste background of candidates as a matter of strategic nomination by examining data concerning such candidates. I argue that caste, as a conceptual category, continues to hold a central position in electoral analysis in India. However, recent focus has largely been on the caste background of candidates.

The remainder of this article is divided into three sections. The second section critically analyses opinion pieces that highlight the significance of candidate caste background in the context of the 2024 national election in Uttar Pradesh. The third section empirically evaluates these claims by comparing the candidate nomination strategies of the BJP and SP alliances, using a descriptive analysis of the caste backgrounds of their candidates. The final section offers a conclusion.

The Return of Caste in Election Analysis

The media analysis of Uttar Pradesh's electoral outcome heavily focused on caste equations (*jati sameekaran*). The word "equation" here is used to explain the winning possibility of any candidate. The winning possibility is largely predicted on the caste and community composition of voters, and their allegiance to the candidates of their own caste/community. Political parties also take into account the assembly constituency-wise social profile of voters while nominating candidates, and expect that the candidate of a particular caste/religion would not only bring in caste and community voters of his/her constituency but also the neighbouring constituencies/regions (Kumar, 2022). For this reason, the increased use of "caste equation" illustrates renewed interest in the role of caste in election analysis.

I briefly provide a description of how political commentators emphasised the role of caste and candidate nomination to explain UP's election outcome in the 2024 National General Election. Beg et al., (2024) observed that "the biggest takeaway in this election is the sway of caste-based politics over communal politics ... Akhilesh Yadav managed to undo the BJP's attempt at polarisation by fielding candidates

from dominant castes."[1] Salaria (2024) argued that the SP's success in the UP election lies in its meticulously designed candidate selection. She points out "the party's candidate selection reflected a detailed caste calculus tailored to suit the demographics of each constituency." Kishor and Ranjan (2024) also argue that "caste selection of candidates explains the differential performance of SP in UP and RJD."

Yadav and Pandey (2024) identified ticket distribution, caste dynamics, and a ground-level disconnect as key reasons for the BJP's electoral setback. They noted that the diversification of SP's candidates worked in favour of the SP-led INDIA alliance. "This time, Akhilesh Yadav expanded his social base by giving tickets to only five Yadavs (all from the Saifai family) out of 62 candidates. There were 10 Kurmis and 6 Kushwaha-Maurya-Shakya-Saini (castes considered close to the BJP for several years). He also appointed Shyamlal Pal, an OBC, as state party president during the polls, which worked in favour of the SP. The BJP, on the other hand, lost its support base to SP without expanding its own" (Yadav and Pandey, 2024). They also noted that the BJP's over-reliance on survey agencies and neglect of ground-level worker input caused dissatisfaction among party members (Yadav and Pandey, 2024). Tiwari (2024) also provides three main reasons for the BJP's poor performance in UP. First, there was an under-representation of non-upper caste leaders in Yogi's ministry and an over-representation of upper caste leaders in candidate selection. Second, the SP altered its caste composition of candidates to attract Kurmis, Kushwahas, and Scheduled Castes (SCs). And third, statements by some BJP leaders about changing the constitution helped the INDIA bloc gain greater support from non-Jatav Dalits and non-Yadavs (Tiwari, 2024). The BJP's strategy of mobilising non-Jatav SCs and non-Yadav OBCs has been crucial in previous elections, but losing their support seems to have led to the decline of the party in the 2024 election (Kumar, 2024). Furthermore, De (2024) also highlights three reasons for the turnaround in UP's political scenario: ticket distribution, PDA outreach, and Rajput community anger. The SP's ticket distribution was based on a well-crafted social engineering plan, reducing the number of tickets for its core voting communities (Yadavs and Muslims) and nominating 27 non-Yadav OBC candidates (De, 2024). Under its PDA outreach, SP shed the tag of being a MY (Muslim-Yadav) party, virtually swept the seats in the Purvanchal region, where non-Yadav OBCs and Dalits form a major chunk of the electorate. The Congress also won 4 seats in OBC-dominated areas. The BJP, which gave the maximum tickets to upper castes, lost 23 seats in OBC-dominated constituencies and suffered losses in Brahmin- and Muslim-dominated seats (De, 2024). De (2024) notes the anger among Rajputs over the BJP's ticket distribution, but a post-poll survey by the Lokniti Team showed that 89 percent of Rajputs still voted for the BJP (Beg et al., 2024).

Singh (2024) argues that "the INDIA bloc increased its tally and vote

share by breaching the OBC, EBC, and Dalit caste formula prepared by the BJP in the 2014 Lok Sabha election." He notes that "poll results also show that the INDIA bloc bagged a large number of seats not only in its stronghold—the Yadav land (Etah, Etawah, Firozabad, Mainpuri and Kannauj), but also in the Bundelkhand region, Central and East UP dominated by OBCs—Kurmi, Maurya, Shakya, Kushwaha, Rajbhar and Nishad communities as well as Dalit communities including Jatav, Pasi, Kori, Valmiki and Dhobis" (Singh, 2024). Similarly, Mishra (2024) attributes SP's performance to its PDA strategy, guiding the distribution of tickets. Pai (2024) points out that "Akhilesh single-handedly created an anti-BJP front of smaller OBC and Dalit parties, and the Babasaheb Vahini to attract Dalit votes. Positioning himself as the leader of the *pichhda* [backward], he changed the election discourse to a battle between Hindutva and social justice." She opines that the Congress manifesto's promise to amend the constitution to raise the 50 percent ceiling on reservation for SC, ST, and OBC groups was well received by voters.

Lastly, Kashyap (2024) observes that "the SP threw itself into the hectic recreation of Kanshi Ram's winning strategy, organizing numerous meetings of underrepresented caste groups, building a sense of pride and self-respect among them as a direct weapon against the BJP's attempt at subsuming them under a Hindu umbrella, ensuring that the election rhetoric stayed focused on social justice demands, and ensuring that ticket distribution represented Dalits and EBCs." He further points out that "for backward castes and their representative parties, elections are first a space to fight for dignity and self-respect, and then for employment" (Kashyap, 2024). Finally, Mishra (2024) observes that "caste returns to centre stage in the 2024 Lok Sabha election. As much as people talk about eliminating caste, there are no signs that it is going away anytime soon, or even becoming less important, either socially or politically."

Caste Equations in Candidate Selection

As the previous section describes, political analysts have heavily focused on the caste equation in candidate selection to explain the electoral outcome of Uttar Pradesh in the 2024 general election. They have almost unanimously agreed that the reduction of Yadav and Muslim candidates and the increase of non-Yadav OBC candidates by the SP alliance were prime factors causing damage to the electoral prospects of the BJP. To explore this further, I present the caste-wise nomination strategy of the BJP and SP alliances to understand the importance of this factor. I investigate the caste background of candidates which I have collected information through the telephonic interviews of party leaders and local journalists.

Figure 1 provides a comparative analysis of the candidate nomination strategy of the SP and BJP-led alliances in the 2024 National General Election in Uttar Pradesh. This state has 80 parliamentary constituencies, out of which

17 constituencies are reserved for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Only members of SCs/STs can contest in the reserved constituencies. In the remaining 63 constituencies, members of all communities, including SCs/STs, can contest the election.

I have categorised the caste background of candidates into Upper Caste, Yadav, Other OBCs, Most Backward Castes (MBCs), Jatav/Chamar, Other SCs/STs, and Muslim. All Muslim candidates, irrespective of their caste background, have been included in the Muslim category. The rationale for this categorisation is the BJP's long-term strategy of dividing OBCs and SCs proposed through the Hukum Singh Committee Report in Uttar Pradesh (Verma, 2001). The Modi government has appointed a similar commission, popularly called the Rohini commission, at the national level for exploring similar divisions. Hence, it is interesting to see whether the formula proposed in the report of the Hukum Singh committee somehow reflects in the candidate nomination strategies of the BJP.

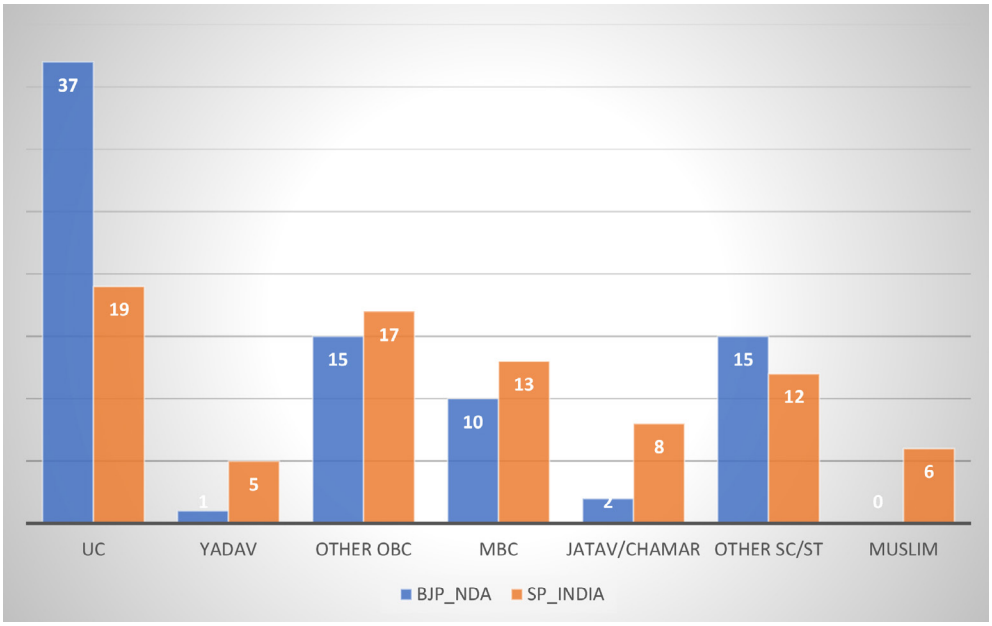

Figure 1: Caste Wise Nomination Strategy of SP and BJP Alliances
Source: Author's Own Data Collection and Calculation

Figure 1 reveals that the BJP alliance nominated upper caste candidates twice as often as the SP alliance. It nominated 36 upper caste candidates in the 63 non-reserved constituencies. In non-reserved constituencies, the BJP alliance nominated more than 50 percent of its candidates from the upper castes. On the other hand, the SP alliance nominated upper caste candidates in the one-third non-reserved constituencies. It nominated remaining candidates from backward castes, SCs, and Muslims.

The BJP alliance nominated relatively fewer candidates from Yadav, other OBCs, MBCs, Jatav/Chamar, and Muslim compared to the SP alliance. Conversely, the BJP alliance nominated more candidates from Other SCs/STs compared to the SP alliance. The SP alliance, although nominating relatively fewer Yadav and Muslim candidates, but a higher proportion of Other OBC and MBC candidates. All 5 candidates from the Yadav caste belong to the family of Mulayam Singh Yadav. Similarly, the BJP alliance remained limited to nominating candidates from SC/ST backgrounds only in the 17 reserved constituencies, whereas the SP alliance nominated 20 candidates from SCs/STs. It nominated 3 SC candidates in non-reserved constituencies—Saharanpur, Mathura, and Faizabad. Among them, the alliance won the Faizabad-Ayodhya constituency. In the reserved constituencies, the BJP alliance nominated 90 percent candidates from non-Jatav/Chamar castes, despite Jatav/Chamar constituting 54.23 percent of UP's total SC population.[2] In comparison to 2 candidates of the BJP alliance, the SP alliance nominated 8 candidates from Jatav/Chamar castes. To match the nomination strategy of the SP alliance, the BJP alliance would have needed to significantly reduce the number of upper caste candidates, which the party could not afford to do.

There is a growing debate over the significance of caste at the *jati* level (Jaffrelot, 2012, 2024). Therefore, I provide a *jati*-level overview of the nomination strategy of the political parties. Table 1 illustrates the *jati*-level candidate nomination strategy of the BJP and SP alliances. It shows that the BJP alliance nominated the highest number of candidates from the two upper castes—Brahmins and Rajputs. Among backward castes, it nominated the highest number of candidates from Kurmis, followed by Jats and Nishads. Among SCs/STs, it nominated candidates from the Pasi caste. It nominated only 2 candidates from Jatav/Chamar castes which comprise more than 50 percent SC population of Uttar Pradesh.

Table 1 further demonstrates that the SP alliance nominated its highest number of candidates from the Kurmi caste, which is a backward caste. Following this, the alliance nominated more candidates from Brahmins and Jatav/Chamar. It nominated six candidates each from the Kushwaha and Muslim communities. The SP alliance's nominations are polarised towards Kurmi, Brahmin, Chamar, Pasi, Kushwaha, Muslim, Rajput, Nishad, and Yadav; however, it includes castes from all categories. In contrast, the BJP alliance's nominations remained heavily polarised towards upper castes. It indeed nominated a larger number of castes, but such nominations might be more symbolic than substantive.

Finally, there is growing discussion about the nomination of candidates in terms of caste against caste. Table 2 provides a brief analysis of the nomination strategy of the BJP and SP alliances in terms of caste against caste. The table reveals that, against the 37 upper caste candidates of the BJP alliance, the SP alliance nominated 10 candidates from

Table 1: Caste Level Candidate Nomination of BJP and SP Alliances

Caste (Category)	Caste (Jati)	BJP_NDA	SP_INDIA
Upper Castes	1 Brahmin	17	10
	1 Rajput	15	5
	1 Bania/Khatri	4	2
	1 Bhumihar	1	2
Backward Castes	2 Kurmi	7	12
	2 Jat	4	3
	2 Nishad	4	4
	2 Kushwaha	3	6
	2 Lodh	2	1
	2 Gurjar	2	1
	2 Gaderiya	1	1
	2 Rajbhar	1	1
	2 Teli	1	1
	2 Yadav	1	5
Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes	3 Pasi	6	7
	3 Balmiki	2	2
	3 Jatav/Chamar	2	8
	3 Khatik	2	0
	3 Dhanuk/Dhangar	2	1
	3 Gond	1	2
	3 Kol	1	0
	3 Kori	1	0
Minorities	4 Muslim	0	6
	Total	**80**	**80**

Source: Author's Own Data Collection and Calculation

the upper castes, 12 from Other OBCs, and 6 from MBC backgrounds. Against the 15 Other OBC candidates of the BJP alliance, the SP alliance nominated 4-4 candidates from each of the Other OBC and MBC backgrounds, and 5 from upper caste backgrounds. Against the MBC candidates of the BJP alliance, the SP alliance nominated 3 candidates from MBC backgrounds and 4 from upper caste backgrounds. Against the 2 Jatav/Chamar candidates of the BJP alliance, the SP alliance nominated 1 of their candidates from the same background. Against 15 Other SC/ST candidates in the BJP alliance, the SP alliance nominated 9 candidates from similar castes and 6 candidates from Jatav/Chamar caste.

Table 2: Nomination of Candidates: Caste against Caste

		BJP_NDA						Total
		UC	Yadav	Other OBC	MBC	Jatav/Chamar	Other SC/ST	
SP_INDIA	UC	10	0	5	4	0	0	19
	Yadav	3	1	0	1	0	0	5
	Other OBC	12	0	4	1	0	0	17
	MBC	6	0	4	3	0	0	13
	Jatav/Chamar	1	0	0	0	1	6	8
	Other SC/ST	2	0	0	0	1	9	12
	Muslim	2	0	3	1	0	0	6
Total		37	1	15	10	2	15	80

Source: Author's Own Data Collection and Calculation

The mobilisation of non-Yadav OBCs particularly MBCs and non-Jatav/Chamar SC/STs through increased nomination of candidates from these categories have been one of the key strategies of the BJP over the last few elections. However, the analysis of comparative nomination strategies of both alliances presented above reveals that the SP alliance appears to have countered this by replicating the same strategy by nominating a higher number of candidates from these social groups and moving away from its traditional reliance on Yadav and Muslim candidates. The BJP seems to have avoided matching the strategy of the SP alliance due to the fear of losing the support of its core upper caste social base.

Conclusion

The results of the 2024 national election in Uttar Pradesh have reintroduced caste as a critical variable in electoral analysis. Political commentators have highlighted the role of caste in candidate selection and nomination, focusing on the disproportionate representation of certain castes or the reduction in nominations of castes such as Yadav and Muslim to alter the party's image. The party's caste image is a crucial aspect of the broader caste equation. However, jati-level analysis of candidates is needed to reveal patterns of polarisation. Additionally, the caste equation involves examining which castes are nominated against one another, and it helps us to understand political mobilisation. My analysis indicates that non-Jatav/Chamar candidates are frequently nominated against each other. While these analyses illuminate the growing significance of caste in candidate nomination, further investigation is needed to fully understand the complexities involved in the candidate nomination policy of parties.

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Class in Indian Politics

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Abstract

Class analysis has struck a welcome comeback in the study of Indian politics. However, the restriction of much of this analysis to the conduct and comportment of the middle class has resulted in an unfortunate neglect of its connections with other social groups, as well as the role of those other groups in Indian politics. This paper makes a case for a relational, as opposed to a fixed, conception of class that can help illuminate the social dynamics of Indian politics. Such an understanding of class can help shed light on a key social dynamic of India's 2024 Lok Sabha elections. According to the National Election Survey results, even as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) saw a reduced vote share in the 2024 elections, it increased its support among one key demographic—the poor. This increase stood in stark contrast to decreased support for the party among all other class groups—the "lower" classes that had buoyed the party to power in 2014 as well as the "middle" and "upper" classes that had been its backbone since its formation in 1980. Why has support for the BJP among non-poor classes ebbed even as it has increased its vote share among the poor? Rather than purporting to convincingly answer this question, this exploratory essay suggests that a relational understanding of class, which appreciates the impulse to maintain privilege, limit mobility and interaction, and maintain social distinction, could offer insights into the gradual erosion of the BJP's support among non-poor classes.

Keywords: Indian Parliamentary Elections 2024, Indian Politics, Class in India, Bharatiya Janata Party, Indian Middle Class, Class and Politics

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Clase de política india

Resumen

El análisis de clase ha tenido un bienvenido regreso al estudio de la política india. Sin embargo, la restricción de gran parte de este análisis a la conducta y el comportamiento de la clase media ha resultado en un lamentable descuido de sus conexiones con otros grupos sociales, así como del papel de estos en la política india. Este artículo defiende una concepción relacional, en contraposición a una concepción fija, de la clase que puede ayudar a esclarecer la dinámica social de la política india. Esta comprensión de la clase puede ayudar a esclarecer una dinámica social clave de las elecciones Lok Sabha de 2024 en la India. Según los resultados de la Encuesta Electoral Nacional, si bien el Partido Bharatiya Janata (BJP) vio reducida su participación en las elecciones de 2024, aumentó su apoyo entre un grupo demográfico clave: los pobres. Este aumento contrastó marcadamente con la disminución del apoyo al partido entre todos los demás grupos de clase: las clases "bajas" que impulsaron al partido al poder en 2014, así como las clases "media" y "alta" que habían sido su columna vertebral desde su formación en 1980. ¿Por qué ha disminuido el apoyo al BJP entre las clases no pobres, a pesar de que ha aumentado su porcentaje de votos entre los pobres? En lugar de pretender una respuesta convincente a esta pregunta, este ensayo exploratorio sugiere que una comprensión relacional de la clase, que valore el impulso de mantener privilegios, limitar la movilidad y la interacción, y mantener la distinción social, podría ofrecer información sobre la erosión gradual del apoyo al BJP entre las clases no pobres.

Palabras clave: Elecciones Parlamentarias de la India de 2024, Política india, Clase en la India, Partido Bharatiya Janata, Clase media india, Clase y política

印度政治中的阶级

摘要

阶级分析在印度政治研究中迎来了令人欣喜的回归。然而，这种分析大多局限于中产阶级的行为举止，不幸忽视了中产阶级与其他社会群体的联系，以及这些其他群体在印度政治中的作用。本文主张一种关系型而非固定型的阶级概念，这有助于阐明印度政治的社会动态。这种对阶级的理解有助于

阐明印度2024年人民院选举的一个关键社会动态。根据全国选举调查结果，尽管印度人民党(BJP)在2024年大选中的得票率有所下降，但它在一个关键群体——贫困人口——中的支持率却有所上升。这一增长与所有其他阶层对该党支持率的下降形成了鲜明对比，后者包括曾在2014年支持该党执政的“下层”阶级，以及自1980年该党成立以来一直是其支柱的“中产阶级”和“上层”阶级。为何印度人民党在贫困人群中的选票份额有所增加，但非贫困阶层对其的支持率却有所下降？本篇探究性文章并非旨在令人信服地回答这个问题，而是提出，从关系性角度理解阶级（即理解维护特权、限制流动性和互动以及维持社会差异的冲动），或许能洞悉印度人民党在非贫困阶层中支持率逐渐下降的原因。

关键词：2024年印度议会选举，印度政治，印度阶级，印度人民党，印度中产阶级，阶级与政治

Class analysis has struck a welcome comeback in the study of Indian politics. Much of this analysis has focused on the electoral preferences and political behaviour of the “middle class.” Such a focus has been justified based on the importance of this class to the country’s political economy, electoral outcomes, and global outreach. However, while undoubtedly important, the restriction of class analysis to the conduct and comportment of the middle class has resulted in an unfortunate neglect of its connections with other social groups as well as the role of those other groups in Indian politics. This paper makes a case for a relational, as opposed to a fixed, conception of class that can help illuminate the social dynamics of Indian politics.

One such dynamic is posed by class-analytic data from the recent elections, based on the National Election Survey (NES) conducted by Lok Niti and Centre for Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). Even as the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) saw a reduced vote share in the 2024 elections, it increased its support among one key demographic (Suri et al., 2024)—the poor. This increase stood in stark contrast to *decreased support* for the party among all other class groups—the “lower” classes that had buoyed the party to power in 2014 as well as the “middle” and “upper” classes that had been its backbone since its formation in 1980. Moreover, for the first time in the party’s history, the share of its support among “the poor” outstrips its support among “lower” and “upper” classes. Why has support for the BJP among non-poor classes ebbed even as it has increased its vote share among the poor? Rather than purporting to convincingly answer this question, this exploratory essay suggests that a relational understanding of class, which appreciates the impulse to maintain privi-

lege, limit mobility and interaction, and maintain social distinction, could offer insights into the gradual erosion of the BJP's support among non-poor classes.

The essay opens with the theoretical debates that emphasise the relational, rather than static, definition of class. Based on this intervention, the paper next offers some thoughts on the building blocks of a relational conceptualisation of class in India.[1] Finally, it explores the political implications of class identities, suggesting that the mobilisation of aspirational classes, which facilitated the rapid rise of the BJP, might also lead to its undoing. In doing so, the paper considers the profound transformations that have shaped the Indian political economy over the last few decades, including the processes of class-formation within the diverse caste groups in the country.

Class: Some Theoretical Observations

The rising tide of global inequality has refocused analytical attention on class (Milanovic, 2023). But the term has been notoriously difficult to define. Understandings of class have been shaped by the works of such theorists as Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Pierre Bourdieu. For Marx (1967), classes exist in relation to ownership of the means of production and the exploitation of labour (see also Marx and Engels, 2008)—the two core classes in a capitalist society are those who own the means of production (the bourgeoisie) and the workers they exploit who are alienated from the means of production (the proletariat). Weber (1978) defines classes by their "market capacity"—people constitute a class when "there is shared typical probability of procuring goods, gaining a position in life, and finding inner satisfaction" (Weber, 1978: 302). This definition highlights the importance of life chances and social mobility by emphasising education, skills and credentials, and social networks that determine one's position in relation to the market. Bourdieu (1984) introduced the notion of cultural capital to offer an even more nuanced understanding of class. Centred on the concept of *habitus,* which encompasses "thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions" (Bourdieu, 1990: 55), *cultural capital* explains the ways in which class inequalities are reproduced through hierarchies in taste, expressed through lifestyle, social skills, command over language, clothes, religious rituals and other cultural and discursive practices associated with economic aspiration and social imagination (Appadurai, 1996; Rajagopal, 2001; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2009).

Blending Marxist and Weberian perspectives, I follow Jon Elster (1985: 331) in defining class as "a group of people who by virtue of what they possess are compelled to engage in the same activities if they want to make the best use of their endowments," where endowments include material possessions, social status, and cultural affiliations and are bounded by mobility closure (Weber, 1978) as well as interaction closure (Giddens, 1973). Such an understanding recognizes the attempts by those at the higher echelons of the class hier-

archy to limit mobility and interaction while appreciating the possibility that these are in fact often breached by those at the lower rungs.

Indeed, "class" is not so much about discrete grades inhering ownership of material resources, as it is about the social relations that underpin access to those resources (Wright, 1994). Recognizing the relational dimension of class has led scholars to call for the integration of culture in class analysis (Wolf, 2009) because the collusion between class and culture enables opportunity hoarding (Tilly, 1999). Pierre Bourdieu (1984) demonstrates the strong correspondence between social and cultural stratification—this correspondence is the product and manifestation of the *habitus* of individual class members. More importantly, for Bourdieu, class competition and conflict permeate the cultural field as much as they do the economic field, with high-status dominant classes deploying their "cultural capital" as much as they deploy their "economic capital" to shore up their dominance. In a similar vein, Paul Willis (1981) illustrates the ways in which the deprivations of social and economic resources reinforce one another. However, Willis' work also reminds us that such reinforcements are not mechanical—they are riven with negotiations, interruptions and fragmentations. Such multifaceted accounts of class remind us that relations, contradictions, and struggles *between* classes are usually accompanied (or preceded) by contests *over* the meanings of class (Roy, 2018). As Wacquant suggests, class identities, practices and 'lived experience' are not 'afterthoughts' tacked on to preexisting classes; they enter into the very making of these classes (Wacquant and Bourdieu, 1992).

A consideration of classes under capitalist conditions leads observers to eschew a polarized model of the class structure in which the ruling classes and the working classes engage in direct confrontation with one another (Marx, 1848). Henry Bernstein (1996, 2010) suggests, for instance, that the spread of capitalist relations have created three, rather than two, broad social classes with significant empirical overlaps, rather than neat distinctions, between them. Additional to the labour-hiring capitalists and the labour-selling working classes, his work calls attention to the category of the petty commodity producers. Harriss-White (2012) goes even further. While Bernstein's prognosis is that class differentiation will result in the *eventual* polarization between capitalists and labouring classes, Harriss-White suggests that the petty commodity producers are "not transitional" (2012: 117). Despite their differences of opinion, both scholars alert us against accepting binary notions of a straightforward class conflict between the rich and the poor, capitalists and workers, dominant classes and labouring classes, bourgeoisie and proletariat. Their accounts remind us of the complexity of class relations and the need for inductive examination of the concrete relations between, within and over different classes.

The greatest challenge to a polarised model of class relations comes from the formulation of the "middle

class" (Marx and Engels, 1848 [2008]; Weber, 1905), an intermediate social group between the apex and the bottom of the class hierarchy. Distinct from the owners of capital as well as manual labourers, the middle class defies easy categorisation and has remained stubbornly difficult to define. The middle class across the world shoulder many expectations as the backbone of the market economy as well as of political democracy (Birdsall et al., 2000; Easterly, 2001; Fredrick, 2002; Kapur, 2010). Their middling position enables them to strike compromises with those above them in the social hierarchy as well as below. These compromises prevent the sorts of class polarisation that undermine and weaken democracy while also placing them in an advantageous position to assume a hegemonic role in society.

Thinking about class in relational, rather than discrete, categories alert us to its dynamic nature. Classes are not pre-ordained. Rather, they emerge in interaction with other classes: for example, a middle class cannot—by definition—exist in isolation from other social classes. The hierarchical nature of class means that no single category of class can exist without reference to others. To be sure, many discrete categorisations of class exist. For example, Abhijeet Banerjee and Esther Duflo (2008) have defined the global middle class as those whose per capita daily consumption, valued at purchasing power parity exchange rates, is between US$2 and US$10 a day, while Martin Ravallion (2010) sets the upper limit at US$13. Homi Kharas (2010) considers a larger interval, from US$10 to US$100. Increasingly, however, efforts are being made to empirically identify class based on relational understandings of that concept. William Easterly (2001) considers the second, third, and fourth expenditure quintiles as constituting the middle class, while Alesina and Perotti (1996) identify the third- and fourth-income quintiles as part of this class. Birdsall et al. (2000) draw the boundaries of the middle class between 75 and 125 per cent of the national median income (see also Pressman, 2007). Combining discrete and relative measures, Birdsall (2010) more recently defines the middle class in developing countries to include people with an income above US$10 per day but excluding the top 5 per cent of that country.

Debating Class in India

Debates over class in India have been no less vibrant than global debates. The mid-century Means of Production (MoP) debates sought to identify the nature of India's political economy and patterns of class-formation. By the 1980s, however, Utsa Patnaik (1986) declared the debate to be ridden with limitations rather than making any positive contributions. However, even as the grand debates on the nature of Indian political economy withered away, several field studies stepped in to offer fine-grained accounts of class-formation in India. Thanks to these studies, we have excellent documentation of the making of the Indian middle class in historic perspective (Misra, 1961; Chatterjee, 1992;

Varma, 1998; Joshi, 2011), its hegemonic aspirations (Fernandes and Heller, 2006; Donner, 2011; Brosius, 2010), the exploitative relations to which it subjects waged labourers (Gardner and Osella, 2003; Lerche, 2010; Rogaly and Thieme, 2012; Gidwani and Ramamurthy, 2018), the emerging class consciousness among waged and unwaged labourers (Lerche and Shah, 2018; Chambers, 2019; Kaur and Kaur, 2021), and the formation of political subjectivities among them (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, 2003; Jeffrey, 2008; Abraham, 2017; Roy, 2018).

An important intervention on class, located between the grand MoP debates on the one hand and fine-grained field studies on the other, was made by Pranab Bardhan (1983) when he delineated the coalition of dominant proprietary classes that shared political and economic power between themselves after independence. This coalition included big business, landlords, and professional groups including, most importantly, the bureaucracy. Big businesses were guaranteed large doses of public investment, including subsidies for inputs. Landlords were allowed enormous sway in the countryside and succeeded in extracting a major fiscal concession from the government: agricultural income was hereafter exempt from taxation. Professional groups—including lawyers and bureaucrats but also doctors, teachers, and other salaried personnel—were assured subsidies for higher education, an elaborate welfare system, and cheap food grains via the public distribution system. This last group formed the nucleus of the middle class, which was upheld as the backbone of the state-led capitalist economy fashioned by the dominant party system led by the Congress.

Debates on class resumed salience in the wake of three seminal political moments that have ineluctably shaped Indian politics since the 1990s. The first such moment was the agitation against the Mandal Commission recommending affirmative action for members of Other Backward Class (OBC) communities, historically disparaged as "lower caste." Defending the privileges shored up by its largely "upper caste" constituents, the middle class took to the streets in large numbers to protest the purported assault on the meritocratic values they associated with themselves. A direct result of their agitation was the second seminal moment shaping Indian politics during that era—the ascendance of Hindu nationalism. As the torchbearer of Hindu nationalism, the BJP was buoyed by electoral support from the middle class, whose "upper caste" constituents balked at the prospects of losing status to those they considered their social inferiors. Concurrent with these two moments was the third—the gradual liberalisation of the Indian economy that opened hitherto unconceived opportunities for the middle class possessing the necessary economic, social and cultural capital. The influx of foreign capital and outsourcing of jobs from the English-speaking West in the technology and services sector was a boon for those versed in the language. Salaries increased, levels of conspicuous consumption rose, and opportunities

now became available to lower-income groups to aspire for better lives than before. Inequality rose considerably as well, leading to commentators remarking on the advent of a Billionaire Raj (Crabtree, 2019; Bharti, 2024).

Much ink has understandably been spilled on the "new" Indian middle class and its distinction from its forebears. Its growing size, approximating 600 million individuals in 2012 (Krishnan and Hatekar, 2012), makes it an important market for domestic and foreign firms alike. Devesh Kapur (2010: 144) outlines:

> the shift from its primary base in public sector employment to the private sector; the growing role of middle-class entrepreneurs with variable incomes and risk-taking propensities rather than the salaried man with lifetime job security; and the vast majority (especially the lower middle class) are the first generation of their family to belong to this group, having ridden the escalator of rapid economic growth.

Pavan Varma (2008) laments precisely these features of the post-liberalisation middle class. For Leela Fernandes (2011), the "new" middle class represents the political construction of a social group, made up of predominantly English-speaking urban white-collar workers, which supports and perpetuates liberalisation. Christiane Brosius' (2010) ethnography offers glimpses into the new cultures of taste amongst this middle class, providing a detailed description of how members of this social group attempt to distinguish themselves from the lower classes, through specific aesthetic means; spatial and cultural strategies; and religious rituals. This "new" middle class was, thus, qualitatively different from the "old" middle class that constituted the dominant proprietary classes formulated by Bardhan in that they explicitly (rather than unconsciously) strove to distinguish themselves from those they considered inferior.

Other works highlight the role of educational attainments in fashioning middle class identities. Educational credentials have always shaped middle class identities (Béteille, 1993; Scrase, 2002) and continue to do so in the wake of liberalisation (Sancho, 2016). De Neve (2011) notes the importance of novel, costly and extensive educational strategies to emerging rural entrepreneurs in Tamil Nadu. Nita Kumar (2020: 220) documents the ways in which educational successes and failures of the middle-class child defines and supports "middle class-ness." However, education in and of itself is often considered inadequate. For example, Ritty Lukose (2009) reminds us that the *speaking* of English is crucial to fashioning a middle-class identity. The growing body of works in this vein emphasise the role of education in the formation of the middle class as well as the reproduction of class hierarchies (Jeffrey et al., 2008). Educational qualifications were seen both as pathways to class mobility as well as barricades to distinguish self-styled superiors from those they relegated as inferior.

The proliferation of works on the middle class—whether established or new—tended to elbow out attention to the labouring classes and poor people. This was somewhat corrected by the explosion of Naxalism and the growing dispossession wrought by liberalisation, which led scholars to undertake class analysis of labour (Shah et al., 2018), informality (Agarwala, 2013) and petty commodity production (Harriss-White, 2022). These works point to the endurance, and in many cases, multiplication, of informal employment. Production—both agricultural and non-agricultural—remains embedded in local, rural, and community networks (Carswell and de Neve, 2022). Informalisation has intensified since liberalisation, rendering to previously secure workers precariousness (Breman, 2004; Sanchez, 2016; Parry, 2020). Reorganisation of the transport industry as well as the introduction of digital platforms (Kesar et al., 2022) have further exacerbated insecurities. Despite these insecurities, however, researchers have noted the role of the extensive social protections in lifting as many as 271 million people from poverty between 2004 and 2014 (Alkire et al., 2018), with special attention to the poverty-reduction effects of welfare programs such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (Roy, 2014; Das and Maiorano, 2019). These avenues of upward mobility threatened the privileges of those who considered themselves socially superior.

The politicisation of OBCs and the rapid changes spurred by liberalisation led to profound changes in the social composition of entrepreneurs across the country. A clear process of class-formation among historically oppressed "lower caste" and "untouchable" has been discernible (Alam, 2008). As leaders of OBC *jati*s ascended to political power in Indian States, they began to patronise entrepreneurs from their own or cognate *jati*s (just as "upper caste" politicians before them had done). These entrepreneurs were often first-generation entrepreneurs from agricultural, artisanal, and service occupations—increasing their presence in the private sector (Damodaran, 2008; Iyer et al., 2013). Dalits, historically stigmatised as "untouchable," were also able to harness the rising tide of subaltern mobilisation and economic liberalisation to advance Dalit Capitalism (Babu, 2023), which challenged the long-held belief that Dalits and capitalism were contradictory terms. Milind Kamble, Chairman and Managing Director of the £93 million Fortune Construction Company, established the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI) in 2005. With 3,000 members from diverse Dalit communities, DICCI broke into the old boys' club of Indian entrepreneurs, represented by such associations as Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and Confederation of Indian Industries (CII). Within a few years, it launched a venture capital fund of £9 million, underwritten by the Planning Commission, to support Dalit-born venture capitalists (Kapur et al., 2010).

Despite these profound patterns of class-formation within subordinate castes, however, marriages across

castes continue to remain abysmally low. The Indian census estimates inter-caste marriages to be as low as 5.8 per cent. Results from a sample survey of 35,145 ever-married women conducted under the aegis of the Indian Human Development Survey arrive at a similar estimate (Desai, 2022): 95 per cent respondents report marrying within their caste. A Pew Research Survey conducted in 2019–20 reveals that 62 per cent Indian men and 64 per cent Indian women believe it is crucial to stop inter-caste marriages. Despite the transformations wrought by decades of social mobilisation, Hindu nationalism and economic liberalisation, caste endogamy endures—thereby enabling opportunity hoarding as well as effecting interaction and mobility closures that are crucial to maintaining class privilege. The description of caste as "enclosed class" (Ambedkar, 1979) and "congealed class" (Lohia, 1964) remains largely valid, thanks to caste endogamy (Desai and Dubey, 2011).

Cultural markers are thus crucial to understandings of class. After all, as Jaffrelot and van der Veer (2008) have argued, a culture of confident bourgeois nationalism, together with the growth of state institutions marked the twinning of upper-caste Hindu cultural traits with middle class-ness. However, measurements and identifications of class continue to lag these sophisticated understandings. The Lok Niti-CSDS National Election Survey relies on a composite index of assets, incomes and occupations to identify respondents' class. The National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) located the Indian middle class as households with incomes between INR 200,000 and INR 1,000,000, with those earning less than the lower boundary as lower class and those with higher earnings than the upper boundary as higher class (Meyer and Birdsall, 2012)—NCAER further sub-classifies the middle class as "seekers" (those earning between INR 200,000 and INR 500,000) and "strivers" (between INR 500,000 and INR 1,000,000). Consistent with her earlier approach, Birdsall (2010) identifies as middle class those with incomes above US$10 per day but excludes the top 5 per cent. While these monetary measures have the advantage of objectively identifying members of different classes, they are woefully inadequate to deal with the relational elements that make class such a dynamic entity. Addressing this challenge, Aslany (2019) offers a multidimensional perspective that could help distinguish between different classes. Although an important intervention, it shies away from appreciating the centrality of caste in class-formation.

A comprehensive set of variables, grounded in the relational understandings of class outlined at the start of this essay, can help offer a dynamic account of class. These variables could include: (*i*) occupation; (*ii*) income; (*iii*) assets with a focus on motorised vehicles, digital infrastructure, and housing type; (*iv*) use of manual labour; (*v*) educational attainments of people over 40 years old; (*vi*) proficiency in English; and (*vii*) *jati*s. Each of these indices, which can be further broken down, are commonly associated with meanings

and understandings of class although most attempts to define class remain overwhelmingly singular and rely on one variable. Interacting these variables can allow a nuanced understanding of class dynamics in the social and political arena.

Although space constraints prevent an elaboration of this class-analytic scheme here, combining these variables could help shed light on the diverse forms of class identities that constitute the social foundations of Indian politics. It could enable understand the growing support for the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) among classes not conventionally associated with it without, initially, compromising the support of its core base but, eventually and counter-intuitively, eroding it. Of crucial importance is the "neo-middle class," a category explicitly invoked in its 2014 Election Manifesto: "[T]hose who have risen from the category of poor and are yet to stabilize in the middle class" (BJP 2014: 7). Extrapolating from the 2014 National Election Survey (NES) of Lok-Niti and Centre for Study of Developing Societies, Christophe Jaffrelot (2015) notes the thumping rise in support for the BJP among members of this social class, labelled as "lower class" in the survey, from 23 per cent in 2009 to 37 per cent in 2014. Many among these respondents certainly would not qualify as "middle class" or even "neo-middle class" in objective terms. But it is quite likely that, in subjective terms, they *considered themselves* middle class—as another survey during that period revealed, as many as 45 per cent of all Indians regarded themselves as middle class (Kapur and Vaishnav, 2014). The BJP's successful outreach to, and incorporation of, the "neo-middle class" may also have paradoxically paved the path for the gradual distancing from it of its "core" middle class base.

The Aspirational Class and Indian Politics

The BJP's ability to breach the limits to its electoral support and incorporate new social groups reflects the party's ability to appreciate and address the aspirations of different social classes across the spectrum. The category of the "neo-middle class" encompassed these aspirations in 2014. These included aspirational classes from among the "low status" Other Backward Classes, many of whom benefitted from the affirmative actions in educational institutions introduced during the UPA years, as well as an emerging slice of Dalit entrepreneurs who harnessed the benefits of economic liberalisation and social mobilisation towards their business interests. In 2019, the BJP made a concerted effort to woo the "Economically Weaker Sections" —people earning less than INR 800,000 per annum from the "upper caste" communities—by extending the benefits of affirmative action to them. The result was a rousing re-election of the BJP to power.

The party's embrace of the "neo middle class" did not initially undermine its "core middle class" base. Far from it—the two complemented each other. The BJP under Narendra Modi bucked the global trend of populists being shunned by citizens with a uni-

versity degree: *The Economist* reported 80 per cent support for Modi among this demographic, almost 15 per cent points higher than support enjoyed by him among respondents without university degrees. (By contrast, support for Trump and BREXIT among respondents with university degrees lagged far behind those without). However, as the BJP has incorporated ever larger sections of the poor within its fold, its appeal among the aspirational class appears to have dampened. Perhaps more worryingly from the BJP's perspective, its support among the higher echelons of the class hierarchy seems to be diminishing, even as it has increased its support among the poor.

By breaching the social distinctions carefully nurtured by the dominant proprietary classes, the post-liberalisation middle class and the neo-middle class in its bid to incorporate the poor, the BJP is likely to be the victim of its own success. For the poor, voting for the BJP may well be a signal to share status which they can flaunt vis-à-vis privileged classes. For privileged classes, however, such attempts to share status will be unwelcome and must be barricaded. The aspirational "neo-middle" class, drawn largely from communities disparaged as "low caste," is especially keen to distinguish itself from the ranks of the poor from which it has recently risen. The BJP's active cultivation of the poor threatens the social distinction the aspirational class seeks to defend, leading to an erosion for its enthusiasm for the party.

The BJP has traversed a long way indeed from its initial appellation as a Brahmin-Baniya party that aided the "elite revolt" (Kaviraj, 1997; Corbridge and Harriss, 2000) of privileged social groups against the "silent revolution" (Jaffrelot, 2002) that saw members of India's historically oppressed communities assume political power. It has successfully made inroads into the poorest classes from among Adivasi (Thachil, 2014) and Dalit (Narayan, 2021) communities, while retaining—even increasing—its support among privileged and aspirational classes. The 2024 election appears to have upended that successful run—for the first time in its history, the BJP has increased its vote share among the poor while seeing it *reduce* among other classes. Poor people have been increasingly attracted to the BJP since the turn of the millennium (Yadav et al., 1999), but their share of support for the party has never exceeded that of their better-off co-citizens, as it has in 2024. The relational account of class advanced in this paper can help analysts unpack this crucial dynamic and analyse its implications for the party as well as the future trajectory of India's democracy.

Note

1 A point of clarification would be in order here. My reference to "lower," "middle" and "upper" classes merely describes the NES results, and does not endorse them. As will become clear subsequently, a relational understanding of class requires a different way of thinking that the discrete approach taken by NES and a host of other studies.

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Social Media and Party Organization in India

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Abstract

How have India's political parties adopted Internet-based communication technologies, including social media, to reach out to their constituencies? What consequences does this have for intra-party and party–voter linkages? Drawing on evidence from recent party campaigns, including those during the 2024 national election, especially in north India, this paper highlights how new forms of media, which are accessible on smartphones, influence party organization. The paper emphasizes the coexistence of multiple modes of campaigning and party organizing activities and, more importantly, synergy between a party's in-person and online activities that shape each other, which makes them fundamentally different from those observed earlier. To build and sustain online partisan attachments, a party establishes organizational units that are fully dedicated to information technology (IT) and social media work, develops vigorous networks on Internet-based platforms within the party and with voters, and creates and disseminates a steady stream of online content. Consequently, a party engages in continuous messaging with its functionaries, workers, and loyal voters, who then remain in a state of constant mobilization, which is a shift away from episodic mobilization that was observed in the pre-social media era.

Keywords: electoral campaigns, mobilization, political parties, political behavior, party–voter linkages, social media

Redes sociales y organización de partidos en la India

Resumen

¿Cómo han adoptado los partidos políticos de la India las tecnologías de comunicación basadas en internet, incluidas las redes sociales, para llegar a sus electores? ¿Qué consecuencias tiene esto para los vínculos internos del partido y entre el partido y los votan-

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tes? Basándose en la evidencia de campañas recientes de partidos, incluidas las de las elecciones nacionales de 2024, especialmente en el norte de la India, este documento destaca cómo los nuevos medios de comunicación, accesibles a través de teléfonos inteligentes, influyen en la organización partidaria. El documento enfatiza la coexistencia de múltiples modalidades de campaña y actividades de organización partidaria y, aún más importante, la sinergia entre las actividades presenciales y en línea de un partido, que se influyen mutuamente, lo que las hace fundamentalmente diferentes de las observadas anteriormente. Para construir y mantener vínculos partidistas en línea, un partido establece unidades organizativas dedicadas por completo a las tecnologías de la información (TI) y al trabajo en redes sociales, desarrolla redes sólidas en plataformas basadas en internet dentro del partido y con los votantes, y crea y difunde un flujo constante de contenido en línea. En consecuencia, un partido mantiene un intercambio de mensajes continuo con sus funcionarios, trabajadores y votantes leales, quienes luego permanecen en un estado de movilización constante, lo que representa un cambio respecto de la movilización episódica que se observaba en la era anterior a las redes sociales.

Palabras clave: campañas electorales, movilización, partidos políticos, comportamiento político, vínculos entre partidos y votantes, redes sociales

印度的社交媒体和政党组织

摘要

印度各政党如何利用包括社交媒体在内的互联网传播技术来接触选民？这对党内联系以及党与选民之间的联系有何影响？本文基于近期政党竞选活动（包括2024年议会选举期间的活动，尤其是在印度北部地区）的证据，重点探讨了那些可通过智能手机访问的新型媒体如何影响政党组织。本文强调了多种竞选活动和政党组织活动模式的共存，更重要的是，政党的线下活动和线上活动之间存在协同作用，这些活动相互影响，与以往的观察截然不同。为了建立和维持线上党派归属感，政党建立了专门从事信息技术(IT)和社交媒体工作的组织单位，在党内和选民之间建立基于互联网平台的强大网络，并创建和传播稳定的线上内容。因此，政党会与其官员、工作人员和忠实选民进行持续的信息传递，从而使他们保持持续的动员状态，这与社交媒体时代之前观察到的间歇性动员截然不同。

关键词：竞选活动，动员，政党，政治行为，政党与选民的联系，社交媒体

Introduction

India exemplifies the ongoing digital revolution, having experienced a rapid rise in the access and use of Internet-based communication technologies (ICTs) in recent years. In 2010, only 7.5 percent of India's population used the Internet; by 2020, this had increased over fivefold to 43.4 percent and by 2023, it had reached 57.5 percent (Waghmare 2024). Availability of low-cost smartphones, primary devices that Indians use to access social media, and mobile Internet data, amongst the cheapest in the world, has made this possible. From 2014 to 2024, India added almost 900 million mobile broadband connections (Waghmare 2024), reflecting a transformative shift in the way Indians are connected to each other via ICTs.

How have the changes in India's media and communication landscape shaped political parties and their relationships with voters in the country? I highlight the ways in which new forms of media, accessible on smartphones, are influencing party campaigns, and emphasize how modern campaigns conducted by India's parties are fundamentally different from those observed earlier. Party organizing and campaigning activities have evolved from when India's parties primarily relied on face-to-face outreach, to now when they deploy multiple modes of outreach to build and sustain partisan attachments within parties as well as those with voters. In the context of recent elections in India, I consider the role of online platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube during parties' campaigns and the interaction between a party's campaign on social media and its on-ground campaign. Beyond typical election times, I explore how intra-party linkages and party-voter linkages have altered in today's multi-faceted media landscape.

This paper proceeds in three parts. First, I outline the modes of outreach that India's political parties typically use. I emphasize that today competitive parties deploy multiple campaign modes that vary based on which media technologies they use and the scale at which they operate. Second, drawing on my intensive fieldwork in north India, I outline the typical steps that a party takes to build and sustain online partisan attachments, both internal to the party and external to the party. Third, I discuss the consequences for party messaging, mobilization, and party organization.

Modes of Outreach by Parties in India

Scholarship on political communication, largely based on evidence from advanced democracies, identifies three types of election campaigning: pre-modern, modern and post-modern (Norris 2000; Gib-

son and Römmele 2001). These map onto the eras of political communication marked by widespread use of the newspaper, radio and television, and now, the Internet, respectively (Farrell, Le Duc, Niemi, and Norris 1996; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Plasser and Plasser 2002). Use of print media, rallies and meetings, which are labor-intensive, characterize pre-modern campaigns. Modern campaigns are marked by broadcast television news and news advertisements, which are capital-intensive and post-modern campaigns by use of the Internet and direct mail. Except for Epstein (2018), who proposes a "multi-stage political communication cycle," extant scholarship assumes a generally linear evolution of campaigns, where changes in communication technology determine the dominant mode parties use to engage with functionaries, workers, and voters.

Until the early 1990s, in India, party organizing and campaigning activities were primarily conducted face-to-face. In this "pre-modern" era, parties' long-term goals—such as the goal of achieving social justice in case of the Indian National Congress (INC) party, which dominated national-level politics until the 1980s—shaped the political content that parties and their leaders communicated during these activities which ranged from door-to-door household visits to mass rallies. However, in the past three decades, parties conduct a range of outreach activities, including face-to-face, through the phone, newspaper, radio or television, and increasingly, through ICT platforms. During this ongoing fast-modernizing era, parties' short-term goal of winning elections and the professionalization of parties (Sharma 2024), has influenced the content of party outreach conducted through these modes.

Alongside the medium through which the outreach is conducted, the scale of outreach varies too. For instance, in case of in-person campaign activities, a party carries out individual or household-level door-to-door canvassing, neighborhood-level walkabouts (or *padyatra*s in Hindi) and street-corner meetings (or *nukkad sabha*s in Hindi), and district-level large public meetings (or *jan sabha*s in Hindi), bike rallies, and roadshows. In case of outreach conducted through the phone (which does not use the Internet), newspaper, radio or television, outreach might be targeted to individuals via phone calls or text messages; to one or more neighborhoods when conducted through pamphlets in the newspaper or advertisements on local cable channels; and to a district, and often beyond, when a party's political advertisements appear in state or national dailies or on state-wide radio or TV channels. Outreach conducted on Internet-based platforms also varies in scale. For example, one-to-one party messages sent on WhatsApp are at the individual-level, while party messages sent to groups on online platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook reach a neighborhood if the group only includes people from a limited geographic area. Moreover, party messages on its website or on social media groups or pages on platforms (such as Facebook

and Twitter) or on channels on YouTube, that are formed by the district or state level of a party organization, have a wider geographic reach.

Although parties pursue outreach activities with the ultimate goal of winning elections, parties hope to achieve specific intermediate goals through outreach activities that they conduct at different scales. For instance, consider the case of in-person outreach activities of a party. During door-to-door canvassing, based on the interaction that a party worker has with a voter, they assess whether the voter is likely to vote for their party or for the party who they perceive as the other main competing party in that electoral constituency. Party workers routinely mention that in the printed version of the electoral roll that they carry with them while conducting door-to-door canvassing; after interacting with a voter, they make a note about which party they think the voter will vote for. Later, this contributes to a party's internal estimates of its vote share in that constituency. Whereas during walkabouts, a party's candidate, party functionaries, and grassroots party workers briefly meet and greet voters on the campaign trail while handing out electioneering materials, and during street-corner meetings, the candidate and local party functionaries meet with a group of voters to highlight—and sometimes to discuss—local, constituency-specific issues. At district-level large public meetings, party leaders speak about the party's past achievements and promises for the future, while emphasizing ways in which the party is different from other parties. Moreover, such meetings, bike rallies, and roadshows are an opportunity for the party to "show its strength" (often referred to as *shakti pradarshan* in Hindi) in the lead-up to an election.

In contrast to the prediction that as a shift in communication technology occurs a party's dominant mode of campaign will change, in developing democracies such as India—where contemporary party campaigns have until recently remained empirically under-examined (Semetko 2022)—we observe a coexistence of "pre-modern," "modern" and "post-modern" campaigning. For instance, an in-person mass campaign rally of party's high-level leader is routinely announced in newspapers, often with a half-page or full-page party advertisements. Upon the conclusion of such a rally, speech excerpts of a party's highest-level leaders such as the incumbent party's chief minister and national-level and state-level presidents, and other competing parties' projected chief ministerial candidates and national-level and state-level presidents, are frequently reported in print media and broadcast media. Anecdotally, during recent party campaigns for national elections, it has been observed that the partisan inclination of a news television channel tends to influence how much airtime it gives to reporting about rallies of parties, especially those featuring the highest-level leaders such as Narendra Modi in case of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Rahul Gandhi in case of the INC.

Moreover, during national elections and state elections in large states

that are conducted across multiple phases, on a day when voting occurs in one set of constituencies, parties often conduct in-person party events and mass rallies in other constituencies where voting is scheduled for a later date. Coverage of those in-person campaign events is broadcast on news channels across the country, including in constituencies where voters are going to the polls that day. This, in turn, can potentially influence vote choice decisions in the constituencies voting on that day, especially in a context where nationally representative surveys reveal that around 15 percent of the voters say that they decide who to vote for on the day of voting (CSDS 2014, 2019, 2024). In this context, recent research has found media exposure to be a determinant of vote choice; specifically, voters with higher frequency of accessing news are more likely to vote for the BJP in India's national elections, including those held prior to social media (Verma 2024).

Beyond their coexistence, in today's social media era when India is characterized by a multi-faceted media landscape, party organizing and campaigning activities that are conducted through different modes shape each other (Sheikh 2024). This, I emphasize, is epitomized by the interaction between a party's organizing and campaigning activities that occur online and in-person. I term the synergy between two modes of campaigning—and specifically, the two-way relationship between a party's online campaigning and in-person campaigning—as *content-complementarity* (Sheikh 2024). Photographs and videos of in-person campaigning and party events are valuable content for parties and their leaders for their engagement on Internet-based platforms, including social media. As many expressed to me during interviews, a party's functionaries and workers share photographs and videos from party events that they organize on WhatsApp groups and on Facebook to show their party loyalty and to signal to their party's higher-ups that they are "actively doing party work," with the overall goal of increasing their visibility within their party. Moreover, by sharing photographs that feature themselves with a party's leaders who were also at a party event, a party functionary also strives to signal their "upward connectedness" (Auerbach and Thachil 2018; Chauchard and Garimella 2022). In the lead-up to an election, a party's candidates typically share videos of walkabouts in which they can be seen interacting with voters on their social media pages to project that they are locally embedded in their constituency. A party's leaders also frequently share carefully selected content from mass rallies that they addressed to signal that they are "among the people" (often summarized as *janta ke beech* in Hindi). Moreover, the anticipation that certain kinds of content will gain greater traction online and possibly have persuasive and mobilizing effects on a party's functionaries and workers as well as on voters, also determines how party leaders conduct themselves at a party's in-person events, including rallies, and the content of their speeches at these events.

How do India's Parties Build and Sustain Online Partisan Attachments?

In the social media era when exposure to content on Internet-based platforms shapes political attitudes and behavior and, in turn, parties' campaign and electoral prospects, parties are compelled to establish an active online presence. Observations from intensive fieldwork that I have conducted in recent years during multiple party campaigns in lead-up to elections in north India, reveal that to build and sustain online partisan attachments—within their organizations and with voters—India's political parties follow three broad steps.

First, a party establishes its information technology (IT) and social media unit (also known as a department or cell or wing), which operates as an organizational vertical from the party's highest levels (e.g., the national-level or state-level) to its lowest levels (e.g., the polling station-level or polling booth-level). This party unit is staffed with "social media volunteers" who are fully dedicated to the party's social media work. Importantly, a party's IT and social media unit is distinct from other existing media-related party units that are centralized and only operate at a party's state and/or national-level headquarters. This organizational unit is also different from other units of a party such as the women's unit, youth unit, or farmers' unit, each of which aim to represent the interests of a particular socio-economic group of the electorate.

Second, after being established, a party's dedicated organizational vertical creates an online presence of the party. At a minimum, this involves setting up social media accounts for the party; however, more importantly, it involves bringing party functionaries and workers into the social media fold and getting them to use Internet-based platforms for party communication—both internal and external to the party.

Through a face-to-face survey of approximately 400 party functionaries of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Samajwadi Party (SP) that I conducted in 2022 in Uttar Pradesh (UP), India's most populous state, I found that among the surveyed party functionaries, WhatsApp was used almost universally and more than 90 percent of the functionaries of each party used Facebook for party purposes. The rampant use of WhatsApp for party purposes is not surprising especially given that by 2019, anywhere between one-fourth and one-third of India's electorate was on WhatsApp (Reuters 2018; CSDS 2019b). More recently, it has been suggested that "India runs on WhatsApp" (Ghaffary and Heath 2022) and in early 2025, it was reported that there are more 500 million WhatsApp users in India (Chaturvedi 2025). A post-election nationally representative survey in 2024 found that 48.6 percent of voters used WhatsApp at least once a day, and 36.8 percent of voters used Facebook at least once a day (CSDS 2024). Moreover, 17.5 percent of the respondents of this survey reported that they had sent campaign messages for a candidate or party on WhatsApp and/or Facebook during the campaign period in the lead-up to

the 2024 national election (CSDS 2024). My survey in UP in 2022 revealed that although Twitter (now, X), Instagram, and YouTube were also used by party functionaries for party purposes, these social media platforms were used to a much lower extent with less than 40 percent of the functionaries of either party reporting their use. Comparing the use of social media platforms among party functionaries at different levels in the BJP, I found that although more than 60 percent of the BJP functionaries who operated at the assembly constituency-level or at a party level above used Twitter for party purposes, less than 40 percent of party functionaries operating at lower levels of the party used Twitter. More generally, Twitter is used to a greater extent by a party's elites, such as high-level party leaders and party functionaries at the national and state levels, compared to lower-level party functionaries. During my interviews, high-level functionaries emphasized that through Twitter a party and its leaders hoped to shape content about the party in mass media, while acknowledging that this platform was much less useful for them to establish direct connect with lower-level functionaries and voters. This aligns with the fact that only a small share of India's electorate is active on Twitter; for instance, a post-election nationally representative survey in 2024 revealed that only 12.3 percent of voters used Twitter at least once a day (CSDS 2024).

Major parties competing in an election use multiple social media platforms during their campaigns, but the intensity with which they use these platforms during election campaigns varies. For instance, in the lead-up to India's 2014 national election, which was the first time that social media had been used by party campaigns during a country-level election, parties focused largely on Facebook (Barclay et al. 2015). The widespread use of WhatsApp by parties in the subsequent national election held in 2019 led observers to consider it as "the WhatsApp election" (Murgia et al. 2019; Arun 2019).

Recently, the 2024 national election has been called "the YouTube election" because national-level parties spent huge sums of money to advertise on YouTube, state-level politicians' used of the platform extensively, and a significant share of voters were consuming content on YouTube (Bhatt 2024; Rashid 2024). In a face-to-face survey that I conducted of approximately 2,000 voters, who were smartphone users in Uttar Pradesh in 2022, I found that the share of respondents who used YouTube at least once a day was considerably high at more than 80 percent and very similar to the share of respondents who used WhatsApp at least once a day. At the time, my party functionaries' survey revealed that only around a quarter of them used YouTube for party purposes. However, by the time of the campaigns for the 2024 national election, parties had understood the potential of YouTube and other video-sharing apps to reach voters, and they began using these apps more extensively, while also collaborating with social media "influencers" (Khan, Mukherjee, and Pal 2024). Moreover, a post-election nationally representative survey in 2024 revealed

that 47.8 percent of India's voters were using YouTube at least once a day (CSDS 2024), and a national telephonic survey conducted in 2024 found that around one-third of respondents reported YouTube to be their primary source of news (Sircar 2024).

Beyond establishing a digital presence on social media, a related task that a party must carry out is to form networks of party functionaries and workers on Internet-based platforms. In case of WhatsApp, this involves the formation of a party's WhatsApp groups. These WhatsApp groups might be internal to a party thereby replicating a party's organization in the online space, or external to the party, when they include voters. During my interviews with party functionaries who worked in IT and social media units of parties, they emphasized that the advantages of WhatsApp groups included: establishing a local connection, engaging in interactivity and obtaining feedback on party messages, and quick dissemination of a party's messages, especially for coordinating campaign efforts and mobilizing people for an in-person party event.

In my survey of party functionaries in UP, I found that, on average, a typical BJP or SP functionary was a part of 30 to 35 party WhatsApp groups during the campaigns in the lead-up to the 2022 state election there. Unsurprisingly, this number declined in the post-election period; however, even when an election was not imminent, a typical BJP functionary was still part of roughly 23 party WhatsApp groups, whereas this number was lower for the SP, whose typical functionary was only a part of 15 party WhatsApp groups. In contrast to the widely held view that parties collate voters' phone numbers from datasets that they purchase or from "missed call campaigns" (Singh 2019; Saini 2020), during interviews party functionaries often told me that to create WhatsApp groups with voters they obtained phone numbers from their local networks (Sheikh 2025). Moreover, among the surveyed party functionaries who had formed WhatsApp groups with voters, around 65 percent said that they collected voters' phone numbers during door-to-door visits, revealing another synergy between a party's in-person and online outreach (Sheikh 2024).

Third, once a party has set up its presence and networks on Internet-based platforms, its focus shifts to online content. The two main content-related tasks that a party's functionaries must engage in while building an online presence are: content creation and content dissemination.

The online content of a party can be classified based on where within the party's organizational structure it is created, the format of that content, and its substance. Content creation can occur either in a centralized way, when content is created at a party's national-level or state-level headquarters and simply shared with all levels below that, or in a decentralized way, when content is created at lower levels of a party and then it moves through party networks, including to its upper levels. Moreover, this content might be generated in-house within a party or by an agency to which the task is outsourced. A party's online content can also be classified in terms

of its format: whether it is text or visual content.

My analysis of parties' official content on Twitter during recent election campaigns in north Indian states revealed that an overwhelming share—typically 80 percent or more—of a party's official tweets contained visuals. Visual content takes the form of a digitally generated graphic, photograph, or video. Much of a party's digitally generated graphics—such as those highlighting a campaign promise or a party's past achievement or an informational graphic on government performance—is created by a party's IT and social media unit, often with professional inputs. In contrast, photographs and videos are online content that are often created and posted by a party's functionaries and workers, and this visual content typically comes from a party's real-world events, including campaign events. For instance, a recent analysis of content that circulated on BJP's WhatsApp groups in Uttar Pradesh, revealed that around a quarter of the content showed participation in a political event, meeting, or rally (Chauchard and Garimella 2022).

To understand the volume of online posts that party functionaries created during their party's campaign, in my survey of party functionaries in UP, I asked them for an estimate of the number of online posts with photographs and videos that they created and posted online during the one month prior to voting for the 2022 state election. On average, each BJP functionary estimated that they had created and posted around 180 online posts with photographs, whereas this was closer to 150 for a typical SP functionary. This suggests that each of the surveyed functionaries posted on average 5 or 6 posts with photographs during their party's month-long campaign prior to voting. The average number of posts with videos that they created and posted was about the same at a little over 60 each for both BJP and SP functionaries, implying that these functionaries made and posted roughly two online posts with videos each day during the campaign's peak.

When a state election is imminent, the substance of content posted by a party on social media can be classified based on whether it is about a party's past performance or the future (i.e., campaign promises), and whether the content is related to the state-level, district-level, assembly constituency-level or local-level. We might expect a greater share of an incumbent party's online content to be focused on past performance, whereas for a challenger party we might expect a greater share of its online content to be about its campaign promises and plans if it is elected to government. However, in my survey, functionaries of both BJP and SP estimated that in the lead-up to the 2022 state election in UP, between 55 and 65 percent of their party's online campaign content was about past performance. Strikingly, the functionaries of both parties provided similar estimates of the level to which the campaign content belonged. They estimated that around 30 percent of their party's content was state-level content, roughly between 25 and 30 percent content was about the district-level, and a sim-

ilar share of content pertained to the assembly constituency-level, with the remaining content being about the local-level.

For content dissemination, parties use online networks including a network of WhatsApp groups and the party's social media pages and groups. A party's internal network of WhatsApp groups replicates the party's organizational structure so there are WhatsApp groups at the state-level, district-level, assembly constituency-level, ward-level and so on. These WhatsApp groups might be connected to each other in a larger WhatsApp tree. While being part of a WhatsApp tree, upon receiving a message from a level above them, party functionaries and workers would forward that message to all the WhatsApp groups that they are a part of, including those which included party members below them. In this way, a party message that originated from a party's high or middle levels would cascade to those located at a party's lower levels as well as to voters who are supporters of the party. During my interviews, functionaries from major parties who contested state elections in north Indian states underscored that a strong network of WhatsApp groups enabled the party to transmit a party message from its highest to lowest levels and to its loyal voters within just five or six hours.

When a party is attempting to create its social media presence and expand its reach through online platforms, it primarily focuses on maximizing the quantity of its online content. However, once its online presence and networks have been built and a party has established a steady stream of content, then its focus shifts to quality of online content. This shift in focus implies that the party is more discerning about the type of content it posts online, and it manifests itself in several ways. For example, rather than posting the same content on all Internet-based platforms where the party has an online presence, party functionaries carefully select the content to post on each platform while being conscious of who is likely to view and consume the party's content on that platform. A sophisticated approach might also involve a party targeting tailored content to specific groups of voters on WhatsApp or on social media.

More significantly, when centering quality of online content, functionaries in a party's IT and social media unit devote time and effort to monitoring content on social media. Typically, they conduct two tasks: monitoring their own party's online content and monitoring the online content of other parties. When monitoring their own party's content—work that a few party functionaries referred to as "content feedback work"—party functionaries seek to assess what kind of content of their party is gaining resonance online and what kind of content is not getting much attention. While monitoring the online content of other parties, a party attempts to comprehend the content of other parties that's going viral and if that content attacks their party, then in response the party composes and circulates new content.

Consequences for Party Messaging, Mobilization, and Party Organization

Equipped with an organizational vertical that is wholly devoted to IT and social media work, together with robust online networks, and a steady stream of online content, a party engages in *continuous messaging* (Sheikh 2025). A party communicates with its functionaries and workers, as well as voters at regular intervals throughout the day. Crucially, this messaging is continuous—not sporadic—because it is frequent in not only the lead-up to an election but also when an election is not imminent.

In my survey of party functionaries in UP in 2022, I asked them about their daily WhatsApp use during the state election campaigns and in the post-election period. On average, during the campaigns, BJP functionaries said that they used WhatsApp to communicate with other party functionaries and workers around 55 times per day, for SP functionaries this was somewhat lower at 48 times per day. The average daily number of times that functionaries of both parties said that they used WhatsApp to communicate with voters during their campaigns was between 40 to 50. During the months after the election, the average number of times that these functionaries said that they used WhatsApp daily for party communication—both internal to the party (i.e., with others in the party) and external to the party (i.e., with voters)—reduced to around 15. This implies that even without an upcoming election and associated campaigns, on average, party functionaries used WhatsApp about once every waking hour for communication within the party and for communication with voters (Sheikh 2024).

I also asked party functionaries how frequently they used Facebook daily for party-related communication. Because this is a social media platform, the distinction between intra-party communication and communication with voters is difficult to make. During their party's campaign for the 2022 state election in UP, on average, party functionaries of both the BJP and the SP reported having used Facebook around 45 times per day. Even during the months after the election when there was no ongoing campaign, party functionaries said that they used Facebook 20 to 25 times per day, which was approximately half of the number of times they had used Facebook during the campaign time.

To understand the regularity with which parties communicate through Twitter (now, X), I observed the content on major parties' official Twitter handles. I found that in the lead-up to state elections held in 2022 and 2023, these parties posted content on their Twitter account every 15-20 minutes, through the waking hours of the day, typically from 7 am to 10 pm. Even when an election was not on the immediate horizon, a party's official Twitter handles posted content approximately hourly through the waking hours of the day.

Such *continuous messaging* enables a party to keep its functionaries, grassroots workers, and loyal support-

ers in a state of *constant mobilization* and strengthens partisanship among those who are already inclined towards it (Sheikh 2025). This is distinct from episodic mobilization that occurred earlier because, prior to Internet use becoming widespread, party organizing and campaigning efforts typically occurred in a more intermittent manner in the lead-up to elections. However, in the digital era, online partisan content which party functionaries, party workers, and supporters are regularly asked to like, comment on, and share on Internet-based communication platforms mobilizes them and repeatedly reinforces their partisan leaning. India's parties lay emphasis on this because partisan attachments have historically been weak in the country.

Parties' rapidly expanding online networks—which often cut across a party's hierarchical levels and enable them to engage in continuous messaging—also have an implication for the conceptualization of party organization and, more broadly, parties. The three faces of party organization: party in public office, party on the ground, and party central office (Katz and Mair 1993) are now increasingly connected with each other through social media. Although a party might have control over what it shares on the online account of each party organization face, the interactivity characteristic of social media means that online content can easily move from party's one face to another (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016).

Due to the social media-enabled interactivity within the party as well as possibilities of interactivity with actors external to the party, instead of the earlier paradigm that theorized parties-as-organizations due to the underlying hierarchical structure of parties, in today's digital age, we can shift towards conceptualizing parties-as-networks (Auerbach et al. 2022). Parties are no longer merely organizations which are monolithic with fixed boundaries (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016), but nor are they entities with flattened hierarchies in which all individuals have equal agency to act. Instead, contemporary parties increasingly resemble networks (Rahat 2022). Within a party, party leaders and party functionaries are nodes in the network and each of them are connected to several other individuals, who may or may not be formally affiliated with the party. Further, parties and their leaders search for and engage with "influencers" on social media—such as celebrities, media persons, and media houses—who are external to the party i.e., they are not formal members of the party, to expand their online reach and network (Lalani, Mothilal, and Pal 2019; Sharma and Jain 2022).

Conclusion

Drawing on evidence from recent campaigns, I have presented insights on how India's political parties have adopted Internet-based communication technologies, including social media, and its consequences. I have emphasized that in today's digital age, a party's multiple modes of campaigning, organizing activities interact with each other. We observe a

synergy between a party's online and in-person activities. I have described the three-step process that a party typically follows to build and sustain online partisan attachments within the party as well as with voters. I have argued that this three-step process—which includes establishing an organizational vertical that is fully focused on IT and social media work, vigorous networks on Internet-based platforms, along with regular content creation and dissemination—enables a party to engage in continuous messaging. A key consequence of this is that a party can keep its party functionaries, workers, and voters, in a state of constant mobilization. Another key implication is that parties, which have previously been theorized as organizations, can increasingly be conceptualized as networks.

To further deepen our understanding of how new communication technologies are shaping party organization in India, there remain several avenues for future research. First, to understand the relative importance of a party's IT and social media unit compared to a party's other units and the extent to which these units work in tandem, organizational dynamics within a party need to be examined in greater detail. Second, how exactly a party functionary's social media activity determines their career progression within a party merits further study. Third, party adoption of emerging technologies—such as artificial intelligence (AI)—in the context of a developing democracy such as India and its impact on the quantity and quality of online partisan content demand closer investigation.

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Reimagining Muslim Agency and Identity in Post-Independence India

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Abstract

This review essay examines three recent scholarly works that explore the evolving relationship between India's Muslim minority and the nation-state in post-Independence India: *Another India* by Pratinav Anil; *The Muslim Secular* by Amar Sohal; and *A Brief History of the Present: Muslims in New India* by Hilal Ahmed. Collectively, these books challenge conventional academic narratives by placing Muslim agency at the centre of their analyses, portraying Muslims as active protagonists rather than passive victims in India's national story. Anil provides a revisionist account of Muslim elites navigating a post-colonial state rife with suspicion toward Muslim mobilization, while Sohal delves into the intellectual history of three prominent anti-partition leaders who re-conceptualized nationalism and secularism. Ahmed offers a sociopolitical analysis of contemporary Muslim behaviour in "New India," examining the historical lineages of the present regime, and emphasizing adaptive strategies amid growing political hostility. Through their various perspectives, these works detail how our present representations of the features of Muslim identity and their relationship to the Indian nation-state are shaped by contingent historical legacies of path dependence which were set during the early post-Independence decades. The review highlights how these works collectively address themes of identity, marginalization, and political negotiation, marking a significant re-conceptualization of the Muslim experience in India.

Keywords: Indian Muslims, Muslim agency, post-colonial India, nationalism, secularism, Congress system, Partition, identity politics, New India, Muslim elite

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Reimaginando la agencia y la identidad musulmanas en la India posindependencia

Resumen

Este ensayo de revisión examina tres trabajos académicos recientes que exploran la evolución de la relación entre la minoría musulmana de la India y el Estado-nación en la India posterior a la independencia: "Otra India", de Pratinav Anil; "El musulmán secular", de Amar Sohal; y "Una breve historia del presente: musulmanes en la Nueva India", de Hilal Ahmed. En conjunto, estos libros desafían las narrativas académicas convencionales al situar la agencia musulmana en el centro de sus análisis, presentándolos como protagonistas activos en lugar de víctimas pasivas en la historia nacional de la India. Anil ofrece un relato revisionista de las élites musulmanas que navegan en un estado poscolonial plagado de sospechas hacia la movilización musulmana, mientras que Sohal profundiza en la historia intelectual de tres destacados líderes antipartición que reconceptualizaron el nacionalismo y el secularismo. Ahmed ofrece un análisis sociopolítico del comportamiento musulmán contemporáneo en "Nueva India", examinando los linajes históricos del régimen actual y haciendo hincapié en las estrategias de adaptación en medio de la creciente hostilidad política. A través de sus diversas perspectivas, estas obras detallan cómo nuestras representaciones actuales de los rasgos de la identidad musulmana y su relación con el Estado-nación indio están condicionadas por los legados históricos contingentes de la dependencia de la trayectoria que se establecieron durante las primeras décadas posteriores a la independencia. La reseña destaca cómo estas obras abordan colectivamente temas de identidad, marginación y negociación política, marcando una importante reconceptualización de la experiencia musulmana en la India.

Palabras clave: Musulmanes indios, agencia musulmana, India poscolonial, nacionalismo, secularismo, sistema del Congreso, Partición, política de identidad, Nueva India, élite musulmana

重新构想印度独立后的穆斯林能力与身份

摘要

本篇述评文章分析了最近的三部学术著作，这些著作探讨了印度独立后穆斯林少数民族与民族国家之间不断变化的

关系，它们分别为：Pratinav Anil撰写的《另一个印度》(Another India)；Amar Sohal撰写的《世俗穆斯林》(The Muslim Secular)；以及 Hilal Ahmed撰写的《当代简史：新印度的穆斯林》(A Brief History of the Present: Muslims in New India)。总体而言，这些著作将穆斯林能力置于分析中心，将穆斯林描绘成印度国家故事中的积极主角而不是被动的受害者，从而挑战了传统的学术叙事。Anil对“穆斯林精英如何在充满穆斯林动员怀疑情绪的后殖民国家中生存”进行了修正主义描述，而Sohal则研究了三位对民族主义和世俗主义进行再概念化的著名反分治领导人的思想史。Ahmed对“新印度”中当代穆斯林的行为进行了社会政治分析，研究了当前政权的历史渊源，并强调了在日益增长的政治敌意中采取适应性策略。这些著作通过不同的视角，详细描述了我们目前对穆斯林身份特征的表述及其与印度民族国家的关系是如何受到独立后时代初期路径依赖的历史遗产的影响的。本文强调了这些著作如何共同探讨身份、边缘化、政治谈判等主题，标志着对印度穆斯林经历的重大再概念化。

关键词：印度穆斯林，穆斯林能力，后殖民印度，民族主义，世俗主义，印度国大党体制，分治，身份政治，新印度，穆斯林精英

Books Reviewed

Pratinav Anil. 2023. *Another India: The Making of the World's Largest Muslim Minority, 1947–77*. London: Hurst Publishers.

Amar Sohal. 2023. *The Muslim Secular: Parity and the Politics of India's Partition*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Hilal Ahmed. 2024. *A Brief History of the Present: Muslims in New India*. Delhi: Penguin.

Introduction

In the academic presentation of the Indian Muslim experience, a significant oversight has been the under acknowledgment of the critical juncture posed by early post-Independence decades. This period, marked by the aftermath of Partition, the consolidation of the nation-state, and the negotiation of citizenship and identity, fundamentally shaped the trajectory of Muslim inclusion or exclusion—in India's polity. Despite its transformative importance, this era has often been

relegated to the margins of scholarly discourse, overshadowed by later developments or reduced to simplistic narratives centred on "Hindu-Muslim relations." Such omissions have left gaps in understanding the institutional legacies and ideological frameworks which serve to "naturalize" a partial and contingent representation of "Muslim identity" and its relationship to the Indian nation-state.

There has, of course, been a wide range of important academic work on how the legacy of the initial conditions, framed by colonialism and Partition, embedded an underlying tension between "Muslim identity" and the Indian nation-state. But initial conditions are not prefigured destinies. As historical sociologists such as Goldstone (1998) and Mahoney (2000) have argued, we must make a crucial distinction between initial conditions and the causal political action/process which follows and responds to those conditions. As they describe, critical junctures are periods when a particular path is chosen among a range of alternatives, thereby channelling future developments in a specific direction. Through such a channelling process, critical junctures narrow the range of possible future outcomes. For example, as the work of Collier and Collier (1991) demonstrated, it was the specific ways in which different Latin American governments chose to pursue the political incorporation of labour, in the chaotic critical juncture from the 1930s through the 1960s, which shaped the character of their respective national politics for many decades to come.

The books under review—*Another India* by Pratinav Anil, *The Muslim Secular* by Amar Sohal, and *A Brief History of the Present* by Hilal Ahmed—are all united in the grounding belief that the political and ideological resolutions made towards incorporating Muslims within the structures of the nation-state in the early post-independent decades matter in more profound ways than usually acknowledged. This is perhaps true both of our present academic and media representations of "Muslim identity," "Muslim demands" and "Muslim politics." Each work engages deeply with the historical contingencies marking this critical period, from various angles, recognizing it as a foundational moment that set the terms for negotiating Muslim agency and shaped the process of Muslim integration/marginalization within the nation-state.

Anil's *Another India* revisits the Nehruvian era to illuminate how Muslim elites navigated the spectres of Partition, communal violence, and shifting political landscapes. By foregrounding this period, Anil underscores the lasting impact of decisions made—or avoided—during these formative years. Similarly, Sohal's intellectual history of figures like Abul Kalam Azad, Sheikh Abdullah, and Abdul Ghaffar Khan situates their visions of nationalism and secularism within the context of this critical juncture, revealing how their efforts to foster inclusive paradigms were thwarted by dominant ideologies. Ahmed's analysis extends this focus into the present, demonstrating how the unresolved tensions of the early decades continue to shape Muslim polit-

ical behavior and societal positioning in "New India." Another virtue shared by all the books under consideration is their ambition to break new ground towards understanding the evolving relationship of the Muslim minority to the Indian nation-state. Alongside, they also place the concept of "Muslim agency" at the centre of their analysis, treating Muslims as multi-vocal protagonists in the larger national story, not mere silent victims.

By situating the understanding of Muslim identity within a proper historical context, and presenting a sociologically rich analysis of Muslim agency, these works not only deepen our understanding of the past but also provide essential tools for interpreting the lineages of the present debates around the nature of "Muslim identity" and its relationship to Indian nationhood. They remind us that the path dependence of political and ideological choices made during foundational moments—whether in constructing legal frameworks, defining cultural identities, or shaping state policies—have enduring consequences.

Muslim Identity and Agency in Nehruvian India

It might be remembered that the Indian nation was born (and the state perhaps "reborn") into a world soaked in the horrors of Partition violence. The proportions of mass violence during the Partition have been captured in terms like "mutual genocide" and the "Partition holocaust." In post-partition India, not only were Muslims exclusively blamed for the Partition, but the prevailing discourse also saddled them with a sense of "collective guilt," whether or not they had participated in the Pakistan movement. In his 1999 essay, historian Gyanendra Pandey wrote a provocative piece titled "Can a Muslim Be an Indian?" Reflecting on the early years of the republic, Pandey noted that "a particular conception of the Indian nation emerged, in which the Muslims had an unenviable place" (Pandey, 1999, p. 625). While the core of the Indian nation came to be embedded within the Hindu majority, and particularly its upper caste segments, which embodied the "national interest," the choice of the "religious minorities and marginal nationalities" lay somewhere between "collaboration" with, or "subordination" to, this predefined core of nationalism. How did Muslims elites then negotiate with the nation-state given these highly constrained choices?

Another India, by the historian Pratinav Anil, is a revisionist account on the place of Muslims in Nehruvian India. In his typical brisk, irreverent style, Anil revels in caustically slaying quite a few "secular myths." But the importance of his project lies in fleshing out a wide-ranging account of the many ways in which Muslim elites navigated with a post-colonial state that had a built-in suspicion of any shade of autonomous Muslim politics. "There was never a good time to be a Muslim in postcolonial India—not unless one was the right kind of Muslim," Anil writes (p. 267). In the account of Anil, the agency of Muslims (or the "Ashraf" Muslim elite) coalesced around three objects: one, "negotiating the spectres of the past" (the

legacy of the Partition); two, dealing with the "changing circumstances of the present" (communal riots and the burgeoning subaltern politics); three, protecting the "Islamic desiderata for the future" (ensuring continuation of personal laws and public representation) (p. 13). The principal actor here were the "nationalist Muslims" or Congress Muslims. As Anil writes, the uprooting of the Muslim League post-Partition meant that these "nationalist Muslims came to achieve complete hegemony as representatives of Muslim India." This did not mean, however, that they possessed any independent base of power. Instead, these Congress Muslims (primarily from the professional or landed upper classes) became toothless dependents of a powerful Congress regime, to which they provided the mildest of resistance.

Indeed, the narrative of the nationalist Muslims drawn in Anil's book is a tragic one, which ends in either disillusionment or opportunistic collaboration. The case of Syed Mahmud (1889–1971), a senior Congress leader from Bihar, who had played a significant role in the party since the period of the Lucknow Pact (1916) and the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), is quite instructive. After Partition, figures like Mahmud appeared to have very little leverage within the party, except personal bonds with Nehru, which could be mined for the sinecures of office. Anil reproduces passages of letters where even mild suggestions of Mahmud regarding the party's functioning is met with dismissive, even scolding, responses from the younger Nehru. Such a positional asymmetry often turned leaders into lackeys. In a rather unfortunate, but quaintly humorous letter, Mahmud wishes Nehru on his birthday and offers his "life-long devotion" to Nehru, and proceeds further for emphasis: "I am painfully conscious of the worthlessness of my devotion, but then, my boy, just like a dog I have nothing else or better in my possession to give to my master—a thought that makes me bitter and sad" (p. 121). Upon hearing that Mahmud had named his son "Jawaharlal" after him, an embarrassed Nehru replied: "For heaven's sake, don't call your son Jawaharlal" (p. 121).

In the book, Anil blames the Congress' "Ashraf" elite, quite justifiably, for eschewing the agitational politics of popular mobilization, and remaining yoked to a politics of "depoliticization and juridification" (p. 112). In the Indian subcontinent, the term Ashraf refers to the upper echelons of the Muslim social hierarchy, traditionally comprising elites such as Sayyids, Shaikhs, and Pathans, who claim foreign ancestry and hold privileged positions within the community. The "blue-blooded" families of this socio-political elite have long played the role of important cultural and political intermediaries, spanning an unbroken historical arc from Muslim sultanates and dynasties, to British India and princely states, and subsequently post-Independence India. Their predilection for a "depoliticized" stance of petitioning and bargaining, instead of an agitational politics of mass mobilization stemmed not just from their sense of powerlessness. It also flowed from an intrinsic cultural elitism that removed

them from the lifeworld of the vast majority of working castes and classes (both Muslims and Hindus).

Similarly, their preference for a "juridical" politics, lobbying for protections of legal/constitutional claims, usually dealing with *cultural* rights (the personal law, the status of Urdu or Aligarh Muslim University) also owed itself to their elite backgrounds, many of them being lawyers. Moreover, given their predominant fecklessness, their limited legitimacy in front of their constituents rested only on the protection of cultural safeguards like the personal law, to which they became zealously devoted. The Congress, meanwhile, tolerated their interventions on such matters because they were relatively cost-less, compared to, for example, measures promoting greater representation in police/bureaucracy, curbing communal riots, and supportive resources for working class artisans. It is in this milieu, as previously demonstrated by Hilal Ahmed in *Siyasi Muslims*, the issue of "personal laws" came to be discursively constructed (in a top-down manner) as a "primary concern" of unique importance, for the Muslim community at large (Ahmed, 2019). That is perhaps why, as Anil suggests, the reform of Muslim personal law (an arbitrary colonial-era amalgamation) was held back for many decades in India, but was executed relatively smoothly in the vast majority of Muslim-majority countries (p. 115).

The figure of the loyal nationalist Muslim, celebrated by liberal Muslim intellectuals, as a bulwark against fundamentalism and communal polarisation, is here cut down to size. As the book states at the outset, such a historiography of post-colonial Muslim elites tended to be overly concerned at taking an activist stance against the tide of Hindu nationalism. In this respect, the book does well in steering clear of the "good Muslim" versus "bad Muslim" binary, a rhetorical device, employed by privileged Muslim academics and journalists, for policing and gatekeeping their less "enlightened" (or properly loyal?) brethren.

What then of the "agency" of the Indian Muslim elite? In northern India, the emergence of the All India Muslim Majlis-e-Mushawarat (AIMMM), a lobbying group composed of nationalist Muslims and the ulema, marked a turning point. While their own successes were rather limited, they made a lasting impact on the politics of states like Uttar Pradesh by their partial backing of non-Congress parties, helping the opposition break away Muslim support, and contributing to an end to Congress hegemony. And they managed to put forth an autonomous agenda (dealing, among other things, the surge of communal riots and concerns over representation in public office). Thus, they helped transcend the era where Muslim leaders were complacently seen as toothless and replaceable components of the "Congress system." Hence, the Majlis opened up the political horizons (and political choices) of Muslim citizens in the Gangetic belt, even if themselves could not exploit the shift.

An important contribution of Anil's book is that it departs from the conventional north-centric commen-

taries of the Indian Muslim community. In turning to southern India, it traces the successes of the refurbished Muslim League in states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and of IUML (Indian Union Muslim League) in Hyderabad. The rump Muslim League in places like Kerala turned themselves into "good nationalists," keeping away from mass protests and ever-ready with demonstrations of loyalty. The IUML weathered a phase of splits and breakaways, and subsequently gathered their forces to take advantage of a new conjuncture—the arrival of regional parties. "The Southern context, of course, was different, because the CPI in Kerala and the DMK in Tamil Nadu had no Northern equivalents" (p. 148). The ascendance of a two-party system gave the Muslim league much-needed leverage, especially in Kerala. And they played their cards well, switching between the CPI-led and the Congress-led alliances, based on their strategic position. The spoils of office afforded them with considerable patronage-dispensing power to build a party machine and enhance their popular legitimacy with their constituents.

Another India is a timely and valuable work which grounds the emerging practices of "Muslim politics" in post-colonial India in their proper contexts. The account is carefully attuned to the constraints and opportunities which shaped the choices of the Muslim elite, as they accommodated themselves to a mainstream nationalism while seeking to carve out their own space.

Nevertheless, one finds a crucial shortcoming in the interpretive framework of Anil. One, at several points in the book, one feels there is too much of a short-shrift given to the domain of ideology. At one point, Anil explicitly offers an "injunction against the temptation of reading too deeply into ideology in the Indian setting" (p. 128). Such a Eurocentric view of the "Indian setting" limits the book from delving into the generative power of ideas in shaping affective identities, framing modes of recognition, and constructing legitimacy. Sure, the practice of politics, everywhere, is prone to the opportunistic use of ideas. This does not however take away from the importance of ideology in Indian politics. As Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma had argued in their illuminating book on the Indian ideology, political contestations in India are indeed as much rooted in ideological contestation, as elsewhere (Chhibber and Verma, 2018, pp. 10-11). The difference is that the axes of ideological contestation tend to follow specific logics, which they capture using scales of recognition and statism. Furthermore, in the concluding chapter, where the author forays into a sweeping commentary on "Islamic ideals" and "global Muslim communities," the engagement surprisingly comes across as thin and outdated. Indeed, at one point, the author quotes the Orientalist Bernard Lewis as an authority on Islam, whose works were used by Edward Said in his book, *Orientalism*, to exemplify the ways in which imperialistic accounts misrepresent Islam and flatten the complex realities of Muslim societies (Said, 1978).

Re-conceptualizing Nationalism and Secularism

And, thus we turn to *The Muslim Secular*, Amar Sohal's original and thought-provoking intellectual history dealing with the political ideas, and *praxes*, of three leading figures of the era—Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958), Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah (1905–1982), and Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1890–1988). The thesis of the book is that these activist politicians, in their own different ways, exemplified a distinctive re-conceptualization of both nationalism and secularism. They fervently resisted the Pakistan demand and remained within the umbrella of the Congress. With equal passion, they also opposed the partition of a united India, which ultimately proved to be, as they had clearly anticipated, a fatal body-blow to their distinctive projects.

While Sohal seeks to recover a distinctive "Muslim" or "Islamic" element in their varied political projects, he does not reduce these figures to exemplars of Muslim identity politics. Their imaginative ambitions were in fact much broader. All of their distinctive political models (Azad for India, Abdullah for Kashmir, and Ghaffar Khan for the Pashtun regions) sought to resolve the modern problem of negotiating cultural-religious diversity through a transcendental framework. They imagined a new paradigm of governance which could integrate: one, a capacious secular nationalism that allows a wide-berth to cultural/religious autonomy; and two, an active, interactionist public sphere which encourages a mutual blending of cultures, and manages conflicts without the need for the policing of a centralized state. Furthermore, they proposed treating nationalism and secularism as concepts emerging from these cultural interactions, based on mutual accommodation and recognition, rather than prior categories imposed upon a diverse population by the state. As Sohal writes, such an interactionist process of accommodation had previously facilitated the blending of Muslim and Hindu cultures, and it could do so again. This model of nationalism might have reconciled the demands of a secular republic with demands of socio-cultural parity. Indeed, they staked their opposition to Jinnah's Pakistan on their belief that such a vision could be realized in independent India. As Sohal ably demonstrates, these leaders were not disinterested theorists but activist-politicians who sought to turn their distinctive vision into reality. For Sohal, the fact that they might have failed in realizing this vision is not a reason to dismiss it as misguided idealism (pp. 17-26).

We might place this work within a new wave of scholarship on the global South that looks afresh at the period of decolonization and retrieves a valuable trove of "political imaginations" which had been effaced over time. The world, as it is now, seems to be cracking open under the weight of its contradictions. In Europe, surging ethno-nationalism amidst growing inequality and a "crisis of immigration"; in the Middle East and Africa, a return to a gloomy phase of wars and state-failures, and in South Asia, a steady erosion of democratic

norms, religious-nationalism, and violent insurgencies. Genocidal attacks on common people continue apace, from Pakistan and Myanmar to Manipur in India's northeast. It is in this context that younger scholars, with considerable creative vigour, have immersed themselves in studying the leading figures of decolonization movement of the mid-20th century. These range from intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), C.L.R. James (1901–1989), and Ghassan Kanafani (1936–1972), and works and thoughts of leaders, such as Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972) and Julius Nyerere (1922–1999).

Aimé Césaire, through his concept of *négritude*, reclaimed Black identity and culture as sources of pride and resistance against colonial ideologies, critiquing the dehumanizing effects of imperialism. C.L.R. James, in works like *The Black Jacobins* (1938), highlighted the agency of enslaved people in shaping history, emphasizing that freedom struggles were not merely derivative of European ideals but had their own revolutionary momentum. Similarly, Ghassan Kanafani, a Palestinian writer and activist, used literature to articulate the struggles of dispossession and displacement, bringing attention to the ongoing legacies of colonialism in the Middle East.

Leaders like Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere contributed to decolonization by envisioning postcolonial nation-building strategies that sought to reclaim sovereignty and cultural dignity. Nkrumah's advocacy for Pan-Africanism and Nyerere's vision of Ujamaa (African socialism) both emphasized self-reliance, collective progress, and the rejection of neocolonial economic structures. By centering indigenous philosophies and practices, these figures have inspired scholars to rethink global histories, dismantle hegemonic narratives, and foreground marginalized voices in the pursuit of a more equitable and inclusive intellectual landscape.

Drawing on the above thread, we can say that the strength of Sohal's book lies in its disavowal of Euro-centric approaches towards concepts like secularism and nationalism. These concepts—inadequate even in European contexts of cultural diversity and conflict—certainly need to be reinterpreted in the contexts of Asia and Africa whose cultural traditions and social norms embody distinct histories and struggles. The nationalism championed by the Congress in post-independence India, or indeed the Muslim League/armed forces in Pakistan, borrowed the same thrust for unrelenting domination and violent assimilation that had bedevilled Europe in the first half of the 20th century. In both of our countries, we still struggle to integrate the same Kashmiri and Pashtun communities that these leaders had represented. The distinguishing facet of these leaders was their commitment to draw upon the accommodative pluralism of early India rather than the European conception of secularism. The latter framework was undesirable in their view because it embodied a drive towards enforcing uniformity based on dominant cultural norms.

Recently, the political activist Yogendra Yadav wrote a trenchant critique

of contemporary Indian academia. Yadav compared the present generation of scholars unfavourably to their intellectual forebears, owing to their inability to come up with path-breaking theoretical ideas.[1] To the extent that the charge is fair, perhaps our flattened intellectual imagination derives from the lack of culturally-rooted frameworks that capture the flow of political contestations. This observation derives from my experience as a student of one of India's premier social science institutes, TISS Bombay. The comprehensive course of development studies covered everything from political science to sociology to economics. Yet for the most part, it followed a standard Eurocentric epistemology. England provided the model for understanding the emergence of capitalism; France for the processes of social-revolution, and the turn towards post-modernism; Italy for the prototypical analysis of "passive revolution" and fascism. The thoughts of Gramsci, Foucault, and Marx peppered most discussions. Of course, all of these frameworks of understanding and analysis are eminently valuable. Yet as Ludwig Wittgenstein would proclaim, "the limits of my language are the limits of my imagination."

Are the limits of our intellectual imagination adequate to understand the fast-paced and multi-dimensional changes taking place in India? This question seems more urgent when faced with contemporary India's dominant political force—the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)— as it seeks to transform the underlying ground of Indian politics. Indeed, to a certain extent, the BJP has already succeeded in reconfiguring our historical imaginations, cultural sensibilities, and sociological ties. How do we then make sense of the "new reality" we are living in?

Muslims in Contemporary India

The book *A Brief History of the Present: Muslims in New India*, by the political sociologist Hilal Ahmed is a sophisticated engagement with the totality of all these questions. The intellectual breadth of the framework—cutting across thematic concerns of history, heritage, society, culture, and electoral politics—bracingly matches the hydra-headed phenomenon under study. Through a kaleidoscopic interrogation of contemporary Muslim behaviour, the book advances a fresh understanding of New India.

The German sociologist Norbert Elias had based his theory of the "Civilizing Process" on the notion that all social actors constrain themselves to adapt to (or reshape) their given sociological environment. In a somewhat similar vein, Ahmed argues, the environment of New India presents certain daunting challenges to Muslims, and they are creatively moulding themselves to survive in it. He frames the participation of Muslims in the CAA protests as a form of "participation as instrumental action," highlighting that Muslims have not shirked away from active political participation despite the growing hostility of their political environment. Rather, they are eking out their own political space, something he also alludes to in an example on the rise of the

AIMIM (All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen) in the Seemanchal region of Bihar. Ahmed notes how the media portrayal of the event focused on ideological issues, such as the rise of autonomous Muslim politics in the wake of Hindu-Muslim polarisation brought on by issues such as the CAA amendment and Ram Temple. Yet this portrayal was far removed from reality, which should have taken into account the relative material backwardness of the Seemanchal region, and the AIMIM's deft positioning within locally preponderant castes such as Surajpuri Shaikhs (an intermediate caste group which claims Ashraf ancestry) and the "Extremely Backward Caste" (EBC) Kulhaiya Muslim community.

Political theorists studying identity politics often come across the "recognition versus redistribution" debate. Generally, these two approaches are seen to be in tension, separated by three crucial differences. One, recognition deals with the cultural sphere, and redistribution with material sphere. Two, recognition evokes the primacy of the concept of human dignity, and redistribution of the concept of human needs. Three, recognition privileges the struggle for individual and cultural "rights," and redistribution of social and economic "justice." This book by Ahmed, follows the line taken by the philosopher Nancy Fraser, that the claims for recognition and claims for redistribution cannot be decoupled, as they are both part of a shared, underlying desire for justice.

Thus, while the focus of scholarly attention coalesces towards issues of recognition (CAA, Gyanvapi mosque),[2] Ahmed refuses to yield to a lens of Muslim exceptionalism. As he notes: "Muslims, like other social groups, take part in political processes, especially in elections, as stakeholders to secure certain material benefits" (pp. 138-140). The rise of the politics of "labharthis" (welfare recipients of cash transfers) has also not left Muslims untouched as they "behave like consumers/clients and respond to welfare packages" offered by different political parties. With the aid of survey datasets, he similarly holds that the electoral choices of Muslim voters "cannot be reduced either to communal polarization or identity-specific considerations" since "everyday life issues" tend to trump "any imaginary anti-BJP-ism" (pp. 153-155)

Similarly, he charts out the multi-vocality of Muslim politics (*pasmanda* [backward or oppressed Muslims], women, liberals), without losing sight of how these voices tune themselves to fit the structure of constraints and opportunities provided by the evolving nation-state. Ahmed also wades into the "memory-wars" taking place around the places of worship (Gyanvapi, Ayodhya) and historical figures (such as Aurangzeb). Characteristically, he advocates a dose of caution in political engagement with these topics, arguing against ideological reactionism to the right-wing. For instance, he notes: "Our public discourse ... relies on a strong assumption that Muslims admire Aurangzeb as a respectable Islamic figure and that any attempt to defame him would eventually upset them. ...

The secular reception of Aurangzeb is equally one-sided. A section of scholars wants to destroy the communal 'myths' to discover a 'tolerant and secular Aurangzeb'" (pp. 80-82). As a matter of political praxis, Ahmed recommends a sort of democratizing engagement with our historical heritage, treating monuments as part of everyday lived culture rather than props for grand ideological contestation.

Conclusion

The works reviewed here are all engaged in a parallel quest of uncovering the dialectic between nation-building and Muslim identity in post-Independence India. While all three books delve into the complexities of the "Indian Muslim experience" through different methodological frameworks and scholarly perspectives—Anil's historical narrative, Sohal's ideological critique, and Ahmed's socio-political analysis—they share common ground in their attempts to challenge dominant academic narratives of the past.

Both Pratinav Anil and Amar Sohal revisit the vaguely remembered early Nehruvian decades to highlight voices and stories that have been systematically overshadowed in mainstream historiography. However, the thrusts of their accounts diverge markedly, particularly on the vexed question of apportioning "blame" for the steady marginalization of Muslims in the polity. For Anil, it was the joint venture of the Congress leadership and an Ashraf elite collective who bore main responsibility for consciously side-lining relevant socio-economic issues of Muslim masses from the political agenda. Meanwhile, Sohal highlights the importance of the dominant nation-state ideology in constraining the space for, what might have been, an enriching communal reconciliation through mutual cultural recognition. The failure to proactively come to terms with the ghosts of Partition would then inevitably strait-jacket Muslims into a subordinated and segregated role. Hilal Ahmed's arguments implicitly draw on both of these explicatory frames, while also drawing out the differential nature of the regime dynamics of the past and present, and emphasizing the unique challenges being faced now by Indian Muslims.

The above books have produced remarkable re-evaluations of postcolonial India, traced through the trials and tribulations, intellectual thought and political behaviour, of its Muslim minority. The shared approach of placing Muslims at the centre of the story of the evolution of the nation-state marks a belated and welcome shift. As Ahmed perceptively observes, the BJP has ingeniously reinterpreted the meaning of secularism, social justice, constitutionalism and nationalism, thus re-shaping the popular "common sense."

All three studies, which approach the beating heart of Indian politics through the pulsating rhythm of its margins have made valuable contributions in making sense of our dizzying times.

Notes

1 See, Yogendra Yadav, "Where are our political thinkers?" 18 August, 2024; and "A vacuum waiting to be filled", *The Indian Express,* 25 August, 2024.

2 The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests, which began in December 2019, were a widespread response to a legislation amending citizenship laws, meant to incorporate "refugees" from neighbouring countries, seen as discriminatory against Muslims, with demonstrators asserting that it undermined India's secular fabric and constitutional values. The Gyanvapi Mosque dispute centers on claims of a Hindu temple's existence beneath the mosque in Varanasi which has, particularly over the last decade, sparked tensions over religious heritage and communal identity. Legal petitions and court interventions have fuelled debates about historical memory, cultural rights, and the politicization of sacred spaces.

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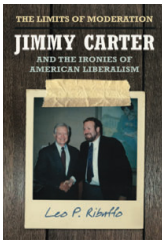

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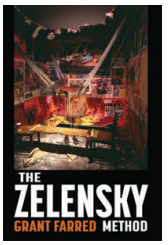

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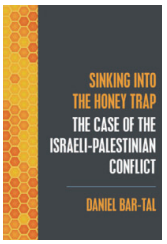

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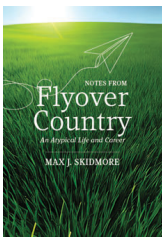

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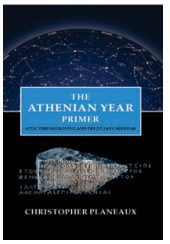

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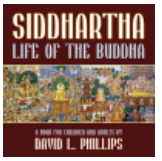

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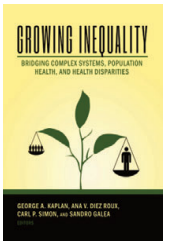

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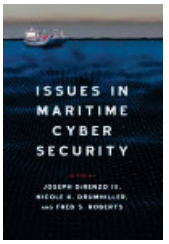

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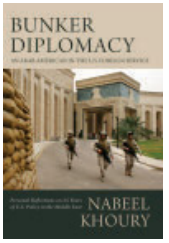

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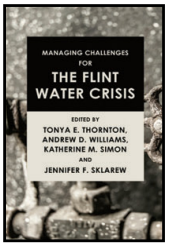

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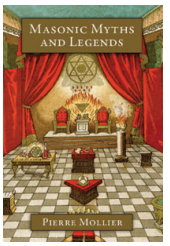
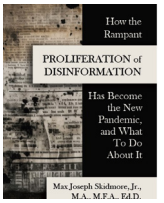


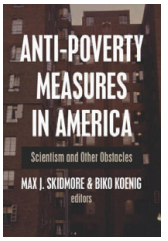
Masonic Myths and Legends by Pierre Mollier

Freemasonry is one of the few organizations whose teaching method is still based on symbols. It presents these symbols by inserting them into legends that are told to its members in initiation ceremonies. But its history itself has also given rise to a whole mythology.



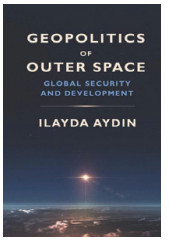
How the Rampant Proliferation of Disinformation has Become the New Pandemic by Max Joseph Skidmore Jr.

This work examines the causes of the overwhelming tidal wave of fake news, misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda, and the increase in information illiteracy and mistrust in higher education and traditional, vetted news outlets that make fact-checking a priority



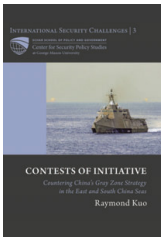
Anti-Poverty Measures in America: Scientism and Other Obstacles
Editors, Max J. Skidmore and Biko Koenig

Anti-Poverty Measures in America brings together a remarkable collection of essays dealing with the inhibiting effects of scientism, an over-dependence on scientific methodology that is prevalent in the social sciences, and other obstacles to anti-poverty legislation.



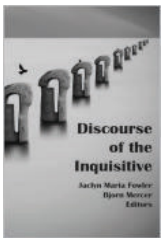
Geopolitics of Outer Space: Global Security and Development
by Ilayda Aydin

A desire for increased security and rapid development is driving nation-states to engage in an intensifying competition for the unique assets of space. This book analyses the Chinese-American space discourse from the lenses of international relations theory, history and political psychology to explore these questions.



Contests of Initiative: Countering China's Gray Zone Strategy in the East and South China Seas
by Dr. Raymond Kuo

China is engaged in a widespread assertion of sovereignty in the South and East China Seas. It employs a "gray zone" strategy: using coercive but sub-conventional military power to drive off challengers and prevent escalation, while simultaneously seizing territory and asserting maritime control.



Discourse of the Inquisitive
Editors: Jaclyn Maria Fowler and Bjorn Mercer

Good communication skills are necessary for articulating learning, especially in online classrooms. It is often through writing that learners demonstrate their ability to analyze and synthesize the new concepts presented in the classroom.