

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-

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 legit-

imacy 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 unwieldy 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 (Grzegorzczuk 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 *gari-bon 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 BJP's 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 construct-

ed 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 Minister 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 ministers 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 be 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 an 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 oth-

er 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 of 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 disenfranchised voters (particularly those from more vulnerable populations) to seek alternatives outside the BJP thus breaking down the BJP's 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 share⁵ 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 au-

thoritarian 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 con-

cerned 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 re-

gional 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 ex-

pect, 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 *andolanjeevis* (career protesters). 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 of 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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