

Does Muslim Vote Matter? Presence, Representation, Participation

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ABSTRACT

The dominant descriptions of Muslim political engagements in contemporary India suffer from three conceptual problems. First, there is an assumption that Muslims constitute a single homogeneous community, whose political/electoral behavior is self-evident. Second, the ‘Muslim voting’ is envisaged as an independent self-governing exercise as if Muslim politics is all about Muslim voting. Third, Muslim voting behavior is always understood in relation to Muslim political representation in legislative bodies. It is assumed, in fact rather uncritically, that there is an organic and instrumental relationship between Muslim voters and Muslim MPs and MLAs. Reliability on these assumptions does not allow us to pay attention to various sociological, cultural, and economic factors that determine Muslim political imaginations in different contexts. In the backdrop of 2019 election, this paper argues that Muslim politics is not simply about the number of Muslim MPs and MLAs. Nor is it entirely reducible to the voting behavior of Muslim voters. The political engagements of Muslims in contemporary India, therefore, need to be explored as an ever-evolving independent discourse, which does not always respond to the challenges posed by Hindutva politics.

Keywords: Muslims, Islam, Hindutva, vote bank, representation, elections

¿Importa el voto musulmán? Presencia, representación, participación

RESUMEN

Las descripciones dominantes de los compromisos políticos musulmanes en la India contemporánea adolecen de tres problemas

conceptuales. Primero, se supone que los musulmanes constituyen una única comunidad homogénea, cuyo comportamiento político / electoral es evidente. En segundo lugar, la “votación musulmana” se contempla como un ejercicio independiente de autogobierno, como si la política musulmana se tratara de la votación musulmana. Tercero, el comportamiento de voto musulmán siempre se entiende en relación con la representación política musulmana en los cuerpos legislativos. Se asume, de hecho, sin crítica alguna, que existe una relación orgánica e instrumental entre los votantes musulmanes y los parlamentarios y parlamentarios musulmanes. La fiabilidad de estos supuestos no nos permite prestar atención a varios factores sociológicos, culturales y económicos que determinan la imaginación política musulmana en diferentes contextos. En el contexto de las elecciones de 2019, este documento argumenta que la política musulmana no se trata simplemente de la cantidad de parlamentarios y MLA musulmanes. Tampoco es completamente reducible al comportamiento electoral de los votantes musulmanes. Los compromisos políticos de los musulmanes en la India contemporánea, por lo tanto, deben explorarse como un discurso independiente en constante evolución, que no siempre responde a los desafíos planteados por la política hindutva.

Palabras clave: musulmanes, Islam, Hindutva, banco de votación, representación, elecciones

穆斯林投票重要吗？体现、代表和参与

摘要

有关当代印度穆斯林的政治参与的主流描述存在三个概念问题。第一，有假设认为，穆斯林组成一个单一同质性社区，其政治/选举行为不言而喻。第二，“穆斯林投票”被视为一个独立自主的活动，仿佛穆斯林政治就是穆斯林投票。第三，穆斯林投票行为一直被理解为与穆斯林在立法机构中的政治代表相关。事实上，相当没有批判意识的假设认为，穆斯林选民、穆斯林国会成员（MPs）、穆斯林邦级立法会成员（MLAs）之间存在有机且重要的关系。依赖这些假设则无法让我们关注不同的社会学因素、文化因素、经济因素，这些因素在不同背景下决定了穆斯林的政治想象。本文以2019年选举为背景，认为穆斯林政治并不仅仅是关于穆斯林MPs和MLAs的数量。也不能仅简化为穆斯林选民的投票行为。因此，当代印度穆斯林的政治参与需被作为一个不断发展的独

立话语进行探究，该话语并不总是对印度教特性政治发起的挑战进行响应。

关键词：穆斯林，伊斯兰，印度教特性，选票库，代表，选举

I. Introduction

This paper asks a simple and straightforward question: do Muslim votes matter after the Bhartiya Janata Party's (BJP)s spectacular victory in the 2019 Lok Sabha election?

Some political observers highlight the declining numbers of Muslim MPs in the present Lok Sabha to argue that there is serious underrepresentation of Muslims in the Parliament, which reflects the political vulnerability of Muslims. The BJP's refusal to give tickets to Muslim candidates, the aggressive Hindutva-driven political campaign to mobilize voters in the name of nationalism, and the strategic silence of opposition parties are cited as evidence to demonstrate that the Muslim vote has lost its significance.¹

There is also a *positive* response to this question. It is claimed that non-BJP parties used Muslims as a vote bank for a long time. As a result, an exclusionary form of Muslim politics emerged that did not allow Muslims to join the political mainstream. Muslims do not require any special treatment/privileges; hence, they should not be addressed as a specific group of voter. The slogan *Sab ka sath, Sab ka vikas* (and *Sab ka vish-*

was!), it is argued, expresses the commitment of Modi-led BJP.² Precisely for this reason, Muslims should not behave like a vote bank and embrace the BJP as their first political preference.³

These seemingly contradictory explanations of Muslim votes are certainly relevant. Non-BJP parties did not show any interest in addressing the concerns or anxieties of Muslim communities as electoral issues during the election campaign. This apathetic attitude of opposition parties contributed to Hindu polarization in favor of the BJP, especially in the northern states. Thus, the argument that the Muslim vote has lost its significance seems plausible.

BJP's *one nation-one political community* thesis that calls on Muslims to vote along purely secular lines is also persuasive, at least technically. No one can ignore the fact that the Indian Constitution disapproves of a separate electorate and proposes an entirely secular imagination of political processes. The *one nation-one political community* thesis helped the BJP justify its stated position that the party does not believe in *Muslim appeasement*.⁴

These dominant descriptions of Muslim electoral engagements in contemporary India, however, suffer from

three conceptual problems. First, there is an assumption that Muslims constitute a single homogeneous community, whose electoral behavior is self-evident. Second, the Muslim vote is envisaged as an independent self-governing exercise as if *Muslim politics* is all about *Muslim votes*. Third, Muslim voting behavior is always understood in relation to Muslim political representation in legislative bodies. It is assumed, rather uncritically, that there is an organic and instrumental relationship between Muslim voters and Muslim MPs and MLAs. Reliability on these assumptions does not allow political analysts to pay attention to various sociological, cultural, and economic factors that determine Muslim political imaginations.

Muslim politics, we must remember, is not simply about the number of Muslim MPs and MLAs. Nor is it entirely reducible to the voting behavior of Muslim electorates. The political engagements of Muslims in contemporary India, I suggest, must be explored as an ever-evolving independent discourse, which does not always respond to the challenges posed by Hindutva politics.⁵ This is what this paper proposes to do. It takes Muslim voting patterns in 2019 election as an empirical reference point to deal with three prominent issues: Muslim portrayal in public life, Muslim representation in institutions (including in legislative bodies), and most importantly, Muslim political action (or inaction!). For analytical purposes, these issues are addressed as three inter-related facets of contemporary Muslim political discourse: *Muslim presence*,

Muslim representation, and *Muslim participation*.

This *presence—representation—participation* framework, in my view, may help us to go beyond the much talked about question, *Why do Muslims vote?* Instead of focusing entirely on Muslim voting patterns as evidence of active political participation in democratic processes, I suggest that we should examine the act of voting as an important form of political action in various sociocultural and spatial contexts. For example, the highly diversified voting behavior of Muslims certainly underlines obvious political heterogeneity. But this crucial empirical finding is not self-explanatory. We need to ask a few other sets of questions to understand why Muslims do not vote as a homogeneous political entity, especially in the present context. These second order questions expand the scope of our investigation and eventually direct us to explore Muslims' imaginations of contemporary Indian politics.

I wish to make a clarification about the scope of the discussion in this paper. The paper is divided into three sections primarily to provide a thematic structure to our main question—*Do Muslim votes matter?* The section on Muslim presence makes a serious attempt to conceptualize the ways that Hindutva-driven public debates on Muslim identity are transformed into electoral issues in the post-2014 period. The next section revisits the question of Muslim underrepresentation in the Modi era. Focusing on the emerging nature of competitive elec-

toral politics, this section examines the changing attitudes of political parties toward Muslim candidates/leaders. The fourth section investigates the electoral participation of Muslims since 2014. It explores the impact of popular debates about Muslim political marginalization on Muslim voters. This thematic structure is useful for establishing an analytical link between the popular portrayal of Muslim political identity and the complex forms of Muslim political participation. The paper, in this sense, offers a possible theoretical outline for studying Muslim politics as a discourse; at the same time, it tries to explain the nature of Muslim electoral heterogeneity in post-2014 India.

II. Muslim Presence

The idea of Muslim presence underlines various interpretative strategies that are used to accommodate Muslims in different ideological configurations by producing certain popular images and acceptable icons. The negative or positive portrayal of Muslims in public life is actually an outcome of these intellectual strategies. Secular Akbar of *Mughal-e-Azam*, the pious figure of Khan Sahab—the pucca musalman of Zanjeer, the barbaric Alauddin Khalji of Padmaavat, and the nationalist APJ Abdul Kalam (a Veena player, a Geeta reader, a Sanskrit lover, and yet a Muslim scientist!), in this sense, are not isolated, independent images; rather, these are concrete illustrations that represent various context-specific interpretations of the Muslim presence in postcolonial India. Poli-

tical parties accommodate these images in their own ideological frameworks in order to make a politically viable distinction between *good Muslims* and *bad Muslims*.⁶

There are at least three powerful metaphorical imaginaries that constitute this Muslim presence: *Muslim homogeneity*—the belief that the Muslims of India belong to a homogeneous pan-Islamic community, which is arguably represented by every single Muslim; *Muslim religiosity*—the belief that Muslims are more religious than others and hence it is legitimate to recognize the burqa and topi as markers of Muslimness; and *Muslim historicity*—the assumption that Muslim cultures are exotic remains of a royal Islamic past, which is lived and practiced by common Muslims.

These constitutive features of the Muslim presence find concrete cultural political meanings only when Muslim identity is defined in a broad postcolonial Indian framework.⁷ For instance, the idea of the Muslim community as a homogeneous group is an inseparable fragment of Indian identity allowing India to celebrate “unity in diversity” as a constitutional value. However, the same idea of Muslim homogeneity turns out to be problematic when it is contrasted with Hindu religious diversity. Islamic adherence to monotheism, according to this interpretation, transforms them into a homogeneous group and does not allow them to become fully Indian. Precisely for this reason, Muslims are often asked to prove their loyalty to the Indian nation.⁸

The Hindutva interpretation of Muslim presence seems to dominate contemporary public discourse.⁹ The pro-Hindutva media discourse has created an impression that the Muslim presence is an irresolvable political problem for the country. We are told that the birth of a Muslim child is a threat to the Hindu population, the madrasa education of a Muslim child is a symbol of separatism, the eating habits of Muslims are anti-Hindu (since Muslims eat beef), and the married life of a Muslim couple is a social evil (since Muslims practice triple talaq). Even the death of a Muslim is an anti-national act (because Muslims occupy valuable land for graveyards!).

These stereotypical perceptions, quite interestingly, have been translated into political issues in the post-2014 period. For instance, the debate on Muslim population growth took on an overtly communal overtone in the electoral politics of Assam and West Bengal. The popular media-driven discussions on the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment bill (2016) normalized Hindutva's critique of secular citizenship.¹⁰ Similarly, the triple talaq and the waqf status of Muslim graveyards emerged as important electoral issues in the Uttar Pradesh (UP) assembly elections in 2016. These political trajectories indicate that the BJP had already transformed the collective Muslim presence into an electoral agenda even before the 2019 election for effective Hindu polarization.¹¹ Various studies demonstrate that the consolidation of the Hindu political identity emerged as a decisive fac-

tor in post 2014 India.¹² However, this Hindu polarization did not produce any collective Muslim reaction. Issues like love-Jihad, ghar-wapasi, Ram temple, and even a ban on triple talaq did not provoke Muslims to respond to the BJP's Hindutva-driven discourse more directly. The Hindutva forces did not realize that these issues had already lost political significance for Muslims.¹³

This strategic failure forced Hindutva groups to focus entirely on the aggressive politics of cow protection, which eventually led to a new form of anti-Muslim violence: lynching. Unlike full-scale riots, lynching was more economical. In this case, Muslim individuals were targeted to create a powerful impact. Lynching has certainly affected Muslim communities across India. However, it has not yet acquired a political vibrancy as a Muslim issue.¹⁴ Although the 2019 Congress election manifesto talks about a law to control mob lynching, other non-BJP parties have not yet articulated it as an electorally viable agenda. The adverse depictions of Muslims in public life and new forms of violence against them have not become electoral issues. Muslim voters did not have any ability to express their opinions through voting in this election on prevalent anti-Muslim discourse.

The Muslim voting patterns in 2019, in this sense, cannot be treated as empirical evidence for mapping out the Muslim responses to issues like lynching. However, the Hindutva-driven imagination of the Muslim presence, it appears, provided an opportunity for Muslim electorates to distinguish

between the anti-Muslim discourse of post-2014 elections and the substance of political participation at various levels. This makes the debate on Muslim representation—symbolic as well as substantial—very relevant.

III. Muslim Representation

The debates on Muslim political representation have revolved around the declining number of Muslim MPs in Lok Sabha for a long time. The rise of the BJP has given a new intellectual shift to this debate. There is a revised argument that non-BJP political parties are also not interested in giving tickets to Muslim candidates. As a result, there are only twenty-seven Muslim MPs in the present Lok Sabha.¹⁵ This political apathy, we are told, will further contribute to what Iqbal Ansari calls “Muslim political deprivation.”¹⁶

This oversimplified explanation relies on an imagined relationship between Muslim MPs and Muslim voters. It is assumed that if an opportunity is given to Muslim voters, they will vote for a Muslim candidate. The elected Muslim representatives, in this framework, are expected to raise specific Muslim concerns in the legislative bodies. This highly idealized imagination of Muslim representation goes against the actualities of legislative politics. Muslim elected representatives do not necessarily work for Muslim interests.¹⁷ In fact, they behave like professional politicians in legislative bodies. The official position of the party they represent in Parliament actually determines their arguments, statements, and interven-

tions.¹⁸ Hence, establishing any direct correlation between number of MPs in Lok Sabha and Muslim marginalization is analytically misleading. Instead, we must focus on the organic relationship between Muslim political elites who claim to represent Muslim interest, and political parties.

The changing attitudes of political parties toward Muslim leaders, especially in the Modi era, are contingent upon two crucial features of contemporary Indian politics: the nature of electoral competitiveness and political tokenism.

The highly competitive nature of the Lok Sabha elections in recent years has forced political parties to deviate significantly from the hitherto accepted principles of political life, such as social inclusion. As professional entities, political parties behave like corporate firms in the market of elections to secure maximum political profit. Representation of deprived sections of society—women, the poor, Dalits, Muslims—remains a major constituent of the electoral package for all parties.¹⁹ However, they concentrate more on the winnability factor at the constituency level. The BJP—as the dominant party—has set up a new political precedent of electoral politics, which defines political activities, especially elections, in a strict organizational/professional sense.²⁰ Non-BJP parties have to abide by this professional norm for their survival, at least in states where they are in direct competition with the BJP. In such a scenario, giving tickets to Muslims to contest popular elections goes against

the fundamental logic of the emerging hegemony of Indian politics, which relies heavily on the anti-Muslim discourse of Hindutva and nationalism.²¹

However, it does not mean that there is no scope for Muslim leaders to find a place in the power structure of state-system. All political parties, including the BJP, accommodate Muslim leaders through different routes—the Rajya Sabha, Wakf Board, the National Commission for Minorities, and so on.²² This oblique presence of Muslims in the state-system should not be confused with Muslim representation. Political parties accommodate Muslim leaders as “good Muslims” and they are expected to propagate the party’s position on Muslim-specific issues. This is precisely what justifies the presence of Muslims in the BJP. These Muslims stridently defend the BJP’s position on Muslim representation.²³

IV. Muslim Participation

Unlike other religious groups, the Muslim electoral participation at the all India level has not increased significantly since the 2009 Lok Sabha election. The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)–Lokniti post-poll survey shows that there was a slight increase in Muslim turnout in 2019 (60 percent) from 2014 (59 percent). On the other hand, the Hindu electorate appears to have more enthusiasm for participating in elections (see Table 1). It is worth situating this finding in the ongoing debate on the efficacy of the Muslim vote.²⁴ Does this mean that Muslims are gradually

moving away from politics? If so, does it also mean that the two popular political assumptions about Muslim voting—*Muslims follow the advice of Ulema* and *they always vote tactically to defeat the BJP*—are factually accurate?

Table 1: Hindu-Muslim Turnout Compared (%)

	2009	2014	2019
Hindus	58	68	70
Muslims	59	59	60

Note: Data weighted by actual turnout recorded in 2009, 2014, 2019 elections.

Source: NES 2009 (n-36,641), NES 2014 (n-22,295) NES 2019 (n-22383)

The findings of the CSDS-Lokniti’s *Religious Attitudes, Behaviour and Practices Survey* (2015) are very relevant to evaluate such perceptions.²⁵ A sizeable number of Muslims believes that Ulema are highly influential in political matters (see Table 2). This observation is historically valid. Since the days of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Indian Ulema have been actively participating in politics in a variety of ways.²⁶

The political influence of the religious elite, however, is not always seen positively. A majority of Muslims do not want Ulema to offer support to political parties in elections. Interestingly, a sizeable number of respondents (35 percent) avoid this question and do not take any clear position. This shows that the Islamic principles and practices do not necessarily influence the political identity of a Muslim voter. They do recognize the role of Ulema in their everyday re-

Table 2: Influence of Ulema in Politics (%)

Are Ulema influential?	Muslim Response
Very influential	28
Somewhat influential	27
Not too influential	10
Not influential at all	8
Can't say	26

Source: The Religious Attitudes, Behaviour and Practices Survey 2015, CSDS-LoknitiData Unit.

Question: *According to you, how influential are Muslim religious leaders in political matters?—Very influential, somewhat influential, not too influential, or not influential at all?* The methodology of survey is given on our website: <https://www.lokniti.org/>.

Table 3: Religious Leaders Supporting Political Parties (%)

Is it okay to support any political party?	Muslim reaction
Agree	22
Disagree	43
Can't say/Don't know	35

Source: The Religious Attitudes, Behaviour and Practices Survey 2015, CSDS-LoknitiData Unit.

Question: *Do you agree or disagree with the statement: Religious leaders should support political parties during elections?*

religious life; yet, participation in politics emerges as a somewhat independent.

It does not, however, mean that the religious elite do not make any attempt to assert their significance in the BJP-dominated discourse of electoral politics. The Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid, Ahmad Bukhari, who is famous for his election fatwas, decided not to support any political party in the 2019 election.²⁷ The Ulema of Mumbai, however, were more vocal. Around 700 Ulema representing different sects (Sunni, Shia, and Bohra) and sub-sects (such as Wahhabi, Deobandi, and Barelvi) of Indian Islam asked the Muslim electo-

rate to vote only for "secular parties" so as to defeat the BJP in 2019.²⁸ These statements did not influence the political choices of Muslim voters. They did not vote only to defeat BJP; nor did they undertake any tactical voting.

On the contrary, Muslim voting patterns suggest that Muslim communities did not show any inclination to become a votebank. In fact, political heterogeneity remains one of the determining aspects of their electoral behavior in the Modi-era (2014–2019). Muslims voted for all political parties including the BJP in these elections (see Tables 5, 6, 7). Although non-BJP par-

ties and regional coalitions remained the first choice of Muslim voters at the all-India level, the vote share of the BJP among Muslims in a few key states also increased significantly. This voting pattern points to the centrality of state-specific politics.

Two examples—Assam and Tamil Nadu—are more instructive for elaborating this regional dimension of Muslim politics. There are two dominant Muslim linguistic groups in Assam—Assamese Muslims and Bengali Muslims. These two groups always vote differently. This linguistic-political division emerged as an important factor in the 2016 assembly election as well. Despite the BJP’s anti-Bangladeshi/anti-Muslim migrant-centric electoral campaign, which posed a serious challenge to the citizenship status of all Muslims in the state, Muslim voters of Assam did not give up their linguistic considerations. Assamese Muslims preferred Congress, while Bengali Muslims voted for both Congress and AIUDF. It shows that apart from religion, other sociological factors (in this case language and ethnicity) can also play a more direct role in determining the political preferences of Muslims.

Table 4. Muslims Voting in Assam (Assembly Election 2016) (%)

Group	Congress	AIUDF
Assamese Muslims	65	12
Bengali Muslims	38	39

Sources: CSDS-Lokniti Data Unit

Tamil Nadu introduces us to a very different scenario. Although the AIADMK won the 2016 Tamil Nadu Assembly Election and formed the government, the performance of the DMK-Congress alliance was not entirely insignificant, especially in terms of vote share. Both AIADMK and DMK received around 41 percent of the votes. The Muslim voting pattern in the state contributed significantly to this politically divided verdict. Around 55 percent Muslims supported the DMK, while 34 percent voted for the AIADMK (see Table 5). Obviously, the majority of Muslim voters did not approve of the AIADMK-NDA alliance. But this rejection of the NDA cannot entirely be reduced to the perceived Muslim apathy to the BJP or BJP-led coalitions. In this case, Muslims, like other social groups, went along with the region-specific politics of Tamil Nadu.

This state-specific Muslim voting pattern can also be observed in the 2019 general election (see Tables 6 and 7). Contra the popular perception, Muslims did not consider the BJP to be a politically untouchable party. It is true that the party was not the first choice for Muslims at the all-India level. However, it gained significant acceptability in many states. Muslim support for the BJP in the so-called cow belt is very revealing. Muslim voters, it seems, were more conscious of constituency-level politics and somehow ignored the anti-Muslim media discourse created by the BJP in these states. The outcome was obvious: of the Muslim votes, the BJP got 25 percent in Gujarat, 33 percent in MP, 18 percent in Rajasthan,

and 9 percent in Maharashtra. These figures show that Muslim voters did not give priority to the promises made by political parties; instead, they voted for particular candidates at the constituency level.

Table 5: Muslim Voting Pattern in Major State Assembly Elections (post-2014) (%)

State	Parties	Muslim Voting Preference
Assam 2016	Congress+	42
	BJP+	5
	AIUDF	36
	Other	17
Bihar 2015	Grand Alliance	75
	NDA	6
	Others	18
Delhi 2015	Congress	20
	BJP+	2
	AAP	76
	Others*	2
Goa 2017	Congress	44
	BJP+	10
	AAP	11
	MGP	3
	Others	32
Gujarat 2017	Congress	65
	BJP	26
	Others	9
Jammu & Kashmir 2014	Congress	17
	BJP	5
	NC	30
	PDP	34
	Others	14
Jharkhand 2014	Congress	38
	BJP	14
	JMM	18
	JVM	6
	Others	26
Kerala 2016	LDF	34
	UDF	57
	BJP+	5
	Others	4

Maharashtra 2014	Congress	53
	BJP	12
	NCP	16
	Shiv Sena	11
	MNS	1
	Others	7
Tamil Nadu 2016	DMK+	55
	AIADMK	34
	DMDK-PWA	6
	BJP	1
	PMK	2
	Others	2
Uttar Pradesh 2017	BJP+	6
	BSP	19
	SP+	65
	RLD+	1
	Others	9
Uttarakhand 2017	Congress	78
	BJP	9
	BSP	3
	Others	10
West Bengal 2016	Congress	14
	Left Front	24
	AITC	51
	BJP	6
	Others	5
Karnataka 2018	Congress	68
	BJP	16
	JDS	13
	Other	3
Madhya Pradesh 2018	Congress	52
	BJP	15
	BSP	3
	Others	30
Rajasthan 2018	Congress+	62
	BJP	14
	Others	24

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Telangana 2018	Congress+	34
	TRS	33
	BJP	1
	AIMIM	22
	Others	10

Source: CSDS-Lokniti Data Unit

Note: All figures are in percent. * Figures do not necessarily add up to 100 due to rounding

Table 6: Muslim Voting Pattern in 2019 (Key States) (%)

State	Parties	Muslim Voting Preference
Andhra Pradesh	Congress	3
	BJP	0
	TDP	46
	YSRCP	49
	Others	2
Bihar	Congress	33
	BJP	4
	RJD+	43
	JDU+	2
	Others	17
Assam	Congress	70
	NDA	7
	AIUDF	20
	Others	3
Gujarat	Congress	70
	BJP	25
	Others	5
Karnataka	INC+JDS	73
	BJP	18
	Others	9
Kerala	UDF	65
	BJP	2
	LDF	29
	Others	4

Madhya Pradesh	Congress	67
	BJP	33
	BSP+	0
	Others	0
Maharashtra	Congress	56
	NCP+	30
	BJP	9
	Shiv Sena+	4
	Others	1
Odisha	Congress	22
	BJP	14
	BJD	64
	Others	0
Rajasthan	Congress	79
	BJP	18
	BSP+	0
	Others	3
Tamil Nadu	Congress	
	DMK+	25
	BJP	147
	AIADMK+	12
	Others	15
Uttar Pradesh	Congress	15
	BJP+	8
	MGB	74
	Others	4
West Bengal	Congress	12
	BJP	4
	AITC	70
	Left	10
	Others	4
Jharkhand	Congress	36
	RJD+	42
	NDA	11
	Others	11
Telangana	Congress	42
	BJP	2
	TRS	43
	Others	13

Table 6 Source: NES 2019 CSDS-Lokniti Data Unit

Note: All figures are in percentages. * Figures do not necessarily add up to 100 due to rounding.

Table 7: Muslim Voting in 2019 (%)

Party	Congress	Congress Allies	BJP	BJP Allies	BSP+	Left	Others
Muslim vote share	33	12	8	1	17	3	25

Source: NES 2019 CSDS-Lokniti Data Unit

Note: All figures are in percentages. * Figures do not necessarily add up to 100 due to rounding.

V. Conclusion

This highly diversified and apparently non-committed Muslim response reminds us of an important political fact. Political parties are made of individuals—not ideologies. In this sense, the BJP has emerged as the most powerful political party—not entirely because of its stated ideology of Hindutva. Its successful regional expansion and expanded social base have attracted a large number of powerful regional leaders. The decline of left parties in West Bengal and disintegration of Congress in Rajasthan and MP (despite its victories in the last elections) mean that individual leaders of these parties have joined the BJP. These leaders continue to nurture their traditional Muslim support and as a result, BJP is able to make effective linkages with Muslim voters.²⁹

This brings us to the main argument of this paper. The presence-representation-participation framework gives us a broad overview of the contours of Muslim political discourse in contemporary India. The Hindutva driven imaginations of Muslim presence has forced all political parties to

rely on Hindu polarization. This is one of the reasons the debate over Muslim underrepresentation in Parliament and state assemblies is irrelevant in the Modi era. The Muslim political elite have also adjusted themselves in this new Hindutva-driven political milieu. In such a scenario, Muslim voters seem to make a crucial difference between the discourse of election and the substance of election. The perception that the BJP has finally achieved its Hindu votebank and the party does not need Muslim votes to win an election governed the media-driven national discourse of the election in 2019.³⁰ However, this overtly communal overtone did not affect the nature of electoral mobilization at the constituency level. Political parties, including the BJP, employed a region-specific political vocabulary to open different channels with all groups, including Muslims. This indirect form of mobilization produced a new kind of Muslim elite as informal stakeholders—community representatives of some kind—who play a crucial role in creating winnable social configurations at the constituency level.³¹ Muslims as voters found a legitimate space in such local informal alliances. In other words,

the multifaceted political identity of Muslim voters and their spatial locations emerge as determining aspects of their electoral participation. I, therefore, argue that Muslim votes matter in electoral politics because provocative Hindutva has failed to dismantle Muslim

political heterogeneity. However, there is a need to conduct a systematic ethnographic mapping of Muslim participation at the constituency level to assess the explanatory potentials of this argument.

Reference

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Notes

- 1 For an excellent overview of this argument, see Aditya Menon, "Dear Muslims in Modi's India: Embrace Politics, Don't Shun It," *The Quint*, 2019, <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/indian-muslims-way-ahead-narendra-modi-asaduddin-owaisi-jharkhand-lynching>.
- 2 For an elaborated version of this argument, see Zafar Islam, "Why Muslims must Give BJP a Fair Chance," *The Indian Express*, 2017, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/why-muslims-must-give-bjp-a-fair-chance-4639535/>.
- 3 This argument relies on three technical justifications. First, the Constitution recognizes voters' identity in purely secular terms. Hence, there is no need to identify voters on religious lines. Second, the Constitution does not define the term *minority*. Thus, recognizing Muslims as a *permanent minority* is constitutionally untenable and politically problematic. Finally, MPs represent all voters in their constituency. Expecting them to treat Muslim voters as a differentiated social segment is inappropriate. In my view, Arif Mohammad Khan's explanation of this official position of the government is relevant. He made these three points in an interview with Karan Thapar: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ok9WTEcrcjA>, accessed on June 24, 2019. I discuss the limitation of Khan's argument in a rejoinder. See Hilal Ahmed. "Arif Mohammad Khan, You are Still in 1986, Your Views on Secularism & Muslims are Outdated," *The Print*, 2019, <https://theprint.in/opinion/arif-mohammad-khan-you-are-still-in-1986-your-views-on-secularism-muslims-are-outdated/248810/>.
- 4 For a conceptual discussion of the idea of Muslim appeasement in India politics, see Hilal Ahmed, *Siyasi Muslims: A Story of Political Islams in India* (Delhi: Penguin-Random House, 2019), 182–87.
- 5 Sudipta Kaviraj reminds us that "the first step in developing the critique of any ideological discourse ... must be to disbelieve its autobiography, the history, it gives to itself"; *Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Following this suggestion, we must question the self-justifications offered by the dominant narratives of Muslim politics in contemporary India. BJP leaders invoke a closed reading of the Constitution to justify the *Sab ka Sath* thesis. Those who are critical of the BJP/Hindutva, on the other hand, always envisage Muslim politics in relation to Hindutva. In my view, there is a need to get rid of these given templates in order to understand what Muslims think of Indian politics

in various socioeconomic contexts. For an elaborated version of this line of argument, see Ahmed, 2019, xxxvi–xl.

- 6 For a conceptual elaboration of the idea of good Muslims vs. bad Muslims, see Ahmed, *Siyasi Muslims*, 177–82.
- 7 I use the term *postcolonial Indian framework* intentionally to underline the ways that the idea of India is interpreted and defined in the post-1950 period. After the success of the first general election, all political groups began to define India in concrete terms. As a result, an acceptable framework of politics gradually evolved. Although there were apprehensions and anxieties about the future of representative democracy in the country, the political parties began to recognize the Constitution as an important reference point. For example, Hindu nationalists, who adhered to the idea of *Akhand Bharat*, redefined their position by adjusting themselves with the new norms of politics governed partly by the constitutional principles and partly by the compulsion of electoral competitiveness. This postcolonial Indian framework of politics contributed significantly in the making of Muslim political discourse in later years. Hilal Ahmed, “Representing Muslims in Postcolonial India: Constitution of a Political Discourse,” in *Decolonisation and the Politics of Transition in South Asia*, ed. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (Delhi: Oriental Blackswan, 2016), 348–37.
- 8 Mohan Bhagwat, the Sarsanghsanchalak of the RSS, delivered a series of lectures on the ideas and ideology of the RSS in September 2018. In an attempt to offer an acceptable and inclusive meaning of the term *Hindutva*, Bhagwat argues: “according to us, Hindutva has three basics: patriotism, glory of our forebears, and culture If ever it is claimed that Hindutva does not desire Muslims in its ambit, that day it will die down as Hindutva itself.” However, this seemingly inclusive definition of Hindutva was later clarified. Responding to a question about RSS’s position on minorities, Bhagwat categorically argued that the majority-minority framework had always been problematic; hence, one must adhere to three principles of Hindutva, patriotism, glory of our forebears, and Indian culture, to be recognized as a patriot. This clarification makes it clear that Bhagwat’s so-called inclusive Hindutva, which has also been seen as a revisionist version of RSS, does not deviate from the old language of *you* Muslims and *we Hindus!* He seems to employ the three core beliefs of his version of Hindutva to remind Muslims that they have to come forward and prove their nationalism (see Ahmed 2019, Chapter IV).
- 9 Suhas Palshikar, “The Making of a Neo-Hindu Democracy,” *Seminar*, 2015, 665. http://www.india-seminar.com/2015/665/665_suhas_palshikar.htm. Shreyas Sardesai and Pranay Gupta, “The Religious Fault Line in the 2014 Elections,” *How India Votes, A State-by-State Look*, ed. Ashutosh Kumar and Yatindra Singh Sisodia (Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2019), 58–74. Ahmed 2019.
- 10 The CAA normalized the conventional Hindu nationalist argument that India should be recognized as a Hindu nation and all Hindus in the world must be treated as its citizens. In fact, one finds a reincarnation of the post-partition debate on the citizenship status of Indian Muslims in recent years. BJP leaders often argue that the party wants to implement the NRC throughout the country as if the purpose of NRC is to evaluate the citizenship status of Muslims. For a systematic analysis of Muslims and Indian citizenship, see Ornit Shani, “Conceptions of Citizenship in India and the ‘Muslim Question,’” *Modern Asian Studies* 44 (2010): 145–73.
- 11 Hindu polarization is different from a Hindu vote bank. The BJP has successfully appropriated the growing religiosity among Hindus to rearticulate the religious-doctrinal distinctiveness of Hinduism into an electoral project. This social polarization certainly has allowed the BJP to emerge as a legitimate stakeholder of Hindu interests. However, this has not yet emerged as

the most decisive factor for Hindus to vote as a community of voters. The success of Naveen Patnaik in Odisha, despite Modi's popularity as a national leader, is a relevant example to underline the political distinctiveness of Hindu polarization in the present context; Hilal Ahmed and Gyanranjan Swain, "Post-Poll Survey: Naveen's Track Record Helps to Overcome BJP Blitz in Odisha," *The Hindu*, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/naveens-track-record-helps-to-overcome-bjp-blitz/article27267792.ece>. For a discussion on changing Hindu religiosity and its political manifestations, see Satendra Kumar, *Badalte Gaon, Badalta Dehat: Nayi Samajiktaka Uday* (Hindi) (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019).

- 12 For an elaboration of this argument, see Pulishikar (2015); Sardesai and Gupta, "The Religious Fault Line in the 2014 Elections"; Hilal Ahmed, "Communal Violence, Electoral Mobilization, and Muslim Representation: Muzaffarnagar 2013-14," in *The Algebra of Warfare-Welfare: Along View of India's 2014 Election*, ed. Irfan Ahmad and Pralay Kanungo (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), 163-96.
- 13 For a detailed discussion on this point, see Ahmed, *Siyasi Muslims*, 194-201.
- 14 One cannot underestimate the responses of civil society organizations and concerned citizens to lynching. The *Not in My Name Campaign* is a relevant example. Non-BJP political leaders, including AIMIM President and Hyderabad MP Asaduddin Owaisi, have been raising this issue in the Parliament as well. See <https://indianexpress.com/article/what-is/what-is-the-not-in-my-name-protest-lynching-junaid-khan-4725668/> accessed June 3, 2019.
- 15 This figure is slightly better than the previous Lok Sabha, which had only twenty-three Muslim MPs. For an overview of the recent debate on Muslim representation, see Ghazal Jamil, "Who Can Represent Muslims in Electoral Politics? Debates in the Muslim Public Sphere," *Economic and Political Weekly*. 2019, <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/who-can-represent-muslims-electoral-politics>.
- 16 Ansari employs a simplistic and rather instrumental method to measure Muslim political deprivation. He calculates the number of Muslim MPs in Lok Sabha and divides these figures by the total Muslim population at the all-India level. This line of argument problematic: it is based on the assumption that a Muslim MP must represent the interests of Muslim citizens (not voters!). Iqbal A. Ansari, *Political Representation of Muslims of India: 1952-2004* (Delhi: Manak, 2006.)
- 17 My ethnographic study of Muslim electoral behavior in the Muzaffarnagar district after the Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013 clearly demonstrates this point. The Samajwadi Party, which had won the UP assembly election in 2012 with a sizable majority, was in power at the time of violence. Known for its pro-Muslim attitude, SP had forty Muslim MLAs in the UP Assembly (out of total sixty-four Muslim MLAs). Thus, the Muslim representation in the Assembly was around 15 percent. (There were 27.15 percent Muslims in UP according to the 2011 India census). The failure of political efficacy in UP illustrates an important aspect of our political system. Muslim MLAs and the Muslim MP of Muzaffarnagar did not claim to represent the riot-affected Muslims of the district. Nor did they campaign for any kind of counter-mobilization of Muslim electorates in later elections. On the contrary, they continued to follow the instructions given to them by their respective political parties. See Ahmed, "Communal Violence, Electoral Mobilization, and Muslim Representation."
- 18 Imtiaz Jaleel, newly elected Muslim MP from Aurangabad representing the All-India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) clarified that he should be known as the Aurangabad MP, not merely as a Muslim MP. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/i-am-aurangabad-mp-not-muslim-mp-imtiaz-jaleel/story-IMjp03U9CwSEeZEBHEwBnI.html>, accessed July 3, 2019.

- 19 BJP's 2014 Manifesto is a relevant example. It recognizes Muslim backwardness as an important issue of political concerns; see <https://www.bjp.org/en/manifesto?archives=1>, accessed June 3, 2019. For an excellent analysis of the role of ideology in Indian electoral politics, see Pradeep K. Chhiber and Verma Rahul, *Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 20 Suhas Palshikar's conceptualization of the "second dominant party system" is relevant here. See "India's Second Dominant Party System," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2017, 101–116. <https://www.epw.in/journal/2017/11/web-exclusives/indias-second-dominant-party-system.html>.
- 21 For an elaboration of the idea of an emerging hegemony, see Suhas Palshikar, "Toward Hegemony: The BJP beyond Electoral Dominance," in *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India*, ed. Argana Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen, and Christophe Jaffrelot (London/Noida: Harper Collins, 2019), 101–16.
- 22 My study of the Muslim representation in the Rajya Sabha also confirms this point. Muslim representation in Rajya Sabha has always been around 9 percent. Hilal Ahmed, *Muslim Representation in the Rajya Sabha: Forms and Trajectories* (Report submitted to the Rajya Sabha Secretariat, Government of India, December 2016), https://rajyasabha.nic.in/rsnew/fellowship/Hilal_Ahmed.pdf.
- 23 All Muslim leaders associated with the BJP interestingly argue that Muslims must give BJP a chance as if Muslims did not vote for the BJP at all. See <https://www.thestatesman.com/exclusive-interviews/muslims-must-join-bjp-get-tickets-shazia-ilm-i-1502751609.html>, accessed June 3, 2019.
- 24 The pro-BJP Hindutva analysts focus entirely on what they call Muslim apathy. They argue that Muslims must give up their isolation and become the part of the mainstream of the nation. For instance, Firoz Bakht Ahmed suggests that "assimilation is the watchword for the Muslim community"; "Time for Assimilation," *The Indian Express*, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/time-for-assimilation-narendra-modi-muslims-madrasas-5777733/>. On the other hand, Muslim apathy is also interpreted a symbol of Muslim victimhood. Ex-MP Mohammad Adeb argues that in the wake of aggressive Hindutva, Muslims must deviate completely from electoral politics to avoid the possibility of communal polarization. <https://scroll.in/article/872710/muslims-should-tell-secular-parties-that-if-they-dont-unite-they-wont-vote-in-2019-says-ex-mp>, accessed June 3, 2019.
- 25 This uniquely designed survey mapped out the changing forms of religiosity in eighteen states of the country. It also looks at the relationship between Ulema and the Muslim communities, especially Ulema's influence on the social and political life of Muslims in different contexts.
- 26 Jamiat Ulema e-Hind's unconditional support for Congress's nation-building project in the 1950s; Majlis-e-Mushawarat's call for strategic voting in the 1967 elections; electoral fatwas of the Imam of Jama Masjid, Abdullah Bukhari, in the 1970s and 1980s; and Ali Mian Nadvi's persuasive role in Shah Bano case are revealing examples that underline the influence of Ulema in politics. The political establishment also recognizes Ulema as representative of Muslim interests. My study of Muslim representation in the Rajya Sabha (1953–2014) reveals that all political parties, especially Congress and Janata Dal (JD), often use the Rajya Sabha to accommodate prominent Ulema in the Parliament. The former President of the Jamiat-Ulema Hind, Maulana Asad Madani, is a good example. He was a Rajya Sabha member from UP on Congress ticket for three terms (1968–1974, 1980–1986, and 1988–1994). JD also brought Maulana Obaidullah Khan Azmi to the Parliament through Rajya Sabha in the 1990s (1990–

1996 and 1996–2002). He was a radical Muslim cleric who became popular because of his fiery speeches during the time of the Shah Bano agitation in the 1980s. After the decline of JD, Azmi joined Congress. As expected, he was rewarded by the Party and given the Rajya Sabha seat from Madhya Pradesh (2002–2008). See Hilal Ahmed, “Muslim Votes Matter: Here’s How They Voted for BJP after 2014,” *The Print*, 2019, <https://theprint.in/opinion/muslim-vote/muslim-votes-matter-heres-how-they-voted-for-bjp-after-2014/219151/>.

- 27 For the history of fatwa politics in postcolonial India, see Hilal Ahmed, *Muslim Political Discourse in Postcolonial India: Monuments, Memory, Contestation* (Routledge: London and New York, 2014), 140–191. For Ahmed Bukhari’s justification for not supporting any party, see <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/india-top-muslim-cleric-to-sit-out-elections/1446155>, accessed June 3, 2019.
- 28 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/lok-sabha-elections-2019/maharashtra/news/mumbai-muslim-religious-leaders-of-all-sects-call-for-votes-for-secular-parties/article-show/68754143.cms>.
- 29 This observation is based on my ethnographic fieldwork during the 2019 election in Rajasthan, Bihar and New Delhi. It would be interesting to do a systematic study of the expansion of the BJP at the state level, especially its minority wings.
- 30 BJP leaders worked hard to create the impression that the BJP is a party of Hindus (read Indians!) and does not need Muslim votes. See <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/7-generations-of-hindus-wont-vote-congress-says-bjp-on-shashi-tharors-hindu-pakistan-remark/articleshow/64969136.cms>, accessed July 3, 2019; <https://www.hindustantimes.com/lok-sabha-elections/lok-sabha-elections-2019-won-t-give-muslims-tickets-as-they-don-t-believe-in-us-karnataka-bjp-leader/story-TaY8O7E6ISPmAUFiN4NwIL.html>, accessed July 3, 2019.
- 31 This observation is based on my ethnographic fieldwork.