

# Understanding Voting Patterns by Class in the 2019 Indian Election

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## ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to understand and explain patterns of voting by class in the 2019 Indian election based on the CSDS/Lokniti post-election survey data. The focus is on patterns of voting preference for the two major parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (Congress or INC). The thrust of the analysis will be to try to explain why there is so little difference in voter preferences across the four-class division in the Lokniti survey dataset. The paper proceeds as follows. Following a brief description of the Lokniti survey's classification of social classes and its comparison with 2014, the paper describes turnout and party preference across social classes, further disaggregated by breakdown by caste/community, age group and rural-urban location. It next asks whether economic questions including the government's many welfare schemes affected voter preferences across classes. Coming to the conclusion that economic conditions as felt by the voters and the government's schemes did not produce major class-wise differences in voter preferences as regards parties, the question arises as to what explains fairly uniform party preferences across classes. The paper then proceeds to look at broader questions of attitudes towards leadership, nationalism and minorities that might affect class voting patterns in a way that produces relatively small differences. Finally, bringing in findings from the literature the paper, somewhat speculatively, explains the above results from the dataset.

**Keywords:** class, caste, community, turnout, leadership, nationalism, minorities, welfare programmes

## Comprender los patrones de votación por clase en las elecciones indias de 2019

### RESUMEN

Este documento intenta comprender y explicar los patrones de votación por clase en las elecciones indias de 2019 basadas en los datos de la encuesta posterior a las elecciones CSDS / Lokniti. La atención se centra en los patrones de preferencia de voto para los dos partidos principales, el Partido Bharatiya Janata (BJP) y el Congreso Nacional Indio (Congreso o INC). El objetivo del análisis será tratar de explicar por qué hay tan poca diferencia en las preferencias de los votantes en la división de cuatro clases en el conjunto de datos de la encuesta de Lokniti. El documento procede de la siguiente manera. Tras una breve descripción de la clasificación de las clases sociales de la encuesta de Lokniti y su comparación con 2014, el documento describe la participación y la preferencia de partido entre las clases sociales, desglosado por desglose por casta / comunidad, grupo de edad y ubicación rural-urbana. Luego pregunta si las cuestiones económicas, incluidos los muchos planes de asistencia social del gobierno, afectaron las preferencias de los votantes entre las clases. Llegando a la conclusión de que las condiciones económicas, tal como las sintieron los votantes y los esquemas del gobierno, no produjeron grandes diferencias entre las clases en cuanto a las preferencias de los votantes con respecto a los partidos, surge la pregunta de qué explica las preferencias de los partidos bastante uniformes entre las clases. Luego, el documento procede a examinar cuestiones más amplias sobre actitudes hacia el liderazgo, el nacionalismo y las minorías que podrían afectar los patrones de votación de clase de una manera que produce diferencias relativamente pequeñas. Finalmente, al traer los hallazgos de la literatura, el documento, de manera algo especulativa, explica los resultados anteriores del conjunto de datos.

**Palabras clave:** clase, casta, comunidad, participación, liderazgo, nacionalismo, minorías, programas de bienestar

## 理解2019年印度选举中各阶层的投票模式

### 摘要

基于发展中社会研究中心（CSDS）Lokniti研究项目的选举后

调研数据，本文试图理解并诠释2019年印度大选中各阶层的投票模式。聚焦于对印度人民党（BJP）和印度国民大会党（INC）这两大党派的投票偏好模式。分析重点试图解释为何Lokniti调研数据组中划分的四个阶层的选民偏好几乎没有差异。本文按以下方式进行。在简要描述Lokniti调研对社会阶层的分类及其与2014年进行比较后，本文描述了各社会阶层的投票率和党派偏好，并进一步通过种姓/社群、年龄群体、农村—城市地点进行划分。本文随后质疑，涵盖诸多政府福利计划的经济疑问是否影响了各阶层的选民偏好。结论则是，选民和政府计划所感受到的经济情况并未在选民对党派的偏好一事上引起重大的阶层差异，那么疑问则是，什么能解释各阶层出现相当统一的党派偏好。本文随后研究了更广泛的疑问，即有关对领导力、民族主义、少数群体的态度的疑问，这些态度可能以制造相对较小差异的方式影响投票模式。最后，通过引入文献得出的研究发现，本文在一定程度上推测地解释了上述数据集得出的结果。

关键词：阶层，种姓制度，社群，投票率，领导力，民族主义，少数群体，福利计划

## Introduction

This paper attempts to understand and explain patterns of voting by class in the 2019 Indian election based on the Centre for Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)/Lokniti post-election survey data. The focus is on patterns of voting preference for the two major parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (Congress). The thrust of the analysis is to try to explain why there is so little difference in voter preference across the four-class division in the Lokniti survey dataset. Unlike in 2014, where the higher turnout of upper and middle classes and their strong pro-BJP preference, particularly in the young-

er age groups and in metropolitan and urban areas, influenced the magnitude of the 12 percent pro-BJP swing compared to 2009, this time, the further 6 percent pro-BJP swing seems to have been fairly uniform across the classes and within classes by age group, rural-urban location, and caste/community disaggregation.

The paper proceeds as follows. Following a brief description of the Lokniti survey's classification of social classes and its comparison with 2014, the paper describes turnout and party preference across social classes, further disaggregated by breakdown by caste/community, age group, and rural-urban location. It next asks whether economic

questions including the government’s many welfare schemes affected voter preferences across classes. Coming to the conclusion that economic conditions as felt by the voters and the government’s schemes did not produce major class differences in voter preferences toward parties, the question arises as to what explains the fairly uniform party preferences across classes. The paper then proceeds to look at broader questions of attitudes to leadership, nationalism, and minorities that might affect voting patterns in a way that produces relatively small differences across classes. Finally, bringing in findings from the comparative literature on why poor voters vote on the same lines as the better-off, and on recent patterns of class self-identification in India, at the end of the paper, I try to, somewhat speculatively, explain the above results from the dataset.

### Defining Class in the Indian Electorate

Table 1: Economic Class of Voters in 2019

Economic Class	Figures (%)
Poor	30
Lower	34
Middle	22
Rich	14
Total	100

Source: National Election Study (NES) (2019)

The Lokniti survey groups 24,235 respondents into four classes— Rich, Middle, Lower, and Poor— based on a composite index of income,

house type, occupation, and occupational level. This results in a breakdown by class of 13.6 percent Rich, 22.1 percent Middle, 34.1 percent Lower, and 30.2 percent Poor (Table 1). Compared to 2014, the Rich slightly increased from 11 percent to 14 percent, the Middle Class shrank considerably from 36 percent to 22 percent, the Lower class is about the same at about one-third, and the Poor increased from 20 percent to 30 percent, much higher than the those below the official poverty line in 2011 (22 percent).<sup>1</sup> Since in a poor country of approximately \$2000 per capita GDP, 14 percent of the population of over 1300 million would give us a huge figure of about 182 million people or more, only a small fraction would be recognizably rich in a serious sense, even by Indian standards, let alone world standards. Another perhaps more meaningful way of looking at the breakdown is to lump the Rich and Middle classes together as Upper-Middle and Middle class. In this case, we get a combined Upper-Middle and Middle class of 36 percent, much lower than the corresponding 47 percent of 2014, despite presumed upward mobility due to five years of 6–7 percent growth and a Poor class of 30 percent compared to 20 percent in 2014. This does not fit well with the latest income-cum-occupational estimate of India’s Middle class (28.1 percent in 2012, according to Aslany, with a Rich class of only 0.8 percent).<sup>2</sup> Hence, the 2014 and 2019 breakdowns, to say nothing of 2009, are not comparable except very roughly in terms of relativities, but not even then. So we will consider 2019 on its own without attempting

class voting comparisons with 2014 except minimally and for some possible explanations of outcomes based in the literature. We turn to the scant theorizing about Indian class voting behavior at the end of the paper in an attempt to explain the findings.

## Outcomes: Turnout and Party Preference

**Table 2:** Economic Class \* Turnout 2019

Economic Class	Turnout (%)
Poor	66
Lower	66
Middle	70
Rich	67

Source: NES (2019)

**Table 3:** Economic Class \* Turnout 2019 \* Locality (Figures in %)

Economic Class	Locality		
	Rural	Town	City
Poor	68	63	55
Lower	67	58	66
Middle	72	59	68
Rich	69	52	70
Total	69	60	65

Source: NES 2019

Class turnout ranged from 66.1 percent for the Poor to 69.6 percent for the Middle class (Table 2). The overall inter-class differential was small, and the overall turnout of 66.8 percent was largely determined by rural locations (actual turnout calculated by CSDS from Election Commission data was 67 percent). Differentiating by location, rural (73 percent of respon-

dents) turnout was 68.6 percent, with the rural Middle class at 71.6 percent; town (16 percent of the respondents) turnout was a low 59.8 percent, with the Rich at a very low 52 percent; and city (11 percent of the respondents) turnout was 65 percent, with the Rich at 69.6 percent and the Poor at a low 54.8 percent (Table 3). There is no discernible reason for lower turnout in towns compared to cities and rural areas. Perhaps campaigning and campaign organization was stronger in both cities and rural areas.

Class party preferences were as follows (Table 4). The BJP got 37.4 percent of the votes of respondents, and Congress got 19.5 percent, exactly matching their national vote shares. The four classes voted for the BJP as follows: Rich at 44 percent, Middle at 38 percent, Lower at 36 percent, and Poor at 36 percent, showing the by now well-known but still only slight bias toward the BJP compared to the national average by the two upper classes and a surprisingly high pro-BJP vote from the Poor, but a spread of only 8 percent between the highest vote for the BJP and the lowest across the four classes. For Congress, the classes voted as follows: Rich at 20 percent, Middle at 21 percent, Lower at 21 percent, and Poor at 17 percent. Overall, the poll shows fairly narrow class differences in party preference around the national average for each of the two major parties, with the Poor voting for the BJP twice as much as for Congress, roughly matching the overall pattern. The spread in BJP preferences between Rich and Poor is only 8 percent.

**Table 4:** Economic Class \* Party Voted for Lok Sabha 2019 (Figures in %)

Economic Class	Party Voted for Lok Sabha 2019						
	Congress	Congress Allies	BJP	BJP Allies	BSP+	Left	Others
Poor	17	6	36	7	7	2	26
Lower	21	8	36	7	7	2	21
Middle	21	8	38	8	6	3	17
Rich	20	7	44	7	4	2	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>21</b>

Source: NES 2019

Differentiating the vote for the BJP and Congress by caste/community, there is a much higher spread in caste/community voting patterns than in class voting patterns, even if we omit Muslims (Table 5).

While overall, 52 percent of Upper Castes voted for BJP and 12 percent for Congress, only 8 percent of Muslims voted for BJP, while 33 percent voted for Congress. The other three major castes/communities—the Other Backward Classes (defined by caste) (OBCs), Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs)—voted as follows: 44 percent of OBCs voted for BJP and 15 percent for Congress; 34 percent of SCs voted for BJP and 20 percent for Congress; and 44 percent of STs voted for BJP and 31 percent for Congress. Overall, Hindu-Muslim polarization (sharp differences in preferences) is observed when it comes to BJP versus Congress. There is also a kind of Hindu consolidation, if one wants to call it that, with Upper Castes, OBCs, SCs, and STs very broadly following the national vote-share pattern with the Upper Castes in particular voting highly pro-BJP, but

even the SCs are broadly in line with the national pattern. However, the spread in BJP preference between Upper Castes and SCs is 18 percent. Notably, the SC vote for the BJP has gone up from 24 percent in 2014 to 34 percent in 2019, a significant jump.

Breaking down class voting by caste/community, the Poor (who are probably highly correlated with the lower castes) voted 36 percent BJP and 17 percent Congress, in line with the national pattern. What emerges is that there is a much higher spread in caste/community voting patterns than in class voting patterns, even if we leave out the Muslims. The Upper Caste Poor voted 49 percent BJP and 9 percent Congress, in line with overall Upper Caste patterns, as did Poor OBCs and Poor STs; even Poor SCs voted 34 percent BJP and 14 percent Congress. Poor Muslims voted 8 percent BJP and 30 percent Congress. The same caste/community pattern of voting, broadly in line with the national pattern, is roughly observable for the Lower, Middle, and Rich classes, with a more pro-BJP pattern among the Upper Castes, pro-Con-

**Table 5:** Caste Community AMONG\* Party voted for Lok Sabha 2019 \* Economic Class Cross-Tabulation (Figures in %)

Economic Class		Party voted for Lok Sabha 2019						
		Congress	Congress allies	BJP	BJP allies	BSP+	Left	Others
Upper Caste	Poor	9	5	49	8	2	2	25
	Lower	12	5	49	9	2	1	21
	Middle	14	7	52	6	2	4	17
	Rich	12	5	58	6	1	1	17
	Total	12	5	52	7	2	2	19
OBC	Poor	12	5	46	10	4	1	22
	Lower	16	8	42	10	5	1	18
	Middle	18	8	42	12	4	2	14
	Rich	17	9	46	9	4	1	14
	Total	15	7	44	10	5	1	18
SC	Poor	14	3	34	8	14	3	24
	Lower	23	6	34	6	10	2	20
	Middle	24	7	30	6	10	2	19
	Rich	26	18	35	4	2	1	16
	Total	20	6	34	7	11	2	21
ST	Poor	27	5	44	2	1	2	19
	Lower	36	6	40	2	2	1	13
	Middle	30	5	48	2	4	2	9
	Rich	35	6	47	1	3	1	7
	Total	31	6	44	2	2	2	14
Muslims	Poor	30	11	8	1	14	4	33
	Lower	35	12	8	1	17	3	24
	Middle	32	17	10	1	20	2	17
	Rich	33	10	9	1	25	4	20
	Total	33	12	8	1	17	3	25
Others	Poor	14	6	28	6	7	4	36
	Lower	20	6	26	7	5	3	33
	Middle	30	6	21	10	4	4	26
	Rich	34	6	21	10	3	4	22
	Total	23	6	25	8	5	4	31

Source: NES 2019

gress among the Muslims, and relatively higher pro-Congress votes among the STs and SCs, although their vote too follows the broad national pattern.

The spread in BJP preference between Upper Caste Rich (58 percent

pro-BJP) and the SC Middle Class (30 percent pro-BJP, the least pro-BJP class among the SCs) is 28 percent and between the Upper Castes and SCs, it is 18 percent; far greater than spreads by class (the Rich-Poor spread is only 8 percent).

Differentiating the class vote for the BJP and Congress by location, we get the following picture (Table 6).

**Table 6:** Locality \* Party Voted for Lok Sabha 2019 \* Economic Class Cross-Tabulation (Figures in %)

Economic Class		Party Voted for Lok Sabha 2019						
		Congress	Congress allies	BJP	BJP allies	BSP+	Left	Others
Rural	Poor	14	5	33	7	8	2	31
	Lower	18	8	34	8	8	2	24
	Middle	18	8	34	8	8	2	24
	Rich	20	6	41	8	6	2	19
	Total	17	7	35	8	8	2	24
Town	Poor	15	6	41	5	7	1	25
	Lower	17	8	36	6	7	1	25
	Middle	17	8	36	6	7	1	25
	Rich	16	3	47	4	4	2	24
	Total	16	6	38	6	7	1	25
City	Poor	25	6	26	4	6	0	33
	Lower	25	6	26	4	6	0	33
	Middle	27	3	30	5	9	0	26
	Rich	14	12	47	5	2	1	19
	Total	23	6	36	5	6	0	24

Source: NES 2019

Overall, there seems to be no rural-urban polarization in party preferences, with 35 percent rural, 38 percent town, and 36 percent of city voters preferring the BJP, in line with BJP national vote share, and 17 percent, 16 percent, and 23 percent preferring Congress, the latter having a slight relative preference advantage in cities, going against the historical impression of the cities being more pro-BJP.

Breaking down the classes by locations, we get the following picture. While nothing goes against the broad national pattern, and in fact, all three location types follow the broad na-

tional pattern, there is some degree of class polarization visible in urban areas between the Rich in the cities and towns (47 percent BJP in both cities and towns, 14 percent and 16 percent Congress, respectively) and the Poor in the cities (25 percent BJP, 25 percent Congress), with a spread in BJP preference between Rich and Poor in urban areas of 22 percent. But this class polarization is within urban areas, not between urban and rural areas.

Differentiating the class vote for the BJP and Congress by age group, we get the following picture (Table 7).

**Table 7: Age Group-1st (Respondent) \* Party Voted for Lok Sabha 2019 \* Economic Class Cross-Tabulation (Figures in %)**

Age		Party Voted for Lok Sabha 2019						
		1: Congress	2: Congress Allies	3: BJP	4: BJP Allies	5: BSP+	6: Left	7: Others
1: > 22 yrs	Poor	19	3	36	8	6	1	27
	Lower	19	5	41	6	5	2	23
	Middle	23	6	39	8	5	2	18
	Rich	22	5	50	4	3	2	14
	Total	20	5	41	7	5	2	21
2: 23–25 yrs.	Poor	15	4	37	7	10	2	25
	Lower	19	5	42	8	8	2	18
	Middle	23	8	35	8	7	3	17
	Rich	20	5	53	6	3	1	12
	Total	19	5	41	7	8	2	19
3: 26–35 yrs	Poor	16	5	40	7	8	1	23
	Lower	20	7	37	6	9	1	20
	Middle	21	9	39	6	7	2	17
	Rich	20	9	43	6	6	1	15
	Total	19	7	39	7	8	1	19
4: 36–45 yrs	Poor	16	5	37	7	7	3	25
	Lower	22	8	34	7	6	1	21
	Middle	21	7	39	8	7	2	15
	Rich	21	6	43	8	4	2	16
	Total	20	7	37	7	7	2	20
5: 46–55 yrs	Poor	18	7	35	6	7	2	26
	Lower	22	8	34	8	7	2	20
	Middle	17	21	16	20	15	25	16
	Rich	18	8	41	6	5	2	20
	Total	20	8	36	7	6	2	21
6: 56+ yrs.	Poor	16	7	32	7	6	3	29
	Lower	21	9	33	7	5	3	23
	Middle	21	7	38	8	5	4	18
	Rich	20	8	43	8	2	2	17
	Total	19	8	35	7	5	3	23

Source: NES 2019

The survey differentiated the electorate into six age groups (up to 22 or first-time eligible to vote, 23–25, 26–35, 36–45, 46–55, 56 and above). Overall, we get the highest pro-BJP preference in the two youngest cohorts (41 percent) and the least in the oldest cohort (35 percent), but the broad national pattern is visible across age groups without any category going against it.

Breaking down classes into age groups, we get the following picture. There are remarkably similar voting patterns across age groups within classes. The notable standouts are that there are higher BJP preferences across age groups among the Rich, particularly in the two youngest cohorts: 50 percent of the youngest and 53 percent of second youngest are pro-BJP.

Summing up the overall patterns of pro-BJP and pro-Congress preference by class, one observes that the degree of class polarization in party preference seems muted. The pro-BJP swing—and the static vote of Congress, nationally—seems to be reflected across classes regardless of age groups, location, or caste/community composition except for a marked higher Upper Caste preference across classes for the BJP, a marked pro-Congress preference among Muslims, and a marked pro-BJP preference among the Rich across age groups. These might be expected from patterns in past surveys, particularly 2014. What is remarkable, however, is that the pro-BJP swing is reflected among the Lower and Poor classes across locations (except cities), age groups, and castes/communities (except Muslims), with a 10 percent in-

crease in pro-BJP vote among SCs and a 12 percent swing among the Poor from 2014 (although the Poor were differently defined then and amounted to only 20 percent).

## **Economic Questions and Voting Patterns by Class**

**T**his raises the question as to how important economic questions were for voting patterns in 2019. On this issue, there is rich data in the survey. The findings are as follows (I sum up the findings of the tables in the text from this point onwards, as there are too many tables to fit in the space constraints).

All economic issues taken together seem to have been the most important for only 43 percent of the respondents, with 57 percent indicating either Other issues were the most important (39 percent) or giving no response (18 percent). Only 11 percent mentioned unemployment, 4 percent inflation, and 3 percent corruption; and economic issues were each under 3 percent. However, 17 percent mentioned growth or development and 26 percent were fully satisfied and 39 percent were somewhat satisfied with the performance of the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre, making 65 percent at least somewhat satisfied, with only 18 percent fully dissatisfied. These responses were remarkably similar across the four classes. These responses perhaps indicate why economic issues were the most important for only 43 percent and the “negative” economic issues (unemployment, inflation, cor-

ruption, etc.) were most important for only 26 percent, while growth and development mattered for 17 percent. One cannot infer from the fact of economic issues being the most important that this indicates dissatisfaction with the government's performance; it is quite possible that the mention of growth and development is an indicator of satisfaction with the government's performance. As many as 47 percent thought that the Modi government should get a second chance compared to 35 percent against, with the Rich endorsing a comeback by 55 percent and even the Poor by 44 percent.

In terms of receipt of government benefits, the findings are as follows. In the past month (this was a post-election survey), one-fifth of households had received some government money remarkably evenly across classes, with only one-sixth of the poor receiving money, and 37 percent crediting the Centre and the state government. The housing scheme (Awas Yojana) benefited 21 percent over the past five years, fairly uniformly across classes, with the Rich at 15 percent, with half crediting the Centre and one-third the state government. Again, 21 percent benefited from the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) employment guarantee scheme (begun by the Congress-led UPA government, but continued by the NDA-II), again uniformly across classes, except for the Rich at a surprising 16 percent, for which half credited the Centre and one-third the state government. And 17 percent had benefited over the past five years from free hospitalization, again

uniformly across classes, for which over half credited the Centre and 30 percent the state government. Further, 25 percent had over the past five years received old age, widows, or disabilities pensions, again uniformly across classes, for which under a third credited the Centre and over half the state government. As many as 44 percent had benefited from the food subsidy (Public Distribution System) over the past five years, with the Rich at 31 percent and the Poor at 50 percent, for which 57 percent across classes credited the state government and 27 percent the Centre; 13 percent had received benefits from income support schemes for farmers, with the Poor less at 10 percent and the Rich at 16 percent, for which 44 percent across classes credited the Centre. Moreover, 13 percent had benefited from loan waivers with the Poor 10 percent and the Rich at 16 percent, with half crediting the state government and one-third the Centre. As many as 34 percent had benefited from the Ujjwala Yojana, with roughly similar proportions across classes, and with 71 percent crediting the Centre. Finally, 22 percent across classes benefited from the Jan Dhan Yojana of bank accounts for the unbanked, with 71 percent crediting the Centre.

What is noteworthy is that *one-fifth* of households had received some money over the past month, and that the *nine welfare programs above had benefited 13–34 percent of the respondents*, with a large proportion in each case crediting the Central government, and hence the BJP or Modi personally; of those who credited the state

governments, a large number would have inevitably been BJP or BJP-allied governments, particularly in northern and western India. That is, the Modi government's welfare outreach was considerable and gained it credit from significant slices of the electorate. What is also remarkable is that in each of the nine welfare programs, the proportion of beneficiaries are similar in each of the four classes with small differences; that is, they seem to be universal, not income-targeted programs, although some like MNREGA are aimed at the poor.

### **Leadership, Nationalism, Minorities and the Ecology of Attitudes That Might Affect Party Preference Across Class Cleavages**

Finally, given that non-economic issues were the most important issues for 39 percent of the respondents, how did these issues impact the public and who would have gained electorally? What were general orientations on questions such as leadership, nationalism, and minorities that have implications for party preferences? The key issue—given the positions taken and propagated explicitly or implicitly by the BJP at various levels—is whether there was a Hindu consolidation across caste and class cleavages based on attitudes to Muslims or minorities in general. A number of questions throw light on these. Our finding is that accommodative attitudes toward minorities enjoy a large majority, although this needs

careful interpretation. We examine what the data says on these matters.

Modi's leadership and the perceived lack of a credible alternative leadership appear to have played a decisive role. As many as 47 percent (Rich at 53 percent, Poor at 44 percent, with others in between) preferred Modi as the next Prime Minister (the post-election survey was done before the results were announced), with only 23 percent preferring Rahul Gandhi. And as many as one-third of the voters who voted for the BJP would have voted for some other party were Modi not the prime ministerial candidate (in 2014, a quarter of NDA voters would have voted for some other party were Modi not the PM candidate). It would appear that Modi's leadership was crucial in what appeared to have become a semi-presidential election, even more crucial than in 2014.

This interpretation is buttressed by responses to another question in which 39 percent fully agreed with the proposition that the country "should be governed by a strong leader who does not have to bother about winning elections," with Rich at 49 percent, Poor 32 percent, and only 7 percent fully disagreeing with this position.

On nationalism, let us look at the much-talked about Balakot airstrike on Pakistan in response to the terrorist attack in Pulwama, and its aftermath, often mentioned as a nationalist rallying point around the ruling party and Modi as a leader. As many as 76 percent had heard of it, including 87 percent of the Rich and 67 percent of the Poor, a 20

percent spread; 32 percent credited the air force alone for the strike (35 percent of the Rich, 27 percent of the Poor, other classes in between) and 16 percent credited the Modi government and 22 percent both, showing a large degree of support (70 percent) across classes for the action. However, it would be too much to infer that that one action in late February swung the election in favor of a decisive NDA victory.

Relatedly, on the question of “how nationalist” the Hindu and Muslim communities are, a tricky question since “nationalist” can be variously interpreted (sometimes quite erroneously as pro-government), 57 percent (Rich 65 percent, Poor 50 percent) found Hindus to be highly nationalist, only 27 percent thought Muslims to be so, fairly evenly across classes, and 11 percent thought them to be “not nationalist at all.”

On the polarizing issue of the Babri Mosque, a narrow majority of 40 percent to 32 percent (with a large proportion of Can't Say or No Response) thought that the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 was not justified, with narrow spreads across classes in each of these responses, but with majority disapproval of the demolition in each class. However, the fact that almost a third justified the demolition indicates the spread of the de facto BJP position. Among those who had heard of the demolition, 37 percent said that a temple should be built on the site of the demolished mosque, while those who said that a mosque should be built or that both a temple and a mosque should be built add up to 35 percent.

Class differences within these opinions are very narrow (spreads of less than 5 percent). A considerable degree of Hindu consolidation across classes appears to have taken place on this particular issue.

On the question of whether in a democracy the “will of the majority community should prevail,” 23 percent fully agreed (19 percent Poor, 27 percent Rich, others in between) and 27 percent somewhat agreed, while 30 percent fully or somewhat disagreed (inter-class spreads are very narrow in each category of response). This is a tricky question to interpret, but only under a quarter fully agreed with the completely majoritarian position. It is also noteworthy that among those who fully disagreed (16 percent), the Rich were 20 percent and the Poor 13 percent; perhaps indicating more liberal attitudes correlate with education and information.

On whether “the Muslim community has been victimized under Narendra Modi’s government,” opinion was divided, with 14 percent (Rich 17 percent) fully agreeing but 24 percent (Rich 24 percent) fully disagreeing.

The above questions seem to indicate both a premium on perceived effective leadership and some degree of majoritarian consolidation in explicit (Babri Mosque) or vague opposition to minorities.

However, and very importantly, on some other questions explicitly about attitudes to minorities, the majority of respondents seem to have attitudes in line with pluralism and accommodation of minorities.

Up to 76 percent, with an inter-class spread of only 4 percent, felt that India belongs to citizens of all religions equally, while only 15 percent (5 percent spread between classes) felt that India belongs to only Hindus.

On the question of whether the “government should treat minorities in the same way as it treats the majority,” 39 percent fully agreed (with an 8 percent inter-class spread between Rich 42 percent and Poor 34 percent) and 24 percent somewhat agreed with this position, with only 6 percent fully disagreeing. This would seem to indicate egalitarian attitudes toward minorities, but this can be tricky to interpret. If respondents start with a conscious or unconscious prejudice that minorities are being pandered to, then seemingly egalitarian attitudes could conceal anti-minority attitudes (in that respondents who are for egalitarian treatment of minorities could actually be expecting the government to correct, from their point of view, a bias toward minorities).

However, on the question, “giving equal treatment to minorities is not enough, the government should give special treatment to minorities,” 27 percent fully and 25 percent somewhat agreed and only 12 percent fully disagreed, with small inter-class spreads in each category of response.

On the question, “Even if it is not liked by the majority, the government must protect the interests of the minorities,” 37 percent (40–41 percent of the Rich and Middle class) fully agreed, 28 percent somewhat agreed, and only 6 percent fully disagreed, indicating a

largely accommodative attitude to minorities, more so among the Rich and Middle class than the Lower and Poor.

On whether “minorities must adopt the customs of the majority community,” only 13 percent, with little inter-class difference, fully agreed, while 27 percent (Rich 32 percent, Poor 24 percent) fully disagreed.

An important question is whether there are significant differences in responses to these questions across regions given the actual result in which the BJP swept most of the North (Hindi-speaking states plus Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir) and West, doing less well in the South and East.

The findings from regional disaggregation of the response are that accommodative and pluralist attitudes to minorities largely prevail in all regions, with the South being more accommodative/less majoritarian on most questions, but counter-intuitively less so on some. Only 15 percent in the South justified the demolition of the Babri Mosque, while 39 percent (West, comprising Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Goa), 37 percent (East, comprising West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Northeast), and 35 percent (North, comprising the Hindi-belt except Bihar and Jharkhand, plus Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir) did so. Only 20 percent in the South thought that only a temple should be built on the site, whereas 41–43 percent in the other three regions thought so. The South (21 percent) fully agreed with the statement that Muslims had been victimized by the Modi government, while 10–15 percent in other

regions did so, and more of the latter three (25–27 percent compared to 16 percent for the South) fully disagreed.

However, counter-intuitively, 37 percent of the South fully agreed that the “will of the majority community” should prevail in a democracy, compared to 16 percent (North), 21 percent (East), and 26 percent (West). In the South, 49 percent fully agreed that the “country should be governed by a strong leader who does not have to bother about winning elections,” whereas only 33–39 percent fully agreed with this proposition in the other three regions, and 18 percent of the South fully agreed with the statement that minorities should adopt the customs of the majority community, while only 9–12 percent of the other regions did so.

On whether the government should treat minorities in the same way it treats the majority, 48 percent (South) fully agreed, whereas 35–38 percent of the other regions did so, with another 20–30 percent in all regions somewhat agreeing and less than 7 percent in all regions fully disagreeing. Only 14 percent or less, in all regions, fully disagreed with the government giving special treatment for minorities. The South is broadly in line with other regions in considering Muslims only about half as “highly nationalist” as Hindus. The South also fully agreed (46 percent) that the government must protect the interests of minorities, even if the majority does not agree (other regions 32–37 percent), with only 7 percent or less in all regions fully disagreeing with the statement.

How do we interpret the above responses to questions on minorities? Reading the responses to these questions together, it seems that accommodative attitudes to minorities enjoy a large majority in 2019 with a majority—including in the North and West—fully agreeing or somewhat agreeing, and only a relatively small minority fully disagreeing, with (a) equal treatment of minorities, (b) special rights for minorities, (c) the government needing to protect minority interests even if the majority is against it, and (d) minorities not needing to adopt the customs of the majority community.

However, opinion is divided on whether Muslims are “highly nationalist,” being rated as much less than Hindus; on whether Muslims have been victimized under the Modi government; and on the Babri Mosque demolition and what should be built there. While majority opinion can be interpreted as still largely accommodative in its attitudes to minorities, this is not as large as it was in 2014, thus indicating a spread of anti-minority sentiment over the past five years. It should be noted that except where I noted above, inter-class differences in each category of response to each of these questions are small, with spreads of 5–8 percent between the widest-apart opinions. This indicates a remarkable lack of class polarization in each of the “attitudinal ecology” questions regarding minorities, which have their implications for party preference, specifically for BJP preference. Also, one needs to add a caveat that at a popular level, attitudes do not reflect thought-out political or

ideological positions, only gut feelings in response to a questionnaire that has to be answered without much thought, and people are entirely capable of entertaining contradictory or mixed positions on sets of issues.

Does majoritarian Hindu nationalism as promoted by the BJP lead to a cross-class Hindu consolidation of opinion on a range of issues, including economic questions, rendering class cleavages unimportant? In addition to this, what might explain the smallness of cross-class differences of opinion? Are there other reasons?

### **Some Theoretical Issues and Possible Explanations for Low Class Polarization**

**T**his raises various theoretical questions. Why do the Lower and Poor classes vote on broadly the same lines as the Rich and Middle classes? Is it because the SCs, STs, and even OBCs, who are probably correlated (with the first two categories probably highly) with the Lower and Poor classes, voted along these lines due to Hindu consolidation in opposition to minorities? We saw above that pluralist/accommodative attitudes to minorities are still dominant despite the probable growth of anti-minority, primarily anti-Muslim, attitudes to an extent greater than in 2014. And to some questions, the Rich and Middle classes are slightly more minority-sympathetic than the Lower and Poor. So we need to look at the larger comparative literature on class voting to search for explana-

tions as to why the working class and poor vote, at certain times, for parties traditionally based on better-off classes and whose core platform reflects the latter's interests. Right-wing populism, with its three components—anti-elite attitudes, nativism/ethno-nationalism, and authoritarianism<sup>3</sup>—comes to mind in these times, but space constraints do not allow further exploration.

There are two theoretical speculations that we can make, and right now the data only allow us to speculate; however, speculation could possibly lead to more definitive research. One possibly profitable line of inquiry to follow is the “poor voter paradox”—why do poor voters in many countries routinely vote for parties that represent the interests of the better off? As Sridharan sums it up, citing Thachil: “there are three explanations in the literature—programmatic redistributive shifts (like anti-poverty programs) undertaken by elite parties, patronage distribution, and ‘distracting’ appeals of identity politics.”<sup>4</sup> All three factors appear to be in place in backdrop of the 2019 BJP campaign. If we look at the responses to the questions on the economy and welfare programs, we see that one-fifth of respondents received some public funds just before the election and significant slices of the respondents (13–34 percent) received some benefits from various welfare programs over the first Modi term. These could dilute class polarization and reinforce pro-Modi attitudes especially given the perception of strong and decisive leadership and the lack of a unified opposition coalition, and a certain degree of growth of anti-minority sen-

timent across classes that the questions on minorities pick up (despite majority opinion being pluralist overall).

Second, one needs to also look at patterns of class self-identification in India and see whether they follow patterns that have long been picked up in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in the social stratification literature. There is very little data on this and none from 2019, but Kapur and Vaishnav showed that as high as 49 percent of respondents in their large 2014 survey self-identified as middle class, whereas all socioeconomic estimates of the middle class put the figure at much less (see Aslany for estimates in the literature; her own estimate is 28 percent<sup>5</sup>).<sup>6</sup> The 49 percent figure for self-identification as middle class is much closer to the majority self-identification as middle

class in OECD countries than to Indian economic realities and relativities. Are we then seeing, along with and perhaps as a by-product of three decades of sustained high growth post-1991, an “aspirational” middle class that while being below the economic and social middle class cut-offs, still identifies “upwardly” or “aspirationally” with the upper and middle classes, including in political and party preferences? My speculation, in the absence of hard data, is that the relative absence of significant class differences in party preference in 2019 in responses to most questions is the result of a complex interaction between growing Hindu identity politics, perceived strong and effective leadership, “upward” or “aspirational” class identification, and effectively implemented welfare programs.

## Notes

- 1 Asian Development Bank, “Poverty Data: India,” <https://www.adb.org/countries/india/poverty>.
- 2 M. Aslany, “The Indian Middle Class, its Size, and Urban-Rural Variations,” *Contemporary South Asia* 27 (2019): 196–213.
- 3 C. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 4 E. Sridharan, “Class Voting in the 2014 Lok Sabha Elections: The Growing Size and Importance of the Middle Classes,” *Economic and Political Weekly* XLIX (2014): 72–76; T. Thachil, “Elite Parties and Poor Voters: Theory and Evidence from India,” *American Political Science Review* 108 (2014).
- 5 Aslany, “The Indian Middle Class.”
- 6 D. Kapur and M. Vaishnav, “Being Middle Class in India,” *The Hindu*, January 10, 2015.