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Workplace segregation and electoral success of right wing identity politics in India

Anirban Mukherjee
Department of Economics, University of Calcutta

Soham Kumar Paul
Adamas University

Abstract

In this paper we examine the role of social segregation on the electoral success of the right wing, Hindu nationalist platform in Indian politics. Existing studies have looked at the effect of social segregation on Hindu-Muslim riots and their findings indicate both possibilities; while some studies found segregated societies are more riot prone, some other studies found the opposite. We, using a state level panel data, examine the effect of Hindu-Muslim segregation at the workplace on the vote share of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) -- the most important right- wing political party in India representing the Hindu-nationalist political platform. We find that workplace segregation in general is positively associated with BJP's vote share. But as the proportion of Muslim population increases in a state, the relationship gets reversed.

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Contact: Anirban Mukherjee - ameco@caluniv.ac.in, Soham Kumar Paul - sohamkpaul@gmail.com.
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1 Introduction

Social segregation between the majority and the minority ethnic groups may affect anti-minority politics in different ways. On one hand, low social segregation may imply a high level of inter-community social contact which makes anti-minority political agendas less popular – a hypothesis which was formalized by Allport (1954) as *"contact hypothesis"*. But on the other hand, in a more mixed society, members of the majority community may see the presence of minority community members as a threat to the established privileges they enjoy which in turn may lead to anti-minority prejudice and increase the popularity of anti-minority politics (Blumer, 1958). This is known as the *"competitive threat hypothesis"* which is used as a framework to study race relation in the United States (Blalock, 1957; Olzak, 1990; Bobo, 1999; Tajfel, 1982; Muller, 2012) and rise in right-wing populism in presence of immigration (Quillian, 1995; Della Posta, 2013). In this paper, we examine the relative strength of these two hypotheses in the context of contemporary Indian politics.

In our paper, we examine the impact of an increase in social contact (measured by workplace segregation index) between Hindus and Muslims on the electoral success of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – the right wing, Hindu nationalist party[1]. BJP was officially formed in 1980, but its root can be traced in Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) established in 1951. BJP did not have much electoral success initially winning only two seats in the 1984 parliamentary election. BJP's emergence as a major political power in India is believed to be triggered by the demolition of Babri Mosque in 1992. This eventually culminated to the BJP led coalition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) forming the national government for the first time in 1998 and completing the full term. In 2014 again, BJP led NDA came to power and continues to be in power till date by winning the next election in 2019.

The scope of our study however, is greater than a specific country experience. The electoral success of BJP in India is often seen as part of a global rise of right wing politics. In this context, the names of Trump (U.S), Modi (India), Bolsanaro (Brazil), Duterte (Philippines) and Orban (Hungary) are mentioned together as prominent examples of right-wing populism with authoritarian style of governance (Kaul, 2017, 2021; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Hibbing, 2022; Daly, 2020). The factors cited

[1]Hindus are the religious majority in India constituting around 80% of total population. Muslims on the other hand are around 14% of the population. These figures are from Indian Census, 2011.

as responsible for such a rise often include 2008-09 economic crisis, refugee crisis, impact of social media and trade exposure (Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022; Autor et al., 2020). Our paper contributes to this literature by examining the importance of another factor in this process viz. inter-ethnic social segregation.

Our paper is also closely related to the immigration literature which examines how exposure to immigrants create cultural backlash, eventually leading to political support for right wing parties (Dinas et al., 2019; Usta, 2022) and hate crimes (Marbach and Ropers, 2018). In a recent paper, Hangartner et al. (2019) exploited a natural experiment in the Aegean Sea to find that direct exposure to refugee arrivals induces increases in native's hostility towards refugees, immigrant and Muslim minority and support for restrictive immigration policies. The relationship between refugee exposure and the support for right wing parties is however not always positive. For example, Vertier et al. (2018) found that in France a small inflow of migrants leads to reduction in the vote share Front National – the main far-right party in France. Hence, in the empirical studies concerning immigration issues, we find support for both the *"contact hypothesis"* and the *"competitive threat hypothesis"*. Similar to the literature on the immigration and refugee crisis, we find support for both these hypotheses in the context of Hindu-Muslim riots in India as well; while Varshney (2002) shows that segregated cities are more prone to Hindu-Muslim riot, Field et al. (2008) finds that more fractionalized areas in Ahmedabad experienced a greater degree of riot.

This paper is directly related to a number of qualitative studies came up recently that attempt to explain the political success of BJP in recent times. These papers attribute BJP's success to their their success in mobilizing a wide array of citizen's support from varied social and economic backgrounds (Chhibber and Verma, 2014, 2019; Jaffrelot, 2015; Sircar, 2022). Unlike these studies which undermine the social demand for right wing identity politics, our paper examines the change in the labor market structure led to an increased demand for the right wing political platform of BJP. We argue that the economic liberalization in the 1990s altered the identity network in the labor market which in turn made the workplaces less communally segregated. This in turn might have triggered the *"competitive threat"* thereby increasing the social demand for BJP's political platform. However, theoretically the opposite might have happened as well – decreased segregation night have led to higher *"contact"* and less popularity for BJP's politics. We find support for both the hypotheses. We find that BJP vote share is higher in states with greater workplace segregation (i.e. less social contact) which provides support for the

contact hypothesis. But in states with higher Muslim population proportion, low workplace segregation is associated with high BJP vote share thereby providing support for the *competitive threat* hypothesis. This is consistent with Vertier et al. (2018) who find that contact hypothesis works only with a small flow of migrants but provide some evidence that the relationship gets altered for large flow of migrants.

However, caution should be warranted while interpreting our results as causal relationships. There are several omitted variables which may affect both BJP vote share and workplace segregation. We have taken care of the time invariant omitted factors by taking state level fixed effect. We have also taken few controls to address such issues. But we cannot rule out all possible endogeneity issues.

The paper is organized as follows: in section 2 we describe the data, in section 3 we detail the empirical model, in section 4 we discuss the results and in section 5 we conclude.

2 Data

Our analysis uses data sets that are collected from various sources. We use vote share of BJP as the dependent variable and relative Muslim wage, workplace segregation index, Muslim population share parameters and per capita Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) as the independent variables. For each of these variables, the data source and related issues are discussed here.

Election variables The dependent variable for our regression analysis is vote share of BJP in general elections. The information on vote share is collected from the Lok Dhaba database of Ashoka University and Trivedi Centre of Political Data. Using the electoral data from Lok Dhaba, we create a panel at state level. We consider all Indian states and six general elections: 1984, 1989, 1996, 2004, 2009 and 2014. Between these time periods, four new states Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand (then Uttaranchal) and Telangana are carved out respectively from Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. These newer states are clubbed with their older counterparts for maintaining a balanced panel dataset. We consider total no. of votes received by BJP, divided by the total no. of valid votes in all parliament constituencies across a state.

Wage variables Using six National Sample Survey (NSS) thick rounds of employment unemployment survey, we calculate the Relative Muslim-to-Hindu average weekly wage at state level. From the NSS data, we identify the non-zero wage earners. For the wage variable we consider the weekly wage/salary earning. We calculate average of weekly wage for Hindu as well as Muslim workers employed across different industries for each state and then consider the ratio of average Muslim-to-Hindu wage. For the variable relative Muslim wage, a value higher than or equal to 1 indicates that on average Muslim wage-earners are earning relatively more than Hindus in the state for that time period, and a value lower than 1 means they are earning relatively less.

Duncan Index We calculate state level workplace segregation between Hindu and Muslim workers. For the measure of workplace segregation, we consider Duncan Index of Dissimilarity (DI). For constructing the Duncan index, we follow Paul (2022), where the workers are categorized into industries as per NIC-1998 classifications and standardized across NSS rounds using NIC concordance tables. Here NIC sections are considered as groups and segregation is calculated using the following formula:

$$\text{Duncan Index of Dissimilarity (DI)} = \frac{1}{2}\sum_{j=1}^{T}\left|\frac{n_j^H}{N^H} - \frac{n_j^M}{N^M}\right|$$

where n_j^i is the number of workers from community i in industry j, and N^i is the total number of workers from community i at some state x and year t, where $i = \{H, M\}$.

Demographic variables Muslim population parameters are calculated from National Sample Survey rounds. We take state level Muslim population percentage for this purpose as can be obtained from the NSS data. A more reliable figure for population data comes from the census. But as the census are conducted every 10 years and do not match with our election years, we use the NSS data for this purpose.

State GDP As a measure of the state level economic activity, we consider the per capita state GDP (GSDP) variable. The data on GSDP is collected from the RBI website. We consider GSDP for all the states in the respective years. For each time period, the GSDP series is deflated in real terms to 1980-81 base year prices using

the ratio of WPI between the current year and base year. We use the following formula:

$$GSDP_{st} = GSDP_t * \frac{WPI_b}{WPI_t}$$

where b is the base year and t is the current year, and st stands for state s at time t.

Timing In our empirical analysis, we have to match data from NSS, general elections and RBI dataset. Table 1 summarizes the timing of these events.
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Table 1: Data Timing Correspondence

Time Period	NSS	RBI Data	Electoral Data
1	1983	1983-84	1984
2	1987-88	1987-88	1989
3	1993-94	1993-94	1996
4	1999-2000	1999-2000	2004
5	2004-05	2004-05	2009
6	2011-12	2011-12	2014

3 Empirical Model

In this paper, we plan to test the effect of social segregation on BJP vote share. A priori the relationship can be positive (*contact hypothesis*) or negative (*competitive threat hypothesis*). In the immigration literature the social segregation is typically measured by residential segregation. However, the residential pattern of Hindu and Muslim in India is already segregated (Adukia et al., 2019) and there may not enough variation to drive the results. We therefore use segregation at the workplace (industry) level. Another candidate is occupational segregation. But we argue that *contact/competitive threat* works better at the workplace level as the chance of contact is much higher at the workplace level than that at the occupation level. For example, a manager of a leather factory is unlikely to meet another manager of software firm, but the leather factory manager meets a laborer in the leather factory on a regular basis.

In our paper, we use a state level panel to run the following regression:

$$v_{ts} = \beta_0 + \alpha_s + \beta_1 W_{ts} + \beta_2 D_{ts} + \beta_3 (D_{ts} * M_{ts}) + \beta_4 M_{ts} + \beta_5 G_{ts} + \epsilon_{ts} \quad (1)$$

where v_{ts}: vote share of BJP in state s and time t
W_{ts}: relative Muslim wage in state s and time t
D_{ts}: Duncan Index of workplace segregation in state s and time t
M_{ts}: share of Muslim population in state s and time t
Gts: per capita GSDP in state s and time t

We use state fixed effect in our model to deal with the issue of unobserved heterogeneity. Hausman tests also support our choice of Fixed Effect model. Since $p\,value = 0.0006$ $[\chi^2(5) = 21.87]$, we choose the fixed effect model. Our main variable of interest is D_{ts}. However, we also include the interaction term between Duncan Index and Muslim population proportion to do a heterogeneity analysis. The coefficient of D_{ts}, β_2 directly test for *contact hypothesis* and *competitive threat hypothesis*. Our results support the *contact hypothesis* if the sign of β_2 is positive. The coefficient of the interaction term, β_3 on the other hand, examines if a particular hypothesis (contact or competitive threat) is triggered by the general Muslim presence in the society. Theoretically, one may expect a scenario where higher contact with Muslim colleagues (i.e. less workplace segregation) is conducive to creating inter-religion social capital which in turn reduces BJP's vote share ($\beta_2 > 0$), but if the general presence of the Muslims is high in the society, such exposure may trigger competitive threat among the majority community ($\beta_3 < 0$). Such a scenario will be consistent with the results of Vertier et al. (2018) who find that the *contact hypothesis* works only with a small flow of migrants.

Besides our main variables of interest – workplace segregation and percentage of Muslim population, we have also taken control of average relative Muslim wage (measured by Muslim wage/Hindu wage) and state per capita GSDP. In India, BJP is well known for their anti Muslim rhetoric and therefore, relative economic position of Muslims (as measured by average relative Muslim wage) may affect electoral finance of anti-BJP parties which in turn may affect BJP's vote share. Per capita GSDP has been controlled for in the regression to account for the possibility that voting pattern may vary between rich and poor states.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

In this section, we present our main results. First, we report some descriptive statistics on some important variables used in our regression model. The variables are collected from different sources and time. In table 2 we show the state level average and median vote share of BJP for each period. We find that, except in period 5 (2009 general election), there is a steady rise in BJP vote share throughout the time.

Table 2: BJP vote share

	BJP Vote Share	
Time Period	Average	Median
1984	8.07	5.14
1989	12.47	7.15
1996	22.16	19.39
2004	27.22	22.99
2009	23.63	18.17
2014	31.32	34.74

Next we look at the average value, median and standard deviation for the independent variables relative Muslim wage, Duncan Index of segregation, Muslim population share and per capita GSDP. These results are reported in table 3. During the time of our analysis (1983-2012), we observe a decrease in Relative Muslim Wage as well as Workplace segregation over time. Muslim population share increased marginally, while GSDP per capita increased manifold.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics

	Relative Muslim Wage			Segregation Index		
Time Period	Average	Median	SD	Average	Median	SD
1	0.95	0.90	0.34	0.39	0.36	0.17
2	3.61	0.67	15.96	0.40	0.34	0.15
3	0.92	0.80	0.42	0.41	0.35	0.20
4	0.87	0.76	0.42	0.38	0.40	0.13
5	0.82	0.80	0.25	0.36	0.32	0.17
6	0.80	0.75	0.23	0.31	0.33	0.14
	Muslim Population			GSDP		
Time Period	Average	Median	SD	Average	Median	SD
1	12.77	8.08	18.68	1944.22	1695.00	728.53
2	12.67	6.35	19.54	2103.96	1850.00	877.18
3	10.48	6.63	16.94	2628.19	2273.50	1235.53
4	12.76	7.63	18.98	19319.65	15888.00	9334.47
5	13.45	8.52	19.36	31157.76	26721.00	16436.69
6	13.93	8.81	20.16	85656.16	78204.52	51184.85

4.2 Full Sample Regression

In this section, we test between two competing hypotheses – *contact hypothesis* and *competitive threat hypothesis* – using the regression framework. The first one suggests that inter-communal hatred (and consequently BJP vote share) will be higher in a more segregated society which lacks in inter-community civic engagement and social capital. The latter hypothesis suggests that less segregated (i.e. more mixed) societies will be driven by competitive threat from the minority community and generate anti-Muslim "backlash" which in turn, will be translated to higher vote share for BJP.

In table 4, we report the regression on the full sample covering all time periods. In first column we start by regressing relative Muslim wage (RMW) on BJP vote share. In the next column, we add the Duncan Index (DI) – the measure of workplace segregation. In the columns that follow we add controls for Muslim population proportion, per capita GSDP and the square of Muslim population proportion. In all these specifications, RMW is positive but not significant. In line with the "*contact hypothesis*", the coefficient for Duncan index is positive but it is not significant. Among other controls only per capita GSDP is positively associated with high BJP vote share.

Table 4: Full sample regression table

Dep Variable: BJP Vote share	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Relative Muslim Wage	-0.418	-0.399	-0.396	0.123
	(3.712)	(3.711)	(3.727)	(3.349)
Duncan Index (DI)		-18.02	-18.48	2.416
		(11.98)	(13.79)	(13.45)
DI*Muslim proportion		0.315	0.359	-0.137
		(0.601)	(0.884)	(1.128)
Muslim proportion			-0.0201	-0.0282
			(0.295)	(0.307)
Per capita GSDP (in '000 rupees)				1.636***
				(0.217)
Constant	22.11***	27.07***	27.31***	12.35**
	(3.264)	(5.174)	(6.287)	(5.995)
Observations	157	157	157	144
R-squared	0.000	0.018	0.018	0.363
Fixed Effect	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes: BJP vote share at the state level is regressed on relative Muslim wage, Duncan index, Muslim population proportion at the state level and per capita GSDP for all years (1984, 1989, 1996, 2004, 2009, 2014). All variables are measured at the state level. Relative Muslim wage is calculated by taking the ratio of average Muslim wage and average Hindu wage at the state level. Standard errors are reported in parenthesis below the estimated coefficients. ***, **, * Significant at 0.01, 0.05, 0.10 level, respectively.

4.3 Post-2000 Regression

In this section, we only consider time periods after 2000. The choice of this specific sub-period is not completely arbitrary. It is supported by Paul (2022) who shows that the average Duncan index for the Indian states is continuously declining since 2000. Therefore, this sub-period shows greater degree of variation in Duncan index thereby creating a possibility of getting a stronger impact of DI on BJP vote share. The results are reported in 5.

Table 5: Post 2000 regression table

Dep Variable: BJP vote share	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Relative Muslim Wage	9.733*	9.742*	9.913*	6.486
	(5.002)	(5.030)	(5.093)	(4.722)
Duncan Index (DI)		10.76	12.10	26.14*
		(12.92)	(13.54)	(14.81)
DI*Muslim proportion		-0.932	-1.028	-3.498***
		(0.639)	(0.697)	(1.201)
Muslim proportion			0.203	0.491
			(0.561)	(0.500)
Per capita GSDP (in '000 rupees)				0.738***
				(0.234)
Constant	19.35***	19.68***	16.73*	12.63
	(4.217)	(5.442)	(9.824)	(8.053)
Observations	86	86	86	78
R-squared	0.064	0.101	0.104	0.314
Fixed Effect	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes: BJP vote share at the state level is regressed on relative Muslim wage, Duncan index, Muslim population proportion at the state level and per capita GSDP for post-2000 years (2004, 2009, 2014). All variables are measured at the state level. Relative Muslim wage is calculated by taking the ratio of average Muslim wage and average Hindu wage at the state level. Standard errors are reported in parenthesis below the estimated coefficients. ***, **, * Significant at 0.01, 0.05, 0.10 level, respectively.

In all the specifications, the sign for the Duncan index (DI) is positive for all

specifications and are significant at the 10% level in column 4 (full specification). This provides support for the "*contact hypothesis*". In column (2)-(4) we have included the interaction term between DI and Muslim population proportion. The sign of its coefficient is negative and becomes significant as we add more covariates (columns (4)). Together, positive coefficient of DI and negative coefficient of the interaction term depicts an interesting picture. It suggests that higher workplace segregation is associated with greater BJP vote share thereby providing support for the "*contact hypothesis*". But the relation between workplace segregation and BJP vote share gets reversed in states with greater share of Muslim population thereby providing support to the *"competitive threat hypothesis"* for these states. The other variables such as relative Muslim wage and the square of Muslim population proportion are not significant at all. Per capita GSDP however, is positively associated with BJP vote share suggesting that BJP is more popular in richer states.

5 Conclusion

In the recent past, many countries including India have seen a rise of right-wing populist political parties who are known for their anti-minority, anti-immigrant rhetoric and authoritarian style of governance. In response to this global phenomenon many studies came up in the recent past that seek to explain this trend in terms of different economic and political events. A significant section of this literature finds an association between right-wing populism and influx of immigrants. We contribute to this literature by studying the Indian case which has also seen the rise of right-wing populism. We, in this paper, examine how social segregation (as captured by workplace segregation) affects BJP vote share. Specifically, we test two competing hypotheses – the *contact hypothesis* and the *competitive threat hypothesis*. According to the former, BJP vote share should increase with rising workplace segregation while the latter suggests a negative relationship. We find partial support for both the hypotheses for the time periods after 2000. We find that the workplace segregation is positively associated with BJP vote share while the interaction term between workplace segregation and Muslim population proportion is negatively associated with it.

We also find that the *competitive threat hypothesis*, captured by the negative coefficient of the interaction term, has a much stronger impact. Such threat works through the prejudice which sees the minority community gaining at the cost of

the majority. A key policy to deal with such prejudice is to build institutions that facilitate inter-community transfer through community neutral public goods. Such institutions played critical roles in creating inter-community harmony in medieval ports in India and its effect continued in independent India as well (Jha, 2013). However, such policies are unlikely to be implemented if political parties benefit from prejudice and communal polarization. One caveat for our paper is the endogeneity concern. We could only partially deal with it using a fixed effect model but cannot rule out the possibility of omitted variable bias completely. In our future work, we will try to get some historical instrumental variable for workplace segregation and run some more robustness checks using district level data sets.

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