Rethinking India and the Study of Electoral Politics in the Developing World*

Abstract: In the study of electoral politics and political behavior, India is often considered to be an exemplar of the centrality of contingency in distributive politics, the role of ethnicity in shaping political behavior, and the organizational weakness of political parties. Whereas these axioms do have some basis, the massive changes in political practices, the vast variation in political patterns, and the burgeoning literature on subnational dynamics in India mean that such generalizations are no longer tenable. The purpose of this article is to consider new and emerging research on India that compels us to rethink the contention that India neatly fits the prevailing wisdom in the comparative politics literature. Our objective is to elucidate how these more nuanced insights about Indian politics can improve our understanding of electoral behavior both across and within other countries, allowing us to question core assumptions in theories of comparative politics.

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Introduction

The study of electoral politics and political behavior across the developing world has grown into a substantial body of scholarship over the past two decades. A hallmark of this literature has been to revise models first developed to explain the politics of advanced industrial countries. While it would be unwise to speak of a unified "consensus" that has materialized out of this rich and diverse scholarship, a set of conventional wisdoms has emerged that structure our understanding of electoral dynamics in the developing world. Three pieces of received wisdom from the literature stand out.

First, electoral politics in the developing world is seen to be dominated by various forms of "distributive politics" (Stokes et. al 2013), which stand in marked contrast with programmatic politics premised on tax-and-transfer policies. Prevailing notions of distributive politics are centrally premised on the idea of *quid pro quo* contingent exchange, whereby voters select leaders based on targeted benefits and leaders, in turn, deliver these benefits to voters. The commitment problems governing such discretionary exchanges require parties to deploy local party brokers who monitor electoral compliance. The distribution of promised goods is typically understood to take place during elections, leading to an empirical focus on campaign season "vote-buying" as the dominant form of distributive politics (Stokes 2005; Nichter 2008).

A second, related element of the received wisdom is that ethnicity is one of the most—if not *the* most—crucial determinants of political behavior for large sections of the developing world, particularly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Many scholars acknowledge that voters might have expressive preferences for co-ethnic candidates and parties (Horowitz 1985; Carlson 2015). Perhaps even more influentially, however, is the belief that ethnicity can provide a useful heuristic

for parties and voters to credibly support one another, thereby solving the commitment problems at the heart of discretionary distributive politics (Fearon 1999; Chandra 2004; Posner 2005).

Third, political parties in much of the developing world are characterized as relatively weak in organizational terms. They lack both strong norms that guide how power and responsibility flow internally as well as the organizational wherewithal to exert a meaningful presence in the daily lives of citizens between elections. Consequently, citizens are thought to attach to candidates rather than parties, which only serves to reinforce the weak incentives for partisan programmatic politics to develop. Parties gather strength in order to contest and win elections but once those elections conclude—the argument goes—these parties tend to fade into the distance.

As the world's most populous—and the developing world's most enduring—democracy, India has provided both inspiration for, and validation of, these three stylized facts about politics in the developing world. First, India has widely been seen to characterize non-programmatic distributive politics. Indeed, the country has been influentially dubbed as the epitome of a "patronage democracy".[1] Second, India has long been invoked as an exemplar of an ethnicized democracy. Decades of scholarship have argued that ethnic markers, typically associated with caste and religion, structure the workings of everyday politics (Chandra 2004). The colloquial expression of this logic, albeit crudely simplified, is that Indians do not cast their vote as much as

[1] This term is defined by Chandra (2004, 6) as a democracy "in which the state has a relative monopoly on jobs and services, and in which elected officials enjoy significant discretion in the implementation of laws allocating the jobs and services at the disposal of the state." The hallmark of patronage democracies, therefore, is that elected representatives manipulate their discretionary authority to trade public benefits for political gain.

they vote their caste. Finally, Indian political parties are largely described as institutionally weak, organizationally shallow, and overly personalistic (Kohli 1990; Manor 2005; Krishna 2007). As Keefer and Khemani (2004, 937) have written, parties in India are rarely credible to voters on the basis of well-specified policy platforms. To the contrary, "individual politicians often are credible to narrow segments of the electorate with whom they have established a personal reputation grounded in a history of repeated interaction."

The objective of this article is to consider emerging research on India that compels us to rethink the contention that India neatly fits the prevailing wisdom on each of the three issues highlighted above—distributive politics, ethnic voting, and political parties. In so doing, it forces us to scrutinize afresh the very underpinnings of that conventional wisdom for research on developing countries more broadly. Thus, this article is not so much about how comparative politics can inform our understanding of India, but what India can teach us about how to reframe some of our core assumptions as comparativists. We also argue that this emerging work suggests scholars must be more prudent in how they invoke India, especially in the study of distributive, ethnic, and party politics. To be clear, our aim is not to suggest that existing characterizations of India are wholly erroneous but rather to bring nuance to prevailing beliefs. Finally, for each of these three issues, we discuss new research frontiers opened up by relaxing some of the standard assumptions that presently shape our thinking.

Distributive Politics

Over the past two decades, a burgeoning literature on distributive politics has sought to model politician-voter relations and their implications for distribution across a range of government-provided goods and services. Scholars have analyzed politicians' decisions to allocate

local public goods or pork barrel projects across space (Dixit and Londregan 1996; Porto and Sanguinetti 2001; Wilkinson 2006; Arulampalam et al. 2009), their strategies over the distribution of private benefits between elections (Calvo and Murillo 2013), as well as their decisions over the allocation of cash and other gifts during electoral campaigns (Wantchekon 2003; Brusco et al. 2004; Stokes 2005). Although research on clientelism, patronage, and vote buying is exceptionally diverse (see Hicken 2011 and Golden and Min 2013 for reviews), a significant portion of this literature is broadly unified around a set of core assumptions about politician-voter relations. These assumptions are three-fold. First, clientelism—defined here as distribution based on a *quid pro quo* of electoral support—defines how transfers are targeted during elections.[2] Second, partisan brokers have the ability to readily distinguish between supporters, opponents, and swing voters. Third, there is a severe asymmetry in power in patron-client relations, with the advantage decisively resting with the former. In this section, we unpack these assumptions further and reevaluate them in light of recent evidence from India.

Core Assumptions

Notions of contingency and *quid pro quo* politics are at the very heart of how scholars understand clientelism. The implications of models that emphasize such contingency (Stokes 2005; Nichter 2008; Gans-Morse et al. 2014) are worth spelling out. If distributive politics is primarily about a *quid pro quo* transaction, moral and programmatic elements should rarely guide allocation decisions and voters should infrequently choose candidates on the basis of their

[2] While some work utilizes a broader conceptual understanding of clientelism (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Ziegfeld 2016), we refer here to work drawing on this narrower conception.

programmatic or personal characteristics.

Contingent transactions require that a clearly identifiable set of political actors exist to facilitate distribution and observe voters' preferences with reasonably high accuracy. Most analyses emphasize the existence of party networks enlisting brokers (Stokes 2005; Stokes et al. 2013; Camp 2015). In many studies, these party networks are thought of as relatively fixed, primarily comprising long-term partisan actors. As a result, brokers—as in the quintessential Peronist example from Argentina—emerge as individuals committed in the long run to a specific network organized along partisan lines. Relatedly, the literature frequently relies on these brokers' ability to distinguish between individuals who are core supporters and those who are swing voters (Stokes 2005; Nichter 2008; Stokes et al. 2013). This assumption itself implies a partial failure of the secret ballot as well as a certain stability over time in terms of voter preferences.

The study of clientelism usually concerns the distribution of targeted goods during elections—and whether and how such efforts sway voters and boost turnout. Across diverse settings such as Argentina (Auyero 2000; Szwarcberg 2015), Brazil (Gay 1994), Nicaragua (Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. 2012), Kenya (Kramon 2016), and India (Piliavsky 2014), among others, it appears that communities are flooded with goods such as cash, liquor, and food in the immediate run-up to elections. An implicit assumption is that politicians perceive some beneficial effect of these efforts or else they would not invest the time and resources in such costly endeavors.

And finally, models of distributive politics, including those that go beyond narrow clientelist perspectives on distribution, often emphasize the hierarchical power structure in politician-voter interactions—the ability of leaders to successfully wield the upper hand in their dealings with voters. The contingency at the heart of clientelism implies a form of "perverse accountability" that robs individuals of choice over their vote (Stokes 2005). The implications of

this narrative are rather bleak for democratic politics, with voters largely characterized as being trapped in unfavorable equilibria.

Prevailing Wisdom

India has typically been assumed, if often implicitly, to exhibit these same characteristics; In fact, the country is frequently described as an archetypical "patronage democracy" in which the distribution of state services is discretionary, whether driven by electoral, material, or cultural expectations (Bailey 1970; Chandra 2004; Chatterjee 2004; Gupta 2012; Piliavsky 2014), and where citizens often turn to intermediaries to help them navigate otherwise dismissive, capricious state institutions (Reddy and Haragopal 1985; Oldenburg 1987; Mines 1994; Manor 2000; Corbridge 2004; Harriss 2005). Thus, descriptions of non-programmatic politics, rent-seeking politicians, and porous state institutions have long been applied to India (Krueger 1974; Rudolph and Rudolph 1987; Bardhan 1998; Benjamin and Bhuvaneswari 2001; Banda et al. 2014). Herring (1999), for instance, described how governance in India exhibits rooted forms of "embedded particularism" wherein the actions of state officials are twisted to local political interests. Gupta (1995) influentially described the "blurred lines" between state and society in India, highlighting the negotiated exchanges that unfold in everyday local governance.

In such contexts, citizens can appeal to politicians to intervene in bureaucratic procedures and have the rules bent to advance their material interests (Berenschot 2010; Anjaria 2016). Intermediaries proliferate in this environment to mediate access to state services and collect rents and patronage for such activities (Reddy and Haragopal 1985; Manor 2000, Krishna 2011). India is thus depicted as an "intermediated democracy" (Berenschot 2010), in which individuals

seemingly similar to the "brokers" at the center of the comparative literature on distributive politics abound.

New Approaches

Such strong evidence of local intermediation might lead observers to assume that India is a setting where we should observe many of the dynamics previously highlighted as central to conventional models of distributive politics. Yet, recent studies of Indian politics upend several of the key assumptions underlying the conventional wisdom on the subject. The first assumption, which finds weak support in the Indian case, is the idea of *quid pro quo*—particularly the ability of politicians or brokers to monitor voting behavior effectively. Such efforts are challenged in India by a robust secret ballot and meaningful voter autonomy. Indeed, one recent study in rural Rajasthan found that *sarpanch* (elected village officials who often function like local brokers) are not particularly competent in "guessing" the voting behavior of villagers in their localities (Schneider 2019). Another study in an urban metropolitan setting (Mumbai) finds that brokers tasked with allocating money for candidates during elections do not even attempt to monitor votes (Chauchard 2020). The exchange of support for goods between voters, brokers, and patrons in India is instead probabilistic, at best. An evaluation of state legislator behavior by Bussell (2019) also shows that these politicians offer constituency service similar to what is observed in Western democracies, without attention to contingency or partisan leanings.

Second, recent work suggests that the universe of intermediaries engaged in distributive politics is often less partisan, and more expansive, than what previous work suggests, thus limiting the ability of partisan brokers to leverage a monopoly over service provision to make their assistance contingent on partisan support. Whereas party activists are often described as having

strong and stable ties to particular parties in the Latin American context (Magaloni 2008; Stokes et al. 2013), recent work suggests the party-broker relationships in India are quite fluid.[3] These actors are not just geographically proximate to voters but they are also quite embedded and active outside of elections, when their primary purpose is to help citizens access the state (Krishna 2002; Kruks-Wisner 2018). In addition to traditional party workers (Harriss 2005; Jha et al. 2007; Berenschot 2010; Auerbach 2016), middlemen can include entrepreneurial, non-partisan individuals who will work for the highest bidder (Manor 2000; Krishna 2002; Chauchard and Sircar 2018). Krishna (2002, 2007) famously referred to this class of non-partisan local middlemen who assist citizens in accessing the state as *naya neta*, quite literally "new leaders."

The assumption that politicians inundate voters with handouts and goodies because they think it will swing elections also finds limited support in detailed analyses of election strategies. Studies of electoral handouts suggest that their impact is marginal and that politicians are well aware of these limitations (Björkman 2014; Chauchard 2020). For politicians, these efforts may instead be about revealing targeting preferences to voters (Schneider and Sircar 2017), generating reputations for efficacy (Auerbach and Thachil 2018), signaling electoral viability or personal credibility regarding the promise of future transfers (Björkman 2014, Muñoz 2014), or simply seeming "glamorous" (Jensenius 2017).

Finally, research on Indian politics forces us to question the perception of voters as passive recipients of targeted goods (Stokes 2005; Nichter 2008). Political preferences in India have conventionally been understood to flow largely from one's ethnicity, especially in state and

[3] It should be noted that some scholarship on Latin America also suggests that local fixers are not necessarily partisan actors (Holland and Palmer-Rubin 2015).

national elections where voters have limited information about candidates, and thus use ethnicity as a heuristic (Chandra 2004).[4] Recent research on Indian politics, however, finds substantial voter agency, often activated via bottom-up forms of organization and associational activity (Auerbach 2017; Dasgupta 2017). Voters often hedge their bets by diversifying their claim-making strategies (Kruks-Wisner 2018) and can circumvent non-responsive politicians and officials in India's multi-tiered, federal democracy (Bussell 2019). As Bussell's work demonstrates, citizens who are "blocked" from accessing public services because they lack connections to local patronage networks (which can be organized on partisan lines) often petition higher-level politicians who have an incentive to respond to their grievances in order to expand their personal following. Put differently, even when local politicians condition assistance on a partisan basis, voters can benefit from non-partisan *and* non-contingent relief at higher (state or national) levels. Poor voters are also pivotal in the construction of patron-client hierarchies (Auerbach and Thachil 2018), challenging studies that see such networks as structures imposed from above (Calvo and Murillo 2013).

As a result of these findings, recent studies of Indian politics have pivoted away from studying episodic forms of "vote-buying" toward more quotidian—and arguably more substantively important—forms of distributive politics that guide public service delivery (Bussell 2012; Thachil 2014; Auerbach 2016; Bohlken 2017; Bussell 2019; Dasgupta 2017; Schneider forthcoming). The services being analyzed—roads, water taps, sewers, and streetlights—are politicized in their allocation and frequently involve networks of intermediaries. Yet, they are high-spillover, undermining the ability of politicians and brokers to exclude non-supporters. This

[4] We interrogate the conventional wisdom on the role of ethnicity in the following section.

suggests that politicians may be targeting groups or localities rather than individuals. In this respect, recent work more closely approximates the questions examined and findings unearthed during an earlier wave of research in Latin America (Ray 1969; Gay 1994). Moreover, these services are often provided not through election-time spending, but rather through everyday acts of allocation that may involve less clientelistic calculations insofar as these allocations are harder to selectively withdraw than campaign handouts (Schneider and Sircar 2017; Chhibber and Jensenius 2018; Bussell 2019).

Implications

If the conventional wisdom in the scholarship on clientelism and patronage imperfectly applies to India, there are good reasons to question how well it applies to other contexts too, as argued in recent work on Latin America and Africa (see, e.g., Lawson and Green 2014; Kramon 2016). This suggests that theories of distributive politics in developing countries need to be updated, expanded, or nuanced. We present two promising avenues for future research.

First, research should explore variation in the roles and characteristics of brokers in mediating distribution. The depiction of the broker as a partisan activist included in a strongly organized machine is just one of many forms in which intermediaries emerge and operate. The Indian case suggests brokers need not be partisan activists in strongly organized machines, but

rather may hedge their bets and refrain from investing in particular parties. New research should consider what types of actors have discretion over distribution and how this varies across contexts.[5]

Second, future work should study what *does* account for patterns of allocation in contexts where partisanship and ethnicity have insufficient explanatory power. Perhaps most importantly in this regard, does variation in citizen-level mobilization and the capacity to engage in diverse claim-making strategies within and beyond local communities increase the chance of distribution? And does variation along these lines lead to more just allocations of benefits or perpetuate inequalities in access to goods and services? Answering these questions would provide important new insights into the ways in which citizens access the state and, fundamentally, the relative importance of agency in distributive politics.

Ethnic Voting

While the study of clientelism has focused on how electoral incentives shape politicians' choices about the distribution of state resources, another extensive strand of literature has focused on the role of ethnic identity in shaping politics in the developing world. Most such efforts hinge on assessing the degree to which people vote along ethnic lines. While definitions of ethnicity can themselves be contentious (see Brubaker 2004; Chandra 2006), we follow broad convention in viewing ethnic groups as based on ascriptive categories such as race, tribe, religion or more

[5] For example, it is plausible that party competition is an important predictor of whether we should see intermediaries with long-term partisan ties or non-partisan leaders (Chauchard and Sircar 2018).

subjectively as "self-identification around a characteristic that is difficult or impossible to change, such as language, race, or location" (Birnir 2006, 66). While studies of ethnic voting in India have generated valuable insights for the field of comparative politics, their influence can inform an overly mechanical view of Indian politics within this field, in which voting is reduced to ethnic identification. In this section, we highlight both old and new research from the subcontinent that offers insights beyond this stylized narrative.

Core Assumptions

Models of ethnic voting can be primarily partitioned into two camps: "expressive" and "instrumental" theories. Theories of expressive voting draw on social-psychological models of intergroup behavior, most centrally social identity theory, which predict in-group favoritism to rapidly manifest under even the most minimal of conditions (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Shayo 2009). Expressive theories anticipate that individuals in ethnically fragmented societies will use the ballot box to seek affirmations of group self-worth and do so by voting along ethnic lines (see Horowitz 1985). In the most extreme manifestations of this dynamic, elections will simply reflect the demographic strength of different groups.

In instrumental theories, ethnicity's political salience is explained as a consequence of its utility in maximizing anticipated access to material benefits. One influential set of arguments views ethnicity as an informational shortcut, or heuristic, in circumstances where voters have little information about a party's programmatic or distributive agenda. Sticky and visible ethnic markers are perceived as especially useful in solving commitment problems plaguing the discretionary exchange of goods for votes. Thus, voters support parties and candidates associated with their ethnic group, not because of a psychological attachment to their in-group, but because they see co-

ethnics as their best chance of claiming state resources (Chandra 2004). Other models focus more on ethnicity's utility, relative to non-ethnic identities, in crafting minimum winning coalitions (Posner 2005; Huber 2017). A third set of studies highlight the instrumental behavior of political elites, who use strategies ranging from rhetoric to violence to engineer and maintain the social divides that ensure ethnic voting (Wilkinson 2004; Ferree 2006). Instrumental models of ethnicity have quickly risen to a dominant position within the study of political behavior across the global South. Carlson (2015, 355) argues that instrumentalist ethnic voting is "a foundational assumption of much of the current literature on African political behavior." Corstange's (2016, 1) study of the Middle East similarly notes that "clientelism and ethnic favoritism, in combination, riddle the diverse societies of the developing world."

Prevailing Wisdom

Whether ethnic voting is interpreted as expressive or instrumental, it is considered an important force molding electoral behavior in low-income, multi-ethnic democracies. India in fact has been central to motivating and confirming this conventional wisdom. The country's postcolonial political trajectory is often described in terms of the evolution of ethnic voting within it.[6]

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[6] While voting clearly depends on the franchise, we do not mean to imply that ethnic politics is a purely postcolonial phenomenon. The British colonial government was instrumental in formalizing ethnic identities (Dirks 2001) and introducing group-based forms of representation in politics.

Pioneering scholarship on India's postcolonial politics outlined how ethnic groups, especially those based on caste, rapidly adapted to the imperatives of democratic politics (Kothari 1964; Weiner 2001). Voters of the same localized sub-castes (*jatis*) were primarily mobilized into electoral blocs or "vote banks" through a range of mechanisms. For example, caste-based associations swiftly transformed from traditional social organizations to foundational vehicles for postcolonial interest group politics whether it was to organize the electorate or to place demands on the state for greater welfare, educational, and economic development (Rudolph and Rudolph 1960).[7] Highly localized caste-based voting blocs were integrated into multi-ethnic factions that aggregated ethnic groups of varying status into diverse coalitions headed by powerful local elites (*zamindars, jagirdars*, and *taluqdars*). These elites, in turn, delivered the votes of their bloc to the dominant Indian National Congress party (Srinivas 1955; Bailey 1970; Kothari and Maru 1970; Jaffrelot 2000).[8] The "catch-all" nature of the Congress Party was thus predicated less on unified

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[7] Caste refers to a ranked ethnic hierarchy, in which communities are partitioned into groups of varied occupational and ritual privilege. At the most local level, this system denotes tightly knit endogamous sub-castes or *jatis*, which number in the thousands. *Jatis* further aggregate into broader caste categories, notably Upper Castes, intermediate "Other Backward Classes (OBCs)," lower "Scheduled Castes" (SCs, or the former "untouchables"), and others (mainly religious minorities and tribal groups). *Jati* is widely regarded as the category most salient for organizing social and political life at the local level (see Huber and Suryanarayan 2016).

[8] Influential examples include the "KHAM" coalition of four social groups (Kshatriyas, Harijans, Adivasis, and Muslims) utilized by Congress in the 1980s, and the 'Yadav-Muslim' alliance forged by the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh in the 1990s, among others.

nationalist sentiment and more on the strategic integration of local ethnic groups (Chhibber and Petrocik 1989).

The nature of ethnic voting shifted in the competitive multiparty system that replaced Congress dominance. No longer content to be subsumed within upper caste-led factions, lower castes sought to aggregate local *jatis* of similar status into broader social blocs that could fuel their own political parties (Yadav 1999; Pai 2002; Michelutti 2009). This "silent revolution" (Jaffrelot 2003) dramatically reshaped the social composition of the country's legislature. In many Indian states, the faltering Congress was replaced by a fragmented set of regionalized political players seen to draw support from specific linguistic or caste communities (Ruparelia 2015; Ziegfeld 2016).

The political transformation of caste-based interests in the early years of Indian democracy can help us understand how the political salience of ethnic identities are activated and continually reshaped in a dynamic social and political context. In particular, the Indian experience informs our comparative understanding of how a status-based system, similar to other *ancien régime* cases, adapts and finds new relevance. As Yadav (1999, 2398) notes: "politics has affected caste as much as caste affects politics." Some scholarship has tried to theorize and test the microfoundations of these patterns of ethnic voting in India. In line with the literature on clientelism, Chandra (2004) links ethnic voting to India's "patronage democracy." In such systems, voters support parties most likely to provide them with patronage, rather than those with policy positions they favor. As a result, stable and visible ethnic identities are more effective than class in structuring such clientelistic exchanges. Consequently, individual voters choose parties with the highest "head

counts" of leaders from their own ethnic group.[9] Other accounts have more strongly emphasized the psychological benefits of descriptive representation, which especially fuel ethnic voting among low-status groups (Pai 2002).

The important contributions of this long lineage of studies are indisputable. They describe an important part of the India's political system. Yet while many of these studies are individually nuanced in their explanations of how ethnic voting manifests, their collective weight often leaves an impression of India as a democracy primarily characterized by mechanically ethnicized political behavior. Early works describe political democracy being brought to Indian villages "through the familiar and accepted institution of caste" (Rudolph and Rudolph 1960, 9). Later accounts describe ethnicity as central to processes of democratic deepening (Jaffrelot 2003) and voter preferences (Chandra 2004).[10] As Herring (2013, 137) notes, many observers continue to describe Indian politics as "the moving about of blocks on a chess board—this caste supports X, this caste, Y, and so the election went." Ethnic voting can thus easily be construed as the past and present of Indian democracy.

New Approaches

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[9] Other accounts of low-income democracies have suggested that voters weigh shared ethnicity with candidates, as opposed to parties, more heavily (Posner 2005; Chauchard 2016).

[10] Referencing how India's multiparty era depended on the rise of lower caste parties, Jaffrelot (2003,10) notes caste "certainly the politicized version of caste- was responsible for the democratisation of Indian democracy."

Recent studies of Indian politics complicate such conclusions by offering new theoretical and methodological approaches to studying political behavior. Several studies challenge the presumed centrality of ethnicity to politicians, finding a marked lack of ethnic favoritism from political elites of all stripes. Bussell (2019) combines a shadowing technique with experimental surveys to show that high-level politicians devote much of their time to constituency service to voters from all communities, not only their co-ethnics. Dunning and Nilekani (2013) exploit the randomization of caste-based quotas and find weak evidence of ethnic favoritism among village council heads in their study of three major Indian states. Jensenius (2017) uses a state assembly constituency-level matching technique and finds no evidence of SC-politicians (elected through SC quotas) working more for the interests of SCs, either in their legislative work or in their constituency service. In fact, some studies even find that highly localized brokers eschew ethnicity in building their support bases. Auerbach and Thachil (forthcoming) combine ethnographic observation, a choice experiment, and observational data to conclude that the informal slum leaders that they study do not condition their assistance to potential clients on shared caste or religion. And Sircar and Chauchard (2018) similarly show using "lab-in-field" games that local rural "influencers" in the northern state of Bihar avoid favoring their own narrow ethnic group.

Each of these studies points to the incentives political operatives face to cultivate support *across* and not simply *within* ethnic lines, a point noted in some of the earliest studies of postcolonial Indian politics. Yet, unlike earlier studies, recent work suggest multi-ethnic coalitions are not simply formed through an aggregation of local caste-based blocks. Instead, they document how high levels of ethnic diversity and political competition combine to compel politicians to craft personal support bases that are multi-ethnic even at the village or slum level. This distinction has implications for the strategies that politicians deploy. Crafting multi-ethnic local support requires

tactics that help project an inclusive personal reputation to all, rather than a narrow image as champion of your own.

Separately, scholars exploring the political preferences of specific caste or religious groups have—contrary to the image of cohesive ethnic vote banks—found substantial empirical diversity in within-group preferences across states and time periods. For example, Thachil (2014) focuses on variation in the electoral preferences of marginalized lower-caste Dalit and indigenous Adivasi (tribal) populations. Specifically, he studies the individual-level determinants of (seemingly counter-intuitive) Dalit and Adivasi support for the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's current ruling party, which has been historically identified as representing wealthy upper caste Hindus. In doing so, he describes how the poor are recruited through private welfare services provided by the BJP's movement affiliates. Suryanarayan (2019) asks why poor members of the upper castes support the BJP despite the party's pro-market and anti-redistribution stance. She finds that the BJP gained support after the controversial announcement in 1989 to implement affirmative action to lower castes, particularly in state electoral districts where upper-caste groups were historically more socially dominant. Further, Heath, Vernier, and Kumar's (2015) work on the electoral preferences among Muslims, long thought to be one of India's most cohesive ethnic vote banks,[11] shows that Muslims *only* support co-ethnic candidates who have a realistic chance

[11] Vaishnav's (2017a) study of ethnic identifiability also shows that Muslim voters are the best at identifying Muslim candidates to political office.

of winning. They consequently argue that winnability should feature far more strongly in models of political behavior of voters in low-income democracies.[12]

Scholars challenging traditional models of ethnic voting in India find support from other recent research offering evidence of performance-based—or economic—voting. Studies of both self-reported satisfaction with the state and of more "objective" measures of economic performance have shown that governments in India tend to do better when the economy is doing better (Verma 2012; Gupta and Panagariya 2014, Vaishnav and Swanson 2015). Jensenius and Suryanarayan (2020) find clear patterns of economic voting when the incumbent candidate reruns for election under the same party label. Furthermore, they find that when parties in India field new candidates (often with the incumbent candidate running against their old party) this mitigates economic voting, because this makes it unclear for voters who to reward or punish for the state of the economy. Performance can also mitigate voter punishment for the effects of adverse events beyond the government's control. Cole et al. (2012) show that voters in India punish the state ruling coalition for exogenous weather emergencies, but much more so when the government fails to respond effectively to the emergency.

To be clear, these findings in no way demonstrate that ethnicity is irrelevant in Indian politics. They do suggest, however, the need to view ethnicity as one of many factors influencing, rather than the undisputed central foundation of, political behavior in India. In fact, recent studies that explicitly compare the relative salience of ethnicity and non-ethnic indicators of efficacy, often find the latter to be as—if not more—significant than the former. Chauchard (2016) draws on

[12] Devasher (2014) arrives at similar conclusions, also through an analysis of Muslim communities in Uttar Pradesh.

experimental data from Uttar Pradesh, widely regarded as a bastion of ethnic voting in India, to show that while ethnicity does shape voters' evaluations of hypothetical candidates, so does information about performance in office, knowledge about their criminal records, and overall party evaluation. At a more localized level, Auerbach and Thachil (2018) provide experimental evidence that poor urban slum residents—often portrayed as prototypical ethnic voters—weigh markers of efficacy more strongly than shared ethnicity when selecting informal slum leaders to represent them within urban distributive politics. Perhaps most starkly, Vaishnav (2017a) finds that many voters in the north Indian state of Bihar cannot even identify the caste of the politicians for whom they voted just days after they cast their ballots.

Implications

Efforts to untether the study of Indian voting from a dominant focus on ethnicity provide openings for several exciting new research. First, they suggest the need for more studies of how parties and candidates develop cross-ethnic reputations for competence within developing democracies. This work will help to contribute to emerging comparative efforts on understanding dynamics of constituency service and credit claiming (see, e.g., Harding 2016), that have received far less attention than theories of ethnic patronage.

Second, there is considerable potential to develop more nuanced frameworks acknowledging the interplay between class and ethnicity in multi-ethnic democracies. Conceptualizing vote choices as dichotomous—either ethnic and clientelistic or programmatic and class-based—is unnecessarily limiting. Models of ethnic politics rightly pushed back against spatial models that presumed the universality of a Western-style left-right programmatic axis. However, their critiques may have been too quick to abandon class entirely, neglecting the fact

that class politics need not be conceptualized solely in terms of traditional tax and transfer policies. Class can inform sectoral voter preferences and political mobilization strategies in economic policy, including in the realms of targeted subsidies, agricultural prices, and a host of other policy agendas. Again, class and ethnic politics might intersect within such strategic efforts, in ways that echo the "ethnopopulism" witnessed in other parts of the world (Madrid 2012). Indeed, Huber and Suryanarayan (2016) use group-wise ethnic voting patterns for castes and subcastes in the Indian states to show that ethnic voting is greater in places with greater inter-group economic differences. In other words, there is a stronger class component to ethnic voting than has been suggested. Contemporary studies of earlier periods of Indian politics provide similarly intersectional insights. For example, Lee (2019) finds that levels of education within caste groups informs their degree of mobilization during British colonial rule, as measured by petitions for name changes submitted to the colonial government.

Finally, where models of ethnic clientelism repeatedly emphasized the lack of ideological and programmatic politics in India, future efforts can help uncover where and when ideology matters, including in service of constructing multi-ethnic coalitions. Chhibber and Verma (2018) argue that citizens' views of who the state serves and how it functions *have* created ideological cleavages in Indian politics that cut across caste lines. They show that the varying economic strength of groups in different states and heterogeneous preferences of members of the same group is associated with whether they support or oppose greater state-led patronage or redistribution. The image of members of various ethnic groups joining in programmatic opposition to a rival coalition that includes their own co-ethnics is an exciting step in moving past depictions of Indian voters as mechanically assembling into caste-based vote banks.

Political Parties

Our third topic concerns some of the key building blocks of democratic elections: political parties. Indian parties have been generally characterized as weak, a charge commonly leveled against parties across the developing world. In this section, we contend that although India's parties are weak according to traditional metrics in comparative politics, research on India amply demonstrates that they excel in two core functions of political parties: campaigning and connecting citizens to the state. Conceiving of parties as networks rather than as vertically integrated organizations incorporates what we know about Indian parties into broader discussions of party strength and reconcile these competing depictions, both in India and elsewhere.

Core Assumptions

In comparative politics, party organization conventionally consists of two elements: institutions and infrastructure.[13] Institutions, or rules, structure how power and responsibility are distributed within a party: the authority vested in particular positions within the organization, and how these positions relate to one another, from grassroots activists to a party's apex executive body. Party infrastructure, meanwhile, refers to a party's "brick and mortar" presence—in the form of working offices, full-time personnel, stable elite membership, and financial assets. According to these criteria, a political party is strong when: a) clearly delineated and consistently enforced rules allocate power and responsibility within the party and often tie the party to civil-society based

[13] See, for example, Duverger (1954, 40-71) on parties' internal organization and their memberships and Mainwaring and Scully (1995) and Tavits (2013, 16-19) on what constitutes a strong party organization.

affiliates (e.g., churches and labor unions); and b) the party boasts a widespread physical presence, has sufficient full-time (paid) personnel, a stable cadre of candidates and leaders, and ample coffers. Conversely, party organizations are weak when rules allocating power are malleable or non-existent, and when a party possesses negligible "fixed" resources. We refer to this understanding of party strength as the *parties-as-organizations* approach; parties are strong when they exhibit the characteristics of a vertically integrated firm, generally construed as a hierarchically-structured organization capable of producing "in house" all the inputs needed to achieve the organization's goals (Williamson 1971).

The literature on parties across the developing world widely characterizes political parties as amorphous entities lacking serious organizational backbone (Lupu and Riedl 2013). Much scholarly literature focuses on party system institutionalization (Mainwaring and Scully 1995), a concept closely related, though not identical, to organizational strength. Party systems are highly institutionalized when patterns of party competition are stable over time; parties have strong roots in society and voters have strong attachments to parties; political elites treat parties as legitimate political actors; and parties are not merely vehicles for individual leaders but have an organizational life of their own.

Scholarship on party system institutionalization typically characterizes party systems in the developing world as weakly institutionalized, exhibiting high degrees of electoral volatility and personalism and low degrees of ideological linkages between parties and voters (Mainwaring and Torcal 2006). For instance, Riedl (2014, 215) laments that "exhilarating and transformative democratic transitions in Benin, Malawi, and Mali were followed by low levels of party system institutionalization" marked by volatility and incoherence, a pattern observed across much of sub-Saharan Africa (Kuenzi and Lambright 2001). Reviewing the state of the party system in the

Philippines, Hicken (2009, 156) writes that parties "can be set up, merged with others, split, resurrected, regurgitated, reconstituted, renamed, repackaged, recycled or flushed down the toilet anytime" (156). Similar descriptions apply to Latin America (Samuels 1999; Van Cott 2007; Calvo and Murillo 2013; Novaes 2018) and post-communist Europe (Bielasiak 2002; Tavits 2005).

Exceptions to this generalization certainly exist, such as the relatively institutionalized party systems in Ghana (Riedl 2014) or Taiwan (Hicken and Kuhonta 2011). Furthermore, even if whole party systems are not well institutionalized, some parties may be (Randall and Svåsand 2002, Chhibber et al. 2014). Brazil's PT (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* or "Workers' Party") has long been characterized as better institutionalized than most other Brazilian parties (Samuels 1999), and many have noted the extraordinary organizational strength of some dominant parties, particularly in (semi-authoritarian) countries like Singapore and Malaysia (Slater 2010) or Indonesia and Tanzania (Smith 2005). Although these exceptions demonstrate the strong parties can arise in developing-world contexts, they do not necessarily undermine the more general claim that parties, on the whole, tend to be weak across the Global South.

Prevailing Wisdom

Judged by standard metrics employed in comparative politics, most Indian political parties are undoubtedly weak (Kohli 1990; Chhibber et al. 2014; Nellis 2016; Ziegfeld 2016). Written codes rarely structure a party's internal workings: most Indian parties are highly centralized and run autocratically by a single leader or family and their close associates. Local branches and frontal wings, like women's units and youth groups, exist on paper but often do little in practice. Outside ruling cliques, titular officeholders within the party tend to wield minimal authority—a point brought out forcefully in Chandra's (2004) analysis of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Wyatt's

(2009) description of party "entrepreneurs" in Tamil Nadu, and Hansen's (2001) ethnography of the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. Transparent rules for candidate selection and intra-party promotions are either altogether absent or widely flouted.[14] Instead, the party's day-to-day functioning depends on the whims of the leader of the moment. In terms of infrastructure, too, Indian parties appear hollow. District- and block-level party offices either do not exist or are shuttered outside of election time—something that Manor (2005) has found to be true even for the purportedly better-organized BJP. Parties have few permanent, paid staff members, and party switching among politicians and activists is frequent (Kashyap 1970; Kamath 1985). Descriptions of a number of major parties emphasize the extent to which they are loosely organized collections of local notables or regional factions (Erdman 1967; Fickett 1976; Fickett 1993). Data on party membership are widely believed to be inflated or exaggerated (Chhibber 1999).

Of course, this characterization of extreme party weakness does not apply equally to all parties at all times. For decades, India's main communist parties possessed the trappings of classically strong parties—well-developed organizations, clear lines of authority, full-time workers, and extensive party offices (Kohli 1987; Heller 2000)—but their presence has long been limited to just a small geographic slice of in India.[15] The BJP and its predecessor's ties to a Hindu revivalist organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), have provided the party with

[14] The classic statement on this process is Roy (1965; 1966), who highlights the wide discrepancy between the formal criteria laid down by the Congress Party for candidate selection and the actual practice. Farooqui and Sridharan (2014) identify a high degree of centralization in candidate selection in five Indian parties in the 2004 and 2009 national election.

[15] Ruud (1994) further complicates this generalization of communist organizational strength.

some measure of organizational presence (Andersen and Damle 1987, Graham 1990), though its organizational strength is easily overstated (Manor 2005), and the BJP's status as a truly pan-Indian party is relatively recent. Most notably, India's former dominant party, the Indian National Congress, had an extensive nationwide organization and well-developed internal institutions in the immediate decades after independence (Weiner 1967).[16] However, from the 1960s onward, Congress' leadership eviscerated the party's organization, especially during the long tenure of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (Kohli 1990). Thus, although not all political parties are equally weak and even though some have varied over time, at no point have India's parties on the whole conformed to traditional understandings of what it means to be a "strong" party.

And yet, this picture of endemic organizational weakness sits at odds with other stylized facts about India's parties. At election time, parties in India quickly mobilize vast amounts of human and financial capital. Parties launch vigorous campaigns requiring armies of volunteers and canvassers, and extensive on-the-ground coordination (Banerjee 2014; Verma and Sardesai 2014; Jha 2017; Palshikar et al. 2017). Parties deploy large sums of money for both traditional campaign activities, such as rallies and processions, as well as for less savory campaign tactics like cash handouts on the eve of elections (Björkman 2014; Chauchard 2017). According to the 2014 Indian National Election Study, 61 percent of respondents reported that a member of a political campaign had come to their house to ask for their vote, attesting to the reach and success of these efforts.[17]

In between elections, too, parties constantly mediate between citizens and the state. Voters turn to elected officials—and the parties to which they belong—for assistance in navigating the

[16] For a dissenting view, see Chhibber (1999).

[17] See http://www.lokniti.org/pdf/All-India-Postpoll-2014-Survey-Findings.pdf.

central, state, or local bureaucracy, and to secure public goods for their communities (Chopra 1996; Auerbach 2016; Jensenius 2017; Kruks-Wisner 2018; Bussell 2019), and distributive politics often occurs through partisan channels (Dunning and Nilekani 2013). In short, though weak by traditional measures, many Indian parties perform just as parties are supposed to: they wage election campaigns and link citizens to the state.[18]

New Approaches

How can we reconcile these seemingly contradictory characterizations of Indian parties: weak by traditional measures yet often immensely capable as electoral machines and as citizen-state intermediaries? In lieu of the dominant *parties-as-organizations* paradigm, we contend that India's parties are better understood using a *parties-as-networks* approach. Rather than relying on formal, internal structures to achieve party goals, Indian parties routinely contract out core party functions to informal social networks.[19] In turn, the extent to which a party is strong or weak depends on the underlying strength of the social network on which it builds. According to this account, a strong party-as-network relies on a broad set of interconnected members endowed with

[18] Conventional theories of political parties presume that parties channel citizens' policy interests or demands, whereas much of a politician's work in India involves dealing with *ad hoc* demands for club or local public goods.

[19] Party "contractors" often maintain ties or affiliations with parties (Thachil 2014); however, their primary loyalties are frequently linked to their social networks (Krishna 2007).

extensive physical, financial, and human assets.[20] A weak party-as-network draws on a comparatively small network of activists; it comprises members working in relative isolation, who bring few assets to the party. The informal, social-network basis of many Indian parties frequently enables efficacy in *campaigning* and *citizen-responsiveness*, sometimes equivalent to that which parties achieve using formal structures and party-owned assets.

To highlight the distinction between strong *parties-as-organizations* and strong *parties-as-networks*, consider how these different types of strong parties campaign and connect citizens to the state. When parties rely on traditional party organizations, they campaign using their permanent physical infrastructure. With input from party leaders, local branches coordinate campaign activities by managing fellow party workers and spending funds raised by the party. Between elections, citizens wishing to make demands on the state turn to titled party members—whether elected representatives, local branch members, or leaders of an appropriate cell or wing—who address concerns either by using party resources or by conveying these demands to someone further up the party chain of command. In the case of traditional party machines, a network of stable, partisan-committed brokers develops close relationships with citizens and mediates access to the state (Auyero 2000; Calvo and Murillo 2004).

In contrast, parties whose strength emanates from informal social networks perform these functions quite differently. During election time, such parties campaign by mobilizing large, extant networks—for instance, groups of voters united by geography or kinship networks and often

[20] Along similar lines, Ziegfeld (2016, chapters 5 and 6) contends that forming national parties in India requires knitting together geographically dispersed politicians and their associated networks of associates and loyalists.

aligned with local brokers or intermediaries (who are often informally elected by their communities)—that provide physical, financial and human capital. Members' homes become *de facto* campaign offices; personal wealth routinely finances election expenditures (Vaishnav 2017b); and friends, family members, and other associates engage in canvassing and assorted campaign activities. These "movable" assets are the lifeblood of the election campaign, but only because network members choose to deploy them; they are not resources attached wholly and exclusively to the party (Chauchard and Sircar 2018). A member can transfer her wealth or followers to another party if she so desires.

A strong party-as-network can also serve as an effective advocate for citizens' needs between elections, as citizens attempt to secure benefits from the state. Citizens approach a party member for help, selecting more on basis of social proximity than the member's formal role in the party. Party members then transmit community demands upward via their parties (Auerbach 2016) and draw on the full menu of social ties available to them—and not only the party hierarchy—to address citizen demands (Bussell 2019). In at least three keyways, the strong party-as-network can facilitate responsiveness to citizens as they navigate the Kafka-esque bureaucracies typical of many developing countries.

First, social networks transmit information to parties about citizens' needs at low cost because citizens can more easily approach an acquaintance from their social network rather than an unknown party functionary. Second, dense networks comprised of many members allow party activists to exploit a wide range of contacts necessary to extract goods from an ill-functioning bureaucracy. Third, because citizens can exert social pressure on party leaders with whom they are

in close social proximity (Auerbach 2016), leaders in party networks are apt to be highly accountable.[21]

Of course, not all parties encompass strong networks. Networks may have few members; they can comprise members who are isolated from one another or tenuously connected; or, they may include members who possess little physical, financial or human capital. Networks that are deficient in any of these ways should be less capable of mounting effective election campaigns or addressing citizens' demands on the state.

Implications

This alternative conceptualization of political party strength, drawing on social networks, appears to have traction in many democracies where political parties have not followed trajectories similar to those of Western Europe's highly organized mass parties (Duverger 1954). Many parties that appear weak because of their poorly enforced or absent rules and lack of fixed infrastructure may actually encompass strong networks capable of mounting extensive and effective election campaigns and channeling citizens' demands.

This argument has a number of implications for future research. First, the presence of strong parties-as-networks calls into question the conventional wisdom that party systems in much of the developing world are inchoate and unstable (Mainwaring and Torcal 2006). The perpetual state of political flux observed in India—with its many parties that come and go (Heath 2005) and sometimes weak linkages between parties and candidates (Jensenius and Suryanarayan 2017)—may mask a surprising degree of structure and order. Second, future research should explore how

[21] Tsai (2007) makes a similar argument in the context of rural China.

parties build and maintain strong networks. What resources do they use to attract social networks into their fold, and how do they retain the loyalty of such networks? Some strategies—whether selective material incentives, ethnicity, ideology, or leadership charisma—may be more effective in attracting high-quality, committed workers, and instilling loyalty to the party brand.[22] The broader party system might also inform parties' strategies toward their constituent networks, as parties operating in a competitive context—with multiple parties vying for members and support—may behave differently than in places where the party is close to a monopolist.

Finally, more research is needed on how political campaigns affect electoral behavior. If the strength of parties lies with the networks they encompass, then how might this change our understanding of how campaigns contact and persuade voters, particularly amidst the growing use of social media as a campaign tool?[23] The types of voters that campaigns reach, the extent to which they can actually persuade (rather than just mobilize to turn out), and the strategies they adopt for persuasion and mobilization may differ greatly when parties rely on a strength that derives far more from social networks than from traditional party organization.

Conclusion

Emerging research on electoral behavior in India not only adds nuance to our conventional understanding of Indian politics, but more importantly it also questions the received wisdom in the

[22] In a similar fashion, Weinstein (2006) posits that the strategies pursued by rebel groups depend first and foremost on initial resource endowments.

[23] See Neyazi, Kumar and Semetko (2016) on online political engagement and Kanungo (2015) on the use and effects of social media in the 2014 Indian national election.

comparative politics literature more broadly. While theories of patronage politics, identity-based voting, and organizationally weak parties certainly capture important aspects of politics in developing societies, the Indian experience shows that there is considerably more variation or nuance on each of these than we often acknowledge.

With regards to distributive politics, new research suggests that brokers and politicians in India are highly constrained in their ability to monitor voters thanks to a large, heterogeneous electorate and the relative sanctity of the secret ballot. These constraints raise doubts about whether politicians and voters can genuinely engage in a contractual *quid pro quo* as has typically been assumed. Many of the brokers encountered in the Indian context, moreover, are not the canonical partisan intermediaries observed in contexts of Latin American party machines. The relatively weak and volatile partisan ties of these actors generate more fluidity in vertical political linkages than is typically described in analyses of distributive politics. Further, recent studies have documented Indian villages and urban neighborhoods as intensely competitive brokerage environments, wherein multiple intermediaries continually vie with each other for a local following—both within and across party lines—by signaling efficacy in problem solving. Significant voter agency, coupled with competitive local brokerage environments and the availability of intermediaries at higher levels of government, leave conventional models of rigid clientelism with diminished analytical purchase in the Indian context.

Recent studies of voting behavior in India in turn question the dominance of accepted narratives regarding ethnic voting. This research shows that ethnicity does not neatly overlap with political preferences; in fact, empirical evidence suggests that ethnic groups in India are remarkably heterogeneous in the expression of their political preferences. Furthermore, the extent to which ethnicity emerges as salient in voting behavior is conditioned by other types of group

characteristics such as the economic or social standing of groups. In some cases, ethnicity appears to take a backseat to other electoral considerations, such as the state of the economy—a sign that the standard retrospective economic voting model popular in advanced industrial democracies could be at play. Another mainstay of politics in well-established democracies—constituency service—is also highlighted as an activity that politicians prioritize and voters reward on Election Day.

Finally, recent studies concur with past assessments regarding the weak formal organizational foundations of Indian political parties. However, they also question whether these formal characteristics—central to the study of Western party systems—are the best metrics through which to assess the robustness of political organizations in developing countries. For example, new work suggests that the tendency to measure party strength using metrics of legislative discipline or physical presence gives short shrift to alternative conceptions, such as viewing parties as rooted in social networks. Indian parties often rely on personal networks to achieve their core goals, which means that they outsource many core party functions to individuals who are not full-time party workers. This suggests that a more profitable way to study parties in India, and perhaps in other developing democracies, is to examine the underlying strength of their associated social networks. Analyses of these networks suggest that Indian parties are more efficacious, and more deeply socially embedded than when viewed through Western evaluative standards.

Our belief is that the findings and hypotheses discussed in the preceding pages will enrich the study of India as much as the broader study of comparative politics. Not only do these findings question the repeated invocation of India in comparative politics for arguments the country no

longer exemplifies, but they also suggest exciting new directions in the study of comparative politics more generally.

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