Article

The discerning voter: Party–voter linkages and local distribution under multilevel governance

Mark Schneider (ID)
Pitzer College, USA

Abstract

What shapes voters' expectations of receiving private benefits and local public goods in developing world democracies? Models of instrumental voting suggest that voters' expectations are shaped by co-partisanship; however, this work does not consider the calculations that voters make in multilevel systems where different types of goods are allocated by different tiers of government. In this article, I argue that voters condition their expectations of private benefits on co-partisan ties with the local leader, but only do so with respect to local public goods when the local leader is aligned with the state government that controls the allocation of pork barrel spending. I test my argument with a vignette experiment conducted in rural India that randomly assigns the partisan affiliation of real village politicians and find empirical support for the argument. I also find suggestive evidence of strategic voting in local elections towards leaders aligned with the ruling party.

What shapes voters' expectations of receiving private state benefits and local public goods? Existing research on distributive politics in developing countries suggests that politicians often favour their co-partisan supporters in the allocation of private state benefits and services and local public goods (Bohlken, 2017; Dunning and Nilekani, 2013; Stokes et al., 2013). Models of instrumental voting, thus, focus on the cues that voters use to determine which party will favour people like them, which shapes their vote preferences (Chandra, 2004; Chauchard, 2016; Conroy-Krutz et al., 2016; see Schafner and Streb, 2002; Snyder and Ting, 2002). Following from the view that voters make blunt judgments under limited information, this work broadly expects voters to form consistent distributive expectations vis-à-vis their preferred party across a wide range of state benefits. This work, however, does not consider partisan alignment in multilevel systems where different tiers of government (e.g. local, state, federal), which may be controlled by different political parties, hold discretion over private goods (e.g. welfare benefits) and local public goods (e.g. infrastructure). Are voters sufficiently sophisticated to take partisan alignment between local and higher levels of government into account in their *distributive expectations* and vote preferences in local elections?[1]

In this article, I present a theory that explains the calculations that voters make in multilevel settings where elected local leaders have substantial discretion over the allocation of private benefits (e.g. welfare benefits), but rely on higher levels of government for discretionary funds for pork barrel projects that are often nonexcludable within a village. I argue that voters expect favouritism in the allocation of private benefits and services from co-partisan local leaders, who are likely to share sociopolitical ties in the context of personalized village politics, but also understand that state leaders are likely to exclude localities represented by leaders from opposition parties. An important implication of this logic is that voters who are likely to fall outside core

Corresponding author:
Mark Schneider, Pitzer College, 1050 N. Mills Avenue, Claremont, CA 91711, USA.
Email: mark_schneider@pitzer.edu

partisan networks and those who value nonexcludable local public goods are likely to vote for local leaders aligned with the ruling party at the state level.

To test my argument, I develop a *real candidate* vignette survey experiment that tests for the extent to which voters in the rural state of Rajasthan, India, perceive the partisan affiliation of elected local leaders to shape the targeting of private goods (e.g. antipoverty benefits) and local public goods (state development funds). Consistent with my argument, I find that voters are more likely to expect a co-partisan sarpanch to provide private benefits over which they have significant discretion. Co-partisanship (relative to its absence), however, only impacts expectations on access to state funds when the local leader is affiliated with the governing party at the state level. I also find suggestive evidence of strategic voting towards the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party broadly expected to win the coming state elections, which is an implication of the argument.

Partisan alignment and distributive expectations in multilevel systems

While voters base their expectations of receiving state benefits, or *distributive expectations,* on a range of types of information from stereotypes of group–party linkages to beliefs about the credibility of parties to deliver on their promises, models of instrumental voting broadly view the vote decision as an instrumental act where voters strategically vote for the party they believe will be most likely to deliver state resources and services to people like them (Calvo and Murillo, 2013; Chandra, 2004; Posner, 2005). My argument takes core propositions of instrumental voting models set in developing countries as a point of departure. First, politicians at various levels of government often target their co-partisan supporters (Boehlken, 2017; Calvo and Murillo, 2004, 2013; Cox and McCubbins, 1986; Dasgupta, 2017; Nunes, 2013; Stokes et al., 2013).[2] Second, voters demand private goods targeted at the individual level and local public goods that all members of a village can often access.[3] Third, whether based on stereotypes of group–party linkages (Chandra, 2004; Green et al., 2004), past distribution (Magaloni et al., 2007) or proximity to patronage networks (Calvo and Murillo, 2013; Dunning and Nilekani, 2013), voters know their partisan types (including nonpartisans) and expect co-partisan representatives to be more likely to deliver resources to people like them than representatives from other parties.

Multilevel systems have important implications particularly for the third proposition above. First, local governments in multilevel systems such as India have substantial discretion over the selection of beneficiaries to central and state government programs (Besley et al., 2004; Bohlken, 2016), but local leaders must lobby the ruling party at higher tiers of government (e.g. state and federal levels)

for local public goods, which are widely understood to favour localities represented by co-partisan leaders (Armesto, 2009; Boehlken, 2017; Dasgupta, 2017).[4] Second, recent work makes an important distinction between the allocation of private benefits that can be conditioned on individual characteristics, such as proximity to partisan networks (Calvo and Murillo, 2013; Dunning and Nilekani, 2013), and local public goods, which can be targeted to constituencies represented by co-partisan politicians, but are accessible to all residents of the locality (Ichino and Nathan, 2013). Since leaders from different political parties may hold power at the local and state levels in this setting, which has implications for the allocation of different types of goods, voters in multilevel systems are faced with a complex task in forming their distributive expectations across candidates for local office. Thus, rather than basing one's distributive expectations on co-partisan bias broadly, a voter in a multilevel system should also consider which party holds power at the state level, which types of benefits (public or private goods) she prioritizes most, and the impact of partisan alignment between local and higher level leaders on her chances of receiving different types of benefits. An important implication of this calculation is that voters who value local public goods over private goods should strategically vote for a local candidate affiliated with the ruling party at the state level.

At the same time, following from co-partisan biases at the local level, voters who strategically support a non-co-partisan leader face a risk of exclusion from private benefits if their choice wins the election. Evidence from rural India, for example, shows that local leaders favour voters whom they perceive are their co-partisan supporters with private welfare benefits (Dunning and Nilekani, 2013; Markussen, 2011; Schneider and Sircar, 2016). Thus, voters who prioritize private goods over local public goods should vote for a co-partisan local leader irrespective of the ruling party at higher levels. Finally, I expect nonpartisans to vote for the local politician affiliated with the ruling party at the state level given that they are unlikely to benefit from co-partisan favouritism in the targeting of private goods and will benefit from the provision of nonexcludable local public goods.[5] This yields the following hypotheses:

H1: Voters, irrespective of party, will expect to receive greater access to private goods when they are co-partisans of the local leader.

H2: Voters will condition their distributive expectations on access to local public goods on co-partisanship when local representatives and the ruling party in state government belong to the same party.

H3: Instrumental nonpartisan voters should support local leaders aligned with the party in power at the state level.

Distributive politics in Rajasthan

I test the argument with data from a 2013 survey of rural voters in Rajasthan, a poor, rural state in north India. Rajasthan was selected for this study because it meets the scope conditions of my argument. First, following the passage of the 73rd amendment, substantial authority over the implementation of federal and state programs was devolved to elected village councils (gram panchayats, GPs). This gave GP presidents (sarpanch) discretion over the selection of beneficiaries to state and federal welfare schemes and authority over the implementation of a large right to work program, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which guarantees 100 days of paid manual labour to all citizens (Dasgupta, 2017). In addition, sarpanch selectively grant favours to villagers and facilitate access to higher level bureaucrats and politicians, which is often necessary for citizens to obtain benefits and routine services from an unresponsive state (Bohlken, 2016; Krishna, 2011). At the same time, state and federal governments retained authority over policy-making and GPs rely on state funds for a wide range of public goods and discretionary pork barrel projects (Devraj et al., 2008). This demonstrates that GPs in Rajasthan, and across India, fit my characterization of a multilevel system where discretion over targeting varies across types of goods.

Second, voters in Rajasthan value the goods examined in this article: private antipoverty benefits and state funds for local public goods. According to estimates based on consumption data from the 2004 to 2005 National Social Survey, Rajasthan has a rural poverty rate of 19%, which is modestly below the 22.5% average for Indian states (Dev and Ravi, 2007).[6] This suggests that voters in Rajasthan are likely to value private welfare benefits,[7] which are understood to be allocated with significant political biases (Dunning and Nilekani, 2013). Research on the provision of schools, roads and other pork barrel projects similarly establishes that political biases are widespread in the allocation of pork barrel project and other local public goods (Boehlken, 2017).

Third, Rajasthan has an institutionalized, competitive two-party system where the Congress Party and BJP have alternated in power at the state level each term since 1993. This was similarly the case at the time of my survey in January 2013. Interviews at that time suggested a widely held expectation among voters that the BJP would decisively defeat the incumbent Congress Party in the upcoming state elections in late 2013, which was the case.[8] Moreover, although the election commission formally bans party symbols from the ballot in GP elections, evidence of partisan salience at the local level is widespread. Dunning and Nilekani (2013), for example, find that voters in Rajasthan correctly identified the party of the sarpanch 96% of the time, and sarpanch in my sample overwhelmingly (95%) identified with one of the state's two major parties.

Following from the pervasiveness of partisan ties at the local and state levels, and the staggered timing of state and local elections,[9] multilevel governance is often characterized by heterogeneity in partisan alignment across local and state governments.

Finally, GP elections in Rajasthan are contexts of high-information and dense social ties. The GPs in Rajasthan comprise 1100 households on average and have stable populations, which means that voters and local leaders are likely to know each other personally. In my data, for example, sampled sarpanch reported to know 95% of voters sampled from their GP personally.[10] The high-information context of GP politics, thus, warrants the research design described below as an alternative to fictional candidate experiments designed for low-information environments.

The challenge of identifying the effects of candidate traits on distribution

Due to the endogeneity of a leader's partisan affiliation, fictional candidate vignette experiments have become the method most commonly employed to identify the *causal* effect of politician characteristics on voters' assessments of candidates and votes. In this design, respondents are exposed to hypothetical politicians, which gives researchers the ability to randomly assign candidate traits in the context of a survey experiment (see Carlson, 2015; Conroy-Krutz, 2013; Winters and Weitz-Shapiro, 2013). There are several reasons that I consider this approach problematic for studying the effects of party–voter linkages on distributive expectations at the local level. First, since politician–voter linkages in local elections are rooted in personal ties characterized by fine-grained information on numerous candidate traits accumulated over a long period of time, voters' distributive expectations are unlikely to rely on the information shortcuts that fictional candidate experiments capture. Second, fictional candidate experiments are often characterized by high cognitive demands and low motivation on part of the respondent because they require respondents to process complex, unfamiliar information in a short period. Research on the psychology of survey response suggests that when cognitive burdens are high and motivation is low, respondents are likely to engage in passive noncompliance, or a strategic attempt to fool the researcher (Krosnick, 1991; McDermott, 2011; Stolte, 1994). Third, fictional candidate vignette survey experiments make the strong assumption that responses are a result of the profile of fictional candidate characteristics alone. Recent work, however, suggests that experimental cues prime respondents to consider other unobserved traits that are perceived as correlated with the treatment (Dafoe et al., 2016; see Gaines et al., 2007). The experimental design introduced in this article addresses these concerns by minimizing cognitive burdens, increasing realism and

capturing the informational and social context of village elections.

Research design

To test my argument, I developed a *real candidate* vignette experiment that randomly assigns respondent-provided local partisan politician cues across the two major parties in Rajasthan, and asked respondents for their vote preferences and distributive expectations across private and public goods after exposure to the treatment. Specifically, earlier in the survey, I asked respondents to identify the *most popular politicians from Congress and BJP in their GP.* Subsequently, I randomized whether respondents were exposed to the Congress or BJP politician they named earlier in the survey.[11] Since local politicians and voters in this context overwhelmingly know each other, voters are understood to have accumulated fine-grained information on the local leaders they identified prior to the implementation of the survey experiment. While this design is likely to produce heterogeneity on the specific leaders respondents identify, I interpret cued leaders on average to represent partisan leaders that respondents consider to be plausible candidates for sarpanch in the 2015 local elections.[12] The experimental design, thus, captures voters' (across partisan types) distributive expectations under a plausible, known Congress and BJP sarpanch. This differs from other work that seeks to capture the effect of partisan information shortcuts (Conroy-Krutz et al., 2016).

In the vignette, I developed a scenario that would be simple and familiar to respondents. Sarpanch has discretion over the proposal of local public works projects in the GP and significant discretion over the selection of labourers for these projects, which often are funded through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act right to work program. Qualitative interviews with sarpanch suggest that the selection of local infrastructure projects such as the building of community centres or local roads is an important and visible aspect of the sarpanch position. The experimental vignette, thus, exposes respondents to partisan leader cues in the context of a local infrastructure project. After reading the vignette to the respondent, voters were asked to report their distributive expectations over salient private benefits and state funds for local public goods *if the cued (Congress/ BJP) local politicians were to win the next election for sarpanch,* which were to take place in 2015.

Distributive expectations (post-treatment) include two measures of private state (antipoverty) benefits and one measure of local public goods provision. The main dependent variable concerns access to a job on the infrastructure project described in the vignette; which is an ordinal measure with a four-point scale. Second, I include a dichotomous measure of expectations of obtaining a below poverty line (BPL) card, which is required for eligibility to a wide range of benefits for the poor. Third, my measure on whether the cued leader would bring funds to the GP from the state government, which captures expectations of pork-barrel spending, is dichotomous. Finally, I include a dichotomous vote intention item that measures whether respondents would vote for the cued partisan leader.[13] Since I am interested in the extent to which voters of different partisan types condition their distributive expectations on the partisan affiliation of the sarpanch, I focus on differences in means across the Congress and BJP leader cue treatment conditions.

Survey sampling

The data for this article are based on a survey of 959 heads of household across 96 village councils (GPs) in Rajasthan, which was administered 9 months before the 2013 state assembly elections won decisively by the BJP.[14] Respondents were sampled from relatively poor and politically competitive subdistricts (blocks) across Rajasthan.[15] These restrictions were applied to ensure that both Congress and BJP local candidate cues would be credible and that antipoverty benefits would be salient in sampled GPs. Along with the vignette experiment, I collected data on demographics, political preferences and access to government programs.

Testing the argument

To test hypotheses 1 through 3, I take advantage of the randomization of Congress and BJP leader cues and compare distributive expectations and vote preferences across Congress and BJP leader treatments.[16] Since the argument concerns the effect of co-partisan ties (or their absence) between voters and leaders, I condition my analysis of treatment effects on partisan subgroups – BJP supporters, Congress supporters and nonpartisans – using a standard measure of psychological attachment.[17] The results that follow present tests of differences in means, subtracting average distributive expectations for respondents in the BJP treatment from those in the Congress treatment groups with Welch's standard errors to take different sample sizes into account. When differences in means are below zero, respondents assigned to the BJP treatment group reported higher distributive expectations than those in the Congress treatment and vice versa.

Results

I present differences in means in confidence intervals in Figure 2 to test hypotheses 1 and 2 on distributive expectations. Evidence presented in the first row of confidence interval plots supports the expectation of hypothesis 1 that voters' distributive expectations of private goods are conditioned on co-partisanship irrespective of party. Congress Party and BJP supporters exposed to a co-partisan politician

You must know that the sarpanch requests funds for public projects in the gram panchayat such as building a village road, school, or health center. For these projects, the sarpanch can tell the BDO [Block Development Officer] that he will choose workers for the project among people with a (MGNREGA) job card.

Let's say the **Congress/BJP** leader named _____ (*the strongest leader in the GP from Congress/BJP mentioned by the respondent in item B8/B9*) becomes sarpanch in the next GP elections two years from now.

The **Congress/BJP** leader named _____will choose workers for a project to build a small community center in the village and a small number of people from the village will get jobs.
Please think carefully about this situation and answer the questions about the project. Remember that Congress/BJP leader_____ is the sarpanch in this situation.

Outcome Measures

1) Would you or a member of your family get one of these jobs?
2) If this person were sarpanch next time, do you think he could help get you access to a below poverty line (BPL) card or Public Distribution System (PDS) benefits– when new BPL cards become released?
3) If this person were sarpanch next time, would he be able to bring funds from the state government to the GP?
4) Would you give _____ **[Politician Name given]** your vote if he ran in the next GP elections?

Figure 1. Survey experiment instrument and outcomes. Figure 1 provides the instrument for the experimental vignette. Names for Congress and BJP leaders were provided by the respondent earlier in the survey and selected according to the partisan treatment condition of the respondent. Figure 1 also includes survey items for outcomes on vote preferences and private and public goods.
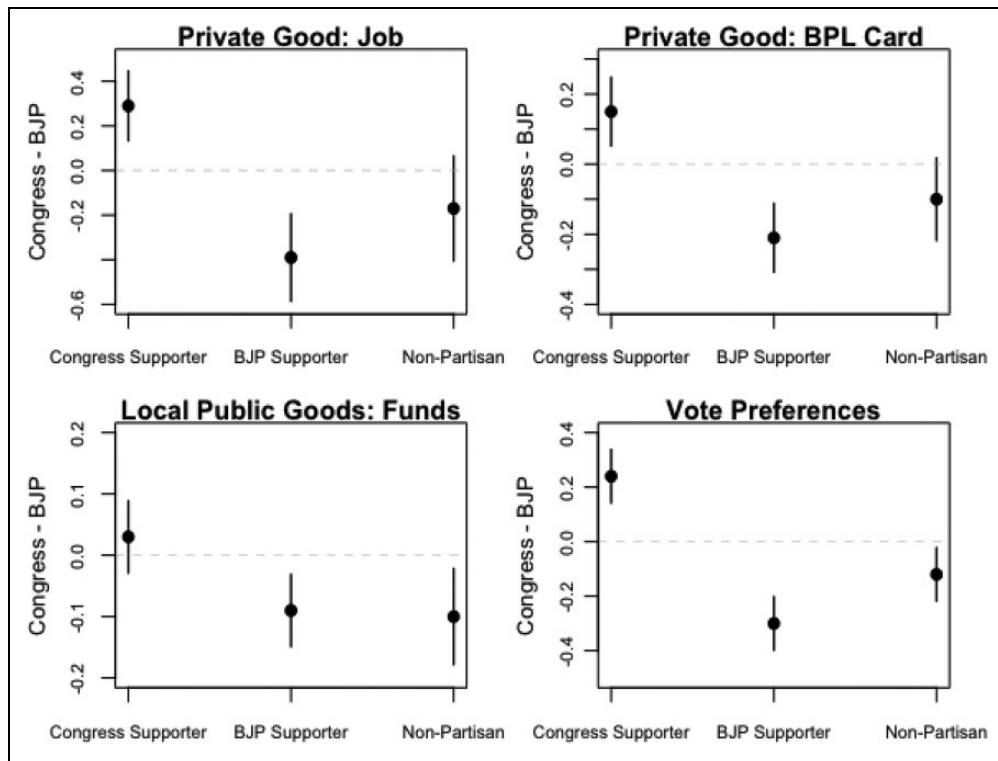
Figure 2. Testing the argument. This figure provides 95% confidence intervals for differences in means on the four outcomes of the vignette experiment, conditioning on partisan subgroups. Differences are calculated by subtracting mean BJP treatment outcomes from mean Congress outcomes (i.e. Congress–BJP treatments). The job outcome has a scale of 1 to 4. The remaining three are dichotomous outcomes. See Table A3 in the Online Appendix for details. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

reported job expectations that were, respectively, 0.29 and 0.39 points higher (on a four point scale) than was the case when Congress and BJP partisans were exposed to a non-co-partisan. Similarly, Congress and BJP partisans were 15 and 21 percentage points more likely to expect a BPL card when the cued leader was a co-partisan leader as compared to a

non-co-partisan leader. Non-partisans held higher expectations of receiving both private goods (i.e. jobs, BPL card) under a BJP sarpanch, although these results fall below conventional levels of statistical significance.

Difference-in-means tests in the lower left plot of Figure 2 confirm hypothesis 2 that voters condition their expectations of local public goods on partisan alignment between the local leader and state government. BJP supporters and nonpartisans were 9 and 10 percentage points more likely to expect a BJP sarpanch to bring state funds to their GP as compared to a Congress politician. Congress supporters, however, reported no significant differences across treatments on local public goods provision, contrary to their strong expectations for targeted goods from a co-partisan. This null result suggests that even committed Congress supporters, 9 months before an election in which Congress was expected to be displaced from power, held little expectation that their preferred co-partisan local was more likely to deliver state funds to their GP than a BJP leader (under a BJP-ruled state government). While Congress supporters were likely to face cognitive biases towards their preferred party, which plausibly explains why they did not report higher expectations for the BJP leader, this demonstrates that voters consider partisan alignment and benefit characteristics before conditioning their distributive expectations on co-partisanship.

Robustness tests

The evidence presented above supports hypotheses 1 and 2; however, due to the heterogeneity in partisan leader names provided by respondents in the same GP, it is plausible that these results are in-part a result of the unobserved characteristics of leaders identified by voters. To establish the robustness of my findings, I conduct two robustness tests that hold leader names constant within GPs.[18] First, I restrict the analysis to 549 respondents (approximately 57% of the full sample) who identified the modal named Congress and BJP leader conditional on treatment assignment. For this test, I identified respondents who identified the most common Congress leader and BJP leader names in their GP who were assigned to treatment conditions that cued those leaders in the vignette.[19] By holding constant leader characteristics (among the treated), this robustness check addresses the concern that the effect of partisan ties and partisan alignment is explained by responses to leaders' unobserved personal traits or idiosyncratic features of voters' leader selections. Second, I conduct a substantially more restrictive test with matched pairs (with replacement), using the *matching* package in R. Here, I match pairs of respondents in the same GP who identified the same Congress and BJP leaders—thus holding constant leader characteristics that inform voters' comparative assessments across plausible Congress and BJP candidates. This includes approximately 340 observations (35% of the full sample) that identified the same BJP and Congress leaders in their GP.
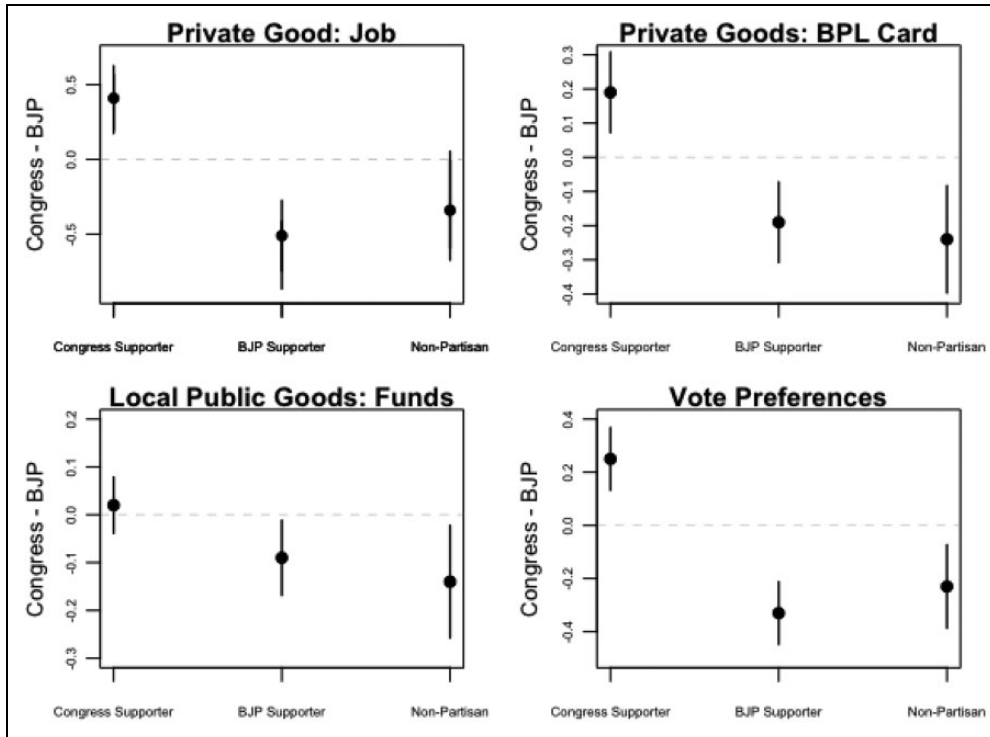
Confidence intervals from robustness tests displayed in Figures 3 and 4 support hypothesis 1. Congress supporters reported distributive expectations for jobs that were 0.41 and 0.39 points (of 4) higher when the cued leader was a co-partisan (as compared to a non-co-partisan) across the modal leader and matched pairs robustness checks, respectively, while BJP supporters reported expectations that were 0.51 and 0.63 points higher. Congress and BJP supporters were both 19 percentage points more likely to expect a BPL card from a co-partisan leader (than a non-co-partisan) in the modal leader robustness check. On the more restrictive matched pairs test, Congress supporters were 34 percentage points more likely to expect a BPL card when the cued leader was a co-partisan as compared to BJP supporters who were 19 percentage points more likely to expect a BPL card from a co-partisan.

Results also confirm hypothesis 2. BJP supporters expected co-partisan leaders to be 9 and 8 percentage points more likely to bring state funds (i.e. pork) to their GP (as compared to a Congress leader) across the modal leader and matched pairs analyses, respectively. The partisan affiliation of the sarpanch had no effect on expectations of state funds among Congress supporters. Finally, the results from the modal leader test shows that nonpartisans expected the ruling party to be more likely to attract funds from the state by 14 percentage points; the nonpartisan sample size in the matched pairs test (approximately 50 respondents) is too small to detect effects for these voters.

Ethnic versus partisan effects on distributive expectations

Although I do not have causal leverage on the ethnic identity of the cued leader, which varies according to voters' perceptions of the most popular Congress and BJP leaders in their GP, I examine the extent to which the effects of partisan ties and partisan alignment on distributive expectations are robust to ethnic considerations in Tables 1 and 2. To code the caste identities of voter survey respondents, I asked them to self-report their caste identities. I code the castes (and Muslim religion) of named leaders by asking survey respondents to provide the castes of the leaders they named earlier in the survey.[20] At the outset, 35% of respondent-named partisan leaders (with respect to treatment) were co-ethnics according to politically relevant caste and Muslim religion. This suggests substantial ethnic heterogeneity across the two major parties in Rajasthan and that respondents did not name only leaders from their own community who are likely to live in their rural neighbourhoods (See also Dunning and Nilekani, 2013).

Results broadly shows that partisanship shapes voters' distributive expectations over private goods (e.g. jobs and BPL cards) when a variety of caste characteristics of named leaders and voters are considered. First, I find the co-partisan effect on expectations of private goods to hold when respondents

Figure 3. Robustness check: modal leader. This figure provides 95% confidence intervals based on differences in means from the modal leader robustness check across four outcomes of the experiment. Differences are calculated by subtracting mean BJP treatment outcomes from mean Congress outcomes (i.e., Congress–BJP treatments). The Job outcome has a scale of 1 to 4. The remaining three are dichotomous outcomes. See Online Appendix A for details. BJP, Bharatiya Janata Party.
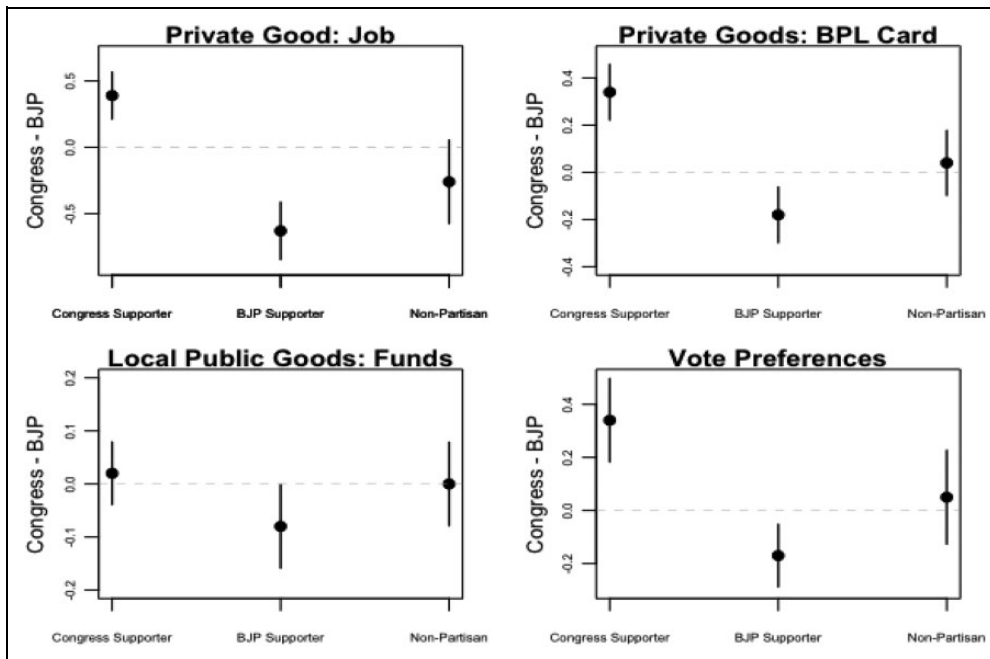
Figure 4. Robustness check: matched pairs. This figure provides 95% confidence intervals based on differences in means from the matched pairs robustness check across four outcomes of the experiment. Differences are calculated by subtracting mean BJP treatment outcomes from mean Congress outcomes (i.e., Congress–BJP Treatments). The job outcome has a scale of 1 to 4. The remaining three are dichotomous outcomes. See Online Appendix A for details. BJP, Bharatiya Janata Party.

Table 1. Partisan and ethnic effects on expectations of private benefits (caste).

	Jobs			BPL card/public benefits		
	Congress partisans	BJP partisans	Non-partisans	Congress partisans	BJP partisans	Non-partisans
Same caste (for both leaders)	0.35** (0.14) N = 117	−0.44** (0.14) N = 112	−0.1 (0.18) N = 84	0.22** (0.08) N = 115	−0.15** (0.07) N = 167	0.01 (0.09) N = 84
Different castes	0.25** (0.1) N = 212	−0.35** (0.15) N = 196	−0.16 (0.16) N = 152	0.17*** (0.07) N = 163	−0.22** (0.07) N = 159	−0.14* (0.08) N = 146
Co-ethnic (W/cued leader)	0.32* (0.18) N = 97	−0.45*** (0.15) N = 155	−0.19 (0.21) N = 80	0.17* (0.09) N = 96	−0.08 (0.07) N = 153	0 (0.09) N = 78
Non-co-ethnic (W/cued leader)	0.28*** (0.1) N = 237	−0.35*** (0.13) N = 216	−0.35*** (0.15) N = 161	0.13** (0.06) N = 234	−0.31*** (0.06) N = 209	0.14* (0.08) N = 157

Note: BJP, Bharatiya Janata Party. Standard errors are in parentheses. N indicates the number of respondents in both treatment conditions for the subgroup referred to in a given cell. Differences in means are calculated by subtracting the average distributive expectations of respondents exposed to the BJP cue from the average distributive expectations of those exposed to the Congress cue (i.e. Congress–BJP).
*$p < 0.001$; ***$p < 0.05$ +$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.01$ + >0.05.

Table 2. Partisan and ethnic effects on expectations of local public goods (state funds).

	Congress partisans	BJP partisans	Non-partisans
Same caste (for both leaders)	0 (0.05) N = 115	−0.12** (0.05) N = 170	−0.08* (0.05) N = 83
Different castes	0.05 (0.04) N = 208	−0.05 (0.05) N = 192	−0.09 (0.06) N = 144
Co-ethnic (W/ cued leader)	0.05 (0.05) N = 93	−0.11* (0.05) N = 153	−0.08 (0.06) N = 79
Non-co-ethnic (W/cued leader)	0.02 (0.03) N = 234	−0.07* (0.04) N = 211	−0.11** (0.05) N = 153

Note: BJP, Bharatiya Janata Party. Standard errors are in parentheses. N indicates the number of respondents in both treatment conditions in a given cell. Differences in means are calculated by subtracting the average distributive expectations of respondents exposed to the BJP cue from the average distributive expectations of those exposed to the Congress cue (i.e.: Congress–BJP).
*$p < 0.001$; ***$p < 0.05$ +$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.01$ + >0.05.

identified both BJP and Congress leaders from the same caste – thus holding caste constant in the partisan comparison. For this subset, Congress and BJP supporters' distributive expectations for jobs were 0.35 and 0.44 points (out of 4) higher when the cued leader was a co-partisan (as compared to a non-co-partisan), while Congress and BJP supporters expected a co-partisan sarpanch to be 25 and 22 percentage points more likely to provide them with a BPL card (than a non-co-partisan) when the castes of named leaders from both parties are the same. Second, Congress and BJP supporters who identified leaders from different castes, who plausibly perceived caste to be salient to local partisan competition, reported distributive expectations for jobs that were 0.25 and 0.35 points (out of 4) higher when the cued leader was a co-partisan (as compared to a non-co-partisan) while expectations for a BPL card were 17

and 22, respectively percentage points higher for Congress and BJP supporters in this subset when the cued leader was a co-partisan (as compared to a non-co-partisan). Third, co-partisanship shapes distributive expectations for both private goods when the cued leader is a non-co-ethnic (irrespective of the caste of the untreated leader). Co-partisan effects broadly hold for expectations of a job benefit when respondents are exposed to a co-ethnic leader, although the result for Congress supporters is statistically significant at the 90% level. Co-partisan effects on BPL cards have the correct sign but do not reach conventional (i.e., 95%) levels of confidence.

Results on expectations of local public goods are relatively weak when ethnicity is taken into account due to low variation on this measure; however, the general expectation of hypothesis 2 holds. Congress partisans do not respond to the partisan cue treatment on local public goods. While these effects often fall below conventional levels of statistical significance due to low variation on this measure, BJP partisans and nonpartisans broadly expect a BJP sarpanch to be more likely to bring state funds to their GP. All differences in means among BJP supporters have the expected sign; however, the effects among BJP supporters are statistically significant at the 90% level for subgroups exposed to co-ethnic and non-co-ethic leaders and there is insufficient variation among the subgroup of BJP supporters who identified leaders from different castes to identify a statistically detectable effect. Nonpartisans also are more likely to expect the BJP leader to bring state funds to their GP as indicated by the negative sign, although these results fail to reach conventional levels of statistical significance. In short, results tentatively support hypotheses 1 and 2, although ethnic considerations also play a role in shaping distributive expectations in some cases. Given that named leaders' ethnic characteristics are endogenous to voter and GP

characteristics, and not directly addressed in the experimental design, future studies are required to evaluate the relative impact of co-ethnic and co-partisan ties.

Implications for vote choice

Finally, I consider the implications of the argument on distributive expectations for vote preferences in local elections. Returning to Figure 2 above, I find that non-partisans were 12 percentage points more likely to report vote preferences for the BJP leader as compared to the Congress leader, while self-identified Congress and BJP supporters were 24 and 30 percentage points more likely to report vote intentions for a co-partisan leader than a leader from the other major party. As 94% of nonpartisans expected the BJP leader to bring state funds to the GP, compared to 84% under the Congress leader treatment, this provides suggestive evidence of strategic voting. This is consistent with comparable survey evidence from Rajasthan in 2011 which shows that 57% of voters who do not consider themselves party members voted for the incumbent Congress Party.[21] Moreover, the large share of nonpartisans in my data (25%) and rather high level of BJP partisans in a poor rural area that elected sarpanch from the Congress Party more than 60% of the time in 2010 also suggests that there was movement in party attachments and vote preferences away from Congress and towards the BJP in rural Rajasthan in 2013 when the BJP was ascendant. That said, the strong co-partisan pattern in vote preferences suggests that the discretion that the sarpanch holds over private distribution is consequential. Consistent with my argument, it is plausible that Congress supporters in poor rural societies, given their low-income profile in Rajasthan,[22] particularly value private goods and personal responsiveness. It is also plausible that self-identified Congress Party supporters are particularly close to the Congress Party, given the plausibly high level in 2013, and thus, consistent co-partisan voters. In short, while future research is required to more systematically test hypothesis 3, evidence from the vignette experiment is consistent with the strategic voting implication of the argument.

Discussion

This article shows that voters condition their expectations of receiving private state benefits on the party affiliation of local representatives (e.g. the sarpanch). When it comes to private benefits over which the sarpanch has discretion, voters condition their expectations on co-partisan ties with the sarpanch; however, voters take partisan alignment with the ruling party at the state level into account when it comes to local public goods. These results are consistent with my argument that voters take variation in the level of government that holds discretion across different types of benefits and the impact of partisan alignment across levels of government into account in forming their distributive expectations. My results

show that BJP supporters strongly condition expectations on local public goods provision on co-partisanship with a leader aligned with the ruling party in the state, while Congress supporters, whose party was expected to be displaced from power at the state level, are unresponsive to partisan cues on this outcome. On the other hand, both Congress and BJP supporters strongly condition their distributive expectations on co-partisanship with respect to private goods. These results support the view that partisan discrimination is substantial at multiple levels of government and that voters understand and respond to this environment.

This article also takes a first step towards developing an experimental design that takes the informational context of local politics into account. I argue that fictional candidate experiments have weaknesses in identifying the causal effects of partisanship on distribution in this informational setting and that their degree of experimental control is likely to be exaggerated. At the same time, there are limitations to the experimental design presented here. First, perhaps due to the nature of leader–voter ties among named local leaders, I find substantial floor effects in distributive expectations measures, which limits the level of variation I observe on distributive outcomes. For this reason, I emphasize the impact of partisan cues on partisan subgroups rather than variation on distributive expectations in absolute terms. This captures the extent to which party–voter linkages shape local distribution. Second, although fictional candidate experiments have their own potential for confounder effects, real candidate experiments also introduce unobserved characteristics of leaders that may impact my results. I address this concern through robustness checks that demonstrate that my conclusions hold when leader characteristics are held constant. Moreover, in village elections, where party–voter linkages reflect a personal sociopolitical tie, a mix of unobserved personal characteristics (beyond ethnicity which I test for) reflects the realistic nature of party–voter linkages on the ground. In short, while my experimental design does not solve all of the problems of a difficult methodological problem – identifying causal effects of endogenous candidate traits – it takes an important step towards addressing this challenge.

My argument and results suggest important avenues for future research. First, although detailed data collection on voters' policy preferences is beyond the purview of this study, future research on voters' preferences across types of government policy benefits and the information that voters have on discretion across these goods would be valuable for more nuanced theorizing in distributive politics. It would also be valuable to map preferences over goods to vote preferences, vote switching and changes in partisanship. For example, while Magaloni et al. (2007) argue that party preferences and the erosion of party loyalties are endogenous to past distribution, understanding how this logic applies when voters vary in their preferences over goods and the party they think is most able to provide

valued goods in the near term would be a major contribution.

In conclusion, this article contributes to an accumulation of evidence from developing country contexts that suggests voters are savvier participants in their democracies than previously expected (Baldwin, 2013; Ichino and Nathan, 2013; Sircar, 2016). My argument suggests that these calculations may be complex, particularly in multilevel systems where the level of government that holds discretion over allocation varies across types of goods. This more nuanced view of political behaviour has broad explanatory power in India and beyond.

ORCID iD

Mark Schneider ![ORCID](https://orcid.org) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8385-345X

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. *Distributive expectations* refer to voters' prospective judgments of government allocation of state benefits of various types.
2. While this research is diverse in its characterization of core supporters, there is extensive evidence of partisan targeting across private and local public goods.
3. Private goods may include antipoverty benefits and everyday responsiveness to constituent requests (Kruks-Wisner, 2018; Schneider and Sircar, 2016).
4. Local government in India and many other developing countries primarily perform an implementation (i.e. targeting) role rather than a policy-making role (Bohlken, 2016).
5. In India's decentralized system, highly salient resources are controlled by the state (Chhibber et al., 2004). Where valued goods are under the discretion of the federal government, we should see strategic voting for local leaders aligned with the ruling party at the centre.
6. This takes into account the 17 most populous states.
7. In my data, 60% of respondents reported to have participated in the MGNREGA right to work program and 34% reported to have a BPL card.

8. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Congress Party won 45.2 and 33% of votes, respectively, in 2013. In 2008, the BJP and Congress won 33.3 and 37.8% of votes, respectively.
9. Local and state assembly elections in Rajasthan are conducted 3 years apart.
10. This result is based on a survey of sarpanch that cross-referenced sampled voters conducted by the author. Research in other settings similarly establishes the high-information context of village politics (Alderman, 2002).
11. Respondents provided both Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party local leader names 84% of the time and the leader of the party for the partisan treatment condition to which they were assigned 93% of the time. When voters could not provide leader names, I provided a list of four alternate backup names provided by the sarpanch prior to the survey. The first name on the list that a respondent reported to know was used as a backup cue. See Online Appendix C for details.
12. In the robustness check, I demonstrate that the results hold when I restrict the analysis to respondents who identified the same partisan leaders (within a gram panchayat).
13. Since I cue only one politician in the treatment, I do not interpret this as a measure of vote choice per se; however, I expect it to capture voters' partisan vote preferences in local elections.
14. I sampled predominately male heads of household as males are most likely to request and receive state benefits, and therefore have informed distributive expectations (see Alsop et al., 2000).
15. I restricted sampling to blocks with average margins of victors of 15% or less and below poverty line (BPL) rates of 20% or more. See Online Appendix B for further details on the sampling procedure.
16. I provide balance statistics in Online Appendix A.
17. The survey question asked: Do you feel close to any party? If so, which one. I code respondents as nonpartisans if they answered 'no' to the first question. I identify voters as partisan supporters (Bharatiya Janata Party, Congress or a third party) if they answered 'yes' and provided the party name. I exclude five respondents who reported preference for third parties from the analysis.
18. Robustness checks include respondents who provided relevant leader names (those who required backups are excluded).
19. In gram panchayats where treated leader names were all unique, I included the modal leader name irrespective of treatment. When names were included in the treatment the same number of times, I randomly selected one name.
20. Caste categories included the following mutually exclusive categories: upper castes, Rajputs, Jats, Yadavs, other backward castes, scheduled castes, Meenas, scheduled tribes and Muslims. I coded self-reported caste names into politically relevant caste categories using a codebook provided by Lokniti, a national survey organization in Delhi. Since Muslim religion is a politically relevant category in rural India, I code Muslims as an ethic category that does not overlap with caste.
21. See replication materials from Dunning and Nilekani (2013). This survey similarly uses a sample frame that targets a high

22. level of poorer citizens given its focus on gram panchayats with reasonably high populations of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.
22. Congress supporters are 0.6 (of 5) wealth quantiles poorer than Bharatiya Janata Party supporters on average.

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Author biography

Mark Schneider is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Political Studies at Pitzer College. His research focuses on the consequences of free and fair elections for distributive politics, political behavior, and accountability at the local level in India.