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From Identity to Incentives: Rethinking Voting Behaviour in Contemporary India

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Abstract

The study of voting behaviour in India has long been organised around a foundational empirical observation: that caste, religion, and community identity are the primary determinants of electoral choice, operating through bloc mobilization, candidate selection, and the calculation of which party most credibly represents one's community interests. This identity-centred framework has never been without critics, and the critique has intensified in the period since 2014, when the BJP's combination of Hindu nationalist identity politics with extensive welfare scheme delivery — and its success in attracting significant support from communities that had historically supported Congress or regional parties — appeared to signal a shift in the mechanisms of electoral choice. This paper examines the theoretical and empirical case for a transition from identity-

based to incentive-based voting behaviour in contemporary India, argues that the binary is analytically misleading, and develops an integrated framework in which identity and incentives are co-constitutive rather than competing explanations. The BJP's electoral success is best understood as a fusion of Hindu identity mobilization with welfare delivery in a model that simultaneously activates identity commitment and provides material incentives — a combination that is more electorally potent than either dimension alone. The paper draws on Chandra's ethnic party theory, the economic voting literature, CSDS post-poll survey data, and the political economy of the BJP's "new welfare nationalism" to develop this argument, and concludes with implications for Indian democratic theory.

Keywords: Caste, Electoral Behaviour, Hindu Nationalism, Identity Politics, Incentives, India, Voting, Welfare Nationalism

Introduction

There is an enduring temptation in social science to explain the same phenomenon through the lens of whichever theoretical framework is currently in academic fashion. When rational choice dominated political science, Indian voting was explained as a strategic calculation of material interest. When sociological approaches prevailed, it was a social act determined by group membership. When psychological models became prominent, it was a function of party identification and candidate evaluation. The honest answer is that voting behaviour is all of these things at different times, in different constituencies, for different voters — and that the theoretical frameworks that claim exclusive explanatory power are typically overstating their case.

The specific binary that this paper interrogates — identity versus incentives — is particularly seductive in the current Indian context because the evidence is mixed in ways that allow advocates of both positions to select confirming instances. The persistence of caste bloc voting at constituency level confirms the identity hypothesis. The cross-caste appeal of BJP welfare schemes in 2019 confirms the incentive hypothesis. The BJP's fall from single-party majority in 2024 — partly attributable to welfare fatigue and partly to the Constitution-protection mobilization of non-BJP communities — is used to support both interpretations simultaneously.

The paper argues that this binary should be abandoned rather than resolved in favour of one side. Identity and incentives are not competing explanations; they are co-constitutive dimensions of the same political process. Welfare delivers material incentives while simultaneously communicating identity-based care — PM-KISAN tells farming communities that the government recognises them, not just that it transfers money to them. Hindu nationalism activates identity solidarity while simultaneously implying material protection — that Hindu communities will be preferentially protected by a Hindu majoritarian state. Disentangling these two dimensions analytically requires more methodological sophistication than the current debate typically deploys.

Literature Review

The foundational texts for the identity side of the binary are Weiner's (1957) ^[10] early observations on caste and voting in Indian elections, Morris-Jones's (1966) ^[7] observations on the primacy of caste in Indian political participation, and Rajni Kothari's (1970) ^[6] Party System in India, which argued that political parties in India did not cut across social cleavages but rather organised themselves around them. Chandra's (2004) ^[2] Why Ethnic Parties Succeed provides the most sophisticated contemporary formalization: in a context where the state controls most resource access and where monitoring of voter behaviour is possible through community networks, ethnic parties rationally concentrate benefits on their own community and ethnic voters rationally prefer co-ethnic parties. The prediction is that caste-based voting will persist as long as the state remains the primary resource allocator and as long as ethnic monitoring of voting behaviour is feasible.

The incentive side is most forcefully articulated in the economic voting literature (Fiorina, 1981 ^[4]; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000) and in the welfare-voting studies already discussed. For India specifically, Vaishnav and Sircar's (2012) ^[9] analysis showed that voters in Indian assembly elections respond to economic conditions in ways consistent with retrospective economic voting — rewarding incumbents for growth and punishing them for economic deterioration — even after controlling for caste and religion. The ScienceDirect (2021) ^[8] Kerala-Bengal study found that BJP electoral gains in these states could be explained by a combination of Hindu nationalist mobilization and welfare scheme delivery, suggesting that the BJP had successfully fused identity and incentive appeals in a single electoral strategy.

The most theoretically sophisticated synthesis is Mehta's (2021) analysis of BJP's "new welfare nationalism" — the thesis that the BJP under Modi has created a distinctive political formation in which welfare delivery is simultaneously a material transfer and a cultural statement: a demonstration that the Hindu majoritarian state cares for its citizens in ways that the secular Congress state allegedly did not. This framework predicts that welfare delivery will be most electorally effective for the BJP where it can be credibly attributed to BJP governance rather than to the abstract state — and most effective among communities whose identity ties to Hinduism are strong enough that welfare delivery by a Hindu nationalist party carries the double valence of material benefit and identity affirmation.

Rationale of the Study

The 2024 election results provide the immediate motivation for this paper: the BJP's failure to achieve a majority despite historically unprecedented welfare delivery suggests that either the incentive hypothesis is wrong (welfare delivery does not guarantee votes), or that identity has reasserted itself (anti-BJP identity mobilization among non-Hindu communities, OBCs, and Constitution-protecting coalitions exceeded the BJP's Hindu welfare nationalist coalition), or — as this paper argues — that both dimensions are correct and their interaction in 2024 produced a different outcome than in 2019. The West Bengal case is particularly instructive: in a state where TMC's welfare scheme architecture was credited with its 2021 victory, the subsequent decline in TMC support and the competitive triangular contest among TMC, BJP, and the Left-Congress

alliance cannot be explained by either identity or incentive models alone.

Research Questions

1. What does the post-2014 electoral evidence indicate about the relative weight of identity and incentives in determining voting behaviour in India?
2. Through what mechanisms does the BJP's "new welfare nationalism" fuse identity and incentive appeals into a single electoral strategy?
3. What analytical framework best captures the co-constitutive relationship between identity and incentives in Indian voting behaviour?

Statement of the Problem

The central problem is the inadequacy of both pure identity and pure incentive frameworks for explaining contemporary Indian electoral behaviour. Identity frameworks cannot explain BJP gains among scheduled caste and tribal voters whose community interests might be better served by parties with explicit SC/ST welfare commitments. Incentive frameworks cannot explain the persistence of bloc voting patterns in constituencies where material interests diverge but caste solidarity remains electorally operative. An integrated framework is needed — one that explains how identity shapes the perception of incentives and how incentives are communicated through identity-laden political symbolism.

Operational Definition

Identity-based voting refers to electoral choice primarily determined by the voter's social identity — caste, religion, language, ethnicity — and their assessment of which party most credibly represents their community interests, regardless of programmatic policy differences. Incentive-based voting refers to electoral choice primarily determined by the voter's rational calculation of material benefit — welfare scheme receipt, economic conditions, employment prospects — attributable to incumbent or challenger parties. Welfare nationalism refers to the political strategy of combining identity-based mobilization (specifically Hindu nationalist identity) with welfare state delivery in a way that makes both dimensions mutually reinforcing rather than competing.

Objectives and Hypotheses

1. To critically review the theoretical frameworks — identity, incentive, and integrated — for explaining voting behaviour in contemporary India.
2. To analyze the BJP's welfare nationalism as a specific electoral strategy that fuses identity and incentive appeals.
3. To examine the West Bengal case as an instance of multi-party electoral competition where identity, welfare, and governance quality interact in ways that test the integrated framework.

Hypothesis H1: Voting behaviour in contemporary India is best explained by an integrated framework in which identity and incentives are co-constitutive — where welfare delivery is perceived through identity lenses that determine whether it generates BJP loyalty or TMC loyalty or community loyalty depending on the specific political context. H2: Welfare nationalism (the BJP strategy) is most effective when it can simultaneously activate Hindu identity solidarity

and provide credible material delivery; when either dimension is absent or contested, the strategy produces lower electoral returns than the 2019 result suggested it reliably would.

Delimitation of the Study

This paper focuses on national and major state election results from 2014 to 2024, with particular attention to West Bengal. It does not include analysis of Panchayat elections or local body electoral behaviour. The analysis draws on published empirical research, CSDS post-poll survey data, and published secondary analyses of ADR electoral affidavit data.

Methods

Critical literature review integrating identity-based and incentive-based theoretical frameworks with case analysis of recent Indian elections. Primary sources: Chandra (2004) [2]; Fiorina (1981) [4]; ScienceDirect (2021) [8]; Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007); CSDS (2019, 2024 [3]); ADR (2024) [1]; Vaishnav (2017). Framework development uses abductive reasoning to construct an integrated explanation consistent with the empirical evidence.

Results and Discussion

The 2014-2024 Electoral Record and What It Tells Us

The four major electoral cycles from 2014 to 2024 provide a natural experiment in identity versus incentive voting. The 2014 victory was primarily about identity — the failure of UPA II, the anti-incumbency against Congress, and Modi's personal appeal as an alternative — with welfare scheme delivery as a future promise rather than a current delivery. The 2019 victory combined welfare delivery (Ujjwala connections, PM-KISAN announcement, PMAY progress) with Hindu identity mobilization (Pulwama response, Balakot airstrikes) in a combination that produced the BJP's largest ever seat count. The 2024 elections, in which welfare delivery was arguably at its historical maximum, produced the BJP's weakest recent performance — which demands explanation.

The most parsimonious explanation consistent with the integrated framework is that anti-BJP identity mobilization in 2024 — among Muslim, Christian, Dalit, and non-dominant OBC communities motivated by the Constitution-protection narrative — exceeded the BJP's Hindu welfare nationalist coalition in a sufficient number of constituencies to reduce the party's majority. This is not a failure of the incentive hypothesis (welfare delivery did generate some support) but a demonstration that identity politics can override incentive calculations when identity threats are salient enough. The Congress's Constitution-protection message worked precisely because it reframed the election as an identity question — who belongs to and is protected by the Indian nation — rather than a welfare delivery question.

The West Bengal Case: A Three-Dimensional Contest

West Bengal offers the clearest illustration of the identity-incentive interaction in a competitive multi-party context. The TMC's 2021 victory against the BJP was widely attributed to its welfare scheme architecture — Kanyashree, Swasthya Sathi, Duare Sarkar — combined with Mamata Banerjee's personal charisma and Bengali identity mobilization against BJP's Hindi-belt centralism. The BJP's

strategy of emphasising central scheme delivery (PM-KISAN, Ujjwala) while simultaneously pursuing Hindu consolidation among tribal communities in Bankura and Janglemahal represented a parallel fusion of welfare and identity. The outcome — TMC victory — suggested that state-level welfare attribution (attributing delivery to TMC) combined with Bengali identity (opposing BJP's Hindi centralism) was more electorally effective than central scheme attribution combined with Hindu identity.

An Integrated Framework

The analytical framework that emerges from this evidence combines three propositions. First, identity shapes the attribution of welfare delivery: the same material transfer can generate loyalty to the BJP, TMC, or Congress depending on which community network communicates it and claims credit for it. Second, welfare delivery shapes identity salience: when material conditions are improving, identity threats are less electorally activating; when material conditions are worsening or welfare fatigue sets in, identity threats become more salient. Third, the relationship between identity and incentives is mediated by local political organisation: the booth worker, the ward president, the community leader who explains a scheme in terms of community care rather than bureaucratic entitlement — this is where identity and incentive are fused in the voter's actual experience of governance.

Summarization, Recommendations, Implications and Conclusion

Summarization

Voting behaviour in contemporary India cannot be adequately explained by either pure identity or pure incentive frameworks. The BJP's electoral trajectory from 2014 to 2024 illustrates both the power and the limits of welfare nationalism as a strategy that fuses both dimensions. When both identity solidarity and material delivery reinforce each other — 2019 — the combination is extraordinarily potent. When identity threats mobilize counter-coalitions and welfare fatigue reduces the marginal electoral value of scheme delivery — 2024 — the strategy's limits become visible.

Recommendations

Political science research in India needs to invest in more methodologically rigorous studies of the individual-level mechanisms of voting behaviour — specifically, experimental or quasi-experimental designs that can disentangle identity and incentive effects rather than relying on ecological correlations that confound the two. Survey instruments need to measure not only voting choice but scheme attribution, identity salience, and the specific community networks through which political information is received — the infrastructural channels through which identity and incentives interact at the voter level.

Implications and Conclusion

The identity-incentive binary is, ultimately, a false dichotomy imposed on a political reality that integrates both dimensions in ways that vary by context, community, and electoral moment. The most important implication of recognising this is for democratic theory: a democracy that organises electoral competition primarily around the fusion of identity and material incentive rather than around

programmatic commitment and accountable governance faces distinctive challenges of democratic quality. Not because identity and material welfare are illegitimate concerns — they are among the most legitimate — but because when identity and welfare are used to generate electoral loyalty rather than to advance genuine community interests, the democratic process becomes a performance of representation rather than its substance.

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