Preferences for Descriptive Representation: Asymmetries Between Hindus and Muslims in India*

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Abstract

Do minorities have a preference for descriptive representation? We address this question in India, a deeply religious society that has experienced extensive conflict between its Hindu majority and Muslim minority populations. Existing studies of preferences in such settings tend to attribute vote choice to strategic behavior by voters and parties. But because an election is a strategic context, voting outcomes usually reveal not the ideal preferences of voters, but rather their preferences mediated through a political and institutional context. Our research instead seeks to reveal ideal preferences through multiple experiments in diverse strategic settings in India. We find that within and across state lines, Muslims express a preference for co-religious candidates, but Hindus do not. Our findings support the idea that minorities may have a preference for descriptive representation even when it is not strategic to vote for coethnic or co-religious candidates.

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Introduction

Do minorities in divided societies have a preference for descriptive representation, or representation by individuals with whom they share minority status? In this paper, we seek to understand the political preferences of Hindus and Muslims in India. Religion is extremely important to individuals in India. According to the 2011 Census, places of worship make up 1.1% of all buildings in the country – more than schools, colleges, and hospitals combined. Moreover, conflict between groups is common, as shown by the ubiquity of Hindu-Muslim violence and the rhetoric of Hindu right wing party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) both nationally and at the state level. Comprising 14.2% of the country's population, Muslims are the religious minority in this case. According to the High Level Committee Report on Social, Economic, and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India conducted in 2006 (more commonly known as the Sachar Report), Muslims have lower levels of employment, literacy, and education and higher levels of poverty and child labor than the average Indian. In several cases, development outcomes for Muslims are worse than those of all religious minorities; in some cases, outcomes are worse than those of the historically disadvantaged scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (Government of India (2006)).

Descriptive representation for minorities might provide a channel for access to resources, policies, and better social standing that could lead to improved outcomes for them (Mansbridge (1999); Pande (2003); Besley et al. (2004); Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004); Chauchard (2014); Jensenius (2015)). In India, quotas (commonly known as reservations) in government, jobs, and education have ensured some level of descriptive representation for disadvantaged caste groups since 1950. As of yet, there are no such quotas for Muslims in India, meaning that Muslim candidates must win by receiving sufficient votes from Muslim voters or other voters if possible. Indeed, it is likely that it was the goal of strong descriptive representation that motivated Asaduddin Owaisi, three-time member of Parliament and president of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen[1], to urge Muslims to vote together for Muslim

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[1]The All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul Muslimeen (*All India Council of the Union of Muslims*) is a regional

candidates in a 2017 campaign rally in Uttar Pradesh.

Observational studies provide mixed evidence on the extent to which Muslims vote for co-religious candidates (Rudolph and Rudolph (1987); Alam (2009); Thakur (2015); Heath et al. (2015); Ahmed (2015)). This may be because strategic behavior at election time obscures the true preferences of voters. We conducted experimental studies across multiple strategic contexts – both within and across state lines – to understand whether Hindus and Muslims in India express a preference for co-religious candidates. In particular, we conducted a series of experiments in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu to assess the confidence citizens have in political leaders who use religious symbols. We conducted our survey experiments in both representative surveys of households and outside of temples and mosques as parishioners left.

Across our many experiments in multiple settings, we found that Hindus did not express greater confidence in politicians using Hindu religious symbols. Muslims, on the other hand, were more likely to express confidence in a leader using Muslim religious symbols than one who did not. The different reactions that Hindus and Muslims had to co-religious cues were found in all of the different settings in which we conducted experiments. In spite of mixed evidence for voting in observational studies for co-religious candidates at election time, our experimental results show that descriptive representation seems to be important for Muslims. These findings suggest the importance of conducting *experimental* studies across *multiple strategic contexts* to understand the true preferences of voters. The findings also suggest that the importance of descriptive representation may vary by minority status for different groups within the same country.

Religion and representation

Why might minorities find the election of individuals who share their minority status beneficial? Studies have found that the needs of a group may be better reflected in the provision of public and/or private goods when a member of that group is in office (Pande (2003);

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political party based in the state of Telangana.

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Besley et al. (2004); Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004)). Even while others (e.g. Dunning and Nilekani (2013); Jensenius (2015)) have found mixed effects of India's electoral quotas on broader developmental outcomes, there is evidence that descriptive representation arising from such quotas can improve inter-group relationships (Chauchard (2014)). More generally, Mansbridge (1999) claims that descriptive representation leads to both better communication among different groups in contexts of mistrust and legitimizes the group's "ability to rule."

Those studying voting behavior in India seem to have come to mixed conclusions about whether Muslims prefer coreligious candidates. The relevant studies have, in large part, used observational data, namely vote choice, to understand whether Muslim voter behavior is distinct from that of other religious and ethnic groups in India. Thakur (2015) has suggested that Muslims may vote strategically in blocks to defeat the BJP where the BJP is seen as a credible threat. Rudolph and Rudolph (1987) and Heath et al.(2015) have indicated that Muslims will only vote for Muslims when the likelihood of a coreligionist winning the election is high. More generally, the consensus seems to be that the Muslim vote is influenced mainly by the given political context (Blair (1973); Alam (2009); Ahmed (2015); Heath et al. (2015); Thakur (2015)).

That the incentive to vote for an in-group member may be distorted in certain electoral contexts is a common idea in the literature. If elections are competitions for access to political goods dispensed by the state, then groups are likely to form minimum winning coalitions to maximize the per capita value of these goods (Riker 1962; Bates 1983). Ethnicity[2] can mark natural boundaries along which coalitions may form because 1) common language and norms facilitate mobilization of individuals by political entrepeneurs (Bates 1983; Chandra 2004); and 2) belonging to an ethnic group is a characteristic that individuals cannot change after elections to gain access to goods (Fearon 1999). As demonstrated by many (e.g. Posner
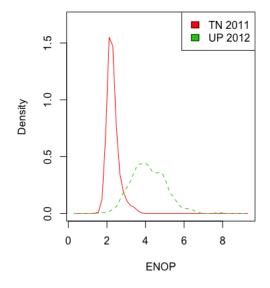
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[2]Fearon (2008) and Chandra (2004) suggest that membership in an ethnic group is defined based on descent – as a result, religious groups may be considered ethnic groups in some contexts. Further, to the extent that intermarriage among Hindus and Muslims is still uncommon in India, the distinction between these two religions may be considered "ethnic" here.

2004; Chandra 2004; Dunning and Nilekani 2013), political boundaries and the number of ethnic groups present can change the size of a minimum winning coalition, affecting whether or not individualsvote on the basis of ethnicity or a specific ethnic cleavage.

Voting outcomes will then reveal not the ideal preferences of voters, but rather their preferences mediated through a given political and institutional context. Individuals vote for in-group members in situations wherein it is strategic to do so. Additionally, as individuals have multiple overlapping identities (e.g. religion, gender, and class), vote choice may also reflect the most politically salient cleavage in a given setting. Parties will likely field candidates with strategic behavior in mind; they may not, for example, field Muslim candidates or use religious cues for Hindu candidates if religion is not a salient divide or there are not sufficient numbers of Muslim voters in a district.

Studies must then be conducted in multiple strategic contexts to truly observe voters' ideal levels and forms of representation. Studies must, further, be experimental in nature to allow the researcher to manipulate the characteristics of the candidate about whom a voter's opinion is sought; the supply of candidates in a real election will likely be endogenous to a given political or institutional context. We therefore conducted experimental studies in different strategic contexts to understand whether Hindus and Muslims in India express preferences for co-religious candidates. Our survey survey experiments were representative surveys of households and surveys outside of temples and mosques as parishioners left. These experiments were conducted in two Indian states, Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Tamil Nadu (TN). In UP by all accounts, vote choice is influenced by religious identity, whereas in TN this influence is much lower. The experiments were conducted in multiple settings across both time and space *within* UP to generate variation in levels of communal strife.

Figure 1: Density of the effective number of parties per election (state assembly)

Multiple settings

The locations in which we conducted our experiments, UP and TN, exhibit variation in both voting strategies and local level social cleavages that affect voters' strategic considerations at election time as well as the salience of religious identity. During the time in which these experiments were conducted (2011-2012), these states, as shown in Figure 1, exhibited variation in the effective number of parties (ENOP) and the percentage of Muslims in the state. According to Wilkinson (2005), a larger ENOP (and therefore greater party fractionalization at the state level) should make it more likely that the Muslim vote is pivotal, incentivizing Muslims to vote together. Figure 1 clearly shows increasing party fragmentation as one moves from TN to UP. This section elaborates on the unique political, historical, and social contexts of each state.

Uttar Pradesh

UP is the paradigmatic case in which religious identity is most likely to be electorally salient. As shown in Table 1, in the 2012 UP state assembly elections, the winning party, Samajwadi Party (SP), received 29% of the votes and the second placed party, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), received 26%. Both of these parties field Muslim candidates and receive Muslim votes. The third and fourth placed parties—the BJP and the Congress—received 15 and 14% of the votes, respectively. In the 2017 elections, however, the BJP won with a stunning 39.67% of the vote. The new Chief Minister, Yogi Adityanath, is well known for his radical anti-Muslim rhetoric (Barry and Raj (2017)).In this environment, religion seems to be electorally salient and it would make strategic sense for the Muslims to vote for co-religious candidates.

Beyond contemporary electoral politics, the history of UP is marked by Hindu Muslim tension and mobilization of religious identities. The Babri Masjid (a mosque destroyed by Hindu extremists) is located in Ayodhya - a town in UP, and there is significant Hindu–Muslim violence in the state (Brass 1997; Varshney 2002; Wilkinson 2005). The most important Muslim seminary, Darul Uloom, is located in Deoband in UP, as are the first Muslim universities—e.g., the Aligarh Muslim University. Before independence, UP was also central to claims for an independent Muslim state - Pakistan. Moreover, there is a clear class divide between Hindus and Muslims in UP. Muslims in UP are poorer than other citizens of the state: the urban poverty incidence rate is 45% compared to a state wide average of 30%.

Settings within UP: varying levels of communal tension

Holding the state political context constant, there may be variation in the social salience of religious identity across both space in time. In particular, communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims may be higher. As a result, we conducted our experiments in both urban Aligarh[3] (where communal tensions are high) and rural Kanpur[4] (where communal

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[3]ENOP was 3.67 in 2007
[4]ENOP was 3.3 in 2007

Table 1: Summary of state electoral contexts. Source: Election Commission of India.

Election	% Muslim population[1]	Vote share 1[2]	Vote share 2[3]
UP 2012	19.26	29.13	25.91
UP 2017	19.26	39.67	22.23
TN 2011	5.56	38.40	22.39
TN 2016	5.56	40.77	31.64

[1] Based on 2011 Census data.

[2] Vote share of the party with the most seats.

[3] Vote share of the runner up party.

tensions are lower)(Brass 1997, 51; Varshney 2002)[5]. Additionally, it is also possible that communal tensions are a result of elite mobilization strategies (Wilkinson Wilkinson (2005)). We thus conducted our experiments in 2011 and then in the run up to the state legislative assembly elections in 2012 in order to vary the extent to which individuals may have been subject to elite mobilization strategies. Election campaigning was ongoing during the second survey, but not the first.

Tamil Nadu

Given the less fragmented political setting and low tensions among Hindus and Muslims, TN represents the case where the electoral salience of religious identity is likely to be low. Two regional parties with an overarching focus on linguistic identity politics, the DMK and the AI-ADMK, define the politics of TN. The two parties garner the overwhelming majority of the votes in the state. The Muslim community in TN is too small numerically (5.6 %) to have a large impact on the outcomes of an election, particularly when the gap between the vote share of the top two parties is large (see Table 1). Moreover, because there is no communal environment in TN (i.e. the BJP is absent) and the major parties are secular, Muslims

[5]See the appendix for how these differences affected the sampling strategy.

may feel less threatened and thus less inclined to vote as a group. Noting these features, Alam (2008) cites TN as an example of a state where Muslims should not necessarily favor co-religious candidates for strategic reasons.

Further, the history of TN has not been marked by Hindu–Muslim tensions. The influence of Muslim emperors of North India in TN was limited, and Islam emerged in this area not via invasion but through Arab traders who had settled in the 8th or 9th century. Electoral and party politics in TN in the second half of the 20th century were dominated not by religious issues, but by a powerful anti-Brahmin movement and the need to preserve a Tamil (linguistic) identity. In TN, Muslims and Hindus are also comparably educated. The rate of urban poverty among Muslims in TN is the same as the state average.
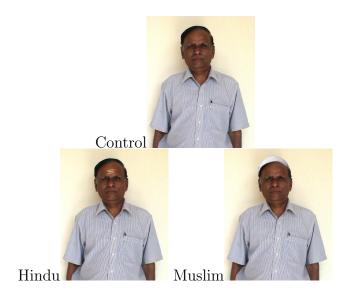
Multiple experiments

We conducted two different types of experiments in 2011 and 2012. The key randomized manipulation was that subjects were shown one of two photos before a short survey was administered. All subjects saw a photograph of a hypothetical politician. In the treatment condition, the politician had marks that identified him to be a religious Hindu or Muslim. Treated Hindus and Muslims were given photos with marks identifying the politician as either a Hindu or Muslim, respectively. In the control condition, he had no religious markings. The subjects in the photos and the clothing, beards, and other markings were chosen so that they fit the ethnic and cultural norms of the given area. For example, Figure 2 displays the control, Hindu, and Muslim photos used in TN. Note the symbol on the forehead in the Hindu photo, and the cap in the Muslim one.

Along with whatever photo subjects were shown, respondents were read the following prompt and question:

> At a recent meeting celebrating India's democracy this leading politician said "Politicians like me from different political parties try hard to represent the interests of the people who support us and vote for us."

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Figure 2: Photos Used in TN

Control

Hindu   Muslim

Do you have confidence [*Vishwas*] in what this person is saying? [Yes, No, Don't Know][6]

These experiments were conducted outside of mosques and temples to measure respondents' opinions as they left religious services. These services should prime the respondents' religious identities, and people attending worship services should be receptive to religious appeals. The one exception to this sampling strategy is the set of experiments conducted during the build up to the 2012 election– these experiments were conducted on a door-to-door sample.

The cue in the photo is intended to provide information about the candidate's religion. Of course, it is possible that the treatment is much stronger for Muslims, as the default expectation may well be that the candidate is a Hindu. The treatment condition for Hindus, then, would not provide much new information to respondents. Moreover, given internal divisions within Islam, a candidate who is a Muslim is not necessarily co-religious with all Muslim respondents. Given these issues, a variation of this experiment conducted only in UP used a coreligionist prompt in addition to the religious cues in the photos. The politician's

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[6]All surveys were translated into the local vernacular.

religious identity was conveyed in the control condition, and the treatment condition indicated that the candidate shared the same religious beliefs as the respondent. The sentence introducing the picture in this experiment read:

> At a recent meeting celebrating India's democracy this [Muslim] [Hindu] political leader whose religious beliefs are the same as yours said "Politicians like me from different political parties try hard to represent the interests of the people who support us and vote for us."

> Do you have confidence [*Vishwas*] in what this person is saying? [Yes, No, Don't Know]

Results across states

Table 2: Treatment effects for confidence in a hypothetical politician across TN and UP[1]

Group	N	Control mean	ATE[2]	SE[3]	Pr($>$|t|)
UP					
Muslims	1150	0.34	0.11	0.03	0.00
Hindus	1228	0.32	0.02	0.03	0.39
Tamil Nadu					
Muslims	400	0.47	0.12	0.05	0.02
Hindus	400	0.24	-0.05	0.04	0.22

[1] Experiments conducted outside of temples and mosques. The dependent variable is whether respondents answer "Yes" to whether or not they had confidence in what the hypothetical candidate was saying.
[2] Average treatment effect is the coefficient on treatment indicator. Regression includes regional dummies.
[3] Heteroskedasticity consistent (HC0) standard errors.

Table 2 presents the results for the experiments conducted outside of mosques and temples in UP and TN. In both states, the point estimates for Hindus cannot be distinguished from zero. In contrast, Muslims expressed greater confidence in the politician using religious

symbols.

Results within UP

Table 3: Treatment effects for confidence in a hypothetical politician within UP[1]

Group	N	Control Mean	ATE[2]	SE[3]	Pr($>|$t$|$)
By region[4]					
Urban Aligarh					
Muslims	393	0.26	0.15	0.04	0.00
Hindus	396	0.25	0.04	0.04	0.39
Rural Kanpur					
Muslims	354	0.33	0.13	0.05	0.01
Hindus	438	0.34	-0.01	0.05	0.79
Over time					
2011[4]					
Muslims	1546	0.43	0.07	0.02	0.00
Hindus	1773	0.41	0.02	0.02	0.44
2012[5]					
Muslims	426	0.47	0.09	0.05	0.05
Hindus	805	0.35	-0.02	0.03	0.47
Co-religionist Prompt[6]					
Muslims	447	0.34	0.18	0.04	0.00
Hindus	514	0.29	0.02	0.04	0.57
Hindus receiving image of a Muslim candidate[5]					
Hindus	170	0.49	-0.23	0.07	0.00

[1] The dependent variable is whether respondents answer "Yes" to whether or not they had confidence in what the hypothetical candidate was saying.
[2] Average treatment effect is the coefficient on treatment indicator.
[3] Heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC0) standard errors.
[4] Experiments conducted outside temples and mosques in Kanpur, Aligarh, and Lucknow.
[5] Door-to-door sample in Kanpur. Regressions include polling station dummies.
[6] Experiments conducted outside temples and mosques in Kanpur.

Table 3 presents the results for the experiments conducted across different settings within

UP. Across several different contexts and with the co-religionist prompt, we see a significant treatment effect among Muslims, but not among Hindus. Note that in the experiment with the co-religionist prompt, wherein the candidate's religion was made clear in the control condition, we still see a large treatment effect among Muslims. This makes it appear less likely that our asymmetric results are driven by default assumptions that a candidate will be a Hindu.[7]

Interestingly, in the door-to-door experiment conducted in Kanpur, several Hindus were given the treatment condition for Muslims. The large treatment effect shown in Table 3 suggests that when Hindus are given information that a candidate is actually *not* a coethnic, they may be less likely to vote for the candidate. This result is particularly surprising because we observe it in Kanpur, a part of UP where Hindu-Muslim conflict is low. In fact, Hindus were only even given the treatment condition for Muslims here because Hindus and Muslims in Kanpur often live *alongside* each other. Of course, experiments with symbols from many other religions would have to be conducted to determine whether this negative treatment is a reaction to the fact that the candidate is a non-Hindu, or a reaction to the fact the candidate is a Muslim.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we conducted a series of experiments to determine if Hindus and Muslims in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu express a preference for descriptive representation. We see consistent results across the multiple experiments: regardless of the electoral context, we see evidence that Muslims prefer Muslim candidates and co-religionists. We see no evidence of a similar trend among Hindus in our sample. In describing this asymmetric behavior, we are not making an essentialist or primordialist claim about Hindus and Muslims generally, as we

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[7]If asymmetric results were driven by default assumptions that a candidate is a Hindu, we would expect negligible treatment effects among Muslims in the coreligionist experiment, wherein the default assumption among Muslims is that the candidate is a Muslim.

conducted our study on Hindus and Muslims in India only.[8] We would be unsurprised to see different results of a similar study in a different country, particularly one in which Hindus and Muslims have a different majority or minority status.

The *reasons* for this asymmetry are potentially numerous and require additional examination. For a majority, subgroups formed by cross-cutting cleavages (see Dunning and Nilekani (2010)) may be more relevant. For a minority, on the other hand, the largest and most widely encompassing identity may be the most politically salient because sub-groups within the identity group may be unable to form minimum winning coalitions. Low levels of national representation may also make minority group membership salient across many different contexts. In a study of attitudes towards urban migrants in Mumbai, for example, Gaikwad and Nellis (2016) find that while ethnicity does not seem to affect the opinions of majority group members, minorities favor those with of the same ethnic group to enlarge their voter base and achieve "safety in numbers." McConnaughy et al. (2010), moreover, claim that Latinos might favor Latino candidates due to a belief in a shared political fate.

As for majority attitudes towards minorities, de Figuerido and Elkin (2003) use a cross-national study to claim that while national pride does not predict hostility towards minorities, *nationalists* are likely to be hostile towards immigrants and minorities. This finding is particularly relevant in the Indian case, given the BJP's history of winning Hindu votes through the use of "us-vs-them" politics, where "them" refers to Muslims (Yadav (1996)). One need only look to the words of Narendra Modi at a rally in Fatehpur before the UP 2017 elections to see that this strategy is alive in Indian politics: "Whatever there is for the Muslims should be for the Hindus too...If there are graveyards being built in villages,

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[8]The study does not fit easily into frameworks of "modernism" or "primordialism," much like studies of race and ethnicity in American politics that often have similar designs (and findings, for that matter). McConnaughy et al. (2010), for example, conduct a lab experiment measuring the effect of cues about racial identity on voter choice for city council, and attempt to explain Latino preferences for Latino candidates alongside Anglo resistance to Latino candidates. A large number of scholars (e.g. Wolfinger 1965; Jackson 1987; Terkildsen 1993;and Philpot and Walton 2007) have similarly investigated the persistence of ethnic voting among minorities in the Unites States. As these studies are conducted in a single country, the authors cannot show context to be an independent variable of interest, yet they are by no means making primordialist arguments because they interpret their findings *within* the context given.

crematoriums should also be built. If there is light during Ramzan, there should be light during Diwali."

This discussion aside, the main takeaways of our study are clear. First, we show that contrary to the findings of other studies, Muslims across India express a clear preference for descriptive representation. We attribute the differences in findings to the fact that our multiple experiment design reveals preferences that may not be visible in vote choices in single contexts due to the strategic behavior of parties and voters. The paper thus provides an example of how researchers may use experiments and a multiple case design to parse out differences between strategic voting behavior and voters' ideal preferences. Our findings have substantive implications as well. While Indian democracy uses political reservations to ensure descriptive representation for disadvantaged caste groups, the system has no such reservations for Muslims, the country's largest religious minority. Muslims are, as such, underrepresented in India; comprising about 14.2% of India's population, Muslims hold only 4.2% of the Lok Sabha (the lower house of Parliament).[9] Given the results of this study, we cannot attribute this phenomenon to disinterest in descriptive representation among Muslims. It may, instead, be a result of strategic behavior by all voters and the anti-Muslim sentiment of Hindu voters. This finding suggest further research be conducted to understand institutional and social barriers to the descriptive representation of minorities, particularly Muslims, in India.

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[9]Members of the Rajya Sabha, the upper house, are elected indirectly by state legislatures; as a result, the composition of this body of government is not an appropriate measure of levels of descriptive representation in India.

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