

The Religious Fault Line in the 2014 Election

Shreyas Sardesai
Pranav Gupta¹
Reetika Sayal

Introduction

Much of the reasoning surrounding the BJP's watershed victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections so far has centred broadly on four points. First, the important role played by Narendra Modi's leadership and the absence of a strong leader among BJP's opponents to take him on. Second, the success of BJP's election campaign in convincing the voters about Modi's so-called development and good governance model in Gujarat. Third, voters' disenchantment with price rise, corruption and poor governance under the Manmohan Singh led UPA government. And fourth, the BJP's success in making inroads among castes and communities which have traditionally not voted for it in large numbers. However amidst all these analyses which are no doubt crucial in explaining BJP's overwhelming performance, an underlying factor that has been given limited attention is that of religion particularly the Hindu-Muslim divide. In our opinion, understanding the role of played by this cleavage is equally significant, if not more, in explaining the 2014 verdict. An analysis of data from the National Election Studies (NES) conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) from 1996 onwards reveals that never in the last two decades has religion emerged as such a major fault line in voting preferences as it did in the 2014 election. This was not the case even during the late 1990s when the Hindutva movement was at its peak. Our argument is based on four aspects emerging from survey data. First, a longitudinal comparison of Hindu voting preferences reveals that overall the BJP attracted an unprecedented proportion of Hindu votes in 2014. Second, as always the Muslim voting pattern was largely determined by the practical calculation of which party was in the best position to defeat the BJP and therefore coalesced mainly

around the Congress which was the BJP's main opponent in many of the large states of central and western part of the country. Elsewhere it either consolidated behind another non-BJP option or got divided. Third, despite 'considered voting' the votes of Muslims seem to have been rendered ineffective because of a greater degree of en-bloc voting for the BJP by certain Hindu communities. Fourth, in many of the states with a significant Muslim population, the degree of polarisation was even more acute in 2014 as the number of parties among whom the Hindu votes got distributed declined since 2009 thus indicating a definite consolidation of Hindu votes. We shall look at each of these aspects and then try to identify the reasons for this religious polarisation.

The Unprecedented Hindu Consolidation Behind the BJP

Survey data reveals that there was greater convergence in the voting behaviour of various sections within the Hindu community. Between 1996 and 2009, overall Hindu vote (Upper castes, OBCs, Dalits and Adivasis taken together) for the BJP, long viewed as the political wing of the Hindu nationalist movement (Hansen, 1999), was consistently less than thirty percent, but in the 2014 election it crossed that barrier and stood at a much higher 36 percent (See Table 1). What is significant is that even during the communally charged decade of 1990s the BJP had failed to attract so many Hindu voters towards it. The deviation of the Hindu vote for the BJP from the overall vote share of the party was also at its highest in the 2014 election at five percentage points. If the Hindu vote for the BJP saw a sudden rise in 2014, the Muslim vote for the Congress which has always been much higher in comparison to its overall vote share did not see any such abrupt increase. In fact it was constant at about 38 percent. This means that the overall consolidation levels of Muslims behind the Congress and of Hindus around the BJP were equally strong and hence for the first time saw a near parity. While the gap between Hindu support for BJP and Muslim support for Congress was in double digits in most elections between 1996 and 2009 (except 1998), in 2014 it reduced to just minus two percentage points thus indicating strong polarisation.

¹ Authors are associated with Lokniti, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

Table 1
Hindu Muslim Divides in 2014

2Year	BJP's overall vote (%)	Hindu vote for BJP (%)	Deviation of Hindu vote for BJP from BJP's overall vote (% points)	Cong's overall vote (%)	Muslim vote for Cong (%)	Deviation of Muslim vote for Cong from Cong's overall vote (% points)
1996	20	23	+3	29	36	+7
1998	26	28	+2	26	32	+6
1999	24	27	+3	28	40	+12
2004	21	25	+3	27	36	+9
2009	19	22	+3	29	38	+9
2014	31	36	+5	19	38	+19

Source: National Election Studies (NES) conducted by CSDS; Sample sizes: 1996 - 9602; 1998 - 8133; 1999 - 9436; 2004 - 27189; 2009 - 36641; 2014 - 22301 (Post Poll).

Given the sheer dominance of Hindus in the electorate (80.4 percent of the country's population is Hindu); a religious polarisation of this magnitude was bound to benefit the BJP in many parts of the country. A regional analysis of the Hindu and Muslim vote shows the varying nature of this consolidation. In Western and Central India there was clear polarisation as the BJP and its allies got more than 60 percent of the Hindu votes and the Congress performed extremely well among Muslims. Incidentally in Western India, Hindu support for the BJP was almost as much as Muslim support for the Congress. Despite the multi polar nature of contests, the BJP and its allies managed a vote share of around 45 percent among Hindus in North India. The high fragmentation of Muslim votes in the region could have also helped the BJP.

The Muslim Vote in 2014

Although Muslim vote for the Congress was much higher than the overall vote share of the party, the question is - why did the Congress not get a greater share of Muslim votes as compared to 2009 even when Narendra Modi, held by many Muslims as being responsible for the anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat in 2002, was the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP? The answer to this can be found in the states and their differing nature of political competition. Since the Congress and its partners are the main opponents of the BJP in some of the large states, the Muslim vote here consolidated behind the Congress helping the party to maintain its Muslim base. CSDS survey data from 2014 clearly shows that in states where there is a direct contest between the Congress and the BJP, the former secured nearly three fourths of the Muslim vote overall. In Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra it was even higher with as many as nine out of ten Muslims voting for the Congress and its partners (*See Table 2*). Meanwhile in states where strong regional parties are also present, Muslim support for Congress was only about 37 percent overall, as they mainly opted for non-Congress players. In Uttar Pradesh for instance the Samajwadi Party attracted the lion's share of Muslim vote, in West Bengal it was the Trinamool Congress and the Left, in Delhi AAP bagged a majority of Muslim votes, and in Assam the minority vote got split between the Congress and the AIUDF.

Interestingly, Muslim support for the BJP also rose to about eight percent nationally as compared to four percent in 2009. However this improvement is only marginal as compared to the gains made by the party among other social groups. The party continues to depend heavily on its support base among the Hindus as less than ten out of every hundred BJP voters were non-Hindus. The lack of support for the party among religious minorities therefore means that the party is yet to establish an umbrella social coalition similar to the one that the Congress used to hold till the 1990s.

Table 2

Survey Based Estimates on Muslim Voting Preference in the 2014 Lok Sabha Election in Key States

States	INC/INC+ 2014 (%)	BJP/BJP+ 2014 (%)	Others 2014 (%)
Andhra Pradesh (undivided)*	34	BJP - 5 TDP - 18	43 (TRS - 9; YSR Cong - 25)
Assam	42	3	55 (AIUDF - 39)
Bihar	INC - 13 RJD - 51	BJP - 1 LJP - 1	34 (JDU - 21)
Delhi	39	2	59 (AAP - 56)
Gujarat*	66	17	17
J&K*	INC - 9 JKNC - 30	2	59 (JKPDP - 50)
Jharkhand	INC - 42 JMM - 17 RJD - 1	9	31 (JVM - 11)
Karnataka	68	25	7 (JDS - 5)
Kerala	INC - 36 IUML - 18 Rest - 9	3	34 (CPI(M) - 12, CPI - 1, LDF Others - 8)

States	INC/INC+ 2014 (%)	BJP/BJP+ 2014 (%)	Others 2014 (%)
Madhya Pradesh	92	8	Negligible
Maharashtra*	INC - 78 NCP - 10	BJP - 7 Shiv Sena - Negligible	5
Rajasthan	55	38	7
Tamil Nadu*	INC - 7	BJP - 8 DMDK - 1	84 (AIADMK-42, DMK-31)
Uttar Pradesh	INC - 11 RLD - 1	BJP - 10	78 (SP - 58 ; BSP - 18)
West Bengal	INC - 24	2	74 (AITC - 40, Left - 31)
All India	46 INC - 38 Allies - 8	9 BJP - 8 Allies - 1	45 (SP- 11, Left - 6, BSP - 4)

Note: * Figures should be read with caution due to low sample size of Muslims. Other states with a very low sample size have been excluded from the Table.

Source: NES 2014 Post Poll

Muslim Votes Rendered Ineffective?

The Muslim community's overall leaning towards the Congress and regional players has led to an oft repeated charge by the BJP that Muslims constitute a 'vote-bank' and that they vote en-bloc for BJP's opponents. However survey data shows that this feature of high support by a community for certain parties is in no way restricted to Muslims. This phenomenon can also be seen among Hindu upper castes and their support for the BJP. While about two out of every five Muslims voted for the Congress in the 2014 election, the upper caste backing for the BJP was one out of two. In fact data since 1996 clearly indicates that consolidated voting happens even among Hindu upper caste voters, not just Muslims. The divide becomes sharper through a state wise analysis of the 2014 survey data. Table 3 shows that not only was the BJP able to consolidate upper castes in all

Table 3

Survey Based Estimates on Hindu Upper Caste Voting Preference in the 2014 Lok Sabha Election in Key States

State	BJP+ (%)	INC+ (%)	Others(%)
Gujarat	81	16	3
Bihar	78	5	17 (JDU – 8)
Jharkhand	74	9	17 (JVM – 10)
Uttar Pradesh	71	7	22(SP-7, BSP-4)
Assam	69	19	12
Madhya Pradesh	65	25	10
Uttarakhand	64	30	6
Delhi	63	10	27 (AAP -21)
Karnataka	62	33	5
Rajasthan	60	20	20
Himachal Pradesh	60	35	5
Maharashtra	49	35	16
Andhra Pradesh (undivided)	49	6	45 (YSR Cong-26, TRS-11)
Chhattisgarh	46	18	36
Haryana	46	15	39 (INLD – 29)
Odisha	32	9	59 (BJD – 56)
Kerala	28	30	42 (LDF – 28)
West Bengal	24	5	71 (TMC – 38, Left 27)
Tamil Nadu*	9	2	89 (AIADMK-24, DMK-54)

Note: * Figures should be read with caution due to low sample size of Upper Castes. Other states with a very low sample size have been excluded from the Table.

Source: NES 2014 Post Poll

states where it was in a direct contest with the Congress, but it managed to get higher upper caste support even in states where the competition was multi-cornered. The BJP's consolidation was highest in states such as U.P. and Bihar where the upper caste proportion in population is comparable to the proportion of Muslims.

So even as the Muslims put their weight behind non-BJP options, a parallel counter consolidation of Hindu Upper castes and OBCs behind the BJP much greater in magnitude, made the Muslim consolidation ineffective. This seems to have occurred even in seats where Muslims have been known to influence electoral outcomes. Out of the 87 seats where Muslims are over 20 percent of the population, the BJP won 43 as opposed to only 15 seats in 2009 (See Table 4). Strategic voting by Muslims has its own consequences on voting patterns and party competition in multi polar states where as demonstrated earlier in the paper, regional players and the Congress compete against each other for Muslim votes. A threat that exists for these players is the possibility of a counter consolidation of Hindu votes locally which would render the Muslim consolidation ineffective owing to the higher proportion of Hindu voters. Also, often attempts by multiple players to consolidate Muslim votes by raising a similar campaign pitch or by putting up Muslim candidates backfires and in fact leads to a fragmentation of the Muslim vote thus benefitting parties such as the BJP.

Degree of Polarisation Greater in States with Higher Muslim Populations

We would now like to further examine the degree of religious polarisation in 2014 and comment upon the nature of Hindu-Muslim consolidation in key states. We shall be using electoral fractionalisation within religious groups as an indicator of the degree of consolidation. For measuring electoral fractionalisation we shall estimate Effective number of parties (ENP) in a state among Hindus and Muslims based on survey estimates of vote shares for parties within these identity groups². Table 5 shows the Effective Number of Parties in 2009 and 2014 within Hindus and Muslims in four states - Assam, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. These are states with multi

Table 4
2014 Voting Behaviour by Concentration of Muslim Population in Seats

Muslim Population	Congress		Cong Allies		BJP		BJP allies		Others		
	Seats	Won	Vote%	Won	Vote %	Won	Vote %	Won	Vote %	Won	Vote %
Below 10%	253	18	21.4	5	3.0	129	29.8	33	10.3	68	35.5
10-19.9%	166	10	16.5	5	5.1	99	33.6	18	6.3	34	38.5
20-39.9%	63	3	13.6	3	3.8	38	35.2	1	0.8	18	46.6
40%+	24	7	23.4	2	5.6	5	20.9	0	0.0	10	50.1
No information	37	6	26.5	0	0.0	11	25.8	2	5.0	18	42.7
Over all	543	44	19.3	15	3.7	282	31.0	54	7.2	148	38.8

Note: The classification of constituencies by religious groups is based on Census 2001 and description of constituency boundary provided by the Delimitation Commission. Source: ECI data compiled by CSDS Data Unit.

polar electoral contests and where the proportion of Muslim population in the total population is greater than 15 percent. The table reflects the changes that have taken place in the social coalitions in these states in the last five years. In Assam, the state with the highest proportion of Muslims (31 percent) in India after J&K, the fragmentation of Muslims votes between the two principal players - AIUDF and Congress increased marginally. On the other hand there was a rare en masse shift of Hindu votes towards the BJP as the ENP among Hindus dropped sharply from 3.15 to 2.3. In both Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the heavy consolidation of Muslim voters for the RJD-Congress alliance and the Samajwadi Party (as reflected in a substantial decline in ENP among Muslims) respectively seems to have been rendered ineffective by the counter consolidation of Hindu votes behind the BJP. Though the absolute decline in ENP among Hindus was marginal in Bihar, one must note that this occurred despite the breakdown of the JDU-BJP alliance. In West Bengal, the ENP results seem to be on expected lines as the breakdown of the Congress-Trinamool Congress alliance and the rise of the BJP led to a fragmentation of both Hindu and Muslim votes and hence the ENP among both communities went up.

Table 5

State Wise Effective Number of Parties Within Hindus and Muslims, 2009-2014

State	2009		2014	
	ENP Hindus	ENP Muslims	ENP Hindus	ENP Muslims
Assam	3.15	2.13	2.30	2.72
Bihar	3.61	4.51	3.43	2.12
West Bengal	2.69	2.04	3.30	3.08
Uttar Pradesh	4.34	4.86	3.03	2.57

Note: All parties with vote share greater than 0.5 percent were considered independently, state allies were considered together and all others were clubbed together under the category of small parties.

Source: NES 2009 and 2014 (Post Poll)

Uttar Pradesh in specific saw a steady rise in incidence of communal violence and rioting in 2013. Muzaffarnagar in Western UP was the most affected district as the riots here were the most widespread and had rendered thousands of people homeless. While the SP government in the state was criticized for its inability to control these incidents, questions were also raised on leaders of various opposition parties for inciting these incidents. In a pre-election analysis of Uttar Pradesh politics, Sudha Pai spoke about the possibility of the SP losing out Muslim votes to the Congress and the BSP owing to its inability to handle the riots. She also mentioned how the BJP could consolidate its Hindu votes in Western UP by reviving its Hindutva ideology (Pai 2014). To briefly understand whether there was greater polarisation in the riot affected region around Muzaffarnagar, we first studied the ENP in all the 80 Lok Sabha constituencies of Uttar Pradesh and then further analysed it by different regions of the state as defined by the voting schedule drawn up by the Election Commission in the 2014 election. We found that as many as 63 out of the 80 seats in the state saw a decline in their ENP. Moreover there was a fall in the average ENP at the constituency level from 4.02 in 2009 to 3.28 in 2014. A decline in ENP on an average and in so many constituencies perhaps indicates greater en masse voting for a particular party by a specific religious group and probably explains the large vote margins by which the BJP won its seats. As expected, the Muzaffarnagar riots did result in much greater polarisation in Western UP and the adjoining Ruhelkhand region. This can be ascertained from the fact that the average percentage decline in constituency level ENP in this region was greater than the average 14.1 percent decline across the state (See Table 6). Having said this, constituencies in the Poorvanchal region also saw a considerable decline in their ENP, but further research is required to understand whether this was a spill over of the Muzaffarnagar riots or there were completely different issues in this region.

Table 6
Average Decline in ENP at the Constituency Level in Uttar Pradesh

Election Phase	Region	Average percentage decline in ENP since 2009
	Overall	14.1
III	Western UP	20.0
V	Ruhelkhand	16.4
VI	Doab	11.5
VII	Awadh and Bundelkhand	9.0
VIII	Mainly Poorvanchal	14.5
IX	Poorvanchal	14.2

Note: The analysis excludes Ghazipur and Etah as both these constituencies are major outliers in their respective regions because of the base ENP in 2009; Source: Authors' analysis of aggregate data

An analysis of booth level data in U.P. also points towards similar results as it showed that the vote share of the largest party at the booth level was higher than other regions in Western UP. A detailed analysis of the Muzaffarnagar seat showed that many booths turned into 'winner-take-all' contests as villages and areas comprising the booth voted one way or the other (Celestine 2014). While it cannot be denied that the Muzaffarnagar riots were definitely a factor behind greater consolidation in some seats of Uttar Pradesh, it would however be incorrect to overestimate the localized impact of the riots. Even though polarisation in 2014 seems to have been more intense than it was during the Post Babri period, what must not be ignored is the fact that unlike the 1990s, development, corruption and leadership were also important factors that determined voting choices in the 2014 election.

Minority Welfare or Minority Appeasement?

Over the years, particularly during the UPA years, the Congress has tried to tread a middle ground in the secular debate citing its commitment to the

broad Nehruvian idea of neutrality towards all religions while at the same time putting greater emphasis on issues related to deprivation and welfare of religious minorities as reflected by the formation of the Sachar Committee, a special 15-point programme for minorities and making a push for a sub quota within the OBC quota. This 'middle ground' has come under criticism from across the political spectrum. The Right has termed it as minority appeasement and has accused the Congress and regional parties of extending undue favours to the minorities. The regional parties and the Left have on the other hand criticized the Congress government for not doing enough for the minorities other than just paying lip service to their issues. We now seek to study whether popular perception about this gradual shift towards 'minority centric secularism' under the UPA could be one of the factors explaining the changes in social coalitions in 2014.

There was indeed some disgruntlement within Hindu OBCs and Upper castes with the Congress's model of secularism as in a survey conducted by CSDS in January 2014, around one third of them felt that some governments pay undue attention to Muslims only because they wanted to appease them for votes About 15 percent felt that governments need to pay special attention to the Muslims as they are socially and economically backward. Another 15 percent agreed with both these statements while the rest had no opinion. On the issue of reservation too, there seems to have been relatively less approval among Hindus for reservation of seats in educational institutions for Muslims as compared to reservations for other marginalized groups like Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs. While more than two third of the Hindu respondents who were not against reservation in principle³ supported reservations for SCs, STs and OBCs, the proportion was just around half for reservation for Muslims (*See Table 7*). While this figure of support for Muslim quotas may seem high, in relative terms however it is weaker as compared to support for reservation for other groups.

Table 7
Opinion on Reservations for Various Social Communities in
Government-run Educational Institutions

	Support reservation for SCs (%)	Support reservation for STs (%)	Support reservation for OBCs (%)	Support reservation for Muslims (%)
Hindus	69	69	63	51
Muslims	67	68	64	75

Source: NES Pre Poll 2014; Sample size - 20957.

Among Hindus who oppose reservation for Muslims, the BJP's vote share was around 44 percent as compared to 31 percent among those who support it. A similar pattern is observed among Muslims too as relatively a higher proportion of Muslims supporting reservation voted for the Congress. Interestingly the BJP enjoyed a one percentage point lead over the Congress among those Muslims who oppose reservation for Muslims. There seems to be a realization even within the Congress about its perceived pro-Muslim shift as reflected by the candid statement made by senior leader A K Antony after the election verdict. According to Antony, the party's "proximity towards minority communities" created doubts among other communities about its model of secularism and that there is a need to correct the notion that certain groups get special consideration within the Congress.⁴

There is also a need to understand why the Muslims remained the only social group which did not support the BJP in the elections. The Muslim voter still seemed reluctant to accept Modi as the Prime Minister as almost 34 percent of Muslims felt that he would be bad for the country as the Prime Minister as compared to only 9 percent Hindus (*See Table 8*). What's more, Muslims were also the only social group who gave a low rating to Modi on all parameters (*See Table 9*).

Table 8

Proportion of Respondents who Feel Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister Would Be Bad for the Country

	Modi bad for the country (%)
Hindus (All)	9
Hindu Upper Castes	7
Hindu OBCs	9
Hindu SCs	13
Hindu STs	9
Muslims	34

Note: Rest either said he would be good or it did not matter or had no opinion

Source: Election Tracker (Jan 2014) conducted by CSDS; Sample size - 18596.

Table 9

Proportion of Respondents Who Believe that Modi is Best Suited for Solving The following issues as Compared to Other Leaders

Community	Controlling Price Rise (%)	Development of the country (%)	Controlling Corruption (%)	Upliftment of Dalits and Adivasis (%)	Betterment of Muslims (%)
Hindu Upper Caste	43	46	39	34	31
Muslim	7	8	7	5	5

Source: NES 2014 Post Poll

Conclusion

To conclude, religion and the religious cleavage played an important role in determining the 2014 election result alongside the popularly discussed factors such as development, corruption and leadership. Empirical evidence clearly points towards a never seen before consolidation of Hindu votes behind the Bharatiya Janata Party. This consolidation not only ensured a majority for the party in Parliament but was also a dream come true for the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), the BJP's ideological mentor. At the heart of the RSS's Hindu nationalism is the idea that caste divisions in the Hindu society weaken Hindu unity (Jaffrelot 2007; Varshney 2014; Hansen 1999). These divisions have long been seen as obstacles by the BJP in its efforts to broaden its electoral appeal (Jenkins 1998). In that sense 2014 was watershed election for both the RSS and the BJP as for the first time they were able to create a 'unified' vote of the Hindus. A deeper research is required to ascertain whether this consolidated Hindu vote was a culmination of long term efforts of the RSS to defuse caste identities in order to create one single Hindu identity or simply a vote for Narendra Modi and his promise of change. What we do know however from the CSDS surveys is that a sense of resentment did prevail among certain sections of the Hindu community as there was a perception that Muslims were being pampered by the Congress-led UPA government. It can be argued that the pro-minority policy discourse promoted by the Congress as a counter to Hindutva communalism after the 2004 victory (Sheth, 2009), started alienating and creating antagonism among not just upper caste Hindus but also other backward groups within the majority community, finally leading to an electoral backlash in the 2014 elections. Not only did the Congress end up losing support among the so called Hindu lower castes but it also failed to break new ground among Muslims who continued to repose their trust in regional parties in many states. For revival the Congress needs to offer a new discourse which helps it to win back not only its traditional voters - the marginalized sections of the Hindus, but also enables it to retain support among Muslims who currently constitute one fourth of the party's total vote. As far as the BJP is concerned, what remains to be seen, is whether