Urbanization and the Rise of the Right in India[1]

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, right-wing parties have made electoral inroads developing as well as developed countries. This paper investigates the role of urbanization in the rise of the right in India. We provide evidence that remote-sensing measures of urban expansion are associated with improvements in the election performance of India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Using an urban expansion forecasting algorithm to isolate plausibly exogenous variation in the expansion of Indian cities into surrounding constituencies, we provide evidence that the relationship is plausibly causal. Tests of competing channels suggest the effect is not driven by exposure to inter-ethnic conflict in urban areas but by the BJP's urban party networks and distinctive party brand/messaging in the context of the shift from an agricultural to urban economy, especially under the leadership of Narendra Modi. The findings show that economic modernization does not automatically produce liberal politics and can create opportunities for right-wing political entrepreneurs.

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1. Introduction

In advanced capitalist economies, urban areas tend to vote for left/liberal parties and rural areas for the right. The emergence of a left-right, urban-rural divide is so ubiquitous that it has come to be perceived as something of a law-like feature of politics, putatively reflecting a divide between the liberalizing effects of exposure to the "modern" economy based on highly educated workers as compared to the political conservatism of backwards regions that have been left behind (Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, and Piketty 2022).

Indeed, extrapolating from the experienced of industrialized countries, modernization theory has long posited a "liberalizing" effect of long-term urbanization in developing countries. Modernization theorists argued that as people left rural environments for urban ones, their political attachments to parochial identities – such as those based on ethnicity or religion – would weaken (Deutsch 1961). Others have argued that that urbanization, as well as the corresponding emergence of an urban middle class, may even be a pre-requisite for the emergence and survival of liberal democracy (Lipset 1959).

In this paper, we explore a case which appears to defy some of these predictions. Specifically, we explore the role of long-term urbanization in the rise of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, which in the last four decades has experienced a meteoric rise from niche force with support in socially conservative parts of northern and western India to a dominant national party, which has won majorities in the last three general elections (Jaffrelot 2017). The rise of the illiberal right in India has occurred during a period of rapid spatial transformation, as megacities, small towns, and urban peripheries have rapidly expanded to the point that, depending on

definitions, a majority of Indians now live in urban or peri-urban environments. Not only has urbanization not apparently hindered the rise of the BJP, we argue, but it may have even fueled its rise.

The pace and spatial incidence of the expansion of cities into previously rural areas has varied across the country. This provides an opportunity to investigate empirically whether urbanization has contributed to the BJP's rise. To investigate these dynamics, we analyze two different sets of data. First, we assemble a panel dataset of general election results at the parliamentary constituency level for the period 1985-2019 and link these electoral returns to satellite-imagery based estimates of the share of a constituency's surface area that is urban or peri-urban as opposed to rural. Analyzing this data with panel regressions including both constituency and state-year fixed effects, we provide evidence that constituencies experiencing urban expansion also experienced a large relative increase in the vote and seat share of the BJP. To establish causality, we use an algorithm to forecast urban expansion from topography, and show that plausibly exogenous variation in urban expansion is also related to the rise of the BJP, suggesting that the relationship is causal.

Second, we report preliminary results from analysis of newly digitized and geo-coded polling station-level results for the 2019 general elections. This involved transcribing large volumes of paper-based "Form 20" electoral data published at the polling station level, and geocoding this data to polling station coordinates which were briefly posted online by the Election Commission of India and scraped. Our analyses are preliminary because, though we are in the process of cleaning the data for all of India (around a million polling stations), in this draft we report results

for four states: Odisha, Rajasthan, Assam, and Gujarat. In cross-sectional regressions including fixed effects for sub-segments of parliamentary constituencies, we provide evidence that in all four states, comparing among proximate neighborhoods, the BJP systematically receives more support in polling stations in urban and peri-urban versus rural areas. This spatially disaggregated analysis of granular voting data provides additional evidence that our findings are not an artefact of ecological inference issues but driven by the tendency of urban voters to support the BJP at higher rates than rural voters.

Our findings shed new light on the rise of the right. In contrast to a large body of work originating in the study of advanced capitalist economies suggesting that economically backwards and peripheral regions are those where the right tends to thrive, we provide evidence long-term processes of "modernization" can unexpectedly intensify political forces, such as religious nationalism, sometimes regarded as "traditional". Indeed, India represents an interesting example of a broader phenomenon where integration with the international economy, urbanization, and economic growth, results in unexpectedly illiberal domestic political consequences. We discuss potential mechanisms behind this relationship, including the role of the economic emergence of a conservative middle class and the cultural/sociological effects of an urban environment combined with exposure to new media technologies.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we provide historical background on the BJP and its rise in as a political force in recent decades. Second, we describe the data, empirical strategy, and results from our panel analysis at the parliamentary constituency level. Second, we describe the data, empirical strategy, and results from our analysis of granular

polling station-level data. Third, we discuss the findings and different potential explanations for the relationship between urbanization and the rise of the right. Fourth, we conclude by sketching plans for future steps in this research program.

2. Background

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has its ideological roots in the early 20th century, tracing back to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist organization founded in 1925. The RSS promoted the idea of a unified Hindu nation, rejecting foreign influences (particularly British colonial rule) and emphasizing Hindu cultural identity. It sought to counter Mahatma Gandhi's vision of a secular Indian nation-state to instead build a nation around traditional Hindu identity and societal structures.

After India's independence in 1947, the RSS remained an influential socio-political movement, but it did not directly engage in electoral politics. However, it inspired the formation of Jana Sangh in 1951, a political wing of Hindu nationalism, under the leadership of Syama Prasad Mukherjee. The Jana Sangh was the direct predecessor of the BJP and shared its core ideological focus on Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism. The party, however, struggled to make significant electoral gains in its early years, functioning largely as a marginal player in Indian politics dominated by the Congress party.

Initial Electoral Success in the 1980s

The BJP was officially founded in 1980 as a successor to the Jana Sangh. After Jana Sangh merged into the Janata Party in 1977 to oppose Indira Gandhi's Emergency regime, internal

ideological conflicts led the former Jana Sangh members to break away and form the BJP. Under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and LK Advani, the BJP initially adopted a moderate platform centered on Gandhian socialism and governance reforms. However, it struggled electorally, securing only 2 seats in the 1984 general election, partly due to the Congress wave following Indira Gandhi's assassination. Recognizing the limitations of this moderate platform, the BJP gradually shifted towards a more assertive Hindutva agenda, aligning itself closely with the RSS's ideology. This shift helped the BJP gain traction, especially among urban middle-class voters and sections of the Hindu majority that felt marginalized by what they saw as Congress's appeasement of minority communities.

Rise in the 1990s: The Ayodhya Temple Movement

The BJP's rise to national prominence in the 1990s is closely linked to the Ayodhya temple movement, which became a flashpoint in Indian politics. The party, under the leadership of L.K. Advani, actively supported the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and other RSS-affiliated groups' demands to build a temple at the disputed site in Ayodhya, believed by Hindus to be the birthplace of the deity Lord Ram, where the Babri Masjid (a mosque) stood.

In 1990, Advani led a nationwide "Rath Yatra" (chariot journey) to galvanize support for the temple movement. This campaign helped the BJP consolidate its Hindu nationalist base and garnered mass support from Hindu communities across the country. The movement culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 by Hindu mobs, an event that triggered widespread communal riots and heightened religious tensions across India.

The Ayodhya movement, while controversial and violent, cemented the BJP as a major political force in India. By the 1991 general elections, the BJP had increased its seat count dramatically and emerged as the principal opposition party to the Congress. The party's emphasis on Hindutva, national identity, and opposition to minority appeasement resonated with a broad section of India's electorate, particularly in northern and western India.

Growing Dominance under Narendra Modi

The BJP's next major political milestone came with the rise of Narendra Modi as its prime ministerial candidate for the 2014 general election. Modi, who was the Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014, became a polarizing figure after the 2002 Gujarat riots, but his image as a decisive, pro-business leader and his record of economic development in Gujarat appealed to urban middle-class voters, youth, and the business community.

Modi's 2014 campaign focused on economic development, job creation, anti-corruption, and a vision of a more assertive India on the global stage. His message of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas" ("Together with All, Development for All") and the promise of a stronger and more efficient government resonated with large sections of the population, particularly in light of the Congress-led UPA government's scandals and perceived inefficiency.

Under Modi's leadership, the BJP won a landslide victory in 2014, securing 282 seats in the Lok Sabha, the first time in decades that a single party had won an outright majority. Modi's success marked a shift in Indian politics, as the BJP expanded beyond its traditional strongholds in northern and western India to make inroads in states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Maharashtra.

In the 2019 general election, Modi led the BJP to an even more resounding victory, securing 303 seats (a gain of 21 seats).

The party's Hindutva agenda remained central, with key actions such as the abrogation of Article 370 (which granted special status to Jammu and Kashmir), the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which fast-tracks citizenship for non-Muslims, and the Supreme Court's 2019 ruling on the Ayodhya temple dispute favoring the construction of a temple at the disputed site. Under Modi, the BJP has not only consolidated its dominance but also expanded its electoral base across states where it once had little presence, making it the most powerful political force in contemporary India. Having won the last three general elections, the BJP is today on the cusp of meeting the conventional definition of a dominant party (four successive election victories or twenty years in power).

Urbanization

Over the period corresponding to the rise of the BJP, India has experienced rapid urbanization. Before the 1991 economic reforms, India's urbanization was relatively slow. India's economy was characterized by a focus on self-reliance and import substitution, with heavy state regulation and control. Industrialization was slow and heavily concentrated in a few urban centers such as Mumbai, Kolkata, and Chennai (Kohli 2006).

India's urbanization patterns changed dramatically after the 1991 economic reforms, which liberalized the economy, opened it to global markets, and encouraged private sector growth (Aghion et al. 2008), especially in the services and technology sectors. The rise of the

information technology (IT) industry, particularly in cities like Bangalore, Hyderabad, Pune, and Gurgaon, significantly contributed to the urban boom, contributing to the expansion of these cities into the previously rural hinterland. Large-scale migration from rural to urban areas increased, driven by a demand for jobs in the expanding services sector and booming urban economy, as well as by stagnant wages in agriculture.

Beyond the rise of these new major metros, new urban centers emerged throughout the country as small rural agglomerations grew into small towns, attracting migration from surrounding agricultural areas. Mid-size cities like Indore, Surat, and Coimbatore have grown rapidly, forming the basis of new industrial corridors and infrastructure development. As a result of these transformations, the share of India's urban population increased significantly. In 1991, only about 26% of the population lived in urban areas. By 2011, this figure had risen to 31%, and it is projected to reach over 40% by 2030. In Figure 1, we provide data on trends in urbanization (average share of parliamentary constituency land classified as urban according to satellite imagery) and BJP support (average BJP vote share) over time.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Mechanisms Connecting Urbanization to BJP Support

Urbanization in India has also been accompanied by the rise of a large aspirational middle class, particularly in major cities and peri-urban areas (Jaffrelot 2015). This group has benefitted from the liberalization of the Indian economy, which has provided new opportunities for upward mobility. The BJP has positioned itself as the party of economic development, attracting urban

voters who prioritize job creation, infrastructure, and a pro-business environment. In contrast to poorer rural voters, urban middle-class voters plausibly have different economic priorities, particularly since the urban middle class is much less dependent on India's traditional rural welfare state. This contrasts with rural voters, who may be more concerned with agricultural policies, subsidies, and welfare, policies traditionally associated with the BJP's historical rival, the Indian National Congress.

Another potential link between urbanization and the rise of the BJP lies in its well-developed party networks, particularly in urban centers (Thachil 2014). The BJP has long invested in building a strong organizational base, often coordinated by the RSS and other affiliated groups, in cities where political mobilization is more feasible due to population density and ease of communication. Urban environments facilitate the development of robust grassroots networks that can be activated during elections. The BJP has been particularly effective at building a disciplined cadre-based organization that can quickly mobilize voters in urban areas, which contrasts with the more fragmented organizational structures of opposition parties. Moreover, the expansion of the BJP's social media presence, coupled with targeted digital campaigns, has further enabled it to reach urban voters effectively. This has allowed the party to capitalize on the rapid growth of internet and smartphone usage in cities, where it disseminates messages tailored to middle-class urban voters, such as economic development and nationalist rhetoric, resonating with concerns about governance and national identity.

The effectiveness of the BJP's 'IT cell' and online tactics rooted in part in the circulation of gossip, rumors, and disinformation targeted at minority groups also may be greater in urban

environments, where face-to-face connections are less present. As Varshney (2001) has argued, more dense social networks in villages and rural areas in India discourage the kind of rumor-spreading and spirals of ethnic violence that often affect urban areas. As populations transit from the face-to-face settings of villages to more anonymous and populous small towns and urban settings, the scope for ethnic entrepreneurs in the BJP to gain votes by spreading anti-Muslim hatred and rumors is potentially enlarged (Brass 1997). Additionally, the BJP, with its emphasis on Hindu nationalism, may benefit from providing a new source of identification to populations in fast changing urbanizing areas seeking new sources of identity and belonging.

3. Urbanization and the Rise of the Right

Did urbanization contribute to the rise of the right in India? To investigate this proposition empirically, we first assemble a panel dataset of general election results at the parliamentary constituency level for the period 1985-2019 and link these electoral returns to satellite-imagery based estimates of the share of a constituency that is urban or peri-urban as opposed to rural (defined in terms of population and built-up density).

To measure urbanization, we use data from a raster file, the Global Human Settlements Layer degree of urbanization estimates (GHS-SMOD 2023), which globally classifies pixels at ~1 sq km resolution as urban (city or towns) or rural at 5-year intervals based on Landsat and Sentinel-2 satellite imagery-based estimates of built-up land and pixel-level estimates of population density (Schiavina, Melchiorri, and Pesaresi 2023). We then use polygons of parliamentary constituencies to compute the percentage of land in a constituency that is urban as opposed to rural. In some specifications, we distinguish between dense urban and peri-urban pixels. Figure 2 provides a map of pixels in India classified

as urban or rural, including those pixels experiencing change from rural to urban between our baseline (1985) and endline (2019) elections.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

To measure support for the BJP, we use two measures: its vote share at the parliamentary constituency level as well as a binary indicator for whether the seat was won by a BJP candidate. This data comes from election reports published by the Election Commission of India at the candidate level, which are cleaned and stored by the Trivedi Centre at Ashoka University. We use data on general election rounds corresponding approximately to the five-year interval years in which we have satellite imagery-based estimates or urbanization: 1984, 1989, 1996, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019. Importantly, parliamentary constituency boundaries were stable in two distinct phases, from 1985-2004 and from 2009 to 2019 (a "delimitation" of constituency boundaries was implemented prior to the 2009 general elections). This provides two balanced panels through which we can investigate the effects of urbanization on the rise of the right across parliamentary constituencies. Figure 3 depicts parliamentary constituencies in 1984 and in 2019 shaded according to the BJP's vote share. As is evident, since the 1980s, the BJP has expanded from a largely niche political force with support mainly in religiously conservative parts of northern and western India, to a countrywide presence.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

We analyze this data on urbanization and electoral returns with regressions of the form:

$$BJP_{it} = \beta Urbanization_{it} + \alpha_i + \gamma_{st} + \varepsilon_{it},$$

where α_i is a constituency fixed effect and γ_{st} is a state-year fixed effect. We run one version of this regression for the 1985-2004 panel and another version of this regression for the 2009-2019 panel. In another specification, we pool across these two panels by incorporating a constituency-delimitation phase fixed effect so that we are comparing within stable constituency boundaries over time. These specifications analyze whether constituencies experiencing a relative increase in the share of land that is urban also experienced a relative increase in the BJP's electoral performance, compared to other constituencies within the same state – pooling across all baseline-endline period comparisons (Ishimaru 2021). In all specifications, we report standard errors adjusted for clustering within constituencies and by state-year, to adjust for both over-time and spatially correlated errors.

The results of this analysis are reported in Table 3. Column (1) indicates that a relative increase in urbanization, pooling across the entire sample, results in an improvement in BJP vote share. Mean urbanization levels (share of parliamentary constituency that is urban) in 1984 were 20 percent. Mean urbanization levels in 2019 were 40 percent. The coefficient implies that on average over between 1984 and 2019 urbanization was responsible for approximately 14.8 percentage points increase in the seat share of the BJP, compared to the BJP's observed gain in seats of approximately 55 percentage point (from approximately zero percent in 1984 to approximately 55 percent in 2019). The implied effect represents approximately 27 percent of the BJP's observed rise.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Columns (2) and (3) break these results out by the pre- and post-2009 delimitation periods. Though both coefficients are large and positive, they reveal that the connection between urbanization and the rise of the BJP are particularly strong in the post-delimitation period, corresponding to Narendra Modi's rise to leadership of the party and to the post of prime minister. Column (4) investigates the relationship between two different types of urbanization – the share of a constituency that is dense urban land versus peri-urban land – and their relative impacts on the BJP's vote share. The results indicate while both have positive impacts, it is the conversion of rural to peri-urban land that is most strongly associated with increases in support for the BJP. Columns (5)-(8) run the same set of analyses but use BJP vote share as the dependent variable. Although the broad pattern of results is substantively very similar, many of the coefficients are not statistically significant due to relatively large standard errors. However, they point in the same broad direction.

A key concern following the OLS results is the potential for endogeneity—whether reverse causality or omitted variable bias might be driving the observed relationship between urbanization and BJP support. To address this, we focus on isolating the portion of urban growth driven largely by topographical constraints and the shape of existing urban areas. In particular, cities differ in how much they can expand based on surrounding natural features such as hills and water bodies, as well as on their pre-existing urban layout. To exploit this exogenous component of growth, we train a convolutional neural network (CNN) on many global "patches" of data

(each measuring 256×256 km) to predict future urban expansion from earlier urban extent and elevation raster data. We then use these CNN-based predictions to estimate urban expansion in India, allowing us to better capture that part of urban growth which stems from terrain and inherited spatial form rather than factors potentially correlated with political outcomes.

Table 4 reports the results, which in general mirror the baseline OLS results. Table 4 reports regressions using the machine-learning–based measure of "predicted urbanization" as the main explanatory variable for BJP electoral outcomes. Columns (1)–(3) use a binary indicator for BJP seat victory as the dependent variable, whereas columns (4)–(6) use BJP vote share. Across the full sample (column 1) and the post-2009 sample (column 2), higher predicted urbanization is strongly and positively associated with BJP seat wins. By contrast, in the pre-2009 subsample (column 3), the point estimate remains positive but is smaller and not statistically significant. When looking at vote share (columns 4–6), the coefficients on predicted urbanization remain positive but are generally estimated with less precision. Taken together, these results suggest that plausibly exogenous variation in urban expansion arising from topography has a plausibly causal effect on the rise of the BJP.

4. Polling Station-level Data

Next, we turn to polling station-level data. In India, voters cast ballots in polling stations to which they are assigned. A polling station contains on average about one or two thousand voters. By regulation, polling stations are usually set up within 2 kilometers of voters' residences to ensure accessibility. Polling station-level data therefore represents highly granular, point-like electoral data that permits more fine-grained, within-constituency analyses and also help to

mitigate potential ecological inference issues arising from working with aggregate constituency-level data.

The 2019 general elections involved nearly a million polling stations. To wrangle and geo-code this data, we downloaded every Form 20 PDF file from the state-level election commission websites. Form 20 documents are paper-based records which report tabulated election results at the polling station level. They are not usually analyzed because these records are non-standard, often paper-based, and published in a decentralized manner for every parliamentary constituency. A single parliamentary constituency typically has hundreds of polling stations. After downloading all the Form 20 PDFs, we fed these scanned paper-based records to the Amazon Textract API to extract tables of electoral results. The automated transcription of these records had many errors. With a team of undergraduate RAs, we cleaned these transcribed polling station-level election results, using internal spreadsheet formulas to check for errors and then correcting them manually.

We then geo-coded the coordinates of each of the polling stations in the dataset to coordinates briefly published by the Election Commission of India. Around the 2019 General Elections, the Election Commission briefly published an online map with the coordinates of each of the polling stations in the country, which were scraped. We linked our polling station-level data to these coordinates based on various identifiers, including parliamentary constituency, assembly constituency, and polling station number. Figure 4 provides examples of the polling stations in one of the states in our dataset (Odisha).

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

For each geo-coded polling station, we also compute a key variable of interest, the share of votes cast for the BJP candidate in that parliamentary constituency. We do this by linking candidate names in each Form 20 spreadsheet to the candidate-wise electoral data, and computing the total votes cast for the BJP candidate divided by the total votes cast in a given polling stations. Empirically, we investigate whether polling stations located in urban pixels, compared to rural pixels, display different levels of support for the BJP. We estimate the following regression:

$$BJP_i = \beta Urbanization_{it} + AC_i + \varepsilon_i,$$

where we control for an assembly constituency fixed effect AC_i – which represents a sub-segment of a parliamentary constituency – thereby restricting comparisons to polling stations in spatially proximate neighborhoods. In India, assembly constituencies (the constituencies electing state-level legislators) are nested within parliamentary constituencies, with typically 5-8 ACs located within any given PC.

In Table 5, we report the results of these analyses, conducted separately for each of four states. Please note that these analyses are preliminary; in future iterations of the paper, we plan to report comparable results for each of the 15 major states in India. As the regression results indicate, polling stations in urban and peri-urban areas tend to have systematically higher, by approximately 1 to 6 percentage points, BJP support compared to polling stations in pixels

classified as rural according to the satellite imagery-based estimates, even when restricting comparisons to spatially proximate neighborhoods.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

6. Online media environment as a potential mechanism

The surge of digital connectivity among urban populations has provided a fertile ground for the rise of right-wing politics in these areas. By disseminating tailored content, the BJP's 'IT cell' uses platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook for outreach and mobilization. This is especially evident on WhatsApp where caste-based groups, misinformation, pro-BJP rhetoric, anti-Congress messages, and Hindutva propaganda dominate (Garimella and Eckles, 2020; Garimella et al., 2024).

To understand how the online media tools have contributed to the BJP's growth in urban areas, we use data from Facebook to investigate the party's advertisement content and targeting strategy compared to other national parties. Specifically, we use the Meta Ads Targeting Dataset which provides the complete microtargeting logic for all Social Issue, Electoral, and Political (SIEP) ads run on Facebook and Instagram in India. Using this, we can isolate top-down mobilization strategies as opposed to bottom-up, user generated political content. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the BJP's dominant position in Facebook advertising between 2016 and 2024. As shown in Figure 5, the BJP ran more ads than any other national party during this period. Figure 6 further highlights this advantage by revealing that the BJP's lower-bound spending on Facebook ads surpassed that of rival parties. Both these figures reinforce the BJP's superior capacity to leverage social media for political mobilization.

[FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

[FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Table 6 shows that in the run-up to the 2024 general elections, the BJP emphasizes hyper-local, pin-code-level targeting, whereas the Congress relies more heavily on demographic-based criteria. This reliance on geographical targeting reflects how the BJP uses advanced targeting tools to adapt its outreach for different locales, for example, by tailoring their messaging for urban voters.

[TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

To gauge whether the BJP's online advertisements exhibit a consistent, unique style, connected to a top-down mobilization strategy, we use a CNN-based approach to analyze thousands of campaign advertisements on Facebook. Our model predicted BJP ads with 100% accuracy, showing that the BJP's visual branding or content strategy is unique and easily distinguishable from their opponents. By combining its uniquely identifiable online presence, with extensive ad spending and hyper-local targeting on social media, the BJP can effectively reach rapidly urbanizing communities.

7. Conclusion

In their paper, we have examine the connection between urbanization and the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India. Using satellite imagery to estimate urban expansion alongside electoral data from 1985 to 2019, we find that constituencies experiencing urban expansion showed a corresponding increase in BJP support. Preliminary analysis at the polling station level for the 2019 general elections confirms that urban and peri-urban areas favor the BJP more than rural areas. These results suggest that urbanization has played a key role in the BJP's rise from a regional force to a dominant national party.

We have proposed several mechanisms behind this relationship, including the emergence of a conservative middle class in cities, the BJP's strong urban party networks, as well as the cultural effects of an urban environment combined with exposure to new media technologies. These findings challenge the traditional association of urbanization with left-leaning politics, showing that in the Indian context, modernization and economic liberalization have intensified support for right-wing religious nationalism. The paper underscores the broader phenomenon where economic and urban growth can lead to illiberal political outcomes, contrary to expectations.

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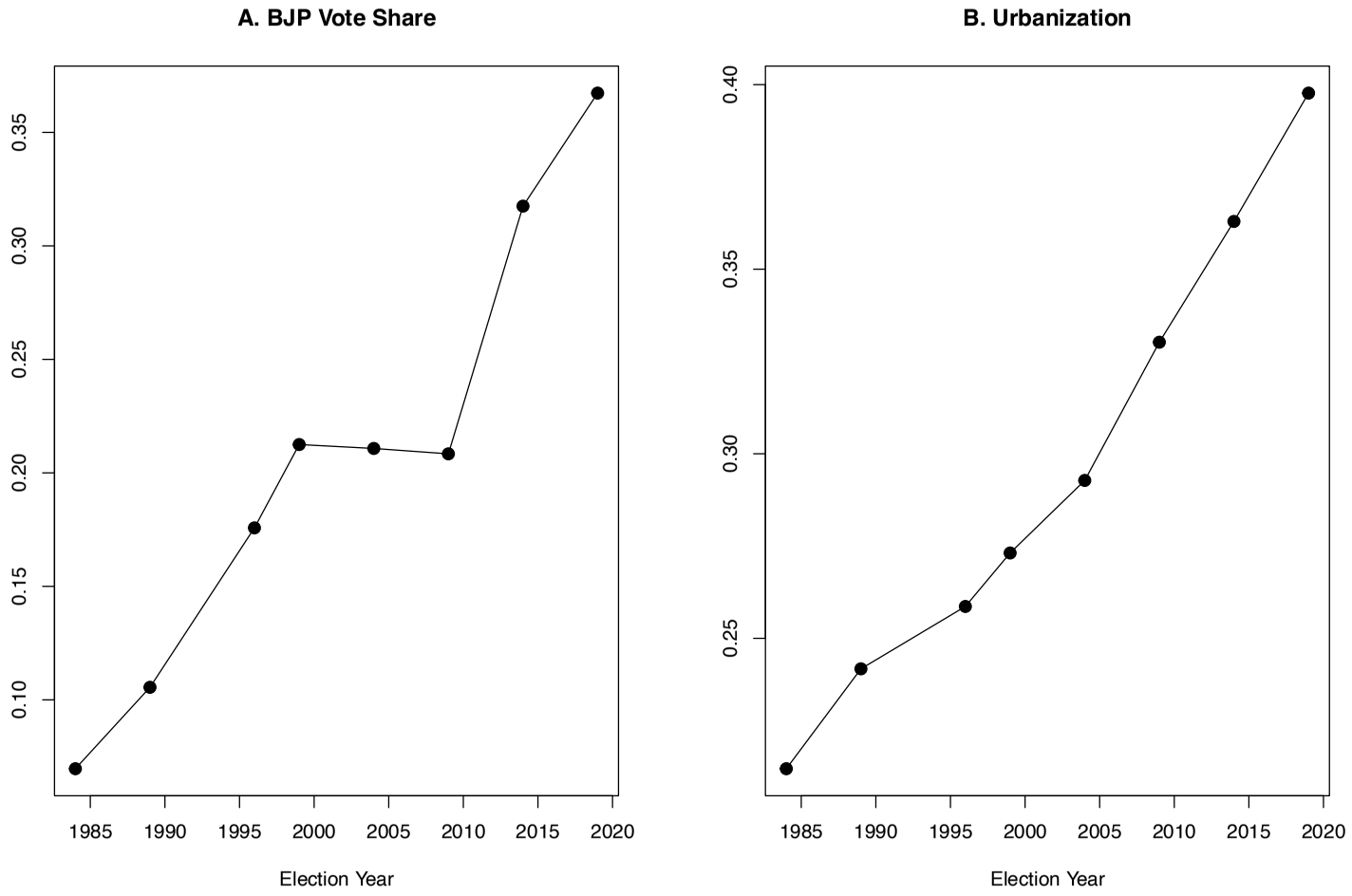
FIGURE 1. Urbanization and the Rise of the Right



Notes: Panel A depicts the BJP's average constituency-level vote share across parliamentary constituencies by general election. Panel B depicts the average share of parliamentary constituency land that is classified as urban or peri-urban, based on Global Human Settlement Layer degree of urbanization (GHS-SMOD 2023) estimates, computer by computing the urban share of pixels in polygons of parliamentary constituencies.

TABLE 1. Changing Media Environment in Urban Areas

	Dependent variable:						
	newspaper_men	newspaper_women	radio_men	radio_women	TV_hours_men	TV_hours_women	mobile phone
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Urban	0.273^{***}	0.283^{***}	-0.027	-0.005	0.519^{***}	0.880^{***}	0.127^{***}
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.039)	(0.055)	(0.011)
District FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	41,455	41,455	41,455	41,455	35,534	35,496	42,123
Adjusted R^2	0.198	0.262	0.184	0.175	0.219	-0.006	0.131

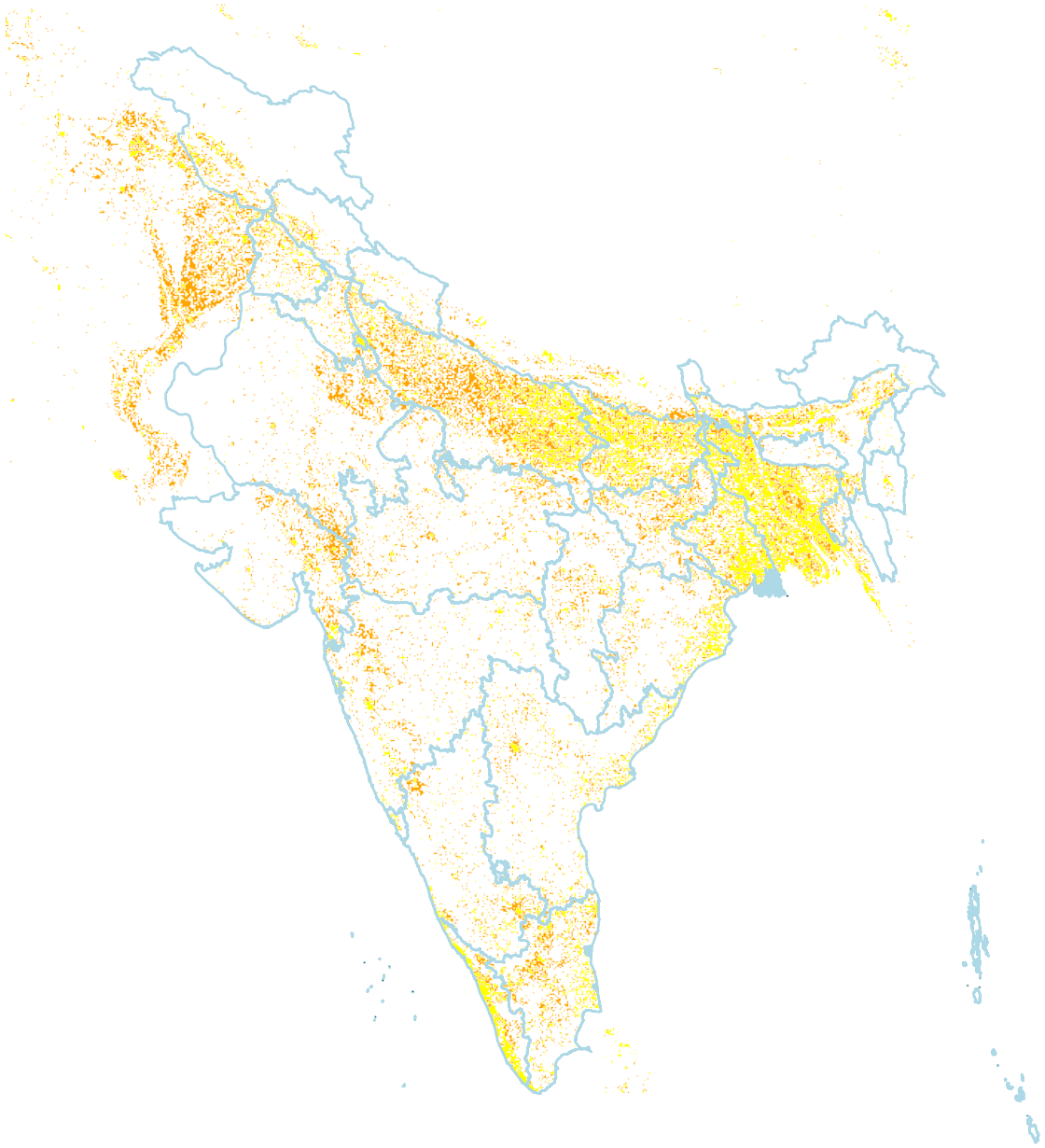
Notes: Data is from India Human Development Survey (Waves 2005 and 2011). Unit of analysis is household. Urban is an indicator for residence in a census-designated urban area. Analysis estimated by OLS. Standard errors clustered by district.

TABLE 2. Changing Social Structure in Urban Areas

	Dependent variable:			
	Years in Place	Agriculture	Artisan/trader	Professional
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Urban	-27.002^{***}	-0.310^{***}	0.160^{***}	0.288^{***}
	(1.749)	(0.017)	(0.012)	(0.016)
District FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	41,400	41,455	41,455	41,455
Adjusted R^2	0.355	0.219	0.075	0.199

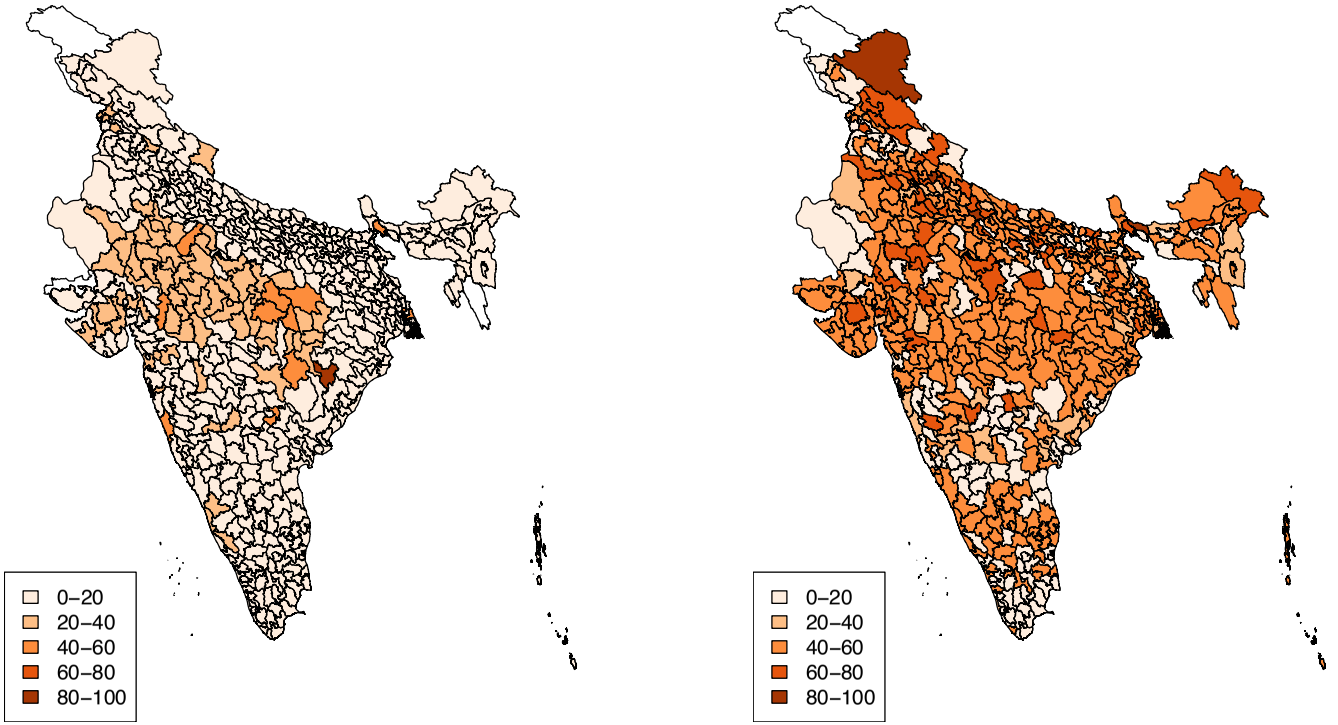
Notes: Data is from India Human Development Survey (Waves 2005 and 2011). Unit of analysis is household. Urban is an indicator for residence in a census-designated urban area. Analysis estimated by OLS. Standard errors clustered by district.

FIGURE 2. Urban expansion in India, 1985-2020



Notes: Map depicts expansion of urban areas in India between 1985 and 2020. Yellow pixels represent established urban areas as of 1985 and orange pixels represent areas that experienced change from rural to urban, built-up land between 1985-2020 based on Global Human Settlement Layer degree of urbanization (GHS-SMOD 2023) estimates.

FIGURE 3. BJP Vote Share, 1984-2019



Notes: Map depicts parliamentary constituencies shaded according to the share of the vote recieved by the BJP.

TABLE 3. Urbanization and the Rise of the Right, 1985-2019

	Dependent variable:							
	BJP Winner				BJP Vote Share			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Urban	0.714***	1.042***	0.239		0.153	0.193	0.093	
	(0.224)	(0.262)	(0.362)		(0.109)	(0.137)	(0.165)	
Dense Urban				0.428				0.044
				(0.350)				(0.187)
Peri-urban				0.801***				0.185*
				(0.236)				(0.112)
Sample	Full	post-2009	pre-2009	Full	Full	post-2009	pre-2009	Full
State-Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constituency FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	4,426	1,638	2,788	4,426	4,426	1,638	2,788	4,426
R^2	0.719	0.790	0.626	0.719	0.824	0.878	0.730	0.825

Notes: Unit of analysis is constituency-year. Urban is measure of share of constituency land that is urban. Dense Urban is share that is dense urban and Peri-urban is share that is peri-urban. Reference category is rural. Analysis estimated by OLS. Standard errors clustered by constituency and state-year.

TABLE 4. Expanding Urban Metro Areas Estimates

	Dependent variable:							
	BJP Winner				BJP Vote Share			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Urban	0.334	0.698*	−0.124		0.389***	0.449***	0.314*	
	(0.295)	(0.375)	(0.489)		(0.119)	(0.160)	(0.177)	
Dense Urban				0.168				0.314
				(0.404)				(0.195)
Peri-urban				0.395				0.417***
				(0.322)				(0.131)
Metro-Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constituency FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,246	1,229	2,017	3,246	3,246	1,229	2,017	3,246
R^2	0.699	0.773	0.603	0.699	0.813	0.860	0.718	0.813

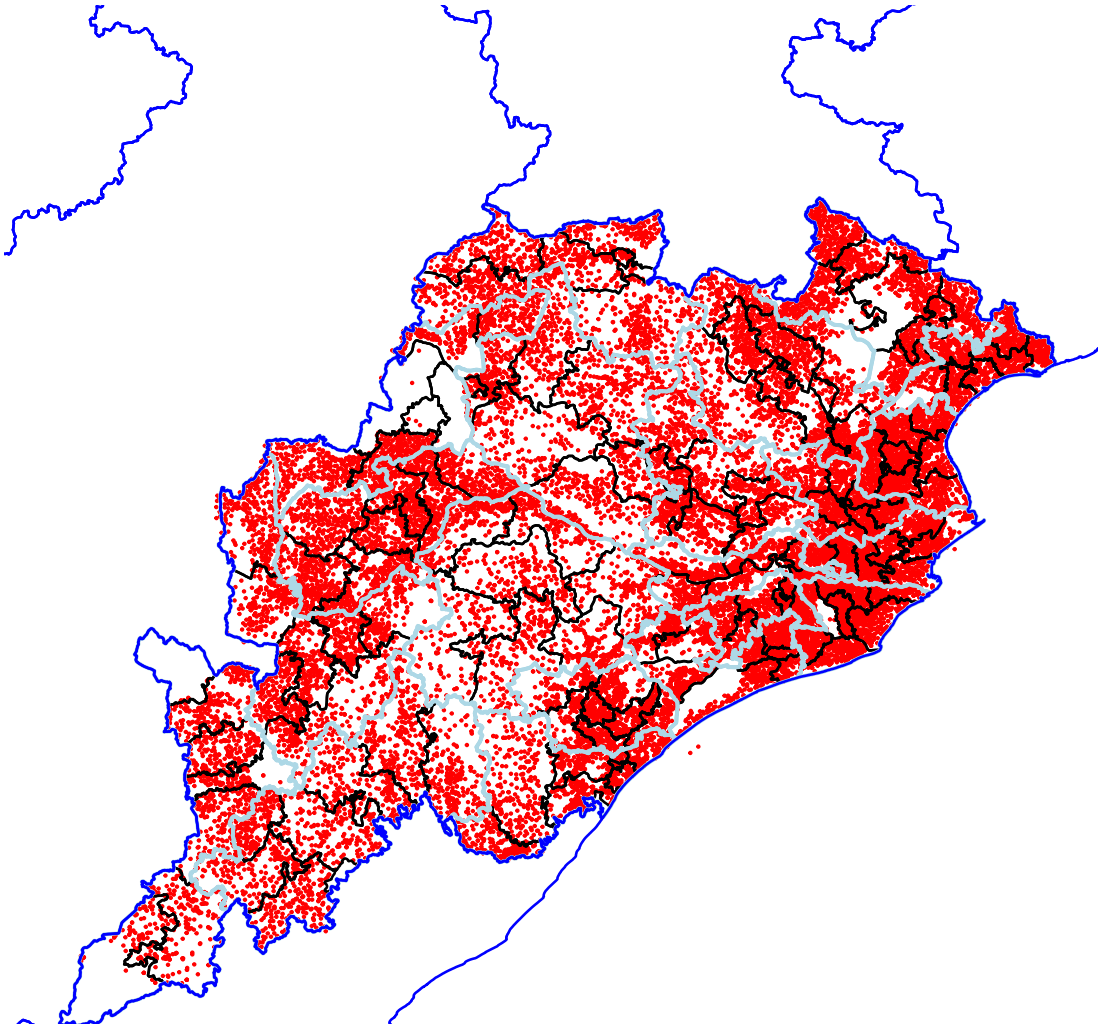
Notes: Unit of analysis is constituency-year. Urban is measure of share of constituency land that is urban. Dense Urban is share that is dense urban and Peri-urban is share that is peri-urban. Reference category is rural. Analysis estimated by OLS. Standard errors clustered by constituency and metro-year. Sample only includes constituencies within 250km radius of India's top-30 largest cities.

TABLE 5. Instrumented Expanding Urban Metro Areas Estimates

	Dependent variable:					
	BJP Winner			BJP Vote Share		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Instrumented Urban	0.305	3.211	-0.259	1.310*	0.423	1.482*
	(1.636)	(2.178)	(1.918)	(0.733)	(0.719)	(0.868)
Sample	Full	post-2009	pre-2009	Full	post-2009	pre-2009
Metro-Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constituency FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,848	1,226	1,622	2,848	1,226	1,622
Adjusted R^2	0.581	0.642	0.496	0.745	0.787	0.644

Notes: Unit of analysis is constituency-year. Instrumented urban is measure of share of constituency land that is predicted to be urban based on machine learning model. Analysis estimated by OLS. Standard errors clustered by constituency and city-year.

FIGURE 4. Example of Geo-coded Polling Station Level Data



Notes: Plot depicts the coordinates of polling stations in Odisha (N=37,605). Each red dot is a polling station. Black boundaries correspond to assembly constituencies. Assembly constituencies are nested within parliamentary constituencies, which are depicted with light blue borders. Dark blue borders correspond to state boundaries. In our polling-station level analyses, we restrict comparisons to polling stations within assembly constituencies.

TABLE 6. Polling Station-level Results

	Dependent variable:			
	BJP Vote Share (%)			
	Assam	Odisha	Gujarat	Rajasthan
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dense urban	2.589	6.014***	4.198***	1.049
	(1.632)	(0.752)	(0.847)	(0.860)
Peri-urban	−0.973	1.955***	1.673**	0.121
	(0.968)	(0.339)	(0.839)	(0.680)
AC FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	24648	37605	50762	50965

Notes: Unit of analysis is polling station. Urban is indicator for whether polling station is in a dense urban pixel. Peri-urban is indicator for whether polling station is in a peri-urban pixel. Reference category is polling stations in rural pixels. All regressions incluse assembly constituency fixed effects, restricting comparisons to polling stations within assembly constituencies, multiple of which are nested within a parliamentary constituency. Standard errors adjusted for clustering within parliamentary constituencies.

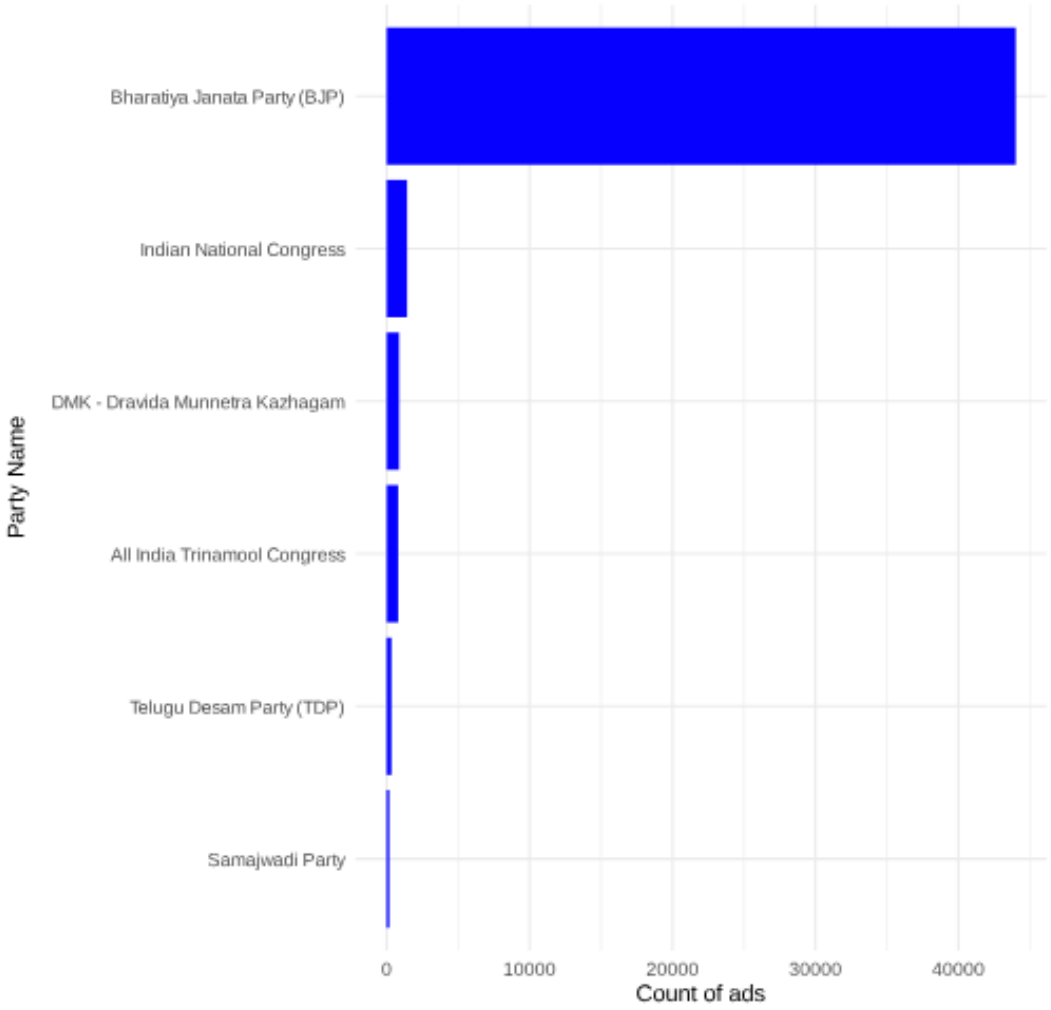


Figure 5: Count of advertisements on Facebook by national parties (2016-2024)

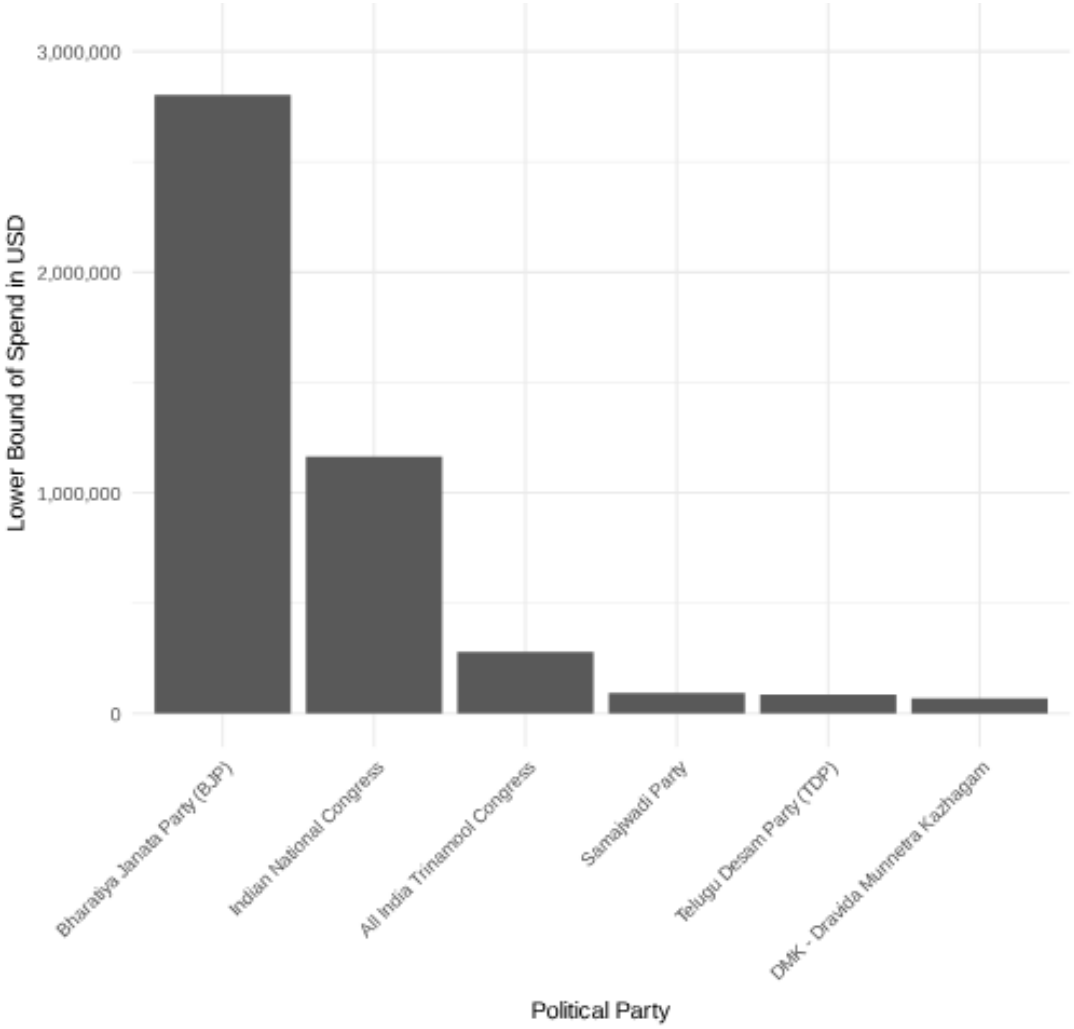


Figure 6: Lower bound of spend on Facebook by national parties (2016-2024)

Targeting Criteria	BJP (% of posts)	INC (% of posts)
Zip-code level targeting	78%	9%
Gender	2%	22%
Age	19%	42%
Interests	0	15%

Table 7: Targeting Criteria used by BJP and INC between January – May 2024