



Religion, politician identity and development outcomes: Evidence from India



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates whether the religious identity of state legislators in India influences development outcomes, both for citizens of their religious group and for the population as a whole. Using an instrumental variables approach derived from a regression discontinuity, we find that increasing the political representation of Muslims improves health and education outcomes in the district from which the legislator is elected. We find no evidence of religious favoritism: Muslim children do not benefit more from Muslim political representation than children from other religious groups.

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1. Introduction

In first past the post electoral systems where the “winner takes all”, minority social groups may be disadvantaged by the policy choices of democratically elected leaders. It is therefore pertinent to consider whether increasing the political representation of minority groups improves their outcomes. Theoretical models of democracy admit this possibility (Besley and Coate, 1997; Osborne and Slivinsky, 1996) and quotas for minority groups are motivated by the assumption that it does but, as we discuss below, the evidence is still scarce.¹ We examine this question by looking at the impact of Muslim representation in India’s state legislatures on development outcomes for Muslims relative to others. This study is of topical relevance given the increasing politicization of religion in India and the frequency of Hindu–Muslim violence.

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¹ Quotas introduce distortions, for instance by lowering candidate quality, so the impact of quotas will in general not be the same as the impact of competitively determined representation. However, evidence of the impact of minority groups in government in the absence of quotas is relevant to motivating quotas.

Muslims are, on many fronts, as disadvantaged a minority group in India as the lower caste population. Yet while political quotas for the lower castes have been in place since the writing of the Indian constitution in 1950, there are no quotas for Muslims and no systematic data on their political representation. We create representative nationwide data on Muslim political participation, inferring religion from name. These data show that Muslims are under-represented in state government relative to their population share. To identify causal impacts of politician identity when electoral outcomes may in general be correlated with constituency level voter preferences or characteristics that make religion salient, we exploit close elections between Muslim and non-Muslim (primarily Hindu) politicians. This allows us to examine the effects of politician identity while holding voter identity constant. We isolate the policy consequences of the personal religious identity of legislators from their political party affiliation by controlling for party affiliation.

We find that raising the share of Muslims elected from a district to the state legislature leads to improved health and education outcomes in the district. An increase in Muslim representation by 1 percentage point results in a statistically significant decline in infant mortality of 0.148 percentage points on average, which is 1.8% of the sample mean, and a more imprecisely determined increase of 0.09 years of primary schooling, which is approximately 2.5% of the sample mean. So as to put a 1 percentage point change in perspective, note that the mean of Muslim legislator share at the district level is 6.4% and the mean of Muslim population share is 12.9%.² Our estimates therefore imply that Muslim representation proportional to population share will have large beneficial impacts on child development outcomes.

Importantly, we find no significant difference in the impact of Muslim political representation on Muslim compared with non-Muslim households. Indeed, the estimated coefficients indicate smaller beneficial impacts for Muslim children. There is thus no evidence of religious favoritism. The fact that our estimates for health and education use different data sources and a different set of cohorts but line up on both results adds credence to the findings.

Our findings contribute to a recent literature on the relationship between religion and development. While cross-country comparisons indicate that religious beliefs are a significant determinant of economic growth, and that Muslim countries have lower growth rates controlling for their religiosity (Barro and McCleary, 2006), two recent studies show that Islamist parties perform better than non-Islamist parties. Meyersson (2013) shows that women's education improves in municipalities led by Islamist as opposed to secular parties in Turkey, and Henderson and Kuncoro (2011) find that Islamist parties commit less corruption in Indonesia than other parties. An important difference between our approach and that of prior studies is that we focus on the personal religious identity of legislators and control for the religious composition of the population and the party affiliation of legislators.

This paper also contributes to the literature on politician identity. If parties or voters could fully control the behavior of elected candidates, politician identity would be irrelevant to the policy process but the evidence tends to reject this tenet. The evidence so far pertains to the relevance of the ethnicity and gender of politicians, and we provide the first evidence for religion. A number of studies show that raising the share of women in government influences policy choices, with a tendency for policy choices to more closely reflect the interests of women (Bhalotra and Clots-Figueras, 2013; Brollo and Troiano, 2012; Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Clots-Figueras, 2011, 2012; Iyer et al., 2012; Washington, 2008). However women are not a numerical minority. This makes it easier to associate the impact of politician gender with politician preferences only, while the behavior of politicians from minority groups may in addition reflect strategic electoral considerations. Results for the ethnic identity of politicians are more ambiguous. Using data from Kenya, Burgess et al. (2011) find that politicians (cabinet members) allocate road building efforts in favor of their own ethnic group but this ethnic favoritism dissipates upon the transition to democracy. In this sense, their results are consistent with our findings from (democratic) India. Pande (2003) finds that political quotas for low caste populations in India's state assemblies are associated with increased transfers to their group alongside reduced overall spending and reduced spending on education.³ These results contrast with ours, possibly because quotas depress any incentive for the low caste (Hindu) population to serve the interests of other social groups. Kramon and Posner (2012) find that co-ethnics of the President and the Minister of Education in Kenya see an increase in education but not in health, while Kudamatsu (2009) is unable to identify any impact of the ethnic identity of the President of Guinea on ethnic differences in infant mortality. Our results contrast with these studies insofar as we find effects on health and education outcomes for the entire population.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the political setting in India, the political status of Muslims and their relative performance on human development indicators. Sections 3 and 4 describe the data and the empirical strategy. Section 5 presents and discusses the results and Section 6 concludes.

2. Religion, politics and development in India

India is a country of considerable religious diversity and the constitution enshrines secularism. Muslims, constituting 13.4% of the population in the 2001 census, form the single largest religious minority. With 138 million Muslims in 2001, India had the third largest Muslim population in the world. Muslims in India are more likely to live in urban areas (36%

² The median district in the sample has nine seats so, on average, less than one in nine seats is held by a Muslim. The figures presented here are for the estimation sample and exclude the only Muslim-majority state, Jammu & Kashmir.

³ Similarly, Besley et al. (2012) find evidence from Indian villages that sharing the village head's group identity is beneficial for access to public goods but only for low spillover public goods.

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