

The Promise and Limits of Leader-Driven Grassroots Mobilization *

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Abstract

Political parties around the world take a range of strategies to try to rebuild. However, the effectiveness of these strategies and the potential mechanisms that they work through remain understudied. We focus on the use of leader-driven grassroots mobilizations as a way to shift narratives and build mass support for a party. We study this in the context of the Indian National Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's 150-day grassroots march (the Bharat Jodo Yatra). This yatra sought to reinvigorate the Congress, which had lost mass support and two consecutive elections to the ruling party. Using a difference-in-difference design, we find that the yatra's impact on Congress' state-level electoral performance was limited, only impacting elections temporally and spatially close to the campaign. Through interviews with party affiliates and voters, we outline a series of mechanisms through which grassroots mobilization matters. However, our original survey of 3500 voters reveals that the efforts to build mass party support only influenced voters with direct contact with the march, further limiting the overall impact. Taken together, the findings demonstrate the limited promise of leader-driven grassroots mobilization.

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1 Introduction

Scholars have extensively studied both the slow and sudden decline of political parties (Magaloni 2006; Lupu 2016). We focus on a party that has declined and examine its efforts to rebuild. Specifically, we study on how political parties use of leader-driven grassroots mobilization as a way to mobilize and rebuild voter support. The paper first seeks to evaluate the impact of this type of campaign and then understand the mechanisms through which it matters.

We focus on party efforts to build mass support in India, the world’s largest democracy. Leader-driven grassroots mobilizations are a regular part of electoral politics and movement building in India. With origins in Gandhi’s Salt March in the 1930s as part of India’s independence movement, *padyatras* or *yatras* (walking marches, journeys) are often a way for party leaders to connect with citizens at the grassroots and build a mass movement. We study an effort by the Congress party to rebuild and mobilize mass voter support. After two consecutive national losses to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and an electoral decline in several states, the Congress Party leader, Rahul Gandhi, engaged in a 150-day march—the Bharat Jodo Yatra—across the country with the stated non-electoral goal of uniting India. Gandhi suggested that the Bharat Jodo Yatra (or BJY) represented an effort to invigorate a mass movement by listening to citizens’ needs, pitching an “alternate vision for the idea of India,” and rejuvenating the Congress party organization.¹ An INC spokesperson emphasized that “The Bharat Jodo Yatra [was] a revolutionary moment for national politics” and that it was “an ideological yatra and not an electoral one” seeking to emphasize the *anyay kaal* (injustice era) of the BJP.²

We examine the electoral impact of the Congress Party’s attempt to build a mass movement through the Bharat Jodo Yatra. We collected the BJY route using Yatra’s daily schedule from Yatra’s official social media accounts. We then mapped the route that the yatra took based on road networks and verified the route with members of the Congress Party. We merged the yatra route with scraped election data from the five subsequent state elections³, along with data from three past election cycles. Using this panel data and a difference-in-differences design, we find that the yatra had a limited impact, with positive effects on Congress vote share and likelihood of winning being limited to elections temporally proximate to the yatra and in areas spatially near to it.

To understand the mechanisms underlying the limited effects, we first conducted inter-

¹BBC - Bharat Jodo Yatra: Rahul Gandhi’s unity march ends in Kashmir

²Times of India - Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra against ‘anyay kaal’ of BJP govt’s 10 years

³We examine state election effects in Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh. These are the five states that had elections after the yatra where the yatra passed through at least one constituency.

views with political elites involved in the yatra, members of civil society, and voters themselves in Delhi and Karnataka. Our interviews highlight three mechanisms for the improved Congress performance: energizing of the party organization, increasing discourse of INC and their viability, and presenting the party as internally cohesive. We test these mechanisms in a telephone survey of about 3500 voters. While we do not find any changes in these mechanisms for respondents living in places where the yatra crossed, we do see improvements in all three mechanisms for respondents who actually participated in the yatra. This suggests the that impact is further limited to direct participation.

2 Context: The Indian National Congress and the Bharat Jodo Yatra

We examine the use of leader-driven grassroots campaigns as a party re-building strategy in the context of the Indian National Congress. We provide context on the Congress Party’s decline and how it loss mass grassroots support. We then highlight the historical importance of grassroots campaigns in India and how Rahul Gandhi’s Bharat Jodo Yatra fit into this campaign.

2.1 The Indian National Congress

The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 with the goal of demanding representation in the government for educated Indians (Kumar 2024). The initial decades of the Congress focused on an “intellectual agitation” which helped make the goals of the party clear (Kothari 1964). By the 1920s and 1930s, the party transformed into “a mass movement with depth and traditions” particularly helped by Gandhi’s grassroots campaigns to mobilize citizens across ethnic lines (Kothari 1964; Kumar 2024; Bhavnani and Jha 2014).

Scholars have classified India’s party system since Independence based on the prominence of the Congress party to electoral politics (Yadav 1999; Vaishnav and Hintson 2019). In the first 20 years after Independence, Congress represented a “party of consensus,” even if it drew from particular social groups in different states (Kothari 1964; Weiner 1967). The party faced a divided opposition, allowing it to dominate both national and state-level elections (Vaishnav and Hintson 2019; Yadav 1999). The primary competition that Congress faced was not from the opposition parties but rather from factions within the party itself (Brass 1965), which the party was able to manage well in this period (Weiner 1967; Kothari 1964).

From 1967-1989, termed India’s second party system, the INC began to lose out at the state level but would maintain dominance at the national level and even recover from its de-

feat after Indira Gandhi’s moment of authoritarianism during the Emergency (Yadav 1999). Moreover, in this period, Congress began to rely deeply on access to the state to distribute patronage, representing a shift away from the mass movement it had built (Wilkinson 2007; Chhibber 2001). For example, Chhibber (2001) notes that Congress party workers were attuned to the importance of using state resources to mobilize votes, making their motivations for joining the party more reflective of self-interest than to influence policy. Wilkinson (2007) notes that as competition increased, there were also higher levels and a wider reach of clientelism.

By 1989-2014, or the third-party system, caste, religious, and economic mobilization would disrupt Congress as the “single pole around which politics revolved” (Vaishnav and Hinton 2019). In 2014 and 2019, Congress suffered two consecutive major losses to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the national level, ushering in the fourth party system with the BJP at the center of politics. This would continue in 2024, where while the Congress outperformed expectations, the BJP came to power in a coalition. Several factors contributed to the overtime decline of Congress Party dominance, including ideological ambiguity (Chhibber and Verma 2018; Hasan 2022), diminished organizational capacity (Kothari 1964; Tudor and Ziegfeld 2019; Hasan 2012), intra-party factionalism (Brass 1965), opposition coordination (Tudor and Ziegfeld 2019), and the mobilization of new identities (Jaffrelot and Kumar 2012). Still, Congress remains the key party amongst the Opposition coalition to the BJP at the national level and the ruling party in several states. In this context, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi sought to reignite Indian citizen support for the party by leading the Bharat Jodo Yatra, a grassroots campaign to build a mass movement.

2.2 The Role of Yatras in India

(Pad)yatras, or marches on foot, hold significant cultural, spiritual, and political importance worldwide. They promote cultural integration and unity by bringing together people from diverse backgrounds to share their customs and traditions. Politicians and activists often leverage padayatra for mass mobilization and campaigning. Padyatras provide direct access to the masses, allowing these leaders to engage with people at the grassroots level, understand their issues, and address them. This direct interaction can be crucial for advancing cultural, political, and national causes.

In the Indian context, Mahatma Gandhi’s Dandi March in 1930 was a non-violent protest against the British salt tax and a pivotal event in India’s independence movement. The Dandi March galvanized the masses, drawing global attention to India’s struggle for freedom and symbolizing civil disobedience and non-violent resistance (Bhavnani and Jha 2014). Gandhi’s padayatra demonstrated the power of grassroots mobilization and set a precedent for using

yatras as tools for political activism and engagement.

In modern Indian politics, yatras have continued to play a significant role. L.K. Advani's Rath Yatra in 1990 is a notable example. This yatra was organized to mobilize support for the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and significantly boosted the BJP (Blakeslee 2018). It energized the party's base, attracted new supporters, and marked the rise of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics. The Rath Yatra highlighted the ability of such marches to transform political fortunes and reshape the political landscape.

Contemporary political yatras continue this tradition, with leaders using them to connect with voters and address various issues. Narendra Modi's Gujarat Gaurav Padyatra in 2002 celebrated Gujarat's development, bolstering his political standing and contributing to his electoral success.⁴ In 2004, Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy, a regional Congress leader in the erstwhile state of undivided Andhra Pradesh, undertook a three-month-long padayatra. He used this as an opportunity to meet voters and members of party organization and discuss changes needed with drought relief programs.⁵ Similarly, his son Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy conducted a 430-day padayatra from 2017 to 2019 with the goal of meeting 4.5 million families.⁶

2.3 The Bharat Jodo Yatra as a Grassroots Campaign

Rahul Gandhi led the Bharat Jodo Yatra, or "Unite India March" under the guise of bringing the country together and connecting with citizens at the grassroots. While commentators highlighted that there may be an electoral bump from this effort, it was not certain given that the campaign was explicitly pitched as non-electoral. Gandhi travelled over 4000 kilometres (about 250 miles) by foot across 150 days from the southern tip of Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu to the northern point of Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir. During the yatra, Gandhi would walk with party leaders, party workers, and voters, stopping for events, speeches, public meetings, and corner meetings (small targeted meetings with local influentials). The yatra also established connections with existing grassroots organizations that helped the party with voter outreach. The INC research team provided Gandhi with a memo about "key issues in the region" to help direct the topics he covered⁷. Topics included state and local issues in the area, such as land distribution, health facilities, and national highways. At its core, the BJY allowed Rahul Gandhi to connect with voters, pitch an alternative idea of India counter to the ruling BJP, and bring together the party organization.

⁴Times of India - Modi Kicks off Gujarat Gaurav Yatra

⁵Times of India - YSRs Padyatra to begin on April 9

⁶India Today - YS Jagan all set to embark on his 3000 KM long Padyatara in Andhra Pradesh

⁷Author interview with Congress team member. January 7, 2024. Bangalore Urban District

3 Data and Empirical Approach

We study the impact of Congress grassroots mobilization during the Bharat Jodo Yatra on political discourse and electoral performance in state elections.

3.1 Data

The Bharat Jodo Yatra travelled across India between September 2022 and January 2023. State elections were held in Karnataka in May 2023, in Telangana, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh in December 2023, and in Andhra Pradesh in May 2024.⁸ We study the impact of the yatra on state elections visualized in the timeline in Figure 1. We are currently working on digitizing all AC-wise results for the national elections.

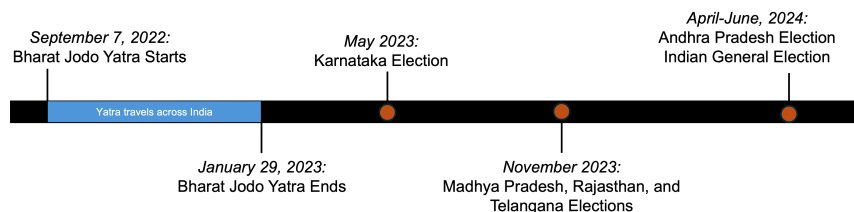


Figure 1: Timeline of BJY and Elections

3.1.1 Bharat Jodo Yatra Route

The Indian National Congress announced the Bharat Jodo Yatra on August 23 2023. The official social media account (Facebook and X/Twitter) of Bharat Jodo Yatra released a schedule of daily on-foot journeys by Rahul Gandhi. Figure 2 shows an example of a schedule for November 19, 2022. We manually mapped this daily schedule from September 7, 2022, to January 30, 2023, every day. Figure 3 shows the route and how it relates to our national and state-level election analysis. The yatra traveled for approximately 20 kilometers every day; the schedule provided 5-6 stops for each day. Given that the yatra traveled on the highway, we used these stops to make a 4000+ kilometer continuous line, which represents the Bharat Jodo Yatra route. We triangulated our route using newspapers, official social media feeds from the Congress party, and the live stream of the Yatra on YouTube in order to account for any changes based on what social media had initially put out. We further verified our route with the Indian National Congress. We use this route to identify “treated” electoral constituencies or places where the yatra crossed.

⁸Between the yatra and the 2024 national elections, there were also state elections in Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, and Odisha; however, the yatra did not cross through any of these states.



Figure 2: BJJ Schedule Example

3.1.2 Google Trends Data

To measure political discourse, we use data from Google trends, which measure average internet search patterns among defined populations in time and space. We collect search behavior for the following specific terms: *Bharat Jodo Yatra*, *Rahul Gandhi*, *Indian National Congress*, *Narendra Modi*, and *Bharatiya Janata Party*. In addition to specific terms, we also use Google Trends Topics, a group of terms that share the same concept in any language. This ensures we capture the entire search pattern on the Google platform regardless of which language or similar wording is used to look for it. Google does not provide raw search totals; instead, it offers data that have already been transformed using min-max normalization from 0 to 100. Our unit of analysis is state-day. the dependent variable will take a value of 100 when the maximum ratio of BJJ topic searches to all Google searches is maximum and 0 when minimum. We scrapped daily data for all Indian states from 6th September 2022 to 31st January 2023 (+/- 1 day from BJJ beginning and ending). We follow a similar process to (Dancy and Fariss 2024) in using Google Trends data to understand changes in online political searches

3.1.3 Aggregate Electoral Data

Legislative Assembly Election: The state assembly election results data for the states of Karnataka (2008, 2013, 2018), Madhya Pradesh (2008, 2013, 2018), Rajasthan (2008, 2013, 2018), Telangana (2009, 2014, 2018), and Andhra Pradesh (2009, 2014, 2019) are accessed from Trivedi Centre for Political Data (TCDP) (Agarwal et al. 2022). The state assembly election results for the states of Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Rajasthan, and Andhra Pradesh were scrapped from the election commission website. We retrieve our key

outcome variable of interest, vote share for the Congress party, from these scraped election returns.

3.2 Research Design

We first examine the effect of the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Google searches. To do so, we estimate the following using standard difference-in-differences specifications:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{BJY}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + \gamma_i + \theta_t + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

Y_{st} is the search intensity for a phrase in state s in day t . BJY_s takes the value 1 if the yatra passes through state s . Post_t equals 1 if the search was made on a day after the yatra passed through the state. γ_s and θ_t are state and day fixed effect, respectively. We cluster our standard errors at the state level, which is the level at which treatment is assigned.

Next, we estimate the effect of the Bharat Jodo Yatra on electoral outcomes. We focus on two outcome variables: vote share for Congress and the likelihood of Congress winning. To do so, we estimate the following using standard difference-in-differences specifications:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{BJY}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + \gamma_i + \theta_t + \delta_s \times t + \epsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

Y_{it} is the vote share for Congress or whether Congress won in constituency i in election year t . BJY_i takes the value 1 if the yatra passes through constituency i . Post_t equals 1 if the election occurred after the yatra. γ_i and θ_t are constituency and election year fixed effect, respectively. We also include state-specific linear time trends indicated by $\delta_s \times t$ to account for state-level factors that might evolve differently over time. We cluster our standard errors at the AC level, which is the level at which treatment is assigned.

Figure 3 shows the BJY route and the treated and control constituencies for the state-level election analysis. For the state elections analysis, we standardize the years to 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2023.⁹ We are unable to look at elections prior to 2008 because the constituency boundaries are different. The parameter of interest, β_1 , represents the effect of the yatra crossing a constituency on the INC vote share or INC win likelihood in that constituency. The identification of the causal effect of the yatra on INC vote share, indicated by β_1 , relies on the assumption of parallel trends. This means that treated (yatra) and untreated

⁹For the state of Telangana, the elections are 2009, 2014, 2018, and 2023. In all figures and tables, we will use 2008 for the 2009 election and 2013 for 2014 to keep the constituency with the other three states. For the state of Andhra Pradesh, the elections are 2009, 2014, 2019, 2024. In all figures and tables, we move these back by one year to allow for consistency in plotting.

(non-yatra) constituencies followed a common trend in Congress vote share before the 2023 election when the yatra occurred.

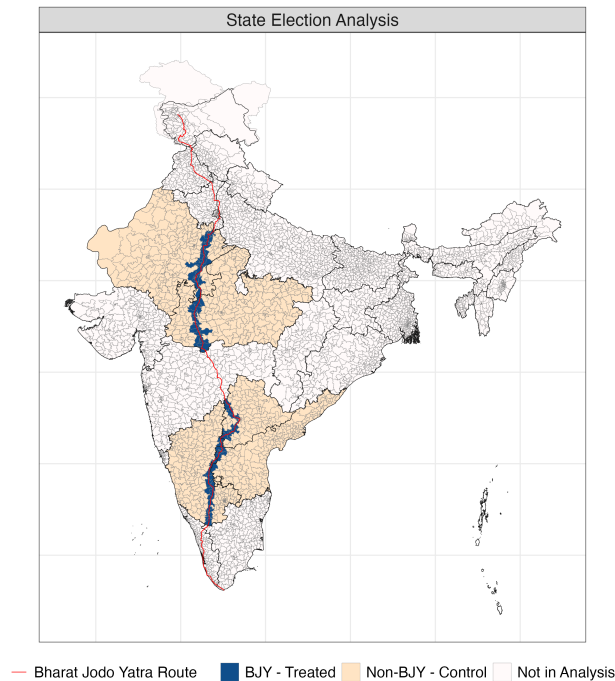


Figure 3: BJY Route with National and State Level Election Results

4 Main Results

In this section, we study the political impact of the Bharat Jodo Yatra. First, we descriptively examine where Congress chose to focus the yatra. Next, we study the impact of the yatra.

4.1 The Focus of the Yatra

Rahul Gandhi walked from the southernmost part of the country in Tamil Nadu to the northernmost tip in Jammu and Kashmir. This route was not random. Instead, interviews with Congress party functionaries suggested that the yatra focused on places where voters “could be receptive to the party.”¹⁰ In Table 1, we present descriptive statistics of ACs that the yatra did and did not cross for the state elections prior to the yatra. A key takeaway is that the INC prioritized areas in their route where Congress actually had some baseline support. For example, the INC vote share in the pre-yatra state election was 3.7 percentage points higher in yatra ACs compared to non-yatra ACs. However, the BJP vote share is

¹⁰Author interview with Congress leader. January 7, 2024. Bangalore Urban District.

slightly higher in yatra ACs. This may be a consequence of other active regional parties in state elections.

Table 1: Average 2019/2018 assembly election characteristics for yatra and non-yatra assembly constituencies

Variable	Yatra Crossed AC	Yatra Did Not Cross AC
Number of Candidates	13.333	13.431
Number of Female Candidates	1.092	0.815
Share of INC Contesting	0.931	0.973
Share of INC Winning	0.322	0.330
INC Vote Share	35.286	31.585
Share of BJP Contesting	1.000	0.997
Share of BJP Winning	0.299	0.303
BJP Vote Share	29.691	27.655
Turnout	74.70	76.64
Share Reserved for SC/ST	0.276	0.273
Effective Number of Parties	2.578	2.690
Distance to BJY route (in KM)	8.115	196.937

4.2 The Discourse-Based Impact of the Yatra

In Table 2, we see that when BJY enters the state, the curiosity regarding BJY and Rahul Gandhi surges by 13.5 and 11.8 points, respectively, representing an increase of 157% and 71% from the mean, respectively. In Figure 4, we plot the event study, and we can see that the Google searches for BJY and Rahul Gandhi surge dramatically after the BJY enters the state and then goes to 0 after around 20 days. However, we don't see any such impact for searches about Indain National Congress, Narendra Modi and Bhartiya Janata Party.

Table 2: Effect Bharat Jodo Yatra on Daily Google Search Rate

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Search Popularity Index:	BJY	Rahul Gandhi	INC	Narendra Modi	BJP
BJY _s × post _t	13.542*** (3.454)	11.773*** (3.024)	-0.476 (0.802)	-0.789 (1.008)	0.166 (0.391)
Mean of Dep. Var.	8.648	16.058	12.877	14.396	6.308
Observation(n)	4,144	4,144	4,440	4,588	4,884
Day FE & State FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
No. Cluster	28	28	30	31	33
R-Squared	.27635	.44531	.65873	.58257	.79596

Notes: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. SEs clustered at the state level.

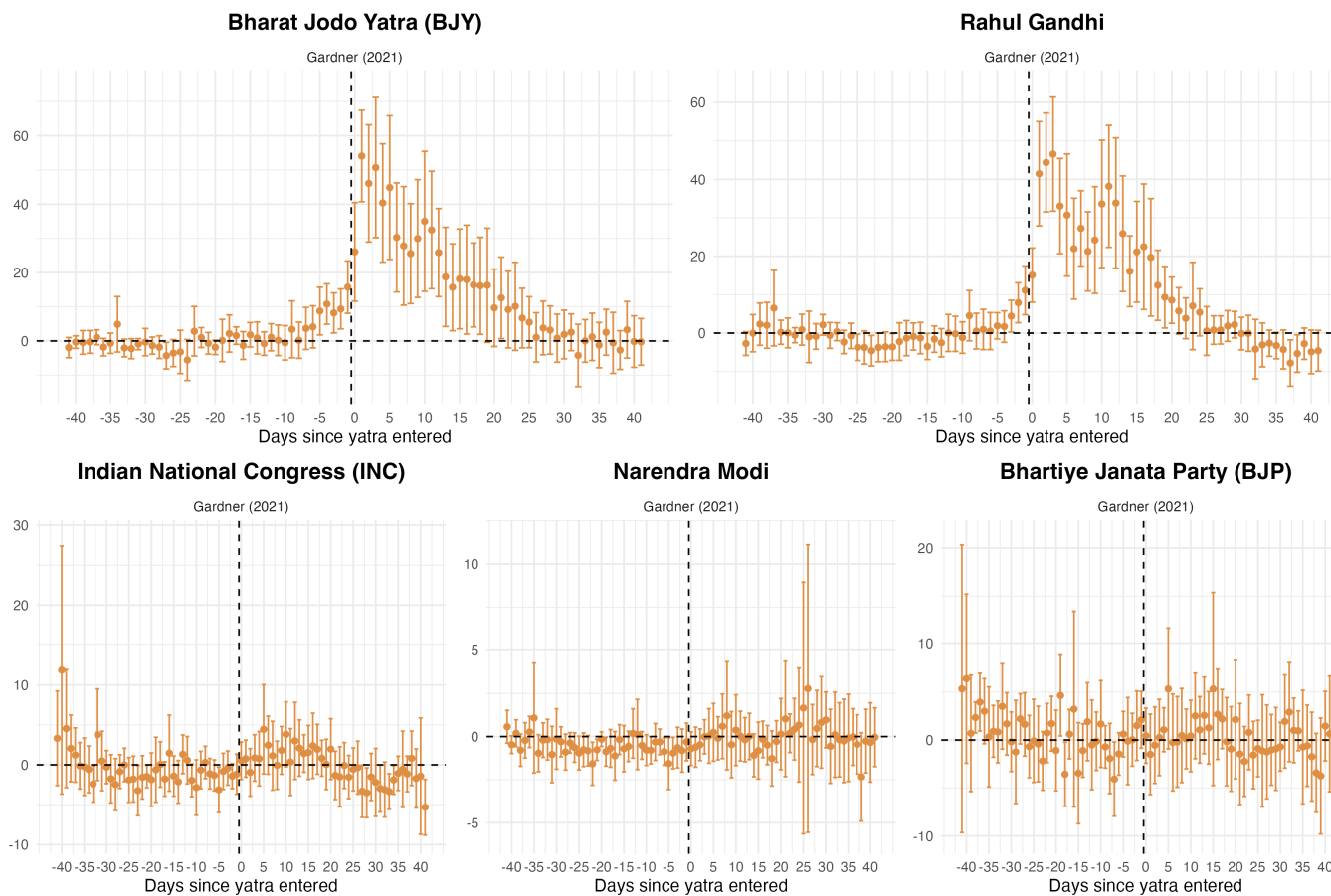


Figure 4: Impacts of BJJ on Google Search Outcomes

4.3 The Electoral Impact of the Yatra

We examine the electoral effects of the Bharat Jodo Yatra on state elections.

Table 3: Effect Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Vote Share in State Elections

	DV: Congress Vote Share			
	all state elections	elections 7 months since yatra	elections 11-13 months since yatra	elections 19 months since yatra
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
BJY _t × Post _t	3.44*** (1.26)	4.49** (2.05)	−0.01 (1.44)	0.20 (0.89)
Observations	3747	891	2160	696
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
AC FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of Clusters (AC)	948	224	549	175
Mean of DV	32.28	38.38	36.55	11.24

Notes: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. SEs clustered at the assembly constituency level. Karnataka elections were held 7 months after the yatra crossed the state, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana elections were held 11-13 months after the yatra crossed their states, and Andhra Pradesh elections were held 19 months after the yatra crossed the state.

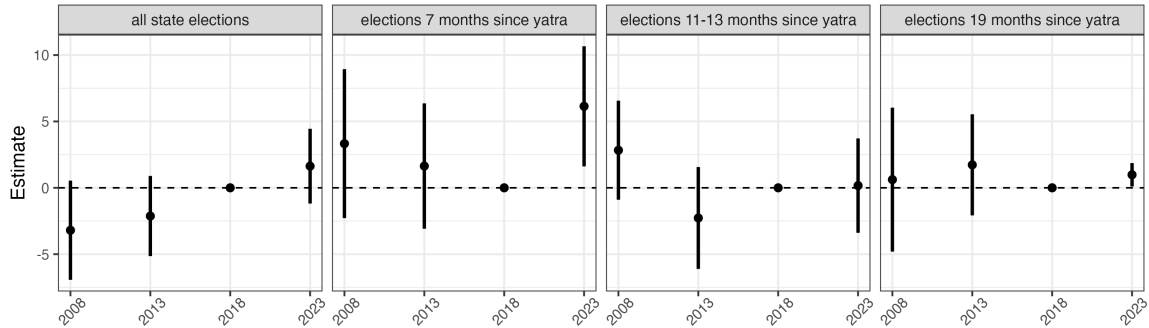


Figure 5: Lok Sabha Effect: Event Study

We assess the effect of the yatra on state legislative assembly elections, concentrating on five states—Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh—where the yatra traversed and elections were held. Table 3 reports the results from our difference-in-differences analysis, estimating the impact of the yatra on the INC’s vote share in these elections. Overall, we observe a 3.44 percentage point increase in the INC vote share, representing an approximately 10% rise from the mean Congress vote share.

4.3.1 Temporal Impact

Disaggregating the analysis into samples based on the timing of elections, we find that the effects are heavily concentrated in the electoral races that occurred seven months after the yatra crossed the state (the Karnataka elections). By the time of the electoral races 11 months and onward after the election (Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Andhra

Pradesh elections), we see small insignificant effects on Congress vote share. The event study in Figure 5 confirms the parallel trends assumption for the positive and significant effects we observe in the elections 7 months after the yatra.

Table 4: Effect Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Win in State Elections

	DV: Congress Win			
	all state elections	elections 7 months since yatra	elections 11-13 months since yatra	elections 19 months since yatra
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
$\text{BJY}_i \times \text{Post}_t$	0.12** (0.06)	0.18* (0.10)	0.07 (0.07)	0.001 (0.07)
Observations	3784	893	2195	696
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
AC FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of Clusters (AC)	948	224	549	175
Mean of DV	0.34	0.47	0.34	0.15

Notes: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. SEs clustered at the assembly constituency level. Karnataka elections were held 7 months after the yatra crossed the state, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana elections were held 11-13 months after the yatra crossed their states, and Andhra Pradesh elections were held 19 months after the yatra crossed the state.

We also examine the impact of the yatra on the likelihood of the INC winning in a constituency in Table 4. We find that overall the yatra increased the INC’s likelihood of winning by 12 percentage points. The effects are again concentrated in Karnataka, which held elections 7 months after the yatra went through the state. Here, we see that the INC’s likelihood of winning increase by 18 percentage points in ACs where the yatra crossed, representing a 38% increase in the average likelihood of winning in the Karnataka sample. Consistent with our findings on the vote share, we see no impact for elections 11 months after the yatra.

4.3.2 Spatial Impact

The results demonstrate that the yatra’s electoral impact was limited to state elections temporally close to the time of the yatra. We now examine whether spatial proximity to the yatra also mattered for its impact. We first test this by using the log distance to the yatra as a continuous treatment variable in the same difference-in-difference specification. The results are shown in Table 5. Here we find that as we move further away from the route of the yatra, Congress vote share decreases. Again, these results are concentrated in the first election to occur after the conclusion of the yatra.

The average area of an Indian assembly constituency is approximately 900 square kilometers. Given this size, using the centroid of a constituency is not sufficient to precisely estimate the impact of yatra proximity on Congress vote share. To achieve a more accurate estimation of the yatra’s effect based on proximity, we collect micro-level electoral data from Karnataka, the first state to hold elections after the yatra.

Table 5: Effect of Spatial Proximity to the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Vote Share in State Elections

	DV: Congress Vote Share			
	all state elections	elections 7 months since yatra	elections 11-13 months since yatra	elections 19 months since yatra
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Log(BJY Distance _{<i>i</i>}) x Post _{<i>t</i>}	-1.50*** (0.27)	-0.99* (0.50)	0.23 (0.30)	0.35 (0.32)
Observations	3747	891	2160	696
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
AC FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of Clusters (AC)	948	224	549	175
Mean of DV	0.34	0.47	0.34	0.15

Notes: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. SEs clustered at the assembly constituency level. Karnataka elections were held 7 months after the yatra crossed the state, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana elections were held 11-13 months after the yatra crossed their states, and Andhra Pradesh elections were held 19 months after the yatra crossed the state.

The Form 20 provides election results at the polling station level for all contesting candidates in India. On average, each polling station has approximately 900 voters. We scrape this data for the 2018 polling station-level results from the Karnataka Election Information System. The 2023 polling station-level results are only available in PDFs from the Chief Election Commissioner of Karnataka. We scrapped the PDF and OCR and then manually cleaned the data to map the candidate with their political party. We also retrieved a shapefile of polling stations in 2018 from the Karnataka Election Information System, which allows us to examine the impact of the yatra spatially. We take a conservative approach to link the 2018 and 2023 polling stations and ultimately link about half of the polling stations. We are currently working on a series of robustness checks related to this. We provide more details on the scraping and matching process in Appendix A.

With this data, we estimate three difference-in-differences models, all at the polling station level shown in Table 6. In Column 1, we define treatment as the yatra passing through a polling station. We find that Congress' vote share increases by 8 percentage points in such areas. In Column 2, we define treatment at the assembly constituency level, where any polling station within the AC being passed by the yatra leads to a similar increase in Congress vote share of 8 percentage points. Interestingly, the effect size remains consistent regardless of whether treatment is defined at the polling station or AC level. In Column 3, we implement a specification similar to the previous section, where we focus on the distance to the route line and find that moving 1 standard deviation away from the yatra route results in a decrease of 1.54 percentage points in Congress vote share.

So far, the method we've used to assess the impact of proximity to the yatra has certain limitations, as it assumes a linear effect of distance on vote share. This means that moving from 0 km to 1 km away is considered similar to moving from 300 km to 301 km away,

Table 6: Impact of yatra at the polling station level in Karnataka

	<i>DV: INC Vote Share</i>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
BJY Polling Station _{<i>i</i>} × Post _{<i>t</i>}	8.00*** (2.31)		
BJY AC _{<i>i</i>} × Post _{<i>t</i>}		8.00*** (2.34)	
Dist _{<i>i</i>} × Post _{<i>t</i>}			−.020*** (.016)
Treatment Definition	Route Crosses PS	Route Crosses AC	Proximity to Yatra
Observations	57,234	57,234	57,234
Control DV	41.5	41.4	41.4
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓
AC FEs	✓	✓	✓
Number of Clusters (AC)	204	204	204

Notes: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. SEs clustered at the assembly constituency level.

which may not accurately reflect reality. To address this issue, we apply a method developed by (Butts 2021), which divides the sample into distance quantiles, as outlined by (Cattaneo et al. 2024; Cattaneo, Farrell and Feng 2020). The effect is then estimated non-parametrically within each bin by comparing units before and after treatment. The estimated effect from the most distant bin is subtracted from the others to normalize the results. This approach allows for a data-driven and optimal selection of the number and location of bins, minimizing the risk of researcher bias. Unlike the conventional ad-hoc selection of treatment and control rings, this estimator enhances robustness by preventing the selection of rings that might unintentionally produce exaggerated or negligible effects.

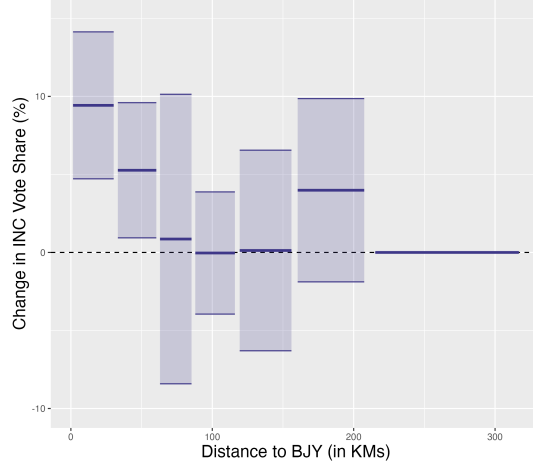


Figure 6: Changes in INC Vote Share by the distance to yatra route

The results from this analysis are visualized in Figure 6. The results reveal that the positive effects of the yatra on INC vote share are concentrated within about 50 kilometers of the yatra. The finding further emphasizes that the impact of the yatra is strongest when a citizen is more likely to interact directly with it.

5 Mechanisms: How Leader-Driven Grassroots Campaigns Matter for Elections

So far, we have demonstrated that grassroots campaigns by the Indian National Congress during the Bharat Jodo Yatra increased INC vote share in a limited way, ultimately mattering for temporally close elections and area spatially nearby to the yatra route. We take a two-pronged approach to understand some of the mechanisms that may be driving these effects. First, we interviewed Congress party leaders and workers, grassroots organizations, and voters, primarily in Karnataka 7 months after the election. This provided a qualitative account of what mechanisms may be at play. Second, we fielded a phone survey in Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh about 13-16 months after the yatra crossed these states to determine what happened over the past year since the yatra particularly to those who participated in it.

5.1 Interview Evidence

We conducted interviews with Congress party leaders and workers, grassroots organizations, and voters primarily in the state of Karnataka. The interviews focused on understanding what happened during the yatra, how it impacted the party and voters, and how it may

have mattered for the election. Three key themes emerged.

Building Party Organization. Our interviews point to key changes in party organization after the yatra passed through the constituency. Specifically, party workers appreciated the ability to interact with Rahul Gandhi, party worker presence increased, and the cadre was more invigorated. One member of the Congress team who supported Rahul Gandhi during the yatra in Karnataka described that the yatra provided the opportunity for party workers to “interact with Rahul Gandhi and get pictures with him” contributing to “cadre-based enthusiasm” where “the workers felt like this was the moment for the party.”¹¹ A local Congress party worker in Mandya district in Karnataka where the yatra passed described how party worker membership increased after the yatra: “after the yatra the members doubled, especially we had many youth joining the party.”¹² He continued to describe the party cadre after the yatra as “more organized.” The interview revealed that the yatra helped build the party organization, which remained a key feature of Congress during the post-independence period when it continued to be viewed as a mass movement (Weiner 1967). The Yatra appeared distinct in that it was broader in its focus, allowing party organization to build linkages with voters.

Discourse Around the Party and Viability. Interviews with voters in places that experienced the yatra revealed how the yatra changed the discourse about the Congress, making them appear more viable as a party. One voter described how on a “mass level the impression of the party went up” and that “people seemed more like to accept the Congress.”¹³ Moreover, the Congress leader Rahul Gandhi regularly faced criticism from the opposition for being an ineffective leader, often being referred to as “Pappu.” In places that experienced the yatra, voters claimed that “less people would refer to Rahul Gandhi as Pappu” stating that they “could no longer attack him like that after he walked across the entire country to meet them.”¹⁴ Party workers also highlighted how Congress became part of the discourse during and after the yatra. One member of the Congress team explained how “the alternative media started covering the yatra because the mainstream media was not covering it” and this “created a buzz” where “people viewed Congress as different than before.”¹⁵ The yatra allowed voters to learn more about the Congress and Rahul Gandhi from direct contact and associated alternative media coverage. This grassroots mobilization allowed the party

¹¹ Author interview with Congress team member. January 7, 2024. Bangalore Urban District

¹² Author interview with Congress team member. January 9, 2024. Mandya District

¹³ Author interview with Congress team member. January 9, 2024. Mandya District

¹⁴ Author interview with Congress team member. January 10, 2024. Mysore District.

¹⁵ Author interview with Congress team member. January 7, 2024. Bangalore Urban District.

to present itself ideologically outside of an election and created a unique buzz around the party.

Bringing the Party Together. Across interviews, the yatra was viewed as an effort to unite factions within the party and present the party as a cohesive front to voters. Congress Party workers highlighted how two Congress leaders representing different factions within the party walked together hand-in-hand with Rahul Gandhi during the yatra. He described that “when DK [Shivakumar] and Siddaramaiah were walking together, it neutralized allegations of infighting in the Congress.”¹⁶ In fact, a large poster of Rahul Gandhi walking hand in hand with DK Shivakumar and Siddaramaiah was still displayed outside the Congress office building 15 months after the yatra had left Karnataka. Factionalism has consistently been an issue for the Congress Party in India (Brass 1965; Nellis 2016). When voters believe that their faction is not being prioritized within the party, they may be less supportive of it. The yatra presented an opportunity to show that the Congress was united and that Rahul Gandhi was connected to leaders of different factions.

5.2 Survey Evidence

The interviews indicate three primary ways that the yatra changed the areas it passed through. We now test whether these changes lasted over a year after the yatra and the state elections ended.

We conducted an original telephone survey of about 3500 citizens. CVoter, an Indian survey firm, administered the survey to respondents in Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh. CVoter added the questions to regular omnibus surveys that use random digit dialing and computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). In Karnataka, we surveyed 420 respondents in 20 assembly constituencies where the yatra passed and 896 respondents across a random sample of 40 assembly constituencies where the yatra did not pass through. In Madhya Pradesh, we surveyed 965 respondents across 18 assembly constituencies where the yatra passed and 1,229 respondents across a random sample of 42 assembly constituencies where the yatra did not pass through. Appendix B includes a map of our survey coverage and demographic details of our sample.

We study the impact of the yatra on individual voter perceptions through a cross-sectional analysis of the survey data. First, we ask standard questions about Rahul Gandhi and the Congress party.¹⁷ Next, we ask a series of questions about voter perceptions and experi-

¹⁶ Author interview with Congress team member. January 8, 2024. Bangalore Urban District.

¹⁷ These questions are similar to other questions that CVoter has fielded in their Omnibus survey in the past.

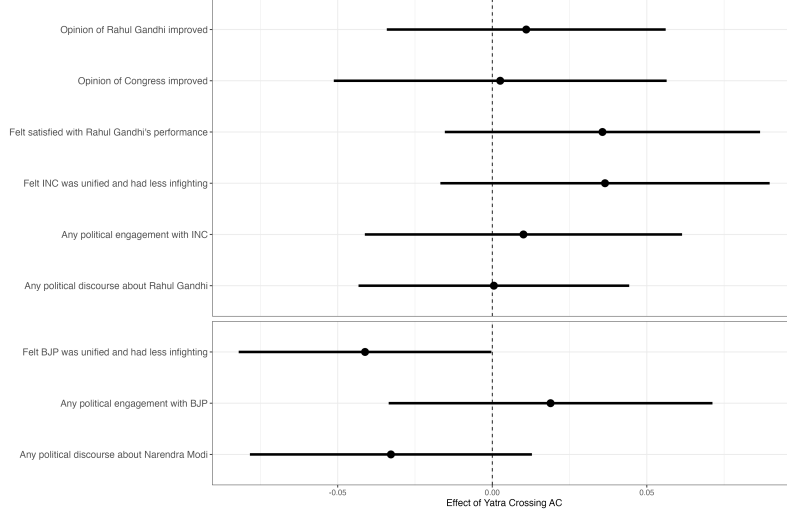


Figure 7: The effect of the yatra crossing an assembly constituency

ences that are classified into three categories related to party engagement (to measure party organization changes), political discourse (to measure discourse and viability of the party), and party cohesion (to measure perceptions that the party was unified). More details on the survey questions are included in Appendix B.

First, we estimate the effect of being in an AC where the yatra crossed on our main outcome variables relating to each mechanism. Figure 7 presents these results. We find largely null effects on being in a yatra AC on all outcome variables.

Next, instead of looking at the effect of being in a yatra AC on the outcome variables, we use the same sample and study the effect of participating in the yatra on the outcomes. At the end of our survey we ask respondents actively participated in the yatra (attending a yatra event, walking with the yatra, etc.). We show the results using this as the explanatory variable in Figure 8.

Interpreting our results descriptively, we find that individuals who reported participating in the yatra were also more likely to report having an improved opinion of Rahul Gandhi and Congress. They also saw increases related to each mechanism: improved perceptions of unity within the Congress, higher levels of political engagement with Congress and more political discourse about Rahul Gandhi. This suggests that in addition to being limited in temporal and spatial ways, the yatra's effects primarily operated through mechanisms that impacted those who had direct contact with it. One interpretation of this finding could be that given the yatra was extensively reported on and was a spectacle, the only people who were really “treated” by the yatra were those with direct engagement with it.

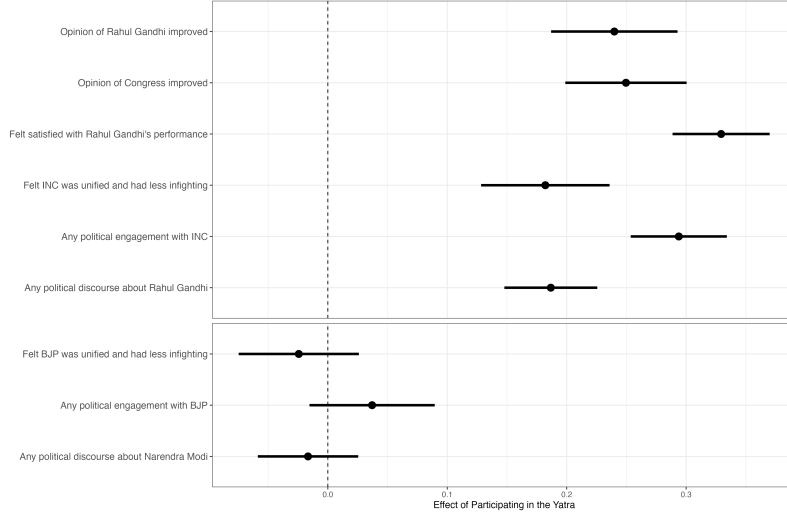


Figure 8: The effect participating in the yatra

6 Next Steps

This is an early draft of our paper. We are still working on the following:

- Digitizing AC-wise results from the national election to study the impact of the yatra on the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.
- Examining sub-group effects in our survey data
- Testing the impact of the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra.
- Robustness exercises related to our polling station analysis

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A Karnataka Polling Station Data

We provide full details on the scraping and processing of our Karnataka polling station data. Form 20 provides election results at the polling station level for all contesting candidates in India. On average, each polling station has approximately 900 voters. There were 56,994 polling stations in the 2018 Karnataka assembly election. We scrape the data for the 2018 polling station-level results from the Karnataka Election Information System.¹⁸ The website gives polling station-level votes for each candidate. We then manually mapped candidates to their political party using the state election data from TCPD. Due to some missingness, we have 54,433 polling stations in our data out of 56,994 in 2018. The data for the 2023 assembly election for the state of Karnataka is only available in PDF format on the website of the Chief Election Commissioner of Karnataka¹⁹. We scrapped the PDF and OCR and then manually cleaned the data to map the candidate with their political party.²⁰ In our data, we have 47,898 out of 58,282 polling stations in 2023.

The Form 20 polling station electoral data for Karnataka for 2018 and 2023 only mentions the assembly constituency number and polling station serial number. However, the polling station numbers do not necessarily remain the same for 2018 and 2023. For example, the number of polling stations has increased by 1,288 from 2018 to 2023. To overcome this challenge, we take the most conservative path and match the polling station over time using the name of the polling station. We obtained the names of 56,653 (out of 56,994) polling stations for 2018 Form 20 from online resources from Gaurav Sood who scrapped the polling station across India in 2018. The names of 58,198 (out of 58,282) polling stations for the 2023 elections were scrapped from Karnataka Election Information System.

We fuzzy-match polling stations using the names for 2018 and 2023. We iterate over all assembly constituencies one by one and successfully match over 50% of the polling stations. To verify our match, we look at the correlation between polling station numbers in 2018 and 2023, as only a small fraction of polling stations changed their numbers, the polling station serial number for the vast majority should remain the same. The correlation for the names matched without a single difference in a name string is 99.24% while for names matched with at most 10 character difference in the name is 97.3%. Right now, this is the most conservative approach to matching. In future iterations of the paper, we will perform a series of robustness checks related to the matching.

¹⁸Karnataka Election Information, last accessed on 6th Aug 2024

¹⁹Karnataka CEO, last accessed on 6th Aug 2024

²⁰Note that many of these websites are only accessible in India or with a VPN.

B Survey Details and Additional Results

Our telephone survey was conducted in Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh. Figure B.1 shows the ACs that we have survey respondents in.

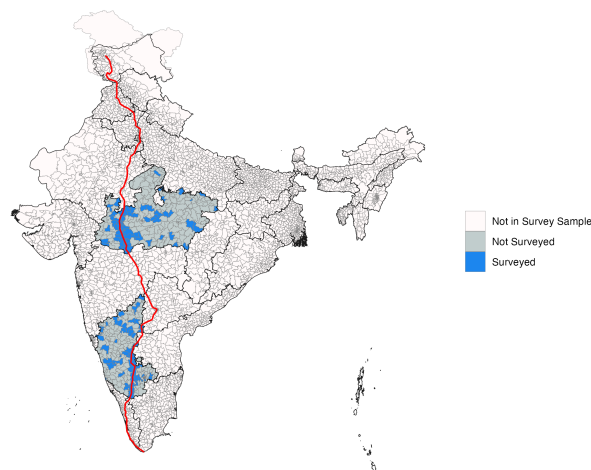


Figure B.1: Map of ACs in our Survey Data

In the paper we use several questions to look at broad mechanisms identified by the qualitative interviews. We list these questions and their categorization below. For each of these we start by saying: Now we will ask you about a list of political actions, and we want you to tell us if this has happened in the past year.

- Political Engagement Through Party Organization
 - Receive any political messages from Congress by phone
 - Attend a Congress political meeting or election rally
 - Got contacted by a party worker from Congress
- Discourse and Viability
 - Discussed Rahul Gandhi with neighbours
 - Heard Rahul Gandhi discussed on television/phone
- Bringing the Party Together
 - Felt that Congress party was unified and had less infighting

We also ask the following questions about Rahul Gandhi and Congress:

- How satisfied are you with performance of Congress leader: Rahul Gandhi? - Very much satisfied, Satisfied to some extent, Not at all satisfied, Don't know / can't say
- Has your opinion of the Congress party improved in the last year? - My opinion of the Congress Party has improved, My opinion of the Congress Party has stayed the same, My opinion of the Congress Party has worsened, Don't know / can't say