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Authors

Baral, Siddhartha

Nellis, Gareth

Weaver, Michael

Publication Date

2023-08-21

DOI

10.26085/C3DK5R

Series Name: WPS
WPS Paper No. 227
Issue Date: 7/31/23

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CEGA

Center for Effective Global Action

Working Paper Series

Center for Effective Global Action
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Recommended Citation:

Baral, Siddhartha ; Nellis, Gareth ; Weaver, Michael (2023): The Electoral Consequences of Mass Religious Events: India's Kumbh Mela. CEGA Working Paper Series No. WPS-227 . Center for Effective Global Action. University of California, Berkeley. Text. <https://doi.org/10.26085/C3DK5R>

The Electoral Consequences of Mass Religious Events: India's Kumbh Mela*

Siddhartha Baral[†]

Gareth Nellis[‡]

Michael Weaver[§]

May 2023

Abstract

Mass ritualized gatherings like pilgrimages are central to religious practice globally. Do they generate votes for religious parties? The events may heighten religiosity, enlarging support for parties seen as owning religious policy issues. Such parties might also co-opt the events to organize and campaign. We evaluate the electoral impact of India's Kumbh Mela, a Hindu festival considered the world's biggest human assembly, leveraging its astrologically determined timing combined with districts' proximity by rail to the festival sites. The Kumbh Mela boosts Hindu nationalists' vote share. Mechanisms tests suggest it does so by increasing religious orthodoxy—seen in the adoption of Brahminical dietary practices—and by strengthening Hindu nationalist party infrastructure. Communal violence is unaffected, but the events are electorally polarizing; they cause India's main secular-leaning party to perform better in regions with denser concentrations of religious minorities. Our study offers a new account of how confessional parties make inroads in multiethnic democracies.

*We are grateful to Nick Gardner, Aura Gonzalez, Toni Liria-Sala, and Jiayi Li for excellent research assistance. For comments, data, and advice, we thank Poulomi Dhar Chakrabarti, Dave Donaldson, Gabe De Roche, Karen Ferree, Michael Joseph, Matt Lowe, Ashish Verma, and participants at the 2021 MPSA and APSA meetings and the 2022 India Politics Workshop.

[†]Department of Political Science, University of California San Diego. Email: sbaral@ucsd.edu.

[‡]Corresponding author. Department of Political Science, University of California San Diego. Email: gnellis@ucsd.edu.

[§]Department of Political Science, University of British Columbia. Email: michael.weaver@ubc.ca.

How do religious parties win votes? Secular nationalism emerged as the governing ideology of newly decolonized states in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet its influence has waned in recent decades. Across a swath of countries—including Turkey, Israel, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Morocco—there has been a surge in support for far-right confessional parties representing majority religious groups (Juergensmeyer 2019). According to Fukuyama (2018, 66), “[o]ne of the striking characteristics of global politics [today] is that the dynamic new forces shaping it are nationalist or religious parties and politicians ... rather than the class-based left-wing parties that were so prominent in the politics of the twentieth century.” This is particularly true of low- and middle-income settings (Kalyvas 2000). These trends have thrown cold water on modernization theorists’ claim that secularization and democracy go hand in hand (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Fox 2006; Norris and Inglehart 2011). Ethnoreligious nationalism has emboldened violent extremists and placed minorities at risk (e.g., Tambiah 1992). There is a pressing need to understand the roots of popular backing for religious parties at a time when liberal democratic institutions are endangered, maybe as never before, by the exclusionary principles such parties frequently represent.

Recent academic research spotlights clientelism as a principal tool for religious party expansion—whether the distribution of cooking oil around election time, or the longer-term provision of basic education and healthcare to the rural poor (Brooke 2019; Thachil 2014). Less investigated, by contrast, is the role played by existing religious practices in fostering support. That is the focus of our paper. In particular, we examine the contribution of mass religious events to the success of religious parties in young, multiethnic democracies.

Large ritual congregations of adherents are integral to most major religions. The annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five pillars of Islam and is considered a sacred duty for all Muslims. Samaritans journey to Mount Gerizim each year in commemoration of the three Jewish *shalosh regalim* festivals. During Holy Week, Catholics from central and northern Mexico convene at the Sanctuary of Atotonilco in Guanajuato to complete a weeklong cycle of prayers and fasting, ending in a procession. The spectacles attract the attention of ethnographers, documentary-makers, and historians. Notably absent so far are detailed assessments of their electoral impacts.

We hypothesize two mechanisms by which mass religious gatherings help religious parties at the ballot box. One possibility is that joint participation in large group rituals alters people’s sense of their religious selves, increasing religiosity among marginal believers and reorienting the beliefs of the already-devout. If greater piety leads individuals to update their political preferences, parties seen as “owning” religious

policy issues stand to benefit (Petrocik 1996). Our second explanation holds that religious parties proactively exploit mass religious gatherings to mobilize votes and build their organizations, a strategy we term platform co-optation. The events have three inherent advantages for religious parties in this regard: (i) they *pre-screen* for ideologically sympathetic voters; (ii) provide a *safe space* where it is hard for hostile state authorities to regulate party activities; and (iii) supply a *focal point* for religious parties to coordinate with civil society affiliates. Taken together, these ideational and pragmatic channels point to mass religious gatherings having a positive electoral externality for doctrinally aligned parties—an effect transmissible directly by attendance at the event, and indirectly through spillovers to non-attendees.¹

To test these claims, we study India’s Kumbh Mela (“The Festival of the Urn”), a Hindu religious festival thought to be the world’s largest human assembly. The Kumbh Mela is held at least once every three years, and rotates between four different locations in northern and western India. The 2013 Mela in Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad) lasted three months and reportedly hosted 120 million visitors.² The gatherings lie at the heart of India’s “sacred geography” (Eck 2012). At the festivals, throngs of pilgrims, *sadhus* (Hindu holy men), and tourists encamp in vast tent cities, perform devotional practices, listen to sermons and speeches, and bathe in the salvific rivers.

We measure the causal effect of the Kumbh Mela on local electoral support for Hindu nationalism, a political project centered on the spiritual and cultural revival of Hinduism, and its protection against alleged threats from the subcontinent’s other religious traditions, principally Islam (Jaffrelot 1999). Since winning power at the national level in 2014, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has dominated Indian politics. It has enacted discriminatory policies targeting the country’s Muslim community.³ Partly as a result, India’s Freedom House rating dropped from “free” to “partly free” in 2021. In the same year, Varieties of Democracy classed the country as an electoral autocracy for the first time.

We construct a comprehensive dataset that links geo-coded, constituency-level returns for all national parliamentary elections held since India’s independence in 1947 with a full schedule of Kumbh Melas—39 in total—that we compiled from newspaper reports and secondary sources. Our benchmark analysis uses a generalized difference-in-differences design. For identification, we exploit variation in a district’s temporal-

¹For ease of presentation, this paper uses the term “religious party” to refer to parties that explicitly represent the religion of the mass religious event in question.

²By comparison, attendance at the Hajj peaked at 3.16 million in 2012.

³See *World Report 2021: India*, by Human Rights Watch, bit.ly/3qh4uE1. At present, approximately 80 percent of India’s population identify as Hindu and 14 percent identify as Muslim.

spatial distance to the Kumbh Mela at a given election period, a function of the idiosyncratic timing of Melas relative to national elections, and districts' proximity via India's railway network to the four Mela sites. For tests of theoretical pathways, we use nationally representative sample surveys of consumer expenditure, census demographics, historical voter surveys, and panel data on Hindu-Muslim violence.

Previewing the results, we document a large positive impact of the Kumbh Mela on the performance of Hindu nationalist parties. Districts within 450kms of a Kumbh site where a festival has occurred within the past year experience a 7.6 percentage point increase in Hindu nationalist vote share. The finding is highly robust. It is supported by placebo tests, and persists across a range of alternative specifications, coding decisions, and estimation strategies—including those that address shortcomings of the two-way fixed effects estimator (De Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille 2020). The Mela's effects are especially pronounced in the earlier phase of Hindu nationalist-party growth. Capitalizing on existing religious events may become less electorally valuable as religious parties become more integrated into mainstream politics.

In terms of mechanisms, there is evidence that the Kumbh Mela promotes orthodox Hindu religiosity, seen in the increased take up of the upper-caste Hindu practice of vegetarianism. The results thus lend credence to the claim that social identity change lies behind mass religious gatherings' impact on voting behavior. We also substantiate our second argument: that mass religious events offer religious parties a readymade platform for organizing and mobilizing. Qualitatively, there are direct accounts of Hindu nationalists piggybacking on the festivals to attend to internal party business and raise party visibility. In a case study using two of the earliest national voter surveys fielded in India, we demonstrate that the Prayagraj Kumbh Mela of 1971 strengthened Hindu nationalist party infrastructure nearby. We end by examining the Kumbh Mela's wider social and political impacts. While the events do not exacerbate communal violence, they are electorally polarizing. In districts with a higher proportion of Muslims, India's principal secular-leaning party gains votes in response to the Melas, whereas other parties lose ground.

Scholars have underscored the need for greater focus on religion's interaction with democratic processes, particularly in non-Western contexts (Woodberry 2012; Chhibber and Shastri 2014). Heeding this call, we tie mass religious observance to voting in the world's largest electorate. In doing so, we add to the specific study of pilgrimages' attitudinal and behavioral impacts. Clingingsmith et al. (2009) find that Hajj attendance increases conformity with global Islamic practices, and improves attitudes toward ethnic and religious outgroups. Christia et al. (2019) show that religious socialization during the Ashura pilgrimage to Karbala, Iraq produces a convergence in sectarian norms. We explore the electoral consequences of mass religious events for the first time—shedding light on the macro-level political shifts they bring about.

Second, our research dovetails with work looking at religion’s social-psychological implications for politics. Speeches with religious content influence the nature and extent of participation in ethnically divided democracies (McClendon and Riedl 2019). Catholic clergy have been politically influential in Brazil (Tuñón 2017). Islamist parties enjoy an electoral head start owing to their perceived sacred links (Grewal et al. 2019). We show that mass religious gatherings—where sermonizing and religious iconography are prevalent—can affect social identities, and intensify political polarization.

Finally, we expand the literature on the political activation of social cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Without denying the significance of the materialist tactics central to recent research, we show how religious nationalists can harness longstanding religious practices to reap electoral rewards. The repurposing of supposedly apolitical religious events in service of electoral competition is a notable example of the “modernity of tradition” (Rudolph and Rudolph 1984).

Argument

Why might large religious gatherings help religious parties pick up votes in elections? This section lays out two reasons: one focused on identity change, the other on platform co-optation. It rounds off by discussing how these mechanisms apply to both event participants and non-participants.

Religiosity and identity change

A mass religious gathering could increase the religiosity of attendees, and the importance they assign to religion in their everyday lives. Identity change at the events may come about through psychological and informational channels. Group ritual activities lead to “depersonalization” and in-group cohesion, according to processual models in sociology (Olaveson 2001). Durkheim (2008, 162) famously portrayed ritualized collective interactions as societal self-worship, marked by “a kind of electricity that quickly transports [participants] to an extraordinary degree of exaltation.” In this state of collective effervescence, he argued, individualism breaks down, prompting participants to bind more strongly with the symbols and value-systems of the community. Turner outlined a similar phenomenon, *communitas*, whereby collective, rhythmic performance in a sacred, “liminal” setting fuses once-atomistic social structures into “a homogenous, undifferentiated whole” (Turner 1977, 177).

Beyond psychological effects, collective rituals—which pilgrimages and processions epitomize—are venues where higher-order beliefs are forged, providing a rationalist explanation for identity switching in these contexts. Chwe (2013) presents a formal model in which rituals foster common knowledge by permitting community members to observe each other’s behaviors and attitudes. Rituals not only communicate what

community members' beliefs are, they make clear that other community members know about the existence of each others' beliefs: "I know that you know ... that I know," and so forth. Gatherings with ritualistic elements thus solve coordination problems, driving group-level changes in practices and norms.

Increased religiosity caused by mass religious gatherings may be an important input into political behavior, but it is not enough by itself to move election outcomes. For that to occur, two further conditions are necessary. First, more religious citizens must go on to demand a bigger role for religion in state policy-making. Such a stance may follow from the content of certain belief-systems, from the instrumentalization of religious wedge issues by election-minded elites, or from religion being at the top of voters' minds while elections are ongoing (Nelson 2011; Wilkinson 2006; Zaller 1992). Second, on the supply side, there must be at least one party or candidate in a position to respond to these demands; i.e., there needs to be an outlet for devout voters to make their preferences heard.

Platform co-optation

The previous argument presents confessional parties as mostly passive beneficiaries of large religious events: gatherings mint more religious voters, who then cast their votes for religious parties. By contrast, our other explanation emphasizes the deliberate actions of parties themselves. We propose that religious parties engage in *platform co-optation*, taking advantage of mass religious gatherings to conduct on-site outreach to potential voters, and to enhance the effectiveness of their organizations.

Three features of popular religious gatherings make them ideal for co-optation. First, the events *screen in* large numbers of individuals and groups likely to be sympathetic to religious parties' cause. Tracking down persuadable voters is an uphill battle for most parties, which is one reason why partisan persuasion efforts often fall flat (Kalla and Broockman 2018). Mass religious gatherings mitigate the search problem owing to participant self-selection. The events attract not only pious voters but also those marginally inclined toward religion (e.g., the pilgrim-vacationers at the Tabbar Inn in Chaucer's *Tale of Beryn*). It is therefore reasonable to expect that attendees will be more receptive to religiously couched political appeals than the average citizen. By the same token, the events are fertile grounds for recruiting the committed rank-and-file cadres needed to staff local party cells.

Second, mass religious gatherings provide a "safe space" where religious party activities are shielded from sometimes hostile state authorities. Democracies and autocracies have, at times, tried to restrict public religious practices. But regulating religious spaces invites blowback in deeply religious countries. Full-scale suppression of collective worship has generally proven impossible. Examples of political movements using religious spaces for officially proscribed activism include the Iranian revolution, when mosques

“served as centers for dissent, political organization, agitation, and sanctuary” (Esposito 1999, 110). Religious pilgrimages were revived at the end of communist rule in Slovakia, with the Christian Democratic Movement immediately embracing their “political potential” (Doellinger 2002, 226). Well-known, too, is the pivotal part Black Baptist churches played in the civil rights movement in the southern United States. Analogously, mass religious events can offer safe-haven to confessional parties trying to sign up voters and volunteers.

The events alleviate a third challenge faced by religious parties: their need to coordinate activities with regional branches and civil society affiliates (Wickham 2015). Religious parties at their early stages of development commonly find themselves geographically over-stretched, resource-constrained, and reliant on outside groups for manpower and ideological direction. Mass religious gatherings are a natural point of convergence for handling organizational affairs.

For these reasons, then, we should expect mass religious events to be a boon to religious parties, and not to their competitors. But the opportunities should not be overstated. Attempting to get electoral mileage from religious festivals involves risks. If religious parties are seen as tarnishing a sacred occasion by injecting it with politics, any vote gains could be offset by public anger. Savvy party operatives must devise strategies for engaging with religious attendees that avoid these pitfalls.

Spillovers

We expect mass religious gatherings not only to shape the political preferences of event participants; they might also mold the voting behavior of a wider segment of the voting population, above all in geographically proximate areas. Participants induced to support religious parties by going on pilgrimage may transmit their new preferences to their families and close social networks. Organizational improvements resulting from the gatherings should prove a significant multiplier, expanding the capacity of religious parties to secure votes well beyond the boundaries of the event itself. Local media coverage could also profit religious parties, giving them visibility and credibility—by dint of their association with the event—that they would not otherwise enjoy. The “treatment” is bundled, therefore. Furthermore, the festivals’ impacts should resemble a ripple pattern, being greatest in the vicinity of the mass gathering and in the time period shortly after its conclusion, then decaying as both distance and time from the event grow.

Background

The Kumbh Mela. The Kumbh Mela is a Hindu religious gathering held approximately once every three years across four Indian cities: Haridwar and Prayagraj in the north of the country, and Ujjain

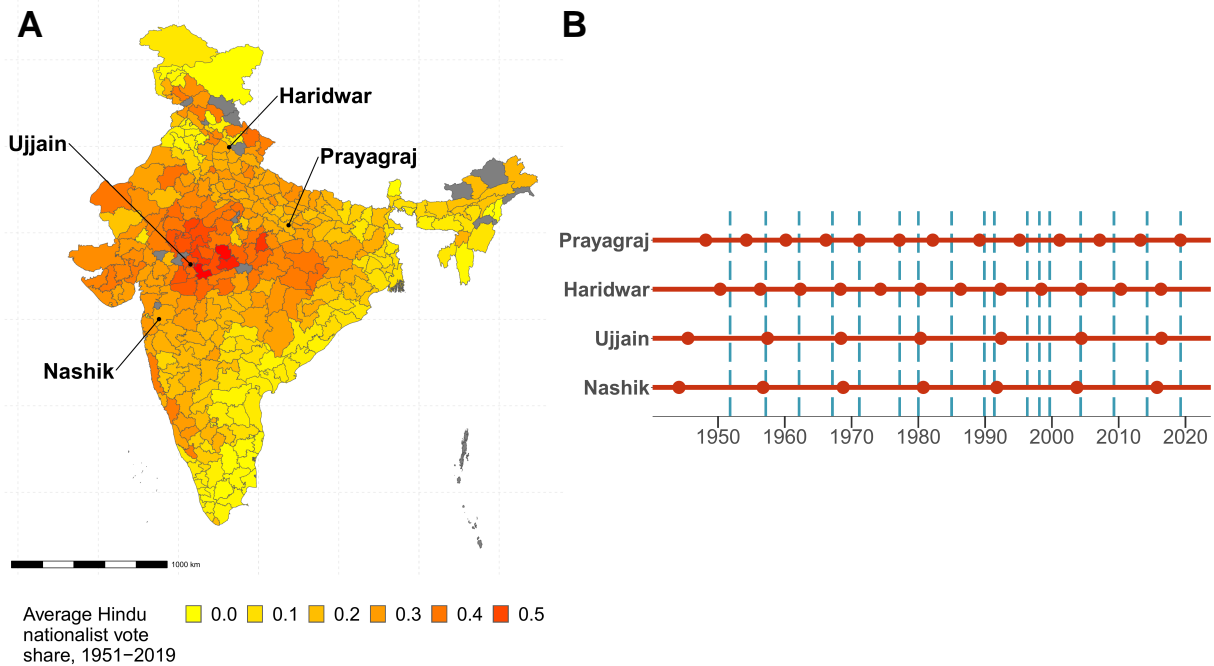


Figure 1: *Panel A:* Map of India showing the locations of the four Kumbh Mela sites and the average vote share received by Hindu nationalist parties across all Lok Sabha elections, 1951–2019, at the 1961 administrative district level. *Panel B:* Timing of the Kumbh Melas—including the *Ardh* melas—across the four event sites (red circles) relative to India’s Lok Sabha elections (vertical blue dashed lines).

and Nashik in the center-west (see Figure 1A). Haridwar and Prayagraj also host *Ardh* (“half”) Kumbh Melas midway between the full Kumbhs. The timing of the Melas is determined astrologically, based on the positions of Jupiter, the sun, and the moon.⁴ During the festival, which generally lasts two to three months, pilgrims seeking spiritual purification bathe in the rivers at the sites. On the most auspicious days, the primary bathing spots are reserved for Hindu *sadhus* who perform the *shahi snan*: ritual submersion at the end of elaborate processions, during which groups of ascetics (*akharas*) brandish ceremonial weapons and parade their leaders on gold and silver palanquins in front of large crowds. The Kumbh itself exemplifies a Durkheimian effervescent environment: “The entire atmosphere is saturated with the religious fervor of chiming bells, incense, flower fragrances, Vedic hymns, mantras, and the beating of drums” (Bhela 2010, 100).

The origins of the Kumbh Mela are unclear. Some ascribe it to Adi Shankaracharya, an eighth-century philosopher who saw regular meetings of Hindu scholars and priests as a means of strengthening Hinduism against Buddhism (Lochtefeld 2004). Violence marred the Melas in the precolonial period, as competing *akharas* vied for status and royal patronage. The Melas also became important commercial fairs at that

⁴See Online Appendix O for further details, and Online Appendix P for a discussion of a rare dispute over Mela timing.

time. The expansion of the railway network during British rule led to ballooning attendance in the nineteenth century (Maclean 2008). Today, regional governments are tasked with organizing the festivals, erecting “pop-up mega-cities” replete with campgrounds, public health facilities, sanitation, and extensive security (Khanna et al. 2013). Trains—the principal mode of transport for poorer Indians—are specially commissioned to convey pilgrims and tourists. The Uttar Pradesh state government reportedly spent USD 500 million on the 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh Mela, which is estimated to have employed 300,000 people.⁵

Hindu nationalism. Politically, the 76 years since India’s independence have seen the decline of secular nationalism—embodied in the Congress party—and its replacement by *Hindutva*, a majoritarian worldview that took root in the 1920s and is today represented by a family of organizations known as the *Sangh Parivar*.⁶ Several political parties have claimed to speak for the “Hindu nation.” Of them, the BJP has made the biggest electoral strides. After its founding in 1980, the BJP seized on divisive socio-political issues. It accused the then-dominant Congress party of “pseudo-secularism” and pandering to India’s Muslim minority. Its pro-market economic policies appealed to India’s burgeoning middle class. It has also won the support of upper-caste Hindus opposed to affirmative action policies for backward-caste groups. The BJP held India’s prime ministership between 1998 and 2004 at the head of coalition governments. Under Narendra Modi, it first achieved its own legislative majority in India’s lower house in 2014.

Kumbh Melas as political sites. The political significance of the Kumbh Mela has not been lost on historians and journalists. The Hindu Mahasabha—an early pressure group advocating for Hindu unity—was initially convened at the 1915 Kumbh Mela in Haridwar (Bapu 2013). During the anti-colonial struggle, the nationalist movement disseminated its messages of *swaraj*, *swadeshi*, and *satyagraha* at the gatherings, while association with the Mela helped imbue it with “a sense of divine right” (Gould 2004, 85). The festival has remained a political hotbed in the democratic era. Parties set up elaborate camps at the Kumbhs, and top politicians make highly publicized appearances to reinforce their religious credentials.

Despite the projection of the Kumbh Mela as an inclusive, pan-Indian cultural event, in recent decades Hindu nationalist organizations have disproportionately conscripted it to advance their political agenda. At the forefront has been the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a militant Hindu nationalist organization associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). It assembled the inaugural World Hindu Con-

⁵“Kumbh Mela 2019 to Generate Revenue of Rs 1.2 Lakh Crore: CII,” *Business Today*, January 21, 2019, bit.ly/2PXjCc7.

⁶Although the Congress has a reputation for being broadly secularist, in practice it has, at times and at different levels, played on religious sentiments for political gain (Sherman 2022, ch. 3).

ference at the 1966 Kumbh in Prayagraj.⁷ At the 2016 Kumbh in Ujjain, the BJP state government put on a *Vaicharik Kumbh*, or “Kumbh of thoughts,” that brought together Hindu nationalist politicians and religious leaders.⁸ In short, hardline groups have repeatedly used the event to elevate the *Hindutva* cause.

India’s pilgrims. To what extent do pilgrims resemble the rest of India’s population? Knowing this can help us understand who might be politically impacted by the Kumbh Mela. Accounts indicate that pilgrimage is a popular activity and not the preserve of “true believers” (e.g., Eck 2012, 64). Online Appendix Figure A2 analyzes nationally representative Pew data collected in 2019–20. It finds the demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal differences between Hindu pilgrims and non-pilgrims to be modest in magnitude. For instance, only 44 percent of Hindu pilgrims report having voted for the BJP in the 2019 national election, compared to 41 percent of non-pilgrims, showing that the pilgrim population encompasses more than staunch Hindu nationalists. In a survey of attendees at the 2016 Ujjain Kumbh Mela, the most commonly cited reasons for attending the event turned out to be non-religious ones (see Online Appendix Figure A3). Surveys thus point to there being a large pool of pilgrims potentially convertible to political Hindu nationalism.

Methods

We describe our empirical strategy for identifying the impact of the Kumbh Mela on electoral outcomes. The core of our approach lies in measuring how politics and society in a locality are affected by (i) ease-of-access to the Kumbh Mela festivals combined with (ii) the recency of festivals at each site.⁹

Data and coding

The unit of analysis for the primary tests is the 1961 administrative district during a given Lok Sabha election.¹⁰ For the main results, we focus on a balanced panel of districts observed across 17 election

⁷“All Set for the Kumbh Mela: Steps to Regulate Pilgrim Traffic,” *Times of India*, January 7, 1966, bit.ly/3wIOoWM.

⁸“Congress Alleges Scam in Ujjain,” *Hindu*, July 19, 2016, bit.ly/3wRBwxu.

⁹Online Appendix N provides evidence from cellphone records that geographic proximity to the Kumbh is predictive of attendance.

¹⁰Excluded from the sample are the sparsely populated Andaman Islands, the archipelago of Lakshadweep, and Daman and Diu. These territories are either wholly or partly *not* on the Indian mainland and are thus inaccessible to the Kumbh Mela by rail.

years.¹¹

Treatment variable. We draw on multiple sources to construct the right-hand-side data. First, we use the online archive of the Bombay edition of the *Times of India*, India’s newspaper of record, in addition to assorted historical and astrological documents, to produce a complete schedule of the start and end dates of all full and half Kumbh Melas held in Prayagraj, Ujjain, Haridwar, and Nashik dating back to 1943.¹² The timeline of Kumbh Melas is displayed in Figure 1B, and a detailed listing of data sources for each event is given in Supplementary Information Table S2. Second, we append the start-dates of each national election cycle to the dataset (taken from Agarwal et al. 2021). Third, we pinpoint the latitude/longitude coordinates of the four Kumbh Mela grounds. Finally, we use geodata on the Indian rail network as it existed in 1956 (digitized by Donaldson 2018) to create a spatial network linking all 1961 district centroids to all four Kumbh sites by train.¹³ For each district d during election t , we then code a binary indicator as follows:

$$Recent\ nearby\ Kumbh_{dt} = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if a Kumbh has occurred within 450kms by rail within the past 365 days} \\ 0, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

The choice of distance and time cutoffs involves some arbitrariness. The distance cutoff represents 12 hours’ train-travel time,¹⁴ while our prior was that any localized Kumbh effects—the product of a months-long festival—would endure at least a year. We demonstrate that the estimated impacts are not sensitive to these particular choices.

¹¹See Supplementary Information D for `panelView` visualizations of data structure and coverage. We present robustness tests below demonstrating that the results are virtually unchanged using the full, imbalanced panel.

¹²We include the *Ardh* Melas because they have attained near-equal prominence to the full Kumbhs.

¹³We use Dijkstra’s algorithm to compute the shortest railroad distance from each district centroid to each of the four Kumbh sites. We employ a map of the network as it existed close to the start of our study period to avoid post-treatment bias, which could arise if rail construction occurred in response to political dynamics induced by the Kumbh Mela. In practice, there has been limited rail expansion since the 1950s; our calculation shows that the 1956 network stood at 84 percent of its total 2001 length. Online Appendix G provides a robustness check on the main results using the 2001 rail map.

¹⁴The average Indian train moves at 38kms per hour.

Outcomes. We gathered constituency-level electoral returns for all national (Lok Sabha) elections, from the first general election in 1951-2 up to the most recent one in 2019. We then identified the geographic locations of every Lok Sabha constituency that has existed since independence. Constituency boundaries are periodically redrawn to correct for malapportionment. To preserve stable geographic measurement units over time—needed for the panel analysis—we assign every constituency to the 1961 district to which it (would have) belonged, using digitized 1961 district maps. We then average outcomes by election-year within those 1961 district boundaries.

Our primary outcome is the vote share received by Hindu nationalist parties in each district/election-year. The case study literature identifies six main parties as having propounded a Hindu nationalist agenda since independence: the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Ram Rajya Parishad, the Shiv Sena, and the 1977–1980 Janata coalition.¹⁵ Additional outcome measures, and the steps taken to build them, are detailed in the results section and Online Appendix Table A2. Online Appendix Table A1 gives summary statistics.

Estimation

Areas close to large pilgrimage sites might exhibit unusual demographic traits (e.g., be home to more very religious people). Governments might also strategically time some religious gatherings to benefit from their wide appeal. If true, naive OLS estimates based on either cross-sectional or longitudinal variation will be biased. To overcome these inferential hurdles, we rely on a long time-series cross-sectional dataset, and the plausibly exogenous timing of the Kumbh Mela festivals relative to India’s national elections.¹⁶ The core

¹⁵For the 1977 elections, which came in the aftermath of the Emergency launched by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, we code the Janata party coalition as Hindu nationalist. Hindu nationalist parties opted to stand under the Janata banner that year, as part of a coordinated effort to unseat the Congress. Janata included a variety of ideological tendencies. But it was repeatedly branded as Hindu nationalist in its fundamental orientation by movement opponents (Jaffrelot 1999, 305). Internal disagreements over holding RSS membership were the primary factor behind the coalition’s downfall. Strikingly, the coalition “gained electoral traction [at the 1977 Prayagraj Kumbh Mela] because of unequivocal support of the Sadhu Samaj (the society of ascetics). The Dharma Sansad (parliament of religion) and a vast majority of Sadhu Sammelans (saintly organizations) in the Kumbh of 1977 had declared Indira as a mortal enemy of India” (*Swarajya*, February 28, 2013, bit.ly/41Q1y2u). We later confirm the results’ robustness to recoding the main outcome measure for 1977 and 1980 based only on Janata candidates with a Hindu nationalist background; see Supplementary Information C.

¹⁶See Online Appendix O and P for further justification of this assumption. We identified no case of a national election being timed with the Kumbh Mela in mind.

specification is a two-way fixed effects (TWFE) estimator of the form:

$$Y_{dt} = \beta \cdot \text{Recent nearby Kumbh}_{dt} + \gamma_{0d} + \delta_t \left[+ \theta_d(\gamma_{1d} \cdot t) \right] + \epsilon_{dt} \quad (2)$$

where Y is the outcome. Time-invariant district attributes—such a region’s underlying political leanings, institutional history, or legacies of Hindu nationalist organization—are captured by district fixed effects, γ_d . Election fixed effects (δ_t) account for shocks such as party “waves” that are specific to each election cycle. In some models we partial out district-specific linear time trends in the outcome variable: $\gamma_d \times t$. The idiosyncratic error term, ϵ , is clustered at the district level.

The parameter of interest is β . The key identification assumption is that, absent the Kumbh Mela, districts near the events would have experienced the same trends in voting for Hindu nationalist parties as districts further away. Crucially, generalized TWFE estimators are not equivalent to difference-in-differences designs, and may suffer from two related problems (De Chaisemartin and d’Haultfoeuille 2020). First, TWFE can place more weight on some treated cases rather than others as a function of treatment timing. If treatment effects are heterogeneous and covary with treatment timing, the simple TWFE procedure gives biased estimates of the average effect of treatment on the treated group. Second, the weighted average effect may include negative weights resulting from “forbidden comparisons”: that is, difference-in-differences comparisons of treated units against previously treated units, which are biased if the effects of treatment are dynamic over time. Recognizing these concerns, we show that: (i) no observations receive negative weights in our application; (ii) there are strong case-specific reasons to rule out dynamic effects; and (iii) the results hold when using estimators that weight treated units equally and exclude forbidden comparisons by design.

Results

Effects on Hindu nationalist vote share. The findings for the primary outcome are presented in Table 1. Panel A, Column 1 reports that the occurrence of a nearby Kumbh Mela (<450kms by rail) within one year prior to a Lok Sabha election increases the vote share for Hindu nationalist parties by 7.6 percentage points on average ($p < 0.001$). The inclusion of district-specific time trends in Panel A, Column 2 yields an effect estimate of 7.3 percentage points. These are sizable impacts relative to the overall outcome mean of 21 percent. Implementing Conley (1999) adjustments for spatial correlation among districts leaves standard errors substantively unchanged, even for radii as large as 1,500kms, which is half the maximum rail distance between any two districts in the sample.

We perform an initial set of robustness checks. Panels B–D of Table 1 display coefficient magnitudes and statistical significance of a very similar order to the baseline model when (i) using the full (imbalanced) panel data, (ii) restricting the estimation sample only to districts within 450kms of a Kumbh site (i.e., those districts that *could* have been treated), and (iii) employing a continuous measure of Kumbh intensity.¹⁷ The effect is not driven by any one state or geographic region (Online Appendix Figure A5). Online Appendix Table A3 shows that the results persist when coding the binary treatment using straight-line distance to the Kumbh sites instead of rail distance, and when computing Hindu nationalist vote share for 1977 and 1980 using only Janata candidates with an avowedly Hindu nationalist background.

Regarding potential issues with the TWFE estimator, we find that there are no negative weights associated with the estimated ATTs (Table 1, Panel A).¹⁸ Results from the matrix completion method for causal panel analysis—a class of counterfactual imputation estimators proposed by [Athey et al. \(2021\)](#) and operationalized by [Liu et al. \(2022\)](#)—show an overall estimated effect of 6.7 percentage points (Table 1, Panel F). The diagnostic placebo and parallel trends equivalence tests for this procedure—one, importantly, that weights treated units equally and precludes forbidden comparisons—are also satisfied.¹⁹ Online Appendix Table A4 demonstrates the robustness of those findings for different codings of the binary treatment variable.

Table 1, Panel E examines temporal heterogeneity. We interact the main treatment with an indicator for the latter half of the time series, starting from 1984, which also marks the first Lok Sabha election contested by the newly formed BJP. The estimated effect of a *Recent nearby Kumbh* is 8.9 percentage

¹⁷We compute a Kumbh “gravity” measure for each district/election year (with k indexing the four sites): $Kumbh\ time/rail\ distance_{dt} = \sum_{i=1}^K \frac{Days\ elapsed\ since\ last\ Kumbh_{kt}}{Rail\ distance\ to\ Kumbh\ site_{dt}}$. Larger values within districts imply greater spatial/temporal distance from—and thus less exposure to—the Kumbh Melas. We do not focus on this treatment variable as generalized difference-in-differences estimators for continuous treatments involve complex assumptions.

¹⁸The absence of negative weights is due to our minimizing the possibility of dynamic effects by only considering units to be “treated” when they occur within one year after a nearby Kumbh. Elections are, on average, spaced more than four years apart. It seems unlikely that the effects of these events would still be changing five or more years after they happen. Online Appendix Figure A4D supports this intuition: upon exiting treatment, previously treated districts return to parallel trends, suggesting no dynamic effects.

¹⁹See Online Appendix Figure A4 for the default plots from the FEct R package used for this estimation. Note, of the many estimators put forward for dealing with the issues surrounding TWFE, the [Liu et al. \(2022\)](#) framework is most appropriate for our study because it permits treatment adoption to be both staggered and to switch on and off.

points greater in the pre-1984 era than in the post-1984 era. This is unlikely to reflect a ceiling effect in the later period: even in districts close to the Kumbh sites, the mean Hindu nationalist vote share has not surpassed 34 percent (Online Appendix Figure A6). In Online Appendix Table A3, Panels D and E, we show that the rapid growth of television and radio ownership after 1989 is not associated with an attenuation of the Kumbh effect, as might be expected if media coverage of the events comes to wash out the impacts of in-person attendance. We instead speculate that mass religious gatherings do more to facilitate the expansion of religious party support earlier in the party’s life-cycle—when the resources available for mobilization are scarcer, and the political opportunity structure is less welcoming.

Figure 2 visualizes four last robustness tests. Panel Ai plots the effect of a Kumbh held within the past year (compared to longer ago), across different distance bins, while Panel Aii plots the effect of a Kumbh held up to 450kms away (compared to further away) across different time bins. For both regression models, we observe the expected treatment-effect decay as—respectively—distance or time from the Kumbh grows. Next, using the FEct matrix completion method, Panel B finds strong evidence of parallel pre-trends, helping to validate the assumptions of the generalized difference-in-differences design. Each tile in Panel C presents the main coefficient estimate from a regression using a differently specified binary treatment variable—separately varying the time and distance cutoffs employed to code it. Reassuringly, we observe a near-monotonic increase in the size of the estimated treatment effect as we shrink the time and distance cutoffs set. Finally, in Panel D, we report placebo distributions generated from TWFE models using “fake” versions of the treatment variable, variously permuting or randomly shuffling the timing of the Kumbh Melas and/or their locations. We find that the result obtained from treatment based on the *true* Kumbh schedule and location—indicated by the vertical dashed red lines—is highly unlikely to have arisen by chance. This test further mitigates concerns about spatial autocorrelation in the estimation of variance. In short, the main finding of the paper is resilient. We now turn to theoretical mechanisms.

Table 1: This table reports estimates of the Kumbh Mela’s effects on Hindu nationalist vote share. The unit of analysis is the 1961 district/election year. Data cover Lok Sabha elections from 1951–2019. Standard errors are clustered by 1961 districts. Panels A–E present OLS regression estimates. Panel F presents estimates using the FEct matrix completion method (which, note, does not enable the inclusion of linear time trends). Apart from Panel D, all models employ the binary treatment *Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450 kms by rail] Kumbh*. In Panel F, the pre-trend test evaluates the null hypothesis that the 90 percent confidence intervals for the estimated ATTs in the pretreatment periods, indexed by s , exceed 0.36 standard deviations of the residualized untreated outcome variable (θ). The placebo test evaluates the null hypothesis that the 90 percent confidence intervals for estimated ATTs in a placebo period p (here, two periods before treatment onset) exceed the same θ -defined equivalence range.

	Outcome:	
	Hindu nationalist vote share (0-1)	
	(1)	(2)
A. TWFE + binary treatment + balanced panel		
Recent nearby Kumbh	0.076*** (0.009)	0.073*** (0.010)
N	3,485	3,485
R^2	0.68	0.77
1961 district FEs	X	X
Election year FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
Conley SE: 500 kms	[0.0084]	[0.0081]
Conley SE: 1,000 kms	[0.0079]	[0.0084]
Conley SE: 1,500 kms	[0.0074]	[0.0079]
Negative ATT weights	0%	
B. TWFE + binary treatment + imbalanced panel		
Recent nearby Kumbh	0.079*** (0.008)	0.073*** (0.008)
N	4,881	4,881
R^2	0.68	0.78
1961 district FEs	X	X
Election year FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
C. TWFE + binary treatment + balanced panel, only districts w/in 450kms		
Recent nearby Kumbh	0.084*** (0.013)	0.063*** (0.012)
N	1,653	1,653
R^2	0.67	0.77
1961 district FEs	X	X
Election year FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
D. TWFE + continuous treatment + balanced panel		
Ln. Kumbh time/rail distance	-0.113*** (0.019)	-0.117*** (0.020)
N	3,485	3,485
R^2	0.68	0.77
1961 district FEs	X	X
Election year FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
E. TWFE + binary treatment + balanced panel; heterogeneous effects		
Recent nearby Kumbh	0.109*** (0.013)	0.100*** (0.013)
Recent nearby Kumbh x Post-1984	-0.089*** (0.020)	-0.069*** (0.017)
N	3,485	3,485
R^2	0.68	0.78
1961 district FEs	X	X
Election year FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
F. Counterfactual estimator, matrix completion method + binary treatment + balanced panel		
Recent nearby Kumbh	0.067*** (0.010)	
N units	205	
Pre-trend equivalence test ($ ATT_s > \theta, \exists s \leq 0$), p-value:	0.000	
Placebo equivalence test ($ ATT^p > \theta$), p-value	0.000	

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

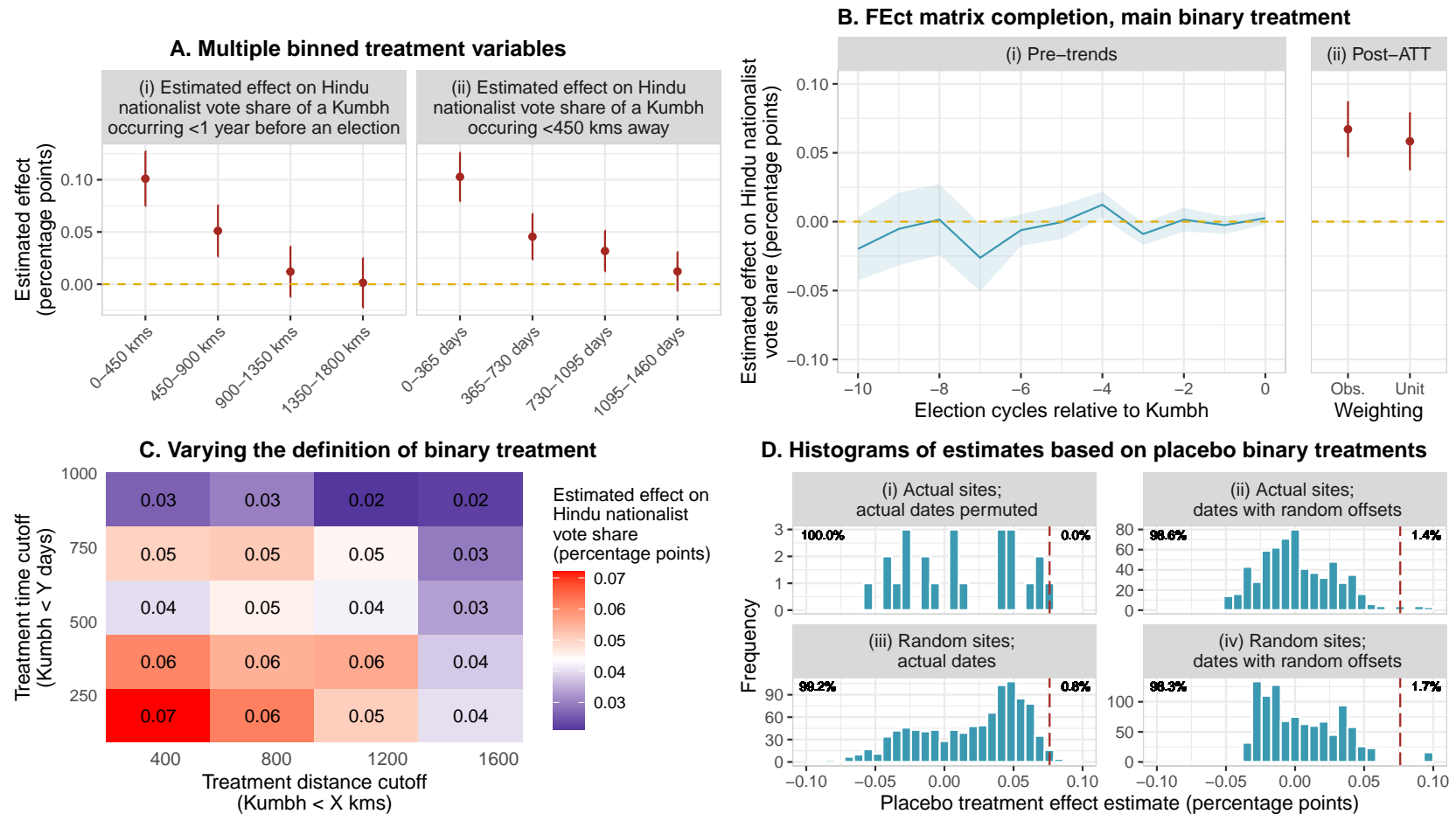


Figure 2: This figure presents tests of assumptions and robustness. *Panel A:* Results from two TWFE regressions estimating the effect of temporal and spatial proximity to the Kumbh Mela on Hindu nationalist vote share, employing binned time and distance treatment indicators; estimating equations are given in Online Appendix D. *Panel B:* Visualization of pre-trends and overall effect ATTs—for different weighting schemes—using the FEct matrix completion method; see Online Appendix Section I for default plots. *Panel C:* Coefficient estimates from 20 TWFE regressions, each employing a differently coded version of the treatment variable. *Panel D:* Distributions of estimated effects from multiple TWFE regressions, each using a different placebo treatment variable; the vertical dashed line represents the estimated effect based on the true treatment variable; see Online Appendix E for full description of the procedures. All TWFE models in this figure include election year and 1961 district fixed effects. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered by 1961 districts. The “main” binary treatment is *Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450 kms by rail] Kumbh*. All models employ the balanced-district panel of 3,485 observations.

Religiosity and identity change. We argued that mass religious events can help religious parties by enlarging the base of religiously-inclined voters locally. To our knowledge, there are no publicly available, large panel surveys for India that have asked directly about respondents’ religiosity. We rely instead on an innovative, revealed preference measure of this concept.

A distinctive feature of Brahminical Hindu orthodoxy is lacto-vegetarianism: a diet that excludes meat, fish, and eggs (Michaels 2004, 26). This, along with belief in *karma*, *dharma*, the Vedas, and a pantheon of deities, is seen as constitutive of an “ideal” Hindu identity (Doniger 2010, 28). Importantly for our purposes, vegetarianism is not mandated by India’s other major religions (Islam and Christianity). Evaluating whether Kumbh Mela exposure popularizes strict vegetarian diets, therefore, can shed light on the festival’s impact on a key private aspect of Hindu religiosity. Seen differently, it can illuminate whether the Melas cause Hindus in general to adopt a largely upper-caste Hindu practice—a process Srinivas (1969) calls “Sanskritization.” Promoting vegetarian diets has always been part of the Hindu nationalist political agenda, too.²⁰

Table 2: This table reports estimates of the Kumbh Mela’s effects on consumer expenditure. The unit of analysis is the 1991 district/NSS round. Data cover all six “thick” NSS rounds that range from 1987–2012. Standard errors are clustered by 1991 districts.

	Outcome: Prop. purchased meat, fish, or eggs within the last 30 days	
	(1)	(2)
Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450 kms] Kumbh	-0.018** (0.009)	-0.024** (0.010)
<i>N</i>	2,388	2,388
<i>R</i> ²	0.92	0.95
1991 district FEs	X	X
NSS round FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
Negative ATT weights	0%	

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Leveraging the data from all quinquennial, “thick” rounds of surveys carried out by India’s National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), we construct a six-period, district-level dataset of household consumption expenditures to test for Kumbh-induced changes in dietary practices. The surveys—the largest of their kind—ask representative samples of households from nearly all districts in the country about their spending on specific categories of food items over the past 30 days. We assign a household a value of one if it reports having spent a non-zero amount of money on meat, fish, or eggs in that time period,

²⁰“Vegetarianism: The Politics of Diet,” *Frontline*, July 23, 2018.

and zero otherwise. The final outcome measure is the average of that variable by district/survey round. Using the same estimating approach laid out in Equation 2, Table 2, Columns 1 and 2 show that a *Recent nearby Kumbh* reduces the proportion of district households reporting any expenditure on meat, fish, or eggs by between 1.8 and 2.4 percentage points, buttressing our theory of religious identity change. Online Appendix Table A5 attests to the result’s robustness, showing various specifications and placebo tests, including that the effect materializes among Hindu households but not Muslim households, as we should expect.

Platform co-optation and party organization. Our second mechanism stipulated that religious parties enjoy an outsized advantage in using mass religious gatherings to recruit, organize, and campaign. The 2001 Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj served as “an opportune backdrop for the Vishva Hindu Parishad to organize its ninth meeting of spiritual leaders” and the event even helped “pole-vault [future prime minister] Modi to national prominence” (Sitapati 2020, 258). At the 2019 Kumbh, “the BJP camp in the mela ground had the biggest area and was no less than a temporary luxurious hotel.”²¹ We probe the platform co-optation claim quantitatively.

To do so, we zero in on the consecutive Lok Sabha elections of 1967 and 1971. This pair of races makes for a fortuitous case study. The 1971 election took place between March 1 and March 10, 1971, immediately following the Ardh Kumbh in Prayagraj (which had ended in February). Party politics were rife at the Mela grounds: “The Brahmachari’s camp was still going strong at the *Ardh* Kumbh Mela in 1971, ‘busy all the time blaring election propaganda against Indira Gandhi and her Congress’ ” (Maclean 2008, 213). There were no other Kumbhs besides the one at Prayagraj in the year prior to the 1971 election. Meanwhile, the last Kumbh before the 1967 election had occurred a full year previously. The two elections each happen to have been accompanied by nationally representative, post-election opinion polls, “the first serious empirical effort to study mass political behavior in India with national surveys” (Eldersveld and Ahmed 1978, x). These coincidences allow for a two-wave difference-in-differences design. Areas near to Prayagraj were “untreated” in 1967 and “treated” in 1971, while faraway areas remained “untreated” in both election cycles. To understand the Kumbh’s impact on party organization, therefore, we can simply assess whether Hindu nationalist party strength grew more between 1967 and 1971 in the vicinity of Prayagraj than it did elsewhere.

The Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) was the leading Hindu nationalist party at this time. Both the

²¹“Kumbh Country Turns into Battleground of Politics Ahead of LS Polls,” *NewsClick*, February 7, 2019, bit.ly/2SMHzEj.

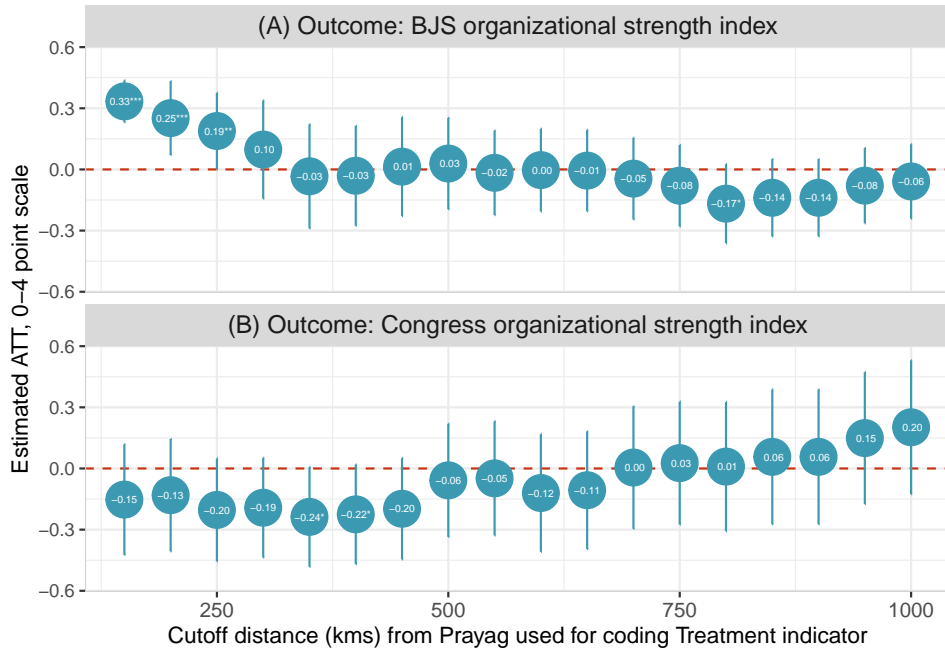


Figure 3: Each point estimate represents the coefficient on the interaction term from a separate TWFE regression, following Equation 3. Models differ only in the treatment indicator, which is coded for different cutoff distances shown on the horizontal axis. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered by the pseudo-districts described in Online Appendix M. There are 5,975 observations in each model. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

1967 and 1971 election surveys posed near-identical questions to respondents about their exposure to BJS campaign activities in the lead-up to polling day. We infer the local strength of the BJS party organization using four survey measures taken at the respondent level: whether they had received a BJS flier, whether BJS canvassers had come to their doorstep, whether they had attended a BJS meeting, and whether they were a BJS party member. We sum the binary variables together to make a four-point index of local Hindu nationalist party strength. Then we run the following model multiple times:

$$Y_{idt} = \tau \cdot (\mathbb{1}\{\text{Prayagraj within cutoff distance by rail}\}_d \cdot \mathbb{1}\{1971 \text{ survey}\}_t) + \gamma_d + \delta_t + \epsilon_{idt} \quad (3)$$

Here, Y is the outcome reported by respondent i in spatial unit d in election t , while γ and δ stand in for unit and survey-round fixed effects, respectively.²²

Figure 3A plots estimates of the coefficient of interest, τ , along with associated confidence intervals, for models using different rail-distance cutoffs for coding the treatment indicator. We see clear evidence that the BJS ground campaign and organization grew more in places close to Prayagraj between 1967 and 1971—to the tune of 0.19 to 0.33 scale points for areas within 300kms—over and above its growth elsewhere. The mean of the outcome index was just 0.21 (out of 4) in the 1967 survey, suggesting that

²²The process by which we linked sampling areas across the two survey rounds to make constant spatial units is described in Online Appendix M.

very recent nearby exposure to the Kumbh more than doubled the party’s organizational capabilities.²³ Importantly, Congress saw no such boost (Figure 3B), consistent with our claim that religious parties are best positioned to cash in organizationally on mass religious events.

Polarization. What are the broader social and political implications of the Kumbh Mela? Social identity theory maintains that self-esteem comes from belonging to social groups, and that a person’s self-esteem is greater when their group is perceived as superior to other groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979). The entrenchment of Hindu self-identification caused by the Kumbhs might thus erode trust between religions, raising the likelihood of communal conflict.²⁴ Electoral polarization could also follow, as victimized groups adapt their voting behavior to safeguard their interests (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972).

We first examine the Kumbh’s impact on the incidence and severity of intergroup violence. Using the updated Varshney and Wilkinson (2006) dataset, we build a district/month panel of Hindu-Muslim riots between 1951 and 2000 and generate the same *Recent nearby Kumbh* treatment indicator as before. Table 3 uncovers no signs that the events escalate either the probability of any communal violence breaking out (Columns 1–2) or the lethality of such violence (Columns 3–4).

Table 3: This table reports TWFE estimates of the Kumbh Mela’s effects on Hindu-Muslim riots. The unit of analysis is the 1961 district/month. Data cover 1951–2000. Standard errors are clustered by 1961 districts.

	Outcome:			
	Any riot		Log(Num. killed + 1)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450 kms] Kumbh	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
<i>N</i>	196,864	196,864	196,864	196,864
<i>R</i> ²	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.04
1961 district FEs	X	X	X	X
Month FEs	X	X	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X		X
Negative ATT weights	0%		0%	

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Next, single-member plurality voting—of the kind used in India—is thought to promote two-party competition around the main axis of social division (Cox 1997). If the Melas make exclusionary religious parties more successful, we might see a response from minority groups who risk losing out if Hindu nationalists win office. Muslims are the population group most threatened by Hindu nationalist party rule. Consequently,

²³The disaggregated results for the index component measures are shown in Online Appendix Figure A1.

²⁴The organizational advances made by Hindu nationalists because of the Kumbhs could also contribute to “institutionalized riot systems” that stoke violence (Brass 2003).

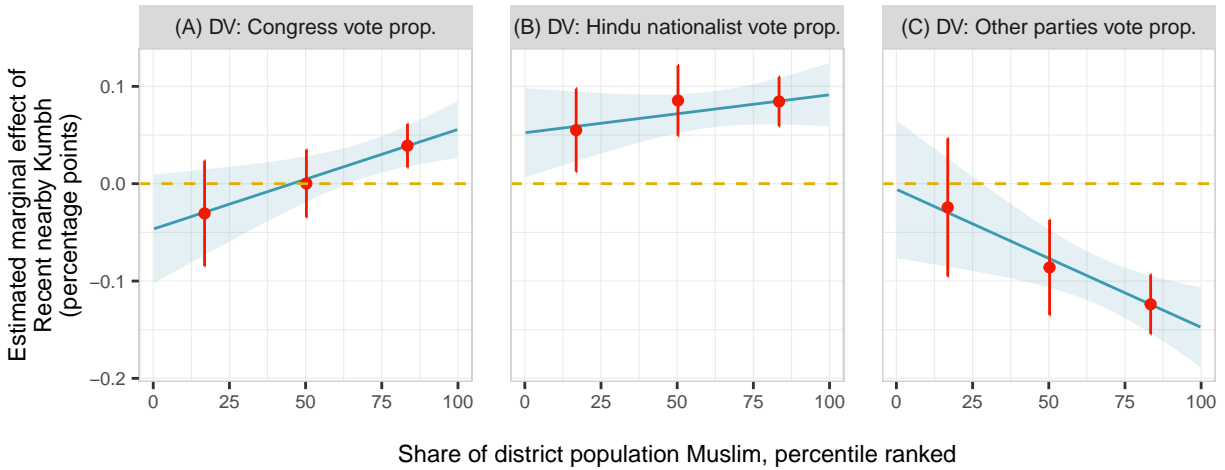


Figure 4: This figure plots the estimated heterogeneous effects of *Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450 kms by rail] Kumbh* on three different outcomes according to the percentile-ranked share of Muslims in the district population, as recorded in the 1961 Census of India. Data cover all Lok Sabha elections from 1951 to 2019. The unit of analysis is the 1961 district/election year. Models include 1961 district and election-year fixed effects. Blue lines show linear interactions, with 95 percent confidence bands. Red circles show estimated subgroup effects, with 95 percent confidence intervals; subgroups are defined by low, middle, and high terciles of the moderator. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered by 1961 districts. All models employ the balanced-district panel of 3,485 observations.

we look at heterogeneity in the Kumbh treatment effect according to the fraction of the district population that is Muslim. We focus separately on the vote share going to Hindu nationalist parties, the Congress party—which has a reputation for being sensitive toward Muslim interests (Nellis et al. 2016, 259)—and to all other parties.

Figure 4 shows that Muslim population share is both positively and linearly associated with the magnitude of the estimated *Recent nearby Kumbh* effect on Congress party support (Panel A). In districts with the smallest shares of Muslims, Congress loses votes when Kumbh Melas are near in space and time. But as the local Muslim population increases, the size of these losses decreases; indeed, in the top tercile (according to percent Muslim), Congress even experiences small vote gains due to the Kumbh. There is no comparable variability when Hindu nationalist party vote share is the outcome (Panel B). Panel C shows that the Congress gains come at the expense of all other parties—that is, those whose brands are less entwined with the religious/secular cleavage. The result is an ecological one; we cannot be certain that individual Muslim voters are reacting defensively. Nevertheless, our best interpretation of Figure 4 is that Muslim communities, who fear marginalization under Hindu nationalist incumbency, consolidate around the primary secularist party in anticipation of an electoral surge by Hindu nationalists.

Conclusion

This paper presents a new explanation for the electoral success of ethnoreligious parties. We show that mass religious events, which are a cornerstone of religious practice worldwide, substantially boost the vote shares of religiously-aligned parties. Employing a credible research design and focusing on India's Kumbh Mela, we find that a region's spatial and temporal proximity to this pilgrimage festival increases support for Hindu nationalist parties. Our theory posits—and our evidence suggests—that the effect operates via changes in the religiosity of voters, and religious parties' exploitation of the gatherings for organization-building. Overall, the findings testify to the transformative consequences of large religious events for politics and society.

Illuminating an overlooked factor behind the rise of majoritarianism in a country home to one sixth of the global population is of direct interest. The theoretical framework we develop may apply to other forms of collective religious worship, too, since church services, processions, and prayer groups are all susceptible to platform co-optation by parties and politicians. An especially promising avenue for future research would be to construct designs capable of decomposing the direct and indirect impacts of large religious events—to gauge, say, how the effect of actual participation in them compares to their influence when mediated through television or the internet. It would also be worth examining the degree to which ritual gatherings in other non-Abrahamic religions, such as Buddhism and Shintoism, become politicized as they do in contemporary Hinduism. Whether pluralist states should better regulate collective religious observance to curb the spread of exclusionary political worldviews speaks to the much larger question of religion's appropriate place in secular democracy.

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ONLINE APPENDIX

Note: All references to “Supplementary Information” (“SI”) relate to the document, supplementary-information.pdf available at: [permanent URL upon publication]







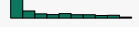



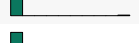






Online Appendix

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A Summary statistics

Table A1: Summary statistics. Detailed variable descriptions are provided in Online Appendix Table A2.

Measure	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min.	Median	Max.	Histogram
Elections analysis, 1961 district/election year, balanced panel, 1951–2019							
Hindu nationalist vote share	3,485	0.21	0.20	0.00	0.17	0.81	
Congress vote share	3,485	0.36	0.18	0.00	0.39	1.00	
Other parties vote share	3,485	0.42	0.23	0.00	0.45	1.00	
Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450kms by rail] Kumbh	3,485	0.07	0.25	0.00	0.00	1.00	
National sample survey, 1991 district/NSS round, 1987–2012							
Prop. purchased meat, fish, eggs	2,675	0.56	0.30	0.00	0.54	1.00	
Prop. owns radio	1,836	0.20	0.17	0.00	0.16	0.91	
Prop. owns TV	1,836	0.28	0.28	0.00	0.16	0.98	
National Election Surveys, respondent-level, 1967 and 1971							
BJS organizational strength index	5,975	0.22	0.59	0.00	0.00	4.00	
BJS handbills	5,975	0.12	0.32	0.00	0.00	1.00	
BJS canvassed	5,975	0.08	0.27	0.00	0.00	1.00	
Attended BJS meeting	5,975	0.02	0.15	0.00	0.00	1.00	
BJS member	5,975	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.00	1.00	
Voted for BJS	5,975	0.05	0.21	0.00	0.00	1.00	
Congress organizational strength index	5,975	0.63	0.90	0.00	0.00	4.00	
Hindu-Muslim riots, 1961 district/month, 1951–2000							
Any riot	197,064	0.00	0.07	0.00	0.00	1.00	
Hindu-Muslim violence in India, 1961 district/month, 1951–2000							
Number killed	197,064	0.04	3.33	0.00	0.00	1120.00	
Census of India, 1961							
Muslim share of district population	3,485	0.10	0.09	0.00	0.08	0.56	

B Variable definitions and sources

Table A2: Data definitions for analysis variables use in the main paper, grouped by source.

Variable name	Definition and source
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hindu nationalist vote share • Congress vote share • Other parties vote share 	<p>We calculate party-wise vote shares in Lok Sabha elections, 1951–2019. Data are aggregated to the 1961 district/election year. Data for elections prior to 1962 were digitized by Myron Wiener (Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research 5904, rb.gy/khsq5). Data for subsequent election cycles are from the Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka Unviersty (see citation in main text). For pre-1977 constituencies, we used GIS software to assign Lok Sabha constituencies to 1961 district boundaries based on the latitude/longitude coordinates of constituencies' titular towns, since constituency boundary maps do not exist for this period. Titular towns are simply the towns that give their name to the constituency. In cases where a town name was not used for the constituency, or where a city contains multiple constituencies, we used the relevant Delimitation Reports of the Election Commission of India to geolocate another major urban center within the constituency. For 1977 constituencies onward, we possess the complete constituency shapefiles (for both delimitation periods) and use GIS software to assign Lok Sabha constituencies to 1961 district boundaries based on the locations of constituencies' geographic centroids. Analysis variables are generated by taking the simple average of the constituency-level data for constituencies falling within the 1961 district boundaries, by election cycle. <i>Hindu nationalist vote share</i> records the average share of votes won by candidates aligned with the Hindu nationalist parties described in Supplementary Information C. <i>Other parties vote share</i> records the fraction of votes won by non-Congress and non-Hindu nationalist party candidates, including independents.</p>

Table A2: (*continued*) Data definitions for analysis variables.

Variable name	Definition and source
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prop. purchased meat, fish, or eggs within the last 30 days • Prop. owns radio • Prop. owns TV 	<p>These measures are based on household-level data from the six “thick” rounds of the National Sample Survey Organisation, Household Consumer Expenditure schedule: rounds 43 (1987-1988), 50 (1993-1994), 55 (1999-2000), 61 (2004-2005), 66 (2009-2010), and 68 (2011-2012). Households are geolocated to 1991 district boundaries, based on district codes recorded in the surveys and merged and standardized by the authors. We code a dichotomous variable denoting households reporting non-zero household expenditures on meat, fish and egg products within the 30 days prior to survey enumeration. Finally, for the primary analysis variable, we take the unweighted average of this measure by 1991 district/NSS round. For the primary analysis we compute the treatment variable using the first date of survey enumeration in that NSS round, but we also present robustness to employing individual-level dates for the computation of the treatment variable. For the interaction models displayed in Online Appendix Table A3 we carry out the same procedure for computing the share of 1991 district households owning radios or TVs—information also gathered in the NSS surveys—and match Lok Sabha elections to the most recent NSS survey rounds.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BJS handbills • BJS canvassed • BJS member • Attended BJS meeting • Voted for BJS • BJS organizational strength index • Congress organizational strength index 	<p>Measures of party organization strength for the BJS and Congress are based on individual-level surveys taken immediately following the Lok Sabha elections of 1967 and 1971. Data are from Indian National Election Study (Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research 25402, rb.gy/ztlv1). (Note, surveys are also available for 1979 and 1985 but the party organization variables we rely on were not asked in those rounds.) For each year, the questionnaires asked whether the voter got a handbill from a party, and if so which one (question numbers 14d in 1967 and 19a in 1971), whether any party canvasser came to the voter’s house to ask for votes (16a in 1967 and 18a in 1971), whether the voter attended any party- or candidate-affiliated meeting during the campaign season (14b in 1967 and 14a in 1971), whether the voter was a member of any political party (43a in 1967 and 64a in 1971), and which party they voted for (18b in 1967 and 6a in 1971). For each of these variables, we record a value of one if the BJS was mentioned and zero otherwise, yielding five binary indicators: <i>BJS handbills</i>, <i>BJS canvassed</i>, <i>BJS member</i>, <i>Attended BJS meeting</i>, and <i>Voted for BJS</i>. The first four zero/one variables were summed together to generate an overall 4-point summary index: <i>BJS organizational strength index</i>. The parallel procedure was used to construct <i>Congress organizational strength index</i>.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any riot • Number killed 	<p>A binary variable for any Hindu-Muslim riot (<i>Any riot</i>) and a count variable for the lethality of riots (<i>Number killed</i>) for each district/month, 1951–2000. Data are from the Varshney-Wilkinson Dataset on Hindu-Muslim Violence in India, 1950-1995 (Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research 4342, rb.gy/raex1), and the update to the year 2000 compiled by Mitra and Ray (2014): “Implications of an Economic Theory of Conflict: Hindu-Muslim Violence in India” (<i>Journal of Political Economy</i> 122[4]: 719–65). The data are drawn from reports in the <i>Times of India</i>, Bombay edition. Counts in the original data are aggregated to form a balanced panel of counts at the level of 1961 district boundaries, using the reweighting scheme developed in Nellis, Weaver, and Rosenzweig (2016): “Do Parties Matter for Ethnic Violence? Evidence from India” (<i>Quarterly Journal of Political Science</i> 11[3]: 249–77).</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muslim population share 	<p>Data on the share of the district population identifying as Muslim, taken from the 1961 Census of India and digitized by the authors.</p>

C Additional results for BJS organizational strength

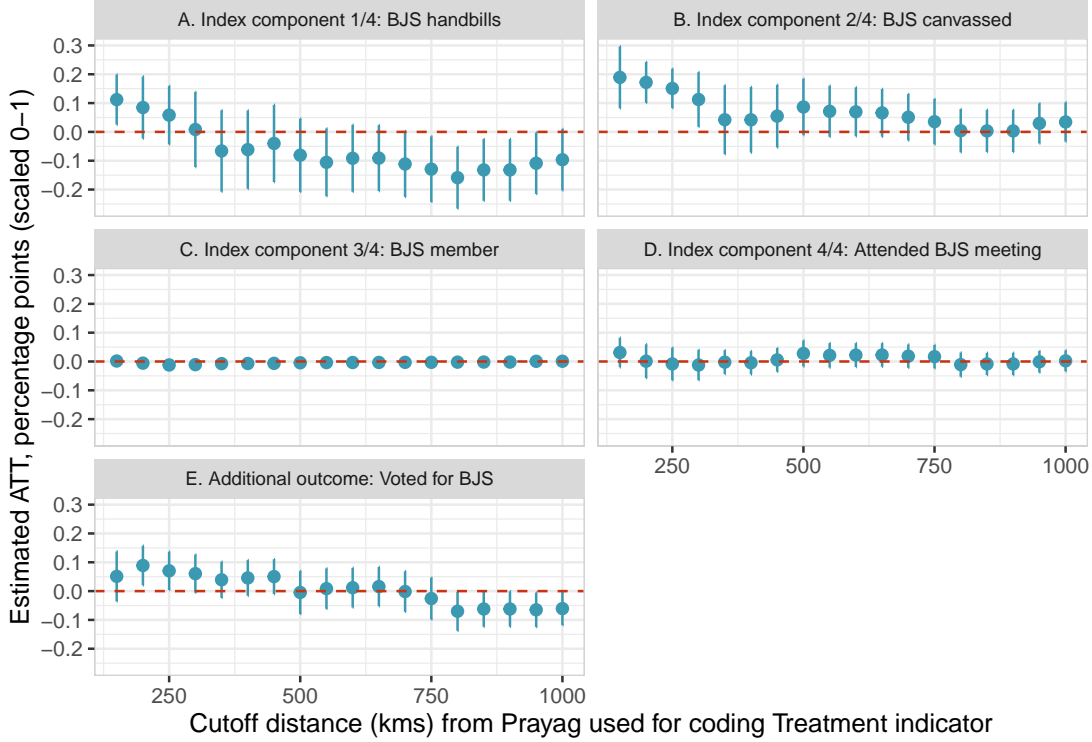


Figure A1: This figure presents results for each of the four individual components of the *BJS organizational strength index* (Panels A to D), as well as results for an additional outcome (Panel E). All outcomes are binary variables. Each point estimate represents the coefficient on the interaction term from the difference-in-differences specification shown in Equation 3 of the main text. Models within panels differ only in the coding of the treatment variable, which is varied according to the cutoff distance used. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered by pseudo-districts described in the main text and Online Appendix M. There are 5,975 observations in each model. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

D Estimating equations for binned regression analysis

$$Y_{dt} = \gamma_d + \delta_t +$$

$$\begin{aligned} & \beta_1 \times \mathbf{1}\{\text{Nearest Kumbh} < 365 \text{ days} \in [0, 450 \text{ kms}]\}_{dt} + \\ & \beta_2 \times \mathbf{1}\{\text{Nearest Kumbh} < 365 \text{ days} \in [450, 900 \text{ kms}]\}_{dt} + \\ & \beta_3 \times \mathbf{1}\{\text{Nearest Kumbh} < 365 \text{ days} \in [900, 1350 \text{ kms}]\}_{dt} + \\ & \beta_4 \times \mathbf{1}\{\text{Nearest Kumbh} < 365 \text{ days} \in [1350, 1800 \text{ kms}]\}_{dt} + \epsilon_{dt} \end{aligned} \quad \text{Estimating equation for Figure 2Ai (1)}$$

$$Y_{dt} = \gamma_d + \delta_t +$$

$$\begin{aligned} & \beta_1 \times \mathbf{1}\{\text{Most Recent Kumbh} < 450 \text{ kms} \in [0, 365 \text{ days}]\}_{dt} + \\ & \beta_2 \times \mathbf{1}\{\text{Most Recent Kumbh} < 450 \text{ kms} \in [365, 730 \text{ days}]\}_{dt} + \\ & \beta_3 \times \mathbf{1}\{\text{Most Recent Kumbh} < 450 \text{ kms} \in [730, 1095 \text{ days}]\}_{dt} + \\ & \beta_4 \times \mathbf{1}\{\text{Most Recent Kumbh} < 450 \text{ kms} \in [1095, 1460 \text{ days}]\}_{dt} + \epsilon_{dt} \end{aligned} \quad \text{Estimating equation for Figure 2Aii (2)}$$

E Detailed description of placebo tests

Figure 2D presents distributions of estimated effects from OLS regressions using the baseline TWFE specification. For each model, a placebo treatment variable is computed by permuting/varying at random the timing and locations of hypothetical Kumbh Mela festivals, holding fixed the outcome variable. The unit of analysis is the 1961 district/election year. The estimate based on the true Kumbh timing and location is depicted by the dashed vertical line in each panel. There are four approaches to recomputing the treatment variable. In Panel (i), the true Kumbh locations and true Kumbh Mela dates are used, but the schedules are assigned to the “wrong” city, for all possible city/schedule combinations. In Panel (ii), the true Kumbh locations are employed but the date schedules are offset by a random number of weeks (in the interval -2207 to +2207 days). In Panel (iii), the true dates are employed but four locations are chosen at random to serve as placebo Kumbh sites from the full set of 1961 Indian district centroids. In Panel (iv), dates are offset by a randomly chosen number of weeks (in the interval -2207 to +2207 days) and four locations are chosen at random to serve as placebo Kumbh sites from the full set of 1961 Indian district centroids

F Who goes on pilgrimages?

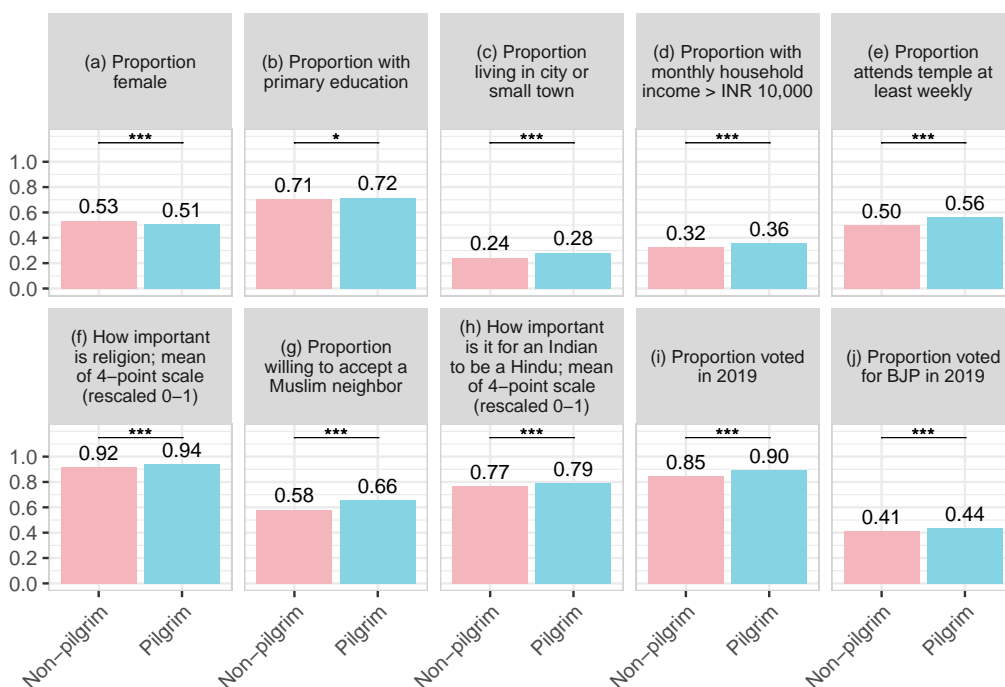


Figure A2: Analysis of data gathered in the survey, *Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation*, conducted by Pew Research Center in 2019–2020. Comparisons of background characteristics and attributes of Hindu respondents who did/did not report having made a pilgrimage. Variable descriptions and codings are provided in Supplementary Information Table S4. N is between 20,750 and 22,824 for each model. *, **, and *** denote statistically significant differences in a two-sided t -test between groups at the 0.1, 0.05, and 0.01 levels, respectively.

G Additional tests for main results

Table A3: This table reports additional results for the Kumbh Mela's effects on Hindu nationalist vote share. The unit of analysis is the 1961 district/election year. Data in Panels A–C cover Lok Sabha elections from 1951–2019. The recoded outcome variable in Panel C is detailed in Supplementary Information C. Standard errors are clustered by 1961 districts.

	Outcome:	
	Hindu nationalist vote share (0-1)	
	(1)	(2)
A. Treatment using straight-line (not rail) distance + balanced panel		
Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450 kms straight-line] Kumbh	0.062*** (0.008)	0.065*** (0.008)
<i>N</i>	3,485	3,485
<i>R</i> ²	0.68	0.77
1961 district FEs	X	X
Election year FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
B. Treatment using 2001 rail map + balanced panel		
Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450 kms by rail, 2001 rail map] Kumbh	0.071*** (0.010)	0.069*** (0.010)
<i>N</i>	3,485	3,485
<i>R</i> ²	0.68	0.77
1961 district FEs	X	X
Election year FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
C. Recoded outcome for 1977 and 1980 (candidates w/ Hindu nationalist history only) + balanced panel		
Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450 kms by rail] Kumbh	0.051*** (0.011)	0.050*** (0.012)
<i>N</i>	3,485	3,485
<i>R</i> ²	0.67	0.78
1961 district FEs	X	X
Election year FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
D. Treatment interacted with Prop. owning radio in district + balanced panel, 1989–2019 only		
Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450 kms by rail] Kumbh	0.020 (0.021)	0.007 (0.027)
Prop. owns radio	-0.042** (0.020)	-0.043* (0.024)
Recent nearby Kumbh x Prop. owns radio	0.090 (0.113)	0.176 (0.165)
<i>N</i>	1,836	1,836
<i>R</i> ²	0.78	0.84
1961 district FEs	X	X
Election year FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
E. Treatment interacted with Prop. owning TV in district + balanced panel, 1989–2019 only		
Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450 kms by rail] Kumbh	0.001 (0.024)	-0.015 (0.026)
Prop. owns TV	-0.063** (0.030)	-0.068* (0.039)
Recent nearby Kumbh x Prop. owns TV	0.110* (0.064)	0.185** (0.071)
<i>N</i>	1,836	1,836
<i>R</i> ²	0.78	0.84
1961 district FEs	X	X
Election year FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

H Survey data from the 2016 Ujjain Kumbh Mela

At the Ujjain Kumbh Mela of 2016, a set of scholars performed what is to our knowledge the only large-scale, systematic survey of pilgrims carried out at a Kumbh Mela event to date. Several publications have appeared from the project, including:

- Verma, A., Verma, M., Yadav, V., Sarangi, P. and Manoj, M., 2021. “An Exploratory Analysis of Activity Participation and Travel Patterns of Pilgrims in the World’s Largest Mass Religious Gathering: A Case Study of Kumbh Mela Ujjain, India.” **Transportation in Developing Economies** 7(2): 1–13.

The survey was gathered using convenience sampling at a randomly selected set of starting points, which were spread across the city of Ujjain (hotels, bus stops, Dharamshala, and Akharas). The final analysis sample consisted of 2,523 completed surveys. Part of the survey instrument posed questions about reasons why pilgrims had attended the Kumbh. Descriptive statistics on the answers to these questions—the share of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that each reason mentioned was relevant to their decision to attend—were generously shared with the authors by Professor Ashish Verma of the Indian Institute of Science.



Figure A3: Overall agreement rates to motivation for attendance prompts among 2,523 survey respondents at the 2016 Ujjain Kumbh Mela. Note, respondents could express agreement to multiple prompts.

I FEct robustness analyses

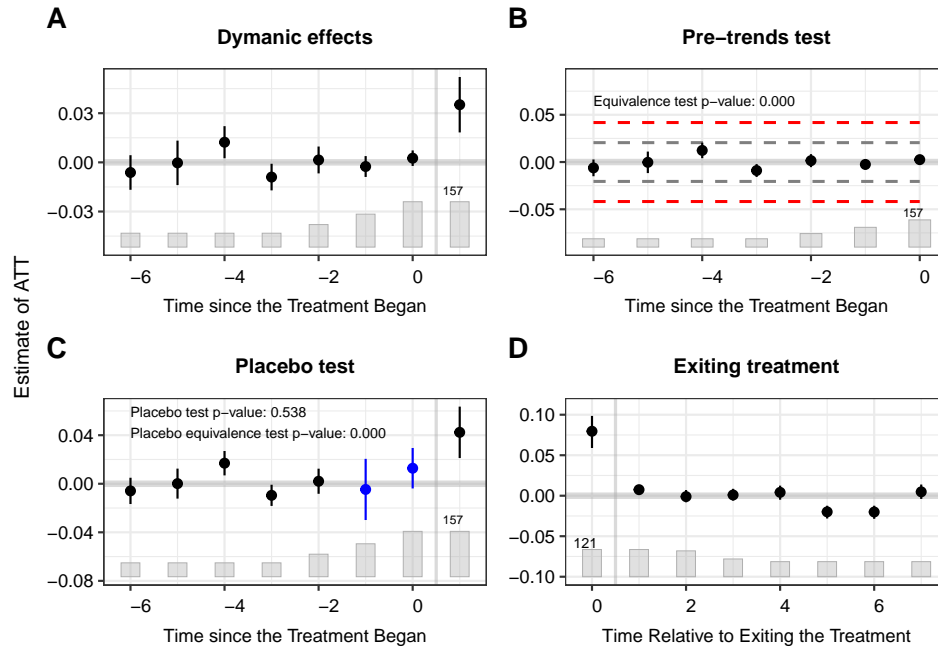


Figure A4: This figure plots the default outputs from the FEct package in R, using the matrix completion method (selected using the package’s cross-validation procedure). The placebo and pre-trends equivalence tests are described in the main text.

Table A4: This table presents various treatment effect estimates using the FEct matrix completion estimator with k -fold cross validation, for different definitions of the treatment indicator. Column 7 presents the p-value from two one-tided t (TOST) tests assessing whether the 90 percent confidence intervals for the estimated ATTs in the pre-period fall outside the pre-specified equivalence range; a low p-value means that the null of inequivalence is rejected, thus indicating a better pre-trend fit.

Treatment definition: Kumbh within past...	Equally weighted observations			Equally weighted units			Pre-trends TOST	N units	
	ATT (1)	S.E. (2)	P-value (3)	ATT (4)	S.E. (5)	P-value (6)	P-value (7)	Treated (8)	Control (9)
<243 days & ...									
<350kms	0.049	0.013	0.000	0.044	0.013	0.001	0.582	28	177
<450kms	0.080	0.012	0.000	0.076	0.012	0.000	0.070	48	157
<550kms	0.083	0.009	0.000	0.075	0.009	0.000	0.188	69	136
<650kms	0.085	0.010	0.000	0.081	0.010	0.000	0.088	93	112
<365 days & ...									
<350kms	0.042	0.013	0.001	0.046	0.013	0.000	0.000	46	159
<450kms	0.067	0.010	0.000	0.058	0.011	0.000	0.000	67	138
<550kms	0.058	0.008	0.000	0.046	0.009	0.000	0.000	83	122
<650kms	0.061	0.008	0.000	0.049	0.009	0.000	0.000	105	100
<487 days & ...									
<350kms	0.043	0.011	0.000	0.034	0.011	0.001	0.000	46	159
<450kms	0.060	0.008	0.000	0.049	0.009	0.000	0.000	67	138
<550kms	0.055	0.007	0.000	0.043	0.008	0.000	0.000	83	122
<650kms	0.057	0.007	0.000	0.049	0.008	0.000	0.000	105	100
<608 days & ...									
<350kms	0.037	0.011	0.001	0.025	0.010	0.008	0.000	46	159
<450kms	0.056	0.009	0.000	0.045	0.009	0.000	0.000	67	138
<550kms	0.054	0.008	0.000	0.042	0.008	0.000	0.000	83	122
<650kms	0.058	0.007	0.000	0.050	0.007	0.000	0.000	105	100

J Leave-one-out robustness analysis

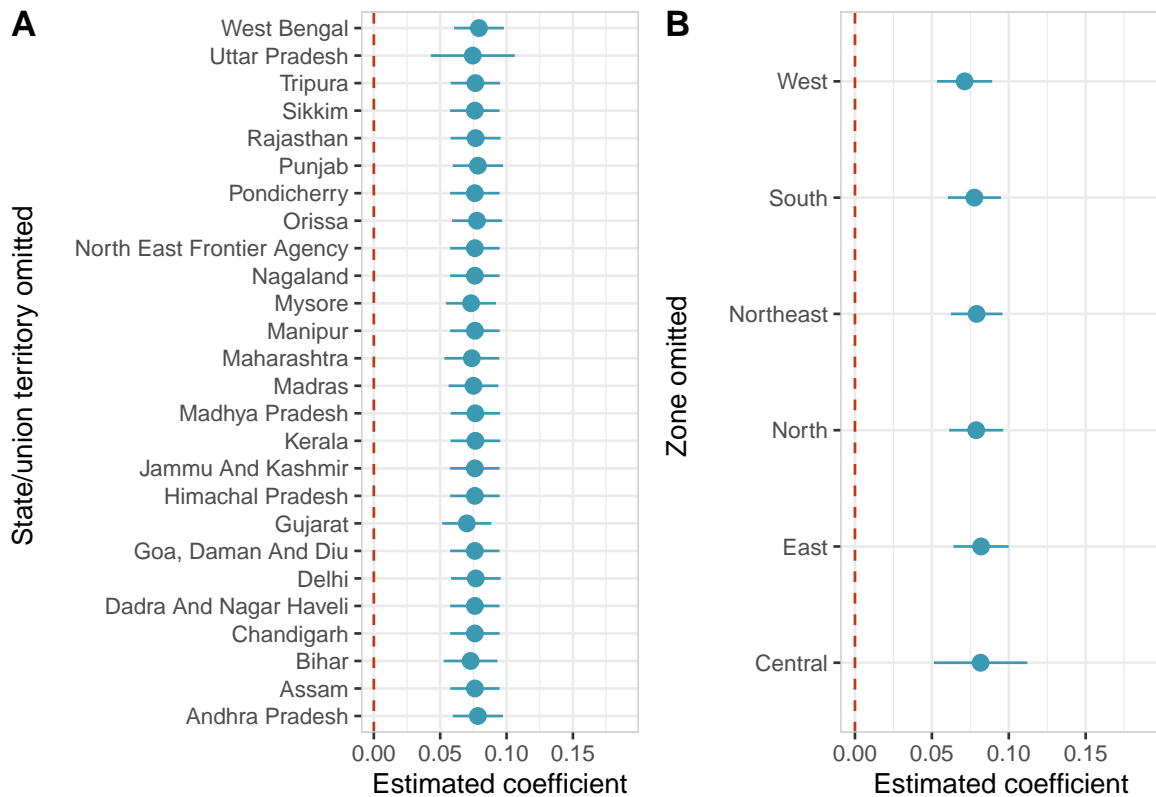


Figure A5: This figure presents coefficient estimates and 95 percent confidence intervals for *Recent nearby Kumbh* using the benchmark statistical model in Table 1, Panel A, Column 1, but omitting district-observations that fall within one 1961-era state at a time (Panel A) or omitting district-observations that fall within one zone at a time (Panel B). India's official zones (in terms of 1961-era states) are: North (Rajasthan, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Chandigarh, Delhi); Central (Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh); West (Gujarat, Maharashtra, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Goa, Daman and Diu); South (Andhra Pradesh, Mysore, Madras, Kerala, Pondicherry); East (Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa); and Northeast (North East Frontier Agency, Sikkim, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura).

K NSS results robustness analysis

Table A5: This table presents robustness tests for the National Sample Survey results on consumer expenditures displayed in Table 2. The unit of analysis is the 1991 district/NSS round, except for Panel B where the unit is the individual survey respondent/NSS round. Data cover all six “thick” NSS rounds that range from 1987–2012. Standard errors are clustered by 1991 districts. The outcome variable is a proportion—the share of sampled households in a district that have made any expenditures—except in Panel B where it is a binary variable.

	Outcome: Purchased meat, fish, or eggs within the last 30 days	
	(1)	(2)
A. District-averaged data + imbalanced panel		
Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450kms] Kumbh	-0.020** (0.008)	-0.025*** (0.009)
<i>N</i>	2,675	2,675
<i>R</i> ²	0.93	0.95
1991 district FEs	X	X
NSS round FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
Conley SE: 1,500 kms	[0.0060]	[0.0069]
B. Complete individual-level data + individual survey dates for calculating treatment		
Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450kms] Kumbh	-0.035*** (0.010)	-0.027*** (0.010)
<i>N</i>	638,337	638,337
<i>R</i> ²	0.33	0.34
1991 district FEs	X	X
NSS round FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
C. District-averaged data + balanced panel + Treatment based on shorter rail distance radius		
Recent [<365 days] nearby [<350kms] Kumbh	-0.024** (0.010)	-0.032*** (0.011)
<i>N</i>	2,388	2,388
<i>R</i> ²	0.92	0.95
1991 district FEs	X	X
NSS round FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
D. District-averaged + balanced panel + Treatment based on longer rail distance radius		
Recent [<365 days] nearby [<550kms] Kumbh	-0.017** (0.008)	-0.022*** (0.008)
<i>N</i>	2,388	2,388
<i>R</i> ²	0.92	0.95
1991 district FEs	X	X
NSS round FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
E. Placebo treatment + district-averaged data + balanced panel		
Future [<365 days] nearby [<450kms] Kumbh	-0.012 (0.009)	0.009 (0.012)
<i>N</i>	2,388	2,388
<i>R</i> ²	0.92	0.95
1991 district FEs	X	X
NSS round FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
F. District-averaged data + balanced panel, Hindus respondents only		
Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450kms] Kumbh	-0.033*** (0.010)	-0.027*** (0.010)
<i>N</i>	494,853	494,853
<i>R</i> ²	0.34	0.34
1991 district FEs	X	X
NSS round FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X
G. District-averaged data + balanced panel, Muslim respondents only		
Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450kms] Kumbh	-0.006 (0.013)	0.005 (0.014)
<i>N</i>	75,002	75,002
<i>R</i> ²	0.12	0.14
1991 district FEs	X	X
NSS round FEs	X	X
District-specific linear time trends		X

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

L Average Hindu nationalist vote shares

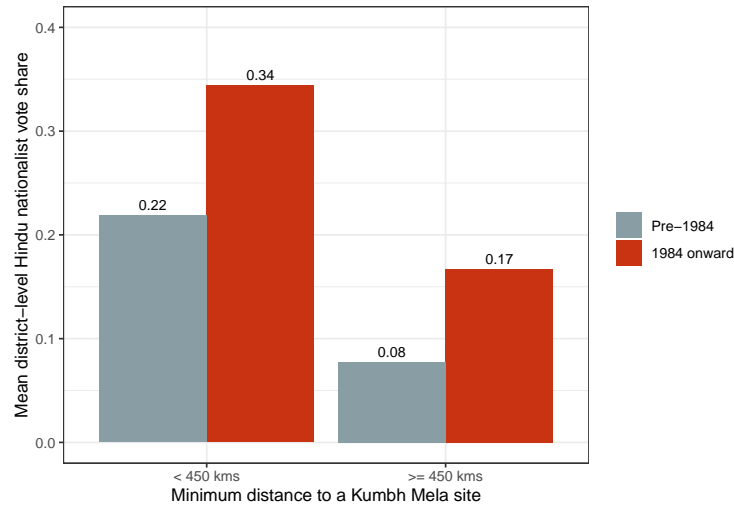


Figure A6: Average district-level Hindu nationalist votes share before and after 1984, by districts' proximity to the nearest Kumbh Mela site. Averages are computed from the full primary analysis dataset, for which the unit of analysis is the 1961 district/election year.

M Creating constant units across election-survey rounds

The 1967 and 1971 Indian National Election Studies, employed for the analysis in Figure 3, used different sets of MLA constituencies as the primary sampling units (PSUs) across the two survey waves. To create a panel, we generate pseudo-districts applying the following procedure. For each state sampled in 1967, we split the state into regions such that all points in that region are nearest a unique 1967 constituency. These regions are shown in Online Appendix Figure A7. We then matched to each 1967 constituency all sampled 1971 constituencies located within its "nearest" region. Finally we take the minimum rail distance to Prayagraj for each pseudo-district for the purposes of calculating the treatment indicator.

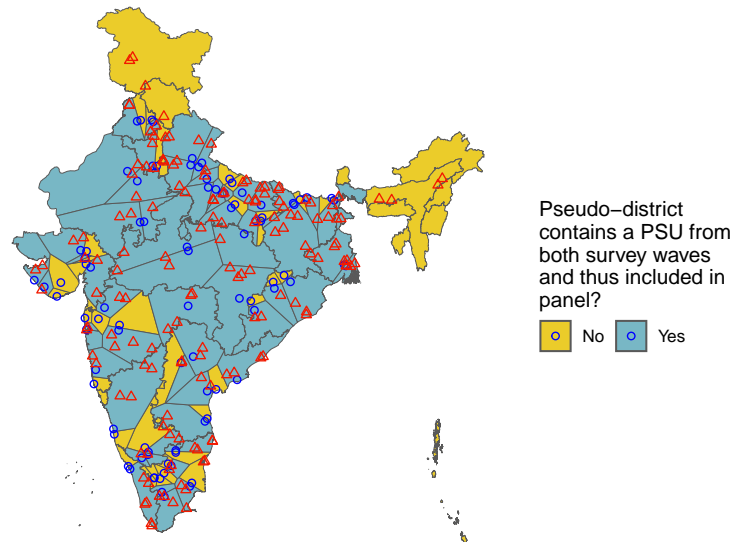


Figure A7: This maps shows the pseudo-districts used for the analysis of organizational effects. Blue circles represent 1967 PSUs while red triangles represent 1971 PSUs.

N Evidence that geographic proximity is associated with Kumbh Mela attendance

An important assumption of our study is that shorter distances to the Kumbh Mela sites raise the likelihood of attendance. While intuitive—the travel and inconvenience costs are substantially less for those who live nearby—we are able to provide some validation by drawing on a study carried out during the 2013 Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj:

- Barnett, I., Khanna, T. and Onnela, J., 2016. “Social and Spatial Clustering of People at Humanity’s Largest Gathering.” **PloS One** 11(6): e0156794.

This study employs complete cellphone call records from a major cellphone provider, Airtel, over the course of the 2013 Mela (which had cell phone towers set up specifically for the festival). These records allow the authors to estimate that 61 million people attended the Kumbh Mela over a three month period; the peak day of the festival alone saw 25 million people attend, according to their model. More revealing for our purposes is Figure 4C of their study, reproduced below, which shows a stark relationship between geographical distance to the Mela and attendance from different Indian states (discerned from the numeric codes at the start of the cell numbers, which denote Indian phone “circles”).

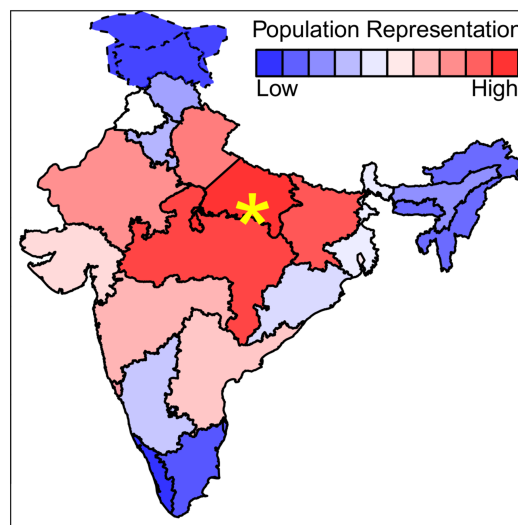


Figure A8: This is a reproduction of Figure 4C from Barnett et al (2016), showing the estimated population representation from each Indian cell circle for attendees at the 2013 Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj.

O Additional background on the Kumbh Mela festivals

Origins of the Kumbh Melas

In this section, we briefly survey the historical literature on the supposed origins of the Kumbh Melas. We parse the evidence on why each of the four locations became established as major pilgrimage sites, and on what explains these specific religious observances having been designated as “Kumbhs.”

Haridwar

It seems clear that Haridwar hosted the original Kumbh Mela. This label was then later adopted by the three other festival sites, likely in the 19th century. Most tellingly, “it is only at Haridwar among the four places that the Kumbha Mela is held when Jupiter is in Aquarius (*kumbha*)” (Misra 2019: 26). Multiple sources describe the Haridwar Kumbh as being “an enhanced version of the annual Baisakhi [spring] festival,” which had taken place on the Ganges at Haridwar previously (Lochtefeld 2004: 108). The *Narada Purana*, composed between the 11th and 16th centuries, explicitly states that bathing in the Ganges at Haridwar every twelve years is auspicious (*Uttarbhaga* 66.44; mentioned in Clark 2018: 294).

The first written description of the Haridwar Kumbh comes from a Mughal-era gazetteer of 1695:

Especially in the year when Jupiter enters the sign of Aquarius (otherwise named *Kumbh*)—which happens once every 12 years—vast numbers of people assemble here from remote distances. They consider bathing, giving alms, and shaving the hair and beard at this place, as acts of merit, and the throwing of the bones of the dead into the Ganges [as the means of] salvation of the deceased (translation in Sarkar 1901: 19).

A late 18th-century British account estimated that two and a half million pilgrims were in attendance at the 1796 Kumbh at Haridwar, and “its accompanying market was a magnet for traders and customers from all over the subcontinent and beyond” (cited in Maclean 2008: 22). Realization of the fair’s economic importance spurred efforts by the East India Company to tax pilgrims, provoking anger and backlash in the early 19th century. Thereafter, the Haridwar Kumbh became more religiously focused: “The rail links to Haridwar killed off this [trading] market in the 1880s, but allowed for much more convenient access to the town for pilgrims” (Llewellyn 1998: 31).

The currently popular origin myth for the Kumbh Mela holds that the nectar of life fell from a divine pot, dropping on the four Kumbh locations. Yet scholars largely concur that this account is recent, and that the “Puranic legend has been forcefully grafted onto the Kumbha fair in order to show Puranic authority for it” (Bhattacharya, cited in Maclean 2003: 876). There is some ambiguity, therefore, about whether the word Kumbh refers to the astrological basis of the Haridwar event, or to the pot of legend. On balance, the former account seems more likely.

Prayagraj/Allahabad

The Kumbh Mela festival at Prayagraj/Allahabad was established after the Haridwar Kumbh Mela and was directly and consciously “adapted from it” (Maclean 2008: 12). To be sure, Allahabad had long been a revered place of pilgrimage, owing to the confluence of three major rivers there: the Ganges, the Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati, with their joining-point known as the *triveni sangam*. An annual “Magh Mela” is referenced in sources dating back at least to the 16th century, and possibly much earlier; indeed, this annual festival continues to be held today. But Maclean (2008: 12) notes that “there is no mention in any text, Indian or European, of a Kumbh festival in Allahabad until the mid-nineteenth century.”

The turning point—the moment at which every twelfth Magh Mela at Allahabad became called a Kumbh Mela—appears to have come around 1870. (A 1868 report by British authorities discusses sanitation arrangements for a forthcoming “Coomb fair” and also mentions a large “Ad Coombh,” or half Kumbh, that had occurred at the site four years previously.) Maclean (2003) convincingly argues that the change was driven by entrepreneurial Prayagwals: members of the Brahmin jati (subcaste) in Allahabad responsible for—and financially dependent on—pilgrims to the city. Their move to “upgrade” the Magh Mela appears to have been a reaction to the anti-British rebellion that swept across northern India in 1857. While the rebellion failed, it provoked the British government to take direct control over India (away from the East India Company) and to make significant changes to religious policies in the subcontinent, shifting toward non-interference:

By appropriating a popular religious festival already well known—indeed, infamous—to the British and to their own city and by imbuing it with an immemorial past, the Pragwals sought not only to boost their business, but, more importantly, they attempted to create for themselves a sphere in which they could enjoy some autonomy from the increasingly repressive colonial state, which, after the mutiny and rebellion of 1857, had formally pledged not to interfere in traditional religious practices. (Maclean 2003: 888)

Nashik

The Kumbh Mela at Nashik arose from the Simhastha Mela, a fair that had been celebrated on the banks of the Godavari River. Lochtefeld (2004: 109) notes that “[t]he Nasik Mela’s origins are clearly independent from the Haridwar Mela’s, since it had a separate charter myth even in the late 19th century.” The Simhastha festival is nevertheless old and significant, and, like the Haridwar Kumbh, attached religious importance to a twelve-yearly astrological cycle. The 1695 Mughal document that first referenced the Haridwar Kumbh also mentions that, “[w]hen the planet Jupiter enters the sign of Leo, people come here [to Nashik] from distances and form a large gathering, which is famous in all parts of the kingdom” (Sarkar 1901: 51).

The exact site of the festival bifurcated in the 18th century. After the breakout of major violence between Vaishnavite and Shaivite sects in 1789 over ritual bathing rights, the Maratha Peshwa ruler of the area settled the dispute by assigning separate bathing locations to each sect: one at Trimbak town, the other at Nashik city. These locations are within 20 miles of each other, and thus the concurrent festivals held there are close enough to be considered a single mela (Burghart 1978: 126).

There is no consensus on when the term “Kumbh” was first applied to the Nashik Simhastha Mela. However, a monthly review from 1905 describes “the Kumbh Mela (recurring once in turn in a cycle of 12 years at Allahabad, Ujjain, Hardwar and Nasik” (Ray 1905: 157). There is no mention of this rotation as having been a new tradition, suggesting the term was likely applied to Nashik sometime in the late 19th century.

Ujjain

Just as the Prayagraj Kumbh emerged as an adaptation of the Haridwar festival, so it seems that “the Ujjain Kumbha Mela is essentially an extension of the existing Nasik Mela” (Lochtefeld 2004: 109). Astrologically, both festivals occur at the point when Jupiter falls in Leo, and thus both originated as “Simhastha Fairs” (which, locally, they continue to be called today). Uniquely, historical accounts pinpoint a clear founder of the Ujjain event, a Gwalior prince intent on establishing his religious bona fides:

According to the Vikrama-smṛti-granth, the Ujjain Mela began late in the eighteenth century when Ranoji Shinde, the founder of the Shinde [Scindia] dynasty, invited the akharas up from Nashik to Ujjain for a religious festival. Here Ranoji was emulating earlier kings such as Ashoka and Harsha, both of whom had convened religious assemblies. Such patronage reinforced his image as a pious Hindu king, and provided religious validation for his reign (Lochtefeld 2008: 32).

Interestingly “[i]t appears that Ujjain observed twelve-yearly melas of special significance ahead of Allahabad” (Maclean 2008: 262). Yet the first reference to the Ujjain Simhastha fair as a “Kumbh Mela” appears to only have come in the late 19th or early 20th century. Lochtefeld (2004: 113) concludes that the earliest written charter myth that conceived of all four Kumbh events as a single cycle appeared in 1947—Kumbhaparva Mahatmya, by Venirama Sharma Gauda—although Lochtefeld also notes that Gauda may have simply been the first to record “an established oral tradition.”

Institutionalization of the Kumbh Melas

Why have the Kumbh Melas persisted at four sites? Why have we not seen widely accepted “Kumbh” festivals emerge in new places? This subsection first argues that path dependent processes characterize the festivals. Next, and consistent with that notion, we demonstrate that recent localized attempts to brand other religious festivals as Kumbh Melas—usually for the purposes of boosting tourist numbers—have met with limited success.

As highlighted above, the available evidence indicates that the rotating, four-site Kumbh Mela festival, and its legitimating charter myths, congealed in the late 19th century, at a time when India itself was undergoing administrative change (with British Crown’s takeover) and some degree of economic modernization (especially the expansion of the railway and communications networks). Having been established in this period, the existing festival structure appears to have become “locked in place” for three reasons, we conjecture.

First, path dependent processes are ones that involve large startup costs (Pierson 2000). From this perspective, adding further pilgrimage sites to the Kumbh Mela would be costly. (a) Substantial physical infrastructure—special trains, sanitation facilities, departments of the provincial/state governments, and so forth—is needed to make the sites operate. (The Kumbh sites were heavily regulated in the colonial period, and have continued to be so post-independence, because of the recurrence of epidemic diseases and stampedes at the events.) (b) Even if material challenges have been overcome, symbolic obstacles pose yet another hurdle: concerned entrepreneurs need to manufacture supporting myths which, in many instances, take centuries to take hold in popular imagination. In conjunction with the origin myths, historical continuity itself bestows religious sites with added importance, making it difficult (though not impossible) for novel myths to legitimate new places as locations of religious significance. Each of the four Kumbh sites, for instance, is mentioned in the Puranic Hindu texts; historical records dating as far back as 1693 also attest to large religious gatherings at the sites (Clark 2018:13).

Second, adding new sites to the Kumbh—or moving an existing site—would require collective action, which is hindered by the vested interests of many powerful groups in maintaining the status quo. Akharas, which are the driving force behind the Kumbhs, have centered themselves in nearby areas (see Online Appendix P), local traders and mercantile sadhus have built up networks in the four cities to cater to crowds of pilgrims, and state authorities benefit from the revenue-generating potential of the events. Pilgrims, particularly until the early 20th century, relied on lineages of *pandas* (pilgrimage priests) to guide their travels (Lochtefeld 2017). Pilgrims, too, therefore, would presumably have been reluctant to turn en masse to new, unfamiliar veneration sites.

Lastly, as Pierson (2000) points out, increasing returns processes in the social domain tend to give rise to power asymmetries that lead to the entrenchment of authority. That is to say, those with the highest stakes in perpetuating an institution are likely to become even more powerful over time. This observation transfers well to the case of religious authorities and the Kumbh Mela. With the establishment of the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad (the “All India Akhara Council”) in 1954, religious leaders managed to centralize authority and contain intra-sect conflict—facilitating the smoother organization of the Kumbh Melas, and by extension, expanding their own authority.

These arguments should not be taken to imply that religious and political entrepreneurs never attempt to tinker with religious events. Yogi Adityanath’s government in Uttar Pradesh tried to sell the Prayagraj Ardh Kumbh Mela of 2019 as a

“Maha” Mela, akin to a “full” Kumbh event. But their failure to attract pilgrims that a full Kumbh event normally attracts, and the eventual fallout with akhara authorities over this politically motivated move, serve to reinforce the conclusion that modifying the existing structure of the Kumbh Mela is now very hard to do.

Other Kumbh Melas

Final evidence of this difficulty comes from considering the stumbling blocks faced when attempting to apply the “Kumbh” moniker to other, smaller festivals in recent years—to boost their profile. We highlight several examples of these appropriations:

- Karnataka’s T. Narasipur fair has often been called the "Kumbh of the South," even though "this site in Mysore district has no mythological significance" and it began only in 1989.¹ A source publicizing the event emphasizes convenience for pilgrims over religio-mythological foundations: "This [Kumbh] Mela provides a great opportunity for South Indians to take part in one such auspicious occasion. Instead of traveling a great distance to North India South Indians can take a holy dip here and become free of all the sins."²
- Another festival also colloquially referred to as "The Kumbh Mela of the South" is Tamil Nadu’s Mahamaham festival.³ Like the Kumbh melas, Mahamaham festival is celebrated every 12 years. It occurs in the town of Kumbakonam, and attracts close to a million devotees. While religiously significant in its own right, the festival clearly lies outside the group of four Kumbh melas, even though it is "related in its symbolism" to the four events (Eck 2012: 156).
- Andhra Pradesh’s Godavari Pushkaram, another festival that occasionally gets called the "Kumbh of the South," also occurs every 12 years.⁴ The mela, usually a low-key fare, gained notoriety in 2015 for witnessing a stampede that took 29 lives.⁵ Ironically, the government of the time blamed the media for excessively publicizing the event, a clear illustration of the organizational and infrastructural capacity limits that hinder the institutionalization of new pilgrimage sites, as discussed in the previous section.⁶
- The state of Chhattisgarh hosts a yearly Magh Mela, which goes by the name of "Rajim Kumbh." The Rajim festival is a noteworthy example of a state attempting to elevate the status of a local festival by tying itself to the famous Kumbhs. Chhattisgarh now calls the Rajim festival "the fifth Kumbh Mela of India" and even passed state legislation recognizing it as such in 2006, an act that one observer referred to as "a Kumbh Mela created by administrative fiat" (Sen 2014). This festival does not have official sanction of the national akhara leadership tasked with organizing the four Kumbhs.
- There are other scattered instances of small regional festivals branding themselves as Kumbh Melas. Dashar "Kumbh" Mela in Kashmir and Ambubachi Mela in Assam ("the Kumbh of the North-East") are two such cases (Misra 2019).⁷

While it is possible that the unifying charter myth of the Kumbh Melas may eventually evolve to accommodate new sites and events, that seems likely to be a protracted and contentious process. As it stands, the four-site structure of the Kumbh Mela is firmly rooted in the public imagination.

Placement of the Kumbh Mela sites in relation to pre-existing Hindu religious sites

One question is whether the four sites that became Kumbh Mela pilgrimage destinations in the 19th century sprung up in areas with higher pre-existing stocks of Hindu religiosity. It is vital to emphasize that, even if this were the case, the inclusion of spatial (i.e. district) fixed effects in our analyses ensures that such legacies would not be a source of statistical confounding. Nevertheless, understanding the Kumbh sites’ placement in India’s religious geography is worthwhile for contextualizing the events.

Measuring the strength of existing Hindu religiosity in a region—prior to the development of the first Kumbh Mela in its recognizable modern form, likely in the 17th century—presents challenges. Mughal imperial state records (from 1526

¹“Preparations for Regional Version of Kumbh Mela,” *Hindu*, January 15, 2013, bit.ly/3He15xF.

²“The South Kumbha Mela—Everything You Must Know,” *Karnataka.com*, February 12, 2019, bit.ly/3G8x5lq.

³“The Kumbh Mela of the South: Mahamaham begins in Tamil Nadu,” *Hindustan Times*, February 13, 2016, bit.ly/35v6v9n.

⁴“Godavari Pushkaram, The Kumbh Mela of South to Begin on Tuesday,” *Hindustan Times*, July 13, 2015, bit.ly/3gdmwmF.

⁵“29 Killed in Stampede at Godavari Pushkaram in Andhra,” *Hindustan Times*, July 14, 2015, bit.ly/3IVzppf.

⁶“Andhra Pradesh: Commission Blames Media for Godavari Pushkaram Stampede,” *Times of India*, September 19, 2018, bit.ly/3HuJLvr.

⁷Even a distinctly non-religious event, the Art of Living Foundation’s “World Culture Festival” of 2016, was referred to as “the Kumbh Mela of culture” by Indian Prime minister Narendra Modi (Misra 2019). With these usages, the “Kumbh” tag has come to be a cultural signifier of scale and importance.

onward) are not adequate to provide a quantitative measure. Moreover, we would ideally like a measure that clearly predates the Kumbhs, capturing a geographic area’s underlying “stock” of Hindu religiosity.

To approximate this, we used the Schwartzberg Historical Atlas of South Asia to generate a geolocated map of all prominent Hindu religious sites—principally temples—constructed between the 8th and 12th centuries (p. 34 of the Atlas). This involved pinpointing the geo-locations of 322 sites within modern India noted on Schwatzer’s map. Next, we used this geo-data to assess to what extent the four Kumbh sites are, on average, more proximate or distant to these pre-13th century religious buildings, compared to locations (district centroids) spread across the rest of India. Put differently, we can use the data to investigate if the Kumbh sites are unusually close to the set of prominent, pre-existing Hindu religious sites identified by Schwartzberg.

A few caveats are in order. We cannot rule out the possibility that the Hindu religious sites listed on Schwartzberg’s map reflect survivor and inclusion bias. For instance, if temples were more likely to have been protected and preserved in strongly religious areas, then those areas would appear on the map to have a higher relative density of pre-13th century temples than was actually the case. Archeological activity—on which Schwartzberg’s map depends—might have tended to be more intense in regions that were more religious, again raising the specter of correlated measurement error. Our metric also weights all sites equally, disregarding the reality that some sites would have carried greater religious significance in the minds of Hindu religionists than others. While imperfect, however, this metric offers what we view as the most credible picture of Hindu religiosity in the period before the appearance of the Kumbh Mela as an institution.

The quantitative analysis using this data is given in Online Appendix Figure A9 and Online Appendix Table A6. We find that three of the four Kumbh sites are closer on average than the majority of district centroids in India to prominent pre-13th century Hindu religious sites, although not exceptionally so. Of the four Kumbh locations, Ujjain is the closest to the set of historical temples listed by Schwartzberg, although 32 percent of district centroids are still closer. Haridwar—the original Kumbh Mela location—is comparatively isolated from the set of temples: fully 70 percent of district centroids have median distances to the temples that are less than Haridwar’s distance. In short, this exercise does not reveal the Kumbh locations to have an unusual degree of centrality within India’s Hindu religious landscape, although we hedge this conclusion in light of the considerable data constraints noted above.

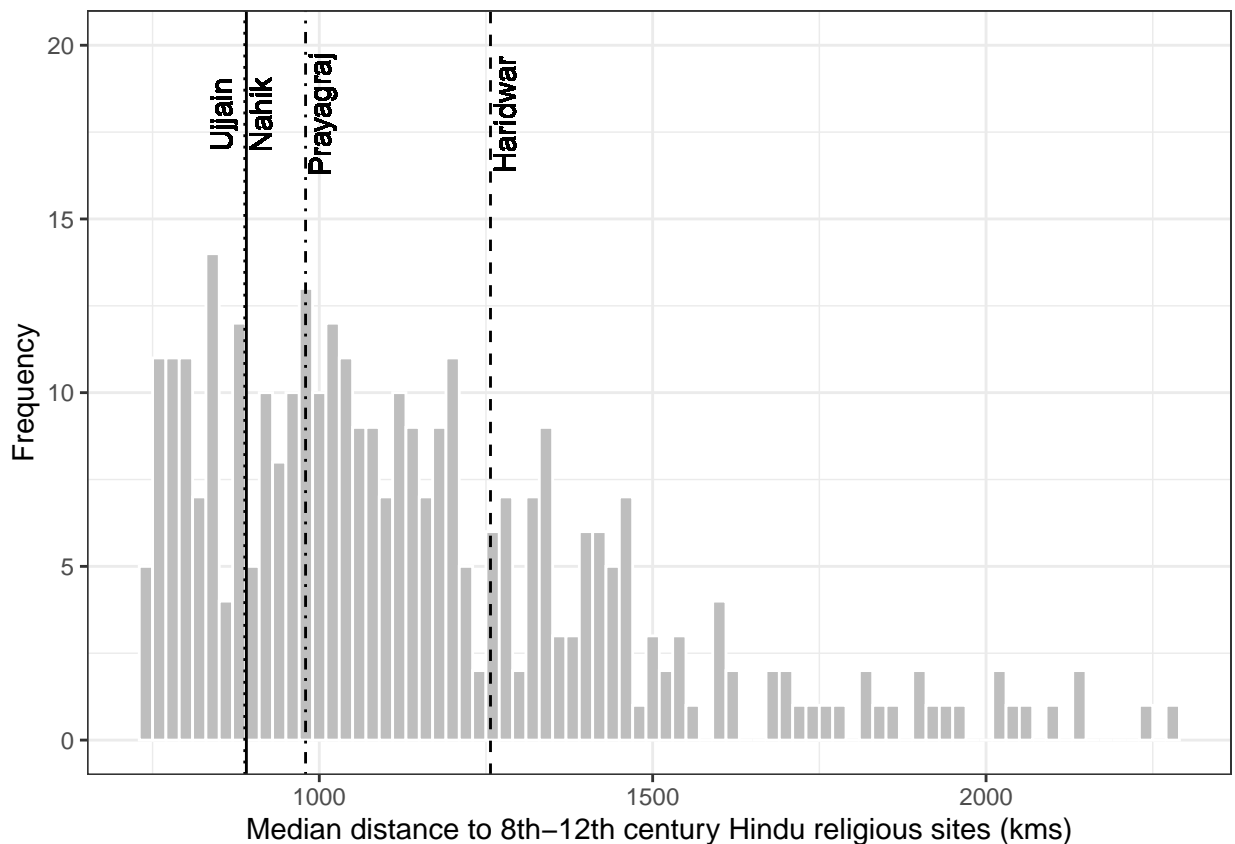


Figure A9: Histogram of the median straight-line distances from each 1961 Indian district centroid—as well as the four Kumbh Mela sites—to the 322 Hindu “Religious and cultural sites, 8th–12th centuries” shown in Schwartzberg (1978: 24).

Table A6: Median distances from the four Kumbh Mela sites to the 322 8th–12th century Hindu religious sites described for Online Appendix Figure A9, compared to the median distances for each 1961 Indian district centroid to the 8th–12th century Hindu religious sites.

Share of district centroids whose median distance to 8th–12th century Hindu religious sites is greater than that of..	
Prayagraj	0.65
Haridwar	0.30
Ujjain	0.78
Nashik	0.77

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P Further background on the akharas

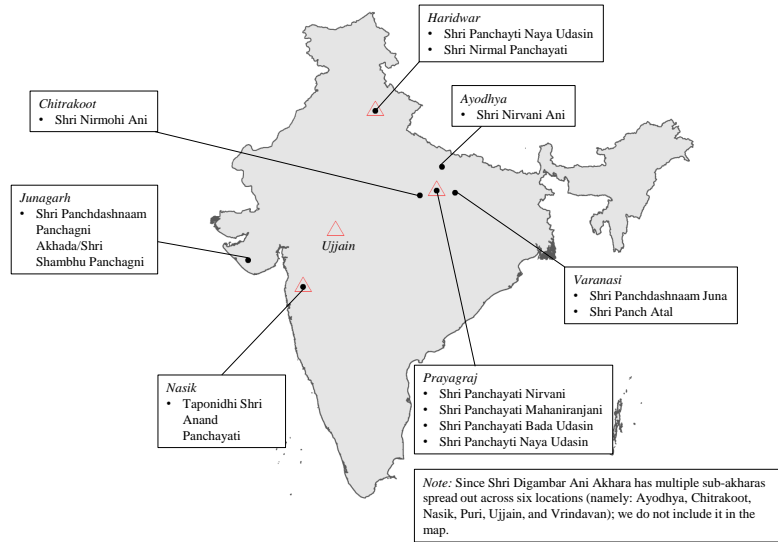


Figure A10: Map showing the headquarters of the akharas responsible for the organization of the Kumbh Melas. Red triangles denote the four Kumbh Mela sites.

Akharas are organized groups of ascetics belonging to various sects and traditions of Hinduism. They are also pivotal to the organization of the Kumbh Melas. This section describes the history of the akharas in relation to the Kumbh Melas, discusses their connections to political Hindu nationalism, and their potential role in electoral mobilization.

Scholars date the beginnings of the akhara organizations to the period of early Islamic rule in India (although some argue for their origins being in the 8th century; Misra 2019: 70). Akharas ostensibly consist of *sadhus* (Hindu holy men) who have “renounced” the world (taken *sanyaasa*) and fully embraced asceticism. Yet historical evidence shows that akhara members have served as mercenaries, and engaged in violent sectarian conflict arising from disputes over money and status (Pinch 2006; Clark 2018: 46). Even to this day, akharas display symbols of this militaristic past in their activities.

There are currently thirteen akharas involved in arranging the Kumbh Melas. As noted in Online Appendix Figure A10, they are composed of seven Shaiva akharas, three Vaishnava akharas, and three Udasina akharas. Shaiva akharas venerate Lord Shiva, while Lord Vishnu is the main deity for Vaishnavas. Sadhus belonging to Udasina akharas, who are neither complete Shaivites nor absolute Vaishnavites, claim to remain “neutral” in regards to deity-specific allegiance (Misra 2019: 75). Little systematic information exists on sadhus’ demographic characteristics. Yet akharas have tended to emphasize their members’ Brahmanical background, although lower-caste sadhus are common (Clark 2018: 34).

Akhara are integrated into the Kumbh events from start to finish. They are most prominent during elaborate processions: ritualistic spectacles in which akharas try to demonstrate their pre-eminence by marching past the crowds down to the most sacred bathing sites at the rivers. These occur on specified bathing days. The bathing order of the akharas has been a point of violent contention, historically. To avert conflict, agreement about bathing priority has developed at each Kumbh site over time (Lochtefeld 2004: 104). At Prayagraj, for instance, the seven Shaiva akharas march first, followed by Vaishnava akharas, with Udasina sadhus marching at the end (Misra 2019: 70).

In 1954, the akharas coordinated to establish an umbrella organization, the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad (ABAP).⁸ ABAP was formed in response to a tragedy at the 1954 Prayagraj Mela, when a stampede caused 800 deaths. Since its establishment, ABAP has been tasked with the responsibility for organizing the Kumbhs, as well as managing inter-akhara disputes.

The question of akharas’ political ties has received little scholarly attention. Still, journalistic reports indicate a nuanced relationship between akhara leaders and various parts of the Sangh Parivar (the Hindu nationalist “family” of organizations, built up around the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh).

The Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP, established 1964), the religious wing of the Sangh Parivar, has been especially proactive in trying to forge institutional connections with sadhus and the akharas. Symbolically, the VHP has courted

⁸“What is Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad? Body Under Spotlight after Narendra Giri’s ‘Suicide,’” *Print*, September 22, 2021, bit.ly/3rkklyk.

sadhus by bestowing on them “ecclesiastical status” within a larger Hindu Kingdom; this promise is said to have helped the VHP make inroads into akhara networks.⁹ In 1982, the VHP had a hundred of its own cadres initiated as sadhus into the Shaiva akharas, labelling these individuals *dharma pracharaks*, or religious publicists (Jaffreot 1999: 353). The *dharma pracharaks* were charged with organizing religious leaders into regional structures known as *margadarshak mandals*—or networks of spiritual guides—whose purpose was to formulate Hindu perspectives on salient social and political issues.¹⁰

Ties between sadhus and BJP leaders deepened with the emergence of the Ayodhya Babri Masjid controversy in the mid-1980s. At the 1989 Prayagraj Kumbh Mela, the BJP, the VHP, and akhara leaders publicly came together in a three-day *dharma sansad*, a conference pushing for the construction of a Ram temple at the mosque site (Jha 2019: 32). Some VHP alumni have gone on to become akhara leaders. For example, Kanhaiya Prabhu Nandgiri, of Juna Akhara, was formerly a member of the Bajrang Dal—the militant youth branch of the VHP—and served as the *mahamandaleswar* (head priest) of the 2019 Prayagraj Ardh-Kumbh.¹¹

Despite these points of affinity, akharas have repeatedly proven to be independent actors, not wholly under the control of political Hindu nationalists. In the early 1990s, the Congress prime minister, Narasimha Rao, encouraged over 300 religious figures (one of whom eventually assumed the position of ABAP president) to pass a resolution urging Hindu religious figures to eschew politics.¹² Sadhus have often objected to attempts by the BJP and VHP to intervene in their affairs. A recent example was the attempt by BJP politicians to rechristen the 2019 Prayagraj Ardh Mela—whose timing happened to fall just before a regularly scheduled national election—as a full Kumbh event.¹³ The ABAP initially resisted the move, although they reportedly relented under pressure from the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath (himself a sadhu).¹⁴

The negative publicity surrounding this dispute, as well as complaints about BJP’s inaction on the Ayodhya temple issue, contributed to the ABAP’s decision to boycott the VHP’s *dharma sansad* at the 2019 Mela. This was widely interpreted as signalling a rift between Hindu religious leaders and Hindu nationalist politicians.¹⁵ In the words of one sadhu, “[ABAP leadership] should have questioned this change. This is a political jamboree organised to send the message of the RSS and not that of the Kumbh.”¹⁶

When it comes to electoral politics, political Hindu nationalists have frequently solicited the support of Hindu religious leaders. Sadhus and akharas have made direct or coded appeals to voters, and have at times made public appearances alongside politicians of the Hindu right. The current head of the ABAP, when asked whether he and his organization were planning to throw their weight behind any party in the 2022 state elections in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, replied: “Those [political parties] who are with [Lord] Ram, Akhara Parishad is with them.”¹⁷ In another instance, during 2013 Prayagraj Kumbh, prominent akhara sadhus, at a joint conference with the VHP, publicly announced their backing for Narendra Modi as the BJP candidate for prime minister.¹⁸ Yet, at the very same event, dissenting leaders of the ABAP argued against exploiting the Kumbh Mela for political gain.¹⁹ Historically, prominent sadhus have even gone so far as to endorse Congress candidates, such as during the 1977 Kumbh Mela.²⁰ In short, the akhara membership is not monolithic, and while it has generally been sympathetic toward the Hindu nationalist political project, there have been significant points of friction.

Akharas, Mela timings, and the 2021 Haridwar Kumbh Mela

The most recent Kumbh Mela held in Haridwar in 2021 became a point of political controversy. There have been accusations that out of electoral concerns, the BJP-led central and state governments went ahead with the Mela in the spring of 2021, a year earlier than the regular 12 year cycle, despite knowing the risk it posed to COVID control.²¹ This led some to speculate whether the government moved the event earlier by a year, in the light of the fact that Uttarakhand, the host state of the Haridwar Mela, had its legislative assembly elections scheduled for February 2022.²² Yet religious leaders in charge of organizing the mela insisted that they were the ones to push the government to move the Mela to 2021.²³ In the words of one

⁹“RSS and the Akharas,” *Fountain Ink*, March 8, 2019. bit.ly/34xnKqk.

¹⁰“Akharas’ Spirituality was Intact, Until Sadhus Began Promoting Hindutva Politics,” *Print*, May 23, 2019, bit.ly/3GdQUHX.

¹¹“How a ‘Low’ Caste Hindu Became a Priest at the Kumbh Mela,” *The Wire*, February 19, 2019, bit.ly/3AWUANp.

¹²“RSS and the Akharas,” *Fountain Ink*, March 8, 2019, bit.ly/34xnKqk.

¹³“Full or Ardh? UP Government’s Mela Hype Triggers Fight over Kumbh Name,” *Hindustan Times*, January 9, 2019, bit.ly/3AM2KIo.

¹⁴“Despite the Hype, the BJP Couldn’t Turn an Ardh-Kumbh into a Full Kumbh Mela,” *Caravan*, February 6, 2019, bit.ly/32RWIJA.

¹⁵“VHP, RSS Back Narendra Modi on Temple,” *Hindu*, February 2, 2019, bit.ly/3gfidY8.

¹⁶“Despite the Hype, the BJP Couldn’t Turn an Ardh-Kumbh into a Full Kumbh Mela,” *Caravan*, February 6, 2019, bit.ly/3gfidY8.

¹⁷“Will Back BJP in UP, Uttarakhand: New Akhara Parishad Chief,” *Times of India*, October 26, 2021, bit.ly/3LdfexF.

¹⁸“BJP Reclaims Hindutva Mantle as Sadhus Warm to Modi,” *Daily Mail*, February 3, 2013, bit.ly/3ANhE14.

¹⁹“The Kumbh is not a Political Tamasha,” *Hindu*, March 6, 2013, bit.ly/3rgciIv.

²⁰During this mela, religious leaders organized a public meeting to felicitate Indira Gandhi a few weeks before the general election. See, “PM, Sadhus Exchange Pledges to Strive for Progress,” *Times of India*, January 23, 1977, bit.ly/3sboo4O.

²¹“Explained: How and Why Kumbh Mela 2021 in Haridwar Will Be Different,” *Indian Express*, October 11, 2020, bit.ly/3gnySsw.

²²“Kumbh 2021: Astrology, Mortality and the Indifference to Life of Leaders and Stars,” *Wire*, April 20, 2021, bit.ly/3rqnO4f.

²³“BJP Fired Ex-Uttarakhand Chief Minister TS Rawat for Restricting Kumbh Gatherings,” *Caravan*, May 8, 2021, bit.ly/3gnFYNu. “Explained: How and Why Kumbh Mela 2021 in Haridwar Will Be Different,” *Indian Express*, October 11, 2020, bit.ly/3gnySsw.

religious leader, Ravinder Puri of the Nirvani Akhara, “Jupiter stays in one sun cycle for 12 months. For hosting Kumbh in Haridwar, Jupiter must stay in Aquarius while Sun should stay in Aries. This was only possible in 2021 as in 2022, after 10 April, Jupiter will leave the Aquarius configuration.” While rare, such off-cycle Kumbh melas may occur once every hundred years or so, as confirmed by the head of the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad, with an earlier such instance in 1938.²⁴ On the part of the BJP-led government, the crucial political decision then was to allow the event to happen as per the wishes of religious leaders. In the words of a senior BJP leader, “Kumbh was allowed to happen because the Uttar Pradesh polls are in the next eight months . . . It made no sense to annoy a friendly ally just a year before elections.”²⁵

This potential exception serves to prove the rule that politicians tend to shy away from direct interference with Mela timing. Further, the historical literature turns up no reason to believe that off-cycle national elections have been timed with the Kumbh in mind. Neither is there evidence that the dates of other Kumbh Melas have been shifted under political pressure. The issue of Mela timing therefore appears to be the sovereign domain of akharas and their astrologers.

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²⁴“Explained: How and Why Kumbh Mela 2021 in Haridwar Will Be Different,” *Indian Express*, October 11, 2020, bit.ly/3gnySsw. “BJP Fired Ex-Uttarakhand Chief Minister TS Rawat for Restricting Kumbh Gatherings,” *Caravan*, May 8, 2021, bit.ly/3gnFYNu.

²⁵“BJP Fired Ex-Uttarakhand Chief Minister TS Rawat for Restricting Kumbh Gatherings,” *Caravan*, May 8, 2021, bit.ly/3gnFYNu.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

Supplementary Information

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A Election/Kumbh Mela pairings

Table S1: This table shows the pairings of each Indian Lok Sabha election with the most recently completed Kumbh Mela held at each of the four Mela sites. The number of days elapsed between these pairs of dates is central to the construction of the treatment variable. Dates are in yyyy-mm-dd format. Election dates represent the first day of each election cycle; Kumbh dates represent the final day of the month in which the Kumbh Mela ended.

Election	Prayagraj	Haridwar	Ujjain	Nashik
1951-10-25	1948-02-29	1950-04-30	1945-06-30	1944-02-29
1957-02-24	1954-03-31	1956-04-30	1945-06-30	1956-09-30
1962-02-19	1960-02-29	1956-04-30	1957-05-31	1956-09-30
1967-02-17	1966-02-28	1962-04-30	1957-05-31	1956-09-30
1971-03-01	1971-02-28	1968-04-30	1968-05-31	1968-09-30
1977-03-16	1977-02-28	1974-04-30	1968-05-31	1968-09-30
1980-01-03	1977-02-28	1974-04-30	1968-05-31	1968-09-30
1984-12-24	1982-02-28	1980-04-30	1980-04-30	1980-09-30
1989-11-22	1989-02-28	1986-04-30	1980-04-30	1980-09-30
1991-05-20	1989-02-28	1986-04-30	1980-04-30	1980-09-30
1996-04-27	1995-02-28	1992-04-30	1992-05-31	1991-09-30
1998-02-16	1995-02-28	1992-04-30	1992-05-31	1991-09-30
1999-09-05	1995-02-28	1998-05-31	1992-05-31	1991-09-30
2004-04-20	2001-02-28	1998-05-31	1992-05-31	2003-09-30
2009-04-16	2007-02-28	2004-05-31	2004-05-31	2003-09-30
2014-04-07	2013-03-31	2010-04-30	2004-05-31	2003-09-30
2019-04-11	2019-03-31	2016-04-30	2016-05-31	2015-09-30

B Kumbh Mela dates and sources

Table S2 lists Kumbh Mela festivals dating back to 1943, with quotations from supporting sources. It includes all Kumbh Melas and Ardh Kumbh Melas that have been held since the first independence-era elections in 1951; it also includes the last Kumbh Mela held at each of the four sites prior to that election. Two areas of uncertainty that we encountered in compiling the list bear highlighting:

- The structure of the Nashik-Trimbakeshwar festival is looser than that of the festivals organized at the other three sites. It has also undergone changes. The Kumbh Mela in Nashik occurs across two locations—roughly 20 miles apart—and is folded into the Sinhastha fair (the same name frequently used to refer to the Ujjain Kumbh Mela, too). This fair has sometimes lasted up to 13 months. In certain years, sources pinpoint a subpart of the festival as having been clearly demarcated as the Kumbh Mela; in other years, however, no such clear distinction was drawn. We have hewed to the sources as closely as possible, and detail the case-by-case decisions on start and end dates below.
- Astrologers aligned with the different akharas have occasionally disagreed about the exact year in which the Kumbh Mela should be held—essentially owing to disputes about how to deal with the leap year problem. This has affected the Kumbh in Prayagraj and Ujjain and has led state governments to arrange two Kumbh festivals at the same site in consecutive years, satisfying both sides. We describe these instances below. In all cases when this happened, it appears that one of the “pair” of festivals was substantially larger in size; accordingly, we consider this to have been the “main” Kumbh for that cycle.

Table S2: List of Kumbh Mela dates, with description of data sources and coding decisions.

Kumbh site (type)	Start and end months (mm/yyyy)	Sources and notes
Prayagraj (Ardh)	01/2019 - 03/2019	• “The mystical Kumbh Mela, the ‘world’s largest congregation of religious pilgrims’ will be organised again from January 15, 2019, till March 4, 2019, in the city of Prayagraj” (“Kumbh Mela 2019 in Prayagraj: From date to other important details, all you need to know about the world’s largest religious gathering,” Financial Express, 2 January 2019, bit.ly/3we7ZxK).
Ujjain (Full)	04/2016 - 05/2016	• “The fair, which started on 22 April and goes on till 21 May, is also a platform for some homegrown start-ups to showcase their technologies” (“A confluence of divine and digital at the kumbh,” Livemint, 10 May 2016, bit.ly/3mbGQai).
Haridwar (Ardh)	01/2016 - 04/2016	• “The Ardh Kumbh Mela opened to a colourful start in Haridwar . . . ‘There is some confusion this year over the date as some (Hindu) calendars claimed the festival would be observed on January 14, while others said January 15,’ said Rohit Tiwari, a Haridwar-based astrologer” (“Ardh Kumbh Mela opens to colourful start in Haridwar,” Hindustan Times, 14 January 2016, bit.ly/2Pfw0V). • “[T]he Ardh Kumbh mela—to be held at Haridwar from January 14 2016 till April-end” (“U’khand braces for Ardh Kumbh 2016,” Times of India, 20 March 2015, bit.ly/31DYFFy).
Nashik (Full)	08/2015 - 09/2015	• “In 2015, the first auspicious day of bathing falls on Aug. 26, in the northern city of Nashik. The last holy day of bathing occurs on Sept. 25” (“Kumbh Mela 2015: What you need to know about this sacred Hindu pilgrimage,” Huffpost, 27 August 2015, bit.ly/3cCG3Mk).
Prayagraj (Full)	01/2013 - 03/2013	• “Maha Kumbh Mela 2013 was held from January 14 to March 10 at Allahabad wherein 12 crore pilgrims participated” (“CAG report blames railways for 2013 Kumbh Mela stampede,” Deccan Chronicle, 29 November 2014, bit.ly/3dkNXJr).
Haridwar (Full)	01/2010 - 04/2010	• “Recent Kumbh Mela begining [sic] from January 14, 2010 to April 28, 2010 includes 11 bathing dates in between, at Haridwar” (Sultan 2015: 14).
Prayagraj (Ardh)	01/2007 - 02/2007	• “A city of tents will house an expected 60 million pilgrims over the six-week celebration” (“Hindu Kumbh festivals,” BBC News, 15 January 2007, bbc.in/39tD2Me).

Table S2: (*continued*) Kumbh Mela dates and sources.

Kumbh site (type)	Start and end months (mm/yyyy)	Sources and notes
Ujjain (Full)	04/2004 - 05/2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • Concurs with Maclean 2003 (876). • “During the festival (April 5–May 4), more than one crore people will flow in and out of Ujjain where new toilets, bridges, roads, pipelines and power stations have been constructed” (“Money, marketing, hitech become Ujjain Kumbha Mela’s new mantras,” India Today, 19 April 2004, bit.ly/3mfyyOv).
Haridwar (Ardh)	01/2004 - 05/2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Ardh Kumbh Mela, one of the largest religious gatherings in the world and an important event for the Hindus is taking place in Haridwar from January 2004 to May 2004” (“Bid notice: Golden opportunity for advertisers,” Times of India, 20 December 2003, bit.ly/3wevtD7).
Nashik (Full)	08/2003 - 09/2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Maclean 2003 (876). • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • “Many of the pilgrims [were] crushed to death [yesterday] . . . on the most auspicious day of the 43-day event” (“Holy man’s gift blamed for 39 dead in stampede,” Guardian, 27 August 2003, bit.ly/3fwfy7). • “With the death of 35 pilgrims in a stampede just six days ago fresh in mind, a tight security ring was put in place as an estimated 1.5 million devotees and 70,000 mahants and sadhus today took holy dip in Godavari for final ‘shahi-snan’ of Simhastha Kumbh Mela here” (“Final royal bath at Kumbh amid tight security,” ZeeNews, 1 September 2003, bit.ly/3vkJ8aq). • “Sadhus prepare for their first Shahi Snan (royal bath) at the Kumbh Mela in Nashik, Tuesday, August 12, 2003” (“Sadhus [collection of archive photographs]” Outlook, 26 April 2021, bit.ly/3dPI48y).
Prayagraj (Full)	01/2001 - 02/2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Maclean 2003 (876). • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • “The all-out efforts made by the state, where all machinery at its disposal was pressed into service, made Kumbh mela the centre of global attraction from January 4 to February 20” (“Mahakumbh: A maha success,” Times of India, 23 February 2001, bit.ly/2PHJsAo).
Haridwar (Full)	01/1998 - 05/1998	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Maclean 2003 (876). • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • “The purna Kumbh bathing, which had begun on January 1, will end when the Digambar, Nirwan and Nirmohi Akhadas take a bath on May 14” (“Hardwar deserted but mela is still on,” Times of India, 21 April 1998, bit.ly/3sRxFOs).
Prayagraj (Ardh)	01/1995 - 02/1995	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Beginning on January 12, this will be the largest fair anywhere in the world” (“Bid to ensure smooth ‘Ardh Kumbh Mela,’” Times of India, 9 December 1994, bit.ly/3u9Nnov). • “The true mela is held every 12 years here, in-between is an ardha or ‘half’ mela—the one this year. It began on January 12th and lasted one and a half months” (“Kumbha Mela: Just a little gathering of 45 million souls,” Hinduism Today, [n.d.] April 1995, bit.ly/3u83ZwU).
Haridwar (Ardh)	02/1992 - 04/1992	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “In all, seven main bathing days fall during Ardh kumbh mela period which started in February and ends in April” (“Arrangements made for Ardh Kumbh,” Times of India, 12 March 1992, bit.ly/3fzpBhx).
Ujjain (Full)	04/1992 - 05/1992	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • “. . . an elaborate security network [is] being planned by the state government for the forthcoming ‘Simhastha’ festival to be held at Ujjain from April 17 to [M]ay 16” (“Tight security for festival,” Times of India, 26 March 1992, bit.ly/3ud3Fx8).

Table S2: (*continued*) Kumbh Mela dates and sources.

Kumbh site (type)	Start and end months (mm/yyyy)	Sources and notes
Nashik (Full)	08/1991 - 09/1991	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Even as the planet Jupiter moves into the constellation Leo on August 21, after a gap of 12 years, more than three million pilgrims of sadhus will flood into the city of Nashik for a holy dip ... This means that the only alternative for him has been to block all eight major roads into the city on the days of the holy dip. Straddling the months of August and September, these are August 21, September 8 and September 13” (“All set for Kumbh Mela,” Times of India, 2 August 1991, bit.ly/3rCmwQh). • “On the back of the 1991 mela, the state government allocated additional funds for the city’s development; and Nashik will reportedly get a Rs10-crore development package from ASSOCHAM after the 2015 Kumbh” (“Nashik Kumbh: Of selfies, detergents and power struggles,” Hindustan Times, 6 September 2015, bit.ly/3o0a1aq). • Note, there is an error in Clark 2006 (294), who records this as happening in 1992. Reporting is clear that the main ‘Kumbh’ months of the festival fell in 1991.
Prayagraj (Full)	01/1989 - 02/1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • “During the next four weeks, over 2,000 big and small Akhara chiefs are expected to take temporary abode in the Sangam, one of the holiest spots in the Hindu pantheon, for the unique conjunction of stars said to be taking place after 144 years” (“Sadhus swamp Kumbh Mela,” Times of India, 15 January 1989, bit.ly/2PemYqZ).
Haridwar (Full)	03/1986 - 04/1986	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • “People have begun pouring in from all parts of the country. Sadhus and godmen have started arriving—some on foot, some on rickshaws and yet others in chauffer-driven limousines” (“Hardwar decked up for Kumbh Mela,” Times of India, 10 March 1986, bit.ly/3dSyMbV). • “[S]everal hundred thousand pilgrims today had a dip in the holy river on the occasion of Baisakhi even as devotees continued to stream into the sacred city for the final bath of the Kumbh Mela after midnight tonight” (“Massive crowds at Mela,” Times of India, 14 April 1986, bit.ly/3rEEbHg).
Prayagraj (Ardh)	01/1982 - 02/1982	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “A tented township with modern facilities spread over 6,000 acres on the Ganga riverbed is nearing completion for the Ardh Kumbh Mela that begins on January 9 . . . After the Ganga puja today, the sadhus and kalpavasis will start occupying their respective akhras and stay there until the first week of February, when the mela ends” (“New Kumbh Mela township rises,” Times of India, 30 November 1981, bit.ly/3rETDD1). • “The incident occurred in Allahabad city where 3 million devout Hindus, holy men and naked ascetics were ending a monthlong ritual of bathing in the sacred Ganges River in a religious festival called the Ardh Kumbh Mela” (“Nine injured in fight at Indian holy rite,” UPI Archives, 28 January 1982, bit.ly/3m6blcb). • Note, this event breaks the cycle. There is no clear discussion that we could find detailing why only five years had elapsed since the last Ardh Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj (1977) and eleven years since the last full Kumbh there (1971).
Ujjain (Full)	03/1980 - 04/1980	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • “More than 50 lakh pilgrims are expected to arrive here for a holy dip in the Kshipra river during the month-long Kumbh Mela, beginning here on Monday [31 March 1980] next” (“50 lakh expected at Kumbh Mela,” Times of India, 29 March 1980, bit.ly/2O8ogTF).
Haridwar (Ardh)	03/1980 - 04/1980	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “[T]his sacred town is getting dressed up to play host to millions of pilgrims expected here on April 13—the holy Ardh-Kumbh bathing day ... Other bathing occasions between now and the Ardh Kumbh (April 13) will be Ramanavami on March 25 and Chaitra Poornima on March 31” (“Hardwar getting dressed up for Ardh-kumbh,” Times of India, 16 March 1980, bit.ly/3sJqrw3).

Table S2: (*continued*) Kumbh Mela dates and sources.

Kumbh site (type)	Start and end months (mm/yyyy)	Sources and notes
Nashik (Full)	08/1979 - 09/1980	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For this event, sources do not point to specific ‘Kumbh’ months within the Sinhastha fair; thus, we consider the full fair to be the Kumbh. • “About 26,000 sadhus of 54 akhads and over three lakh devotees from all over India took a holy dip in Ramkunda today, the first ‘parvani’ of the Sinhastha fair here. Sadhus of Nirmotri, Nirvad and Digambar akhads came in a procession with their convoy of elephants, horses and flags” (“3 lakh devotees take holy dip at Ramkund,” Times of India, 30 August 1979, bit.ly/2QWaSnj). • “Thousands of mendicants and pilgrims gathered recently on the banks of the Godavari at Nashik for the Sinhastha Kumbh Mela, held every 12 years ... This year, during the last week of August, sadhus, followers of the devas, begin converging on the ancient city of Panchvati, on the outskirts or Nashik. They are gathering for the holy baths during the Sinhastha Kumbh Mela” (“Coral shells, sadhus and surging crowds,” Times of India, 16 September 1979, bit.ly/3hgTi83) • Clark 2006 (294) gives the Nashik Kumbh year as 1980. • “Nearly 3000 [? unclear] ‘nanga’ (naked) sadhus of [? unclear] akhada along with their groups took a ‘holy dip’ in the early hours of this morning in [? unclear] Trymbakeshwar ... on the occasion of the first ‘Sinhastha Parvani’ ” (“5,000 sadhus take part in Sinhastha fair,” Times of India, 10 August 1980, bit.ly/2QVJghD). • “About three lacs pimgrims, including about 2,000 nanga (naked) sadhus took a holy dip on Tuesday in the Godavari river, on the occasion of the third Parvani day of the Sanhastha fair at Timbakeshwar ... Laks of devotees from different parts of the country thronged to the banks of the Godavari river to have ‘darshan’ of the sadhus” (“District news,” Times of India, 10 September 1980, bit.ly/33K4UZv).
Prayagraj (Full)	01/1977 - 02/1977	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • “Allahabad is getting ready to received 1,500,000 pilgrims from different parts of the county and abroad during the Kumbh mela, beginning on January 5, 1977, the Paush Purnima Day” (“Allahabad gets ready for Kumbh mela,” Times of India, 30 September 1976, bit.ly/3m6pc7N). • “Spread over 40 winter days, from January 5 to February 16, the festival became the venue for some 10 million pilgrims, saints, mendicants and ascetics, gurus and godmen to congregate for a sacred bath that would assure them a thousand promises in heaven” (“Kumbh mela: Raghu Rai records the intricate fabric of life in Allahabad,” India Today, 15 February 1977, bit.ly/31ydlpD).
Haridwar (Full)	02/1974 - 04/1974	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • “Sir,—Millions of rupees will be spent on the Kumbh Mela which begins at Hardwar on February 1 next year” (“Kumbh Mela: To the Editor,” Times of India, 8 October 1973, bit.ly/3fsnwnP). • “Eleven people were killed and 22 injured yesterday in two accidents connected with the Kumbh Mela” (“11 mela pilgrims killed in mishaps,” Times of India, 13 April 1974, bit.ly/2QVzkn1). • “The Indian side stated that the remaining Pakistani prisoners of war and civilian internees in India to be repatriated under the Delhi Agreement, numbering approximately 6,500, would be repatriated at the usual pace of a train on alternate days and the likely short-fall due to the suspension of trains from April 10 to April 19, 1974 on account of Kumbh Mela” (“Bangladesh-India-Pakistan: Agreement on the Repatriation of Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees,” International Legal Materials 13(3), 1974: 501-5. bit.ly/3d2GU9a).
Prayagraj (Ardh)	01/1971 - 02/1971	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The Brahmachari’s camp was still going strong at the Ardh Kumbh Mela in 1971, ‘busy all the time blaring election propaganda against Indira Gandhi and her Congress’ ” (Maclean 2008: 213). • “About 20,000 pilgrims ... had a dip ... today marking the beginning of the one-month Ardh Kumba Mela” (“Ardh Kumbh at the Sangham,” Times of India, 11 January 1971, bit.ly/3cEKOEY).

Table S2: (*continued*) Kumbh Mela dates and sources.

Kumbh site (type)	Start and end months (mm/yyyy)	Sources and notes
Ujjain (Full)	04/1968 - 05/1968	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Clark (2006: 294). • “Thousands of pilgrims today had a dip in the sacred waters of the Kashipra here on the occasion of Chaitra Purnima, the first main bathing day of the month-long Kumbh festival. ... This year’s Sinhastha will continue till May 12” (“Ujjain rush less than expected,” Times of India, 13 April 1968, bit.ly/3ma9Bnr). • “Though the mela authorities spent about Rs. 1 crore to provide amenities for an expected crowd of 2.5 million pilgrims, besides 30,000 sadhus, the rush this year so far has been much less. This was partly because of the controversy over the date of the Sinhastha, which, according to one religious school, would fall next year and also because of the coincidence of the Ardha Kumbh at Hardwar (“Ujjain rush less than expected,” Times of India, 14 April 1968, bit.ly/3twBdVS). • Note, despite this controversy, there are no signs that a Kumbh Mela/Sinhastha of any significant magnitude was held in Ujjain in 1969; as in the previous Ujjain Mela, the second of the two years appears to have been the primary festival.
Haridwar (Ardh)	04/1968 - 04/1968	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “One million pilgrims are estimated to have sought spiritual salvation with a holy dip in the Ganga, the river of faith and hope, here today on the occasion of Ardh Kumbh” (“One million take holy dip in the Ganga,” Times of India, 13 April 1968, bit.ly/3u8EuM0).
Nashik (Full)	08/1967 - 09/1968	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Mr. Baburao Dixit, president of the Sinhastha Samiti of the Nashik Panchavati Purohit Sang, asserted today that the Sinhastha fair did not actually fall on next Wednesday. He said that as Ekadashi fell on Wednesday, some people might take a holy bath on that day. However, the first Sinhastha Parvani begin only on September 3, and the Kumbha Snaan was on the following day. He told a press conference that the Sinhastha fair would go on for 13 months. The mahapuja of the Godavari would be performed on September 17. Some other important dates were September 28, October 27, November 23, January 15, April 27, and May 27” (“Sinhastha fair dates,” Times of India, 16 August 1967, bit.ly/2PQdRNa). • The Nashik Gazetteer records the Kumbh Mela has having occurred in 1968 (bit.ly/3f3eITs). • Misra (2019: 44), too, records the Kumbh Mela has having occurred after the Ujjain Kumbh Mela in 1980. • Given these accounts, we consider the full Sinhastha fair to be the Kumbh Mela, lasting 13 months from 1967 to 1968.
Prayagraj (Full)	01/1966 - 02/1966	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “With the first principal bathing day—Paus Purnima—today, the month-long Kumbh Mela started on the sandy banks of the Ganga and Yamuna Sangham” (“Kumbh Mela begins: Over a lakh take dip,” Times of India, 8 January 1966, bit.ly/3cDwQU7). • “There was also a dispute over when one of the Prayag Kumbh Melas should be held, the Sanyasi astrologers believing it should be in 1965, while the Vairagis (Ramanandis) believed it should be in 1966 ... The solution and consequence was the enhanced funding by the government of the annual, month-long Magh Mela, held at the same site, the two sects of sadhus attending in different years. On both occasions many millions of pilgrims attended.” (Clark 2006: 294). • A Kumbh Mela was held in 1965 also, but judging by the volume of news reporting, the 1966 event was far larger. Regardless, the exclusion of the 1965 event from the list cannot have a bearing on our results, as the 1966 event occurred closer in time to the subsequent (1967) elections.

Table S2: (*continued*) Kumbh Mela dates and sources.

Kumbh site (type)	Start and end months (mm/yyyy)	Sources and notes
Haridwar (Full)	03/1962 - 04/1962	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • “For the U.P. administration April 13, 1962 was a proud moment when it saw first accident-free Kumbh of the twentieth century” (“Causes of Kumbh tragedy,” Times of India, 2 May 1986 bit.ly/3dRI16). • “The Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama of Kankhal in Uttar Pradesh has solicited public support for maintaining a relief centre, a mobile relief squad and a boarding and lodging section in the sevashrama for the benefit of the pilgrims attending the forthcoming Kumbha Mela at Hardwar” (“Kumbh Mela,” Times of India, 13 January 1962, bit.ly/3rJO5XP). • “Despite both these meetings being failures, the Samaj convinced the government to fund a third vya sammelan, this time coinciding with the Kumbh Mela in Haridwar between March and April 1962 (Menon 2018: 236).
Prayagraj (Ardh)	01/1960 - 02/1960	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “...today, Makar Sankranti, the first principal bathing day of the month-long Ardh Kumbh Mela” (“Ardh Kumbh Mela,” Times of India, 15 January 1960, bit.ly/2PivLlx).
Ujjain (Full)	04/1957 - 05/1957	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • “[A]ll the intending pilgrims to Sinhashta fair, to be held at Ujjain in April and May this year, have been asked to get themselves inoculated against Cholera” (“Sinhashta fair at Ujjain: Inoculations for pilgrims urged,” Times of India, 13 February 1957, bit.ly/3tsetGR). • “Nearly 60,000 persons had their holy dip in the River Kshipra today, the first of three important bathing days of the Simhashta Fair” (“Simhashta fair at Ujjain: 60,000 take holy bath,” Times of India, 13 April 1957, bit.ly/3szAILf). • “Under a canopy of shimmering stars and bright moon nearly three lakh people, men and women and children, bathed in the sacred waters of Shipra river today, inaugurating the Sinhashta Fair” (“Sinhashta fair inaugurated,” Times of India, 13 May 1957, bit.ly/2PQDVHD). • Note, there are references to a break-off fair in 1956: “The next Simhashta was in controversy as sadhus, seers and akhadas were divided over the year of holding the event. ‘It was in fact a classical dispute as one faction was banking on the leap year theory while the other opposed it,’ recalled Pt Vyas. As a result, the Shankaracharyas and other top acharyas celebrated the fair in 1956 while mahamandleshwaras and akhadas in 1957” (“Will Shivraj govt follow tradition of inviting sadhus, akhadas?” Free Press Journal, 6 January 2013, bit.ly/3uyhmqF). However, any 1956 fair appears to have been very small in scale, and receives no mention in the Times of India that year.
Haridwar (Ardh)	04/1956 - 04/1956	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “An estimated 8 lakhs of pilgrims bathed in the waters of the Ganga here amidst the chanting of vedic mantras and singing of devotional songs of the Baisakhi Day, principal day of the Ardh Kumbh Mela, today” (“8 Lakhs Bathe in Ganga: Ardh Kumbh Mela,” Times of India, 13 April 1956, bit.ly/3rG1gZO). • “An estimated 600,000 to 700,000 thus brought to an end Ardh Kumbh Mela, a week-long religious festival held every six years to commemorate the mythological struggle between the gods and demons” (“Hindu pilgrims purify selves in Ganges,” Times of India, 14 April 1956, bit.ly/3f2IN6U).
Nashik (Full)	08/1956 - 09/1956	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • “The Sinhashta Fair will began on September 20 this year and continue up to October 16, 1956. The most important period of the fair is the ‘Kumbh Mela’ in which more than 50,000 sadhus are expected to participate. It will be held from August 17, 1956 to September 16” (“Sinhashta fair plans: High-level talks in Bombay,” Times of India, 15 January 1955, bit.ly/3drYDpu).

Table S2: (*continued*) Kumbh Mela dates and sources.

Kumbh site (type)	Start and end months (mm/yyyy)	Sources and notes
Prayagraj (Full)	01/1954 - 03/1954	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • “[I]t is estimated that in all approximately 4,500,000 pilgrims have visited the Mela since its inauguration in January” (“Kumbh Mela visit by over 45 lakhs,” Times of India, 2 February 1954, bit.ly/3ueyzVH). • “Thousands of pious Hindus observed Shivaratri by having a sacred dip today in the holy waters of the Sangam in Kumbh City” (“Kumbh festivity,” Times of India, 3 March 1954, bit.ly/31BcLHF). • “An Ordinance providing for a graded levy of terminal tax from January 7 to March 15 for passengers travelling by rail to certain stations in the Kumbh Mela area has been promulgated by the President.” (“Kumbh Mela Tax Graded Levy Ordinance by President,” Times of India, 5 January 1954, bit.ly/3sKACAF).
Haridwar (Full)	03/1950 - 04/1950	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • “Asia’s greatest bathing fair, the Kumbha Mela on April 13, is the fifth of its kind of the century to take place in Hardwar” (“The Kumbh Mela of Hardwar,” Times of India, 2 April 1950, bit.ly/31yxxaV). • “About Rs 8 lakhs is understood to have been sanctioned by the U.P. Government for expenses on public health and medical services during the ensuing Kumbh Mela at Hardwar which will begin shortly” (“Kumbh Mela,” Times of India, 19 January 1950, bit.ly/3dqFx7).
Prayagraj (Arhdh)	01/1948 - 02/1948	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “[The] Ardhkumba Mela, which begins here on January 14” (“‘Kumbh Mela’ in Allahabad plans upset,” Times of India, 8 January 1948, bit.ly/3sDXmlE). • “The epidemic, one of the most virulent on record, broke out towards the end of February during the famous Ganges fair—Ardh Kumbh—in Allahabad, and spread rapidly” (“High death-roll from Cholera,” Times of India, 9 July 1948, bit.ly/39QExEH). • “It was stated that the death was due to suffocation caused by the heavy rush of pilgrims for the Kumbh Mela at Allahabad” (“The rest of the news,” Times of India, 14 February 1948, bit.ly/3w6zSXV).
Ujjain (Full)	03/1945 - 06/1945	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concurs with Clark 2006 (294). • “In the interest of the intending pilgrims it is hereby announced that considering the shortage of foodstuffs and difficulties of transport due to war time, the Gwalior Government has banned the holding of the Singhasth Fair the second phase of which is to take place from March, 1945, to June, 1945” (“Notice: Ujjain Singhasth Mela banned,” Times of India, 13 March 1945, bit.ly/31yARCX). • “Pandit Anand Shankar Vyas of Ujjain said he is witnessing Simhastha since 1945 but there were no attempts earlier on the part of political parties to draw a political mileage from the religious programme as they were doing it now” (“Saffron brigade’s agenda has lent a political tinge to Simhastha Kumbh,” Hindustan Times, 12 May 2016, bit.ly/2SHjTRH). • Simhastha Fair-1945 was an unforgettable [sic]. The then Mahant of Dutt Akhada Sandyapuri Maharaj announced that despite government’s non-cooperation, the event would be hosted successfully in Ujjain in 1945 with the cooperation of civilians, recalled wellknown astrologer Pt Anand Shankar Vyas. The World War-II was a major hindrance to hosting the religious event in 1945 ... Local people extended financial help to the event and the Gujarat- based disciples of Sandyapuri Maharaj also offered ‘blank’ cheques to meet the expenses (“Will Shivraj govt follow tradition of inviting sadhus, akhadas?” Free Press Journal, 6 January 2013, bit.ly/3uyhmQF).

Table S2: (*continued*) Kumbh Mela dates and sources.

Kumbh site (type)	Start and end months (mm/yyyy)	Sources and notes
Nashik (Full)	10/1943 - 02/1944	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clark 2006 (294) notes this event as only occurring in 1944. • “A warning is issued to pilgrims considering going to the Sinhasta fair at Nashik from October 9 until February 28, 1944, that no special facilities can be provided by the railways; no special trains will be run, says the Director of Information, Bombay, in a Press Note. Pilgrims are also likely to encounter considerable hardships in regard to food and motor transport” (“Warning To People Going to Sinhasta Fair,” Times of India, 24 September 1943, bit.ly/3fspbK1). • “The first period of the fair begins on October 9, 1943 and lasts until February 28, 1944” (“Sinhasta fair at Nasik,” Times of India, 15 September 1943, bit.ly/2RB3o92). • We have found no references to an additional part of the fair in 1944.

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C Coding parties as Hindu nationalist

Table S3: List of political parties receiving the highest vote shares nationally in each Lok Sabha election. Letter codes in square brackets refer to the official Election Commission party codes; numeric codes in square brackets are those assigned to parties by the Trivedi Centre for Political Data.

Rank	Party	Vote share	Hindu nationalist
1951 Lok Sabha election			
1	Indian National Congress [INC]	45.0	No
2	Socialist Party [SOC]	10.6	No
3	Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party [KMPP]	5.5	No
4	Communist Party of India [CPI]	3.3	No
5	Bharatiya Jana Sangh [BJS]	3.1	Yes
6	Scheduled Castes Federation [SCF]	2.4	No
7	Akhil Bharatiya Ram Rajya Parishad [RRP]	1.9	Yes
8	People's Democratic Front [PDF]	1.3	No
9	Shiromani Akali Dal [SAD]	1.0	No
10	Krishikar Lok Party [KLP]	1.0	No
11	Peasants and Workers Party of India [PWP]	0.9	No
12	All India Ganatantra Parishad [GP]	0.9	No
13	Hindu Mahasabha [HMS]	0.9	Yes
14	Forward Bloc (Marxist) [FBM]	0.9	No
15	Tamil Nadu Toilers' Party [TNT]	0.8	No
16	Jharkhand Party [JKD]	0.7	No
17	Revolutionary Socialist Party [RSP]	0.4	No
18	Krishikar Lok Party [KP]	0.3	No
19	Commonweal Party [COMW]	0.3	No
20	Lok Sewak Sangh [LSS]	0.3	No
1957 Lok Sabha election			
1	Indian National Congress [INC]	47.9	No
2	Praja Socialist Party [PSP]	10.4	No
3	Communist Party of India [CPI]	8.9	No
4	Bharatiya Jana Sangh [BJS]	6.0	Yes
5	Scheduled Castes Federation [SCF]	1.7	No
6	All India Ganatantra Parishad [GP]	1.1	No
7	People's Democratic Front [PDF]	0.9	No
8	Hindu Mahasabha [HMS]	0.9	Yes
9	Peasants and Workers Party of India [PWP]	0.8	No
10	Jharkhand Party [JKD]	0.6	No
11	Forward Bloc (Marxist) [FBM]	0.6	No
12	Chota Nagpur Santhal Parganas Janata Party [CSJ]	0.4	No
13	Akhil Bharatiya Ram Rajya Parishad [RRP]	0.4	Yes
14	Revolutionary Socialist Party [RSP]	0.3	No
15	Praja Party [PP]	0.1	No
1962 Lok Sabha election			
1	Congress [INC, 3482]	44.7	No
2	Communist Part Of India [CPI, 2444]	9.9	No
3	Swatantara Party [SWA, 12923]	7.9	No
4	Praja Socialist Party [PSP, 6168]	6.8	No
5	Bharatiya Jan Sangh [JS, 4152]	6.4	Yes
6	Republican [REP, 6921]	2.8	No
7	Socialist [SOC, 12721]	2.7	No
8	Dravida Mummetra Kazhagam [DMK, 10192]	2.0	No
9	Akali Dal [AD, 16994]	0.7	No
10	All India Forward Bloc [FB, 3040]	0.7	No
11	Akhil Bharat Hindu Maha Sabha [HMS, 268]	0.6	Yes
12	Peasant Worker Party [PWP, 12019]	0.6	No
13	Akhil Bharati Ramrajya Parishad [RRP, 359]	0.6	Yes
14	Janata Party [JP, 4406]	0.4	No
15	Revolutionary Socialist Party [RSP, 12053]	0.4	No
16	Muslim Leage [ML, 11621]	0.4	No
17	Gantantra Parishad [GP, 10323]	0.3	No
18	Lok Sevak Sangh [LSS, 11536]	0.2	No
19	Nutan Maha Gujarat Janta Parisha [NJP, 11789]	0.2	No
20	Hariyana Lok Samiti [HLS, 10355]	0.1	No
1967 Lok Sabha election			
1	Congress [INC, 3482]	40.8	No

Table S3: (continued) List of best-performing political parties by Lok Sabha election.

Rank	Party	Vote share	Hindu nationalist
2	Bharatiya Jan Sangh [BJS, 4152]	9.3	Yes
3	Swatantara Party [SWA, 12923]	8.7	No
4	Communist Part Of India [CPI, 2444]	5.1	No
5	Samyukta Socialist Party [SSP, 7619]	4.9	No
6	Communist Marxist Party Of India [CPM, 14635]	4.3	No
7	Dravida Mummetra Kazhagam [DMK, 10192]	3.8	No
8	Praja Socialist Party [PSP, 6168]	3.1	No
9	Prepublican Party Of India [RPI, 6911]	2.5	No
10	Bangal Congress [BAC, 9026]	0.8	No
11	Peasant Worker Party [PWP, 12019]	0.7	No
12	Akali Dal - Sant Fateh Singh Group [ADS, 17049]	0.7	No
13	All India Forward Bloc [FBL, 3040]	0.4	No
14	Muslim Leage [MUL, 11621]	0.3	No
15	Kerala Congress [KEC, 4807]	0.2	No
16	J & K National Conference [JKN, 11089]	0.1	No
17	Akali Dal - Master Tara Singh [ADM, 17047]	0.1	No
18	Jan Kranti Dal [JKD, 4133]	0.1	No
19	Jan Congress [JAC, 4124]	0.1	No
20	All Party Hill Leader's Confernce [AHL, 817]	0.1	No
1971 Lok Sabha election			
1	Congress [INC, 3482]	43.7	No
2	Indian National Congress (Org) [NCO, 3805]	10.4	No
3	Bharatiya Jan Sangh [BJS, 4152]	7.4	Yes
4	Communist Marxist Party Of India [CPM, 14635]	5.1	No
5	Communist Part Of India [CPI, 2444]	4.7	No
6	Dravida Mummetra Kazhagam [DMK, 10192]	3.8	No
7	Swatantara Party [SWA, 12923]	3.1	No
8	Samyukta Socialist Party [SSP, 7619]	2.4	No
9	Bharatiya Kranti Dal [BKD, 1691]	2.2	No
10	Telangana Praja Samithi [TPS, 14939]	1.3	No
11	Praja Socialist Party [PSP, 6168]	1.0	No
12	Akali Dal [SAD, 16994]	0.9	No
13	Utkal Congress [UTC, 8424]	0.7	No
14	All India Forward Bloc [FBL, 3040]	0.7	No
15	Peasant Worker Party [PWP, 12019]	0.5	No
16	Revolutionary Socialist Party [RSP, 12053]	0.5	No
17	Republican Party Of India (Khobragade Group) [RPK, 14880]	0.4	No
18	Kerala Congress [KEC, 4807]	0.4	No
19	Bangal Congress [BAC, 9026]	0.4	No
20	Muslim Leage [MUL, 11621]	0.3	No
1977 Lok Sabha election			
1	Bharatiya Lok Dal [BLD, 1711]	41.3	Yes (w/ robustness check)
2	Congress [INC, 3482]	34.5	No
3	Communist Marxist Party Of India [CPM, 14635]	4.3	No
4	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [ADK, 930]	2.9	No
5	Communist Part Of India [CPI, 2444]	2.8	No
6	Dravida Mummetra Kazhagam [DMK, 10192]	1.8	No
7	Indian National Congress (Org) [NCO, 3805]	1.7	No
8	Akali Dal [SAD, 16994]	1.3	No
9	Peasant Worker Party [PWP, 12019]	0.5	No
10	Republican Party Of India (Khobragade Group) [RPK, 14880]	0.5	No
11	Revolutionary Socialist Party [RSP, 12053]	0.5	No
12	All India Forward Bloc [FBL, 3040]	0.3	No
13	Muslim Leage [MUL, 11621]	0.3	No
14	Kerala Congress (Pillai Group) [KCP, 4833]	0.3	No
15	Kerala Congress [KEC, 4807]	0.3	No
16	J & K National Conference [JKN, 11089]	0.3	No
17	Muslim League (Opposition) [MLO, 11623]	0.2	No
18	Socialist Unity Centre [SUC, 8082]	0.1	No
19	Vishal Haryana [VHP, 14945]	0.1	No
20	Prepublican Party Of India [RPI, 6911]	0.1	No
1980 Lok Sabha election			
1	Congress [INC(I), 3482]	42.7	No
2	Janata Party [JNP, 4406]	19.0	Yes (w/ robustness check)
3	Janta Party (Secular) [JNP(S), 15079]	9.4	No
4	Communist Marxist Party Of India [CPM, 14635]	6.2	No
5	Indian National Congress (U) [INC(U), 3823]	5.3	No

Table S3: (continued) List of best-performing political parties by Lok Sabha election.

Rank	Party	Vote share	Hindu nationalist
6	Communist Part Of India [CPI, 2444]	2.5	No
7	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [ADK, 930]	2.4	No
8	Dravida Mummetra Kazhagam [DMK, 10192]	2.1	No
9	Akali Dal [SAD, 16994]	0.7	No
10	Revolutionary Socialist Party [RSP, 12053]	0.6	No
11	All India Forward Bloc [FBL, 3040]	0.5	No
12	J & K National Conference [JKN, 11089]	0.2	No
13	Muslim Leage [MUL, 11621]	0.2	No
14	Peasant Worker Party [PWP, 12019]	0.2	No
15	Republican Party Of India (Khobragade Group) [RPK, 14880]	0.2	No
16	Kerala Congress [KEC, 4807]	0.2	No
17	Prepublican Party Of India [RPI, 6911]	0.2	No
18	Socialist Unity Centre [SUC, 8082]	0.2	No
19	Jharkhand [JKD, 4717]	0.1	No
20	All India Muslim League [IML, 10468]	0.1	No
1984 Lok Sabha election			
1	Congress [INC, 3482]	49.1	No
2	Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP, 1605]	7.7	Yes
3	Janata Party [JNP, 4406]	6.9	No
4	Lok Dal [LKD, 4996]	6.0	No
5	Communist Marxist Party Of India [CPM, 14635]	5.9	No
6	Telugu Desam [TDP, 8300]	4.3	No
7	Communist Part Of India [CPI, 2444]	2.7	No
8	Dravida Mummetra Kazhagam [DMK, 10192]	2.4	No
9	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [ADK, 930]	1.7	No
10	Indian Congress (Socialist) [ICS, 3372]	1.5	No
11	Indian Congress (J) [ICJ, 15232]	0.6	No
12	Revolutionary Socialist Party [RSP, 12053]	0.5	No
13	All India Forward Bloc [FBL, 3040]	0.4	No
14	J & K National Conference [JKN, 11089]	0.4	No
15	Muslim Leage [MUL, 11621]	0.3	No
16	Kerala Congress (J) [KCJ, 4824]	0.3	No
17	Door Darshi Party [DDP, 15197]	0.2	No
18	Peasant Worker Party [PWP, 12019]	0.2	No
19	Jharkhand Mukti Morcha [JMM, 4653]	0.1	No
20	Kerala Congress [KEC, 4807]	0.1	No
1989 Lok Sabha election			
1	Congress [INC, 3482]	39.5	No
2	Janata Dal [JD, 4217]	17.8	No
3	Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP, 1605]	11.4	Yes
4	Communist Marxist Party Of India [CPM, 14635]	6.5	No
5	Telugu Desam [TDP, 8300]	3.3	No
6	Communist Part Of India [CPI, 2444]	2.6	No
7	Dravida Mummetra Kazhagam [DMK, 10192]	2.4	No
8	Bahujan Samaj Party [BSP, 16651]	2.1	No
9	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [ADK, 930]	1.5	No
10	NA [JNP (JP), 4486]	1.0	No
11	Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar)(Simranjit Singh Mann) [SAD(M), 17026]	0.8	No
12	Revolutionary Socialist Party [RSP, 12053]	0.6	No
13	Pattali Makkal Katchi [PMK, 11891]	0.5	No
14	Door Darshi Party [DDP, 15197]	0.4	No
15	All India Forward Bloc [FBL, 3040]	0.4	No
16	Jharkhand Mukti Morcha [JMM, 4653]	0.3	No
17	India Congress (Socialist- Sarat Chandra Sinha) [ICS(SCS), 3411]	0.3	No
18	Muslim Leage [MUL, 11621]	0.3	No
19	Indian People's Front [IPF, 10840]	0.2	No
20	Peasant Worker Party [PWP, 12019]	0.2	No
1991 Lok Sabha election			
1	Congress [INC, 3482]	36.3	No
2	Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP, 1605]	20.1	Yes
3	Janata Dal [JD, 4217]	11.8	No
4	Communist Marxist Party Of India [CPM, 14635]	6.2	No
5	Janata Party [JP, 4406]	3.4	No
6	Telugu Desam [TDP, 8300]	3.0	No
7	Communist Part Of India [CPI, 2444]	2.5	No
8	Dravida Mummetra Kazhagam [DMK, 10192]	2.1	No
9	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [ADK, 930]	1.6	No

Table S3: (continued) List of best-performing political parties by Lok Sabha election.

Rank	Party	Vote share	Hindu nationalist
10	Bahujan Samaj Party [BSP, 16651]	1.6	No
11	Shiv Sena [SHS, 18691]	0.8	Yes
12	Revolutionary Socialist Party [RSP, 12053]	0.6	No
13	Asom Gana Parisad [AGP, 978]	0.5	No
14	Jharkhand Mukti Morcha [JMM, 4653]	0.5	No
15	Janata Dal (Gujrat) [JD(G), 10960]	0.5	No
16	Pattali Makkal Katchi [PMK, 11891]	0.5	No
17	All India Forward Bloc [FBL, 3040]	0.4	No
18	India Congress (Socialist- Sarat Chandra Sinha) [ICS(SCS), 3411]	0.4	No
19	Muslim League [MUL, 11621]	0.3	No
20	Indian People's Front [IPF, 10840]	0.2	No
1996 Lok Sabha election			
1	Congress [INC, 3482]	28.8	No
2	Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP, 1605]	20.3	Yes
3	Janata Dal [JD, 4217]	8.1	No
4	Communist Marxist Party Of India [CPM, 14635]	6.1	No
5	Bahujan Samaj Party [BSP, 16651]	4.0	No
6	Samajwadi Party [SP, 7425]	3.3	No
7	Telugu Desam [TDP, 8300]	3.0	No
8	Tamil Maanila Congress (Moopanar) [TMC(M), 8247]	2.2	No
9	Samata Party [SAP, 7575]	2.2	No
10	Dravida Mummetra Kazhagam [DMK, 10192]	2.1	No
11	Communist Part Of India [CPI, 2444]	2.0	No
12	Shiv Sena [SHS, 18691]	1.5	Yes
13	All India Indira Congress (Tiw Ari) [AIIC(T), 8871]	1.5	No
14	Ntr Telugu Desam Party (Lakshmi Parvathi) [NTRTDP(LP), 11834]	1.0	No
15	Asom Gana Parisad [AGP, 978]	0.8	No
16	Akali Dal [SAD, 16994]	0.8	No
17	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [ADMK, 930]	0.6	No
18	Revolutionary Socialist Party [RSP, 12053]	0.6	No
19	Prepublican Party Of India [RPI, 6911]	0.4	No
20	Jharkhand Mukti Morcha [JMM, 4653]	0.4	No
1998 Lok Sabha election			
1	Congress [INC, 3482]	25.8	No
2	Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP, 1605]	25.6	Yes
3	Communist Marxist Party Of India [CPM, 14635]	5.2	No
4	Samajwadi Party [SP, 7425]	4.9	No
5	Bahujan Samaj Party [BSP, 16651]	4.7	No
6	Janata Dal [JD, 4217]	3.2	No
7	Rashtriya Janata Dal [RJD, 12103]	2.8	No
8	Telugu Desam [TDP, 8300]	2.8	No
9	West Bengal Trinamool Congress [WBTC, 13066]	2.4	No
10	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [ADMK, 930]	1.8	No
11	Shiv Sena [SHS, 18691]	1.8	Yes
12	Samata Party [SAP, 7575]	1.8	No
13	Communist Part Of India [CPI, 2444]	1.7	No
14	Dravida Mummetra Kazhagam [DMK, 10192]	1.4	No
15	Tamil Maanila Congress (Moopanar) [TMC(M), 8247]	1.4	No
16	Biju Janata Dal [BJD, 9079]	1.0	No
17	Akali Dal [SAD, 16994]	0.8	No
18	Lok Shakti [LS, 5137]	0.7	No
19	All India Rashtriya Janata Party [AIRJP, 8896]	0.6	No
20	Revolutionary Socialist Party [RSP, 12053]	0.6	No
1999 Lok Sabha election			
1	Congress [INC, 3482]	28.3	No
2	Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP, 1605]	23.8	Yes
3	Communist Marxist Party Of India [CPM, 14635]	5.4	No
4	Bahujan Samaj Party [BSP, 16651]	4.2	No
5	Samajwadi Party [SP, 7425]	3.8	No
6	Telugu Desam [TDP, 8300]	3.6	No
7	Janata Dal (United) [JD(U), 11002]	3.1	No
8	Rashtriya Janata Dal [RJD, 12103]	2.8	No
9	All India Trinamool Congress [AITC, 18228]	2.6	No
10	National Congress Party [NCP, 5792]	2.3	No
11	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [ADMK, 930]	1.9	No
12	Dravida Mummetra Kazhagam [DMK, 10192]	1.7	No
13	Shiv Sena [SHS, 18691]	1.6	Yes

Table S3: (continued) List of best-performing political parties by Lok Sabha election.

Rank	Party	Vote share	Hindu nationalist
14	Communist Part Of India [CPI, 2444]	1.5	No
15	Biju Janata Dal [BJD, 9079]	1.2	No
16	Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S), 10979]	0.9	No
17	Akali Dal [SAD, 16994]	0.7	No
18	Pattali Makkal Katchi [PMK, 11891]	0.7	No
19	Tamil Maanila Congress (Moopanar) [TMC(M), 8247]	0.6	No
20	Indian National Lok Da [INLD, 3863]	0.5	No
2004 Lok Sabha election			
1	Congress [INC, 3482]	26.5	No
2	Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP, 1605]	22.2	Yes
3	Communist Marxist Party Of India [CPM, 14635]	5.7	No
4	Bahujan Samaj Party [BSP, 16651]	5.3	No
5	Samajwadi Party [SP, 7425]	4.3	No
6	Telugu Desam [TDP, 8300]	3.0	No
7	Rashtriya Janata Dal [RJD, 12103]	2.4	No
8	Janata Dal (United) [JD(U), 11002]	2.3	No
9	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [ADMK, 930]	2.2	No
10	All India Trinamool Congress [AITC, 18228]	2.1	No
11	Dravida Mummetra Kazhagam [DMK, 10192]	1.8	No
12	Shiv Sena [SHS, 18691]	1.8	Yes
13	National Congress Party [NCP, 5792]	1.8	No
14	Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S), 10979]	1.5	No
15	Communist Part Of India [CPI, 2444]	1.4	No
16	Biju Janata Dal [BJD, 9079]	1.3	No
17	Akali Dal [SAD, 16994]	0.9	No
18	Lok Jan Shakti Party [LJNSP, 5029]	0.7	No
19	Rashtriya Lok Dal [RLD, 12169]	0.6	No
20	Telangana Rashtra Samithi [TRS, 8284]	0.6	No
2009 Lok Sabha election			
1	Congress [INC, 3482]	28.6	No
2	Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP, 1605]	18.8	Yes
3	Bahujan Samaj Party [BSP, 16651]	6.2	No
4	Communist Marxist Party Of India [CPM, 14635]	5.3	No
5	Samajwadi Party [SP, 7425]	3.4	No
6	All India Trinamool Congress [AITC, 18228]	3.2	No
7	Telugu Desam [TDP, 8300]	2.5	No
8	National Congress Party [NCP, 5792]	2.0	No
9	Dravida Mummetra Kazhagam [DMK, 10192]	1.8	No
10	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [ADMK, 930]	1.7	No
11	Biju Janata Dal [BJD, 9079]	1.6	No
12	Praja Rajyam Party [PRAP, 6132]	1.6	No
13	Shiv Sena [SHS, 18691]	1.5	Yes
14	Janata Dal (United) [JD(U), 11002]	1.5	No
15	Communist Part Of India [CPI, 2444]	1.4	No
16	Rashtriya Janata Dal [RJD, 12103]	1.3	No
17	Akali Dal [SAD, 16994]	1.0	No
18	Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S), 10979]	0.8	No
19	Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam [DMDK, 2956]	0.7	No
20	Telangana Rashtra Samithi [TRS, 8284]	0.6	No
2014 Lok Sabha election			
1	Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP, 1605]	31.3	Yes
2	Congress [INC, 3482]	19.5	No
3	Bahujan Samaj Party [BSP, 16651]	4.2	No
4	All India Trinamool Congress [AITC, 18228]	3.9	No
5	Samajwadi Party [SP, 7425]	3.4	No
6	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [ADMK, 930]	3.3	No
7	Communist Marxist Party Of India [CPM, 14635]	3.3	No
8	Telugu Desam [TDP, 8300]	2.6	No
9	Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party [YSRCP, 8615]	2.6	No
10	Aam Aadmi Party [AAP, 13]	2.1	No
11	Shiv Sena [SHS, 18691]	1.9	Yes
12	Dravida Mummetra Kazhagam [DMK, 10192]	1.8	No
13	Biju Janata Dal [BJD, 9079]	1.7	No
14	National Congress Party [NCP, 5792]	1.6	No
15	Rashtriya Janata Dal [RJD, 12103]	1.4	No
16	Telangana Rashtra Samithi [TRS, 8284]	1.2	No
17	Janata Dal (United) [JD(U), 11002]	1.1	No

Table S3: (*continued*) List of best-performing political parties by Lok Sabha election.

Rank	Party	Vote share	Hindu nationalist
18	Communist Part Of India [CPI, 2444]	0.8	No
19	Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S), 10979]	0.7	No
20	Akali Dal [SAD, 16994]	0.7	No
2019 Lok Sabha election			
1	Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP, 1605]	37.8	Yes
2	Congress [INC, 3482]	19.7	No
3	All India Trinamool Congress [AITC, 18228]	4.1	No
4	Bahujan Samaj Party [BSP, 16651]	3.7	No
5	Samajwadi Party [SP, 7425]	2.6	No
6	Yuva Jana Sramika Rythu Congress Party [YSRCP, 8615]	2.6	No
7	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [DMK, 10192]	2.3	No
8	Shiv Sena [SHS, 18691]	2.1	Yes
9	Telugu Desam [TDP, 8300]	2.1	No
10	Communist Marxist Party Of India [CPM, 14635]	1.8	No
11	Biju Janata Dal [BJD, 9079]	1.7	No
12	Janata Dal (United) [JD(U), 11002]	1.5	No
13	National Congress Party [NCP, 5792]	1.4	No
14	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [ADMK, 930]	1.3	No
15	Telangana Rashtra Samithi [TRS, 8284]	1.3	No
16	Rashtriya Janata Dal [Rashtriya Janata Dal, 12103]	1.1	No
17	Akali Dal [SAD, 16994]	0.6	No
18	Vanchit Bahujan Aaghadi [Vanchit Bahujan Aaghadi, 17208]	0.6	No
19	Communist Part Of India [CPI, 2444]	0.6	No
20	Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S), 10979]	0.6	No

Substantiation for the coding of parties as Hindu nationalist:

Our main approach to coding parties as Hindu nationalist involved compiling a list of the 20 parties receiving the largest number of votes, nationally, for each Lok Sabha election (see Online Appendix Table S3, above). For each party in that list, we review the case study literature to evaluate whether—and to what extent—the party is described as Hindu nationalist in its overall brand and ideological orientation. For parties that we code as Hindu nationalist, we provide justifications and relevant quotations below. Importantly, we are cognizant of the fact that many parties tagged as *not Hindu nationalist* have, at some times and in some places, evidenced Hindu nationalist tendencies. The Congress party has been frequently described as “pseudo-secular” by opponents. Some of its candidates have used communal appeals targeting Hindu sentiments to win votes; Jaffrelot, for instance, notes the “shallowness of the Congress commitment to secularism at the local level, evident from the policies of many Hindu traditionalist chief ministers in the 1950s-60s.”²⁶ Nevertheless, this has not formed the party’s official ideology, as articulated in its manifestos and the speeches of the party’s primary leaders, and the expert literature is near-unanimous in depicting the party as secular nationalist.

- **Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS):** The BJS “was formed in 1951 and soon became the most aggressive and determined of the Hindu nationalist parties which were attempting to win power by constitutional means” (Graham, 1990, 3). From the outset, it operated as “the political arm of the RSS” (Siyech, 2021, 5).
- **Ram Rajya Parishad (RRP):** “In 1948, Karpatri Maharaj founded the Ram Rajya Parishad (RRP), an orthodox Hindu religious political party” (Chhibber and Verma, 2018, 59). The name of the party translates as, “Council of the Kingdom of Ram.” The party “joined the Jana Sangh in 1962” (Jaffrelot, 1999, 188).
- **Hindu Mahasabha (HMS):** “The leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha were the most vocal proponents of Hindu nationalism during the Constituent Assembly debates” (Chhibber and Verma, 2018, 80).
- **Bharatiya Lok Dal (BLD), 1977 only:** During the Emergency (1975–77), opposition party leaders and activists were either jailed or went underground. This led to parties of disparate ideological backgrounds to come together as a coalition. “The Jan Sangh joined other opposition parties, in the Janata Front, which contested the 1977 general elections. It became an important constituent of the Janata government (1977–80)” (Basu, 2013, 82). Note, what was popularly called the Janata Party in 1977 was actually “competing under the label of one of its constituent parties, the Bharatiya Lok Dal [BLD]” (Pehl, 2008, 308). Thus, we classify the BLD as Hindu nationalist for the 1977 election. To be sure, Hindu nationalism was intimately associated with the Janata brand. “At the plane of culture and heritage, the Janata was conditioned by Jan Sangh’s communal, anti-secular, anti-minority approach within the framework of their concept of a Hindu Rashtra. Jan Sangh’s philosophy of intolerance for religion and community other than Hindu, became the official practice of the Janata party” (Bhatnagar and Shakir, 1980, 70). “[T]he three main constituents of

²⁶Christophe Jaffrelot, “BJP Not Congress-mukt,” *Indian Express*, April 13, 2017.

the Janta Party—the Jana Sangh, the BLD, and the SSP—were identified in the voters’ mind with Hindi dominance” (Basu, 2013, 82).

- **Janata Party (JNP), 1980 only:** The Janata Party fought the elections to the Seventh Lok Sabha, which occurred between January 3 and January 6, 1980, now under its own label (the JNP). Things changed quickly in that year. “The Jan Sangh split from the Janata Party when it prohibited Jan Sangh members from participating in the RSS in March 1980. Some 3,500 people, including 15 of 28 Janata MPs, split and formed the BJP on April 5, 1980.” (Basu, 2013, 82). For voters going to the polls in January 1980, though, the Janata Party was clearly the one most closely associated with Hindu nationalism. For the robustness test in Online Appendix Table G, Panel C, we only code the Hindu nationalist vote share for 1977 and 1980 based on Janata candidates with an avowedly Hindu nationalist background. We identify these candidates using (i) the personal identifiers in the Trivedi dataset to assess whether each Janata candidate had previously or subsequently stood for the BJS, BJP, SHS, HMS, or RRP as a candidate in an MP or MLA election; and (ii) newspaper reports and other other biographical information online identifying the candidate to be part of the “Jan Sangh” group within Janata.
- **Shiv Sena (SHS):** “The 1960s saw the emergence of another Hindu Nationalist party, the Shiv Sena. The Shiv Sena was not associated with the RSS, although it emerged in the same region that had produced the RSS, the state of Maharashtra . . . The Shiv Sena turned to a militantly anti-Muslim position in the late 1980s and has been allied with the BJP since” (Swamy, 2004, 87).
- **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP):** The BJP is by far the most prominent Hindu nationalist party in India today, and has been since its inception. “On 5 April 1980 the ex-Jana Sanghis inaugurated a new party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, which saw itself as the Janata Party’s heir . . . This new move by the Hindu nationalists was aimed primarily at widening its base” (Jaffrelot, 1999, 37).

Note, we do not classify the Swatantra Party (SWA) as Hindu nationalist, despite some ambiguity in the literature. McKean (1996, 315) writes: “Referents to Hinduism and endorsements from Hindu religious leaders were used to popularize the legitimacy of Swatantra Party policies. Party meetings included performances of Hindu rituals. The concept of citizenship prompted by the Swatantra Party was described as consonant with the way of life preached in the Bhagavad Gita.” Conversely, Erdman (1963, 402) clearly distinguishes Swatantra from other avowedly Hindu nationalist parties: “Absent also are the other favorite subjects of . . . the militant Hindu nationalists . . . The contrast with the views of the Ram Rajya Parishad, Hindu Mahasabha and Jan Sangh is quite striking.” Noteworthy, too, is the lack of any identification of Swatantra as Hindu nationalist in Christophe Jaffrelot’s classic text on Hindu nationalism (Jaffrelot, 1999).

Validating the process of identifying Hindu nationalist parties:

By investigating the electoral histories of long-time BJP *loyalists*, we independently cross-checked the validity of our method of identifying Hindu nationalist parties. To do so, first we identified such “pure” BJP candidates using the three following criteria: 1) the candidate did not run for any other party except for the BJP after its formation in 1980; 2) the candidate ran in the 1984 election; and 3) the candidate ran for the BJP at least three times since 1984. This procedure gave us a list of 53 candidates. We then back-traced these candidates’ electoral histories prior to the formation of the BJP using candidate personal IDs provided in the Trivedi dataset. Out of 53 candidates, only 20 had run for any election prior to 1984. Key to the objective of our assessment, these 20 candidates had only run under parties that we have identified as Hindu nationalist parties in our dataset (BJS, BLD in 1977, and JNP in 1980), or as independents. No BJP loyalist had ever run under a party that we had not identified as Hindu nationalist.

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D Panel data visualization

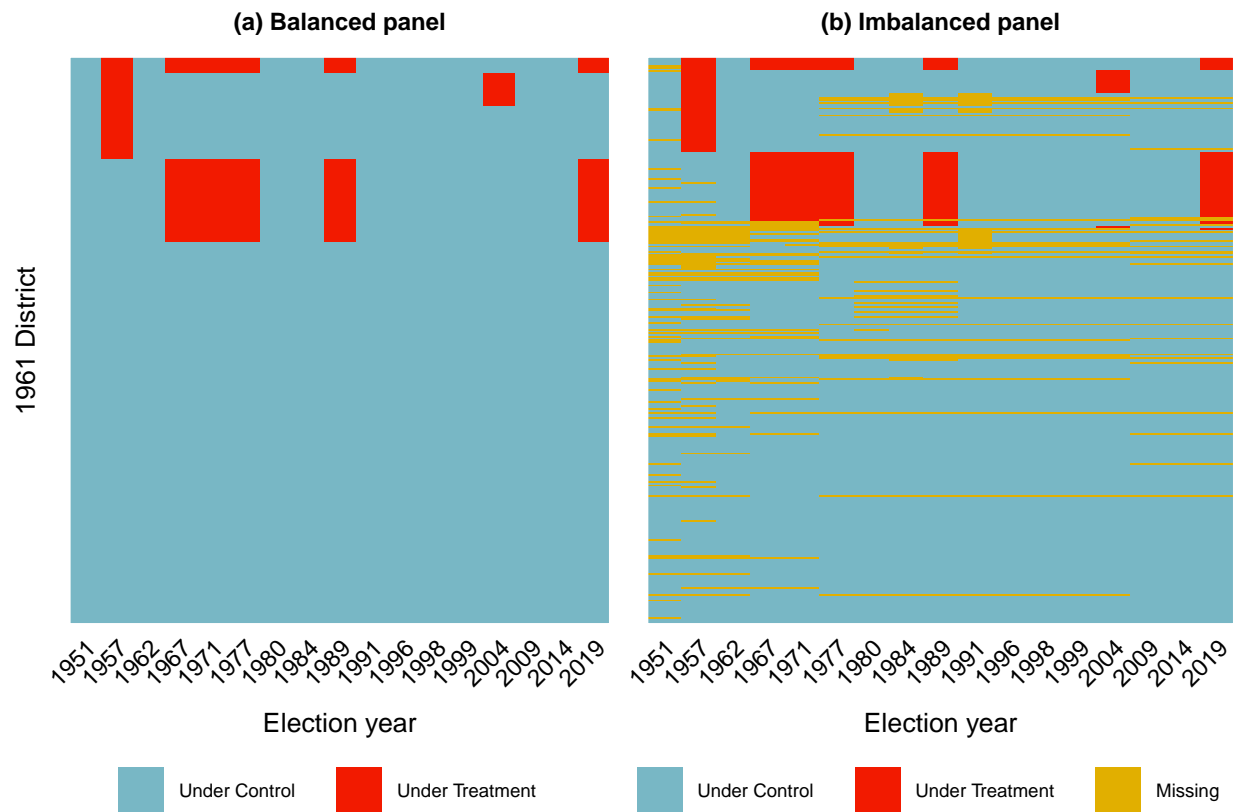


Figure S1: This figure visualizes the treatment status of *Recent [<365 days] nearby [<450 kms by rail] Kumbh* for the primary outcome variable, *Hindu nationalist vote share*, employing the panelview package in R.

E Pew survey data: variables description and summary statistics

Table S4: Pew survey data: Variable definitions and recodings.

Variable ID from Online Appendix Figure A2	Survey question number and text	Response options; recodes in square brackets	Mean of recoded variable	SD of recoded variable
(a)	QGEN. What is the respondent's gender?	1 = Male [=0], 2 = Female [=1].	0.52	0.50
(b)	QEDU. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree received?	1 = Illiterate [=0]; 2 = Literate but no formal schooling [=0]; 3 = Primary education (primary certificate) [=1]; 4 = Upper primary (upper primary certificate) [=1]; 5 = High school, Industrial training institute (matriculation certificate or ITI certificate) [=1]; 6 = Senior secondary / Intermediate (senior secondary school leaving certificate) [=1]; 7 = Technical education training [=1]; 8 = Nursing, general nursing and midwifery (GNM) [=1]; Junior teachers training (diploma) [=1]; 9 = Bachelor (university 1st) / MBBS, LLB [=1]; 10 = Master (university 2nd) / Post-graduate diploma [=1]; 11 = Doctor (tertiary 2nd) [=1].	0.71	0.45
(c)	Q85. Were you raised in a ...?	1 = City [=1]; 2 = Small town [=1]; 3 = Village [=0]; 4 = Other [=0].	0.27	0.44
(d)	QINCINDrec. Here is a list of monthly household incomes. Which of these does your household typically fall into, counting all wages, salaries, pensions and other incomes that come in? Just tell me which group your household falls into, before taxes and other deductions.	1 = Rs. 10,000 and below [=0]; 2 = Rs. 10,001 and above [=1].	0.34	0.47
(e)	Q3132rec. How often do you go to the temple?	1 = Every day [=1]; 2 = More than once a week [=1]; 3 = Once a week [=1]; 4 = Once or twice a month [=0]; 5 = A few times a year [=0]; 6 = Seldom [=0]; 7 = Never [=0].	0.54	0.50
(f)	Q35. How important is religion in your life?	1 = Very important [=1]; 2 = Somewhat important [=0.666]; 3 = Not too important [=0.333]; 4 = Not at all important [=0].	0.93	0.18
(g)	Q63b. Would you be willing to accept a Muslim as a neighbor?	1 = Yes [=1]; 2 = No [=0].	0.63	0.48
(h)	Q69b. Some people say that the following things are important to be truly Indian. Others say that they are not important. How important do you think it is to be a Hindu to be truly Indian?	1 = Very important [=1]; 2 = Somewhat important [=0.666]; 3 = Not too important [=0.333]; 4 = Not at all important [=0].	0.78	0.33
(i)	Q77arec. Did you vote in the last national election? [IF YES] Which party did you vote for in the last national election?	1 = Voted, Bharatiya Janata Party [=1]; 2 = Voted, Congress Party/Indian National Congress [=1]; 24 = Voted, Other party [=1]; 994 = Voted, Don't know [=1]; 995 = Voted, Refused [=1]; 996 = Did not vote [=0]; 997 = Was not eligible to vote in last national election [=0].	0.87	0.33

Table S4: (continued) Pew survey data: Variable definitions and recodings.

Variable ID from Online Appendix Figure A2	Survey question number and text	Response options; recodes in square brackets	Mean of recoded variable	SD of recoded variable
(j)	Q77arec. Did you vote in the last national election? [IF YES] Which party did you vote for in the last national election?	1 = Voted, Bharatiya Janata Party [=1]; 2 = Voted, Congress Party/Indian National Congress [=0]; 24 = Voted, Other party [=0]; 994 = Voted, Don't know [=0]; 995 = Voted, Refused [=0]; 996 = Did not vote [=0]; 997 = Was not eligible to vote in last national election [=0].	0.43	0.49
Pilgrim	Q36. Have you ever made a pilgrimage?	1 = Yes [=1]; 2 = No [=0].	0.58	0.49