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Political articulation: the Bharatiya Janata Party's unification of the Hindu vote

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ABSTRACT

Although the dominant sociological and political perspective explains political preferences as a result of social change, experience has shown otherwise. In the current article we challenge the leading perspective to state that political parties are not simply a mirror of existing social cleavages, but actively create and shape those divisions. For this purpose, we will analyse the history of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with the objective of identifying the variables that explain the unification, disintegration, and reunification of the Hindu vote around the BJP. We will conclude that the concentration of the Hindu vote is a result of the BJP's political articulation strategies, one of moderation and the other of polarisation.

Keywords: cleavage theory, top-down and bottom-up approaches, Hindu nationalism, Bharatiya Janata Party's, religious cleavage, Narendra Modi

RESUMEN

Aunque la perspectiva sociológica y política dominante explica las preferencias políticas como resultado del cambio social, la experiencia ha demostrado lo contrario. En el presente artículo desafiamos la corriente principal al afirmar que los partidos políticos no son simplemente un espejo de las divisiones sociales existentes, sino que crean y dan forma a esas divisiones. Para ello, analizaremos la historia del Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) con el objetivo de identificar las variables que explican la unificación, desintegración y reunificación del voto hindú en torno al BJP. Llegaremos a la conclusión de que la concentración del voto hindú es el resultado de las estrategias de articulación política del BJP, una de moderación y otra de polarización.

Palabras clave: teoría de clivajes, enfoques top-down y bottom-up, nacionalismo hindú, Bharatiya Janata Party, clivaje religioso, Narendra Modi

I. INTRODUCTION

The prevailing sociological and political perspective on party formation, heir of Lipset and Rokkan's social cleavage theory (1967), explains that political parties reflect the main divisions of a given society. According to this approach, the development of cleavages or political preferences is an independent process that takes place before the formation of political parties. However, experience has shown otherwise: while some existing social divisions have a political translation others don't. The dominant perspective ignores the role political actors play in creating and shaping social divisions and translating them into the political field.

Nowhere have the shortcomings of bottom-up approaches to cleavage change been better illustrated than in India, where the country's rich religious diversity has been object of political instrumentalization for centuries. This exploitative game of political articulation has resulted in grave consequences for the nation and its people, including discrimination, communal violence, and the tragic event of Partition. Undoubtedly, the latest evidence of political articulation of India's religious heterogeneity is Hindu nationalism, which intends to win the vote of the country's majority community on the basis of different strategies, such as religious polarisation, coalition policies and, more recently, a combination of communalism and populism. So much so that most scholars believe that the 2014 Lok Sabha elections symbolised the emergence of India's fourth party system, where multipolarity and coalition have led to a new dominant party system in which the BJP has assumed the central role the Congress used to play (Chhibber and Verma, 2019).

Thus, the main objective of this paper is to identify the variables that explain the unification, disintegration, and reunification of the Hindu vote around the BJP from the point of view of top-down theories of cleavage change. To this end, we will begin by explaining the purpose and rationale of our research and developing the theoretical framework by going through the different theories of cleavage change and how they have been applied to Hindu nationalism. In addition, we will state the objectives of our study and formulate four main hypotheses. To confirm our hypotheses, we will analyse the history of the BJP and explain how its different interpellation strategies have shaped the articulation, disarticulation, and rearticulation of a Hindu voting bloc. This will lead us to identify moderation and polarisation as the main strategies through which the BJP has achieved its desired objective. Finally, we will analyse Narendra Modi's years as Chief Minister of Gujarat to confirm that his polarisation

strategy has articulated a political Hindu bloc through the activation of the religious cleavage and populism and we will end with the main conclusions of our study.

II. PURPOSE AND RATIONALE

Traditionally, scholars have tended to frame India's communal violence as an inevitable result of the country's social context, mainly its rich religious diversity. In addition, the classical colonial and postcolonial image of communalism portrayed it as a sort of "pathology", as a result of irrational violence among the uneducated lower castes (Hansen, 1999). More recently, several authors have explained the success of the first and second Hindu or "saffron" waves (so called for the colour of Hindu nationalism) as consequence of India's underlying social changes.

However, experience has shown that India's religious polarisation is neither inevitable, nor irrational, nor socially driven, but primarily the result of top-down articulation practices of different political actors. This context leads us to study the latest manifestation of political instrumentalization of India's religious diversity, modern Hindu nationalism, and pose the following question: **what are the variables that explain the unification, disintegration, and reunification of Hindu vote around the BJP?** In the following section, we will begin by developing the theoretical framework of our analysis that contrasts top-down and bottom-up models of cleavage change.

III. STATE OF PLAY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP MODELS OF CLEAVAGE CHANGE

Political science and sociology have identified two main models of cleavage change. On the one hand, bottom-up approaches assume that political preferences are determined by social characteristics. Thus, divisions in the political arena are based on occupations, religion, ethnicity, or language, which impact interests, values, and party preferences, making the articulating practices of parties secondary to social transformations (Evans and Tilley, 2011). For instance, in the case of Evans and Tilley's seminal work (2011), which analyses the decline of the class basis of party support in XXth century Great Britain, many authors stated the source of change in the relationship between class position and party choice was the fracturing of class

distinctiveness because of economic development¹. In the end, this approach follows the dominant sociological approach to the formation of political parties, as outlined by Lipset and Rokkan (1967, p. 5), which posits that parties are created and reflect the main cleavages within a society. As De Leon *et al* (2009) argue, this reflections approach is also shared by other relevant theories like Anthony Down's rational choice perspective of voting behaviour (1957) or Burnham's theory of critical realignment (1970). What all of them defend is that cleavage or preference formation is an inherent and independent process that takes place before and outside the formation of political parties (De Leon *et al*, 2009).

Many scholars have used this bottom-up approach to explain the emergence of Hindu nationalism in India as a result of underlying social changes, mainly the intensification of the political mobilisation among the lower castes and minorities, what is known as the "Mandalisation" of Indian democracy. Thus, as Hansen (1999) puts it, in response to the increasing influence of less privileged groups in the political arena, certain segments of the educated urban middle class and upper-caste populations started to criticize the political landscape, question the legitimacy of the state, and reject the principles of democracy and secularism. Hence, during the 1980s, the first saffron wave, emerged as a successful political force by appealing to a form of "conservative populism" which mainly attracted more privileged groups who were concerned about losing their dominant positions (Hansen, 1999). Other scholars like Chhibber (1997), Hansen and Jaffrelot (2001), Hasan (2002), and Kohli (1991) have similarly attributed the success of the BJP in the 90's to factors such as the emergence of the middle class, the increasing political empowerment of lower castes, and the rapid socioeconomic transformations following the dismantling of state socialism.

Moreover, Jaffrelot (2021) explains how Narendra Modi's victory in 2014 and 2019, the second saffron wave, has been able to mobilise not only the BJP's upper-caste traditional base, fearful of the rise of lower caste groups, but also members of non-dominant OBCs who resented the way these groups had risen to power and cornered reservations. Other scholars, like Suri (2019) have explained Modi's success in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Shaba elections as a result of factors such as the increase of the literacy rate of lower castes, land reforms and the

¹ This popular stance was defended by authors such as Lipset (1981) or Inglehart and Rabier (1986).

increase in the representation in government employment of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST).

On the other hand, the second model of cleavage change, the political choice model, emphasises the top-down structuring of political cleavages by the action of political parties (Evans and Tilley, 2011). Thus, the correlation between social divisions and political preferences is influenced by the strategies and positioning of parties: they shape the level of social divisions by either highlighting their distinctions in areas that matter to voters' choices or downplaying their differences on those same aspects to make them less significant in determining party preferences (Evans and Tilley, 2011)². As De Leon *et al* (2009) state, political parties carry out a process of political articulation by which they establish and normalize divisions based on class, ethnicity, and race, forming cohesive socio-political groups by integrating diverse interests and identities. Consequently, divisions or cleavages among individuals within society are not inherently politically charged, but parties can strategically utilize them to gather majority support through the differential interpellation of subjects (De Leon *et al*, 2009). This approach is also defended by Posner (2004, p. 543) who studied the different political salience of cultural diversity and stated that “cultural differences are neither *sufficient* nor *necessary* for the emergence of political or social divisions”³. In short, for the political choice model parties are not simply a mirror of existing cleavages, but actively create and shape those divisions.

However, top-down theories of cleavage change accept that strategic shifts in party positions are influenced by changes in the structural social composition (Evans and Tilley, 2011; De Leon *et al*, 2009). Thus, this perspective doesn't agree to a purely voluntarist view of politics where parties have complete freedom to organize constituencies as they desire. The political choice model maintains that social divisions, class dynamics, institutional regulations, and the economic context all influence the opportunities and constraints of political dominance: parties can't fabricate divisions from nothing. For instance, in Evans and Tilley's analysis

² This view has been defended by influencing authors such as Przeworski and Sprague (1989) who stated that political parties shape the magnitude of social divisions by either emphasizing their differences on relevant issues that align with voters' choices or downplaying those differences to make them less significant in influencing party preferences.

³ Posner (2004) argues that the political and social salience of the cleavage depends on the sizes of the groups defined by the cleavage. That's why the Chewa-Tumbuka cleavage is politically salient in Malawi, where they constitute large groups and are therefore useful in political competition, but not in Zambia, where both communities are too small to serve as viable political vehicles (Posner, 2004).

(2011), the decline in the size of the manual working class due to de-industrialization and globalization forced political parties, especially those on the left, to adapt their political appeals as they faced a shrinking base of core voters. This resulted in the Labour Party, traditionally seen as representing the working class, transforming into a more inclusive catch-all party (Evans and Tilley, 2011). As a result, the ideological distinctiveness of the two main parties' messages to the electorate was weakened so as the link between social class and party choice (Evans and Tilley, 2011). What some scholars, like De Leon et al (2009), argue is that it's precisely in times of social transformation when political articulation is more crucial.

This top-down approach to cleavage change has also been used by many scholars to explain the emergence of Hindu nationalism in the Indian subcontinent. For instance, Hansen (1999), not only explained the emergence of Hindu nationalism in the 90's as a result of social change, but also highlighted the ability of the BJP to activate the religious cleavage. In his words, the Sangh Parivar, umbrella term that refers to the collection of Hindutva organisations spawned by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)⁴, was able to develop a narrative to activate the "communal unconscious" of individuals who may not typically align with its political agenda (Hansen, 1999). Jaffrelot (2019), on its side, attributes Narendra Modi's success to many factors, but he especially stresses the BJP's successful activation of the religious cleavage and Modi's populist rhetoric to effectively encourage a significant portion of the population to prioritise their membership to the dominant Hindu community over their caste and class identity. This position has been advocated by other scholars such as Sardesai (2019), Heath (2020), Sircar (2022), Chhibber and Verma (2019) or Kumar (2020).

Thus, we can't help but defend a top-down approach to cleavage change, which in our view is the only one capable of explaining the emergence and evolution of Hindu nationalism in the Indian subcontinent. We agree with De Leon *et al* (2009) that political parties reframe specific matters as grievances by selectively addressing individuals and recognizing them as distinct subjects through ideological and political actions. We also acknowledge the significance of institutional dynamics and social cleavages such as class, ethnicity, and religion but hold that *how* and *when* they become central depends on the competition among political parties (De Leon *et al*, 2009). In our view, as Posner (2004) argued, this is the only way to

⁴ Indian right-wing, nationalist organisation founded in 1925 by K. B. Hedgewar with the aim of protecting the interests of Hindus and securing their dominance within the Indian nation (Jaffrelot, 2021).

understand the divergent political salience of cultural differences: it's the only way to understand why some social differences have a political correlation while others don't.

Therefore, we believe a top-down approach to cleavage change is the best way to explain the role religion has played in Indian politics for centuries and, consequently, the emergence and evolution of Hindu nationalism as its latest manifestation. Thus, although almost any period in India's modern history could be suitable for our analysis, we have decided to focus on Hindu nationalism. Accordingly, in the following sections we will demonstrate how the articulation approach can help us better understand the political mobilization of India's Hindu majority by the BJP.

IV. OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

With this theoretical framework in mind, the main objective of this paper is to identify the variables that explain the unification, disintegration, and reunification of the Hindu vote around the BJP. To this end, we will first try to determine if Hindu support to the BJP responds to underlying social changes or party politics (Specific objective I) so that, in the latter case, we can later specify the concrete articulation strategies that explain the unification of Hindu vote by the BJP (Specific objective II). Therefore, in the following lines we will try to answer the following question: **what are the variables that explain the unification, disintegration, and reunification of Hindu vote around the BJP?** To do so we have formulated four main hypotheses which we will try to confirm with our empirical analysis:

- I. India's Hindu majority shouldn't transform into a political Hindu bloc until the BJP manages to mobilise the Hindu vote
- II. The Hindu bloc should lose its political dimension as soon as the BJP's articulation strategies fail
- III. The articulation of a political Hindu bloc by the BJP should respond to two main strategies: moderation and polarisation
- IV. Narendra Modi's polarisation strategy has achieved a political Hindu bloc through two main variables: the activation of the religious cleavage and populism

Thus, Hypotheses I and II will try to determine if Hindu support to the BJP responds to party politics, while Hypotheses III and IV will try to specify the concrete articulation strategies, if any, that explain the unification of Hindu vote by the BJP.

V. METHODOLOGY

Our work intends to confirm the aforementioned hypotheses through a historical analysis of the BJP's electoral history. Thus, we will necessarily focus on two main aspects: the different strategies of the BJP to unify Hindu vote in each election and the subsequent electoral results, with special focus on the successful or failed articulation of a Hindu voting bloc. As for the first element, we'll base our work on different secondary sources, which will allow us to determine the different strategies employed by the BJP to win the vote of the majority Hindu voters. Amongst these, we cannot fail to mention *The Saffron Wave* (1999) by Thomas Bloom Hansen and *Modi's India* (2021) by Christophe Jaffrelot's, which have provided in-depth knowledge of the origin and evolution of modern Hindu nationalism.

On the other hand, our analysis of the different electoral results will be based on data from the respective post poll surveys elaborated by the Lokniti Programme for Comparative Democracy of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). However, given the limited access of CSDS Data Unit we'll normally reach its information through different secondary sources. Finally, in order to determine the unification of Hindu vote we will mainly focus on three main elements: the total percentage of Hindus that voted for the BJP (and NDA) in each election and the Hindu support to both by caste and economic class. We'll consider there's unification of the Hindu vote only when support to the BJP goes beyond its electoral base of Hindu elites and reaches middle and low segments of society. This will mean that voters prioritise their Hindu identity over other characteristics like caste or class, which continue to play a decisive in Indian democracy.

VI. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

1. HINDU VOTE AS A RESULT OF PARTY POLITICS: ELECTORAL HISTORY OF THE BJP AND ITS ARTICULATION PRACTICES

As we mentioned, in the late 1980's the intensification of the political mobilisation among the lower castes and minorities caused India's transition to a true majoritarian democracy. The term "Other Backward Castes" (OBCs) refers to a social and economic segment that finds itself situated between the higher castes and the scheduled castes. As Hansen (1999) explains, this group consists of individuals from marginalized farming backgrounds, landless laborers, and members of traditional service and artisan castes, such as barbers, boatmen, blacksmiths, carpenters, fishermen and oil pressers. Although the OBCs represent around one-third of the overall population, because of their relatively small size, geographic dispersion, and economic challenges, they have always faced difficulties in establishing a collective sense of identity and wielding significant political influence independently (Hansen, 1999).

Although the term was initially used as an administrative category as far back as 1950, it was only after the Mandal Commission that the OBC label started gaining political significance (Hansen, 1999). Thus, the Commission was created in 1979 by the Indian government with the objective of identifying the socially and educationally backward classes in India. In 1980 the Commission recommended the reservation of 27% of educational seats and government jobs for OBCs, but it wasn't until August 1990 that Prime Minister V. P. Singh, tried to implement its recommendations. Singh's proposal led to massive agitations and self-immolations of upper-caste students against reservations as they feared the rise of lower sections of Hindu society. As a result, the Commission ended having widespread popularity and the political grouping of OBC castes was highly fuelled: an alliance of lower and scheduled castes emerged as a stable political constituency (Hansen, 1999).

As we know, this "Mandalisation" of the Indian democracy has been used by many scholars to defend a bottom-up approach to cleavage change. Scholars like Hansen (1999) have stressed how Hindu nationalism emerged as a powerful force during the 1980s appealing to privileged groups who were concerned about losing their dominant positions as a result of the

growing influence of marginalized groups in politics. Years later, Jaffrelot (2021) has explained how Modi was able to mobilise not only the BJP's upper-caste traditional base, fearful of the rise of lower caste groups, but also members of non-dominant OBCs who resented the way dominant OBCs had risen to power and cornered reservations. For our part, we don't deny the essential role of these social transformations for the emergence and development of Hindu nationalism, but we believe they played a secondary role. Thus, in or view, underlying social changes created fear in Hindu elites in the first saffron wave and frustration in part of the middle class in the second which allowed the BJP to capitalise on those sentiments to unify the Hindu vote. Therefore, it was the BJP's political articulation strategy that led to the emergence of a Hindu bloc, although it was, of course, aided by the aforementioned social transformation. We will now demonstrate this by going through the history of the BJP and its approach in the different elections, from 1984 to 2019.

1.1. The BJP's articulation of a Hindu bloc: from foundation to government

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) traces its roots back to the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, which was established in 1951 by Shyama Prasad Mukherjee as the political arm of the RSS. Following the Emergency (1975-1977), the Jana Sangh merged with other political parties to form the Janata Party, which successfully defeated the Indian National Congress in the 1977 Lok Shaba election and ruled the country until 1980. However, the Janata Party began to disintegrate in 1979 and Indira Gandhi overwhelmingly won the 1980 general election, prompting the Janata Party's National Executive Council to enforce a ban on dual membership of both the party and the RSS. In reaction to this decision, the former members of the Jana Sangh chose to form a new political party, which came to be known as the BJP, which emerged as the parliamentary wing of the RSS.

1.1.1. The BJP as a moderate party: the 1984 Lok Shaba election

After the dissolution of the Janata Party, the BJP aimed to move away from the niche status associated with the Jana Sangh. Thus, under the leadership of A.B. Vajpayee, the BJP sought to distance itself from its Hindutva-based identity and introduced new principles, such as "Gandhian socialism", which emphasised the village as the foundation of the Indian

economy, and “positive secularism”, that critiqued the Congress' approach of appeasing minorities for electoral gains but endorsed the secular nature of the regime (Jaffrelot, 2010).

The first general election the BJP contested as a party was the 1984 Lok Shaba election. That time, the BJP made efforts in the political arena to revive and preserve the moral and secular principles of the Janata party. In an attempt to demonstrate secular tolerance, the BJP attracted Muslim personalities and candidates for state and general elections, encouraged participation in Muslim festivals, and undertook other inclusive actions (Hansen, 1999). Moreover, the BJP adopted a moderate Hindu nationalist ideology, offering a cautious moral critique of the Congress party's governance, and pursuing a logic of opposition aimed at fostering unity among diverse groups opposing the Congress (Hansen, 1999). This moderate secularist approach was very different from that of the RSS, to the point that leading RSS figures openly called to support the Congress, not the BJP (Hansen, 1999).

However, the BJP's strategy ended up being disastrous: the Congress got its biggest historical victory with 403 of 513 seats while the BJP obtained only two (Election Commission, 1984). Upon analysing the reasons behind the BJP's poor performance in the elections, Vajpayee acknowledged the failure of his centrist approach as a loyal opposition to the Congress, took personal responsibility for this outcome and recognized the deep crisis within the BJP (Hansen, 1999).

1.1.2. Communalist shift: the 1989, 1991 and 1996 Lok Shaba elections

As we just mentioned, the BJP's gross electoral failure in 1984 led to radical change of approach. In 1986 Lal Krishna Advani was elected president and the party moved toward a clear-cut communal strategy: the BJP started to blatantly activate the religious cleavage (Hansen, 1999). Thus, the BJP aligned with a more purist stance that emphasized the party's role as the defender of Hindu society and abandoned coalitional politics. Starting from 1989, the BJP gradually intensified its communal rhetoric, issuing a continuous stream of press releases, resolutions, and statements, took the lead in shaping Indian political discourse and propagated simple slogans and concepts that depicted Congress as weak and effeminate in the face of determined Muslims (Hansen, 1999). These slogans, such as “pseudo secularism”, “pampering of minorities”, “appeasement of Muslims”, and “foreign infiltration”, became widely used in the subsequent years (Hansen, 1999).

Probably, the clearest proof of the BJP's communal shift was his active support of the Ayodhya movement⁵. In the mid-1980s, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), Hindu nationalist organisation member of the Sangh Parivar, launched a new movement to reclaim the location on behalf of Hindus and establish a temple in honour of Lord Ram. As Jaffrelot (2021) recalls, the BJP recognized the strategic importance of the agitation and actively joined the movement, leading to an increase in its popularity. In 1990, BJP president L. K. Advani initiated a massive Ram Rath Yatra a political-religious rally across the country in support of constructing a temple in Ayodhya. The Rath Yatra led to widespread communal violence, with Advani's arrest and the storming of the Babri Masjid by his supporters in what has come to be known as the Ayodhya firing incident. This radical phase culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, an event in which the BJP's involvement was implicated despite their claims of spontaneous activism (Jaffrelot, 2021).

As soon as Advani was arrested, the BJP withdrew its support for the ruling V.P. Singh, which the BJP had backed after the 1989 general elections, and precipitated an early election in 1991. The exacerbation of communalism continued during the election campaign, which according to Hansen (1999), became the most expensive, aggressive, and violent in the history of independent India. In fact, armed young men became a common sight at rallies while passionate speakers gained notoriety for their provocative speeches attacking Muslims, depicted not only as "pampered minorities" but as enemies of the nation and immoral killers who needed to be cleansed (Hansen, 1999). Thus, the campaign witnessed an exceptionally intense and divisive atmosphere, with a sharp focus on communal issues: election rallies often triggered incidents of communal violence, occasionally escalating into large-scale riots, even in regions that had previously been free from such conflicts (Hansen, 1991).

The activation of the religious cleavage by the BJP paid off. In the 1989 Lok Shaba election the party managed to go from 7.74% of the popular vote and 2 seats (Election Commission, 1984) to 11.36% of the vote and 85 seats (Election Commission, 1989). In 1991, after a violent and communalist campaign the party's support jumped to 20.11% of the electorate and 120 seats (Election Commission, 1991). During these years, the party had

⁵ The Ayodhya conflict is a contentious issue in India with political, historical, and socio-religious dimensions. Beginning in the 19th century, it revolves around a specific piece of land in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, which Hindus believe to be the birthplace of their deity Lord Ram. During the Mughal period Muslims constructed a mosque on the site, the Babri Masjid, but Hindus argue a pre-existing Hindu temple was demolished or altered to make way for the mosque.

managed to raise the electoral support of urban, educated, upper caste, upper class males, forming what would be the party's elitist social bloc (Hansen, 1999; Yadav, 2009). So much so that most scholars mark 1989 as the end of the dominance of the Congress and the beginning of the third-party system, based on multipolarity, fragmentation and coalitions (Chhibber and Verma, 2019).

In the 1996 election the BJP became the first party in India, getting 20.29% of the popular vote and 161 seats in the Lok Shaba (Election Commission, 1996). However, Vajpayee, back to the party's leadership, was unable to form a majority coalition when called on to form a government. The party's consistent use of divisive language had alienated both the Congress party and other left-leaning political groups to such an extent that forming a coalition with them became impossible (Hansen, 1999). This led the BJP to shift towards a more moderate stance after 1996, not solely due to the attitudes of other political parties, but because it recognized the need to attract potential allies in order to establish a governing coalition (Jaffrelot, 2010).

Table 1: Social change, religious cleavage and coalition policy to explain the emergence of Hindu vote in the 1984, 1989, 1991 and 1996 Lok Shaba elections.

	Social change	Activation of religious cleavage	Caste politics	Coalition policy	Hindu voting bloc
1984	Before Mandalisation	No	-	No	No
1989, 1991, 1996	After Mandalisation	Yes	BJP's (elitist) social bloc	No	No, but formation of the BJP's (elitist) social bloc

Source: The author.

Thus, by comparing the BJP's support in the 1984, 1991 and 1996 Lok Shaba elections we start to see the effect of the activation of the religious cleavage, and therefore party politics, on the emergence of a Hindu nationalist vote. Although, as we can see in Table 1, India's democratic revolution made a significant difference between the previous three elections and the next three, in our view it was the BJP's capitalisation on the feelings of fear and frustration created by these social transformations through the activation of the religious divide that

explains the Hindu elites' vote for the BJP. Thus, we start to see how India's Hindu majority doesn't transform into a political Hindu bloc until the BJP manages to mobilise the Hindu vote (Hypothesis I). However, given the possible explanatory power of the social change variable and the lack of Hindu vote from middle and lower segments of society we prefer to be cautious and wait until the next section to confirm our first hypothesis.

1.1.3. BJP's relative moderation as coalition leader: the 1998 and 1999 Lok Shaba elections

As we just saw, the 1996 Lok Shaba elections were a turning point for the BJP. Although the party managed to become the leading political force, its radical discourse had alienated the Congress and other left-leaning political groups so that forming a coalition with them became impossible (Hansen, 1999). Thus, the BJP realised that its polarisation strategy had earned the support of Hindu elites but had proven ineffective to reach to further segments of society. This limitation prompted the BJP to embark on a whole new strategy: the leadership of the BJP pursued a more comprehensive approach by forging alliances with various regional parties in states where the party's own electoral prospects were limited due to linguistic and caste barriers and by the fact that in eastern and southern parts of India, the Hindu nationalist movement is primarily linked to the Hindi-speaking regions known as the "cow belt" (Hansen, 1999). As Advani recalled in a future interview: "Though we were the largest party, we failed to form a government. It was felt that on an ideological basis we couldn't go further, so we embarked on the course of alliance-based coalitions..." (Interview of L. K. Advani in Outlook, 25 October 1999:38).

Thus, in 1998 the BJP formed the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) an anti-Congress coalition with around 12 regional parties to contest the general election. The BJP's strategy was very successful as the party managed to gain 25.59% of popular support and 182 seats, while the NDA got 37.25% of the vote and 256 seats (Election Commission, 1998). Thus, the BJP was able to form a coalition government led by the NDA with the external support of the Telugu Desam Party. However, the political price of the BJP's pragmatism was considerable as the during the challenging and lengthy negotiations which ultimately resulted in the formation of the multi-party government, the party was compelled to make compromises on the majority of the issues that had been central to its campaigns for over a decade, such as

the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya, the abolition of Article 370 of the Constitution which granted autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir or the imposition of a uniform civil code so that *sharia* would cease to be a source of law (Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 2010; Jaffrelot, 2019). Among the prominent themes of the BJP, only a few remained intact, including adopting a more assertive stance towards Pakistan, establishing a National Security Council, and re-evaluating the nuclear policy with the intention of exercising the nuclear option (Hansen, 1999). To downplay the Hindu nationalist aspect of the BJP, Advani stressed the importance of “good governance” as a goal that could be achieved by any ideology⁶. For this reason, Jaffrelot (2021) has named the years between 1998 and 2014 the BJP’s period of “forced moderation”.

However, elections were held as soon as 1999 after defection of one of the coalition partners. Again, the BJP followed the same strategy and even gave up the idea of having a separate election manifesto (Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 2010; Jaffrelot, 2019). This time the party maintained the same number of electoral seats, but NDA increased its support to 269 seats making an outright majority (Election Commission, 1999). The elections were followed by five years of reasonable stability making Vajpayee the first non-Congress president to serve a full five-year term.

The BJP’s coalition policy worked perfectly and enabled the party to transcend its core elitist electorate and reach to all segments of Hindu society. This meant that the BJP remained a predominantly elitist party, supported by 47% of the upper castes in 1998, but only by 28% of upper OBCs, 27% of lower OBCs, 14% of SCs and 21% of STs, which made a discrete 28% of the total Hindu vote (Lokniti-CSDS, 1998, as cited in Sardesai, 2019). These results were very similar in 1999: 40% of upper castes, in contrast with 23% of upper OBCs, 22% of lower OBCs, 14% of SCs and 22% of STs, making 27% of the total Hindu vote (Lokniti-CSDS, 1999, as cited in Sardesai, 2019). However, the party’s allies of the NDA were able to compensate the BJP’s limitations in terms of caste, class, and urban constituencies. Thus, in 1998 the NDA got the vote 56% of upper castes, 39% of higher OBCs, 43% of lower OBCs, 18% of SCs and

⁶ On the Inaugural address of the 1998 BJP’s National Executive Meeting Advani declared: “A large area of governance has little to do with ideology, any ideology, except the overriding principle of national interests. Indeed, good governance in most spheres of national life becomes possible only when it is de-ideologized and de-politicized” (Advani, 1998).

31% of STs, which made 41% of Hindu vote (Lokniti-CSDS, 1998, as cited in Sardesai, 2019). In 1999 the NDA was supported by 61% of upper castes, 44% of higher OBCs, 44% of lower OBCs, 25% of SCs and 35% of STs, making 45% of Hindu vote (Lokniti-CSDS, 1999, as cited in Sardesai, 2019). As we can see, the BJP's successful coalition strategy had enabled it to articulate a socially transversal Hindu bloc.

Thus, it's difficult to offer a social change-based explanation for the emergence of a Hindu voting bloc in the 1998 and 1999 Lok Shaba. As we can see in Table 2, all five elections happened after the Mandalisation of the Indian democracy, while the main difference between the 1989, 1991 and 1996 general elections and the ones in 1998 and 1999 was the BJP's approach. In the formers the party followed a strategy of intense religious polarization and managed to get the vote of Hindu elites, its core electorate. However, in 1998 and 1999 the BJP changed its strategy, turned down its communalist rhetoric and engaged in a coalition policy with a great deal of regional parties to compensate its electoral shortcomings. As a result, the BJP's articulation strategy managed to expand its social base and unify the Hindu vote. Again, the underlying social changes of the Indian subcontinent in the late 1980's might have helped the BJP to raise support of certain segments of society, but the formation of a socially plural Hindu bloc was a clear effect of the party's new coalition policy. Therefore, now we can confirm our Hypothesis I as we clearly see how India's Hindu majority didn't transform into a political Hindu bloc until the BJP managed to unify the Hindu vote thanks to its alliances.

Table 2: Social change, religious cleavage, caste politics and coalition policy to explain the emergence of Hindu vote in the 1989, 1991, 1996, 1998 and 1999 Lok Shaba elections.

	Social change	Activation of religious cleavage	Caste politics	Coalition policy	Hindu voting bloc
1989, 1991, 1996	Post Mandalisation	Yes	BJP's (elitist) social bloc	No	No
1998, 1999	Post Mandalisation	No	BJP's (elitist) social bloc	Yes	Yes (NDA)

Source: The author.

1.2. Disarticulation of the Hindu bloc: the 2004 and 2009 elections

Thus, just like it had done since 1996, during the next two elections the BJP continued to dilute its Hindu nationalism in favour of its coalition policy. However, the inherent contradictions within the BJP's party organization and its attempt to appeal to a diverse range of social classes reached a critical point during the 2004 elections, resulting in its defeat by a coalition led by the Congress party (De Leon *et al*, 2009). In a surprising turn of events in 2004, the BJP was only able to gather 22.16% of the popular vote and 138 seats (Election Commission, 2004).

Following Yadav (2009), scholars have offered three main inaccurate explanations for the unexpected defeat of the BJP: most analysts construed the result as a popular mandate against the NDA's governance record ("national incumbency argument"), as a widespread condemnation of the NDA's history of communalism, particularly in Gujarat ("pluralism argument") and as the indictment of the BJP's aggressive policies of economic seen to be pro-rich ("economic argument"). The latter group includes, for example, Suri (2004) which stated the outcome was not so unexpected considering that the BJP sought to implement market reforms favouring the middle class and big business yet struggled to address the persistent issue of poverty during its time in power.

Yadav (2009), for his part, understood the 2004 verdict as the result of three main factors: the votes-seat ratio of India's first past the post electoral system which converted a small movement of votes into much greater loss of seats, the erosion of the BJP's system of alliances and the success of the Congress's and the limitations of the BJP's social bloc. For us, the last two variables were the most explanatory of the result. Thus, on the one hand, one of the most important factors to explain the BJP's defeat in 2004 is the deterioration of its coalition policy and the success of the Congress's, which for the first time managed to put together a broad electoral coalition, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) to challenge the NDA. As Yadav (2004) explains, taking into account the minor losses from allies that the Congress dropped, the party can be considered to have achieved a net gain of 47 Lok Sabha seats and 4.1% of the national vote share as a result of its partners. In contrast, the BJP experienced minimal gains and significant losses making a net loss of 27 Lok Sabha seats and 1.5% of the votes (Yadav, 2004). Others such as Shridharan (2004) have also stressed the importance of

coalitions for the 2004 outcome, as was the case in the BJP's victory in the 1998 and 1999 elections⁷.

On the other hand, we should understand the BJP's defeat in 2004 as a result of the party's partial inability to keep its social bloc together. In 2004, the BJP continued to receive a greater number of votes from upper-caste, upper-class, educated voters, men, and urban areas while the party's allies acted as a complement to its core social bloc (Yadav, 2009). However, the BJP lost support from all segments of Hindu society and especially from the most supportive sections: it only got the vote 51% of upper castes (-10%), 40% of higher OBCs (-4%), 40% of lower OBCs (-4%), 23% of SCs (-2%) and 34% of STs (-1%), reducing Hindu support from 45% to 40% (Lokniti-CSDS, 2004, as cited in Sardesai, 2019). Thus, as Yadav (2009, p. 34) recalls, "the swing against the NDA among the upper caste Hindus and the peasant proprietor communities was substantially higher than the general swing against it". Conversely, the Congress and its allies made significant gains among these communities winning the support of 30% of upper castes (+9%), 36% of higher OBCs (+3%) and 36% of lower OBCs (+3%) (Lokniti-CSDS, 2004, as cited in Sardesai, 2019). It looks like the BJP's moderation and coalition strategy wasn't able to achieve the necessary level of mobilisation of its core social constituency.

Following the BJP's electoral loss in 2004, the party made efforts to strengthen its coalition strategy but didn't manage to maintain the NDA's unity: the alliance went from 23 parties to 7 (Jaffrelot and Verniers, 2009). The result was disastrous for the BJP: the party's support declined to 18.80% (-3.36%) and 116 seats (-22), making its worst results since 1989 (Election Commission, 2009). Following Jaffrelot and Verniers (2009), the Congress Party benefited greatly from the disintegration of the NDA as the departure of key regional parties like the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), AIADMK, TNC, and Biju Janata Dal (BJD) had a significant impact on the BJP's electoral prospects. As Yadav and Palshikar acknowledged (2009), these changes within the NDA resulted in a loss of 42 seats and nearly 8% of the national vote share, meaning that had the BJP managed to retain the NDA coalition from 2004,

⁷ Following Shridharan (2004), coalitions played a crucial role in securing the victory of the Congress party in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu and Kashmir. These coalitions also contributed to reducing the margin of defeat or improving the Congress party's position compared to the 1999 elections in Maharashtra and Goa (Shridharan, 2004). Conversely, the absence of a strong opposition coalition had a significant effect on the magnitude of the Congress party's victory and the BJP's defeat in Assam, Haryana, and Jharkhand (Shridharan, 2004).

the gap between the UPA and the NDA would have been much narrower. Like in 2004, the NDA lost support from all segments of Hindu society, but this time in a much higher and socially balanced proportion: its support dropped to 35% of upper castes (-16%), 26% of higher OBCs (-14%), 29% of lower OBCs (-11%), 15% of SCs (-8%) and 26% of STs (-8%), which lowered Hindu support to 27% (Lokniti-CSDS, 2009, as cited in Sardesai, 2019).

Again, the comparison between the 1998, 1999, 2004 and 2009 Lok Shaba elections is good evidence that Hindu vote is the result of party politics rather than social change. It's crystal clear that all four elections happened after the Mandalisation of Indian democracy, India's democratic revolution. This means that if social change was generating Hindu vote the result should be similar in all four elections: all four should show the unification of Hindu vote. However, we clearly see that the BJP's capacity to hold a stable alliance or not lead to important differences in electoral support. Thus, in 1998 and 1999 the party continued its policy of communal moderation and developed a successful coalition policy which enabled it to transcend the elitist composition of its electoral base and win the government. However, in 2004 and 2009 the BJP's coalition strategy deteriorated, was not as good as that of the Congress and the party lost much of the support of its main social bloc, considerably reducing overall Hindu support for the BJP.

Table 3: Social change, religious cleavage, caste politics and coalition policy to explain the emergence of Hindu vote in the 1998, 1999, 2004 and 2009 Lok Shaba elections

	Social change	Activation of religious cleavage	Caste politics	Coalition policy	Hindu voting bloc
1998, 1999	Post Mandalisation	No	BJP's (elitist) social bloc	Success	Yes (NDA)
2004, 2009	Post Mandalisation	No	BJP's (elitist) social bloc	Failure	No*

Source: The author.

Note: * As we have seen, although the NDA's performance in 2004 was not radically different from that of 1998 and 1999, it lost Hindu support in general and especially among its core social bloc.

Thus, the main difference between 1998, 1999, 2004 and 2009 was the success or failure of the BJP's coalition policy, making this factor the explanatory variable of Hindu vote

as shown in Table 3⁸. As De Leon *et al* (2009, pp. 212-123) stated, “the success and consequent failure of the BJP’s political project is therefore best understood by granting articulating practices and interpellation their force and autonomy in suturing social formations, which are always precarious, open to contradictions, and threatening to come apart”. Therefore, the result of the comparison is perfectly consistent with Hypothesis II, as the Hindu bloc lost its political dimension as soon as the BJP’s articulation strategies failed.

1.3. Rearticulation of the Hindu bloc: Modi’s victory in 2014 and 2019

After the BJP’s progressive electoral erosion and as the 2014 elections approached, the BJP’s moderation and coalition strategy became increasingly questioned. On the one hand, Advani, who had moved towards a more moderate position after Vajpayee’s retirement, argued that the BJP needed allies and should continue to dilute its ideology to attract them (Jaffrelot, 2021). On the other side, the RSS and many party members, who had strong roots in the organization, were willing to sacrifice alliances in order to mobilize the Hindu majority (Jaffrelot, 2021). Eventually, the latter strategy took precedence, leading to the selection of Narendra Modi as the BJP’s prime ministerial candidate. Thus, the election of Narendra Modi as the party’s candidate responded to a new turn in the BJP’s strategy. The moderation thesis, the relaxation of communalism in order to conform stable alliances, had proven unstable and unsustainable in the long run, so the BJP moved back to a strategy of pure polarisation. This strategy was characterised by a strong move towards communalism and Modi’s populist rhetoric and enabled the BJP to overcome the sociological limitations of the Hindu nationalist core social bloc.

Thus, during the 2014 election Modi moved the BJP towards a strong communalist rhetoric, like he had previously done in Gujarat. However, as Jaffrelot (2021) explains, he didn’t need to emphasize it excessively, as the memory of his involvement in the 2002 Gujarat riots⁹ was enough for a few subtle remarks to reignite his image as a leader favoured by Hindu

⁸ We could also argue that the decrease in elitist support to the BJP, especially acute in 2004, is a result of the extension of the party’s moderation and coalition policy which repels more conservative voters. However, this stance would require further analysis that we cannot address for sake of length.

⁹ On February 27, 2002, violent clashes erupted between Hindus and Muslims in Godhra, Gujarat. This occurred after fifty-nine Hindus, including women and children, were killed in a fire aboard the Sabarmati Express. The train was carrying Hindu nationalist activists who had gone to Ayodhya to build a temple dedicated to Lord Ram on the ruins of the Babri Masjid. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) called for a general strike the following day

supporters. However, Modi's campaign took a more pronounced Hindu nationalist direction towards the end, resembling his approach in the Gujarat elections. He made a deliberate effort to visit Hindu temples and holy sites during his campaign stops, he often appeared alongside religious figures and he strategically chose to contest elections not only in Gujarat but also in Varanasi, a significant Hindu pilgrimage site and the spiritual capital of Hinduism (Jaffrelot, 2021). Moreover, although Modi did not visit Ayodhya, he held a meeting in Faizabad with a prominent portrait of Lord Ram displayed in the background, while the BJP's election manifesto briefly its commitment to exploring legal avenues within the constitutional framework to facilitate the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya (Jaffrelot, 2021). In addition, Modi retook the traditional BJP discourse on the Pakistani threat, both to promote Hindu nationalism and disqualify the softness of the Congress and didn't lose a chance to exploit local conflicts, such as the Muzaffarnagar riots and their aftermath (Jaffrelot, 2021)¹⁰. Modi's majoritarianism was also evident in the fact that the BJP nominated an extremely limited number of Muslim candidates, which resulted in the leading party having no Muslim members in the Lok Shaba for the first time in the country's history (Chatterji *et al*, 2019).

On the other hand, the 2014 election campaign was marked by a strong populist rhetoric. Thus, the campaign was characterized by a highly personalized and focused approach: the primary objective was to establish Modi as the central figure and emphasize his leadership qualities (Jaffrelot, 2021). The campaign slogans, such as "Abki bar, Modi sarkar!" (This time, a Modi government!), aimed to imprint his name in the minds of the people (Jaffrelot, 2021). Moreover, Modi sought to portray himself as a symbol of change and a challenge to the established political class, often accused of corruption (Chatterji *et al*, 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021). The message conveyed to the electorate was that voting for a BJP candidate was, in essence, a vote for Modi himself. This personalised approach proved to be highly effective as 27% of BJP

and as the strike took place, riots erupted, leading to the spread of anti-Muslim violence throughout Gujarat. As Jaffrelot (2021) declares, Ahmedabad and Godhra were the most severely affected by the clashes, resulting in approximately 350 and 100 deaths, respectively, according to official figures, but a total of 26 cities were placed under curfew, with significant casualties reported in some of them. Some NGOs raise the figure to more than 2,000 dead (Jaffrelot, 2021).

¹⁰ In August 2013, a series of riots took place in Uttar Pradesh, resulting in the deaths of 55 individuals, mainly Muslims, and the displacement of 51,000. Several BJP politicians, who had been implicated by the police for their inflammatory posts on social media targeting Muslims, were publicly honoured by the party during a rally in Agra, attended by Narendra Modi. They were praised as "heroes" for their alleged protection of Hindus during the riots. Surprisingly, when the time came to choose candidates for the elections, the BJP selected three of these legislators, despite the ongoing investigations into their involvement in the Muzaffarnagar riots.

voters supported the party solely because of Modi (Lokniti-CSDS, 2014, as cited in Kumar, 2019).

Moreover, in the 2014 election campaign Narendra Modi strategically emphasized his humble social background. By positioning himself as someone from a lower social stratum, Modi aimed to set himself apart from the Nehru-Gandhi family, whom he portrayed as elitist rulers who disregarded the underprivileged (Chatterji *et al*, 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021). Modi presented himself as the champion of India's marginalized communities, positioning himself as a symbol of empowerment for the downtrodden and as a voice for the common people against the privileged class (Jaffrelot, 2021). During a rally in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, he declared that the next decade would be dedicated to the advancement of Dalits and OBCs, further reinforcing his commitment to representing the interests of these social groups (Jaffrelot, 2021). Overall, Modi strategically tapped into the aspirations and identity consciousness of lower castes, using his own background to differentiate himself from the perceived elitism of his political opponents.

As Chatterji *et al* (2019) argue, the 2014 elections marked the culmination of the BJP's long-standing aspirations to govern India: the party got its best result with 31.34% of the popular vote and 282 seats earning its first absolute majority in the Lok Sabha (Electoral Commission, 2014). So much so that the majority of scholars hold the belief that the 2014 Lok Sabha elections marked the advent of India's fourth party system, in which BJP has taken on the dominant role that was previously held by the Congress (Chhibber and Verma, 2019). Most analysts agree that the BJP's success in the 2014 elections can be attributed to its ability to expand its support base among various segments of Indian society, as the party was able to appeal to urban middle class, lower and intermediary sections, and various caste groups.

As the Lokniti-CSDS post poll survey showed, although the BJP continued to be mostly supported by upper castes (47% of them voted for the party, an increase of 19% compared to 2009), the BJP made important advances in lower segments of society achieving the support of 30% of upper OBCs (+8%), 42% of lower OBCs (+20%), 24% of SC (+12%) and 37% of ST (13%) (Lokniti-CSDS, 2014, as cited in Sardesai, 2019). Moreover, Modi made significant gains in the lower and middle social classes. Again, although the BJP was mostly supported by upper classes (38% of them voted for the party, making an increase of 13%), Modi managed to raise the support of 32.3% of middle classes (+10%), 31% of lower middle classes (+12%)

and 24% of lower ones, what meant an increase of 9% (Lokniti-CSDS, 2014 as cited in Jaffrelot, 2015). Jaffrelot (2021) has argued this increase mainly responds to Modi's ability to mobilize the urban middle class, which had previously been disillusioned and less likely to vote, and to attract lower and intermediary sections of society to the BJP, especially the neo-middle class. Thus, Modi was able to unify the Hindu vote like no one had done in recent history: 36% of Hindus supported the BJP in 2014, 43% if we consider the whole NDA (Lokniti-CSDS, 2014, as cited in Sardesai, 2019).

Modi's 2019 Lok Shaba election campaign was not very different from 2014's and showed another display of both communalist rhetoric and populism. However, authors like Chatterji *et al* (2019) and Jaffrelot (2021) understand that the 2019 election campaign in India marks the shift from national populism to electoral authoritarianism as the playing field for electoral competition was no longer fair and balanced. This was not only due to the ruling party's financial resources but also because of the influence of the media and the perceived bias of the Election Commission of India, which was responsible for overseeing the election process (Jaffrelot, 2021).

On the one hand, Modi continued with his communalist discourses and practices. For instance, in Uttar Pradesh, he aimed to rally Hindu voters by once again bringing up the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots and portrayed Muslims as being responsible for committing atrocities against the majority community (Jaffrelot, 2021). However, as Jaffrelot (2021) argues, the use of communal rhetoric during the election campaign was particularly evident in the discussions around "Hindu terrorism". Thus, the BJP nominated Pragya Singh Thakur, who faced accusations of domestic terrorism targeting Muslims, as a candidate in the Bhopal constituency. Despite being released on bail, Thakur campaigned vigorously with the support of Narendra Modi, who defended her nomination by highlighting her alleged mistreatment and emphasizing the honour of Hindus ("Congress Works to Build Narrative", 2019). Additionally, there were other attempts to exploit religious divisions, such as accusing Rahul Gandhi of contesting in a supposedly Muslim majority constituency, Kerala, which Amit Shah, the party's president even equated with Pakistan (Deshpande, 2019). Moreover, a government minister accused Raoul Gandhi of being a Muslim ("Rahul Gandhi Was Born", 2019), Yogi Adityanath accused the Congress of being influenced by the "Muslim League virus" ("Congress Suffering", 2019), while Pragya Singh Thakur even praised Mahatma Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse.

Moreover, Modi's campaign showed several populist features which were already present in 2014. Again, Modi claimed to represent the people against the corrupt elites epitomised by Congress's leaders and highlighted his humble origins, reiterating that his family came from the "most backward class" and portrayed himself once again as a victim of the system (Rashid, 2019). In addition, the BJP employed a traditional electoral strategy by selecting candidates based on their caste background. According to Jaffrelot (2021), this strategy was made possible by the unequal distribution of reservations among SC and OBCs, with certain subcastes –*jatis*– gaining more advantages in education and the public sector. These socially mobile subcastes formed their own parties and became politically active, causing resentment among smaller and less educated SC and OBC groups who had limited access to reservations. In the 2019 elections, the BJP capitalized on this resentment and managed to attract some non-dominant SC and OBC groups, despite the dominance of upper castes within the BJP (Jaffrelot, 2021).

In addition, if Muslims constituted the internal "other" for Modi, Pakistan was framed as the external one, especially after the 2019 election. This time Modi had an unprecedented opportunity to exploit this factor extensively and effectively: a deadly attack by a Pakistani-based jihadi group in Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir, where forty-one Indian Central Reserve Police Force personnel lost their lives, occurred just weeks before the official campaign began. As Jaffrelot (2021) points out, Modi successfully positioned himself as India's protector, employing nationalist and even warlike rhetoric throughout the campaign. As a symbolic move, on March 17, Modi added the prefix "Chowkidar" (watchman or sentinel) to his Twitter handle, turning it into a campaign label adopted by a significant number of his supporters, including union ministers (Jaffrelot, 2021). Other key priorities of Modi's agenda which were included in the party's manifesto were an unwavering stance against terrorism, prioritizing national security and the well-being of soldiers, addressing issues of infiltration and coastal safety, enacting the Citizenship Bill, combating the Maoist movement, and repealing Article 370 (BJP, 2019).

Again, Modi's populist rhetoric played a significant role in the BJP's electoral success, even to a greater extent than in 2014. According to the Lokniti-CSDS election post-poll survey, 32% of BJP voters stated that their voting preference would have changed if Modi was not the prime ministerial candidate (Lokniti-CSDS, 2019, as cited in Kumar, 2019). As Jaffrelot (2021) pointed out, without Modi the BJP's performance would have been similar to the 1990s,

requiring the support of coalition partners to govern. Similarly, the NDA partners would have been weaker in 2019 if Modi was not in the picture, as among non-BJP NDA supporters, 25% would have voted for another party if Modi was not the NDA candidate for prime ministership, compared to 21% in 2014 (Lokniti-CSDS, 2014 and 2019 as cited in Jaffrelot, 2021).

Consequently, Narendra Modi gave the BJP the second best consecutive result in its history, achieving 37.46% of the popular vote and 303 seats in the Lok Shaba (Election Commission, 2019). This impressive result was a consequence of the consolidation of 2014's Hindu voting bloc: 44% of Hindus voted for the BJP (+8%), 52% (+9%) if we consider the whole NDA (Lokniti-CSDS, 2009, as cited in Sardesai, 2019). This unprecedented level of support for the BJP among Hindus not only represents the highest ever recorded but also demonstrates that the significant consolidation of Hindu votes around the party in 2014 was not an isolated event and strengthened further between the two elections (Sardesai, 2019). Moreover, as Sardesai (2019) showed, Hindu consolidation around the NDA was higher in constituencies where Muslims constituted a significant proportion of the population, to the extent that in constituencies where Muslims more than 40% the level of Hindu consolidation behind the NDA increased by 39 percentage points.

The BJP was able to secure massive support from Hindu voters in the 2019 election by gaining increased backing from various Hindu castes and communities. As the Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey showed, the BJP's support among the different caste groups continued its convergent trend: the party was supported by 52% of upper castes (+5%), 41% of higher OBCs (+11%), 48% of lower OBCs (+6%), 34% of SC (+10%) and 44% of ST (+7%) (Lokniti-CSDS, 2009, as cited in Sardesai, 2019). Thus, we see how support for the BJP rose amongst all social categories, especially among upper OBCs, narrowing the gap between higher and lower OBCs, SC and ST. Moreover, the same trend was observed regarding social classes: the BJP was supported by 44% of upper classes (+6%), 38% of middle classes (+6%), 36% of lower one (+5%) and 36% (+8%) of the poor (Lokniti-CSDS, 2019, as cited in Sardesai, 2019).

Thus, the comparison between the 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019 Lok Shaba elections perfectly evidences that the formation of a Hindu bloc is the result of party politics rather than social change. As we saw, the BJP's defeat in 2004 and 2009 was a result of the party's inability to hold its former voting bloc together, which was based on unstable and contradictory political coalitions. However, in the last two elections Narendra Modi managed to agglutinate a great

deal of the Hindu vote and overcome caste and class divisions through a strategy of communal polarisation and populist rhetoric.

Again, we don't deny the influence underlying social changes might have played in Modi's results, but we defend their role was secondary. For instance, Modi's mobilisation of both upper-castes (fearful of the rise of lower caste groups) and members of non-dominant OBCs (who resented the way dominant OBCs had risen to power and cornered reservations) had an obvious social component (Jaffrelot, 2021). However, it was Modi's polarisation and populism that managed to capitalise on their fears and frustrations, some of them provoked or fuelled by social changes, and win their vote for the BJP. Now more than ever, it's very difficult to offer an alternative explanation for the unbundling of the Hindu vote in 2004 and 2009 and its unexpected unification in 2014 and 2019, given that the social context was almost the same.

Thus, the only reasonable explanation for this phenomenon is the BJP's strategic approach in the different elections. As we mentioned earlier and show in Table 4, in 2004 and 2009 the BJP continued its forced moderation to develop the coalition policy which had brought the party to government in 1998 and 1999. Thus, the BJP kept its communal rhetoric down and continued to appeal to its core social bloc (Hindu elites) with the aim of complementing its shortcomings through the party's regional allies. However, among other factors¹¹, the success of the Congress's UPA in 2004 and the disintegration of the BJP's NDA in 2009 limited the party's reach to non-dominant social groups and ended up losing both elections. As we now, with the arrival of Modi to the party presidency the BJP adopted a totally different approach. Thus, the BJP renounced moderation and moved back to pure polarisation: the party resorted to a policy of high communal division and introduced a populist rhetoric that appealed both to Hindu elites and the poor with a decisive role of Narendra Modi himself. It was this approach that managed not only to consolidate the BJP's core electorate but to appeal to all segments of Hindu society.

Thus, given that the party's coalition policy failed in 2004 and 2009 and was not at all decisive in 2014 and 2019 it's the activation of the religious cleavage and Modi's populist appeal to elites and plebeians that explain the emergence of the biggest Hindu bloc in modern

¹¹ As aforementioned, we could also argue that the decrease in elitist support to the BJP, especially acute in 2004, is a result of the extension of the party's moderation and coalition policy which repels more conservative voters, but this stance would require further analysis.

India's history. Therefore, this new comparison allows us to reconfirm our Hypothesis I as we clearly see how India's Hindu majority, which had lost its political dimension, regained it once the BJP managed to reunify the Hindu vote thanks to its policy of polarisation.

Table 4: Social change, religious cleavage, caste politics and coalition policy to explain the emergence of Hindu vote in the 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019 Lok Shaba elections

	Social change	Activation of religious cleavage	Caste politics	Coalition policy	Hindu voting bloc
2004, 2009	Post Mandalisation	No	BJP's (elitist) social bloc	Failure	No*
2014, 2019	Post Mandalisation	Yes	BJP's (elitist) social bloc + lower segments (populism)	Not decisive	Yes (BJP)

Source: The author.

Note: * As we have seen, although the NDA's performance in 2004 was not radically different from that of 1998 and 1999, it lost Hindu support in general and especially among its core social bloc.

2. TWO PATHS FOR THE HINDU VOTE: MODERATION AND POLARISATION

The previous section clearly confirmed that emergence and evolution of modern Hindu nationalism must be regarded as a result of party politics rather than social change (Specific Objective I). As we just saw, India's Hindu majority didn't transform into a political Hindu bloc until the BJP managed to mobilise Hindu vote (Hypothesis I) and the Hindu bloc lost its political dimension as soon as the BJP's articulation strategies failed (Hypothesis II). Although the intensification of the political mobilisation among the lower castes and minorities in the late 1980's (Mandalisation) might have had some influence in the success of Hindu nationalism it played a secondary role. After all, India's social transformation fails to justify the electoral unfolding of Hindu majoritarian vote: the only way to explain the unification, disintegration, and reunification of the Hindu bloc are the different interpellation tactics of the BJP. Thus, once we have concluded that the unification of the vote of the Hindu majority has been a result of the BJP's political articulation strategies it's time to determine the specific articulation strategies that could explain the unification of the vote (Specific objective II).

As we can extract from the previous section's historical review and show in Table 5, there are two ways though which the BJP has managed to aggregate the vote of the majority community: moderation and polarisation, which confirms our Hypothesis III. On the one hand, in 1998 and 1999 the BJP achieved the vote of a majority of Hindus by engaging in a thorough coalition policy and diluting its Hindu nationalism. This strategy intended to turn down the party's polarising discourse in order to retain key allies which could compensate the social sectors the party couldn't reach. As a result, the NDA managed to agglutinate the vote of 41% of Hindus in 1998 and 45% in 1999 (Lokniti-CSDS, 2019, as cited in Sardesai, 2019). As Jaffrelot (2010, 2021) explains, this strategy complies with the moderation thesis which argues that extremist political parties tend to adopt a more inclusive approach in their program with each consecutive election, aiming to attract a broader range of voters due to the competitive nature of elections. Thus, in 1998 and 1999 the BJP kept down its communalist discourse and appealed to its traditional electorate but managed to conform a Hindu voting bloc through alliances with smaller parties.

However, as Jaffrelot (2021) argues, in twenty-first century India the moderation thesis has proven much less relevant than the polarisation thesis, given that Modi has managed to form a socially diverse Hindu voting bloc through a strategy of pure political polarisation. Just like he had previously done in Gujarat, Modi highly exacerbated communal tensions and used a populist rhetoric to appeal both to upper castes and classes and lower segments of society. Though this polarisation strategy Modi managed to gain the support of 36% of Hindus for the BJP in 2014 and 44% of them in 2019, while the NDA reached 43% and 52% of Hindu support respectively (Lokniti-CSDS, 2009, as cited in Sardesai, 2019).

This program of polarisation has proven much more effective than the former policy of coalition, it has granted the BJP greater popular support and secured for the first time the government for two full and consecutive mandates. Moreover, it has enabled the BJP to dispense with the need of diluting Hindu nationalism to achieve majority coalitions with moderate allies. For the first time, Modi has achieved to obtain the vote of a socially pluralistic Hindu bloc through and not at the expense of Hindutva. Thus, given the unprecedented character of Modi's method, in the following section we will compare Modi's Gujarati years with his national approach in order to confirm that communal polarisation and populism are the two main elements of his successful unification of the Hindu vote (Hypothesis IV).

Table 5: Social change, religious cleavage, caste politics and coalition policy to explain Hindu vote in 1984-2019 Lok Shaba elections

	Social change	Activation of religious cleavage	Caste politics	Coalition policy	Hindu voting bloc
1984	Before Mandalisation	No	-	No	No
1989, 1991, 1996	After Mandalisation	Yes	BJP's (elitist) social bloc	No	No, but formation of the BJP's (elitist) social bloc
1998, 1999	After Mandalisation	No	BJP's (elitist) social bloc	Successful	Yes (NDA)
2004, 2009	After Mandalisation	No	BJP's (elitist) social bloc	Failed	No*
2014, 2019	After Mandalisation	Yes	BJP's (elitist) social bloc + lower segments (populism)	Not decisive	Yes (BJP)

Source: The author.

Note: * As we have seen, although the NDA's performance in 2004 was not radically different from that of 1998 and 1999, it lost Hindu support in general and especially among its core social bloc.

3. MODI'S WAY: FROM GUJARAT TO NATIONAL POLITICS THROUGH COMMUNALISM AND POPULISM

As we just explained, there are two ways by which the BJP has won the majority of Hindu vote: moderation and polarisation. However, only the latter, Modi's way, has proven effective in the long run and enabled the BJP to stick to its Hindutva ideology. Thus, in the following lines we will focus on Modi's polarisation strategy with the aim of confirming that the activation of the religious cleavage and populism are the explicative variables of the unification of Hindu vote (Hypothesis IV). To do so, we will compare Modi's current period as Prime Minister with the years in which he was Chief Minister of Gujarat.

In October 2001, Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel's declining health and the BJP's loss in state assembly seats prompted the party to choose Narendra Modi as new candidate for the

chief ministership. In much the same way as he has done at the national level, Modi's first years were characterised by the activation of the religious cleavage. For instance, Modi did not hesitate to take advantage of the 2002 Gujarat riots. Modi characterized the Godhra tragedy as a "pre-planned attack" (Jaffrelot, 2021) and described it as a "one-sided collective violent act of terrorism from one community" (Ghassem-Fachandi, 2012). Moreover, in an attempt to capitalize on the polarization caused by the violence, Modi dissolved the state assembly in Gujarat in July 2002, and brought forward the scheduled state election to December 2002 (Shah, 2002). Modi's campaign was full of anti-Muslim references and largely focused on the Islamic and Pakistani threat.

The BJP's strategy was extremely successful as it managed to get 49.85% of the popular vote and 127 out of 182 seats (Election Commission of India, 2002). Moreover, as Jaffrelot (2021) shows, the party won a significant number of seats (42 out of 50) in three districts that were severely impacted by the communal violence (Panchmahals, Dahod, and Vadodara) what clearly demonstrated how the riots provided electoral advantages for the BJP. Modi's strategy of communal polarisation managed to relegate caste identities and unify the Hindu vote in a very effective manner. According to an exit poll conducted by the Lokniti-CSDS, the BJP maintained strong support from upper castes and Patels, with 76% and 82% voting for the party, respectively, but there was also a notable shift among OBC castes, with 54 to 61% supporting the BJP, depending on their specific subcaste (Lokniti-CSDS, 2002, as cited in Kumar, 2002).

After the 2002 communal violence, Narendra Modi adopted a more restrained approach towards Hindu nationalism, as it was no longer necessary and could harm his image. However, his government remained closely associated with Hindutva ideology, he frequently appeared in public with Hindu religious figures, often highlighted the perceived negative role of Muslims in India's history and implemented discriminatory policies towards them (Jaffrelot, 2021). Thus, as Jaffrelot (2021) recalls, unlike other states, Gujarat under Modi's leadership refused to implement a scholarship program for needy Muslim students initiated and funded by the central government or neglected to provide financial or other assistance to Muslims in Gujarat for the reconstruction of buildings and monuments that were destroyed during the 2002 events.

Moreover, during these years Modi developed an intense populist repertoire. From 2001 to 2014, Narendra Modi aimed to position Gujarat as a counterforce to the central

government in New Delhi and portrayed himself as a victim, contrasting himself with the established political dynasty (Jaffrelot, 2013, 2021). Thus, like he did in 2014 and 2019, Modi presented himself as a common man, emphasizing his modest background by highlighting his experience of serving tea in his father's shop during his childhood (Jaffrelot, 2013, 2021). This social background connected him with the masses of OBSs who belonged to the same milieu and saw him as both an equal and a role model. Moreover, as the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi frequently invoked the working class, despite implementing policies that prioritized business interests over social welfare (Jaffrelot, 2021). Following the 2002 elections, he aimed to enhance his reputation among the influential business community, which held significant sway in Gujarat's industrial landscape. Like many populist leaders, Modi made promises to uplift the poor but failed to deliver on socioeconomic issues: Modi adeptly tapped into emotions, including fear, anger, and pride, employing a Hindu nationalist approach to mobilize the masses, as demonstrated by his successful election campaigns (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Although popular vote to Modi's BJP saw a slight erosion, he was able to maintain great support to the party and obtain an absolute majority in every election in which he ran. Thus, in 2007 the BJP got 49.12% of the popular vote and 117 seats, while in 2012 he got 47.85% and 115 seats (Election Commission, 2007, 2009). Moreover, the vote pattern during those years reflected the unification of Hindu vote with 49.5% of Hindus supporting the BJP in 2012 (Lokniti-CSDS, 2012). Thus, although there was indeed social polarisation, as high castes and classes voted for the BJP in a higher proportion (61% of upper castes, 63% of Leuva Patels and 82% of Kadwa Patels) intermediary groups tended to shift their support towards the BJP. Thus, the BJP gained significant support from the OBCs, which was crucial to Modi's success: 52% of Kshatriyas, 53% of Kolis and 54% of other OBCs voted for the BJP in 2012 (CSDS, 2012). In terms of economic class, wealthier voters favoured Modi's party over the Congress in 2007 and 2012 (57% of upper classes and 54% of middle ones voted for the party in 2012), but the middle class and lower social classes showed strong support for the BJP, with 41% of low class and 43% of the poor casting their ballot for the party in 2012 (CSDS, 2012). As Jaffrelot (2013) explains, this can be attributed partially to Modi's own social background, his national-populist strategy that called for Hindu unity across castes or the strong support of the "neo-middle class", comprised by those who had lifted themselves out of poverty but had not yet fully entered the middle class.

Thus, we see how in his years as Chief Minister of Gujarat Modi achieved a great unification of the Hindu vote around the BJP, making caste and class play a secondary role. As we just explained, this pluralistic Hindu vote was attained through the activation of the religious cleavage and a populist rhetoric that appealed both to elites and lower castes and classes. Hence, we see how Modi exported his method from Gujarat to the 2014 and 2019 Lok Shaba elections. As we mentioned in the previous section, his nation-wide tactics also relied on high communal polarisation with both incendiary discourses and direct discrimination to Muslims as well as a strong populist discourse which appealed to all segments of Hindu society. Thus, as we show in Table 6, in both the 2002, 2007 and 2012 elections in Gujarat and the 2014 and 2019 Lok Shaba ones, Modi activated the religious cleavage and articulated a populist discourse that appealed to Hindu society as a whole. In both cases, the result was an unprecedented unification of the Hindu vote, which confirms the explanatory nature of both variables and, consequently, Hypothesis IV.

VII. CONCLUSION

The prevailing sociological and political perspective on party formation, heir of Lipset and Rokkan's social cleavage theory (1967), explains that political parties reflect the main divisions of a given society. Followers of this trend, many authors have explained the origin and development of modern Hindu nationalism as a result of underlying social changes, namely the intensification of the political mobilisation among the lower castes and minorities in the late 1980's (Mandalisation). Thus, the main objective of these lines has been to identify the variables that explain the unification, disintegration, and reunification of the Hindu vote around the BJP. To this end, we have first tried to determine if Hindu support to the BJP responds to underlying social changes or party politics (Specific Objective I) so that, in the latter case, we could later specify the concrete articulation strategies that explained the unification of Hindu vote by the BJP (Specific Objective II).

In order to answer if Hindu vote was a result of party politics, we formulated our two first hypotheses, both of which were confirmed in our analysis. First, the 1998, 1999, 2014 and 2019 Lok Shaba elections and their comparison with those of 1989, 1991, 1996, 2004 and 2009 allowed us to confirm our Hypothesis I, as they showed how India's Hindu majority didn't transform into a political Hindu bloc until the BJP managed to mobilise the Hindu vote. On the

Table 6: Activation of the religious cleavage, caste politics and coalition policy to explain the emergence of Hindu vote in the 2002, 2007 and 2012 Gujarat elections and the 2014 and 2019 Lok Shaba

		Activation of religious cleavage	Caste politics	Coalition policy	Pluralistic Hindu vote
Gujarat	2002	Yes	BJP's (elitist) social bloc + lower segments (populism)	No	Yes
	2007	Yes	BJP's (elitist) social bloc + lower segments (populism)	No	Yes
	2012	Yes	BJP's (elitist) social bloc + lower segments (populism)	No	Yes
India	2014	Yes	BJP's (elitist) social bloc + lower segments (populism)	Not decisive	Yes
	2019	Yes	BJP's (elitist) social bloc + lower segments (populism)	Not decisive	Yes

Source: The author.

other hand, the 2004 and 2009 general elections and their comparison with those of 1998 and 1999 confirmed Hypothesis II as they showed how the Hindu bloc lost its political dimension as soon as the BJP's articulation strategies failed. Therefore, after going through the party's history and electoral performance from 1984 to 2019 we can confirm that the formation of a bloc of Hindu voters has always been the result of the BJP's political articulation strategies. Although the Mandalisation of Indian democracy might have had some influence in the success of Hindu nationalism, social change fails to explain why some elections showed Hindu unification, but others didn't.

Secondly, to determine the specific articulation strategies that explain the unification of Hindu vote by the BJP we formulated our last two hypotheses, both of which we also confirmed in our study. First, our historical analysis allowed us to confirm that the articulation of a political Hindu bloc by the BJP responded to two main strategies: moderation and polarisation (Hypothesis III). On the one hand, in the 1998 and 1999 Lok Shaba elections the BJP achieved power through a policy of coalition and moderation. The party diluted its radical discourse to embark on strategic alliances with smaller parties that could compensate its electoral limitations in terms of caste, language, or geography. On the other, Narendra Modi managed to obtain the vote from all sections of Hindu society through a strategy of high polarisation, based on a strong communalist rhetoric and a populist discourse that appealed both to elites and plebeians. Thus, our work has showed how the BJP has only achieved the unification of the Hindu vote through these two distinct and opposing methods. Finally, the analysis of Modi's years as Chief Minister of Gujarat allowed us to confirm that the BJP's polarisation strategy has achieved a political Hindu bloc through two equally necessary variables: the activation of the religious cleavage and populism (Hypothesis IV).

For all these reasons, we should necessarily follow a top-down approach to cleavage change to understand the origin and unfolding of modern Hindu nationalism. The Indian subcontinent has been object of the political instrumentalization of religion for centuries and Hindutva is not an exception, but its latest manifestation. Sadly, much will have to change in Indian politics before political interests cease to punish the country for its religious diversity.

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