

# Does Franchise Expansion Affect Legislative Activity?: Evidence from British India Legislative Debates, 1916-1925

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March 1, 2021

## Abstract

Universal suffrage, the unconditional provision of voting rights for every adult citizen, is a key element of democracy. The transition from a more limited to less limited franchise, therefore, is purported to bring diverse policy preferences to the legislature. While existing research has identified such transformation by looking at policy outcomes, it lacks an explanation of how they were brought about in the legislature, a key actor in policy formation. We fill this gap with the first-ever text-as-data analysis of the British India legislature for ten years between 1916 and 1925, showing the impact of franchise expansion in 1920. Contrary to our expectations, we do not find that policy preferences are significantly different between elected and non-elected members or between different constituencies. Instead, preferences vary widely within each of the groups. The findings will provide a new perspective on colonial legislatures and their role in policy formation after franchise expansion.

## 1 Motivation

How did governments form policies in colonial states? While existing historical political economy research highlights the many policy decisions made under colonial rule as well as their consequences for state development, the institutions in place for creating them remain poorly understood beyond individual historical accounts. Particularly, colonial legislative institutions, which initially emerged in North America and then later spread to colonies across Africa and Asia, has only recently received attention for their role in policy formation (paineDemocraticContradictionsEuropean201; Gailmard 2017) while the implications

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of their development over time remain to be investigated. In this paper, we look at the history of British India to show how an institutional change leads to transformations in the features and role of colonial legislative institutions.

The said institutional change is franchise expansion, or the increase in population that can select legislative members through an election. We argue that, with the introduction of a larger electorate with different policy preferences in the legislature, franchise expansion fundamentally reshaped the role of colonial legislative institutions in policy formation. Specifically, as members are elected from different constituencies with a broad voter base (rather than appointed or elected through a narrow base), we expect to see the introduction of more diverse policy preferences to the legislature. In a mixed-franchise legislature (some members are elected while others are nominated), diversity is due to clustering of policy preferences by type of constituency and by franchise status.

## 2 Historical Context

We then look at British India to understand the role of colonial legislative institutions in policy formation, and if franchise expansion can bring substantial changes in its role. Most territories of present-day India were formally organized as a British crown colony under Government of India Act of 1858, which effectively transferred political administration from the British East India Company to the crown government. Enacted just after the violent rebellion, the law was part of the numerous institutional reforms that followed, one being the establishment of Imperial Legislative Council in 1861. This legislature was mainly composed of nominated members by the governor and elected members from organizations such as Bombay Chamber for Commerce.

Another wave of reforms followed the First World War with the introduction of Government of India Act of 1919. These reforms fundamentally reshaped the legislature in two ways. First was a bicameral legislature namely Imperial Legislative Assembly (Lower House)

and Council of States (Upper House). Second was the introduction of elections open to indigenous populations subject to gender and property restrictions (also vary by constituency) for elected members in the legislature. These seats could either be broadly geographic (such as Madras) or sector-specific (Muslim landholders).

### 3 Data and Methods

We introduce a novel historical data created from the documents covering British India parliamentary debates from 1916 to 1925; this totals nearly 4,000 sessions from both chambers as compiled by India Parliament Digital Library. Each of this document contains daily questions and answers as well as debates on various topics in Legislative Assembly and Council of States, which are upper and lower houses respectively. These preliminary results the post-expansion period, and we plan to extend them to pre-expansion period in the near future.

### 4 Findings

Before presenting our preliminary results, we first look at the changes in legislature size before and after expansion (Figure 1). We find that the expansion resulted in a significant increase in legislature size, from roughly 60 members before 1920 to around 200 members by 1921. The growth mainly came from elected members, which increased from around 20 members to around 130 members, now representing roughly two-third of the legislature.

We then observe whether this increase in elected members is correlated with diversity in policy preferences. At this point, instead of looking at sector-specific preferences, we estimate ideal point estimates from debate speech data based on Vafa, Naidu, and Blei (2020). Contrary to our expectations, the estimates do not show clustering among elected versus nominated members, or by different constituencies that they represented (Figure 1). Both elected and non-elected members are distributed across the spectrum, similar for

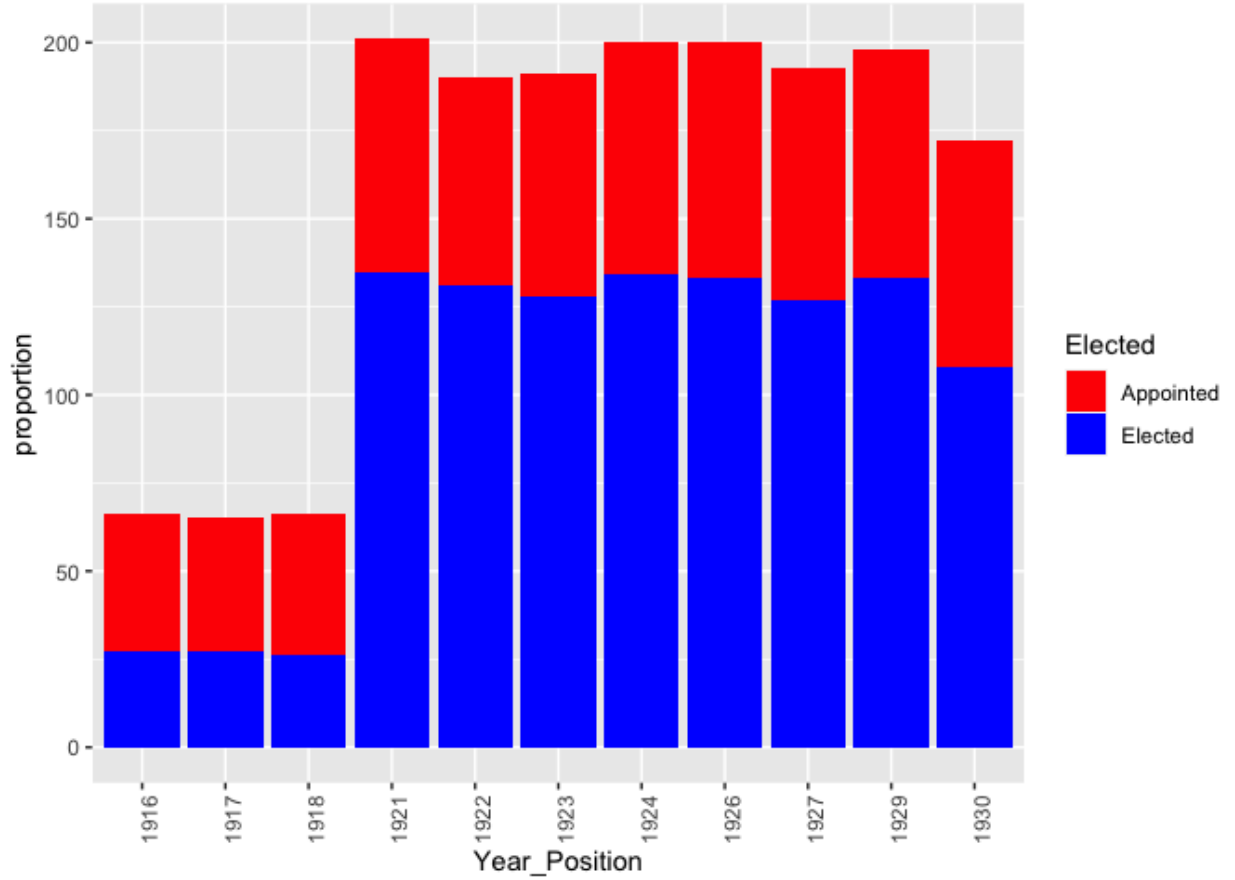


Figure 1: Number of colonial legislative members, 1916-1930. Red represents appointed members and blue represents elected members. Figures after 1920 are from both chambers. Data collected by authors.

Muslim and non-Muslim members.

We then follow with distribution plots of ideal point estimates by elected/nominated status and by constituency (Figure 2). The plots also do not show differences in distribution by group. Overall, the estimated results do not provide evidence that franchise expansion was followed by increased diversity or clustering of policy preferences between elected and nominated members or by constituencies that they represented.

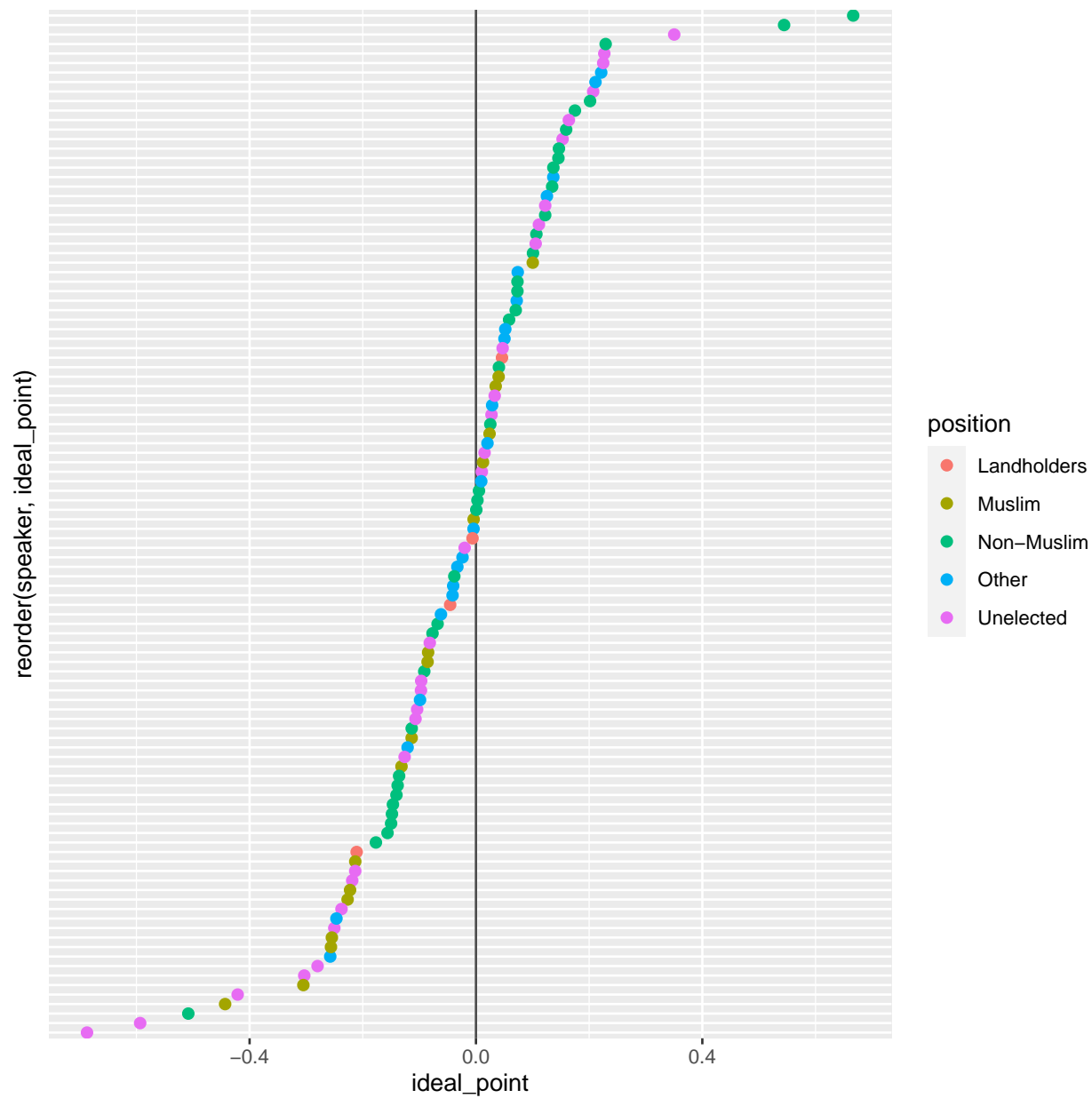


Figure 2: Number of colonial legislative members, 1916-1930. Red represents appointed members and blue represents elected members. Figures after 1920 are from both chambers. Data collected by authors.

## References

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